

BETWEEN EAST AND WEST: THE BALKAN CHURCHES IN THE FIRST CHRISTIAN CENTURIES

By Charles Frazee

There is a general perception that the Greek churches of the Balkans were attached to the Patriarchate of Constantinople at an early date. This is not the case. During the early Middle Ages both the Greek and Latin communities in Southeastern Europe fell under Rome's direct jurisdiction, with the exception of those churches within the diocese of Thrace, after the late fourth century.

It was not easy for the Popes to hold the Balkan bishoprics once Constantinople had become the Imperial Capital in the East. The Greek churches, for both political and cultural reasons, were drawn to the Patriarchs of Constantinople. This was especially true because the civil boundaries of Illyricum gradually shifted in favour of the Eastern part of the Empire. Nevertheless, the Popes continually stressed that law and tradition were on their side. The papal appointment of Thessalonika's archbishops to be their personal representatives in Eastern Illyricum was meant to confirm their position. In the contest between Rome and Constantinople, the Balkan bishops were caught in the middle.

Christianity in the Balkans began in Apostolic times. St. Paul, impelled by a vision urging him to go into Macedonia, did just that. He founded the first Churches there and in Greece and, in his Letter to the Romans, he includes an otherwise unknown visit to Illyricum, the area north of Macedonia. Later his disciples expanded the Christian mission of Macedonia; still later, they expanded the Christian mission into Dalmatia. The Epistle which Paul wrote to the Church in Thessalonika is the oldest document of the Christian New Testament.¹

Papal correspondence between Rome and a Balkan Church commences with the letter of Pope Clement to the Church in Corinth. Written in the last decade of the first century, it shows Pope Clement's

¹ Cf. Acts 16:9; Rom.15:19; and 2 Tim.4:10.

concern for peace among factions in the ever-quarrelsome Corinthian Church. Already at this early date, the Roman Church had assumed a responsibility for a Balkan community.²

After the letter of Clement, there is little information on the progress of Christianity in the Balkans during the next century. Apparently it was a time of quiet growth, especially in the port cities where Christian merchants from Syria made their homes. The city of Cibalae, located about 100 miles North and West of the present-day Belgrade, gave the Church its first martyr in the person of its bishop, Eusebius. Eusebius suffered during the persecution of Valerian in the mid-third century.³

By the end of the third century, small Christian communities existed from the Peloponnesus to the upper Danube. In 303, when the persecution of the Emperor Diocletian commenced once more, Christian martyrs appeared; this time in great numbers. There is a legend according to which Diocletian ordered four stone cutters to make a statue of the Greek god, Asklepios. They refused because they were Christians; so the Emperor ordered them killed. They became known as the *Sancti quattuor coronati*, and were venerated at Rome for their courage.⁴

The largest Christian concentration was at Sirmium, now the town of Sremska Mitrovica on the Sava River. During the persecution, Bishop Irenaeus and 23 other Christians were arrested and put to death. One was a deacon named Demetrius. Later his relics were brought to Thessalonika, and his life became emblazoned with so many wonders that he became the patron of the city. At Siscia, now Sisak, a town south of Zagreb, Roman officials killed the bishop Quirinus. In Dalmatia, the bishop of Salona—presently Solin just north of Split—was led into the amphitheatre and martyred with five companions.⁵

Diocletian's rule was not only remembered for the great persecution; but it was important because of administrative changes. In order to provide better government, the Emperor doubled the number of provinces, putting all of them into twelve dioceses. Three of these dioceses were found in the Balkans: Moesia, Pannonia and Thrace.

² Letter of Clement in *The Epistles of St. Clement of Rome and St. Ignatius of Antioch*. (Ancient Christian Writers, vol. 1) (Westminster, 1961) 9-49.

³ A. Lengyel and G.T.B. Radan, *The Archaeology of Roman Pannonia* (Budapest and Lexington, Ky., 1980) 193-194.

⁴ Jules Lebreton and Jacques Zeiller, *The History of the Primitive Church*, vol. 2, (N.Y., 1949) 711-725; Andras Mócsy, *Pannonia and Upper Moesia: a History of the Middle Danube Provinces of the Roman Empire* (London, 1974) 325.

⁵ Jacques Zeiller, *Les origines chrétiennes dans les provinces danubiennes de l'Empire romain* (Paris, 1918) 5. The bishop's name was Domino. Born in Syria, his body was later buried in the basilica of Monasterine.

Located within Moesia were Dacia mediterranea, Dacia ripensis, Moesia prima, Dardania, Macedonia, Thessaly, Achaëa, Praevalitana, Epirus nova, Epirus vetus and Creta. Pannonia included Pannonia prima, Pannonia secunda, Sava, Dalmatia, Valeria and two provinces of Noricum. The most Eastern provinces were placed under Thrace: Europa, Rhodopa, Thracia, Haemimontus, Scythia and Moesia secunda.

The dioceses, in turn, were part of the four prefectures which Diocletian set up when he established the tetrarchy. One prefecture, known as Illyricum, contained both the dioceses of Moesia and Pannonia, but Thrace was joined to Anatolia and Syria within the prefecture of the East. When a person left Thrace for Moesia he passed through a border station known as "Latina," for a linguistic, as well as a political border, ran between these provinces.⁶

When the Emperor Diocletian instituted administrative reforms, the Balkan bishoprics, as part of Europe, were under the loose supervision of Rome. Rome, the Imperial Capital and the Church founded by Peter and Paul, had no competition from any other city on the European continent as the leading city in the Christian world. Antioch in Asia, and Alexandria in Egypt, the most populous cities of the Roman Eastern Mediterranean, also claimed Apostolic foundation and enjoyed a precedence over the Churches of their continents.

The changes in the Empire made by Constantine the Great were momentous for both the Church and the state. To be a Christian was now lawful, and the Empire had a new capital in Constantinople built on the Balkan shore.

Moving the capital to Constantinople challenged the arrangement of the hierarchy of the Christian world. The city of Byzantium, predecessor of Constantinople, had no claim to greatness. Its bishop was but a suffragan to the Metropolitan of Heraklea at the time it was elevated to imperial status.

In 325 A.D. at the Council of Nicaea, the bishops agreed to delineate the borders of the jurisdiction of the bishop of Alexandria, and less firmly the boundaries of Antioch. No limits were placed upon Roman jurisdiction, and Constantinople's bishopric, despite the city's new importance—its public buildings and the imperial palace not yet finished—was not mentioned at all.⁷

⁶ *Notitia dignitatum*, Otto Seeck, ed. (Berlin, 1876) 7-10. There exists a list of provinces from Verona in a seventh century MS which shows the situation of the Empire in 310-320. It is printed in Stephen Williams, *Diocletian and the Roman Recovery* (New York, 1985) appendix, 222. See also Timothy D. Barnes, *The New Empire of Diocletian and Constantine* (Cambridge, Mass., 1982) 209-222.

⁷ Canon VI of Nicaea in *Sacrorum conciliorum nova et amplissima collectio*, ed. Johannes Mansi (31 vols. Florence and Venice, 1759-1798) vol. 2, 670-671.