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RAJKO GLIŠOVIĆ: A PRIEST FROM TEMSKA (PIROT)*

THE VILLAGE OF TEMSKA

The preserved material evidence testifies that several settlements in the Municipality of Pirot existed even before the coming of the Turks to the region. One of them is *Temska* in whose immediate neighborhood there used to be a medieval city of Temac, precursor of the present-day settlement. The legend says that the city was captured by the Turks from its ruler, Despot Stefan the Tall, so as to ensure the passage of their army through the region (Milićević 1884, 179; quoted from Stojković 2010, 22). Temska is located at the bottom of Stara Mountain, at 15km from Pirot. Through it runs the River Temštica, a right tributary to the River Nišava. It is of compact type; it has several *mahalas* and it is the third settlement, by population number, in the Municipality of Pirot (today less than thousand people). In its economy the dominant production are farming and ranching, most of all, small cattle breeding; as for other professions, stone-cutting is also notable (Stojković 2010, 40) though the number of craftsmen is decreasing.

Some important places in the village include more than a century old primary school “Teacher Stojan”, a small hydro-electric plant and the monastery of St. George as an important spiritual and cultural center of this region of Southeast Serbia. Its residence housed, in the early 19th century, a monastic school as the only educational institution in the region. Folk legacy testifies that the foundations of an original 11th century shrine were used for building new ones by the nephews of Tsar Dušan from the Dejanović family in the 14th century (today’s church was built in the mid-16th century). The church interior walls were painted with frescoes in the 16th and 17th centuries by the Serbian *zografs* (wall painters). A special place in the narthex is allotted to the illustrated Life of St George (Popović 2003). The iconostasis, decorated with woodcarvings as well as the residence originate from 18th century. The monastery yard comprises the grave of Captain Milutin Karanović who got killed in the Serbian-Turkish War, in the fights for liberation of Pirot, in 1877, at Nišor. The patron saint day of the monastery is St. Djurdjic; it is celebrated on November, 16 (Kostić 2009, 73). In the seventies (20th century), impressive archeological studies were accomplished as well as conservation of frescoes and the architecture of the shrine which is today under the protection of the UNESCO.

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The church authorities of Pirot work within the bishopric of Niš. Pirot is one of the archbishopric regency comprising 16 parishes; in addition of the settlements of Pirot region, it also covers the area of the Municipality of Dimitrovgrad and part of Knjaževac Municipality (Stojković 2010, 76).

FATHER RAJKO GLIŠOVIĆ

Protopresbyter Rajko Glišović was born in 1936, in the village of Pre-toka (Knić, Gruža) in the area located between Čačak, Kraljevo and Kragujevac. His two daughters presently live in Kragujevac while his son who lives in Pirot.¹ He is also grandfather of four granddaughters and one grandson (ph. 1). He completed the Faculty of Orthodox Theology in Belgrade in 1960. He was ordained a Dean on October, 14, 1962, in Plaško (present day Croatia) while in Karlovac he was ordained a priest of Upper Karlovac Bishopric.

Since August 9, 1976, Glišović has been living in Temska as Head of the Church of St Parascheva (Petka) and Spiritual Advisor and Administrator of women's monastery of St Greatmartyr George.² Truly, he did not come to Temska on his own free will: former Serbian communists from Croatia accused him of working against the state and exiled him to Serbia (ph. 2).

His parish comprises an area of almost sixty kilometers, from Sopot to Ravno Bučje near Babin Zub.³ The general impression of this region is that of dying off of its population with the last household being abandoned and with no sign of any possibility of changing the present population policy. In a melancholy voice, the parish priest informs us how a small town of Kalna is largely devastated; in Mirkovci only three believers' homes with six people have remained, Adrina Reka has only one believer; Janja has five of them; in Ravno Bučje there are only nine souls while in Crni Vrh only fifteen remaining houses invite the clergyman. In Temska itself, in only one part of the village, from the entrance to the primary school, seventy houses are devoid of people.

There are churches in Topli Do (St Parascheva on the very state border, near the border post, just beneath the top of Mount Midžor⁴), in Zas-

¹ His son, after the death of Father Rajko's wife, in 1996, came back from Niš where he was a dean at Bishop Irinej and got employed in the old church of Pirot so as to be close to his father in his days of loneliness.

² Tears emerged in Father Rajko's eyes while he was describing how, in the mid-seventies of the last century, when he got to Temska, 17 nuns of Russian origin who had found a refuge in the monastery after the October Revolution in 1918 greeted him there. For many years they kept a complete monastery economy (gardens, vineyards, cattle and vegetable fond). The last nuns died in the early nineties and were buried on the monastery graveyard. At present, prioress Efrosinija and nun Nedelja are living in the monastery.

³ The village of Kalna and its surroundings (Janja, Šesti Gabar, Vrtovac, Sinovac, Čuštica) now belong to the Municipality of Knjaževac while, up to 1947, they were part of the Municipality of Pirot. The borders of the church parish, however, did not change so that it is still served by the same parish priest.

⁴ Father Rajko gladly remembers the times of his arrival to this region when everything was teeming with people in Topli Do. Two teachers were engaged to work with village children

kovci near Babin Zub (St Trinity), in Sopot (St Prophet Elijah), in Rudinje (St Trinity⁵), in Cerovo (St Petka), in Stanjince (St Kirik and Julita⁶), in Izvor (St Trinity), in Kalna (St Greatmartyr Panteleimon), in Čuštica (St Apostles Peter and Paul), in Barta Berilovac (All Saints) and in Crni Vrh (St. Elijah). All of them were built before the early twenties of the last century and the renewal of religiosity in Serbia; no new one is built (ph. 3).

The material situation in the parish is poor. Nothing much can be expected from the old men who had remained in the village homes in the sense of supporting church life while in the past everything was teeming with activities (ph. 4, 5, 6 and 7).

“Well, you see, in Temska since the beginning of this year six houses have been emptied, all of them devoid of people; no prospects whatsoever. I have no villages any more; they are gone for good. Few people are left, increasingly poorer. No childbirth on my territory; only one child was born lately in Temska; no single child was born in the villages.”

No older priest than Father Rajko in the neighboring parishes. He keeps friendly relations with everyone; everybody knows him since he has been in the Church of Temska since 1976 (with no breaks). Despite all this, Sunday religious service is attended by few believers only.

“Here, in Temska, people come twice a year to church. More of them visit the monastery but these are mostly people from Pirot and Niš. No better is the situation in the other villages; they come once a year on the church day, five to six old men, and that is all.”

Though the times have changed and no one is forbidden today to observe his ways of worship, he objects to the unchanged habits of the local people from remote and passive areas such as not inviting the priest to perform a funeral service to the deceased.

“In Orlje hardly anyone calls the priest to a funeral, unlike Bazovik, Rudinje and Sopot. Likewise in Topli Do and Zaskovci. No one forbids them to do anything; they can worship without fear; yet, no one invites the priest to his house. It is simply like that. Who used to do it is still doing it now; who has not done it before, no change can force him to change his behavior.”

People were afraid, in the socialist times, to openly express their religious beliefs. The churches were not attended. The rites were done fast and

while today there are only 14 houses with people living in them. In the days of former Yugoslavia, it was the most developed village nicknamed “Little Constantinople.”

⁵ In Father Rajko’s opinion, this is the most beautiful church in the whole state. It was built in the Byzantine style from the patterned stone and painted with natural colors. It is devoted to the Holy Trinity.

⁶ In the vicinity of Stanjince there is a monastery of St Onuphrius.

in secrecy, away from the spying eyes. The secrecy turned into a habit so that the villagers even today move away from the path when they notice the priest's mantle. They do not have their water blessed. They do not cut the patron saint's cake in the church. They do not invite the priest to their homes in Easter times. Father Rajko says that 137 houses in Temska celebrate the patron saint's day of the Holy Archangel Michael yet no one brings a cake before the altar. Simply, they cut it on their own, in the evening, in their homes. And yet, they bring food, in ample quantities, to the graveyard on the All Souls Day.

“I was in Šesti Gabar, they knew I was there. Two women told me there had been two funerals but they did not want to hear about a priest! Yet, they carry a cross, they observe a forty day memorial – I do not know what these people want! I am telling them things but they do not listen to me. I have never asked any money from them, any single coin, only what they wanted to give to me (underlined by D. T.). There are wealthy ones who hide and run away from me. In Orlje people are, for instance, rich; they have houses in the village and in the town but their habits are bad. It will be hard for any priest to stay there for good after I am gone. The only chance is for the Bishop to annex all this to the monastery and appoint the monks to preserve the faith; otherwise, all this will be ruined (underlined by D. T.). I do not interfere in the Bishop's decisions but it was easier, in my time, to work with full villages; people are here no more. We have survived so far because the Bishop of Niš, Irinej, supported us with all his heart; he is our present Patriarch. People have given up faith; they do not call a priest (underlined by D. T.). Otherwise, no one makes me any problems; I cannot object to anything; I can walk late at night or walk on foot anywhere, but when it comes to religious rites, they only say, ‘Father, you should come when we call you; otherwise, do not come.’”

People do not change. Neither does their religious instructor change his habits. They have it deeply stored in their collective memory: an image of his giant-like body on a small red moped, in summer heats and in winter cold. Neither was it difficult for him to walk for seven hours, one way, in order to get to Jabučko Ravnište beneath Babin Zub, just for the sake of seeing off the deceased ones to their last journey.

Father Rajko is pessimist regarding the possibility to somehow change the deep rooted habits of the villagers. The pagan rites persist by inertia as if the decades and centuries had not passed by. The first to respect is the word of hunched-back and scarf-wrapped old women; the priest's word comes second. Older people stick to the behavior patterns passed on from one generation to another; as for new generations, willing to adopt proper religious teachings and behaviors, they are not here. They left their native hearths a long time ago. “The habits preserve faith,” repeats Father Rajko Glišović referring to the genuine Christian customs, based on Orthodoxy instead of paganism.

“To tell you honestly, these people are stubborn; they do not accept when you tell them how to do something. I am telling them, I am showing them how to do things properly; I do it nicely with everyone; but here only old women are obeyed. As an old woman says, so it is – who cares about priest, or bishop! (underlined by D. T.). It is well known here. When you go to the graveyard, take some wine and wheat – this is a memorial. But here they put piles of food on the grave! The dogs spread it around all the day long. This is pagan behavior, not Orthodox. I criticize them all the time. This is no good. This is a sin. Better give it to some poor old woman or children to eat it for the sake of the soul of the deceased – but no one wants to listen to me. When Bishop Irinej got to our village, the village laughed, “The priest has brought the Bishop to teach us and to charge us his services!”

As for collaboration with the municipal services, it comes to mutual respect but there are no material allowances for supporting and promoting religious life. Father Rajko confirms that he has never asked the state for anything:

“When I got here, to Temska, for the first time, I immediately initiated an action to repair the ruined church and build a parish home and other auxiliary buildings. Many people here, together with those from Temska living in other regions, contributed; I made a note of every donation and read before all the names of the donors and what the money was used for. Bishop Irinej offered his help then but I said, ‘As people need a church and a priest, so they will help.’ And helped they did. Without their help there would be nothing here. People were better when I got here than they are now! (underlined by D. T.). On St George’s Days there were lambs turning on a spit; the priest used to take rear jaws and a front shoulder blade or half of the breast; thus I used to gather two bags of grilled meat and cheese that I could not eat in a year’s time! Now there is nothing. No people are left, they have all gone away (underlined by D. T.). We have recently counted the remaining people: in Topli Do only 32 people are left, in Zaskovci 22, in Mirkovci 6, in Tovarnici only five souls. No cattle is left, either. Topli Do has not even hundred sheep. When I got here thirty years ago you could not count them, so many were they!”

The local community chose St George’s Day as their baptismal holiday. He was invited to come to the monastery to cut a cake. Democrats are the loudest party at the local level but party affiliation is of no serious consequence in such small places. A usual phenomenon is the turning of the “party coats”, all for the sake of preserving power.

Among the parishioners there are no other nationalities apart from Serbs and a few Romas. There is a separate Roma graveyard close to the monastery, some two hundred meters away from the Serbian one.⁷

⁷ Roma population represents a single source of population renewal: only Roma children are born. The primary school in Temsa has 22 pupils in the eight (final) grade; the majority of children are Roma. One pupil comes from the nearby Cerovo and two come from Sopot.

“All local Tsiganies are baptized, both newcomers and natives. Neither do they come to church. I do all the rites for them: I bless their water, I bury them, that’s it. In the area there are about 70. They respect me. These are not bad Tsigany. The native ones usually rent some land and work on it; there are also those that the Municipality has placed in empty houses. I have become friendly with them since in my native Gruža there were never any Tsigany. Look, one of them is helping me with the works in the church; together we paint the walls and the wooden things with a new paint to prevent humidity. No difference is there when they come to communion or on some great holidays; for me, they are all the same.”

The believers are exclusively Orthodox; no Roman Catholics or Muslims are there.⁸ Father Rajko admits that in Oreovica there are newcomers (guest workers, *Gastarbeiter*) who have returned from abroad. In addition to fashionable new habits, they also brought to their homeland another religious faith. These are Jehovah’s Witnesses; three households are their followers but no one takes them seriously. Nor does anyone listen to their proselytizing, at least that is how our interviewee estimates the situation.

The nature of this region has affected the dwellers to develop the characteristics that could ensure their survival under the conditions of scarcity. Father Rajko is critical when it comes to the parsimony of the local people.

“This is a quiet area and people are good. No one will harm you. But people are stingy, or better to say, mean (underlined by D. T.). I bless his water and he gives me a few coins. When someone gives you one hundred *dinars* (about 1 euros) it is like he is giving you the whole house! I do not remember ever getting any larger sum of money from anyone. Or a handful of beans or two corncobs. Listen, the other day I visited the whole of Cerovo on my moped and I made, in toto, 750 *dinars* (about 7 euros). Not even to cover my fuel expenses! But yet, I feel pangs of conscience if I fail to visit them! Another priest, when I am gone, will be sure not to go and see them, I guarantee it. But local people do have money, it would be untrue to say otherwise! Here it is, a woman in Šugrin was found, post mortem, to have hidden a full bag of folded banknotes; yet she had lived in an almost empty house, she had lived in such a misery! God forbids that she has given a candy to her daughter or granddaughter! I served in Istria, North Dalmatia, Lika and even in my place in Gruža but nowhere have I seen such misers as in Pirot region!”

CONCLUSION

The background area of Pirot shares the fate of rural Serbia: a drastic decline of rural population and dying off of rural settlements. The real possibilities for stopping the overall demographic processes are endangered firstly

⁸ We were surprised to hear this data regarding the closeness of the border with Bulgaria but Father Rajko claims that among his own rural parishioners he has never had believers of other nationalities except for Serbian and a somewhat small number of Romas.

by the unfavorable age structure of population. The dwellers are mostly of older age; they live either alone or married to a partner of similar age. In such households there are no work able persons. Mostly they live on raising some cattle, on primitive work on land or modest pensions. A gloomy picture of the rural population in Temska is slightly alleviated only by Romas. They are of Orthodox faith. Some of them are native to the region; others are settled there by the municipal political resolutions that brought them into the emptied houses. They live on extensive work on the mountainous estates they rent. Maybe the present generation could not choose otherwise but it has related its future to this village in the Pilot region. Thanks to their offspring, there is still noise in the schoolyard and in the classrooms of a hundred-years-old school. They have adopted to the local habits and customs; they share their hard-earned bread with other local people and they do not complain.

In the deserted villages, the religious shrines are also abandoned and ruined. The priests make rounds of their parishioners mostly when invited and the duty they mostly perform is a funeral service. Another occasion is related to the greatest Christian holidays but this is not compulsory. Usually it is done only in larger church centers (Kostić 2009, 71). The church estate in Temska, on the other hand, leaves an impression of orderliness and functionality. It looks like a small oasis in a stony landscape (ph. 8 and 9). Protá Rajko Glišović, though retired for quite some time, does not neglect either his pastoral or host roles, heartily supported by a few believers. The estate is perfectly ordered. The house is surrounded with luxuriant verdure and flowers. On the grass fields there are peacocks and she-peacocks parading with their colorful feathers. In the economy buildings, near the parish home, numerous fowls are located as well as large cattle for fattening. The religious shrine looks fresh and composed; the facade is white-washed and the wooden parts are protected by fresh paint (ph. 10, 11 and 12). The only missing ones are – believers.

Of grey hair and beard, well advanced into old age, the servant of the altar of God in Temska leaves an impression of a man of spirit and commitment. A vital old man speaks in a low voice but his sentences are short and well thought of. Behind his piercing look there lies a many-decade experience of work with the local villagers. He does not rush with his estimates and with a reconciliatory tone he avoids every possibility for misunderstanding. Rather wondering at than criticizing, the staunch man from Gruža seems not to be able to get used to two characteristics of his parishioners even after several decades of living together: namely, *people's religiosity* and their *stinginess*.

As for the Orthodox doctrine, people have modified it to suit the wisdom of living under concrete historical circumstances, most of all in the cases when there was no church as a support. The old customs and celebrations have survived even when the dogmatic belief and conventional religious behavior failed, especially during the atheistic period of marginalization of the Orthodox religious culture. *The return of religion* to the post-socialist social and cultural scene of Serbia in the late nineties did not automatically bring with it the long desired *return to religion*. Namely, the attempt to bring back

to the church religiously non-socialized citizens who are on the “Christian pathway” is time-demanding and difficult. It is the assignment that the Serbian Orthodox Church is facing as well as other traditional religions on the Balkans (Blagojević 2013; Đorđević 2013; Cvitković 2013). For the Stara mountaineers from Temska, in their older age, namely, those immersed in the unhappy and perspectiveless present day border area, it seems that there is no time to modify their “Christian paganism.”

As for parsimony, the citizens of Pirot bear it as their identity trait though it has been ascribed to them out of misunderstanding since “it is impossible to be a cavalier and a big spender when you do not have enough” (Dinić 2007-2008, 372). The poverty was the reason for prudent living in the passive areas in Southeast Serbia. Respectful for whatever was cultivated under the rough mountain regime, industrious, intelligent, hospitable and committed to home and family, the hosts were not so willing to give up any hard-won coin. Modest in their needs, they have always preferred the practical over the spiritual which was deeply felt by the local clergy. This has made Father Rajko state that “it will be difficult for a priest on this territory to subsist, after I am gone.” Time will show how right he is.

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PHOTOGRAPHS



Ph. 1. With his wife Vukana and his elder daughter from his younger days, as a priest of Upper Karlovac Bishopric (wife died in 1996)



Ph. 2. Opening up of the parish home in Temska in 1978



Ph. 3. Father Rajko cuts a patron saint's holiday cake



Ph. 4. With his parishioners in the Processions in Temska



Ph. 5. Baptism in the village church



Ph. 6. With nuns before the church in the monastery of St George
(some twenty years ago)



Ph. 7. Consecration of the church in Crni Vrh, together with Bishop Irinej, present Serbian Patriarch



Ph. 8. Church of Saint Petka Trnovska in Temska



Ph. 9. Father Rajko before the Parish home



Ph. 10. Father Rajko before the Church entrance



Ph. 11. Father Rajko before the alter of the church St Petka



Ph. 12. Father Rajko before the church altar in the monastery of St George

