



"We Have no one closer to each other": an interview with Bishop Stefan of Remesiana



*On March 11, 2024, the representative of the Serbian Orthodox Church to the Patriarch of Moscow and All Rus', Bishop Antonije (Pantelić) of Moravica, rector of the revived Serbian Metochion in Moscow, reposed in the Lord. His funeral at the Cathedral of Christ the Savior was led by Patriarch Kirill of Moscow and All Rus' and Patriarch Porfirije of Serbia. The Holy Synod of the Serbian Church appointed Bishop Stefan of Remesiana as Bishop Antonije's successor. After a year of service in Moscow, Bishop Stefan spoke to the Journal of the Moscow Patriarchate about his journey, Serbian saints, the late Bishop Antonije, the situation in Kosovo, and the healing of the schism with the Macedonian Church (No. 3, 2025, **PDF version**).*

- Your Grace, how was your first year on the Russian soil?

I first became personally acquainted with Russia and the Russian people in 2003, when, with the blessing of the Church, I came to study at the Moscow Theological Academy. I can say with confidence that from that moment until now, my love for the Russian land and its spirituality has not diminished in

the slightest—on the contrary, it has grown stronger and deeper.

The most profound moment of this past year, since I assumed my duties as rector of the Serbian Orthodox Church's metochion in Moscow, was undoubtedly the funeral and burial of my predecessor, the ever-memorable Bishop Antonije (Pantelić) of Moravica. The very fact that the Divine Liturgy at the Cathedral of Christ the Savior in Moscow was led by two Patriarchs—His Holiness Patriarch Kirill of Moscow and All Rus' and His Holiness Patriarch Porfirije of Serbia—speaks volumes about the tender and heartfelt relationship between our fraternal Orthodox peoples. The majestic beauty of the church, a monument to heroic deeds and Russian glory, the angelic singing of the Patriarchal choir, the sincere prayers of the faithful—in that moment, I understood, and remain firmly convinced, that God is with us in His fullness, in both joy and sorrow. In this, the entire beauty of Orthodoxy and the unity of our Slavic peoples is reflected.

"I Saw God's Hand in this Decision"

- Tell us about yourself. Why did you enter military service after graduating from theology school? And what later influenced your decision to become a monk?

Both in Russia and in our country at that time, military service was compulsory. Although I was a student - which meant I could have postponed my service for some time - I nevertheless decided that fulfilling my duty to the motherland by serving in the army would be the most natural thing to do. I would not be mistaken in saying that one of the key reasons was the merciless NATO bombing of Yugoslavia in 1999, which claimed countless civilian lives, including innocent children. After being discharged, the world no longer seemed the same to me, and I developed a longing for higher, eternal values - for monastic life.

- The Ostrog Monastery, where your monastic journey began, is one of Serbia's most revered shrines. Tell us about it.

Just like the great spiritual centers and pilgrimage sites of the Russian Orthodox Church - the Holy Trinity Lavra of St. Sergius, Kiev-Pechersk Lavra, Seraphim-Diveyevo Monastery, Optina Pustyn, Pskov-Caves Monastery, Pochaev Lavra, Polotsk Monastery and others - the Serbian land is rich in ancient holy sites. Among all these great shrines, the famous Ostrog Monastery stands out in its veneration not only by Orthodox Serbs but also by Muslims and Catholics. It houses the relics of Saint Basil of Ostrog, the wonder-worker.

After completing my military service, I began contemplating which path to choose and where to go next. I remember a thought flashing through my mind - a kind of sign from above - telling me to go to

Ostrog Monastery. That very night, I did just that...

When I met Archimandrite Lazar (Adžić; † 2000), the abbot of Ostrog, I found answers to all my life's questions. He was a rare kind of monk and priest, able to see and bring out the best in every person. Streams of people in need of help flowed to him. Father Lazar welcomed everyone, helping all who came, especially children and young people. I too became one of the many scholarship recipients of Ostrog Monastery.

The time I spent in Ostrog near the relics of Saint Basil remains etched in my memory as the most important period of my spiritual growth.

- You studied at the Moscow Theological Academy for several years—what stands out most from that time?

As I mentioned earlier, I arrived at the Holy Trinity Lavra of St. Sergius back in 2003 to enroll in the first year of the Moscow Theological Academy. There were many of us Serbian students, forming a veritable small diaspora. Thanks to the hospitality of both faculty and students at the Moscow theological schools, we soon came to be regarded as family and felt completely at home. The Academic Committee even blessed us to serve the Liturgy in Serbian every Saturday in one of the monastery's churches.

My first memory of the Academy is of the Church of the Protection of the Most Holy Theotokos and the daily services we participated in: the Akathist on Wednesday evenings, common evening prayers (at ten o'clock), Sunday and feast day Liturgies, and memorial services for the Academy's professors and students. These services were graced by magnificent choirs united under the direction of the 'musical soul' of the Holy Trinity Lavra of St. Sergius - Archimandrite Matthew (Mormyl; † 2009).

And of course, the ever-present snow and biting cold that caught in your throat, the sharp, piercing wind characteristic of Sergiev Posad's harsh climate - at least that's how we Balkan students experienced it in our very bones.

- Your thesis at the Academy focused on St. Justin of Ćelije. Who was this saint, and why did you choose him?

In recounting my first and most significant impressions of studying at the Moscow Theological Academy, I would be committing an unforgivable omission if I failed to mention the person dearest to me at the Lavra - Professor Alexei Ivanovich Sidorov. It was he who was primarily responsible for my doctoral dissertation being dedicated to the greatest theologian of the late 20th century, Saint Abba Justin. The choice of topic was no accident. For me, then a young monk, Justin Popović embodied the

ideal of monastic life that I aspired to emulate and to whom I prayed. When asked who serves as my primary spiritual authority, I typically respond: Father Momo Krivokapić (a priest from Kotor; † 2020) is my spiritual father, while Saint Justin of Ćelije is my spiritual grandfather.

- Your monastic service took place at the Liplje Monastery in Republika Srpska. Tell us about the monastery and the region.

Speaking of Republika Srpska within Bosnia and Herzegovina's borders - where I was born - it's important to note that it's surrounded by NATO member states with hostile attitudes (with the sole exception being the Republic of Serbia). In its western part lies the beautiful Liplje Monastery, founded according to chronicles as early as the 13th century. Sharing the fate of its people, the monastery has endured numerous trials throughout its turbulent history. Conditions were no better during the civil war of 1992-1995. By God's grace and that of the Most Holy Theotokos - to whom the monastery is dedicated (in honor of her Annunciation) - this region experienced a spiritual revival after the war, which ultimately led to the introduction of Religious Studies as a mandatory subject in school curricula. This true earthly paradise with its kind and warm-hearted people stands as testament to centuries of Serbian presence in these lands.

- How did you feel about your appointment to Russia?

I was elected as the second rector of the restored Serbian Orthodox Church metochion in Moscow—originally reestablished in the late 1990s—through the recommendation of His Holiness Patriarch Porfirije of Serbia during the Holy Synod of Bishops session on April 18, 2024. At that time, I was already at our Moscow metochion, where I was to serve the 40-day memorial service for Bishop Antonije (Pantelić) on behalf of the Serbian Church's Synod.

Considering all circumstances, and knowing that before God nothing happens by chance—that everything is part of a greater plan which many of us often fail to perceive—I accepted the Church's will. I understood that the path set before me carried immense responsibility, yet I recognized in this decision the finger of God's providence. It may sound somewhat immodest to say, but this is an evident truth: through this very choice, God has shown me mercy.

Serbian Saints revered worldwide

- Which saints are most venerated in Serbia?

I have already mentioned Saint Basil of Ostrog, whom our people hold in deep reverence and call a 'living' saint. Standing alongside him are Saint Sava I, Archbishop of Serbia—the glory of all students

and schools; followed by Saint Stefan of Dečani, the martyr-king; Saint Bishop Nikolaj [Velimirović]—'the lyre of the Holy Spirit'; Venerable Father Justin (Popović)—one of the greatest interpreters of Fyodor Dostoevsky; and many other saints who became glorified in Serbian lands. I believe it is widely known and hardly needs mentioning that the relics of Saint Paraskeva-Petka remained in Serbia for over a century (they now reside in Romania), which is why in the Orthodox world she became known as Paraskeva the Serbian.

- This year marks the 825th anniversary of the repose of St. Stefan the Myrrh-Gusher and the 700th anniversary of St. Nikodim of Serbia. How did these saints become glorified?

For me, the image of Grand Župan (Prince) Stefan Nemanja—Saint Simeon the Myrrh-streaming—represents the ideal of an earthly ruler, from whose life many contemporary statesmen can draw important lessons. As the unifier of Serbian lands, he renounced all worldly honors to follow Christ, enriching his people through his fruitful works. He is venerated not only in Serbia but throughout other Local Orthodox Churches. During the reign of Tsar Ivan Vasilyevich the Terrible in Rus', devotion to Saint Simeon, Saint Sava, and Saint King Lazar spread to Russia as well, evidenced by their frescoes in the Archangel Cathedral of the Moscow Kremlin.

Moreover, in 2021, an imposing monument to Stefan Nemanja was unveiled in Belgrade—the work of Russian sculptor Alexander Yulianovich Rukavishnikov. This rectified a historical injustice, finally granting the progenitor of the holy Nemanjić dynasty a monument in the Serbian capital. Notably, the feast of Saint Simeon the Myrrh-streaming is the *krsna slava*[1] (patron saint day) of the Red Star sports society.

Alongside Saint Simeon, Saint Nikodim, Archbishop of Serbia, left behind numerous spiritual treasures, most notably his manuscript works and translations into Church Slavonic.

Standing Together for Truth and Victory

- How would you characterize current relations between the Russian and Serbian Churches?

For the past seven years (since 2017), I have served as rector of the Church of Saint Sava in Belgrade. Holding such a high and deeply responsible position allowed me to host numerous ecclesiastical and state delegations from around the world, including those from our fraternal Russia. I myself have also participated in various international delegations, particularly those focused on Serbian-Russian relations. I have observed – and this remains true today – that throughout this period, church-state

relations in both Serbia and Russia have never been stronger than they are now. The same holds true for the bonds between our two brotherly Slavic nations and between our sister Orthodox Churches. Just as Serbs can have no one closer than Russia, so too Russians can have no people nearer and more devoted to them than Serbs. This unique symphony and unity between our two Churches and nations bears witness to an evident truth: we always stand together, on the side of truth and victory.

- Last year, Patriarch Porfirije visited Moscow, albeit for the sorrowful occasion of Bishop Antonije's repose. Are more visits planned?

Indeed, last year His Holiness Patriarch Porfirije of Serbia made his first visit to Russia and the Russian Orthodox Church as Patriarch. While the occasion was sorrowful, those gathered nevertheless felt in their hearts the joy of Resurrection and the light of eternity shining through that moment.

In November of last year, marking the 100th anniversary of the Russian Metochion in Belgrade, Metropolitan Antony of Volokolamsk, along with a delegation from the Russian Orthodox Church, undertook a multi-day visit to Serbia and Republika Srpska. Alongside divine services led by the Serbian Patriarch together with an assembly of Serbian Church metropolitans, meetings were held with Serbian President Aleksandar Vučić, Republika Srpska President Milorad Dodik, Serbian Prime Minister Milos Vučević, and other officials.

I am confident that in the coming months, further meetings will be organized at both ecclesiastical and state levels to advance our relations across multiple spheres.

- Bishop Antonije of Moravia was deeply respected in Moscow. Did you know him personally?

My first encounter with Bishop Antonije occurred upon my arrival in Moscow. His Grace personally welcomed all new students at the airport and introduced them to the academy's rector and faculty. Such was the case for me as well. But few know what happened after we landed at Sheremetyevo International Airport. On our way into Moscow, we were involved in a car accident. Fortunately, no one was injured. Recalling this incident—and the fact that the accident happened specifically during my arrival—I believe it was a kind of Divine sign...

As a student at the academy in the rank of hierodeacon, I regularly served under Bishop Antonije—nearly every Sunday and during major feast days. Later, after my own episcopal consecration, we often served together at various church celebrations and solemn occasions. The news of his illness deeply affected me, and his repose struck me even more profoundly.

- In Russia, many ever-memorable Serbian hierarchs are known and venerated – His Holiness Patriarch Pavle, His Holiness Patriarch Irinej, and Metropolitan Amfilohije.

Thanks be to God that in our Church – and we have been witnesses to this – there lived in the 20th century such godly men as Patriarch Pavle (who sent me to study in Russia on the recommendation of Metropolitan Efrem of Banja Luka, awarded the Order of Friendship by President V.V. Putin); Patriarch Irinej (who appointed me as his vicar); Metropolitan Amfilohije of Montenegro and the Littoral (under whose watchful guidance I graduated from the Cetinje Seminary); and others. These were true spiritual giants from whom everyone could learn much – bishops of what we call the 'old school,' for whom the interests of the Church were always and unquestionably paramount.

The Path of St. Sava

- The Serbian Church also pastors Montenegro, Bosnia, Croatia, and Slovenia. How is the Church faring there?

Regarding the Serbian Church's pastoral care in the aforementioned countries, the situation there can to some extent be compared to that in the states that emerged following the dissolution of the Soviet Union. I say 'to some extent' because today we don't have open conflicts or violations of fundamental human rights. Though this certainly doesn't mean we didn't experience such things in years past. In the 20th century, Yugoslavia—while a communist country—was unified, and the Church managed to administer its dioceses and parishes across this multinational state. With its breakup came new countries, new national identities, even new languages... The most striking example of this is Kosovo and Metohija—a severed, or rather, usurped part of Serbia.

- Why is Kosovo so important to the Serbian Church?

Were we to describe the significance of Kosovo and Metohija in contemporary terms—that is, to answer what it represents for our Church and the Serbian people—we would first need to find analogous concepts among other Orthodox nations. In Christian literature, one often encounters expressions like 'Heavenly Jerusalem,' 'Holy Rus',' and others. As is known, these reflect a particular metaphysical understanding of a land (territory) as the greatest sanctuary—the very soul of a people. Moreover, this concept is imbued with the most sublime ideals that form an inseparable part of Orthodox Christianity.

We are witnesses to all that is happening today on Ukrainian soil, across the expanse of ancient Kievan Rus', where the most pivotal event occurred in 988—the Baptism of Rus'. This marked a new beginning for the Russian people. Similarly, Kosovo and Metohija represent a defining moment in the consolidation of Serbian national identity. The turning point came with the Battle of Kosovo Field in 1389, when the

famous 'Kosovo Covenant' was made. This covenant lies at the heart of Serbian epic poetry, where supreme value is placed on sacrifice through which the Heavenly Kingdom is attained.

- The reconciliation with the Macedonian Church was remarkable. Why did the Serbian Church take this step?

Every schism in the Church—as the very word implies—represents a tearing of the Lord's robe and inevitably leads to catastrophic consequences. Throughout Christian history, we have witnessed numerous divisions, many of which remain unhealed. When we speak of the now-healed schism with the Macedonian Orthodox Church—the Archbishopric of Ohrid—it is important to note that it differed from the schism that occurred in Ukraine (with the OCU). Yet despite the Macedonian clergy maintaining Apostolic succession, they lacked the freedom to partake in Eucharistic communion with other Orthodox Churches. Through the courage of our Patriarch and the sobriety of the clergy in North Macedonia, after more than five decades, canonical unity was finally restored, and the Macedonian Church was inscribed in the diptych of canonical Local Orthodox Churches. The pinnacle of this unity was the Liturgy of Reconciliation celebrated at the Cathedral of the Holy Archangel Michael in Belgrade on June 5, 2022, when His Holiness Patriarch Porfirije of Serbia presented Metropolitan Stefan of Skopje with the tomos affirming the Macedonian Church's autocephaly. Remembering that divine service, I can say with certainty that I felt transported to another—parallel—world, one filled with bliss, peace, and tranquility.

- How is Patriarch Porfirije regarded in the Serbian Church's territories?

Just as one cannot conceive of a true Serb without the Orthodox faith of their forefathers, so too is it impossible to imagine the Serbian Church without its head, the Serbian Patriarch. Even during his time as abbot of Kovilj Monastery in the Bačka Diocese of Vojvodina, His Holiness earned profound respect among believers of all confessions. This became even more evident during his tenure as head of the Metropolitanate of Zagreb and Ljubljana. His ascension to the patriarchal throne of the Serbian Church reaffirmed his authority, particularly among the youth.

Of course, we must recognize that steering the ship of the Serbian Church is no easy task, especially at a time when the West—and what may be worse, our immediate neighbors—view it as a 'destructive and pernicious factor' in society. Observing our Patriarch's words and actions, one sees how he labors to preserve peace and unity among all neighboring peoples, tirelessly advocating for respect of fundamental human rights. This is why we pray fervently that the Lord may grant him many blessed years, that he may continue guiding our Church along the path of Svetosavlje (Saint Sava's legacy) [2], shielding it from all assaults and the evils of this world.

Russian hospitality Like Abraham's

- What is the main task of your service here?

In concluding our conversation, I must share this truth: it has been my profound honor to serve as a Serbian bishop on the great Orthodox soil of Russia. Russian hospitality mirrors Abraham's welcome—you feel it at every turn, both in the capital and beyond. During my visits to St. Petersburg, Sergiev Posad, Yekaterinburg, Kazan, and other cities, I witnessed firsthand the expansiveness of the Russian soul and its boundless love.

Strengthening the spiritual and cultural bonds between our peoples is my foremost calling—a mission I hope to fulfill with dignity and completeness. It heartens me to see so many of our students in Russia—theologians, lawyers, engineers, IT specialists, and professional athletes. I trust Russia will reciprocate: may Russian students, artists, and athletes come to Serbia and Republika Srpska. Thus shall we fulfill our sacred task, revealing to the world the authentic unity of our two brotherly Slavic nations.

Deacon Alexander Cherepenin

Bishop Stefan (Šarić) of Remesiana – Representative of the Serbian Orthodox Church to the Patriarch of Moscow and All Rus', Vicar Bishop to His Holiness the Serbian Patriarch. Born on July 29, 1978, in Bravnica near Jajce, Bosnia and Herzegovina (then part of Yugoslavia). Completed elementary school in Bravnica. From age ten, served as a choir singer and reader at his local parish church. Enrolled at the Cetinje Theological Seminary, graduating in 1998. During seminary, he was a scholarship recipient of the Kotor church community, where he served during summer breaks at the Church of St. Luke and participated in the Jedinstvo (Unity) choir ensemble. After seminary, entered the Theology Faculty of the University of Belgrade.

During the 1999 NATO bombing of Yugoslavia, he enlisted for military service, after which he embraced monasticism. Lived in obedience to his spiritual father, Archimandrite Lazar, at Ostrog Monastery. Following his spiritual father's repose, he returned to the Diocese of Banja Luka and was received at Liplje Monastery in 2002. On April 7, 2003, at the Annunciation Church of Liplje Monastery, he was tonsured a rassophore monk with the name Stefan and ordained a hierodeacon by Bishop Efrem of Banja Luka. From 2003 to 2006, he studied at the Moscow Theological Academy, earning a Candidate of Theology degree with a dissertation titled "Toward a Systematization of the Theological Legacy of Venerable Justin (Popović)." After graduation, he returned to Liplje Monastery, where on August 6, 2006, Bishop Efrem ordained him a hieromonk.

In 2006, he was appointed abbot of Liplje Monastery and named synkellos (ecclesiastical steward) in recognition of his zeal and faithful stewardship. At the invitation of Metropolitan Nikolaj (Mrđa) of Dabar-Bosnia, he served as Professor of Orthodox Theology at the Foča Theological Seminary during the 2010–11 academic year. Later, with the blessing of Patriarch Irinej of Serbia, he served as spiritual father at the Belgrade Nativity of the Theotokos Monastery in Rainovac, where he organized monastic life and initiated the restoration of the monastery church. On September 21, 2012, he was elevated to protosynkellos, and on September 21, 2014, Patriarch Irinej raised him to the rank of archimandrite at Rainovac Monastery. On August 7, 2017, he was appointed rector of Belgrade's St. Sava Cathedral on Vračar.

On May 10, 2018, the Holy Assembly of Bishops of the Serbian Orthodox Church elected him Bishop of Remesiana, Vicar of the Belgrade Diocese. His episcopal consecration took place on June 17 in the crypt of St. Sava Cathedral on Vračar, presided over by Patriarch Irinej. On April 18, 2024, he was appointed Representative of the Serbian Orthodox Church to the Patriarch of Moscow and All Rus' and rector of the Patriarchal Metochion—the Church of Saints Peter and Paul at Yauz Gate in Moscow.

[1] Krsna slava – A Serbian tradition celebrating the feast day of a family's or institution's patron saint. Here, St. Simeon the Myrrh-streaming is the patron of the Red Star sports society.

[2] Svetosavlje (literally "St. Sava's Tradition") – A term used in Serbia for Orthodoxy, emphasizing the profound link between the Serbian people's embrace of the Orthodox faith and the role of St. Sava of Serbia.