

**Reflections on the Inaugural Conference
 of the International Orthodox Theological Association (IOTA)**



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Tudor Petcu: Dear Dr. Rico Vitz, as far as I understand, this is for the first time that you are visiting Romania. And I would be tempted to mention that such a visit is a truly blessed one considering that you came to Iași, the capital of the ex-Kingdom of Romania and a symbol of Romanian spirituality. That's why I am asking you to tell me how was your first contact with Romania and how meaningful was the spiritual experience of being in Iași.

Rico Vitz: Greetings, Tudor. It's nice to speak with you again.

That's right. I had been to a number of European countries, but I had never been to Romania. So, I was looking forward not only to attending the inaugural conference of the International Orthodox Theological Association (IOTA) but also to seeing the country. My experience of Iași was wonderful. It is a lovely city with a rich history, both political and religious. And since the conference took place shortly after the Feast of the Nativity, the city was particularly charming in its Christmas decor.

Honestly, the spiritual experience of being in Iași and visiting some of the local monasteries was the most meaningful aspect of my time in Romania. On the one hand, this was due to the conference itself since it was a remarkable blessing to have the opportunity to pray and to dialogue not only with Orthodox scholars from around the world but also with the non-Orthodox "ecumenical observers" in attendance. On the other hand, this was due to the rich presence of Orthodox Christianity in the city and its surrounding areas. It seemed as if there were an Orthodox treasure at every turn: e.g., a cathedral, a church, a monument, a museum, a bookstore, a roadside shrine, and so forth. When I came home, I explained my experience to my family and friends this way: the presence of Orthodoxy in Romania is like the presence of Starbucks Coffee shops in the U. S. In Romania, Orthodoxy is everywhere!

Tudor Petcu: It's well-known that you are an American philosopher converted to Orthodoxy so I would like you to explain to me what's the main treasure of Romanian Orthodoxy that you have found. In other words, how would you characterise your experience as American convert to Orthodoxy on the soil of a traditionally Orthodox country?

Rico Vitz: What I found most remarkable was the way that everything in Romania seemed to be, so to speak, “fully saturated” with Orthodox Christianity. As I said, at every turn I encountered a richness and depth of faith both in things, like churches, and in people, not only among monastics and clergy but also among the laity. And I encountered it not only in the more deeply devout and pious, but also in those whose families are still struggling to recover the wealth of personal faith that the communists tried so mightily to steal.

Tudor Petcu: We know very well what a Romanian can learn from America (and there are truly a lot of things, especially if we should talk about freedom and democracy), but what can an American learn from Romania, especially from a spiritual point of view?

Rico Vitz: In all honesty, I am particularly in awe of the Romanian people for their ability to have maintained any semblance of faith despite the immense persecution they faced over the past century. I am also moved by the kindness of nearly every Romanian person I have met both in the U. S. and in Romania. It's really a rather remarkable pair of traits to find in people: that is, both to be so firmly resilient and to be so kind. On these points, we Christians in the U. S. have much to learn from our Romanian brothers and sisters, especially in these acrimonious times.

Tudor Petcu: If you should talk to your American friends about the Relics of Saint Paraskeva, what would you tell them?

Rico Vitz: I've tried to convey both the aesthetic sense of what it was like to be in that holy space and the meaningfulness of the experience. Conveying some semblance of the aesthetic sense to my friends and family in California has been reasonably easy. A number of them have been blessed with the opportunity to venerate the incorrupt relics of St. John Maximovitch at Holy Virgin Cathedral in San Francisco. They have some sense of what it is like to enter an awe-inspiring nave and to approach a holy shrine. For those who have not, I've done my best to describe the beauty and sanctity of the Metropolitan Cathedral in Iași.

To understand the meaningfulness of the experience, one has to have an understanding both of the life of St. Paraskeva and of the significance of the communion of saints. Reading and re-telling the life of St. Paraskeva has been useful for helping others (and for helping me!) to appreciate this amazing woman of God. As for understanding the communion of saints, most of my traditional Christian family and friends “get it,” but I suspect some of my Protestant friends do not. God willing, in time, those who don't will come to understand and appreciate more fully the significance and power of the “great cloud of witnesses” whose earthly lives are a witness to us and whose heavenly intercession is a blessing for us.

Tudor Petcu: Do you think that this international conference organised by IOTA in Iași was an opportunity for Orthodox American philosophy to become more well-known in a traditionally Orthodox country, such as Romania?

Rico Vitz: Yes, I believe the inaugural conference of the International Orthodox Theological Association (IOTA) did present an opportunity for the work of English-speaking philosophers, especially those of us from the U. S. and the U.K., to become more well-known in central and eastern European countries and elsewhere where Orthodox Christianity is the majority religion. I also believe that it presented an opportunity for us, English-speaking philosophers, to become better acquainted with the philosophical and theological work that is being done by our academic colleagues and spiritual brethren of those countries.

My hope is that the conference will lead to greater interaction and collaboration among us all, and that this work will make meaningful contributions in our efforts to work out our salvation, by loving God and loving our neighbors. That is my hope. Will it be realized? We'll see, as God wills it.