

## **NEW MONTENEGRIN GOV'T AWARDS BISHOP FOR PROTECTING HOLY SITES**



This time last year, the faithful of the Serbian Orthodox Church in Montenegro, facing persecution from their own government, were taking to the streets by the hundreds of thousands several times a week to defend their religious rights and protect their holy sites from the state's greedy eye.

Now, under the new government that came into power in early December, the Church is being thanked and awarded for standing up for itself under the previous government.

On Monday the 22nd, Minister of Justice, Human Rights, and Minorities Vladimir Leposavić gave His Grace Bishop Joanikije of Budimlja and Nikšić a state award "For the tireless work and honest and courageous struggle for the protection of the holy places, as well as for the protection and affirmation of the universal rights and freedoms of all citizens of Montenegro," reports the Metropolis of Montenegro.

His Grace was appointed temporary administrator of the Metropolis following the

repose of the greatly-beloved and hugely-influential Metropolitan Amfilohije on October 30, who personally led the faithful in many cross processions last year and whose efforts contributed to the election of the new government that immediately ceased the persecution against the Church.

Not only did Bp. Joanikije march together with Met. Amfilohije, but he also faced personal harassment from the state. His Grace was detained on May 12 for 3 days along with the priests of his diocese following the procession in honor of St. Basil, who is especially revered by the Serbian Orthodox faithful. The arrest sparked a wave of protests throughout the country, with believers taking to the streets to express their disagreement with the arbitrariness of the authorities.

Upon his release, Bp. Joanikije was festively greeted by hundreds of believers in the city of Berane.

Minister Leposavić also gave His Grace a symbolic copy of the governmental gazette of January 26, 2021, which published the Law “On Amendments to the Law on Freedom of Religion or Belief and the Legal Status of Religious Communities,” which removed the clauses that granted the state the authority to seize property from the Orthodox Church.

The scandalous law was initially adopted in late 2019, when President Milo Đukanović’s party still held majority power in Parliament. In essence, it afforded the state the authority to seize 650 properties from the Serbian Orthodox Church and claim them for its own.

The new Parliament adopted the necessary amendments to the law on December 29, ending the persecution of the Serbian Church and making all religious bodies equal in the eyes of the law, though President Đukanović exercised his veto power and returned the law to Parliament for a new vote. The law was then adopted a second time in mid-January, after which Đukanović was constitutionally-bound to sign the amendments into law, thus ending the persecution he and his coalition had initiated.

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# Saint Joseph the Hesychast

