

St. Sava Serbian Orthodox School of Theology

Text by Very Rev. Dr. Milos M. Vesin, 2018.

The most intelligent Serbian woman of the twentieth century, Isidora Sekulic, left us as a stimulant, but also a warning, the words she dedicated to Bishop Rade-Petar Petrovic Njegos, writing: „Blessed is that nation which has people with vision as their leaders”. The history of our people does not lack in people with vision, but truth be told, not all visionaries succeeded to embody their visions. One of the rare visionaries among Serbian spiritual fathers of the twentieth century who succeeded to begin and lay the foundation of an unbelievable far-reaching vision, on the cochlea of the Serbian people, but also the entire fullness of Orthodoxy, in America, was Bishop of Sumadija, Bishop Dr. Sava (Vukovic), of blessed memory.

Pastoring the Serbian Orthodox Diocese of Eastern America and Canada for a full ten years, Bishop Sava already at the end of the 1960’s saw the essential need for Serbs on this continent to have their own School of Theology on the highest level, where young Serbs from Serbia, together with Serbs born in America and Canada, would be prepared for their pastoral work. The other hierarchs also realized the necessity of the existence of such an academic institution, and so the Holy Assembly of Bishops, at its regular meeting in 1986, under the wise presidency of Serbian Patriarch German of blessed repose, decided that for the needs of our Church in the American-Canadian diaspora a Theological School be established at the St. Sava Monastery in Libertyville.

At the very beginning (1986-1988), our School of Theology acted as a department of the Theological Faculty of the Serbian Orthodox Church in Belgrade. From 1988-1996, the School in Libertyville was under the academic wing of the

Lutheran Theological College of the University of Chicago, and from 1988 to this day it acts as an independent institution of higher education.

It is worth noting that our School of Theology was founded exactly 245 years after the founding of the Theological Collegium, that first institution of higher education among Serbs, which was the very beginning of higher Serbian theological schooling. The Spiritual Collegium, since 1741, was in fact the perfected offshoot of the Latin-Slovenian school which on the feast of the Nativity of the Most Holy Theotokos in 1737 in the Sanc of Petrovaradin, modern day Novi Sad, was launched by one of the most brilliant hierarchs of the Metropolitanate of Karlovci, Bishop Visarion Pavlovic of Backa. The head prefect, and also lecturer of philosophy and theology at the Spiritual Collegium, was the notable Serbian educator Dionisije Novakovic, a cadet of the Spiritual Academy of Kiev and later Bishop of Budim. We mention this because seen from a wider historical perspective, the establishing of these two educational institutions – though separated by time – served in spreading the educational-scientific perspective, but also in preserving the Serbian Orthodox identity, at the time – close to the middle of the eighteenth century – among Serbs in the Hapsburg monarchy, and now – at the end of the twentieth century – among Serbs in the diaspora in the wide vastness of America and Canada.

In the Fall of 1986 the first academic year (1986/87) began at the newly established School of Theology in Libertyville. The first members of the professor collegium were: His Grace Bishop Sava (Vukovic) of Sumadija, V. Rev. Stavrophor Mateja Matejic, V. Rev. Stavrophor Professor Dr. Nedeljko Grgurevic, Protodeacon Professor Dr. Stanimir Spasovic and Protodeacon Professor Dr. Dragan Milin. Four students enrolled to the first year of theological studies. For the next three years every Fall a new generation was added since the students enrolled one year passed into the next, etc. until the first generation of graduates in 1990. Therefore, since its founding

until today the School of Theology in Libertyville has produced twenty-seven generation of graduated theologians.

Over time the number of teaching staff has been filled so that today the teaching staff at the School of Theology includes fifteen college teachers from regular to associate professors, visiting professors, docents and assistants.

Upon completing the administering of the Diocese of Midwestern America, and then Western America, by Bishop Dr. Sava (Vukovic), and after serving as the dean of the school, the duties of dean were completed in the following years by: V. Rev. Stavrophor Dr. Mateja Matejic and V. Rev. Stavrophor Dr. Nedeljko Grgurevich. When in 1991, then Bishop of Eastern America, His Grace Christopher (Kovacevic), was elected as the first Metropolitan of Midwestern America, with his see at St. Sava Monastery in Libertyville, he was also elected and appointed as the new dean of the School of Theology. Metropolitan Christopher of blessed memory completed his duties as dean with much dedication until his repose August of 2010. Among the many merits of Metropolitan Christopher, in the field of preserving and advancing the school, we will mention here only those two most significant. The first was that through his efforts and persistence our college was officially recognized by the Committee for Higher Education in the State of Illinois. The second achievement of the metropolitan's was that, thanks to a very generous financial assistance of the late +Dragomir Nikolic, he secured a fairly undisturbed life of the school for many years. At the first meeting of the teaching staff, after the repose of Metropolitan Christopher, Bishop Mitrophan (Kodic) of Eastern America, long time professor of New Testament and Liturgics at our school, was unanimously elected as the new dean. He completed this duty very conscientiously and not without sacrifice he serves as dean to this day but since May 2016 as Bishop of Canada.

It should be stressed here that from the very beginning, as well as during the first years since its founding, a large and significant role in the survival of the school was played by the respected and church active laity from throughout America. We mention only a few names: +Milos Kovac, +Ilija Rebic, +Luka Bajic, +Mica Radotic, Dmtitar Rakic and many, many others. As far as support from clergy is concerned it also was not lacking. Not wanting to neglect anyone, we should still single out and mention the name of one unordinary diligent priest, an enthusiast and selfless helper of the school, and that is the late V. Rev. Stavrophor Milan Markovina, the longtime parish priest of the St. Sava Church in Milwaukee, Wisconsin.

That which our school has accomplished during third years of existence is impossible to state only through numbers. But still, we will depend on numbers in this short review, so that the results of a theological school of higher education, which is under difficult circumstance, might be more obvious to us, that we see how it justified its thirtieth-year existence. What do number tell you, therefore, from the last three decades?

During the next thirty years 136 would graduate from our school. Of that number, as of February 2018, 108 were ordained. A special joy of our school is the process of renewal in our teaching staff as five of our previous students, after their post graduate studies, are now lecturers at the very school they graduated from. There are 50 graduated students among the clergy in our Dioceses in North and South America. Three of them have duties in the administration of our Dioceses: the New Gracanica and Midwest America Diocese, Eastern American Diocese and Western American Diocese. There are 37 of our graduated students who serve as priests or deacons in Serbia. One of our graduates is now a bishop. There are 16 of the graduated students who teach religious classes in Serbia and Republika Srpska. Three of them are professors at St. Petar Seminary in Foca. There are three priests, graduates

of this school, who serve in Western Europe. We are especially thankful to God that girls graduated from our school, two of whom are popadijas.

Regarding higher academic achievements, nine of our students after finishing their studies, received their doctorates, receiving either the title Ph.D or Th. D. Fourteen of them received their Masters Degree. Two of our graduate students are currently pursuing their doctorate degrees, while five of them are in Master's programs. We should also mention one of our graduate students who has already has a reputation internationally as an iconographer.

The first and basic question connected with the future of our school could only be: In what further direction is it going? This is certainly a question tied with the nature of the very mission of Orthodoxy in this region. The future of the Serbian Orthodox Dioceses and parishes on this continent is based on two equally same processes, even though not completely of the same dynamic. The first is the need for a larger and truly more necessary openness to others, from all regions, interested in the revelation of the unrevealed truth, goodness and beauty of the Image of Christ, preserved in Orthodoxy, and who in themselves, simultaneously, feel the calling for the clerical-pastoral service. That openness is already given in the very nature of Orthodoxy. On the other hand, the process that should in no way ever be neglected is – the further nurturing of our cultural characteristics as Orthodox Serbs, never forgetting how great of a role the elements of inculturation played in the Orthodoxy of the Serbian national being, from the time of the Holy brothers, equal-to-the-Apostles, Cyril and Methodius, and their disciples, through Saint Sava, all the way to the newly-glorified Nikolaj of Ohrid, Zicha and Libertyville, Mardarije of Libertyville and Sebastian of Jackson. Each era in which the mentioned Saints acted had and has its various cultural patterns, but that which has particularly decorated the tree of the Serbian cultural ethos is its dignified Orthodoxy. But, at the same time, the dynamics

of Orthodox piety in specific Serbian form - such as Svetosavlje - composed with truly enlightening aspirations, has, beyond all doubt, an unordinary appeal. And this is not only for those who seek „any kind of ethnic ground“ under their feet in a time that resounds with threats of the „end of history“, but precisely for those who see the fullness of life in the fruitful cooperation of that form of Christianity that in itself has the heritage of the early Church on the one hand and has implemented Orthodox Christianity nurtured in culture on the other hand.

It is undisputed that for the reality of the Serbian Orthodox in this region - and all of Orthodoxy in North and South America as well - a spiritual school of the highest level is more and more necessary, one exactly in the heart of Midwestern America, where for thirty years now, as a small wonder of time, and we can freely say as a counterpoint at the change of centuries, the School of Theology exists and functions at St. Sava Monastery in Libertyville, currently situated at New Gracanica Monastery. For our school to become all the more necessary in the spiritual dynamics of contemporary Orthodoxy, it would over time have to mature in such a spiritual-academic institution where every Orthodox Christian from here - and particularly every Orthodox Serb - would be directed as to a shining and valuable breath of freshness, a source of a needed beauty without which there is no progress on the narrow path of Christian perfection. All of this, of course, is supported by the newest achievements in academic education of the 21st century, but only those that are for good.

In his, now already historically memorable, speech: "On the responsibility of the Orthodox in America", delivered in 1949, the famed Protopresbyter and Professor Fr. Georges Florovsky, defending the mission of the then just established St. Vladimir's Academy in New York, said, among other things: "We do not need just a professional school in which a few people will go to school for their priestly services -

people that will be able to serve services and perform routine duties...We need a school of prophets, spiritual and intellectual athletes, who will be capable and who will desire to go into the world and take with them true knowledge, true understanding, a fiery faith and the power of homilies.....”.

The words of Fr. Florovsky, with which we began this journey into the history of our School, are current today, perhaps even on a greater level than more than seventy years ago when they were spoken. Those words can be applied to every theological school today on this continent. In the measure that our brothers and sisters, the Orthodox: Serbs, Russians, Greeks, Romanians, Americans, Georgians, Bulgarians, Arabs and many others, and each from their standpoint of the seemingly “ordinary” layperson, today there are truly the details of the name of Christ and the firm witnesses of faith in the crucified and resurrected Christ, in that measure all the theological schools on this continent: St. Vladimir's Academy, Holy Cross Academy in Boston, Holy Trinity Seminary in Jordanville, and our St. Sava School of Theology in Libertyville, as well as the others - have truly become, if not schools of prophets, then at least, if we can say, schools of prophetic students.

To all the zealous workers who over these thirty years have placed a part of themselves, their faith and love in the life and mission of the School of Theology in Libertyville, may God reward them through His Mercy and His blessing. May God grant memory eternal to those deceased, and from us immeasurable gratitude for the courage of vision, the great sacrifice, for understanding, support, for every word of defense, every well intended smile. To those who still seek their salvation and walk towards the light, may the Lord grant them abundant spiritual peace and bodily health, and for all good things done for our school, the students and professors.

To this generation of faithful - and this is our sincere prayerful wish - may the Lord grant effective talent of charity, as well as the consciousness of the need to nurture, preserve and further improvement our only theological institution of higher education - the School of Theology in Libertyville. We live in a time more pronounced and, let's say open, all the more painful need for evangelization - both here and elsewhere.