

***Archimandrite Sebastian Dabovich***  
The First American Serbian Orthodox Apostle

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8 March, 2005

## **Introduction**

The legacy for which Father Sebastian Dabovich is most remembered is that he was the first American-born man to be ordained an Orthodox priest. Significant indeed, it is even more impressive considering that he avidly pursued Our Lord's calling to "make disciples of all nations," serving not only his own Serbian Orthodox people, but reaching out to all people throughout America, Serbia, and even as far away as Japan. Father Sebastian's role as missionary cannot be understated. His first assignment, while still hierodeacon, was as the english-language preacher at the cathedral in San Francisco. Upon his ordination to the Holy Priesthood, he spent a year as missionary in northern California and the Pacific Northwest. The following year he spent at the cathedral in Minneapolis helping to ease the newly received Uniates into the Orthodox Church while Saint Alexis was away serving the community in Wilkes-Barre, Pennsylvania. After returning to the West Coast, Father Sebastian founded a church in Jackson, CA for the many Serbian gold miners living near the mother lode. For all his missionary efforts he was awarded the gold cross, normally a ten-year award, after only two years of service. His efforts for the Church in America, and throughout the world, are truly remarkable. On his gravestone at Saint Sava Monastery in Zhicha, Serbia, the inscription reads, "The First American Serbian Orthodox Apostle."<sup>1</sup> The title aptly describes this man, who was not only the first American-born Orthodox priest, nor solely a minister to his own Serbian Orthodox people, but a great missionary of the Church throughout the whole world.

## **The Early Years**

Father Sebastian was born on 21 June, 1863, to Serbian immigrants in San Francisco. Ilija Dabovich, together with his wife Elena and brother Nikola were among the earliest Serbians to immigrate to California. Originally from the village of Sassovici in Herzeg Novi, the family, including Father Sebastian's two older siblings, traveled across the Atlantic Ocean and crossed the isthmus of Panama before sailing north along the Pacific Coast, arriving in San Francisco in 1853. Ilija and Elena operated a store there, serving the rapidly growing population of the "City by the Bay."

An Orthodox Community was formed in San Francisco in 1857, called the "Greek-Russian-

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<sup>1</sup> George A. Gray, Ed., *Portraits of American Saints* (Los Angeles, 1994), p. 80.

Slavonian Orthodox Eastern Church and Benevolent Society.”<sup>2</sup> It was not chartered as a parish until 1867, and did not receive its first priest until a year after that. Until then, the spiritual needs of the Orthodox in San Francisco were served by chaplains from the Russian Imperial Navy. It was one such chaplain, a Father Cyril, which baptized the child of Ilija and Elena Dabovich, the infant Jovan (John), in 1863.

When a priest was assigned to the San Francisco parish in 1868, the name of the community became the “Prayer House of the Orthodox Oriental Church.”<sup>3</sup> The pastor was a Father Nicholai Kovigin, assisted by Reader Vasili Shishkin, both transferred from the cathedral in Sitka, Alaska. The community began serving a regular cycle of services, which the Dabovich family attended. Father Sebastian later reflected on these early years:

I remember the first church service to which I went with my mother. We took a long walk down dirt roads. It was raining mercilessly. We had to cross a board thrown across a ravine, and finally we reached a small church house. Actually it was a divided room converted into a church... This ceremony was attended by twenty people.”<sup>4</sup>

Young Jovan spent much of his time around the Church. In 1872, when he was nine years old, Bishop John (Mitropolsky) moved his residence from Sitka to San Francisco, and the parish became Saint Alexander Nevsky Cathedral.

At the age of 21, in 1884 Jovan was assigned to assist at Saint Michael’s Cathedral in Sitka. During his stay in Alaska he decided to further his spiritual education, so by 1885 he traveled to Russia, where he spent 3 years studying at the Saint Petersburg and Kiev Theological Academies. While there he was tonsured a monk, given the name Sebastian, and on December 25, 1888 he was ordained to the Holy Diaconate.<sup>5</sup>

## **Missionary in America**

Hierodeacon Sebastian returned to San Francisco in June of 1889 and served at the cathedral as the English-language preacher and also as teacher at the newly established past oral

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<sup>2</sup> Ibid., p. 76.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

<sup>5</sup> Constance J. Tarasar and John H. Erickson, Eds., *Orthodox America 1794-1976: Development of the Orthodox Church in America* (Syosset, 1975), p. 96, gives the year as 1887. Since Father Sebastian did not complete his studies, nor was of the canonical age for ordination until 1888, and returned to San Francisco only in the summer of 1889, it seems more likely that 1888 is the correct year.

school. On 28 August,<sup>6</sup> 1892, he was ordained to the Holy Priesthood at the newly built cathedral of Saint Basil the Great in his native city by Bishop Nicholas (Ziorov). Father Sebastian's first assignment was as missionary in the Pacific Northwest. During this time he established churches in Portland, Oregon, and Seattle, Washington. A historical account of the latter parish records:

Life was relatively bleak for many of the first Orthodox in these parts and they jumped at the chance to form a church when it was offered to them by the Russian bishop in San Francisco via an itinerant missionary, Fr. Sebastian Dabovich, a multi-talented Serbian-American priest-monk fluent in English, Russian and Greek.<sup>7</sup>

His work in Seattle left its impression on the people there. The Jerisich family, in particular, noted Father Sebastian's ministry, as recorded in an article published in *The Diocese of the West's* publication *The Vision*:

The Orthodox Church in America was faced with ministering to the faithful in a variety of languages. Fortunately God raised up his servants for the task. Two of those servants were Fathers Sebastian Dabovich and Michael Andreades. Fr. Dabovich was a nativeborn American of Serbian parents; Fr. Andreades was a Greek from Asia Minor who spoke Russian. Both these men ministered to the Jerisich family: Fr. Dabovich baptized Mrs. Jerisich, and Fr. Andreades ministered to Mr. Jerisich in his final illness.<sup>8</sup>

Father Sebastian's role as priest of Serbian ancestry was not simply to minister to his own people, but to provide for the spiritual needs of whomever he encountered, Serb, Russian, Greek, Orthodox or not; he was truly a missionary in the fullest sense of the word.

In 1893 Father Sebastian was called to serve Saint Mary's Russian Orthodox Greek Catholic Church in Minneapolis, as recounted in the life of Saint Alexis (Toth) of Wilkes-Barre:

Before leaving Wilkes-Barre, St. Alexis saw the need to do follow-up work with them. He wrote to Bishop NICHOLAS requesting an assistant priest to serve St. Mary's to free himself to return to Pennsylvania and complete the work of bringing the Wilkes-Barre community more fully into the Orthodox ethos and mentality. Bishop NICHOLAS assigned the first priest born in the United States: the Russian-educated hieromonk, Fr. Sebastian Dabovich.<sup>9</sup>

While there, Father Sebastian, continuing the work of Saint Alexis, sought to help the people adjust to Holy Orthodoxy, preaching and also teaching in the parish's missionary school. The choir

<sup>6</sup> Tarasar (p. 96) gives the date as 16 August. Since in the 19th century the difference between calendars was 12 days, it seems reasonable that the discrepancy here is a result of not accounting for the different calendar. Both dates given are the day after Dormition on respective calendars, so 28 August seems to be the most correct date after recalculating for the calendar difference.

<sup>7</sup> "Parish History," *Saint Spiridon Orthodox Cathedral*. <<http://saintspiridon.org/history.html>>

<sup>8</sup> "Historical Perspective: Orthodoxy in Seattle," *The Orthodox Vision* 10.2. <[http://www.ocadow.org/resources/vision/winter04/section\\_2.pdf](http://www.ocadow.org/resources/vision/winter04/section_2.pdf)>

<sup>9</sup> "St. Alexis of Minneapolis: 'Confessor and Defender of Orthodoxy.'" *Diocese of the Midwest*. <<http://www.midwestdiocese.org/dmw/id27.htm>>

director at the parish, and music teacher at the school, Paul Zaichenko, wrote of Father Sebastian:

Father Sebastian Dabovich succeeded Father A. Toth as parish priest. He was a quiet and pensive monk, always considerate, conscientious, modest. He performed his duties sincerely, and taught the Bible class of the parish school with enthusiasm. He was a tireless and unselfish worker, a humble and a just man before his Lord. He was one of the most worthy workers in the Mission.

I knew him back in San Francisco. At that time he sang in the Cathedral choir of which I was a choirmaster. His aim was his betterment in religious life. As in San Francisco, so too in Minneapolis, he was the example of virtuous living; he always considered it his duty to avoid an evil step. Leading a quiet monastic life, he found great happiness in reading religious books and in teaching students the Holy Bible. He loved children and was always considerate of his parishioners. Notwithstanding his short stay in Minneapolis, he was loved by his flock. He was a bright torch of love, kindness, and sincerity. (Golden Jubilee Album, St. Mary's R.O. Church, Minneapolis, 1937, p. 44)<sup>10</sup>

A year later he was recalled to resume his missionary work on the West Coast.

One of his missionary visits to Jackson (Amador County), California, a mining community near the "mother lode," prompted Fr. Sebastian to create of a Serbian parish there. This event was noted in a Romanian account of the history of the Church in America:

Serbian immigration to the United States reached serious proportions about 1890 and four years later, in 1894, the first Serbian Church in America was founded in Jackson, California, by Archimandrite Sebastian Dabovich. This church was dedicated to St. Sava, the great national Saint of Serbia.<sup>11</sup>

The church was built atop a hill at the Serbian cemetery, and the bells were reportedly sent down from Alaska. On the occasion of the parish's 110th Anniversary, a newspaper article recalls:

In December of 1893, Fr. Dabovich arrived in Jackson from San Francisco to baptize an infant. On looking around, he immediately saw a need to establish a church and urged the local Serbs to begin planning one.

The dedication ceremony was conducted under the supervision of Rev. Bishop Nicholas, Bishop of Alaska and the Aleutian Islands, assisted by the local pastor, Rev. S. Dabovich and two other dignitaries whose names we were unable to obtain and several of the local members of the congregation.

"The ceremonies were conducted in the Slavonian language and a portion was, however, translated into the English language by Rev. Dabovich. The Slavonian Benevolent Society turned out in a body in their society regalia and marched to the church headed by the Jackson Band which had been engaged for the occasion."<sup>12</sup>

Approximately 10 years after its founding, Saint Tikhon, then ruling hierarch, visited the parish:

Making a point of visiting the Serbian community in Jackson, CA, he was welcomed by Fr. Sebastian Dabovich, the first American-born Orthodox priest, with the following words: "May you and this little-

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<sup>10</sup> Tarasar, p. 96.

<sup>11</sup> Protopresbyter Constantine Alecse, "History of the Holy Orthodox Church: Part III – Orthodoxy in Europe and America," *Holy Trinity Romanian Orthodox Church*. <<http://holytrinity-la.org/engl/pages/general/hist3.html>>

<sup>12</sup> Leslie McLaughlin, "St. Sava celebrates 110 years in Amador," *Ledger Dispatch* (28 October, 2004), *News @ Serbian Unity Congress*. <[http://news.serbianunity.net/bydate/2004/October\\_28/6.html](http://news.serbianunity.net/bydate/2004/October_28/6.html)>

cultivated field enjoy forever that blessing of the Apostles, the success of the great Hellenic hierarchs, the power of the Syrian martyrs, the prayers of the Russian monks, and with them, the Serbian miracle-worker, Bishop Savva. Amen."<sup>13</sup>

Although Hieromonk Sebastian was based in San Francisco, he continued his missionary travels throughout the West. These travels included regular visits to the new parish in Jackson, as well as journeys to places farther away. The parish in Butte, Montana, records:

Fr. Sebastian Dabovich, the first American-born Serbian priest, came to Butte in August, 1897. He served the Divine Liturgy, the first time in the history of Butte, on the feast of the Dormition of the Theotokos (August 28th, New Calendar). Fr. Sebastian was a missionary priest, who had already organized and built the first Serbian Orthodox Church in America, St. Sava's in Jackson, California. After the Divine Liturgy, Fr. Sebastian met with the 31 Serbs in attendance to organize a new parish in Butte. After that, Fr. Sebastian visited Butte 4-6 times per year to serve the Divine Liturgy and observe the progress of the parish. In his sermon at Christmas in 1903, Fr. Sebastian asked the parishioners to start to raise money to build a church and get a permanent priest for their spiritual needs. After four months, the parishioners were able to raise enough money to start building a temple dedicated to the Holy Trinity. The church was completed in September, 1904. The first Divine Liturgy in the new church was served on the feast of the Beheading of St. John the Forerunner on September 11, 1904 by Fr. Sebastian and Fr. Jacob Odzich. On Vidovdan, June 28th, 1905, Russian Archbishop Tikhon of Central and Western America consecrated the new temple. During the Hierarchical Divine Liturgy, Archbishop Tikhon, who later became the Russian Patriarch and has since been glorified as a saint, elevated Fr. Sebastian to the rank of archimandrite and confirmed Fr. Jacob as Holy Trinity's first permanent priest.<sup>14</sup>

Father George Gray, pastor of Saint Nicholas Church in Portland, Oregon, records Father Sebastian's labors in that city:

In February 1895, Hieromonk Sebastian traveled to Portland to visit the homes of the few Orthodox faithful living here and to prepare their new chapel for its dedication and first services. On February 26, Father Sebastian formally blessed and dedicated the chapel to the Name of the "Holy and life-Giving Trinity." Immediately afterward, he celebrated the Divine liturgy. He noted that there were two Russians, six Arabs, and four Serbs in attendance. Father Sebastian occasionally served there for the next two years.<sup>15</sup>

In November of 1896, Hieromonk Sebastian was assigned as pastor of Saint Basil Cathedral in San Francisco. His new role, however, did not prevent him from continuing his missionary labors, as he continued to visit the new parishes. He tended to the spiritual needs of the new communities, ensuring their survival beyond the initial years of building and growth. When Saint Sava Church in

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<sup>13</sup> "History of the Antiochian Orthodox Christian Archdiocese of North America: Tikhon, Saint, Enlightener of America," *The Antiochian Orthodox Church*. <<http://www.antiochian.org/Bishops/tikhon.htm>>

<sup>14</sup> "A Short History of Holy Trinity Serbian Orthodox Church," adapted from an article by Subdeacon Svetolik Petrovich, *Holy Trinity Serbian Orthodox Church*. <[http://llamacom.com/~orthodox/holy\\_trinity/history.html](http://llamacom.com/~orthodox/holy_trinity/history.html)>, no longer online.

<sup>15</sup> Gray, p. 78.

Jackson was to receive full parish status, Bishop Nicholas demanded it be chartered as Russian Orthodox, since it was under the Russian Orthodox diocese. Father Sebastian defended the people's desire to have their charter read "Serbian Orthodox," but also stipulated that the parish would still be under the omophorion of the Russian missionary bishop. Thus Father Sebastian defended the right of the Serbian community to maintain its ethnic identity, while maintaining the unity of the Church as a single Orthodox diocese encompassing parishes of all ethnic backgrounds.

For his missionary labors, Bishop Nicholas awarded Father Sebastian the gold cross 1895. Normally a 10-year award, Hieromonk Sebastian received it not even a full three years after his ordination to the priesthood. When Saint Tikhon became Bishop of the Aleutians and Alaska in 1898, he quickly realized Father Sebastian's missionary prowess, and appointed him to the administration of the North American Mission. On 17 June, 1899, *The San Francisco Call* newspaper ran the following story, entitled "Rev. Sebastian Dabovich, Who Has Been Honored by the Czar of Russia":

Information was received yesterday by the Rev. Sebastian Dabovich of this city that the Order of St. Anne had been conferred on him by the Czar of Russia. This is the second order presented to the minister during the past two years. He received the handsome order of Daniel of Montenegro from Prince Nicholas two years ago, and he prizes both very highly.

The doctor is of the opinion that the degree was awarded to him through the influence of Bishop Nicholas, who left this city a year ago and had an audience with the Czar, at which he probably recommended the local divine by reason of the assistance he had rendered him in his work.

The Order of Daniel, he says, was conferred on him for his kindnesses to Servians and Montenegrin subjects in this city and for the articles he has written on the province of Montenegro and of its struggles against the Turks and other tribes.

Dr. Dabovich (sic.) is a traveling missionary connected with the Holy Trinity Cathedral. He was born in this city in 1863 and received his early education in the public schools of San Francisco. On graduating from the latter he entered a religious school and upon concluding his studies in 1884 he went to Alaska and served in that country. In 1889 he journeyed to Russia and entered the Theological Academy of St. Petersburg. On Graduating in 1892 he returned to this city and took up missionary work, and is engaged in that labor at the present time. He has written a number of books and has also contributed to magazines. His sermons at the Cathedral are extremely popular and cover a wide range of topics on matters pertaining to the Orthodox church.<sup>16</sup>

Father Sebastian thus quickly became a renowned missionary, recognized not only in the United States, but abroad as well.

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<sup>16</sup> "Rev. Sebastian Dabovich, Who Has Been Honored by the Czar of Russia," *The San Francisco Call* (17 June, 1899), *Holy Trinity Orthodox Cathedral*. <<http://www.holy-trinity.org/history/1899/06.17.SF.Call-Dabovich.html>>

Amongst his already many labors, Father Sebastian found time to write and publish several books: *Lives of the Saints (Lectures and Sermons)*; *Preaching in the Orthodox Church*; and *The Ritual, Services, and Sacraments of the Holy Orthodox Church*. The latter, an English-language catechism, was written for Orthodox children, especially those of new immigrants, as well as for others who were interested in the Orthodox Church. Father Sebastian's desire to bring non-Orthodox into the Church was further manifested in his work to receive a group of traditional "high church" Episcopalians. Relations were established with the Episcopalian Bishop of Fon du Lac, Wisconsin, Bishop Grafton, and discussion ensued. In 1900 Bishop Tikhon, together with Father Sebastian, and Father John Kochurov, rector of the Chicago Cathedral, attended the consecration of a coadjutor for Bishop Charles Grafton:



The so-called "Fon-du-Lac Circus" of November 1900 (the consecration of Reginald Weller, coadjutor of Fon-du-Lac). Saint Tikhon is pictured on the far right, with Father Sebastian Dabovich (with the beard and hat), and the clean shaven priest behind him is Saint John Kochurov of Chicago, Protomartyr of the Bolshevik Revolution. Bishop Grafton is seated on the front row, in the middle.<sup>17</sup>

Although these efforts ultimately did not prove to be successful, in 1902 Saint Tikhon noted that Father Sebastian was greatly responsible for making non-Orthodox Christians, especially Episcopalians, aware of the teachings of the Orthodox Church. Some of the Western Rite parishes

<sup>17</sup> James Jaffrey, "In the Presence of the Saint: Saint Mark's Parish, Denver and Saint Tikhon, Enlightener of North America," *The Lion*, 129.4/5 (2004): 1-2, *St. Mark's Western Rite Orthodox Church*. <<http://www.westernorthodox.com/stmark/lion/lion2004-04>>

received by the Antiochian Archdiocese from the Episcopal church even point to these efforts as a significant steppingstone in their return to the Orthodox Church.

As far as inter-Orthodox relations were concerned, Father Sebastian appears to have realized the need for a single, unified Church, while addressing the specific needs of each ethnic group. His oversight of the Greek community in San Francisco, for example, is demonstrated in a 1903 correspondence with Bishop Tikhon:

To His Grace the Right Reverend TIKHON,  
Bishop of the Aleutian Islands and North America  
From the Cathedral property manager,  
Hegoumen Sebastian  
A Most Humble Report

It is my duty to report to your Grace that the Greek Community in San Francisco has begun building a new church in San Francisco on a plot of land purchased south of Market Street. They ordered a priest by mail for themselves who arrived and was present today at Divine Liturgy at the Cathedral church (he was standing in the altar). This priest (married) in the rank of sakellarios, Father Constantine . . . [Tsapralis, or Chaprales] has his credentials from his Bishop, Ambrose of the Diocese of Salaris [probably, Fr. Sebastian is mistaken, it could be "Salamis"] (in the Kingdom of Greece), in the jurisdiction of the Holy Synod in Athens. He has a Holy Antimension that was given to him (he says) to celebrate Liturgy in the United States of North America. He was here with two Orthodox Greeks known to me.

The lowest servant of your Grace,  
Hegoumen Sebastian  
San Francisco, November 16, 1903.

May God grant them all success.  
Dec. 12, 1903,  
Bp. Tikhon<sup>18</sup>

Although the Greek parish was allowed to seek a Greek priest from overseas and outside the jurisdiction of the Russian Church, nevertheless Bishop Tikhon was notified of this priest's proper status to serve in the territory. Clearly, episcopal oversight in North America during the 1900s belonged to the Russian diocesan hierarch. In any event, that same year Hieromonk Sebastian, after 18 years, returned to the place where as a youth he served as a parish assistant, becoming Dean of the Sitka Deanery in Alaska. He continued his missionary labors there, quickly constructing a small mission church dedicated to Saint Sava.

During his rule as hierarch, Saint Tikhon initiated an extensive restructuring of the North

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<sup>18</sup> Hegoumen Sebastian Dabovich, Correspondence with Bishop Tikhon of the Aleutian Islands and North America, 16 November, 1903, *Holy Trinity Cathedral LIFE*, 5.3 (1997). <<http://www.holy-trinity.org/history/1903/11.16.Dabovich-Tikhon.html>>

American diocese, as described by Father Leonid Kishkovsky in his historical account of the saint's life, published in Constance Tarasar's work:

Bishop Tikhon's extensive pastoral journeys led him to the conclusion that a reorganization of the diocesan structure was necessary. Three factors entered into the final equation: 1) the concentration of parishes and faithful in the eastern states; 2) the continental distances between the diocesan center in San Francisco and the extremities of the diocese in Alaska and the Eastern seaboard; 3) the presence of ethnic groups requiring special attention and leadership.<sup>19</sup>

The latter factor was addressed by Saint Tikhon in his creation of a vicariate for the Syro-Arab people in 1904, leading to the Consecration of Archimandrite Raphael (Hawaweeny) as Bishop of Brooklyn and Vicar to the Arabic churches in America. Such was his plan also for the Serbian churches, and therefore in March, 1905, he established a Serbian Orthodox Mission in America. Anticipating that Father Sebastian, like Saint Raphael for the Arabs, would become bishop of this mission, Saint Tikhon elevated him to the rank of Archimandrite,<sup>20</sup> and transferred him to Chicago, so that he could administer the Serbian Mission centered there. Archimandrite Sebastian was assigned rector of Holy Resurrection Serbian Orthodox Church in Chicago, as parish records suggest:

Following the departure of Archimandrite Firmilian, the Chicago Congregation was then serviced by Archimandrite Sebastian Dabovich, the head of the Serbian Spiritual Mission in America. In June of 1905, he was appointed as the parish priest in Chicago.<sup>21</sup>

During this time Father Sebastian served the needs of many Serbian communities, both within and outside the auspices of the Serbian Mission. As an example, he served a year as pastor of Holy Transfiguration Church in Denver, Colorado, a multiethnic parish received from the Unia into the North American diocese by Saint Tikhon in 1904:

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<sup>19</sup> Tarasar, p. 92.

<sup>20</sup> The account from Holy Trinity Church in Butte (see above) claims this took place on 28 June, when Archbishop Tikhon was making a parish visit there. Father Kishkovsky gives the following:

"On October 13, 1905, Father Sebastian was raised to the rank of archimandrite in Chicago; the diocesan, on handing the pastoral staff to Archimandrite Sebastian, charged him to be firm but gentle with his flock." (Tarasar, p. 93)

Father Sebastian's life description in the same work states:

"On August 17, 1905, he was relieved of his administrative duties for the North American Diocese and placed in charge of the Serbian Mission in America. At that time he was also raised to the rank of archimandrite." (p. 96)

In a n account of Saint Tikhon's life on the Antiochian Archdiocese of America's website, the following is given:

"In Chicago on Sunday Sept. 18th, the new Archbishop elevated Fr. Sebastian Dabovich to the rank of archimandrite, and named him official Head of the Serbian Mission, destined to follow Bp. Raphael into the episcopacy. The Serbs thanked Tikhon for all the care and help he had shown their people in America." (History of the Antiochian Orthodox Church in North America)

With such conflicting accounts, it is difficult to determine the actual date. It is possible that the Butte account may be correct, and the event that took place in Chicago was the official installment of Father Sebastian to his new position. There appears to be no clear evidence in any particular direction. In any event, Father Sebastian was elevated to Archimandrite by the end of 1905.

<sup>21</sup> "Parish Information," *Holy Resurrection Serbian Orthodox Cathedral*. <<http://serbiancathedral.org/Parish%20Information.htm>>

Early pastors of Holy Transfiguration included Fr. Gregory Shutak (1905-1908), Archimandrite Sebastian Dabovich (1908-1909)...<sup>22</sup>

During his tenure as head of the Serbian Mission, Archimandrite Sebastian initiated the publication of the *Herald*, the first Serbian Orthodox newspaper in the U.S. Unfortunately, the Serbian Mission never became its own vicariate, never received its own bishop, as George Michalopoulos recalls:

Hoping to replicate the success of Hawaweeny, Tikhon tapped Fr. Sebastian Dabovich to be the Serbian auxiliary bishop of Chicago in 1905, a year after elevation of Hawaweeny to the episcopate. However, due to repeated delays (and Archbishop Tikhon's promotion as Archbishop of Yaroslavl in 1907), the creation of the Serbian Auxiliary Diocese was put on indefinite hold.<sup>23</sup>

After Saint Tikhon's departure in 1907, it is suggested that the new ruling hierarch, Archbishop Platon, accused Father Sebastian of Serbian "ultranationalism."<sup>24</sup> Perhaps sensing contempt for the Serbian Mission, and probably suspecting that Saint Tikhon's vision of a Serbian vicariate would not be realized, it appears that Father Sebastian did not want to embroil himself in a political struggle. In July of 1910 Father Sebastian asked for a release from his duties as administrator of the Serbian communities so he could continue his work as a missionary.

As war broke out in the Balkans, Father Sebastian felt called to aid his suffering Serbian brothers. During the Balkan Wars (1912-13), and again during the Great War (World War I, 1914-18), he traveled to Serbia and served as chaplain in the Serbian Army. While there, as an American citizen he was invited to officiate at the United States Consulate in Belgrade for Thanksgiving Day services. Between the wars, Archimandrite Sebastian returned to America and taught at the new seminary which opened in 1913 in Tenafly, New Jersey. However in 1916, perhaps in no coincidence coinciding with the troubles of the Serbian Mission parishes, Father Sebastian asked the Holy Synod of the Russian Church to release him so he could serve the Serbian Church, a request which was granted in 1917. As Michalopoulos notes:

The Serbian diocese actually was the first to go into schism from the Russian archdiocese in 1916, when all 19 Serbian-dominated parishes petition for merger with the Patriarchate of Belgrade. This was due in part to the tardiness with which the Holy Synod of Russia acted with their (and Archbishop Tikhon's) request for the installation of a Serbian auxiliary bishop. The hope was that Fr. Sebastian Dabovich would fill this role. Since Fr. Raphael Hawaweeny had already been consecrated in 1904, the Serbs could not understand why Tikhon's wishes were not acted upon expeditiously. During the chaos

<sup>22</sup> "History of Our Parish," *Holy Transfiguration of Christ Cathedral*. <<http://www.transfigcathedral.org/about/history/index2.shtml>>

<sup>23</sup> George C. Michalopoulos and Herb Ham, *The American Orthodox Church: A History of Its Beginnings* (Salisbury, 2003), p. 47.

<sup>24</sup> Gray, p. 79.

of the Great War and the immediate aftermath, there was no way this could be resolved. Matters became complicated further when, during the war, Dabovich returned to Serbia to serve as a chaplain in the armed forces, never to return.<sup>25</sup>

## The Final Years

What Father Sebastian did, and where he lived exactly during the years immediately following his transfer are rather uncertain. Father George Gray suggests he continued his missionary labors primarily in America:

In 1916, Archimandrite Sebastian requested the hierarchy of the Church of Russian that he also be granted a release in order to serve the Serbian Church; the release was granted in 1917. He then traveled from coast to coast and even to the Far East on his missionary journeys. After his missionary time in America, he crossed the Atlantic in 1936 for the last time and settled in Serbia.<sup>26</sup>

Unfortunately, there is no confirmation of such activity, rather implication that he stayed in Serbia after the war until his death. Tarasar confirms Michalopoulos' belief that Father Sebastian never returned after W.W.I:<sup>27</sup>

He served as a chaplain to the Serbian Army in the Balkan Wars and the First World War. In 1916, he requested a release from the American mission to serve in Serbia. After brief visits to the United States in 1915 and 1917, he spent the rest of his life working for the Church in Yugoslavia.<sup>28</sup>

Regardless of this time period, Archimandrite Sebastian eventually ended up in Serbia, the land of his ancestors. Father Gray says he lived on the Patriarchal grounds in Belgrade until 1938, when he moved to his family's home in Herezeg Novi. He later retired to Saint Sava Monastery in Zhicha, where he died on 30 November, 1940. Father George notes:

It was from there, during his last years of his life, that he wrote to a friend in California: "I am not feeling well these days. My body is getting weaker and weaker. I would like to see once more the Golden Gate. All my dearest memories from childhood are centered in San Francisco and in the state

<sup>25</sup> Michalopoulos, p. 132. Earlier in his book, Michalopoulos writes:

"Eventually, however, many of the non-Slavic trustee parishes chafed at Russian oversight: the Greeks especially, but also the Romanians. Even several of the Serbian parishes requested separation from the Russians, and in 1913, Fr. Sebastian Dabovich led 16 of the 19 Serbian parishes out of the Diocese of the Aleutians and North America, hoping to set up an exarchate under the Patriarch of Belgrade. The Serbian-Americans were rebuffed by Patriarch Dmitrij, and three years later a reconciliation was effected with the Russian hierarchy." (p. 28)

There is no evidence to suggest that Father Sebastian "led" this movement, especially considering he was most likely overseas at this time. Rather, Father John Matusiak and Alexander Doumouras note in Tarasar:

"Unfortunately, delays in the execution of this plan and other problems led to a convocation of a Church Assembly in Chicago late in 1913, under the chairmanship of the Administrator, Father Sava Voyvodich, successor to Archimandrite Sebastian." (p. 147)

The implication of Father Sebastian in this schism is most likely an error.

<sup>26</sup> Gray, pp. 79-80.

<sup>27</sup> See above, ff. 25.

<sup>28</sup> Tarasar, p. 96.

where I was born. I am thankful to His Grace, Bishop Nikolai [Velimirovich], who is doing all he can to restore my health.”<sup>29</sup>

The role that Saint Nikolai played in Father Sebastian’s final years, as Tarasar states, was “friend and father confessor.”<sup>30</sup> Father Gray recalls the events surrounding the missionary’s death:

It was at his residence in the St. Sava Monastery in Zhicha that Bishop Nikolai went to visit him on November 30, 1940. Father Sebastian sat in an armchair. His breathing was labored. The bishop asked him if there was anything he wished. Father Sebastian whispered: “Only the Kingdom of Heaven.” Those were his last words. Soon thereafter he fell asleep in the Lord. He was buried the next day at the monastery by his friend, spiritual father and fellow American missionary, Bishop Nikolai. The American Consul General came from Belgrade for the funeral, for Archimandrite Sebastian was an American citizen.<sup>31</sup>

### **Father Sebastian’s Legacy**

As Father Sebastian’s tombstone notes, he was a true apostle, not only to his own Serbian people, but to Orthodox and non-Orthodox alike throughout America and the world. Father George Gray lists the extent of the missionary’s journeys:

During his 77-year life, Archimandrite Sebastian crossed the Atlantic Ocean 15 times and the Pacific Ocean nine times. He spent 57 years in America and 20 years abroad (mostly in Serbia). He had been a priest for 48 years. At the time of his death, all he owned was his gold cross, a few mementos and some books. He had given everything else away to the poor and needy.<sup>32</sup>

His meekness and humility when it came to possessions and money is further recounted by Father George:

He lived very humbly. Bishop Nikolai (Velimirovich) once met with him in New York: “I invited him to lunch. Blushing, he said, ‘Thank you, Your Grace, but I just took a roll of bread with my last five cents.’ And as to salary: none. ‘But you are without means!’ He smiled with his usual childlike and fascinating smile, and quoted, ‘The Lord will provide.’ And marvelously enough, the Lord always provided for His faithful servant. He lived on people’s free-will donations. Yet, still, with empty pockets, he planned journeys to Alaska, Japan, and Europe.” The story is told that much later he sold St. Tikhon’s mitre (which he had been awarded when he was made an archimandrite) and used the money in an attempt to alleviate St. Tikhon’s sufferings at the hands of the communists.<sup>33</sup>

But, above all else, Father Sebastian was a missionary. Father George notes:

Archimandrite Sebastian was known to carry a battered case full of New Testaments, tracts, sermons,

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<sup>29</sup> Gray, p. 80.

<sup>30</sup> Tarasar, p. 96.

<sup>31</sup> Gray, p. 80.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid. Note, the time given for time spent in Serbia suggests he moved there in the early to mid 20s, not in 1936.

<sup>33</sup> Gray, p. 79.

pamphlets and little crosses for children. He distributed these wherever he went, later explaining that it is more blessed to give than to receive.<sup>34</sup>

Such missionary zeal is what made Father Sebastian an apostle, an ardent worker in the spreading of Christ's Holy Church throughout the New World. His missionary efforts led to the creation and/or building-up of many churches all over America, from Seattle to Minneapolis, Jackson to Butte, and many places between.

Archimandrite Sebastian Dabovich will forever remain as the first American-born Orthodox priest. This detail, not to be overlooked, shaped his ministry, from the beginning when his first assignment was as the English-language preacher in his hometown of San Francisco, to the end of his ministry in America as administrator and liaison of the Serbian churches to their Russian-American hierarchy. He worked and interacted with *nearly all* of America's canonized saints of his time, including Saint Tikhon, Enlightener of America, Saint Alexis of Wilkes-Barre, Saint John Kochurov, and Saint Nikolai of Zhicha and South Canaan. He sets an example for later generations, that one can be of a certain ethnicity and maintain his cultural identity and pride, but still, first-of-all, be an Orthodox Christian, a member of the Orthodox Church in America not only in ethnic identity, but in ecclesiology as well. It behooves us, the descendants of this great missionary, to emulate his meekness, his love for the Church, and his zeal for the strengthening of the Body of Christ. May Father Sebastian's memory be eternal!

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<sup>34</sup> Ibid.

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