



IRINEJ

BY THE GRACE OF GOD
BISHOP OF EASTERN AMERICA
OF THE SERBIAN ORTHODOX CHURCH

Most beloved Clergy and Monastics, Sons and Daughters,
faithful Children of the Eastern American Diocese of our Most Holy Church!

It is with abounding gratitude emanating from a paternal heart,
that We greet you on this most auspicious occasion
in our collective ecclesiastical history:

**THE 120TH ANNIVERSARY OF THE FOUNDING
OF THE CIRCLE OF SERBIAN SISTERS
28 AUGUST 1903-2023**

*“What do workers gain from their toil?
I have seen the burden God has laid on the human race.
He has made everything beautiful in its time.
He has also set eternity in the human heart;
yet no one can fathom what God has done from beginning to end.
I know that there is nothing better for people
than to be happy and to do good while they live.”*
(Ecclesiastes 3:9-12)

The Federation of the Circles of Serbian Sisters, a most invaluable ancillary organization of the Serbian Orthodox Diocese of Eastern America in specific and of the Serbian Orthodox Church in general, in celebrating their Patronal Feast, the Dormition of the Most Holy Theotokos, is, in like manner, rightfully marking on the very day, the 120th Anniversary of the founding of the Circle of Serbian Sisters (CSS) on August 28, 1903, in Belgrade.

The year 1903 was a year of profound change, indeed a pivotal point in the life of newly revived Kingdom of Serbia. Having previously emerged from the externally imposed 500-hundred-year Ottoman occupation from the 14th to 19th centuries, numerous regions of Serbia were still engulfed in residual poverty and gross underdevelopment. Having followed suit, domestic regicide caused waves of international startle and concern. Then, by Divine Providence, with the restoration of the Karageorgevich Dynasty, King Peter the Liberator, affectionately known as the ‘Old King’, ascended the Throne of the Kingdom of Serbia on June 15, 1903. At this point, everything began to move forward. A brilliant French-schooled cadet, he was ever mindful of the critical role of higher education, both domestic and foreign. He was an astute military leader, a profound diplomat, and a wise reformer, credited with the establishment of one of Europe’s most enviable liberal democracies in Serbia. He ushered in an era of progress and prosperity in most areas of life in the Kingdom.

Many notable Serbs, deeply inspired by this newness of life, especially the aristocratic and intellectual elite rose to the occasion to assist the King Peter in his groundbreaking reforms, despite the looming threats of peril, grave dangers and invasion from surrounding enemies, as well as disease and starvation in yet occupied parts of Southern Serbia. Most notably among them were numerous influential women, of whom one truly stands out in her commitment to afflicted members of society and, subsequently, braving the horrors of war as a field nurse was Nadezhda Petrovich. An expressionist and fauvist, she was internationally acclaimed as Serbia's most famous female painter, and a recognized pioneer of women's war photography in the region. It was she who conceived of the creation of a women's philanthropic society in June 1903, that evolved into the Circle of Serbian Sisters – *Коло Српских Сестара*, so named by famous Serbian playwright, satirist, essayist, novelist, journalist and founder of modern rhetoric in Serbia, Branislav Nushich, who also worked as a civil servant in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

In this year, we also commemorate the 150th Anniversary of the birth of Nadezhda Petrovich, born the night between the October 11/12, 1873. Two other distinguished women who merit special recognition in the formation of the Circle of Serbian Sisters are Delfa Ivanich and Mable Grujich, both wives of members of the Royal Serbian Diplomatic Corps, Ivan Ivanich of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, and Slavko Grujich, Undersecretary of Foreign Affairs, respectively.

Delfa, daughter of famed Vojvoda Ivan and Cvija Musich, was a Serbian painter and humanitarian, who together with Slavka Subotich, the first President of the Circle, and Nadezda Petrovich, was one of the founders of the Circle of Serbian Sisters. She was also an apt translator, writer, editor of magazines, such as 'Vardar', the official journal of the Circle, and the first Serbian woman to receive the coveted Florence Nightingale Medal. She founded the Serbian Support Society – *Српско потпорно удружење* in 1915 in London. She travelled extensively, internationally and locally. In her humanitarian work, Delfa widely held lectures on the work of women's philanthropic societies during The Great War – World War I. She was also involved in the building of the Center of the Circle of Serbian Sisters in Belgrade, which included a boarding school for girls, especially those orphaned by war. She was president of the Circle from 1941 to its abolition at the hands of the Communist Party in 1946.

Mable nee Dunlop was an American archeologist, philanthropist and voluntary nurse with the Red Cross in Serbia, during the two Balkan Wars and The Great War, she was known for organizing food parcels and fundraising for needy families and Serbian soldiers. With the assistance of the American Red Cross and her friends from the United States, she organized a hospital for babies in Nish, which was open for the reception of patients on August 29, 1915, under the name of the 'Mable Grouitch Baby Hospital'. Subsequently, due to war need, it was turned into a field ambulance for sick and wounded Serbian soldiers.

As the Circle of Serbian Sisters continued to develop and evolve, earning the respect and admiration, indeed, love of the broad spectrum of Serbian people at home and abroad, from simplest to most educated, one of their critical Royal Patrons was Her late Majesty Queen Maria of Yugoslavia. It was she who wholeheartedly supported the Sisters, both morally and financially. She was their Honorary Life President, who traditionally patronized their Annual Circle's Charity Ball. Such was the outpouring of affection for the Queen Consort, that she was held to heart by her people, following the assassination of King Alexander I, as 'Queen Mother'. Even after the abolition of the Circles, the Sisters continued to work with her from her exile in London until her repose. In 1945, she honored the Holy Ascension Circle of Serbian Sisters from Youngwood, Pennsylvania with a Citation for Sacrificial Work, comparing them to the Maiden of Kosovo – *Косовска Девойка*. Today, a number of Circles bear the name, 'Queen Mother Maria'.

Gratefully, at present, many of our Circles, collectively, and Sisters, individually, continue this fine and noble philanthropic tradition by assisting 'Lifeline', a charity under the patronage of Her Royal Highness Crown Princess Katherine of Serbia, both here in the United States and throughout the

Diaspora. Additionally, the Federation of the Circles of Serbian Sisters responsibly carries out their duties in maintaining our St. Sava Summer Camp Program at our Monastery Estate of the Most Holy Theotokos in Shadeland, Pennsylvania, as well as provide much need humanitarian aid to local communities, and providing immeasurable assistance to the Diocese, as well as local parishes.

The first Circle was organized in the United States at the St. George Serbian Orthodox Church in Cincinnati, Ohio, by Milan Mrvichin, who immigrated from Kikinda, Banat, with his wife, Darinka. Chartered by the State of Ohio in 1911, Darinka Mrvichin was elected the first President in 1912. The Sisters chose as their Patronal Feast, the Nativity of the Most Holy Theotokos, after which they named their Circle. Thereafter, the Federation of Circles of Serbian Sisters was incepted in America and Canada in 1945 by its founding President, Nada Rashkovich of Chicago.

Following the crude abolition of the Circle of Serbian Sisters in 1946, with the fall of Communism, through the reemerging process of democratization in a free Serbia, which is continuing to regain self, the Circle of Serbian Sisters was restored in 1990, however, now under the aegis of the local Dioceses of the Serbian Orthodox Church. The 120th Anniversary of the Founding of the Circle of Serbian Sisters was celebrated on May 18, 2023, at the Russian Centre of Science and Culture in Belgrade, with a Gala Academy, titled "On the Path of Mercy", in the presence of His Holiness Serbian Patriarch Porfirije and Their Royal Highnesses Crown Prince Alexander and Crown Princess Katherine, together with numerous hierarchs, including this author, and other dignitaries.

MANY YEARS TO OUR BELOVED AND DEDICATED SISTERS!

With Archpastoral blessings and paternal love,

+Irinej

BISHOP OF EASTERN AMERICA

E. No. 251

On the Twenty Fourth Day of the Month of July in the Year of our Lord, 2023,
On the Feast of the Holy Great-Martyr Euphemia the All-Praised, and
The Blessed Olga, Princess of Russia.
Given in our Episcopal See in the God Protected City of New York.