

RUSSIA: Roman Catholic leader raises concern that his people may be treated like Jehovah's Witnesses

General secretary of Conference of Catholic Bishops of Russia criticizes ban of Jehovah's Witnesses

SKGNews (02.05.2017) – <http://bit.ly/2qLcYUh> – The Catholic church of Russia condemned the decision of the Supreme Court banning the Jehovah's Witnesses and it warned that this step increases the worries relative to new restrictions with respect to Catholics' rights.

"Churches such as ours do not regard Jehovah's Witnesses to be Christian and we do not engage in dialogue with them, but we must distinguish theological problems from legal rights," declared the general secretary of the Conference of Catholic Bishops of Russia, Monsignor Igor Kovalevsky.

"The situation in Russia now is complex and difficult. Catholics have very strong worries that we also may be faced, if not with persecution then at least with new manifestations of discrimination and restrictions of our freedom of religious confession," he said.

By the decision of the Supreme Court of 20 April, Jehovah's Witnesses were called an "extremist organization" and sentenced to confiscation of the property belonging to this organization throughout the country.

As Msgr. Kovalevsky reported to a correspondent of the news agency "Catholic News Service," it is not clear to the Catholic church which actions may be considered "extremist," adding that all religious groups have the right "to exist and

to develop in the Russian federation,” if they do not violate the law. “The law should be fairly applied to all A law may be severe, but it is the law as before. I think that the government is obliged to give to everyone a clear explanation about why this group was liquidated,” Msgr. Kovalevsky said.

The Jehovah’s Witnesses were registered in Russia in 1991 and reregistered in 1999, but they have been subjected to regular arrests and police raids for passing out leaflets and witnessing “from door to door.” Their members have been subjected to attack and their property has been damaged by vandals.

A ruling of the Supreme Court established fines of up to 10,700 USA dollars and up to 10 years incarceration for anyone who will be involved in the activity of the Jehovah’s Witnesses.

Msgr. Kovalevsky said that although there are no signs that the Catholic church will be treated as the Jehovah’s Witnesses were, “the government should assure citizens that freedom of conscience remains intact.”

“Jehovah’s Witnesses have the same right to protect their dignity and faith as do other citizens,” he said. “Although protecting human rights is not our main task, the Catholic church defends the right of each person to freedom of conscience.” (tr. by PDS, posted 2 May 2017)

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