

THE KOSOVO COVENANT IN THE LIGHT OF THE NEW TESTAMENT

Bishop Irinej Bulović

IN OUR TIMES the entire local Saint Sava Church has been making enormous efforts to renew, for the broadest circles of its faithful, the true importance and the true meaning of the Kosovo Covenant, that leading idea of our entire history. For that reason it is very important that in this Jubilee Kosovo Year we, the clergy of the intelligent flock of Christ, remind first ourselves of the meaning and content of that Testament. And how would we remind ourselves and remember that? We would have to measure our Serbian Kosovo Covenant by the criteria of the New Testament, which is the last and eternal Testament between God and humanity, and see it in the waters of the Lord's revelation, as it is written in the New Testament, given to us according to the Apostolic Tradition of the Holy Church of Christ and interpreted, explained, and realized for us through the works and wisdom, and God-given reasoning of the Fathers and Teachers of the Church. I will, therefore, attempt, as succinctly as possible, to present several basic ideas and to articulate in words that all of us, as Christians and as clergy, feel deeply in our hearts and souls.

The Notion and Meaning of Testament

What does Testament mean in the Holy Scriptures, that is, in that old experience and tradition of the Church later written down in the Bible? A Testament is actually the basic and initial spiritual experience of the Lord's people, first the Old Testament and then the New Testament. It is not by chance that the two main parts of our Holy Scriptures are called exactly by the very name in which the word Testament appears in the title: The Books of the Old and of the New Testament.

Sadly, the Serbian language has, since the time of Vuk Karadžić, gradually lost its *ecclesial* component, and two variants of Serbian were created: one variant of the language, which only we Christians understand, is used in church; the other became profaned. In the latter many words are either missing or their meaning has changed. Therefore, in our language we no longer fully understand the spiritual and religious notion "testament." That is why I will remind you briefly of the original meaning of this word and of this concept. *Testament (Zavet)*—*Berit* in Hebrew, *Diathiki* (Διαθήκη) in Greek, *Testamentum* in Latin, *Zavjet* in Old Church Slavonic—actually originally meant cov-

enant, as well as many other words with related or similar meanings such as: contract, agreement, act, understanding, pact, etc. These words could all express the original Hebrew word *berit* which attempts to describe, but not exhaust—that is, to describe only approximately—the spiritual experience which is found in the base, at the root of that concept.

As in our entire spiritual reality, spiritual experience in the Judeo-Christian tradition is preceded by experiences and followed by words. Furthermore, the notions and the words by which we try to point out the meaning of that which the Lord's revelation contains, and which is contained in our spiritual experience, are usually taken from our ordinary, real, everyday experiences and then are enriched by those contents that surpass them. The same has happened with this notion of testament. *Berit* or *covenant* was originally a single legal, military, social term. It referred to relationships between individuals, between social groups, and between nations, much as it is in our language: when we say *covenant* we think of a certain understanding, a treaty with common interests, goals, with specific rights and duties, and conditions necessary to protect that covenant, and so on. It was the same in ancient Israel, which made military, economic, political, and other covenants with neighboring nations.

That was also a common practice in the whole Middle East, including Israel, and there are many written traces of that in the Old Testament. Besides the covenants between equal partners, there also existed covenants among unequal ones. Those are the covenants that maintain relationships of vassals with sovereign masters. Such covenants, totally profane in character, be it legal, military, political, or social, also had (besides the written contract or act) an external, ritual, apparent side. They were always accompanied by appropriate ceremonies and certain cult-related actions. Usually, in addition to the ceremonial written part, which both parties had to sign, sacrificial animals were also killed. Both signers of the pact, i.e. the covenant, had to walk among the dismembered parts of the sacrificial animals; the blood of the sacrificial animals was a ceremonial confirmation of the importance and value of the concluded covenant. They would pronounce some curses and threats against those who would violate the covenant and they would also say blessings for those who honored the regula-

tions of the agreement. Finally, following all those cult-related acts and after the feast, certain objects were placed as markers to commemorate the signing of the covenant. For example, a tree was planted or rocks were placed somewhere, or other similar actions were taken. That was the external aspect.

Israel then, as the first and only people at that time who knew about the true God and who were God's people, also expressed their experience of Yahweh, the Lord, on that basis. Taking a notion from their everyday experience, the notion of covenant (*berit*), they tried to use it to express the nature of their relationship with the Lord, in other words the nature of the Lord's relationship with His chosen people. In the process Israel did not pretend to claim that the relationship was the same as the relationship between two equal human partners or between human masters and their vassals. Rather, reality, pictures from human life, served as a good illustration of a relationship that was difficult to describe in words and which cannot fall into any concepts, because that experience simply surpasses our words and our notions. However, these pictures from our reality, if we understand them in a godlike, sublime manner, help us to become more deeply engrossed in the nature of the mystery and the revealed truth.

Thus it came to the application of the word *covenant* to the relationship of God and His chosen people. Here we have an essential theological and spiritual dimension that separates the religion of Israel, as the people of God, from the religious experience of the rest of humanity. Thus the notion of Covenant indicates that here one truly deals with a supernatural religion revealed by God. In contrast, the religions of the ancient East—for example, Canaanite or Egyptian, Babylonian, Assyrian or Hittite in Asia Minor, as well as still living religions such as Shintoism, Shamanism, Hinduism, and others—are in reality natural religions of the pagan type: they represent an expression of a fallen man's longing for God, but that longing is often turned upside down and perverted in the adoration of nature and natural powers. All of them are more or less of a pantheistic character. However, the idea of Covenant reveals to us something very deep that shows the great distance between religions revealed by God and those so-called natural religions.

In the first place, the concept of Covenant shows us that Man—that is, God's people—is a catholic person, a universal man, created free by God and created in the image of God. That idea—that God is not some sort of a heavenly pharaoh who simply dictates conditions and forces them upon man, but that He respects man, that is, the human community, so much that He comes to an agreement with it—is unique and was unheard of in that time. By making a Covenant, God seeks free collaboration in His plan for salvation. He prepares that plan in a sovereign way: it doesn't depend on man, just as the creation of the world did not depend on man. But the Lord doesn't want to realize His plan for life and for the salvation of the world alone. Rather,

He seeks the collaboration of man, of the people, of the community, and, finally, of the Church. Because man was created free and in the image of God, the idea of the Covenant points to the greatness, the elevated character of the human being and to the infinite perspective that the living and true God, revealing himself to man and stepping into a direct relationship with him, opens up to man and to humanity. In all the natural religions, as I said, the human being doesn't play any role. On the contrary, that is often what those religions fight.

It is therefore not strange at all that throughout the entire history of the chosen people the idea of Covenant has remained the framework, the central religious idea which expresses the uniqueness and the God-revealed character of the religion of ancient Israel and, later, of the Church, which is its natural continuation and fulfillment. In that way Covenant remains to this day a solid religious experience of all mankind and something that is truly God-given to us and that represents more than the natural human religious inclination. The essence of the original Covenant is a community whose aim is the salvation of man and the world. God makes a covenant with man not because He wants to show him His power or to subjugate him or to force him to do what He wants, but in order, out of love, to make that free community possible and to lead man toward salvation.

The Sinaitic Covenant of the Old Testament

That Testament—Covenant—we already have in Paradise itself. It was made between our most ancient parents and God, before sin; later it was renewed by individual righteous men chosen by God, men such as Noah, Abraham, etc. But all those were preparations, or rather, pale pictures of what would follow. In the true sense of that word, we don't truly have a Covenant until the Sinaitic Covenant, where we have God's people at the lead with Moses, and where we have the Lord, and we have the Law—the Torah—which actually represents the written part of the contract, i.e., the agreement between God and His people. It is clear to us in the entire Old Testament that the essence of that Covenant is found in the following words: "You will be my people, and I will be your God." That community between God and the people has its agreed-upon aspects. Out of pure love, and not by force, nor through any merit earned by people, God gives them blessings, life, wellbeing, happiness, progress in everything, and leads them toward abundance, toward that which He has prepared, that which He has planned for them. The people—who were not chosen because they were better than others, but because God chose them, entrusted them with a mission, with responsibility—respond at the same time with their faith and love. On God's side there is no possibility, nor is one even envisaged, that He would violate or alter his positions established in that original contract or Covenant, while on

the side of the Israelites, the side of God's people, it is expected that when they violate the Covenant, instead of blessings they will earn curses; instead of happiness, unhappiness; instead of freedom, slavery; and all that which we already know from the Old Testament.

That Sinaitic Covenant, made in the time of Moses, was later renewed with regularity, along with the reminder of its meaning and content. We had that during Josiah, then during the time of King David—again, a ceremonial renewal of the Covenant—as well as at the time of Solomon with the building of the Temple and the reading of the Law, and later during the time of Ezra, and so on up to the dawn of the times of the New Testament. The prophets renewed and deepened the meaning of this concept of Covenant, because that concept would be threatened were it to be understood literally or negatively rather than in a manner connected to God, through the elevation of our thoughts and concepts to a higher reality, through the experience of the spiritual, through communication with God. Without that dimension the concept of Covenant is in danger of being understood in a superficial, juridical way, as an external relationship, a sort of “for hire” or mercenary and commercial relationship between God and His people—I give to you, give to me; I give you blessings, you give me loyalty; you show me disloyalty, I curse you. But that is neither the first nor the final meaning and content of the Covenant. Its meaning and content are actually those of love that assumes man's absolute freedom. And its goal is also an absolute love, a complete reciprocally permeating love between God and man, a love of the kind that would appear only in the person of the God-man Christ.

The person of the God-man Christ, as the carrier of the New Testament is not the result of man's fall into sin. Rather, it is the embodiment, the humanization of God's Logos. That love already existed in God's primordial plan before the creation of the world and man, before the fall and before sin, before everything. According to Saint Maximus the Confessor and other great Fathers and Teachers of the Church, that love is also the ultimate goal of God's entire creative act. Therefore, that reciprocal love between God and man which leads to and brings about the hypostatic or personal union of man and God in the person of the God-man Christ was the ultimate goal of that entire Covenant of God and Israel throughout history. Because of that, the prophets do not warn only Israel and do not point out only the horrible consequences of disloyalty to Him, of violating the Covenant with God; they do not predict only the misfortunes that will fall upon Israel through violation of the Covenant; they do not only say that Yahweh is the master and Israel His servant and slave. He is also the vintner and Israel is his vineyard. But this too is not enough to show the relationship and communion of love between God and His people, that is, the Old Testament Church. They go even further: Israel is the Son of God and Yahweh is his father. And they go still further: Israel, the believing people of God,

is the (female) fiancée and the (male) fiancé is God himself. Israel is the wife; Yahweh is the husband. His faith and love are marital faithfulness; idolatry is adultery. Through all these illustrations and comparisons, the Prophets sought to awaken and preserve in the consciousness of God's people the truth that love, God-man's love and God-man's salvific communion, are indeed the final goal and content of the Covenant.

However, the Prophets, observing as real people, for the Prophets are superb realists, and seeing the historical development of things and the real disloyalty of the majority of Israelites, were brave enough to tell God's people: People, your sin is so immense that the Covenant has actually been broken. You violated the Covenant with God! At the same time, the Prophets predict, with much conviction and hope, the renewal of the Covenant and the creation of a new one, which would be eternal, last, and final. That which must be done to remain faithful to the Covenant will be written on the pages of human hearts; and only then will that which was at the base and the root of the Sinaitic Covenant be fulfilled. And that was: “You will be my people, my sons and daughters, and I will be your Lord God.” In such a manner we arrive at the realization of God's Logos. The Lord Christ first arrives among the people of Israel, and through them to all of mankind. He brings the message that He is the new and eternal Archpriest and the sole intermediary between God and mankind and He who establishes the new Covenant—in other words, He who renews that Covenant to its completion and perfection.

The Content of the New Testament

As we know from the testimony of the Evangelists and the Holy Apostle Paul, at the Last Supper our Lord Jesus Christ established the New Testament and the Church by blessing the bread and the wine and establishing the Mystery of the Holy Eucharist. The Church would be entirely built, revealed, and announced on the day of Pentecost. However, we actually already have the New Testament Church at the Last Supper. It was born from the ribs of Jesus Christ; as Eve was born from the ribs of ancient Adam, so from the life-bringing ribs of Christ, through Christ's suffering, is born the new Eve, the source of Life, and that is the Church. Therefore, Our Lord Jesus Christ—preparing for his suffering, for his cross, for the spilling of his blood for the life and salvation of the world—gives bread and wine and through his Holy Spirit, He transforms it into his body and his blood. Then, according to the Evangelist Mark, He says to the Apostles: “This is the New Testament, that is, the New Covenant in my blood,” and, according to the testimonies of other Apostles, he added: “which is shed for you.” So, the ritual sacrificial part which accompanied the creation of the Old Testament now looks like a magnificent prototype and the prophesy of a new reality, in which the only true Bishop and Archpriest of the New Testament,

the final, eternal Covenant between God and His people, spills his blood “for the life of mankind.” The blood that was spilled was not that of any animal but the blood of the Lamb of God, the blood of the Archpriest who offered the sacrifice and of the Sacrifice that is offered, the blood of the intermediary between God and man. He is the intermediary in the sense that He is the herald, our apostle before God the Father, because He is equal to us through his humanity but at the same time He is also the real and true herald and apostle of God, or the courier, the envoy from heaven, because He is the true God, the very same as the Father and the Holy Spirit, one of the Holy Trinity.

Therefore, in His person God and man are forever together and one, without confusion and without change but also without separation and division. He is, therefore, Archpriest and Sacrifice, the Lamb and the Shepherd. He is the one who brings about the completeness of the Covenant between God and man by shedding His blood for the life of mankind. Now the nature of the Covenant is shown in its completeness. What the Old Testament once suspected and prophesied, what it hoped for, that is now being realized. That is what He himself says: that there is no greater love than that shown by someone who gives his own life for his friends (John 15:13). And He, the sinless God-man, gives His life, not for his friends but for mankind, which, through its sins, was His enemy. By that act He destroys death and gives the gift of life. This shows that the content of the New Testament is self-sacrificing love, a love that crucifies itself for others. This also reveals the true content and the true meaning of Covenant or Testament. Let me mention here that already in the translation of the Old Testament into Greek (in what is known as the Septuagint), the Jewish translators chose the word *diatheke* for the Hebrew *berit*. This adds a new dimension, a new understanding, which connects with death and with testament, with the bequeathal of one’s entire estate when writing one’s testament.

Hence *diatheke* or *testamentum* or testament, the last will, indicates that essential sacrificial character of the New Testament and points out that the death of Christ will redeem and save the entire world. It is clear that now, here, there are many dimensions, that this Testament–Covenant now spreads out across the entire world, including all nations and tribes. Israel is spreading too; the prophetic vision that God will save all those who call His name is being realized. As the Apostle Paul would say, all of us other nations and tribes, like the wild olive tree, graft ourselves to the cultivated one, and all together we become one people of God, the clergy of the kingdom, we become God’s inheritance. And thus we have the union of the New Testament. The Synagogue of the Old Testament was again the prototype of that union of the New Testament, the introduction to the New Testament Church. Actually, we are all the people of the New Covenant–the New Testament. The reality in which we live, the spiritual reality, is the reality of

that new and final Covenant between God and men. That Covenant which is sealed by the descent of the Holy Spirit and by the founding of the Church is the last, final, eternal Covenant, which will, in its complete form, appear in the future Kingdom, the Kingdom of universal love. This is, speaking briefly, the elementary concept of Testament–Covenant.

What Is the Kosovo Covenant?

Let us now see what the Kosovo Covenant is in the light of the New Testament. We all know that our people compare the person of the Holy Prince Lazar and his behavior before the Battle of Kosovo with events in the New Testament. It is not by chance that in our folk poetry we have Prince Lazar’s Supper. It is actually a projection of Christ’s Last Supper before his suffering; all those words that, according to folk tradition, were exchanged between Lazar and his feudal lords and heroes, about faith and treason, etc., then follow. We also have those now classical words by which the Holy Prince Lazar expresses the essence of the Kosovo Covenant: “The Earthly Kingdom is a short-lived; the Heavenly Kingdom is forever and ever.” He also said that we have to choose the Heavenly Kingdom in order to be true to God, i.e., to our salvation through Christ, through the Church. One thing is certain: our people, as a Christian nation, unmistakably understood the spiritual essence of Lazar’s decision, his character, as well as the spiritual essence of the events which took place on Kosovo Field on the day of the battle. From then up to our time, and, as I personally believe, as long as there will be Serbs on this planet and as long as they belong to the Orthodox Church, they will live according to the Kosovo Covenant.

However, what is that Covenant in its essence? Can we Serbs make our own separate Covenant with God and establish our own special relationship with Him now, besides the one and eternal Covenant that God and all of mankind have made with the God-man Christ? Is this what it is? Of course it is not. So what it is? I will try to answer this question in the shortest way possible. Of course, more capable and educated people in our nation have already spoken and written much better about this question. Suffice it to mention the Holy Bishop Nikolaj and St. Justin (Popović), who pondered these topics, who delivered sermons and wrote about these topics. All that I can say will seem, compared to them, like simple recitation or stuttering. That is why I mention the book by Bishop Nikolaj (Volume Five) which contains a text of his entitled *The Prince’s Covenant*. I personally think that this is perhaps one of the most beautiful descriptions of the Kosovo Covenant, just as I think that the book by Father Justin Popović, entitled *The Way of St. Sava as a Philosophy of Life* could also be entitled *The Kosovo Covenant as a Philosophy of Life*. What do I mean by that? The Kosovo Covenant is nothing but a ceremonial renewal of the St. Sava Testament or Covenant in a given



Mandilion, Dečani, ca. 1339

historic moment, under given historic circumstances. And that, again, is nothing new and original, except that it too is actually a true, creative application of our original Cyril-and-Methodius Covenant with the living God. But even the Cyril-and-Methodius Covenant of our ancestors was nothing new. It is an organic continuation, a creative application of that which the great Fathers and the great Synods of the ancient Church revealed to be the eternal Covenant between God and His people. This means that they revealed the secret of the Church. The Church is actually the locus of the Covenant, its fruit and its meaning.

But what the great Fathers and the Teachers of the Church and the great Synods convened by God accomplished is, once again, nothing new. In their time and in their living, creative way, remaining faithful to the Tradition but responding to the challenges of their times, they only revitalized or actualized what the Apostles saw, experienced, and tasted, as the original disciples of Jesus Christ and witnesses of His making of the Covenant between God and mankind. Thus, we can follow this line backwards from the Holy Prince Lazar to Christ's Last Supper and the making of the New Testament, the New Covenant; and if we want to go even further back, to the prophesy and expectation, then we go to the Sinaitic Covenant and the Council and yet further to Paradise.

So, here is a short definition of the Kosovo Covenant, or Testament: It is nothing but a creative application of the only and the eternal Testament or Covenant of God with Man, i.e., Christ's Covenant, to the history, life, experience, and sufferings of our people. In other words, the choice of

Lazar, his Covenant, is actually our choice—like our decision to have a conciliar personality, as the local Church, as one of the tribes of the New Israel, as an organic part of God's people—to responsibly, freely, with sacrificial love and conscience include ourselves in that eternal Community which is expressed in Jesus Christ through the Covenant between God and mankind.

I consider it very important to insist on that spiritual, evangelical, Christ-centered content of our Kosovo Covenant. It is nothing new, nothing special and nothing original. For me, the most important characteristic of its novelty and originality is contained in the fact that it maintains us in communion and love with the Only One, the One eternally new under the sun, with the person of the God-man Christ. That is why the Kosovo Covenant is irreplaceable for us, and that is why as long as our people exist on this planet, they will not be able to live without it.

Father Justin used to say that The Way of St. Sava simply represents Orthodox Christianity expressed in the Serbian style and through Serbian experience. We can say the same about the Kosovo Covenant: that it is the New Testament 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, in its destiny on this Earth. But this didn't happen by magic or automatically. This happened thanks to the conscious and free choice by our people.

What the Kosovo Covenant Is Not

We all know that the possibility exists of incorrect interpretations and of distortions of the meaning of the Kosovo Covenant. I will mention only two. You know that the ideologues of the until recently ruling Marxist ideology (today pretty tired and apathetic) often blamed us, the Orthodox clergy of the Serbian people, as being carriers of intolerance, nationalism, even chauvinism, exclusivity, and other similar claims. Others, shuddering at the Kosovo Covenant, consider it as some sort of Serbian equivalent of that inhuman ideology in Croatian territories which reached its peak in Francoist ideology, in an extreme clerical nationalism that finally gave birth to the Ustasha movement in Croatia. This shows that such people not only do not understand the evangelical essence of the Kosovo Covenant, its natural tie to and similarity with the only eternal Covenant, Christ's Covenant, but they also deny it.

However, we must say in all sincerity that in an era of romanticism and nationalistic awakening a part of our churchless intelligentsia gave a certain permission, through its interpretation at the time of the Kosovo Covenant and of the Way of St. Sava, to those bad-intentioned people blinded by intolerance to falsify in this manner the content of our Kosovo Covenant and to constantly slander and attack us. We must admit, whether we like it or not, that there exists one translation of the Way of St. Sava and of the Kosovo Covenant into the language of Serbian nationalistic ideology which is unacceptable to us who are Christians. This wasn't the only cause but it was one of the causes which later triggered this kind of leftist climate, a total lack of concern for our nation, and the loss of national feeling. This was not normal, because we exist as concrete peoples.

Certain romantics, therefore, instead of accepting the Kosovo Covenant for what it is—that is, the only way by which our people would return to the Church, be introduced to the reality of the New Testament, to the reality of the people of God, in the Church—they rather tried to use the Kosovo Covenant as the basis for creating a nationalist ideology, and ideologies are, by their nature, idolatrous. There was, however, a barrier preventing such an ideology from becoming genocidal and misanthropic; that barrier was actually the content of the Kosovo Covenant itself. Although we had nationalisms, nationalistic ideologies and movements, the Kosovo Covenant alone saved our national renaissance from degenerating into something that happened in other nations. The danger of translating the Kosovo Covenant into the forms and shapes of a nationalist ideology, where Orthodoxy appears as a kind of servant to

the nation, is a temptation, a spiritually subtle danger, which is not always easily recognizable but which we, the clergy and the faithful of God's Church, must face. We cannot allow the Kosovo Covenant to be demeaned to the level of a nationalistic ideology. This is one thing.

Secondly, many of our intellectuals, educated people who are not tied closely enough to the Church, to God, and to prayer but who worry about the destiny of our nation on this exposed, wind-blown Balkan territory, and many of whom lack the criteria evident in Lazar's decision and in Vidovdan (St. Vitus' Day), think that our Kosovo Covenant is a kind of historical misfortune, a certain masochism on our part, an enjoyment of our own martyrdom and fall. For that reason, they think that we were not decisive enough throughout our history and that it was exactly the Kosovo Covenant, so church inspired and monastically branded, that brought us to the point where everyone can step on us. Those people believe that we should abandon the Kosovo Covenant and move forward with strength, an eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth. This is the second variant of translating the Kosovo Covenant into its opposite. For the same reason as in the previous case, we must oppose, with all our spirit, this kind of calculated interpretation of the Kosovo Covenant and such an approach to its content. That is an absolutely untrue and wrong interpretation. Lazar did not go to Kosovo to be defeated but to defeat evil by good, so that Christ wins over Satan. Lazar did not try to defeat evil by evil, because that way evil only multiplies. Christ did not go to Golgotha to be defeated but to win, and he did win. God's son is celebrated on the cross; and on his cross, on his crucifix, are written the words "The King of Glory." Therefore, every defeatist interpretation of the Kosovo Covenant is truly nonsense and a falsification.

Finally, let me posit several problems to my and your conscience. What, in our practice, should we, and must we, do to revive the Kosovo Covenant and its true meaning within ourselves and around us? In the first place, we must resurrect and awaken in our people the ethos of true spirituality characteristic of the original Kosovo Covenant because it makes us part and parcel of God's eternal New Testament and members of Christ's Church. Awakening, enlivening, resurrection, development, and nurturing of those contents—these represent our only possible contribution to the return to the Kosovo Covenant and our faithfulness to it.

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The Western world owes an immeasurable cultural debt to a civilization which alone preserved much of the heritage of Greek and Latin antiquity during these dark centuries when the lights of learning in the West were almost extinguished.
(Lord Norwich in the epilogue to his trilogy on the Byzantine Empire)