

## Exarch Josif I

(1840-1915)

(real name Lazar Yovchev)

is a distinguished Bulgarian Orthodox cleric.

He was Bishop of Vidin, Metropolitan of the Lovech Diocese and Bulgarian Exarch – Head of the Bulgarian Orthodox Church.

Lazar Yovchev was born on the 5 of May 1840 in the enlightened town of Kalopher at the foot of the Balkan mountain. Studious and curious student during the primary school, he later became a teaching assistant of Botio Petkov, well known teacher in Kalopher and abroad. Supported by affluent Kalopher citizens living in Tzarigrad (Istanbul) he continued his studies in the Grand People's School in Fener (in Turkish - *Fener Rum Erkek Lisesi*) and later in the French College (Tzarigrad). With the financial help of the Kalopher community he enrolled in 1864 in the prestigious Literary Faculty of the Sorbonne University (Paris). After three years study there he transferred to the Law School of the same university, which he graduated with a Bachelor degree and license to practice law.

After six years in France, Lazar Yovchev returns to Tzarigrad and works at the Central Court of Commerce. In the same time he is active in political journalism and translation. He became a Board Member of the *Macedonian Bulgarian Union* (Makedonska Bylgarska Drujina). He was also invited to become a Secretary of the *Joined Exarchate Council* (Smesen Exarchiiski Syvet). Thanks to respect and popularity and without a formal ecclesiastical education, in 1872 the newly ordained monk becomes *Coadjutor of the Exarch* (equal to a Bishop reverence) under the monk name Yossif.

In the next 3-4 years Bishop Yossif actively participates in the organization of the newly independent Bulgarian Church, travels the Bulgarian lands, meets representatives of the Great Powers, owing to his excellence in French, but mostly because of his ability to negotiate and persuade.

In the beginning of 1878 he is ordained as Metropolitan of the Lovech Diocese, before that he has been for one year head of the Vidin Bishopric. His secular education, the law license, the broad European culture and his abilities to be balanced and diplomatic made his nomination for a Bulgarian Exarch acceptable and welcome in the influential Tzarigrad quarters. On 24<sup>th</sup> of April 1877 the young Lovech Metropolitan Joseph was chosen and ordained as Exarch of the Bulgarian Orthodox Church by the *People-Ecclesiastic Convention* in the Exarchate's Headquarters in Ortakioy.

## All-Bulgarian Spiritual Leader

Exarch Yossif I defines his mission as a duty to unify all Bulgarians. His ideal as a Bulgarian spiritual leader and his “grand duty” to be a spiritual pillar of the Bulgarian consciousness, to “unify all Bulgarian dioceses in the open arms of the millennial Bulgarian Church” was in general realized with success. Up to the Balkan Wars (1912-1913) 7 new dioceses led by Metropolitans joined the Exarchate, as well as eight new bishoprics in Macedonia and Odrin (Edirne) regions, led by Vicars.

As a new head of the Bulgarian Church he had no choice but to be a mediator between the State Authorities and the Christian population in the circumstances dictated by the political and ethnic rivalries in the multinational Ottoman Empire. The destiny of the 37-years old Exarch was to lead Bulgaria, risen for a new life of freedom.

Within the framework and limitations of the Berlin Treaty Exarch Yossif I was more a Diplomat and a Politician than an Orthodox Prelate. Tirelessly he fought to keep alive the Bulgarian spirit in the fragmented dioceses of the Exarchate, to defend the religious and national interests and rights of the Bulgarians in Macedonia, Aegean and Odrin Thrace (Thrakia) remaining under Ottoman rule.

He opened a *Bulgarian Theological College* in Tzarigrad (Bylgarska Duhovna Seminaria), looked after building and renovating new churches and new schools, after the formation and ordaining of new priests and teachers, purchasing school equipment, learning tools and books, sending talented youth for a study abroad. Thanks to his tireless work in the academic year 1912-13 the Exarchate has 1 373 schools, 13 secondary schools, 87 middle schools with 78 854 students and 2 266 teachers. In 1902 Exarch Yossif was elected a Honorary Member of the *Bulgarian Literary Union* (Bylgarsko Knijovno Drujestvo) later *Bulgarian Academy of Sciences*.

The Exarch rejoices at the victorious advance of the Bulgarian Army during the First Balkan War and suffers as a tragedy the Peace Treaty of Bucharest after the Inter-allies War of 1913. The deed of the Exarchate, his life-work, built with love and devotion and through so much pain, is crushed and devastated. On November 27 1913 he had to leave Tzarigrad like all Bulgarian bishops leaving Macedonia and Odrin Thrace. The heart-broken Exarch, crushed psychically and physically settles in Sofia. Despite his poor health and advanced age he remained Head of the Bulgarian Orthodox Church until his last hour. For 38 years Exarch Yossif was a Church and People’s leader and inspirer of the grand education-enlightenment national project.

The Exarch dies in 1915. His tomb is on the south side open gallery of the *Sveta Nedelia* church in Sofia.

## Donor's Activity

All his personal property and goods Exarch Yossif bequeathed to patriotic and charitable causes. His testament is dated May 6 1915. Executors are the Metropolitans of Dorostol-Cherven and Turnovo –Vassilii and Yossif and the Exarch's nephew – Miron Mironov. The wealth comes from bank accounts in Bulgaria, Great Britain, Austro-Hungary and Russia, from Bulgarian State securities and bonds from the municipalities of Kiev, Kharkov and Kherson (Russia). Subsequently over some of the goods there has been a sequestration, according to Article 177 of the Neuilly dictate. The bonds in Russia devaluated as a result of the war and the revolution. That made the execution of the Donor's will more difficult.

Three funds have been established with goods of the Exarch's Estate:

- ≡ The "Exarch Yossif" Fund at the *Holy Synod of the Bulgarian Orthodox Church* according to the Will amounts to 300 000 leva. The Donor stipulates that the interest from the capital serves five scholarships for students at the *Theological Colleges* of Sofia and Plovdiv, among them – one mandatory from Kalopher, the native town of Yossif.
- ≡ The "Exarch Yossif" Fund at the *Bulgarian Academy of Sciences* according to the Will amounts to 150 000 leva. The Donor stipulates that the accumulated interest serves for an annual award for book publishing on Orthodox faith and of Bulgarian Studies.
- ≡ The "Exarch Yossif" Fund at the High School in the town of Razgrad according to the Will amounts to 5 000 leva. The Donor stipulates that the accumulated interest serves for supplying books for underprivileged students.

On April 20<sup>th</sup> 1902 Exarch Yossif was proclaimed Honorary Citizen of Lovech – "Merits for Defense of the Church and People's Rights". The central square and the *High School for Foreign Languages* in Lovech as well as streets and plazas everywhere in Bulgaria bear his name. In 2008 a monument of Exarch Yossif I was erected in Lovech in addition to the one previously inaugurated in his native town of Kalopher.

Source: *Wikipedia* (Bulgarian)

Translated into English by *Vassil Popvassilev*