

UDK 316.74:271.222(497.11 Bosilegrad)-725:929 Stojanov Z.

Dragan Todorović
Dragoljub B. Đorđević
Neven Obradović

ZORAN STOJANOV: A PRIEST FROM BOSILEGRAD*

ABOUT THE MUNICIPALITY OF BOSILEGRAD

A cross-border municipality of Bosilegrad is situated in the furthest southeastern part of the Republic of Serbia, in the Pčinj County, next to the Bulgarian-Macedonian state border (130km from Sofia and 200km from Skopje). In the north, it borders with the municipality of Surdulica, in the west with the municipality of Vranje, in the southwest with the municipality of Trgovište, in the south with the Republic of Macedonia (9km in length) and in the east and southeast with the Republic of Bulgaria (54km in length). The highest mountain top is Besna Kobila mountain with its elevation of 1,992 metres. (<http://www.bosilegrad.org/sr/OBosilegradu.aspx>).

According to the census from 2011, the total population from 37 populated areas is 7,979. In the urban settlement of Bosilegrad, there are 2,530 citizens (31.7% of the total population), and other settlements are inhabited by 5,449 citizens (68.3% of the total population). The municipality of Bosilegrad is characterised by a vast demographic drain, and it is considered *an underdeveloped region* which is shaped by extremely poor infrastructural, material, economic and human resources (*the Spatial Plan of the Municipality of Bosilegrad*). The municipality sees its chance in the development of tourism, the production of healthy food and manufacture production, as well as in the strengthening of the international regional cooperation by implementing mutual projects with the Bulgarian municipalities (the town-twinning with the municipalities of Blagoevgrad and Kozloduy has already been done).

The urban centre of Bosilegrad lies in a spacious valley where the Božička River and the Ljubatska River merge and further flow as the Dragovištica River. The municipality also includes 36 rural populated areas: Barje, Belut, Bistar, Brankovci, Bresnica, Bucaljevo, Gložje, Goleš, Gornja Lisina, Gornja Ljubata, Gornja Ržana, Gornje Tlamino, Gruinci, Doganica, Donja Lisina, Donja Ljubata, Donja Ržana, Donje Tlamino, Dukat, Žeravino, Zli Dol, Izvor, Jarešnik, Karamanica, Milevci, Mlekominci, Musulj, Nazarica, Paralovo, Ploča, Radičevci, Rajčilovci, Resen, Ribarci, Rikačevo and Crnoštica.

* Prepared as a part of the project *Sustainability of the Identity of Serbs and National Minorities in the Border Municipalities of East and Southeast Serbia (179013)*, carried out at the University of Niš – Faculty of Mechanical Engineering, and supported by the Ministry of Education, Science and Technological Development of the Republic of Serbia.

ABOUT FATHER ZORAN STOJANOV AND THE PARISH

Neven Obradović interviewed Father Zoran Stojanov in the rectory in Bosilegrad on 19th April 2013; the conversation lasted for three hours, between 12pm and 3pm. The priest showed a remarkable interest in the conversation and he answered exhaustively on the asked questions.

Priest Zoran Stojanov was born in 1967 in Bosilegrad (ph. 1). He has one male offspring (ph. 2). He graduated from the Faculty of Defense and Protection of the University of Belgrade¹ – now he is a student of the Faculty of Orthodox Theology of the same university. He was ordained a deacon in 2010, a priest in 2011. For a short period, he was also serving in the monastery of Holy Prohor Pčinjski.

The parish which is in his jurisdiction is officially called the Third parish of Bosilegrad, and it covers urban as well as rural territories and includes eight churches (ph. 3, 4 and 5). He boasted about the fact that four of them were built or renovated after the 1990s, when a return to religiosity started in the Serbian territories: in Donje Tlmino, a church dedicated to Saint George was built from the foundation up, just like the churches dedicated to Saint John of Rila and the Holy Trinity; the Church of Saint Pantaleon, which was near collapsing, has been rebuilt. There are 35 temples in the parish of Bosilegrad and the biggest problem, which the cult servants are facing, is a chronic deficiency in the necessary material funds for everyday maintenance.

“The most common technical and material problem is money. Considering the fact that we have 35 churches, if one dinar is put in each church, and being that there are 365 days in one year, you can see how large the expense is, and how much money we need.”

He cooperates very well with other elders from the parish; when needed, they help each other in their duties, especially with the visits to the rural areas, whose distance very often requires a whole day commitment. The obligations regarding ordinance do not leave much free time to socialise with the Orthodox clergy in the neighbourhood, the closest one being the parish of Surdulica.

He has harmonious relations with the Elder of the church municipality, Bishop Pahomije of Vranje, (Tomislav Gačić), mostly because the cooperation is strengthened by the fact that Father Zoran has a role of the secretary of the church and municipal governing board. Furthermore, he is willing to confirm that, during the whole 20th century, no one from the episcopal throne of the Eparchy of Vranje has done more for the church municipality of Bosilegrad than Bishop Pahomije!²

¹ Now, this is a highly respected Faculty of Security Studies which is attractive for students.

² His claim about Bishop Pahomije Gačić is somewhat disagreeable with the prevailing opinions about him in the public. An interesting fact is that his words about Pahomije concur with the opinion of the pastor from Trgovište, Radovan Milošević (Đorđević and Zdravković 2013).

“I can freely guarantee that no bishop has done so much on the territory of the church municipality of Bosilegrad, if, of course, we exclude those years before World War One and Two and the Balkan wars in these areas. During his time, a new church in the village of Tlamino has been built; the Church of Saint Philip and the Church of the Ascension of the Lord in the village of Rajčelci have been renovated, as well as the cathedral in Bosilegrad, a further implosion of the Church of the Holy Trinity, an imposing object measuring 760sqm, in the village of Izvor has been stopped. The Church of Saint Philip in the village of Belut has been renovated, as well as the Church of the Ascension of the Lord in the village of Donja Ljubata, and the Church of Saint Archangel Michael in the village of Gornja Ljubata. As far as the church in the village of Paravo is concerned, the construction was started and finished all at once. The Church of Saint Pantaleon in the village of Rikačevo has been renovated from the foundation up. The Church of the Holy Trinity has been built in the village of Ploča. And as far as the organisation of the very liturgy is concerned, until 1992, you had to be very lucky to come across the serving of Liturgy, not to mention the morning and the evening service, vigils and the like. All in all, we have a good relationship and I am truly grateful to be able to cooperate with one such Archpriest.”

ABOUT PARISHIONERS AND A RELIGIOUS LIFE

Without reaching out to precise statistics, but using a rough estimate, mister Stojanov says that the Municipality of Bosilegrad has around eight thousand inhabitants, out of whom more than a quarter fictitiously live at their home addresses: the reason is either the schooling of the young in big urban centres or labouring of the adults in Macedonia and Bulgaria. The urbane center includes around two thousand people. During the important religious holidays, the Cathedral of Bosilegrad is visited by a thousand believers – the visits are significant in the other churches in the parish as well. An entirely different situation occurs when the affiliation to Orthodoxy is to be confirmed during those days that are not “red-letter days” in the calendar: for example, you cannot count the regular visitors of morning and evening services on the fingers of both of your hands.

“As far as the Cathedral in Bosilegrad is concerned, during the important holidays such as Christmas Eve, Christmas, Good Friday or Easter, around 1,000 believers walk through the cathedral. We keep an approximate record based on the sold candles; on average, one believer lights between seven and ten candles and that helps us to see how many believers approximately go through the cathedral. As far as other churches are concerned, during important holidays, they are also very visited; the churches are full. Morning and evening services are the same as in the Church of Saint Marco in Belgrade; there are five to ten believers and there is nothing we can do. Well, actually, we can, but that requires a more profound performing of pastoral duties in the field and of our work as clergy and many other factors. But, if you

take a look at much larger towns such as Vranje, Vladičin Han or Surdulica, which have much larger population, and if we take into account that our budget is around 1,560,000 dinars, the attendance is more than we have expected.”

People with grey hair are the most zealous during liturgies. Their religious consciousness and practice was not clouded by the repression which was applied after World War Two, when the communist government rigidly sanctioned the mentioning, let alone the practicing, of religion. Today, many older people are joined by the young who were not shaped by the socialist ideology but by religion classes during their regular education. Women are in greater number than men.³

Priest Zoran is aware that the guilt does not belong exclusively to the inconsistent practitioners of Serbian Orthodoxy. Pastoral missions require a very committed work among the congregation and it should include more clergy, the lack of whom is present not just in his eparchy; a better financial support for the maintenance and functioning of sacral objects is understood. There are a lot of tasks and the most important step in their solution is the objective analysis, facing with the real condition in the field and the beginning of a long-term action regarding the restoration of the religious life among Serbian Orthodox population along the state border with Bulgaria.

A border line between Sofia and Niš, which includes the area of Bosilegrad, is referred to as “Krajište” (*the border region*) among the local population and it is characterised by a specific speech, culture and folklore. Nationally, the local people declare themselves as Bulgarians and that does not bring them any difficulties; they are even a majority. They live in harmony with their neighbours, the Serbs, and there is no record of any disputes based on ethnicity. For priest Zoran, both nations are brothers in the Orthodox faith and as such, he welcomes them equally in his cathedral. To some extent, however, the Orthodox believers from Bulgaria keep the religious life in Bosilegrad vital,⁴ while religion appears as the mediating factor in the improvement of good border relations between the two states.⁵

“I can tell you one thing right now, in the last three years we have an increased number of visits by our brothers and sisters in Christ, from the Republic of Bulgaria; this started around 2009. Two to three buses arrive during the week, and if we assume that there are on average 40 people in one bus, that is not a small number. This probably occurs because there is a certain hunger for religion which is a consequence of even stronger discipline and repressions which were present in

³ About the restoration of Orthodox religiosity more in: Đorđević 2013.

⁴ Archpriest Rajko Glišović, the Elder of the Church of Saint Petka and a clergyman and administrator of the female monastery of Saint George in Temska near Pirot, has testified about the buses full of believers from Bulgaria visiting Serbian churches and monasteries. More about that in: Todorović 2013.

⁵ This is contributed to by the good relations between Serbian and Bulgarian Orthodox churches, because there are no “open questions” between them.

Bulgaria during communism; and, partly, this perhaps comes from tourist motives. What I, as a priest, find very symptomatic is the fact that there are over 50, maybe even 100 people from Bulgaria who come to me to confess.”

Besides Bulgarians and Serbs, there are also Roma people among the more devoted parishioners. They live in Laloš Mahala and they receive a Christian Orthodox priest into their homes, while often trying to overcome their brothers in faith in certain forms of confessional expressions. As far as other religions and creeds are concerned, there are few Catholics and Muslims in Bosilegrad, as well as religious communities of Protestant origin, but their representation is minor and it does not undermine the predominance of Christian Orthodoxy.

The saints' feast days of Saint Prophet Elijah and Saint Archangel Michael are celebrated in more than twenty villages, so the three pastors from this parish are hardly able to visit all the homes of believers. As a step forward in the believers' habits, Father Stojkov has noticed that the hosts nowadays bring the cakes specially made for saints' days to church for the cutting ritual, while, in earlier days, this was performed within a family at home. On the other hand, they adjust themselves to the folk rituals which have remained from the pagan times, such as the visit to spiritual places called “obročiste”⁶, which are regularly visited by the locals during the Saint's feast days and which are properly consecrated by the priests.

Today, a religious life runs freely, which is most surely favored by a turn in the state climate regarding the whole religious and church complex. Although, in the old days, the church bells were scarcely heard during the liturgy in the villages of Bosilegrad, regardless of the modest possibilities of the expression of religious content, the spirit of Orthodoxy was deeply rooted into the lives of the faithful population. After the 90s of the previous century many things have changed: firstly, the number of clergymen who are willing to commit to the pastoral work increased, and then the shrines in the remote villages have strengthened financially.

“Specifically, in the church municipality of Bosilegrad, until twenty years ago, the church bell was hooked under the parish court and children were playing football there. Until 1993, you would have to be very lucky to come across the serving of a liturgy, because the pressure and the repression in these small communities were so tough, that I can say in full right that the damage we suffered in those fifty or sixty years will not be able to be reversed in the next two hundred years. Fortunately, thanks to the bravery of the local people and the ingenuity of the priests, children were very often baptised together with the consecration of the water in the homes of believers. Even today, if you start checking the church books, you will rarely find a child that was not baptised, even in Bosilegrad itself. The example is the village of

⁶ The places where there used to be churches, and now only a remaining rock or votive cross testify about that. More in: Hristov 2004; Đorđević, Gavrilović and Todorović 2012.

Ljubata where the departed archpriest Aleksandar served liturgies during all important feasts; on Sundays there were always liturgies and the temple was always full. Still, now when the religion is freely practiced, the pastoral work is much more profound; we have cadres of better quality and we can make better influence on believers, starting with resolving the most ordinary individual problems of believers to solving much bigger problems that trouble the entire community. Most surely, we are now an indispensable factor in social life as well.“

If there is something that Priest Zoran is complaining about, within those changed conditions of church activities, it is the unequal treatment of priesthood in the urban areas and the border areas by the Holy Synod and the state. Namely, a year ago the Serbian state accepted, by a special statute, the obligation of paying taxes and fees on the level of a minimum wage for the priests and the clergymen of traditional churches and religious communities. Among 2,000 persons, the members of the Serbian Orthodox Church are the most numerous, and the provisions are linear, regardless of the real incomes. Besides, the Serbian Orthodox Church is a regular user of budget funds in the form of donations, which are set aside for the improvement of religious education, protection of religious identity, nurture of religious freedoms and tolerance, and the construction, renovation and maintenance of the churches and religious objects. Despite a negative image which is spread in public for an alleged large acquisition of wealth based on the charges of religious services, the improvement of priests' material conditions in the border areas can significantly help in the conduction of missions among the believers. This is so, because the money given by the villagers during religious holidays, when they most frequently appear in churchyards and monastery estates, does not even provide for basic existential needs of the active clergymen in rectories, let alone a financial support for larger church ventures in the field.

“The most negative things are material problems. The last legal or sublegal regulations, I am not sure which one, imply that the pension and disability insurance for all priests from Subotica to Preševo are being paid for linearly, which, in my opinion, is not right. It is not the same being a priest in Bosilegrad and being a priest in Terazije or in Grocka, and the incomes are not the same either; therefore, we are burdened with additional financial problems. Therefore, our Holy Church has to find a model for marginal areas, especially the southeast of Serbia which is extremely poor, and maybe this can be done through state authorities. I have to single out a good period during the government of Vojislav Koštunica, when Mr Radulović was a part of the Ministry (of Religion) and when we received a significant material help. The state could now also intervene in the same way in order to facilitate our mission.”

ABOUT THE COOPERATION WITH THE LOCAL AUTHORITIES

Do priests in marginal areas count on the cooperation with the local authorities, and thereby count on their help, until anticipated larger moves by the highest state authorities are put into effect? Father Zoran says that the church municipality in Bosilegrad fully participates in the work of the city council of the local offices, and that everyday communication, concerning important official questions, exists between the church and the municipal office, and the very president of the municipality, Vladimir Zaharijev.

The life of the church prelatore in secular society includes contacts with the highest politicians. A pluralistic political system in the post-socialist period in Serbia has produced a number of political entities which are indifferent to Christianity and spirituality, but also some with the prefix of “demo-Christian”. In *Bases of Social Conceptions of the Russian Orthodox Church* (2007) the relationship between the church and politics is thoroughly analysed. Priests are not allowed to participate in a political fight, campaign and agitation for any political option, but the believers are permitted to participate in politics and to be members of political blocks. The church does not object to the performance of political and governmental activities which are based on the basic Christian, spiritual and moral principles, primarily within Christian branches of larger political associations. In the last two decades, it has become fashionable for political parties of those provenances on the republican and municipal level to choose a Christian saint to be their patron and to celebrate patron’s day, when the presence of the local clergymen is implied. The Serbian Orthodox Church does not avoid such contacts, and believes that in that way it affirms Christian values and spreads influence of the Church within the public sphere, but it is aware that those contacts may partly undermine the reputation of an institution which common people trust in. Priest Zoran reveals to us that he himself belonged to the political world before he replaced his secular clothing with clerical one, and that he knows very well the mechanisms of political action, but that now, as a priest, he feels closest to those political currents that have programmes which pay attention to the protection of vital national interests of the whole Serbian people, and especially the people from Kosovo and Metohija.

“These questions seem to have been written for me (he laughs), because I literally came from one political group into the Church; of course, I cut all my links with politics and I resigned from all potential political functions. The interesting thing is that those people who were my most bitter opponents in politics are now my best and most devoted parishioners. Still, I, as a priest, am not interested in and I don’t have desires to bother myself with politics. We communicate with political groups as much as we need for the proper functioning of the church. For example, there is not a single political party on the territory of Serbia, especially those parties which are Orthodox, which does not celebrate its patron’s day. They also have their programmes, and some of those programmes, with regard to social issues, include

church, and we cooperate with them in that sense. If I could mention someone specifically... I find acceptable all those politicians and groups who take care of our crucified Kosovo which is the cradle of Serbhood and Orthodoxy. I simply cannot communicate with those political groups and leaders that go towards a certain global view and towards that kind of broadness which kills us and which maybe in a way acts satanically.”

ABOUT LIFE AND ACTIVITIES IN THE BORDER AREA

Father Zoran does not consider the life in the border area as a handicap: a meeting between different cultural patterns creates a possibility for new findings and it encourages individuals to make a creative exchange. National minority of Bulgarians in Bosilegrad represents a majority of population with a multi-decade intercultural experience of living together with the Serbian people. History was not always on their side; borders were drawn by those who won victories after large armed conflicts, but the people knew how to save interpersonal relationships during peacetime from devastating nationalist influences. In the forgotten corner of Serbia, being left on their own, the Bulgarians and the Serbs have built friendships, bridges of cooperation and tolerance and have taken care of their own cultural legacy and tradition, but they have also created ethno-linguistic and folklore peculiarities which are not present in any other part of the Balkans.

Father Zoran is not concerned about the survival of either Bulgarian or Serbian identity: he says that they will be preserved in the future, no matter whether they will have support from the Serbian or the Bulgarian states or not. Still, he does not want to behave as a foster parent to “the Serbs from the tri-border region”, so the state should take more care about two moments: 1) the affirmation of this territory in the public media and 2) learning and education in native language. Primarily, because of the fact that the spoken language in the described area gained the specificities of the mixture of the Serbian and Bulgarian languages a long time ago, and is known by the name “Šopski”. It could testify about the closeness of the cultural legacy of those two nations, but also about the loss of the Serbian language as the identity emblem of the Serbs.

Leaving the state to take care of the strategic national interests, Priest Stojkov does not grant amnesty to church structures for active involvement in resolving everyday problems of the parishioners. And, they have piled up and gone to extremities. In the recent past, poverty and unemployment were singled out in colloquial conversations, but nowadays, the lack of prospects for young people has given birth to new deviant forms of behaviour that used to represent exclusively urban vices – alcoholism and drug addiction. Therefore, the role of a priest does not stop anymore at the reading of prayers and the introduction to the holy secrets of the church, but also includes the fight with addiction disorders which stand for a threat to the vitality of the existing body of believers.

Another important problem, that this pastor from Bosilegrad points out, is the concern about the preservation of family, because there are more and more divorced marriages among the population of Bosilegrad. Hand in hand with the absolute decrease in the population of the entire region, excluding the municipal center and the suburban area of Rajčilovci, the destruction of families can take the last remaining locals on their way to Belgrade or Sofia.

“Sooner or later, the Church will have to go into battle with addiction diseases/disorders – alcoholism and drug addiction. It is already involved to some proper extent, because that epidemic is spreading, especially in these border areas, where you could not even think about such things twenty years ago... This is a problem we have to take care of in a more serious way, but also we have to work on the preservation of family because, nowadays, every second or third marriage is broken or close to being broken, so here we can help through pastoral work.”

CONCLUSION

The border region of Bosilegrad, with the administrative centre in Bosilegrad, is the name of the area which borders with the valleys of Vranje, Kyustendil, Radomir, Trn and Leskovac. It belongs to a specific geographic area situated next to the tri-border of Serbia, Bulgaria and Macedonia, between the Balkans Mountains and the Rhodopes Mountains (Nikolić 1912; quoted in: Ivkov, Pašić and Ćurčić 2008, 85). As a synonym, it is known around the world by its folklore music, songs, dances and a folk costume which is specific to this region and known as *saja* (Ivkov, Pašić and Ćurčić 2008, 85). It is characterised by a heterogeneous population and customs which over the years acquired entirely specific forms of expression (“džalamare”, “sedećar” songs, koliada, “todorica” festivity, “litije” – a form of procession...). It could even be said that within the triangle of Bosilegrad, Kyustendil and Kriva Palanka, one and the same people with the distinctive name “Šopi” live there – partly Bulgarians, partly Serbs and partly Macedonians – with a recognisable language which is a mixture of the spoken languages of these three nations. All these features can serve as a key to overcome the marginal position which *the border region* has on the map of the Balkans, primarily by preserving it from oblivion and representing its characteristics as unique cultural events in the tourist offer.

REFERENCES

- Dorđević, D. B. (ed.) *On Religion in the Balkans*. Niš, Sofia: Yugoslav Society for the Scientific Study of Religion, „Ivan Hadjyiski“, 2013b.
- Dorđević, D. B., Gavrilović, D. and D. Todorović (eds.). *Religion, Religious and Folk Customs on the Border*. Niš: Yugoslav Society for the Scientific Study of Religion, Faculty of Mechanical Engineering, 2012.

A PRIEST ON THE BORDER

Dorđević, D. B. and D. Zdravković. „Administration in a remote region – Trgovište.” In *A Priest on the Border*, edited by Dorđević, Dragoljub B., Todorović, Dragan and Miloš Jovanović. Niš: Yugoslav Society for the Scientific Study of Religion, Faculty of Mechanical Engineering, 2013.

Христов, П. *Общности и празници. Служби, слави, събори и курбани в южно-славянското село през първата половина на XX век.* София: НО „Марин Држин“, 2004.

Ивков, А., М. Пашић и Г. Ђурчић. „Игре и обичаји из босилеградског крајишта.” *Зборник радова Департмана за географију, туризам и хотелијерство* 37 (2008): 84-91.

Основи социјалне концепције Руске православне цркве. Нови Сад: Беседа, 2007.

Todorović, D. „Rajko Glišović: A Priest from Temska (Pilot).” In *A Priest on the Border*, edited by Dragoljub B. Dorđević, Dragan Todorović, and Miloš Jovanović. Niš: Yugoslav Society for the Scientific Study of Religion and Faculty of Mechanical Engineering, 2013.

<http://www.bosilegrad.org/sr/OBosilegradu.aspx>.

PHOTOGRAPHS



Ph. 1 Father Zoran Stojanov



Ph. 2 Father Zoran Stojanov with family in front of the parish house



Ph. 3 The Church in Bosilegrad



Ph. 4 Father Zoran Stojanov in front of the Church in Bosilegrad



Ph. 5 Father Zoran Stojanov at the altar