

**WOMEN MONASTICS IN ORTHODOX
CHRISTIANITY:**

The Case of the Serbian Orthodox Church

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Executive Summary

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The goal of this study was to look into the institution of female monasticism in the Serbian Orthodox Church in the period of post-communist transition in order to advance our understanding of its social and anthropological particularity.

On the basis of my research there are about 706 nuns and 74 novices in the Serbian Orthodox Church today. This is an increase in over 20% in little over a decade, when 563 nuns and 43 novices were recorded. Coupled with a significant increase in the number of young women seminarians (over 20% of the students body), these data point to a significant rise in interest in religion among women in contemporary Serbian society. While women who take a monastic vows are still relatively few, the monastic calling is becoming more intriguing for the general public, especially in the light of the fact that the latest wave of monastics do not fit into the stereotype (prevalent in socialist times) of persons from backward rural areas, poorly educated, and sometimes even physically or otherwise impaired.

Taken as a whole, the three generations of monastic experiences of women in the Serbian Orthodox Church reveal not only personal narratives centered around specific religious sensibilities, but also offer a rare perspective and commentary on particular social and historical conditions. Even though monastics are members of an unique social group, there seems to be a growing audience in these post-communist times willing to hear these stories. Monastics themselves are also rediscovering their roles as spiritual fathers and mothers, councilors and guides in spiritual matters for a number of young people who grew up in 80s and 90s, who witnessed the wars of disintegration of socialist Yugoslavia, sanctions, the break down of one system of values and painful attempts to create a new one out of the friction of awakened religious needs and the unfolding ways of the so called civil society. By reclaiming its place in the society today, the institution of monasticism is also reclaiming its rich heritage from the past, which reveals that its founders were not dubious or marginal characters, but major figures in Serbian history and culture. Those who take up monastic way of life nowadays see themselves in the context of that honorable living tradition and find in it the source of inspiration and strength for their mission in today's Serbian society in transition.

Introduction

My study of women monastics in the Orthodox Church was prompted by the story of my high school friend's sister, who had become an Orthodox nun in 1998. The woman in question, then in her mid fifties, had been married for thirty years, was mother of two (adult) sons, and an attorney at law. I knew that she was not raised in a religious household, and that for most of her life she (as all of us) lived in a state which was either expressly atheistic (communist Yugoslavia) or at the official level indifferent to or ambiguous toward religion in general (Yugoslavia of the 90s).

I became interested in how monasticism, and specifically female monasticism, operated today in Serbian society, which had been traditionally Orthodox Christian but had witnessed radical changes during 45 years of communism and almost a decade of wars and sanctions that marked Yugoslavia's ending, only to find itself still in what is usually termed as post-communist transition. How have these tumultuous events of the second half of the twentieth century impacted on the institution of female monasticism, which has witnessed an increase of about 20% in last fifteen years? How have they related to the lives of individual women who have chosen this unique calling? By giving them voice, I hope to advance our understanding of the social and anthropological particularity of their unusual profession, which even though insufficiently recognized continues to exert its subtle social and psychological influence in the present.

At one level, my initial approach was simple: I asked these women about their lives, which resulted in a set of life histories: narratively shaped fragments of their more comprehensive life stories. At another level, I sought to put these life stories into a wider context of the formerly communist Yugoslav society, since the break down of communism resulted in a violent break up of the country itself and tearing of various aspects of its social fabric.

However, personal as these stories are, and reflecting specific experiences of monastics as members of a unique social group within the Church and society as a whole, they offer revealing points of intersection with particular social and historical conditions and as such represent rare commentaries on

them. Even though I originally thought that my focus would be the turn of the century period (1990s and on), it turned out that an understanding of monastic conditions of life in the communist period became indispensable for exploring the current situation, just as understanding an overall historical perspective on monasticism turned out to be necessary for understanding the specific identities of the chosen few. Thus it was the stories themselves, life histories of these women, which structured the findings of my research into the following segments.

Female Monasticism in Orthodox Spirituality: Past and Present

In the history of Christian monasticism women played equally important parts as men, but women's roles have not been equally recognized and studied. As Kallistos Ware points out, when we ordinarily talk about St. Anthony of Egypt as "the father of Christian monasticism," we fail to note that before he gave up all his possessions and became an ascetic, he had entrusted his younger sister to the care of a "'convent' of virgins," clearly an already existing fully organized monastic community for women, preceding even St. Pachomios' first cenobitic monasteries for men.¹ Renunciation of the world for the sake of God was clearly as important for women as was for men in early Christianity. Even before the 4th century, the time usually counted as its beginning, monasticism had become a way of life for a small number of Christians. So it has remained to this day.

While we do not seem to have problems studying monasticism of the past, aware at some level of the otherness of the past itself, doing it today turns out to be a different matter. In the science-dominated, more or less secularized world of our time, a life of celibacy, poverty and obedience-- i.e. a life devoted exclusively to God-- calls for unusual effort at understanding on the part of a religious or any other

¹ Kallistos Ware, "Man, Woman and the Priesthood of Christ," in *Women and the Priesthood*, Thomas Hopko, ed. (Crestwood, NY: St Vladimir's Seminary Press), 21.

scholar dealing with the phenomenon of monasticism². The main difficulty appears to be understanding its continuity with the past, continuity in *willingness* to devote one's life to God, or in layman's words, to stake one's whole life on a single card.

Because of the widespread perception that our own, modern times offer such lifestyles that people in the past, especially women, could not have even dreamed of, the fact that somebody would renounce so many aspects of worldly life to live in and for God does not process easily in a modern layman's mind.

This became clear to me gradually, in my communication with friends, colleagues, or just people to whom I would tell what kind of research I was currently doing--namely, studying women monastics. The main question in almost everybody's mind was why would these women do it *today*?

In that sense, and in the context of the history of the Serbian Orthodox Church (hereafter SOC) it is one thing to read about the first Serbian nun Theodora (princess Kosara, widow of the martyred prince Vladimir) back in 1015³ and many other princesses and noble ladies of medieval times who followed in her steps; ⁴ it is quite another, however, to read just under a millennium later, about Mother Makarija of Sokolica in Kosovo, a former university professor of chemistry, a reputable scientist in her field, who left her career and worldly life to become a nun, saying that her only regret was not to have done it earlier. When asked by a journalist about her past life "in the world" Mother Makarija replied that chemistry had always been her love, until one day she discovered a love that was more "loving," surpassing her love of

² Lack of understanding of monastics, who they are and what they stand for, renders their unique position in society meaningless in various writings of social scientists, who tend to eliminate religious dimension from consideration (see Milica Bakic-Hayden: "What's so Byzantine about the Balkans?" in *Balkan as Metaphor* [Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2002], 70-73).

³ Miloško V. Veselinović, *Srpske kaludjerice*, reprint *Glasa srpske kraljevske akademije LXXX* (Beograd, [1909] 1997), 169.

⁴ There is enough evidence to show that the institution of women monastics was well in place in Serbia by the twelfth century, and quite spread out during the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries. It appears that the number of women who were nuns but living life outside the monasteries was large since the XIV Century Code of Serbian Tzar Stephan Dushan included regulations on life of tonsured monks and nuns who "shall live in the monasteries" and not "in their own homes" (*Dushan's Code* [Beograd: Vajat, 1989], 43-4); also Veselinović, *Srpske kaludjerice*, 175-78.

chemistry and all other loves, too. "And I just followed the voice I heard in my heart and from Dr. Milica Obradovic I became nun Makarija. That's my great joy."⁵

Another element that turned out to be an important link between the past and present was the sense of belonging to a particular monastic tradition often associated with certain monasteries. The longer and holier the history of a particular monastery the greater its role as a constituent element of identity of nuns belonging to it both in the past and today.⁶ In medieval times, nuns were usually from ruling and noble families⁷. They would take monastic vows as widows or when both husband and wife would decide late in their lives to devote themselves to God.⁸

The educational profile of the early nuns from medieval times was not typical of the general female population of that time, for nuns were as a rule literate and devoted to study of the Scriptures and the lives and teachings of the holy fathers and mothers of the Orthodox church. Nuns learned how to sing, write music, ring the bells, sew, do needlepoint, weave, paint and perform other tasks necessary for life in the monastery.

Monasteries were generally supported by ruling families, women especially in those families would be sponsors of women's monasteries. It was not unusual that nuns were sent to stay for a period of time with wealthy families and be in charge of education of their daughters, upon completion of which they would return to their monasteries. It was customary for queens, princesses and noble ladies who became nuns to have monasteries built, which later served as the places of their burial. The landscape of

⁵ "Hodocasce u svet ikone," *Pravoslavni put* (no.1-00 [7], 2000): 16-17

⁶ This was prominent in the monasteries such as Zica, Ravanica, Gradac and others.

⁷ Although not as common, there were none the less cases of girls and young women of more modest background, who entered monastic life either of their own inner yearning or because they could not settle in any other way due to some personal impediment.

⁸ Most notable examples, in addition to Teodora, are Queen Marija the Greek (nun Martha), Queen Jelena (nun Evgenia), Lady Teodora (nun Ksenija), nun Jefimija (wife of despot Ugljesa, Princess Milica, wife of famous Prince Lazar (nun Evgenija) and many others and of the couples who became monastics we shall mention just King Stefan Nemanja, the founder of Nemanjic Dynasty, and Queen Ana (later St. Symeon and nun Anastasia), King Urosh I and Queen Jelena (Symeon and Jelena), and many others.

medieval Serbian states was dotted with such monasteries. Even though women's monasteries were not as numerous as men's at that point in time, they were equally significant as religious centers and on some there are extensive written records.

During the Ottoman period, the whole culture of monastic life was in crisis because of the gradual disappearance of the nobility who traditionally supported it and life in monasteries became increasingly difficult and dangerous (particularly after the abolition of the Serbian Patriarchate in Pec in 1459). The numbers of monks and especially nuns was depleted and female monasticism practically died out in the course of the 16th and 17th centuries. The situation was not better in the 18th century, with only two operating women's monasteries in the north, across the Danube in Vojvodina, then part of the Habsburg empire.

In Church records from the mid 18th century we find the description of the conditions in one of the women's monasteries in Fruska Gora revealing not only the decline in numbers of nuns, but in their education compared to the medieval period. For example, out of thirteen nuns, two became nuns as girls, so called virgin nuns, while the others became nuns as widows. They could recite the Creed, the Lord's Prayer, some Psalms and knew the Commandments, but only the daughter of the Abbess was actually literate. By the end of the 18th century even these two monasteries died out. In the period that followed there is a mention of nuns living scattered in the compounds of men's monasteries or at homes, helping out men's monasteries by selling little crosses, and similar church items and collecting donations from people around, but for about seventy years, up until mid 19th century female monasticism was practically non-existent.⁹

Then, almost as a grass-root movement in the areas which had traditionally given many women to monastic life (around towns such as Skoplje, Debar, Pec, Novi Pazar, Vranje, Kumanovo, Stip, etc.), some women started exerting pressure on bishops to tonsure them to be nuns. Since there were no

⁹ Veselinovic, *Srpske kaludjerice*, 221.

women's monasteries at the time, the bishops were reluctant to do so, or they would do it and then let the nuns live near the churches or man's monasteries. Women who were doing this tended to be from well-off rural families, widowed or single and usually with sufficient means and property to support the construction of additional buildings on the monastic grounds, which they used as their living quarters and which later on gradually expanded and were converted to women's monasteries attracting not only widowed women, but young girls and single women, too. There they learned how to read and write and acquired other skills needed for life in monastery. In Pec and in Sarajevo it was owing to efforts of such pious women, who were either tonsured nuns or led life of ones, that the first all-girl's schools were founded.¹⁰ By the end of the 19th century, nuns were replaced by trained women teachers in girl's schools.

The 20th century was marked by wars (Balkan wars, WWI and WWII and finally Yugoslav wars of the 90s), which left marks on monastic life, making survival the basic priority. According to Professor Radoslav Grujic from Theological Seminary in Belgrade, in the late 1920s there were only seventy nuns in Serbia. The renewal of female monasticism was helped by the coming of Russian nuns (mother Ekaterina with five sisters) in the early 1920s.¹¹ During WWII clergy and monastics of the SOC suffered great losses, from which they were slowly to recover in post-war circumstances and in an environment hostile to religion (communist Yugoslavia).

Finally, in the latest wars of Yugoslav disintegration several eparchies of the SOC found themselves suddenly in four different, now foreign countries, with clergy and monastics subjected to very different challenges directly conditioned by where they were stationed. It is at this juncture that general history intersected with personal histories of some of the nuns I met and talked to, the subject I shall come

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 227-35.

¹¹ See "S verom, bez podataka," *Vreme* (10.oktobar 2002):31. It is interesting that while monks were significantly more numerous in 1920s (442) their number dwindled to 233 (+56 novices) in 1996.

to shortly. Before that, however, it is necessary to give a few observations on the setting in which this research was conducted.

Monastery as a Locus of Field Work: Types, Location and Historic Importance

Since there are no "Orders" in monasticism of the Orthodox Church, comparable to Carthusian, Benedictin, Franciscan, Cisterian, Caramelite, or other orders of the Roman Catholic church, all monastics are members of a single fellowship of men and women, monks and nuns, who are attached to particular monasteries. A general distinction is made between men's and women's monasteries,¹² although not necessarily as concrete places, for the changing waves of history sometimes caused traditionally men's monasteries to become women's and the other way around. After WW II, to give a recent example, as female monasticism was on rise, many traditionally men's monasteries, destroyed or abandoned in times of wars and persecutions, were transformed into thriving women's monasteries owing to efforts of several capable Abbesses. The strict distinction between the monasteries is sometimes blurred today by the fact that a few nuns will occasionally stay in men's monasteries, especially if they are pilgrimage sites, to help out or as obedience, just as monks may stay in women's monasteries in various capacities. In my attempt to find out whether there are corresponding gender differences in spirituality of monks and nuns I was getting strictly uniform answers, be it from a bishop, simple monk or nun, that there is only one Orthodox spirituality and that those who aspire to monastic life commit themselves to angelic life beyond gender division and condition. Whether male or female this type of monastic life is called *cenobitic* (from Greek "koinos bios," communal life),¹³ and monks and nuns are called to share in it their vows of celibacy (abstinence from sexual relations), poverty (no personal possession of any kind)

¹² For that reason I will use the term "monastery" rather than "convent" or "nunnery," which (though not incorrect) are none the less more common for the Western Christian traditions.

¹³ In Eastern monasticism there is also eremitic monasticism (hermits, ascetics leading solitary life in huts or caves) and semi-eremitic way of life consisting of small group or groups of monks gathered around a spiritual elder (Timothy Ware, *The Orthodox Church* [London:Penguin Books, 1997], 37-8).

and obedience (to spiritual elders), thus struggling to accomplish the goal of monastic life, the "life of perfection."

Monasteries further differ in their location, size and in overall religious and cultural and historical importance. Physical setting and the location of monasteries bear a fair correspondence to the regulation of daily life and dominant activities of nuns in them. If a monastery is in a rural setting or in a remote area, manual labor (working in fields, orchards, vegetable gardens, tending sheep, goats, cows, poultry, etc.) will be a regular salutary discipline for all nuns (or monks)¹⁴. In more or less urban settings, or in the cases of monasteries which are not landed, there is a greater emphasis on the performance of the monastic hours, psalmody, and other aspects of liturgical life, as well as iconography.

Some monasteries are considered to bear special significance because of religious and historical personages associated with them, or because of the holy remains (*moshti*) kept in them; as such they are a source of great pride for the monastics living in them (eg. Zica, Ravanica).

(Pre)Conditions of Field Work in Serbian Orthodox Monasteries:

In order to conduct this research I realized from the very beginning that certain *pre-conditions* would have to be fulfilled before I could embark on my field work. By pre-conditions I mean a specific kind of networking that needed to be done ahead of time, such as finding ways to meet with the relevant people from the Church, most notably bishops, without whose blessing it is very difficult to access monasteries in the way I needed for this study, let alone get the trust of nuns for conversations about their lives and monastic callings. Once in a monastery, I had to have the permission (blessing) from the Abbess for conversations with nuns, and they had to have a specific blessing from her in order to talk to

¹⁴ This may create a problem when the monastic community is small in numbers and elderly, and cannot maintain or make full use of the property surrounding the monastery, This is the case with monastery Gomirje (Croatia), where there are only four nuns, the youngest of whom, the Abbess, is in her late fifties. The monastery used to be known for its cheese (*gomirski sir*), but the nuns can no longer keep enough cows and sheep to produce cheese for commercial use as well.

me or other guests. This rule particularly applies to novices for whom observing silence at certain periods constitutes part of a monastic training.

I soon found out that because of the wars which marked much of the 90s in the lands of the former Yugoslavia and the increased presence of media in the region, monasteries were frequented by journalists who wanted to interview monks and nuns and who, according to my several informants, often had little knowledge but a lot of preconceived notions about Orthodoxy, its relation to Serbian nationalism and the unfolding events. As a result, some nuns felt that their hospitality was misused, their words put in inadequate contexts or misquoted, and were initially reserved with me. Under such circumstances, my personal and social identity also needed to be negotiated in my communication with these women: being *from* there originally and Orthodox myself was certainly an advantage, but being married to a foreigner and living in a foreign country, especially the United States, often required further clarifications.

During the period of my field-work I visited about two dozen monasteries, fifteen of them women's. I stayed three or four days in five of them (Gomirje, [Croatia], Gradac, Sveta Petka, Ravanica i Zica) and talked to and/or collected detailed materials about more than thirty nuns. In the monasteries in which I stayed overnight I had all the benefits of in-depth participant-observation research, while my day visits to various monasteries offered the benefit of experiencing a kind of hospitality (or lack thereof) toward a stranger, a casual visitor. In the former case I had the privilege to be in private areas in monasteries which generally remain off limits to a lay visitor, where one does not go unless invited.

When I was staying in the monasteries I had to adjust to the schedule of their liturgical life and also be part of the community by helping out in daily chores (most often in the kitchen, with dishes or peeling vegetables, or going on errands). However, the level of my engagement in these monasteries depended on how busy they were with guests and visitors. For example, in Gomirje, the only Orthodox women's monastery left in Croatia, guests are no longer as common, so neither the Abbess nor other nuns

would let me help. Instead, they were very accommodating and the priest monk who lives with them offered his office and monastery library to my disposal.

In Zica, on the other hand, which is often visited by various dignitaries (clergy, politicians, diplomats), tourists and school excursions, the need for help is great indeed. The help, outside the monastic community, is most often volunteered by young pious girls or women of different ages who would come and stay in the monastery (from a few days to a few weeks or months at a time) for their own personal reasons; they help nuns in serving brandy (*rakija*) or coffee and sweets, a traditional offering of hospitality in Orthodox monasteries. Visitors come not only to see the church, but also to talk over particular matters (baptisms, weddings, funerals), or to seek spiritual counsel from an experienced nun or the elder living in the monastery.

Although every Orthodox monastery adheres to the same universal tradition by following *Typica* (monastic rules of conduct), each community tends to create its own customs and organize its style of living. Today within the SOC life in most monasteries is regulated by *Typica* revised in 1963. Relations within the monastery reflect the hierarchical structure with the Abbess in charge of nuns and senior schema nuns enjoying respect by the younger ones. As far as interpersonal relations of nuns are concerned, the most concise description came from nun Zinovija, who noted that amongst them in the monastery there are all kinds of personalities. There are even some who, strictly speaking, don't belong there, and yet God has brought them there and "He only knows why." "There are many of us here (40 nuns and 2 novices), and we are all different and have to find ways to fit in. There are many temptations in that regard, but it's all good because if we were all 'of one spirit' we would not have the chance to perfect ourselves. It is through imperfections of others and our own that we are called to improve ourselves."¹⁵ In monasteries in which I stayed images of spiritual companionship and nurture among the women were obvious as well as extraordinary respect and loyalty to the Abbess.

¹⁵ Interview conducted in monastery Sv. Petka, August 2001.

Women Monastics in SOC Today

Determining Current Numbers

On the basis of a 1996 publication of the Holy Synod of the Serbian Orthodox Church, *Crkva*,¹⁶ and some more current information including my field work,¹⁷ there are 706 nuns and 74 novices in 32 eparchies of the SOC, centrally located in Serbia and Montenegro, in the successor states of the former Yugoslavia (Croatia, Bosnia, Macedonia) as well as in Western and Central Europe, the US, Canada, Australia and New Zealand.¹⁸ It is interesting that this number is substantially higher than the number of monks, which is estimated to be less than three hundred. Also, this would be an increase in over 20% in a little over a decade, compared to 563 nuns and 49 novices quoted for 1987.

The exact numbers of nuns and novices today, however, proved difficult to determine for several reasons. One is that because of the wars in the former Yugoslavia, a number of monasteries in Croatia, Bosnia and most recently Kosovo were abandoned or destroyed, and a certain number of nuns were or still are forced to move within those regions or outside of them.

Another difficulty is that the category of novices is highly variable one and there is no prescribed time period for advancement to the next stage (even though this period commonly lasts three years). What advancement really depends on is the age and spiritual maturity and progress of a person entering the monastery, which is generally assessed by Abbess and/or spiritual father, *duhovnik*, in charge of the monastery, and is highly idiosyncratic. In the records of the SOC the novices are counted separately and the number should be taken with flexibility because since 1996 a certain number of novices have in fact

¹⁶ *Crkva: kalendar srpske pravoslavne patrijarsije, 1996* (Beograd: The Holy Synod of the Serbian Orthodox Church, 1996).

¹⁷ Cf. "S verom, bez podataka," *Vreme* (26.oktobar 2002): 26-31.

¹⁸ See "The Serbian Orthodox Church," *Eastern Christianity and Politics in the Twentieth Century*, ed. Pedro Ramet [Durham and London: Duke University Press, 1988], 248).

taken a monastic vow or else come to recognition that monastic life is not for them after all, but others have presumably also joined.

To make this variability clearer a few more details about the stages of Orthodox monastic life for women are in order. Initially there were no stages in monastic life, but later on monasticism has become a progressive process, from a *novice* to a *rasophore* nun, who receives the *habit* (black robe or *rasa*, leather belt and prayer rope), i.e. gives a monastic vow. The next degree is that of a *schima nun*, who gives vow to God, and is tonsured (symbolically cutting off all previous thoughts of the world). This is called Lesser schema and finally there is the Great schema marked by high ascetic and spiritual achievements.¹⁹ Monastic etiquette calls for novices and rasophores to be addressed as "sisters" while schema nuns are called "mother." These distinctions are also marked by head dress: the cylindrical black hat with the veil in the back (*klobuk*) which are worn only in church or at formal occasions, are worn by schema nuns.

Three Generations of Experiences

Generational differences between the nuns become obvious and relevant when their personal (hi)stories are viewed against the background of general history of their time, just as they are blurred when it comes to the inner experiences of faith and life in monastery, which tend to be more uniform. I discerned three generation of nuns: those who took the monastic vow immediately after WW II (in the 50s), those who took the vow in the late 60s and 70s, and finally the ones who became nuns in mid 80s and 90s.

Among the nuns of the first group, who are now sixty years old or more, it was more typical (though not universal) to encounter the so called virgin nuns i.e. those who joined a monastery as very young girls (ages 12 to 16); in my study such were the cases of mothers Mihaila (of Vavedenje), Nimfodora (temporarily serving in Slanci) or the Abbess Paraskeva (of Gomirje), and several older nuns I

¹⁹ For example, the Abbess Irina of Kamenac who is 84 years old and says 12000 prayers a day.

heard or read about during my field work.²⁰ What distinguishes this generation of nuns is the fact that they entered monastic life when general conditions of life in the Yugoslav post-war communist society were difficult, let alone in the Church, which came out of that war devastated by wartime deaths of its clergy and destruction of its property.²¹

The reality of an atheist society left profound marks on the lives of these nuns. Mother Mihaila talked about various forms of harassment that she as a young novice of 14, together with other nuns, were subjected to in the 50s: it was hard enough that their monastery was obliged to give the government a certain amount of grain and other produce per year, but it was even more painful to know that there was no one to protect them from local party officials who would occasionally rob them of the food and wine supplies produced for the monastery's own needs.

There were also psychological pressures: for example, the police would come and talk disrespectfully to the Abbess and sisters, and summon for interrogation all younger nuns and novices who had joined the monastery after the war, reproaching them for not joining the Communist Youth of Yugoslavia instead. Attempts were also made to persuade some of those younger nuns to return to the world.²²

In nun Nimfordora's experience it was not just government officials but also ordinary people, Party members who supported the new system and were ideologically hostile to religion, that made life difficult for the nuns in those days. Coming from a very religious rural family, with a father who was an accountant in the nearby town of Svilajnac (Serbia), she followed her older sister to the monastery at the

²⁰ According to monastic rules, when such young girls come to monastery they are not allowed to be tonsured before the age of 18; they usually live as novices before that and have the option to leave this kind of life.

²¹ Over 1/5 of the clergy were liquidated during the war, a few hundred more died, and almost 25% of the church property (churches, chapels, monasteries) were totally destroyed and 50% was seriously damaged (Ramet, "The Serbian Orthodox Church," in *Eastern Christianity*, 237-38).

²² Interview conducted June 18, 2001 in Vavedenje Monastery, Belgrade.

age of 13, while her three brothers one after the other went to Theological Seminary in Belgrade to study for priesthood. Her third sister married a priest.

Because her father gave all of his children to the Church, rather than the Party, he was pronounced an irresponsible and inadequate parent and his two young daughters who joined the monastery were taken from his custody. At the court, Nimfodora says, she and her sister and their mother had to testify that they were not forced to go to the monastery, but had done so out of their free will. The girls were subjected to all kinds of intimidations, including physical abuse and inappropriate teasing about the boys waiting for them in the "world," but they persisted saying that their *rasa* (black monastic robe) was dearer to them than anything Tito's Yugoslavia could offer, upon which they were finally released and allowed to return to their monastery.

Life for their parents, especially their father, remained difficult, for the whole family was ostracized by the local community, some out of fear and some out of ideological conviction. The nun said that even later on when she used to visit her parents some people were still hostile to her and made fun of her monastic robe, and even spat on her.²³ She also said that sometimes in those early days they were poorly treated when they went to the doctor or dentist, for they had no medical insurance.

Another characteristic of life for this generation of nuns was that they had to do a lot more manual labor than nuns today. Whether it be physical work associated with rebuilding the destroyed or damaged monasteries or tilling the fields and raising farm animals, manual labor was and remains to this day an important part of daily life at least in some monasteries and for some of the nuns. It was almost an unanimous comment of the older nuns (from Gomirje to Sv. Petka, Ravanica, Zica or Vavedenje) that younger nuns are not capable of the type of physical exertion that they had endured in their youth.

The older nuns claimed that such physical hardships strengthened them spiritually. They also thought that they could do the work because of their social background which was different from the

²³ Interview conducted on October 2, 2001 in Monastery St. Stefan, Slanci.

younger, city-bred generations. Most of the nuns of the older generation that I met come from rural areas or small towns, and from religious households of poor or modest to solid means, in which the children were respectful of their elders and were expected and accustomed to helping them both in and around the house. As a result, a life of hard work and obedience presented less of a challenge for nuns with such background than it does for younger nuns..

The formal educational background of older nuns, sometime only with the exception of Abbesses, was limited to four grades of elementary school or eight years of elementary education.²⁴ However, they as well as those nuns of the middle generation with similar background, i.e. only elementary education, would be quick to point how much they learned in the monastery. More than one nun noted that despite their lack of high school or higher education, years of studying the Patristics, the Lives of the Saints and contemplating the meaning of the Scriptures, put them in a position today of giving spiritual advice to people far more educated than they.

This may seem paradoxical, one nun admits, but the monastic experience has helped her understand the inner workings of human heart so she can more easily see things troubling a lay person in the world. While this nun indeed had much higher fluency and articulation of thought than her formal education would suggest, I also encountered nuns of this age group who were more withdrawn and had difficulties articulating matters that pertained to something more complex than their immediate tasks of obedience. Their devotion was simple and sincere, their obediences mostly related to some form of manual labor. Even in the Church during the liturgy those who could not sing or read well would have a task to light the candles and incense burners or ring the bells at appropriate moments during the service

²⁴ In Orthodoxy it is widely considered that formal education does not necessarily help a monastic, for monastic habit is as much the matter of "heart" i.e. experience as it is of mind. In my research I have encountered the fascinating case of nun Paula from Gomirje Monastery, who is for all purposes illiterate, when it comes to modern Serbian/Croatian language, but who learned in the monastery how to read Psalter and various liturgical books in Church Slavonic! She belongs to generation born in mid or late 1930s whose education was interrupted or never started due to WW II. As a result in 1948, 38% of the female population of Yugoslavia were illiterate; the rates of female illiteracy decreased progressively, but was still 17% in 1981 (Tatjana Djuric Kuzmanovic, *Gender and Development in Serbia* [Novi Sad: Buducnost, 2002], 36). In view of that, the educational background of nuns was not inconsistent with the overall situation in the former Yugoslavia.

and thus be integrated in liturgical life as well. It was interesting to note how well the obedience of each nun is matched to her overall abilities and type of personality..

The middle generation of nuns is particularly interesting, for their calling to monasticism occurred at the time of intense secularization of Yugoslav and Serbian society, reflected unambiguously in the system of education in which the Church was portrayed as a retrograde institution, belonging to the past and with no relevancy for modern society. The Abbess Anastasija (of Ravanica fruskogorska) talks about her experience: "I went to the monastery Bogovadja at the age of 18 in 1964. I was a novice for four years, and became a nun in 1968. [...] When I decided of my own free will for this 'angelic life', it was a difficult time of communism. Many looked at us at the time as symbols of bad omen..."²⁵

I found particularly persuasive cases for monastic calling in stories of two nuns from Ravanica: Haretima, who came to a monastery as a fifteen year old girl in 1981, and Zinovija, who became a nun in 1974, at the age of 20.²⁶ Now in their mid and late thirties, they both grew up in religious semi-rural households, but while Haretima's family was poor Zinovija's was more lower middle class. Haretima's family moved near Ravanica monastery, where her father got a job. Proximity to the monastery and frequent visits to it familiarized Haretima with monastic life, and nuns were in many ways her first and only role models.

After finishing elementary school she spent her summer in the monastery. By the end of the summer the Abbess asked her if she would like to stay, and Haretima recalled her dilemma: she did indeed want to stay, life in a monastery was very appealing to her, but she also wanted to continue her schooling and become a nurse. Her father encouraged her to stay by saying that if she were to go off to school and into 'the world' she would no longer wish to become a nun. She acted on her father's advice, but still regrets not acquiring skills in nursing, especially now when it turned out that such training would have been useful in her current task of obedience as a care taker in an institution for handicapped and

²⁵ Quoted in "S verom, bez podataka," *Vreme* (10. oktobar 2002): 31.

retarded children associated with the nearby monastery of Sv. Petka. At my hint that her father's suggestion to go to monastery might reflect his desire to settle her future given their meager livelihood, she stressed that she was quite confident that she would have joined the monastery at any event (i.e. even if she continued her education) for one is "called to this profession as much as one chooses it."

Nun Zinovija said that she first felt the urge to go to the monastery at the age of 13.²⁷ Her family was quite observant, they went to nearby monasteries often and she found the peacefulness of life there immensely appealing. Her parents found the hostile attitudes toward religion or its marginalization, prevalent in the society at the time, difficult to live with so the family immigrated to Australia where they had some relatives. Zinovija said that in Australia she led the life of a teenager, had her own car and a job that paid reasonably well, but could not stop thinking and intimately longing for a different kind of life.

“Different” really meant monastic for her. Through a remarkable set of circumstances and events ensuing from them, Zinovija returned to Yugoslavia on the pretext of visiting her family. Her uncle was supposed to wait for her at the airport in Belgrade, but so were the nuns from Ravanica monastery with whom Haretima had secretly made arrangements. It happened, in her words by God's will, that her uncle's car broke down and he was more than an hour late. Meanwhile, Haretima was already on her way to the monastery. Her father knew all along about her plans and being a very pious man he gave her the necessary blessing, deeply moved by the fact that for the first time someone in his family would devote her life to God. Her mother, on the other hand, was adamantly opposed to her daughter's decision and tried to pull her out of the monastery by force with a busload of relatives and friends. In the end, however, she, too, had to accept the reality of Zinovija's inner yearning.

Both of these nuns stressed the formative role that the Mother Superior played in their lives from the very beginning. Ravanica had already been famous for its previous Abbess, Greater schema nun

²⁶ Both interviews were conducted in the Monastery of St. Petka in August 2001.

Efimija²⁸. The current Abbess was her spiritual daughter and took great care of young novices like Haretima and Zinovija, providing them their education and well-being, sparing them from hard physical labor to which they (unlike the older nuns) were not accustomed, and allowing them time for outdoor activities and reading. What was mentioned earlier about the great pride associated with being a nun in the monastery of great cultural and historical importance was very true in cases of these two nuns. Not only were they living in this holy place (Ravanica) and proud because of it, but their Mother Superior and her predecessors were powerful personalities and inspired respect and love. In their eyes, those Mothers Superior offered living examples of holiness. Monasticism in cases of young girls who opt for it clearly reshapes their personality and conforms it to the needs of this unique calling. As nun Marija from Grgeteg explained, "to 'opt' for a monastic calling at such a young age does not mean a choice made in full awareness of its implications. It is a strong yearning of the heart which the mind understands only later."²⁹

In the third generation of nuns, who joined monasteries in the late 1980s and 90s, we see the greatest variation in age, social and educational background as well as in motivation for a monastic calling. Two examples are instructive: Abbess Jefimija (of Gradac), now in her late thirties, formerly a painter, and nun Marija (of Grgeteg), in her mid fifties, formerly an attorney of law. Jefimija is roughly the same age as Haretima and Zinovija, but became a nun at the age of 26. She grew up in Belgrade and was not raised in the faith; in fact, she recalled how strange she felt when as a nine year old girl she asked her mother if God existed and got the answer: "I don't know." How could it be, she thought to herself, that her mother did not know what she as a child knew--that God *exists*? Even though her life had no outer

²⁷ A psychologist might find this indicative of anxiety over upcoming adolescence, and would probably be right in some cases, but not in all, or certainly not in the case of nun Zinovija, who impressed me with sincere enthusiasm for the profession to which she was called.

²⁸ Stories about her remarkable life as a woman and monastic were gathered in a monograph by the sisters of Ravanica monastery: *Zivotopis shi-igumanije Jefimije, nastojateljice manastira Ravanice i Sv. Petke* (Beograd, 1972).

²⁹ Interview conducted on June 11, 2001 at monastery Grgeteg, Vojvodina, Serbia.

religious structure, inwardly she was constantly searching for the Eternal and was articulating her quest through painting--first as a student at the Art Academy in Belgrade and then as a professional artist.

Her inner search for meaning was only reinforced by an increasingly meaningless spiritual situation in the country culminating in its violent disintegration and the subsequent imposition of sanctions. Despair over war coupled with the sense of isolation and lack of purpose in life marked her generation, who were then in their twenties. She saw her friends leading useless and self-destructive lives and realized that intellectual debates were not going to change that. A different kind of healing was necessary. During her stay in a monastery, where she came to study Byzantine-style painting and iconography, she realized that she could help others with prayer and finally fulfill her own quest for holy and immortal through icon painting. She did not join a monastery right away but took time to prepare herself and then, fully aware of her choice, became a monastic.

Sister Marija was a successful lawyer, with an average marriage and family life. She, too, grew up in secular society but from high school days cultivated interests in philosophical questions. Over time she also developed an interest in paranormal phenomena and started following scientific research in that field. She joined the Association "Nikola Tesla" which gathered professional people (engineers, doctors, scientists) with similar interests and where ideas and books were exchanged. There she heard about stories about Orthodox monastics with gifts of clairvoyance, pre-cognition and the like.³⁰

Intrigued, she started to go to the monasteries where such monks lived and slowly was getting to enjoy those visits and her conversations with them. Realizing that she had no background in religion and beginning to discover its deeper meaning she started researching Orthodoxy and attending church on Sundays. There she met a priest, Fr. Vasilije, who played a crucial role in her gradual initiation in religious life and the ensuing personal transformation. He was her spiritual father until his death in 1996,

³⁰ In Orthodox monastic circles an important terminological distinction is made between the phenomenon of clairvoyance known in occultism (*vidovitost*) and *the gift of seeing logoi* (the inner essence of things) developed as a byproduct of asceticism (*prozorljivost*). The former is egocentric product of "powers" that can be misused, the latter is considered God's gift

after which she had to look for another person for spiritual guidance and found it in Fr. Dositej, a priest-monk who, being a monk, introduced her to even more intense spiritual practices.

She gradually found that her new life was no longer easily compatible with her life in the world. Her spiritual elder confirmed that by saying that her task in the world was completed, the circle was closed. What about her family and job? Her family, husband and two adult sons, took it as a natural and expected step, because they witnessed her transformation over the years and felt that it was just a matter of time when she would go.³¹ With her colleagues in the law firm she had arranged for a smooth transition before she left for monastery. Having spent just over a year as a novice, she took monastic vows together with other novices, exceptionally, during the NATO bombing of Yugoslavia, when all of them staying in the monasteries of Fruska Gora in Vojvodina were in life threatening situations.

In both of these cases we see professional women, of different age groups and in different stations of life, of similar urban middle class and secular background making their choices for monastic life. They did it not because they had no experience of other kind of life or had somehow failed in it, but because they found in monasticism the meaningful completion of their inner searches and longings.

But in this third generation of nuns, who joined monasteries in 1990s, especially those who are young, there are many young women coming from completely secular and often broken or incomplete families. Their wish to become monastics and serve a higher good is sincere, but the inner struggle they have to endure is more intense than that of their predecessors who came from more stable rural families in which religion was part of their life and upbringing.³² Experienced nuns say that it is not sufficient to want to live in a monastery but be able to endure it; and not all endure the inner struggle of novicehood: "...if a girl is to come to the monastery because of some disappointment in life, she will not be able to

which is not an end in itself and, in fact, according to patristic literature, can be a special kind of temptation for a monastic if he or she starts thinking about it as "his" or "hers."

³¹ The life of the family was transformed, too, and in a positive way, sister Marija's son Mishko claimed. Both he and his brother, who is married with a child, felt that their mother was helping them more efficiently from the monastery--through her prayers, the power of which they took seriously (Oral communication, Belgrade, June 2001).

stay. Her soul and her mind will be pressed by the very burden she came with...and such person is not likely to stay."³³

Atheization of society had created generations of parents who knew little and cared little about religion. Some of them now found themselves in paradoxical situations of having children willing to devote their lives to God. The story of the twenty-five year old novice Melanija, a graduate of philosophy, made the newspapers in summer 2002. The girl was in a monastery as novice for over a year when her relatives kidnapped her in order to preempt her monastic vow. Melanija was a daughter of a local police chief and a teacher for whom the relatives working in municipality administration had fabricated a document giving the parents custody of their more-than-old-enough-to-decide-about-her-life daughter.³⁴ Even though this case is somewhat extreme, the fact remains that many parents of young and prospective monastics, especially if they are not believers, live through agonizing experiences and are dismayed by them. Some in the process become religious themselves (Abbess Jefimija's mother, for example) and some never accept the decision of their daughters (or sons) even if they are past midlife (such is the case of nun Marija's mother, who to this day refuses to visit her). In the latest generation of monastics, novices in particular, the level of education and sophistication is higher as well as the awareness of what all they are renouncing when they commit themselves to lead the life of the chosen few. This makes it even more difficult for parents to persuade their children not to give up worldly ambition and family life.

Conclusion: Relations With the Outside World

³² Oral communication with Mother Jelena. Zica, October 2002.

³³ Abbess Anastasija, quoted in "S verom, bez podataka," *Vreme* (10.oktobar 2002): 31.

³⁴ *Glas* (6. avgust 2002), 5.

The nuns I talked to acknowledge that people in the world generally cannot grasp the motivation behind their calling and how real the joy behind the life of prayer is.³⁵ Some people have a hard time understanding that monasteries are not places of refuge--from the world or from one's own self--rather, they are cloisters, meeting places of the "one (who is) alone with God," the "monk" or "monastic"--*monachos*.³⁶ Historically speaking, monastics in Orthodox Christianity have generally enjoyed great respect and support of the people, perhaps because monasticism was at some level perceived, as Florovsky aptly notes, as "a permanent 'Resistance Movement'" within the Church.³⁷

In contemporary Serbian society monastics and the monastery as an institution have been getting more attention and arousing more curiosity in the lay public since mid 1980s. Political scientists would be inclined to see this as only another manifestation of Serbian nationalism--its "well-known" connection with the Serbian Orthodox Church, but such a view would ignore the purely religious dimension of the phenomenon. From the religious vantage point, there is little doubt that an old tradition within Orthodoxy, the tradition of "elders" (Greek *geron*, Russian *starets*), is currently being revived. The elders are people whose ascetic life has brought them gifts of spiritual discernment and wisdom so they can offer guidance to those who seek it.

Unfortunately, "the scope of their subtle influence on culture and history has generally remained unrecognized, since it pertains to self-creativity, and to transfiguration of human nature rather than to the more tangible social and economic circumstances of life."³⁸ And yet we cannot understand much of what

³⁵ Prayer, as one Greek nun has put it, is not just what you say (even a parrot can learn to say it), or what you do, "it is a state of the soul. Your soul can be in state of Prayer, wherever you may be, whatever you may be doing, whichever circle of people around you. Because our soul is from God" (Nun Gavriilia, ed. *The Ascetic of Love* [Thessalonika: Talanto, 1999], 272-3)

³⁶ This, of course, does not mean that there are no problematic persons among the monastics, even pathological ones. What amazed me during my stays in some monasteries, was the openness with which nuns, monks, priests or lay faithful talked about such personalities in front of me--an insider/outsider. The common perception that the SOC is "closed" for the outside world really didn't hold in my experience; I would say that those who are within it know both its strengths and weaknesses.

³⁷ Georges Florovsky, *Christianity and Culture*, vol.2 (Belmont, Mass: Nordland Publishing Co., 1974), 88.

³⁸ Milica Bakic-Hayden, "What's so Byzantine about the Balkans?" in *Balkan as Metaphor* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2002), 72.

is going on in monasticism today, and the subtle social impact it has, if we fail to see the role of the elders on lay people and monastics alike.

For a lay person an elder plays a role of a psychologist, religious teacher and spiritual father/mother. Among the young women I met in monasteries, who came there because of their spiritual mothers/father, there were painters, teachers, journalists or simply students and high school girls, who flock to monasteries in search of spiritual advice.³⁹ For a monastic, an elder is a source of inspiration, a person through whom the will of God is made manifest. More than once in my conversations with nuns and monks have I attested to this, namely, how decisive and formative the role of the person considered holy can be.⁴⁰

Besides this relation with the outside world, which takes place within the boundaries of monastic grounds, there are also interactions which nuns have when they are "in the world" on some business or the other. During the communist period, as mentioned in the story of Mother Nimfodora, and in the case of the monasteries that were in municipalities in which the majority of the population was supportive of the Party, the relationship towards monastics ranged from indifferent to discriminatory, disrespectful and based on stereotypes of nuns as women who were not pretty or smart enough to marry or were somehow handicapped in some way. But even in communist time, when monasteries were pronounced "cultural-historical monuments," those monasteries which were famous were favorably looked upon by local population irrespective of their ideological views.

The Abbess of Zica, Mother Jelena, confirmed this by saying that from the mid-1980s there were more people coming to monasteries as monasteries, i.e. treating them as places of worship, rather than museums with walking monks and nuns recreating the atmosphere of the past for curious visitors. She

³⁹ Psychologist Petar Jevremovic confirms this when he notes that young people need positive and stable role models, especially if they come from broken or dysfunctional families, families traumatized by war, exile, and the like ("S verom, bez podataka," *Vreme* [10. oktobar 2002]: 29).

said that monasteries like Zica, in which St. Sava lived, were powerful places. Local people showed respect for them even if they did not understand or care for their way of life and what it stands for.

Consequently, when the nuns had to go to nearby towns they rarely experienced anything other than kindness and respect from the locals. Similar comments were made by nuns of Sv. Petka and Ravanica. However, for the four nuns of Gomirje in Croatia the situation is different. Wherever they go, they are clearly identifiable as Serbian Orthodox nuns, which in the post war atmosphere has not always been pleasant and easy to endure.

The case of the monastic communities in Kosovo is even more problematic, with some nuns evacuated from monasteries that were torched or demolished by Albanian extremists. Others live lives that are threatened on a daily basis and whose monasteries are under constant protection of UN forces. Mother Makarija of Sokolica says: "At first we were protected by the French and now it is the Danes. They treat us fairly. There were a few small problems here and there which we resolved by explaining to them what a monastery is, who lives in it and how they must behave."⁴¹ These contrasting outer conditions put nuns in very different conditions of life, but they see it as part of their calling in which a peaceful external environment need not be a precondition for realizing God's internal peace within. Just as hardships and threats to life from outside cannot prevent monastics from experiencing the discovery of the "heavenly kingdom" within themselves.

⁴⁰ For example, during my visit to Ravanica I heard that one of the younger nuns was not feeling well, or as they would say, had severe "temptations;" an elder from the monastery Ostrog in Montenegro was called on the phone for advice, which he gave right away i.e. without hearing what her specific problems were--because he could "see" them.

⁴¹ Inet News (Belgrade); www2.inet.co.yu