

Week One:

Saint Nikolai of Zicha

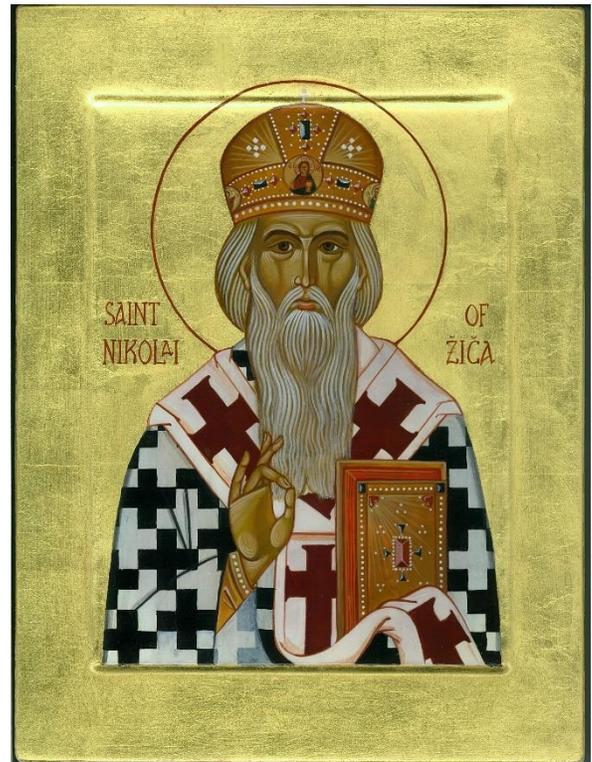
Born in 1880 to pious farmers in the small Serbian village of Lelich, Nikolai Velimirovich received his early education at the local Chelije Monastery. He then attended the Seminary of Saint Sava in Belgrade. His brilliant mind enabled him to go on to undertake doctoral studies at Berne, Switzerland and at Oxford.

But having been a shepherd in his early years, he felt called to become a shepherd of people, and to enter the priesthood. On a single day late in the year 1909 he both entered a monastic order and was ordained a priest.

Returning to the Seminary of Saint Sava as a professor, he wrote some of the great number of poems and theological works that would become his precious legacy to the Church.

But as the First World War engulfed the world, he also traveled to England in 1914 to raise funds for the suffering Serbian people. He would later do the same in Europe and America. A powerful and convincing speaker, his efforts were very effective and continued over many more years.

In 1919, having returned to Belgrade from his travels, he was made Bishop of Zicha. During the next decades, he continued to write and to minister to the people of Serbia. Among his written works is the *Prologue from Ohrid*, a collection of the lives of saints.



World War Two brought the occupation of Yugoslavia by the German Nazis, and the bishop was imprisoned, like many prominent Christians, in the notorious Dachau concentration camp. He was tortured, and witnessed many deaths by firing squad as well as prisoners' horrible suffering. His own lifelong poor health only made the ordeal worse.

Bishop Nikolai came to the United States as a refugee in 1946. During the next ten years he taught at Saint Sava Serbian Orthodox Seminary, Saint Vladimir's Orthodox Seminary, Holy Trinity Orthodox Seminary, and Saint Tikhon's Orthodox Seminary, where he became rector. He died at Saint Tikhon's in 1956, and years later his relics were taken to rest in his native Serbia.

Saint Nikolai knew the Bible very well. In the difficult years of his imprisonment and torture, he relied for sustenance on passages like this one: *"Beloved, do not be surprised at the fiery ordeal which comes upon you to prove you, as though something strange were happening to you. But rejoice in so far as you share Christ's sufferings, that you may also rejoice and be glad when His glory is revealed" (1 Peter 4: 12-13).*

Perhaps few of us will ever suffer as greatly as Saint Nikolai did. But during Great Lent, we are called on to undergo tiny "sufferings" like fasting, and giving ourselves fewer pleasures and distractions. Can these be occasions of rejoicing for us? Can they remind us of the great joy we anticipate in the Kingdom of God?

Saint Nicolai wrote a long series of "Prayers by the Lake." In one of them he addresses God in this way: *"I see a fish dying as soon as it is taken out of the water and I say, 'That is me! If they take me out of Your embrace, I shall die in seconds—like a fish tossed onto the sand.'"*

What "tools" does the Church offer us during Great Lent to help us stay firmly in God's embrace? *(Some suggested answers: attendance at the special services, confession, Holy Communion both on Sunday and during the week.)*

Note: For more on Saint Nikolai of Zicha, see *Saints of North America*, one of the series of Activity Books produced by the Department of Christian Education. The whole series is available for free download at dce.oca.org.