

## What an Opportunity!

by Janez Sever

*Janez is a young American recently graduated from West Point. Born in Yugoslavia, he grew up in Milwaukee, and has been working as a mission assistant in the parish in Magadan, Russia, our neighboring parish. We think you will be interested in his reflections about his work in Russia.*

At the start of this "adventure" in Russia, I did not have in mind a lofty purpose. I just saw it as another adventure, in another part of the world. I would meet new people, learn another language, and see things that have been closed not only to foreigners, but to Russians as well. I thought, "What an opportunity!" It has been that--but in a much grander and majestic sense. My time spent in Siberia and the Far East of Russia has been like a continuous retreat. The last six months have afforded me the opportunity to really discern what my faith has meant for me and what role it should play in my future. My work in Magadan and my recent travels throughout the Russian Far East and parts of Siberia have taken me on an adventure in faith. What becomes readily apparent for anyone who comes here with an open mind and heart is that what has been preached to us since our childhood is actually true. That is, that the Gospels and Epistles are really the Good News. They are not only a history of the first Christian communities, but our present story in Russia. I have found that these inspired works are really our owner's manual, a "how-to" book. It is not just a book of prayer, but a guide, a formula that always works.

The Catholic faith is not new in Russia. Its enemies of the past 70 years tried desperately to hide the Truth, to surround it with thorns, to stifle and kill it. The communists almost succeeded. Small communities exist where large communities of believers once worshiped freely. Luckily,

The Lord came down to see the city and the tower that the men had built.

Then the Lord said: "If now, while they are one people, all speaking the same language, they have started to do this, nothing will later stop them from doing whatever they presume to do. Let us then go down and there confuse their language, so that one will not understand what another says." (Gen 11:5-7)

In the time of Stalin and even Gorbachev, those who did not want to speak the same language, who did not want to build the same tower, were either worked to death, or even as late as 1988, put in prison or in asylums in order to "revise their conscience". The Lord saw this, and confused their own plan. If one hears how this revolution took place, beginning in 1989, almost bloodlessly, you cannot help but notice that God had to intervene and confuse orders to shoot or not to shoot demonstrators. This happened in East Germany in October of 1989, a number of weeks prior to the tearing down of the Berlin Wall, and again during the failed coup of August 1991 in the USSR. Perhaps it began even prior to these events. Gorbachev took power in 1985 with full intentions of "revitalizing" socialism. That is what *perestroika* was really meant to do! Then he met with Pope John Paul II! Back in the States you read of the economic and political

confusion left in communism's wake. But I really want to tell about my own experiences of the small Catholic community in Siberia and the Far East.

## MAGADAN

The city of Magadan is one of Stalin's "children". It was established in 1939 as an administrative and supply base for the Gulag. Magadan began as a sterile city, one of solid concrete. Seeds that fell on this territory died. Until recently, no church of any sort existed here. Presently in this city of 150,000, there is a small Orthodox church, and a Seventh-Day Adventist church under construction. Other religious communities, including the Catholics, are confined to rented quarters or apartments.

"What comparison shall we use for the reign of God? What image will help to present it? It is like a mustard seed which, when planted in the soil, is the smallest of all the earth's seeds, yet once it is sown,..." (Mark 4:30-32).

In Magadan there is no one single predominant group of people who have held on to their religious beliefs, such as a Polish, or German, or Ukrainian group. People came to live, or die, in Magadan as prisoners or in search of higher wages and other benefits. The system that promised those benefits no longer exists. Many people are either stuck where they are, or are moving back to the motherland. With no former religious tradition as a community, how does one begin? Father Austin Mohrbacher, the first Catholic missionary priest to begin work in the Far East, began with two suitcases and the support of 5 or 6 people interested in the Catholic faith. There were only one or two known baptized Catholics at the time. He simply began to preach to those who cared to listen.

"A people living in darkness has seen a great light. On those who inhabit a land overshadowed by death light has arisen." (Matt:4,16)

God sent Father Austin the people he needed to begin work. People in no way connected to any sort of church in the past gathered at Father Austin's side. In the course of nearly two years, the Catholic Church of the Nativity of Christ has had many people come and investigate. Presently, about 125 are part of our community. Some 50-70 faithfully attend Sunday Mass. Our community is one of neophytes. Their level of knowledge is that of our young children in the States.

## CHILDREN

I firmly believe that Russia's children will be Russia's way out of this religious, economic, and political calamity. It will take at least a full generation to bring normality back to life here. I have found the pattern that the children are actually leading their parents into faith! Generally, people not previously baptized, and over the age of 30, have a very hard time coming to faith in God. The system of values that they were taught, and had lived under all their lives, has been internalized. The Soviet educational system was very effective in the formation of sterile and revolutionary socialists. If they weren't successful at producing socialists, then they indeed succeeded in making robots. Many an atheist is struggling to shake this unbelief from his soul.

Children are leading this awakening, as in the case of Kirril, a 9 year old boy. His first contact with our church was a little over a year and a half ago. His school teacher, Irina, one of our parishioners, had a project for her students: to help her distribute humanitarian aid from the church. He was one of many who agreed to help on one of his days off. Then he came to Mass one time and really admired how beautifully the choir sang. He came several more times to listen to the choir. His interest began to grow in the church and not just in its choir. He liked the Mass as a whole and wanted to learn more. He started coming to our little Sunday school and asked questions. My fellow missionary, Teresa Chen, saw his interest and took him under her wing. She prepared him for the Sacrament of Baptism and became his godmother. Kirril got the consent of his mother readily, but his father held out to the beginning of the Mass.

Kirril came to Mass every Sunday. Not long, and his mother came, just to watch. It took about a year, but she became the second in the family to be baptized. Her second son Igor, 16, is now also studying to get ready for Baptism. Perhaps it will not be long before the father comes in and sees the light! It is definitely all backwards, but

"I assure you, unless you change and become like little children, you will not enter the kingdom of God." (Mt 18:3)

Another boy, Albert, 12, has his mother wake him up on Sunday mornings before father gets up so that he can go to Mass. He is also the leader in that family. I asked him if this is something he really believed in or was it something he just enjoyed. He stated, "I know that this is my path!" The children in Russia are making some very adult decisions. After talking to several other priests in our diocese, I am told that this is common here. Christ had a good reason for saying,

"Let the children come to me and do not hinder them." (Mark 10:14)

#### THE WORLD'S LARGEST DIOCESE

With the little experience that I had from my time in Magadan, I had the urge to see more of Russia, and not just Russia, but Catholic Russia, and to see how everyone else was "doing it", how everyone else was building the Church. Recently I was afforded the opportunity to see our sister mission in Vladivostok, a new parish in Khabarovsk, our diocesan center in Novosibirsk, and a few small Russian-German Catholic communities in the Altai province and the city of Omsk. Although I traveled through 5 time zones, I had still not reached the other end of our vast diocese. Bishop Joseph Werth, S.J. is the Apostolic Administrator of this diocese that covers over 5 million square miles, the entire Asiatic portion of Russia. He, along with several other priests, were called early in their lives to begin to study for the priesthood under the harshest of conditions. Often only the parents knew that they had left home in order to study for the priesthood in Lithuania or Latvia. Others, such as their brothers, sisters, and neighbors thought of them as prodigal sons, gone off to squander their share of their fathers' inheritance. Perhaps it is because of this trust in God's will that they are now called to shepherd the world's largest diocese.

#### VLADIVOSTOK

As late as 1923, as many as 11,000 Catholics celebrated openly in Vladivostok. So active and vibrant were these communities in this area, that it was made its own diocese. Fathers Myron Effing and Daniel Maurer, both members of the Canons Regular of Jesus the Lord, an order dedicated to the spiritual maintenance of cathedral parishes, are working tirelessly to reawaken this spirit in Vladivostok, now a city of almost a million people. Along with shepherding five separate new parishes in and around Vladivostok, ranging in size from 13 in Khabarovsk to approximately 175 in the center of Vladivostok at the Most Holy Mother of God Catholic Church, Fathers Myron and Daniel have taken on several other gigantic tasks. At the top of their agenda is to win the bureaucratic battle for the right to re-own the cathedral church located near the center of Vladivostok. It was boarded up and taken over by the Bolsheviks after the Russian Civil War. It currently houses the region's archives. Repossession of the church will be a momentous occasion, but it will mark only the beginning of all the work that needs to be done to restore it to its proper condition. This work is being done along with broadcasting weekly on television, and translating and publishing Catholic literature into Russian.

To accomplish all these things, one wonders how much time, talent, and money this must require. As in Magadan, the priests here are ably assisted by a very dedicated corps of Catholics, some of whom only recently considered the faith. This is the very essence of a Christian community: selfless sacrifice of oneself, and faith that God will provide the rest. With more money, this evangelization could progress even faster. Currently, in the space of an American living room, the pastor of Vladivostok runs his parish office, celebrates daily Mass, eats, and sleeps! Additional space is just too expensive. Sunday Mass is held in a rented hall. Money that is raised for the mission is going directly towards the needs of evangelization, printing, broadcasting, etc.

One of Father Myron's most vocal petitions is for more priests and religious. He and Father Daniel have already resolved to dedicate their lives to this ministry in Russia, but there is more than enough here for countless numbers of religious, especially if the hope for a diocese in the Far East is to be realized.

#### KHABAROVSK

I was very privileged to be part of an historic and joyous occasion on the 26th of January, 1993. Seven faithful stood before each other, and before the Lord, and celebrated the resurrection of the Catholic Church of the Transfiguration of Our Lord after 70 years of trial. The Mass began with the profession of faith of two men who knew they had been baptized secretly as children, but did not know exactly when. During the course of the Mass, two others were baptized, while the rest of those gathered vowed to serve as godparents. In this manner, the members of this community were bonded together as guardians and witnesses of each other's faith. For one elderly lady, this was a moment of real joy and peace, tears filling her eyes. Her new child through baptism, a younger lady, had struggled with her decision to be baptized and now realized that it was only the beginning of new life. The Spirit of this occasion in Khabarovsk parallels the disciples' experience with Jesus in a village outside of Jerusalem following His resurrection:

By now they were near the village to which they were going, and he acted as if he were going further. But they pressed him: "Stay

with us. It is nearly evening-the day is practically over." So he went in to stay with them. When he had seated himself with them to eat, he took bread, pronounced the blessing, then broke the bread and began to distribute it to them. With that their eyes were opened and they recognized him...(Luke 24:28-31).

#### OMSK, ALTAI, NOVOSIBIRSK

In a way, Central and Western Siberia is the guardian of the Catholic faith in our diocese. The old people that I encountered in Omsk showed me for perhaps the first time in my life, what it means to really pray for an intention. There is a brigade of these famous Russian babushkas that has been praying unceasingly for the day that they would be able to have a priest worship with them, and not in jail. They prayed years of rosaries, along with other prayers they managed to remember and to write down on paper. Most people had their own prayerbook, all handwritten and well worn.

"Pray perseveringly, be attentive to prayer, and pray in a spirit of thanksgiving. Pray for us, too, that God may provide us with an opening to proclaim the mystery of Christ, for which I am a prisoner." (Col 4:2-3)

When I visited Omsk it was with Bishop Werth. For the parish it was indeed a very special occasion. Even though it was a weekday the small church was packed with people. The people had not come just for the Mass. They prayed the rosary before Mass, the Litany of Saints and a number of other prayers afterward, and then had a few words with their shepherd. For sixteen babushkas it was a pilgrimage. They had come a day or two earlier from as far as 50-75 miles away. They spent almost all of their time in prayer. They took occasional breaks to eat and do some chores around the church. They were just happy to be together and did not at all mind that they had no place to stay except for one small room in the church.

The majority of the Catholics in this region, in Omsk, Novosibirsk, and the Altai are of German and Polish nationalities. Most of them were deported here by Stalin from the Volga. They have held on to their traditions and beliefs and have fervently prayed for the day that the prophecies of Mary at Fatima would come true. Because there is a lot of tradition here, the situation is quite different than what I found in the Far East. The Church does not have to be built from the ground up, but it has to face different challenges. There are perhaps 200 small communities of Catholics, 10-15 people each, in this region alone. The formidable task ahead is to unite all these people and to send out more priests. Again, as in Vladivostok, the Church is back, but the work has only begun!

#### THE CONVERSION OF RUSSIA

When people unfamiliar with the real situation in Russia talk about her conversion, they aim at some mystical goal or ideal. The conversion of Russia is an internal conversion required of each and every individual. It is not a matter of simply passing out a few thousand Bibles, building a few churches, giving a fiery speech when everyone's already fired up and then calling on the Holy Spirit to do the rest. The conversion of Russia will take many more prayers, a lot of sweat, many hours of education, bringing to Russians the truth that they have been

deprived of for so long. It is a matter of bringing order where there is now chaos, peace where there is a great deal of confusion. Each conversion is a struggle towards understanding Christian values and how they are practically lived out. As you can see, this will take a great deal of time, money, talent, priests and other religious, and above all, grace.

Римско-католический Приход Пресвятой Богородицы + Владивосток + Россия  
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## **"I was ill and you comforted me." (Matt 25:36)**

by Fr Daniel Maurer

One of the most rewarding tasks of parish ministry is the regular visits to our sick and shut-in parishioners and others who come to our attention. Both Father Myron and I make frequent sick calls in homes and in hospitals, often bringing with us the Blessed Sacrament.

At first many of our people were surprised that their priests would take the time to see them outside of Church. This is explained by the fact that none of them has ever known a time of religious freedom where Catholic priests had the possibility to work openly among their people. Also, the Russian Orthodox Church, with many more members than the Catholics, and suffering under one of the worst persecutions in Christian history, did not have priests enough to say Mass and baptize their people, to say nothing of making house calls.

One of our parishioners who receives a regular visit from us is Tamara who lives next door to our former church building. She was baptized a Catholic as a child in the Ukraine but was never able to practice her faith. As an adult wife and mother she moved to the Far East with her family. Now she is widowed and her son lives hundreds of miles away. Tamara has been confined to her bed for 16 years with the progressively degenerative disease of multiple sclerosis. At this point she can only move her head, mouth and eyes. Her sister Maria takes excellent care of her. Their apartment, though sparsely furnished, is always clean and fragrant. Maria, an Orthodox, has a collection of Russian icons in the living room. In Tamara's bedroom are prominently displayed a crucifix and a picture of Mary as the Mystical Rose, both of which she received from our Catholic parish. Our bishop paid a visit to Tamara during his first trip to Vladivostok in August. We are impressed by her gentle humor and her quiet dignity.

Once when I was visiting Julia Adamovna, one of our elderly parishioners on an extensive stay in the neurological section of the State Hospital, all the ladies in her ward wanted to meet with me and learn more about the Christian Faith. I did not have enough time in my schedule that day, but a few days later I went back with Igor as translator and had a wonderful time talking about Jesus and the Church to the eighteen ladies in Julia's ward.

A sadder situation is the condition of Vitaly Trofimovich. He suffers from muscular dystrophy and is confined to bed. But Vitaly

(the name means lively and describes well his personality) has no family to care for him. When found by a policeman called to his building for another reason, he was living in squalor and filth, with only the occasional help of an alcoholic acquaintance squatter to cook for him. Seven months before my first visit, he had fallen and broken his hip. But his visiting doctor (socialized medicine) had failed to diagnose the break which had never healed properly. With the help of Valentina, a friend of ours who is a doctor, we got Vitaly admitted to a hospital for an operation to reset his hip. But there are limits to what we can do because the hospitals are so full and the bureaucracy so agonizingly slow. Vitaly has been there for over three months, but still no operation. On one of Valentina's visits to the hospital, she discovered that he had not eaten anything for two days.

Please pray for all the sick and suffering members of our parish and especially all those in Russia who have no one to care for them in this time of transition from socialism to a market economy. The needs are so great. Perhaps someone reading this letter would like to be a medical missionary or donate some time giving medical or dental care to the people of Vladivostok.

## **New Mailing Address**

For those who want to send mail to us directly to Russia (not recommended, but it may be necessary sometimes), we have a new mailing address:

Most Holy Mother of God Catholic Church  
P.O. Box 3185  
690087 Vladivostok  
RUSSIA

## Nastya Potapenko invited to Rome

Our parish secretary, Anastacia Potapenko, was invited by the international Catholic charitable organization CARITAS to attend their conference in Rome in December. It was a surprise for her, because she had never been out of Russia before. She was invited because her experience as a founding member of our parish, as a mother of two, and as parish secretary puts her in touch with the needs of people of our region. It was extraordinarily difficult for her to arrange to travel on such short notice, but she later said that it was like a miracle that everything worked out, and she found herself in Rome! The highlight of her trip was meeting Pope John Paul II personally in a private audience which was arranged for the group of seven Russians attending the meeting. After the trip Bishop Werth asked her to begin organizing CARITAS here in the Far East. The nearest branch is in Novosibirsk, which is thousands of miles away.

## The Legion of Mary

Fr Daniel L. Maurer

If any reader of this newsletter has any fear that the task of winning Russia back for God is too great, fear no more. If ever you had any doubt of the ability of God to produce good in spite of sin and sorrow, doubt no more. A powerful force has been unleashed upon the land, a force that will not be denied. It will triumph as surely as Jesus Christ triumphed over death and won for His followers salvation from sin. This force is the grace of God, working in humble, simple people, organized under the banner of Mary. It is named for her, and seeks to serve Christ in others as Mary served Him. It is the Legion of Mary.

Founded in 1921 by Frank Duff, and now spread around the world, the Legion of Mary is a very disciplined and active force, as its name implies. It goes by the book, that is, *The Official Handbook of the Legion of Mary*, and each local chapter, called a praesidium, bases its spirit and its work on the wisdom of its system which has been perfected by long years and wide experience. According to the handbook, "The object of the Legion of Mary is the glory of God through the sanctification of its members by prayer and the active co-operation, under ecclesiastical guidance, in Mary's and the Church's work of crushing the head of the serpent and advancing the reign of Christ" (pg. 3).

After three weeks of investigation and discussion of the Legion system, the Vladivostok praesidium held its first meeting on January 2, 1993 with eight young men, and myself as spiritual director. Since then it has elected its officers, chosen the name of the Immaculate Heart of Mary in recognition of Russia's special relationship to the promises of our Lady of Fatima, and begun its apostolic work under the direction of the pastor of our parish, Fr Myron Effing. All that remains to be done to make us an official praesidium is to submit the form of affiliation to international headquarters in Dublin, Ireland, have it approved, and after a period of probation, to have the members make their official promise to the Holy Spirit which constitutes them as true members.

During the first few weekly meetings the legionaries chose their praesidium officers. All are parish members. The acting president is Yuri A. Belosorov who was received into the Catholic Church in January. German A. Ceevouhoff, baptized a Catholic on November 1, 1992, is acting secretary, and Victor A. Anisimov, also received into the Church in January of this year, is acting treasurer.

The idea of beginning the Legion of Mary in Vladivostok came from Fr Myron who has long known of its excellent work. Before beginning our Russian mission, Fr Myron was in touch with Legion leaders in the United States to talk about the possibility of starting a local praesidium here. Then we learned that Fr Robert Bradshaw in the central Siberian city of Kraznoyarsk is a leading figure in the Legion of Mary. Before moving to Russia last year, he had visited Russia on Legion business every year since 1968. He has started two praesidia in Kraznoyarsk, and was able to provide us with invaluable advice and assistance to establish our own local praesidium.

Each member of the Legion of Mary promises to do weekly "the performance of a substantial active Legionary work, in the spirit of faith, and in union with Mary..." The kind of work is to be decided by the pastor of the local parish. Fr Myron has asked our new legionaries to work in the evangelization of non-Christians. This fits very well with traditional Legion work, as stated in the handbook, "The faith must be brought to the notice of every person outside the Church. Timidity and human respect and difficulties of one kind and another must all be swallowed up in the supreme desire to share that gift of Faith with those who have it not. The Gospel must be brought to every creature, (pg 247)." To that end, our young legionaries go door-to-door with Catholic literature, visit the sick in hospitals and shut-ins in homes, teach catechism to adolescents, and help the priests in their liturgical and educational services to those who come to Mass and instruction classes on Sunday. They have become a powerful force in bringing the message of the Gospel, in word and deed, to those who might otherwise never have heard it or paid much attention to it.

*Nastya Potapenko (second from right) with the Holy Father in the audience at the Vatican, December 1992.*

*Legion of Mary workers trying out their door-to-door manner on our housekeeper, Zina-Ida Gregorievna: (from left) Igor John Temashenko and Victor Anisimov.*

*Baptism of Ludmilla Bacilievna at home in the village of Orechova. Her husband and son, Valerie and Alexei Kurdumov, were baptised previously in Vladivostok.*

*Fr Effing and his scientific translator, Lydia Kovbas, giving a talk at the Arcenev Museum on the question of whether the universe is finite or infinite in time and space. About 60 geologists and interested people attended the talk.*

*Dennis Bondarev, our TV director and anchorperson, with the technical crew who broadcast our weekly TV program.*

## The News

On the Feast of the Holy Trinity, I suddenly realized that a whole year had passed since I was looking for a poster of the famous icon called "The Trinity" by Rublov to use on last year's Feast of the Holy Trinity. A great deal has happened, and more is yet to come.

Father Dan completed the first parish hymnal in Russian, and is finishing the organ accompaniment, thanks to help from Father Tom Lamping in Chicago who arranged for us to receive a computer music program. We are hoping to enlarge and publish this hymnal for all of Russia.

Our first text publications also came off the press: several booklets on alcoholism (a major problem in Russia), a brochure for the Legion of Mary to use in door-to-door work, a regular by-weekly parish newsletter (which is especially needed for those members of the parish who live far from Vladivostok), first video dubbing productions for use by other religious organizations, and now we have permission to translate and publish some full-size books and catechism materials for children. All this publishing is very important, because while Russia was behind the iron curtain, practically no Catholic materials were translated and published. There is now a tremendous need for Catholic materials in the Russian language, especially catechisms, children's teaching materials, materials aimed at the former "dis-information" about the Church, and for general reading material for adults to grow in the faith. We are looking for help with publications.

Unfortunately, dear benefactors, you have been neglected again, because we haven't had a chance to publish this newsletter since September!

Baptismal and Confirmation classes continue, and there are now already about 180 Catholics in our parish. We have had our first wedding, and our first funeral. Our parishioner, Julia Adamovna Riabovna died on May 28 after having been anointed by Fr Myron and after having received communion several times from Fr Dan. Her daughters, granddaughters, and great-granddaughter are Catholics, too. She remembered when our Catholic church was still open here in Vladivostok, and she was most anxious to help the parish receive back its church building.

As of the date of this writing, we still have not received our building, even though there were news releases that we had. We have reached an agreement with the Krai Culture Department about the

return of the building, but the agreement has not yet been approved by the authorities. Meanwhile, we are looking for funds to repair the building as soon as we receive it. God willing, by the time of the next newsletter we hope to have our church, and some funds to begin the repair.

On June 3 we were the victims of a hit and run accident with our green van. No one was hurt, but there was major damage to the van, and right now we are walking again. Thankfully, Fr Effing had finished a tour of our members who live in villages, but we are in need of our van for moving to a bigger apartment. We have totally outgrown our small, two-room apartment which we have used for living, offices, and chapel since we have arrived.

Our Mail Information Service continues to be very popular, and currently more than 1000 people are taking our Catholic Faith by Mail course. We continue to desperately need literature, Bibles, medals, rosaries, icons, and other materials for people who ask for them by mail. Many prisoners are interested in our course, and we are receiving many inquiries from people with Arabic surnames from various parts of the former Soviet Union.

God bless you, our benefactors. We continue to pray daily for you and your needs. Remember to pray for us, too, please.

## **Our Mailing Address**

Donations should be made out and sent to Vladivostok Mission, 225 Cordova Street, Anchorage AK 99501. Our Russian address (no money or resellable items): P.O. Box 3185, 690087 Vladivostok, Russia. Correspondence is best by E-mail: [myron@catholic.marine.su](mailto:myron@catholic.marine.su)