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Venerable Sisoës the Great

The main purpose of my trip to Russia in July of 2018 was to participate in church services connected with the hundredth anniversary since the brutal killing by the Bolsheviks of Czar Nicholas II, his family and their loyal servants.

I had wanted to organize a pilgrimage from our Diocese for the “Royal Days”, but was dissuaded because, supposedly, I started too late, and all hotels would be booked for the World Cup. This proved not to be quite right, because the World Cup events in Ekaterinburg ended before the church festivities began. What was correct, thought, was the expensive airfares and heavily booked flights.

I arrived in Moscow on Tuesday, July 10th. As always, I stayed at the Serbian representation/mission to the Moscow Patriarchate, and participated in the patronal feast of the mission - Apostles Peter and Paul - on Thursday, July 12th. I served at the mission again on Sunday, July 15th.

Monday, July 16th, I flew to Ekaterinburg. It was a very clear day and, since I had a window seat, once again I could appreciate the vastness of Russia, her excellent natural system of rivers, the forests stretching for miles and miles, etc.

Ekaterinburg lies a few miles into Asia, in the Ural Mountains, which in reality are rolling hills. I learned something new: I always thought that Siberia begins on the Asian side of the Urals. I was told by the locals it is not so. Siberia begins much more to the East; the boundaries do not coincide. So Ekaterinburg is in Asia, but not in Siberia.

I had a new experience upon my arrival: a black limousine was waiting for me at the bottom of the steps of the airplane. While all the passengers boarded a long-stretched bus, I was met with flowers and whisked through a special VIP terminal. From exiting the airplane to exiting the VIP terminal was less than five minutes. True, I only had one carry-on.

All-in-all, the festivities in Ekaterinburg were very well organized. The Vigil was presided by Metropolitan Onuphry of Kiev and All Ukraine, with about 20 bishops co-celebrating. Services were held outside. The sun was relentless, but the locals enjoyed this, because they had snow in the city as late as June 1st.

Divine Liturgy started at mid-night, with Patriarch Kyrill presiding. About 30 bishops participated. ROCOR was represented by Bishop Theodosy of Seattle, Bishop George of Canberra, and myself.

From our Diocese we had deacon Alexander Petrovsky and the Sander family, both from Cincinnati. There may have been others. Australia and New Zealand were represented by a fairly large group, headed by Archpriest Vladimir Boikov.

It is hard for me to estimate the number of worshipers, but I was told that the crowd was much larger than in previous years. Some estimated its size at 100,000. The majority were visitors. Unfortunately, 70 years of communism left its mark. I am told that only about 20% of the population of Ekaterinburg are believers, the rest are indifferent, with some even being hostile.

After Liturgy the Patriarch led the 20-kilometer procession to Ganina Yama, where the Bolsheviks tried to dispose of the bodies of the Royal Martyrs. Due to my back problems, I did not go, but returned to the hotel and had a short rest. It felt as Pascha.

At 11:00 a.m. my guide, Fr Anatoly, came to the hotel and we went on a pilgrimage to some of the holy sites of Ekaterinburg. We started by returning to the "Church on the Blood", which was built on the spot where the Ipatiev House stood. The house was demolished on the orders of Yeltsin, when he was the local governor.

The church is large, with two levels. Everything, floors and iconostasis, are marble. The lower level has an altar and a chapel next to it which stands on the exact spot of the basement where the Imperial Family was killed. There was a constant flow of pilgrims, bringing flowers and praying. I was told that this goes on year-round. Some of the frescoes depict moments from the life of Czar Nicholas: coronation, glorification of St Seraphim of Sarov, etc.

From the "Church on the Blood" we went to the New-Tikhvin Convent. Before the revolution it had 1,000 nuns. It was from here that food was brought daily by the nuns to the Ipatiev House. Whether it reached the Imperial Family no one knows. On July 17, 1918, the nuns were told not to bring food any more.

Part of the convent complex was returned to the church and is slowly being rebuilt. Today there are 100 nuns. We were served a delicious lunch.

From the convent we drove to Ganina Yama, about a 40-minute ride. A monastery was organized after the fall of communism and is slowly growing. Six or 7 churches have been built, all in Russian wooden style. The monks conduct daily services.

We came in the afternoon. The majority of pilgrims had left, but, again, there was a constant flow of people. The area is surrounded by a forest of birch and pine trees. The smell was fresh and intoxicating.

Of all the places we visited, this left the biggest impression on me. With many people around, walking, praying, eating, resting, even sleeping, there was an air of serenity, tranquility, graceful and soothing peacefulness. Even a group of Chinese young visitors (probably World Cup fans) were extremely quiet and respectful, almost tip-toeing. The guides spoke in soft voices, no loudspeakers. This place is special.

One thought was constantly on my mind. The Church teaches us that in the afterlife we continue to grow and develop spiritually. We know that Czar Nicholas loved Russia endlessly, and gave his life for his beloved country. This love is only growing within him in Heaven. To whom, if not to him, should we beseech prayers before the Throne of God for Russia, when almost the entire world has unjustifiably turned against her? As the late Patriarch Pavle of Serbia warned, politics aside, this is war against Orthodoxy.

Returning to Ekaterinburg we stopped at the "Mid-Ural Convent". It was established about 20 years ago, and now has 500 sisters, 150 of which are full-fledged (mantia-wearing) nuns. They follow a very strict rule of prayer. Besides their regular monastic obediences, they also run an orphanage with a school, have a home for single mothers, and a hospice where they care for terminally ill cancer patients.

From the convent I was driven directly to the airport.

Wednesday morning Bishop Antonije, the Serbian representative in Moscow, and I went to the Holy Trinity-St Sergius Lavra for the feast day of the Saint. Thousands and thousands of pilgrims. The sky was overcast, which made the inside of churches less hot. Bishops presided at Divine Liturgies in every church within the Lavra. The Patriarch served at the Dormition cathedral. About 30 bishops concelebrated with him, myself among them.

On the same day as St Sergius was the feast of the New-Martyr Grand Duchess Elizabeth. Festive services were held in Alapaevsk, where she was killed with her faithful attendant - nun Barbara, and in Jerusalem, where their relics repose.

Today I learned that on July 17th, a festive Divine Liturgy was served at the Russian church in Belgrade by Patriarch Irinej of Serbia. Afterwards a large procession went from the church to the monument of Czar Nicholas, which was erected where the Imperial Embassy once stood, opposite the Old Royal Palace.

Holy New-Martyr Czar Nicholas, together with your Family and all the New-Martyrs, pray to God for us!

+ Archbishop Peter

Peter, Archbishop of Chicago & Mid-America

