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# **Orthodoxy on the eve of a split or secession from Moscow?**

By Willy Fautré, Human Rights Without Frontiers

HRWF (27.02.2023) - Lithuanian Orthodoxy maybe on the eve of splitting into two branches: on the one hand, the Lithuanian Orthodox Church (LOC/ MP) subordinate to Moscow Patriarchate and on the other hand, a dissenting group joining the Patriarchate of Constantinople.

### ***Dissenting priests leave the LOC/ MP***

On 17 February, the Patriarchate of Constantinople agreed to accept the membership request of five priests of the Lithuanian Orthodox Church / Moscow Patriarchate (LOC/ MP) who had been defrocked by Metropolitan Innokenty of Vilnius and Lithuania in June 2022, on the alleged grounds that those clerics divided the community and neglected their vows and other canons.

The internal conflict began to unfold in spring 2022, when the LOC/ MP Metropolitan Innokentiy raised for discussion the question of whether Patriarch Kirill should be remembered and prayed for in religious services after he had clearly supported the invasion of Ukraine by the Russian army. A number of clerics who opposed prayers for the head of the Russian Orthodox Church (ROC) were in the minority and refused to abide by the decision of the majority. After being defrocked, they surprisingly appealed to the Patriarch Bartholomeus of Constantinople for the recognition of their priestly status and to be taken under his wings.

The LOC/ MP is one of nine traditional religious communities in Lithuania. It has the title of a Metropolia and is fully part of the Patriarchate of Moscow and All Russia. It has the status of an ordinary bishopric within the ROC. Its finances, personnel and practices are determined and controlled by the ROC, although many of its leaders have been strikingly pro-Lithuanian.

With Russia's war in Ukraine, many Lithuanians believe they should have the chance to worship in churches that are not subordinate to Moscow. Approximately 20,000 Orthodox live in Lithuania on a permanent basis, and another 18,000 on temporary work permits.

### ***Request of Metropolitan Innokenty for autonomy***

In March 2022, Metropolitan Innokenty of Vilnius and Lithuania publicly said he opposed the special military operation of Russia and stressed that he and Patriarch Kirill had "different political views."

He demanded Patriarch Kirill for greater autonomy and self-administration.

This would essentially mean bringing the status of the Orthodox Church in Lithuania in line with reality, as its hierarchs actually make all decisions independently today, Metropolitan Innokenty said.

"Our church does not pertain to Moscow or Russia but to Lithuania. All of its administrative decisions are made in Lithuania. In the complete absence of any financial ties with the Moscow Patriarchate, we're preserving the canonical and prayerful connection to the Mother Church and remain devoted to the traditions of Russian Orthodox piety," he said

The Synod of the Russian Orthodox Church accepted his request for consideration and decided on 27 May 2022 to set up a commission to address the Lithuanian issue.

Metropolitan Innokenty of Vilnius and Lithuania has not received any response from that commission, hereby increasing the number of those in the LOC/ MP who want complete separation and autocephaly.

*Metropolitan Innokenty. Credit: Saint-Petersburg Theological Academy*

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