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BULGARIA: 80th anniversary of the rescue of Bulgarian Jews

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Patriarchal and Synodal message

By Holy Synod of the Bulgarian Orthodox Church



The European Times (13.03.2023) – On the tenth of March, the institutions of the Bulgarian state and our public commemorate the day when, in 1943, in the darkest hours of the Second World War, when its outcome was not at all clear, with its collective efforts, our people stopped the deportation of our

compatriots of Jewish origin, the Bulgarian Jews, to the Nazi death camps.

The role of the Bulgarian Orthodox Church in this work has never been forgotten and has always been emphasized, especially by the Jewish community, for which we are grateful. Therefore, there is no need, and it is not appropriate for the Church to point out its merits, even less for the fact that in a certain, difficult historical moment, it acted in the only way possible for it, namely – in harmony with the commandments of the Orthodox faith .

The truth is that when, on the night of March 9-10, 1943, Metropolitan Stefan sought an urgent meeting with the state leadership to express the Church's disapproval of the impending deportation, and Metropolitan Kirill entered the imprisoned Jews at the school in Plovdiv and told the guards, that if they were taken he would go with them, these were not isolated acts of civil position, but the result of a systematic, firmly held line of the Holy Synod. In accordance with the Christian teaching and the thousand-year-old practice of tolerance, empathy and love, the Bulgarian Orthodox Church has always rejected any form of anti-Semitism, racial or religious hatred towards the representatives of the Jewish community, as well as in principle towards every person. As early as the adoption of the anti-Semitic Law for the Protection of the Nation, in the minutes of the Holy Synod of 1940, the warning words of the Bulgarian bishops can be heard: "The Bulgarian Orthodox Church, which carries out among our people the saving truth and commandment of our Savior that we are all sons of a heavenly Father, cannot fail to draw attention to the factors responsible that this bill, in some of its decrees against the Jewish-Israelites, contains provisions which cannot be considered just... Every man and every nation must protect from dangers, but in this justified pursuit, injustice and violence against others should not be allowed".

And more: "The question of our attitude towards the Jews is clear. We are Christians, and as bishops of the Holy Bulgarian Church, we cannot but stand on the ground of the Holy Gospel and Christ's teaching about the equality of all people before God, regardless of origin, race and culture. Therefore, we must stand up for the Jews."

The Holy Synod declared this position as early as 1940, and it found its most vivid expression in the action of the ninth against the tenth of March 1943, as a result of which not a single Jew living on the territory of the canonical diocese of the Bulgarian Exarchy at that time, was not sent to extermination to the death camps.

This action would not have been possible if the Bulgarian people had not been churched, if they had not been firmly united around their metropolitans, if the voice of the Church had not been so strong, because it was the voice of the faithful, Christ-loving and philanthropic Orthodox Bulgarian people of God. Not someone else, namely the Bulgarian Orthodox Church, has nurtured in its people the strength and determination to oppose evil – qualities that are a manifestation of their belonging to the Christian faith and its values. The power of faith was demonstrated by the people, led by the bishops of their Orthodox Church, in the frosty days of 1943, and with their faith they saved their compatriots – Jews. People's power is impossible without the Orthodox faith, and this is a very important lesson that we must learn for ourselves today from the case of the tenth of March.

We cannot but mention with deep sadness that, despite this, more than 11 thousand Jews from neighboring territories, temporarily under Bulgarian secular administration, were still taken and many of them died in the flames of the Holocaust. We mourn for them. We regret that the Exarchate did not have the strength and opportunities to take care of the Jews in those dioceses that were forcibly separated from its body 30 years

earlier, in the same way as for the Jews in Bulgaria. We are sincerely sorry!

Usually, on this day, the names of only some of the metropolitans, who especially manifested themselves in the holy and philanthropic work of saving the Bulgarian Jews in 1943, are mentioned. However, we are obliged to recall the names of all worthy bishops who were members of the Holy Synod of the Bulgarian Exarchy, who were gathered in the name of Christ and God was among them and blessed their work, and the Holy Life-giving Spirit dictated their decisions. These are: Metropolitan Neofit of Vidin – Deputy Chairman of the Holy Synod, Metropolitan Stefan of Sofia, Metropolitan Mihail of Dorostol and Cherven, Metropolitan Paisiy of Vrachan, Metropolitan Boris of Nevrokop, Metropolitan Sophronius of Turnovo, Metropolitan Yosif of Varna and Preslav, Metropolitan Kirill of Plovdiv, Metropolitan Philaret of Lovech, Metropolitan Evlogii of Sliven and Metropolitan Kliment of Stara Zagora.

Eternal and blessed be the memory of these ancestors of ours! Let their work be an inspiration and an example to us when we have to face contemporary manifestations of xenophobia, anti-Semitism or human hatred of any nature and against anyone. Their faith is our faith, their strength is our strength, their convictions are our convictions. The Bulgarian Orthodox Church will always educate its pious and Christ-loving people in love for neighbor, tolerance, solidarity and humanity. It has been so since Bulgaria became an Orthodox Christian state and, as far as it depends on us, it will be so here forever and ever.

May God forgive our archpastors who died blessedly, who helped save the Jews in the exarchian dioceses on the territory of Bulgaria and thus protected the dignity of the Orthodox Church and preserved the honor of our Motherland.

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