



Saint Simeon-Stefan Nemanja, Grand Župan of Serbia (1166–1196),  
narthex, west wall, Church of the Mother of God of Ljeviša, 1308–1314

# INTRODUCTION

*Maxim Vasiljević, Bishop of the Serbian Western American Diocese*

CONSIDER a Kosovo forever empty of the Orthodox Christian presence and spiritual radiance? “Of course not,” a monk of old might have said, perhaps adding, “It isn’t possible to talk about the Christian heritage of Kosovo unless there is *somebody* there to talk about it.” Indeed, no understanding of this tremendous heritage would be possible without a real presence and meeting, without some measure of “congeniality” and spiritual sympathy. Beyond peripheral differences and worldly interactions and views, beyond the logic of West and East—the *Christian heritage of Kosovo and Metohija* testifies to a sign of the love of God. This heritage, like an outburst in the stillness, dissipates the deceitfulness of delusion. Eventually, it grants the truth of life as a cherishing of freedom and harmony for everybody on this *terra sacra*.

The area known as Kosovo and Metohija has had a dramatic and often violent history. During the early Middle Ages Kosovo was a part of the Serbian empire. It was Christian, and many churches and monasteries were built in the area; their walls were richly decorated with precious frescos. From the 15<sup>th</sup> century until World War I Kosovo was controlled by the Muslim Ottoman Empire, and later (after 1912–1918) it became a part of Serbia and Yugoslavia. Kosovo is not only the cradle of Serbian statehood and culture, it also comprises 15 percent of the territory of Serbia, a democratic state with as much a right to territorial integrity as any other member state of the United Nations. Historically speaking, the enduring monuments in the lands known as *Serbia sacra* are the result of the farsighted need of the autonomous Christian Church and Serbian state to master human destiny’s ephemerality with a sense of perpetuity. They attempted to erect and establish a lasting identity amid the flux of time—mostly through art and culture and sometimes through wars and struggles—in an attempt to defend their national identity.

Certain books resist obsolescence because of their continuing relevance for ongoing dialogue and witness. *The Endowments of Kosovo—Monuments and Testimonies of the Serbian people*, appearing in 1987 in Serbian (eds. Atanasije Jevtić and Živorad Stojković) on which the book you hold in your hands is based, has played such a role. By advocating the priority of spiritual culture over politics this book has helped its readers transcend some of the ideological divisions in the politically charged atmosphere of yesterday’s and today’s Kosovo and Metohija. It also shows that the challenge of reconciling legitimate Serbian sovereignty with the desire of Kosovo’s Albanians for self-government is not insurmountable.

This completely revised and updated edition of the book, *The Heritage of Kosovo and Metohija: The Spiritual, Historical, and Aesthetic Heartland of the Serbian People*, is in fact a new book, with more than 50 percent added documenta-

tion, testimonies, pictorial materials, and fresh historical analysis, and as a collection of testimonies has a very humble ambition. It maintains that the existence of successors and descendants determines the fundamental destiny of the sacred land of Kosovo. It bears witness to the biblical, eschatological truth that the future gives substance and meaning to the past. In that sense, “culture, when it is the most precious possession, is never the past,” as André Malraux pointed out. So the same truth applies to these enduring spiritual, cultural, and theological treasures of Christianity, transcending national and political concerns. Only the “historical memory” can create self-awareness and become an incentive for survival and for securing national and human rights, as well as feelings of justice and dignity.

It is unrealistic to expect one book on Kosovo and Metohija to encompass all the crucial evidences about their art, history, and thought. This book is a living testimony to the exceptional efforts of the Serbian Orthodox Church to create a rich spiritual and material culture, preserving its centuries-old monuments and the Christian heritage of Kosovo and Metohija. The book conveys a wealth of information and provides valuable new insights into the telling testimony of richness of Serbian culture in its southernmost province. Facts presented here in superabundance are accumulated from over the course of more than eight centuries on this much-ploughed Balkan soil. It should be noted that the new English edition draws a large amount of material from the 1987 Serbian publication, including the Foreword from Patriarch Pavle of blessed memory. It contains texts from our noted historians, theologians, artists, and journalists. Most important of all, translated historical documents and charters, various historical chronicles, and recent communiqués and reports testify to our tragic fate in Kosovo. What gives life to the past and scope for future creative endeavor is precisely both the facts themselves and the interpretation of those facts. All of the contributors fully embrace the given opportunity to share in the presentation and affirmation of the Serbian people’s cultural values by publishing this book. Their work aims to nourish the reader’s personal reflection and seeks to stand as a verbal and pictorial monument to the martyrs of the great Kosovo Covenant, bringing the wealth of this covenant before the public worldwide.

The editor and publisher have the fervent hope that today’s peoples in Kosovo and Metohija will be able to begin their discussions not from what divides them but from what unites them, emphasizing in positive and constructive ways the areas in which a Serbo-Albanian ethnic symbiosis has existed. This book invites all to consider their differences in the light of history and of the future.

There are already grounds for claiming that *The Christian Heritage of Kosovo and Metohija* will serve as a symbol to us and to all future generations indicating that, in spite of

all the temptations of history, it is they who will ensure that our Kosovo testament will be lasting. It does not invite anyone to a misanthropic and armed rebellion, but aims to resurrect, awaken, develop, and nurture in the Serbian people and all people of good will the ethos of true spirituality characteristic of the original *Kosovo Covenant*.

This book on Serbia's Christian Heritage in Kosovo and Metohija, its heartland in medieval times and through Ottoman domination, is intended to introduce to a wide reading public the oldest and richest treasury of Serbian medieval history and culture. Its authors are leading specialists in the fields in which they write, so readers may place complete reliance on the factual accuracy of the material.

Many of the monumental churches, monasteries, and treasures in Kosovo and Metohija have been plundered or destroyed by Albanians, but the best-preserved and the most beautiful among them—Ljeviška, Dečani, Gračanica, Peć, these foundations of the Serbian medieval kings, witnesses and testaments of our forefathers, and UNESCO World Heritage Sites—have been bequeathed to later generations as a testimony of a community of men founded on justice, law, and tolerance in all areas of social life. This reality can be seen from many chronicles, charters, legends and, most explicitly, from *Dušan's Code*, that great product of Nemanjić statesmanship. The Serbs justifiably feel pride at being the descendants of holy men and women, pious kings and princesses, and of those living in solitude far from the paths of power and glory, all of whom believed it was their duty to leave to posterity traces and records of the events of their time. Those events happened in a certain context, which we call "sacred history."

As a result of a number of historical, political, economic, demographic, and other factors, the situation in Kosovo has become a dangerous generator of the most recent crisis in the Balkans. In the culmination of the wars that followed the breakup of Yugoslavia, the "Christian" nations in NATO chose Easter 1999 to bomb Christian Serbia into submission and end Serbian control of Kosovo. In 2008 Kosovo declared itself independent from Serbia. The rich cultural and Christian heritage that survived Ottoman and communist rule is now at risk and targeted for destruction in spite of UN protection.

To put it simply, as Serbian *terra sacra*, Kosovo is sacred ground to Serbs, like Jerusalem is to Jews; that is why "the cradle of Serbian nation" is there. The full title of the Serbian Patriarch is: "Archbishop of Peć, Metropolitan of Karlovci-Belgrade Mitropoly, and Patriarch of Serbia." This title as well is a reminder that (also in the heart of Kosovo and Metohija) Peć was the center of Serbian spirituality for centuries, while the seat of the Serbian Patriarch and archbishops was the monastery situated at the River of Bistrica's outlet from Rugovska Gorge.

Therefore, Kosovo is the cultural, spiritual, historical, and aesthetic heart of the Serbian people. As such, the monuments and objects of material and spiritual culture in Kosovo and Metohija constitute an indisputable 700-year-old proof of the Serbs' rightful ownership of the sacred land. As

a contemporary Serbian poet penned: "If Kosovo is not ours, then why do they want us to give it to them? If Kosovo is theirs, then why are they stealing it? And since they are able to steal it, I don't know why they are hesitating so much."

The chapters contained in this volume aim at tackling the subject of the Christian heritage in Kosovo and Metohija in different ways.

Chapter I displays the aesthetic endowments and insignia of Kosovo and Metohija. Here we encounter a visualization of an extraordinary story of life as well as a comprehensive analysis of an expanded Serbian cultural framework that represents one of the summits of Byzantine-inspired Serbian architecture. The leading monasteries founded by the Nemanjić dynasty (Gračanica, The Mother of God of Ljeviška, St. Stephen's Church in Banjska, Dečani, and The Holy Archangels)—with their unparalleled frescos—contain icon paintings showing the sovereignty of the state and continuity of Serbian rule, along with relics of canonized rulers. Its Great Church (the Peć Patriarchate) holds relics of canonized leaders of the national church. These sites, together with many other monasteries and a dense network of small parish churches all over Kosovo and neighboring regions, represent the basis on which the Serbs formed and consolidated their national consciousness and built up a national and cultural identity.

These monuments, then, concentrated and deployed over one territory, are national boundary-stones. The only intact survivors of the Turkish-Albanian Muslim devastation of these parts, they are still active centers of Serbian spiritual and national consciousness.

Original texts, written by experts in their individual fields, accompany the photographic plates and clearly demonstrate that Serbia's architectural and art monuments in Kosovo rank among the finest achievements of medieval Europe, while the literary creations from this region represent the very foundations of the Serbian written word, which helped form a national consciousness during this period. It was rightly said (in the Serbian Memorandum to the ambassadors of the European Powers in London in 1913) that this territory is a kind of "Holy Land" for the Serbian people; for it was here in the Middle Ages that they attained a high degree of civilization, and it is on the achievements of this period that their European identity rests. The paintings, form, spatial composition, structure, and architectural decoration of these monuments clearly reveal the creative synthesis achieved by Serbian artists from the Late-Byzantine period. The iconography of the paintings at Gračanica (1321) and Dečani (1335), as D. Talbot Rice noticed, "is in the main Byzantine, though the style is Serbian, as indicated by the love of vividness and precise detail." A new humanism characterizes these works, and it was this style that served as a basis for what Gabriel Millet termed "the Byzantine Renaissance."

In Chapter II, a large, rich, and varied selection of studies and papers, both theological and historical, inform us about the co-called *Kosovo Covenant* and its relation to Serbia's historic destiny. As one contributor in this monograph emphasizes, the original *Kosovo Covenant* is the New Testa-

ment expressed in the Serbian style and through the Serbian experience. Still, it is Christ's New Testament and not something else. The *Kosovo Covenant* does not exist outside of the New Testament. Therefore, the *Kosovo Covenant* is an embodiment of the New Testament in the fabric of our nation, in its history, in its being, and in its destiny on this Earth. The translated old Serbian literature and art inspired by the *Kosovo Covenant* are the most eloquent testimony of a level of enlightenment that never ceases to surprise us. Everything was knit and welded into a unity by the driving force of Christian faith, so that literature, art, liturgical life, and customs soon took on not only a new complexion, in conformity with the faith they served, but also a new soul. This chapter is intended to demonstrate that the inseparable unity of history with eschatology is of crucial importance for the understanding of the Christian character of the Serbian *terra sacra*.

The living and lively remembrance of its own medieval state was a dynamic cause in the Serbian struggle for liberty and unity centuries later, and an inextricable part of that remembrance is the cognizance that Kosovo is the homeland of the Serbian nation. However, the Serbs' approach to Kosovo is not simply based on memories of the past, nor is the mythical factor the most important element in their attitude. Every aspect of the memory of Kosovo contains the essence of the Serbian identity—past, present, and future. It is a remembrance of and appreciation for what we were in our past, an identification with and concern for what we are in the present, and a hope for what we are and will continue to be in the future. The same can be said of our historiographic or political reflections on the problem. Kosovo is not some imaginary legend of the past, but a real historical destiny that continues today.

Chapter III deals with the famous Battle of Kosovo. According to its ethos and historical consequences, the Battle of Kosovo left a deep imprint on the collective memory of the Serbs. That which is called the Kosovo Covenant and was epically sublimated in the form of a Gospel parallel—the Prince's supper as the Last Supper, Vuk Branković's betrayal as Judas' betrayal, the Prince's sacrifice as Christ's sacrifice—is a unique example of a conceiving of life and collective memory characteristic of poetry of supreme quality—the poetry of a patriarchal people, imbued with the Christian and epic ethos, which is also its greatest value and originality and which exceeds local and ethnic bounds.

Chapter IV contains the "Memorandum on Kosovo and Metohija" published by the Holy Assembly of Bishops of the Serbian Orthodox Church. In this document we can follow the complex development of Serbia's history in Kosovo and

Metohija during the long ages from the 12<sup>th</sup> century to the end of the 20<sup>th</sup>. The region of Kosovo and Metohija had been settled since the early Middle Ages by a predominantly Serb population. The first Serbian states of the 10<sup>th</sup> and 11<sup>th</sup> centuries leaned toward Kosovo. Under Byzantine rule, right up to its final incorporation into the Serbian Nemanjić state in the late 12<sup>th</sup> and early 13<sup>th</sup> centuries, Kosovo was, in demographic terms, a Serb-inhabited land a Serbian land when political integration began. This is borne out by historical documents (the charters of Serbian rulers), particularly by a study of the anthroponyms (first names) they contain and the original toponyms (place names)—for in Kosovo and Metohija these are all mainly of Slavic origin.

This is connected with Chapter IV, which is a testament of the various Serbian holy shrines in Kosovo—even if they have been overlooked, erased, insulted, or demolished. Looking at enlisted Christian cities and holy shrines we can see why Kosovo and Metohija were two of the most developed parts of medieval Serbia, the cradle of its civilization with the most important spiritual and cultural centers, and its central part, in which many Serbian rulers were born. Of all the Serbian lands, Kosovo and Metohija have the highest density of Orthodox church institutions, churches, and monas-



teries (Dečani, Gračanica, Banjska, Holy Archangels, the Mother of God Ljeviška, Devič, and many others). The most important and most valuable monuments of Serbian culture and spirituality are in these lands; some of them have been included on the UNESCO World Heritage List. Through the centuries Kosovo and Metohija, with their 1,400 churches and monasteries, holy places, and grave-sites, have become for the Serbian people what Jerusalem is for the Jewish people.

Chapter V, entitled "History, Identity, Legacy," explains why it is extremely important that the Kosovo question be viewed in a historical light. If it is not, the present political situation is incomprehensible, nor can the real meaning and range of Albanian intentions be grasped. Moreover, the position of the Serbs in the Balkans is much too intricate and involved for it to be examined merely in the light of present events. For the Serbian people Kosovo put the seal on their identity, and it became the key to their history and the banner of national freedom. The Serbian province known as Kosovo actually consists of two regions: Kosovo and Metohija. One is a Serbian toponym and the other one is Greek. The name Kosovo is derived from the word "kos," meaning blackbird. Metohija comes from "metoh," indicating property of a monastery. Both regions are studded with old Serbian churches and monasteries dating from the medieval

period of the Serbian state that was centered there. Metohija received its name due to the fact that most of the land had been granted to numerous monasteries established by Serbian rulers. We are not dealing here with a myth, but a historical idea, which helps a nation forge a link with its real historical past. Cognizing the past is richer than “the past itself” because it is a renewed reliving of the past as a viable tradition, along with its appropriation and clarifying interpretation. Evaluations and interpretations offered here are objectively presented, but they are always open to scholarly dispute, new views, and fresh approaches.

Chapter VII presents Kosovo after the Battle of Kosovo. To stress the present demographic picture in Kosovo and maintain that these regions are Albanian simply because a large number of Albanians live there today is to overlook the fact that this land was inhabited primarily by the Serbian people as their heartland and, historically speaking, their motherland. There has never been any break in Serbia’s attitude toward Kosovo as a Serbian national territory, no interruption in the struggle to liberate Kosovo’s Serbs and make them part of the Serbian community in the whole country. Failure to observe real historical facts could result in the legalization of the consequences of genocide. And this, of course, would mean attacking an ethical principle at its very roots. So, this chapter offers a convincing picture of the time, place, manner, and causes of invasion by the Albanians and their colonization and oppression of the Serbs. After centuries of Ottoman domination, from the end of the 14<sup>th</sup> through to the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the desire for the independence of the Serbian people became intertwined with the idea of the liberation of Kosovo.

A contemporary account of the renewed martyrdom is to be found in Chapter VIII. Instead of a real picture of Albanian-Serb relations, which for the past three centuries have been characterized by violent treatment of the Serbs by Albanian Muslim converts, we are handed the idea of “reciprocal responsibility,” whereby the alleged 20-year period of “Greater-Serbian discrimination” against the Albanian population is equally balanced with the 200-year period of abuse by the Muslim Albanians against Christian Orthodox Serbs within theocratic structure of the Ottoman Empire.

The future of a multiethnic Kosovo is ambiguous and dubious. The UN has not prevented “ethnic cleansing in reverse” and the further destruction of medieval religious and cultural monuments. Over a thousand churches, monasteries and other religious sites witness to Serbian Orthodox immersion of the province over centuries. The U.S. House Foreign Relations Committee should urgently hold hearings on the status of the Serbian Orthodox Christian population and church in Kosovo—the only place in Europe where Christians live under apartheid-like conditions in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. The Serbian Orthodox Church has always advocated a peaceful multiethnic cohabitation, within mutually acceptable status solution between Belgrade and Priština.

The policy of “ethnic purity,” if we take a look at history, is always racist in character. Nothing can justify it, no matter who pursues it. Least of all can it be justified by pseudo-

historical mystification. On the other hand, it cannot be hushed up by a simplistic tale of peaceful, harmonious, and idyllic relations between nations and nationalities in the region. There again, the logic that says the status of a region depends on the current situation and demographic ratio — regardless of how, when, and in what circumstances that situation arose and those relations were established — is absolutely untenable in human, moral, and historical terms.

It should be noted that the illustrations in this book have been chosen from a great mass of fine materials. Their object is to illustrate primarily the quality of the artistry of Serbian Kosovo and Metohija throughout the centuries, but also the historical continuity of the Christian heritage in those lands. In this sense, this monograph is a humble offering to the international scholarly and cultural audience providing a closer insight into the spiritual and cultural values of the Serbian people through an account of the multiple (artistic, architectural, literary, etc.) achievements embodied in the unique monuments of Serbian medieval culture. Certain parts of this book have already appeared elsewhere. Many of them, however, are published for the first time here. In both cases, the text has undergone special revision in view of the present edition, which is unique in its synthesis.

Special and warmest gratitude is due to Prof. Dušan T. Bataković, director of The Institute of Balkan Studies, Serbian Academy of Sciences and Arts, Belgrade. It has been a pleasure and a rewarding experience to have had many discussions about the contents of this book with him during the process of putting it together. The book benefited from his historical expertise and critical insights and was vastly improved by his extensive knowledge of history and art. We are indebted to Prof. Bogoljub Šijković, professor of Philosophy at the Faculty of Orthodox Theology, University of Belgrade, for the great amount of time and work he contributed toward the publication of this book.

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Let this volume serve as proof of our gratitude to those unknown creators for the immeasurably rich heritage they have left us and to those who still remain on this *terra sacra*, in spite of all the difficulties.

We particularly thank all the sponsors of this monograph. A special page of recognition is dedicated to them.

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*Next page:*

**Saint John the Baptist,**  
Chapel of Saint Nicholas, apse, Gračanica, 1318–1321



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