

The Episcopal Council of the Orthodox Church in Montenegro demands the release of Bishop Joanikije and the other detained priests



The Episcopal Council of the Orthodox Church in Montenegro has issued the following statement regarding the arrest of Bishop Joanikije and seven other priests.

The statement reads:

The Day of Miraculous Saint Basil of Ostrog – His glory and mercy! – is, for centuries now, a day of a great gathering of the people in Montenegro. During the previous decades, it was a celebration day of all religious kinds in the city of Nikšić gathering a large number of believers. In particular, there has always been a public mass (perhaps like nowhere else among Christian Orthodox) prayer procession, which has been led by

the clergy on the streets of Niksic since 1996. On this year's Saint Basil Day people gathered as well, but this time spontaneously: first, in the Ostrog Monastery and then in city of Niksic with the blessing of St. Basil Himself, without the invitation of the bishop and the clergy.

Yesterday, Metropolitan Amfilohije, Bishop Joanikije and the clergy decided that, due to health measures, only a prayer should be held in the church, without a prayer procession outside the church. However, there were so many people that couldn't enter the church so they were standing around the church and into the streets. When they spontaneously moved into the traditional walk, there was no alternative for the clergy – neither before God nor before believers. Although the previous decision of the local clergy was to offer a prayer in the place of worship, people asked for something else. The clergy decided to stay with them precisely because of the concern that in any other way they would be left to be by themselves and possibly abused.

It was a decent and peaceful spiritual act. There wasn't a single tone of anything political within it. But then, when the prayer ceremony ended, police started acting. In the same manner which was on the scene during the entire period of the epidemic crisis, police kept acting selectively and abusively. By doing so, police showed up being a mere tool for political and ideological persecution of the Church.

Bishop Joanikije and seven other priests were arrested in a middle of the night in a way which was neither legal nor justified. This action of the central executive authority made the Church being not the culprit but a victim.

Once again, the Church is not against implementation of the temporary health measures, but it strongly opposes selective and discriminatory implementation of the same.

Disappointed by behaving of the Police Directorate, we demand an immediate release of the bishop and detained priests. It is clear to everyone that the detention of the clergy creates an atmosphere of persecution where the state demonstrates naked force inciting serious civil conflicts and violation of the dignity of a free citizen and believing man. At this moment, like all the people, we have no other thoughts or desires except for all detainees to be free. Without it, it is not possible to

go back to normal life and conduct further dialogue with the state authorities.

We call on the believers and all those who are offended by this vandal act of state authorities – to pray to God, to pray for unity, for reconciliation and multiplication of love, to pray for having peace among the brothers, for healing all the viruses – especially this worst one, virus of God-hatred and brother-hatred. We also pray for the freedom of those unjustly detained and injured.

There is no doubt that this time, as ever before, the truth and justice will rise up sitting on the side of the people gathered around Christ and His Holy Church.

As many times before, the Episcopal Council calls on all political leaders to refrain from any act of political abuse of the Church.