

## **Bottom-up Initiatives: What Impact Has the Law on Grassroots Dialogue Initiatives?**

The title of our panel includes two parts connected with “initiative” – bottom-up and grassroots. The first of them may concern not only the topic of dialogue between religious groups, but also the involvement of the local authorities. I consider that the adopted law has already given an emotional impulse for seizure of parishes of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church. A recent and sensational example of such an aggression at the grassroots level is the seizure of the cathedral in the city of Cherkassy. It took place on October 17, less than two weeks ago.

This is an outstanding example that in addition to the law we discuss, we should keep in mind the mood that was created through aggressive informational campaign in preparation for adopting the law. Such changes of belonging under pressure and with physical violence do not need confirming signs of affiliation and other procedures that are formulated in the law we discuss.

In Cherkassy we have an example of the merger of the local authority and the structures of the OCU in establishing the so-called civil religion. In their struggle against the UOC, the ideologues of the OCU demand their own exclusivist status. From their perspective only they are a genuine Ukrainian church congregation, and their competitors are pro-Russian collaborators without any exceptions.

What opposes this tendency within the UOC is a kind of Pharisaic position. The biblical Pharisees defended the purity of the faith and fulfillment of the law in its accuracy and completeness. Radicals from the UOC also refuse to recognize any signs of ecclesia or “Una sancta” in the competitive church structure. This includes the non-recognition of the key sacraments – baptism and Eucharist.

I suppose that Ukraine needs to abandon these two extremes of exclusivism of both hierarchical structures and to search for a “middle way” that proposes the coexistence of both church congregations. Therefore, I would like to tell you about the “Sophia Brotherhood” initiative. You can learn about its activities from its website, which is supported in both Ukrainian and English (<https://sofiyske-bratstvo.org/en/>). This website explicitly states its main goal: “The Brotherhood’s primary objective is to fully promote inter-Orthodox dialogue in order to achieve unity of Ukrainian Orthodoxy, consolidate efforts and support initiatives of Orthodox Christians aimed at its development”.

It is worth noting that the members of the board of the Brotherhood are elected according to an equal quota from three groups – the UOC, the OCU and the Ecumenical

Patriarchate of Constantinople. Thus, a third party external to Ukraine is actively engaged. Most of the board members are clergy, but three of 12 members are laypeople, including two women. From the Ecumenical Patriarchate, the board quota includes citizens of Ukraine who were forced to leave the country because of the war.

The Brotherhood was officially founded only ten months ago, in last February (cf. news “Constituent meeting of the public organization ‘Sofia Brotherhood’ was held”, <https://sofiyske-bratstvo.org/en/constituent-meeting-of-the-public-organization-sofia-brotherhood-was-held/>). However, many of its members have worked for reconciliation in Ukrainian Orthodoxy long before.

On the part of representatives of the current UOC, this is a group of so-called **signatories**, it means clergy and laypeople who, after the beginning of the full-scale war in 2022, signed appeals to Metropolitan Onufriy of Kyiv with the aim to encourage the church leadership to leave the Moscow Patriarchate.

A significant part of the Brotherhood’s members from the OCU belong to the **“10 Theses” group**. This was a group that signed a list of theses in the name of priests and lay people who enthusiastically accepted the Tomos on autocephaly for the “Orthodox Church of Ukraine” in 2019. Under many important messages of these theses is a call for dialogue, openness and inclusiveness.

In my opinion, the Sophia Brotherhood offers medial, “third way” between the two paths of confrontation I mentioned – the Pharisaic “canonical purity” and unification based on the concept of “civil religion”. In its documents the Brotherhood criticizes “deep alienation, mistrust and formation of an ‘enemy image’” between both Ukrainian Orthodox jurisdictions, which “leads to mutual dehumanization”. They stress “a mature need to renew our relationships, to get rid of old claims and prejudices”. This approach testifies that the “Sophia Brotherhood” is a unique movement striving for gradual reconciliation in Ukrainian Orthodoxy.

Nevertheless, the law we discuss has negative influence on the members of the Brotherhood. The reason is that the UOC parishes use hundreds of church buildings that have formal status of historical importance, and according to the law, the buildings must be returned to the state. For commissions that are acting in accordance with the law we discuss, formal affiliation with the UOC and unwillingness to change its belonging to the OCU is more important than active parish life, patriotic position of the parishioners and the sincere search of rectors of these parishes for reconciliation in Ukrainian Orthodoxy.

In this way formal approach of the law we discuss threatens the sprouts of hope for long-term peaceful coexistence of two main groups of Orthodox Christians in Ukraine.