

## Summer School on Human Rights 2020

### Webinar 8

#### **Archbishop Nikitas of Thyateira and Great Britain, Ecumenical Patriarchate**

Good morning and thank you for the opportunity to speak and be part of this important panel, as we discuss the rights of minorities during the time of the Coronavirus. I am also pleased that the Archdiocese of Thyateira and Great Britain is one of the sponsors of this important program

This morning, we will speak about the rights of various minorities. I believe, though, we will focus on the rights of religious communities and the rights of the Roma. Of course, I hold the position of a clergyman, but I am not Roma, and you may ask why and how I speak about and for the Roma community.

First, as a religious leader, I am called to speak out against injustice and to preach and defend truth. As an Orthodox hierarch, I know that many Roma are Orthodox Christians and I must speak out for them, as they often do not have a voice. I am also pleased to note that my Godson, Dr. Petre Breazu, wrote his doctoral dissertation on the Roma and issues of discrimination and the violations of human rights. I read the work prior to his defense and because of his work, am called to speak for these people.

The Roma have been the victims of transgression and violence for centuries. They have been and continue to be blamed for all sorts of things, as they are the perfect scapegoat. In some places the Roma have been restricted, isolated and are outcasts. They have been blamed not for only carrying the virus, but also for importing it and bringing it with them, as they travel and relocate. A recent article in the New York Times presented clear evidence to these matters, as all sorts of excuses are made to blame the Roma - "the other" for all sorts of problems. And, at the same time, the Roma settlements and areas have been restricted and/or are isolated, lack proper medical attention, clean water and plumbing, as well as having no access to the basic commodities afforded others. I ask you, is this justice or the clear violations of basic human rights, during the time of the virus.

During this time, death rates of minority groups were higher, according to a UN report (June 2020). This is certainly so because of less access to socio-economic resources and less access to health care services. Minority groups, including the Roma, were more exposed to being infected with the virus because of the risky nature of the low-paying jobs they often perform. Media scholars have also shown that in specific countries, especially Eastern Europe, the media legitimized the force and violence used by the police and masked officers to quarantine entire Roma villages.

We need to remember that the Roma have no country and no political voice, so who will speak out and stand up to these injustices.

When looking at the realities of the rights of religious communities, we need to see that faith traditions were "stripped" of their rights. Religious communities were forbidden from gathering, as synagogues, churches and mosques were closed. The very identity of religious traditions was violated. For Christians, the central feature of the Eucharist was forbidden in some places. Where is the freedom of religion and where are the rights of Churches? How can civil authorities make decisions about matters of faith? Passover, Easter (Pascha) and Ramadan were spent behind closed doors. Religious traditions became subject to civil authorities and regulations.

While I could continue and say other things, I would prefer to allow us to move on and give the next speaker the opportunity to speak.

Thank you.