

Not a schismatic, but an impostor

The question of Miras Dedeic and the “Montenegrin Orthodox Church”

By Tihomir T. Popovic

Establishing and maintaining Church unity was one of the great problems of Christianity throughout the centuries. On the Balkan Peninsula this still seems to be the case, as is clearly shown with the matter of the so-called “Montenegrin Orthodox Church” (“MOC”). As if the existence of this self styled organization were not a considerable problem in itself, there is also another great problem in its reception throughout the Western world. This is clearly illustrated by the article “The conflict in Montenegrin Orthodoxy”, presented by the European Stability Initiative (ESI).

In the ESI text it is stated that Metropolitan Amfilohije of Montenegro, who belongs to the Serbian Patriarchate, considered the “MOC” as both “heretical” and “schismatic”. These attributes, which the said Metropolitan probably never used literally in connection with the “MOC”, could in this case even be interpreted as a compliment:

- A “Schism” signifies the splitting of a part of the Church from its main body, without the consent of the latter. However, the leader of the “MOC”, Mr. Miras Dedeic, never was a part of the Serbian Orthodox Church (SOC), which was canonically recognized as the Orthodox Church on the territory in question by the Ecumenical Patriarchate (v. Tomos of the 24. October 1922) and by all other Orthodox Patriarchates. On the home page of the “MOC”, Mr. Dedeic proudly states the fact that he was never a priest of the SOC. Also, Mr. Dedeic was never a cheirotonized bishop in any canonical way: the cheirotony was accomplished by the service of the un-canonical leader of a fraction of the Bulgarian Orthodox Church.
- “Heresy” basically signifies, as is well known, a false ecclesiastical doctrine. What Mr. Dedeic is spreading is however not a doctrine, but merely a political message: That the “MOC” is an autocephalous Church and that it has the right to the property of the Metropolitanate of Montenegro of the SOC. The latter fact is indeed very much emphasized in the website presentation of the “MOC”.

By using the said terms, the authors of the ESI article gave – probably unwillingly – an almost intellectual dimension to a movement of a completely different nature. The “MOC” is from the ecclesiastical point of view a purely political organization, founded and lead by laymen.

Without using the arguments of the SOC, which one would be inclined to interpret as biased, the canonical illegitimacy of the “MOC” can be clearly demonstrated by quoting from its own website presentation. There it is stated, that the “MOC” was “renewed” by the “free will of the Montenegrins” in 1993. It is obvious that this “renewal” of the supposedly autocephalous “MOC” was nothing but an act of a group of laymen. Much as we value the will of the people nowadays, we must recognize that a Church is not a state and that the criteria that are used to legitimize the latter may not be essentially relevant to justifying the former. It is but clear that a foundation – or a “renewal” – of an Orthodox Church needs more than a group of interested laymen. When the Serbian Orthodox Church itself was founded in its present form (1920), its leaders – all of them canonical bishops – took great pains to obtain the mentioned ecclesiastical recognition from the Ecumenical Patriarchate in Constantinople.

The Christian Church as a whole was, as we all know, not founded by an acclamation of people, but by Christ himself. We Christians – the Orthodox and the Roman Catholics at least – believe that He chose His Apostles and that the bishops continue their mission. It is therefore essential, that the legitimate – i.e. canonical – succession of the bishops is continued and respected. Where this is not the case, there can be no Church. The Orthodox and the Roman Catholics would agree on this, however differently they may see the role and the position of the Bishop of Rome.

Far from being a bishop, Mr. Dedeic is from the ecclesiastical point of view not even a priest. He had belonged to the clergy of the Ecumenical Patriarchate (Constantinople) and was laicized in 1997 by Patriarch Bartholomew (Vartlomaïos) I. In the following year Mr. Dedeic was even excommunicated by the same Patriarch who is a *primus inter pares* among the patriarchs of the Orthodox Church, a fact that is undisputed, even by Mr. Dedeic himself. The excommunication is further mentioned in the biography of Mr. Dedeic on his website presentation. It is clear that such a gentleman cannot then found or “renew” an “autocephalous” Orthodox Metropolitanate. The “MOC” is therefore not recognized by any of the canonical Orthodox Churches in the world.

Whilst the present situation in the “MOC” is all but Orthodox or canonical, their own interpretation of history is likewise problematic. The authors of the said ESI article quoted the opinion of the “MOC” stating the Metropolitanate of Montenegro had been an autocephalous (fully independent) church before it was abolished by the decree of the Yugoslav King Alexander I in 1920. Whilst it would be naive to assume that the foundation of a united Orthodox Church on the territory of the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats and Slovenes (later Kingdom of Yugoslavia) after the First World War could have been completely devoid of any political implications, it is totally erroneous to assert that such a foundation was merely a political act of a King. The unification of the Orthodox Churches, which had hitherto existed in the Kingdoms of Serbia and Montenegro as well as in the Austro-Hungarian Empire, was accomplished in a canonical way. The Church of Montenegro actually took an active part in it. Indeed, its Metropolitan, Mitrofan Ban, was president of the Central Council of Bishops of the United Serbian Orthodox Church. The Ecumenical Patriarchate recognized the unification of the Serbian Orthodox Church by the said “Tomos” (Bull) of 1922, the original of which can be seen in the Archives of the Holy Synod of the SOC in Belgrade.

Finally, one of the favourite arguments of the “MOC” is that the (Serbian) Patriarchate of Pec, to which the Orthodox Church in Montenegro had belonged, was abolished by the Ottomans and given over to the Ecumenical Patriarchate 1766. According to the “MOC”, the Metropolitanate of Montenegro then automatically became autocephalous. This is obviously illogical: Even if the abolishing of the Patriarchate of Pec by a Moslem Sultan were canonically legitimate – which can hardly have been the case – then the Metropolitanate of Montenegro would, after 1766, have belonged to the Ecumenical Patriarchate, no matter how independent the Metropolitans of Montenegro actually were. Canonically, the Metropolitanate of Montenegro continued to be part of the abolished Patriarchate of Pec. Its unification with it in the year 1920 and the creation of the modern Serbian Orthodox Patriarchate was the actual “renewal” of the Orthodox Church in the Region.

The problem of the Western reception of the situation in Montenegro – represented also by the ESI article – is that it is trying to treat the organization lead by Mr. Dedeic equally: An organization that is not recognized by a single canonical church in the world, including the legitimate Serbian Orthodox Church, which is recognized by all of them, and a valued dialogue partner to the Roman Catholic Church as well as the protestant churches. Let us

imagine for one moment that a group of laymen decided to proclaim an alternative Roman Catholic Archbishop, of Mainz for example, against the legitimate one appointed by the Pope. Never would the Western media present the former as an equal antagonist of the latter. Unfortunately this is exactly what is being done in the case of the “MOC”, in spite of all obvious arguments. A discourse has its own rules and one of the invisible and probably not consciously constructed rules of the Western discourse on Serbia seems to be that (“after all that happened in the 1990s”) it is hardly possible that a Serbian institution is undoubtedly right and its opponent undoubtedly wrong, even when this institution is the Church and the problem not primarily of an ethnic, but of a canonical nature. However, in the case of Mr. Dedic all arguments point out that he is not an alternative to the SOC, nor is he a schismatic or a heretic. Mr. Dedic is merely an impostor. It is gratifying to know that even the Montenegrin government seems to be slowly grasping this fact. It would present a considerable contribution to understanding the situation in the Balkans if the Western media would also try and do the same.

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Tihomir Popovic is Lecturer at the University of Music and Drama in Hanover and Vice-President of the Diocesan Council and Executive Board of the Serbian Orthodox Diocese of Central Europe (Germany, Austria, Switzerland and Liechtenstein). He is also Ph.D. candidate at the Humboldt University in Berlin and bears a scholarship of the Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung.