

# Bulgarian priests join union over late paychecks

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SOFIA, Bulgaria (RNS/ENInews) The decision by Bulgarian Orthodox priests to join a trade union because they haven't been paid on time has angered at least one church hierarch, saying it goes against the church's internal canon law.

According to Bulgarian-language media reports, the new union will be part of Podkrepa, one of Bulgaria's two national trade union federations.

In the northwestern town of Vratsa, priests said that they had not been paid on time, and their statutory health and retirement insurance had not been paid, the Standart daily newspaper reported.

Metropolitan Kipriyan of Vratsa, however, said it is "absurd" for priests to join a union.

The move follows complaints about the low and late pay of priests and lay employees, a criticism echoed by Bozhidar Dimitrov, the cabinet minister in charge of Bulgarians abroad, who had said priests in villages are "living in poverty."

Church employee Hristo Latinov, named as head of the union, told Bulgaria's Darik Radio on Monday (Dec. 13) that it is "unacceptable,

immoral and scandalous" that priests are classified in the same labor law category as gravediggers and people with no college education.

The same labor classification, meanwhile, assigns bishops and metropolitans the status of corporate directors.

The Standart reported on Tuesday that union membership will include priests, sextons, administrative staff and employees who manufacture candles, although it is unclear how many people have or will join the union.

Bulgaria's Trud daily newspaper reported on Dec. 9 that the church had earned about \$8 million from the sale of candles, which is exempted by law from value-added tax.

The sale of candles was meant to cover the pay of priests, but in some smaller dioceses, not enough candles were sold to achieve this. The alternative was that priests were paid in kind by being given candles.

"I cannot eat candles," Trud quoted an unnamed priest as saying.

The newspaper reported that in the Danube River city of Rousse, 80 priests in the diocese were paid an average monthly maximum of around \$240.