

August 27, 2006

Eleventh Sunday after Pentecost

Father Pat's Pastoral Ponderings

I will not be at All Saints when this Pondering appears in our weekly parish bulletin, so I am preparing it early. I plan to fly in the next few days to Albania, where I will be until August 30, at which time I will come back in order to speak at the Orthodox Missions and Evangelism Conference in Colorado Springs during the first week in September.

As I prepare to leave for Albania, to be with our missionary, Lynette Hoppe, in what seem to be her final days on earth, I am certain that I could write nothing more profitable to the soul than what Lynette wrote just a few days ago. Because she has taken so dramatic a turn for the worse, these words truly form something of a final testament from dear Lynette.

Raised in the mission field as a child, Lynette has literally never been out of the mission field during her whole life, except for the years she spent getting an education to become a missionary. She and her husband Nathan are the first members that our parish, All Saints Church in Chicago, sent to the foreign mission field. They went over in 1997. Nathan and the children will stay there, and it is in Albania that Lynette wishes to be buried.

The third family from our parish, the Luisi Family (our daughter and son-in-law and grandson), will be leaving for Albania on September 7. Please remember them too in the charity of your prayers.

For the rest, let's have Lynette speak here for herself. You will not be disappointed.

(OCCMC, by the way, means "The Orthodox Christian Mission Center," the normal controlling agency for foreign missions from the United States.)

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August 14th, 2006

We're in the middle of our third girls' camp and things seem to be going smoothly. Today we lost two girls, who said that they were unaccustomed to being in such a closed environment with so much religious activity. Their reason for leaving was a bit difficult to comprehend, but the girls must not have realized that this was a Church camp. Everyone else seems to be in high spirits, including me. This is the first summer that I have attended all three camps, but the time has been very precious. Nathan has had a lot of work to do in Tirana this week, but he has made the effort to be with us almost every night. This has necessitated doing a lot of driving late at night on a terrible road that winds through the mountains. Last night he left Tirana at midnight and ran into dreadful fog and couldn't move faster than 20 mph. The road,

with its many sharp turns, has few guardrails, and no lines painted on it. I couldn't sleep until Nathan arrived, but thank God he made it safely.

Nathan's work has involved overseeing an OCMC short-term team from the States. Part of the team is focusing its efforts on the children's home and helping with the orphans there. The other part of the team has organized and is now implementing a seven-day English camp in Tirana. The program, which is being attended by 40-45 children, is going well, and the team has taken to it with a great deal of zeal and energy. We thank God for their helpful and serving spirits.

My craft project of making hemp bracelets and necklaces with beads continues to be a hit with the girls. As the ages of the girls has increased with each camp, their skills have increased as well, and they are able to learn more complex designs as well as complete the projects faster. At the end of this camp, the girls will probably go home with their arms and necks dangling with numerous bracelets and necklaces.

Each summer we realize the importance of these camps in feeding the girls spiritually. They have so little Christian teaching, if any, in their homes, so we want to take advantage of the time to plant and water spiritual seeds in their hearts and minds. Nathan and I will both give talks at this camp as well as have discussions on various relational issues.

The third week of August will see the start of another series of children's camps in Kosovo. Nathan, for the most part will spend his time with me, but he may go up with the group and open the camps, then return after the first few days. If the camps start smoothly then our Albania staff can carry on by themselves without Nathan. These camps are extremely challenging and intense, as shown by the camps early this year, in which the press and government got involved, but our Albanian staff does a very good job of overseeing them. Despite this, it is still important for Nathan to be there if he can. For certain, George Russell will accompany the group to Kosovo, and his help will be much appreciated.

I had a CT scan made of my thorax and abdomen the day camp started. The results were startling. The liver had grown dramatically. We were all surprised because the blood counts from my previous tests three weeks ago had indicated very early stages of cancer activity in my liver. The only reason I went in for a scan last week was because I was beginning to feel swelling in my abdomen, which was accompanied by difficulties in breathing and eating, and I wanted to have these things checked out.

My blood tests yesterday indicated that the liver counts had more than quadrupled, indicating that the liver is failing rapidly. The doctor said it was likely that I had only weeks to live, not months. It was all very sobering.

I'm not sure how one copes with such bad news. I cried some, of course, thinking about leaving my husband and children, but the Lord also gave me a tremendous amount of grace to be joyful in a time of crisis.

As I have reflected back on the past three months-the duration of our stay here and the "incubation" period of my liver cancer-I am amazed that I have felt so well, that I have almost been unaware of anything going on in my liver, so I have felt no anxiety about it. I have been able to prepare for the camps without any interruptions. Camp ends this week and it will probably be the last formal ministry I will do on earth, but I'm so happy about it. I have loved doing these camps, knowing that it truly is important in the lives of these girls. Pray

I have had this overwhelming sense that God is allowing me to stay in the saddle until the end. It appears that I am being allowed to fall off my horse at the last minute and won't have a long, drawn-out illness like my mother had. If this is truly the case, I'm so thankful for the opportunity to be active until the end, but we'll see what God actually has for us.

One thing that is proving to be rather challenging is the question of where to be buried. Nathan is really taking this to heart. We had wanted me to be buried at St. Vlash, the natural choice for us because we are connected with the school there and really love the place. I asked the Archbishop, but he felt that it would not be appropriate. Others have asked and been refused, and if I am granted permission, others will ask in the future and will question why I was allowed and they are not. It is rather complicated. I have resigned myself to this reality, but now, where do we go? The major cemeteries are large, crowded miserable places. Today we will look at the village cemetery just outside the monastery grounds of St. Vlash. This might be close enough, and most certainly the land was a part of the former property of the Church as all of the land surrounding the monastery and school was at one, but it hasn't been returned to the Church, and probably never will be.

You ask, how am I feeling spiritually? and I answer, very well, thank God. This is manifestly the result of God's grace. Both Nathan and I feel ourselves overwhelmed by the amazing grace that God has given to us. We could not be so joyful without his help. I pray that this will continue to the end. Who knows what will happen when I begin to feel poorly, but for now, I am happy and feel a great sense of joyful anticipation at my home-going. God is with us and will continue to be with us until the end.

Nathan spoke with the children a little bit last night about what may be coming in order to prepare them a bit for the end. They were surprisingly peaceful. Tristan said, "If mommy does die, then she'll be with Jesus." Then they asked if I would be here for Christmas. The truth is that because I do not look or act sick, they can't really get their little minds around my going. The truth is that we can't either.

One exciting thing for me is that so many people want to come and see me before the end, including members of my own family, my best friend and her daughter, who is also my goddaughter, and several priests with whom we are very close. Here, also, we have our dear co-workers who are ready to help with the smallest detail. Dennis and Constance Luisi, new missionaries with the OCMC who are from our home parish, are planning to arrive on 8 September, and they will be so attentive to

any needs we may have. The Archbishop, too, has offered whatever help we may need. From him, we have asked for a hospital bed for such a time as I may become bed-ridden. We are hoping to find a reclining chair as well, but these are not available in Albania and it may be very hard to find one. I know my mom spent a lot of time sitting in her recliner, so that she would not have to be in bed all day long.

Running through my mind is what do I need to do with my last days. I have this urgent sense that I need to complete some projects-writing letter to leave with the children for the special events in the future-birthdays, graduation, weddings, first babies, and so on. I'm also doing photo memory books for them. Tristan's is almost done, but I have yet to start Katherine's. I have recorded some songs at the request of some of our young people here who like my singing. I'm also writing a book for Nathan of our memories together. Please pray that I will have both the discipline and the wits to complete these projects. I really would feel bad in the end if I didn't complete these.

When I first got news of my pending departure, I was frantic, thinking I needed to do some kind of "ministry," but I soon realized that there was no value in ministry at this point. What I have done until now is what I have done. What I have become, is what I am. To try to have some kind of dramatically different prayer life is simply an attempt to "win his favor" and would actually be rather artificial. I am allowing myself to simply relax in the love of Jesus, to enjoy him in a new way. To think about joining him soon.

I have so much peace in thinking that there is nothing I can do to win over Christ. All I can do is throw myself into his arms and know that it is only through the work of Christ that I can be saved. I feel that I am ready to die a "painless, blameless, and peaceful death" even as we pray every liturgy. I may have a lot of physical pain, but in spirit I feel no pain, other than the pain of leaving those I love.

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