

COMMUNIQUÉ 22nd Church Assembly-Sabor of the Serbian Orthodox Dioceses in the United States of America



800 Years of the Autocephaly of the Serbian Orthodox Church:
Endowed by God, Treasured by the People

The hierarchs, clergy and delegates representing parishes and diocesan bodies from the three Dioceses of the Serbian Orthodox Church in the United States of America met July 13-16, 2019 at New Gračanica Monastery in Third Lake, Illinois and St. Sava Monastery in Libertyville, Illinois for the 22nd Church Assembly-Sabor of the Serbian Orthodox Dioceses in the United States. Throughout, the meetings were characterized by Christian fellowship in prayer, which brings the love and unity of mind and heart, which are the gifts of the Holy Spirit to those who assemble in Christ's name to the glory of God the Father.

This Assembly was also blessed to be the central celebration in America of the 800th Anniversary of Autocephaly of the Serbian Orthodox Church. The prayers of St. Sava, the Enlightener and first Archbishop of the Autocephalous Serbian Orthodox Church were invoked, along with those of St. Mardarije of Libertyville, the first Serbian Orthodox Bishop in North America, who founded the St. Sava Monastery in Libertyville, where his incorruptible relics are enshrined. The highlight of the Assembly was certainly the Hierarchical Divine Liturgy celebrated by our

hierarchs at St. Sava Monastery, in the presence of St. Mardarije's holy relics. The delegates and faithful people of God were able to venerate his relics and receive the Heavenly Mystery of the Eucharist in his presence.

His Grace Bishop Maxim of Western America celebrated the Liturgy, in concelebration with Their Graces Bishop Longin of New Gracanica-Midwestern America, host bishop, and Bishop Irinej of Eastern America, together with His Eminence Archbishop Peter of Chicago and Mid-America, representing the Russian Orthodox Church Outside of Russia, and His Grace Bishop Sava, retired Bishop of Slavonia. Also present and receiving the Holy Eucharist with the other hierarchs at this Liturgy were His Eminence Archbishop Demetrios, recently retired Archbishop of the Greek Orthodox Archdiocese of America, and His Eminence Metropolitan Kallistos (Ware) of Diokleia. By the decision of the Holy Synod of Bishops of the Serbian Orthodox Church, following the Divine Liturgy and the celebration of the Rite of the Patronal Feast in honor of St. Mardarije of Libertyville, Archbishop Demetrios was awarded the Order of St. Sava in the First Degree in recognition of his service to Orthodoxy and to the Serbian people during his many years of ministry.

Metropolitan Kallistos, one of the foremost spokesmen for Orthodoxy of the past sixty years and prolific author on Orthodox theology, faith and history gave the keynote address on the Assembly's theme: "800 Years of the Autocephaly of the Serbian Orthodox Church: Endowed by God, Treasured by the People". Appropriately his address centered on a central belief of Orthodox Christianity, the Incarnation, the understanding that in the person of Jesus Christ, the Son and Word of God, by Whom all things were made, becomes fully and completely a human being, while remaining fully and completely God. He does this so that, in the words of the Fathers, "God became what man is, so that man may become what God is." And the Church, as the Body of Christ, is also truly both divine and human. It unites heaven and earth above all in the Eucharist, and it exists both in time and history and beyond time and history. It exists to bring us from our temporal existence into the eternity of the Kingdom unbounded by time and space. The 800th Anniversary of the Serbian Orthodox Church's autocephaly should be understood in this context—that God works in history to bring us to salvation in this world so that we may live forever in and with the blessed Trinity in the Kingdom which is now and is coming as well. The Assembly was blessed to hear several presentations by Metropolitan Kallistos over the course of the Assembly, going deeper into the ways God works in His Church with His people for their ultimate salvation, and that of the world.

The Assembly was also honored to have as its guest, the Most Venerable Archimandrite Metodije, Abbot of the Hilandar Monastery, the first Serbian institution of higher education, the foundation of Saints Sava and his father, Saint Simeon, which is the center of Serbian spirituality on Holy Mount Athos.

Gathered in conjunction with this Assembly were a record number of young Serbian Orthodox Christians, brought together by the Standing Committee on Youth Ministry, who had the opportunity to share in the worship and some of the presentations of the Assembly, as well as pursuing their own program aimed at advancing their growth in Christ and their future service to God and His Church. The keynote speaker for the youth was famous Hollywood actor Jonathan Jackson.

The Assembly was chaired by the Presidents of the Assembly, Bishop Longin, Bishop Maxim and Bishop Irinej. The Assembly thanked Their Graces for their labor in the vineyard of our Lord in the USA, protecting the values of our faith, liturgical life, Orthodox Tradition, hierarchical and canonical order, and joined in the prayer of the Divine Liturgy asking that God may grant them to continue to define the Word of God's Truth in peace, safety, honor, health and length of days. The Assembly extended this same prayer for His Holiness Serbian Patriarch Irinej, for the entire Episcopate of the Serbian Orthodox Church, and for all Orthodox bishops, here and throughout the world.

Assembly Actions

The Assembly discussed and decided on a number of issues which fall within its competency:

- A report on the work of the various Standing Committees since the last Assembly was heard;
- Reports on the major decisions of the Central Church Council and from the Central Treasurer since the last Assembly were presented;
- A presentation on the importance of adequate insurance for congregations and diocesan properties, as well as child and youth safety, was made by Michael and Daniel Herzak of Insurance Systems Group, which has developed a group insurance plan tailored to the needs of the Serbian Orthodox Church;
- A report on the St. Sava School of Theology was presented and discussed at length. The report included mention of some improvements to the overall life of the School, such as the establishment of a Trusteeship Council to assist the Dean in

administrative and financial matters. Further study on all matters regarding the School, including its accreditation and future, will be done by the Episcopal Council in tandem with the Holy Synod of Bishops;

- A combined version of the current Constitution, General Rules and Regulations and Uniform Rules and Regulations for Parishes and Church School Congregations of the Serbian Orthodox Dioceses in the United States of America was published and distributed to all attendees and received by such on July 16, 2019. The printed new white bound edition is a compilation of all prior documents, inclusive of past amendments and updated decisions rendered by the Holy Assembly of Bishops that have been incorporated into the prior versions of all three documents; and
- Clergy compensation, including pension and health care plans, was discussed. A new monthly minimum remuneration for clergy of \$3,200 per month was enacted. The current church pension plan is under study by the Central Church Council for possible revision and improvement.

Ministry to America

The Assembly expressed serious and deep concern for the spiritual state of American culture and society. While we know we are truly blessed to live and prosper in these United States of America with the freedom and liberty we so enjoy, we are more conscious than ever before of serious challenges to Christian morality. This way of life and conduct is given to us by God to aid us in fulfilling our vocation to become truly human, and in so doing to be joined to the divine. While the Church understands that there exist in a free secular society differences of belief and opinion, the Church has a great responsibility to clearly articulate and defend its traditional Orthodox world view, and to maintain that world view even in the face of pressure to conform to contemporary world views which contradict it, compromise it or even seek to eradicate it.

Marriage, Family and Home Life

The institution of the family, which is the foundation of every healthy society, and with it marriage and the Christian home are increasingly under attack from such new pressures. The importance of family life cannot be overemphasized, for even our Lord Jesus Christ was born into a family in which he was nurtured in his youth and as a young adult by his mother, the Most Holy Virgin Mary, with his foster father, Joseph, in Nazareth.

The demands of modern life quickly weaken such ties and relationships between parents and children, between siblings, and within the entire family. Too often the

mundane demands and tasks of life can prevent us from seeing the sacred spiritual opportunities those demands can present for us.

Economic concerns often take both parents out of the home and into the workplace for more and more hours each day and each week. Children's athletics have become a focal point, taking children out of their homes for more and more hours each week requiring careful attention to balance the demands of sports with a healthy home life. How many of our families find their Sunday mornings dominated by activities other than worship in church and participation in church school? How many mothers and fathers find themselves almost as chauffeurs during the course of the day, ferrying their children from one activity to another?

Essentially, this means that we must work all the harder to maintain our homes as a place of prayer and a school of virtue, "the little church", a sacred place where families pray together and learn from one another, serving one another and learning by example. Parents must work hard at their marriages, be committed to their spouses and create a stable and loving place for the building of the family. And that "little church" of the family members must be nurtured within the larger church community, nourished and strengthened by their relationship with God in the Church's common worship and the Holy Mysteries and with their church family, their fathers and mothers, brothers and sisters in Christ.

The Struggle for the Christian Way of Life

We should make no mistake: more than perhaps ever before in America, a war is being waged for the souls of our people, our families and especially our children and youth. The technological advances we enjoy also bring with them new challenges to maintaining healthy family life as well as human life in general. For all too many people, the misuse of the Internet, Facebook, Instagram, Twitter and other social media have created habits inconsistent with our Orthodox Christian way of life and social interaction. Cyberspace is often not holy space. The amount of time we spend on our mobile phones and computers quickly alienates us from real quality time face to face with one another. Human interaction is more and more limited to Facebook and email, as face-to-face dialogue is being replaced with communication by way of text messaging.

Television, music, internet, video games, social media and other forms of information media today not only dominate the time of all too many, but they also often promote violence, selfishness, sexual promiscuity, criminal behavior and pleasure seeking self-indulgence of all kinds. Let us also be aware that the result of excessive time spent in these ways creates hyperactivity, impatience, nervousness,

and the need to be constantly entertained and stimulated. Any form of entertainment or information which does not lift up and edify the human person as created in the image of God is harmful and should be avoided.

As such, the grave sin of abortion is in the vast majority of cases committed for reasons of personal convenience. Where proponents of legal abortion once said that it should be “legal, safe and rare,” many, even some state legislatures, now advocate the right to abortion at any time up to the moment of birth, even when the child is viable outside the womb, and hold public celebrations in honor of this abomination. Some even suggest that a child who has been born is not safe, but is subject to the whim of the mother, perhaps with advice from a doctor.

The Assembly recognized that the Serbian Orthodox Church’s Dioceses and faithful in the United States have the task, duty and calling to speak prophetically to this society in which we live, to fearlessly and faithfully proclaim and defend the Truth as traditionally understood and practiced in Orthodox Christianity, and to lead all who will listen to the true life in Christ.

With regard to the same, the Assembly welcomes the convening of the Second Annual Ministerial to Advance Religious Freedom in Washington, DC, where, among others, the Orthodox Church has been given a prominent place to express our traditional faith and steadfast values in a contemporary context and freedom to practice the same. Bishop Irinej and the Reverend Dr. Vasilije Vranic, an expert in Canon Law, will be participating in this Ministerial.

On the Situation in Kosovo and Metohija

In this year 2019, when the Serbian Orthodox Church and the Serbian people commemorate 800 years of Autocephaly, the Assembly responded to the most recent developments in Kosovo and Metohija, the cradle of our religious and cultural patrimony, caused by the decision of Kosovo institutions to impose 100% tariffs on all goods coming from central Serbia, while permitting tariff free import for goods from Albania, as well as other restrictive measures of Pristina.

At the moment, the situation in northern Kosovo is seriously threatening to become alarming, especially for the poorest and socially vulnerable population, which has no way to be supplied either with more expensive goods from the south of Kosovo, and no way to travel outside the Province and bring goods, such as food and medicine, even in smaller quantities back to their homes. If this unsustainable situation continues, it will influence gradual displacement of the remaining Serbian population.

Discrimination based on the origin of goods, which reminds us of the darkest times in European history, is one of the most serious violations of human rights. Coupled with action of demonstrative ignition and destruction of Serbian goods from a few months ago, to which Pristina authorities did not react, there has been multifaceted deterioration of interethnic relations and security throughout the territory of Kosovo and Metohija with unforeseeable consequences.

The Assembly unanimously appeals, first and foremost, to the United States of America, and to the International Community, to rectify this existential crisis. This appeal does not constitute any interference in politics, but is above all a reaction of the Church to unprecedented abuses committed against innocent people, especially our faithful people in the north of Kosovo and Metohija, who are deprived of their basic freedoms and rights by restrictive measures. It is incumbent upon us to once again make our self-sacrificing efforts to ease the burden of our beloved Orthodox Christian brothers, sisters and children in Kosovo and Metohija, by offering them our generous support in these times of adversity.

The Assembly respectfully voices its appreciation to the Ambassadors in Pristina of the United States and Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe-OSCE, as well as the European Union, for taking to task and condemning the now seventh desecration of the Orthodox Cemetery in Lipljan.

On the Situation in Montenegro

The Government of Montenegro issued on May 16, 2019 a Draft Law on Freedom of Religion and Beliefs and Legal Status of Religious Communities. Predicated on a previous Draft Law of 2015, instead of primarily focusing on the restitution of seized property, it now prescribes a revolutionary nationalisation of temples and all religious structures constructed before 1918, along with their registration as state property. This effectively means that the Government of Montenegro is seizing ownership of the majority of all religious edifices. This is being done despite the fact that the borders of Montenegro at that time do not correspond to its present

borders.

Today, secular Montenegro, where churches and religious communities are separated from the state, wants to adopt a law on religious freedom, based on assumed autocephaly, which did not exist as such, even when the Metropolitanate of Montenegro was the State Church in Montenegro. Back then, the legal system of Montenegro distinguished between the property of the Church, the State and the Ruler.

This draft law was adopted by the Government without consulting and cooperating with churches and religious communities, non-religious organizations, non-governmental organizations and experts, and most definitely without consulting the Dioceses of the majority Orthodox Church.

The Assembly calls upon the Government of Montenegro to repeal its adoption, and to work with the Venice Commission, churches, religious communities and other interested parties, through normal cooperation to draft a religious freedom law that is legal and just, and in conformity with European standards.

The Assembly of the Serbian Orthodox Dioceses in the United States of America is truly one in spirit and an indivisible part of our Holy Serbian Orthodox Church, constantly striving to remain steadfast on the Way of St. Sava, as we call to mind the words of the Holy Apostle: "If one member suffers, all suffer together; if one member is honored, all rejoice together" (1 Cor. 12:26). Ever mindful of the same, as we celebrate together the 800 Years of the Autocephaly of the Serbian Orthodox Church: truly, endowed by God, and treasured by the People!

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