

INTERESTING PASTORAL ISSUED BY SERBIAN BISHOP OF "BÁCSKA" REGION

BY
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The re-incorporation in the mother-country (Hungary) of four-fifths of the "Bácska" region (a territory 8669 sq. kilometres in area) has resulted in some 140.000—145.000 Serbian inhabitants being placed once more under Hungarian rule. These Serbians represent only 18% of the total population of the whole "Bácska" region, — a circumstance which in itself suffices to prove the crying injustice perpetrated against Hungary when the Trianon Peace Edict wrested this territory from that country and annexed it to the Yugoslav Kingdom. Now that this territory — which until the rout at Mohács (August 29th., 1526) had been inhabited exclusively by Magyars and was only later (particularly in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries) populated in parts by the settlement of various foreign elements — has once more taken its place in the ancient Hungarian Kingdom of St. Stephen, the Serbs living there, who at the "Great National Assembly" held at Ujvidék on November 25th., 1918, declared themselves in favour of separation from Hungary, would like to recover with as little delay as possible the church and educational self-government guaranteed the Serbian nationality living in the mother-country. This is the desire expressed in the Christmas Pastoral from the pen of Dr. Irinej *Tchiritch*, Serbian Bishop of the "Bácska" region, published in the columns of the "*Nova Posta*", a paper appearing at Ujvidék, in which Pastoral, *inter alia*, we find the following extremely interesting statements, declarations and wishes: —

"The stormy times through which we are now passing have brought about great and momentous changes also in the life of the Serbians belonging to the Serbian diocese of the "Bácska" region. Our diocese has been transferred to a new State unit and is today subject to the sovereignty of

the Hungarian State. The territory included in that diocese is an organic part of the Kingdom of Hungary. In the new situation we all ask what the days in store for us are likely to bring? When I investigate the conditions of the immediate and more distant past and future, I feel encouraged to hope that *our holy Orthodox Serbian Church and its Members will be able in the future too to live in peace, to develop intellectually and materially, — our religion, our culture, our material assets and our national peculiarities being respected and appreciated*, while we are to enjoy the same rights and undertake the same obligations as all other citizens of the country. We are encouraged to entertain this hope also by the fact that *until little more than twenty years ago we were subjects of the Kingdom of Hungary, to which we had belonged, not for a short period, but for centuries.*

"During these centuries our saints were respected — a fact shown by the beautiful churches and school buildings to be found everywhere in the territory of my bishopric, as also by the crosses to be seen in the towns and villages, in public squares and at street-crossings, which have always been regarded by our fellow-citizens of other faiths and other nationalities as symbols of religious faith. Another circumstance encouraging us to cherish these hopes is that it was the Hungarian laws still in force today that adjusted the situation of the Serbian Orthodox Church too within the territory of the Kingdom of Hungary. *And under these laws the Serbian Orthodox sister-bishopric in Buda is living today also in peace: and it was with the help of these laws that — just over twenty years ago — this Serbian bishopric of ours too was enabled (apart from administering the spiritual affairs of our Church) to manage its schools and monasteries and administer its Church property.*

"What is particularly calculated to encourage our hopes is the friendly interest in us shown in the highest quarters. Vitéz Nicholas Horthy de Nagybánya, Regent of the Kingdom of Hungary, has publicly expressed his friendly feelings for the Serbian people, — doing so, not in the most recent past, but several years ago, when that was no easy task. *We offer His august person the tribute of our profound respect, homage and gratitude, and value greatly the friend-*

ship of His noble heart, which acts as a balm in these days of trial. We believe that in these peaceless days too the God of Peace will ensure peace to us who for centuries lived in peace with the other citizens of the country."

This Pastoral issued by the Serbian Bishop will undoubtedly create a widespread sensation; for the facts established by him *fully and completely vindicate the policy of understanding and generosity in fulfilment pursued towards the Serbs living in Hungary by the Hungarian Governments.* But there is one point which is a *sine qua non* of a compliance with the desire expressed in the Bishop's Pastoral. I refer to the question of loyalty to the State and of trustworthiness, evidence of which should — in the light of certain well-known antecedents — be forthcoming, not only in words, but in actions too. Once that is done, *we have no doubt that the competent Hungarian factors will, once the war is over, not hesitate to restore the Church autonomy referred to in the Pastoral,* the chief points of which we herewith detail for the information of our readers.

The Church and educational autonomy of the Serbian nationality was adjusted anew and definitively by Act IX. of 1868 drafted with due consideration for the resolutions passed at the Serbian Orthodox Church Congress held at Sremski-Karlovitz in 1864 and 1865.

The Serbian Orthodox Church Constitution incorporated in Act IX. of 1868 established three organs (the secular elements being given a considerable voice in these matters) for the conduct of Church affairs, — the local vestries, the diocesan assemblies and (as supreme organ) the Church Congress. The Serbian National Church Congress, which was delegated to represent all the Members of the Orthodox Serbian Church in the management of their church and educational affairs and of all material questions connected therewith, consisted of the Patriarch, the 6 Serbian bishops, 25 priests and 50 secular Members. The ecclesiastical Members were elected by their Curia, the secular Members by the persons entitled to vote at the elections of Members of the church representative assembly, by open ballot (show of hands). *Just as in the case of vestry and diocesan assembly elections, in that of the election of the Members*

of the Church Congress too all interference on the part of the political authorities was precluded. This principle was so strictly observed that no political officials could be Members even of the committees of scrutineers responsible for conducting the elections. The Members of the Church Congress could not be called to account for any statements made by them in the exercise of their functions as such. In this respect, therefore, the Members of the Congress enjoyed privileges similar to those of Members of Parliament. The Church Congress met every three years at Karlovitz under the presidency of the Patriarch or, in the event of his being prevented from attending, of the oldest bishop, each session lasting usually six weeks. The convening of extraordinary sessions had to be notified in advance — by way of the Hungarian Government — to the King of Hungary, who sent a royal commissioner to represent him at the meetings of the Congress and to exercise his prerogative of supreme control. *But the royal commissioners were not entitled to take part in the discussions or to influence the passing of resolutions.* The prerogatives of the king included the right of adjourning and dissolving the "Sabor"; in the latter case fresh elections had to be ordained to elect a new Church Congress. The right of control of the Hungarian Government was reflected in the fact that the minutes of the Congress had to be submitted to the Hungarian Prime Minister, that Government at the same time reserving to itself the right to receive and definitively adjust appeals against the resolutions of the Congress. *The Church Congress was not empowered to deal with political questions.* The jurisdiction of the Congress included the regulation of all church matters (with the exception of all purely dogmatic, liturgical and similar questions), the election of the Patriarch, the election of the Metropolitan Church Council, of the Members of the Supreme School Board, of the principal *rapporteur* on educational matters and finally of the Executive Committee of the "Sabor", an organ responsible for preparing (drafting) motions to be submitted to the Congress, for making public the resolutions passed by the Congress and for the management of the financial administration of the whole patriarchate.

The great value attached to this church autonomy by the Serbs themselves is shown, for example, also by the following statements made by Dr. Radivoj Simonovitch, a doctor residing in Zombor who prior to the first Great War was one of the foremost champions of the pan-Serbian idea: — *"In Hungary the Serbian national Church enjoyed an ideal autonomy which made it possible for the Serbian nationality to decide freely and without let or hindrance — at its meetings at Karlovitz, the seat of the Patriarch — in all questions connected with church and school affairs and in respect of the appropriation of the church funds."*

However, quite apart from the rights ensured it under the Hungarian laws, the Serbian National Orthodox Church was enabled by its exceptionally favourable material situation to act as a veritable stronghold of the Serbs living in Hungary. The extent of its material resources may be gathered from the following data taken from Serbian sources: —

Dr. Vlastoje Aleksijevitz, in his biography of *Jasha Tomitch*, leader of the radical Serbs of Southern Hungary (published at Belgrade in 1938) estimates the value of the property possessed by the autonomous national Serbian Church of Hungary as follows: "in 1906 that Church still owned 34.000 cadastral yokes of land in the form of property attached to its monasteries; the Patriarch himself was the usufructuary of landed property of an area of 25.000 cadastral yokes: the value of this property — which, inclusive of the other estates, amounted to altogether 108.000 cadastral yokes — was appraised at 23 million gold crowns. The value of the 813 churches and several thousand other church buildings situated within the jurisdiction of the Serbian National Patriarchate represented a further 40 million gold crowns, the result being that the total value of the assets of the National Church (real estate, cash and securities) amounted to more than 90 million gold crowns. In the whole territory under the jurisdiction of the autonomous Church — i. e. in Croatia-Slavonia and in Southern Hungary — there were 666 parishes, 715 rectories, 27 monasteries, 7 bishoprics, 7 cultural institutes and 859 schools and a similar number of teachers..." These institutions and institutes were the most precious treasure owing

its origin to the well-known generosity of the Serbs which had to be preserved at all costs."

This exceptionally favourable material situation explains why the Serbian nationality and its Church flatly refused to avail themselves of the subsidies offered by the Hungarian State. For, whereas of the sums appropriated in the 1913—14 Estimates of the Hungarian Ministry of Education for the support of the Churches the amount of 8.762.231 gold crowns was allotted to the Greek Catholic (Uniate) Church and the amount of 9.283.598 gold crowns to the Rumanian Greek Oriental Church, the extremely wealthy Serbian Orthodox Church only accepted subsidies amounting to altogether 493.742 gold crowns, though it was entitled by the number of its Members to claim a sum many times in excess of the said amount.

It was to this church autonomy that the Serbians of Hungary owed the development within the territory of that country in the second half of the nineteenth century (particularly after the Compromise of 1867) of a flourishing Serbian culture which fostered the spiritual and intellectual development also of the Serbian people of the Serbian principality which was not finally liberated from the Turkish yoke until the last quarter of the previous century.