

Russian patriarch calls priests who opposed prayer service 'traitors'

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Moscow (ENInews)--Patriarch Kirill I called clergy who opposed the holding of mass prayer meeting held in Moscow on April 22 "traitors in cassocks," in a sign of continuing division within the Russian Orthodox Church over political and social issues.

Moscow police said the nearly 65,000 people participated in the service of supplication, or moleben as it is known in Russian, held in front of Christ the Savior Cathedral.

"Those same people who cried 'The Apostles stole him in the night,' those same ones said 'Why should we rebuild Christ the Savior Cathedral?'" Kirill said in his sermon. "'With this same money we can do this and that, build this and that.' Then as today we have traitors in cassocks among us who say 'Why should we gather for prayer? Let's forget about it and make pretend that nothing is happening.' But something very significant is happening."

The prayer service "in defense of the faith, of desecrated shrine, the Church and its good name" was announced several weeks ago to coincide with St. Thomas Sunday, a week after Easter, on which the Orthodox Church recalls the Apostle Thomas's doubts about Christ's Resurrection.

The cathedral has been at the center of an ecclesiastical, media and social storm since February 21, when a feminist group called Pussy Riot performed a "punk prayer" against Vladimir Putin and church hierarchs in front of the altar.

Patriarch Kirill and other church leaders have said that a concerted campaign is being waged against the church, but even within the church some clergy and lay people say that it has become a target because of its close connection to the state.

The cathedral, built by former Moscow mayor Yuri Luzhkov after being destroyed by Stalin, has become a symbol of that relationship. President Dmitry Medvdev and Vladimir Putin, who begins a third term as president next month, attend holiday services at the cathedral.

Andrei Kuraev, a deacon in the Orthodox church known for his missionary work and blogging, has called for mercy towards Pussy Riot. Last week a Moscow court extended to June 24 the pre-trial detention of three young women accused of participating in the performance; they face up to seven years in prison.