

A visit to Estonia

Father Paul Elliott

I recently went to Estonia as part of an Educational delegation on behalf of The Department for Educational and Skills and the British Council. I was supposed to be looking at the emergent school system as it restructures after the demise of Soviet control in the early 1990s. However, I also wanted to see the legacy of The New Martyrs on today's Orthodox Church in Estonia. There are two jurisdictions in Estonia: the Moscow Patriarchate and The Orthodox Church of Estonia.

On the Sunday morning I attended the beautiful Cathedral of St Alexander Nevsky in Tallin. The church belongs to the Moscow Patriarchate. This lovely Cathedral was closed for many years under the Soviet regime. They had considered demolishing it in the 1940s but thankfully it was used as a store for books from the National Library nearby. It was very crowded the day I went and the singing was just wonderful. My fellow head teachers were rather puzzled by me so they chose to attend the Liturgy at the back of the Church to see what it was like. They arrived as the whole congregation sang the creed with great devotion led by the Deacon. My colleagues were very moved by the deep conviction and faith of the people. I stood in the Nave throughout the Liturgy. I was constantly asked for blessings and the clergy sent out prosphora and hot wine for me after their communion. The people were most welcoming and extremely devout. Though there was an icon of the new martyrs of Estonia, there were no signs of any relics of them in this cathedral. I also visited the ancient and beautiful church of St Nicholas in Tallin which had survived the Revolution with its treasures intact. I failed to gain entry to the Estonian Orthodox Cathedral of the Transfiguration which was a pity as I believe that it has the relics of St Platon of Revel within it.

Later in the week, I journeyed into deepest Estonia to the City of Tartu. This is not all that far from Pskov. Tartu or Dorpat or Uryiev is the site of the deaths of three of the New Martyrs of Russia. I found the outside of the Credit Bank in Kompani Street in Tartu. There is no outward sign that this is a place of Martyrdom but it has a silent witness all of its own to those who are aware of it. I believe that there is a plaque in the cellar where Bishop Platon and his companions were murdered, but nothing on the outside that I could see.

СВЯТЫЙ ПЛАТОНЪ АРХИЕПИСКОПЪ РЕВЕРСКОЕ



СВЯЩЕННОМУЧЕНИК ПЛАТОН (КУЛЬБҮШ),
ЕПИСКОП РЕВЕЛЬСКИЙ
1869–1919

We can be brought into submission only by pure force. We shall serve the Church and our parishes, and should it happen that we, together with our brothers of the priesthood, must face exile or death, that makes no difference.

These prophetic words were said by Bishop Platon on the 23rd of December 1918 as he announced to the City Authorities of Tartu that he intended to serve the Christmas services as usual. This inspired the Protestant and Roman Catholic congregations of the city to do the same even though the Communists had threatened to throw hand grenades into the churches if they dared to celebrate Christmas. The Communists took over St Peter's Lutheran Church in the City on Western Christmas Day, covered the Holy Table with Red Flags and sang Communist Songs from the pulpit. All church services were then prohibited by the Communists on December 29th as they especially wished to stop Orthodox Christmas. The Bishop of Reval, Platon, had come to Tartu to console the parishes in the face of Communist onslaughts which had begun the previous February. He himself had founded the Brotherhood of St Isidore of Tartu (+ 1432) in St Petersburg for the furtherance of Estonian Orthodoxy and now came to this city to console and lead his people. He fell ill after serving the Liturgy illegally on January 1st 1919 in the Dormition Church in Tartu.

The next day, the brave bishop was taken from his sick bed by the Communists and forced to walk barefoot through the town to the Credit Bank at 5 Kompani Street even though he had pneumonia. Here he was tortured for 12 days. On the 14th January 1919 as the free Estonian army was approaching Tartu he was asked to stop preaching the Gospel. His words "As soon as I am set free, I shall praise God!" were heard by witnesses who survived the imprisonment. Bishop Platon was severely beaten but uttered no protest and

was the first to be shot followed by his companions. He was buried in Tallin at the Transfiguration Cathedral. His body was barely recognisable and he was identified by the Panagia he was wearing under his shirt.

After leaving the site of Bishop Platon's Death, I crossed the river and I found the Church of St George the Conqueror which has been recently restored. It belongs to the Moscow Patriarchate and is obviously very well attended. Its priest in 1919, Fr Nicholai Bezhanitsky was martyred by the Communists with St Platon.



He was arrested because he had been a prominent member of the State Duma and was a very influential priest much loved by his people. He was taken to join his Bishop, Platon in the Credit Bank in Tartu. The church was locked when I visited so I do not know if there is any particular reference to St Nicholai in this church. He was murdered in that cellar moments after St Platon and was buried with his friend Fr Michael in the Dormition Church near by.

I crossed the river over a bridge rebuilt by the Soviet authorities after the defeat of the Germans in 1942 and came once more to the central part of Tartu. I searched for the place where St Platon had served his last Liturgy and where two of his companions were buried. I lingered for a long time at the Church of The Dormition in Tartu. What a melancholic place it is! The church is in poor condition and was locked. It appears to be still functioning but is in desperate need of restoration. I think that it belongs to the Estonian Orthodox Church. I sat in its church yard for quite a while. Here, Fr Michael Blieve served his last liturgy on the morning of Sunday 5th January 1919.

Св. Св. Прот. Анхана (Байбс)



БЕЯЦЕННОМУЧЕННИК
ПРОТОДИАКОН АНХАНА (БАЙБС)
1873-1919

All services had been declared to be illegal by the Communists but Fr Michael did not recognise their authority. His bishop had been arrested on Jan 2nd. He resolved to go to the Communist authorities after the Liturgy to offer himself in the place of Bishop Platon. He knew where Bishop Platon was and knew the danger he himself was in. Fr Michael was arrested in his church just after the Liturgy for offering services without permission and dragged to the Credit Bank despite the protests of his congregation. Here he was tortured until Jan 14th when he was shot in the cellar just after his bishop and buried in the Dormition Church near by with Fr Nicholai, his friend. His relics along with his companion were uncovered on May 30th 2005.

The quiet and faithful witness of these three men moved me very deeply. In Estonia, apart from in the Orthodox Churches, there is little or no mention of them. It is as if their sacrifice has gone unrecognised and barely known. Not for them are the massive shrines to the New Martyrs now rising in Russia with huge churches built on the site of their witness for Christ. Perhaps it is better that these dedicated and holy clergy witness quietly to those who seek them out. What matters is that, despite great persecution in Estonia since WW2 by particularly brutal representatives of the Soviet regime, The Church of Christ is nevertheless alive and shining with the Life of its Saviour. When we think that our labours for Christ are ignored or go unrecognised, when we think that things are difficult and that it is almost impossible to follow our Saviour, perhaps we should think of Ss Platon, Nicholai and Michael of Tartu.

Holy Fathers pray for us!

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