









The Bigorski Monastery 20 years Jubilee of Revived Monasticism (Collection of texts) Publisher
The Sacred Bigorski Monastery

EDITOR IN CHIEF Archimandrite Partenij Fidanovski

EDITORS
The Fraternity of the Sacred Bigorski Monastery, Sasho Cvetkovski, Angel Micevski

AUTHORS OF TEXTS

The Fraternity of the Sacred Bigorski Monastery

Review of texts
Ph.D. Ratomir Grozdanoski, Αρχιμανδρίτης Νεχτάριος Najdoski

Translation to English
The Fraternity of the Sacred Bigorski Monastery

PHOTOGRAPHS Monastery's Archives, Savé Bogdanovski, Nenad Andonov, Ognen Teofilovski, Tome Ljushev, Stojan Vujichich

> SETTING AND DESIGN Angel Micevski

ARTIST OF THE INITIALS Mihajlo Blazheski

> BOOK COVER Angel Micevski



The Bigorski Monastery 20 years Jubilee of Revived Monasticism



(Collection of Texts)
In preparation for the 1000 years jubilee of the Monastery



CONTENTS

Monastic Testimonials

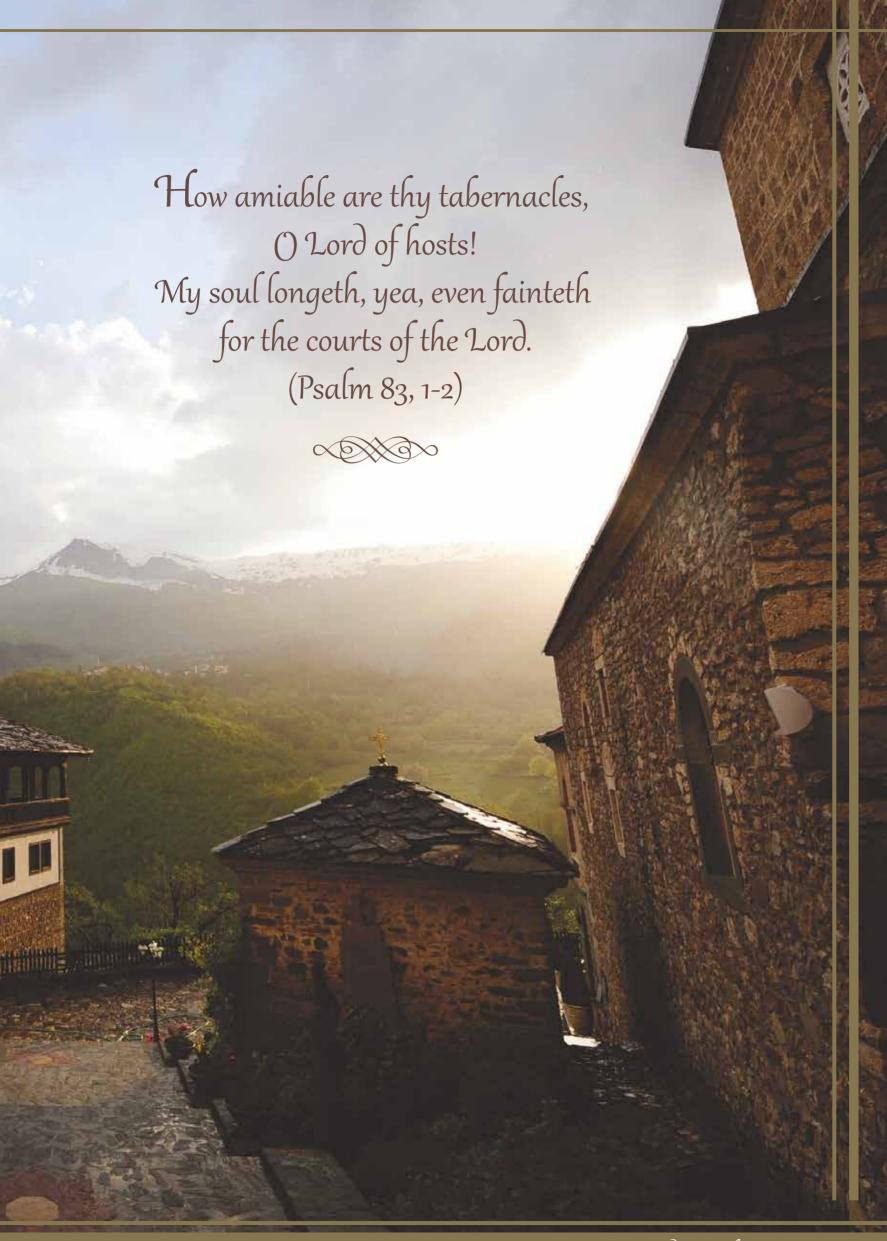
Introduction_	14
Foreword	18
Monasticism — angelic life on Earth	22
The dark communist period of the Monastery	39
The first swallows - forerunners of the spiritual spring	59
Building a home	69
As if gold purified trough fire	125
The festive consecration of Eastern and Upper Palace - a proclamation of the Bigorski Resurrection.	159
Let God arise	173
As fruitful olive trees in the Garden of God	237
The angelic image	257

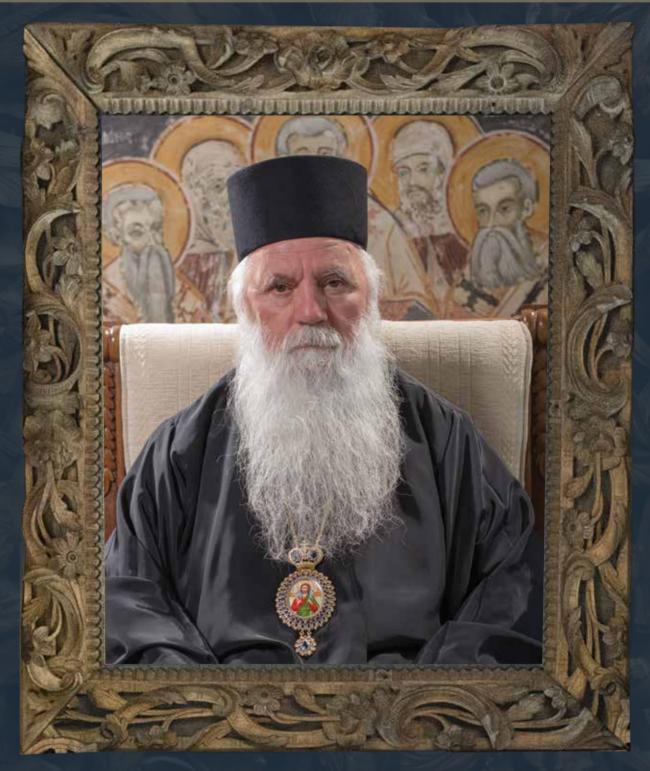












kyr Timothy, Metropolitan of Debar and Kichevo

Introduction

The Holy Orthodox Church expresses in one of the ecclesiastic chants the power and the love of our Lord towards the humankind and the entire creation, through the words: Where God desires, He overcomes the laws of Nature (dogmatic tone 7). There is no doubt that God, as a Creator and Inventor of everything created in this world and time, premeditates and governs the entire creation during the whole time of its existence. This can be confirmed by the centuries-long history of the great number of churches and monasteries in the world, and in Macedonia as well. Our country is embellished by many sanctuaries. Sanctuaries that exist for centuries and testify the power of God. One of them, with its ten centuries-long history behind, is the monastery of St John the Baptist, also known as the Bigorski Monastery. An old saying claims that life is filled with ups and downs. Such saying could also be applied to the historical development of our churches and monasteries. This Holy Monastery alone speaks of a great, primarily spiritual treasure, expressed through the cultural artistic and national treasure as well. It's the wealth which it holds and presents before its faithful. But also before all the visitors and

people of good will, lovers of the sacral, architectonic and cultural treasure of the Macedonian nation.

In its long history this Monastery had an irreplaceable cultural educational and religious influence in the nourishing and development of the Orthodox spirit, faith, tradition, language culture and everything else essential for an Orthodox nation. There aren't many monasteries in Macedonia which could proudly present such treasure as the one this Holy Monastery had in the past and still holds in its possession. Just like the other monasteries significant for the history of the Macedonian nation, the Bigorski Holy Synodia also went through a dark period which turned this Monastery into a silent cultural historical monument. Few people believed that this sanctuary would ever shine again with the same glory and spiritual beauty, which it has been endowed with by the diligent hands of our predecessors.

We have before us a collection of works, divided in two parts. The first part begins with the foreword of His Reverence, Archimandrite Parthenius, as an Abbot of the Monastery, and then continues with a number of chapters in which one can see through various aspects the chronological development of the Monastery in these past 20 years. All this is conveyed through the artistic writings of the Monastic fraternity, as well as through the essays of three Macedonian journalists, a sociologist and a theologist. The second part contains several scientific works which shed light on the cultural treasure of this Holy Monastery. The mentioned works would contribute to the revelation of certain historical moments, as well as of the great artistic treasure possessed by this Holy Bigorski Synodia. Although in 1994 certain renowned scientists already published the Collection for the Bigorski Monastery, one could never deplete all the scientific opportunities for the discovery of new documents, new facts and data, and for the revelation of the immense treasure of this Holy Monastery.

During these past 20 years of active monastic life, the Bigorski Monastery of St. John the Baptist confirmed the power and the presence of God in His Holy dwellings. The Fraternity of Bigorski not only restored the spirituality and the monastic tradition, but also extended the scope of their activities, besides in the field of architecture, reaching high architectonic and esthetic achievements, also in the field of missionary work, engaging themselves in the activities of helping many victims of addictions in their search for God and their unquenchable longing to fulfill their spiritual needs.

The life and deed of Archimandrite Parthenius only confirms the unwritten principle that where there are sincere and devout God's servants, there one could fell the abundance of God's mercy and grace, proving that what is impossible for men, is possible to God. The nineties of the past century was a period of intensified dialogues with the Government institutions regarding the restitution of confiscated churches and monastery of the Macedonian Orthodox Church. As their main argument the then authorities stressed the incapability of MOC to maintain the churches and monasteries, if they are ever restituted to it. This imaginary argument proved itself wrong, and the greatest proof of that is the reviving of the Bigorski Monastery, or as our people would say: Where there was water running once, it would no doubt run again.

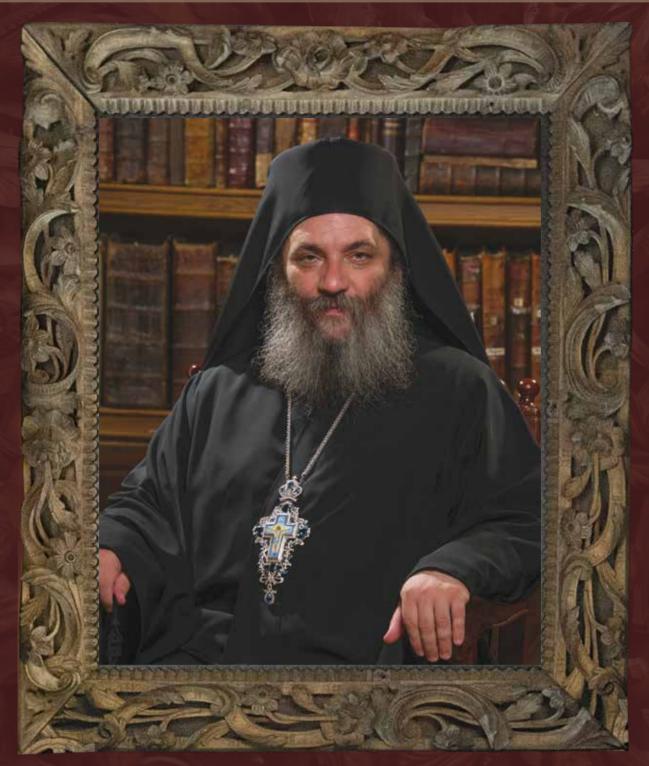
In the end I would like to express my sincere gratitude to all the authors for their efforts to mark through their writings the latest period of the life of this monastery, as well as to the authors of those scientific works which reveal the treasure of this monastery of ours, this wonderful pearl of culture, art and spirituality. We cordially recommend it to all the lovers of our monasteries, of the Macedonian culture and to all the lovers of the written works of art.

With an Archieratical blessing Metropolitan Timothy

Ment + Dersone







Archimandrite Parthenius Abbot of the Sacred Bigorski Monastery

Foreword

The Bigorski Monastery represents a great and significant part of our spiritual history. In fact, this history could not be imagined without this Sanctuary, which has always been a source of graceful and spiritual strength for the faithful Macedonian nation. Furthermore, in the glorious period of the Rebirth in the XIX century, Bigorski was even more than that, it was the heart of our nation, a zealous guardian of the Cyril and Methodius' Slavic tradition. But the unfavourable winds of the historic circumstances in the XX century gradually scattered the spiritual fruit that had been collected for centuries before, and the cold winter of communism brought spiritual desolation. So the Monastery became a silent cultural-historical monument; the monasticism, on the other hand, was referred to as something terminated, ancient and long gone.

However, our Most Kind Lord by His immense mercy and by the prayerful intercession of St. John the Baptist, wanted to resurrect again this Sanctuary of ours, so He brought us, the unworthy and humble monks, and grafted us on the roots of the previous rich monastic tradition. In a short period of time, the Bigorski Monastery

with its revived fraternity, became once again a powerful spiritual beacon, a true spring of Orthodox spirituality. Here even the common visitor cannot stay indifferent to the grace that can be felt in the air, because of the prayers of generations and generations of monks, who have consecrated this place, but also because of the present feats and efforts of the new Synodia. Here the faithful have found a spiritually inspiring well of grace where they draw the much needed graceful strength for their personal spiritual feat in this world of various temptations, in this modern atheistic time. Our humble monastic Synodia, which is an offspring and fruit of the repentance of this nation, following humbly the path of obedience and love for the sake of Christ, slowly took its essential place in the revival of the spiritual life of this Church. Thus, strengthened by the prayers and protection of its great Patron Saint, this centuries-old Sanctuary of ours with its Synodia has become an example to follow and an agent of a new spiritual rebirth, especially now, when we need it more than ever. So seeing now the first results of this rebirth, we remember with great zeal the words of Christ, expressed in the Gospel: I am come to send fire on the earth; and what will I, if it be already kindled? (Luke 12, 49) In a similar way, inspired by the same wish, we place our prayerful hopes before the Most Merciful God, with the firm belief that He would continue to kindle in us the eagerness to testify the Evangelic truth, so this spiritual rebirth would spread all over our nation as a burning flame. That is, after all, the true mission of the Bigorski monk — to present to God as a gift a multitude of repented people, a great number of followers, educated and ascertained in the mission of Christ. In his heart one can see the aim of monkhood written — to cry, to pray, love in the manner of Christ and for His sake, away from the comfort and amenities of this world.

These short 20 years of monastic feat are nothing compared to the eternity we have been offered as a gift, the effort is incomparable to the prize which God has prepared for His faithful servants. But we have decided to mark this 20th anniversary, not to praise ourselves, our praise is in God, but in order to present the fruit of revived monkhood, to leave a testimony and thus glorify the great monastic lineage that we belong to. The history can testify just how much the monasticism, this radiance of the holiness of our Mother Church and its most wonderful offspring, has contributed for the flourishing of this Church. So in addition to this we humbly offer our small contribution which our monkhood has made for the spiritual awakening of the Macedonian people in these past 20 years. In a way we feel responsibility towards the future generations to convey to them the past experience, as well as the knowledge for monkhood and its great spiritual value, so that they don't repeat the same mistakes from the atheistic period, when the monasticism was considered a socially negative phenomenon. In fact, being aware of what's been happening in the world in the past decades, we cannot but feel worried for the future of mankind, due to the devastating spirit of changes which the new age brings upon us. For that reason today the mission of monasticism is even more essential and salvatory for the world.

I convey my warmest gratitude towards our most respected Archiereus and spiritual shepherd of this God-protected Diocese, His Eminence the Metropolitan of Debar and Kichevo Diocese, Mr. Timothy, for his versatile support in these past 20 years in which he, guided by his strong love for God, and just as strong love for monasticism, as well as by his sincere paternal care for us, contributed greatly so that the Monastery could become what it is today — a real spiritual fortress and a firm pillar of our Holy Ohrid Archbishopric.

I would also like to thank all those who out of great love and care have invested themselves in this monumental edition through their research and work, thus assisting us in the enrichment of the Macedonian scientific literature and giving their testimony of the experience they had from the encounter with the Bigorski Monastery and monks.

But above all, I'm most grateful to the Trinitarian God Who has summoned me the unworthy and the last among the monks to guide spiritually in this turbulent time the Holy Bigorski Synodia and humbly carry the cross of serving my neighbour. Asking for the prayers of all the readers of this book, of all my spiritual children, I convey my prayers to the All-Merciful Saviour, so that He could give me strength to accomplish, without embarrassment, my feat to the very end, and to be able to give a good account of the deed He has summoned me for

years jubilee of revived monasticism





Monasticism – angelic life on Earth



onfused before the secret of monastic life, the contemporary world helplessly wanders through the labyrinths of its empty logics, looking for an answer to a very frequent

question: Why monasticism? This world arrogantly displays before the young man all its pleasures and temptations, all its knowledge and secrets, all the commodities and vain beauties, and feels offended when the young man rejects all that, leaves behind even his closest ones and goes far away to some secluded monastery, to live a life of complete abstinence, self-denial and solitude. What is the purpose of all that? For those who reason by the flesh and live their life in plentitude of leisure and egocentric pleasures, it's really hard to grasp and understand this mystical longing of the young soul, this thirst that cannot be quenched by all the pleasures the world offers. And lacking of an answer, they arrogantly and almost presumptuously declare their judgment of monasticism: escape from responsibilities, egoism, self-centeredness, absence of love...

Certainly, the empty logics of futile human reasoning cannot reach the essence of monastic feat, that hidden Divine treasury. Cannot because this profound spiritual mystery is revealed only to the humble and pure heart, in which the Divine spark has enkindled and burns

with the flame of Divine love. The spiritual gates open to this heart and the graceful light shines through and in the midst of this light, all worldly things look different. Everything fades, loses its importance, becomes worthless when compared to our gentle Lord. Together with the Holy Apostle Paul, it gives its testimony: Yea doubtlesse, and I count all things but losse, for the excellencie of the knowledge of Christ Iesus my Lord: for whom I have suffered the losse of all things, and doe count them but doung, that I may win Christ (Phil. 3, 8). And the soul suddenly feels enslaved, as if in a drie and thirstie lande (Psalms 63, 1), and even if it could hold the whole universe in the palm of his hands, he would still be displeased, because no one and nothing can quench this thirst for God, Who calls upon everybody: If any man thirst, let him come unto me, and drink (John 7, 37).

It is hard to find words for what happens then. Elated by Divine love, which pours abundantly upon you, you listen to the quiet whisper of grace in your heart and as if the Saviour Himself speaks to you: Follow me (John 1, 43). Then you go back to the history in your mind and you realize: for 2000 years already the God-Logos, Who is ever living and Who summoned the Apostles for a Divine service, still continues to invite the chosen ones who sincerely love Him and constantly seek for Him. He inspires the hearts with this mystical invocation and everybody follows without hesitation, just as the Apos-

tles followed Him, leaving their parents and relatives behind.

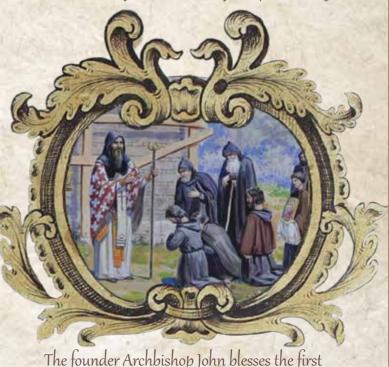
And it becomes apparently clear that the gentle, merciful and philanthropic Lord has dignified you, the small, weak, sinful you, has chosen you from the world and invited you to His heavenly army here on Earth. He has invited you not so that you can find peace and security, but rather to give your contribution to the invisible combat against the evil, combat constantly going on inside the human heart. With the feeling of unworthiness, but with a strong desire to serve the Lord, similarly to the Apostles you abandon your parents' home, your friends, all the possibilities the world offers, all the things that once meant so much to you, and ignoring all the vanities of the world, you take upon yourself the angelic image and follow the path of our Saviour, the path of self-crucifixion and remaining before the Cross of the Lord.

And you can already sense the importance of this blessed deed the Lord has assigned you with, but also the difficulty of the feat you are facing: because you have been given a chance to testify every day with your life, as a witness - martyr, the good news of victory over death. In your continuous feat of self-crucifying, along with the crucified God-Logos, every day on the cross of voluntary passion, you mortify the old sinful person within you, chained by the shackles of the biological law of our fallen and sinful nature. To each vice you oppose a virtue: instead of gluttony – fasting; instead of carnal lust - chastity; instead of pride and vanity - humbleness; and you bury all your desires and demands in the ground of blessed obedience and self-denial. Until your innate forces distorted by sin are mended and restored by the Divine grace itself, and are given their natural and primary aim and meaning. Give blood and receive the Spirit.

This battle is not an easy one and requires a great deal of effort at prayer and complete humbleness on the part of the monastic, because it is directed against the forces of sin, which aim at diseasing and infecting the human personality with their sinful sting, so that this personality in its fallen state without Christ, becomes just a mask, a tragic presentation of the Divine image damaged by sin. Therefore the monk has to constantly force himself to suppress his nature, to strive in order to

restore and find in himself the original beauty, that the New Adam — Christ reestablished, transforming the fallen image of the old Adam. In his battle against its powerful enemy: the sin and dark demonic powers, he offers everything he owns as a sacrifice, crucifies himself on the cross of absolute devotion to the Lord, humbles himself, contrite in the awareness of his own weaknesses. In this way he attracts the Divine grace, because it is the only way for him to overcome the power of sin.

But all this suffering and burden of the monastic cross, is softened by the tranquil hope and joy of the eternal comfort, hidden inside the cross, as its deepest secret. Because for those who obediently carry their cross with love and humbleness, sharing completely the same destiny with his Lord, all the way to the death on the Cross, there is only one thing important: to become participants in His Resurrection as well. And thus, to become also a coinheritor of eternal life - the new creation, which as an ever-living leaven leavens the entire creation mortified by sin, lamenting and grieving in the shackles of sin. Clad in the black garment of repentance and deeply broken by prayerful mourning, this spiritual pearl, transfigured by the Divine grace, becomes a real earthly angel and heavenly man, glowing with the light of his virtues. He doesn't lure himself with the false lights around him, but rather directs his entire attention to his Lord and his neighbor. With the Divine love, flaming in his heart, he joins the choirs of angels, the fortress of Orthodoxy, above which the Holy Cross rises. And in every ordeal, in every temptation he fac-



The founder Archbishop John blesses the first Bigorski monks (a scene of the great Reception Hall)

es, he constantly reminds himself of the love of Christ and His Kingdom to come. His life, seemingly fruitless and dry, shines with the strength of vital optimism and hope. As fresh water in the midst of the deepest desert, he becomes as a never-ending spring of joy, which supplies the thirsty and burdened souls with the new vital hope and faith.

And as absurd as it might seem, still everybody agrees upon this: The very person who out of love for God has abandoned the world and sin, having crucified them within himself, becomes this transforming power to resurrect the world from the evil in which it lies. With his prayers, tears and ascetic efforts, quietly and unpretentiously changing himself, the monk mysteriously transforms the world as well, becoming thus a collaborator of Christ in the mission of saving the world. That's because for the monk who has managed to cleanse his heart from the pestilent desires through the everyday efforts of monastic life, the entire creation attains a completely different meaning. He doesn't despise the world, but rather

envisions it through the light of Christ's Resurrection, in the perspective of transformed beauty in the eternity, thus giving it an incorruptible and endlessly profound value. Therefore the attitude of the monk towards the world is not the one of total avarice and selfishness, typical for the atheistic modern man. Inspired by his self-sacrificing and compassionate love, similarly to the incarnated God-Logos, Who out of His infinite altruism clad Himself in a mortal body and suffered for us, the monk takes upon himself all the grieves and pains of the world, co-suffering with the entire Universe. That's why it was not accidental that in the troparions of the great ascetic St. Antonius is said: "Thy prayer sustains the Universe". The prayers of monks constantly rise before the Throne of God, as a sweet-smelling spiritual incense, thus achieving for all the suffering people in the world a relief in their misfortune. And so much more than that. Their prayerful interceding fortifies, as if with strong walls, the earthly fatherland as well, protecting it from every enemy and dark evil.



A Litany with the miraculous icon of St. John the Baptist

And there are no words to describe the love with which the monk PRITA MO spiritually embraces every HAXY CY human being, seeing in him a reflection of the Divine image. No matter who he might be, what he might be like, where he might be from, for the monk he is just a misfortunate creation of God, intoxicated by sin, who is probably unaware of his own mortal disease. Who could remain indifferent to this unearthly love of the monastic heart, expressing the entire plentitude of his love towards God through his love for the neighbor!? That's because only those who have attained the One Philanthropist — Christ, can truly love others. Maybe that's the reason why the secluded monastic dwellings have turned so quickly into shelters of consolation and new hope for the entire Universe, like small pieces of Heaven, glittering in the darkness of the so-called secular valley of tears.

The monasteries - these holy treasuries where the Orthodox dogmas are inviolably preserved - sources of true piety and nobility, keepers of the unique spiritual tradition and salvational mission, today have become true oases of joy and love for the modern man, spiritually depleted and exhausted by sin. They are the kernel of life, ornaments of the Earth, holy sanctuaries, vision for the blind, a telescope for those who want to look in the distance, horns for those who listen, altars with mystical light and joy. Here people really progress as useful members of the Body of Christ, in love and service, with diligence and prayer, with joyful participation in the Divine services, because here the praising of our beloved Christ nev-

er ceases. So here, the people together with the monks constantly strive at climbing the spiritual ladder in order to achieve the desired Kingdom of Heaven. Therefore, for those who have sincerely and from the bottom of their heart begun to love the One Life-Giver, the monastery becomes a true monastic Jerusalem, holy metropolis, land of saints, equal to Heaven by grace. It is an especial MAÉHIE C sacristy available to us all, where all our spiritual experience and weap-WHEHOW8 ons are kept. It is a wine-skin for the new wine, a wheat barn for the APIE, HOOF Bread of Life, a shield for safe looking at the Sun and at the spiritual TIOCA= stars. After Christ, His Holy Mother and the Saints, second glory of the Sun and second glory of the Moon and stars. Our Lord, the Son of Men Himself, has spoken: This is the place of my throne, and the place of the soles of my feet, where I will dwell in the midst of the children of Israel for ever (Ezekiel 43, 7).



Т'Я ПОЯЧЕ

HIE MONH

тва расх





Sacred Bigorski Monastery





Sacred Bigorski Monastery





Empress accept the supplication of your servant...



The flowery tomb of Christ on Holy Friday



The Holy Light



Always rejoice in God, and I repeat: rejoice (Phil. 4, 4)



The diligent monastic hands



We offer You praises Christ, our Lord...



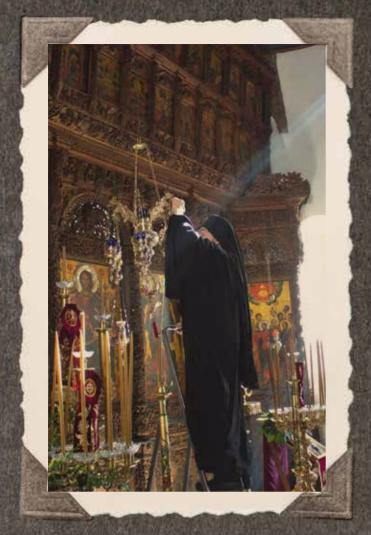
The holy relics



The monastic love tames the beasts



I will praise my Lord as long as I live...



Zealous service preparation in the church



Obedience is a source of joy



Christ is risen!



Festive litany



In harmony with nature



A meal of love

The candle goes before the Light, announces the coming of the Ray of Righteousness, for the renewal of all and the salvation of our souls

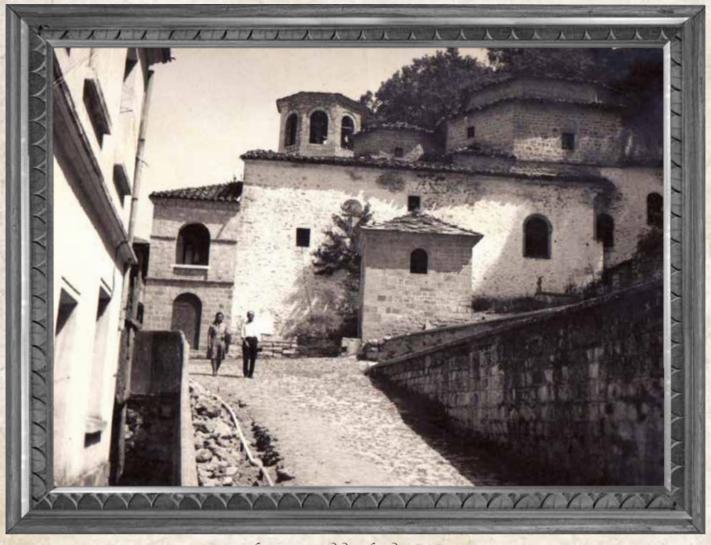




Sacred Bigorski Monastery



The dark communist period of the Monastery



The empty and desolated sanctuary



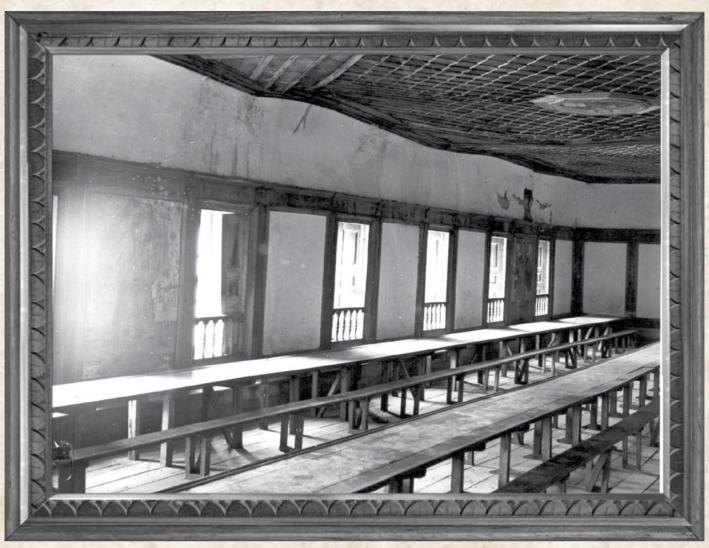
istory is not just a sum of facts. No, history resembles an experienced grizzled elder, sat near an enkindled fireplace, musing on memories, narrating to his descendants, curiously gathered around him, the stories

of his long and unusual life. The stories are beautiful, but some of them are sad. Oh, how much he would like to forget the poignant moments of the past and not to bring to mind the old wounds, still not completely healed, that over and over again restore in him that same once experienced pain. Yes, it is hard to narrate about things that hurt, to inspect into the distressing memories from the past, but how otherwise could he fully transfer the acquired experience to his young predecessors, the experience he would rather protect them from, and that is why he must advise them, so that they, being aware, would

not repeat the same mistakes from the past.

And the elder, wrapped in pain, narrates about the dark, atheistic times, the years of an apparent liberty, but actually times of the hardest slavery of the soul, times of cunning and systematic killing of faith and spirit, moral dignity and tradition of our nation, all that manipulatively wrapped in the eternal ideals of fraternity and unity, equality and parity. Under the influence of the poisonous atheism, so openly and eloquently preached by the wicked and self-declared atheists of the new era, the moral and devoutness of our people disappeared, the Divine spark was extinguished...The national soul being alienated from the One Who redeemed humankind with His impeccable blood, slowly but surely sank in a quiet spiritual death. Because the one who does not love God, he actually loves death, sin and the devil.

The false teachers of the nation, in their intransigent persecution of the Church and Christ, did not choose means for the accomplishment of their goals. They didn't spare even the innocent children's souls.



The previous look of the monastery Refectory

Using foul figments and lies, scorns, insults and contempt, they expelled Christ from their hearts, and in His place sowed the seed of the poisonous and destructive heresy, making them a fruit of sin and a gain of death. How insane is the one who likes the rays but hates the Sun, loves the water drops, but hates the spring, loves the material world and yet hates its Creator. Indeed, the proud materialists, scientists and pedagogues who thought that they could erase the Lord from their lives and from the world, actually erased themselves from the Book of Life, taking to doom all those innocent young souls that they misguided with their deceits.

Yes, our youth, our bright future was the greatest victim of that atheistic and dark time. Without that centuries-old Christian family education and without the sublime and divine moral, they were mercilessly being pushed into the flame of the communist disbelief and immorality, in which all the traces of their former devout souls were irretrievably burnt down. The atheistic leaders took care to suppress

every single pious thought and to replace it with the atheistic spirit and vilifying and impure thoughts, while every aspiration for good deeds was transformed into tendency to sin and insults of God.

So bearing this in mind, it hurts that the Bigorski monastery - the lighthouse of knowledge and the true teacher of Divine wisdom, having turned into a boarding school for young people and an educational institution in 1946,' was the one that became a silent witness of that terrible, moral degradation and desolation, of that everyday covert violence over the young fragile souls. Such a tragedy! All these young people that the Bigorski sanctuary accepted into its embrace and opened to them the doors of its spiritual treasury, were instructed by their teachers to look with contempt on the holy monastery and

¹ Immediately after the Second World War and the arrival of the communist authorities, the monastery was transformed into a boarding school and a center for pre military training. At the same time, the monastery's estates were taken over by the state and given to the cooperative society. The monastery was functioning as a boarding school even during the time of the last monk and abbot of the monastery - Fr. Spyridon (+1948), and so it was up to 1950 when the monastery was completely abandoned and left deserted. The estates remained property of the cooperative society up to the moment of denationalization in 2001.





its sacred objects, which were a powerful sermon for eternity. Indoctrinated in such a way, these young people were supposed to gradually be transformed into enemies of everything the monastery stood for: the unquenchable faith in the One God and the infinite Divine love. In the false light of the atheistic science, the monastery represented just an old building; the temple was a useless area, and the sacred icons - insignificant pictures. The icons were removed from the monastic quarters and thrown into the dark, desolated basements and in their place, the new communist ideology set their recognizable iconography - the pictures of Marx, Engels, Lenin, Stalin, Tito and certainly the well - known red five pointed star that was painted on the very entrance of the monastery. In such an atheistic atmosphere believers almost did not come, at all, but even the rare ones, who would dare to come, were impudently insulted and considered as primitive people worthy of disdain.

Oh, if the monastic walls could only speak! What distressful stories would they narrate to us! On these walls a tragic event will remain written forever, a shocking testimony of just how much evil a young soul can hold within, when the Divine love is killed in it, leaving place in it only for carnal passions and desires, from which nothing can grow, except brambles and knotgrass of sin. Namely, in the year 1946 an unusual visitor appeared at the monastery, for the atheistic youth an incarnation of everything that the new ideology was fighting against. That was the noble Christian woman Iconia Jackovlevska, an honorable woman from the Reka region, who came to the monastery with concern and great hope, inspired by her strong and adamant faith and the wish to help her diseased grandchild. It is indescribable what she experienced then, the terror she faced, the anger of the perverted and impudent young boys, their scornful exclamations, insulting sneers and mockery, while she was humbly walking towards the church followed by the enraged crowd. However, having unwavering courage and disregarding the scorns and insults, she entered the church, stood still in front of the miraculous icon and from within her self-sacrificing heart came an affectionate prayer towards



The last Abbot Fr. Spyridon († 1948)

Christ and His glorious Forerunner. She prayed in such manner for a long time, pouring out all her pain to the Healer of human souls and bodies, while behind her she could hear the heavy insults and degrading shouts. But all this did not affect her, and her undisturbed tranquility irritated and provoked the disbelievers even more. Silently, without saying a word, she left the monastery and started descending towards the woodland region below to the spring with holy water "The Zoodochos Pigi (Fount of Life)" that was her last hope for the grandchild. At that very moment, as if all the evil sprung at her. It seemed like all that shouting and scorn was not enough for those furious boys. While the old woman was descending down the narrow path, hidden from their looks by the greenery of the forest, they started to throw stones imprudently, with the intention to frighten her. However, one of the stones accidently hit her on the head and killed the unfortunate woman. Having merely the intention to mock and humiliate her faith, the young communists became the cause of a major crime. But this was just one more, for them an insignificant case in the list of anonymous victims of the brutal communist regime².

Yes, this dark history really needs to be known, so it would never be repeated again. We are obliged not to forget all those courageous martyrs who laid down their lives, professing their faith at the time when the majority of people, already reconciled with the evil, disdained the truth of Christ.

As a matter of fact, the Bigorski sanctuary begun its way to Golgotha long before, as early as in the Ottoman occupation, when on several occasions, the Turks cut to the root the monastic tree, so it arduously and with great efforts grew new sprigs, in spite of everything, not allowing to be completely suffocated by the disbelieving rage. On the contrary, martyrdom became the seed for a new flourishing, and the tree sprouted the new branches up in the sky, becoming a spiritual shelter to the much suffering people. However, what the evil of Hagara's descendants could not do, slowly but surely was done during

² By Divine Providence the tragedy of this woman was revealed to the new brotherhood at the time when her grandchildren came to the monastery and narrated this incident to the monks. In that way, her name, origins and a precise description of the event were preserved in the monastic archives.

all those fratricidal wars among the Balkan Christian countries, the hatred and conflicts between the different ecclesiastical jurisdictions that led to a gradual decrease of our monasticism in the first half of XX century. Eventually, the atheistic communist waters that penetrated in, completely demolished the fruitful soil that could no longer produce new sprouts to continue the monastic kind. When the last monk and Abbot, the venerable father Spyridon, who was continually being mocked, humiliated and insulted by the hopeful communist youth and future builders of the "progressive" society, died in 1948, the monastic life in Bigorski ceased completely. Thus, the Bigorski sanctuary, this eternal guard of our people and a sacred dwelling of the national consciousness, this living sanctuary of people's faith and unquestionable confirmation of the sublime Macedonian spirit; which even in the hardest times of its glorious past, guided our nation on the path of absolute and eternal values of Christian culture and tradition, the center of the national Enlightenment and progenitor of our glorious leaders of the national Revival, in the new communist state become a place of sin and immorality. Because the church is a place for prayer and if it loses this primary purpose, it will immediately turn into a bandit cave. And in vain the voice of the Savior resounded in the despised sanctuary, as once in the glorious Jerusalem temple: My house shall be called of all nations the house of prayer? But ye have made it a den of thieves (Mark 11:17). There was no one to hear His voice. Instead of monks, some unknown people without any respect and fear of God treaded the monastic yards, people who did care much about the sanctity of the monastery, because for the atheistic mind nothing is sacred.

One can comprehend the shock of the devotional priest from Ohrid, Fr. George Nikoloski when he noticed the ultimate disregard and disrespect of the new authorities towards the monastic sanctity and the holy objects of major spiritual and artistic values, which he was able to notice during his occasional visits to the monastery. Many years later, when after the revival, he visited the monastery again, he was emotionally touched to tears of affability by the



A scull from the monastery ossuary

view of the lit oil lamps in the church that warmed his heart and made him remember many distressful memories from those communist times. Fr. George, with grief in his heart, told to the new monks in the monastery about the old painted and very expensive Epitaphios which he noticed wrapped around a barrel with lime. He was horrified by that desecration! He could not believe that something so sacred and valuable, such a beautiful painted Epitaphios, a real rarity and a significant spiritual, cultural and historic artefact could be used by the neglectful hand of the atheists as a cover for some filthy barrel. The scene perplexed his soul. Then, the zeal for God and the love towards His sacred objects induced him to a very bold action: he bent down slowly, unwrapped

the Epitaphios, hiding it under his mantle and took

it out of the monastery without being noticed. On another occasion, not being able to watch the atheists carelessly throwing the holy crosses and silver cherubs into the church, he took good care of the holy objects and carried them out to a safer place. In this way the Epitaphios was saved, and now it enriches the residence of the Diocese of Debar and Kichevo and some of the sacred objects are placed in the altar place of St. Sophia in Ohrid. In addition, one cannot but marvel at the way the cross of the Bigorski Abbots, which by tradition was handed over from one to another abbot, was preserved. This very cross, was carried out of the monastery by the pious former guard Veljo, who wanted to protect it from the communists, so he kept the cross in his house for a long time. When the new Archbishop, Dositheus, came to visit the monastery, Veljo handed him the cross, with the request: that this precious cross be given to the future abbot of Bigorski. After that, Metropolitan Timothy was entrusted with the cross, until finally, by God's Providence, it come to its proper place, when the Metropolitan of Debar and Kichevo, Mr. Timothy, handed the cross over to the present Abbot, Archimandrite Parthe-

the Holy Table from sacrilege. Some atheistic and utterly unscrupulous and greedy people totally dug up the Holy Table, seeking for some kind of a buried treasure, while the holy relics in it were taken out and lost forever. A similar sacrilege happened to the relics from the monastic ossuary. Without any respect for the deceased, the supporters of the new atheistic ideology exploited these holy bones as a simple study material and props for the then students of medicine. The sculls were available to anyone, unscrupulously carried out from the monastery, scattered around, taken to all kinds of

3 An evidence for the authenticity of the Abbot's cross, which after the revival of monastic life was handed down to Fr. Parthenius, is an old photograph, in which, Fr. Athanasius (Fr. Tashko), the former prior of the monastery (1925-1941), wears the cross on his chests.

medical institutions, their tracks being lost forever. What a horrible distress for the deceased! There was no peace for their old bones. Those few that remained, were buried again under the very floor of the ossuary and thus preserved. And just how many old archives, rare icons, priceless relics, important documents and ancient woodcarvings were destroyed, sold and robbed. One cannot evaluate the spiritual and cultural treasure that disappeared irretrievably in the whirlpool of communist devastation. Maybe, not a single letter or a document would

have remained, if it wasn't for the noble heart of an unknown benefactor, who hid in a chest a significant part of the monastery archives and in this way transported it to the National

Archives.

And as if there was no end to those dark and distressful times for the Bigorski sanctuary. Years went by, slowly and imperceptibly, people came and left, and yet, in

Bigorski the same sorrowful image:
old half-decaying walls, broken doors, empty rooms, pale
shadows of the former rich
Macedonian-Byzantine architecture. In spite of all that misery and devastation, atheistic
hands still stretched towards
the monastery; not the caring or

concerned ones, but rather predatory and negligent, hands that destroyed and plundered whatever they could,

until the monastery was brought to the edge of total ruin.

Not even then, the all too merciful Lord, being patient to the very end, did he turn his face away from His misguided people. He was tirelessly seeking for at least a single divine spark, a bit of love, just a small piece of fertile soil, so that He could plant His noble seed. And finally, His long-lasting patience gave results in the hearts of some noble people among the communist authorities of that time, from the village of Galichnik, who got inspired with a desire to save the holy Bigorski monastery from the

terrible destiny of decaying. So finally, the authori- the ravenous hands of foreigners, this proud nation ties turned their eyes on this glorious centuries-old simply buried itself in the dying monasteries, exactly lighthouse of our Christian nation, and perceived, if the place where it drew its life-giving power from. nothing else, at least its cultural importance. Part-

Still, that little renovation which was carried out durly renovated, the monastery became a cultural and ing this period was sufficient enough for the monas-



The ancient aghiazma (holy water spring) below the Monastery

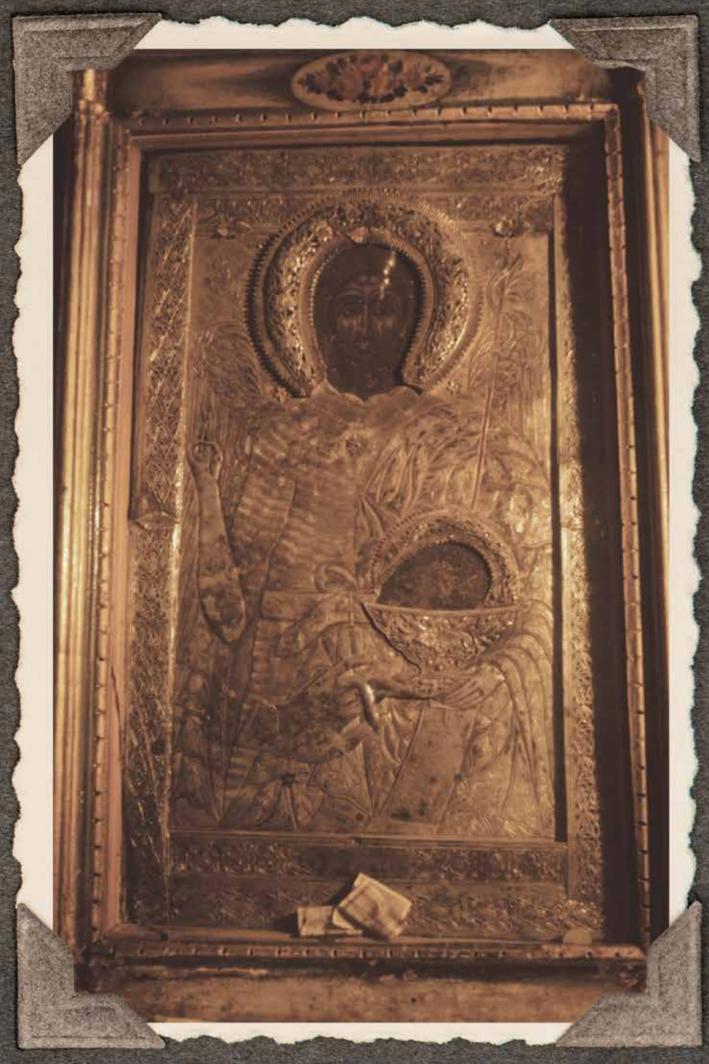
historic monument, a museum of antiquities, more of tery to survive somehow. That small material renewa tombstone, where the faith of a nation was buried⁵. What an irony! The nation that has always been an example of the unconquered and insubordinate spirit, a sprit that was born from the fervent faith and immense love for the homeland, inherited as a legacy of our ancestors who defended it with their blood from

al, which by the prayers of the holy Forerunner, took place in the seventies of the previous century was actually a realization of God's will to save this sanctuary for some other time, which was to come; when the oil lamps in the church would light up again and the prayer as a sweet-smelling insence would rise up towards the Lord. While the feet of the wicked trampled the stones of Bigorski sanctuary sanctified by prayer, the holy Forerunner patiently waited for this time to

4 In the year 1964, the State Institute for protection of cultural and historic monuments conducted a photo-archiving of the state monastery was in. The photographs show that Bigorski was on the edge of decay. Two decades later, in 1981 the Institute completed a partial restoration of the hospice "Upper Palace". The abovementioned photographic material was also used for the purpose of the authentic restoration of the referred hospice which was destroyed in a fire in 2009.

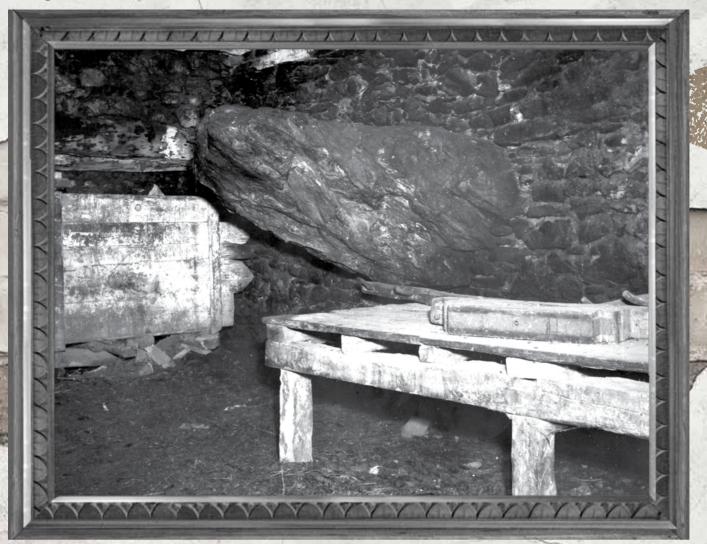
 $5\,ln\,1981,$ for the first time, the Institute also carried out the process of fumigation in the temple with a purpose to protect the iconostasis and the other woodcarvings, as well as the valuable icons. At that time, the post for guards was introduced in the monastery which started functioning as a museum. It was returned under the authority of the Macedonian Orthodox Church as late as in 1991, with the decision of the Government of the Republic of Macedonia. During 1994, experts from the State Institute for protection of cultural and historic monuments conducted a conservation and restoration process of the wall fresco painting in the big refectory.





The sad look of the miraculous icon

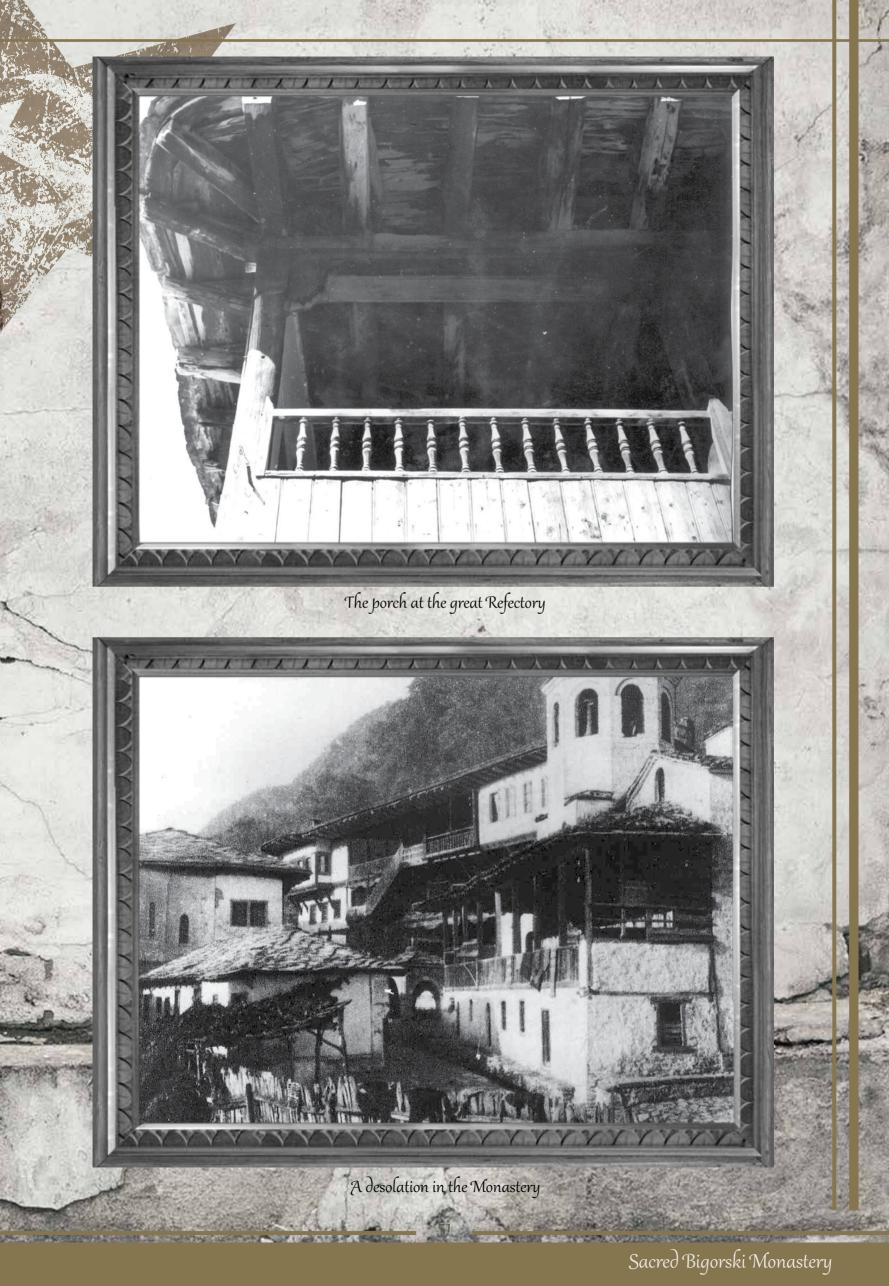




The bakery at the verge of destruction

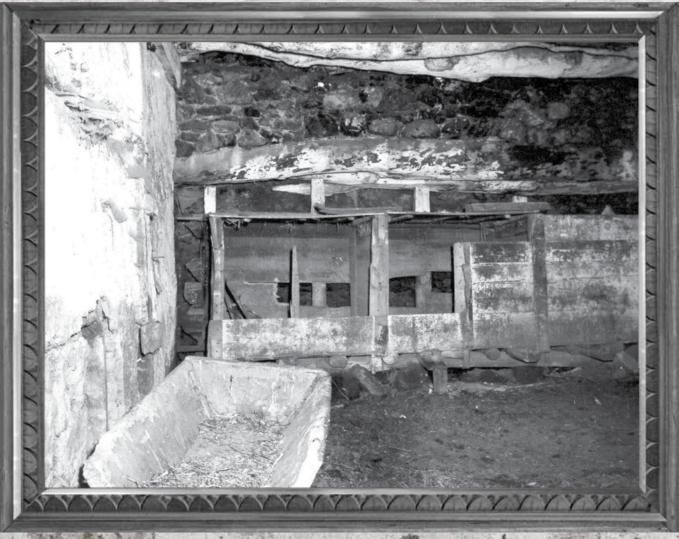


What was left of the main kitchen

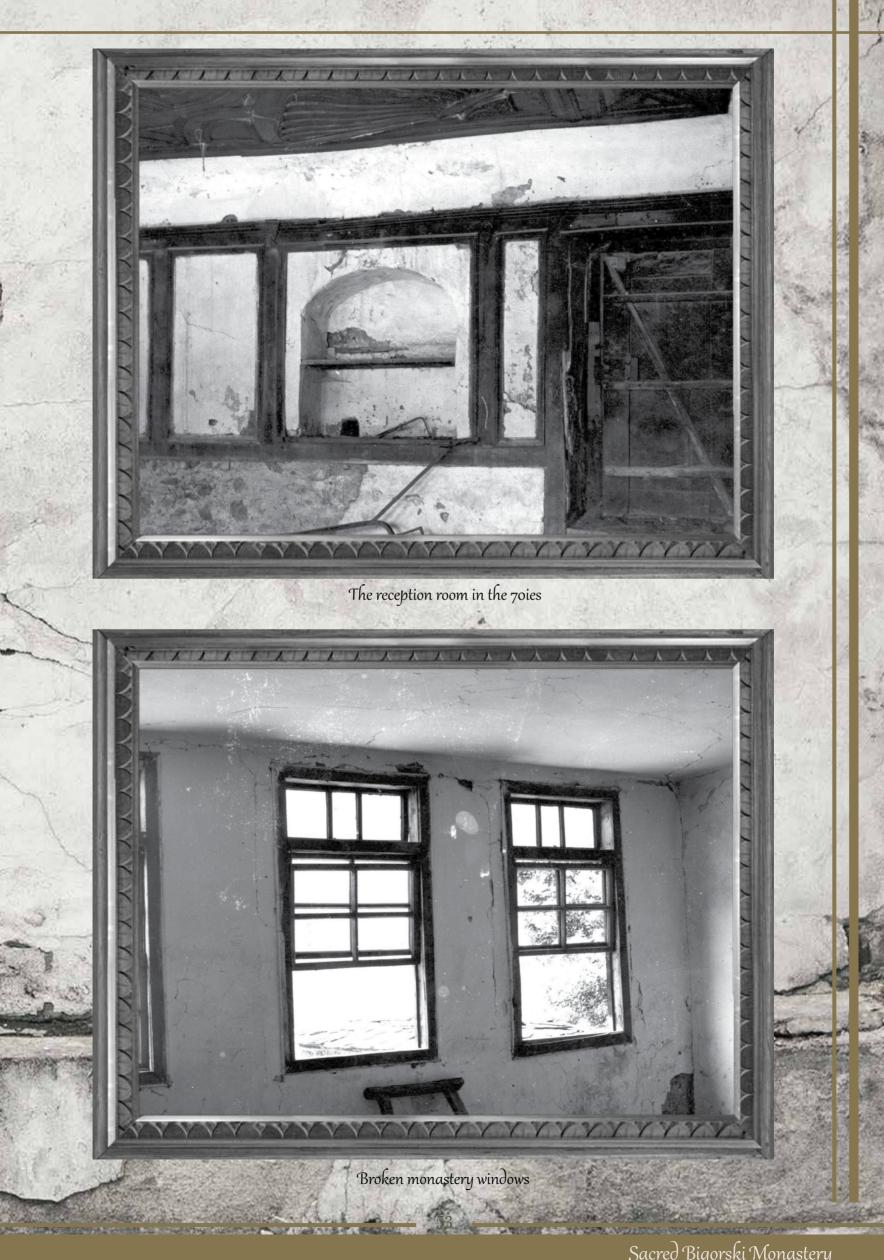


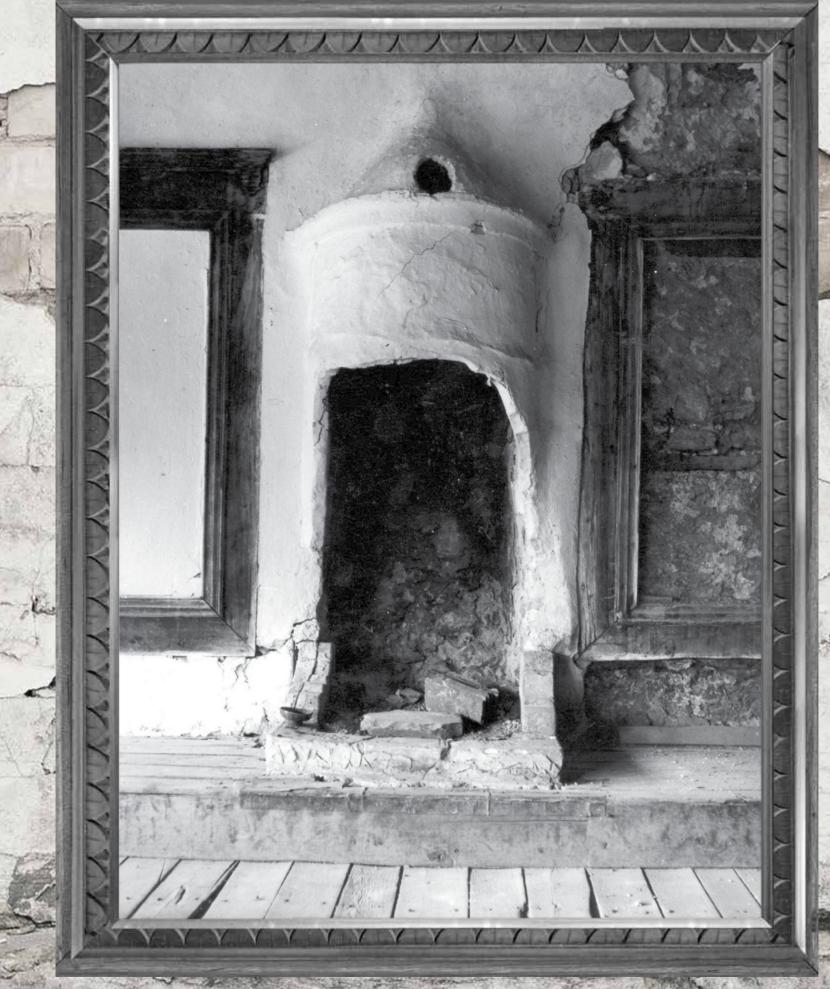


The Refectory entrance

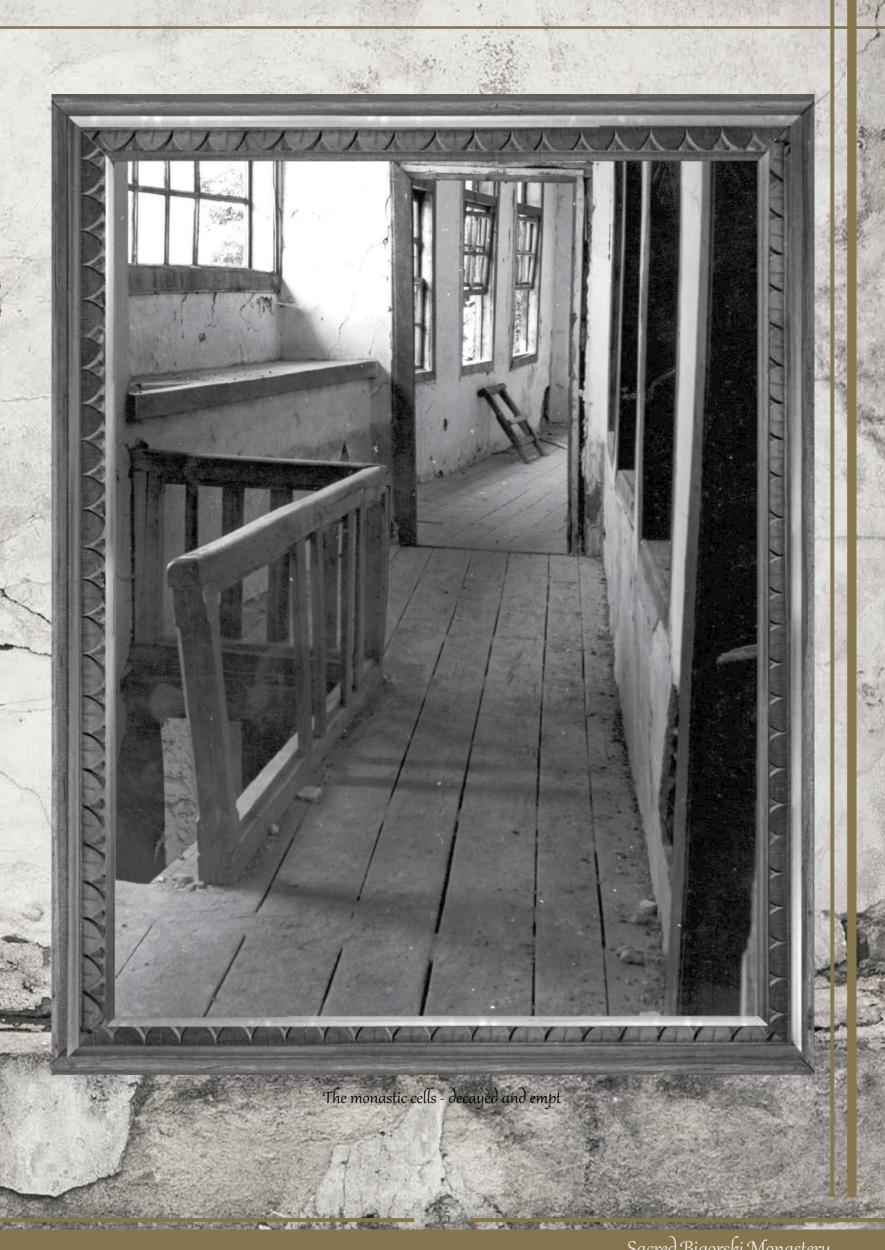


The previous bakery turned into a goat barn



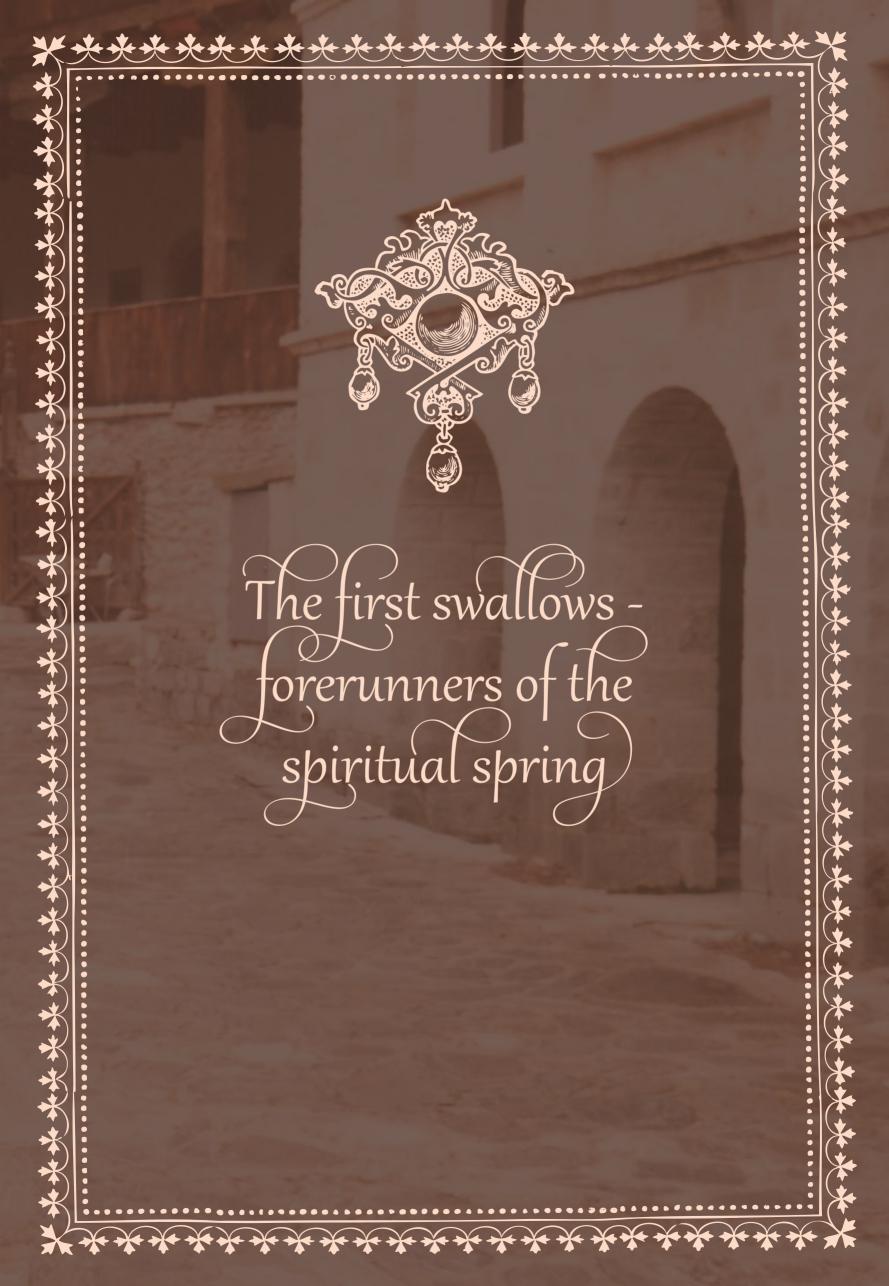


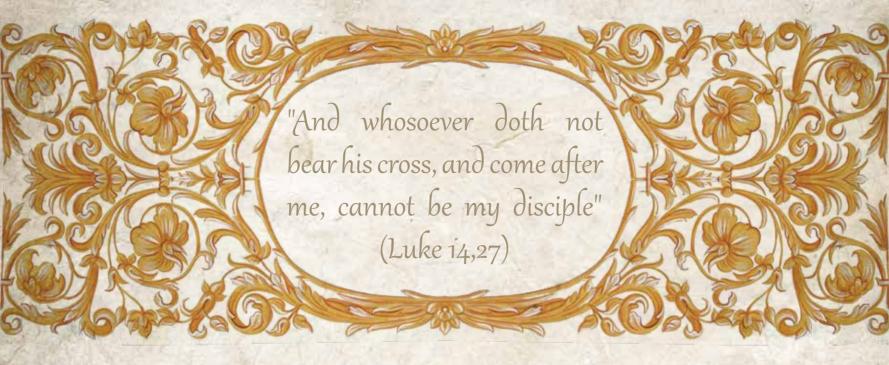
Remains of the fireplace













hey say that a single swallow does not make the spring. Maybe it doesn't but it certainly announces it. And what good news would that be for the nature still bound in the

shackles of ice! The tender song of this bird announces the nature that the imprisonment will finally end and that it will be liberated from the cold, wintry bonds of death. Just now, soon, sooner than you think, the gentle breath of the wind will awaken nature from its sleep, springs will burst out and the life-giving bountiful flows will run to dissolve its frozen veins, a new life will perk

Such a good news for the spiritually dying and forgotten Bigorski sanctuary, was the arrival of the current Abbot, Archimandrite Parthenius, from the Athonite monastery of St. Gregory in 1995. Father Parthenius, as the first swallow, cut through the darkness with his mighty spiritual wings, showing the path to his future winged descendants, and announcing long awaited spiritual spring. Because till then, the monastery was like a land in a snowy region, confined in the ice cold bosoms of the futile irreverence. Like a neglected vineyard that once produced young vine sprouts and yielded sweet fruits, but the unscrupulous and wicked people broke in, so the vineyard fence was torn down, the young sprouts cut by the atheistic ideology, the life-giving fountain —

devastated and the tower converted into a bandit cave. And now the time has come for the spring Sun of God's grace to shine again, the ice of hostility to melt down, the land to be awakened, and to flourish with the loveliest, fragrant flower of monasticism. That's exactly what this first swallow of the new spring announced, together with his first fellow-brother, the hierodeakon Hilarion', and the holy monastery, being awaken from the winter sleep, flashed with a new splendor and joyfully welcomed its long-expected residents, offering them all its hidden spiritual beauties.

Finally a resurrection after the heavy Golgotha cross of communism. Finally the time has come for the Baptist and Forerunner of the Lord, so now, rejoicing in inexpressible delight, he embraced fatherly the new spiritual offspring, the new saplings who immediately grafted themselves on the old spiritual roots of the rich monastic tradition. And not only grafted, but also blossomed right away and spread their fragrant spring scent, which as the sweet-smelling incense filling in the temple, spread all over the country, announcing to the modern man the joy of salvation in Christ: "The true spring day shone and all the creation is reborn, by the devotional cognition of the life-giving Christ".

The warm rays of the blazing Sun of the new spring flashed, dissolving the ice in the human heart, which agonized for years entangled in the net of disastrous vices; poisoned by the spirit of modern atheism and

¹ Here we talk about the present Metropolitan of Bregalnica, his Exellency, Mr.

sunk in despair of mundane idleness. For so many years this heart wandered, longing for someone to show him the way, because there are many ways but only one of them is the true one that leads to eternal life. I am the Way, the Truth and the Life (John 14: 6) — said our mild Lord. However, in the darkness of a miserable existence without God, it is very hard to see that way. Therefore our philanthropic God has sent His graceful spark and enkindled the monastic hearts, turning them into a mighty flame. New light appeared from the Bigorski sanctuary illuminating the way, because the monk is like a lighten candle, like a golden oil lamp that burns with the holy oil of the Divine grace, and the whole world sees its light, even when

concealed in intransitive or inaccessible calves.

The Bigorski monastery, until recently spiritually dead, once again became the true lighthouse of faith for our misguided Macedonian nation, deceived by the delusion of its irreligious leaders. It became a life-giv-

ing spring of inexhaustible grace spiritually feeding the ones hungry for God, a real cornerstone of faith and an authentic example of the Orthodox tradition. The monastery became a shelter for the penitents and a guarantee for the eternal joy in the Kingdom of Heaven. And that was not all. The new monks shone

forth as zealous teachers of Christ's love, devout prayers for our country, constantly laying down their lives for their countryman, walking day and night along the path of Christ and carrying the cross for all people.



I give my whole self to You, Christ My Lord (Tonsure of Fr. Partnenius on the eve of St. Christine, August 5, 1995)



The monastic tonsure of Fr. Parthenius



Archieratical blessing and a new name



The first Holy Friday (1996)



One of the fist baptisms



Ordaining for an Abbot on the Birth of St. John, July 7, 1996



Zealous for the monastic tradition from the very beginning



Easter Friday – Balikli, 2000



Work and prayer



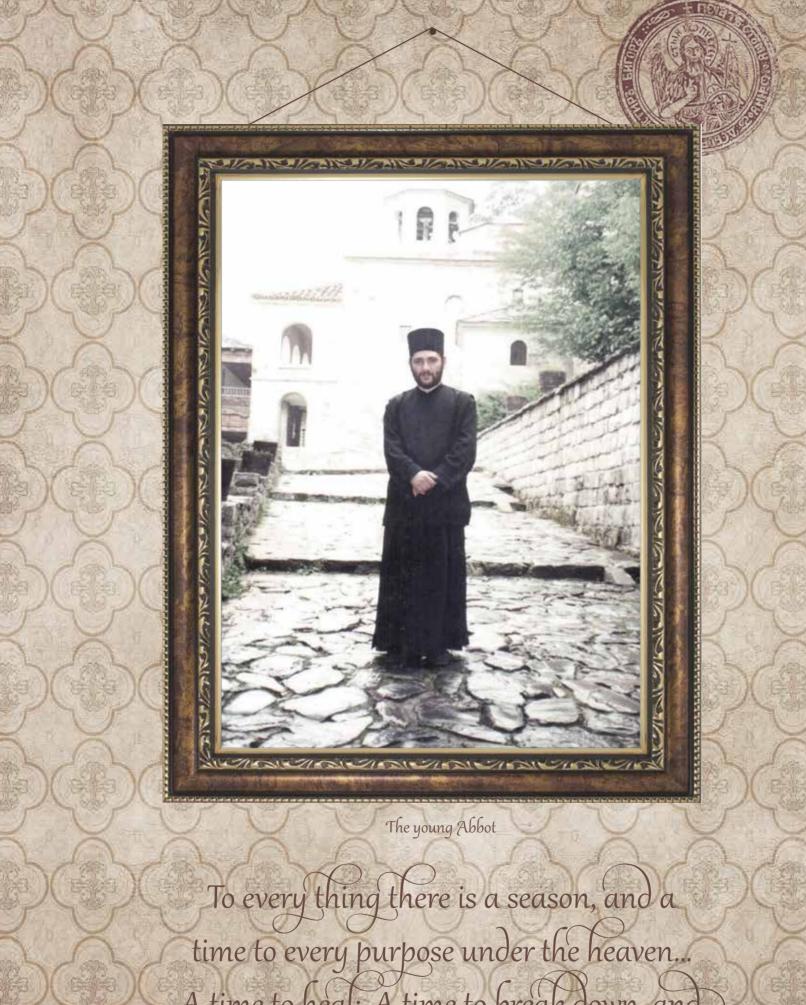
Holy Week, 1996



The Metropolitan Timothy with the monastics and priests

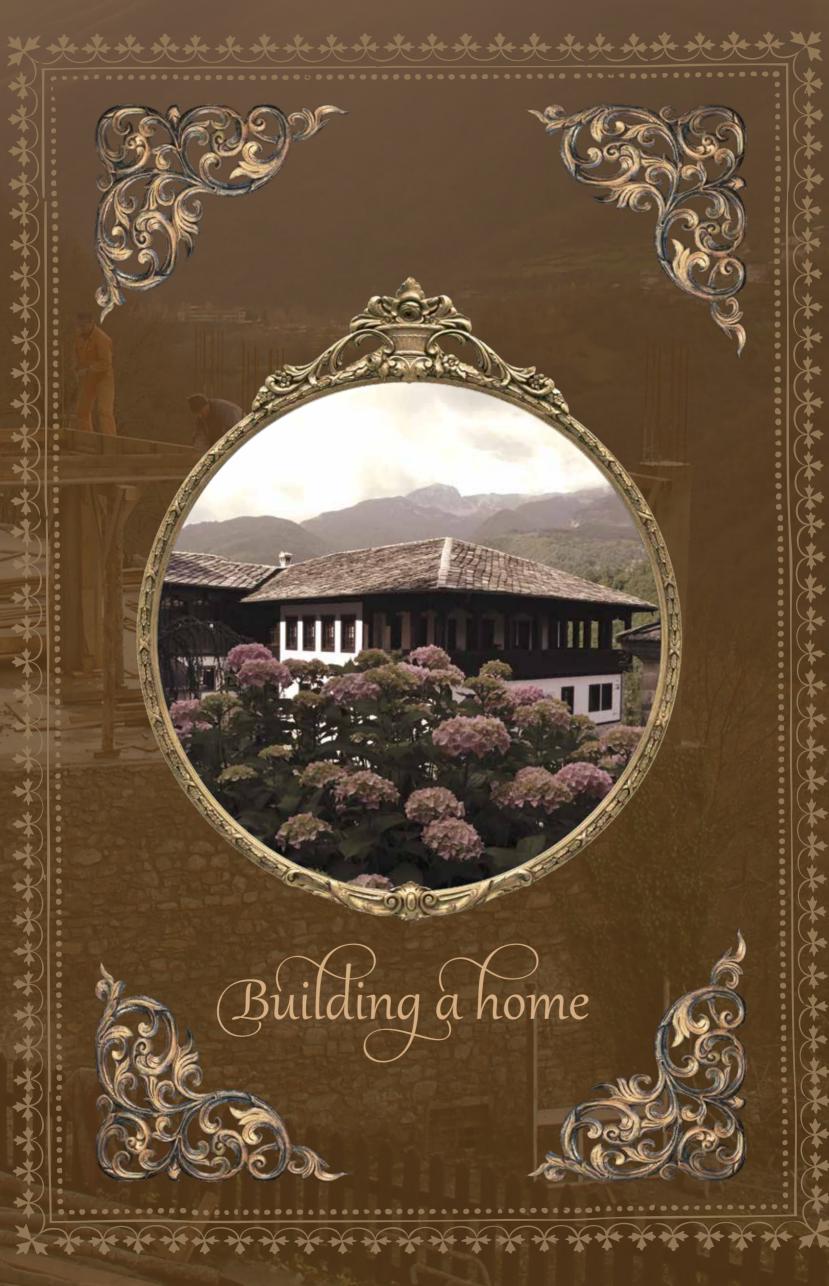


The Metropolitan and the fraternity (1996).



A time to heal; A time to break down, and a time to build up...









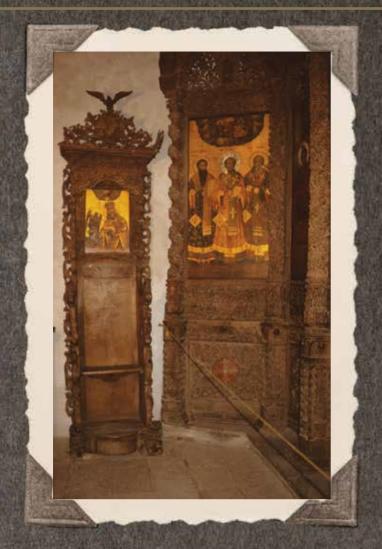
ust as the birds build their nests, carefully and with love, tirelessly bringing straw after straw, and skillfully twining them into a wonderful shape, as if

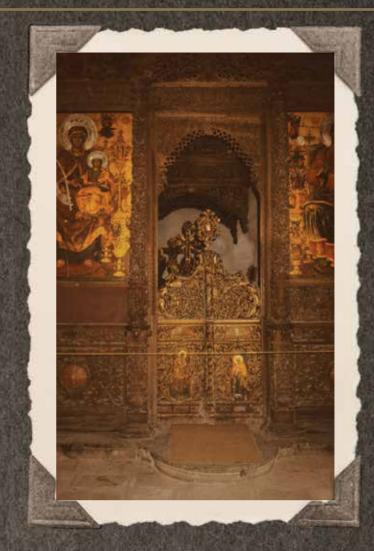
weaving on a loom, until, their little house, the dwelling place for the future offspring, is built on some branch of a tree, the same way, the monks, those heavenly birds, devotedly involve themselves in the rebuilding of the hose of God. Prayer after prayer, stone after stone, and so on, until the end of the day. And the next day - all over again. In every stone they build in, they invest a part of their immense love for the wisest Primary Constructor. And every wall they erect speaks about the unquenchable yearning of their souls, yearning for the other home, the Heavenly Jerusalem - the true homeland of us all. How lovely our heavenly home must be, the Kingdom of eternal joy? If only for a moment we could "steal" a bit of its splendor and plant it here in these inaccessible mountains, so that anyone who would come, could see at least a reflection of that Eden beauty and glorify our Heavenly Father? For this reason, they work tirelessly; do not spare their strength, and the Lord, seeing their love and enthusiasm, sends His blessing from above. That is why every corner, even the tiniest thing, being a yield of their hands, radiates with an exceptional beauty and grace. And the new

monasteries rise up, as if some hidden oasis in the middle of a desert, as spiritual residences of the Heavenly Kingdom, as the rarest flowers grown on a futile rock. And the infidels came, over and over again destroying everything, breathing with malevolence against the One True God, but in vain they strove to destroy those flowers; to pluck them out not to sprout again. Humble monks demonstrate the greatest strength in their weakness, and therefore the monasteries grew again, rising up from their ashes, even more beautiful and splendid than before, reflecting the eternal glory of the Creator of all beings.

Many secrets of that tough but glorious past are concealed in the Bigorski sanctuary. How many feats it can testify for, how many tears and prayers are invested in its stone yards, how much labor from the weak ascetic, to which even the mere mentioning of the most sacred name of God, gave superhuman strength. Generations and generations of monks left a piece of their souls in this monastery. As an ineffaceable mark of their strong unwavering faith. How could this be forgotten? How could the new Bigorski monks disregard the silent whisper of their glorious ancestors, their legacy written in every stone, in all those traces of the former majesty?

The silence of the Bigorski temple spoke the loudest. That once magnificent kingdom of the orthodox splendor, crowned with its unique decoration - the rich woodcarving as an artistic outburst of





The ancient carvings — silent witnesses of glory, desolation and resurrection



The embellished church in 1996

the skillful hand of the Mijaks, now suffocated, drowned in impurity and cobwebs. And the only thing that remained from those masterpieces that were decorating the church, was the almost fully blackened miraculous icon of St. John the Baptist, the two cases for relics, one of which completely empty, and certainly, the glorious Bigorski iconostasis, drowned in silence and darkness'. What a sad sight for the true God-loving souls! As for the new monks, enkindled with immense love for the sweetest Jesus — a sight unbearably painful. Where is all that magnificence, all the rich fruit of the labor of all those who worked all their lives for the glory of God, where did it disappear?

The zeal of thine house hath eaten me up (John 2:17) - the heart sings and gives its best to restore the lost dignity of this Bigorski treasury. At first, to restore the beauty of the miraculous icon of the Baptist. Centuries had left traces on this icon. The then shining silver cover was now all in dirt and layers of dust. The abbot's diligent hands, inspired by all his love towards St. John the Baptist, labor hard to bring back its lost glow. And suddenly nothing is the same in the church. The silver coating shines brightly again, as well as the image of the glorious Forerunner, as if sending its blessing for the beginning of this noble deed of renewal. Then the lit up oil lamps shine, the souls of the monks rejoice and sing, expressing their gratitude to the Heavenly Bishop. Prayer flows again in the church; monks offer services for the salvation of humanity. The Forerunner lies his holy hand down and shelters the new ascetics like a mother, helping them in every God-enlighten deed. With every day that goes by the church radiates more and more. Magnificent candlesticks, new oil lamps, wonderful icons and icon stands, shiny chandeliers, worthy adornments for the new spiritual kingdom, in which the King of the Kings begun to reign again. Like a heavenly tabernacle in which everything glit-

1 We have no records regarding whose relics were placed in the empty case in the left part of the church, as for the case on the right side, the relics of St. Harlambos, St. Nikita were stolen from it, as well as the particle of the Holy Cross. Much later, by God's providence, thanks to Fr. Porphirios, then a hieromonk from the Simonopetra monastery form Athos, and now an Abbot of the monastery St. John the Baptist in Veria, the brotherhood from Bigorski was honored again with the relics of St. Haralambos. During the process of restoration of the case with the relics, it was discovered that a bigger part of the Cross was actually preserved in the interior of

the silver filigree cross, located in the middle of the case.

ters with new grace testifying to any pilgrim about the royal dignity of the One to the one for whom it is intended. Moreover, the pilgrims touched by its shinning beauty, can sense the perfect beauty of the Creator.

Now that the church was worthily decorated, the time has come for a complete restoration. It was a heavy cross for the weak shoulders to bear. Plenty of work to do, where to start from? Years that passed nibbled and nibbled, leaving everywhere their visible marks. But only if they could at least repair the home a little bit, just to have a place to lay the head. To have a quiet shelter where in the late hours, while the world is asleep, one could pour out his heart in prayers towards the Lord. So the monastic hands diligently work, while the lips glorify the Good Provider, because in their hearts monks know that the Lord would never abandon them in their tribulations, but rather hasten to help and fortify them with His heavenly grace, granting them divine strength. Everything is much easier with God's grace. The soul gets prayerfully recovered, the body strengthens and the monks, with a new zeal, tirelessly carry the mortar, do the whitening, set new flooring, change roofs, repair the walls... Slowly, little by little, the monastery changes in front of the monastic eyes. The basic conditions for life have already been provided2. As well as the new monastic cells for the future spiritual offspring, because the third monk is already here, and the fourth, the fifth... There is the new big kitchen, the renewed refectories, the guest premises and the monastic meeting rooms. So much done and all of it for the glory of God and in the service of our neighbor. As if a real mother, the monastery opens widely its embrace and tells the pilgrims: "Come my children and rejoice in the Lord! Come and rest from the worldly worries. Lay your heavy burden here, so that you could fly like free birds, winged by the new grace".

² Arriving in the Bigorski sanctuary in 1995, the new brotherhood faced a seriously difficult condition. Almost none of the premises were suitable for living. The electric current (in the Upper Palace) and the central heating (in the Lower Palace) was installed the same year, at the same time when the repairing and the equipping of the monastic cells was finished. The representative premises also required a serious intervention. The guest chambers and the Great Synodicon room were completely renewed by the end of 1998. One of the major interventions was the changing of the roof construction of the Upper Palace, performed during 1999, which helped to protect the wall paintings in the big refectory and created conditions for the normal functioning of the refectory.



The renewed Archondaric (guest reception) room before the fire

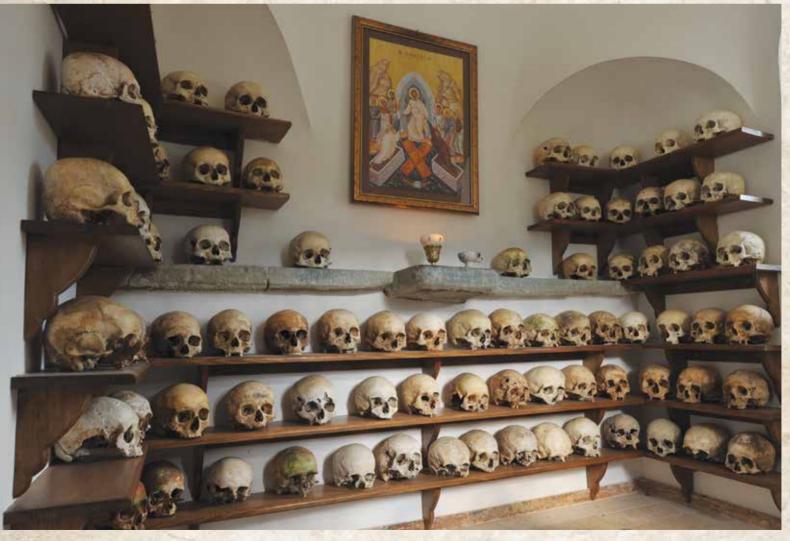


And goes on exhibiting its new guest rooms that monastic love has prepared for all those who were brought here, inspired by the yearning for God. With every day their number increases. Like bees attracted by the sweet scent of the blossomed garden of Bigorski, they come to feed spiritually of the sweet honeydew of morals that emanates from the monastic lips. The divine love, as if a healing balsam, comes down on their wounded and hardened hearts, instantly melting away the chains of egoism, giving them rebirth through the fire of grace. Thus, the monastic family grows, more and more pilgrims come, united by their love for God.

Now the time has come to consecrate the desecrated Holy Table and the temple. For that purpose, new frescoes were painted on the altar walls giving a different splendor to the sanctuary that was happily awaiting the holy ritual. What love was exhibited in order to welcome properly the holy hierarchs on the 17-th of October 1998, how cordially it opened its doors expecting the blessing that was to come. The long awaited finally came. The wounds from

the communist regime healed and God's blessing, as a sweet-smelling balm, generously poured out through the hands of His servants, wiping off the past condemnation. A truly worthy tribute to the glorious monastic predecessors. And even greater joy, when the new descendants, with immense respect and honor took out the relics, which the Providence finally revealed to them, on the first Friday evening after the re-consecration, in the eve of the day when the Holy Church prays for the deceased souls³. How profound and inextricable is the link between life and death, the past and the present! Nobody knows that better than the monks. "We were like you and you will come to us. Despise us not in our death. Leave us not to oblivion!" This

3 By God's Providence, the search for the relics of the deceased monks that remained in the monastery, took a long time and finally gave results after the reconsecration of the church, on 23-th October, 1998. The Providence intended this to happen exactly on the eve of Saturday, the day when the monks always perform the service for the souls of the deceased. The relics were found at a great depth in the monastic ossuary, carefully taken out and placed in the renewed ossuary, were the relics are at present. Later, in 2013, a part of the relics was found in the Southwestern corner of the church. Those are the relics of the Abbots as well as bones from the other graves that were found in the church during the archeological excavations and researches in the 80's. These relics were buried in the abovementioned place in the church. Now they too are placed in the same ossuary. Every Saturday, the Memorial Service (Parastasis) is chanted for the souls of the formerly reposed monks.



The monastery ossuary

mysterious testament of the reposed ascetic glimmers in the souls of each new monk, inspiring himwith an immense respect towards his holy predecessors, awakening the prayer of the heart. So every Saturday, in the monastic ossuary prayers are offered for the deceased. The new brothers remember the reposed with deep affection.

It is such a great blessing for the monastery! How many monks which have once lived here, consecrating themselves with their devout life, are now intercessors before God for the new brotherhood? What an army of prayers! What grace! By their prayers, the Bigorski sanctuary glitters even more and continues to prosper in spirituality. In the meantime the new brothers work diligently, transforming every inch of the land into a flowery garden. Orchards appear⁴, new roads are being made⁵

4 The monastic orchard, located near the monastery, where the St. Seraphim skete is at present, was made in the period of 1999-2000. The vicarious brothers with great commitment made sure that this desolated and arid place would convert into a beautiful garden with a variety of fruit trees, a spacious apiary and a small animal farm.

5 The road between the monastic lower and upper gate was asphalted in 1991 for the first time. The first intervention on the road was made by the brotherhood in 1998, when it was expanded and a new supporting wall was built together with the

and walls rise up like mighty fortifications. Every corner is being ennobled and everything blossoms in beauty. And each monastic room is like a living moral about God, an open book from where the visitors learn the most important philosophy in the world. The new icon gallery, as a secret treasury, opens before the curious eyes, revealing its valuable old icons, woodcarvings, precious old ecclesiastical objects, rare traces from the rich history⁶. The guest chamber, enriched with numerous portraits, whispers about some ancient times⁷. As if the old

fountain at the lower gate. There was another intervention on the other supporting wall, bellow the monastery, when it has been given the present appearance. In 2006, due to the transportation needs duringf the construction of Easter Palace, a new road was opened in the forest zone, stretching from the parking lot to the present monastic tower.

6 In 2002, the so-called female refectory was made over into an icon gallery for the restored old icons and ecclesiastical objects treasured in the monastery.

7 The so-called Selechka or guest chamber that was used for the reception of guests, in 2005 was enriched with the portraits of the most significant Abbots in the history of the Bigorski monastery, as well as of certain church hierarchs connected with the monastery. There were the portraits of the abbots: Arsenius, Joachim, Hilarion, Theodosius, Hadji-Seraphim, Spyridon, Parthenius, the well-known activists from the Revival Period like Archimandrite Anatolius, Bishop Parthenius of Zograf, Metropolitans Cosmas of Prechista and Nicodemus of Tiberiopolis. Those portraits were the work of the great artist Stavre Dimitrov-Stadim. The portraits that at present decorate the walls of the Selechka chamber are made by the artist Goce Trajkovski.



The renewed Refectory before the fire



Part of the fresco-painting in the great Refectory

Abbots watch us carefully from these masterfully painted portraits, trying to convey to us their joy because they see their sanctuary once again restored in all its glory. The big refectory also displays its embellished image. Seems like the graceful power of the monastic God-loving soul has left its stamp on everything.

Still, the zeal of the heart enkindled by the Divine fire could not cease. There was so much to be done. The hardworking monks labored again. A new fountain and a gate appeared on the restored road. The monastic garden was also well-groomed. The remaining yards were arranged as well. The spring with healing water, "Life-Giving fountain" the walls





The Holy Aghiazma: before and after



of which decayed from humidity, was now brought to life. The brotherly care of the Bigorski fathers left its trace even there. The road was cleansed, the water tapped and the ancient revived holy spring flashed like a pearl in the midst of dense greenery8. But God, the Provider, had already prepared a new and majestic duty for the eager heart of the Bigorski Elder. His heart burning with the wish to announce everywhere the glory of God, accepted the holy mission: to revive the almost desolated metochion of Bigorski, dedicated to the Holy Great Martyr St. George the Victorious in the village of Rajchica. A mission just as difficult as it was glorious. Because in the midst of the whirlwind of the war in 2001, he was supposed to build a monastery from the foundation, as it has never been done before in the recent history of our country. He was to erect a magnificent monastic hospice, to enkindle a new spiritual sparkle in them, so that once again hymns could be heard dedicated to God. That meant to simply forget about yourself, to invest everything of your own. The place where once the former hospice had been, was now turned into ruin. Only a few desolated walls remained. It seemed as if the ruins themselves were grieving awaiting for the mercy from the All-compassionate God. And when the Divine grace encounters the strong and adamant faith, then miracles happen. And was it not a miracle that this metochion of Bigorski so quickly rose again, being re-born from its ruins? As if it grew overnight, got resurrected as a result of the faith and hope of a heart burning with love for all mankind. Who says miracles do not happen today? There are no miracles for those who don't believe and do not seek God. However, for those who with strong faith have given themselves completely to God, the way monks do, miracles happen every day. Therefore the abbot's heart placed all his hope in the hands of the Most Merciful Creator, knowing that nothing is impossible for the Lord, and God Himself heard and fulfilled this great wish. He enlightened his mind, opened the hearts of certain noble representatives of the Government and managers of some bigger companies

giving Spring", were finished in 2001.

and with their support, on the old foundations a new monastic hospice was built in 2001, like some snow-white beauty in the midst of the picturesque landscape of the region near the Debar Lake⁹. The

9 The restoration of the metochion dedicated to the Holy Great Martyr St. George the Victorious in Rajchica, begun with the consecrating of the foundations for the new hospice on the Feast of the Exaltation of the Holy Cross, on 27 September 1999, on the very day when the church of St. George was consecrated in 1835. The foundations for the new monastic hospice with two floors covering an area of 1200m², were set on the old basis, but with an architecture completely inspired by the creative spirit of Fr. Parthenios and his sense for construction. In a very short time, a period of 2 years, the newly restored convent for nuns, so-called "The White Palace of St. George", was consecrated and opened on 4 June 2001 (the second day of Pentecost); during the whirlwind of war, becoming a forerunner for the revival of Orthodoxy in these regions. The first nuns of the monastery were tonsured on the Feast of St. George. The same year the relics of St. George arrived, signifying his



⁸ The above mentioned interventions of the holy spring, the aghiazma dedicated to the Holy Mother, in honor of her miraculous icon known as "the Life-





The monastic hospices of Rajchica once...





...and now







Sacred Bigorski Monastery





new monastic sisterhood found their home here; as young female co-ascetics of the Bigorski brotherhood, who just like the prudent brides of Christ, left everything behind, in order to win the One, and true Bridegroom of their souls (O Nymphios). St George the Victorious accepted these virgin souls under his prayerful protection, and was granted by God blessing from the heaven, which made this monastery shine with grace. So the monastic sisterhood, instructed by its wise Elder, began to offer fruits of repentance, progressing in the virtue of obedience.

Still, the burning eagerness knew no limits. That inexpressible love for God the Beneficent and His All-merciful Holy Mother, burning unceasingly within the heart, gave it no peace. The legacy of ancient fathers was still there, obliging the Abbot. The mission had to be fulfilled and the work completely finished. Because the rooms were few, and with every day - more and more pilgrims came. Young and old, rich and poor, people with different professions and from different strata of the society, they all resorted to the monastery, seeking comfort, an answer to their dilemmas and spiritual advice from the experienced and caring Elder. They needed his wise words to heal their sinful wounds, his prayer to recover the weak souls, his love to encourage and console them, his care to warm their hearts. Where could one find enough space for all of them? The monastery was already too small for them all. So the heart of the Elder once again offers prayers towards God and his gaze encompasses the guest lodgings. Just an ordinary, inappropriate building, with no basic conditions for life. In spite of the mighty, thick old walls which remained from the former building, the bottom levels were of no use at all¹⁰. What a splendid hospice was there! One could only try to imagine that magnificent building which disappeared in fire in 1912. Every chamber was unique in its carved elements and richly decorating ceilings. As if some rare lily in

the meadow, embellished with unusual and vivid colors. The external architecture of the hospice was a strong reflection of the Slavic-Macedonian artistic soul. And now, instead of the former palace, unique by its beauty, this insignificant building. And even that one — too small for everybody. The brothers had to build again.

Thus, the respect for the work of the ancient fathers flashed in full splendor in 2004. The abbot of Bigorski was building together with the brothers, incorporating all his love for the Byzantine splendor and paying in that way a tribute to the ancient constructors. Because he knows well just how noble souls they had and with how much love and faith they constructed that gorgeous hospice! They had strong faith that their work would not be forgotten and that when they depart from the living, someone else would continue and perfect their work, glorifying God in that way. So now, it was the turn of the Bigorski monks, their spiritual descendants, to take over this difficult task. With warm love and monastic care, they invested themselves in this holy deed, supported by some generous benefactors and soon afterwards as if suddenly the old

¹¹ The only photo documentation of the hospice that is available to us is the photograph of G. Trajchev from Sophia located in his personal photo album of the Bigorski monastery photographed in 1912. On the photograph one can notice the specific Mijak architecture of the hospice. As for the interior, according to the testimony of the L. Miletich the inner decoration of the chambers of the hospice did not lag behind the beauty of the external appearance. On the contrary, the interior design featured a special artistic artistry of the ceiling and the doors that differed in every chamber. (L. Miletich, "Historical and artistic monuments in the monastery St. John - Bigorski (Debar)", a journal of the Bulgarian Academy of Science and Arts, book XVI, Sophia, 1918, 5).



actual coming with a powerful sweet fragrance and myrrh streaming which has never stopped up the present.

¹⁰ On the very place of the former beautiful guest lodgings, that was consumed in a fire accident in 1912, during the period from 1925 to 1939, a new, very simple and inappropriate building was constructed, and that made functional only the upper flat, but this poor building was far from the authentic look of the above-mentioned building.



The old and new architecture of the Lower Palace



























Sacred Bigorski Monastery

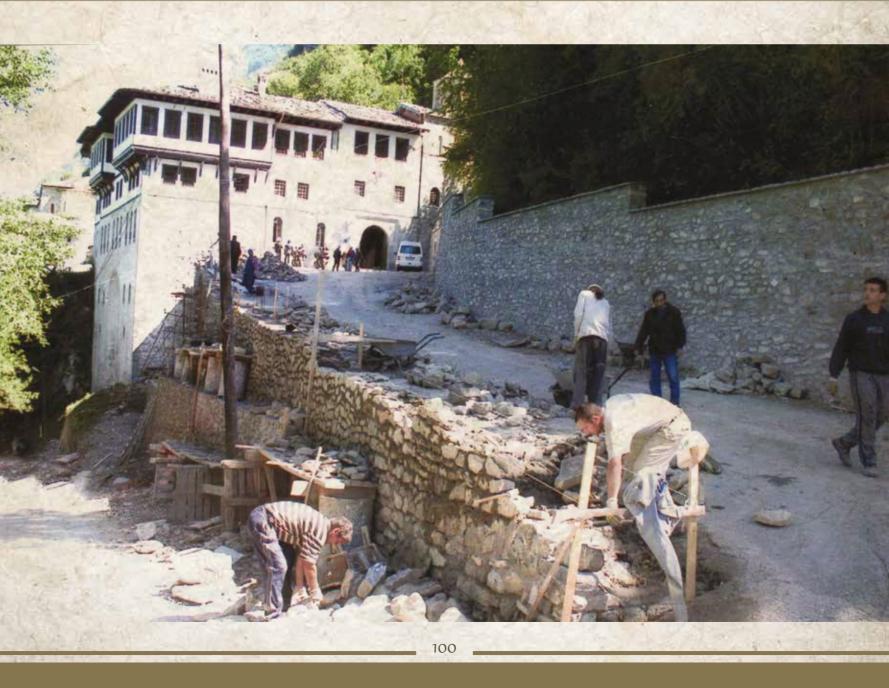
yellowish photograph, the only remaining trace of the former hospice, was brought to life before their eyes12. Now displaying a hospice even more luxurious than before, enriched by the flat of the Abbot with the grand bishop's and abbot's chambers, as well as rooms for priests arranged in a traditional style, magnificent balconies and the most spiritual place of them all - the chapel dedicated to the Holy Annunciation, in which the monks incarnated all their tender love towards the Most Pure Theotokos. In a very short time, less than two years, on 28 May 2006, the Bigorski sanctuary once again gathered inside it the hierarchs of the Holy Hierarchical Synod, so that they could consecrate the new hospice. What a majestic grandeur that was! The beautiful byzantine chanting of the choir from the Theological Seminary caressed the souls of the numerous

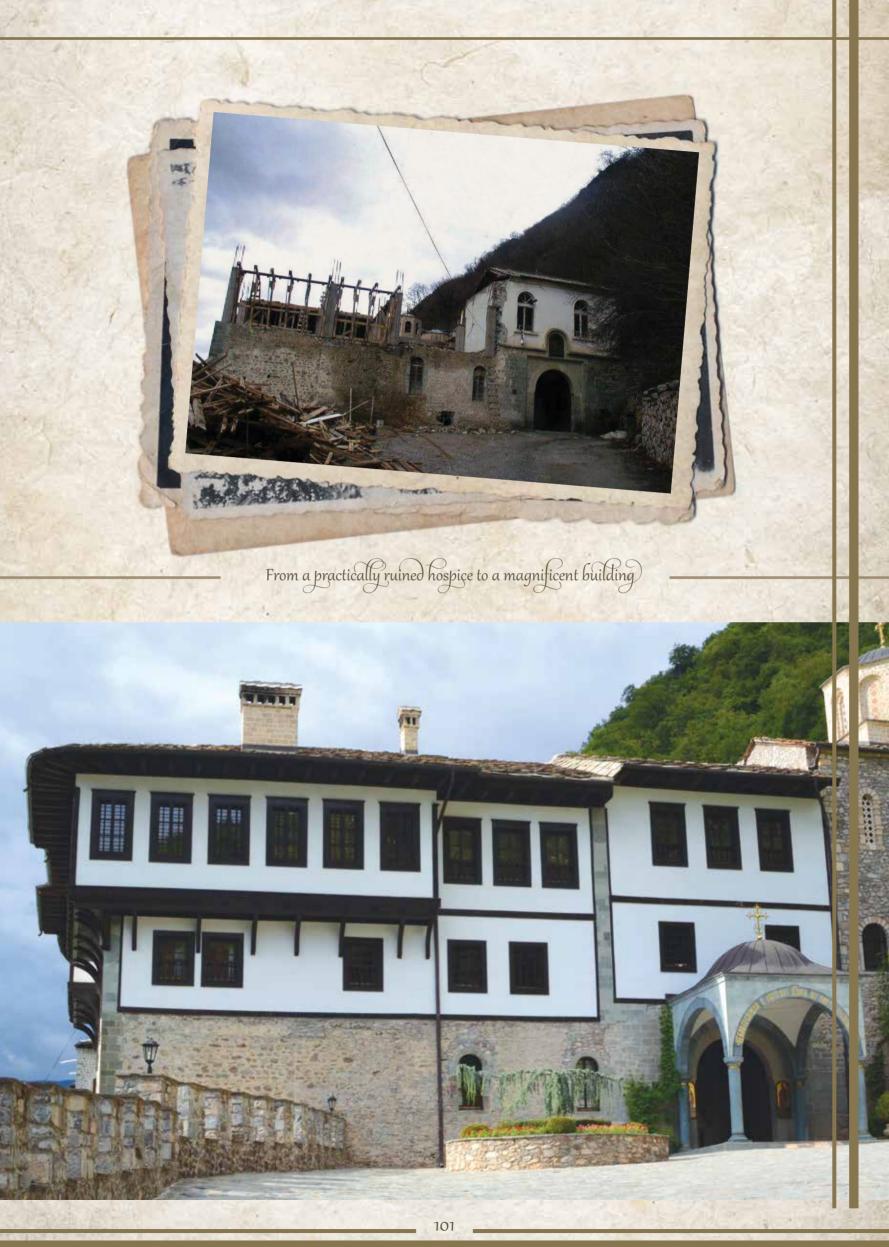
12 Greatest gratitude for the restoration of this hospice Bigorski brotherhood owes to Mr. Triphon Kostovski, whose name is written on the donor's inscription above the entrance of the chapel dedicated to The Annunciation.

guests, elevating them to the heavens, while their melodies echoed through the yards. As if the whole monastery was chanting and rejoicing with an unutterable joy. Still, the happiest of all were the ancient monks and benefactors, having observed from the heaven and blessed wholeheartedly the glory of Bigorski resurrected in full splendor.

Thus, day by day, year by year, the Bigorski Palace shone brighter and brighter, lightened by the rays of the warm monastic love. Above the entrance of the monastery a magnificent dome - a baldachin rose up, built in the spirit of the rich Athonite tradition, in remembrance of the same architectural ornament dating from the period of the Revival, which once decorated the main monastic fountain¹³. On the baldachin, there is an inscription:

¹³ Originally, the baldachin, ordered by Abbot Michael, was situated at the upper fountains under the church and it was a work of the monk - constructor Neophyte. The building of the present such construction at the main monastic gate, was completed in April 2007. On the baldachin, in golden letters (of 22 karat genuine gold leaves) is engraved: "Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord".





"Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord"in this manner, the monastery, this ancient beacon
of Orthodoxy, welcomes everyone with pure faith
and honest wish in heart, offering with a Christian
hospitality its abundant spiritual feast.

Even the monastery orchard obtained its ennobled appearance. Here the restless heart of the Elder, enkindled by the zeal for God, testified his love towards the Holy Elder of Sarov Seraphim. This unforgettable holy Elder, being endowed with unearthly love, accepted everyone in his prayerful embrace, tirelessly consoling, healing and giving them a new birth in Christ. He addressed them all with the words - My joy! So here, the Bigorski Elder found himself in that same loving care for the neighbor, following this bright example of the glorious Elder

Under the baldachin, on both sides of the main gate, are set the icons of the Mother of God and of St. John the Baptist. The golden cross on the baldachin is a present from the Russian businessperson Anatoly Murashko from Moscow.

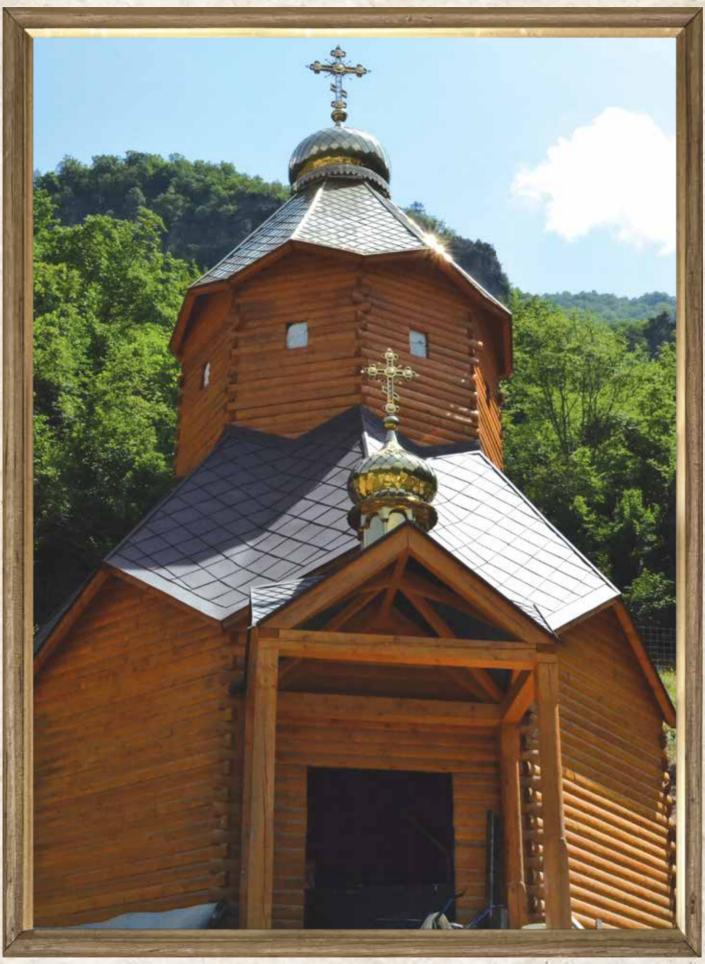
of Sarov, the glorious champion of Theotokos. The abbot asked for the prayerful intercession of the Holy Elder and in 2008, in the amazingly beautiful forest idyll at the orchard, foundations were laid for a Russian style church, dedicated to St. Seraphim of Sarov. There, in the midst of the dense greenery, the monastic love built a beautiful wooden Russian edifice, a small picturesque temple, proudly rising up towards the heavenly heights, proudly displaying its golden cupola with a shining cross and thus testifying the invincible strength of Orthodoxy. Around the small temple a small wooden monastic dwelling is to be built, designed in the spirit of the humble hermitage of St. Seraphim. In that tranquil paradise, the Merciful God has prepared a small hesychastic corner for all those who hopefully direct their eyes towards the Wonderworker of Sarov, asking him to intercede in their hardships. And



Litary with the Holy Relics and the icon of St. Seraphim of Sarov

Christ is Risen, my joy! (St. Seraphim of Sarov)





The ancient appearance of the Russian style church dedicated to St. Seraphim of Sarov in the Skete of the same name

the blessing of the Sarov Elder poured out in the form of a holy water - Aghiazma, which appeared from the ground by the prayers of the Venerable one. However, the Holy Bigorski Synodia felt to the most his graceful visit prayerful patronage on 28 July 2008, when to the joy and merriment of the brothers and the faithful, a particle of his relics arrived at the monastery¹⁴.

Now when the monastery resurrected in full beauty and splendor, the time came for the spacious monastic yards to obtain their outstanding deco-

14 The relics of St. Seraphim of Sarov arrived at the monastery as a gift from the Very Rev. Abbot, Archimandrite John Magramm of the Skete of the Resurrection of Christ in Minneapolis, Minnesota, Russian Orthodox Church in the USA, through the devout believer Dragica Veljanovska from Skopje.



The flower decorated monastery phiale

ration. The hand of the Creator rose up again and in front of the fully restored guest lodgings, which completely preserved the old monastic, Slavic-Byzantine spirit, He planted one more extraordinarily beautiful object. A lavish Phiale - a baptistery for blessing water, embellished the monastic yards. The beautiful cupola flashed brightly with its picturesque fresco paintings. And as if this rich décor from the Athonite architecture has always been here, as if it has been decorating for centuries the Holy Bigorski Synodia. In this archaic traditional ambience, which testifies to all the visitors the glory of God, the heart of the pilgrim cannot but join this constant doxology, so it resounds joyfully fulfilled with fluttering love for the Creator. That joyful resounding seems to merge with the sound of the new church bells, which instead of the few old bells, adorned the old bell tower and announced the good news. How these new bells adorned the Bigorski fortress with their glimmering beauty and harmonic sweet sound! The bells brought here a small part from the Orthodox Russia, because they arrived from the distant Voronezh, in 2009, right before the monastery Feast Day, greeting the Forerunner with their festive sound. What a fest was that day

15 In the year 2009, the head manager of the representative office of the Russian company for petroleum and oil derivates "Lukoil" in Skopje, Mr. Andrew Kuku, donated 13 bells, cast in the Russian city Voronezh, of which 11 were placed inside the monastic bell tower, and one in each of the two chapels, of The Annunciation and of St. Hierarch Nicholas the Wonderworker.



The blessing of the new bells (September 11, 2009)

for the soul! While the unearthly melodies resounded, the mind contemplated into that ancient period of the Revival, when for the first time during the centuries long Ottoman slavery on the territory of the present Republic of Macedonia, with the personal permission of the sultan, the bells were rung in the Bigorski monastery, as if predicting the todays actual grandeur.

Years passed by, the brotherhood increased in number, the shrine got surrounded by fascinating hospices, emphasizing even more the beauty of the Bigorski temple. There was just one more thing to be done so that the mosaic could be finished, so that the monastery could shine forth with its true image. One more hospice on the eastern side! What a magnificent and lavish palace the monastery would become then! And how many people, constantly yearning to come here for spiritual recuperation, would find place







in its numerous chambers! So the heart of the Abbot burns again with desire, and the Holy Spirit weaves His threads of Divine inspiration and suddenly in the mind an image is created of a wonderful building with antique balconies, a high tower, a façade - richly decorated with ancient wooden ornaments in the spirit of the old Bigorski tradition, and with a chapel dedicated to St. Nicholas, The Wonderworker of Myra in Lycia. A new hospice - "The Eastern Palace" 6. As a gold-plated stone built into the Bigorski mosaic, where the Byzantine architecture presented its full splendor. A new task for the monastic brotherhood. And not an easy one. The high mountain has pressed the monastery within its stony embrace, without any intention of releasing it. One should break through a new road, remove the tough stony hands of the Bistra Mountain and then build again. There should be a new strong rampart to hold the heavy mountain cliffs. And new strong foundations as well, like mighty and tough roots, from where the new hospice is to emerge. Above all, there should be strong faith that the Almighty God will look mercifully upon His servants. Accompanied by the prayer, a sincere prayer of the heart, a prayer towards the Holy patron and Baptist of our Lord. But the wise Abbot does not hide his hope. In his thoughts, he already sees this magnificent construction and joyfully praises God. His monastic heart is aware that he has placed everything of his own into the hands of God, the only One he hopes for and expects assistance from.

So once again, by the mercy of the Most Kind God, good-hearted benefactors came to help. With their generosity, in 2007, the supporting wall was finally finished and in 2009, the construction of the hospice initialized. Then, The Wisest Provider, wishing to test and strengthen the faith of the monastic heart, on 30 September 2009, permitted the fiery ordeal in which after only a few hours the Upper Palace disappeared in flames; thus the ancient monastic home, that with its unique architecture gave a unique feature to the Bigorski sanctuary, was tragically destroyed. This temptation united everybody, those close to the monastery and the distant ones equally, not just the pilgrims and friends and all those

The idea about the construction of Eastern Palace, Archimandrite Partenius "envisioned" in the background of the portrait of the Abbot Arsenius, in the big Refectory. This was preceded with a breaking through of an accessible road to the place of construction of the retaining wall. Finally, on the Feast Day of the Nativity of St. John the Baptist, in 2009, the cornerstone for the foundations of the East Palace was placed. The hospice was finally completed in September 2010, after which the brothers moved into the new cells.

to whom Bigorski became their second home, but also the ones who have never visited the monastery. However this tragedy affected the most those who have found here consolation in their hardships, all who have felt the love of the monastic heart. Because when you give your heart to someone, when you accept someone in your heart, that person becomes a part of your life, in good and evil. This temptation proved that all the monastic love that had been given was not in vain, but rather fell on a fertile soil and yielded sweet spiritual fruits in the hearts of people. Many of them reformed spiritually, changed touched by the tragedy of that night. The fiery ordeal, beside the faithful, somehow inspired even the undetermined in faith, to become unselfish, to be eager to help and even to say a prayer. Because of that united love, in a very short period of time, as soon as in 2010, the magnificent new hospice Eastern Palace appeared, a joint accomplishment of monks and people. An act which our nation can be proud of, because God made this nation worthy to build for the glory of our Lord, as our predecessors in past did, and acquire in this way the Divine blessing. Bigorski received its third tabernacle, were the monastic synaxis, similarly to the disciples on Mount Tabor, enlighten by the grace of Christ, gratefully exclaims: Lord, it is good for to be here! (Matthew 17:4) How could someone not feel well in the new tranquil small cells, in the embellished and cozy balconies, the chapel of St. Nicholas, with its frescoes transcending us to the world of Angels and Holy Saints! Here the blessing from this great Wonderworker of Myra in Lycia came together with his relics, on the 1 August, 2012, as a gift by the Abbes Petronia of the Robaia monastery in Romania.



Frescoes from the chapel of St. Nicholas the Wonderworker







Sacred Bigorski Monastery

The third tabernacle became the vessel of wisdom and knowledge, placed on the lavish shelves in the divinely embellished two-storey library of Bigorski. Here, in this separate world of patristic texts and testimonies of human experience, the reader can easily forget the present, fascinated by the fresh breath of centuries streaming through. Because here, amidst the heavy carved shelves and ornamental pillars, amidst all those warm, nostalgic reminders of past and glorious times - the extraordinary and marvelous ceilings, the playful wooden floor mosaics, on could find the words of our spiritual and divinely wise teachers, educators and revivalists. It is not by chance that

presented here. They are our most holy fathers and ancestors, warm supplicant for the entire Slavic nation. As for the ceiling, the meek and mild image of Christ, painted amidst the set of ceiling carvings, with His strict but meek look, vigilantly watches from above upon the lovers of the written word, fatherly blessing and enlightening them. In order not to get totally lost in this timeless whirling, the immense clock of the monastic tower, with its harmonious sound constantly reminds us that time flows inexorably, and with every hour we get closer to the moment when we would stand before the throne of our













Sacred Bigorski Monastery

Creator, to give an account for all our actions. This clock is the Bigorski reminder for constant repentance. Maybe that is why every single day at noon one can hear exactly the troparion of the Forerunner, reminding everybody of his eternal call: Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand! What a strong stimulus can this be for the tireless icon painters, working just one floor above the tower clock, in that marvelous tower, high up as if some heavenly guardhouse. The tunes of the clock inspire them over and over again to live in constant repentance, while transferring on the wood the images of The Savior, His Most Holy Mother and of all those who have given the brightest fruits of this precious Evangelic virtue and eventually have departed to the dwellings of heavenly beatitude.

Thus, imbued by repentance, the monastic life passes by in constant feats for the sake of Christ. It was so in the past. It is the same now. This monastic feat seems to have connected them all in an un-

breakable chain, wrought by many rings. Each new monk is like a new ring of the chain. Feeding of the rich spiritual past, nourishing himself with the fruits of his monastic ancestors, but at the same time collecting food for his future descendants. Forever bound with the past and yet opened for the future as well. Fulfilling the legacy of the past Abbots and Elders, he yields fruit as his own legacy for the future offspring. The Bigorski Synodia continued with great zeal this ancient monastic tradition. The new Abbot connected himself as a ring in the long monastic chain, respectfully fulfilling the legacy of the glorious Abbots and benefactors of Bigorski. And not just that. This rich spiritual fruit that matured in the embraces of the glorious Prophet in the restored Bigorski sanctuary, seems to speak to the future monks, conveying them as a testimony the love for the church splendor and the care for the lost souls.



The Monastery's Tower





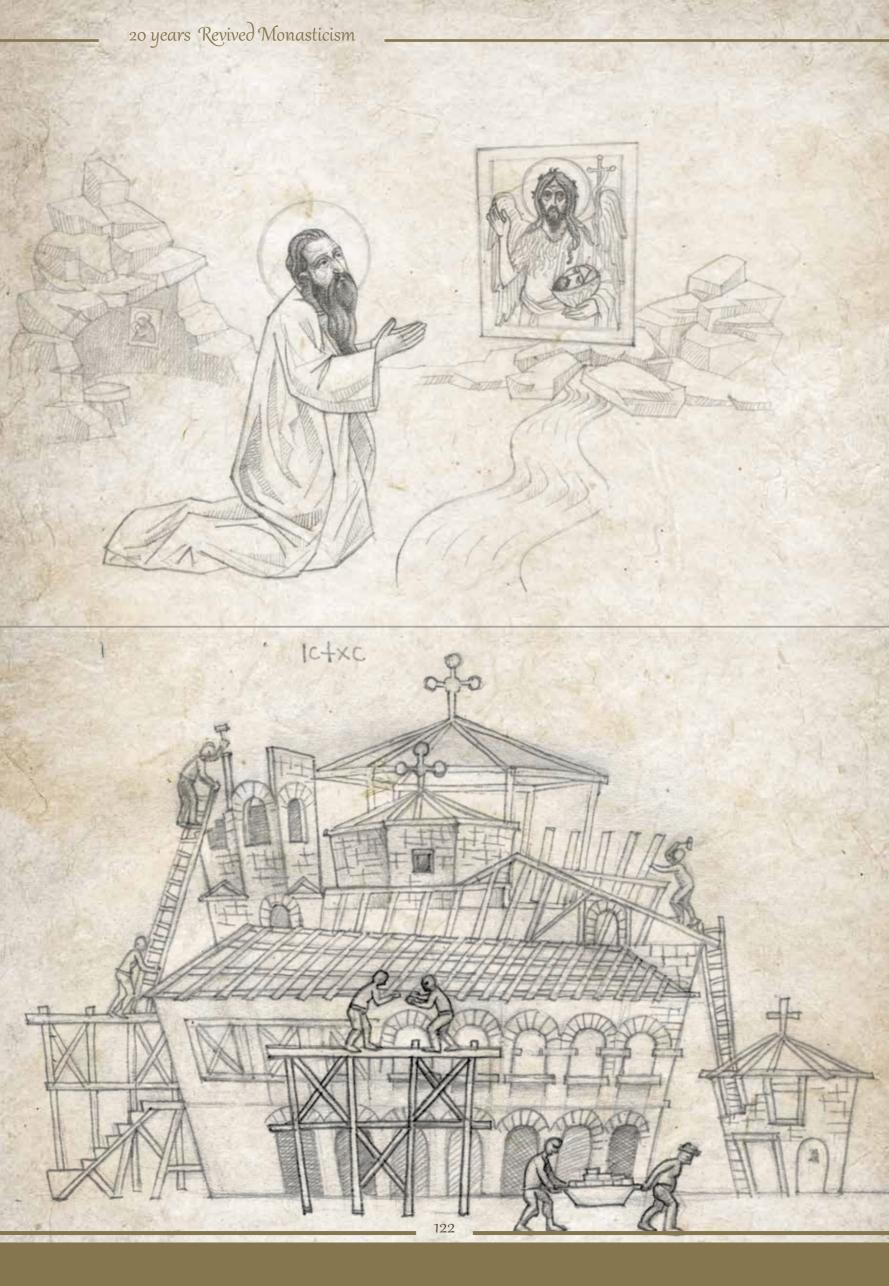
From desolation to heavenly beauty

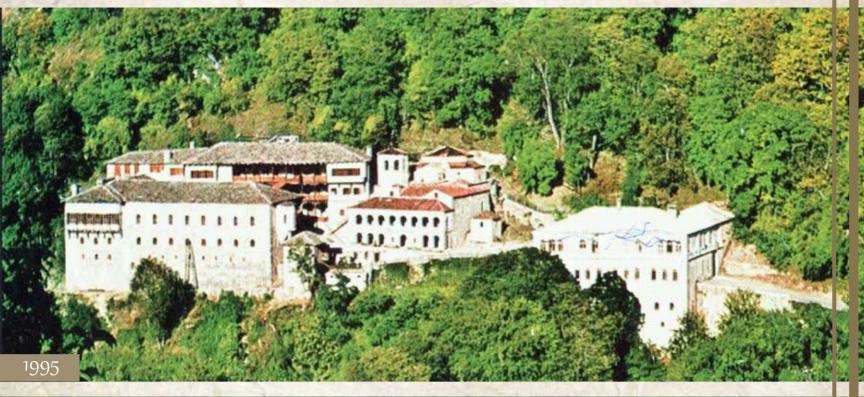




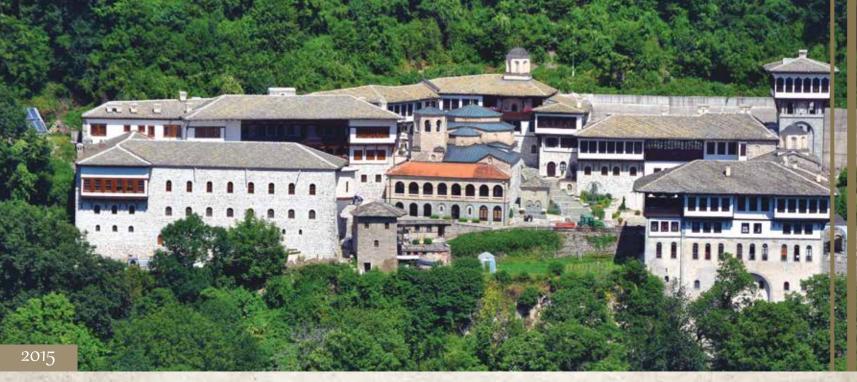
The cultivated space around the church



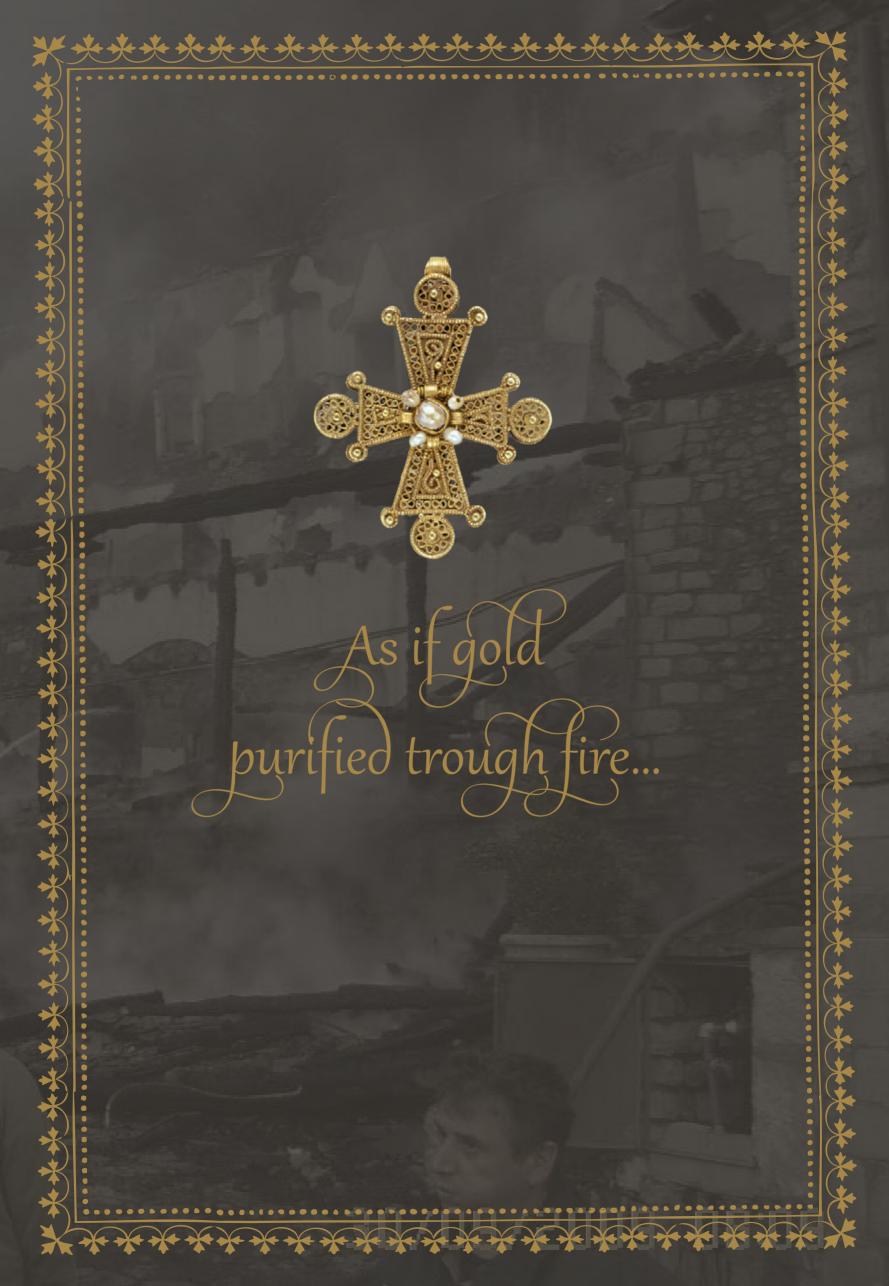
















onks have nothing of their own here on the Earth. Even he doesn't belong to himself. He belongs to God completely. From the very moment, when lying down with hands

spread in a shape of a cross, he has placed himself in God's hands, he can no longer consider anything to be his own - not his home, neither relatives, nor friends, not even his life. Everything He expects and everything he hopes for is only from God Himself. And with the same gratitude and love he accepts from Him, the Beloved One, all the joys and sorrows of the monastic life. As an obedient solder, devoted to his commander, the monk has risen his eyes towards the King of Heavens, carried by the strong faith that everything happening to him during his monastic feat, whether good or bad, victories or falls, strengthens him in the spiritual battle, and is useful for the salvation of his soul. He considers all the passions as "temporary and insignificant distress" which brings him eternal life. And the Omniscient Creator makes sure that no earthbound affection should distance his devoted servant from His eternal love. And with this paternal love He educates him, tempering him through temptations and pains, so that his soul, tested through the fire of temporary trials and passions, could present itself as much

more precious than of gold that perisheth..., might be found unto praise and honour and glory at the appearing of Jesus Christ (1 Peter 1, 7).

These wonderful words of the Holy Apostle Peter, addressed to the faithful in his Apostolic Epistle, have been proven true to the full extent in the life of the Bigorski Synodia, when our Lord decided to test with material fire the strength of their faith, in order to make them participants in His Holiness. Because suffering is not uncommon for the monk, it makes him an emulator and cohabitant of God. By suffering, he personally becomes a witness of the spiritual knowledge of the Holy Fathers, and learns that "when the heart is in pain and sorrow, it sheds springs of spiritual waters" - as mentioned in the Philokalia - those salvational springs which flow towards the eternal life of the Spirit. Thus the monk learns that by "giving blood, he receives the Spirit". Because the Heavenly Kingdom is given not to those who carelessly and in leisure spend this temporary life, but rather to those who earn the eternity through many sorrows and pains.

And it seemed like an ordinary September day. Just as the monks of Bigorski raised the Cross of our Lord on the Day of the Holy Cross with great glory and victorious joy, and already comforted by the strength and hope emerging from it, greeted with prayer and monastic zeal the holy day of the three Martyrs Saints—the mother with the name of wisdom, St. Sophia, and the three daughters carrying the names of the three

biggest Christian virtues: Faith, Hope and Love. It seems like that night exhibited all three of them in the greatest glory, incarnated in the monastic heart. It wasn't easy to watch the Bigorski home in flames. Here in those hidden coves, in the prayerful mysteriousness of their monastic cells, the Bigorski brothers outpoured their hearts, had reached Heaven and hell. That's because for the monk his cell is a place of battle with the old sinful person within, but also a sight of Mount Sinai, where he encounters God. It becomes a dwelling place of God, a small temple

in which the ascetic moves freely as if a child in his father's home. It is easy to understand this special connection which attracts so powerfully the zealous prayer to his cell, this silent witness of all his pains, repenting cries, and graceful visits of the Spirit. Only God knows what things he has experienced in here, what unforgettable spiritual memories!

And now suddenly that secluded place is gone, only blazes

of flame lightening the night, as if reminding that nothing on Earth is eternal. There is only one thing to be saved – that which contains the mark of eternity – the holy and archaic icons from the monastery gallery. No time for desperation. At the appeal of the Abbot, the zealous brothers and the present faithful are already entering the dark and smoky gallery, with astonishing courage taking down from the wall the priceless spiritual antiquities and moving

through the burning sparks which fall from above their heads, carry them away, out of the perilous fire. They are not alone in this, but together with the monastery protégés, all those who came here looking for a cure for their addiction and having knocked on the monastery door, finally managed to find the true Salvation from it. Now sharing with the monks both the good and the bad, they cannot ignore them in this misfortune, but rather give themselves to the end in this hard rescuing venture.

silently
before the ing sight burning. This contains been effort for 15 years he has himself, with loving an ing this this spiritum from create many ago in bear to the God pass.

The sad view of the hospice in flames (September 30, 2009)

silently in prayer before this touching sight of the burning hospice. This construction has been his main effort for the past 15 years, where he has invested himself, repairing with love, enriching and enlarging this building, this wonderful spiritual pearl from Heaven, here created many centuries ago in order to bear witness to the glory of God. Encompassed by his strong prayer

The Abbot stands

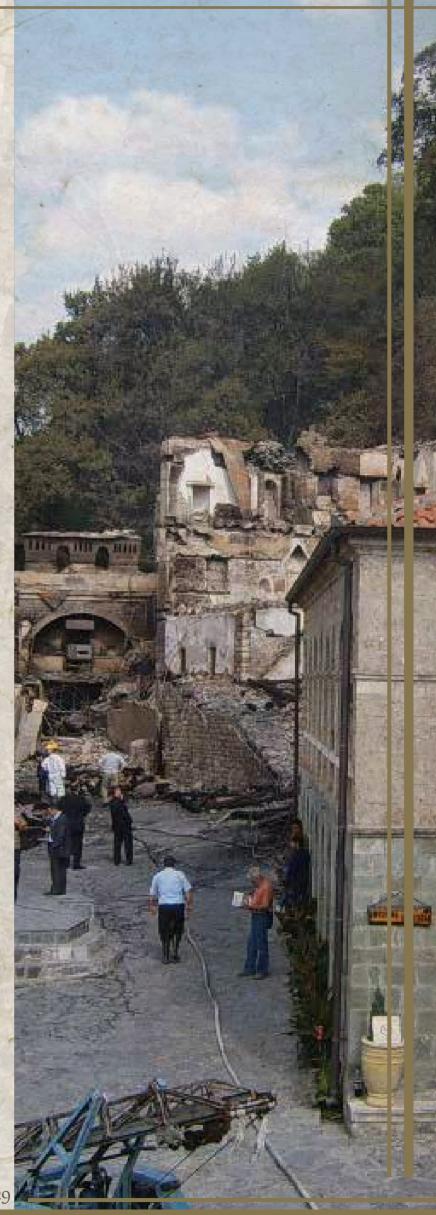
sor, the holy Forerunner and Baptist of our Lord, he burns with desire never to recede from the building in flames. And those flames reach high up in the sky, even several tens of meters above the ancient precious temple, threatening to take in their fiery embrace this centuries old sacred building, where the famous miraculous icon, the holy relics, the particle of the Holy Cross and the unique iconostasis are placed.



His wise council in these moments of heavy temptation is a real comfort for the wounded hearts of his faithful companions and fellow-travelers towards eternity. They inspire courage and strength, rise hope and awaken strong faith. He knows well that the merciful God would not desert His children in this time of great temptation for them. Even now, He is here, together with His Forerunner, protectively rising His hand and already the fire stops as if before an invisible wall which stands before the Bigorski church, saying: "You have no further access". And the fire as an obedient servant retreats before the uncompromising and almighty will of God. Someone would say that this is no miracle, it was just a coincidence that during the night, while the monastery was asleep, a profound sound of an alarm warned the brothers of Bigorski; that the great oil tanks did not explode in contact with the fire; that the church in the proximity of the burning building remained untouched by the flaming fiery arrows; and it certainly didn't touch the chapel on the opposite side. But the heart of the Elder knows, he knows and warmly expresses his gratitude to God. He sees also the great spiritual fruit of this painful temptation, hidden in the eyes of those coming from all sides of the country early at dawn, horrified by the news and surrounded by sorrow.

"What a terrible tragedy! Irreversible loss!" - expressed the faces of numerous faithful, Church representatives, journalists, art conservers, archeologists and Government officials. Their compassionate looks encompass the small monastic flock, gathered in pain around their Elder, before the image of the burned ground on which only the blackened walls remained, as silent witnesses of the tragic event. Now it's time for the people to forget about themselves and their own concerns and to share the pain of the brother who suffers. And in such moments, the grace is close. It embraces the heart and slowly melts the ice around it, breaking the hardened fortress of egoism and sin. The terrible sight awakens repentance in them all. And something more. Awakens a wish to help, to assist, to be here, to invest a part of yourself, in order to wipe at least one tear off the monastic heart. And as if this wish unites every one of them into a common prayer towards God, a common striving and determination to make this sanctuary glow again in all its splendor.

In the middle of the fiery temptation, the soul of the nation offers fruits of repentance, just like the dry land, when









Sacred Bigorski Monastery





soaked by the raindrops, yields rich crop. The spiritually graceful heart of the Elder sees and feels this transformation of the souls in these moments of grief, and sincerely rejoices because of this multiple yield. His mind goes back to the past. This is not the first time for Bigorski to be in flames. The sanctuary has always shared the burden and carried the cross of its nation; it has always been the heart of this nation, and their pride and a symbol of resistance before the oppressors. A witness of every spiritual downfall, but of victory and resurrection as well. It was from here that constant prayers were directed towards God asking for mercy; and it was here that the Slavic-Macedonian national tradition and language was cherished; here many tears were shed for the destiny and the future of our orthodox people. Therefore our noble orthodox nation, spiritually nourished by such immeasurable love, never allowed this sanctuary to perish completely. How many times oppressors left it in ashes and ruins, but it always raised again, glittering with even greater beauty - marvelous architecture, unique iconostasis, magnificent church... Our builders didn't spare their energy and time to enrich and increase its glory. And many of them helped, some with their property, some with their hands, others with their wisdom and experience. Each in his own way built himself in the bigor stone walls of this ancient Divine fortress. Now it will be no different.

But first to overcome and endure this pain. Not to give in to despair. There, the Bigorski protégés are already engulfed by numerous concerns. How to add the burden of their quite heavy cross to the hardship of this terrible tragedy for the brotherhood. Until now the brothers managed well to carry them on their hands, but how can they do it now? And sadly direct their eyes towards the monastery gates. But the Abbot senses their thoughts. Even now, in the middle of this undesired misfortune, his fatherly care and love never stops. He gathers them the way the brood hen gathers its chickens under its wings (Mt. 23, 37) and paternally comforts them: "Don't worry, my children. God is now by our side, the closest to us, because His strength fully shows in our weakness. You know what St. Apostle Paul tells us: 'And he said unto me, My grace is sufficient for thee: for My strength is made perfect in weakness (2. Kor. 12, 9)'. God brought you here and made you share this misfortune with us. We are together in the temptation. Do not go away. God will help us overcome this suffering together. We will share everything, if there is enough for us it would be enough for you too, this monastery is your home as well".

Who could have remained indifferent to such warm words and

unearthly love which shines forth with so much brilliance and banishes away the clouds of hesitation and resurrects the doubtful souls? Strengthen by it the young hearts burn with a desire to devote themselves completely so that this tragedy would pass quickly. So they spare no strength, lifting heavy stones, clearing the ruins, doing everything they can so that this home which once hospitably opened its gates for them, could rise again. God looks upon this obedience and faithfulness and accepts their sacrifice, strengthening them with enormous grace. Just the next day, during the first Holy Divine Liturgy after the terrible fire, He testifies to the brothers that He is with them, would never leave them, and re-

news their strength so that they could better injure this hard temptation and come out of it spiritually stronger. Nourished by the Body and Blood of our Lord Jesus Christ, they exit the church with a revealing sense of spiritual resurrection.

And already the message conveyed from this sanctuary is not the one of pain and despair, but rather of bright hope for a new beginning, expressed by the heart of the Abbot, on the day after the fire: "We will rise from the ashes just like the Phoenix bird. The old building went to his place as a phoenix, so that it would rise again, being more luxurious and strong. So it will be with this precious architectural pearl called the Upper Palace. By the grace and



mercy of our Lord and the prayers of St. John, soon a new building would rise here. God is inviting us to a sublime and God-pleasing deed. He gives us an opportunity to earn His blessing, to build ourselves in this big historical sanctuary and thus prove again our strong faith in Him. He demands from all of us, the present generations, to revive Bigorski, to bring it back and offer it as a gift to Him. So let's pray that He should accept all this from our hands. What happened is a great tragedy for us, our grief is enormous, but for a Christian there can be no despair. And if we cry now, we cry only because of our individual and the common national sins, not in despair. Because the history remembers many

such temptations, but our fathers never despaired, not even in the hardest times. They had strong and firm faith in the Cross of our Lord, in His resurrection, and raised again from the ashes and served God faithfully. Our fathers left us a big legacy, and we are going to follow their steps. We will revive the sanctuary for the glory of God and to the joy of our future generations. We will continue to build with our noble Macedonian faithful, who are the living Church, because God loves the living Church. God cherishes above all the pure hearts, the prayers and our tears of repentance, the rest He would return to us in even greater glory. As He Himself has said: But seek ye first the kingdom of God, and his righteous-

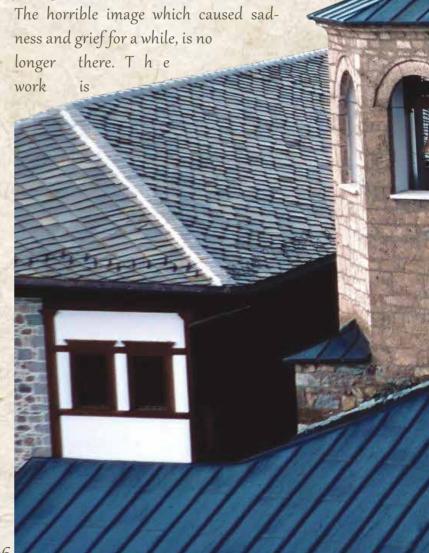


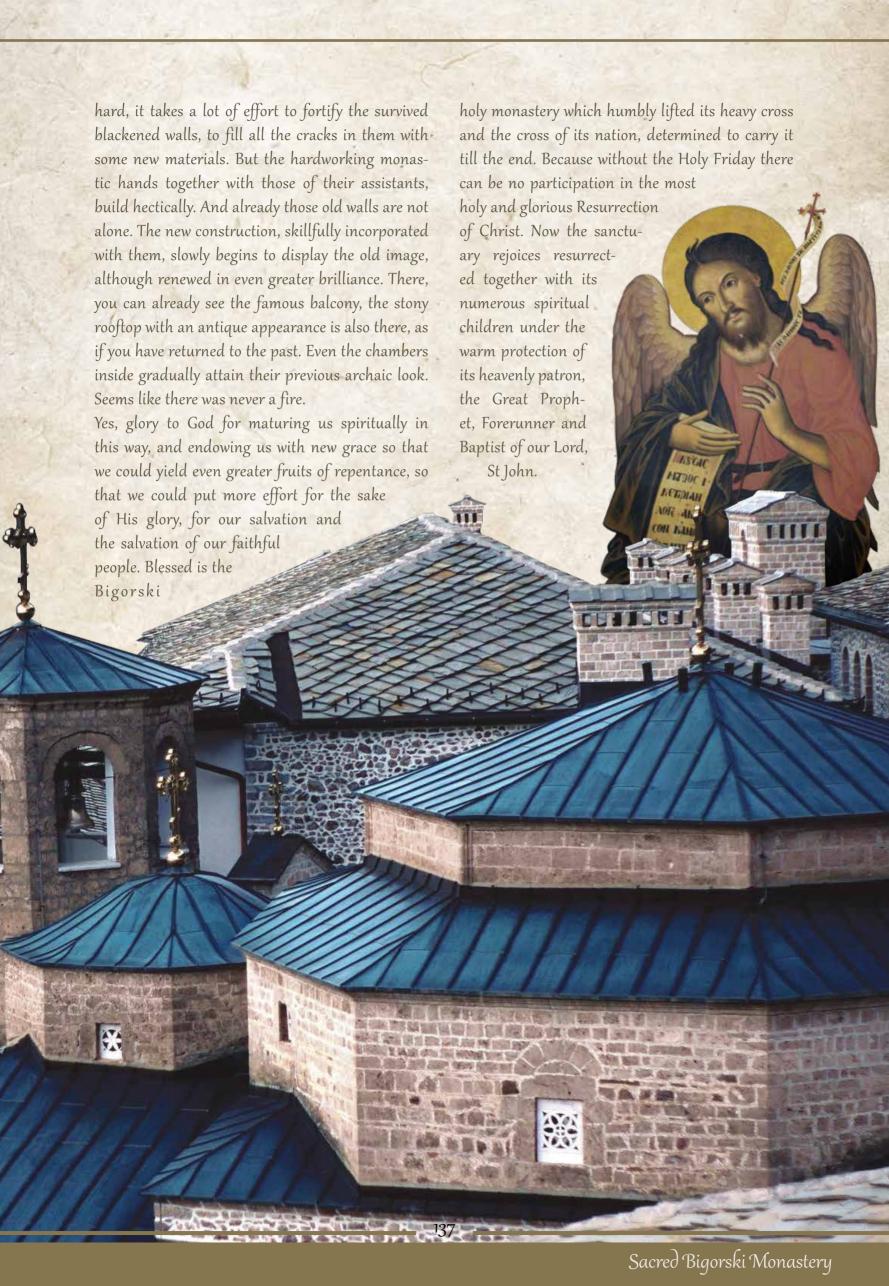
ness; and all these things shall be added unto you (Mt. 6, 33)".

A really amazing message for the world, which being founded on the material aspect and firmly bound by the logics of its rational mind, saw only the material loss in this unwanted misfortune, the loss of mainly the visible structure. But what the fire could not touch, and which seemed hidden from the eyes of this world, was the spiritual building, which now glittered with all its spiritual beauty, outshining the glamour of the material building which has been an object of admiration for such a long time. As the most rare and beautiful incense, which burns in order to spread its sweetest scent, so did the fiery temptation reveal before the eyes of the world the true, spiritual building, founded on Christ the Cornerstone. This is what the Bigorski Synodia has striven for so many years with so much effort, led by its Elder. These living souls, earned for the sake of Jesus Christ trough constant daily battle with evil, all those who at least once wormed themselves on the rays of the Divine love, which flows from the monastic hearts. Everyone who was brought here by the Providence of our Lord, to be comforted in his sorrow, to be healed from the sinful wounds, and when leaving this place, took a piece of the monastery with them. They are the real treasure of the spiritual Bigorski sacristy, its hope, joy and a victory girdle (1 Thess. 2, 19). So now, the effort invested yielded abundantly its spiritual harvest. With a feeling of sacred duty and immense love, the Christ-loving souls arrive from all parts of the country in order to submit their humble coin, giving if necessary everything they possess, as once did the Evangelical widow, only to take part in this common national almsgiving. Many of them came, offering even their physical labor. What a wonderful sight for the eyes this was! Hundreds of young people gathered and united with the same purpose, working tirelessly, cleaning whole mountains of ruins, preparing the grounds for the future reconstruction. And each and every one building himself in this deed with his talents. The entertainers offer their voice and through their song sound an appeal for help; the experts help with their knowledge, the constructors with their experience, the painters offer

their gift for making works of art... And the most merciful God looks upon the result of their efforts and rejoices. He is glad that in this small piece of land love still flourishes, the nobility and altruism still exist. It's true that in the moments of great temptations our nation really shows the best of themselves.

Those who thought that the tragedy would stop the spiritual progress were deceiving themselves. On the contrary, the monastery turned into a beehive, becoming too tight for all those who wanted to come and taste directly the fruits of the spiritual flourish. Even those who have never visited before, came together with those who had the sanctuary as their second home, and equally rejoiced at the spiritual encounter with the meek Lord, through the grace which emanates from His presence here. And in the church of the Forerunner there was a real feast. Here where the heaven and Earth meet and where the united prayer rises up in the sky as a fiery pillar, the faithful experience their paradise. So they come in every available moment in order to share with the Bigorski brothers this feast of prayer and festive rejoicing.









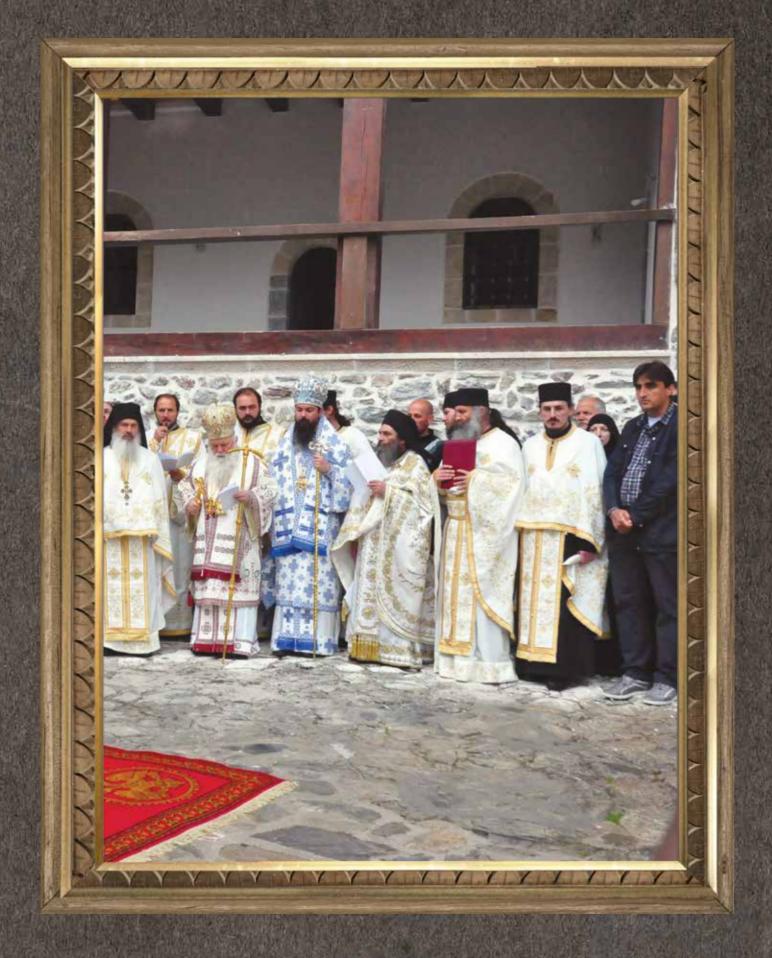
In the middle of the greatest fire source, where in spite of all the efforts, the fire would break out over and over again, we become witnesses of a miracle: only three days after, a new green wheat grows through the burned logs, as if testifying that similarly to Jonas in the whale, and the Resurrection of our Most Kind God, this building which was buried in the fire would resurrect from its ashes in full glory.

The renewal after the fire









As a forerunner of the general resurrection of Bigorski, the new church bell, the Great Blagovesnik arrived in time to proclaim everywhere with its strong and profound sound the joy of the resurrection: Christ has risen and brought life to the dead, people rejoice! Yes, after the cold winter of temptation the spring of resurrection came: Proclaim in the world the great joy, praise in the heaven the glory of God!





But the zeal doesn't stop here. The grace of revival overflows the monastery walls and reaches the church of Theotokos in the nearby village on the other side of Radika River, in order to embellish it with a completely new gorgeous image. As if a heavenly palace descended from the paradise city and planted here on the hilly slopes of Rostushe, this beautiful church proudly raises with its rich byzantine architecture, decorating the entire Radika valley with its unearthly beauty.



Placing a cross on the restored church of Theotokos in Rostushe village (August 15, 2012)

High up in the mountain, in the outskirts of Krchin, on a wonderful upland, a small monastery, a skete is being built, dedicated to the memory of our Equal to the Apostles fathers and Slavic teachers, the Divine brothers Cyril and Methodius. Even today, as in the time of their earthly life, they never stop to watch over their descendants from above and carefully gather their young flock to the Divine teaching and spiritual knowledge so essential for the salvation of the young souls. With their prayerful grace they invite the Bigorski Elder in this quiet safe harbor in order to relax from the efforts of the exhausting paternal care and to renew his spiritual strength.



Consecration of the foundations for the church in the Skete of Ss. Cyril and Methodius in Bitushe (May 31, 2014)











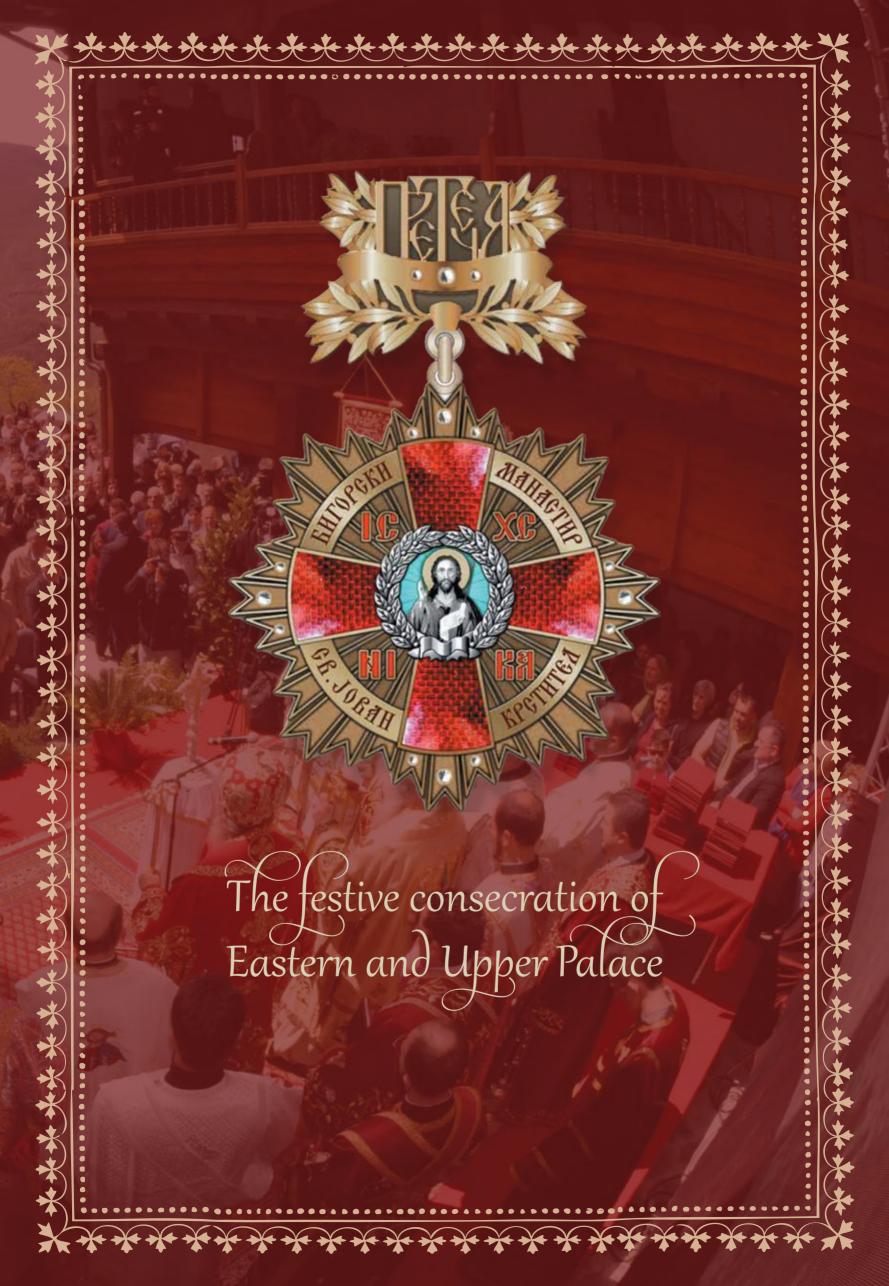












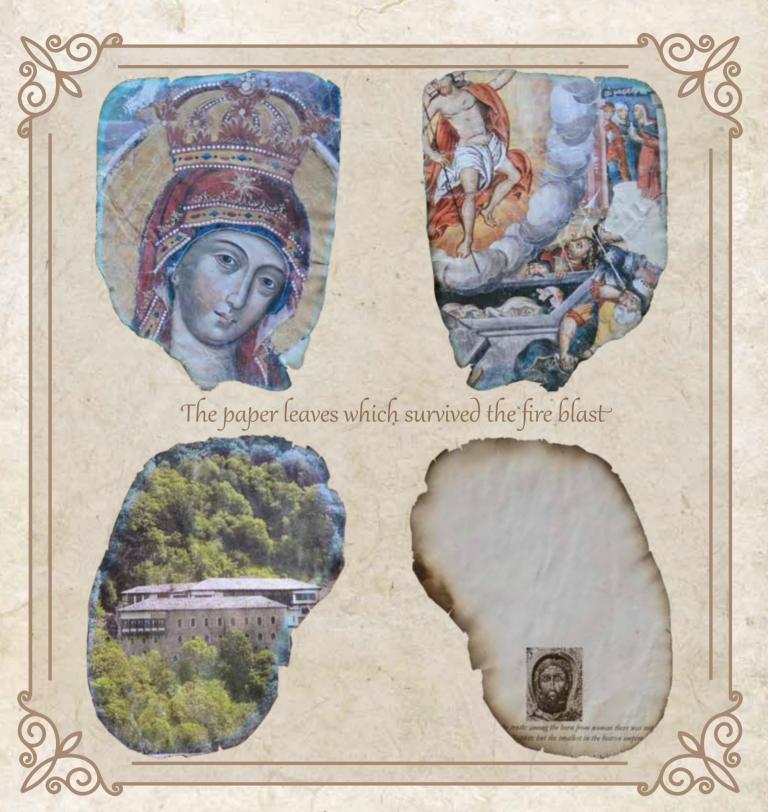




ur Lord, Who is inexplicably merciful and great, by His wonderful and amazing providence arranged that the event of the festive consecration, which

marked the Resurrection of the sanctuary near Radika, should take place exactly on the Sunday of the Myrrhbearers on the 13/26 of April 2015 AD. And it's not by chance, because the first human lips who proclaimed the joyful news of victory over death were the lips of the women Myrrhbearers, the first announcers of the glorious Resurrection of our Savior and Lord Jesus Christ. And here are they now, proclaiming on this holyday a new resurrection, marking at the same time the 20th jubilee of revival of monkhood. After five and a half years since the fire Golgotha in 2009, after so much suffering, prayer, tears and effort of our beloved Elder, archimandrite Parthenius, of our monastic brotherhood and sisterhood, of the numerous spiritual children of Bigorski, finally the newly build Eastern Palace and completely restored Upper Palace are being consecrated. In fact, the Most Wise Lord announced this Bigorski resurrection on the same day He aloud this fiery temptation, marking it with a miracle which has now been revealed: Amidst all that was burned, including metal and glass, the only thing which survived the fire catastrophe and

which the architects Iskra and Vlado Lekovski found in the ashes and preserved in order to give it to our Elder on the day of the consecration, were two partially burned pages from a book about Bigorski. On one of the pages you could clearly see a part of the fresco-painting in the great Refectory, depicting the Resurrection of Christ with the Myrrhbearers in the background, while the most pure image of the Mother of God was shown on the back side. The other page carried a different message: that the burned building, which was represented on the page, would be restored with the prayerful intercession of St. John the Baptist, who was clearly presented on the back side, trough the image of his miracle icon. The festive event which proclaimed the Bigorski Resurrection began with the Holy Archiereus Liturgy, headed by His Grace, the Archbishop Stephen of Ohrid and Macedonia, in community with several Archiereus of MOC -OA: the Metropolitan of Debar and Kichevo diocese Mr. Timothy, the Metropolitan of the Povardarie diocese Mr. Agathangel, the Metropolitan of Bregalnica diocese Mr. Hilarion, as well as several hieromonks, priests and deacons. In the Divine Liturgy, beside the huge multitude of faithful, participated also several government representatives, among which the President of the Republic of Macedonia, Mr. George Ivanov, the President of the Parliament Assembly, Mr. Trajko Veljanovski, the Rector of "St. Cyril and Methodius" University Mr. Velimir Stojkovski, the Minister of Culture



Mrs. Elizabeth Kanceska — Milevska, the President of the Commission for relation with religious communities and groups in RM, Mrs. Valentina Bozinovska, the Ambassador of the Russian Federation in RM, Mr. Oleg Scherbak, as well as the most righteous Archimandrite Mr. Eugenius, the Abbot of the Chernogorski monastery "St. Cosmas and Damian" near Sophia, and his hieromonk Nikanor. Since the church was too small for all the guests and faithful, the brotherhood arranged a video transmission of the Liturgy in the yard.

The festive ceremony of the consecration, which was carefully and silently observed by several thou-

sands of people which came to the monastery, was followed by the Ceremony of Awarding of an especially designed church order and certificates of gratitude. This was a convenient moment for His Grace the Archbishop of Ohrid and Macedonia, with his sermon to transfer us for a moment back to those suffering moment, but then he immediately pointed out the Resurrection, distinguishing Bigorski "as a living witness of the centuries past, but also of this and the future times". Our most respectable Metropolitan Timothy in his sermon in this occasion pointed toward the irreversible contributions of Archimandrite Partenius who "being



The reception of the Archbishop of Ohrid and Macedonia, kyr kyr Stephen

an Abbot of his holly Synodia, striving hard in fits for twenty years in this place, together with his brotherhood, build themselves in the restoration of this holy sanctuary as living stones".

As a sign of gratitude towards all those who have helped so that the Bigorski sanctuary could be restored in full glory, the monastery prepared an especial church medal (order), called "The Forerunner", which was awarded with highest honour to the President of RM, Mr. George Ivanov, to the President of the Parliament Assembly, Mr. Trajko Veljanovski, the Minister of Culture Mrs. Elizabeth Kanceska – Milevska and the State Secretary Mrs. Natasha Stoimanova. They all pointed to the Bigorski Synodia

as a positive example of unity, mutual understanding and sacrifice one for another, which is an example that should be followed by our entire society, especially the politicians. The

Mr. Agathangel, when expressing his gratitude for the award, especially stressed the achievements of Archimandrite Parthenius and his Synodia as ambassadors of the Autocephalous Macedonian Orthodox Church – Ohrid Archbishopric. Beside the abovementioned, the order "The Forerunner" was awarded to several other benefactors who gave their significant contribution so that this sanctuary could shine again in its full glory.



Moments from the festive Divine service of the consecration







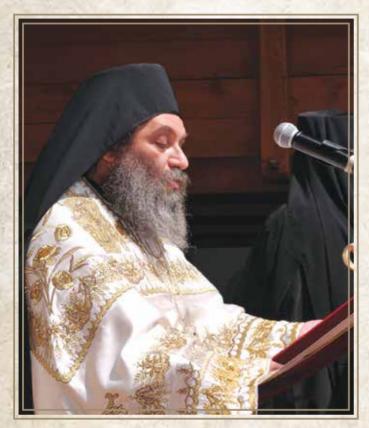






"The living Church shines brightly in the world"

(The sermon by the Most Venerable Archimandrite Parthenius on the day of the consecration)



our Beatitude, Archbishop of Ohrid and Macedonia, Mr. Stephen, most respected President of RM, Mr. George Ivanov, most respected President of the Parliament Assembly of RM, Mr. Trajko Veljanovski, Your Beatitudes, honorable Ministers of the Government of RM, Your Excellences, Righteous Fathers, monks, nuns, beloved brothers and sisters in Christ the Resurrected!

Our hearts are fulfilled with holy gratitude towards the Most Noble God, because He has enabled us to stand with inexplicable joy today, before the authentically renovated building — an embellishment of the Macedonian Mijak building tradition, and to admire his magnificent construction harmony which so skillfully blends with the natural beauties of this picturesque surroundings. However, overwhelmed by a spiritual meditation at this moment, I would rather talk about the reason, than the construction itself. Namely, now in front of my eyes I see another, incomparably more majestic, an immaterial building, glittering in its full magnificence, a work the hands of the Great architect, the most wise Creator of all - and that is the living Church of God, the eternal

spiritual construction, whose foundation is Jesus Christ, the Saviour Himself. On this foundation, for almost 20 years now, our humble brotherhood has been developing, lining up the bricks of good evangelic feats and obedience, and binding them together with the plaster of congregation unity, which simultaneously unites us all together in the unique community of love, equivalent to the love of the undivided Trinity in the One and Only God. In fact it is the living Church that builds our monasteries and churches, turning them into spiritual growing seedlings for new orthodox Christians, thus giving sense and meaning to the material constructions, and making them not just silent witnesses of someone's efforts, or someone's private property, but rather loud trumpets of preaching, when used in their proper function. Every new member of the living Church, spiritually affected by Christ's love, builds himself in this spiritual fortress, making it stronger and more solid in unity, prepared to sustain even the hardest temptations, for it is Eucharistically gathered around The Body of Christ. Such hard temptation, mostly for our brotherhood, but also for our faithful nation, was the fire in 2009, which in a moment swallowed all that was material, corruptive and temporary. However, in those moments of actual and imaginary darkness, The Lord showed His mercy and with His righteous, merciful and affectionate judgment, He gave and showed us His true and single consolation that can really console, defeating any human logic. That's when the immaterial, eternal and incorruptible shone forth, our real treasure - the spiritual construction. In those moments, it was a real consolation to see great multitude of people flowing as if rivers into the monastery: those who have been enlightened here, as well as those wounded and rejected by this world, but who have found the Merciful Samaritan in Bigorski; also those who have been struggling against God, but here have embraced Him; and those who have been deluded, but finally found the way to the absolute Truth; including those who have been spiritually reborn in this sanctuary, all those faithful who have met Christ - the ever living God in their souls - they all came burning with a sincere desire to contribute, to help as much as one could, to restore again that which perished in the fire. And certainly, that which will remain as an undeniable witness for time and history; as a proof that the

good heart knows no determinations, boundaries and divisions, - is the fact that among those who came to help us, the monks, and this sanctuary of Macedonian spirituality and culture, were many of our brothers in blood - the Macedonians of Islamic belief, who during the Ottoman occupation were forced to accept Islam, as well as Albanians from Debar.

In these moments, I would especially like to stress out the confidence and care of our bishop, Metropolitan Timothy, the nobility of some archpriests of our Holy Church, the sacrifice of our believers here and abroad, the generosity of the Government of the Republic of Macedonia. I certainly couldn't forget our friends, who in those moments compassionately met our needs, becoming in that way cooperators in God's endeavor for the resurrection of this eternal sanctuary, which only came to prove that here, in Bigorski the material splendour is a result and reflection of the spiritual building. Once again, I would like to emphasize that our hearts are burning unceasingly and will continue to burn with the warmest gratitude for all those who have incorporated themselves, in every possible way, in the spiritual and the material resurrection of the home of the Forerunner. But above all, we are immensely grateful to God Who presented the hearts of all well intended people with great blessing and spiritual gifts, providing for each one of those who were rebuilding this sanctuary an opportunity to build themselves as a temple, where the Living God enters and dwells inside. And no less are we rejoicing because of the fact that in these hard times, in the era of global apostasy, our nation has proved that it cares about its sanctuaries, protects and builds them, because when a nation preserves and builds its holy sites, they preserve and build the nation itself.

The Bigorsky monastery is a contribution of our nation to God, a testimony of its fervent faith, a candle lamp that burns before the Throne of God for our martyred homeland. Centuries testify that every time when the Bigorsky sanctuary experienced a resurrection, at the same time this was also a spiritual, intellectual and moral uplift of our people. That is why we raise our eyes towards God, sincerely wishing that this present resurrection of Bigoria and moral uplift of our people.

orsky would convey a good message to our people — so that the dissention and mutual condemnations could stop, so that our hearts could yield repentance and our minds acquire spiritual enlightment, and so that we could all comply with the Resurrection and the Paschal joy. Maybe that's why the Divine Providence has chosen this paschal period for the joyful act of consecration. May the merciful God preserve this magnificent shrine till the end of the ages, and may He accept this humble effort of ours - the sacrifice of our faithful people and the temptations that we have experienced during the reconstruction, for forgiveness of our sins and achievement of new spiritual strength and prosperity. Amen!



Handmade embroidery by the monastic sisterhood



The act of consecration

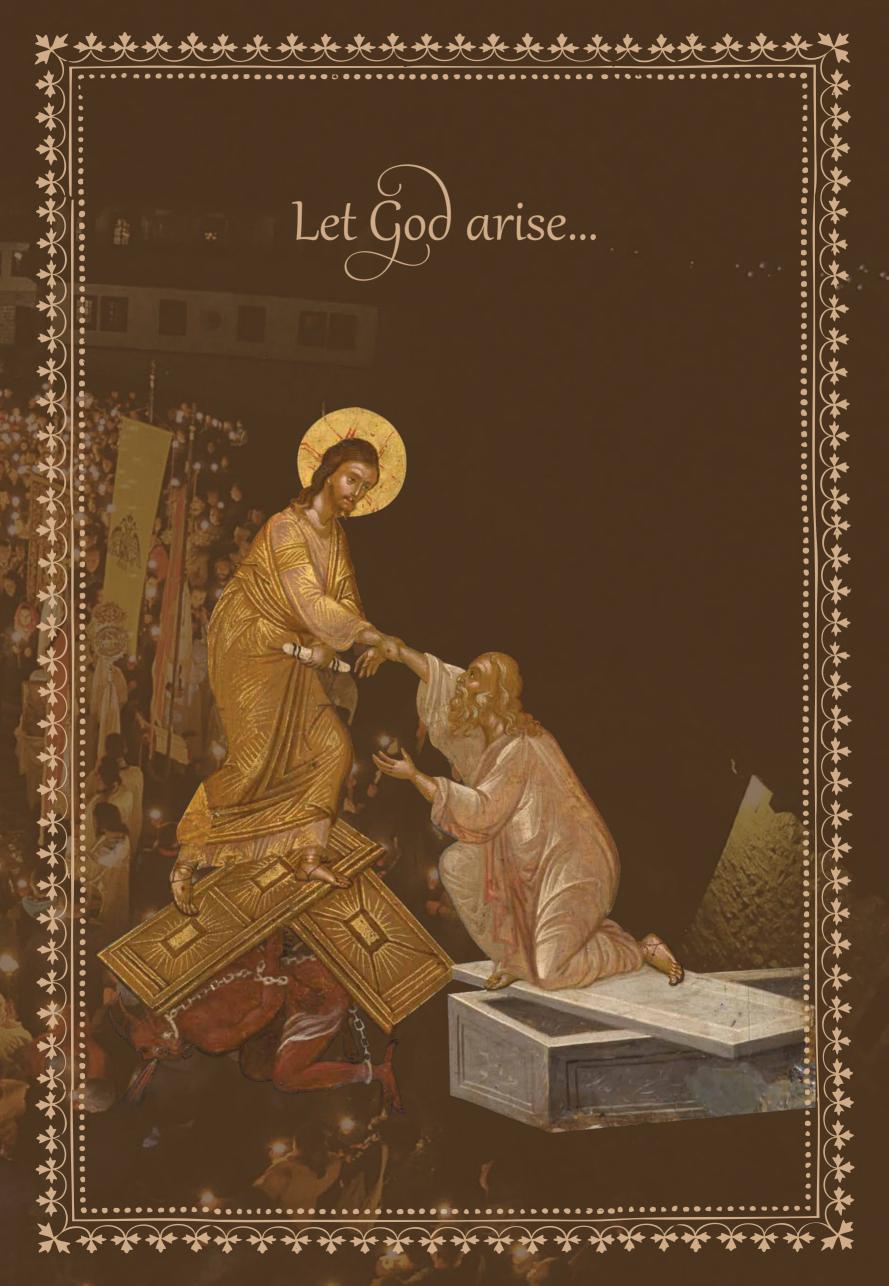


The ceremonious revealing of the donor's inscription above the entrance to the Refectory



Sacred Bigorski Monastery







s a piece of clay in the hands of a skillful artist, gently shaping itself in a true masterpiece and attaining gradually all those unique features that reveal its unusual,

mysterious beauty and the intent of the Creator, the Bigorski sanctuary got out of its dark cocoon and shone in the sun in all its beauty. Glowing in splendor, it took the breath away of all the guests and visitors. But what is a monastery without its spiritual life and rich spiritual tradition? Just an empty shell. A wonderful flower that catches the eye, but doesn't have the strength to attract the bees, since it doesn't have that sweet nectar, which attracts with its appealing scent. And really, the Bigorski sanctuary without its rich spiritual life would be nothing but a luxurious, still empty building. The spiritual bees, hungry for God, who, having searched for the sweet nectar of the Divine words, have finally found the Bigorski life-giving treasury, can undoubtedly testify to this. For them the monastery is not just a museum of culture and a monument of art. It is a sigh of their hearts, a light for their steps. It's a place which testifies the victory over death, a place where they met the Resurrected God, where amidst the lifeless desert of the modern world, wonderful and very rare flowers sprouted, spreading around them the sweet scent of the perfect love towards God and men.

So the Holy Bigorski Synodia rose from the dead, like St. Lazarus of the Four Days, not when the magnificent monastic dwellings and high stone walls were built, but rather when in the desolated Bigorski church, for the first time after 50 years, the monastic prayer was heard; when the fiery monastic hearts started offering Divine service to the Bridegroom of their souls, pouring into the words of the Holy service all their zealous love towards the One and Sweet Jesus.

Such holiday for the soul and food for the heart are these monastic services! Glory to God for this amazing circle of Divine services which incarnates itself and is expressed through the monastery Liturgical order of the monastic Typikon. Because the Divine service is the primary activity of those who, having overcome the needs of the mundane life, have chosen as their main goal the emulating of the angels and their constant doxology, as much as it is given to men to do so. Thus, by the words of St. Theodor the Studite, chanting is followed by chanting, reading goes after reading, learning after learning, and a Divine service after the previous Divine service. But that is the basic endeavor of the monastic life, as a constant doxology. That's why the length of the Divine service is part of the monastic feat, and it doesn't exhaust the monk, since his participation in the service is not an obligation, but rather a necessity of his soul, thirsty for God. He isn't burdened by worldly concerns, nor troubled by worldly problems, and for the monk there is nothing better than to communicate with the Saviour, His Holy Mother, and His friends. The monastic services are services of grace, joy and glory, revelation of the soul and a foretaste of the Paradise. They flow authentically and modestly, just as the life of crucifixion for the sake of Christ, humbly and God-pleasing, committing a deed of repentance for the glory of God. And everybody participates. One brother serves, the other assists, one reads, others chant, alone or in a choir, one follows the Typikon, the other helps him, one sounds the talandon and rings the bell, the other performs the sacristan duty and is responsible for the decoration of the church, one watches over the order of the Divine service... They all serve, "co-serving".

The spiritual birds of Bigorski committed themselves with the total zeal of their souls to this angelic life of unceasing doxology. Through the wonderful stichires which stem from the depth of the rich tradition of the Holy Fathers and the amazing Byzantine chants which the Bigorski Elder managed to bring over as a fruit of his Athonite experience, the monastic souls made effort to bring back that ancient Slavic-Romeic tradition, which ennobled the hearts of our ancestors, as if emulating the angels in their constant Doxology. And much more than that. Through these doxologies which the Church created in order to glorify God and his Saints, the





Let your light so shine before men, that they may see your good works, and glorify your Father which is in heaven. (Mat. 5, 16)

monks outpour their soul, open their heart so that it reveals all the inner desire, all their heavenly love, which the Creator inspired their souls with. Therefore the services in Bigorski simply fascinate with their intensive, soul-moving and graceful, Eastern-ecclesiastic chanting, which as a prayerful sigh comes from the depth of the monastic hearts and invites the present faithful to repentance, leaving nobody indifferent to this call.

So, in the time set for prayer, the Bigorski monks hallow that specific part of the day, remembering at the same time of a certain moment of the ecclesiastic history and the life of Christ. Namely, the afternoon schedule of Divine services begins with the Ninth Hour, when our Lord Jesus Christ experienced death and when the thief, with the renowned words: Remember me, oh, Lord ..., as if with a key, opened the gates of Paradise, becoming the first to enter the Heavenly Kingdom. And while the words of the psalm for the creation of the world can be

heard in the quiet church, denoting the beginning of the Vespers and of the entire daily circle of services, the monks, filled with repentance, direct their prayers towards the Almighty God, patiently standing in the wooden chairs, which resemble a quiet shelter for those who have chosen a life of crucifixion. Then the touching verses of the vespers chant follow, conveying the pain of the fallen mankind, banished from the Paradise.

Oh, Lord, I have cried to Thee. Hear me Lord! (Psalm 140) As if you could hear the repenting cry of Adam before the Paradise lost. The prayers that come out of the hearts of monks and the present faithful, mingle with the chanting, uniting into a powerful prayerful cry and thus attaining help from God's merciful hand, from the Divine Mother, the angels and saints, who always intercede for those who wage a spiritual fight. And the Holy Spirit abundantly sheds His grace and sweetens the prayerful souls.



The Divine services are a nourishment for the monastic soul

in the solemn silence of the temple, monks carry on with the prayers of the Small Compline. The prayerful sighs of the monastic soul flow out as the monks, committing themselves to God, pray feverously: Grant us, Thy children, oh, Lord, who take a rest, a peaceful night, repose of both our body and soul, keep us from a dark and sinful dream and the dark passions of the night. That's a moment for the emotional sounds of the hymn to our Theotokos, the Most Holy Virgin Mother to resound again in the Bigorski temple. Those magnificent verses of the Akathist incorporate within themselves the entire gentle love of the monastics, twining with each word a wreath of appraisals for the One, Who in the dark night of futile centuries, opened the inward way to the ancient Divine Mystery, to the sacred incorruptibility and immortality, leaving the future monks a legacy with Her example. So especial is this bond which ties the monastic heart with

the Mother of Light, the Intercessor for the misfortunate, and Lady Protector of the monasticism.

And while the world is asleep, those who have chosen a life equal to the angelic, rising from their sleep, instantly join the doxology of the angels. Just like the wise virgins, awaiting patiently their Bridegroom, the monks rush to direct their very first thoughts to the One Who has inflamed their hearts with the Divine fire. Having risen from sleep, we fall down before Thee, O Good One, and the angelic hymn we cry aloud to Thee, O Mighty One. Holy, Holy,

Holy art Thou. O God; through the Theotokos, have mercy on us.

Early in the morning, the sound of the talandon denotes some other time, the time when the first rays that shine through the God-wisely composed Matins, announce the revelation of the Holy Trinity – the true Light. Glory to the Most Holy, Consubstantial, Life-giving and Undivided Trinity!

Gathered in the church, together with all the angels and saints, the God-loving souls give in with zeal to their most important deed, celebrating and honoring the saint of the day or the holiday. The monastic lips pronounce honeysweet words, enchanting verses filled with love and respect towards the friends of the Lamb of God, inviting us to take part in the mysterious feast of His Supper. Troparions, psalms, verses, cannons, kondakions, chants, doxologies... And amidst the dense forest, the voices of the Mattins mingle with the wonderful song of the birds and the rustling of the leaves, as if the entire nature sings along with the monks, creating an enchanting harmony of sounds. This choir is replenished by the ripple of the numerous monastery founts. The course of the service overwhelms the faithful to the state of a light and harmonious oblivion, giving the impression that God is among us and that in a mysterious way, by the grace of God, we are in communion with Him.

The verses of the Matins flow towards the dawn, towards the Divine Liturgy. Gradually the First, Third, and the Sixth Hour go by, while the Bigorski brothers, remembering the birth of our Lord Jesus Christ in the world, His trial before Pontius Pilate, the horrible Crucifix, His death on the Cross and the Descend of the Holy Spirit on the Apostles, humbly direct their prayers towards the Merciful God, praying for spiritual enlightenment and direction of their paths according to God's Commandments, so that everything in the day that comes should be for the glory of God.

All this circle of Divine services, all the sadness for the Paradise lost, the serene joy which emanates from the memory of the Divine love towards humanity with which God created the world and life, all that exaltation of praising God, the Most Holy Theotokos, and the Saints through their troparions and verses — all that reaches its climax, its meaning, in the Eucharistic Divine service of sacrifice and love.

The Divine Eucharist, in which we experience the reality of the Divine community; the highest point in the love of the Trinity God; the meeting and community with the Resurrected Lord and its most

immediate experience, which makes the communion of faithful a community of immortal, simultaneously encompassing all the generations and epochs, is a royal mystery, a Mystery above all mysteries. This is a mystery of the entireness of the Holy Church united in a Body; unassociated mixing of the carnal with the Incarnate; a grace of elevating the world and men towards God; sanctification and transformation of the entire matter, the entire life; offering and means for the salvation and sanctification of mankind and the world. Through this mystery the entire created world transforms into an abode of Divine glory, an icon where every human being retrieves its liturgical meaning and becomes a humble, but glittering participant of the Theophany. Through the Eucharist we become brothers, not simply and uncertainly, but of one soul and of one heart, people who know how to live in awakened love and who have everything in common. Participating in the Divine Eucharist we learn to love. But the Divine Eucharist is above all a Mystery of joy; more of a hymn than a prayer; a royal feast of the Life-Giving God; a gateway for the Church into the joy of her Bridegroom; a meal of the fullness of life; a participation in the eternal joy, in the eschatological heavenly supper and a foretaste of the never-ending Kingdom of God.

At the most joyful Eucharist communion, even the angels participate. As St. John Chrysostom says: even the heavenly angelic communities celebrate, and while participating in the Divine Eucharist, we are imitating their doxology. So when in the heavens the Seraphs sing the Holy Trinity Chant, down below on Earth as a festive echo, simultaneously the same chant is sang by the monastic lips, in one united, unutterable angelic symphony. A united celebration of the Heaven and the Earth, one thanksgiving, one rejoicing, one joyful Divine Service. Therefore during the Cherubika in a cloud of insence, the Bigorski church glows with a new light. With the sounds of the chant to Holy Trinity, the church lifts up from the ground and begins its heavenly journey. And then the whole community of the Christ's flock on Earth travels peacefully through the Eucharist towards the Heavenly Kingdom, where everybody is



Take, eat; this is my body...Drink ye all of it; for this is my blood of the New Testament (Mat. 26, 26-28)

invited to taste of our Lord's feast. What immense mercy and endless humanity of the Lamb of God. With Him we are anointed, in Him we are dressed and He is our Mysterious Supper. Taking Him as our Holy Communion we become Christ-bearers, vessels of the Holy Spirit. Our soul doesn't just take in some rays of light, it welcomes the Sun Itself, we settle in Him and He settles in us, we dress Him with ourselves and we are dressed in Him — thus becoming of one spirit by grace.

That is why the Divine Eucharist represents the focal point around which the monastic life is concentrated. After the finishing of the Divine Service, the Liturgy at the monastery is transferred to the Refectory, the workshops, the library, the garden, to every monastic room and every separate chore, which the monks carry out in Divine order and atmosphere, with prayer and meditations of God. Actually the entire monastic life is an incessant Divine Liturgy, in which the monks, offering the

Eucharistic gifts, give also their entire being as an offering on behalf of the whole creation. Because it's right here, in the Divine Liturgy, that they live their primeval destination. Therefore every activity, every object in the monastery has its liturgical place and meaning and everything in it is carried out with prayer and a blessing. Every other form of a monastic life separated from the Divine and Liturgical order, loses its spiritual meaning and mark.

The most magnificent aspect of the Liturgy can be seen at the glorious monastery vigils, which every year attract more and more participants in the prayerful life of the Bigorski sanctuary'. What

¹ The lovers of the Bigorski vigils would say that each one of them carries a specific mark and each enchants in its own way. Still, one cannot forget the grace which makes the Christmas vigil unforgettable and deeply imprinted on the soul, with its ambience reminding of the Bethlehem cave; also the traditional vigil in the eve of Teophany, unique by its old ritual of godfathering the cross by the nearby Mijak villages; the all-night memory of St Gregory Palamas, celebrated in Rajchica, the repentive vigils of the Great Lent, the rejoicing of the Annunciation; the most graceful all-night veneration of the Mother of God, in honour of Her miraculous icon "It's Truly Meet"; the affable celebration of the birth of the Forerunner during the monastery feast; the amazing appraisal towards the Most Holy Theotokos and Her graceful visit to the faithful in the night of Her honorable Dormition... The Bigorski monastery feels the burden of responsibility as a carrier of the Orthodox Tradition and strives to completely emulate and convey to everyone this traditional







a feast for the soul! What noble unity of prayer! How much grace! The mind is awake, hearts dance with joy, participating in the spiritual intensity of the angelic orders and the joyful presence of the celebrating saint or the holiday itself. Even the ringing of the bells is heavenly, as if some kind of angelic music. The monks come from everywhere, like some quiet dark shadows and enter the church followed by numerous faithful-pilgrims.

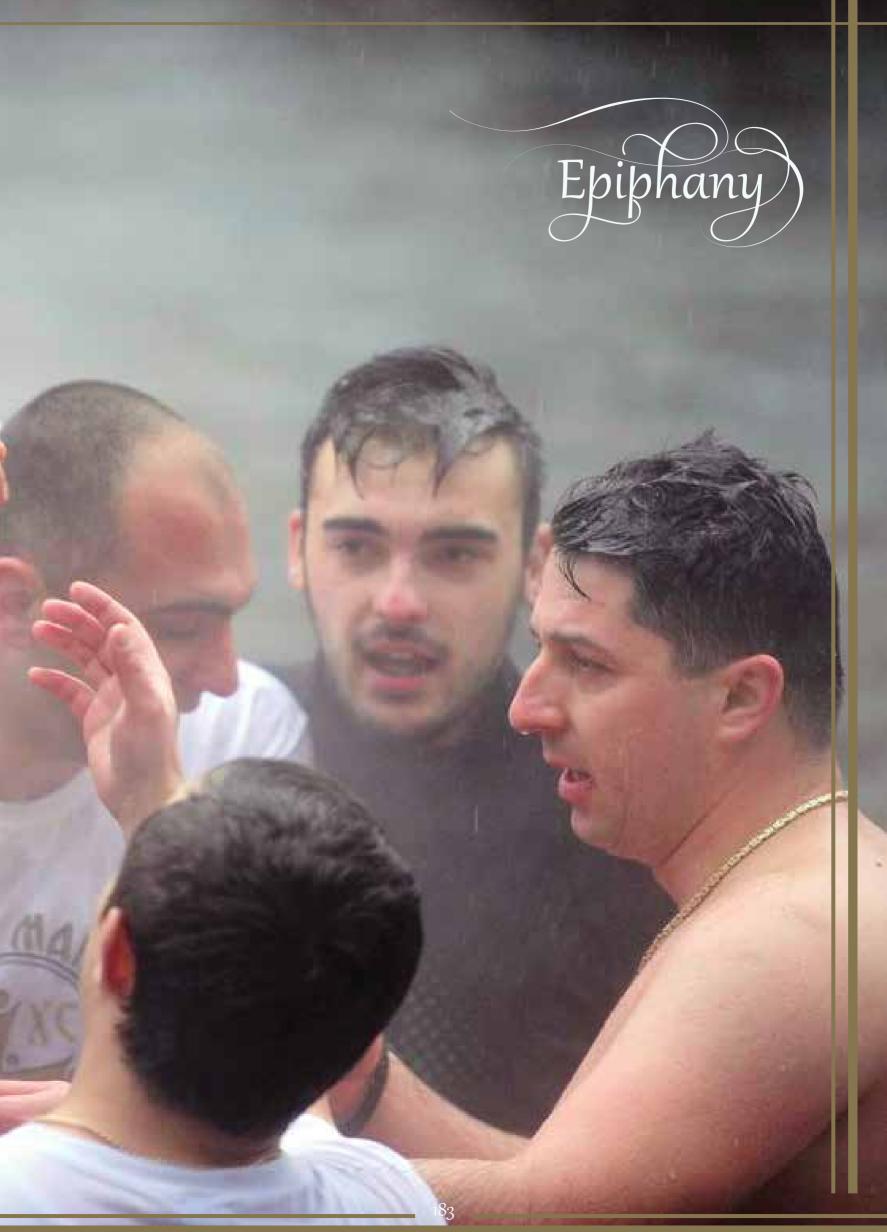
Standing in the temple of God we think we are in heaven, Theotokos, Gate of Heaven. Open the gates of Thy mercy for us.

What could be sweeter than the most beloved name of God, our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ? What could we need more than the peace of our mind and heart? The sublime scent of the insence turns into a breath of spiritual sweet-smelling odor. The humble chanters sing hymns of spiritual exaltation. The angels and the saints of the icons watch us carefully through the glittering light of the other world. Their garments winnow in the whirlwind that leads to this other, eternal life.

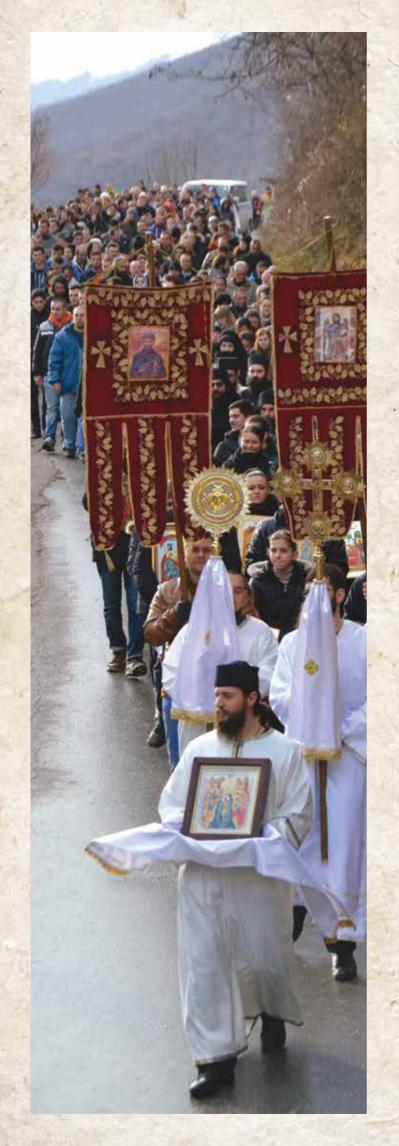
So how could the monastic eyes not be awake? Negligence disappears and the eyes, those mirrors of the monastic soul become participants in the bright glory, symbolically represented through the mysterious gleam of the oil lamps and chandeliers. Filling themselves with heavenly joy, because of the affable chanting of the choir, monks ingest the freshness and sweetness of the grace and rejoice together with the present faithful and the angels. Then the mind, as if in a carriage, raises up to the upper sacrificial altar, and the spirit el-

spirit, which gets its best expression during the monastery vigils.













Today the Sinless is being baptized in the river Jordan by the hand of the Baptist, not to be cleansed from sin - He doesn't have any - but to cleanse the humanity from the sin of Adam. And, behold, the sky is opening, the Spirit of God descends unto the Son of God in form of dove and a voice is heard from the heavens: "This is my beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased!"





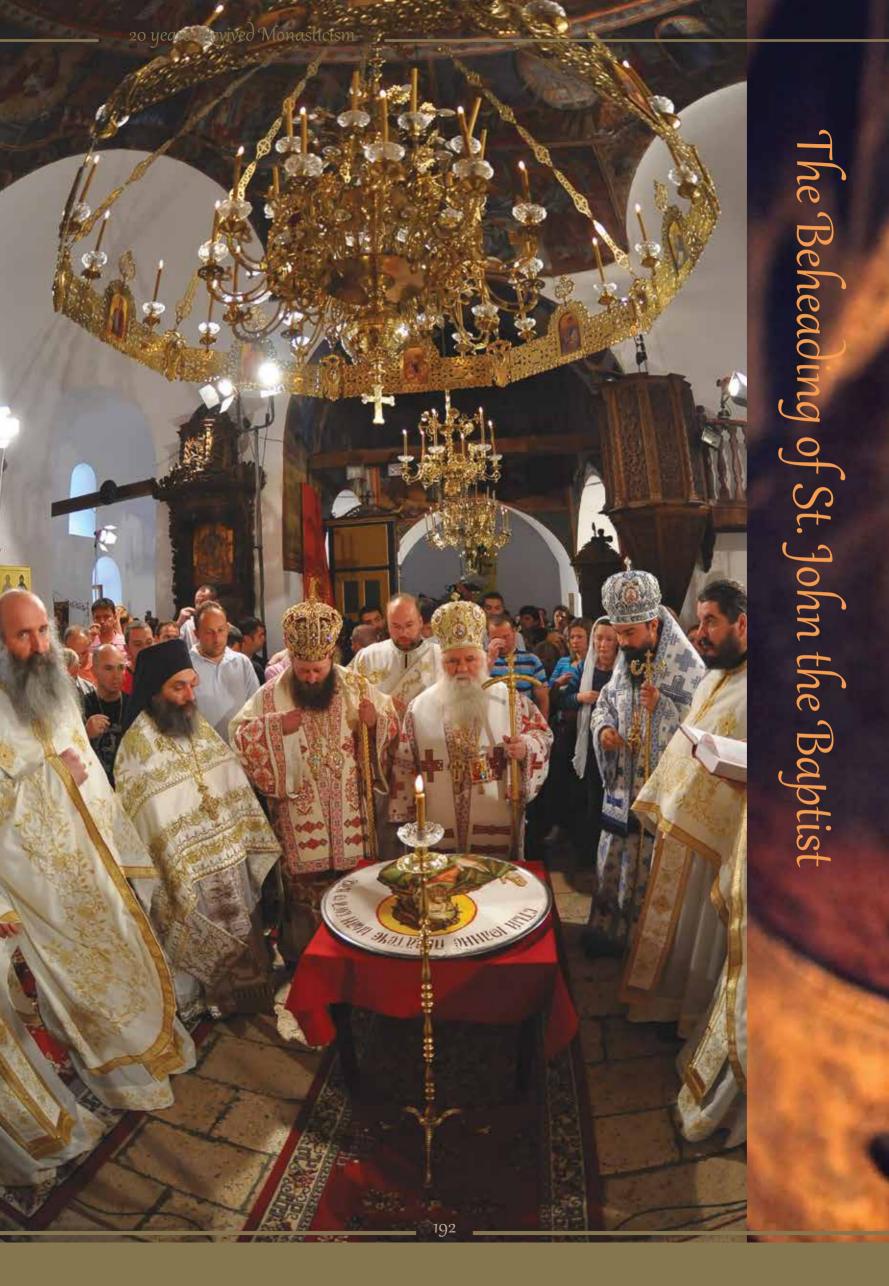


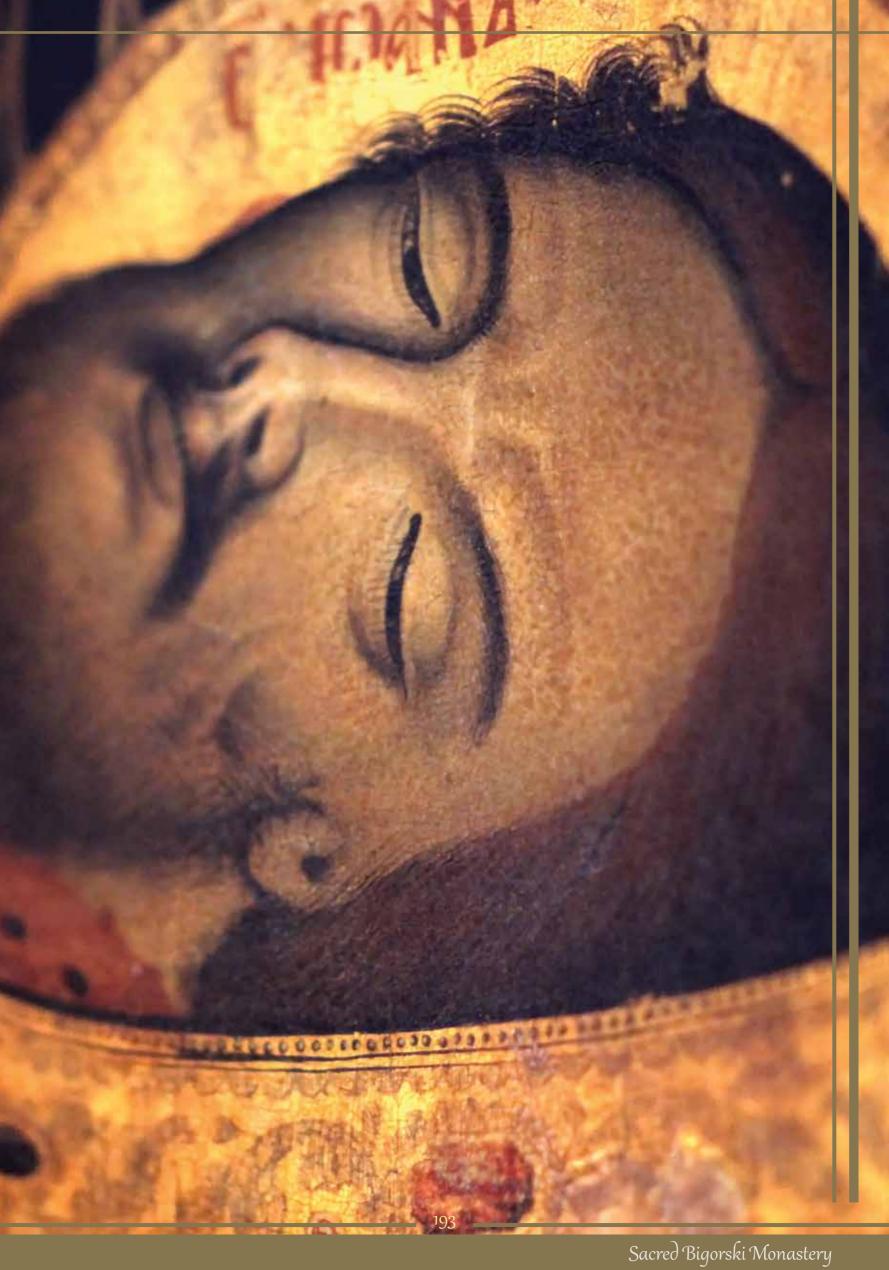


Sacred Bigorski Monastery









evates righteously and poignantly, so that in a mystical way it could find the heavenly treasury and take part in that which eye hath not seen, nor ear heard, neither have entered into the heart of man, the things which God hath prepared for them that love him... (1 Cor. 2, 9). Enchanted by this inexplicable joy, monks spread their hands with love, so that they could embrace with that boundless love all the children of Christ, spread everywhere around the world, because although we are many, we are one Loaf and one Body, we all take communion with the one Bread of Life.

The importance which the Bigorski Synodia gives to the Divine service, especially the Liturgy, reminds our nation that if we don't make the Divine Liturgy and services center of our life, the world could not unite nor transform, in spite of all those human projects for reformation and improvement of life, and could certainly not overcome divisions, injustice, emptiness and death. The monkhood reminds us that the Divine Liturgy and services are not just "something" in our life, but rather a center, a source, a renewal and sanctification of our entire existence, both spiritual and material.

The very architecture of the monastery shows the primary place of the Divine services. Everything begins form the church and the Holy Table and everything goes back there. Everything is directed towards the place for communion - the church. Even the material things testify for the transcendence of the entire life and matter, through the grace of God. The bred and the wine of the Divine Eucharist, the holy oil, the insence, bells ringing at a given time, the oil lamps and candles, which are being lit and extinguished at certain moments during the service, the movements of the priests, ecclesiastics and all the events in the church, are determined by the ancient monastic Typikons and old monastic Constitutions. All these are not just some kind of routine, nor psychological reactions to certain feelings, but rather signs and annunciation of the new creation.

But there is some other, for the monks very blessed time, time when they can endlessly take pleasure in

the long prayers and outbursts of repentance of the soul, soaked in tears. The time of the Great Lent. Time when the spiritual birds of Bigorski literally live in the church. One should see how everything changes overnight then! How everything gets a new, different meaning, a different colour! The church wraps itself in solemn silence, covered with dark cloths, the priests come out of the altar wearing heavy dark vestments, the Royal Gates have a dark curtain on. The holy silence of the temple, in that mysterious twilight, becomes almost deathlike. Even the chanting is different, somehow slow and mournful. The stichires invite everybody to plunge into the darkness of his soul and with humble self-criticism to analyze himself, dedicating fully to the Lord and the neighbor. But above all to repent and ask for forgiveness2.

O Lord, grant me to see my own faults and not to condemn my brother...

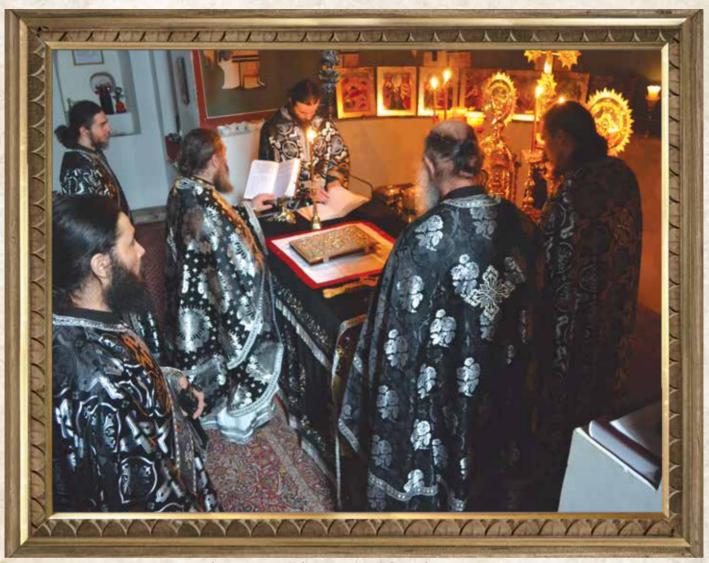
The Lenten prayer of St Ephraim is an essential food for the repenting soul in those days. Monks go to sleep with it, they wake up with it, wrap themselves in it and breathe it. With deep humbleness they to-

tally give in to this call for repentance, abiding in silence, as if in a grave. It seems like the Bigorski sanctuary has fallen asleep, and yet it actually vibrates with life. But this life is inner, a hidden life of the heart emerged in prayer.

There are almost no external activities, the conversations are quiet and brief, the yard is empty. Everyone rushes to enrich that short break between services with a prayer in his monastic cell. The kitchen is also closed, everything is covered with solemn silence.

And in the church - the greatest beauty. The chanting of the Great Cannon of St. Andrew of Crete. And each and every one of this God — inspired

² For the spiritual children of the Bigorski Synodia, who consider repentance something they live every day, a tradition was created to gather in the monastery before the beginning of the Great Lent and to attend the wonderful and inexpressibly profound in meaning Vespers of asking for Forgiveness. Everything in it in a mysterious way introduces that special atmosphere, that mystical cry of the soul, soaked in the deepest repentance. After the Bigorski Elder, Archimandrite Parthenius asks for forgiveness with his quiet words and a humble prostration, saying: Bless me, Holy Fathers and brothers, and forgive me, the sinner, for every wrong thing I have done today and in all the days of my life, with words, deeds, thoughts and all my feelings, the service continues with a sincere and cordial act of mutual asking for forgiveness of all the present, which is a really wonderful and touching sight.



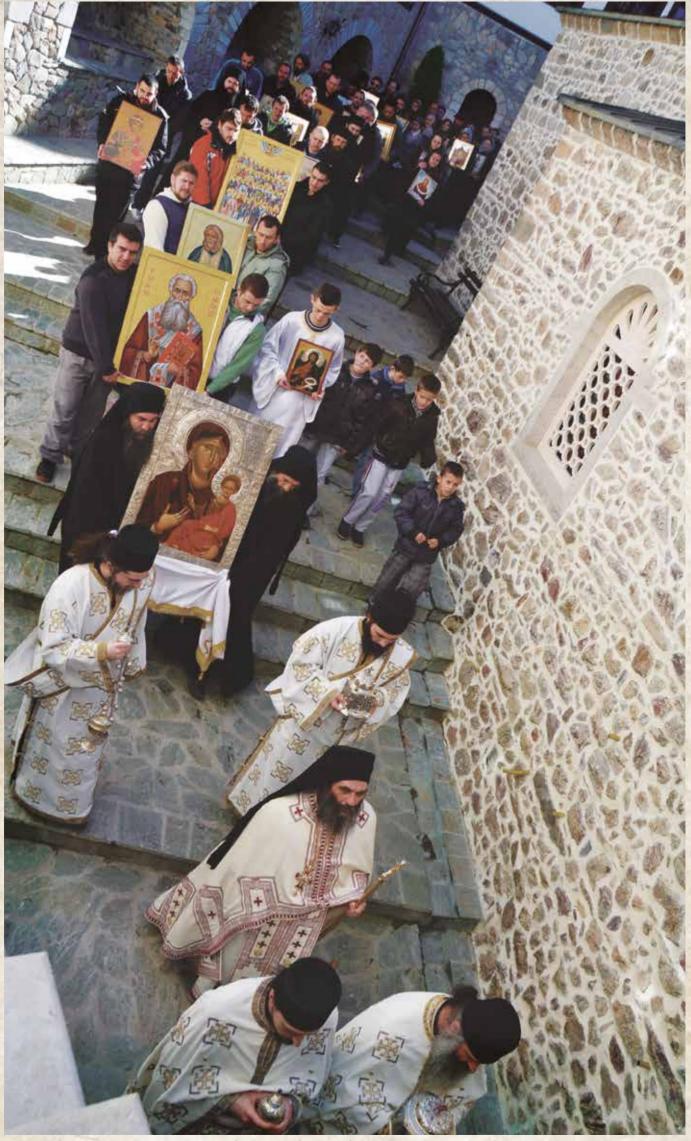
The Liturgy of the Presanctified Holy Sacraments

troparions touches with inexpressible sweetness and leads to affability. In the quiet twilight, monks humbly remind themselves of the entire sinful history of mankind, of the pain of Adam before the paradise lost and the rejected possibility to abide in the eternity together with God, the possibility that the Merciful Creator generously offered to humanity. All these verses, created to lead us through the dessert of our insanity and bring our spirit towards intense repentance, subconsciously enter the heart, making it soft and gradually opening it for the salvational cleansing by tears.

Simply, with few words filled with strength and irresistible intensity, the renowned events and persons from the Biblical history become a synonym for at least one episode in the spiritual wandering of every human. And after each of these clear pictures, the choir as if from the depth of the soul cries: Have mercy on me, my Lord, have mercy! And it looks like it's trying to seal these words in the mind of the present faithful. During these first three days the

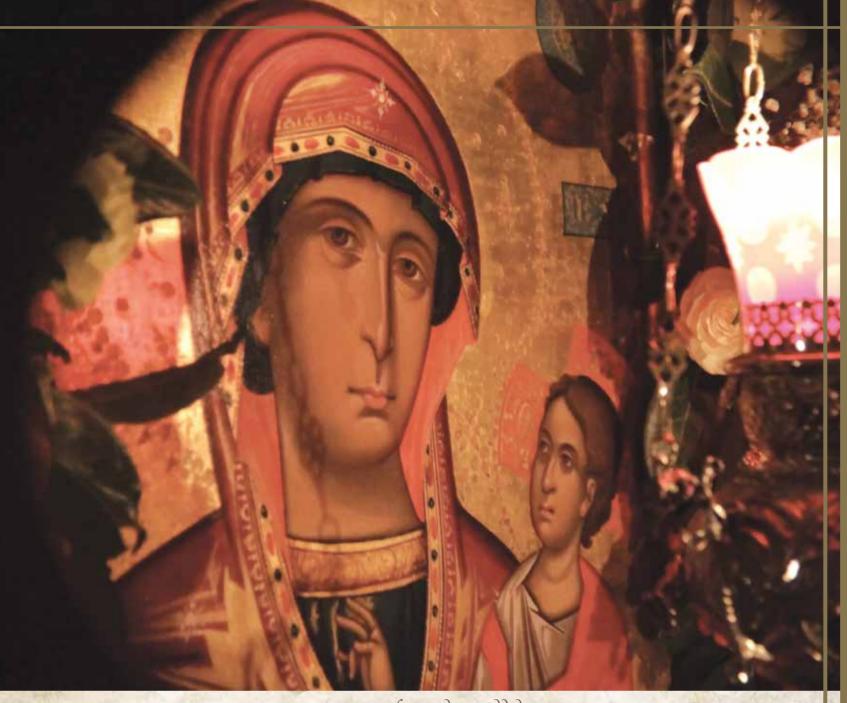
only food and beverage which nourishes the monastic soul is the Divine word, metrified into prayers, repentive sighs, and deep humble prostrations. The soul needs nothing else. As a modest bride, embellished only with her repentance and tears, it submerges with all her zeal in the quiet ambience of the Liturgy of the Presanctified Gifts. Let my prayer be like incense set before you, my uplifted hands like an evening sacrifice. Receiving the Presanctified gifts, the monks and faithful enjoy the encounter with the One, Who has already rushed towards them. And the Divine food is so sweet, so comforting and sustaining for the soul!

The end of this amazing first week of the Lent is crowned with a glittering service, which illuminates as if with bright light the heavenly connection of the Mother of God with those who have given up all the worldly pleasures for the sake of Christ. This inextricable connection can be seen in all aspects of monastic life, but it reaches its peak in the days of the Great Lent, when trough the verses of the Lent-



In memory of the Triumph of Orthodoxy (Sunday of Orthodoxy)

196

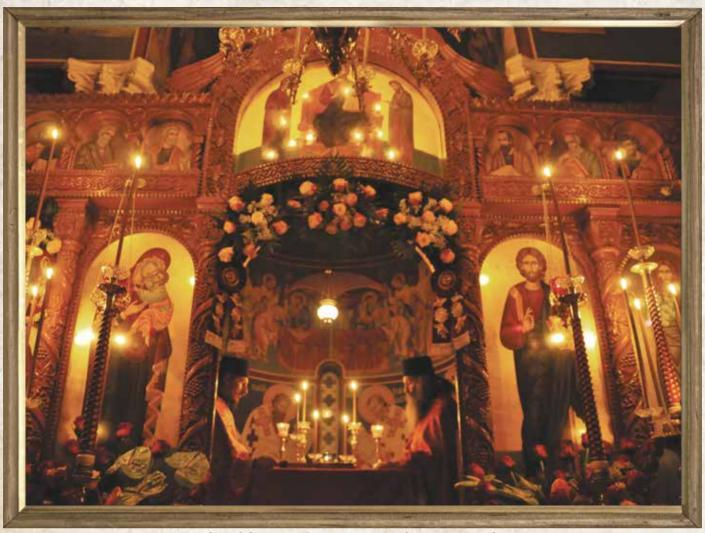


Rejoice, thou Bride unwedded!

en Akathistos Hymn towards the Mother of God, the monks put into words all their filial respect, gentleness and fidelity. For the Holy Bigorski Synodia the first Akathistos is a very festive event, for which it prepares with special love. Then, in honor of the Queen, the church leaves its solemn, dark, repentive cloths and again dresses itself in a festive garment, embellished with flowers and scented with sweet - smelling odor. It rejoices in splendor, anxiously expecting the moment when the monks and numerous faithful would open their hearts and pour out a most beautiful hymn towards the self-sacrificing Lady Intercessor of the entire human kind, our dearest Mother, the Most Holy Theotokos. And while everybody worships with respect the One Who is being praised by the entire Heavenly Kingdom, the hearts of the faithful children of the Most Pure Virgin fill up with Her quiet and bright motherly grace.

After the quiet moments of repentance, the ceremonious memory of the Victory of Orthodoxy approaches, resounding with all its intensity and strength. The Bigorski Synodia, joining the entire community of the Church, triumphantly celebrates the moment when the Holy Fathers victoriously proclaimed the Synodikon of the Orthodoxy. This ancient writing filled with numerous blessings for the Orthodox and anathemas for the heretics, is a worthy conclusion of a wonderful ceremonious litany with the noblest images of our beloved Saviour, His Most Pure Mother, the light-bearing angels, Saints and Righteous.

The second week is another reason for a feast. The Bigorski Synodia and the sisterhood in Rajchica rejoice, honouring with festive glamour and a night vigil the memory of the Divine pillar of truth and a guardian, protector from the perilous heresies – St. Gregory Palamas. They celebrate this Holy Father



The celebration of St. Gregory Palamas in Rajchica

and teacher as a worthy example for the hidden life of prayer, something which is so close to the monks and which they live for! Trying to emulate this life of prayerful conversation with our Sweetest Lord, the Bigorski brothers and sisters fulfil daily his legacy for the prayer.

And when the human strength gradually starts to weaken due to the everyday self-crucifying and restraining from passions, the Divine Fathers of the Orthodox Church inspire new zeal, wisely placing the veneration of the Holy and Life-giving Cross in the middle of this Holiest Lent, so that it could strengthen, comfort and fortify us, reminding us of Christ's eternal victory over evil. Thus supported by this new hope and gracefully nourished by the spiritual strength that emanates from the Cross, in the fourth week of the Holy Lent the monks slowly climb up the Ladder, as a kind of prayerful ascending through the virtues, until they meet the One God, the True Everlasting, Who is expecting them at the end of this journey of the Great Lent, in order to resurrect them with Him. That's when in the Bigorski church you can

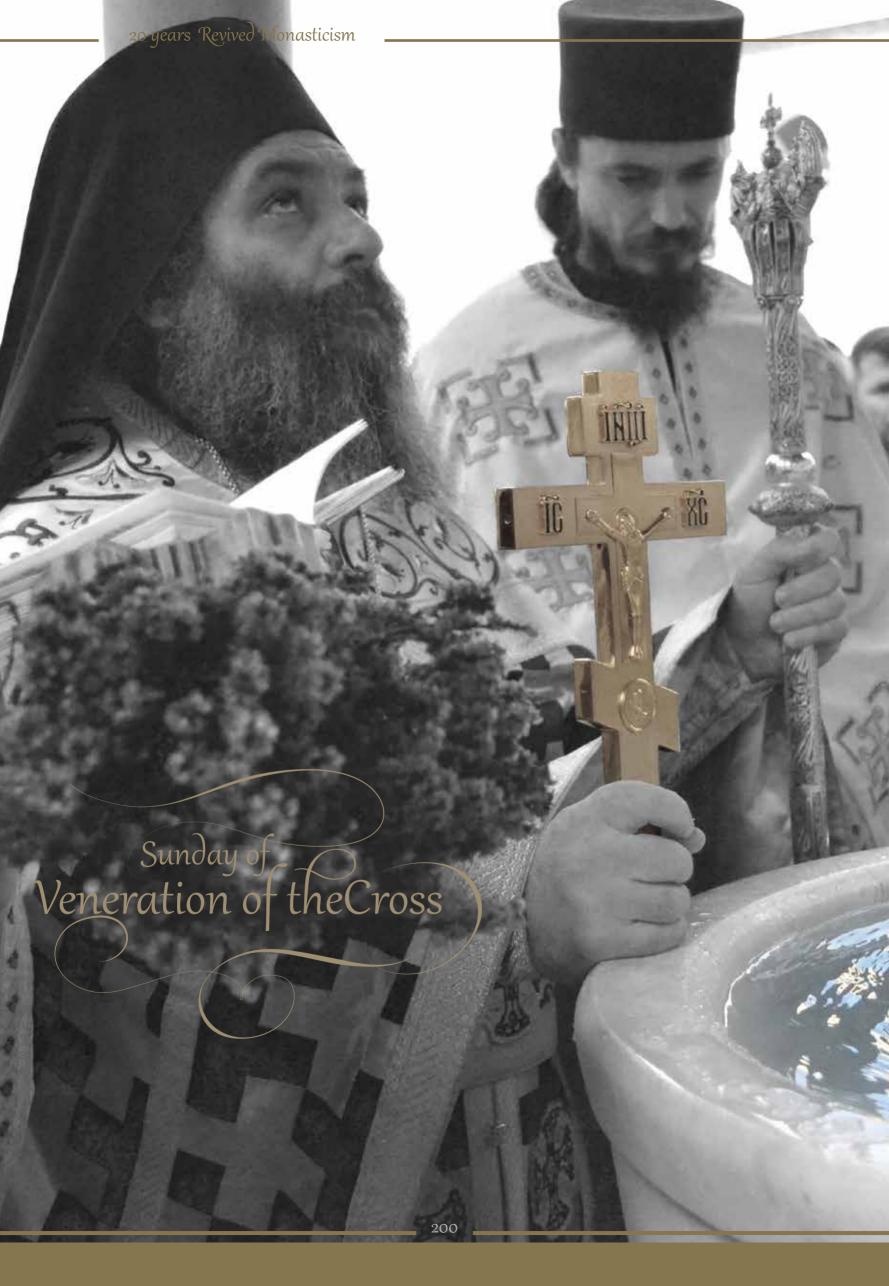
hear again a century old sigh, a quiet appeal of the Mother Church transferred into the words of the Holy Forerunner: Repent, for the Kingdom of Heaven is near (Mt. 3, 2). And again the wonderful verses of the Great Cannon of St. Andrew of Crete resound emotionally in the church, as if an open door to the way of repentance, but now these verses are understood differently by the monastic soul: they become its cry, its sigh, and its criteria for the success in the fasting feat. How far have you gone, oh soul, on your way towards the Golgotha? Behold, Christ is waiting for you there, don't be afraid to crucify yourself with Him. If for a second you lose hope, because of your numerous trespasses, have in mind the example of the righteous mother St. Mary of Egypt, celebrated in the fifth week on the Lent. Let her amazing life endow you with courage, let it be a challenge for you, a calling to at least now, at the end of the Lent, you take upon yourself the light burden of repentance, according to the words of the One Who has said: Come unto me, all ye that labour and are heavy laden, and I will give you



The Elder with his children

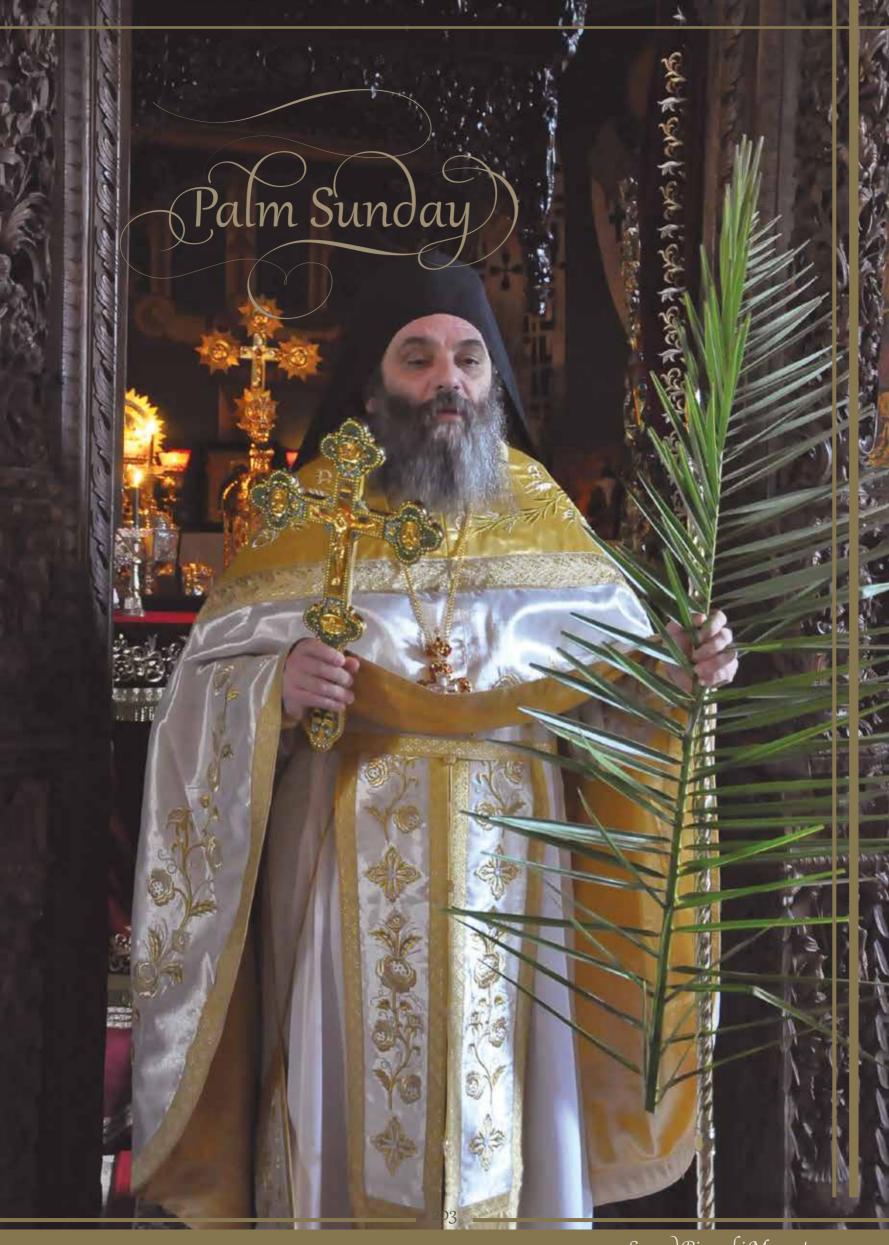


Festive meal in Rajchica









Sacred Bigorski Monastery



The Service of the Bridegroom

rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn of me; for I am meek and lowly in heart: and ye shall find rest unto your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light. (Mt. 11, 28 - 30). And the souls of those present in the Church mysteriously listen to this final appeal for repentive cleansing from passions, before they are to be invited to take part in the mystery of Crucifixion and Resurrection. Because Christ mercifully accepts even those who have come in the eleventh hour and rewards them equally with the first.

In this manner, one after another, weeks pass slowly, each filled with repentive prayers and constant Divine service. Each one of them, making use of its own images and metaphors, fortifies in humbleness the faithful who repents, and gradually prepares him for the greatest of all weeks, the Week of the Holy Passions of our dearest Lord, the touching image of the redemptive Sacrifice, which every year seems to happen again before the compassionate eyes of the faithful in the Bigorski church, making them accomplices in this suffering. The tone of the Divine services changes, the monks and present faithful forget about themselves and their own temptations, the entire attention is focused on Christ. We are already on the way to Jerusalem, walking silently with the Apostles and listening to Him while He announces to us His future passion: Behold, we go up to Jerusalem; and the Son of man shall be betrayed unto the chief priests and unto the scribes, and they shall condemn him to death, and shall deliver him to the Gentiles to mock, and to scourge, and to crucify him: and the third day he shall rise again. (Mt. 20, 18-19). Let's imaginatively

enter Jerusalem with Him so that we could witness the triumphant reception, hear the joyful cry of the people gathered to meet him: Hosanna! Blessed is the One Who comes in the name of the Lord. These same people, after just a few days, would cry with even greater determination: Crucify Him! so that we could be reminded of the fickleness and weakness of our human nature, which in a single moment of temptation could betray Christ. But here we are, at the threshold of the Passion Week and before us, in the twilight of these days, where darkness is pierced by sudden rays of light, where betrayal is faced with the fruit of the ultimate Divine self-sacrificing love, before us we behold the image of the Bridegroom of the Church, Who, having married His Church, sets off to voluntarily shed His Holy Blood. Therefore, with this terrible sight of the redemptive sacrifice for our sake, before their eyes, the monks and faithful prepare through repentance for His reception:

Behold, the Bridegroom comes at midnight, and blessed is the servant whom He shall find watching... These wonderful verses which are to be chanted the next few days resound with a touching tone in the church of the Forerunner, calling us to a spiritual watchfulness and readiness for the reception of the Heavenly Bridegroom! But the Holy and Divine Fathers know well that we need help from above in the weaving of the bridal garment with our virtues and good deeds, because without it no one could enter in the bridal chamber of the Bridegroom. Therefore here is the wonderful prayer: Thy bridal chamber, O my Saviour, do I behold all adorned, and a garment I have not that I may enter therein. Illumine the garment of my soul, O Giver of Light, and save me.

Blessed and most blessed are the Holy and God-bearing Fathers, which having been inspired by the Holy Spirit, have created most wisely these heavenly bright Divine services and left them to us as a most precious heritage. Could there be anything more to be said than what has already been expressed in the twelve Gospel Readings and the emotional hymns of the service, which, resounding profoundly, pierce through the hearts of the faithful, united with the priests and monks in the same pain before the Crucified? Along with the stichires they mourn the human malice, and dismayed before the horror of the inexplicable mockery, whipping, the crown of thorns and the horrific Crucifix, with burning candles in their hands and glittering tears in their eyes, in a long prayerful litany, move silently towards the Baldachin above the monastery gate, from where the Elder, similarly to St. Simon of Cyrine, raises up the large cross and places it on his shoulders:

Today He who hung the Earth upon the waters is hung upon the Cross. He who is King of the angels is arrayed in a crown of thorns... resounds in the trembling soul the weeping voice of the Elder. And the quiet nights in the Bigorski monastery become silent witnesses of this touching drama, of the pain which tears the heart, the warm tears, the crucified love. Creation mourns the voluntary passion of his

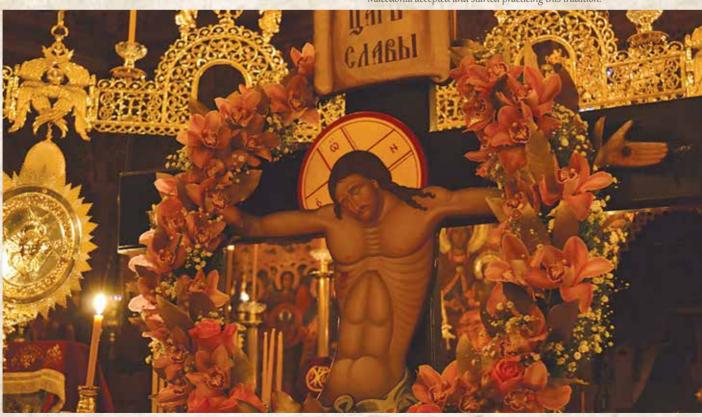
Creator.

And the moment comes when in the middle of the church the Epitaphios is placed, which is a sort of icon of the passions, the loneliness, the rejection and finally of the death of our Lord Jesus Christ, the final victory over evil. Because the Bishop of life and the King of glory has been taken off the Cross, wrapped in a clean cloth and placed behind the Royal Doors - this new grave of the Arimathean. The floral Tomb shines brightly in the middle of the temple with all its beauty, worthy only of the Heavenly King, and the magnificent gold-embroidery, the Epitaphios, placed inside it, represents Christ the Life-Giver placed in the tomb as a three days Dead Man³. The emotional, affable verses, composed in honour of the mourning of Christ, continue to increase the feeling of joyful sadness in the God-loving souls, because of the Cross and of the anticipated joy of the Resurrection:

Every generation, o, my Christ, offers praises at Thy burial.

But in this overwhelming sadness you can almost

³ The magnificent embellishing of the Tomb of Christ in the image of a flowery baldachin — Kuvuklia (Sepulture), is a way in which the faithful express their love and respect for the Most Kind God and a worthy reflection of the glory of His Life-Giving Tomb, from where the eternal Life shone forth for all of us. This wonderful tradition has been revived in Macedonia by the Bigorski Elder, Archimandrite Parthenius, right after his arrival at the monastery in 1995, and it was a result of his rich Athonite experience. The amazing Epitaphios with its lavish entwining of most beautiful flowers and the harmony of colours, became a real feature of the splendor of the Divine services in Bigorski. Following this example, the other churches all over Macedonia accepted and started practicing this tradition.



Holy Friday





Today He who hung the earth upon the waters is hung on the tree,

The King of the angels is decked with a crown of thorns.

He who wraps the heavens in clouds

is wrapped in the purple of mockery.

He who freed Adam in the Jordan is slapped on the face.

The Bridegroom of the Church is affixed to the Cross with nails.

The Son of the virgin is pierced by a spear.

We worship Thy passion, () Christ.

Show us also Thy glorious resurrection.



Glory to Thy enduring patience my Lord







Sacred Bigorski Monastery



feel the first rays of joy breaking through. The Great Prokeimenon, which so victoriously echoes in the church, slowly introduces everybody in the Paschal merriment. The present faithful imaginatively descend with Christ to the Hades and rejoice, because God is making peace with mankind and releases the condemned. He, the Humanitarian, descends with His Divine force and power to release the enslaved, which have been swollen by the bitter and insatiable death, and rises them with Himself, joining them to the heavenly residents. This seems to announce the moment when the entire creation would exclaim with happiness. In this Holy and Great Saturday we are pierced by the feeling of expectation, when we look with hope upon the life-giving Tomb of God. Placed in the middle of the church and covered with rain of flowers, it already gives the foretaste of the Paschal glory.

Finally the long anticipated and brightest night! At first the service begins somehow quietly. In the still dark church, void of the light of the candles and oil lamps, only the temperate and serene verses of the Holy Saturday Cannon can be heard, filled with mournful joy, celebrating the redemption from the spiritual pharaoh - the death. These are the final moments of silence before the radiance of the Paschal joy and in those moments the soul seems to prepare for the night brighter than any day. Then all the hearts would be filled with this inexplicable delight which is not from this world, a happiness which will reside in them during that night and many nights to come, destroying all the strongholds of sin and death. The church has already taken off the dark covers and is now luxuriously dressed in a glamourous white gown, embellished with rich colourful floral wraths, as if some kind of bridal jewelry to decorate that pure whiteness, giving it some unearthly dimension. Everything is prepared for the Paschal inconceivable glory.

And suddenly a flash of lightening! Come receive the light from the unwaning light, and glorify Christ, Who has risen from the dead! As a sweet-smelling scent, these most desired for the soul words fill the temple, uttered from the mouth of the Bigorski Elder, Fr. Parthenios. How victoriously these words

sound, while the Elder slowly moves towards the exit of the church, as if taken by some heavenly force4, carrying a torch of thirty three candles lit with the Holy Light. His voice reaches deep in the most hidden places of the soul and awakens joyful tremor. It's now! Just a few more seconds and... thousands of mouths exclaim: Christ is risen! He is truly risen! And the gates of the Bigorski church open up, revealing a magnificent sight of a divinely adorned palace, illuminated by an amazing light which is not from this world. As if some invisible hand has covered everything with gold. The chandeliers are swaying, candles glitter in the hands, clouds of flowers floats in the air and joyful singing resounds, accompanied by merry exclamations coming from everywhere. Even the bells sing with their ringing voice, and together with them the forest celebrates too, and the surrounding hills, the sky and the whole Universe (2 Kor. 5, 17).

Now all things are filled with light: heaven and earth, and the nethermost regions. So let all creation celebrate the Resurrection of Christ, whereby it is established... How joyful, how victorious this words are! Everything is united in the Paschal joy: the heaven, the Earth and the kingdom of the dead. The entire world takes part in this victory of Christ, in His Resurrection everything gets its meaning, purpose and truth. It is happiness for the living, which together with Christ rise from their sinful desert, but happiness for the dead as well, who together with Christ rise for an eternal life. This is the day when death is conquered forever.

The Paschal night is a testimony that Christ is forever alive and with us, that we are alive through Him, the Immortal. It is a call for to man to recognize in this world and in his life the dawn of the mysterious eighth day of the Heavenly Kingdom. Because the

⁴ The miracle of the Holy Light is a phenomenon which happens every year oh the Holy and Great Saturday and amazes and endows with grace the huge multitude of faithful, present in the Jerusalem church of the Resurrection at that moment. By tradition, the Holy Light which descends in the church, ignites first the torch with thirty three candles of the Jerusalem Patriarch, who awaits in the sealed Tomb of Christ on that occasion. Then with the blessing of the Patriarch, the Holy Light, carried in lanterns, is transported to all the Orthodox countries. In 2009 as a result of the efforts of the Abbot of Bigorski, Fr. Parthenius, the Holy Light, brought here on the feast of the Resurrection of Christ, enlightened and hallowed for the first time our country. One cannot forget the sight of the Abbot, appearing at the Royal Gates of the Bigorski church with a torch of thirty three candles lit by the Holy Light, similarly to the Jerusalem Patriarch. According to the testimony of numerous faithful who witnessed this holy and graceful event, the grace of the Holy Light present in Bigorski, is no lesser than the one in Jerusalem.





Come ye and receive light from the unwaning Light...







Lift up your heads, () ye gates; even lift them up, ye everlasting doors; and the King of glory shall come in



Let God arise, let his enemies be scattered...



A view of the Paschal triumph from Rostushe village



Shine! Shine! () New Jerusalem! The Glory of the Lord has shone on you...

Holy Pascha is real, all-pleasing and most desired encounter with the One Whom our heart has already met and recognized in Him its true Life. The monks from Bigorski and the thousands of faithful who have merged their life with the Holy Synodia, live for that. Still, one can say that for the grace-endowed monastic soul Pascha is a condition which never ends, because it continues through the inner prayer, inextricably connected with the Divine Liturgy. It's not by chance that the prayer is the most important occupation of the monk, as St. John the Chrysostom means it, when he says that we should pray all day and if possible, the whole night too. So the prayerful feat which the zealous monastic heart begins every morning in the temple, and keeps him in constant remembrance of the sweetest name of Jesus Christ during the day, continues in the evening in the monastic cells as some never-ending harmonious tune, which calls and awakens the beloved Bridegroom and the grace of the Holy Life-Giving Spirit, Who comes from the Father. The prayer is short, but it contains in itself our entire salvation: Our Lord, Jesus Christ have mercy upon me, the sinner.

With the word Lord we celebrate our God, His glorious magnificence as the King of Israel, Creator of everything visible and invisible, before Whom the cherubs and seraphs tremble. With the sweet calling Jesus we testify that we stand before our Saviour and humbly show Him our gratitude for He has prepared an eternal life for us. With the word Christ, we confess that Christ is Son of God and God Himself. It's not a man, nor an angel of God who came to save us, but Jesus Christ Himself, the True God. Then with the sigh from deep within our heart have mercy upon me we humbly prostrate and beg our Lord to have mercy upon us and to fulfill all our humble requests, giving us the essential for our salvation. And not just to us. This "me" contains all the members of the Body of Christ, all known and unknown, close and distant. And finally we confess our sinfulness because we are all sinners and crucify every day the Most Kind God with our sins.

With this prayer the spiritual birds of Bigorski live, work, rest and feed. Because it is the real food and beverage. Repeating it in their hearts, the monks feed of the Lamb of God, of that heavenly "manna" of mysterious communion with Christ, and drink "the good vine" of the grace that leads to heaven. And their prayer comprises the entire matter and intercedes for the renewal of the world. They say that life on Earth would end when people stop praying. But you can see, the Merciful God continues to choose His virgin souls and puts in their hands this holy mission: prayer for the entire world. Until these earthly angels exist, this world would not perish.







Thousands of smiling faces for Christ's Resurrection



Paschal heavens in the church









Sacred Bigorski Monastery





Come, let us rejoice for Christ's Resurrection!



The pure faith shines from the children's hearts





Sacred Bigorski Monastery



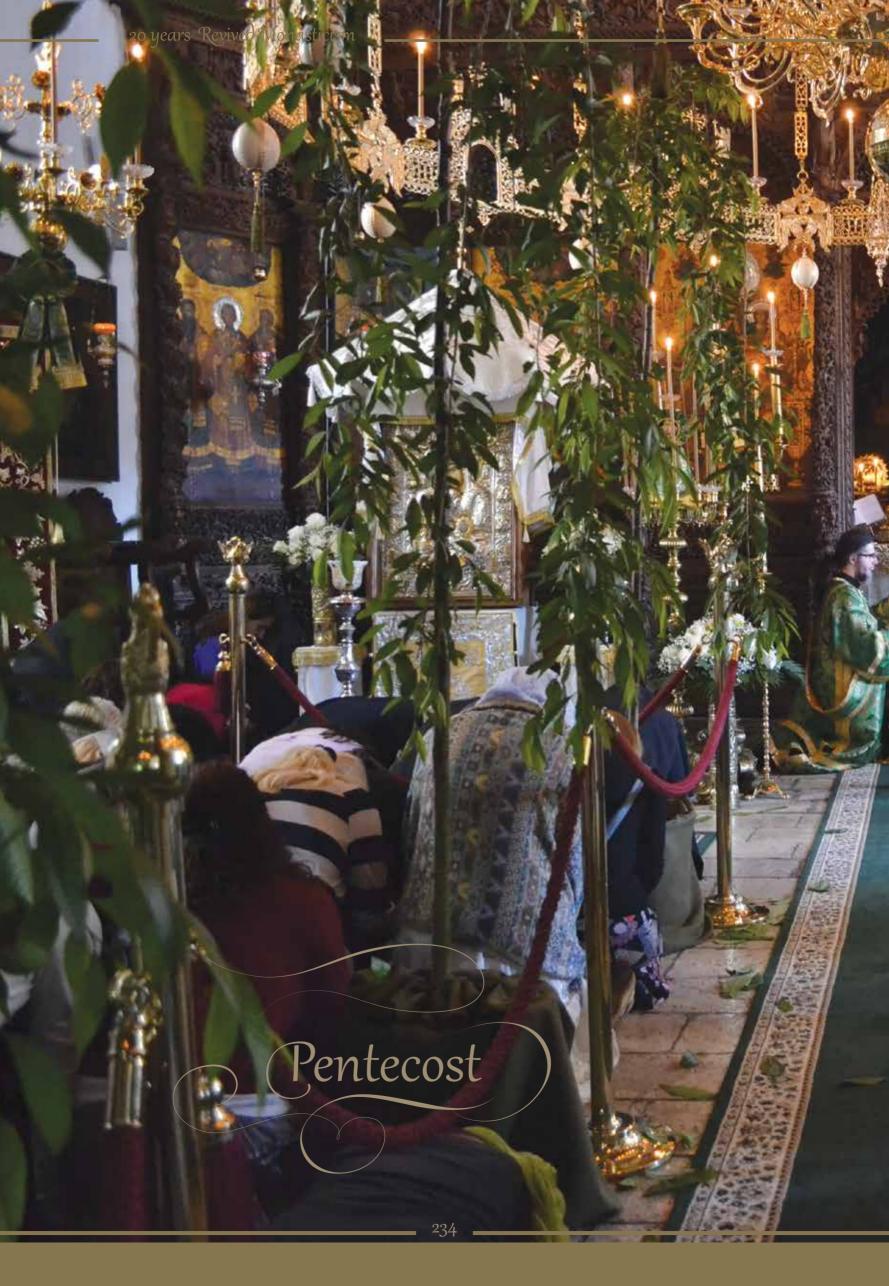


Sacred Bigorski Monastery



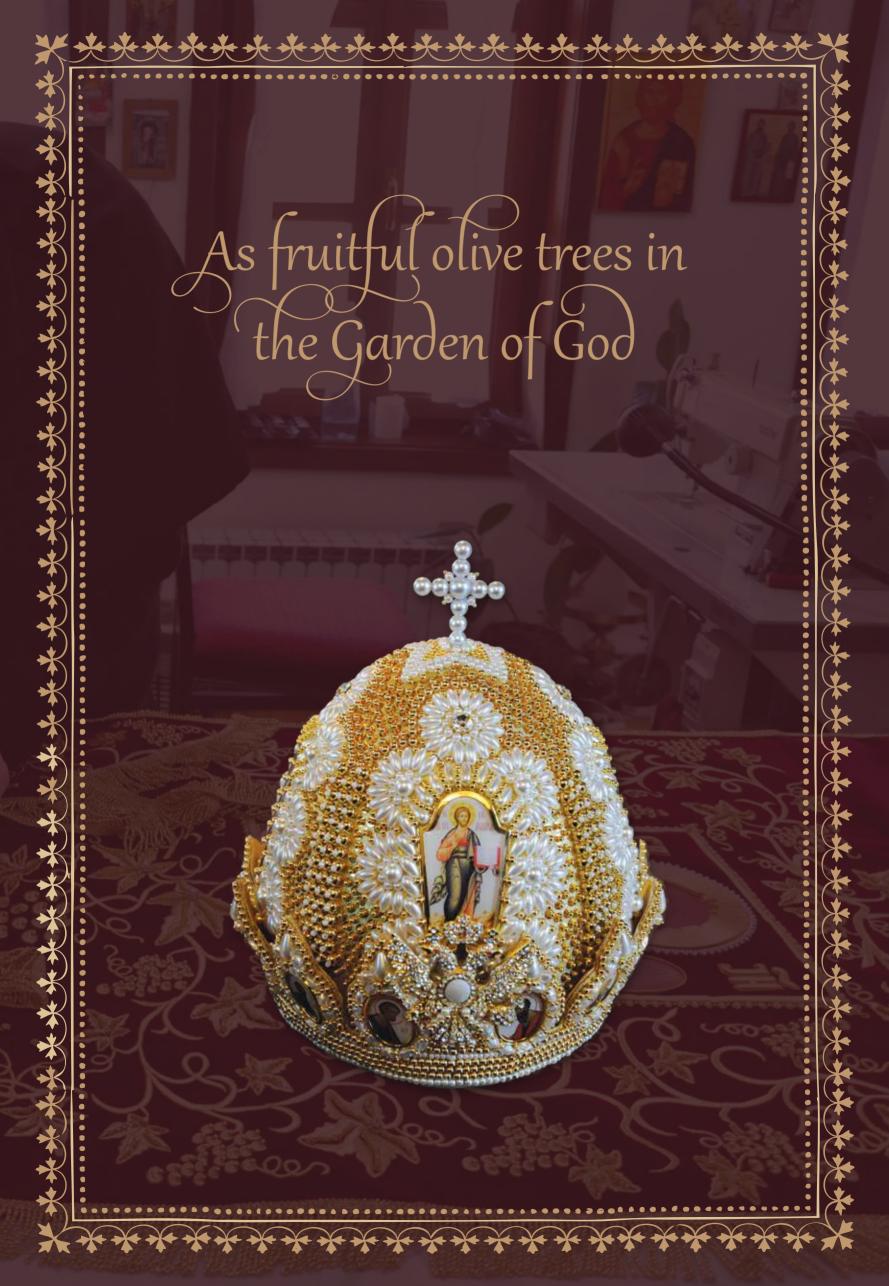


Sacred Bigorski Monastery













oday, more than ever, our entire modern existence has turned into a silent scream of the restless soul, wounded by the desire for freedom. Freedom! That human

dignity that can be described with just one word. The most wanted, the most important, the most frequently mentioned. There isn't a single person who doesn't know this word. But do most of us understand its real meaning? While we are considering this, the hidden corners of our mind project memories of a carless time, the pure concepts of a child's soul, when the warm smile of the teacher, while she explains the meaning of this word, creates a kind of elevated impression in the innocent child's mind. Just how many verses have we dedicated, glorifying this notion so precious for us? How many wonderful images in our heads. And have we really learned anything about the nature of this God's gift to man? Even today after such a long time, nothing has been changed. People are prepared to do anything in the name of a certain freedom. But while everywhere around people talk about this so much desired freedom, about the peace, justice, love, our modern world and our life are more and more enslaved, restless, filled with injustice and inequality, malice and vindictiveness. Everybody wants a comfortable life without much effort and today in this XXI century man has turned into a spoiled brat, so tired of his

own fragile comfort and tragicomically exhausted by boredom, ultimately irresponsible and so dangerously confident in his smugness. He struggles to find a way not to struggle, he suffers looking for a way not to suffer, he gets nervous attempting not to get nervous, he crucifies himself trying to avoid crucifixion, he dies of worrying that he might die. The constant focus only on the external, the exaggerated wish for comfort and material benefits, as well as the selfish ambitions for ensuring repose, entertainment and material prosperity have turned into real cages for the soul, which suffocates and sends signals, looking for someone who could really liberate it. And the modern man doesn't pay attention to these signs of the tired, lonely and miserable soul. He lives, moves, even goes to demonstration in the name of freedom, locked in his cage of pride and egoism, bound by the chains of his passions. In spite of this, the delusion is getting bigger and he thinks that in exactly that way he is free. Thus even the drug-addict, the criminal and the suicidal consider themselves free, and in this modern world of ours we can count millions of victims in the name of such freedom.

Yes, it's really tragic that we don't know how to be free. We demand freedom at the expense of all the others and don't even consider the possibility of giving up even the smallest thing for the sake of someone else: we consider that as violation of our rights and the freedom of our personality. Our disease is egoism and that's not freedom. Freedom is when you learn to demand from yourself, and not from life,

nor the others, and when you know how to give. As the great Russian director of the previous century, Andrew Tarkowski has said: Freedom means sacrificing in the name of love.

In other words, really free can only be the one who loves sincerely. And the expression of sincere love is when you cry for the sinners, sympathize with the pain of thy neighbor, when you take it upon yourself, adopt this pain, act unselfishly. Such is the

Christian love. Only a real Christian could speak with warmth, rejoice for not being the first, be friendly with a stranger, be satisfied with less, try harder, mourn the greedy and lustful. He loves and forgives without any objection, even when he gets deserted by those he never would have expected of: the relatives, friends, proselytes. Thus Christian love becomes this transforming power which could prevail over the evil in the world and only through Christian love the sinfulness of the world could become that turning point which could mark the beginning of its rebirth and move-

ment towards the truth.

So, freedom without God, without liberation from passions and sins — doesn't exist. Our Lord Jesus Christ, talking about it in the Gospel, testified: And ye shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free. (John. 8, 32) Truth is the freedom and it provides the true benefits of the spirit, which are love, joy, peace. The stretch of this freedom surpasses time and place, because it's eternal. The transformed man becomes immortal, because he willingly cooperates with the Truth in the creation of his immortal personality. In the indefinable jumble of people in the world, every individual sees in his neighbor only a passer-by, and each and every one with his own dreams, his life and intentions is involved in his own egoism

and cupidity, and doesn't exist for the others. Contrary to this, the Christian liturgical gathering and life represent a perfect heaven-on-Earth community of mutually known, close, free and beloved persons, together united into the mystical Body of our Lord, Jesus Christ. That mystical body is the community of the Orthodox Church, which with its sublime example of unselfish dedication to the neighbor, shows the

restrained and fearful souls to open up to God and the neighbor, not to be afraid to express love, even if they have never received it, or only express it when it's reciprocal.

Maybe that's the reason why the

eyes of the young modern man, so tired of the vanity of his life, more and more frequently turn towards the revived monasticism. Amidst it, the Bigorski monastery, as if a real oasis of freedom, peace and love, shines brightly in the absurdity of human existence, introducing light in the darkness of this century and transforming mankind. The monastery reflects that real community for which man was created — a community in love with God and the neighbor and the entire God's creation. As some

completely different kingdom in which other laws and regulations exist. As if in the desert of human insanity, which can only produce weed and thorn bushes, a secret flowery garden was created, and in it each flower is a unique and especial adornment, replenishing the general fra-

grance with its own specific scent.

These fragranced flowers are filled with sublime love towards the neighbor, burn with eagerness for harder spiritual struggles, their faces are covered with tears because of the suffering of others. It's amazing how the monks, although separat-







A sacristan duty in the church

ed from the world, are open towards every person. How they accept everybody as an image, an icon of God and a brother. Monks endowed with grace can give peace to any man, can soothe him, no matter how tormented or restless he might be. If you have soothed your brother, you have pleased God.

The soul feels that spiritual peace and calms down, any time you visit the Bigorski sanctuary. The moment you pass through the gate, one feels as if drawn apart from the world outside, entering another, much different world, where the connection with the past is so tight and can be felt and where man truly lives according to his primary determination.

And what is it that makes everybody who has spent even just a few days in this holy monastery feel like that? What is that wonderful community of mutual love among the brothers, which soothes the souls in such a way, that one has a feeling of living with angels? That's the coenobitic monastic life, organized according to the example of the first Chris-

tian community in Jerusalem. As an Athonite Elder wonderfully explains it: The Holy Coenobitic Monastery represents the widespread children of God gathered in one who rest in the shelter of the Coenobium in concord and unanimity. It is an Earthly heaven, calling us to the first community of God, and to the joyful communion with the riches of the Heavenly Kingdom. The Coenobium is familiarity of souls, joint journey of individuals united in one body through love, in Divine merriment, mutually rejoicing, worshipping God in one voice and one heart. This is what the Holy Father and Prophet David means when he says: Behold, how good and how pleasant it is for brethren to dwell together in unity! (Ps. 133, 1)

Just as our Lord shared everything with the twelve Apostles, so do the Bigorski monks have everything in common and a shared life in Christ. Everything is shared explains St. Basil the Great, they share the efforts, the victory girdles, many are as one and the one



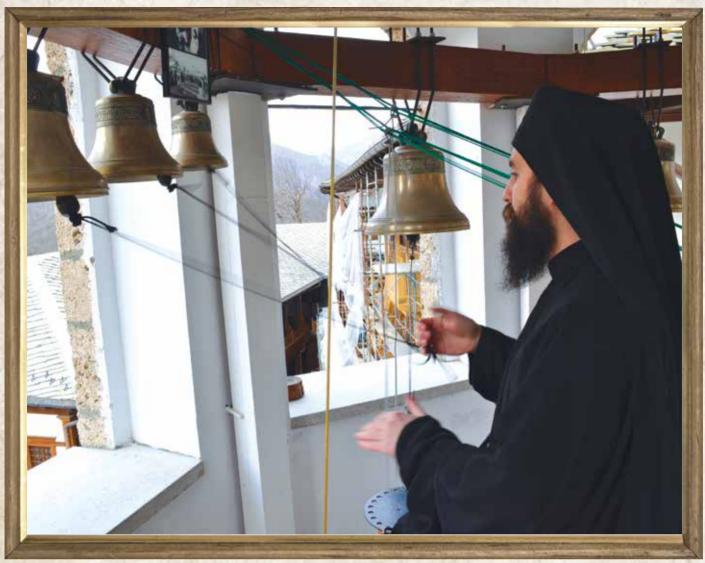
The fraternal love and prayer make the food tasty

is not alone. The physically ill has many to co-suffer with him, the spiritually infirm and the suffering one has many to heal and raise him. In the same way they are servants to one another and masters to each other and with indisputable freedom they compete among themselves to perform a better service Because through love and of our free will we submit to one another, thus giving the freedom of choice to every one separately. That's how God wanted us since the beginning and that's what he has created us for... Monks follow the example of angelic life, faithfully emulating them in the constant praising and love towards God. Angels don't know of any rage, or vanity, or discord... because everything belongs to everybody and thus everyone is equally rich..."

The common property, equality, righteousness, mutual respect and sacrifice of one for all and all for one elevates the monastic life to true love and freedom. These elements, according to the opinion of the Holy Fathers make cenobitic life perfect, and such

life represents a result of the Incarnation of our Saviour. So the Bigorski monks look up to the Saviour and His earthly life. Just as He, gathering a group of disciples, created the first apostolic community, the same way these monks, submitting themselves to their Elder, worthily imitate the life of the Apostles and the Lord.

In the embrace of the coenobitic monastery monks can truly live an apostolic life, in the mystery of the Church, as in a mystery of a community and unity of people with God. They can live in unity of faith and in unity with the Holy Spirit, which is a striving of all the Christians. The monk knows from his experience that the Church is not a religious institution, but a community in Christ, a Body of Christ, a Synod of the once scattered children of God, his family in Christ. This ecclesiological experience gives the monk an opportunity to see his brothers as members of his own body and to respect them like Christ. That's how one can explain the self-sac-



In the monastery bell tower

rificing brotherly love and the monastic unceasing prayer with tears for the living and the deceased brothers, known and unknown.

In the realization of such God-human community the Bigorski brothers are helped the most by the prayer and the participation in the Divine services and the Divine Liturgy. Without prayer the monk cannot get to love God and his brother. With each repeating of Lord, Jesus Christ, have mercy upon me a step is made towards overcoming of egoism and opening the heart to God and the people.

But this community of love of the monastic coenobium could not exist if there was no obedience, as a basic virtue of the monk and a precondition for his spiritual progress. That is a feat with which the monk renounces his will before the Divine one, which is expressed through the Elder. Through obedience he offers as a sacrifice that which for the sinful mankind is really valuable — his own reasoning — confessing thoroughly his faith and trust in God. The

most perfect example of obedience which the monks are obliged to always fallow 1 our Lord Jesus Christ Himself. Being a true God and a perfect Man, He obeyed in everything the will of His Heavenly Father. He was obedient in everything, until His death on the cross. He ended each prayer to the Father with the words: Thy will be done. The first Adam due to his disobedience lost the perfection of the paradisiacal life. The new Adam, Christ, with His perfect obedience to God the Father, earned the paradisiacal perfection. He became an example of perfection and thus a Giver of paradisiacal life to those who fulfil His Holy will.

Therefore the Bigorski monks, trying to perfectly revive within themselves the will of God, give in voluntarily to absolute obedience to their spiritual father, their Elder, who is being instructed by Christ Himself. The obedience to the Elder is the best way to overcome egoism, that bitter fruit of the primary sin of our ancestors. Certainly, obedience doesn't



The monastic painting studio

undermine the will of the novice and in no way does it enslave him, it merely demonstrates his readiness to accept the holy experience of those who have already travelled that road and have implemented this Divine activity in their everyday life. Thus the renouncing of your own free will doesn't represent its annihilation, but rather healing of the diseased will, its transformation according to the will of God. The obedient novice prefers that the will of God is done in everything. Learning to want what his Elder wants, he actually learns to want what God wants. The monk which strives at obedience is free of any kind of restlessness and doubt, since he has humbly given in his soul to his Elder, and all that because of the love for Christ.

Thus the novice, liberating himself from the passions that control him and make him incapable to find love, through the obedience humbles himself, reaches true knowledge of himself, broadens his heart, becomes merciful, embraces the whole world. This

entirety represents freedom. Because true freedom is not when the individual can do what he wants, say what he wants, eat what he wants. True freedom is liberation from the passions and sins, so the monk, living in obedience, feels free in a special, supernatural way, because he is free of the above. In the monasteries everything is subordinated to freedom. Each monk completely voluntarily chooses this kind of life. He freely walks along the path of obedience to his Elder and to his fellow-brothers equally. Monks are obedient to each other out of love for Christ Who was the first to give us an example of this God-pleasing virtue. Thus the monk who sticks to the blessed obedience, actually follows Christ. This virtue becomes his fortress, leads him to humbleness and unites with God. The obedience contains all the other virtues: love, altruism, faith, humble thoughts. It is a powerful magnet which attracts the Divine grace. In the monastic life obedience and freedom represent the two sides of the golden coin of love.

When the zealous novice gets to truly feel the joy of obedience, he begins to practice it sincerely and continuously wants it, because he is well aware of the benefits he attains in this way. As a blank

piece of paper he gives himself to God, so that God could write on him a won-

derful hymn of eternity, through the hand of his Elder. Because

through obedience eternal life becomes reality even here. The wise postulant

here. The wise postular feels this very well, as if he lives in heavens, rejoicing in the Holy Spirit, Who not only endows the soul with sweet tranquility, but also with a firm belief

that we would transcend from death to life.

Therefore the novice practicing obedience is joyful, simple, and progresses in

virtues. In his heart then the Divine blessing increases, descending

upon him through the ladder of obedience.

Oh, how wonderful is the three times blessed obedience! What a wonderful sight are the diligent monks, daily at work in the monastery, each of them studiously involved in his everyday chores. They work and pray, pray and work. These hardworking spiritual bees know no rest. They cook, work in the garden, build, paint icons, take care of the livestock and perform many other activities. Because of them the monastery resembles a bee hive, in which everyone knows his place and contributes for the progress of the monastic community, attaining in that way peace in his soul and attracting the grace of God. The Abbot watches over his children with paternal love, he prays for them, takes care that no one of the brothers should go astray, preserves the peace and concord in the Holy Synodia, gives advice, teaches, guides. The hosts, always good-humored, kindly receive the visitors, live with them for a while, share

their wishes and experiences, warm, noble, patient, and always ready to hear out the guests. In every visitor they see the Lord Himself, Who wants us to

be hospitable. The sacristans, as well as those responsible for the order of the service and the chanters in the church zeal-

always working hard to make sure that the Divine service is served properly

ously earn their spiritual reward,

and worthy of God, and

that the church, with its immaculate tidiness and beauty, faithfully reflects the Divine glory. The cooks and kitchen assistants work tirelessly, the tables are set with rich meals, and the food prepared with prayer, nourishes the brothers and feeds them with grace. The intendant responsible for the economy of the

monastery carries huge responsibility upon himself, taking care of the admin-

istrative and external affairs of the monastery. The prosphora baker puts all his love and zeal for God in the prosphoras he makes, the one responsible for the Refectory humbly and with love serves the brothers, laying the tables, and the stockman takes care of the storerooms and basements. Those assigned to hard chores work scrupulously and diligently, aware that for their hard work they would have a reward up in heavens. The handiwork, on the other hand, carries a special grace, which turns the hours spent in travail into a salvational movement towards eternity, a feat that bears ample fruit. Fathers say that if the postulant finds joy in his service, his life would be sweet. His chore turns into a Teophany and a gleaming outburst of joy, even when the work is hard. So now, knowing this, should we be surprised and amazed by that everyday unearthly joy which shines from the faces of the Bigorski



Prayer melts the monastic heart like beeswax and offers it like a candle before God

monks? They are given to feel, even here on Earth, the heavenly sweetness of the next life.

The joy of obedience is complemented by simplicity, childish carelessness and angelic purity, which the monk obtains as a result of the two wows to God: the wows for virginity and voluntary poverty. He gives in to these wows with all his heart, rejecting the rapaciousness and the carnal pleasures and in this way reaching the entirety of the spiritual progress in Christ. With his monastic feat of self-restraint the monk overcomes the demonic temptations which rotten the human nature, degrading the man to the level of animal instinct, throwing him into falsehood and vanity. Therefore the brothers of the Holy Bigorski Synodia strive to emulate the angelic life in everything. Their cells, although simple, yet are rich with spiritual treasure. Here one can find icons of the Saviour and the Mother of God, of the heavenly patron saint; also a monastic rosary and a lit oil lamp; here is the Holy Gospel too, and some spiritual books. This is the real treasure of the cell, where heavenly thoughts arise, providing an angelic joy. And the virginity, yet, is the best adornment of their souls, which have attached themselves to the true Bridegroom with immaculate purity and love, becoming a temple and a beloved home of God.

Noticing all these monastic virtues, we cannot but agree with St. John Chrysostom that the monk is worthy to be called a king, because he rules over himself better than the king does and he doesn't allow himself to be conquered by any sinful passion. He fights the temptation as a solder, embellishes his soul with virtues more precious than the jewels of the royal crown. He covers himself with humbleness instead of with a royal garment, rules with wisdom instead of with the truncheon. And, yet, he is so aware of his unworthiness and sinfulness. The more he grows spiritually, on the path he has chosen, the more he learns of his personal indignity and therefore humbles himself, and the humbleness elevates



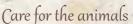
The artistic monastery painters



him before God, so that he could justly be called an earthly angel and a heavenly man.

This makes the Bigorski angels joy and light of the world, because in the unnatural state of sinfulness in which people live, the humankind has forgotten and lost the criteria for a true man. But, here is the humble monk, who shows with his example what the fallen sinful man was and what the holy one is like. Thus he becomes a real hope, at least for those who can recognize the deep and true nature of man, without the prejudices of the passing ideologies. Because if the people in the world have never met a graceful, holy man, how could they ever hope that man can overcome his fallen state and achieve that which God designated him for - deification by the grace of God. As St. John Climacus has said: Angels are the light for the monks, while as monks are the light of the whole mankind.









Christmas gifts for the youngest



Monastic everyday life through various handicrafts
250



The obedience makes the monk a skillful master



Working together brings joy 251



The handiwork is a blessing





Flowers for the Tomb of Christ















hat a wonderful joy for the mother are the first steps of her little child! She attentively stands, bent over it and her heart glows with unspeakable happiness,

while she watches its first insecure steps. Such is the happiness evoked by the first steps on the path of monasticism — the monastic tonsure. Indeed, how touching and dear is the act of tonsure! It is a joy, not only for the one who has given up the world, because the rejoicing of his spiritual father, of the whole monastic family, and of course, the angels in heaven, is even greater. And how could the heaven not rejoice, when another heavenly citizen has been born, another name has been written in the Book of Life, another warrior against evil has appeared.

There spectacle inside the monastic cell is a very touching. Alone in prayer, collecting his thoughts, the young God-loving man rises up his eyes, yearning to capture once again that sincere tremor of the heart, addressing the Lord: "O, my Lord, take me

if it pleases You too". So great is his yearning for spiritual life that he wants to approach the angelic happiness, to live only for his Creator, to submit himself unconditionally, to work just for Him, to seek Him day and night, walking humbly on the way of perfection. However, before that, he had to question himself very well. He had to feel thirsty, hungry, to satiate his hunger, to quench his thirst. Now his path is clear, illuminated by the flash of Divine love. The fatherly hands are already expecting him, spread on the cross. The heart filled with joy and unutterable longing expects for that particular moment with unhidden flutter.

Finally, the silence retreats before the mystical sound of the wooden talandon that solemnly announces, with its balanced rhythm, the great mystery that follows. The sun is in its zenith and caresses with its last rays the dome of the holy temple of the Forerunner. Shortly after, the bells begin to toll. Their sound slowly disappears in the woods and distant areas of Bistra Mountain. The entire nature awaits the desired spiritual ceremony in the holy Synodia. There is a new brother, a new joy — one more salva-

tion. One more
soul earned for
God! Angels rejoice
in heaven for the repented sinner, monks are
happy because they have a

new brother. The novice approaches slowly with flutter and mixed feelings of fear and happiness that overwhelm him completely. In a modest white robe, he enters the temple of Bigorski, proving that he has taken off all the vain desires of the world. What a heavenly and tremendously joyful spectacle for the eyes of the attending faithful and guests! A young man, accustomed to all kinds of amenities, diverts his head from the world's vanities, renounces any kind of carnal comfort, despising this world as a worthless dust in the wind, only to gain the Most Kind Lord. Leaving behind the earthly, contemplates about the heaven. He wants nothing else, has no will of his own any more, nor avarice, has no authority over his body, renounces everything, determined, to hold firmly, to the last breath, to the words of his Elder.

This very moment is a real feast for his soul. Looking at the brothers overwhelmed with of happiness, he humbly prostrates before them, asking for forgiveness. The temple is ready and adorned with flowers; all the oil lamps and candles are lit. Before going over the threshold, he makes the sign of the Cross and quickly glances at the Holy Altar. There, in the shimmering candle light, Christ is expecting him in order to give him the new life - the angelic one.

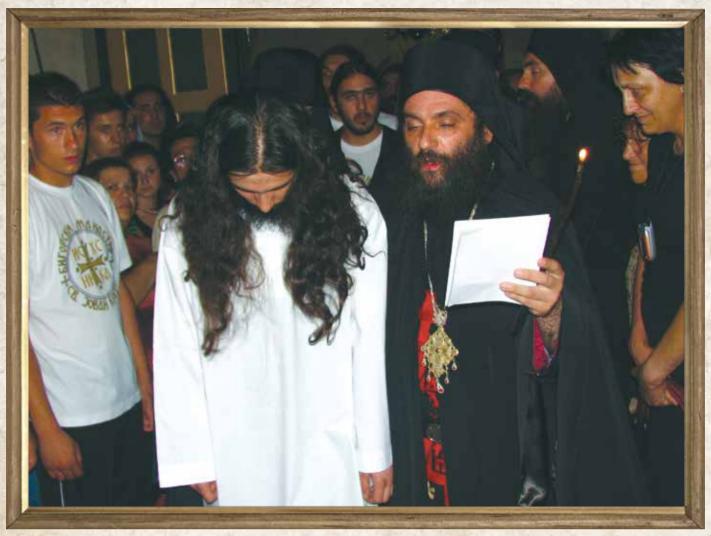
With a feeling of unworthiness, the young man slowly bows his head, whispering the prayer of the Publican: God have mercy upon me the sinner (Luke 18:13). In a white robe, barefoot, as a beggar and as the prodigal son, he humbly expects, while the Elder with his hand protectively wrapped around him and tears in his eyes, chants the renowned stichira: Make haste to open Thy fatherly arms unto me who have wasted my life like the prodigal. Despise not a heart now grown poor, O Saviour Who hast before Thine eyes the boundless riches of Thy mercies. For unto Thee, O Lord, in compunction do 1 cry: O Father I have sinned against heaven and before Thee.

The priests and the deacons, arranged in a solemn procession, with lit up candles, take their places on both sides in front of the Altar. Suddenly eyes

turn towards the entrance, where, in a prayerful immersion and with teary eyes, the Abbot slowly walks forward, sheltering the novice with his mantle. With deep prostrations- metnoias, the novice slowly approaches the Altar and finally, remains lying on the ground, with his hands in a shape of a cross, as if saying: Look, my Christ, I crucify myself for the world. What an emotional spectacle! All the present breathlessly follow his every move. Their hearts burn with love for the new brother. Tears of joy in their eyes, and prayer on their lips. With his head bowed, the new brother stands before the cross and The Holy Gospel. The Saviour is present here. Together with His Most Holy Mother; the holy angels and all the saints, as silent witnesses of this solemn act. The eyes of the entire visible and invisible world are directed towards him. Silence reigns, while everybody expect his vows for a new life.

What a festive promise! The angels rejoice for the repented sinner. They rejoice watching him as he humbly, with the head bowed, sheds tears of affability. The Righteous rejoice in heaven too, as well as all the faithful present on this spiritual festive event, crying with happiness. Blessed is your intention, my brother, and marvelous is your ascesis. The Lord has been presented with the most beautiful gift. And, He, the Sweetest One, the Most Kind, accepts, embraces, shelters and sustains such sacrifice. An engagement of the soul begins with the timeless angelic life and the scissors, together with his hair, cut off the veil of ignorance of God and the cobwebs of passions from the mind. The newly tonsured monk now radiates with grace. The new spirit overwhelms and enlightens his heart with its rays. Because the Divine Spirit is the love that gives birth to saints.

Just look at him! He tonsures his head in the name of his Lord and God to prove that out of love for Him, he has eradicated all the perilous passions



Thy fatherly embrace hasten to open to me...

of his soul. He arms himself with deadly weapon against the enemy who wishes to hamper his good intention; he covers his body with a garment in order to escape, as a dove, the hostile arrows; he covers his head with the helmet of salvation in order to be wise like the snake, safeguarding every day because of his constant attacks; strengthens his tights so that he wouldn't get attracted to carnal desires; he puts sandals on his feet in order not to go astray on the path of virtues; dresses himself with a cassock to show that he has fully mortified himself in order to live with Christ; he takes the most powerful weapon - the cross, to break down all demonic forces and their temptations. He now holds a lit up candle in his hands, thus showing the light of his good deeds, for people to see them and glorify God. Because the Saviour Himself says: Let your light so shine before men, that they may see your good works, and glorify your Father which is in heaven (Matthew 5:16).

And already a new man is born. New name is written in heaven. The bridal robe is put on. Sins are

forgiven. The newly-tonsured monk, amidst his joy-ful brothers, the prayerful wishes and the messages on the service, accompanied by the thundery refrain Lord have mercy, becomes equal to the angels, in order to walk and think like an angel. Everything becomes new. Now he belongs to God and to the Church combating the evil. While walking and speaking, he shows the icon of Christ, hidden deep inside his being. The monk himself becomes remission, expansion and spreading of Christ, becomes a reflection of the Sweet and long awaited Lord.

O, what great honor is hidden in the holy and sacred monastic schema! What sweet fragrance it is scented with! O, invocation that touches the heavens! An invocation which unites us with God. An invocation which saves the world! Because the monastic schema is a cross, instead of the Cross Christ carried for our salvation; it is a holy mystery resembling the wreaths on the Holy Matrimony. The monk, instead of wreaths, takes Christ in upon himself and vows to chastity until the end of his life. This is a marriage

with the Divine grace of the uncreated light of Tabor, which will continue to grow more and more, until the Divine fire inflames not only his soul, but the body as well. It is the monk's garment of light for the wedding day of the Son of God.

While the service goes on, the new brother stands in prayerful rapture before his Master, with the new spiritual weapons in his hands. Tears run down his face and the fluttering heart talks to his Creator: Grant me, o Lord, mu most Merciful Benefactor, to serve you with my soul and body, to sanctify myself, to enlighten, to save myself, to become your home, through the feat of obedience and the communion with the Holy Mysteries, having You alive inside me with the Father and the Spirit. May your Holy Body and sacred Blood be my fire and light, my sweet Saviour. Burn the traces of my sin and the thorns of my passions, enlightening me entirely so that I can worship your Deity.

And already the heart listens to the voice of his Beloved: I am the good shepherd, and know My sheep, and I am known of mine. (John 10, 14) That Divine voice with an inexpressible beauty that the soul likes, moves the strings of the heart, directs the gaze towards the heavens, inspires the mind to contemplate about God, enlightens and illuminates the spirit. The new monk holding a lit candle and an illuminated soul, comes out the church and directs himself towards the Elder to receive his useful morals. And the Elder with his fatherly love slowly leads him towards the essence of the monastic feat: Now, my child, you have taken Christ's yoke upon yourself. The Lord took you into His embrace and enlightened you with His grace to distance yourself from the world, to leave your father's home and despise the vanity and the empty glory; to enter this holy dwelling and quiet harbor and taking upon you the angelic image, to start the path of your monastic life. Our souls rejoiced because of your answers, the promise you gave the Lord. Your soul seeks Christ, wants Him to be its Bridegroom. That is why you must trust Him with all your soul and heart. And lay all your hope on Him. Then you will get to love him, because you will see how sweet the Lord is. When you start to love God as your Creator, then you will love

your neighbor as yourself, knowing that we are all brothers by nature and in Christ by grace.

The Lord is calling you, my child, to pass, in this life, the entire ascetic path, as described on the icon of the crucified monk, concentrated on your inner self, shining with the light of your virtues; to crucify yourself to the very end, although all the passions keep calling from outside: 'Get off the cross'. However, you stay on the cross, because the cross is our salvation. Just as the penitent thief entered the paradise with the help of the cross, the same way we would, through our obedience, as if with a cross, enter the Heavenly Kingdom. Because having put the schema on, we have put the obedience on. You have vowed to live in fasting, patience, humbleness, obedience, poverty, chastity, because on the very beginning of your monastic tonsure, you said to God: 'I desire the life of asceticism'. You gave the vows of chastity, obedience towards the Abbot and all the brothers in Christ, until your death. You promised to live in a voluntary poverty for the sake of Christ and have nothing of your own, except the most necessary and even that out of obedience, not of your own will. Constantly remember the salvational sufferings and the life-giving death of our Lord Jesus Christ, Who willfully suffered everything for our salvation. Endure, like Christ Himself, your torments and sufferings as a good soldier of Christ. Taking the cross, my child, means to be ready to fulfill God's Commandments until death, because when the monk endures everything: hunger, thirst, rebukes and torments, vilifications, persecutions and all kinds of hardships, then he will rejoice in the Lord, because great is the reward that awaits him in heaven.

Go now, my child and flourish there where the Lord has summoned and planted you. May all your monastic days resemble this very day. Amen!



The tonsure of Fr. Macarius (September 10, 1997)



The Elder with the first two nuns, s. Barbara and s. Catherine (May 5, 2004)





The monastic schema — angelical image















