

Bishop Nikolai † March 18, 1956

Bishop Nikolai was born on January 5, 1881, of Dragomir and Katerina Velimirovich, in the village of Lelich, Serbia. He was part of a very large family, and as a result always had a deep love for children and especially, for large families. This love for children was expressed often during his later life, and Bishop Nikolai often explained that one of his greatest joys accomplished on earth was when he built an orphanage for the poor children of his diocese. Later, when he was very old, he was known to carry candies in his pockets, and when he would walk about the slums of New York City, the ghetto children would run up to this familiar figure with the long white beard (who was their special friend) and ask for his blessing, in order to be rewarded by a friendly smile and a never-failing piece of candy.

Young Nikolai attended elementary school in Lelich and in 1898, he graduated from High School (Gymnasia) in Valjevo, the nearest large city to Lelich. Later he attended the St. Sava Theological Seminary in Belgrade, graduating in 1902. In 1905 he entered the graduate program at the Theological Faculty of the University of Berne, Switzerland, graduating with a Doctorate in Sacred Theology in 1909. Returning to his homeland, Nikolai was tonsured a Monk at the Monastery of Rakovica and on December 20, 1909, he was ordained a Priestmonk. In 1911, the young Monk-theologian became a Professor at the Seminary in Belgrade, continuing in that position until 1915.

With the outbreak of World War I, Archimandrite Nikolai was sent to England on a diplomatic mission, and while there, he lectured at Oxford University, earning a Doctorate of Philosophy from King's College. He was also awarded two honorary Doctorates from Cambridge and Glasgow Universities.

In 1919, Archimandrite Nikolai returned to Serbia, and in that year he was consecrated by the Holy Synod of the Serbian Orthodox Church as Bishop of Zicha. Later he was transferred to the ancient see of Ochrid.

In 1921, Bishop Nikolai was sent to America as the first Serbian Missionary Bishop there. Laboring two years in America, Nikolai returned to Serbia, having nominated Archimandrite Mardary (Uskokovich) as his successor, to be consecrated Bishop of the new Serbian Orthodox American Diocese. Resuming his duties as Bishop of Ochrid. During this time he organized the "Religionist Movement," whose purpose was to *activate* the Orthodox faith among both clergy and laity alike. This movement became such a dynamic force that it managed to survive the Second World War and even today in Communist Yugoslavia, it continues to bear witness to Christ and is a living testimony to the greatness of Bishop Nikolai.



World War II brought many trials to Bishop Nikolai and many times over he was arrested, subjected to interrogation and imprisonment. Later, he

and the Patriarch of Serbia, Gavrilo, were arrested and sent to Germany, where both were imprisoned in the notorious Dachau concentration camp, enduring great suffering. Near the end of World War II, in 1945, Bishop Nikolai and Patriarch Gavrilo were released from the camp. The Patriarch returned to Serbia, but Bishop Nikolai, knowing that he would probably be arrested and shot by the new Communist government, with great soul-searching decided to go to England. From England, in April, 1946, Bishop Nikolai returned to America.

Upon arriving in America, Bishop Nikolai spent his first few years there at the Serbian Cathedral in New York City, lecturing in many churches in the New York area (both Orthodox and non-Orthodox), as well as teaching at the Serbian Seminary in Libertyville, Illinois, from 1946 to 1949. Finally, in 1951, Bishop Nikolai came to St. Tikhon's Seminary, first as a Professor, and finally as its Rector from 1955 to 1956, upon the death of the previous Rector, Bishop Jonah. Here he lived out the last five years of his life as an example of humility and as an elder to the monastics of St. Tikhon's Monastery. To the students of the Seminary, the old Bishop was a loving father figure, whom they would never forget. To the laity and faithful of the Monastery parish, as well as all who came in contact with the Bishop, he was a hierarch in whom they saw manifest the grace of God. And to all, he was an example of humility.

On Sunday, March 18, 1956, Bishop Nikolai fell asleep in the Lord. As related by the late Igumen Afanasy, "the Bishop served the Holy Liturgy on Saturday, March 17. Everything was unusually beautiful. Following the service, he went to the Monk's dining room. After a short talk, with a low

bow, three times he humbly muttered, 'Forgive me, brothers,' as he was leaving. This was something special, for he never did that before...He frequently spoke about wanting to be buried here at St. Tikhon's Monastery, since he taught, prayed, and served God here. He had lived among the Monks, and had said, 'It is more natural that I should be buried here.'" That Sunday morning, the late Fr. Vasily went down

to Bishop Nicholai's room at the Seminary, and upon knocking at the door, received no answer. Opening it, he found the Bishop dead, stretched out on the floor in a kneeling position. In all probability, he had died probably between seven and eight that morning. The next day, a Memorial Service was served in the Monastery Church for the departed Hierarch by the Serbian Bishop Dionysius, but, contrary to Bishop Nicho-

lai's expressed wish, he was not buried at the Monastery/Seminary where he had spent his last days, but was taken to the Serbian Monastery at Libertyville, Illinois and buried there. Nonetheless, although his mortal remains lie elsewhere, his spirit remains at St. Tikhon's Monastery/Seminary, in the memories of those who knew him as Bishop, Monastic, Professor and Friend.



Bishop Nicholai with the Rector, Professors and Students of St. Tikhon's Seminary.