

December 28, 2008

The Sunday After the Lord's Nativity

Father Pat's Pastoral Ponderings

St. Sophia's is an excellent sidewalk café, and the local brew here is remarkably good. It would have to be, I think, because it accompanies the finest plate of trout ever to grace a pilgrim's table. This trout is certainly fresh, as well, because it was caught in the lovely lake that lies at the bottom of this hill, about a hundred yards in front of me. They assure me this species of trout is found only in this particular lake.

I am enjoying this wonderful meal in the little city of Ochrid, unevenly spread over a bunch of small hills near the northeast corner of the lake. The lake itself, also called Ochrid, is part of the boundary separating Makedonia from Albania. From where I sit here at St. Sophia's café, the "white hills" of Albania are clearly visible on the other side of the water.

I mentioned being in Ochrid on pilgrimage. (Indeed, I did not even know they had trout and beer until just a few minutes ago.) I came to Ochrid in order to walk where the saints have walked and to pray where, for many hundreds of years, the saints have prayed.

When the modern citizens of this place named their airport for the Apostle Paul, it was hardly a vain boast. Lychnidos, as Ochrid was known in Paul's time, sat along the Egnatian Way, the ancient Roman road that ran from Byzantium, on the Sea of Marmora, all the way west to Dyrrachion, on the Adriatic Sea. This was surely the road Paul took on his westward mission trip to the upper Balkans, probably in the year 57 (Romans 15:19).

Evangelized very early, Ochrid became an important Christian center, its bishops invariably included among the fathers of the Ecumenical Councils and other important Church synods, right up to modern times. Because of its 365 churches--one for each day of the year--Ochrid was known as "the Jerusalem of the Balkans."

In the mid-ninth century the Bulgarians conquered this region, and Ochrid was made the capital of the Bulgarian Empire, as well as the see city of the Bulgarian Patriarchate. That did not last very long. When the Byzantines took the area in 1018, the pastoring of this church passed to the Greeks.

The most famous of the Greek bishops of Ochrid (then known as Achrida) was St. Theophylact, who came here sixty years later, in 1078, and pastored this church until his death in 1107. Theophylact's flock, made up largely of Bulgarians, revered him as a loyal, learned, and devout priest.

Theophylact was a considerable Bible scholar, as well, composing commentaries on the Gospels, the Epistles, and the Minor Prophets. Long before I knew exactly where Ochrid was located on the map, I recall--especially today--reading Theophylact's commentary on Romans as a young biblical student, some fifty years ago.

Among modern pastors of this city, I suppose the best known was the very holy and learned bishop, St. Nikolai Velimirovich. It is difficult to understand how this very busy pastor found time to write about thirty books on so many aspects of theology, philosophy, and history. St. Nikolai also spent an entire year of his ministry in this city on a massive work of hagiography-biographies for several saints each day, accompanied by meditations and sermon outlines--which he modestly entitled *The Prologue from Ochrid*.

The city's patron is another of its bishops, St. Clement, an immediate disciple of Sts. Kyril and Methodios, the Thessalonian brothers sent to convert the Slavs back in the ninth century. St. Clement's earliest biographer was St. Theophylact, mentioned above.

About an hour ago I visited the Church of St. Clement, just a few blocks away. That little church, all by itself, would make a trip to this city worthwhile. Its walls are adorned with numerous biblical scenes painted by the iconographers of Ochrid, Michael and Eutychios, who began their work in 1295 and created a whole new school of Byzantine iconography. This church well illustrates how easy it was for simple Christians to learn the content of Holy Scripture from the walls that surrounded them during worship.

I must return here someday, if I can, because this is a venerable city, the home of saints, biblical theologians, and very significant churchmen. The steady influence of divine grace over the centuries doubtless accounts for Ochrid's important place in Church History. I prefer to think, however, the beer and the trout played their part too.

Photograph - Father Patrick on the Streets of Ochrid
<http://picasaweb.google.com/AllSaintsOrthodox/2008OchridMacedonia>

Photographs - Tirana Cathedral
<http://picasaweb.google.com/AllSaintsOrthodox/2008TiranaCathedralNovember>

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