



IRINEJ

BY THE GRACE OF GOD
BISHOP OF EASTERN AMERICA
OF THE SERBIAN ORTHODOX CHURCH

Most beloved Clergy and Monastics, Sons and Daughters,
faithful Children of the Eastern American Diocese of our Most Holy Church!
It is with abounding joy emanating from a paternal heart,
that We greet you on this most radiant and auspicious occasion
in our collective history, both sacred and secular:

**THE CENTENNIAL
OF THE FOUNDING OF THE FIRST DIOCESE
IN THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA AND CANADA
OF THE SERBIAN ORTHODOX CHURCH
1921 – 2021**

*“There is a time for everything,
and a season for every activity under the heavens,
I have seen the burden God has laid on the human race.
He has made everything beautiful in its time.
He has also set eternity in the human heart;
yet, no one can fathom what God has done from beginning to end.
I know that everything God does will endure forever;
nothing can be added to it and nothing taken from it.”
(Ecclesiastes 3:1, 10-11 & 14)*

Heaven and earth rejoice with us during this, the 100th Anniversary of the founding of the first Diocese of our Serbian Orthodox Church, here in the United States of America and Canada: *for the Sun of the East has kissed the soil of the West.*

In these echoing conceptual thoughts of our founder and first administrator, the Holy Bishop Nicholai of Zhicha and Ochrid, we find the profound faith of Saint Sava, indeed, our Orthodox Christian faith, incarnate in our Serbian lands and hearts, uniquely through our culture and tradition. Now, the same has been firmly planted, here, in these United States of America and Canada. An ancient faith has now blossomed in a new land, and that which was scattered has been gathered, thus fulfilling the words of our Savior, “Behold, I make all things new!” (Rev. 21:5).

In anticipation of that newness of life, immigrating to North America, our Serbian people brought with them an acute awareness of their Orthodox faith and Serbian heritage. Coupled with the freedom of religion which they encountered, they hastened to erect churches and as such lay the very foundations for their new, collective home and life. The first Serbian Orthodox church in America was built in 1894 in Jackson, California, under the patronage of the Venerable Archimandrite Sebastian of Jackson, himself, the first Orthodox priest born in America, and son of an immigrant family. The church was built at the hands of Serbian miners from the West Coast, who dedicated their new temple to Saint Sava.

Relying on the abiding protection of Saint Sava, Serbian immigrants prayed in anticipation of the continued growth of their fledgling communities in North America. Subsequently, a church was erected in Galveston, Texas, and by 1919, another 30 churches had been established in the states of Pennsylvania, Alaska, Illinois, Indiana, Michigan, Kansas, Montana and Ohio, as well as Canada. Prior to the establishment of a Serbian Diocese in America and Canada in 1921, our parishes were under the patronage of the Russian Orthodox Metropolia in North America, for which our Church and our Serbian people remain deeply grateful.

As the young prince Rastko, who was received and tonsured in the Russian Athonite Monastery of St. Panteleimon, and went on from Chilandar Monastery to seek autocephaly for the Serbian Orthodox Church, the Serbian clergy of the Pittsburgh Protoperbyterate wrote in April 1921 to His Holiness Patriarch Dimitrije, the first Patriarch of the reunited Serbian Orthodox Church (1920), noting their firm resolve and heartfelt desire for unification with their own Mother Church:

“On St. Demetrius Day, 1913, Orthodox Serbs held a Church Convention in the city of Chicago at which the clergy together with representatives of church-school congregations and mutual-aid organizations unanimously decided to place the Church here under the jurisdiction of the Belgrade Metropolitanate; and since your Metropolitanate has been a place of suffering for several years, this could not be achieved despite all the efforts of Your Holiness.

“Therefore, now that the Resurrected Patriarchate has gathered up all the dismembered parts of the Serbian Church—this still unorganized overseas fragment wishes organically and legally to join the Mother Church.”

Thus, it was on the 24th of January in 1921, that the Holy Bishop Nicholai of Ochrid arrived for the second time in the United States of America. Now, in his person, for the first time, a hierarch of the Serbian Orthodox Church stepped foot on these shores. He was to remain for the following three and a half months and to deliver approximately 140 lectures and homilies in America’s finest universities and cathedrals, as well as in smaller parish churches and missionary congregations. Importantly, for us, one hundred years ago, the endeavors of this saintly bishop brought about the inception of the first diocese of the Serbian Orthodox Church in the United States of America and Canada. Let us rejoice in this newness of life, for truly we have great cause for joy, as our first diocese on this continent was founded by a saint of such renown!

Having gathered many of our clergy and their faithful, by visiting numerous Serbian churches, schools and social centers, as he could not visit them all, Bishop Nicholai issued a Paschal Encyclical that year, 1921, to all Serbian parishes in North America.

As the poet author of Ecclesiastes before him, who, having seen God in the burdens of humanity, the timeliness of beauty, and eternity laid in the hearts of humankind, understood that in Divine economy there is an appointed time for everything, and a season for every activity under the heavens:

“For my part, I shall endeavor to be a faithful interpreter of the soul of our people in America before the Serbian Patriarch and Holy Synod. I shall endeavor to describe the difficulties, efforts and labors of our priests, both secular and monastic, in this country, in religious as well as educational-cultural work. I shall tell them that our people here have not neglected their church and school, their baptismal name, and other sacred and fine customs despite their difficult, arduous labor for a livelihood. And it is already well known to them and all our people in the Homeland, from beggar to King, what financial sacrifices you made in the last wars

and how much aid you sent to those who suffered in the war, especially to the Red Cross and war orphans.”

Predicated on the persuasive report of Bishop Nicholai of Ochrid, the Holy Assembly of Bishops of the Serbian Orthodox Church, convening in Sremski Karlovci, under the presidency of Patriarch Dimitrije, on September 13th, 1921, established the first Diocese of the Serbian Orthodox Church in the United States of America and Canada. In turn, Bishop Nicholai was appointed administrator of this nascent Serbian Diocese in North America. He was succeeded in 1923 by the Holy Bishop Mardarije of Libertyville, a man of unparalleled sacrifice and vision, who became the first Bishop of the American and Canadian Diocese.

Bishop Mardarije would erect the first Serbian Orthodox monastery in the United States, in Libertyville, Illinois. This monastery, dedicated to Saint Sava, which initially served as an orphanage, has evolved into the spiritual epicenter of our entire Church on this continent.

Following suit, individuals such as Nikola Tesla and Mihajlo Idvorski Pupin, as well as many other remarkable figures in American society, significantly secured the foundations of the Serbian American community. Mihajlo Pupin, to whom the personality of Saint Sava served as an inspiration in his scientific work, exemplified himself as a great benefactor of Saint Sava Monastery in Libertyville. While in New York, the Holy Bishop Nicholai established the Serbian Bible Institute. As a prolific author, in 1951, he published *The Life of Saint Sava* in the English language, which was, in the words of Professor Veselin Kesich, “an account of an unusual saint, written by an unusual bishop”.

Through the testimony of a certain bishop, Irinej by name, a contemporary of Saint Sava, history attributes to Saint Sava the following exposé: “We are considered to be East by the West and West by the East, while we belong neither to the East nor the West, but only to the Heavenly Jerusalem”. This is both our uniquely Serbian and common Orthodox *ethos*, our creative might of interaction with the world and our contribution to contemporary society, which is no longer merely East nor merely West. The same must become in unity: “a harmony of elevated emotion, intellect and will power”, according to the Holy Nicholai. Thus, in describing America, he aptly notes:

“The light of the East and the light of the West will rest at their noon on the continent, which lies between East and West...”

In that light of noon, Lord, make us worthy to behold Your Light, in order that we may fulfill St. Nicholai’s prayerful admonishment to American church leaders in 1921 to “make plans as large as the world and efforts as hard as those of the apostles”; and “to prepare for a sacrifice as holy and as universal as Yours”. For in these troubled times, only exalted endeavors, arising from a strong faith, will be able to sustain those who are apprehensive. Therefore, in celebrating this Centennial, profoundly inspired by the words of our saintly founder, let us reiterate his “*only sincere question of a historian to history*”, as our own:

“History, tell me who you are, so that I may know who I am?”

Given in New York,
On the 13th of September in the Year of our Lord 2021

YOUR HUMBLE INTERCESSOR BEFORE THE THRONE OF SAINT SAVA,

+IRINEJ

BISHOP OF EASTERN AMERICA
THE SERBIAN ORTHODOX CHURCH