

THE SERBIAN ORTHODOX CHURCH - A SHORT HISTORY



The Serbian Orthodox Church is an autocephalous, or ecclesiastically independent, member of the Orthodox communion, located primarily in Serbia, Montenegro, Bosnia and Herzegovina and Croatia. Since many Serbs have emigrated to foreign countries, there are now many Serbian Orthodox communities on all continents.

Soon after their arrival to Balkans the Serbian tribes were successively baptized by Christian missionaries and became Orthodox Christians. The consecration of St. Sava as autocephalous Archbishop of Serbia in 1219, even more strengthened various Serbian principalities in their ecclesiastical allegiance to Constantinople and Christian East. Later, as the medieval kingdom of Serbia grew in size and prestige and Stefan Dusan, king of Serbia from 1331, assumed the imperial title of tsar in 1346 to 1355, the Archbishopric of Pec was correspondingly raised to the rank of Patriarchate. The period before the arrival of the Turks was the time of the greatest flourishing of the Serbian Church. After the final Turkish conquest of the most influential Serbian principality in 1459, the greater portion of Serbian lands became a Turkish pasalik (province). After the death of Patriarch Arsenios II in 1463 a successor was not elected. The Patriarchate was thus de facto abolished, and the Serbian Church passed under the jurisdiction of the Ecumenical Patriarchate. The Serbian Patriarchate was restored in 1557 by the Turkish sultan Suleiman the Magnificent. Macarios, brother of the famous Mehmed Pasha Sokolovic was elected Patriarch in Pec.

The restoration of the Patriarchate was of great importance for the Serbs because it helped the spiritual unification of all Serbs in the Turkish Empire. After consequent Serbian uprisals against the Turkish occupators in which the Church had a leading role, the Turks abolished the Patriarchate once again in 1766. The Church remained once more under the jurisdiction of the Ecumenical Patriarch of Constantinople. This period of so called "Phanariots" was a period of great spiritual decline because the Greek bishops had very little understanding for their Serbian flock. This was also the period when great number of Christians converted to Islam to avoid severe taxes imposed by the Turks in retaliation for uprisings and continued resistance. Many Serbs with their hierarchs migrated to Southern Hungary where they had been granted the Church autonomy. The seat of the archbishops was moved from Pec to Karlovci. The Serbian Orthodox Church finally regained its independence and became autocephalous in 1879, the year after the recognition by the Great Powers of Serbia as an independent state. After World War I all the Serbs were united under one ecclesiastical authority, and the Patriarchate was reestablished in 1920 with election of Patriarch Dimitry, the Patriarch's full title being "Archbishop of Pec, Metropolitan of Belgrade and Karlovci, and Patriarch of the Serbs." During the Second World War the Serbian Orthodox Church passed through severe trials in which many bishops, priests and about 700.000 lay Orthodox Christians were killed by Croatian and Moslem fascists. Hundreds of churches were completely destroyed or desecrated. After the Second World War the Church experienced new trials under the communists who prohibited teaching of religion in schools, confiscated the property of the Church and using various overt and covert means of persecution in order to diminish the influence the Church had among the people. It was only after 1989 that the position of the Church has become tolerable, although the Church estates have not yet been returned to their lawful owners.

The supreme authority of the Serbian Church, the Holy Synod, is composed of all its bishops, who meet once a year in May. There is also a standing Synod of four members who administer the day-to-day affairs of the church, which is estimated to number some nine million faithful. There are 32 dioceses, including 4 in North America, 2 in Western Europe and 2 in Australia and New Zealand; four seminaries and a theological faculty train candidates for the clergy.