

Serbian Patriarch Pavle 1914 -2009

Saturday, 21 November 2009

I felt I had to share this with you. Maybe at first glance, this may seem more like just a piece of history and spiritual heritage of my people than something that has to do with panic and anxiety. I can assure you that it is not the case, so if you have time, please read on, if not for anything else than to the memory of this special man and for some hope that can sometimes be hidden even within such a sad event. Not much was known about our Patriarch, the head of the church of my country during his earthly life, not even among true believers, let alone among people like me. We sort of knew that he was a very good man and we would see him mostly only on TV especially when he served the Christmas and Easter liturgies or read epistles – open letters from the Pastor to his people on important occasions, including big holidays. We knew that he existed and that he was our Patriarch. We knew he was a very humble man who just needed simple things to be happy. We knew he used to be very ill with tuberculosis in his early thirties and that doctors told him he wouldn't last more than another 3 months. He prayed and cried in a monastery and was virtually waiting to die, which of course didn't happen. He was healed without medication as after World War II there weren't any for him here in the middle of misery and poverty, and filled with gratitude later dedicated his whole life to faith and doing good things. He passed away last Sunday in a hospital which he never left in the last 2 years, being 95. That was supposed just to be the end of one life on this Earth, the end of one chapter in the history of my country's church, nothing more or less. But on the contrary, it was as if some big dam broke and masses of water started to flow. Over the past week with so much astonishment and sorrow I was learning, day after day, who he really was. Today I am proud that such a man was part of my people and sorry and even angry because nobody cared to explain to all of us how special he was while still alive, a person of a tiny constitution but incredible force of spirit. He spent 34 years on Kosovo and endured so much, fighting each and every day against evil and pain, loving people for being people, never caring about their nationality or religious declaration. He suffered with people and was verbally and physically abused, always on his feet, always running around the land he was to take care of to make sure nobody lacked anything. He could be seen in buses, standing in the rain in bus stops with common people, refusing to be any different from them. He was an Orthodox monk, which means that he devoted his whole life only to church and prayers, but in a moderate and calm way, dedicated to care for others. He ate only as much as he thought he needed and shared food with poor, never letting anybody around waste even a smallest bread crumb. He hasn't changed a bit even when he was elected Patriarch in 1990, at the worst moment for my people. His constitution led everybody believe he wouldn't last long on that position, but his strong willpower blew away all our disbelief, he lasted almost 20 years there, 2 decades that can truly be called 2 most challenging decades for all of us who live here. They have a significant role even in my Survivor story, if I ever get to write it, which I most certainly hope I will. He was on the position that comprises a lot of duties and obligations, but it's also a position that can secure you enormous privileges, benefits and commodities. He refused all of that. Even when he came to Belgrade to lead the church, he used public transportation, he walked along my city's long streets, he sewed his own special gowns or if anybody did any of them for him, he always insisted on paying for it. He had a small pension of a little more than 100 dollars a month and everything else collected above that he would give away. He made with his own hands his own special walking stick with ornamented top, he fixed his own shoes and at the same time cleaned and fixed the shoes of other priests as well. He always liked to say that only politicians rule, while if you belong to church even if you are the head of it, you are there to serve. He read Holy Scripture and other texts day and night, he was very educated and spoke several languages. His sayings and attitude were sharp, intelligent and strict, but never ambiguous. I was astonished when I read many of his sayings for the first time, amazed and mad because it was only now that I understood who he was. It was only at that moment that I truly understood how come that all those thousands of people came from all over the country and other parts of the world to kiss his remains while they were still exposed in our main church. People were standing in line for 7-8 hours in order to enter the church, in a line that was long a couple of miles. Nobody in this country has ever received such an honor and people do doubt that somebody will deserve such honor ever again. An estimated one million people came to bow in front of him in almost 4 days. That's enormous for a country with 7 million inhabitants and those facts speak for themselves. On the day of his funeral, there was a strange mixture of grief and happiness in almost everybody's soul, people from TV stopped so many people in the streets and they all had more or less the same thing to say – we lost a great man, but we have a saint now. Strangely enough, before the day of his death we had low temperatures, rain and even a blizzard here. Since he died, during the day it's been always almost 70 degrees with so much sunshine which is abnormal in my country in this period, the weather is like that only in spring, our winters are marked with temperatures that go down to 5 degrees and less. Grass and little flowers come out and I don't remember they have ever done so in the last week of November. People just felt they had to come to the funeral, masses were arriving from everywhere. There wasn't a single incident, nobody felt seriously ill because of all that waiting and walking along the streets, ambulance had nothing to do. If he could endure so much, we can, too, people would say. There was an estimated 700,000 people attending the last liturgy on the biggest open square we have. He was the Patriarch, he could have been buried at the most important place in the biggest temple we have. He absolutely required in his will to be buried in the yard of a tiny monastery in the suburb of Belgrade, where he liked to enjoy the peace of nature and pray, it's a female monastery with only 10 nuns. He required to be buried directly into the ground next to the old apple tree and said that nobody was to put the monument or any sort of marble plate onto his grave, just a plain wooden cross. He asked from all people who were to come to say goodbye for the last time to refrain from bringing any flowers or even buying candles – instead he said if they were able to spend money, he wanted them to donate it to the temple or for charity. And people listened. He prohibited to all media to record or take pictures of the burial itself, he said that he didn't want anybody to earn on his death. Trains and buses were

bringing people to Belgrade for free. Watching the last liturgy in front of our biggest temple and all that people who were so solemn and quiet, obeying the words of such a small but all the same time big man, I couldn't help but think – we Serbs really can be both the worst and the best of people, we can hate so much but also love so unconditionally.. it is so very true, but it would take me ages to explain this to those of you who have never been here, and anyway this is not a place for such explanations. Patriarch Pavle rests in peace now, buried on the day of Saint Pavle, (Paul so that you can understand better). Sun still shines, the official 4 days of mourning in the whole country are over. I still feel both sorrow and happiness, just like those people interviewed in the street. I can't explain how come, but I feel I love him very much, as though somebody very close passed away, even though I never really knew him. I met him once though, 18 years ago, I have such a vague memory of being in that very main church where his body was exposed this week and that he, all of a sudden showed up with some other priests. I remember waiting in line and kissing his hand. I couldn't kiss him goodbye because I am not healthy anymore like I was 18 years ago. But I still can learn more about him, his deeds speak for themselves and make me love him and feel sorry even more. It's not about faith in the end at all, whether I or anybody else believe or not, it's about the incarnation of good he most certainly was. These days made me stop and think about certain things and value them differently. His words gave me example for many things that needed answers. In comparison to him, I feel ashamed of myself for some things I did in my life and still do. Where panic and anxiety fit into that story, you are definitely asking yourselves by now. Well, all this opened at least slightly my eyes. Made me think how anxious and nervous I used to be and still am for all wrong reasons. How I used to care for some wrong people I always used to be there for, while they never were there for me. Of big presents I bought for some who already have everything in this world and never appreciate anything. Of a person who didn't ask me an entire year how I am, but had the courage to text me now when it's her birthday to tell me to come to the party. Well, people who attend such parties always bring you presents, and that's exactly why she called me… for the first time in the last 2 and a half years of having PD this bad, I wasn't sorry for saying I wasn't coming somewhere. That was a choice and not a must, and I chose not to go, which I am more than fine with. It made me think about all this crippling fear I have to put up with. And for the first time, I gave a serious thought to with how much serenity priests live and wait for their last moment to come. They are not afraid of death, they are happy because they believe. They embrace death as a road towards going to finally meet God and unite with him. If you think that way, there is no place for fear. Our Pavle used to say that he himself never believed that God's intention was for us to have predestined lives. He believed in our free will to be what we want and do what we think is right, while God will only help us on that way or try to warn us if we are not right. He slept little and spent a lot of time reading at night. So these last 3 days, when anxious especially in evenings, I just think of how NORMAL it was for him to do whatever he thought was right at any time of day or night. How actually it is all the same, it's just our plain old life at whatever time of the day. I am of course still anxious when I have to try to sleep or have to wake up, but then I sort of don't think about it any more as of some act of dying like I did, I think of it as of something natural, just falling asleep while still being in this same plain old place as always. There is nothing fearful about my room, my street, my town. I knew that all right all along, but only rationally. Now for the first time, I FELT a glimpse of it. It's not enough to know certain things, you have to FEEL them and MEAN them. I think of him being on Kosovo and how that used to be hard, yet he wasn't afraid because he had God with him all the time. I am home and have more than I need to lead normal life. There is nothing to be afraid of. It's just maybe a first step, but some step it surely is. This is my country, my life, my inspiration. I know you people can never feel for this man what I feel, but maybe you have some other example right there beside you. Some example of somebody who with the way he/she leads his/her life can help you find the way how to truly feel that there is nothing to be afraid of. Patriarch Pavle had virtually no personal belongings. He left behind only one clock which used to wake him up and it is to be given to the great-grandson of his late brother, as he had no family of his own. There is something symbolic in an old-fashioned alarm clock. Something that makes you wake up and think about yourself and the world around you. If he managed to make at least some of us wake up at least in some way these days, that is a beautiful legacy to his people. He always repeated – Let us truly be people and never negation of people. If our country and world itself are to survive but at cost of something that is not human-worthy, and if I were the last person here or anywhere to survive at that cost, I would always prefer the world to disappear, including myself. It is much better to die like a true, good human being, then to survive like somebody inhuman. There is a very long road from here to any help for me, I am aware of that. But I feel inspired and that somehow is enough right now. Life is never easy, for us especially, because sometimes no matter what we do, endurance is something we have to live with. Our lives are not shortened, but that's not always a consolation as there is so much to put up with every single day, sometimes for a very long time. But if HE could, I think I can, too. And I think you guys can as well. Just find your inspiration. All the best.. as always!