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Archimandrite Sebastian Dabovich.



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SERBIAN ORTHODOX APOSTLE TO AMERICA

by Hieromonk Damascene

I. AN APOSTLE OF UNIVERSAL SIGNIFICANCE

BORN during the presidency of Abraham Lincoln, Archimandrite Sebastian Dabovich has the distinction of being the first person born in the United States of America to be ordained as an Orthodox priest,¹ and also the first native-born American to be tonsured as an Orthodox monk. His greatest distinction, however, lies in the tremendous apostolic, pastoral, and literary work that he accomplished during the forty-eight years of his priestly ministry. Known as the “Father of Serbian Orthodoxy in America,”² he was responsible for the founding of the first Serbian churches in the New World. This, however, was only one part of his life’s work, for he tirelessly and zealously sought to spread the Orthodox Faith to all peoples, wherever he was called. He was an Orthodox apostle of universal significance.

Describing the vast scope of Fr. Sebastian’s missionary activity, Bishop Irinej (Dobrijevic) of Australia and New Zealand has written:

¹ Alaskan-born priests were ordained before Fr. Sebastian, but this was when Alaska was still part of Russia.

² Mirko Dobrijevic (later Irinej, Bishop of Australia and New Zealand), “The First American Serbian Apostle—Archimandrite Sebastian Dabovich,” *Again*, vol. 16, no. 4 (December 1993), pp. 13–14.

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“Without any outside funding or organizational support, he carried the gospel of peace from country to country.... Concentrating much of his work in the United States, he ceaselessly traveled back and forth across the American continent, using every available mode of transportation—from stagecoach to railroad to foot. His wider ministry stretched from the Aleutian Peninsula of Alaska, to Russia and Japan, to small Balkan towns on the coasts of the Black and Adriatic Seas.”³

It is said that Fr. Sebastian baptized more people than any other Serbian priest of the Western Hemisphere.⁴ St. Nikolai (Velimirovich)⁵ of Zhicha, Serbia, who buried Fr. Sebastian at the Zhicha Monastery when the latter reposed there in 1940, called him “a viceless man” and fittingly designated him “the greatest Serbian missionary of modern times.”⁶

2. PREPARATION FOR APOSTOLIC MINISTRY

Fr. Sebastian was born in San Francisco on June 21 (new style), 1863. His parents, Ilija and Jelena Dabovich, were the first recorded Serbian immigrants to the West Coast of America. In the company of his two older siblings and his father’s brother Nikolai, his parents had originally come from the village of Sasovici near Herceg Novi, at the entrance of the Bay of Kotor, Montenegro. After a long voyage (including crossing the isthmus of Panama on donkeys), they arrived in San Francisco in 1853.⁷ Ilija Dabovich opened a store there, and he and his brother Nikolai established a wholesale fruit business. Fr. Sebastian was the fourth of seven children born to Ilija and Jelena, and was given the

³ Ibid., p. 13.

⁴ John R. Palandech, *Commemorative Book of the Serbian Orthodox Church in Chicago, 1905–1955*. Quoted in Mirko Dobrijevic (Bishop Irinej), p. 15.

⁵ In this article we have spelled St. Nikolai’s given (first) name in the way that he himself spelled it when writing in English.

⁶ Bishop Nikolai (Velimirovich), “Father Sebastian Dabovich,” in *Serb National Federation Commemorative Book, 1951*.

⁷ Larry Cenotto, *Logan’s Alley, vol. 4: Amador County Yesterdays in Picture and Prose* (Jackson, Calif.: Cenotto Publications, 2003), p. 126.

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name Jovan (John). In his later years he would write to a friend: “I am the first male child born of Serbian parents in America. Before me two of my cousins (female) were born to my uncle.”⁸

An Orthodox community had formed in San Francisco six years prior to Fr. Sebastian’s birth, called the “Greek-Russian Slavonian Eastern Church and Benevolent Society.” The community consisted of Russians, Serbs, Greeks, and Syrians who had come to California in the first years of the Gold Rush. Since this community was not yet chartered as a parish and a priest had not yet been assigned to it, the spiritual needs of the Orthodox faithful in San Francisco were served by chaplains of the Russian Imperial Navy. In 1863 one of these chaplains, Hieromonk Kyrill from the Tikhvin Monastery in Russia, baptized the infant Jovan—the future Fr. Sebastian—in a chapel on the Russian warship *Bogatyr*, which was then anchored in the San Francisco Bay.

“Eventually,” Fr. Sebastian wrote many years later,

the Russian ships weighed their anchors. And there were no more priests here. It would seem that, left without a church or a priest, this Orthodox community should have disappeared from the face of the earth, especially in the rush for gold, for wealth. Through the mercy of God, however, this did not happen. The Orthodox—Serbs, Greeks, and Russians—lived at that time in concord, and supported each other in a brotherly manner. On all major feasts, they gathered together with those who had families, and sang religious and folk songs.⁹

⁸ Letter of Fr. Sebastian Dabovich to Archimandrite Georgije Kodzhich. Quoted in Mirko Dobrijevic (Bishop Irinej), pp. 13–14. Bishop Irinej notes: “Fr. Sebastian ... was known as the ‘first Serbian child,’ as he was considered to be the firstborn male of Serbian ancestry in America.... (This may not be strictly true; however, the term is used as one of endearment.)”

⁹ Fr. Sebastian Dabovich, “*Pravoslavnaya Tserkov v Kaliforniye*” (The Orthodox Church in California), *Amerikanskii Pravoslavnyi Vestnik* (American Orthodox Herald), nos. 15–16 (April 1898). Written by Fr. Sebastian in San Francisco, February 12, 1897. Translated from Russian by Robert A. Parent.

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Bishop John (Mitropolsky)
of Alaska and the Aleutians.

In 1868, a year after the United States purchased Alaska from Russia, a Russian priest was assigned to the San Francisco Orthodox community. The new pastor, Fr. Nikolai Kovrigin, had been transferred from the Russian Orthodox cathedral in Sitka, Alaska, along with an assistant, Reader Vasily Shishkin. The community in San Francisco now began to hold church services in the home of a local Serb, Peter Sekulovich, located on Mission Street, which was at that time considered to be outside of town. The Dabovich family attended services regularly in this house chapel, known as the

“Prayer House of the Orthodox Oriental Church.”

Jovan Dabovich was a serious, quiet, and somewhat frail child, whose piety was manifest from an early age. He later recalled the first Divine Liturgy that Fr. Nikolai celebrated at the Sekulovich home, which was evidently the first Liturgy celebrated on land (not on a ship) in San Francisco. At the time he would have been four or five years old:

I remember that first service, to which I went with my mother. We had to walk a long way along unpaved streets. Furthermore we were mercilessly drenched by rain. At last we reached a small house; we crossed over a ditch (or temporarily excavated gutter) on a plank and entered the church. The “church” was set up in a divided room. At the end, opposite the entrance, the Holy Antimension lay on a covered table. A little table in a corner served as the table of oblation. I

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remember two icons on the walls: the Savior and the Mother of God. There were approximately twenty communicants at that Liturgy.¹⁰

In 1872, when Jovan was nine years old, the newly consecrated Russian bishop of Alaska and the Aleutians, John (Mitropolsky), transferred his residence from Sitka, Alaska, to San Francisco. Since he was the only Orthodox bishop for the American continent, this move marked the transfer of the entire American diocesan administration to California.

Bishop John was proficient in the English language, and came from Russia to America with the intention not only of serving the needs of the Orthodox Native Americans and Russians in Alaska, but also of bringing the Orthodox Faith to the heterodox on the North American continent. This was the primary reason why he moved the diocesan residence to California. In the midst of the large American population in San Francisco, he believed, the Orthodox Church would be able to reveal her truth to the non-Orthodox Christian confessions and to American society in general with greater effect and impact.¹¹ It is likely that Bishop John's desire to bring Americans from other Christian confessions into the Orthodox Church was passed on to Jovan Dabovich even at that early period of his life, for it became Jovan's lifelong desire, also.

In coming to San Francisco, Bishop John erected a church on Pierce Street and consecrated it as the St. Alexander Nevsky Cathedral. As often as there was a service at the cathedral, young Jovan was there. Having become wholly dedicated to the Church, he deeply loved the beauty and solemnity of Orthodox worship, and desired with all his heart to serve God and his fellow man at the holy altar. As he later

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Constance J. Tarasar and John H. Erickson, eds., *Orthodox America 1794–1976: Development of the Orthodox Church in America* (Syosset, New York: The Orthodox Church in America, 1975), p. 29.



Photo courtesy Alaska State Library, Michael Z. Vinokourov Collection P243-1-076.

Jovan Dabovich as a young man in San Francisco.

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affirmed, it was his intention from childhood to become a priest, and he never thought of anything else.¹²

With this in mind Jovan attended the Saturday church school and the “Graeco-Russian Seminary” (also known as the Mission School) that Bishop John had transferred from Sitka to San Francisco. At the small seminary he studied alongside Aleut natives who had come from Alaska. There he became proficient in Russian and Church Slavonic, and also gained a fair knowledge of Greek. Recalling those days in San Francisco, Fr. Sebastian wrote:

From the time of the arrival of the Right Reverend John, priests, after his example, began to proclaim the word of truth to the flock in San Francisco. A Saturday school for the children of parishioners was opened where they were taught the Catechism and the Russian language.... Michael Vladimirov was choir director and singing teacher. He also taught mathematics at the [Mission] school. Besides the clergymen that taught at the school, Vladyka himself also had seven classes a week, in Holy Scripture and the Slavonic language. A native Greek, Dimitrios Frankiades, from the University of Athens, was teacher of the Greek and English languages.

At the time of the Right Reverend John as many as sixteen pupils studied at the bishop’s school in San Francisco. Of that number five are now serving in various positions of the local diocese. The Right Reverend John loved his school, one might say, with a singular love.¹³

As he grew to manhood, Jovan Dabovich became known not only for his love for the Church but also for his selflessness and abstinence. As Bishop Irinej writes: “Those who knew him best invariably tell of his lack of ostentation and his disdain for personal wealth or possessions. A modern St. Nicholas, Jovan felt deeply the plight of the poor and

¹² “An Ordination Service Held at the Greek-Russian Church Yesterday Morning,” *The [San Francisco] Morning Call*, Monday, August 29, 1892, p. 2. Reprinted in *Holy Trinity Cathedral Life*, vol. 1, no. 6 (February 1994).

¹³ Fr. Sebastian Dabovich, “The Orthodox Church in California.”

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Kolosh (Tlingit) Warrior from Baranov Island (near Sitka). Painting by Mikhail T. Tikhanov, 1818.

helpless, identifying so readily with them that he preferred to wear only modest apparel and eat the simplest of meals—often nothing more than milk or a little cheese—rather than to eat expensive meals and dress lavishly while others did without. Frequently he simply gave his possessions away to those in need—a pattern that persisted throughout his life.”¹⁴

After graduating from high school, Jovan served at the San Francisco cathedral as a reader and chanter of church services, and as a teacher. In 1884 he was assigned to work in the same capacity at St. Michael’s Cathedral in Sitka, which had been estab-

lished in 1848 by the great enlightener of Alaska, St. Innocent.

Amidst his far-reaching missionary endeavors, St. Innocent had converted the Tlingit (Kolosh) natives in the Sitka area to the Orthodox Faith. Jovan Dabovich, when assisting at the Sitka cathedral, became acquainted with native families that St. Innocent had originally evangelized. As a result, the twenty-one-year-old Jovan began some missionary work of his own, manifesting the evangelical zeal that would become the hallmark of his life. Learning from the Orthodox Tlingits in Sitka that there was another Tlingit population to the northeast that had not yet converted to Orthodox Christianity, Jovan initiated their evangelization. As the catechist of the Sitka cathedral, he organized a mission of Tlingit parishioners to bring the Orthodox

¹⁴ Mirko Dobrijevic (Bishop Irinej), p. 14.



At left: St. Michael's Cathedral in the snow, Sitka, Alaska, ca. 1900.

Below: Iconostasis and royal doors of St. Michael's Cathedral.



Photo courtesy Alaska State Library, Michael Z. Vinokourov Collection P243-1-038.

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Faith to the non-Christian Tlingits in the area around present-day Juneau, over a hundred miles away. Several years later he recorded:

My assistants among the Indians—the Kolosh natives Ivan Hlyantich, Pavel Katlyeyan and others—set out for what was then a very small place, now the sizable town of Juneau, and following special instructions from me, they (and other parishioners) spread the Word and Orthodoxy—and the result of that is—the present Church of St. Nicholas in Juneau.¹⁵

So it happened: Within six years of the Orthodox Tlingits of Sitka beginning to evangelize the Tlingits of Juneau under Jovan Dabovich's guidance, the Juneau natives began coming to Sitka for baptism. Three years later, in 1893, an Orthodox church was built in Juneau by the local natives together with Serbian gold miners who were then living in the area.¹⁶ Today it is the oldest continually functioning church in Alaska.¹⁷

During his stay in Alaska, Jovan decided to further his theological education in preparation for the holy priesthood. Thus, in 1885 he traveled to Russia, where he spent three years studying at the St. Petersburg and Kiev Theological Academies. In 1888 he was tonsured as a monk in St. Petersburg and given the name Sebastian. On December 25 of that year he was ordained as a deacon in the same city by Metropolitan Isidore (Nikolsky) of Novgorod, St. Petersburg and Finland.¹⁸

Metropolitan Isidore was a major figure in the Russian Orthodox

¹⁵ Fr. Sebastian Dabovich to the Religious Council of the Diocese of North America in New York. Written in Los Angeles, December 2, 1915. Quoted in Bishop Sava of Shumadija, *History of the Serbian Orthodox Church in America and Canada 1891–1941* (Kragujevac, Serbia: Kalenich, 1998), p. 256.

¹⁶ The church was consecrated on June 24, 1894, by the hierarch of Alaska at that time, Bishop Nicholas (Ziorov), who had first visited Juneau two years before.

¹⁷ "The History of St. Nicholas Church," <http://www.stnicholasjuneau.org/history.html>. See also, <http://dioceseofalaska.org/html/Juneaubelltower07.html>.

¹⁸ Tarasar and Erickson, p. 96; [Fr.] George A. Gray, ed., *Portraits of American Saints* (Los Angeles, 1994), p. 77.

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Church, and a major support of the Orthodox Church in the New World. When Fr. Sebastian was studying in St. Petersburg, Metropolitan Isidore was crowning fifty years of episcopal service, having participated in the consecration of over one hundred bishops, including all the bishops of the American mission in the latter half of the nineteenth century. As Fr. Sebastian later wrote, the metropolitan “was the most faithful friend, spiritual advisor, and material support, under God, of the young Church in North America in her many serious trials, temptations, and persecutions.” Recalling his own association with the great hierarchy, Fr. Sebastian wrote: “[I] had the good fortune of obtaining [my] first official appointment to service in the ranks of the clergy from the Most Reverend Isidore ... and furthermore had the spiritual consolation and privilege to obtain his personal blessing, and to kiss the hand of the greatest Prelate of the day.”¹⁹



Metropolitan Isidore (Nikolsky) of Novgorod, St. Petersburg and Finland.

Hierodeacon Sebastian returned to San Francisco in June of 1889. There he served as a deacon under Bishop Vladimir (Sokolovsky-Avtonomov), who in 1888 had been appointed to the American diocese by the Holy Synod of the Russian Orthodox Church. Bishop Vladimir had previously served in the Japanese Orthodox Mission under St. Nicholas of Japan. Fluent in Japanese, he brought his Japanese cell-attendant with him to San Francisco. It is likely that this connection with

¹⁹ Fr. Sebastian Dabovich, *The Lives of the Saints, and Several Lectures and Sermons* (San Francisco: The Murdock Press, 1898), p. 3. Fr. Sebastian dedicated this, his second book, to Metropolitan Isidore, who reposed in 1892. The above quotations are taken from Fr. Sebastian's dedication.

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Photo courtesy Alaska State Library, Michael Z. Vinokourov Collection P243-1-004.



Bishop Vladimir (Sokolovsky-Avtonomov)
of the Aleutians and Alaska.

the Orthodox Church in Japan planted the idea in Fr. Sebastian of visiting Japan, which he did later in life.

Bishop Vladimir had learned from St. Nicholas of Japan that, when the Orthodox Faith is brought to new territories, it must be made available in the local languages. He became the first Orthodox hierarch in the New World to preach and serve in English; and he required his priests to learn and serve in this language as well. As Fr. Sebastian recalled: "The bishop paid special attention in the temple to

preaching the word of God in English, which was the language commonly understood. To this end the bishop himself, although not completely familiar with the English language, improvised talks in English, which the people readily heard."²⁰ Bishop Vladimir also assigned Fr. Sebastian, as a native English speaker, to be the English-language preacher at the San Francisco cathedral.

Musically talented, Bishop Vladimir formed a superb choir at the cathedral, which he instructed to sing English translations of Orthodox services set to traditional Russian melodies. His efforts attracted many

²⁰ Fr. Sebastian Dabovich, "The Orthodox Church in California."

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people to the cathedral, which by that time had moved to Powell Street, so that it soon became filled beyond capacity.²¹ In 1888 he enlarged, remodeled, and magnificently adorned the cathedral and dedicated it to St. Nicholas. When, in 1889, this cathedral was destroyed by fire, Bishop Vladimir had a new cathedral built in honor of St. Basil the Great. Fr. Sebastian served as deacon in the consecration of the new cathedral.



The St. Basil Cathedral in San Francisco.

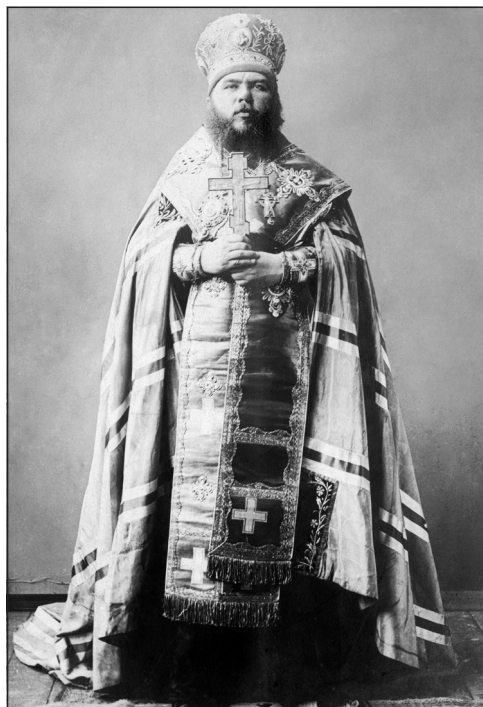
Fr. Sebastian had great admiration for Bishop Vladimir, seeing in him a true shepherd who gave his life for the sheep (cf. John 10:11). The bishop was a man of refined, gentle character who had no regard for his personal needs, living a highly ascetical life and observing a sparse monastic diet. A missionary-minded hierarch like his predecessor Bishop John, he was the first Orthodox bishop to traverse the American continent, which he did three times in search of Orthodox communities and of non-Orthodox people to bring into the Faith. In 1891 he traveled to Minneapolis, Minnesota in order to receive a Uniate (Eastern-rite Roman Catholic) priest, Fr. Alexis Toth, and his parish of 350 believers into the Orthodox Church. In this way he began the return of American Uniates to Orthodoxy, a movement which would bring forth an abundant harvest in the years to come.

Fr. Sebastian, in serving under Bishop Vladimir during his formative years as a deacon, was undoubtedly influenced by the bishop's evangelical spirit, just as he had been formed earlier by the missionary vision of Bishop John.

²¹ Tarasar and Erickson, p. 30.

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Photo courtesy Alaska State Library, Michael Z. Vinokourov Collection P243-1-008.



Bishop Nicholas (Ziorov) of the Aleutians and Alaska.

3. THE BEGINNING OF HIS APOSTOLIC LABOR

Bishop Vladimir was replaced by Bishop Nicholas (Ziorov) in 1891. On the day after the Feast of the Dormition of the Mother of God in 1892,²² Bishop Nicholas ordained Fr. Sebastian to the holy priesthood in the St. Basil Cathedral. On the following Sunday Fr. Sebastian gave his first sermon as a priest, on the theme “Love according to Christian Doctrine.”²³

Before his ordination, Fr. Sebastian had submitted a report to Bishop Nicholas in which he estimated that there were some 1,500 Orthodox

Christians residing in the states of California and Oregon, and in the then-territory of Washington. He asked that he be assigned to minister to these believers; and Bishop Nicholas, recognizing his rare apostolic zeal, granted his request.²⁴ Thus, the newly ordained Hieromonk Sebastian was appointed as missionary priest for California and the

²² August 16/28, 1892. At that time there was a difference of twelve days between the old-style and new-style calendars.

²³ “An Ordination Service,” p. 2.

²⁴ Brigit Farley, “Circuit Riders to the Slavs and Greeks: Missionary Priests and the Establishment of the Russian Orthodox Church in the American West, 1890–1910,” Occasional Paper 276 (Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars, 2000), p. 1.

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Pacific Northwest. Losing no time in fulfilling the task given him, within a week after his ordination he left on a missionary tour of the West Coast of North America. He traveled as far north as Vancouver, British Columbia, and as far south as San Diego, eventually covering over 3,000 miles.²⁵

On this missionary journey Fr. Sebastian found poor Orthodox immigrants of many ethnic backgrounds who lived far from Orthodox churches and clergy. As he wrote in a letter to Bishop Nicholas, some of these believers had come under the influence of Protestant churches, and yet they welcomed the opportunity to return to the Church of their youth. He also found many Uniates who, although they called themselves Orthodox, had acquired what he termed questionable practices resulting from their ecclesiastical ties to Roman Catholicism.²⁶

While in the Northwest Fr. Sebastian performed baptisms, both of children and adults, and offered the other Mysteries and services of the Church to the isolated Orthodox Christians. Extremely grateful to the missionary priest, these believers began to cherish hopes that Orthodox churches would be founded in their region.

In Oregon Fr. Sebastian decided that Portland was the best site for a chapel. While he regretted that there were few Orthodox in the city itself, Portland was a central location for believers in the area. For example, a population of Greek fishermen had settled along the Columbia river and in the port city of Astoria.

In Seattle Fr. Sebastian saw even more possibilities, for there he found a core group of dedicated Orthodox Christians who were eager to form a parish. Seattle, he wrote to Bishop Nicholas, “promises to be the center of a lively parish.” He also found Orthodox Christians in the communities of Tacoma, Gig Harbor, and Wilkeson, Washington,

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Ibid., referring to the letter of Fr. Sebastian Dabovich to Bishop Nicholas, November 17, 1892, Alaskan-Russian Church Archives, *Records of the Russian Orthodox Greek Catholic Church of North America—Diocese of Alaska* (Library of Congress, Manuscript Division, 1984), container D511/13, reel 520.

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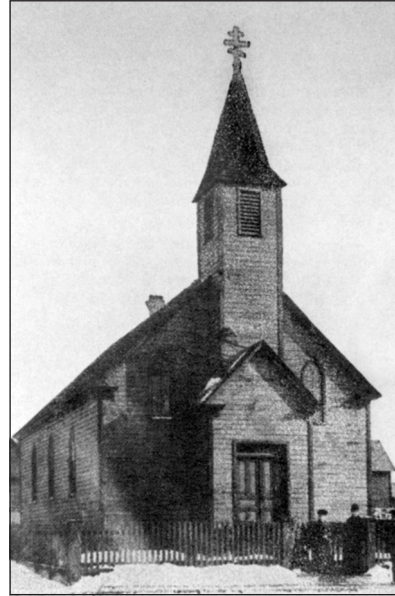
and in Vancouver and Victoria, British Columbia. In Gig Harbor he baptized the American Indian wife of a pious Serbian man from Herzegovina; this couple and their large extended family later became founding members of the first Orthodox church in Seattle.²⁷

Although he was of Serbian ancestry, Fr. Sebastian knew his task was to minister to Orthodox Christians of all ethnic backgrounds, and to minister and reach out to the non-Orthodox as well. Being fluent in English, Serbian, and Russian, and knowing some Greek as well, Fr. Sebastian was a bridge between the New World and the ancient Faith of traditional Orthodox lands. In the words of Bishop Irinej: "By every report Sebastian Dabovich was not one to ask about jurisdictional or national affiliation before setting out on long journeys to minister to Orthodox Christians in mining communities, lumber camps, or far-distant towns or villages. He offered his pastoral services with a free hand to anyone who was in need. Just as he gave no thought to his own comforts as a youth, caring more for the needs of others than for his own concerns, Fr. Sebastian denied himself all worldly comforts of home, family, or earthly possessions, so that he could provide for the spiritual needs of the Russian, Serbian, Bulgarian, Greek, Syrian, or Arab Orthodox Christians who required his aid."²⁸

While Fr. Sebastian was serving as a missionary in the Pacific Northwest, the above-mentioned Fr. Alexis Toth was traveling from his former Uniate parish in Minneapolis to Uniate communities in Wilkes-Barre and Mayfield, Pennsylvania. Soon he succeeded in bringing these communities into the Orthodox Church as well. An outstanding missionary through whose influence and example nearly thirty thousand Uniates were eventually united to the true Church of Christ, Fr. Alexis was canonized by the Orthodox Church in America in 1994 as St. Alexis of Wilkes-Barre.

²⁷ Ibid., pp. 2, 4–5, and the letter of Fr. Sebastian Dabovich to Bishop Nicholas, November 17, 1892.

²⁸ Mirko Dobrijevic (Bishop Irinej), p. 15.



Above left: St. Alexis Toth of Wilkes-Barre. *Above right:* St. Mary's Church, Minneapolis, Minnesota. *Below:* The missionary school at St. Mary's Church.



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In 1893, St. Alexis wrote to Bishop Nicholas requesting an assistant priest for St. Mary's Orthodox Church in Minneapolis, so that he could return to Pennsylvania and complete his work of bringing the Wilkes-Barre community more fully into the Orthodox ethos and way of life. Granting this request, Bishop Nicholas sent Fr. Sebastian to serve at St. Mary's Church in Minneapolis.

While at St. Mary's, Fr. Sebastian continued the work of St. Alexis, striving to help former Uniates enter more deeply into the life of the Orthodox Church. He preached eloquent sermons and taught at the parish's missionary school. The choir director of the parish and the music director of the school, Paul Zaichenko, has provided for us this valuable portrait of Fr. Sebastian in the early days of his priestly ministry:

Fr. Sebastian Dabovich succeeded Fr. A. Toth as parish priest. He was a quiet and pensive monk, always considerate, conscientious, modest. He performed his duties sincerely, and taught the Bible class of the parish school with enthusiasm. He was a tireless and unselfish worker, a humble and a just man before his Lord. He was one of the most worthy workers in the Mission.

I knew him back in San Francisco. At that time he sang in the cathedral choir, of which I was a choirmaster. His aim was his betterment in religious life. As in San Francisco, so too in Minneapolis, he was the example of virtuous living; he always considered it his duty to avoid an evil step. Leading a quiet monastic life, he found great happiness in reading religious books and in teaching students the Holy Bible. He loved children and was always considerate of his parishioners. Notwithstanding his short stay in Minneapolis, he was loved by his flock. He was a bright torch of love, kindness, and sincerity.²⁹

While serving at the parish in Minneapolis, Fr. Sebastian made his first visit to Chicago, where he spent ten days helping Bishop Nicholas to organize an exhibit of Orthodox Christianity at the World's

²⁹ *Golden Jubilee Album*, St. Mary's Russian Orthodox Church (Minneapolis, 1937), p. 44. In Tarasar and Erickson, p. 96.

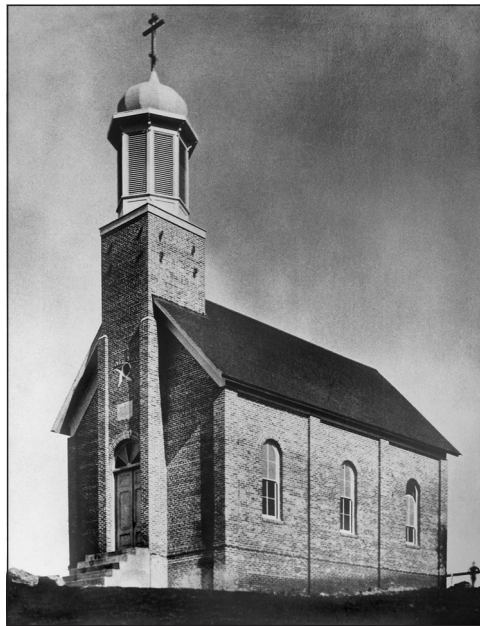
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Columbian Exposition (also known as the Chicago World's Fair). While in Chicago, he gathered local Orthodox Serbs and celebrated the Divine Liturgy for them. Although he was only able to meet about twenty Serbs at that time, years later he would build upon the foundation he had laid for a Serbian Orthodox church in Chicago.³⁰

After less than a year of serving in Minneapolis, Fr. Sebastian was recalled to the West Coast to resume his missionary work there. He arrived back in San Francisco in December of 1893. Shortly

thereafter he went to baptize a Serbian infant in Jackson, California, a gold-mining community near the "mother lode." Seeing that many Serbian miners had settled with their families in Jackson and in neighboring towns, Fr. Sebastian immediately recognized the need to build an Orthodox church there, and he urged the local Serbs to begin planning one. The Serbs agreed and began pooling their resources. Fr. Sebastian asked for and received a contribution from the "Kennedy Mining and Milling Company," which owned the main gold mine in Jackson. Soon the Serbs purchased land for both a cemetery and a church.³¹

In February of 1894, Bishop Nicholas came to Jackson to bless the



St. Sava Church, Jackson, California,
as it originally looked.

³⁰ Fr. Sebastian Dabovich to Protopresbyter Petar Stajchich, Ravanica Monastery in Srem, 1935. *Holy Resurrection Serbian Orthodox Cathedral, 1905–2005* (Chicago, 2005), p. 48.

³¹ Bishop Nicholai (Velimirovich), "Father Sebastian Dabovich."

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church property; in May of the same year the first burial in the cemetery occurred; and by December the church was completed. It was a small but beautiful church, situated prominently atop the tallest hill in the town, and surrounded by the cemetery.

Bishop Nicholas had bells for the church sent down from Alaska. He also donated a chandelier, together with an icon of the Mother of God which had been painted at St. Panteleimon's Monastery on Mount Athos. In time the Mother of God would perform miracles through this icon, which would come to be known as the "Jackson Icon of the Mother of God."³²

On December 16, Bishop Nicholas, assisted by Fr. Sebastian, consecrated the new church, dedicating it to St. Sava of Serbia. Although the service of consecration was in the Slavonic language, Fr. Sebastian—always the missionary—translated portions of the service for the non-Serbian locals in attendance.³³ The new church in Jackson, founded by the first Orthodox priest ordained in the United States, became the first Serbian Orthodox church consecrated in the Western Hemisphere. (Today the building itself has the further distinction of being the oldest standing Orthodox church in the western contiguous United States.)³⁴

While remaining based in San Francisco, Fr. Sebastian regularly went to Jackson to serve at the new parish. He also continued his missionary travels throughout the western United States. In February 1895, he visited Portland and Seattle, where he had helped to organize Orthodox communities three years before. In Seattle an Orthodox church, dedicated to St. Spyridon and comprised of Russian, Greek and Serbian immigrants, was already being built, and was soon to

³² The icon's feast has been appointed to be celebrated on July 12/25.

³³ Leslie McLaughlin, "St. Sava Celebrates 110 Years in Amador," *Ledger Dispatch* (October 28, 2004).

³⁴ The original church building still serves an active parish. The parishioners are currently compiling accounts of miracles performed through the above-mentioned "Jackson Icon of the Mother of God."



The Jackson Icon of the Most Holy Theotokos.

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receive its first priest, Fr. Amvrosios Vretta. In Portland, a chapel had recently been built by an Alaskan of mixed Native-Russian ancestry. Fr. Sebastian served the first Divine Liturgy in this chapel, dedicating it in the name of the “Holy and Life-giving Trinity.” At that time, the small congregation consisted of six Syrians, four Serbs, and two Russians. By 1907, the community had grown to about eighty believers.³⁵

In his travels, Fr. Sebastian again visited the Orthodox community in Wilkeson, Washington, helping to found a parish there which later, in 1900, would build a church also dedicated to the Holy Trinity.³⁶ Further south, he met with groups of Serbs in Angels Camp (near Jackson), California; in Fresno, California (and in the nearby towns of Visalia and Hanford); and in Bisbee, Arizona. These visits bore fruit as well, for in all of these places Serbian Orthodox churches were eventually built.³⁷

Fr. Sebastian also visited isolated Orthodox Christians who had recently settled in the mining boomtown of Virginia City, Nevada.³⁸ When the famed Comstock silver lode was exhausted in 1898, however, the city’s population declined drastically, and it is probable that the small Orthodox community moved elsewhere.

In recognition of Fr. Sebastian’s missionary labors, in 1895 Bishop Nicholas awarded him with a gold cross. Although this award was normally given in the Russian Church only after ten years of priestly ministry, Fr. Sebastian received it not even a full three years after his ordination to the priesthood. The reason for this was explained by Bishop Nicholas in his address to Fr. Sebastian:

³⁵ Tarasar and Erickson, p. 35.

³⁶ This church was consecrated by Bishop Tikhon (later canonized as a saint; see below) in 1902. In 1996 the parish in Wilkeson, having outgrown its church building, moved to a nearby location in Tacoma. The original church in Wilkeson remains in pristine condition, and is used for occasional services. After the church in Jackson, it is the oldest surviving Orthodox church building in the western contiguous United States.

³⁷ Farley, p. 2.

³⁸ Gray, p. 78.

ARCHIMANDRITE SEBASTIAN DABOVICH

With the blessing of the Most-holy Ruling Synod of All Russia and by the assent of the Most-pious Emperor, this high sign of distinction is now bestowed upon you, my beloved brother in the Lord. It is granted to you not only as a reward for your devout ministry in the lower ecclesiastical ranks, but even more so as an encouragement in the ever greater labors and heroic tasks which you will continue to face in your missionary ministry....

You were not forced to pick up the cross of a monk and a missionary, but did it of your own free will, for your and others' salvation. This made you not your own but Christ's (cf. Gal. 3:29); now you should seek not your own (cf. I Cor. 13:5) but the things which are Jesus Christ's (cf. Phil. 2:21).³⁹

In 1896 Fr. Sebastian made a trip to his ancestral land of Serbia, where he studied theology for several months. When he returned to San Francisco in November of the same year, he was assigned as pastor of St. Basil Cathedral and as a teacher in the church school.⁴⁰ This new position did not prevent him from carrying on his missionary work throughout the western United States. He continued to visit the new communities he had formed and organized, tending to their spiritual needs, making the Holy Mysteries available to them, and ensuring their survival.

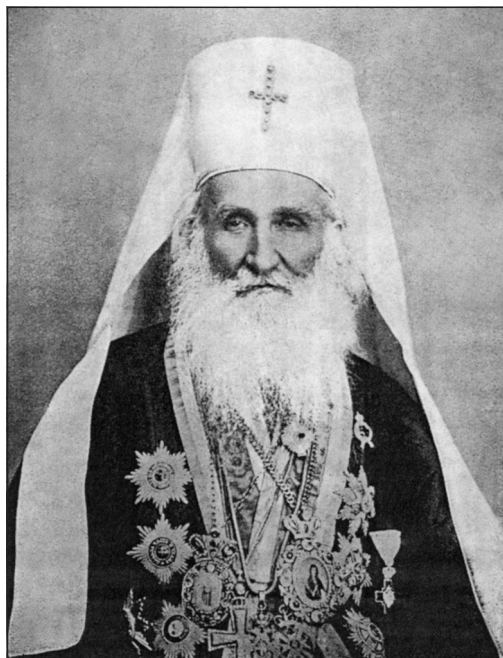
When the St. Sava Church in Jackson, California, had received full parish status, Bishop Nicholas had wanted it to be chartered as Russian Orthodox, since it was under the Russian diocese. Fr. Sebastian defended the desire of the parishioners to have their charter read "Serbian Orthodox," but also indicated that the parish would still be under the omophorion of the Russian bishop for the American mission.⁴¹ Thus Fr. Sebastian defended the right of the Serbian community to retain its

³⁹ Bishop Nicholas (Ziorov), "A Message to Hieromonk Sebastian (Dabovich) as He Is Awarded a Gold Pectoral Cross from the Office of His Majesty." Translated from Russian. First published in English in *Holy Trinity Cathedral Life*, December 20, 1992.

⁴⁰ *Orthodox American Messenger*, no. 5, December 27, 1896, p. 143.

⁴¹ Bishop Nikolai (Velimirovich), "Father Sebastian Dabovich."

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Metropolitan Mihailo (Jovanovich) of Serbia.

ethnic identity, and at the same time upheld the authority of the local diocesan bishop.

Interestingly, Bishop Nicholas was not against the idea of having Serbian priests and parishes in the United States subordinate to the Orthodox Church in Serbia, as long as the Serbian Church could support these priests and parishes. In 1897 both Bishop Nicholas and Fr. Sebastian wrote to Metropolitan Mihailo (Jovanovich) of Serbia, asking if this was possible. Metropolitan Mihailo replied to Fr. Sebastian:

His Grace Bishop Nicholas has written to Us and asked if We could allocate money for churches, schools, priests and teachers; and if We could, he would have nothing against there being separate Serbian priests subordinate to the Serbian Metropolitanate. And I answered that We could not do this because We could not support so many churches and priests, schools and teachers there.

I think that You should agree to this and listen to Your Bishop, and he will help You and protect the Serbs and Orthodoxy, and will not destroy Serbian national customs.⁴²

In reply, Fr. Sebastian wrote to Metropolitan Mihailo:

⁴² Serbian Metropolitan Mihailo to Hieromonk Sebastian. Written in Belgrade, October 24, 1897. Quoted in Bishop Sava, p. 23.

ARCHIMANDRITE SEBASTIAN DABOVICH

I have received Your well-intentioned letter and I completely understand. I bow before You and thank You sincerely. I shall be guided by Your advice. Orthodoxy progresses in America. Serbs are found in various states, they are being revived spiritually and communicate with our organization.⁴³

In August of 1897, Fr. Sebastian traveled to Butte, Montana. At that time the center of the nation's copper-mining industry, the western boomtown of Butte was the home of a large number of Serbs who had come to work in the mines. On the Feast of the Dormition Fr. Sebastian celebrated the first Divine Liturgy in the history of Butte, and afterwards he met with the thirty-one Serbs in attendance in order to organize a parish there. He followed up on this visit by traveling to Butte four to six times a year to serve the Divine Liturgy and observe the progress of the parish.⁴⁴

At the end of October in 1897, Fr. Sebastian and Fr. Alexander Hotovitsky—a Russian priest from New York, later canonized as a New Martyr of Russia—accompanied Bishop Nicholas on a trip to Washington, D.C. Fathers Sebastian and Alexander served as translators when Bishop Nicholas met with President William McKinley. This was the second meeting in the history of the United States between an Orthodox bishop and a U.S. president (the first having been a meeting between Bishop Vladimir and President Grover Cleveland in 1889).⁴⁵ In his audience with President McKinley, Bishop Nicholas expressed his

⁴³ Hieromonk Sebastian to Metropolitan Mihailo of Serbia. Written in San Francisco, December 14, 1897. Quoted in Bishop Sava, pp. 23–24.

⁴⁴ Reader Alexander Vallens, "Archimandrite Sebastian Dabovich: The First American Serbian Orthodox Apostle" (2005), p. 5. <http://www.transfigcathedral.org/faiht/corner/Dabovich.pdf>.

⁴⁵ *Tserkovniye Vedomosti* (Church Gazette), 1889, no. 10, p. 262. During his meeting with President Cleveland, Bishop Vladimir reported on the condition of his flock in Alaska. See Bishop Gregory (Afonsky), *A History of the Orthodox Church in Alaska (1794–1917)* (Kodiak, Alaska: St. Herman's Theological Seminary Press, 1977), pp. 82–83.

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concern over the treatment of Orthodox Christians in Alaska, particularly over the fact that American trading companies were compelling the faithful to work on Sundays and feast days and had unlawfully taken possession of Church properties. The president promised to bring the matter before Congress.⁴⁶

On November 9, 1897, soon after returning to his post at the San Francisco cathedral, Fr. Sebastian officiated at the wedding of his niece, Ella, to a young Russian immigrant, Theodore Pashkovsky.⁴⁷ His new son-in-law was ordained to the priesthood less than a month afterward. Many years later, following the repose of Ella, Fr. Theodore Pashkovsky would be tonsured a monk with the name Theophilus, consecrated a bishop, and eventually (in 1934) elected as the Metropolitan of All America and Canada for the American Metropolia.⁴⁸

4. SERVING UNDER ST. TIKHON

The year 1898 brought a great blessing for Orthodoxy in America, when Bishop Tikhon (Bellavin) was appointed by the Russian Orthodox Church to head the American diocese. A farsighted apostle of Christ, Bishop Tikhon would later become the Patriarch of Moscow and all Russia, and would eventually be canonized by the Russian Orthodox Church.

On December 23, 1898, St. Tikhon arrived at his new cathedral city of San Francisco. He was met at the train station by Fr. Sebastian, by Hieromonk John Shamie (a Syrian priest from the Orthodox mission in Galveston, Texas), and by representatives of the various nationalities of the cathedral parish: Russian, Serbian, Greek, and Syro-Arab.⁴⁹ Bishop

⁴⁶ "Bishop Nicholas' Complaint," *Washington Post*, November 5, 1897. In Tarasar and Erickson, p. 73.

⁴⁷ "An Orthodox Ceremony," *The San Francisco Call*, Tuesday, November 9, 1897.

⁴⁸ Tarasar and Erickson, p. 200.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 85.



Above: Photograph of the Dabovich family in San Francisco, ca. 1900, showing Fr. Sebastian, his mother, and all six of his brothers and sisters with their families. In the center, seated in the chair, is Fr. Sebastian's mother Jelena (his father Ilija had reposed in 1887). The clergyman at left is Fr. Sebastian. The clergyman at right is Fr. Theodore Pashkovsky (the future Metropolitan Theophilus), whom Fr. Sebastian married to his niece Ella in 1897. Ella is in the back row, second from the right.

At right: detail of Fr. Sebastian.



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St. Tikhon when he was Bishop of
the Aleutians and Alaska.

Tikhon was at that time the only Orthodox bishop of the North American continent, the head of a vast multilingual and multiethnic missionary diocese.

By the time Bishop Tikhon came to America, Fr. Sebastian had become well known as a missionary not only at home but also abroad. In 1899 Fr. Sebastian received the Order of St. Anne from the Tsar of Russia, Nicholas II. This order had been conferred on him through the influence of Bishop Nicholas, who, on returning to Russia the previous

year, had had an audience with the Tsar and had recommended Fr. Sebastian for the award.⁵⁰

Two years earlier, in 1897, Fr. Sebastian had been awarded the Order of Daniel from Prince Nicholas of Montenegro, primarily in recognition of the pastoral care he had shown for Serbian immigrants who had come to America from Montenegro, and also for the articles he had written on the province of Montenegro and its struggles against the Turks.⁵¹ According to the testimony of St. Nicholai of

⁵⁰ "Rev. Sebastian Dabovich Honored by the Czar of Russia," *The San Francisco Call*, Wednesday, June 17, 1899.

⁵¹ Ibid.



Photographs of Fr. Sebastian printed in
The San Francisco Call.

Top left: printed June 16, 1899.

Top right: October 20, 1905.

Bottom left: April 22, 1900.

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Zhicha, Fr. Sebastian was also given awards by the King of Serbia and the Patriarch of Jerusalem.⁵²

Toward the end of the nineteenth century, Fr. Sebastian somehow found time, amidst his already abundant labors, to develop one of the first English translations of the Orthodox Divine Liturgy,⁵³ and also to write three English-language books on the Orthodox Faith: *The Holy Orthodox Church: The Rituals, Services, and Sacraments of the Eastern Apostolic (Greek-Russian) Church* (1898); *Lives of the Saints, and Several Lectures and Sermons* (1898); and *Preaching in the Russian Church: Lectures and Sermons by a Priest of the Holy Orthodox Church* (1899). In addition, he wrote articles on Orthodoxy in Alaska and California, and on Orthodox traditions surrounding the Feast of the Nativity of Christ.

In 1897, as he was completing his first book, *The Holy Orthodox Church*, Fr. Sebastian wrote about it to the above-mentioned Metropolitan Mihailo of Serbia:

In a few days I shall finish a book, which I am writing in English—17 chapters and a foreword—about the Orthodox Church, its rites, symbolism, liturgy, and sacraments, and how it differs from the Roman and Protestant churches, etc. If His Grace Nicholas blesses the publication of this book, I think and hope to God that it will be of use to the East and West, since I am fairly well acquainted with both.⁵⁴

(When Metropolitan Mihailo reposed in 1898, shortly before this book was published, Fr. Sebastian included in the book these words of dedication: “To the sacred memory of the late Metropolitan Michael of Serbia, by his dutiful son in the spirit, the author.”)

Published with money from his own small salary, Fr. Sebastian’s books bore witness to the missionary vision of their author. As his

⁵² Bishop Nikolai (Velimirovich), “Father Sebastian Dabovich.”

⁵³ Mirko Dobrijevic (Bishop Irinej), p. 15.

⁵⁴ Hieromonk Sebastian to Metropolitan Mihailo of Serbia. Written in San Francisco, December 14, 1897. Quoted in Bishop Sava, pp. 23–24.

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letter to Metropolitan Mihailo makes clear, they were intended to serve as books of basic Orthodox instruction, written for second- and third-generation immigrants from Orthodox lands, most of whom had English as their first language, and also for non-Orthodox who were interested in the Orthodox Church. While such books are common today, at the end of the nineteenth century they were a rarity and far ahead of their time. Anglicans, Episcopalians and others had by then translated and published some English-language books on Orthodoxy, but the Orthodox themselves had published very few expositions of the Orthodox Faith in English. Fr. Sebastian understood that, for the growth of Orthodoxy in America, this situation had to change—that the Orthodox Faith had to be taught and preached, not only in the languages of traditional Orthodox countries but also in the common language of the new country.

Fr. Sebastian's books bear witness as well to his ardent love for Jesus Christ and His Church, to the depth of his knowledge of the Orthodox Faith, to his careful adherence to the teachings of the Church, to his pastoral zeal, to his literary and poetic gifts, and to his profound sense of spiritual beauty. A large portion of the books consists of sermons that he gave in the San Francisco cathedral and in mission churches on various feast days. These sermons reveal him as an inspired preacher whose words could soar to the heights and at the same time strike deeply the hearts of his listeners. Consider, for example, these words from a sermon he delivered on Holy Friday:

He Who prayed, *Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do*, has stretched out His arms on the wood in order to embrace a sinful world. But no mortal knoweth how *the Word was with God, and the Word was God*. The Word of God is not bound by death. As a word from the lips dies not entirely away at the moment its sound ceases, but rather gathers new strength, and passing through the senses penetrates the minds and hearts of the hearers, so also the Hypostatical Word of God, the Son of God, in His saving incarnation, whilst dy-

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ing in the flesh, fills all things with His spirit and might. Thus when Christ waxeth faint and becometh silent on the Cross, then is it that heaven and earth raise their voice to Him, and the dead preach the resurrection of the Crucified, and the very stones cry out.⁵⁵

In other sermons included in his books, Fr. Sebastian shows himself to be a sensitive observer of the spirit of the times. His sermon “The Condition of Society” is seen to be especially prophetic today, over a century after he wrote it.⁵⁶ In it, he lamented the rise of new trends in society that indicated an apostasy from the traditional Christian way of life: the “craze after unwholesome fashions”; the “nervous, unsteady rush to ‘keep up with the times,’” in which parents are in such a hurry, and are so empty inside, that they deprive their children of a stable, secure Christian home; the exaltation of shamelessness among young women, and the disdain of the virtues of modesty and purity; the disrespect of young men toward their elders; the rising number of young people who wish to remain unmarried, and of married people who do not want to have children so that they can have as much pleasure as possible. “In view of all this,” Fr. Sebastian said in his sermon, “the preacher of the Word of God is obliged by a terrible oath he has given before he received the gift of Apostolic succession at his ordination, to present to you the whole of the Truth, not a part of it.”⁵⁷

As an Orthodox preacher of the Gospel to the modern world, Fr. Sebastian boldly challenged the unbelief that was increasing in his day and that has only continued to grow during the following century. His books included a lengthy treatise entitled “The Authenticity and Truthfulness of the Gospel,” in which he defended the historicity of the Gospel narratives; an article called “The Necessity for Divine

⁵⁵ Fr. Sebastian Dabovich, *Preaching in the Russian Church* (San Francisco: Cubery and Company, 1899), p. 130.

⁵⁶ See pp. 86–88 below.

⁵⁷ Fr. Sebastian Dabovich, *Preaching in the Russian Church*, pp. 160–62.

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Revelation, and the Indications of a Revealed Religion,” in which he showed why the Christian Faith alone is the full and unadulterated revelation of God; and an essay on “The Immortality of the Soul,” in which he demonstrated that, contrary to the view of modern materialists, the soul indeed lives on and is active after the body dies, even as the body awaits the General Resurrection.⁵⁸

Fr. Sebastian’s books also reveal how much he valued and venerated his holy missionary predecessors in America, Saints Herman and Innocent of Alaska. In one place, he included the name “Ghermanus of Alaska” in a list of particularly illustrious saints.⁵⁹ This is striking in a book published in 1898—seventy-two years before the humble monk Herman was formally glorified as a saint by the Orthodox Church. In yet another book, Fr. Sebastian included an address he had delivered at the San Francisco cathedral on August 26, 1897, on the occasion of the centennial of the birth of St. Innocent of Alaska. St. Innocent, who had reposed in Russia eighteen years before, was still remembered by some of the Orthodox Christians then in San Francisco. At the request of Bishop Nicholas, Fr. Sebastian had produced the first English translation of the Life of St. Innocent, which was presented at the centennial celebrations.⁶⁰ In his address, Fr. Sebastian proclaimed: “*Innocentius*: My whole being thrills with a veneration at the sound of that name.... I become bold and venture to look into the unseen, where I behold the spiritual eyes of our first hard-working Missionary, with kindly light beaming upon this gathering.”⁶¹ Again, these words are all the more remarkable considering

⁵⁸ Ibid., pp. 9–63.

⁵⁹ Fr. Sebastian Dabovich, *The Holy Orthodox Church: The Rituals, Services, and Sacraments of the Eastern Apostolic (Greek-Russian) Church* (Wilkes-Barre, Pennsylvania, 1898), p. 74.

⁶⁰ *American Orthodox Messenger*, no. 2, September 15–27, 1897, pp. 45–46. In Russian.

⁶¹ Fr. Sebastian Dabovich, *The Lives of the Saints, and Several Lectures and Sermons* (San Francisco: The Murdock Press, 1898), pp. 164–66.

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that they were uttered a full eighty years before St. Innocent's canonization. Undoubtedly, Fr. Sebastian looked on both uncanonized saints, Herman and Innocent, as models of emulation and as heavenly helpers in his own apostolic labors in America.

It was not merely through his books that Fr. Sebastian sought to introduce non-Orthodox Americans to the Orthodox Faith. According to Bishop Irinej, Fr. Sebastian "spoke tirelessly to countless individuals, making friends on all levels of society—from the common man on the street to the highest strata of American social, political, and religious life."⁶²

Ever seeking to reach out to those outside the Church, Fr. Sebastian initiated contacts and discussions with non-Orthodox churches. He made his greatest efforts in the direction of the Episcopalian Church, which, at the turn of the twentieth century, he saw as the most similar to the Orthodox Church among non-Orthodox American confessions, and also as the church most receptive to Orthodoxy. As early as 1865, two years after Fr. Sebastian's birth, the ober-procurator of the Holy Synod of the Russian Church had noted that an Orthodox church was needed in San Francisco not only to provide for the residents who were already Orthodox but also "to answer to the growing interest in the Orthodox Faith among American Episcopalians."⁶³ Having grown up in San Francisco and having been entrusted with the apostolic ministry of the holy priesthood, Fr. Sebastian now sought to address this need. He met several times with Bishop Charles Grafton, Episcopalian bishop of Fond du Lac, Wisconsin, and was instrumental in organizing a conference of Orthodox-Episcopalian dialogue in Fond du Lac.⁶⁴ In November of 1900, Bishop Tikhon, together with Fr. Sebastian and Fr. John Kochurov, rector of the Chicago cathedral and future New Martyr of Russia, attended the consecration of a vicar for

⁶² Mirko Dobrijevic (Bishop Irinej), p. 15.

⁶³ Tarasar and Erickson, p. 33.

⁶⁴ Mirko Dobrijevic (Bishop Irinej), p. 15.

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Bishop Grafton.⁶⁵ Three years later Bishop Grafton made a trip to Russia to experience the Orthodox Church there firsthand.⁶⁶

In all of his meetings with Episcopalians, Fr. Sebastian was sympathetic, respectful and understanding, appreciating the points in which Episcopalian doctrine and practice still reflected the original Orthodox Faith. At the same time, however, he was firmly convinced that he must reveal the Orthodox Church as the one, true Church of Christ.

This loving yet firm approach to the non-Orthodox confessions can be found in his books. At the beginning of his book, *Preaching in the Russian Church*, he placed as the epigraph the words of the Apostle Paul, *Speaking the truth in love* (Eph. 4:15)—a saying that he clearly took as his guiding principle in reaching out to those not in the Church.⁶⁷ In the same book, having presented the above-mentioned articles establishing that the soul is immortal, that Christianity is the true Faith, and that the Gospels are historically verifiable, he followed with an essay entitled “The True Church of Christ,” in which he painstakingly laid out the reasons why the Orthodox Church, and no other, is the true Church.⁶⁸ Elsewhere, in an essay entitled “Sincere Religion,” he said it was “foul treachery” for Orthodox Christians to make no distinction between the teachings of the different churches, and to deny that the Orthodox Church alone teaches Christ’s truth purely and completely. “You will say,” he wrote, “shall we then condemn our erring brethren? By no means. Christ forbids us to judge anybody, for only God knows whether our brother culpably holds the error, or whether he believes it to be the truth. But even if he believes his error

⁶⁵ Vallens, p. 6.

⁶⁶ Fr. Sebastian Dabovich, “The Madonna of Alaska: A Tale of the Greek-Russian Church in Many Lands” [an overview of Orthodox Nativity traditions], *The San Francisco Sunday Call*, Christmas Number, December 20, 1903, sec. 2, p. 1.

⁶⁷ Fr. Sebastian Dabovich, *Preaching in the Russian Church*, p. 4.

⁶⁸ Ibid., pp. 64–77. This article was reprinted in *The Orthodox Word*, no. 5 (1965), pp. 182–87, along with an article by Eugene (later Fr. Seraphim) Rose about Fr. Sebastian (see p. 68 below).

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to be the truth, error remains error, and can never become truth. Therefore, we must always condemn error, though we may not condemn the person erring.”⁶⁹

Although Fr. Sebastian’s efforts to bring Episcopalians into the Orthodox Church did not prove successful during his lifetime, St. Tikhon later noted that Fr. Sebastian was greatly responsible for making non-Orthodox Christians, particularly Episcopalians, aware of the teachings of the Orthodox Church.⁷⁰ According to one biographer of Fr. Sebastian, some of the Western Rite parishes that were received many years later into the Antiochian Orthodox Archdiocese of North America pointed to these early efforts of Fr. Sebastian as a significant stepping-stone in the return of Episcopalians to the Orthodox Church.⁷¹

From the beginning of his time in America, St. Tikhon had recognized Fr. Sebastian’s abilities as a missionary pastor. In 1900 he appointed Fr. Sebastian to the North American Ecclesiastical Consistory, which was the diocesan council of the entire American mission.⁷² Then, in 1902, he appointed him as the Dean of the Sitka Deanery and the superintendent of Alaskan missions. Thus, after an absence of eighteen years, Fr. Sebastian returned to Alaska. He served the Sitka Deanery for two years, during which time St. Tikhon elevated him to the rank of abbot.

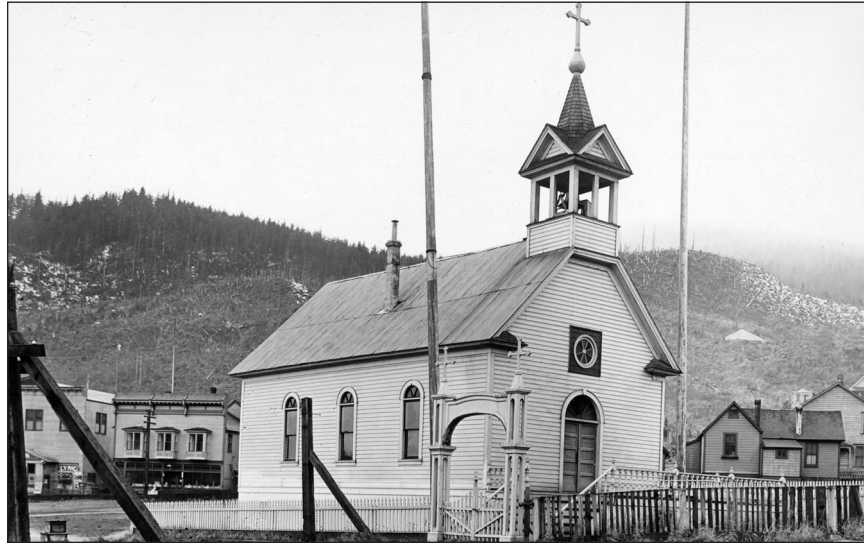
During his time in Alaska Fr. Sebastian made contact with a group of Serbian and Russian miners in Douglas, near Juneau, and quickly set about providing an Orthodox church for them. Land was donated by the local mining company, and a donation for the church’s construction was sent from the Holy Assembly of Bishops in Serbia. Fr. Sebastian built the church with his own hands, working together with the local Orthodox Christians. On July 23, 1903, Fr. Sebastian, along

⁶⁹ Fr. Sebastian Dabovich, *The Lives of the Saints, and Several Lectures and Sermons*, p. 181.

⁷⁰ See p. 53 below.

⁷¹ Vallens, pp. 7–8.

⁷² Gray, p. 78.



Above: Exterior view of the St. Sava Church, Douglas, Alaska.

Below: Interior view.



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with Hieromonk Anthony (Deshkevich-Koribut) and the priest Aleksandar Jaroshevich, consecrated the Church of St. Sava in Douglas.⁷³

Upon leaving Alaska in 1903, Fr. Sebastian went to Chicago, Illinois, where he continued the work he had initiated a decade earlier of establishing a Serbian parish. On this trip he met many more Serbs than he had during his first trip to the city. He stayed for a week and served the Divine Liturgy for them. A number of families pledged their support in building a church.

During the same year Fr. Sebastian also paid another visit to the Serbian community in Butte, Montana, encouraging the parishioners to raise money to build a church and obtain a resident priest. Then, after a brief stay in San Francisco, he left on a trip to Russia and Serbia.

Within four months after Fr. Sebastian's visit, the parishioners in Butte, Montana were able to raise enough money to start building a temple dedicated to the Holy Trinity. The church was completed in the fall of 1904, and on the Feast of the Beheading of St. John the Forerunner, August 29/September 11, Fr. Sebastian served the first Divine Liturgy in the new church, assisted by the Serbian priest, Hieromonk Jacob (Odzhich). On Vidovdan, June 15/28, 1905, St. Tikhon consecrated the Holy Trinity Serbian Orthodox Church in Butte, assisted by Fr. Sebastian and by Fr. Jacob, who became the church's first permanent priest.⁷⁴

Due to the growth and diversity of the American diocese, St. Tikhon had by this time begun to restructure it with the blessing of the Holy

⁷³ Fr. Sebastian Dabovich to the Religious Council of the Diocese of North America in New York. Written in Los Angeles, December 2, 1915. Quoted in Bishop Sava, p. 256 (see also pp. 43, 240). In 1937 the church in Douglas burned down, but the Serbian cemetery still remains nearby.

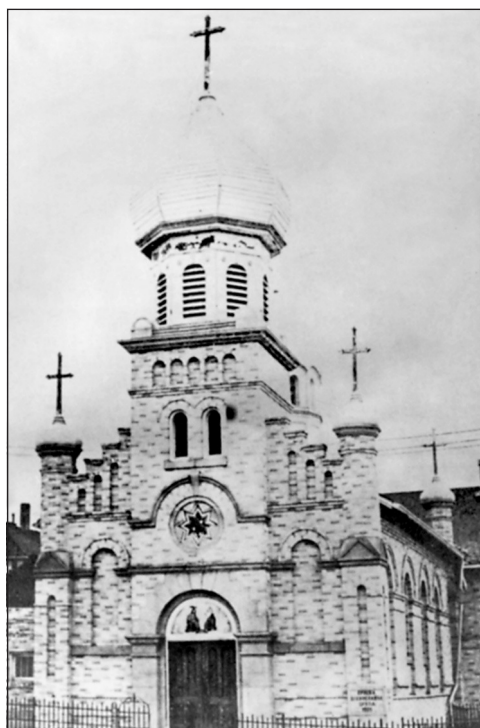
⁷⁴ Vallens, p. 5. This church building served the congregation for sixty years, until the opening of a new copper mine forced the razing of the entire area. A new church, also dedicated to the Holy Trinity, was built at another location, and was consecrated by Bishop Gregory (Udicki) in July 1965. (See Bishop Sava, pp. 257–58.)

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Synod in Russia. In 1903 he transferred the diocesan see from San Francisco to New York and assisted in the consecration of a Russian vicar bishop for Alaska, Bishop Innocent (Pustynsky). At the same time, in the Orthodox spirit of *sobornost* (catholicity), he sought to provide for the needs of his multiethnic Orthodox flock in America, realizing that each ethnic group required special attention and leadership. As he wrote to the Holy Synod in Russia in 1905: “We do not consider that we have the right to interfere with the national character of the churches in this country; on the contrary, we try to preserve it, giving each a chance to be governed by leaders of the same nationality.”⁷⁵ With this in mind,

in 1904 he took part in consecrating Archimandrite Raphael (Hawaweeny), later canonized as St. Raphael of Brooklyn, as a vicar bishop for the Syro-Arab Orthodox churches in America.

St. Tikhon also planned to consecrate a vicar bishop for the Serbian Orthodox churches in America. In March 1905 he established the Serbian Orthodox Mission in America, centered in Chicago. Anticipating that Fr. Sebastian, like St. Raphael for the Arabs, would become the

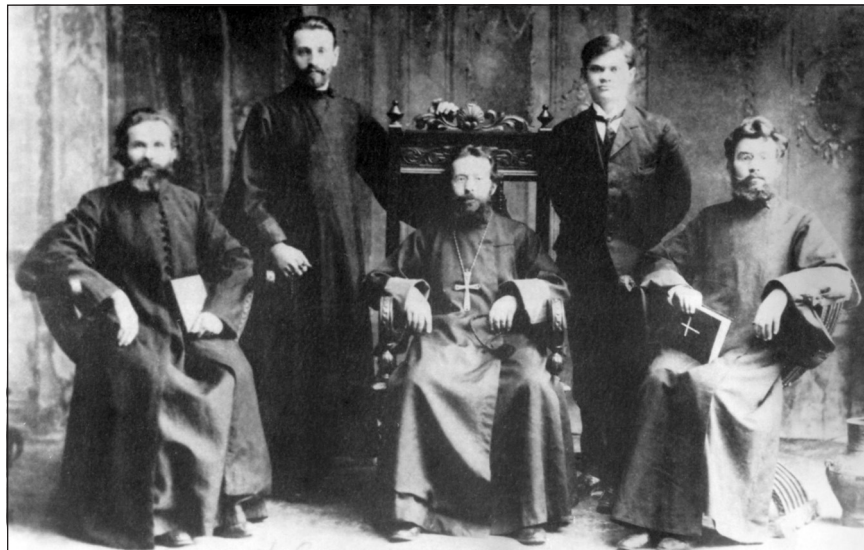


The original Holy Trinity Church
in Butte, Montana.

⁷⁵ Quoted in *Holy Resurrection Serbian Orthodox Cathedral, 1905–2005*, p. 52.



Fr. Sebastian with other missionaries, ca. 1902. *Seated, left to right:* Fr. Dmitri Kamenev; Abbot Innokenty (Pustynsky), future auxiliary bishop of St. Tikhon in America; St. Alexis Toth; Deacon Vladimir Alexandrov; Abbot Sebastian Dabovich. *Standing:* General Skliarevich, a Russian engineer.



Fr. Sebastian with fellow Serbs in America, ca. 1905. *Left to right:* Hieromonk Jacob (Odzhich), the first permanent priest at Holy Trinity Church, Butte, Montana; Hierodeacon Damjan (Grujich); Archimandrite Sebastian (Dabovich); poet Proka Jovkic, who wrote enthusiastically in the San Francisco-based newspaper *Srpska Nezavisnost* about Fr. Sebastian's work in Chicago; Priest Paja Radosavljevich.

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The original Holy Resurrection Church
on Fowler Street in Chicago.

bishop for this mission, he transferred him to Chicago and placed him in charge of the Serbian Orthodox Mission. At the same time he appointed him as the parish priest of the Serbs in Chicago, although they did not yet have a church.

A year earlier, in 1904, Fr. Sebastian had made a third visit to Chicago, spending two weeks with the Serbs there and again celebrating the Divine Liturgy for them. Now, as the acting Serbian Orthodox priest for the city, he came there for the fourth time to stay. He lost no time in fulfilling his long-held goal of founding a church for the Serbian community. Soon af-

ter his arrival in June of 1905, he served the Divine Liturgy in a rented hall on Milwaukee Avenue, with about two hundred Serbian families in attendance. Immediately afterward, he organized a parish committee and began looking for a building suitable for the new church. Within a matter of days, the first Serbian Orthodox church in the city had been established. As he later recalled:

After some days we found a place for the new church, which was located at 8 Fowler Street,⁷⁶ on the corner of Evergreen and across from Wicker Park. We put down a \$1,000 deposit (donated by

⁷⁶ In 1936–1937, the address was changed to 1950 West Schiller Street.

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Acim Lugonja). The remaining \$6,500 was to be paid with interest. We created an improvised chapel immediately, made an iconostasis, and raised a cross on the building, all within several days. The first Liturgy was held, and the church was consecrated to the Resurrection of our Lord Jesus Christ, on the 4th of July, 1905.⁷⁷

On September 18, 1905, St. Tikhon raised Fr. Sebastian to the rank of archimandrite at the Holy Resurrection Serbian Orthodox Church in Chicago. In the words he addressed to Fr. Sebastian on this occasion, two things are evident: first of all, the genuine love and concern that this wise hierarch had for the Serbian flock in America, and secondly the great esteem he had for Fr. Sebastian in entrusting to him the spiritual guidance of the entire Serbian Mission. To Fr. Sebastian he said:

I greet you, most honorable Father Archimandrite Sebastian, with your elevation to the rank of archimandrite and your assignment as head of the Serbian Mission in America. You were entrusted by the diocesan authorities even earlier, as a native Serb, with the administration of one or another of the Serbian parishes here. Now you are being called to a greater ministry: upon you is being laid the care of all the Serbian churches in our extensive diocese and of the spiritual needs of all the Serbs in America. You know how many of them are scattered here, how often they go astray like sheep that have no shepherd, how they end up in a foreign home, and how, having come here for work or to become rich, some of them become spiritually impoverished and, in this heterodox country, lose the great spiritual treasure of the old country: the holy Orthodox Faith, love for the Slavic people, and fondness for their good native customs.

⁷⁷ Fr. Sebastian Dabovich to Protopresbyter Petar Stajchich, Ravanica Monastery in Srem, 1935. The church building on Fowler Street served the parish until 1932, when a new church was built on the same spot. A *Chicago Tribune* article from 1932 stated that only two buildings were being built in the city at that time, in the midst of the Great Depression: one was the post office, and the other was Holy Resurrection Church. In 1964 the church was elevated to the title of Cathedral, and in 1975 a new church building was consecrated for the congregation on Redwood Drive.

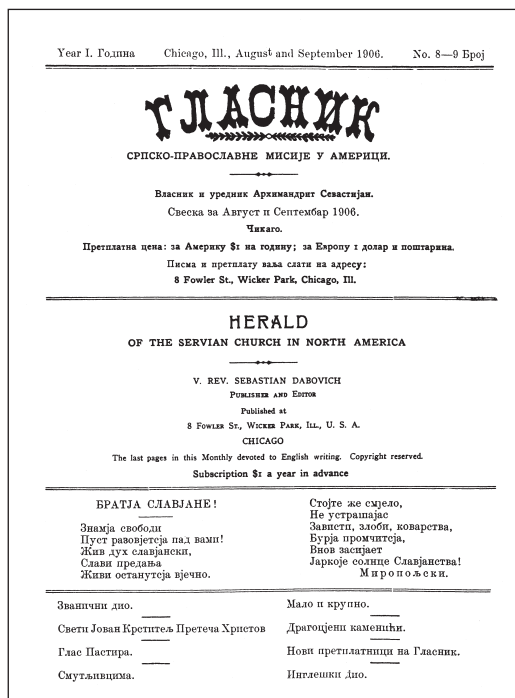
ARCHIMANDRITE SEBASTIAN DABOVICH

Our benevolently solicitous hierarchy, which is always concerned about the needs of the Slavs, who are of one blood with us, desires to have mercy on these people, and is calling upon you now to spiritually guide the Serbs who are living here.⁷⁸

The newly elevated Archimandrite Sebastian served as rector of the church he had founded in Chicago. During his time as head of the Serbian Orthodox Mission, he tended to the needs of the many Serbian communities throughout the country. He also initiated the publication of the *Herald of the Serbian Church in North America*, the first Serbian Church newspaper in the United States.

In 1905 St. Tikhon entrusted Fr. Sebastian with the task of procuring written permission from the hierarchy in Serbia for the consecration of a vicar bishop for the Serbian Orthodox Mission. Taking this task very seriously, Fr. Sebastian wrote letters to Patriarch Georgije and to the Holy Synod of Bishops in Serbia, asking for a letter confirming that, as far as they were concerned, there was no obstacle to the

⁷⁸ *Slovo Pravoslaviya v Amerike: Propovedi i poucheniya Svyatitelya Tikhona* (The Word of Orthodoxy in America: Sermons and Teachings of Holy Hierarch Tikhon) (Moscow: Sretensky Monastery, 2001), pp. 143–44. Translated from Russian.



A 1906 issue of the *Herald of the Serbian Church in North America*.

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appointment of a bishop for the Serbs in North America. The hierarchy in Serbia, however, not knowing firsthand the situation of Serbs in America, and also not being certain of the relationship between the Russian and Serbian hierarchies in the context of America, replied that they were not prepared to send such a letter to the Holy Synod of Bishops in Russia. Meanwhile, some Serbian congregations in America, not wanting to be under the Russian Church even if they could have a Serbian vicar bishop, were appealing directly to bishops in Serbia for archpastoral support and direction.⁷⁹

The Holy Synod of the Russian Church honored St. Tikhon with the title of archbishop in 1905, and two years later assigned him as to the see of Yaroslavl. Thus, St. Tikhon left America with many of his plans for the American archdiocese unrealized. Before his departure for Russia, he did not neglect to show his appreciation for Fr. Sebastian's many labors. As St. Nikolai of Zhicha records:

Archimandrite Dabovich could have been a bishop even in 1907. The Russian archbishop wanted to consecrate him as a Russian bishop for the Serbian people. But the Serbs did not want it that way. Archbishop Tikhon was sorry about that. He was eager to show his appreciation to Fr. Dabovich for all his wonderful work. Failing to make him a bishop, he did something else. Once when he celebrated the Holy Liturgy in the Serbian church in Chicago, he presented our archimandrite with a precious mitre, which was worth 1,000 roubles in gold. But Fr. Dabovich quickly sold that precious gift and gave it to the church towards paying its debts. Such a man was he. He was absolutely unselfish.⁸⁰

5. "THE BEGINNING OF SORROWS" (MATT. 24:8)

In 1908 Archbishop Platon (Rozhdestvensky) replaced St. Tikhon as the archbishop of the American archdiocese. Fr. Sebastian hoped

⁷⁹ Bishop Sava, pp. 29–30.

⁸⁰ Bishop Nikolai (Velimirovich), "Father Sebastian Dabovich."

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that the new archbishop would offer the same support to the Serbian Orthodox Mission as had his predecessor. In September of 1908, he wrote to Archbishop Platon, outlining the needs of the Serbian congregations in America:

Last Easter in three churches there were no services, a fourth was closed, and many colonies with a fairly dense Orthodox population did not even hear 'Christ is Risen.' It is impossible to obtain priests anywhere, and in most cases people cannot give enough to support a priest properly. Now they have promised me in Belgrade that at the next Assembly of Bishops they will raise the question of allocating two scholarships for the Mission, so that two Serbian lads from America may be educated at a seminary in Serbia. But this presents other problems: finding the money to send these lads to Europe.

Serbian archpastors in the Old Country with brotherly love expect Your Eminence to organize our part of the Church. The Lord's blessing will doubtless be given to a continuation of the work begun with wisdom, after six years of responsibility, by His Eminence Tikhon, now Archpastor of Yaroslavl.⁸¹

During the same year, Fr. Sebastian, while retaining his position as head of the Serbian Orthodox Mission, served at the Holy Transfiguration Church in Denver, Colorado, a parish that had been received into the Orthodox Church from Uniatism in 1904. The parish consisted primarily of Russians and Serbs. In September of 1908, Fr. Sebastian wrote to Archbishop Platon: "Here the church is fairly large, there is enough land, the debt is small.... Many children. They want a psalm-reader and teacher, who can direct a choir.... Come, Your Eminence, to Denver."⁸²

Since the Cathedral of St. Basil in Fr. Sebastian's native city of San

⁸¹ Archives of the American Orthodox Church, no. 1129, July 23, 1908. Quoted in Bishop Sava, p. 216.

⁸² Fr. Sebastian Dabovich to Archbishop Platon. Written in Denver, Colorado, September 29, 1908. Quoted in Bishop Sava, p. 278.

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Holy Trinity Cathedral in San Francisco.

Francisco had been destroyed in the great earthquake of 1906, a new cathedral, dedicated to the Holy Trinity and located at Green and Van Ness, had been built. In July of 1909 Archimandrite Sebastian traveled to San Francisco in order to consecrate the new cathedral.

In the meantime, Fr. Sebastian was experiencing a growing sense of futility as the head of the Serbian Orthodox Mission. Many Serbs in America had made it clear to him that they did not wish to support or be united under the Serbian Orthodox Mission because it was within the jurisdiction of the Russian Church. Some Serbs were even unfavorable toward Fr. Sebastian because he was under the Russian Church and had placed Serbian congregations in America under that Church.⁸³ Calling

⁸³ Bishop Sava, pp. 34, 40.

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the Serbian Orthodox Mission “a totally Russophile agency,”⁸⁴ they accused Fr. Sebastian himself of being a “Russophile.”⁸⁵

In reality, Fr. Sebastian, as a selfless servant of Christ in His Church, cared first of all for the spiritual well-being and salvation of Christ’s flock. He followed the words of His Master: *Feed my sheep* (John 21:16–17). Like St. Tikhon, Fr. Sebastian knew that, for the Serbian flock in America to be fed properly, they needed a Serbian archpastor and Serbian priests who spoke their language and understood their needs. This was the reason behind his attempt, at St. Tikhon’s behest, to organize the Serbian Orthodox Mission and to have a Serbian bishop consecrated for America. Fr. Sebastian was also completely open to the possibility of Serbian congregations in America being placed under the Serbian Church; however, as we have seen, at that time the Serbian Church was not yet ready to take full responsibility for priests and parishes in America. As far as Fr. Sebastian was concerned, the most pressing question was not what Local Orthodox Church—Russian or Serbian—the Serbs in America would be under (as long as they were under a canonical hierarchy), but rather how their spiritual needs would be met, how they would be nourished by the life and grace of the Church.

Fr. Sebastian was greatly saddened that, at the end of the first decade of the twentieth century, the needs of the Serbs were *not* being met properly. For the nineteen chartered Serbian parishes in America (not to mention the smaller Serbian Orthodox communities), there were only eleven canonical priests. Non-canonical priests from Serbia took advantage of this situation, roaming the United States and performing services in Serbian communities without the blessing of any bishop. With no Serbian bishop assigned to America, and with many Serbs not wanting to be in the jurisdiction of the Russian Church,

⁸⁴ Serbian Church-School Congregation in Steelton, Pennsylvania, to Serbian Patriarch Georgije, October 19, 1905. Quoted in Bishop Sava, p. 30.

⁸⁵ *Holy Resurrection Serbian Orthodox Cathedral, 1905–2005*, p. 51.

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there was little Fr. Sebastian could do to stop this non-canonical activity.⁸⁶ He was placed in the unenviable position of having to defend the canonical authority of the Russian hierarchy over American Serbs (because that was indeed the canonical authority at the time) despite the fact that many Serbs resented this authority, and despite the fact that he himself knew that the Serbian churches in America were at an impasse without their own bishop.

Seeing that some Serbian priests and congregations were avoiding him because of his connection with the Russian Church, and finding that the Serbian Orthodox Mission was then (as he said) “left without resources, aid and, what is more, goodwill,”⁸⁷ at the end of 1909 Fr. Sebastian asked Archbishop Platon to relieve him of his duties as administrator of the Mission. At the same time he wrote a letter to the Holy Synod of Bishops in Serbia, informing them of the situation of the Serbian Orthodox churches in America and asking for their aid:

Most Serbs have said that they do not want any other jurisdiction, not even Russian, but their own Serbian Church jurisdiction. On this day I am submitting to North American Archbishop Platon my resignation as administrator of the Serbian Mission, for I am exhausted from the effort and cannot oppose a multitude single-handed.... Once again I caution the Holy Synod that the Serbian Church in glorious, vast America has been left without an administrator and I urge that a Serbian archpastor be sent.⁸⁸

Archbishop Platon reported to the Holy Synod of Bishops in Russia about Fr. Sebastian’s request to resign. When the bishops in Russia sent back a Decision to Archbishop Platon granting Fr. Sebastian’s

⁸⁶ Bishop Sava, pp. 35, 42, 176–77.

⁸⁷ Fr. Sebastian Dabovich to Archbishop Platon. Written in Oakland, California, December 6, 1909. Quoted in Bishop Sava, pp. 34–35.

⁸⁸ Fr. Sebastian Dabovich to the Holy Hierarchical Synod, Karlovci Patriarchate. Written in Oakland, California, December 14, 1909. Quoted in Bishop Sava, p. 35.

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request, they felt it necessary to recount the praise that St. Tikhon had given eight years earlier for Fr. Sebastian's accomplishments in America:

Concerning the Hieromonk Sebastian, His Grace Tikhon of the Aleutians, in his communication to the Holy Synod of June 2, 1902, no. 74, wrote that the appointed Hieromonk, during his service in the Mission, exerted considerable efforts towards 1) building holy churches in America (the construction of churches in Jackson and Seattle, and the decoration of the cathedral church in San Francisco), 2) organizing church-parish life in Minneapolis shortly after the parishioners joined the Orthodox Church, 3) raising religious and national consciousness among Slavs scattered across America, 4) acquainting non-Slav Christians (primarily Episcopalians) in America with the teachings of the Orthodox Church, for which purpose he wrote and published, from his meager resources, several books in English, and 5) translating official documents of the Administration into English.⁸⁹

6. "GO YE THEREFORE, AND TEACH ALL NATIONS"
(MATT. 28:19)

After being released from his position as head of the Serbian Mission in 1910, Fr. Sebastian served the Serbian Orthodox communities in California. As he wrote to Archbishop Platon:

The receipts from modest services performed for the many Serbs in the cities of Los Angeles, Fresno and Oakland, I hope, will be enough to nourish me. The new church in Angels Camp is already finished, and to there and to the church in Jackson a new priest, Fr. Jovan Duchich, will soon be coming from Herzegovina.

The mission in [Bisbee] Arizona has been reorganized into a par-

⁸⁹ Decision no. 4822 of June 22, 1910, Archives of the Synod of the Russian Orthodox Church. Quoted in Bishop Sava, p. 36.

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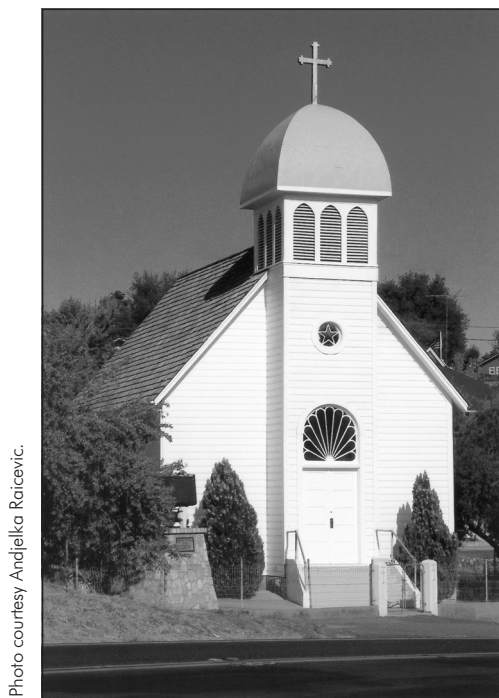


Photo courtesy Andjelka Raicević.

The St. Basil of Ostrog Church
in Angels Camp, California.

ish, and Fr. Samuel Popovich from the Timisoara Diocese will be coming to build a new church.⁹⁰

The Serbian church communities in these cities and towns had been organized by Fr. Sebastian himself. As mentioned earlier, Fr. Sebastian had begun to establish a parish in the mining town of Angels Camp during his early visits to Jackson, located only twenty-seven miles away. In 1909 the Serbian community in Angels Camp, numbering about 1,500 people, began building a church. The church was consecrated on August 14, 1910, and was dedicated to St. Basil of Ostrog.

Since the congregation in Angels Camp, together with those in Jackson and Bisbee, were already being served by priests from Serbia, Fr. Sebastian now settled among the Serbian congregation he had organized in Los Angeles, while paying regular pastoral visits to the smaller communities in Oakland and Fresno.⁹¹ Under his leadership, in 1909 the Los Angeles congregation purchased a large plot of land on the east side of the city for use as a cemetery, and began building a church on

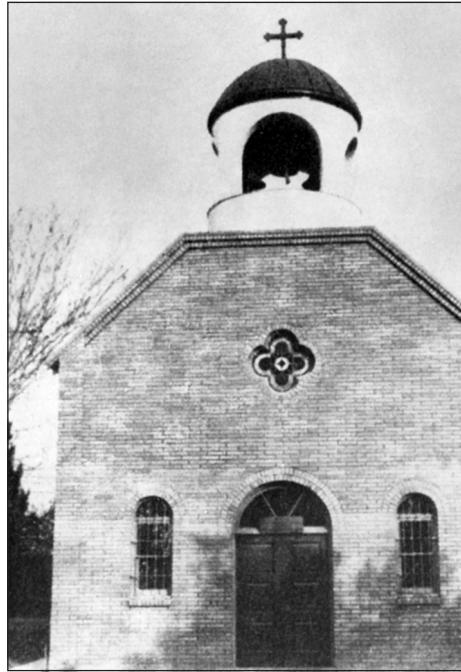
⁹⁰ Fr. Sebastian Dabovich to Archbishop Platon. Written in Oakland, California, December 6, 1909. Quoted in Bishop Sava, p. 35.

⁹¹ Serbian Orthodox churches were eventually consecrated in Oakland and Fresno, in 1926 and 1957 respectively.

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this land. Fr. Sebastian held services in a temporary home chapel while the church's construction was underway. In 1911 the completed church was consecrated by Fr. Sebastian in honor of St. Sava of Serbia.⁹²

Fr. Sebastian hoped to stay at the St. Sava Church in Los Angeles as the resident priest, but this was not to be. When the Balkan Wars broke out in 1912, he felt called to help his suffering Serbian brothers. Thus he traveled to Serbia and served as chaplain in the Serbian army for over a year. During this trip he took the opportunity to make a pilgrim-



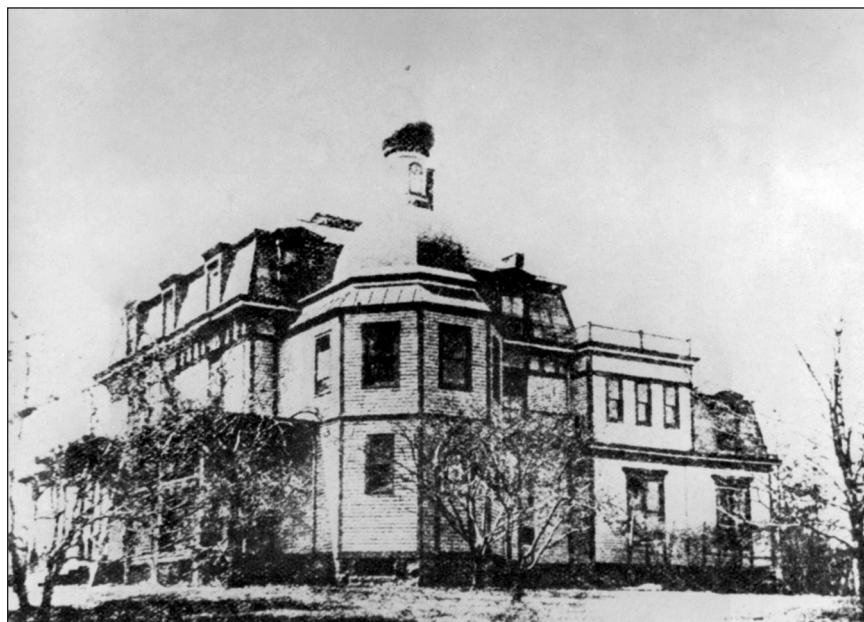
St. Sava Church in Los Angeles.

age to the holy places in Kosovo and the other Serbian Orthodox lands. While in Belgrade, as an American citizen he was invited to officiate at the United States Consulate for Thanksgiving Day services.

When visiting Skopje, Fr. Sebastian wrote a letter to Nikola Pashich, President of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in Belgrade, in which he expressed his hope that a Serbian diocese would finally be created in America, with a Serbian bishop residing there. It is noteworthy that he named St. Nicholai (Velimirovich) as a candidate for becoming the Serbian bishop for America at that early date, when St.

⁹² This church building served the Serbian community until 1963, when the new St. Sava Church was built in San Gabriel. The old church still stands, surrounded by the Serbian Orthodox cemetery, and services are still held in it occasionally.

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St. Platon's Theological Seminary in Tenafly, New Jersey.

Nicholai was still a hieromonk. As Fr. Sebastian wrote to Nikola Pashich, "You have two candidates in Serbia, Nicholai and Valerian."⁹³ I consider myself a third only if necessary."⁹⁴

In August of 1913, Fr. Sebastian visited San Francisco and spoke at an Episcopal Church there. When St. Platon's Orthodox Theological Seminary was established by Archbishop Platon in Tenafly, New Jersey that same year, he became one of its first instructors, bringing with him many years of experience of teaching in church schools. There he prepared for ordination several Serbian seminarians, who went on to become much-needed priests for the Serbian parishes in America.⁹⁵

⁹³ Hieromonk Valerijan (Boshnjavkovich).

⁹⁴ Fr. Sebastian Dabovich to Nikola Pashich. Written in Skopje, November 20, 1912. Quoted in Bishop Sava, p. 49.

⁹⁵ Mirko Dobrijevic (Bishop Irinej), p. 15.

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While based on the East Coast, Fr. Sebastian continued to travel to the Serbian parishes that were still without a priest, in order to serve the Divine Liturgy and pastor the faithful. These included not only parishes in the United States but also a parish in Canada: for a time he served at the Serbian Orthodox Church of St. Nicholas in Hamilton, Ontario, Canada, which was established in 1913.⁹⁶ He also continued to be involved in conferences and discussions with the non-Orthodox. Here he took the same charitable yet uncompromising approach that he had always taken in witnessing Orthodoxy to the non-Orthodox, *speaking the truth in love*.



The original St. Nicholas Church
in Hamilton, Ontario.

In 1915 Fr. Sebastian met with St. Nikolai (Velimirovich), then an archimandrite, in San Francisco. As St. Nikolai later recalled, Fr. Sebastian met him at the train station, introduced him to many Serbs in the city, and took him to the Holy Trinity Cathedral. A close spiritual kinship developed between these two dedicated missionaries. St. Nikolai was later to describe Fr. Sebastian as follows:

He was a sincere and convinced believer and a Christian missionary of world-scope. He traveled restlessly and preached and lectured indefatigably. He composed books, wrote articles, epistles, and thousands of private letters to laymen and priests with needed explanations, exhortations and encouragements. He spoke and wrote in Serbian, English, and Russian. His clumsy handbag was al-

⁹⁶ Bishop Sava, pp. 11, 18.

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ways full with New Testaments, religious booklets, printed sermons and tracts. Also with small crosses for boys and girls. All this he distributed freely. He never visited a Serbian family empty-handed. He remembered the apostolic words: *It is more blessed to give than to receive* (Acts 20:35).⁹⁷

By this time all the chartered Serbian parishes in America had elected to leave the Russian Church and to place themselves under the hierarchy of the Serbian Church. The Russian Church did not agree to this, and tensions understandably ensued.⁹⁸ Fr. Sebastian managed to remain relatively uninvolved in the brewing conflict, but still he was not spared being subjected to unjust accusations. Whereas formerly he had been resented by some Serbs for being too pro-Russian, now he was resented by some Russians for being too pro-Serbian. Archbishop Evdokim (Meschersky),⁹⁹ who as Archbishop Platon's replacement in America was trying to keep the Serbian parishes under Russian jurisdiction, accused Fr. Sebastian of "agitating against the Russian church authorities in America" and St. Nikolai (Velimirovich) of "spreading dissension among Serbian parishes in America."¹⁰⁰ On October 5, 1916, Archbishop Evdokim called an Assembly of Serbian Clergy in Chicago, with the purpose of, as he said, "sorting out the ambitions of the Serbs."¹⁰¹ At this meeting, presided over by the archbishop, Fr. Sebastian was roundly criticized. Afterwards Fr. Sebastian received a

⁹⁷ Bishop Nikolai (Velimirovich), "Father Sebastian Dabovich."

⁹⁸ Bishop Sava, pp. 49–61.

⁹⁹ Archbishop Evdokim arrived in America in May 1915. He returned to Russia in August 1917, where in 1922 he became a metropolitan of the schismatic "Living Church."

¹⁰⁰ "Decree of His Imperial Highness, All-Russian Autocrat and the Host Governing Synod to Aleutian and North American Archbishop Evdokim," St. Petersburg, June 18, 1916. Quoting from "Archbishop Evdokim to the Most Holy Governing Synod," New York, June 15, 1915. Quoted in Bishop Sava, p. 56.

¹⁰¹ "Svjedjenje" (Testimony), October 18, Archives of the American Orthodox Church. Quoted in Bishop Sava, p. 60.

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letter of sympathy from one of the Serbian priests present, Fr. Matej Stijachich:

With a feeling of profound pain in my soul, I remembered long after our meeting in Chicago ... that business of ‘bearded children,’¹⁰² and also the personal attacks on Your person at every opportunity. Believe me, the sympathies of the Serbian clergy were never so much on Your side as they are today.¹⁰³

Contrary to what was being said about him, Fr. Sebastian’s primary concern was not, as we have seen, the question of Russian or Serbian jurisdiction, but rather the proper shepherding of Christ’s flock. As St. Nikolai wrote, Fr. Sebastian “never engaged in fruitless polemics”; and hence, during this period of controversy, he “went on with his apostolic mission all over America from coast to coast. Thus many times he visited lonely Serbian families in deserts and wildernesses to administer Holy Sacraments and bring consolation.”¹⁰⁴

World War I was then raging, and Fr. Sebastian felt he could not neglect his suffering brethren in the Old Country. He asked the Holy Synod of the Russian Church to release him so that he could serve the Serbian Church in the land of his ancestors. In 1917 this request was granted, and Fr. Sebastian went to Serbia once again to serve as chaplain in the Serbian army.

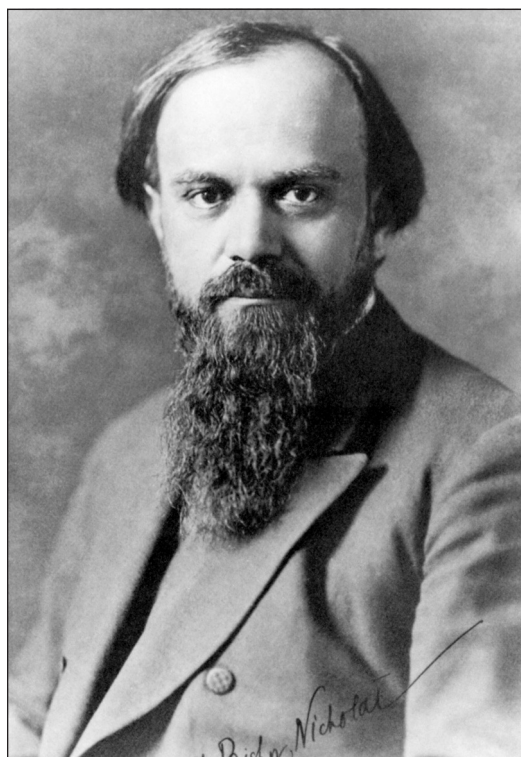
After his return from Serbia, Fr. Sebastian again met St. Nikolai in America in February of 1921, this time in New York City. Two years earlier St. Nikolai had been consecrated as a bishop in Serbia, and his visit to America in 1921 marked the first time that any Serbian hierarch had come to the New World. Here is how St. Nikolai remembered his meeting with Fr. Sebastian during that trip:

¹⁰² Evidently an accusation that Serbian priests, who had beards, were behaving like children.

¹⁰³ Priest Matej Stijachich to Archimandrite Sebastian. Written in Indiana Harbor, Indiana, November 15, 1916. Quoted in Bishop Sava, p. 184.

¹⁰⁴ Bishop Nikolai (Velimirovich), “Father Sebastian Dabovich.”

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St. Nikolai of Zhicha during his early years as a bishop.

His poverty amazed me when I met him.... I invited him to lunch. Blushing, he said, "Thank you; I just bought a roll of bread with my last five cents." And salary? None. He lived on people's freely given donations. And still, even with empty pockets, he planned new journeys to Alaska, to Japan, and of course to Europe.

"But you are without means!" I remarked.

He smiled with his usual childlike and fascinating smile and quoted the Bible: *The Lord will provide* (cf. Genesis 22:8). And marvelously enough, the Lord always provided for His faithful servant.¹⁰⁵

For his part, Fr. Sebastian saw in St. Nikolai a true man of God. Now that St. Nikolai was a bishop, Fr. Sebastian felt even more strongly that he was the best candidate to become the first Serbian Orthodox hierarch in America. By this time the tensions between the Russian Church and the Serbian Orthodox congregations in America had essentially ended, for with the Russian Revolution of 1917 a rupture had occurred in contacts between the Church in Russia and its

¹⁰⁵ Ibid.

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American archdiocese. In 1921 the Greek Orthodox Archdiocese of America was established and was soon to receive its first Greek bishop.¹⁰⁶ St. Nikolai, meanwhile, had come to America with an assignment from the Holy Assembly of Bishops in Serbia to study the situation of the Serbian congregations in America and determine how they could be organized. Thus seeing greater hope that a Serbian hierarch could be consecrated for the Serbian flock in America, Fr. Sebastian wrote to Patriarch Dimitrije of Serbia on March 30, 1921:

Considering the conditions and problems of the Serbian population in colonies across America, with their churches, organization and needs, it is imperative to undertake as soon as possible the reorganization and unification of our parishes and missions there, so that it truly becomes the Serbian Church in America. His Grace Bishop Nikolai could do this, taking advantage of the present circumstances which are well known to him, especially since he enjoys the sympathies of the authorities there. Asking Your Holiness to confer the blessing in the form of assistance in the struggle for the Orthodox Church in America ...¹⁰⁷

On September 21, 1921, Metropolitan Varnava (the future Patriarch of Serbia) nominated St. Nikolai as Bishop of America, with Archimandrite Mardarije (Uskokovich) as his administrative assistant. Many pious people in Serbia objected to the nomination of St. Nikolai, being unwilling to relinquish their beloved "New Chrysostom."¹⁰⁸ Thus, in 1923 Archimandrite Mardarije was appointed administrator of the newly formed Serbian Orthodox Diocese of North America and Canada. According to Fr. Mardarije, the hierarchy in Serbia "were thinking of electing as Bishop for the American Church one of the three

¹⁰⁶ Bishop (later Archbishop) Alexander (Demoglou) of Rodostolon.

¹⁰⁷ Fr. Sebastian Dabovich to Serbian Patriarch Dimitrije. Written in New York, March 30, 1921. Quoted in Bishop Sava, p. 86.

¹⁰⁸ Fr. Daniel Rogich, *Serbian Patericon*, vol. 1 (Platina, Calif.: St. Herman of Alaska Brotherhood, 1994), p. 234.

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Bishop Mardarije.

archimandrites in America, and they are: Sebastian Dabovich, Georgije Kodzhich, both from California, and myself. Who will be chosen is a big question.”¹⁰⁹ In its fall meeting of 1925, the Holy Assembly of Serbian Bishops elected Archimandrite Mardarije as the Bishop of the American-Canadian Diocese. On April 25, 1926, Fr. Mardarije was consecrated to the episcopacy in the Orthodox cathedral in Belgrade, and in July he arrived in his diocese as the first Serbian bishop of America.

7. HIS FINAL YEARS AND REPOSE IN SERBIA

In the years following World War I, Fr. Sebastian traveled many times between America and Serbia, carrying on his untiring pastoral work. As St. Nikolai recorded, in 1921 Fr. Sebastian was “engaged by the American Bible Society to distribute Bibles in the Balkans.”¹¹⁰ In America, he continued to serve not only in Serbian Orthodox churches but also in the homes of believers who lived far from an Orthodox church or were unable to drive to one. One of these, Anna Smilanich,

¹⁰⁹ Archimandrite Mardarije to Dr. Paja Radosavljevich. Written in Chicago, Illinois, April 3, 1924. Quoted in Bishop Sava, pp. 109–10.

¹¹⁰ “Report of Bishop Nikolai of Ohrid to the Holy Bishops’ Assembly Concerning the Situation and Needs of the Serbian Orthodox Church in America,” Sremski Karlovci, June 26, 1921. Quoted in Bishop Sava, p. 93.

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Zhicha Monastery in Serbia, where Archimandrite Sebastian reposed in 1940.
Photograph taken in 2006.

remembers Fr. Sebastian baptizing her as a child in 1927, in her family's home in Long Beach, California.¹¹¹

Fr. Sebastian also made missionary journeys to the Orthodox Mission in Japan, which had long interested and inspired him. St. Nikolai of Zhicha records that Fr. Sebastian, during his lifetime, crossed the Atlantic fifteen times and the Pacific nine times. He also writes that St. Nicholas of Japan, sometime before his repose in 1912, had offered Fr. Sebastian to stay in Japan and serve the Orthodox mission there.¹¹² Although Fr. Sebastian did not stay there permanently, he was able to

¹¹¹ Anna was born in 1922 to Drago and Elena Vuksanovic. She now lives in Fresno, California, where her son-in-law, Protopresbyter George Gligich, is the rector of the St. Peter Serbian Orthodox Church.

¹¹² Bishop Nikolai (Velimirovich), "Father Sebastian Dabovich."

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visit the Japanese Mission many times, offering his wealth of pastoral experience.

Finally, when Fr. Sebastian crossed the Atlantic for the fifteenth time and came to Serbia, he stayed there until the end. Not long before his repose, his fellow Serbian priests in America wrote to the Patriarch of Serbia: "We take the liberty of mentioning that our Homeland has acknowledged the religious and national work of our elder brother, Archimandrite Sebastian Dabovich, who is spending his old age in retirement."¹¹³

St. Nikolai of Zhicha describes the last years of Fr. Sebastian's life as follows:

Patriarch Varnava gave him an apartment in the Patriarchate where he stayed until 1938. Then he moved to Zhicha, where he stayed with us for some time, then again to Herceg Novi. On his way to and fro he was steadily accompanied by Rev. Jovan Rapaich, whom he loved most of all and who took true filial care of the old man. Finally he returned definitely to Zhicha, his last resort. He stayed with us until the end of 1940. From there he wrote many letters to his American friends. In a letter to Mr. Niko Mussich he wrote: "My body is getting weaker and weaker. I would like to see once more the Golden Gate. All my dearest memories from childhood are concentrated in San Francisco and in the country in which I was born."¹¹⁴

I visited him frequently, asking how the brothers served him. His heart was failing. Fr. Rapaich was with him day and night. The

¹¹³ "Statement/Appeal of the Priesthood of the Serbian Orthodox Church of the American-Canadian Diocese, Humbly Sent to His Holiness, Archbishop of Pech and Metropolitan of Belgrade and Karlovac, Dr. Gavriilo, Patriarch of Serbia." (This document is not dated; since His Holiness Gavriilo was elected patriarch in 1938 it would have been written during the last two years of Fr. Sebastian's life.) Quoted in Bishop Sava, p. 188.

¹¹⁴ Out of humility, St. Nikolai did not quote the sentence that follows, in which Fr. Sebastian writes: "I am thankful to His Grace Bishop Nikolai, who is doing all he can to restore my health." Quoted in *The Diocesan Observer*, no. 503 (December 24, 1975).

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last time, on my return from the diocese, I went to see him. Sitting in an armchair, he was breathing heavily and spoke in a whisper.

“Do you have any wish, Father?” I asked.

“Only the Kingdom of Heaven.”

He spoke no more. These were his last words, representative of his entire career on earth. After that he gave up his spirit. He died on November 30, 1940.

The next day he was buried in the monastery’s cemetery alongside another famous archimandrite, Fr. Raphael, formerly the Superior of the great Serbian monastery Hilandar on the Holy Mountain, who died in Zhicha in 1937. During the night the season’s first snow covered the earth, and it was cold. Yet His Excellency the American Ambassador Arthur Bliss Lane sent the American Consul General from Belgrade to represent him at the burial. For Fr. Sebastian was an American citizen. Besides, Mr. Bliss Lane had great personal devotion to him, calling him “my spiritual father Dabovich.”

So ended the earthly pilgrimage of a great servant of Christ and the greatest Serbian missionary of modern times. He was a missionary by words, by deeds, and—what is the greatest of all—by his personal character. He was a viceless man. Meek and unpretentious, he was positive and constructive in all his words and works. He never engaged in fruitless polemics. Externally he was a little, lean man, with a beard. Just a priest the Serbian immigrants liked, remembering their bearded priests in the Old Country. And behold, he was American-born and not an immigrant. But his conviction was that an Orthodox priest ought to be recognizable as Orthodox by his exterior, too.¹¹⁵

Archimandrite Sebastian was buried in the cemetery of the Zhicha Monastery. “At the time of his death,” writes Bishop Irinej, “Fr. Sebastian owned nothing more than a gold cross, some books, and a few personal mementos. He had long since given away any significant personal possessions to the poor and needy, choosing for himself a life of poverty, simplicity, and dedicated missionary service.”¹¹⁶

¹¹⁵ Bishop Nikolai (Velimirovich), “Father Sebastian Dabovich.”

¹¹⁶ Mirko Dobrijevic (Bishop Irinej), p. 13.

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Ten years after Fr. Sebastian's repose, St. Nikolai wrote of him:

Here is a man who indebted all the Serbian race, especially all the Serbs and all the Serbian organizations in America. Should that man remain without a monument or any sign of honor on American soil? He does not need it. He did not wish it. All he wished to his last breath was the Kingdom of Heaven, which I believe he has obtained by the grace of his Lord. But his people need it; his posterity needs it. The Serbian people always cultivated the noble virtue of gratitude. Let them express their traditional gratitude to this remarkable Serbian—Father Sebastian Dabovich.¹¹⁷

Now, with the transfer of Fr. Sebastian's relics from Serbia to America—to the first Serbian church in America, which he founded in Jackson, California—this outstanding missionary is at last being shown, in his native country, the gratitude of which he is worthy. He sacrificed himself unremittingly for Christ's Holy Church throughout America and the world, creating new churches where they were needed, and spiritually strengthening those that already existed. It was his tremendous love for Jesus Christ and His Church that not only inspired but *drove* him in his apostolic ministry, that made him burn with zeal as he labored to bring all peoples into the fullness of the Church's grace. We are the inheritors of his spiritual legacy in America—the legacy of a life given wholly to Christ.

"Truly," Bishop Irinej has written of Fr. Sebastian, "this amazing man is deserving of our honor and respect. Even now he is considered worthy of canonization among the Serbian people. May that day indeed come quickly! The epitaph on his tombstone at Zhicha Monastery reads most appropriately, 'The First American Serbian Orthodox Apostle.'¹¹⁸ Holy Apostle Sebastian, pray for us!"¹¹⁹

¹¹⁷ Bishop Nikolai (Velimirovich), "Father Sebastian Dabovich."

¹¹⁸ As will be seen in the article that follows, this same epitaph was later inscribed on Fr. Sebastian's headstone in Jackson, California.

¹¹⁹ Mirko Dobrijevic (Bishop Irinej), p. 15.

The Transfer of Archimandrite Sebastian's Relics from Serbia to America

By Hieromonk Damascene

SEPTEMBER 1, 2007, marked a celebration of great significance for Orthodoxy in America, when the relics of Archimandrite Sebastian Dabovich were interred in the St. Sava Church in Jackson, California. The first of many churches founded by Fr. Sebastian (in 1894), the St. Sava Church is the oldest Serbian Orthodox church in the Western Hemisphere.

The interment of Fr. Sebastian's remains in this historic church was preceded by their transfer from the other side of the world. Having been born in San Francisco and having labored for most of his life as a missionary throughout the United States, Fr. Sebastian spent his last years in his ancestral land of Serbia, where he reposed in Zhicha Monastery on November 30, 1940. After Fr. Sebastian's body was buried in the snow-covered ground of the Zhicha cemetery by his spiritual friend and fellow missionary St. Nikolai (Velimirovich) of Zhicha, his grave was marked by a simple cross.

In the sixty-seven years that have passed since Fr. Sebastian's repose, veneration for him by Orthodox Christians has taken root and grown. An impetus toward this veneration came on the tenth anniversary of his repose, when St. Nikolai of Zhicha, then living in America, gave a beautiful speech on Fr. Sebastian's many accomplishments and

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virtues, calling his fellow Serbs to honor the memory of this modern-day apostle.¹

After St. Nicholai, one of the first Orthodox writers to recognize and make known Fr. Sebastian's greatness was the co-editor of *The Orthodox Word*, Fr. Seraphim (then Eugene) Rose. In 1965, the twenty-fifth anniversary of Fr. Sebastian's repose and the first year of *The Orthodox Word's* publication, Fr. Seraphim wrote and printed an article on Fr. Sebastian, followed by a chapter, "The True Church of Christ," from one of Fr. Sebastian's books.² In his article, Fr. Seraphim wrote: "Few Orthodox Americans are perhaps aware of the promising beginning of the Orthodox mission in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, when a serious attempt was undertaken to make the riches of Holy Orthodoxy accessible to Americans. One of the most notable examples—and results—of this missionary endeavor was the life and writings of Archimandrite Sebastian Dabovich."³ Years later, in talking about the beginning of American Orthodox missionary work in the English language in the early part of the twentieth century, Fr. Seraphim called Archimandrite Sebastian "the outstanding Orthodox missionary" of that period.⁴

Over the years, articles and books on the history of Orthodoxy in America devoted special attention to Fr. Sebastian and his far-reaching influence. The many Serbian churches he founded or served in, as well as many non-Serbian ones, remembered with gratitude his pioneering

¹ Bishop Nicholai (Velimirovich), "Father Sebastian Dabovich," in *Serb National Federation Commemorative Book*, 1951.

² Archimandrite Sebastian Dabovich, "The True Church of Christ," *The Orthodox Word*, no. 5 (1965), pp. 182–87. The following year, two other articles by Fr. Sebastian were published in *The Orthodox Word*: "The Sunday of Orthodoxy" (no. 7, pp. 20–23), and "O Joyful Light" (no. 10, pp. 129–32).

³ [Eugene Rose], "Archimandrite Sebastian Dabovich and the Orthodox Mission to America," *The Orthodox Word*, no. 5 (1965), p. 181.

⁴ Hieromonk Seraphim Rose, "Orthodoxy in the USA: Its Historical Past and Present" [a talk delivered at the St. Herman Winter Pilgrimage, Dec. 12/25, 1979, Holy Trinity Monastery, Jordanville, N.Y.], *The Orthodox Word*, no. 94 (1980), p. 212.

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missionary labors in America. Back in Serbia, however, Fr. Sebastian remained relatively unknown. The primary place of his apostolic work—the United States—was far away from the land where he had reposed and been laid to rest; and the Communist takeover of Serbia six years after his repose hindered contact between the two countries. By the 1980s, nothing was known about him at his resting place in Zhicha Monastery, beyond the fact that he had been born in America.

At this time, another American-born Serb, Mirko Dobrijevic—the future Bishop Irinej of the Serbian Orthodox Diocese of Australia and New Zealand—began to research Fr. Sebastian's life. The more Mirko learned about Fr. Sebastian, the more he became inspired by his life and witness, and the more he came to love and revere him as a holy man of God.

In 1984 Mirko went to Fr. Sebastian's resting place in Zhicha for the first time. "When I came to his grave," recalls the now Bishop Irinej, "I was heartbroken. There were, literally, two rusted metal bars wired together in the form of a cross, with his name partially preserved: ARCHIM. SEBASTIAN. Nothing more. Though I knew that this was in keeping with his humble and austere way of life, I felt that he deserved far more from us who now reap the benefits of his apostolic labors. I then asked the late Bishop Stefan of Zhicha in 1986/7 for permission to solicit funds for a proper marker on his grave. I collected funds from parishioners at Holy Resurrection Cathedral in Chicago, which Fr. Sebastian had founded (I was then the Director of Christian Education at the cathedral); and I placed an article in *American Srbobran* and *The Path of Orthodoxy*, entitled 'Marking the Grave of Fr. Sebastian.' At this point some of his family stepped forward with donations.

"Enough money was collected to erect the gravestone. Bishop Stefan gratefully added the epitaph: 'The First American Serbian Orthodox Apostle.'"⁵

Soon afterward, iconographic renderings of Fr. Sebastian began to

⁵ Bishop Irinej of Australia and New Zealand to the author, Sept. 11, 2007.



Iconographic renderings of Fr. Sebastian. *Above left:* fresco by Leonidas Diamontopoulos, Holy Resurrection Cathedral, Chicago. *Above right:* fresco by Miloje Milinkovic, St. Sava Church, Libertyville, Illinois (Fr. Sebastian is shown holding St. Sava Church in Jackson, California). *At left:* fresco by Fr. Theodore Jurewicz, New Graciana Monastery, Grayslake, Illinois.



Above left: Grave of Archimandrite Sebastian at Zhicha Monastery, Serbia, before the exhumation of his remains. *Above right:* Memorial to Archimandrite Sebastian, with the St. Sava Church in the background, Jackson, California. *Below:* Memorial to the founders of the St. Sava Church in Jackson, California.



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adorn the walls of Serbian Orthodox churches in America. In 1988, when Leonidas Diamontopoulos was commissioned to fresco the interior of the Holy Resurrection Cathedral in Chicago, the future Bishop Irinej sketched out iconographic renderings of Bishop Nicholai Velimirovich and Fr. Justin Popovich to be placed to the right of the iconostasis, and of Bishop Mardarije (the first Serbian Orthodox bishop of America) and Fr. Sebastian to be placed to the left. In subsequent years iconographic frescos of Fr. Sebastian, based on the same original sketch, were painted by Fr. Theodore Jurewicz on the walls of the church at New Gracanica Monastery in Grayslake, Illinois, and by Miloje Milinkovic on the walls of four churches: St. Sava Church in Libertyville, Illinois; St. George Church in Schererville, Indiana; Holy Assumption Church in Sacramento, California; and St. Sava Church in Jackson, California.

At St. Sava Church in Jackson, Fr. Sebastian had never been forgotten. The parishioners had erected a marble monument to Fr. Sebastian in their cemetery, and for years they had cherished the hope that he would be “brought back” to them—that his remains would rest at the first church he founded in America.

One parishioner in particular, Deacon Triva Pavlov, took the initiative in turning this wish into reality. In 2006 he received the support of the newly enthroned bishop of the Serbian Orthodox Diocese of Western America, His Grace Bishop Maxim. In January of 2007 Bishop Maxim sent a letter to His Grace Bishop Hrizostom of the Diocese of Zhicha in Serbia,⁶ requesting that Fr. Sebastian’s remains be brought from Zhicha to Jackson. This letter was sent along with a letter from the clergy and the parish council president of the Jackson parish, stating the same request.⁷ The matter was presented by Bishop

⁶ Bishop Hrizostom had served as the Bishop of the Serbian Orthodox Diocese of Western America from 1988 to 1992.

⁷ The letter of request was signed by Protopresbyter Stavrofor Miladin Garic (the senior priest in Jackson, ordained to the priesthood by St. John of Shanghai and San Francisco), Priest Stephen Tumbas, Deacon Triva Pavlov, and parish president Slavko Kostic.

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Hrizostom at the Holy Assembly of Bishops of the Serbian Orthodox Church in Belgrade, and the request was granted. Bishop Hrizostom then wrote to Bishop Maxim:

“Your Grace, in connection with the February 13/26, 2007 resolution, no. 145/section 94, of the Holy Synod of Bishops of the Serbian Orthodox Church, as a result of Your January 25, 2007 letter, E. no. 41, and the request of the St. Sava church-school parish of Jackson, California, we give Our Archpastoral blessing and approval that the bodily remains of Archimandrite Sebastian Dabovich be transferred from Zhicha Monastery to the church of St. Sava in Jackson. Your Grace’s brother in Christ and co-worker—Bishop Hrizostom of Zhicha.”

News of Fr. Sebastian’s return to America was greeted with joy by the Serbian Orthodox Diocese of Western America. Bishop Maxim set up a “Committee for the organization of the transfer and welcome of Archimandrite Sebastian,” which prepared for the reception of Fr. Sebastian’s remains in America and for their interment in the St. Sava Church in Jackson. It was decided that the interment would take place in conjunction with the “Diocesan Days” gathering of the Serbian Diocese of Western America, which occurs every year on Labor Day Weekend at the St. Sava Mission in Jackson, a mile from the church.

On Saturday, August 4, 2007, Fr. Sebastian’s remains were exhumed from their grave in Zhicha Monastery. Before the exhumation, the Divine Liturgy was served in the thirteenth-century Zhicha Monastery church. Archimandrite Gerasim of Zhicha presided, with Protopresbyter Djurica Gordic concelebrating and two deacons assisting. Protopresbyter Djurica was visiting from America, where he serves at the St. John the Baptist Serbian Orthodox Cathedral in San Francisco. It was by God’s Providence that this priest from Fr. Sebastian’s birthplace and hometown in America was granted to be present in Zhicha for the event of Fr. Sebastian’s exhumation.

That day a gentle rain covered the earth. Following the Liturgy, the above-mentioned clergy, the nuns of Zhicha Monastery, and assembled pilgrims ascended the hill above the monastery, where the

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monastic cemetery is located. There Fr. Sebastian had been buried, along with former Bishops of Zhicha Stefan and Vasilije. After over two hours of digging, Fr. Sebastian's copper casket was unearthed and his bones were carefully taken from it. Immediately a *Parastos* (memorial service) was held for Fr. Sebastian in the cemetery chapel.

The relics of Fr. Sebastian were sent to America on the following Wednesday. They arrived at the see of the Serbian Diocese of Western America in Alhambra, California, where Bishop Maxim clothed them in priestly vestments. Then, a few weeks later, they were taken to Jackson, where they were placed in a beautiful hardwood ossuary. During the preceding weeks, the ossuary had been lovingly made by Paul Sharp of the St. Gabriel Antiochian Orthodox Mission in the nearby town of Angels Camp—one of the many towns originally evangelized by Fr. Sebastian.

On Saturday, September 1, six hierarchs, thirty priests, six deacons, and numerous faithful gathered at the St. Sava Mission in Jackson to celebrate the transfer of Fr. Sebastian's relics from Serbia and their interment in the St. Sava Church. In the morning, the ossuary with the relics of Fr. Sebastian was met by the hierarchs, clergy and faithful in front of the Mission. It was carried in procession by three priests who now serve in parishes that Fr. Sebastian founded in the western United States over a century ago (in Jackson, Los Angeles, and Butte), and by one priest who serves in a city where the Orthodox community was first organized by Fr. Sebastian (Seattle).⁸

The hierarchical Divine Liturgy was then celebrated under a large canopy at the Mission. (The Liturgy was celebrated outdoors at the Mission because the large number of people could not be accommodated at the St. Sava Church.) The liturgical celebration was presided over by Metropolitan Christopher of Mid-Western America (Serbian

⁸ The priests were Priest Stephen Tumbas of the St. Sava Church in Jackson, California; Protopresbyter Stavrofor Petar Jovanovic of the St. Sava parish in Los Angeles (San Gabriel); Priest Russell Radojicic of Holy Trinity Church in Butte, Montana; and Priest Ilija Balach of the St. Sava Church in Seattle, Washington.

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Procession to the site of the outdoor Divine Liturgy, St. Sava Mission, Jackson, California, September 1, 2007. The priests are carrying the ossuary with Fr. Sebastian's relics, followed by the hierarchs.

Orthodox Church), with the concelebration of Metropolitan Joseph of the USA, Canada and Australia (Bulgarian Orthodox Church), Archbishop Kyrill of San Francisco and Western America (Russian Orthodox Church Outside of Russia), and the Serbian hierarchs Bishop Irinej of Australia and New Zealand, Bishop Porfirije of Jegar,⁹ and Bishop Maxim of Western America. The assembled priests and deacons, who belonged to several different Orthodox jurisdictions in America, took part in the service as well. All the dioceses of the Serbian Church in the United States and Canada were represented by the clergy and the faithful in attendance.

With Bishop Maxim's blessing, during the Liturgy Deacon Triva

⁹ Bishop Porfirije was visiting from the ancient monastery of Kovilj, near Novi Sad in northern Serbia.

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Pavlov was elevated to the rank of protodeacon by Bishop Irinej. It was a fitting day for Deacon Triva's elevation, since, as we have seen, it had been through his initiative that the day's celebrations had been made possible.

At the conclusion of the Liturgy, a *Parastos* was served for Fr. Sebastian, with the blessing of *kolyva*.¹⁰ His Eminence Metropolitan Christopher presided, censing Fr. Sebastian's ossuary as he read and sang the prayers; and the hierarchs, clergy, and faithful participated in the singing.

Bishop Irinej then gave a moving sermon on the life of Fr. Sebastian. The sermon was spoken from the heart, without the aid of written notes. Hearing Bishop Irinej's inspired words, one could sense that this moment and this day were a prelude to Fr. Sebastian's formal glorification as a saint of the Church. It was a prelude worthy of the man whom it extolled.

Having greeted all those who had gathered, Bishop Irinej began by recalling Fr. Sebastian's humble burial in Zhicha Monastery many years previously, where he had died with almost no possessions. "It was by all earthly standards and measures a pauper's funeral," His Grace said, and yet, "indeed in many ways it was the most regal of coronations. It was the ushering into the Kingdom of Heaven of a man born so long ago here in America."

At this point, Bishop Irinej ceased to address his audience and began to address Fr. Sebastian himself. In this he demonstrated that Fr. Sebastian, whose relics then lay in an ossuary in front of the iconostasis, was not dead but alive—that his immortal soul, having ascended to heaven to be with Christ and His saints, had been granted to be present with the faithful in Jackson that very day, even as his earthly remains awaited the General Resurrection.

Speaking alternately in English and Serbian, Bishop Irinej

¹⁰ *Kolyva*: a special dish made with boiled wheat, which is blessed and served at a memorial service.



Parastos (memorial service) for Fr. Sebastian with the blessing of *kolyva*, led by Metropolitan Christopher after the Divine Liturgy.



Metropolitan Christopher censing the relics of Fr. Sebastian during the *Parastos*.



Metropolitan Christopher giving the dismissal blessing at the end of the *Parastos*.
Hierarchs left to right: Bishop Maxim, Archbishop Kyrill, Metropolitan Christopher,
 Metropolitan Joseph, Bishop Irinej, Bishop Porfirije.



Bishop Irinej giving a sermon on the life of Fr. Sebastian.

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addressed Fr. Sebastian as follows: "Welcome, our holy and venerable Father Sebastian! Welcome, O first Serbian child born here on this American continent! Welcome back, holy missionary, you who spread Christ's Gospel from one side of this continent to the other! Welcome, our holy and venerable father, you who have established the Serbian Orthodox Church here as her founding father during this past century! Welcome, holy father, you who disregarded yourself for the sake of spreading the Gospel of Him Who gave life, resurrection and hope to you and to us; you who spread the Gospel in far-off Japan, Russia, Serbia, but most of all to us here on this American continent....

"Welcome to your home ... to this town of Jackson, where you built in the year 1894 this magnificent temple dedicated to the first Serbian saint and enlightener, Sava. And that temple still stands, and you yourself will be ushered in in full glory by the hierarchs, the clergy, and the faithful of our Church, to rest in that sanctuary which you have built with your own hands, that sanctuary which stands here in testimony to your apostolic endeavors and missionary zeal on this continent."

Still addressing his words directly to Fr. Sebastian, Bishop Irinej outlined some of the main events of his life. His Grace then called to mind two parallel manifestations of Divine Providence—that, whereas the relics of St. Nicholai of Zhicha were brought from America to his birthplace in Lelich, Serbia (in 1991), so now the relics of Fr. Sebastian have made the opposite journey in having been brought to rest in his native state of California:

"It was Blessed Bishop Nicholai who laid you in the earth—the same earth from which you were taken and brought here to this your fatherland in America. And all according to God's marvelous Providence, that same saint, Bishop Nicholai, who was born in Serbia and was buried here in America, returned to Serbia to lie in Lelich Monastery, where he radiates his joyful presence to all who come to venerate and call upon him, and where he is a source of enlightenment to this very day to our Serbian people. In like manner, the Holy Synod of

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Photo by Bryan Patrick, Sacramento Bee.

The faithful venerating the relics of Fr. Sebastian at the St. Sava Mission.

Bishops of the Serbian Orthodox Church have deigned to return you, Fr. Sebastian, so that you will be a luminary here in Jackson, California, as St. Nikolai is in Lelich. Your teachings, your legacy, your life, all that you did for us will continue to glow and to radiate from your presence here among us. You are by all standards, as Bishop Nikolai wrote of you, the greatest missionary of the Serbian Orthodox Church in this past century....

“And now you, holy Father Sebastian, freed from all earthly constraints, again live and abide here among us. Teach us, holy Father Sebastian, to be missionaries as you were! Teach us, holy Father Sebastian, to give up all that we treasure, all that binds and fetters us to this earth, so that we too may find the same apostolic wings that you possessed, so that we, as you, may help spread—each according to his

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ability and the gifts which have been bestowed upon him—the Gospel and the teachings of our Lord, God and Savior Jesus Christ. Welcome home, our holy and venerable Father Sebastian. Pray to God for us, your sinful kinsmen. Holy Father Sebastian, as we pray for you, pray for us before the throne of the Lord, before Whom you now stand in glory. Amen.”

Having thus finished his words to Fr. Sebastian, Bishop Irinej again addressed the assembled faithful, saying, “May God grant the day of his illumination and glorification to come! Until that very day, may the Lord God be with us. Thank you, and God be with you until we meet again in His Kingdom which will know no end. Amen.”

At the conclusion of Bishop Irinej’s sermon, Bishop Maxim went to the opened ossuary and placed an archimandrite’s pectoral cross on Fr. Sebastian’s relics. He then poured wine, according to tradition, on the vestments that covered the remains.

The hierarchs came up to venerate the relics, followed by the clergy and faithful. Each person was given a card with an iconographic rendering of Fr. Sebastian from the church of St. Sava Monastery in Libertyville, Illinois. On the back of the card was printed a beautiful prayer written by Fr. Sebastian, from his sermon “Thoughts for Good Friday at the Passion and Burial of Christ.”¹¹

After the veneration by the faithful, the ossuary was placed in a hearse. A procession of cars followed the hearse through the historic town of Jackson, and soon arrived at the St. Sava Church. There the aforementioned four priests carried the ossuary up the steep steps from the road to the hilltop church, passing through the cemetery. Halfway up, they were met by Protodeacon Triva, who guided the ossuary into the church.

The ossuary was placed on the ambo. By this time the church was tightly packed with people. Metropolitan Christopher censed the relics

¹¹ Published in Fr. Sebastian Dabovich, *Preaching in the Russian Church* (San Francisco, 1899), pp. 131–32.

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Metropolitan Christopher censing the ossuary with the relics of Fr. Sebastian, after it had been placed on the ambo of the St. Sava Church, Jackson, California.

and poured wine on the vestments that covered them for the second time. As he did so, everyone in the crowded church sang in unison “*Vechnaya Pamyat*” (Memory Eternal), so loudly and with such prayerful feeling that it seemed that the walls shook.

The ossuary was then placed in a waterproof concrete vault that had been constructed beneath the floor on the right side of the church. As the priests were slowly lowering the ossuary into the vault, suddenly and spontaneously everyone broke into singing the Paschal troparion, “Christ Is Risen.” The troparion was sung in both Slavonic and English, and again it was poured forth with such feeling that the voices reverberated from the walls. “It was the most spiritually uplifting moment of my life,” Protodeacon Triva now recalls. With their heartfelt singing, the faithful were proclaiming that, because of Christ’s victory over death, His faithful servant Fr. Sebastian now *lived*, and would

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The headstone and "prayer box" that were placed over the vault containing Fr. Sebastian's relics. St. Sava Church, Jackson.

live forever in God. This, Christ's "trampling down death by death," was the central point of the very Gospel that Fr. Sebastian had devoted his life to preaching and spreading, thus enabling countless others to gain eternal life in Christ as well.

When the ossuary had been placed in the vault, a concrete lid was placed over the vault, and on top of it was placed a marble headstone. On the headstone were inscribed the words that had been previously written on Fr. Sebastian's gravestone in Zhicha: "The First American Serbian Orthodox Apostle." At the bottom of the new headstone were added words anticipating Fr. Sebastian's listing in the Calendar of Saints: "Holy Apostle Sebastian, pray for us!"

Behind the headstone had been placed a large, upright, hardwood "prayer box," also made by Paul Sharp. On the front of it was inscribed a verse from the Epistle of St. Paul to the Ephesians which Fr. Sebastian

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Photo by Victoria Shogunovich.

St. Sava Church, Jackson, California. Photograph taken in 2005.

had taken as his motto in his missionary labors: “Speak the Truth in Love” (cf. Eph. 4:15). Below that was a verse from the Psalms of David: “Precious in the sight of the Lord is the death of His Saints” (Ps. 115:6). In the conviction that Fr. Sebastian is indeed among the saints, a slot was made in the top of the hardwood box, so that the faithful could put in it written requests for Fr. Sebastian’s heavenly intercessions.

The site of Fr. Sebastian’s relics in the St. Sava Church in Jackson is now a place of pilgrimage for Orthodox Christians throughout America and the world. Together with the relics, the church treasures the miracle-working “Jackson Icon of the Mother of God,” which was donated by the church’s first hierarch, Bishop Nicholas (Ziorov) around the time of its consecration.

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As Bishop Irinej indicated in his sermon, we now await Fr. Sebastian's formal glorification. The interment of his remains within the walls of the St. Sava Church, and the glorious spiritual celebration that surrounded it, may be seen as a step toward this yet-more-glorious moment. In the meantime, hierarchs of the Serbian Orthodox Church, together with hierarchs of other Local Orthodox Churches, have given their "Amen" to the cry that has sprung from the hearts of the faithful: "Holy Father Sebastian, pray to God for us!"

Notes on the Veneration of Righteous Ones:

Bishop Irinej of Australia and New Zealand has noted that veneration of righteous ones in the Church proceeds from God's revelation: "God reveals the sanctity of the person's life, which evolves into local veneration by the faithful. In turn, that which God has revealed is crowned by the Church with a formal proclamation of glorification."

Bishop Maxim of Western America writes concerning the veneration of righteous ones before their formal glorification: "In the Orthodox Church, veneration for a holy person is initiated by the *pleroma* of the Church—the clergy and the faithful. Usually veneration entails a concurrence of local respect and synodal recognition. Sometimes the faithful begin to ask the holy person's intercessions on the local level, and later Orthodox hierarchs, based on what the people of God have already proclaimed through this veneration, make a conciliar decision to enter the name of the holy person in the Calendar of Saints (which is the Orthodox tradition)—an act commonly known as 'canonization' or 'glorification.' Before the canonization, the Church does not celebrate services in honor of the holy person. Not infrequently, however, the faithful ask that person's heavenly intercessions, paint 'pre-canonization' iconographic portraits of him, and in some cases even call him 'saint' (which means 'holy'). Such was the case with St. Nicholai of Zhicha, who was called 'saint' by the faithful long before his name was entered into the Calendar of Saints by the Holy Assembly of Serbian Orthodox Bishops in 2003."