

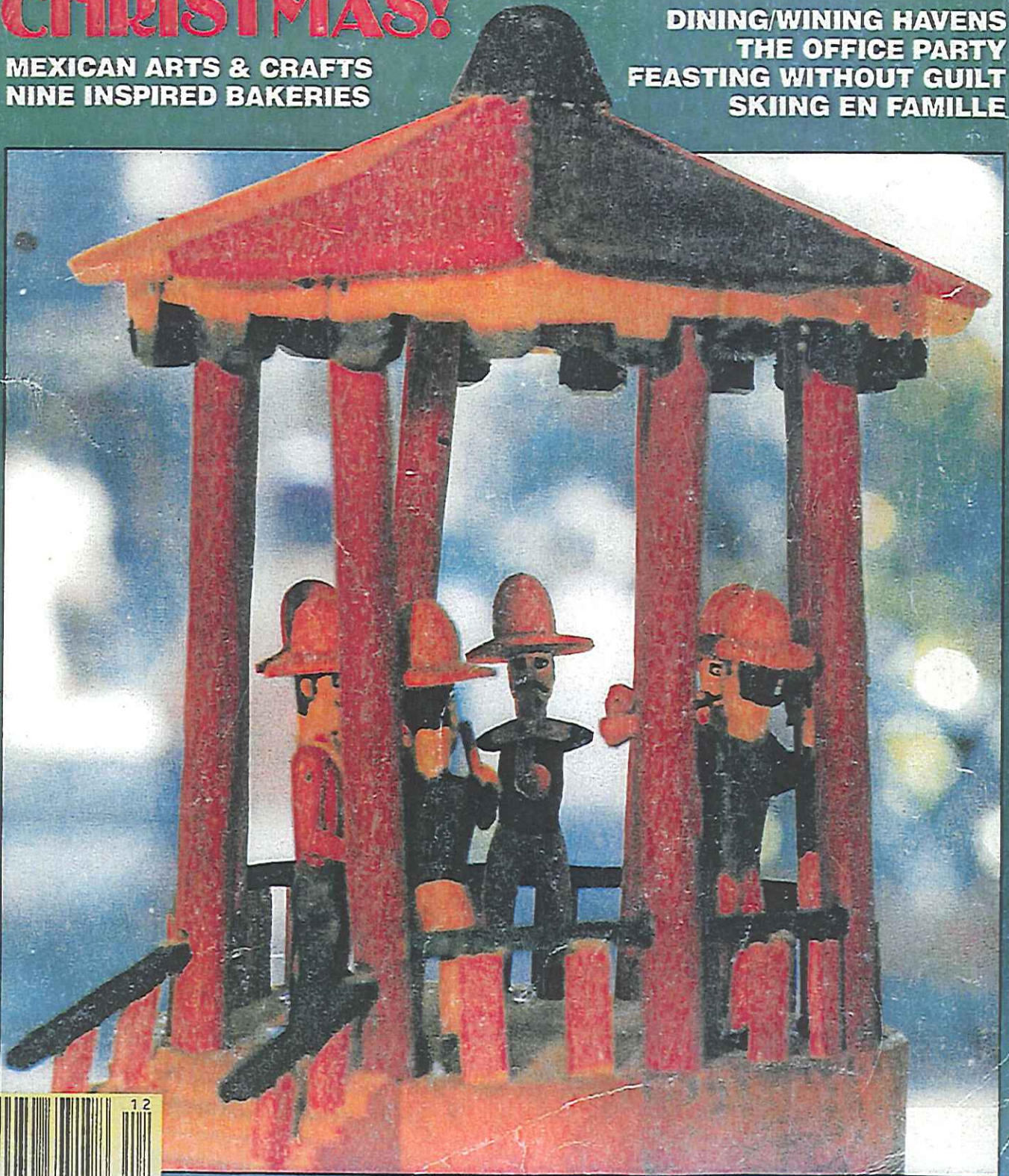
# SAN DIEGO magazine

DECEMBER 1979 \$1.75

## CHRISTMAS!

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THE OFFICE PARTY  
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# The Vision of Father Petakovich

*A tiny Serbian orthodox congregation in Clairemont have built themselves a masterpiece of mosaic art*

by Zenia Cleigh



Blue mosaic domes cap a white exterior.

Photographs by John Oldenkamp

CHRISTMAS is always the season when we recollect our faith. This is true, of course, for some more than others, but there always seem to be those who carry the knowledge for the rest. High on a hill in Clairemont stands a testament to this, an exquisite little monument to a Christian faith that still lives with all the passion and dedication of its saints. It was built with sacrifice over ten uncertain years by a tiny Serbian congregation of 230 families—many of them first-generation immigrants—and their former pastor, who refused to give up in the face of enormous financial roadblocks to its completion.

This, the Serbian Orthodox Church of Saint George, is a blue-domed little Byzantine edifice and a magnificent work of art. The splendor of the religion which fired western civilization blazes down from every square inch of the vaulted mosaic walls in a joyful panoply of disciples, martyrs and saints. Each figure is cast with a plasticity of form and subtlety of detail and expression extremely difficult to master with mere pieces of tile.

Saint George's is said to be the only church in the United States entirely covered with mosaic. Although its sweeping cascade of figures is orthodox in position and selec-

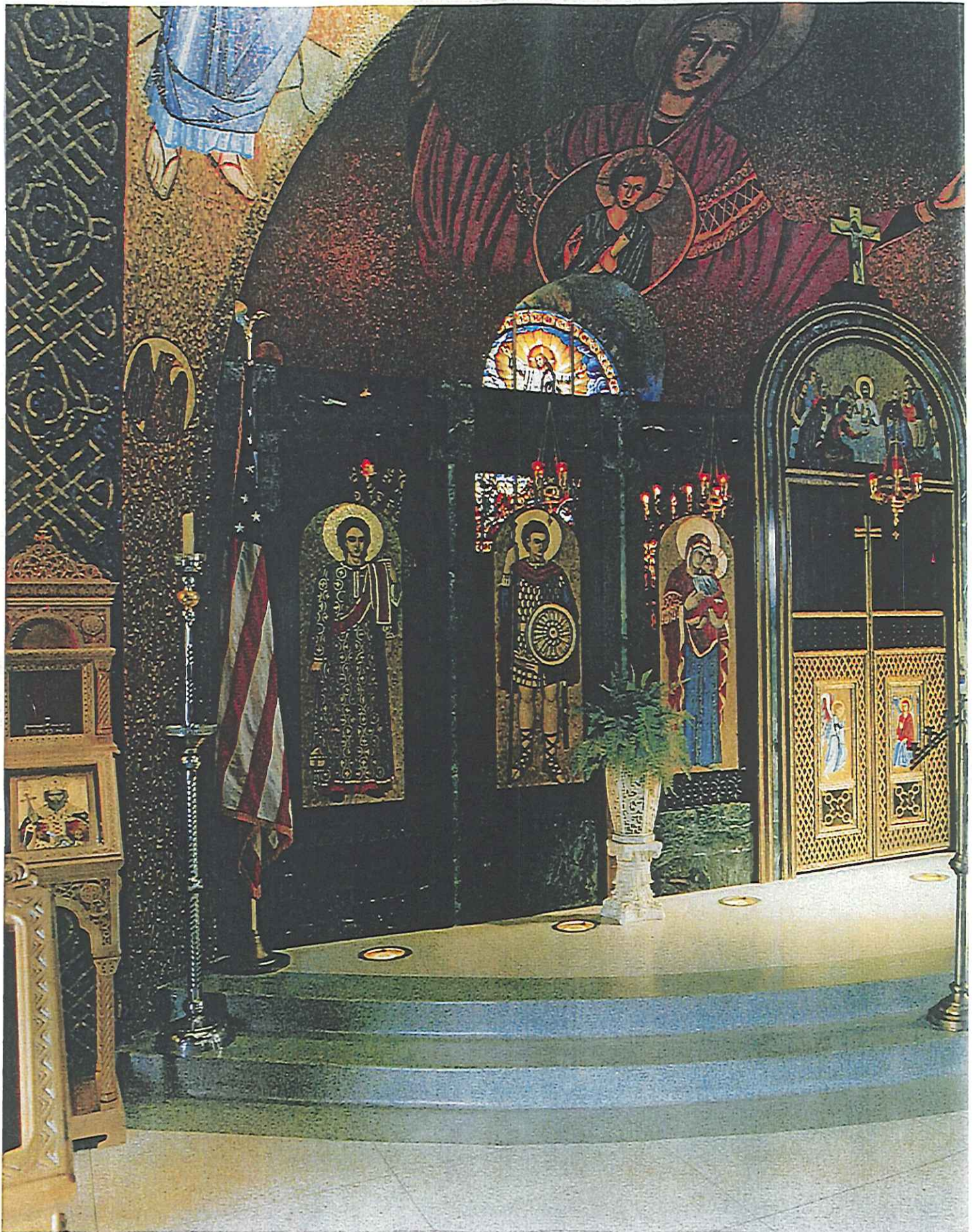
tion, and Byzantine in derivation, reaching back through the centuries to Greek Constantinople, the building itself is a modern interpretation of ancient form. And the faces are those of western humanity.

This is no replica, no burial ground of a forgotten creed, but a mark of our times, a translation into contemporary San Diego of the rich culture and strength of the Serbian Orthodox Church which has upheld the Serbian national identity through centuries of oppression, first by the Turks, and later,

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The green marble Bishop's throne is guarded by figures of Disciples at the Pentecost.







*"... Saint George's is said to be the only church in the United States that is entirely covered with mosaic . . ."*

with the formation of Yugoslavia, by the Communists.

The church's current pastor, Father Milorad Dobrota, says, "You feel a part of heaven here."

More than anything, Saint George's is the vision of a single man, Father Velimir Petakovich, pastor of the church from 1964 until his retirement last year, ten months before the final dedication ceremony. A big man with the high cheekbones and wide blue eyes of a Balkan patriot, Petakovich broke his health building the church and raising much of the money for the approximately \$250,000 investment. Since the undertaking left the tiny congregation nearly bankrupt at times, Petakovich worked for five years in the administrative services department of First National Bank, raising a family and carrying on church duties at night, often putting in 18-hour days.

The saga of Saint George's began ten years ago when the State Highway Department decided to run Highway 805 right through the property of the old church building in North Park. Church members at first

wanted to move the old structure to a new site, but Petakovich, after tramping through 60 possible locations, persuaded the congregation to spend a part of the \$100,000 received from the state on an undeveloped site overlooking Mission Bay.

Because frescoes would deteriorate in the salt air, Petakovich hit on the idea of placing a few small mosaics above the doors of the new church, and gradually the thought to cover the entire church with this ancient art form took hold in his mind. One Christmas, Giovanni Nastrucci, a principal in the Mexico City firm of Mosaicos Italianos, which had been commissioned for the first mosaics, came to San Diego to shop.

Petakovich recalls: "I said, 'Giovanni, don't you think it would be marvelous to do the whole church in mosaic?'"

"He said, 'In the 20th century nobody does things like this.'"

"I said, 'Okay, let's do it.'"

Nastrucci introduced Petakovich to a skilled mosaic craftsman born in Rome, Publio Cavallini, whom Petakovich persuaded to move to San Diego from Texas to install the work. Then, he says, "It was no longer only one fool. It was three fools—Giovanni, Publio and me."

Nastrucci agreed to donate the materials for the first half of the church, leaving to Saint George's the task of paying for the transportation and artists' fees at the Mexico City factory, where the designs, drawn on paper placed on the church walls, were

The Virgin Mary with the child Jesus at her breast beckons the faithful to worship from behind the traditional "iconostasis" leading to the sanctuary. Figures on the doors, from left, are Saint Stephen, Saint George, Mary and Jesus, Christ, Saint John the Baptist and the Archangel Michael. The Last Supper is portrayed in mosaic above the Holy Doors.

painstakingly translated into tiny bits of tile. The mosaics were glued backwards on the drawings and then shipped to Tijuana in flat squares which Cavallini (now owner of Cavallini Tile Company here) and his son Mickey laboriously applied to the walls with a mixture of latex and cement, often working late into the evening, and for little pay.

Donors appeared from miraculous quar-

ters. Businessman Tom Dyke paid off the church mortgage of \$82,000 in one fell swoop in memory of his late wife, Donna Rose, a Serb and member of the church. Later he donated another \$10,000 for the mosaic. Leslie Hodge, first conductor of the San Diego Symphony, spotted the church one day from the freeway, drove up to investigate, and subsequently gave numerous

piano recitals as benefits. Members of the congregation held endless dinners and bazaars to raise money, and Serbs in Mexico helped by paying some of the factory bills.

Petakovich himself helped with the installation and design, choosing scenes from the life of Christ to emphasize, dictating placement of the icons, and even fighting with the artists over interpretation and style. He once

*“ . . . One thing I must tell you: You must love art . . . ”*



Detail of Virgin and Child by Stevan Cukich on "iconostasis."

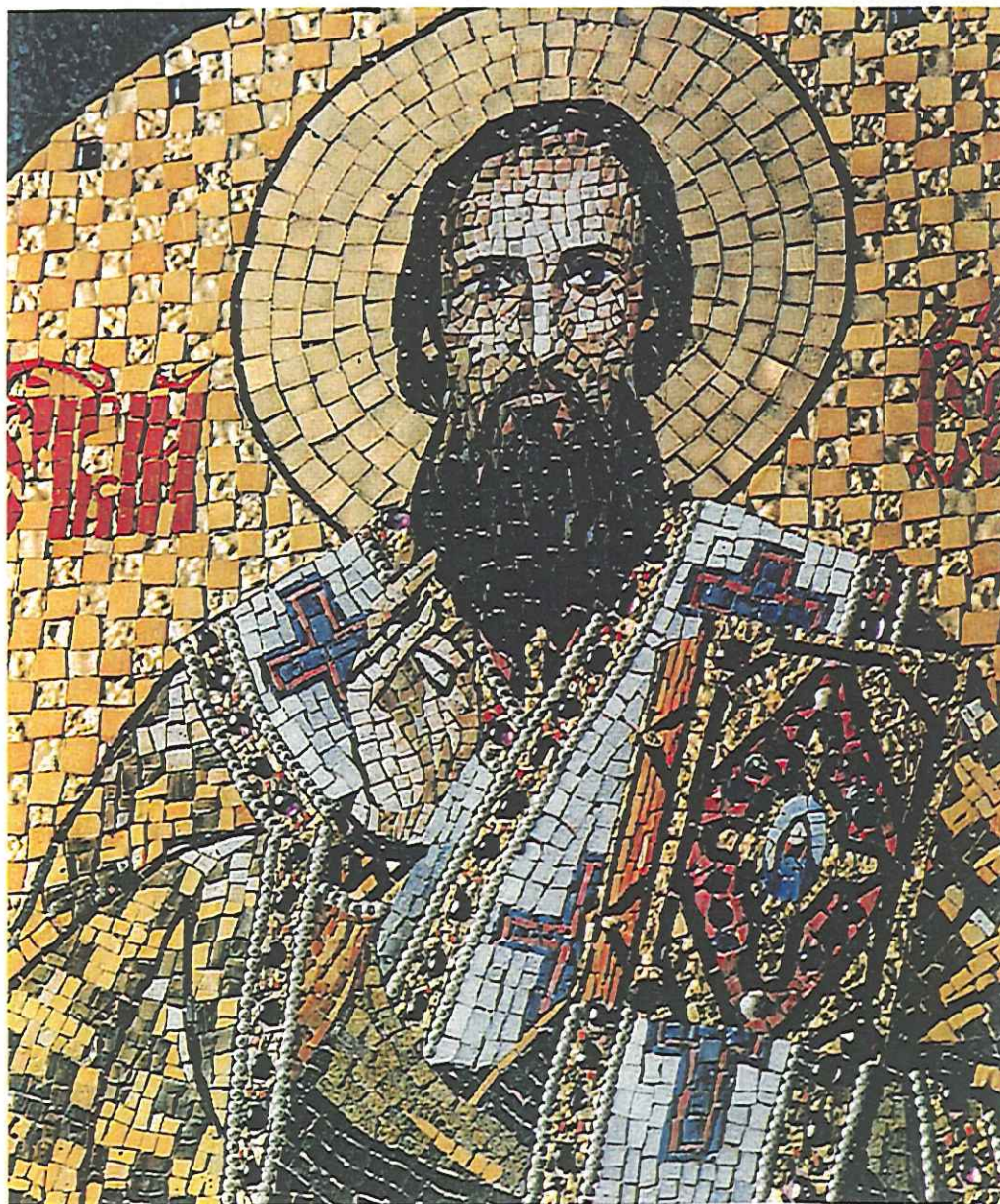
*“ . . . It doesn't matter how small the congregation is. If you have faith, people will follow. . . ”*

tore up a month's production of drawings by Stevan Cukich, an academic painter from Belgrade who was the first artist to work on the church.

The result of this painstaking and backbreaking effort is a tiny masterpiece in which a joyful and gracious spirit seems to dwell. The gentle face of Christ beams down from the central dome with a six-foot hand

raised in blessing. The Virgin Mary, arms outstretched above the sanctuary, beckons the faithful to prayer with large, soulful eyes which can be seen from everywhere in the church. Lining the walls of the nave are comforting scenes from the life of Christ—Christ healing the sick and blessing the children, reminding the faithful not so much of the agony of Christ but of the grace.

Artist Cukich lived with the Petakovich family for 18 months, while he designed the east half of the church leading up to the altar. The north wall contains scenes of Palm Sunday, the kiss of betrayal by Judas, the washing of the disciples' feet, the Crucifixion and the descent into Hades. The south wall depicts events from the Resurrection—the angel at the tomb, doubting Thomas placing



The figure of Saint Sava, one of the smallest mosaics in the church.



his finger in Christ's wound, Christ's appearance to the two Marys, and the Pentecost, a powerful representation of the descent of the Holy Spirit onto the disciples 50 days after the Resurrection. Beneath the figure of Jesus on the dome stand eight prophets of the Old Testament, and in a third layer are more scenes from the life of Christ: the Annunciation to Mary, the Nativity, the presentation at the temple, and the transfiguration on Mount Tabor.

Cukich did some of his best work on the "iconostasis," the traditional screen-bearing doors leading into the sanctuary, where stand the figures of Jesus, Saint John the Baptist, and the Archangel Michael on the right, and the Virgin, Saint George, and Deacon Stephen, the first Christian martyr on the left.

One of the most beautiful mosaics in the church rests on the green marble of the Bishop's chair. This is the tiny medallion of Saint Sava, patriarch of the Serbian Orthodox Church, who gave up his right to the throne in the 13th century and entered a monastery, later winning autonomy for the Serbian church from the mother church in Constantinople. The eyes of Petakovich's

persecutions in the 4th century A.D.; Saint Cyril and Saint Methodius, Greek brothers who were the first to translate the Bible into a Slavic language and to bring Christianity to the Balkan peninsula; Saint Nicholas, bishop of the city of Mira, who was legendary for his good deeds. One story has Saint Nicholas once throwing bags of gold through the window of a poor man's home one night so he could marry off his daughters.

On the stairs to the choir loft the scene of Christ calming the stormy seas is recorded, and upstairs, angels by Donnelly fly toward heaven with expressions of sweet ecstasy. On the north wall of the loft, seen by few, is the story of the sisters Martha and Mary, one who served a feast for Christ, and the other, who was content simply to listen to his words. It is a humble Christ on this wall, the patient teacher. The artist? Petakovich looks a little sheepish. "Giovanni and me."

"You must love art," says Petakovich. "One thing I must tell you. Every time I had any money, I was buying art. I have to tell you that many times I was not happy with what I accomplished. In 1971 I went to Europe and saw many monuments, frescoes, mosaics. It was close to midnight when I

Lincoln so big. It's a monument. To me a church is a monument."

Over the years, Petakovich's struggles were not only with the artists and the budget. He resigned last year, it is intimated, after conflict with some of his parishioners, people of modest means who sometimes felt the undertaking was too grand for them, and who did not approve of Petakovich's recent side business in real estate. Petakovich is now a controversial figure within the parish, who asks for no praise and tends to stay away.

"I don't measure by the standards of this world. I think the Lord is the only witness of all our efforts and accomplishments." But his eyes brighten when he says: "I am happy with what I did. If I have to do it again, I'll do it. You know, in this life I think all of us should leave our signature here somehow. If we don't, man has no reason to exist."

Father Petakovich always used to leave the doors to Saint George's open, so anyone could drop by to admire its beauty. The new pastor, Father Dobrota, awed by the treasure entrusted to his safekeeping, now keeps them locked, although tours can be arranged. The Serbs celebrate Christmas under the Julian

*"... In this life all of us should leave our signatures here somehow. If we don't, man has no reason to exist . . ."*

favorite saint gaze out like righteous flames, remarkably alive within the confines of tile.

San Diego artist Donald Donnelly fashioned the mosaic of the Last Supper on the choir loft, and a humanitarian version of Saint George and a very fine dragon in the rear of the church, showing the beast merely captured, not slain. The Reverend John Walsted, an Episcopal priest from Santa Barbara, contributed a row of medallions to the arch of the nave. The bulk of the west end of the church, including the dramatic Ascension of Christ on the ceiling, was designed by Marko Ilich, a deacon in the Serbian Orthodox Church in Belgrade and its official iconographer.

Centuries of church history filter back through the years in the faces Petakovich chose for the stained glass windows of the nave: Emperor Constantine of Rome, who legalized Christianity and put an end to the

arrived in San Diego. The first thing I did was discover my church again. At that moment I was the happiest man in the world. I realized I had created something unique.

"You see, it doesn't matter how small the congregation is. If you have faith, people will follow. I believe God was very pleased with what we were doing, otherwise people would not have come from many directions, helping us. A church for me is not just a building. A church has to be a monument to the Lord. You have to testify how it is beautiful to believe, and how it is beautiful to worship.

"I was often asked by rational people why the church was so high—five or six stories—and could only seat 200 people. Americans are so practical. Here in the United States you have very few monuments. You have to go to Washington to see them. They don't question why they made

calendar. It falls on January 7, 1980. Christmas Eve service at Saint George's is at 7 pm, January 6, but during December the church is open for worship Sundays and holidays at 10:30 am, with the service in English, Serbian and Church Slavonic.

"In the church," says Father Petakovich, "two and two are not four. It depends on our faith. I really believe the rational way of thinking is damaging our country. Man must have more faith."#

The face of the Christ looms from the top of the main dome. The hand raised in blessing measures six feet. In the middle row are the faces of eight Old Testament prophets, and, on the lower level, scenes from the life of Christ, including: from right, baptism and presentation to the elders, and left, the transfiguration on Mount Tabor and the Nativity. All drawn by Stevan Cukich.

