

WEEKLY MEDITATION

Part of my recent trip to Kazan was a kind of pilgrimage. I was able to venerate the wonderworking icons of Our Lady of Kazan (in Kazan at the St. John the Forerunner Monastery) and the Georgian Mother of God (at the Raifa Monastery, out in the country-side). I visited the Annunciation Cathedral in the Kremlin, the Saints Peter & Paul Cathedral in the city, the Zilantov and several other urban monasteries, and several churches including well-known ones dedicated to St. Barbara, the Epiphany, St. Sophia and Her Daughters, St. Parasceva, St. John of Kronstadt. It was interesting to visit the Chuvash parish (close to the Kremlin) and the Kryashen parish (in the old Tatar quarter, close by mosques and madrassas). The Orthodox Chuvash and Kryashen are both ethnic minorities and have scripture and liturgical materials translated and in use in their communities. Orthodoxy has a multi-national character in Kazan. Rowan and I had a really wonderful visit and tour of the thriving Theological Academy, which is especially noted for its history of mission work among the various non-Russian peoples and its role in the encounter between Orthodoxy and Islam. Metropolitan Anthony Khrapovitsky, who became First Hierarch of the Russian Church Abroad, was Rector of the Academy at one time. St. Raphael of Brooklyn studied at the Academy before embarking on mission work in America. The current Academy is no longer in Kazan itself, but at a distance in a 'suburb'.

One evening I gave a talk and led a discussion about Minnesota to the English conversation group at the National Library. The group consisted of about 15 or so Tatar men, but mostly women, of various ages and professions, muslim and secular. It was enjoyable to talk about lakes and loons, the Mississippi - which, like the Volga into the Caspian, winds its long way into a sea - and so on, but when it was discovered that I was an Orthodox priest the conversation lasted well beyond the allotted time. It was obviously something remarkable and curious to find a friendly, convert priest from America.

Visiting Kazan is somewhat like going back in time. It seems to me that glasnost and perestroika only found their way to Tatarstan about 2005, fifteen years after the changes began in Moscow and St. Petersburg. Undoubtedly this was mostly due to the 2005 celebration of 1000 years of Tatar presence, with its international visibility and anticipated tourist presence. Even today Lenin especially, but also Marx and Derzhinsky are prominent in the city. The hammer & sickle is visible in many places, jostling with the omnipresent winged dragon symbol of Tatarstan (and to a lesser extent crescent moons and three-bar crosses). Although a very few churches were returned in the 90s, most were returned more recently and restoration work is going on apace. The city-scape is beautiful and indeed there is much of great beauty, especially the pre-Revolutionary civil architecture, somewhat faded - but perhaps more poignant because faded. **Fr. Andrew**

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