

Patriarch Irinej on the Church and State



In his interview given to the leading Belgrade newspaper “Politika” of the 29th September 2019 His Holiness expressed his opinion on the Church - State Relations:

In the past eight centuries, the relationship between the Church and the State has changed significantly. What is the situation today?

Naturally, we have no illusion that the time of harmonious relation – as it was in Byzantium or in Nemanjić’s Serbia – can return. But I also think that we, as the people who carry out responsible duties in the Church and in the State, should always look up to shining examples of Saint Sava and his brother Saint King Stefan the First-Crowned and their manner of thinking, so that we could make decisions that are undoubtedly beneficial to all the citizens, not just the faithful ones.

This looking up to them is not anachronistic at all, because the circumstances in which they lived and led the Serbian people, the Serbian Church and the State are very similar to today’s. For example, the conflict and competition between the East

and the West, the division of the Serbian people into several smaller states, and likewise. In these circumstances, Saint Sava and Saint King Stefan the First-Crowned solved the problems first of all by putting their trust and solemn faith in God, who gave them strength and wisdom, then by diplomatic skills, pragmatism, respect for different interests, and by building bridges both towards the East and towards the West, but with lasting spiritual commitment to the East, that is to Orthodoxy.

Such a commitment of theirs and their God-inspired skills in conducting state and church affairs improved Serbia both religiously, culturally and economically, so that the period of the Holy Nemanjić family is regarded as the golden age of the Serbian history. Naturally, Serbia is a secular state today. The Constitution defines the Republic of Serbia as a secular state in which churches and religious communities are separated from the State. The principle of cooperative separation and cooperation is appropriate to our time. Everyone does one's job, and when and where they need each other, they help each other. However, the legacy of the previous decades, when atheism was the state doctrine and the Church was marginalised and, in many things, banished from the public life, has not yet been overcome. Such a position of the Church, where it does not have the right to voice on the most important issues, which some advocate even today, I do not accept. The Church does not accept that. If it were not for the Church of Saint Sava, our people would not exist today. Some other people and peoples, rather than the Orthodox Serbs, would inhabit these beautiful landscapes today. Therefore, when deemed necessary, especially when it comes to vital issues and the identity of our people, the Church will always and decisively voice itself in such circumstances. No matter if someone likes it or not.

On the other hand, I would like to emphasize that the Church's relationship with the State, state authorities and authorities is in an upward trajectory. This is evidenced by the fact that the State has accepted, amongst other things, to commemorate and celebrate the great 800th anniversary with the Church, to assist our Church in the endangered areas, especially in Kosovo and Metohija. It is the same in our second republic – the Republic of Srpska. There too we have good cooperation between the Church and the State. Our bishops and priests testify so, and so do our people. And that is also good and to the benefit of our people, the State and the Church. Although we are in a festive atmosphere, I will have to mention the tragic situation in Montenegro, which is a classic Serbian country – no less than Kosovo and Metohija. That situation is tragic to the point of absurdity. Not only did the local government recognise Kosovo and Metohija as an independent state, thereby maintaining close relations with the Priština authorities, all of which have

been the soldiers of the terrorist army, but it also reaches out to Metohija from Cetinje and claims that it belongs to Montenegro, and not Serbia. In other words, with perfidious and systematic pressures, they obliterate the Serbian people in the Republic of Montenegro, and some circles at the same time emphasize territorial claims on Serbia.

Is the Serbian Church sufficiently present in social issues and attempts to provide concrete solutions or answers to the problems of today, starting from: emigration of young people, low birth rate, rise in domestic and any other type of violence, up to the ones posed as global challenges: the misuse of modern technologies and the violation of privacy, experimentation with biotechnologies, and environmental devastation.

There is a question of broader social engagement of the Serbian Church, that is, of establishing and maintaining balance between prayer and social activity. The Church is very active in solving some of the problems of the modern society. In my Diocese, in Belgrade as a megalopolis, through the Religious Charity Trust, the Church supplies thousands of the needy every day. It has its own health counselling centres, doctors giving free help, then psychological and marital counselling etc. The Church heals many young people, hundreds of them, of addiction, drug addiction, alcoholism...There are many other similar social services of the Church in other dioceses. We do not point that out. Individuals are also dealing with the problem of the misuse of modern technology, and we have priests who are real experts on such issues. But this is not the Church's primary role. Naturally, we do not neglect it; we strive to improve our social engagement. Some of the problems you have raised are posed both locally and globally, not only before the Serbian Church, but also before other social factors more and more rapidly and intensely. People have right to expect answers. The Church responds quickly and relatively easily to some of them, such as dignity, birth ethics, opposition to violence etc. thereat reaching for the existing answers within the treasury of its theology. Other questions must be considered more carefully, because they did not exist in the sphere of theology in the form in which they are being put before us today, and with the present meaning. In my opinion, the solution to the threatening world problems, which many see as apocalyptic: war and nuclear ones, ecological, climatic ones... and the like, can only be found in a clear and unambiguous return to the basic Christian values that civilization over the centuries has forgotten and from which it has deviated. And in no other way. We as an ancient Christian people have a rich tradition, bright examples from the past and beyond, saints, living monasteries and worship places, Chilandar – a true and immeasurable spiritual wealth that has been given to us: to be preserved and

used! And everything else – that is the faith of our fathers that has never been betrayed – will be added by the Lord Himself. With this faith, with the Lord and Saint Sava as helpers, all the issues of this world become different, easily solvable, and insignificant. It is totally unacceptable to think that we are alone, caught, that our problems are the biggest ones and unsolvable. The Church reveals this faith to its people every day, as it always did, by the Gospel it preaches.

- Source: spc.rs