

The Evangelization of Captives

by Yuri Byelozorov
tr Rev Myron Effing, C.J.D.

[Yuri is the Pastor's Assistant for Evangelization for Most Holy Mother of God Parish in Vladivostok, helping with all the projects and programs of our parishes. He also teaches natural family planning, and conducts our chastity program in the public schools. --ed]

Do you have any idea what it is like to be in prison in Russia? I didn't either until my pastor Fr Myron gave me the assignment and his blessing to teach evangelization lessons in the high security prison which is located near Artyom in the village of Zavodskoy, about a hour from Vladivostok.

You can ask whether that was an easy assignment for me. Let's look at the question the way it happened. Already in 1994 Fr Myron spoke of the necessity to find a way to work with prisoners. But it seemed at the time to be just a wish and far away at that, although several sects and cults used the wild religious freedoms of those days to push their way through to work in the prisons. They visited the convicted, held mass rallies, and passed out hundreds of their books. But then the wild days passed and a new period of distrust of missionaries who wanted to visit the prisons became the norm.

God opened the door for us to work in the prisons through the visit to our parish of police Captain Constantine Slovodenyok at the Christmas Vigil Mass of 1997. He invited the pastor to somehow organize evangelization in the prisons and jails of our state. So already at the beginning of 1998 my pastor put before me the task of cooperating with the captain who was working in the prison system as the officer in charge of relations between prisons and religious organizations.

I had to first meet with Constantine, who, it seems, had only been a Christian for one year. He was able to verbalize his hope to improve the world by teaching prisoners the principles of Christian morals. There is an old Russian saying for people like Constantine: "He cries out like a newborn." Maybe his boss didn't like it, I don't know, but for some reason Constantine was transferred from his new job to being the shift captain of a prison brigade. So we lost our insider, but a beginning was laid and we received a go ahead for our program from the state prison department headquarters.

We picked a prison not so far from Vladivostok and began to meet with the officers, proposing to have a regular meeting with the convicts following a set of lectures based on the correspondence course "Introduction to Christianity" written by our pastor. The officers met us cautiously, demanding a lot of official documents and permission slips which we gave them at the next meeting. It turned out that in the time between our meetings they investigated me and my Christian brother

Zhenya Balanyov through police channels, and even inquired about us at the state Department of Religions. Evidently the result of their research was positive, because they offered us the chance to meet with prisoners.

"Attenhut!" came a voice from the loudspeaker behind the tall blank wall where Zhenya and I stood waiting for the completion of our prison passes. Our bodies froze in position-- Maybe the guards were talking to us!

When the passes were done we passed into the prison through a series of three gates. Before us was a huge square, clean and well-kept. On the edge of the square there were barracks with sporting areas between them, and some trees. It looked at lot like an army camp. The prisoners were marching by in groups wearing black quilted prisoner's suits. On their chest was a patch with the family name and their group number. We went to the office of the head of the Department of Instruction, since there was still time before our class. Here we had the first contact with prisoners, since a group was standing near the office smoking and looking inquisitively at us. I noticed the unhealthily grey-yellow faded colors of their faces. Being anxious I answered their "hello" in a tense voice. In the office we spoke about how the lesson would be conducted, and then we went to the cafeteria, and suddenly...

I am standing in front of forty pairs of eyes staring at me from faded faces. At my right on the table is a crucifix with two glowing candles. Behind me is Zhenya whom I cannot see, but I know he is there. I have to begin but I just can't get my ideas together since they seem to be like some terrified doves who want to fly away. Finally I force myself and start by introducing myself and my brother in faith, telling where we came from and why we came. Then I suggest that they introduce themselves to each other by giving their first names. They start hesitantly but then their voices get stronger.

I begin my lecture by talking about what the Christian religion is all about, and about God's plan of salvation for mankind. Heaven's sake! I'm a teacher, and I've given lectures in front of conferences where there were more than 500 people. I've helped the priests prepare people for baptism. But never before was I so frightened as this! Never before did my voice get so caught in my throat or my words fail me. I continue to speak, my eyes glancing around the auditorium, trying to notice the expressions on their faces, expecting some kind of reaction to my words. But there isn't any! My words seem to disappear into nothingness. I feel a silent wall of distrust and misunderstanding in front of me. But suddenly the first stroke of reaction--questions start to arise. The pressure starts to fall. Somewhere in the back the head of the Department of Instruction complains to Zhenya that we have dragged out our lesson too long. I look at my watch, and, wow, the whole hour flew by unnoticed! We say goodbye, promising to come back in two weeks. We give out little catechisms and Miraculous Medals, explaining how important it is to turn to Mary in prayer. We say the "Our Father", and I

ask God's blessing on us and the prisoners.

We walk out into the fresh evening air. The darkness is stabbed by the spotlights shining brightly on the high walls. I feel like I'd like to get beyond the walls as soon as possible, so unconsciously I walk quickly across the square, faster than those who are escorting me...

The whole evening my anxiety didn't leave me. Continuously in my head circulated awful thoughts, and later there were nightmares in my sleep. For the whole week after the event I had little fights with my family, with my wife and kids. Even though I had a lot of work to do, I accomplished nothing and everything just seemed to fall from my hands. A reporter from the newspaper *Novosti* came to me, asking about exorcism of evil spirits. I felt like I'd like to show her a devilish place: a prison. Overhearing our conversation, the pastor reacted to her question, "Yes, its real." "I've had to do exorcisms myself." "People really suffer from demons." "I don't want to tell you about the actual cases because it is too terrible." "But the most important exorcism takes place just before baptism."

When it came time for the second class we brought holy water with us, and strengthened ourselves with Jesus' words, "On this rock I will build my church and the gates of hell will not prevail against it." On the road we prayed the Rosary for the increase of our faith and for the success of the meeting...

Again we are behind the walls of the prison. Again we walk across prisoners' square, several of whom recognize us and greet us. Today there are more people at the class. It seems the "jail telephone" passed out the news about us. We begin immediately with the Sign of the Cross and the "Our Father". The topic of the lecture is familiar and thought-through: Abraham, Moses, God's name, the Passover Lamb, the type of the sacrifice of the Cross of Christ. I try to be calmer but it doesn't help much. Again my words kind of wander, and I'm afraid maybe I'm not saying the most important things. Something is bothering me. When I explain the name of God I see the dissatisfaction of some guys who had been exposed to the Jehovah's Witnesses. I decide that I won't sidestep a fight.

After the lecture there are again questions, but it is clear that the looks on the faces are already more friendly, and more guys than before come forward for individual attention. I give out booklets about Father Luigi Orione, but there aren't enough. Again I give out medals, thanking those who didn't just keep them to themselves but who gave them to others with the request to pray to the Mother of God. I announce that henceforth the lecture will be once per month.

But I see some guys reluctantly coming to me led by a thin-faced fellow. I think, "This will be the Jehovah's witness to fight with me. Lord, help me not to offend them." He says, "Brother, why do you hide God's proper name from people: Jehovah! Here it is, read it!" He waves his New World Bible under my nose. "You are lost in darkness, but you can be saved. Repent that you have served Satan who lives in the

Catholic Church. Become a Jehovah's witness and then you will be saved," he says giving the usual propaganda of the Witnesses, not giving me time for a word. "One of their catch," I think. "They already dragged him in and quartered him. He probably already ruined the brains of a lot of people here." I try not to notice the offensive tone of my attacker and calm down. His friends also ask him to calm down. Having fought back the Witness, I answer the question in the Christian way which comes to different conclusions than his.

Outside the walls I grab for the bottle of holy water and gratefully wash up. My uncertainty gradually goes away. On the way home I am able to switch my brain back to home duties...

From my own experience I know what it means to be in prison, even if I was only there a few hours. Prisoners are there eight to fifteen years. It became clear to me why visiting prisoners is a Christian work of mercy. We are called to bring the light even to that darkness which is prison. I ask you, dear reader, to pray for Yuri and Zhenya who are visiting prisoners that the Holy Spirit helped us in our ministry.

Bare Altar

by Rev Myron Effing, C.J.D.

The stripping of the altar after The Mass of the Lord's Supper on Holy Thursday gives us the opportunity to see once again the reality of our altar. We made it from an old light table, which was the one piece of furniture that the archive left behind when we received the building. It still had the electric fixtures, but the surface glass was broken. I took off the fixtures, laid a board on top, and--ta,da--an altar! Since then we have improved it by nailing a shipping skid to the top to make it higher, and painting it gray from paint that Judge Wozniak of St Paul, MN, gave us. I placed an altar stone inside where the light table glass used to be.

Behind the altar is the makeshift "bookcase" where we place the statue of the Virgin Mary, candles and flowers. Someday we hope to have a tabernacle with the Blessed Sacrament there, but there is such noise and mess in the church--we replaced the floor, and soon we will begin replacing the windows--that we have to keep the Blessed Sacrament in a tabernacle in the chapel on the first floor for now.

The "bookcase" was made from scrap boards and old rusty nails by Franciscan Brother Paul Ruge, OFMI, who was recently ordained to the priesthood in North Dakota. He lived with us a year to study Russian. (It would be better to say he suffered with us a year to study Russian, because the building was so cold and so dirty at the time he was here that it was a real purgatory for him to live here--let alone the difficulty of the Russian language.) I remember the days when Brother Paul would wander the streets searching for nails, since we couldn't buy any, and the streets are rather full of old nails, the result of wood ashes being hauled out of the city. People in our neighborhood don't have central heating. They use coal or old wood to heat their homes, and the old wood is often full of nails. (Drivers beware!)

Why do I mention the bare altar? Naturally because we would dearly like to replace it with a real altar, and we would like to replace the bookcase with a real reredos and a tabernacle. The statue of the Blessed Virgin Mary will be placed high above the tabernacle, and the curtain which currently hides a boarded-up double door behind the bookcase will be eliminated. We are just waiting for a benefactor who wants to have the honor of providing these places for Mary, for the Lord, and for the Holy Sacrifice of the Mass.

Meanwhile, 363 days of the year the "altar" is covered with cloth so that its poverty won't show. On Good Friday, maybe this altar is better than any new one would be--It shows the poverty of the Cross very well.

News Notes

by Rev Myron Effing, C.J.D.

- Thanks to Transfiguration Parish in Pittsford, NY our parish of the Transfiguration in Blagoveschensk, Russia, has seats for mass! The New York families of our sister parish made Lenten sacrifices for this purpose. In Blagoveschensk, the parish ordered the seating special-made at the local furniture factory, which gave work to local citizens who produced the seats in one month. The design results in very strong seating, which should last us through the time when we will receive back our historic brick church. The first contract was 60 seats for \$2000. We expect to order another 26 seats soon. Dianne Sarno of New Jersey also sent a donation for seats, but we presume she won't mind if we use her donation to make the altar, tabernacle stand, statue pedestals, and chairs for the priest and servers. Thanks, benefactors! You make all the difference.

- Thank you to the Koch Foundation of Gainesville, Florida, and to Archbishop Francis Hurley of Anchorage, Alaska. Archbishop Hurley proposed a grant to the Foundation to support evangelization in the Far East of Russia. The funds granted, \$20,000, will help all American priests working in the Far East: a total of six, including myself and Fr Daniel Maurer working in the south, Frs Ben Zweber and Edward Schoellmann working in Khabarovsk and on Sakhalin Island, and Frs Michael Shields and David Means working in the north in Magadan. The grant will provide funds for printed materials, for AV equipment used for evangelization, and for training of catechists.

- Our Bishop Joseph Werth called us on March 28 with the news that the Holy Father has decided to appoint an auxiliary bishop for Bishop Werth. He is Father Yezhy Mazur, a member of the Society of the Divine Word. Father Yezhi will be ordained a bishop in Novosibirsk on May 31. He will be assigned to take care of Eastern Siberia and the Far East of Russia--which means we will be seeing him often. The new bishop will live in Irkutsk. The Holy Father also appointed a second bishop for the European part of Russia, as an assistant to Archbishop Kondrusevich. So there will be four Roman Catholic bishops in Russia.

- The first concert with paid tickets was held in our church on May 2, 1998. It was a sell-out crowd of 250 seats, which went for 50 rubles each (\$8.33) The concert featured our parish organist, Marina Omelchenko, and a local popular vocal soloist Elena Kiri. After expenses are paid, income from the concert will be used by the parish. It is part of our continuing effort to increase our fundraising within Russia itself, so that our mission will not be forever dependent upon foreign aid. There was such a demand for tickets that it was decided to hold an encore concert on May 22. Thanks, Epiphany Parish in Coon Rapids, Minnesota. Your gift of an organ keeps on giving. It is the only full size church organ in all of Far Eastern Russia.

- Father Milosh Krakovsky from Slovakia, who takes care of

the new parish in Bratsk, which is in Siberia near Irkutsk, had the honor of saying the first mass in the apartment of our Nakhodka parish on May 7, 1998. Father had flown to Vladivostok to get our help to buy a car, since they cost about half here in Vladivostok what they cost in Siberia. We are closer to the source of supply: Japan. He will ship the car to Siberia from Nakhodka on the Transsiberian Railroad. While he was here he delightedly raided our liturgical closet for things he needed for his new parish. We've been collecting church items, statues, and vestments from America which we gladly share with other priests in need here in Russia. Thank you, donors in America. But why didn't the pastor, Fr Myron, say the first mass in the apartment? He can only go to Nakhodka once a month when the whole parish gathers at the Music School for mass. The parish, Our Lady of the Pacific, really needs a live-in pastor. Volunteers?

- Our experiment is a success! Nativity Parish in St Paul was discouraged that we could not import used clothing for needy children in Russia because of customs regulations. But they decided to try an experiment. We sent them the names of ten children in the nearest orphanage by electronic mail to St Paul. Parishioners sent a little package through the mail individually addressed to each child. In the packages were usually a toy, a piece of clothing, a toothbrush, etc. All the packages were received by the children unopened by postal authorities, and the children were delighted, as well as the orphanage. So now we are planning to expand the list of kids. If other parishes are interested in getting a list of kids, please let us know. Maybe somebody would even like to take on the 500 teenagers in prison in Vrangl? None of them have any underwear or socks at all.

Our Sister Parish dedicated to our “Grandmother in Faith”

by Rev Daniel Maurer, C.J.D.

It is not every parish in the United States that has a Rusophile pastor who goes so far as to build back yard *poustinias* complete with Byzantine-style Russian icons and oil lamps. (*Poustinia*, Russian for “desert”, has come to mean a quiet, out-of-the-way place for prayer and meditation.) That is what Father Scott Daugherty built on the rectory grounds of his first pastorate. Ever since his teenage years Fr Scott has had a fascination with things Russian, and especially the deeply mystical current of Russian spirituality. So the question is, with so few of these priests around the USA, how did we find him, and, once found, how could we get him to take part in the rebirth of the Catholic Church in Russia?

The world gets smaller every year, and even though the Catholic Church is the largest religious body in the world (and growing--one billion members to date), it often seems as small as an extended family, especially that part of the church made up of the clergy and religious. Sooner or later everybody meets everybody. And if the Lord wants you to meet someone He will make sure that it is sooner rather than later. Father Scott was out-going pastor in the Parish of Holy Family in Cutler, CA when this author's dear friend from seminary, Fr Angel Sotelo, was the in-coming pastor. For those who know Fr Angel, no more needs to be said. Fr Angel has a reputation for getting people together who should meet each other. Perhaps Fr Angel did not invent “networking” but he has brought it to the level of a high art form.

Fr Angel made a point to introduce Fr Scott to us would-be Russian missionaries even before we got to Russia. That was back in 1991 as Fr Scott was leaving his *poustinia* and settling into his second pastorate in the parish of St Anne's in the beautiful city of Porterville, CA nestled into the southeast corner of the San Joachim (central) Valley, just below the foothills of the Sierra Nevada mountains. A medium-small city of about 35,000, Porterville has a predominantly Hispanic Catholic population - and only one Catholic parish, St Anne's. By Midwestern or Eastern standards the parish is huge - roughly 5000 families!

It is one thing to meet people of similar interests, but another thing to sustain a mutual relationship over a long period of time. Soon after learning of Fr Scott's interest in our work it became clear that he and his new parish wanted to maintain an active involvement in helping to re-establish and sustain the Church in Russia. Toward that goal, our pastor Fr Myron Effing suggested that St Anne's become our first Sister Parish. He drew up an informal Sister Parish Agreement by which both parishes pledge to pray for one another, to learn from one another and to help support the Russian mission financially when possible.

From the beginning of our Sister Parish relationship Fr Scott and the parishioners of St Anne's have been welcoming, generous and supportive in the extreme. To remind all his parishioners of this special relationship Father Scott has even put the name of our Vladivostok parish on the masthead of his parish bulletin under the heading of: “Our Sister Parish”.

This author visited St Anne's in 1994 and 1997 and Fr Myron visited in 1996. On those occasions not only did the parishioners give us generous financial support in the form of mission collections, but they also turned out in great numbers to learn more about the work of their sister parish in Vladivostok. They arranged dinner-talks in restaurants and in the parish hall; visits to all the classes at St Anne's parish grade school and with the parish Sisters of the Love of God in the convent, and interviews and articles about our mission which have appeared in the secular press in Porterville and the California central valley.

A significant step to strengthen the ongoing nature of the sister parish relationship was taken in September 1997 with the establishment of the Sister Parish Committee under the direction of Mr John Penic, Jr. On a hot Sunday afternoon during this author's last visit to Porterville twelve parishioners gathered to form the committee. Their main task is to keep the parishioners of St Anne's informed about the progress of their sister parish in Vladivostok and to help organize fund raising. Committee member Ofelia Flores is corresponding secretary in charge of email links with us in Vladivostok and keeps us well informed of the work of the committee. Other charter members of the committee are: Margaret Rogers, Irene Johnson, Kathy Null, Jessie Romo, Myrt Ellis, Micki (Lois) Ward, Jan Beutler, Helen Aromin, Maureen Cowley and Art Cowley.

At the first committee meeting the members advised me that people feel better about contributing to specific projects, so it was agreed that the committee's first fund raising efforts would go toward financing the joint projects of the new parish hymnal and the cost of insulation of one section of the ceiling of the church. It was left up to the members of the committee at future meetings to decide how best to try to accomplish these goals. By January, 1998 the committee, through a combination of yard sales and cookie dough sales, had raised over \$1,300. Thanks to them I was able to live in warm comfort this past winter in my insulated church tower room/office, and 600 copies of our new hymnal were blessed for use on Sunday, April 24, 1998. Spurred on by their success the committee members have committed themselves to raising enough money for the insulation of the entire Gothic vaulted ceiling of the church. This will be an enormous help to their Vladivostok sister parishioners who have had to endure indoor temperatures as low as 38 degrees during Sunday Masses the last four winters, ever since our decrepit church building was returned to the parish in 1994.

Because our mission receives no on-going financial support from the American Bishops nor from our Russian bishop, and because our order has no members in the United States to coordinate fund raising activities, the survival of our Russian parishes is dependent on the initiatives of private friends and benefactors. Among these initiatives the work of our sister parishes has proved to be the single most valuable asset we have. St Anne's, our first sister parish, has been a treasure of financial and spiritual support for the Vladivostok parish of the Most Holy Mother of God. Our people are very grateful to their American sister parishioners for their overwhelming generosity. In families it is common for parents to help their adult children get started financially and to pray for their success and happiness. St Anne is the mother of Our Lady for whom our Vladivostok parish is named. When the parish of the Most Holy Mother of God looks to St Anne's for help it is as though the Blessed Virgin Mary is looking to her own dear mother, the Grandmother of our Savior, for help in the rebirth of His Church in the Russian Far East.

I composed the following prayer to Saint Anne for the members of the St Anne Sister Parish Committee to begin their committee meetings. It was reprinted by Fr Scott Daugherty in the St Anne's parish bulletin.

Dear Saint Anne,
Mother of the Mother of God,
Grandmother of our Lord Jesus Christ,
And patroness of our parish,
Kindly intercede with your Daughter and Grandson
For the needs and intentions
Of our Sister Parish Committee and all its members.
Graciously ask your Grandson to send us
His Holy Spirit of wisdom and strength.
Ask your Daughter to keep us faithful to Her Son
In thought, word and deed.
Just as God blessed you with the fruitfulness
Of conceiving and bearing the Blessed Virgin Mary,
So also ask Him to bless our works
With the fruitfulness of faith, hope and love
In all that we do.
We ask this through your most powerful intercession
In Jesus' name. Amen.

How to Communicate
with Us

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Phone: 011-7-4232-26-9614

Money cannot legally be sent by mail to Russia. Donations of money should be sent to:

Vladivostok Mission
225 Cordova Street
Anchorage AK 99501 USA

Your donations are tax-deductible. You will receive the required receipt for IRS tax purposes by return mail.

Letters without donations can be sent to:

Most Holy Mother of God Catholic Parish
Volodarskovo 22
690001 Vladivostok RUSSIA

Please do not mail packages directly to Russia, since every package mailed to Russia costs us \$50. If you have items that you think we can use, please contact us by electronic mail or fax giving a complete list of items. If we accept your offer you will need official inventory information from:

Mrs Joan O'Rourke
P.O. Box 266
Hanford CA 93232
FAX (650)871-2856
Phone (209)582-4112 until July 14
(559)582-4112 after July 14

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Remember
"Vladivostok Mission"
in your will.

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- 11 - - 12 - - 13 - - 14 - - 15 - - 16 -

Fr Myron's latest "guardian angels", Andre Shaidurov and Renat Kolinichenko.

Our Marian statue on Easter Sunday, under the Relic of the True Cross which we received from the Propagation of the Faith office of St Paul and Minneapolis.

Baptism of Albina Agnesa in Blagoveschensk.

Captain Constantine Slovodenyok.

Covered dish supper for Fr Myron in Porterville in 1996.

Porterville parishioners helping with the mission collection.

St Anne's Church, Porterville, California.

Fr Dan with Porterville Catholic Daughters of America, Carmen DiGrado, Virginia Casalda, Victoria, Gary Girandi and Laling Dulay. September, 1994.

Fr Raul Sanchez, Fr Scott Daugherty, the Pastor of St Anne's of Porterville, Fr Dan Maurer, and Fr Angel Sotelo, 1994.

The bare altar and bookshelf on Good Friday, 1998.

Parish kids posing with the new seating in the chapel of the Blagoveshchensk Parish Center.