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Patriarch of Jerusalem: ‘For us Kosovo is the Serbian Jerusalem’



‘We wish the Serbs in Kosovo and Metohija the strength to endure and persevere in the parts they hold sacred, and to protect their shrines.’

In an exclusive interview for the Christmas double issue of Kurir, His Holiness Patriarch Theophilos III of Jerusalem spoke about his church’s position on Kosovo and Metohija, pointing out that the only canonical church in Montenegro is the Metropolitanate of Montenegro and the Littoral. Patriarch Theophilos also touched on the death of the Serbian Patriarch Irinej and Prince-bishop Amfilohije, the conflict between the Ecumenical Patriarchate and the Moscow Patriarchate, the importance of Saint Sava, as well as the fight against the coronavirus and the use of vaccines.

The Serbian Patriarch Irinej passed away recently, following the passing of Metropolitan Bishop of Montenegro and the Littoral Amfilohije. The Serbian Orthodox Church has thus suffered two heavy blows. How familiar

are you with the current situation in the Serbian Orthodox Church (SOC)? What is the relationship like between the Jerusalem Patriarchate and the SOC?

“The relationship between the Jerusalem Patriarchate and the SOC is brotherly, very respectful, and filled with Christian love. The fact that two dignitaries of the brotherly Serbian Orthodox Church now rest in peace means that the Serbian people have gained two intercessors before the throne of the Son of God, whose birth we are celebrating. I would not describe this as a blow, but rather as a blessing and a divine approval. I am sure that the Serbian Church will continue down the path travelled by the blessedly departed Patriarch Irinej and Metropolitan Bishop Amfilohije. And thus the church will continue its life with a new first-hierarch at its helm, and we pray that he be chosen.”

The Serbian people and its shrines in Kosovo have for years been under threat. What is your view on the secession of Kosovo and the position of the Serbs and other non-Muslim nations there?

“For us Kosovo and Metohija is the Serbian Jerusalem. As the blessedly departed Patriarch Irinej used to say, and before him the venerable Patriarch Pavle. Here in the Holy Jerusalem Patriarchate, which keeps the shrines of the Son of God, we wish for the Serbian people, wherever they may live, to be awash in the light of Christ’s birth bringing peace and love, and to overcome the perilous calamity of the coronavirus which has befallen all of humanity. We wish the Serbs in Kosovo and Metohija the strength to endure and persevere in the parts they hold sacred, and to protect their shrines in Kosovo and Metohija.”

Do you follow the situation in Montenegro? The contentious law on freedom of religion, prompting the faithful to walk in lities for months, has been amended, and the SOC property in Montenegro will be preserved.

“We follow the SOC-related developments in Montenegro closely. We are happy and offer our thanks to the Lord for the announced repeal of the law in question, which amounts to no more than pillaging of the SOC’s property in Montenegro. I would like to point out that we are glad that the law will soon be repealed, and we pray for peace, unity, and harmony among all Orthodox Christians. We think that this law is unjust to the SOC and its faithful in Montenegro.”

What is your position on the attempts of the so-called Montenegrin

Orthodox Church to acquire autocephaly?

“For us, the only canonical church in Montenegro is the Metropolitanate of Montenegro and the Littoral. No other Orthodox church in Montenegro has its foundation in the canon. Therefore, we don’t view the Montenegrin Orthodox Church either as canonical or as a church. It’s important to repeat yet again that the Metropolitanate of Montenegro and the Littoral, headed until recently by Metropolitan Bishop Amfilohije, and soon to elect a new metropolitan – when our sisterly SOC’s hierarchy makes the decision – is the only canonical church in Montenegro.”

Since the declaration of autocephaly of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church, a rift has opened up between the Ecumenical Patriarchate and the Moscow Patriarchate. Whose arguments do you support and how damaging is this situation to all of Orthodox Christendom?

“As the Patriarch of Jerusalem and keeper of Christ’s Tomb and the sacred sites of the Holy Land, I pray for the unity of all Orthodox Christians. My answer is clear – I pray for the unity of all Orthodox Christians, and I wouldn’t want to comment in a way that might affect the unity of Orthodox Christians and of Orthodox Christendom in general. It is important for all Orthodox Christians to be part of one holy, ecumenical, and apostolic church. Those who understand what a holy, ecumenical, and apostolic church means will understand well my answer to your question.”

A year ago you received a portrait of Saint Sava as a gift from the Serbian delegation. Saint Sava went on two pilgrimages to Christ’s Tomb in Jerusalem.

“I did indeed. I am always happy to see Serbs come to bow before the shrines of the Jerusalem Patriarchate. I gladly see them and give them my blessing, as the Serbian nation is blessed and long-suffering. As Saint Sava adds further ties between Jerusalem and the Serbian people, I was happy to receive that icon, as I am to see any group from Serbia visit the Jerusalem Patriarchate.”

Early next year the construction of the Cathedral Church of Saint Sava – which is already considered as one of the most beautiful Orthodox churches – will finally be completed. Are you planning to come and visit this edifice?

“We certainly want to come to Serbia, and we want you to come to the grounds of the holy church of Jerusalem. The most important thing now is for me to wish for the Serbian people blessings for the coming Christmas, so that they may celebrate this festival in peace and love, bearing the blessing of the Son of God. The Serbian people are in my thoughts and prayers, and in this way we are together. There will be time and opportunity for visits.”

Your Christmas message to the faithful in Serbia?

“In lieu of a message – and there are many in both your questions and my answers – let me send once more the blessing of the Grotto of Bethlehem, wherein Jesus Christ, the Son of God, was born, bringing to us great joy and blessing. I too send blessings to the Serbian people and the faithful of the Orthodox Church, and wish them all good things from Christ, the Son of God.”

‘God blesses any and all medicines. The vaccine will help save lives.’

The coronavirus has changed the entire world. What is your view on this calamity and what do you think about the vaccine as a way to fight the Covid-19 pandemic?

“I am in favour of anyone who wishes to take the vaccine taking it. The vaccine will not decisively defeat this calamity that has befallen the world, but it will certainly help save lives and mitigate the perilous effects the coronavirus has on humanity. If we were to oppose vaccines as medicines, then we can certainly question the use of any medications when we fall ill. God blesses any and all medicines that help human beings. So, if you are asking me whether to take the vaccine – yes, by all means. The vaccine or any other medication that can contribute to human life as the loftiest shrine given to us by God.”

— kurir.rs / Aleksandar Đondović