

A BENEDICTINE VISIT

by

Metropolitan Ephraim of Boston

We had just finished the service of Vespers when the Benedictines came in. It was March 14 by the church calendar, and four Benedictine monks dropped by to visit an Orthodox Christian monastery, and — wouldn't you know it! — they arrived on the feast of Saint Benedict of Nursia.

The Benedictine fathers sat in the front room and, after the fashion of Orthodox monastic hospitality, refreshments were brought in to welcome the guests. The founder of our monastery, Father Panteleimon, sat and chatted with them.

In the course of the conversation, one of the Benedictines remarked, "What a wonderful coincidence! We came to see you on the very day when your Church celebrates Saint Benedict, our patron saint. Of course, we Benedictines have a very great reverence for Saint Benedict."

Father Panteleimon replied that we also have a great love and reverence for Saint Benedict, and that the Orthodox Patriarch of Jerusalem bore his name (this was still the 1960's).

The monks replied that it is very encouraging that there are instances where we all agree and have common points of reference.

Whereupon, in his usual "shoot from the hip" manner, Father Panteleimon replied, "Fathers, forgive me for saying so, but I dare say that we are more Benedictines than you. We don't have different monastic orders in the Orthodox Church. But, since we follow in his steps, we are more sons of Saint Benedict than yourselves."

An awkward silence followed.

"How so, Father," asked one of the Benedictines.

At that point, another of the visitors chimed in, "Of course, you have beards and wear the monastic habit, as our father Saint Benedict did, whereas we do not."

"Well, yes, we do continue as before in our traditional apparel and outward appearance, as all our monastic fathers of old. But I am referring to another, more important, aspect," said our abbot.

"And what is that?", asked one of the Benedictines.

"Can you tell me," asked Father Panteleimon, "who was Saint Benedict's favorite author outside of the Scriptures, whose works were read every day in the Saint's monasteries and even in the church services of the Saint's monasteries, even as we read selections from the Old and New Testaments?"

Another awkward silence followed. There was some clearing of throats and glances among the monks.

Finally, one of the fathers answered, "It was John Cassian."

"*John Cassian*," replied Father Panteleimon with emphasis, "not *Saint John Cassian*."

"Well, some doctrinal errors were found subsequently in Cassian's works, so he is not considered a saint in our church," responded the same visitor.

"That's the crux of the whole matter," replied Father Panteleimon. "For you, there are doctrinal errors in Saint John Cassian's works and you see him as a 'semi-Pelagian'; but for Saint Benedict himself, Saint John Cassian* was the Saint's favorite spiritual author, the ecclesiastical writer *par excellence*, after the Holy Scriptures themselves. And why were 'errors' found subsequently in Saint John Cassian's work in the Roman Catholic Church? Because Saint John Cassian had refuted some of the writings of Augustine of Hippo, and because of the growing influence of the latter's writings in the West in the centuries that followed — especially after the time of Charlemagne.** But, for us, the writings of Saint John Cassian are still esteemed very highly, as they were also by Saint Benedict in his day. Actually, the writings of Saint John Cassian were esteemed so highly from the very beginning in the East, he is the only Latin Father who was translated into Greek during his lifetime."

After a few polite expressions of "thank you for your hospitality," the Benedictines left quickly.

There was not much else to talk about after that brief encounter.

* Celebrated on February 29. St. John Cassian reposed in A. D. 433.

** Charlemagne, whose vigorous promotion of Augustine's theology in the West prompted a rupture with the Eastern Church and the Orthodox Catholic patristic tradition, lived in the ninth century (+814). Historians feel that many of Charlemagne's policies — both political and theological — were motivated by a desire to establish an empire in opposition to "the Greeks" — i.e., the Byzantines.