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## **Orthodox Church of Portugal Holy Synod of the Bishops**

### **Communiqué**

In the aftermath of the judicial conviction of Orthodox Archbishop Seraphim (Storheim) of Ottawa and all Canada, we feel obliged and indeed our conscience dictates that each one of us – members of the Holy Synod of Bishops of the Orthodox Church of Portugal – give testimony about Archbishop Seraphim's righteous, serious, trustworthy, good and human character and behaviour.

All of us, undersigned, knew Archbishop Seraphim personally since the year of 1990, when he visited our Orthodox Church of Portugal on behalf of the Orthodox Church in America for the first time. At that occasion, two of us were already bishops, one was a married archpriest and another, a postulant in a monastic community, having then no sacred orders. Archbishop Seraphim visited our Church two more times, in the years of 1993 and 2000, always as an official representative of the Orthodox Church in America. In this condition he participated in public worship, solemnities



and social intercourse, where he had contact and conversations not only with our bishops but virtually with all our clergy and many faithful people.

During all these public gatherings, Archbishop Seraphim never gave opportunity to any scandal, be it in great or in small things. On the contrary, all our clergy and faithful who dealt with him even for a while have a fond and warm memory of these meetings, full of sound teachings, proved by good and plain examples of love, selfless service and meekness.


Before the year of 1990 our hierarchy exchanged frequent official correspondence with him, dealing oftentimes with difficult and thorny ecclesiastic matters, where he always offered good and sound advises, as well as practical solutions whose execution he often assumed entire responsibility, willingly and without receiving anything in return. He never left a single letter without reply, always answering clearly every topic with a singular kindness and attention. This official correspondence lasted until recent years.

One could say these contacts are not enough to have a real picture of one true character. However, between many ecclesiastic guests we received throughout years and many hierarchs with whom we exchanged correspondence, his qualities were so conspicuous that his image remains with vivid colours as one faithful and genuine friend, always having a good and edifying word to comfort, always ready to help or to give explanations, always ready to hear, patient and forbearing, prayerful, not given to judgments or criticism, tolerant with others and demanding with himself, effective in working peace and reconciliation, entirely alien to indecent and base words or glances. We could speak also on his humility, his meekness, his deep respect for everyone – either great or small – his unchangeable kindness towards everyone. It seems all these human qualities are universally appreciated and treasured, not only by Christians but by all humankind.

Nevertheless, one could rightly object that these virtues might in many cases be feigned, simply because they are expected to be found in ecclesiastic people, in the ones who are clothed with the religious habit, only as a matter of preserving social status and power of influence over human souls. Furthermore, everyone is aware that some lived and live indeed as *ravens wolves, which come to us in sheep's clothing* (Matt 7:15): they who live in duplicity, being double-faced, as if having two minds, two words, two hearts, two lives, cultivating an outward image with no relation whatever with their real thoughts, feelings and intentions. These last ones are indeed accursed by God and their crimes are worthy of



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the most severe condemnation by ecclesiastic and civil powers – above all when the victims are the innocent children.

To the ones who dare to perpetrate child abuse, the following words are expressly addressed by our Lord: *“Whoso shall offend one of these little ones which believe in me, it were better for him that a millstone were hanged about his neck, and that he were drowned in the depth of the sea”* (Matt 18:6), and *“Woe to that man by whom the offence cometh”* (Matt 18:7); and finally *“Take heed that ye despise not one of these little ones; for I say unto you, that in heaven their angels do always behold the face of my Father which is in heaven”* (Matt 18:10).

Being said that, how could we be so sure regarding this particular case where Archbishop Seraphim is charged of such a grievous and criminal sin? Are we by chance being foolish by reproofing sin and condoning it at the same time? Not at all. Since we brought to mind the heavy spiritual chastisements from the Gospel, let us produce the evidence of innocence from the very same source. *“Ye shall know them [the false prophets, who come in sheep’s clothing] by their fruits. Do men gather grapes of thorns, or figs of thistles?”* (Matt 7:16). When we speak about fruits, we do not think, in first place, about pastoral works, such as the foundation of parishes and the building of temples; we do not think only in the appeasement and reconciliation within communities and families Archbishop Seraphim worked oftentimes. We think above all in a quality or else, in a mode of life which may not be feigned, which is: selfless love.

Men may pretend to love through a certain period of time. Nonetheless, after a while, they shall search impatiently after rewards, be they honours, pleasures, richness or any kind of power – life itself shows it clearly. Anyone who knew and dealt with Archbishop Seraphim is aware that he never behaved after such a psychological pattern. On the contrary, throughout his entire life, consistently and without cessing, he gave without expecting or demanding anything in return: neither money, nor ecclesiastic power or prestige, nor well-being of any kind. We will not consider here base and mean things: if he often gave up normal needs of life, how could one consider unlawful and abject gratifications, abominable before God and men?

Regarding our Orthodox Church of Portugal, we must testify that Archbishop Seraphim gave us much more than he received from us, always with a deep sense of responsibility and respect, never dealing serious matters with thoughtlessness or lightness and always setting an inspiring example of a good shepherd, who truly loves his rational sheep.



Furthermore, the support and solidarity from many faithful members of the Orthodox Archdiocese of Canada – more than any official communiqué from any ecclesiastic chancellery – is the best possible character reference to Archbishop Seraphim: the rational sheep know well their good shepherd. For *“the sheep hear his voice: and he calleth his own sheep by name, and leadeth them out. And ... he goeth before them, and the sheep follow him: for they know his voice”* (John 10:3-4). They are indeed *his epistle written in their hearts, known and read of all men* (2Cor 3:2). Are they by chance defending corporative interests and privileges? Do they make any profit by their standing? On the contrary, they receive in turn distrust and suspicion from society, as if accomplices of an abomination.

Moreover, we saw and see everywhere, within Orthodoxy – both in America as in Portugal and in the rest of the world – that a shepherd without genuine love for his flock, when fallen from his position, shall never receive any support from the faithful people. On the contrary, he will be quickly forgotten, for *“a stranger will they [the rational sheep] not follow, but will flee from him: for they know not the voice of strangers”* (John 10:5). In the light of recent events, how is it that Archbishop Seraphim is not yet forgotten by his rational flock? May we simply deny these people to be heard, their opinion to be considered, they who know better than anyone who their shepherd really is?

We understand clearly that both courts as well churches in general are under severe scrutiny of public opinion, which demands justice and punishment for such grievous sins which claim unto Heavens from the ground as of old the blood of the righteous Abel. Such sins shock and scandalize every human being with a small human sense of justice and compassion. We are aware that this natural hunger and thirst after justice is strongest and much more vehement between the ones who have been deprived untimely of the natural joy and happiness of the blessed years of infancy. Of course, they do not expect nor deserve paternalistic words of hypocritical consolation, but real deeds of justice and protection of the following generations of innocent children.

However, let us be allowed to ask: may any society have as a sound foundation for justice and right the immediate presumption of guilt, as we witnessed throughout public forums? Let us also be allowed to present the following question: If one consider even by a second the idea, the hypothesis that Archbishop Seraphim is innocent – as we believe – may one possibly make justice and protect the innocent children by punishing an innocent elderly man, putting shame upon his hoary head? May one



work righteousness through unrighteousness, may one work justice through injustice?

If such a charge, in practice, implies *ipso facto* in the ecclesiastic suspension of any priest or bishop; if a conviction in court, as many pretend, should imply in automatic deposition, defrocking and banishment, what will protect every good-hearted, devoted and elderly priest or bishop from slander, from plots, from envy, from any kind of petty and cruel revenge, which are at least so ancient as any kind of abuse? Elders are not defenceless people, in a different sense? Are they not worthy of respect and compassion, are they not worthy of receiving the benefit of the doubt when there is no absolute evidence at all? Or are they people who only deserve to be thrown aside, a useless burden to society, to families and churches and therefore it is no matter if we throw in jails an innocent and defenceless elder who has nothing more to give to society since his physical powers are in rapid decline? All of us walk daily and quickly to oldness, to the ebb of life, to the yellow leaf – let us remember that injustice may attain us in every stage of life, since inception until death, in different and manifold ways.

The subjective criterion of guilt “beyond reasonable doubt” should not be enough, in a civilized world, to convict and possibly incarcerate an elderly man who lived a whole life of selfless service which many simply prefer to ignore and overlook, for different reasons. Most of them, due to vehement indignation and natural thirst for justice; but some others, simply as a matter of convenience, since in cases of public dilapidation the safest and most comfortable place is the one of a spectator, of a bystander. As Saul of Tarsus before his conversion, *they also stand by, and consent unto his death, and keep the raiment of them that slew him* (Acts 22:20).

May God, *Who searcheth the reins and hearts, give unto every one according to his own works* (Rev 2:23).



†João

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Metropolitan and Primate of Portugal, Spain and all Brazil



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*Damasceno*

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Orthodox Bishop of Silves and Portimão

Orthodox Monastery of the Nativity of the Mother of God, on the Feast of the Nativity of Saint John the Prophet, Baptist and Forerunner of the Lord, 7 July 2014

