

A Brief History of the Serbian Orthodox Church: From 1920 Until the Present

Due to its participation in World War I, several new territories were added to the Kingdom of Serbia. These included the former Kingdom of Montenegro, and several former territories of the defeated Austro-Hungarian Empire comprising what is now Bosnia and Herzegovina and most of what now the states of Croatia and Slovenia. In 1920, the Metropolitanate of Belgrade was merged with the Patriarchate of Karlovci and the Metropolitanate of Montenegro to form the unified Serbian Orthodox Church. The former Metropolitan of Belgrade, Demetrius, was enthroned as the new Patriarch in 1920. In 1922, he wed King Alexander I and Princess Maria of Romania in the Cathedral Church in Belgrade. The Serbian Orthodox Archdiocese of America and Canada was officially established in 1921, by the Holy Synod of the Serbian Orthodox Church. In 1923, the administration of the diocese was entrusted to archimandrite Mardarije Uskokovic, who was elected and consecrated as the ruling bishop of the eparchy of America and Canada in 1926. Bishop Madarije would later be canonized as a saint of the Serbian Church, and after his death in 1935, he was succeeded in his position as Bishop of America and Canada by Dionysius Milivojevic who arrived in the United States in 1940 to occupy his diocese.



Patriarch Demetrius of Serbia



Saint Mardarije of Libertyville

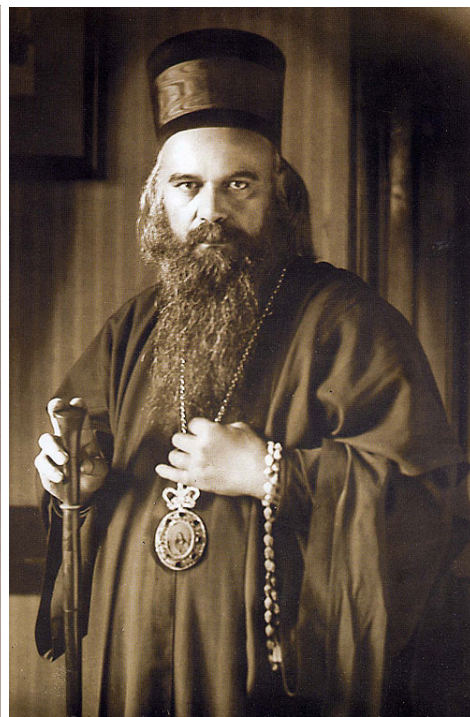
One of the most notable bishops of the Serbian Church during this period was Bishop Nikolai Velimirovich of Ohrid and Zica. He was known as an eloquent writer and fiery orator, and was one of the most respected theologians of the Serbian Church during this period. Especially interesting is his trajectory of opinion towards other Christian denominations. He was always a strict anti-communist and royalist, however in the first period of his episcopal service, his theological leanings were decidedly ecumenical and pro-Western. During his studies at the Old Catholic Theological Faculty at the University of Berne, Switzerland, it is rumoured that he even communed at the Old Catholic Cathedral in the city. As a student at Oxford during World War I,

he developed close ties with several Anglican clerics and academics, with the intention of facilitating a dialogue aimed at union between the Anglican and Orthodox churches. In his book of reflections *Prayers by the Lake* (1922), he even went as far as to praise figures within Eastern mysticism such as Krishna, Buddha and Zoroaster, surpassing inter-Christian ecumenism and venturing into outright perennialism!

However his views seem to have shifted at some point in the mid-1920's when he was serving as the bishop of Ohrid, to a more dogmatically Orthodox and traditionalist outlook. He was a vocal critic of Freemasonry, and in 1937 he vigorously opposed the proposed Concordat between the government of Yugoslavia and the Vatican, which proposed to grant a disproportionate amount of rights to the Catholic Church in Yugoslavia. He was joined in this opposition by the Serbian patriarch Barnabas (1920-1937), and most of the Serbian church hierarchy. The Concordat was eventually abandoned due to persistent opposition to its implementation by the Serbian Church and Orthodox faithful.



Blessed Barnabas I, Patriarch of Serbia



Saint Nikolai of Ohrid and Zica

During this time Bishop Nikolai's views continued to become more conservative as seen in his support for the Greek Old Calendarists. In 1930, a Council was held at Vatopedi monastery on Mount Athos where the calendar issue was to be discussed by representatives of the Ecumenical Patriarch and the Slavic Churches. Vatopedi was chosen as the venue for this council because it was the only monastery on Mount Athos that had adopted the New Calendar, and the only monastery during the twentieth century which never stopped commemorating the Ecumenical Patriarch. Only representatives of the Serbian and Polish Orthodox churches were able to attend, given that the Russian and Georgian churches were suffering from Stalinist

persecution at the time. Representatives from the Bulgarian Church were not invited because the schism between Bulgaria and Constantinople which had started in 1872 was still in effect and would only be resolved in 1945. At the council the Serbian and Polish clergy refused to concelebrate with the Greek representatives, because of the calendar. Vladyka Nikolai who was present at the council in his capacity as Bishop of Ohrid, rigorously defended the traditional church calendar during the proceedings, and was even compelled to send holy chrism to the Greek Old Calendarists after returning to Serbia. At no point during the council did the Greek and Slavic delegates concelebrate despite the insistence of the Greeks.

With the establishment of the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats and Slovenes in 1918, a new ideology known as Yugoslavism began to gain traction within the political and religious spheres of the nation. With the assimilation of millions of Catholic Croats and Slovenes in the newly conquered territories, a new modus vivendi had to be established so that the disparate cultural and religious groups could find a way to exist in harmony. Yugoslavism proposed a fundamental unity between all South Slavic peoples across religious lines, thus giving it a decidedly ecumenical character. Its main proponents were King Alexander of Yugoslavia, who naturally wanted to promote peace and harmony among his subjects, and a group of reform-minded theologians led by Archimandrite Aleksa Ilic (Bishop Nikolai had earlier been a member of this group). They were opposed in their ecumenical tendencies by Patriarch Demetrius of Serbia (1920-1930), and most of the Serbian episcopacy which took the dogmatic Orthodox position on relations to other Christian confessions.



King Alexander I of Yugoslavia

However, these ideals were never realized, and increasing political violence led to King Alexander suspending parliament and establishing a royal dictatorship in 1929. In the same year, he officially renamed his realm the Kingdom of Yugoslavia. In 1934, Alexander was assassinated during an official diplomatic visit in Marseilles, by Vlado Chernozemski, a Bulgarian terrorist who received assistance from Ante Pavelic, the leader of the Croatian Ustase. Upon his death, Alexander's brother Prince Paul took over as regent, since King Alexander's son Peter was still underage.



Prince Paul of Yugoslavia



King Peter II of Yugoslavia

Prince Paul managed to negotiate Yugoslavia's entry into the Tripartite Act, securing the Kingdom's virtual neutrality at the outbreak of the Second World War. However, a poorly timed coup by the pro-Allied head of the Yugoslav air force, General Dusan Simovic on March 27, 1941, overthrew the regency and enthroned Peter as King of Yugoslavia. The former agreement with the Axis Powers was renounced and Yugoslavia entered into the war on the side of the Allies. Hitler was furious and ordered the Wehrmacht to invade the country, and began to vehemently support the Ustase in Croatia led by Ante Pavelic, who managed to take control of the government in Zagreb by early April and form the Independent State of Croatia.

Hitler invaded on April 6, and the Kingdom quickly succumbed to the overwhelming might of the German war machine. A significant resistance movement of Orthodox Serbs was formed in the 'Chetnik' resistance movement led by General Draza Mihailovic that was loyal to King Peter, who had fled to London where he headed the Yugoslav government-in-exile.

The persecution of Orthodox Serbs during this period was brutal. Approximately 750,000 Orthodox Serbs were killed, including five bishops (Metropolitan Saint Petar of Dabar-Bosnia, Saint Platon of Banja Luka, Saint Sava of Gnorji Karlovac, Metropolitan Saint Dositej of Zagreb and Metropolitan Saint Joanikije of Montenegro). 200,000 of these new martyrs perished in the notorious Jasenovac concentration camp headed by the Croatian Ustase, in conditions that even the German Nazis found appalling. The only chance at survival offered to the Serbs by the Ustase was to convert to Catholicism, with the alternative being a brutal martyrdom.



Metropolitan Saint Petar of Dabar-Bosnia



Saint Platon of Banja Luka



Saint Sava of Gnorji Karlovac



Metropolitan Saint Dositej of Zagreb

On July 2, 1942, the Romanian Patriarch Nicodemus raised ROCOR's Archbishop Hermogen (Maximov) to the rank of Metropolitan of the newly founded, uncanonical "Croatian Orthodox Church", whose objective was to "Croatize" the Serbs. Nobody converted to this pseudo-schurch which had been set up by the Ustase in the Independent State of Croatia. The Serbian Church and the ROCOR under Metropolitan Anastatsy, (the ROCOR synod had been headquartered in Karlovtsy after fleeing Bolshevik persecution in their native Russia), rejected Hermogen and in July, 1945, he was executed by communist partisans. During the Second World War, the Serbian Patriarch Gabriel V, and Bishop Nikolai Velimirovich had been imprisoned in the Dachau concentration camp in Nazi Germany. After they were liberated by the allies at the end of the war, Patriarch Gabriel returned to Yugoslavia, while Bishop Nikolai settled in the United States deciding never to return to native land while it was under the control of the communists.



Ante Pavelic



Draza Mihailovic

Immediately after Soviet troops entered Serbia in 1945, the Belgrade patriarchate was compelled to recognize the elevation of Patriarch Alexis I to the patriarchal throne of the church in Moscow. Persecution of the Serbian Orthodox Church began almost immediately after Tito's partisans took control. During this period, the church was deprived of 1,180 church buildings, a printing plant, and pension fund for the clergy. State donations to the church ceased, catechism was banned in schools, the Church had to deliver all the registration books to the State registration officials. Between 1944 and 1945, there were extrajudicial killings of all the priests who, as the communists believed, were unwilling to collaborate with the new government. Approximately 98 Serbian priests were killed during this period.

The church hierarchy and laity, unanimously wanted Patriarch Garbiel to return to Yugoslavia. He had been sojourning in Italy, after his liberation by the Allies from Dachau, and was undecided about returning to his country. After a time, he did decide to return, whereupon the communist authorities went to work straightway trying to bend him to their will. The patriarch found himself in a difficult position, upon returning to Belgrade in 1946. On the one hand, he managed to avoid enforcing many requests from the communists, including the communist clergy association, the foundation of the "Macedonian church", as well as the condemnation and defrocking of the hierarchs abroad whose removal was requested by the authorities (which included figures like Bishops Dionysius and Nikolai in the United States). However, he did enter into communion with the Moscow Patriarchate and recognized the election of Patriarch Alexis I. In 1948, he attended the church council hosted by the MP in Moscow, and signed off on most of its decisions.



Patriarch Gabriel V of Serbia

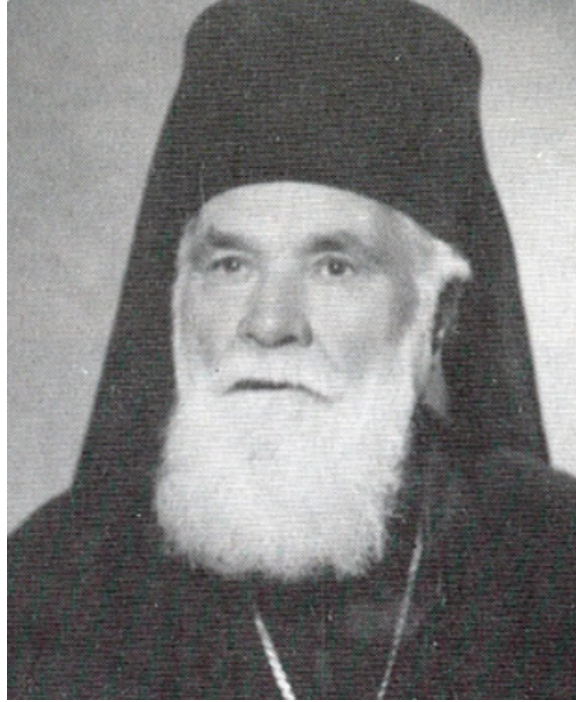


Metropolitan Joseph of Skopje

After the repose of Patriarch Gabriel in 1950, the communist authorities sought the election of someone completely subordinate to them. The Serbian hierarchs favoured Metropolitan Joseph of Skopje, the second most powerful hierarch in the Serbian Church after the patriarch, and an outspoken critic against the communist authorities. Another favoured candidate was Metropolitan Nectarius Krulj of Dabro-Bosnia. The communists' favoured candidate was Bishop Viktenije Prodanov of Zlato-Strumieka. The bishops' council rejected Viktenije's candidacy, so the communists used the UDBA (Yugoslav secret police), to imprison Metropolitan Joseph and block the workings of the council. Metropolitan Nectarius was pressured to withdraw his candidacy. Having been thoroughly intimidated by the communist authorities, the other bishops and two Metropolitans (Damascene of Zagreb and Arseny of Montenegro), assented to the election of Vikentije. Although the authorities found him to be more malleable than his predecessor, Patriarch Vikentije did put up some resistance to Tito and his demands, when it came to the formation of the Macedonian church for example. He also maintained good relations with the ROCOR, which maintained a number of mission parishes in Yugoslavia throughout the communist period.



Patriarch Vikentije of Serbia



Metropolitan Arseny of Montenegro



Metropolitan Damascene of Zagreb

After Patriarch Vikentije's repose in 1958, the communist's desired a completely loyal person, who would definitively subjugate the Serbian church to the atheist regime. They found a candidate in the person of the widowed priest Chranislav Djoric, who after becoming a monk

took the monastic name German and was chosen as Patriarch Viktenije's vicar-bishop in 1951. Several archimandrites and bishops were threatened and paid off to support German's elevation to the patriarchal throne, which inevitably occurred in 1958.

During this time, Bishop Nikolai, although still officially the ruling bishop of his diocese in Zica, was effectively living as a retired bishop in the United States. From 1946 until his repose a decade later he maintained close relations with the ROCOR and the American Metropolia (OCA), taking various teaching positions at Jordanville seminary, Saint Sava seminary (Serbian archdiocese), St. Vladimir's seminary and St. Tikhon's monastery where he ended his life as the rector in 1956.

In 1957, Metropolitan Danilo II of Montenegro was elevated to the episcopacy. Unlike his predecessor, Arsenius, Danilo's election was secured by the UDBA. In the same year as his elevation to the episcopacy, Metropolitan Danilo raised Fr. Seraphim Kasic to the position of abbot of the famous Ostrog monastery. After Patriarch German's election, and during the first few years of his reign, it is believed that some of the Ostrog fathers became non-commemorators (zealots), that is they ceased to commemorate their local bishop (Metropolitan Danilo), and the Serbian patriarch German during the divine liturgy.



Metropolitan Danilo II of Montenegro

The church's independence from the state authorities was totally destroyed by German upon his election as Patriarch in 1958. Some of his first notable acts were the illegal granting of

autocephaly to the Macedonian Orthodox Church, and the granting of patriarchal approval for priests to join the pro-communist association of clergy, through which the possibility of total state control of the church was created.



Patriarch German of Serbia

The same ideology of Yugoslavism from the inter-war period while the nation was still a kingdom, carried over into the communist period. Tito wanted to foster a fundamental unity among the South Slavs across religious and cultural lines, thus ecumenical policies were encouraged among the various religious bodies in the Yugoslav republic. Thus in 1965, the Serbian Church joined the World Council of Churches. At this point, the ROCOR's attitude toward the Serbian Church began to shift. The ROCOR Bishops' Council in 1967, decided to suspend prayerful communion with all Serbian clergy while the Belgrade patriarchate remained involved in the ecumenical movement and under communist control.

Nonetheless, communion with the Serbs continued, especially among the more liberal-minded clergy in the ROCOR, and Serbian Orthodox laity were still universally communed in ROCOR parishes in North America, Western Europe, Australia and New Zealand.

One of the most notable Orthodox theologians of the 20th century was the Serbian Archimandrite Fr. Justin Popovic. He was a vocal critic of ecumenism, and the policies of the Serbian Patriarchate. Since 1948, he had been confined to Celije monastery by the communist authorities and was constantly monitored, not allowed to leave the small confines of the

monastic compound. In 1971, he broke communion with Patriarch German, and ceased to commemorate his name during the Divine Liturgy, while continuing to commemorate his local bishop Jovan Velimirovich, and collaborating with other Serbian bishops. Upon the saint's death in 1979, no representative of the patriarch attended his funeral. Before his repose, Fr. Justin received holy unction and communion from Father Mark Arndt of the ROCOR.



Saint Justin of Celije

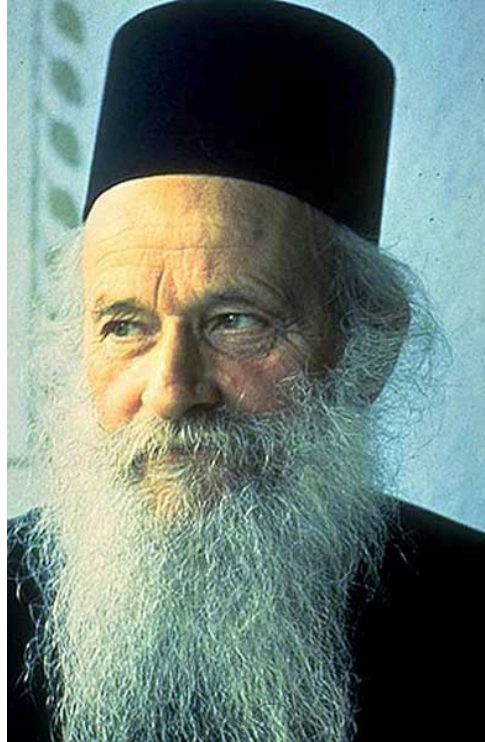


Bishop Jovan Velimirovic of Sabac-Veljeo

Among the Serbian emigration, the American-Canadian diocese headed by Bishop Dionysius Milivojevic broke communion with the Serbian patriarchate in 1963, over the mainland synod's decision to divide the American-Canadian diocese into three. Bishop Dionysius claimed that this was a communist plot to subjugate the Serbian emigration to Belgrade and Tito. Most of the Serbian emigrant population remained loyal to Dionysius, and after he was defrocked by the mainland church three pro-Belgrade priests were ordained bishops in his place.



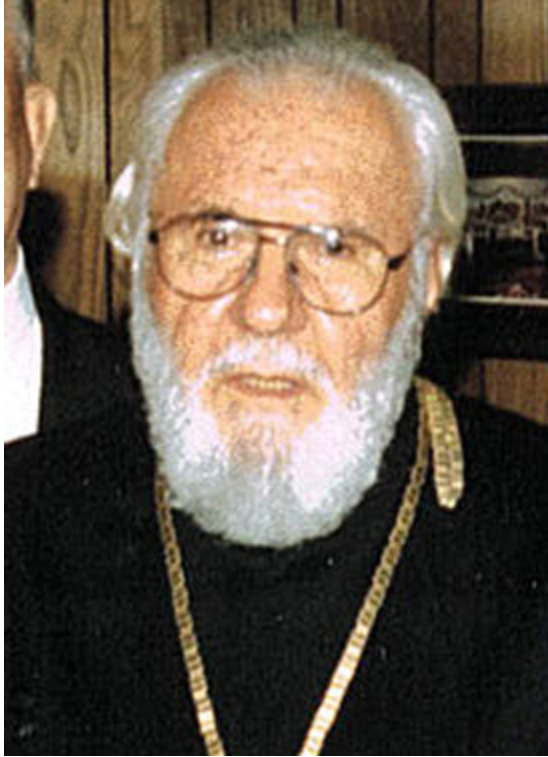
Bishop Dionysius of America



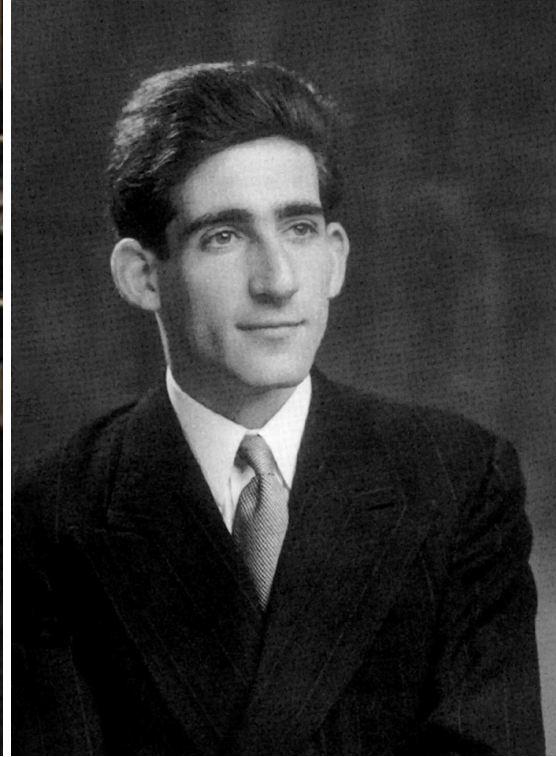
Archimandrite Nikanor of Hilandar

However Bishop Dionysius' newfound anti-communist stance was not entirely consistent with some of his past statements when he had praised Tito and Stalin, not to mention his past ecumenism through participation in the American National Council of Churches, and concelebrations with Episcopalian clergy.

Nevertheless, the exiled King Peter of Yugoslavia supported the Free Serbs, and was buried at Saint Sava monastery in Libertyville, Illinois when it was still under the control of the Free Serbs in 1970. After a ruling by the US Supreme Court in favour of the mainland Serbian Orthodox Church, Bishop Dionysius and his supporters were forced to vacate Saint Sava's monastery and transfer their headquarters to nearby Grayslake, Illinois. At the consecration of the new headquarters of the Free Serbs at New Gracina Monastery in 1984, were Metropolitan Irinej Kovacevic (Bishop Dionysius' successor), King Peter II's brother Prince Andrew Karageorgevic, and two Metropolitans of the Genuine Orthodox Church of Greece who participated in the consecration ceremony (Ioustinos Kolotouros and Athanasios Charalampides). Metropolitan Irinej and Prince Andrew were interviewed by a Chicago TV reporter outside the church immediately after the consecration liturgy. The prince told the reporter that his late brother, the king, would have supported the Free Serbs in the newly consecrated headquarters.



Metropolitan Irinej Kovacevic of America



Prince Andrew of Yugoslavia

The Free Serbs were eventually united with the Belgrade Patriarchate, in 1992, two years after the fall of communism in Yugoslavia. This was largely due to the efforts of Archimandrite Nikanor Savic, the abbot of the Hilandar monastery on Mount Athos, who travelled to Australia in 1990 to negotiate with the Free Serbs. He reposed in Sydney on the Sunday of Orthodoxy, never to return to Mount Athos.

The fall of communism in Yugoslavia did not result in any shift in the Serbian Church towards a more traditionalist and dogmatically Orthodox position. In 1999, Patriarch Paul participated in a festival organized by the communists celebrating the day of the foundation of the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia in 1945. Several bishops in the Serbian state hierarchy, were notorious for their ecumenist tendencies such as Bishop Irenaeus Bulovic of Backa and Laurence of Sabac, who often participated in ecumenical meetings and common prayer with Roman Catholics.



Patriarch Paul of Serbia

In 1995, after the visit of the Ecumenical Patriarch to the Pope of Rome, three Serbian entered the monastery of Esphigmenou and were received into True Orthodoxy there by the abbot Euthymios. Led by Hieroschemamonk Akakius Stankovic, they were accepted under the omophorion of Metropolitan Kallinkos of Corinth of the Genuine Orthodox Church of Greece, and were given a blessing to establish True Orthodox parishes and monasteries in Serbia. In 1997, Fr. Acacius was ordained to the priesthood.



Archimandrite Euthymios
with Hieromonk Akakije, 1997



Bishop Akakije of Uteshiteljevo

In 2003, the True Orthodox Church of Serbia was joined by the women's monastery of Stjenik, whose inhabitants were forced to vacate their monastery by the representatives of the official church. The monastery of Novo Stjenik was founded for the nuns in the mountains of Eastern Serbia.

In 2010, Bishop Artemije of Raska-Prizren broke communion with the Serbian state synod, accusing the newly enthroned Patriarch Irenaeus of heresy. The Serbian state synod, on the other hand, accused Bishop Artemije of appropriating church funds for his own gain. Indeed Patriarch Irenaeus proved himself to be every bit an ecumenist, most notably when he lit a menorah in a synagogue during a Hanukkah celebration in the same year he was elevated to the patriarchal throne. Moreover Bishop Artemije (a disciple of Saint Justin of Celije), had long been a lone voice for traditional Orthodoxy among the Serbian church hierarchy, and had condemned ecumenism on several occasions. However, after walling himself and his diocese off from the official church he continued to maintain a bizarre ecclesiology whereby he still considered himself to be in communion with ecumenical World Orthodoxy.



Bishop Artemije of Raska and Prizren



Patriarch Irenaeus of Serbia

Bishop Artemije's establishment of his own independent diocese, prompted many clergy and laity among the Serbian True Orthodox to seek to enter under his omophorion. This prompted Fr. Akakius appealed to the Russian True Orthodox Church headed by Archbishop Tikhon of Omsk and Siberia to receive an episcopal consecration for the long-suffering Serbian Church, which was accomplished in 2011. The Genuine Orthodox Church of Greece, subsequently declared the newly consecrated Bishop Akakius of Uteshiteljevo to be defrocked and a schismatic. However, most of the Serbian True Orthodox parishes remained under the omophorion of Bishop Akakius. In 2013, Bishop Nectarius of Shumadia was consecrated to the episcopacy by Bishop Acacius with the assistance of bishops from the Russian True Orthodox Church. In 2017, the STOC under Bishop Akakius broke communion with the RTOC over various scandals, and subsequently entered into communion with Archbishop Andronik of the ROCANA in 2018.

As it stands today the Serbian True Orthodox Church is growing under the leadership of Bishop Akakius. The synod is most notably associated with the main men's monastery of Uteshiteljevo and the main women's monastery of Novi Stenjik.