September 10, 2006

Sunday Before Holy Cross

Father Pat's Pastoral Ponderings

This afternoon (Sept 7) Denise and I put our daughter and her family on the plane to Albania, where they will serve as Orthodox Christian missionaries. They will be joining the Hoppe Family, also from our parish, and the other American missionaries who work under the episcopal authority of Archbishop Anastasios of Tirana.

Only recently did I meet the Archbishop. Indeed, today it is exactly two weeks ago, when I entered the cathedral in Tirana and was introduced to him. The Archbishop kindly invited me to concelebrate the Divine Liturgy with him. On the following Sunday I did so again, and I also accepted his invitation to preach at the Divine Liturgy in the cathedral that Sunday morning.

The Archbishop, who holds the Primatial See in Albania and currently serves as the president of the World Council of Churches, is a man of vast intellect and great heart. Under his brave and wise pastoral leadership the Church in Albania has made great strides since the fall of Communism in that poor country. I am happy to place this part of my family under the pastoral care of so godly a priest.

I went to Albania, as most of you know, to be with one of the parishioners from our little church in Chicago, Lynette Hoppe, whose family has served as missionaries in that country for the past nine years. Lynette was dying, and she had asked me, when I spoke to her by phone just days before, to come and help her die. This being one of the things that priests do, and Lynette being one of my favorite parishioners, I hastened to comply.

I was blessed to be with Lynette and her family during the closing days of her life. In addition to her husband Nathan and her children, Tristan and Catherine, Lynette was surrounded by her father, her older sister, and her three younger brothers, along with Gaye Buchanan and her daughter, Lynette's goddaughter, Rebecca. Gaye herself (the wife of Dr. Tom Buchanan, a Touchstone Senior Editor) has been Lynette's close friend since their college days at Wheaton. Father Luke Veronis, formerly a missionary to Albania, likewise ministered to Lynette during most of that time.

On each of the closing days of her life, including the Sunday on which she died, Lynette was strengthened with the Sacred Viaticum, faithfully carried to her by the priests from the cathedral. The Archbishop also came by to pray with her.

All of us prayed with her constantly during that time. Lynette was blessed to come from a strong family of Evangelical missionaries to Africa. Her father, sister, and brothers led us in singing scores of classical Protestant hymns over the several days, many of their lines assuming new dimensions in my mind by reason of the context. We also sang Orthodox hymns from time to time, including the Cherubic

Hymn. (I recalled that St. Elizabeth the New Martyr died while singing that hymn down in the mine shaft where she had been thrown by the Bolsheviks.) The Psalms and other parts of the Holy Scriptures (2 Corinthians 4 & 5 come prominently to mind) were read to Lynette over and over, as we prepared her to meet the Lord.

The final crisis came on Sunday, August 27. By mid-afternoon it was obvious that this was Lynette's last day on earth. Her family and the other American missionaries to Albania filled the room where she sat propped up on a reclining chair. Although she struggled for breath, Lynette did not fight death. She demonstrated the faith, serenity, and deep trust in God that we had always seen in her. On one of the days when I counseled with her last year, I encouraged Lynette not to let the memory of the sufferings of our Lord depart from her mind, and she told me that this had been a great source of strength to her. I rather suspect that this was the subject of that dear soul's final conscious thoughts.

I gave Lynette final Absolution and stayed right at her ear during the final hour or so of her life, praying the Jesus Prayer and gently saying other things to fill her with hope. When Lynette's breath and pulse stopped at 5:14 pm, I placed the Church's stole on her head and prayed the ancient admonition, "Go Forth, Christian Soul, out of this world . . ." Then we all started singing the Trisagion for the Departed. When we finished, I read everybody the 1st Epistle to the Thessalonians 4:13-18. They all gave it a hearty "Amen!"

Something happened about thirty minutes after Lynette died that I have never otherwise seen. Dead already for 30 minutes, Lynette began to smile. Everyone saw it. She was buried with that smile. It was certainly the death of a holy one, precious in the sight of the Lord.

Two days later three bishops, many priests, and hundreds of the faithful laid our sweet Lynette to rest, still wearing that smile. You may see pictures of the funeral at http://www.prayforlynette.org

©2006 Patrick Henry Reardon

All Saints Orthodox Church
Antiochian Orthodox Christian Archdiocese of North America
4129 W. Newport Avenue / Chicago, IL 60641
Church Office: (773) 777-0749
http://www.allsaintsorthodox.org/

Father Patrick Henry Reardon, Pastor
phrii@touchstonemag.com

Pastor's Daily Biblical Reflections:
www.touchstonemag.com/frpat.html
Pastoral Ponderings:
http://www.allsaintsorthodox.org/pastor/pastoral_ponderings.php