

STATEMENT

Regarding the Episcopal Council for North, Central and South America, the St. Sava Serbian Orthodox School of Theology, Constitutional Matters and Draft Child Protection Policies and Procedures

To the Very Reverend and Reverend Priests and Deacons, Venerable Monastics, the Members and Parishioners of the Church-School Congregations and Mission Parishes of the Serbian Orthodox Dioceses in the United States of America

*For God is not a God of confusion but of peace,
as in all the churches of the saints
(1 Corinthians 14:33)*

Beloved Clerics, Brothers and Sisters in Christ,

It has come to our attention that misinformation continues to circulate on the Internet, related to the Church Assembly-Sabor which was held in July 2019. Out of our pastoral love and concern for our faithful Clergy and Laity, ever mindful of the Scriptural adage, you shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free (John 8:32), we state the following to liberate you of your doubt:

The Episcopal Council for North, Central and South America

- First, as we clearly set forth in the “Statement” that we issued on August 1, 2019 (https://serborth.org/news_190805_1), the Episcopal Council of the Serbian Orthodox Church for North, Central and South America continues to exist and is comprised of the following Bishops: Longin of New Gracanica-Midwestern American, Mitrophan of Canada, Maxim of Western America, Irinej of Eastern America, and Kirilo of Buenos Aires and South-Central America. Any suggestion that the Bishops of Canada and South America have been excluded from this Episcopal Council is simply false.

The St. Sava Serbian Orthodox School of Theology

- Second, among its many functions, this five-member Episcopal Council is also in charge of and continues to supervise the work of the St. Sava Serbian Orthodox School of Theology (Libertyville-Third Lake). At the recent Church Assembly-Sabor held in July 2019, a report regarding the St. Sava School of Theology was presented and discussed at length (https://serborth.org/news_190728_1). The report included mention of some improvements to the overall life of the School, such as the establishment of a Trusteeship Council to assist the Dean in administrative and financial matters.

Further study on all matters concerning the School, including its compliance with the laws and regulations of the State of Illinois, its accreditation and future, will be done by the above-described five-member Episcopal Council in coordination/tandem with the Holy Synod of Bishops in Belgrade. The Holy Synod may send a Commission to evaluate the School. In preparation for the visit of the Commission, the Episcopal Council is consulting educational, legal, financial and other relevant experts to objectively assess the School without any pre-conceived agenda, so that the Episcopal Council can make authoritative recommendations to the Holy Synod.

Constitutional Matters

- Third, with respect to our current and long-standing (not new!) Constitution and related governing documents, we once again ask you, our dear spiritual children, to carefully read our Statement issued on August 1 (https://serborth.org/news_190805_1), which explains the arrondation (limitation in territorial scope) of the existing Constitution to only the territory of the USA (decided by the Holy Assembly of Bishops at its meeting in May 2018) and how this territorial arrondation of the Constitution resulted in the changing of our constitutional title, which now reflects the de facto reality of the actual territorial jurisdiction of this document, the United States of America.

We again want to remind everyone that the holy canons of our Church leave certain decisions to the Bishops alone. One of those decisions is changes to the territory of a diocese. Only a diocesan bishop can propose a territorial change to his diocese and only the Holy Assembly of Bishops can allow and approve any changes. We remind everyone of the recent territorial changes which occurred in 2009, when final administrative unity was achieved. Diocesan boundaries were changed (e.g. the Metropolitanate of Chicago and Libertyville was created and then abolished), and all of these changes were done by the Bishops and these changes then automatically became part of our Constitution. Those territorial changes were not done by a vote at the Church Assembly—Sabor, but were proposed by the affected Bishops and were then approved by decisions of the Holy Assembly of Bishops. That is exactly what has taken place regarding our Constitution and related governing documents.

Draft Child Protection Policies and Procedures

- Fourth, at the recent Church Assembly—Sabor in July 2019, there was an educational safety presentation for Clergy and Laity on the current liability issues facing all religious organizations in the USA, including our three USA Dioceses. The focus of the presentation was on child protection policies and procedures that are being developed and implemented by many religious organizations and denominations, as a direct response to new State and Federal legislation, regulations and caselaw concerning child sexual molestation and abuse claims. The Episcopal Council has been working with insurance and legal experts in enhancing our current Diocesan policies and procedures.

These enhanced policies and procedures are still in draft form and have not yet been promulgated/adopted by the Episcopal Council. During the educational safety presentation at the Sabor, mention was made that many US States, the once-sacred “Priest-Penitent Privilege” has been abolished. In plain language what that means is that, in these States, all clergy (Orthodox, Catholic, Protestant, etc.) are now required to immediately report any knowledge of sexual molestation of a minor, including but not limited to knowledge gained during the course of the confession. We are told that many more US States are also considering abolishing the Priest-Penitent Privilege and we expect that judicial rulings will also further erode the Priest-Penitent privilege in child abuse situations.

The Episcopal Council is greatly troubled by the abolition/erosion of the Priest-Penitent Privilege – however, the Episcopal Council has no choice but to come to terms with this tragic change and we must develop a coherent and canonically correct Orthodox

Christian response. We have invited and look forward to receiving concrete proposals from our own Serbian Orthodox clergy and laity (as well as from our sister Orthodox Christian jurisdictions and other Christian denominations which have the Holy Mystery of Confession), on how we as Serbian Orthodox Hierarchs should respond and deal with this tragic development and change to US law.

Internet “Postings” and “E-Petitions”

- Last, the unsigned and anonymous internet “postings” and “e-petitions” attacking the Episcopal Council, the Central Council and their working committees, particularly the Legal Risk and Compliance Committee, are wholly unfounded and should be ignored.

Knowing that the Church “is in the world, but it is not of this world”, we seek the expertise of many subject-matter experts in dealing with central/national, diocesan and local parish issues on a regular basis. The experts we consult are not limited to legal experts, but we also regularly work with financial, educational, insurance and other experts. Unsubstantiated, and unattributed attacks on the members of any of our expert committees is unfair and unethical, because these committees work at our request to help us protect our Dioceses, parishes, monasteries and other institutions in the USA.

With respect to the Legal Risk and Compliance Committee, we regularly ask our lawyers (who volunteer all of their time!) to identify and help develop canonically permissible responses to the risks imposed by the multiple legal systems that our Church confronts in the United States. The sole purpose of this committee is to advise the Episcopal Council and the Central Council with regard to strategies and actions that will protect the Bishops, Clergy, Laity, and assets of the Dioceses of the Serbian Orthodox Church in the United States. Rather than being attacked, we must all thank our lawyers for the countless volunteer hours they spend protecting our Church! As the Church of Christ, we are in the House of God, but the building of the House of God, which is the Church, is still in progress and continuing.

Therefore, we call on you, the faithful children of Saint Sava to:

- REFRAIN from falling victim to these deceptive and ill-intended internet “postings” and “e-petitions”, and from becoming signatories; and
- AVOID circulating or, God-forbid, signing your own name where you do not know the name of the author of an article (or a posting, or a document), or where you do not have personal knowledge of the “facts”, which are put forth, nor the intended end use of the petition, of your signature and of your contact information.

We further remind you that “petitioning” of any kind within the Holy Community of God is in direct contradiction to canons, laws, teachings and church-hierarchical structure of our Serbian Orthodox Church. Moreover, a petition is a mirror of the ethos and, in essence is a mainstay, of Protestantism and totally non-Orthodox in character. We again invite our Clergy and Laity to communicate any and all concerns, suggestions or comment on any of the issues described above directly to us, your Diocesan Bishops. As the community of the people of God in history moving on a path towards the Heavenly Kingdom, we continue to embrace that open dialogue with all.

September 7, 2019
IN LIBERTYVILLE

Your intercessors before Christ,

LONGIN, Bishop of New Gracania-Midwestern America

MAXIM, Bishop of Western America

IRINEJ, Bishop of Eastern America