

## fireside chat RIGHT REV. ARCHIMANDRITE SAVA JANJIC Abbot of Visoki Decani Monastery, Kosovo-Metohija

by Milos Rastovic

The Serbian-American Leadership Conference (SALC) sponsored a fireside chat with the Right Reverend Father Sava Janjic, Abbot of the Monastery Visoki Decani in Kosovo and Metohija on May 2, 2020, with representatives of Serbian-American organizations, societies, distinguished individuals, guests from all over the United States, and others. Aleksandar Djuricic, the President of the SALC, thanked everyone and added that this is the time to remember all tragic events in which Serbs suffered. "We are again witnessing suffering and persecution of Serbs in Kosovo and Metohija, the cradle of Serbian history and civilization, and our most important religious and cultural sites such as Visoki Decani Monastery. The Serbian-American Leadership Conference has a goal to raise awareness about the history of crimes perpetrated against Serbian people in the past and present so that we can promote and ensure justice, peace, and stability in the region. It is on this mission that I believe we are united as you have been at the forefront of raising global awareness about Serbian suffering for decades." Neno Djordjevic moderated the event. Here is part of the interview with Father Sava:

**Q - What happened with the recent arsenic attacks on Serbian families and homes in Kosovo and Metohija, and how are the victims now?**

**Father Sava** - Thank you, everybody. I am glad that I have an opportunity to talk with you in this way...wherever we live, we are together. We are going more or less through similar difficulties with Covid-19. This is a challenging time in Kosovo and Metohija. Many of us in Kosovo and Metohija would say that things are not so much different than they were because we got used to living (through) emergencies in the last 20 years and even longer. The attacks usually happen in the spring. The political situation is complicated in Kosovo and Metohija. The U.S. Embassy in Pristina condemned these attacks, as did the European Union, and the United Nations. (He mentioned some of the incidents, such as an April 17 house fire near Obilic, another near Prizren, and one in Istok municipality on April 25.) We alerted the international representatives and requested an investigation. We have had a lot of incidents against Serbs, but they have never been properly investigated; these cases never brought to justice. The perpetrators are free. In the last twenty years, we are dealing with cultural impunity. This is encouraging extremists to attack Serbs, Serbs south of Mitrovica, where a majority of Serbs live in Kosovo and Metohija and are targeted by Kosovo Albanian extremists. A lot of religious and human rights in Kosovo and Metohija are lacking.

**Q - These attacks have been going on for 20 years. You have an entire generation which has grown up in these conditions now. Do these attacks become simply something that you're used to, or is it always shocking?**

**Father Sava** - Most of the Serbs from Kosovo and Metohija, particularly in the southern places, will say they are in a way used to all this. It is always disappointing. People are very resilient and courageous. Their bravery is coping with all of these here in the Monastery. We've had such a vast number of severe incidents for arms attacks. We have only military to protect the site (KFOR, the peacekeeping mission in Kosovo and Metohija, has been giving constant protection at the site continuously). Sometimes, they use drones. It's been happening for 20 years after the armed conflict and the war. Many people in America and the world generally think that things are peaceful here. But, of course, we have not had severe incidents like armed attacks in the last ten years, which is encouraging. But, we have had ISIS graffiti.

Now we have Italians...we also have Austrians, Slovenians, and Moldavians as members of the peacekeeping mission and as a part of the

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## fireside chat

## RIGHT REV. ARCHIMANDRITE SAVA JANJIC

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NATO mission. Italians are the most responsible for the Monastery, which is an important UNESCO World Heritage Site. When these incidents happen, we are grateful that nobody is killed or hurt. The damages, burned houses, stolen possessions, and agricultural machines are a serious problem.

Many times we have appealed to people who are willing to help and pay off the damage. I must say that the Serbian Government is also taking care to help in these cases. It's complicated because most of our people live very poorly and they don't have regular jobs. People are affected very much. For instance, when somebody steals a cow, it's probably all they have. This (type of theft) is a very clear message: you don't belong here, and you should go. Very often, the victims of these incidents are forced to leave for Central Serbia. This is direct pressure for Serbs in Kosovo and Metohija to leave their ancestral homes and ultimately make the entire region of Kosovo and Metohija Albanian territory, ethnically cleansed. Although I must say that I cannot always be entirely sure that the perpetrators have all these things in their minds, but the kind of collective mandate against Serbs in Kosovo and Metohija is still going on. Quite a number of Kosovo Albanians feel that nothing is wrong. Very often, it's not reported correctly, and very often, their authorities would never condemn. I have not heard any Kosovo authorities condemn these attacks. Some of them call them alleged attacks, although we have full confirmation from the police. That is a severe problem as it directly encourages further attacks. The International Mission here is entirely aware of how much they report. It's not something that I fully know, but I believe that they closely work with Kosovo and this region. They are aware that the situation is complicated enough.

**Q - When we hear that a cow or sheep are stolen, it may sound like a minor or nuisance, but in reality, for a family, those cows and sheep could be their livelihood, their entire job, how they feed their children.**

**Father Sava** - Yes. A monastery was involved when our Bishop Teodosije was an abbot in the Monastery. Later, we were engaged in humanitarian activities such as helping people get livestock. In 1999, after the war, a certain number of people returned in the meantime. Their houses were rebuilt. It was very modest to say that they had small bungalows, but they didn't get anything to live from. We worked on finding donations to help them get cows, sheep, and so on. Some managed to return to a relatively normal life. But, most of the people who returned live in a very difficult situation. We also have a Diocesan soup kitchen. Kitchens are run by Protinica Svetlana, who is a real heroine of our time. She runs six soup kitchens providing food for 2,000 persons per day who live in poverty. She is also running a farm, baking bread, and creating agriculture opportunities for families. Despite all difficulties, we are continuing. She is managing a lot of



Fresco of the Second Coming

difficulties in providing funds and finding food, especially when the borders between Central Serbia and Kosovo and Metohija are closed. It is quite complicated. It is hard work, but I must say that Protinica Svetlana and her 50 people who work in the kitchens are adored.

**Q - We are using new technologies such as video conferences for the benefit of some of our viewers. If I remember correctly from the 1990s, you actually might be the original cyber monk. Can you tell us the first time Visoki Decani Monastery connected to the Internet? What was the idea behind this reaching out to the world?**

**Father Sava** - I must say that before I didn't have much interest in technology. In 1993, somehow, I was spontaneously introduced to this. The first email which we received was in 1993. We had a website very soon. One year after, we got the first email, it was the time with modems. We were very happy to get 20 minutes of regular modem connection to send everything that we prepared. Now we have a website decani.org, and we are trying to provide as much information as possible. We also have a Diocesan website, and we are on Facebook, and Twitter. The idea is to get as much out there as possible to keep people informed, especially abroad, by tweeting and sending posts in both languages. I am trying to inform English speakers as to what's going on here and journalists. That was my first idea to get into contact with journalists. At that time, I got their emails, and I was sending emails back to them during the war and immediately after the war. They were coming here, and we did interviews. Some contacts have continued. A number of diplomats who are now in senior positions helped us share information. Beside their frequent visits, particularly at the end of the 1990s and before the NATO bombing, we were trying to witness the complexity of the situation to the United States and European Union countries. That was a kind of duty beside many other responsibilities here. The first role was prayer and spiritual obligations as an abbot and witnessing what's going on and speaking for those who are suffering. We were active with the International Orthodox Christian Charity. We worked with them at the time of war, helping serve Serbians from Kosovo and Metohija as well as 200 Kosovo Albanians. We found refuge in the Monastery during the war... The Diocese is continuing with the help of benefactors and donors from all over the world. Now, it is difficult because of the global pandemic and economic crisis, which is now emerging as a global



Fresco depicting the Nemanjic Dynasty

problem.

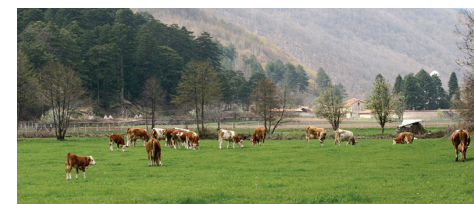
**Q - Our Orthodox churches are organized and envisioned on a territorial basis. Believers are under the pastoral care of our local priests, who are under the local Bishop. Our Bishops and priests should provide us with needed pastoral guidance, especially when we have crises such as this Covid-19. Is there room in the Orthodox Church for a diversity of opinions between Bishops and diversity of practices?**

**Father Sava** - There's always been diversity in practices. We share the same face. Every local church in the world runs in different countries and continents. Orthodox Christianity is global now. They are facing particular situations, and bishops need to take certain steps and positions which reflect certain needs of the people following the legal framework in which they live. The situation in Serbia is different than the situation in Montenegro. Our church in Montenegro has a difficult time, especially these days. Our bishops there, especially H.G. Metropolitan Amfilohije, are bravely coping with this and show tremendous resilience and strength. The situation in Kosovo and Metohija is complicated. According to U.N. Resolution 1244 and the Serbian Constitution, we are on the territory of Serbia. There is also local legislation. Local administration and local institutions take on certain conditions, and we have to adapt as much as possible to be able to live here. It's different in the United States. It's different in other continents and countries such as Greece. Bishops regard certain practices, for instance, what is possible, and what is not, how to organize parish life. It's essential not to jump to conclusions because every Bishop has his own responsibility, and that is not easy. The priests have to find a way to do things under different state legislations in different states. So it's not always the same. That's why it's important to find some creative solutions on how to continue our parish life. The most important thing is to preserve the communal feeling because we are a church, and we communicate. Everything is centered on Liturgy. Now, this is very difficult because there are certain limits on how many people can attend Liturgies and meetings. We are practicing different methods to do it. But, we can communicate through Skype or Zoom. We cannot share communion. There are different opinions on whether we can experience the fullness of Liturgy without the possibility to commune. This is a very challenging time. Bishops and priests have to find various solutions, and we all

hope that these measures will relax, and it will be easier. The Monastery is different because they are more or less isolated. Parish life is difficult under these circumstances. Our Holy Synod gives us instructions, but local Bishops have the freedom to find good solutions within the legal system in which they live. The most important thing is that we feel solidarity. We understand that it's time to show care for dear ones, particularly for the elderly affected by the Covid-19. Although there are no rules, we are exploring ways of working with sick people, as they need Communion and Confession. It is a much more difficult issue because it's not easy to enter facilities. Recently, I have seen in Russia some priests trained with special equipment to enter Covid-19 hospitals to provide the sacraments.

**Q - Before the quarantine, you spoke in Podgorica near the Resurrection Christ Cathedral in front of 10,000 people. In addition to Montenegro, there is also a problem with the municipality of Decani. There is a Supreme Court decision regarding the monastery land which the local municipality refuses to honor. Why is church property ownership such a threat that people need to try to deny the ownership in this modern day?**

**Father Sava** - We live in a time when holy sites are seen as a critical element of identity, not just religious identity. It's also a national identity; our holy sites like this Monastery for us are religious sites which we share all Christians in the world, and the UNESCO World Heritage Site cultural perspective. Serbian monasteries are essential for local people. They are primarily Serbian monas-



The monastery pasture



The daily routine includes working the fields



Picking grapes in the vineyard



teries with an important history. We are currently facing attempts to reshape or interpret the history of this region in a very unscientific and anti-Serbian way. So, we hear that Serbs never lived here or occupied all these churches, or that they don't belong to Serbs. The Nemanjić Dynasty did so much in our St. Sava church in Montenegro, as the pillar of the faith in Montenegro. Now, we are facing attempts to implement a new religious law. I was privileged that I was one of them (at the processions/demonstrations). It was an amazing event with more than 80,000 people on the streets of Podgorica. I have never seen so many people at any church event in my whole life. Lots of children lots of people want to join... We can see that the Montenegrin Government is striking back by rigorously applying measures against the church in cases where they do not apply in similar situations elsewhere. It directly violates the freedom of religion, which is very important. It is one of the basic democratic standards, which is at stake in Montenegro... That is a wider plan to change the entire identity of the people in Montenegro. Whatever they say, they are Montenegrins or Serbian Montenegrins, certainly, whatever they call themselves, this is their homeland. For religious believers, there's not much difference in saying I am an Orthodox Christian. Likewise, someone from other parts of the United States can say that he/she is an American. It doesn't matter. This is now becoming a serious problem with the current Montenegrin authorities. In Kosovo and Metohija, the problems are different. In 2015, there was an attempt by the government to pass a law on cultural heritage, which was opposite to the Martti Ahtisaari Annex about Cultural Heritage. It was an attempt at reaching an agreement which ultimately resulted in the unilateral proclamation of independence of Kosovo and Metohija and its recognition by a number of leading Western countries, but not the majority in the world. Kosovo's obligation is to unilaterally apply principles from the Martti Ahtisaari Agreement among the laws protecting Serbian religious and cultural sites and heritage. These laws are essential. These laws cannot be changed according to the Constitution. International representatives are standing firm on this. There are special protected zones around 15 of them. Monastery Visoki Decani has additional security protection, which is something that this related to this law. No one can build any sites around the Monastery, particularly they cannot do anything that might compromise the identity of the site, which is recognized by the Constitution. This does not exist in Montenegro. Every law is changeable, and we have to wait for long term solutions. Protection of our cultural heritage is an essentially important part not only for us who live here but for our church and our people no matter where they live. These sites are equally important either here or in Chicago. So, that's why we have to constantly inform people about these important things as a part of our heritage. I think it's understandable to many in the United States as the importance of freedom of religion is one of the pillars of society. We expect that the U.S. stays firm on this."

**Q - What does daily liturgical life look like for a monk at Visoki Decani Monastery?**

**Father Sava** - On Saturday evening, we usually serve vespers. We find it much

easier to connect two services in the evening. In the morning, we have our service and the Liturgy at 8:00 am. In normal circumstances, we would have visitors in the Monastery. We have a huge number of pilgrims in the Monastery in the last few years. Several buses of people were coming including tourists. Since the outbreak of the pandemic and with special measures by closing borders, we don't have visitors...and are not traveling anywhere. We are living in self-isolation, trying to apply all these safety measures. Monastic life is truly self-isolation dedicated to prayer and reading and managing daily life in the Monastery. We have a farm here, and we also produce a wine.

#### BIOGRAPHY OF FR. SAVA JANJIĆ

He was born on December 7, 1965, in Dubrovnik, Croatia. After completing his elementary and secondary education in Trebinje (Herzegovina), he studied English and literature at the Belgrade School of Philology. After his studies in 1989, he joined the brotherhood of Crna Reka Monastery and became a novice. He received monastic tonsure in 1991 and was ordained a deacon in 1992 at Dečani Monastery in which he came together with Fr. Teodosije and became a deputy abbot. In 1993 he was ordained a priest and in 1997 promoted to the rank of a protosyncellus. Between 1997 and 2002, he worked as secretary to the Diocesan Bishop, particularly responsible for public relations and media. From June 1999, he joined the Diocesan Bishop at Gračanica Monastery until 2001 when he returned to Dečani Monastery to resume his regular monastic duties. While in Gračanica, he was a member of the Provisional Council of Kosovo established by the U.N. as the first body of the U.N. provisional administration in Kosovo. He has represented the Serbian Orthodox Church in many international meetings and seminars. Fr. Sava has popularly nicknamed "a cyber monk" thanks to his website on Kosovo, which appeared as early as in 1996. Currently, he is chief editor of the Diocesan website [www.eparhija-prizren.com](http://www.eparhija-prizren.com). In June 2011, Archimandrite Sava became Abbot of Dečani Monastery.

#### Visoki Decani Monastery Church in Kosovo and Metohija

The main church of the Visoki Decani Monastery in Kosovo and Metohija is more than 36 meters long, 24 meters wide, and the height of its dome measures 29 meters. Located in the center of the monastic enclosure, the Church of the Ascension of Christ dominates the whole area, not only due to its location but also because of its extensive and seemingly boundless construction. It is a five-nave complex with a tripartite altar space on the east side and a three-nave narthex on the west. The side chapels are located in the north and south nave. The south one is dedicated to St. Nicholas and the north one to St. Demetrius.

Immediately upon entering the church building, visitors to Dečani Monastery are faced with a complex work of art comprised of elaborate architecture, sculptures, murals, and icons. In bringing together Romanesque, Gothic, and Byzantine architectural traditions, skillful artisans from Kotor, produced an entirely unique creation in its design, construction, and adornment. Dečani Monastery's main church (katholikon) by far contains the most extravagant and awe-inspiring examples of stone ornamentation present in Serbian medieval

art, as well as the largest gallery of frescoes from the period.

#### Construction of Monastery

After choosing the place where the Monastery was to be built, Stefan Uroš ordered that the area be encircled by a rampart fortified by towers, adjacent to which were the monks' quarters and other monastery buildings. This task was given to an experienced architect, Đorđe, and his brothers Dobroslav and Nikola. Fra Vita, a master architect of the time, and the regionally renowned stone-cutters of Kotor built Dečani's Church of the Pantocrator and decorated it with bas-reliefs.

Those who witnessed the construction of the Monastery wrote vividly firsthand of the great skill of the craftsmen who cut various types of marble, saying that it was a wonder to behold simply the raising of the walls of the Church. Fra Vita adorned his widely acclaimed work in Western style Romano-Gothic style. Despite this, as with other churches built in the so-called Ras style, the interior of the church is perfectly suited to the needs of Orthodox liturgical practice. Here we see the clear influence of Holy Archbishop Danilo II, who was the king's primary advisor in designing the interior of the church.

The beauty of the church's interior complemented the grandeur of its exterior: everything was wrought of carefully-hewn stone, gold and other precious materials. It was richly endowed with gold and silver liturgical vessels and exquisite vestment ornamented with pearls, precious stones and silk textiles. The founder himself wrote in his Charter: *I began to build a house unto the Lord God the Pantocrator, and upon completing it, I decorated it with every beautiful thing inside and out.*

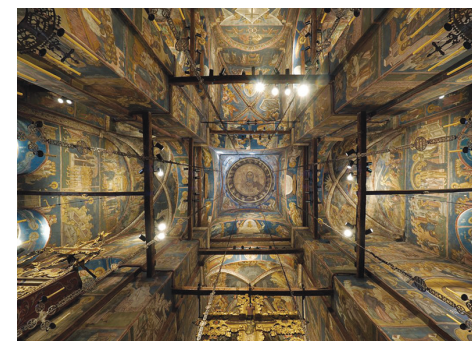
Preserved above the south entrance to the Church is an inscription in Medieval Serbian which recounts the building of the Monastery. The master builder, Fra Vita from the royal city of Kotor, according to the inscription, worked on construction of the church for eight years and completed it in 1335.

**SOURCE:** Visoki Decani Monastery Official Website <https://www.decani.org/en/history/>

#### FOR MORE INFORMATION:

Please visit Visoki Decani Monastery website at <https://www.decani.org/en/>

**FOR DONATIONS:** please visit <https://www.paypal.me/visokidecani>



The Altar

Daily Prayers

