

The Serbian Church and Milosevic

Very Reverend Thomas Hopko

The Serbian Orthodox Church has consistently criticized and opposed the Milosevic government. The "open letter" of Bishop Artemije of Ras-Prizren in Kosovo written on Orthodox Good Friday is no exception. It rather testifies to what has been the unwavering rule of Serbian Church leadership toward the Milosevic government since the fall of marxism.

Speaking of the "crimes" of President Milosevic, Bishop Artemije relates in his letter how he and lay leaders of an "embryonic" democratic movement in his country visited world leaders in The US, France and Russia five times between February 1998 and February 1999. He describes their written and verbal pleas to the highest-ranking officials, including US Secretary Albright, to give democracy a chance in his country. He underlines their warnings of the disastrous consequences of all military solutions, including NATO intervention. And he laments with indescribable sorrow how their hopes have been buried in the rubble of the NATO attacks and the savagery which it inevitably produced.

Patriarch Pavle

Most of the bishops of the Serbian Orthodox Church have been installed since the end of Marxist domination in former Yugoslavia. Many of them, including the present Patriarch, were staunch anti-communists who were greatly persecuted in communist times. They were fervent followers and co-workers of the confessing priest Fr. Justin Popovich, already venerated by many as a saint, who spent his adult life imprisoned in a monastery.

To insure that there would be no government interference in the election of the new patriarch in 1990, and even no possible charge of such interference, the Synod of Bishops of the Serbian Orthodox Church elected three candidates for the Church's primatial see. The names of these candidates were placed in a sacred vessel. After vigil, fasting and prayer Bishop Pavle of Ras-Prizren in Kosovo, the compromise third candidate elected by the Synod, was chosen by lot to be patriarch.

Pavle had served as bishop in Kosovo and Metohija for 34 years, until 1990. This diocese was established in 1219 by St. Savva, the prince-become-archbishop who founded Serbian Christianity. The Kosovo region of Serbia is the "cradle" of Serbian Christianity and national self-identity. It includes the ancient patriarchal see of Pec, the place where the Serbian Patriarch has traditionally been enthroned. It is to Serbs what Jerusalem and Zion are to Jews, what Boston and New England are to many white Anglo-Saxon Protestant Americans. Known and loved for his humility, poverty and identification with all of the people of his diocese, Serbian and Albanian, Christian and non-Christian, Pavle was among the least likely candidates for the patriarchal office among the Serbian bishops. He was certainly among the least acceptable to the ex-communist nationalists like Milosevic who were ruling the country and inciting the crowds.

Patriarch and Peacemaker

Patriarch Pavle came to the United States in the fall of 1992 to preside over the healing of a schism among the Serbian Orthodox churches in North America caused by the conditions of the communist era. The healing of such divisions was his highest priority upon taking office. St. Vladimir's Seminary honored itself at that time by granting the degree of Doctor of Divinity honoris causa to the new patriarch.

The patriarch spoke without notes at the ceremony. He naturally referred to the conflict then raging in Bosnia-Herzegovina. He said that he was convinced that peace could come to the former Yugoslavia only when people would relate to each other as they did in his former diocese of Kosovo, and proceeded to tell how an Albanian Moslem would come daily to his cathedral to pray before the relics of a Christian saint entombed there, believing it to be a holy place where the one God was to be worshipped. God alone, the patriarch said, could bring peace to the former Yugoslavia with its deeply engrained memories of brutality and blood. Without God, he insisted, every effort for justice and unanimity would inevitably fail.

After the ceremony I remarked to a bishop in the patriarchal party that such words would surely not sit well with the former communists who were ruling, and ravaging, the former Yugoslavia in the name of nationalism. I suggested that such words might even lead to violent action against the patriarch himself. The bishop responded that such an eventuality was not impossible, and added that Pavle was not a "political person", but a "holy man of God" and a "servant of all people".

The patriarch's peacemaking activities, with the members of the Synod of Bishops of the Serbian Orthodox Church, and with Roman Catholic and Moslem leaders, have been firm and consistent. His marching, with Orthodox bishops and priests, at the head of popular protests against the Milosevic regime, as with the university students on the Church's

national feast of St. Sava, also testifies to his Church's official position in national affairs.

Church, People and Power

All the above testifies to a fact of greatest significance. Milosevic is not the Serbian people; and the Serbian people are not Milosevic. The Serbian Orthodox Church is no friend of the Milosevic regime; and Milosevic is no friend of the Serbian Church. Still less is the Serbian Church an instrument in Milosevic's hands to be used at will for evil purposes. Many of the Serbian Church's present bishops and priests were among her most dissident clergy and her most persecuted confessors in the days of communism. Their record with Milosevic, and those like him and with him, speaks for itself -- at least to those with eyes to see, ears to hear, and minds willing to understand.

That American observers can be so ignorant about the Serbian Orthodox Church, and the Serbian people generally, in regard to Milosevic and his government, is comparable only to our American government's ignorance of the realities of Balkan history (medieval, modern, marxist and contemporary), and the mentalities of the Balkan peoples. One can only wonder with amazement and fear about why such inexcusable ignorance continues to endure, if it is indeed ignorance, and not something infinitely more wicked and terrifying.

And one can only weep over the enormity of the sufferings which it brings to the countless peoples of all nations and religions through the criminal policies and actions which it produces and empowers.