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Statement of the Episcopal Council of the Serbian Orthodox Church with the clergy and monkhood of Montenegro (June 11, 2020)



Podgorica | June 11, 2020

Dear Brothers and Sisters;
Dear Fellow Citizens;
Dear Friends,

Today is the birthday of the Church but also the second consecutive the Holy Trinity Day that we spend here in our country of Montenegro with anxiety, fearing that our nation's government will act upon its announced intention of the nationalisation of our Church. It is the act of straightforward confiscation of Church property and the placing of Church affairs and its organisation under the administration of the state. Such plans most directly and brutally violate both international legal standards and the Constitution of Montenegro together with the religious canons. That is why we stand here today in front of the Montenegrin and international public raising our voice as loyal citizens and committed believers.

It has been a year since all of us took the Holy Trinity Oath – the promise that we will defend our Holy Places. We have been striving for six months now to talk to the local authorities about amending the anti-constitutional and discriminatory “Law of Freedom of Religion”. With our humanity and our consciences – as well as through those international calls made by others – we seek this dialogue. We have listened for the last six months to the Government's verbal consent and alleged willingness to enter into negotiations: and what, really, do we have? We have procrastination and circumvention of dialogue on one hand and the obvious implementation of this “Anti-Law” on the other! In fact, this government – claiming it is for democracy – continues the work of the former communist authorities of Montenegro which killed Metropolitan Joannikije and more than a hundred Orthodox priests immediately after 1945 and then later sentenced Metropolitan Arsenije to eleven years in prison for “propaganda activities”, and demolished the church of Peter the Second Petrović and drove people out of Church...

Today, the most recent developments unequivocally tell us that the Government of Montenegro has practically given up on negotiations. It has been a month since we have awaited the answer of Prime Minister Duško Marković to the Metropolitan's letter to continue the negotiations – after the announced mitigation of health measures at the beginning of May 2020. We have not received the answer to this day!

A statement made by Mr. Blažo Šaranović, Director of the Property Administration Agency, on June 6th this year clearly told us that state authorities – ignoring the negotiations – have started implementing the discriminatory and widely protested Law on Freedom of Religion. By starting the implementation of the Law's provisions when they have been condemned by the public and professionals as discriminatory and anti-constitutional insults intelligence; it violates the spirit of elementary unspoken etiquette; and the basic human rights that are threatened by the very same Law. We expected the state authorities to refrain from any legal and

administrative actions regarding this Law until the negotiations are over. But not only was that not the case, but by its unilateral actions the state confirmed that it was not in favour of negotiations or reaching of agreement – which it claims to advocate – and instead continues to abuse domestic and international public opinion.

In addition, the Montenegrin government presently holds, arrests and expels our priests and believers – not distinguishing between bishops, priests and lay people – but rather creates unprecedented discrimination of the Church against all other subjects and public gatherings in Montenegro. It violates its own proscribed health measures on the streets of Montenegrin cities for political rallies (both at stormy state celebrations and at peaceful civic demonstrations), in shopping malls, discos, construction sites, and in state bodies. Just look at the crowds at present in front of public institutions that issue ID cards and personal documents – which are far larger than those at gatherings within and without Churches. Yet only our bishops, priests and believers are disturbed and penalised. During the official duration of the COVID-19 epidemic in Montenegro, health measures were selectively applied and were repressively directed only toward religious gatherings. Because of that, Metropolitan Amfilohije was arrested while Bishop Joanikije and other our priests were detained. For the first time in the history of Montenegro, some of our priests were expelled from the country. It should be emphasised that the highest of state officials have recently declared our clergy as “occupiers” and “enemies of the state”. The root of all this is the senseless and anachronistic aspiration of the present authorities to use a secular, multi-confessional and civic state to build its own “state church” at the beginning of the 21st century. They forget the proclamation of European revolutionaries of the 19th century which called for the separation of Church and State, and which clearly and loudly called for a “Free Church in a Free State” as well as the European Union’s efforts to liberate the former communist countries from their Bolshevik totalitarian legacy with its trampling of basic human rights.

We are obliged to inform all the international actors about the chronology of discrimination and application of double standards in Montenegro as well as to present the clear evidence that in our country the law is far from equal and the same for all. It is superfluous to talk about the fact that such a discriminatory implementation of health measures has made their existence and the purpose of their further existence meaningless. In addition to the great sacrifice and philanthropy shown by Montenegrin doctors in hospitals and clinics – to whom we, as the Church, helped with prayer and donations – we must point out that certain measures of the so-called health authorities are perceived as measures against the

Church, not against the sinister virus. Clearly, the Government uses the virus to affirm what for it is an even more dangerous disease – their love for limitless power as well as for nationalisation and property deprivation of both public and private subjects – but also against the Church and holy places and their sacred objects.

There are no reasons why we could expect a honest and well-intentioned attitude of the current regime towards the Church. On the contrary, it is clear to us what would happen to our Holy Places and Temples if this government were to reach them by any chance. The Government has proved and demonstrated its intention during these few days as well: the recent sale of shares in the company “St. Stefan Hotels”, which, unfortunately, owns the island temples illegally as well as the decision on selling the ancient mill belonging to the Holy Trinity Monastery in city of Pljevlja. Through its discriminatory actions, the Government also promotes religious intolerance which causes state of insecurity in those areas where the Orthodox Christians constitute a distinct minority of the local population. Let’s just remember the events on the Holy Place of Svač, than the removal of the Holy Cross in Martinovići place near city of Gusinje (the place of the remains of the Church demolished by the fascists in 1941) or yesterday’s unprecedented demolition of the residence of St. Basil of Ostrog on Briska Gora near city of Ulcinj using shamefully the assistance the of the Special Antiterrorist Unit where the couple of bare-handed nuns and priests have presented an armed threat to this Government. The strength of the state is not to be shown by force of arms and violence against its own citizens, but by democratic and uncorrupted institutions and the rule of law existing for all equally.

And now, here in front of the public and Montenegrin institutions, whose work in the first instance should be the good progress of this society through the renewal of justice, we announce that we continue our protests and peaceful prayers against this injustice. Prayer walks will start in all Montenegrin cities at June 14 this year, which is All Saints’ Day. Prayer walks will take the same streets and places where we could see other protests these days as well as state celebrations and ordinary walks of citizens, which are – thanks be to God – countless. We pledge our prayer walks shall be organised in accordance with the Law on public gatherings. And our liturgies go towards achieving four goals: peace, love, justice and brotherly reconciliation. And we will achieve that goal with The Lord’s help.

We call on members of the National Parliament and the Government of Montenegro – those who adopted this anti-Law as well as those who clearly intend to implement it forcibly and shamelessly – to give up their one-sidedness, and instead build a state that respects its communities through laws made in agreement and in

accordance with Constitution and God's justice. We call on them to respect fraternal harmony and reconciliation, for healing and not fratricide and – at the same time – as clergy and monks of the Serbian Orthodox Church of Montenegro, we say, confirming the oath made by the people of Montenegro:

We will never abandon our Sacred Places!