*A Remembrance of Artemis Danzig*

Archpriest Alexander F. C. Webster, PhD

Rector, St. Herman of Alaska Russian Orthodox Church

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Our beloved sister in Orthodoxy, Artemis, died a “good death.”

A divine model of the good death is our Lord Jesus Christ’s on the Cross. Mercilessly whipped, beaten, and bloodied, in the throes of agony of the Cross, our Lord still had the presence of mind and abundant compassion to declare His “last will and testament,” as it were. The Gospel of John reveals that poignant moment in chapter 19, verses 26-27:

When Jesus saw his mother, and the disciple whom he loved standing near, he said to his mother, “Woman, behold, your son!” Then he said to the disciple, “Behold, your mother!” And from that hour the disciple took her to his own home.

Artemis Danzig lived her last seven months—in the shadow of death generated by pancreatic cancer—as well as anyone I have known in my more than 34 years of priesthood. And throughout that ordeal, her faithful husband Ivan was by her side, devotedly, lovingly, every step of the way.

But that’s how it always was for them throughout their 46 years of married life.

Artemis, or Diane, as she was called by Ivan and her closest friends and relatives, was born in Greece. She was serving as a licensed practical nurse in a clinic in Boston, Massachusetts, where Ivan was working as a chemical engineer, when they first met at the wedding of two friends. Soon enough, in September 1970, they were joined in Holy Matrimony at Annunciation Greek Orthodox Cathedral in Boston.

That glorious day almost began under a cloud. Ivan, a Jewish American from Brooklyn, New York, had been baptized into the Orthodox Church as a result of meeting and falling in love with Artemis. That did not sit well with Ivan’s not especially observant Jewish parents. They balked at attending the wedding until Ivan’s grandmother, Mitzi, a more devout Orthodox Jew, told her daughter and her husband, “You *will* go to the wedding!” Where she managed to “persuade” Ivan’s parents to do the right thing for their son, my maternal grandfather refused to attend the wedding of my Irish Catholic mother to my Scots Presbyterian father in 1948. So when Ivan told me that story, I instantly liked Mitzi. And you can be sure that Ivan and Artemis revered Mitzi for her compassion and good sense.

By 1981 Artemis and Ivan had moved to the Washington, DC, area so that Ivan could make a career move as a chemical engineer with what is euphemistically called the “Agency” or the “Company” in nearby Langley across the Potomac from the District. Of course, I’m talking about the *Central Intelligence Agency – the CIA*! Four years later, Artemis followed Ivan into the “Agency,” when she, too, was granted a Top Secret / SCI security clearance. There she worked in various capacities beginning as a GS4, working her way up the “Agency’s” country desks for Greece (her native proficiency with the language surely helped there), Jordan, and Zimbabwe-Zambia.

Ivan shared one memorable story from Artemis’ tenure there, which might be dubbed the “Coke and Cookie Caper.”

On one occasion when King Abdullah II of Jordan was visiting Langley, the receiving line of distinguished “Agency” types had begun before he was greeted with his favorite American snack food—a glass of Coca Cola and a fresh chocolate chip cookie. Royalty can be quirky like that in their particular cravings. So Artemis, then manning the Jordan desk, rushed to the kitchen to retrieve the overdue newly-baked cookies, and then rushed back to the receiving line, cutting in front of the waiting dignitaries in order to deliver the goodies as promised. I suppose there’s protocol, and then there’s Protocol.

Artemis continued with the “Agency” until her retirement in 2003. Three years later, Ivan retired as a 25-year man with the “Agency.” Then they began the next phase of their life together as world travelers. You might say that theirs was a marriage made in heaven, blessed in Boston, but certified, after so many years, by the CIA!

King Solomon of ancient Israel asked rhetorically in the Old Testament book of Proverbs 31:10:

A good wife who can find?

She is far more precious than jewels.

I think it’s safe to say that Ivan would reply, “*I* can and I *did*!”

My own familiarity with Artemis and Ivan began some years ago when they occasionally visited the Protection of the Holy Mother of God Orthodox Church (Romanian Diocese, Orthodox Church in America) in Falls Church, Virginia, while I served as parish priest. That casual association blossomed into a genuine friendship after I retired as a U.S. Army chaplain and became rector in 2011 of what is now St. Herman of Alaska Orthodox Church (Russian Orthodox Church Outside Russia) in Stafford, Virginia. As “dual members” here and at St. Katherine Greek Orthodox Church in Falls Church, they have regularly participated in every adult Bible study and other special religious education series that I have offered on Wednesday evenings, attended Divine Liturgies on some feast days and Sundays, and contributed quite generously to our “little country church,” as we like to say.

Earlier this year, when Artemis began to suffer from weariness and low energy and went to her doctor for medical tests, the diagnosis of pancreatic cancer was, of course, deeply troubling to the clergy and faithful at St. Herman’s Church, as it was devastating to her, Ivan, and their family, *kumbaroi*, and friends. And yet, during the ensuring seven months until her last breath on Wednesday, December 21, she was at peace with God the Holy Trinity, her husband, and herself.

Beginning in early September, when Artemis was no longer able to travel except for doctor’s visits, chemotherapy, and hospital stays, I brought the Holy Mysteries of the Body and Blood of our Lord Jesus Christ to her roughly every other week and provided various anointings of the sick. Never did she lament, complain, or even question why she was afflicted with that deadly disease, even as the chemo treatments took a heavy toll and the cancer seemed unstoppable.

Her amazing spiritual equanimity and trust in divine providence reminded me of the spirit of the fictional character of Lukerya in one of the 19th century Russian writer Ivan Turgenev’s short stories titled, “Living Relic.”

Once a tall, vibrant, joyous beauty, Lukerya suffered an accidental fall that led quickly to extreme stomach pains, paralysis of her lower body, and severe emaciation of her body. And yet, she was at peace through all of it. When a friend from years ago chances upon her in the corner of a humble country hut while grouse hunting, he inquires about her plight. She replies:

“I’ve been lying here seven years. In the summertime I lie here in this shanty, and when it gets cold they move me out into the bath-house: I lie there.”

  “Who waits on you? Does anyone look after you?”

  “Oh, there are kind folks here as everywhere; they don’t desert me. Yes, they see to me a little. As to food, I eat nothing to speak of: but water is here in the pitcher; it’s always kept full of pure spring water. I can reach to the pitcher myself: I’ve one arm still of use. There’s a little girl here, an orphan; now and then she comes to see me, the kind child. She was here just now. You didn’t meet her? Such a pretty, fair little thing. She brings me flowers. We’ve some in the garden—there were some, but they’ve all disappeared. But you know, wild flowers too are nice; they smell even sweeter than garden flowers. Lilies of the valley, now—what could be sweeter?”

  “And aren’t you dull and miserable, my poor Lukerya?”

  “Why, what is one to do? I wouldn’t tell a lie about it. At first it was very wearisome: but later on I got used to it, I got more patient—it was nothing; there are others worse off still.”

    “How do you mean?”

    “Why, some haven’t a roof to shelter them, and there are some blind or deaf; while I, thank God, have splendid sight, and hear everything—everything. If a mole burrows in the ground—I hear even that. And I can smell every scent, even the faintest! When the buckwheat comes into flower in the meadow, or the lime-tree in the garden—I don’t need to be told of it, even; I’m the first to know directly. Anyway, if there’s the least bit of a wind blowing from that quarter. No, he who stirs God’s wrath is far worse off than me. Look at this, again: any one in health may easily fall into sin; but I’m cut off even from sin. . . .

“And I repeat the prayers too,” Lukerya went on, after taking a little breath; “only I don’t know many of them—the prayers, I mean. And besides, why should I weary the Lord God? What can I ask him for? He knows better than I what I need. He has laid a cross upon me: that means that he loves me. So we are commanded to understand. I repeat the Lord’s Prayer, the Hymn to the Virgin, the Supplication of all the Afflicted, and I lie still again, without any thought at all, and am all right!”

The fictional Lukerya’s tragic condition in the short story endured for some seven years. Artemis’ travails lasted seven months. That Turgenev, a man of, shall we say, dubious Orthodox faith, could depict such a saintly character was a miracle in itself. But a greater miracle was unfolding before my own eyes and ears whenever I visited Artemis in her final months.

In an oft-quoted line, Malcolm in Shakespeare’s *Macbeth* remarks wryly about the execution of the late Thane of Cawdor, “Nothing in his life became him like the leaving of it.” As it happened, that medieval lord had finally repented before his execution for his treachery and other dastardly deeds.

Although Malcolm’s memorable quip may seem misplaced with regard to Artemis, I submit that it fits her perfectly! After a pious life of Orthodox faith, hope, and love, and a professional career of service, first, to the poor and downtrodden in need of nursing care and, later, to her country, Artemis managed, cooperating with God’s grace, to *surpass* in spiritual virtue even her once vibrant life in her waning months.

I shall always cherish the memory of the living soul—so transparent to the divine will and providence, so accepting of her seemingly unfair and unacceptable destiny, so inspirational to those of us around her—that Artemis revealed in full as she died.

May her memory be eternal! Αἰωνία ἡ μνήμη! Вѣчьнаꙗ памѧть!