

At Last--Vladivostok!

by Brother Daniel Maurer, C.J.D.

We're here! Our flight from San Francisco stopped in Khabarovsk on February 10, where the temperature was -8F! We could not leave for Vladivostok until 6:00 pm the next day. Hotel rooms for foreigners cost \$113 (more than most Russians make in one year) so we spent the night at the Khabarovsk airport. After a short flight to Vladivostok, we were met at the airport by Andrei Popok the chairman of the Vladivostok Catholic Community, Alexei Kurochkin the driver, and Andrei Jarygin an interpreter. They drove us to an apartment which they had found for us that same day. The temperature was milder than in Khabarovsk, +34F when we arrived. At our apartment we were greeted by more members of the community with their spouses and children where they had prepared a delicious supper for us.

Our apartment has an odd collection of chairs, stools, a very small table and even a few plates and pans and kitchen utensils. There is no refrigerator, so we keep food outside on the balcony. We have plenty of heat from hot water radiators. We needed to pay \$400 rent for our apartment for the year--an immense fortune by Russian standards--apartments are scarce!

Our first public Mass was on Sunday, February 16, at noon at the Hall of the Young Pioneers. About 25 people attended, most of whom Father Effing recognized from his visit in November. Since then, several priests have visited from Kiev, Irkutsk, and Poland, and 16 people have been baptized, so the community is growing. They are anxious to get the word out that there is a Catholic priest in the city, so we have been interviewed for newspaper articles and there are TV programs planned.

We have been invited to dinner often at the homes of parishioners and friends, so we have been able to see how they live. No one has a private home. Their apartments are very small, but no one seems to be hungry even though the available food lacks variety and proteins. Fresh foods are scarce, including milk and eggs. The food we have been served has been tasty, but we think our hosts are taxing their resources to care for us. We hope to be self-sufficient as soon as possible. In the days ahead we will find out more about the nutritional and medical needs of our people.

Russians complain about the high cost of living and about the scarcity of goods and food. Prices are high and rising faster than salaries. We have heard various estimates of the average salary--between \$7.27 to \$13.60 per month!

The people of Vladivostok are serious but friendly. They like to laugh and are very generous. They do not have the extras and sometimes not even what seems essential to us, but we haven't seen anyone sleeping on the streets. They seem very family-oriented and very solicitous for their children. Are they hopeful for the future? Their common expression for their situation is, "It's a hard life." Jesus will give them hope.

Vladivostok is a beautiful, interesting and needy city. It especially needs the Church and the Sacraments. Our work is absolutely necessary, and the people are happy we are here. A Russian businessman told us, "This is an historic event--You are the first Americans to come to Vladivostok to stay!"

The Rebirth of the Catholic Community of Vladivostok

by Brother Daniel Maurer, C.J.D.

In 1986 Mikhail Gorbachev inaugurated his programs of *glasnost* (openness) and *perestroika* (restructuring), those now-familiar words which signaled his attempt to fashion a kinder, gentler communist empire. But it would take five long years for Catholics in Vladivostok to be able to trust that religious freedom had actually returned to their land. Perhaps it took so long because too many Russians still remembered the depths of terror with which the communist officials obliterated any sign of religion after the Russian Revolution of 1917.

The Russian Far East, a proud, energetic frontier land at the turn of the century, did not succumb without a struggle. After the Czar was assassinated, the Far East declared itself an independent republic. But their independence was short-lived. Red Army forces, naval and ground, invaded and finally established their control over the entire region on October 25, 1922. Vladivostok was a part of Russia again -- this time, Communist Russia.

After brutally consolidating their power, the communists could carry out their comradely, utopian socialist agenda, including the systematic destruction of the very idea of God as a supreme, creative, loving being. They especially devoted their energies to the persecution of Christianity.

Before 1923 more than 30,000 Roman Catholics lived in Vladivostok and the surrounding Primorya Region. They had nearly completed the construction of a beautiful church built in the style of Polish gothic revival. By 1935, the year the last priest was killed, the Catholic community was only a memory. The church

was closed and converted for use as the Primorya Government Archives.

No one today knows the full story of those terrible years between 1923 and 1935. It is said that most of the Catholics of the region were killed by 1928. The local people today, who received the stories of that tragic time from the few who survived, now say that every Catholic priest was imprisoned and killed; that the vast majority of practicing Catholics were shot and their bodies dumped into mass graves that were later used as building sites. Some say that virtually all 30,000 Catholics were killed. One of our parishioners lost her only brother. A newly-baptized parishioner of Polish descent, 24 years old, reports that his Catholic grandfather was killed as a "Polish spy" in 1929.

Knowing the terror that the communist regime had used in the past and might still use, it took religious people today some time before they were willing to express themselves openly. In Vladivostok, that open expression came through two young men and a Polish priest. In 1989 Igor Davidov converted to Christianity and joined the Seventh Day Adventist Church in Vladivostok. In 1990 he read an article in the Seventh Day newspaper of the Soviet Union about Father Jan Sergi Gajek, a professor at Lublin Catholic University in Poland, and his work for cooperation among all Christian groups. Igor invited Father Gajek to visit Vladivostok. While he was here, during December 1990, they advertised on radio, cable TV and newspapers to locate Catholics in the city. They found none while Father Gajek was here, but the day after he left, a young Catholic, Mr. Andrei Popok, identified himself to Igor.

Andrei Popok, born in the Ukraine in 1966, came to Vladivostok in 1988 as an officer of the Red Banner Fleet. He had converted to Catholicism earlier that same year while studying anti-christian propaganda in

his military college. Once in Vladivostok, in the middle of *glasnost*, Andrei set about trying to find other Catholics like himself for prayer, for Bible study and for mutual support. He had heard that there had been a large Catholic community here before 1935, and he searched for the lost members. But people were still afraid. He was not able to find one other Catholic until he met Igor. After that meeting, the two young Christians set about in earnest to locate more Catholics, advertising on TV, over the radio and in the newspapers. Their perseverance met with success. In July of 1991 Anastasia Potapenko heard an advertisement about a meeting. She attended. "Wherever two or three are gathered in my name..." The Vladivostok Catholic Community was reborn.

Just a few weeks after that first meeting, the August Coup tried to topple the relative openness of *glasnost* and to reimpose a doctrinaire communist orthodoxy on the Soviet Union. The world knows the outcome of that struggle. It is still fresh in our minds. Thanks be to God.

By Russian law, for an organization to be registered officially, it must have at least ten members and a constitution. There were still not ten baptized members, but catechumens are members of the Church, too. A few who were interested in becoming Catholics signed up so that the Community could receive official status. Slowly, they found new Catholic members. Even though the people were Catholic and had a true Catholic spirit, they knew little about Catholic traditions and canon law. Andrei wrote to his friend Father Jan Krapan in Kiev for a sample of a constitution. One was sent. The community used it as a guideline to write their own, and on August 25, 1991, a date which they consider the foundation date, just four days after the coup attempt failed, the Vladivostok Catholic Community asked for official recognition according to the laws of the State.

Local government officials were very surprised to learn that there were Catholics in Vladivostok, and it took time to process the registration. All documents were ready by the beginning of October: constitution, protocol reports of meetings, membership lists. Only one more requirement was needed, a document from the bishop responsible for administering the Church in this area. For Vladivostok, it was Bishop Joseph Werth, S.J., the Apostolic Administrator of Novosibirsk, 2500 miles away. But Bishop Werth, newly appointed in April 1991, had not yet been able to register his own position legally with the government. There were problems about differences between canon law and Russian law. The constitution needed to be seven pages long, not three pages as submitted. Finally, perhaps as a way to celebrate the visit of Archbishop Hurley of Anchorage who had done charitable works here in Vladivostok, the Catholic Community was registered on January 4, 1992, and Andrei received the notification on January 10.

The feast day of the Community and the name day of the church is January 1--"Most Holy Mother of God"--the start of a new year, the start of a new day for the Catholics of Vladivostok. Father Effing received his visa to work in Vladivostok on February 7, his birthday.

Mission Needs

When we were investigating the possibility of coming to Russia we had to go into debt to pay for the investigation. We knew that part of what would be needed was benefactors who cared for us and for Russia. We were waiting for our visas and for the resources necessary to begin the mission. God supplied these needs through generous friends, too many to mention here, but including the Capuchins of Pittsburgh, Ignatius Press, many diocesan priests, and even more old and new friends, in America and in Europe. We hope to tell about our donors in future issues. Now that we have arrived in Vladivostok, we can see more clearly what is needed.

The most urgent need is for a car, since public transportation takes a long time, and is not safe at night when most of our meetings must be held. A three-year-old Japanese car costs \$2000. Next, we look forward to the renovation of our church building. We need to have a study done about the costs and availability of materials. This will cost about \$1000. At a recent meeting, members of the Community said that what they most wanted was crucifixes for their homes, and Bibles and books for Mass and for learning more about the Catholic faith. Such books are about \$3.00 apiece. Or perhaps your parish can support our mission's expenses for one week: \$288. --M.E. .S A Reflection by Father Myron

Vladivostok is truly unique, a city of skyscrapers built on hills surrounding a bay. At night, the buildings are not illuminated on the outsides, but the windows twinkle with the thousands of lights of families at their dinner tables. How beautiful the view across the bay is, and how nice to reflect on what God has brought about. Issue Number Two Issue Number Two !Vladivostok Sunrise! is a newsletter published by the Canons Regular of Jesus the Lord for their

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