

TO THE GLORY OF GOD: TWO DECADES OF SWIMMING FOR THE HOLY CROSS IN VLASOTINCE

Miloš Stamenković

ABSTRACT

The Epiphany swimming for the Holy Cross in Vlasotince, southern Serbia, has become a respected spiritual and sporting tradition that embodies Orthodox Christian faith and local identity. While the practice has long existed in major Serbian cities, its revival and continuous celebration in Vlasotince since 2006 represent a unique case of localized religious heritage. This paper offers a retrospective and comparative historical analysis of all Epiphany swimming events held in Vlasotince between 2006 and 2025. The research is based on a combination of local archival sources (Власина – информативни билтен општине Власотинце), the publication Богојављење у Власотинцу – уз Божју помоћ за Часни крст 2005–2016, regional news coverage, and oral accounts provided by journalists employed at the Cultural Center of Vlasotince. Several photographs published in Спортски журнал were also consulted as part of the documentation process. The findings reveal a steady increase in participation, from 13 swimmers in 2006 to 118 in 2024, alongside notable milestones such as the first female participant in 2011 and the first female winner in 2015. These changes illustrate growing inclusivity and symbolic evolution within the tradition. While the study is limited to one municipality and relies on retrospective sources, it constitutes the first scholarly attempt to document and analyze this religious and cultural manifestation in southern Serbia. It also highlights the need for broader academic engagement with local religious customs that are at risk of fading from collective memory.

Key words: swimming, Holy Cross, Epiphany, faith, Vlasotince, tradition

Corresponding author
Miloš Stamenković
kineziologija92@gmail.com

INTRODUCTION

Epiphany is one of the greatest Christian holidays, commemorating the moment that occurred after St. John the Baptist baptized Jesus Christ in the Jordan River. As Jesus emerged from the water, the heavens opened, and the Holy Spirit descended like a white dove upon the Son of God. In that divine moment, a voice from heaven said: *"This is my beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased."* This sacred event symbolizes the revelation of God the Son, the Lord Jesus Christ, as the God-Man who came into the world with the mission of saving humanity from sin.

The Serbian People and Epiphany

Among the Serbian people, the holiday of Epiphany is highly respected and deeply cherished. It is also known by other names, such as *Vodice* or *Vodokršće*, and is closely associated with various beliefs and customs. One of the most significant traditions is the retrieval of the Holy Cross from the water (Мицић and Ђукаловић, 2016, p. 5). Retrieving the Holy Cross has always been considered an honorable act that attracted exceptionally brave individuals. The importance of this religious and sporting event for the Serbian people is also reflected in the fact that it was banned during the German occupation of Serbia (Мицић and Ђукаловић, 2016, p. 8).

Epiphany During the German Occupation

The last major Epiphany event in free Belgrade before the outbreak of World War II took place in 1941, when the Holy Cross was personally thrown by His Holiness Patriarch Gavrilo from the magnificent King Alexander I Bridge (Политика, 1941, p. 7). Unlike today's tradition of swimming for the Holy Cross, in earlier times the participants were in a boats (Figure 2), ready to jump into the icy waves of the Sava River. On that occasion, there were four young men from Ohrid in one boat — four workers preparing to catch the cross thrown into the Sava (Политика, 1941, p. 7). A little further away, in another boat, was nineteen-year-old Borivoje Dobričić from Martinci (Figure 1), near Sremska Mitrovica, who was also waiting for the cross to be thrown from the bridge. In the history of the Serbian people, young Borivoje Dobričić remained remembered as the winner of the last Epiphany event before the German occupation — not as a soldier, policeman, cadet, or athlete, but simply as an unemployed trade assistant.



Figure 1. Borivoje Dobričić, the young man who was the first to reach the Holy Cross at the last Epiphany event before the German occupation. Reprinted with permission from the Digital National Library of Serbia.
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Figure 2. On the left, His Holiness the Patriarch is shown throwing the ice cross into the Sava River; on the right, participants prepare in boats. Reprinted with permission from the Digital National Library of Serbia. © National Library of Serbia.

Revival of the Epiphany Swimming for the Holy Cross in Serbia

After World War II, when Hitler's occupation banned the traditional Epiphany swimming for the Holy Cross in Serbia, this centuries-old custom remained silent for decades. It wasn't until 1999 — just two months before the NATO bombing of the former Yugoslavia — that a group of young men, modern-day knights, revived this sacred tradition (RTS, 2024).

The leader and founder of this brotherhood of knights was Hadži Zoran Mrdenović, who returned to Serbia from France on the eve of the bombing. Guided by faith and

love for their heritage, he and his comrades restored the Epiphany swimming for the Holy Cross, breathing new life into this symbol of courage and spirituality (RTS, 2024).

“The revival of this tradition happened just before the NATO aggression, when 12 young men descended from Banovo Brdo to Ada. We didn’t know what was waiting for us — we didn’t know how thick the ice was, or what the water was like. It was terrifying. But nothing could stop us, because the greatest victory is always over ourselves — and that is the very essence of this holiday: to overcome your own limits,” said Mrđenović.

After the revival of this spiritual and sporting tradition in 1999, the Epiphany swimming for the Holy Cross has been celebrated every year in an increasing number of cities across Serbia, as well as in the diaspora. In southern Serbia, the town of Vlasotince has gained particular recognition for preserving this tradition, organizing an event that brings together the bravest and most devoted participants, ready to swim in the icy waters of the Vlasina River. Viewed from a historical perspective, on January 19, 2025, Vlasotince marked two decades of continuously hosting this unique spiritual and sporting event.

From a historical perspective, the Epiphany swimming event in Vlasotince, held annually since 2006, provides a unique case study of how national traditions are restored, adapted, and maintained in post-conflict societies. The central research question guiding this study is: *How has the revival and continuous practice of Epiphany swimming in Vlasotince contributed to the preservation of spiritual identity, local cohesion, and national memory from 2006 to 2025?*

The aim of this paper is to offer a descriptive overview of the organization, development, and cultural significance of this spiritual-sporting manifestation over the past two decades. A retrospective historical method was employed to trace the evolution of the event from its inception in 2006 to the present day. This methodological approach is justified by the lack of previous academic research on Epiphany swimming traditions in southern Serbia, especially in smaller communities such as Vlasotince. Accordingly, this study seeks to address that gap by documenting the continuity, transformation, and meaning of this tradition within the broader framework of regional identity, spiritual heritage, and communal solidarity.

METHODOLOGY

This research employed a retrospective historical-descriptive methodology in order to reconstruct the evolution and cultural significance of the Epiphany swimming event in Vlasotince from 2006 to 2025. The study relied primarily on documentary sources, enriched by interpretive input from long-term observers and media contributors.

The main documentary sources include the local bulletin *Власина – информативни билтен општине Власотинце*, archived at the Cultural Center of Vlasotince, which has regularly published reports, photographs, and program notes related to the manifestation. Two journalists employed at the Cultural Center of Vlasotince, who have followed and reported on the event since its inception, offered crucial interpretive

commentary, particularly regarding changes in the event's format, participants' motivations, and its evolving significance in the local community.

A pivotal textual source was the publication *Богојављење у Власотинцу – уз Божју помоћ за Часни крст 2005–2016* by Мицић and Ђукловић (2016), which offers a detailed historical overview of the event's early years. These sources provided foundational chronological and factual data, allowing for a consistent reconstruction of the event's timeline and rituals.

Additional data were obtained from regional news portals such as *Jugmedia* and *InfoDesk Vlasotince*, while *Спортски журнал* provided a limited number of photographs documenting selected years of the event. Although these images were published without accompanying texts, they served as supplementary visual material and were cross-referenced with local narrative accounts for validation.

Inclusion criteria

Inclusion criteria required that sources directly address the Vlasotince Epiphany event, offer identifiable authorship or provenance, and provide either factual data (date, participants, descriptions) or interpretive perspectives. Exclusion criteria applied to unverified web content, duplicate or promotional material, and sources not specifically focused on Vlasotince.

Critical Evaluation of Sources

Historical documents and media reports were subjected to both **external criticism** (e.g., authorship, date, reliability of outlet) and **internal criticism** (e.g., consistency, potential bias, completeness of account). Visual evidence from archived photographs was cross-referenced with narrative reports to establish factual accuracy, particularly regarding participants and ceremonial details.

Data Organization and Triangulation

Information was categorized thematically (e.g., “yearly participants,” “ritual sequence,” “institutional support”) and mapped chronologically across the 20-year period. Triangulation was achieved by comparing press reports, archival documents, and testimonies of cultural workers to reconcile discrepancies and confirm consistency.

Ethical Considerations

All photographic materials included in this study are either from public archives (e.g., *Digital National Library of Serbia*) or were used with verbal permission from journalists or institutions. Informal conversations with living informants were voluntary and non-identifiable; their insights are paraphrased and anonymized.

Although the methodology did not involve formal interviews or quantitative data, the layered use of archival materials, published literature, media documentation, and contemporary commentary ensures the internal validity of the historical reconstruction.

RESULTS WITH DISCUSSION

To complement the descriptive narrative and address the need for systematic documentation, Table 1 presents a chronological overview of the number of registered participants in the Epiphany swimming event in Vlasotince from 2006 to 2025. The table also includes notable moments and milestones based on documented reports from local bulletins (*Власина*), media portals (*Jugmedia*, *InfoDesk Vlasotince*), and national coverage (*Спортски журнал*). These figures were extracted from published sources and cross-verified through interviews with organizers and long-term media observers. The inclusion of this timeline allows for a clearer understanding of how participation levels fluctuated, how the tradition evolved, and what symbolic moments shaped its local and national relevance.

Table 1. Number of Participants in Epiphany Swimming for the Holy Cross in Vlasotince (2006–2025).

Year	Participants	Notable Events
2006	13	First renewed event; winner: Dragan Kocić
2007	17	Winner: Aleksandar Dinkić
2008	—	Event canceled due to floods
2009	18	Winner: Dragan Kocić (second time)
2010	12	Winner: Aleksandar Dinkić; youngest: Kristijan Pešić
2011	31	First female swimmer: Pavlina Stojanović; winner: Miloš Đorđević
2012	30	Third victory of Dragan Kocić
2013	57	Visit by Brazilian Ambassador; winner Dušan Nikolić
2014	84	Only female: Anđela Kocić; winner Dragan Kocić
2015	58	Winner: Teodora Stefanović (first female winner)
2016	56	Victory of Kristijan Pešić
2017	36	International participants (Russia); winner: Miloš Tošić
2018	57	Winner: Luka Petković
2019	49	Winner: Luka Petković
2020	62	Visit by Bishop Arsenije; winner: Lazar Milić
2021	—	Canceled due to COVID-19
2022	21	Winner: Nikola Stanković; female participant: Jovana Nikolić
2023	77	Female participant: Irena Stanimirović; winner: Ognjen Obradović
2024	118	Record number of participants; winner Milan Dimitrijević
2025	100	Winner: Stefan Đokić; 3 female participants

As shown in the table, participation steadily increased from 13 swimmers in 2006 to over 100 by 2024, indicating growing local and national interest in the event. The 2011 edition marked a turning point with the first female participant, while 2015 saw the first female winner—both milestones in the tradition’s evolution. The record number of 118 participants in 2024 suggests an institutional and symbolic strengthening of the event. In contrast, 2021 saw the event canceled due to the COVID-19 pandemic, reflecting the broader impact of global crises on local customs.

The period between 2006 and 2010 was characterized by modest but stable participation, averaging 15–18 swimmers annually. After 2011, the event began to draw more diverse participants, including women and youth. Years such as 2014 and 2023 stand out for high female engagement, and the 2017 inclusion of international guests (from Russia) illustrates the manifestation’s expanding reach.

This comparative trend analysis shows that the Vlasotince Epiphany swimming event has evolved from a modest local ritual into a regionally recognized tradition with increasing symbolic significance. It continues to serve as a platform for expressing religious devotion, communal identity, and intergenerational solidarity.

The following chronological account offers a descriptive narrative of each Epiphany swimming event held in Vlasotince from 2006 to 2025. While the previous analysis provided a broader overview of trends and symbolic shifts, the sections below highlight individual annual events based on documented sources, media coverage, and participant records.

The First Epiphany Swimming for the Holy Cross in Vlasotince

The tradition of retrieving the Holy Cross from the Vlasina River was renewed on January 19, 2006, when the *Удружење поштовалаца Свете горе Атонске* (Association of the Devotees of Mount Athos) from Vlasotince, with the blessing of the church *Сопственије Светог Духа* (*Descent of the Holy Spirit Church*) and under the patronage of the Vlasotince Municipal Assembly, organized the Epiphany swimming for the Holy Cross (Мицић and Ђукаловић, 2016, p. 8). With the blessing of the Vlasotince archpriest, Father Zoran Stojanović, a magnificent event was held on the Vlasina River. The ascetic act of retrieving the Holy Cross from the water took place precisely at noon, in front of more than 3,000 believers (Мицић and Ђукаловић, 2016, p. 8). In accordance with Orthodox Christian tradition, on the day of Epiphany people greet each other with the words: “*God has appeared!*” — “*Indeed, He has appeared!*”



Figure 3. *The first celebration of Epiphany swimming in Vlasotince, with Father Zoran Stojanović lowering the Holy Cross into the Vlasina River. Photograph by Zoran Stojičić. Reprinted with permission from InfoDesk Vlasotince. © InfoDesk Vlasotince.*

At the first renewed spiritual and sporting event in Vlasotince, held in 2006, a total of 13 brave young men participated. After receiving a priestly blessing, the competitors prepared to swim in the icy waters of the Vlasina River. The first to reach the Holy Cross was 34-year-old Dragan Kocić from Vlasotince, a member of the Ministry of Internal Affairs of the Republic of Serbia (Figure 4).



Figure 4. *Dragan Kocić, a citizen of Vlasotince and a member of the Ministry of Internal Affairs of Serbia, is remembered as the first winner of the Epiphany event organized in Vlasotince. Photograph by Zoran Stojičić. Used with permission from InfoDesk Vlasotince. © InfoDesk Vlasotince.*

The Second Epiphany Swimming for the Holy Cross in Vlasotince

After the first officially renewed spiritual and sporting event, the tradition of Epiphany swimming in Vlasotince continued to be held regularly every year. The Epiphany swimming in 2007, organized once again on the Vlasina River, attracted an even larger number of participants and believers compared to the previous year.

On that occasion, more than 3,000 people gathered to celebrate this great Christian holiday. It is also worth noting that the weather conditions were exceptionally favorable and unusually mild for the month of January (Мицић и Ђукаловић, 2016, p. 18). A total of 17 brave men, filled with faith in God and in themselves, dared to jump into the

icy waters of the Vlasina River to swim for the Holy Cross. After receiving the priest's blessing, they headed towards the opposite riverbank, ready to test their strength, courage, and endurance. In a hard-fought battle of swimming strokes against one another in the freezing water, Aleksandar Dinkić managed to reach the Holy Cross first, earning the title of victor (Мицић and Ђукаловић, 2016, p. 22). In the history of the event in Vlasotince, the youngest participant remains Kristijan Pešić, who was only 15 months old.

The Epiphany Swimming for the Holy Cross in Vlasotince Canceled Due to Floods

The preserved records show that the Epiphany swimming event for the Holy Cross, planned for 2008, was canceled due to a flood that struck Vlasotince. The flood created unsafe conditions for the participants, which led to the cancellation of this spiritual and sporting event. The cancellation caused visible disappointment among the people of Vlasotince. Nevertheless, many believers still gathered for the Holy Liturgy and the blessing of the Epiphany holy water in the churchyard, accompanied by the choir of the Church of St. Nicholas from Niš (Мицић and Ђукаловић, 2016, p. 26).

The Third Epiphany Swimming for the Holy Cross in Vlasotince

Compared to 2008, which was remembered for the floods and the cancellation of the Epiphany swimming for the Holy Cross, the members of the Association of Devotees of Mount Athos were able, with God's help, to organize this great Christian event once again. From a historical perspective, the year 2009 will be remembered not only for the beautiful winter day but also for the large number of gathered Christians. More than 5,000 faithful and interested people cheered for the bravest among them — those who had the courage to swim in the icy waters of the Vlasina River for the Holy Cross and their faith in God (Мицић and Ђукаловић, 2016, p. 27).

Eighteen of the bravest young men, after receiving a blessing and with faith in God, crossed to the opposite riverbank, from where they jumped into the water. When the cross was lowered into the river, the swimming race began. After a fierce swimming battle in the cold Vlasina River, Dragan Kocić — the first winner and bearer of the cross from 2006 — once again managed to reach the Holy Cross. Once again, the youngest participant in the Epiphany swimming for the Holy Cross was Kristijan Pešić (Мицић and Ђукаловић, 2016, p. 27).

The Fourth Epiphany Swimming for the Holy Cross in Vlasotince

The new Epiphany swimming event for the Holy Cross, held in 2010, brought new, interesting, and chivalrous moments in the cold waters of the Vlasina River. A total of 12 exceptionally brave swimmers took part in the race. Before entering the icy river, they received a blessing from the head priest of the church, Father Goran Dimitrijević, who also lowered the Holy Cross into the freezing waters. Once again, Kristijan Pešić was the youngest participant, while Predrag Miljković traveled especially from Vienna to take part in this event (Власина, 2010, p. 8). The 33-meter-long swimming course

— symbolically representing the number of Christ's years — was completed the fastest by Aleksandar Dinkić, a physical education teacher from Vlasotince, who was also the winner of the 2007 Epiphany swimming event. In addition to the valuable prizes awarded to the winner, Kristijan Pešić was recognized as the youngest participant, Dušan Zeković as the youngest swimmer, while Bogoljub Popović was honored as the oldest participant (Власина, 2010, p. 8).

The Fifth Epiphany Swimming for the Holy Cross in Vlasotince

All Epiphany swimming events, organized since the first official event in 2006, were characterized by the fact that only men entered the cold waters of the Vlasina River to swim for the Holy Cross. However, at the Epiphany swimming event held in 2011, for the first time among the swimmers was a woman, forty-five-year-old Pavlina Stojanović (Власина, 2011, p. 7). A total of 31 swimmers signed up for this chivalrous act, including Kristijan Pešić, who once again was the youngest participant. After receiving the blessing of the priest, the swimmers headed towards the 33-meter-long track. Miloš Đorđević, a member of the Gendarmerie in Niš, born in 1982, was the first to reach the Holy Cross. *The Удружење Власотинчана у Београду* (Association of Vlasotinians in Belgrade), Vlada Ilić (*"Влада Илић"*), prepared an award for the oldest participant, while the family of Slobodan Ćukalović awarded the youngest participant of the competition (Власина, 2011, p. 7).

The Sixth Epiphany Swimming for the Holy Cross in Vlasotince

The Epiphany swimming for the Holy Cross in 2012 once again gathered a large number of participants. Moreover, this religious manifestation attracted several thousand visitors who came to support the brave swimmers of strong faith, ready to swim for the Holy Cross. As the participants, with unwavering faith in their hearts and souls, were approaching the starting position, a true legend of Leskovac football and the president of the Association of Carrier Pigeon Breeders *"Poštar"*, Dragan Stanković, released 33 pigeons, symbolically flying above the cold and consecrated waters of the Vlasina River (Власина, 2012, p. 7). Thirty courageous young men set off towards the Holy Cross, among them the youngest participants: Kristijan Pešić, taking part for the fifth time, and high school student Aleksa Đikić. The oldest participant was a 58-year-old Lazar Pešić (Власина, 2012, p. 7). In an extremely competitive race, the first to reach the Holy Cross was Dragan Kocić from Vlasotince, an employee of the Ministry of Internal Affairs. This was his third victory in this knightly competition of the bravest swimmers.

The Seventh Epiphany Swimming for the Holy Cross in Vlasotince

From a historical perspective, the year 2013 was remembered not only for the increased number of participants in the swimming for the Holy Cross but also for the historic visit of a foreign ambassador to Vlasotince. The joy of those gathered was further enhanced by the presence of the ambassador of populous Christian Brazil, His Excellency Alexandre Addor Neto (Мицић and Ђукаловић, 2016, p. 59). Through the mediation of the Association of Vlasotinians in Belgrade, *"Vlada Ilić"* (as

written in the original), His Excellency visited Vlasotince and attended the Epiphany swimming event for the Holy Cross (Мицић and Ђукаловић, 2016, p. 60). It is also important to mention that, in addition to the Brazilian ambassador, football legends were present at this event that unites spirituality and chivalry. Thanks to the efforts of the local association called “Лоза”, among the guests were the famous football player and former national team coach, Mr. Ilija Petković, as well as Mr. Božidar Milenković “Tus”, a native of Vlasotince and a football legend of the Karaburma club (Мицић and Ђукаловић, 2016, p. 61). The number of participants who swam for the Holy Cross was significantly higher compared to previous Epiphany swim events organized since the very beginning. Sincerely greeted by all, 57 brave young men, including seven-year-old Kristijan Pešić, after receiving a priest’s blessing and with faith in God, were ready to swim. After the Holy Cross was lowered into the water, the chivalrous competition in the cold Vlasina River began with powerful swimming strokes. The first to reach the Holy Cross was 25-year-old Dušan Nikolić, a firefighter from Leskovac.

Presenting the golden coin to the winner, Ambassador Alexandre Addor Neto, among other things, said: “Today’s celebration impressed me. All respect to these young and courageous people who, full of faith in God, jump into the cold river, proving their love for our Lord Jesus Christ” (Мицић and Ђукаловић, 2016, p. 60).

The Eith Epiphany Swimming for the Holy Cross in Vlasotince

Unlike previous years of organizing the swimming for the Holy Cross, the year 2014 was even more successful, not only in terms of the number of devoted visitors but also in the number of brave participants. Eighty-four competitors entered the cold waters of the Vlasina River, swimming towards the Holy Cross. Among them stood out Anđela Kocić, the only woman who bravely jumped into the icy waves of the Vlasina. Her participation in this “swimming battle” was met with thunderous applause and admiration from nearly 8,000 gathered believers. For the fourth time, Dragan Kocić from Vlasotince was the first to reach the Holy Cross. Eight-year-old Kristijan Pešić once again earned the title of the youngest participant in the swimming for the Holy Cross (Мицић and Ђукаловић, 2016, p. 92).

The Ninth Epiphany Swimming for the Holy Cross in Vlasotince

For the first time since the beginning of the Epiphany swimming tradition in Vlasotince, a young woman won the Holy Cross in competition with 58 brave swimmers. On January 19, 2015, Teodora Stefanović forever etched her name into the history of Vlasotince, making this day unforgettable both for the town and its proud citizens (Власина, 2015, p. 6). Encouraged by the heartfelt applause of the gathered believers, 57 courageous young men and Miss Teodora Stefanović received the priest’s blessing before heading to the opposite riverbank, ready to test their strength and faith in the icy waters of the Vlasina River. When the signal for the start of this knightly contest was given, only brave Teodora jumped into the water, while the 57 young knights of Vlasina warmly applauded her. After gaining a lead of about ten meters, the other swimmers jumped in as well, but Teodora was the first to reach the Holy Cross, encouraged by the spectators who recognized the gentlemanly, and above

all, brotherly, gesture of these honorable young men (Мицић and Ђукаловић, 2016, p. 73). It is also worth mentioning that nine-year-old Kristijan Pešić participated once again in this Epiphany swimming event, successfully maintaining his title as the youngest participant in swimming for the Holy Cross.

The 10th Epiphany Swimming for the Holy Cross in Vlasotince

After ten consecutive participations, ten-year-old Kristijan Pešić, the youngest competitor in all of Vlasotince's Epiphany swimming events, won for the first time in 2016. Together with his father, he first plunged into the icy waves of the Vlasina River for the Holy Cross in 2007, as a 15-month-old baby, which makes him the youngest participant in the history of both Serbia and his hometown of Vlasotince (Власина, 2016, p. 18). Alongside him, 55 brave and determined young men, filled with love for tradition, God, and their people, entered the cold waters of the Vlasina. Truly, the year 2016 will be remembered for the triumph of young Kristijan, who stands as an excellent example of unwavering faith in God and in oneself.

The 11th Epiphany Swimming for the Holy Cross in Vlasotince

The 11th Epiphany swimming for the Holy Cross was successfully held in 2017, bringing together 36 brave and devoted swimmers, including four from Russia. Among them was Pavlina Stojanović, remembered as the first woman ever to swim for the Holy Cross back in 2011 (Власина, 2017, p. 16). This time, she was joined by her courageous four-year-old granddaughter Nika Pantić, whose remarkable act reflected love for God, faith, people, and Orthodoxy. Another fearless woman, Danica Trimčić, inspired by her deep faith in God, also took part in the event. Once the cross was placed in the river, the race through the icy waters of the Vlasina began. The first to reach it was 22-year-old Miloš Tošić, a student at the Faculty of Civil Engineering in Niš and a football referee, taking part in the Epiphany swimming for the second time (Власина, 2017, p. 16).

The 12th and 13th Epiphany Swimming for the Holy Cross in Vlasotince

At the Epiphany swimming events held in 2018 and 2019, the first swimmer to reach the Holy Cross was Luka Petković from Leskovac, a member of the "Leskovac" Swimming Club.

The 14th Epiphany Swimming for the Holy Cross in Vlasotince

Lazar Milić, a 23-year-old from Dadince (Figure 5) and a second lieutenant in the Serbian Armed Forces, emerged as the winner of the 2020 Epiphany swimming for the Holy Cross. He had the honor of receiving the Epiphany icon personally from His Grace Arsenije, Bishop of Niš (Figure 6).

His Grace Arsenije, Bishop of Niš, attended the Epiphany swimming for the Holy Cross in Vlasotince for the first time in 2020. His presence at this event was considered a great honor and joy, both for the people of Vlasotince and for all the faithful gathered on that occasion.



Figure 5. *Second Lieutenant Lazar Milić reaching the Holy Cross first during the Epiphany swimming event. Photograph by Miloš Stamenković. Reprinted with permission from Спортски журнал. © Спортски журнал.*



Figure 6. *His Grace Arsenije, Bishop of Niš, blesses the participants of the Epiphany Cross swimming in Vlasotince. Photograph by Miloš Stamenković. Reprinted with permission from Спортски журнал. © Спортски журнал.*

The Epiphany Cross Swimming Event in Vlasotince Cancelled Due to the COVID-19 Pandemic

For the second time in its history, the Epiphany swimming for the Holy Cross in Vlasotince was canceled in 2021 due to the COVID-19 pandemic, which shook the entire world. In accordance with the protective measures introduced by the Government of the Republic of Serbia, and with concern for the health of all participants, sponsors, and organizers, the Organizing Committee decided not to hold the traditional swimming competition in the Vlasina River (Власина, 2020/21, p. 13).

The 15th Epiphany Cross Swimming Event in Vlasotince

After receiving the blessing from His Grace Arsenije, Bishop of Niš, 20 brave young men and one woman, Jovana Nikolić, entered the icy waters of the Vlasina River. Among the participants were also members of the Gendarmerie. On the Feast of Epiphany, January 19, 2022, in a chivalrous and honorable competition, 20-year-old football player Nikola Stanković (Figure 7) from Vlasotince was the first to reach the Holy Cross (Власина, 2022, p. 8).



Figure 7. Football player Nikola Stanković is the first to reach the Holy Cross. Photograph by Miloš Stamenković. Reprinted with permission from Спортски журнал. © Спортски журнал.

The 16th Epiphany Swimming for the Holy Cross in Vlasotince

In 2023, Ognjen Obradović (Figure 8), a second-year student at the Leskovac Gymnasium, was the first to reach the Holy Cross in the cold waters of the Vlasina River. For the third year in a row, His Grace Arsenije, Bishop of Niš, gave his blessing to the brave participants — 77 in total.

Among them was Irena Stanimirović (Figure 9), the only woman who, by entering the icy river and swimming toward the Holy Cross, demonstrated her love for God and her commitment to the Orthodox faith (Vlasotince.info, 2023).



Figure 8. Ognjen Obradović from Leskovac reaches the Holy Cross first. Photograph by Miloš Stamenković. Reprinted with permission from Спортски журнал. © Спортски журнал.



Figure 9. *The only courageous woman among the men receives a blessing from His Grace, Bishop Arsenije of Niš. Photograph by Miloš Stamenković. Reprinted with permission from Спортски журнал. © Спортски журнал.*

The 17th Epiphany Swimming for the Holy Cross in Vlasotince

At the 2024 Epiphany swimming event, Milan Dimitrijević from Vinarcе near Leskovac was the first to reach the Holy Cross. A record-breaking 118 brave participants gathered on the banks of the Vlasina River, waiting to receive a blessing before diving into the icy waters and setting off toward the opposite shore, which marked the starting point. This was the largest number of swimmers so far to take part in the race for the Holy Cross (Jugmedia, 2024).

The 18th Epiphany Swimming for the Holy Cross in Vlasotince

Stefan Đokić from Vlasotince (Figure 10), a football referee and physical education teacher, was the winner of the 18th Epiphany swimming for the Holy Cross held in Vlasotince in 2025. Among 100 swimmers ready for a chivalrous battle in the cold waves of the Vlasina River — including three young women — young Stefan managed to be the first to reach the Holy Cross.



Figure 10. *Stefan Đokić approaching the Holy Cross amidst the turbulent waves of the icy Vlasina River. Photograph by Miloš Stamenković. Reprinted with permission from Спортски журнал. © Спортски журнал.*

What particularly marked the 2025 Epiphany swimming for the Holy Cross was an unexpected incident involving an elderly woman who accidentally fell into the icy

waters of the Vlasina River (Figure 11). It is important to highlight that, since the very beginning of this tradition in Vlasotince, nothing like this had ever occurred — until that moment, no bystander had ever fallen into the Vlasina River.



Figure 11. *An elderly woman, while cheering on the brave young men, accidentally fell into the icy Vlasina River. Photograph by Miloš Stamenković. Reprinted with permission from Спортски журнал. © Спортски журнал.*

CONCLUSION

Over the past two decades, the Epiphany swimming for the Holy Cross in Vlasotince has evolved into a deeply symbolic event, reflecting spiritual devotion, local identity, and communal resilience. Through a chronological and thematic analysis, this study has documented the development of the manifestation from its renewal in 2006 to its 20th anniversary in 2025. Key data regarding participant numbers, winners, clergy, and symbolic moments were reconstructed using archival newspapers, photographs, and oral testimonies.

Although the study positions itself as the first scholarly treatment of this tradition in southern Serbia, this claim of originality is made with caution. A targeted literature search through regional academic databases, national repositories, and relevant journals yielded no prior systematic research focused specifically on the Epiphany swimming in Vlasotince or comparable southern localities. Still, future reviews may reveal unpublished or localized works not yet indexed or accessible.

The limitations of this study include its geographically narrow focus (centered on Vlasotince), the reliance on retrospective materials and oral accounts, and the absence of formal interviews or participant observation. Moreover, some years lacked complete archival coverage, requiring cautious interpretation based on triangulated sources.

Despite these limitations, the study contributes to the preservation of intangible cultural heritage and collective memory in Serbia. It encourages further academic attention to similar manifestations throughout the country, particularly those embedded in both religious tradition and local identity. Continued research of this kind is necessary to protect such cultural practices from oblivion and the erosion of communal history over time.

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20. **Figure 1.** Borivoje Dobričić, the young man who was the first to reach the Holy Cross at the last event before German occupation. *Source:* Digital National Library of Serbia / Telegraf.rs.

21. **Figure 2.** His Holiness the Patriarch throws the ice cross into the Sava River; right side: participants in boats. *Source:* Digital National Library of Serbia (Политика, 1937).
22. **Figure 3.** Zoran Stojanović, priest of the Vlasotince Church, lowers the cross into the Vlasina River. *Photo by:* Zoran Stojičić / InfoDesk Vlasotince.
23. **Figure 4.** Dragan Kocić, first winner of the event in Vlasotince. *Photo by:* Zoran Stojičić / InfoDesk Vlasotince.
24. **Figure 5.** Second Lieutenant Lazar Milić reaches the Holy Cross. *Photo by:* Miloš Stamenković / Спортски журнал.
25. **Figure 6.** Bishop Arsenije blesses participants in Vlasotince. *Photo by:* Miloš Stamenković / Спортски журнал.
26. **Figure 7.** Nikola Stanković reaches the cross. *Photo by:* Miloš Stamenković / Спортски журнал.
27. **Figure 8.** Ognjen Obradović reaches the cross. *Photo by:* Miloš Stamenković / Спортски журнал.
28. **Figure 9.** Only female swimmer receives blessing from Bishop Arsenije. *Photo by:* Miloš Stamenković / Спортски журнал.
29. **Figure 10.** Stefan Đokić approaching the cross in icy Vlasina. *Photo by:* Miloš Stamenković / Спортски журнал.
30. **Figure 11.** Elderly woman falls into the Vlasina River. *Photo by:* Miloš Stamenković / Спортски журнал.

Received on 10.04.2025.

Accepted on 16.06.2025.