

Bishops Meet in Blagoveschensk

By Rev Myron Effing, C.J.D.

December 13 and 14 were historic days for our Parish of the Transfiguration in Blagoveschensk. A Catholic bishop visited the parish for the first time since Bishop Slivovsky was there in the 1920's. Bishop Jersey Mazur came from Irkutsk to confirm two parishioners there on December 13, 1998. He was pleased--and the parish was proud--of all the progress they had made, thanks to the joint effort between the parish and their sister-parish of the Transfiguration in Pittsford, New York, who supplied the funds for chapel seating and a new heating system. Other benefactors supplied funds for the altar and other needs.

December 14 saw another historic moment. Bishop Mazur was received by Russian Orthodox Bishop Gabriel. The meeting took place in the old Catholic hospital building which is currently the Orthodox chancery. Also in attendance were representatives of the State Department of Religion. The meeting was filmed and shown in the evening by the local media. Besides the respect the bishops showed to each other, a remarkable moment was when Bishop Gabriel again publicly stated that the Orthodox diocese would return the Catholic church building to the Catholic parish as soon as the new Orthodox cathedral is dedicated, which should take place before two years are past. He also recognized that the hospital building also rightfully belongs to the Catholics and will be returned as soon as possible. The third Catholic building on the site, the old rectory, is also currently in use as a residence for Orthodox seminarians, but the Orthodox church rents it from the State medical commission. Hopefully the Catholic church will eventually receive this building, too.

After their meeting, the bishops invited those assembled to a formal dinner which consisted of a big variety of special Russian Advent foods. Bishop Gabriel commented that perhaps Orthodox and Catholics don't agree on all aspects of church doctrine, but they must surely agree that charity is the rule for all relationships. And he himself gave us a good example of charity in action.

Bishop Mazur promised the parish that they would get the next available priest for full-time pastor. I have been pastor of the parish since its refounding four years ago, and have travelled to Blagoveschensk every month since, a distance of 800 miles from Vladivostok. The Blagoveschensk parish covers an area equal in size to all of Poland, and is ready to begin subdividing into four parishes, as soon as a full-time priest is available.

News Notes

by Rev Myron Effing, C.J.D.

- January 21 saw Fr Dan on an unexpected trip to Japan. The Russian government declined to renew his visa, and since he had already overstayed his welcome, he had to quickly leave the country so as not to fall on the "blacklist" of people to whom they wouldn't give a future visa. He received a new visa in three weeks and returned to us. Thank you to the priests of the Neo-Catechumenate from Latin America who welcomed him to stay with them in the city of Niigata where there is a Russian consulate. Meanwhile, he got some practice with his Spanish.

- Our new bishop in Irkutsk who is our ordinary now, Bishop Jersey Mazur, S.V.D., will really be challenged to find priests and resources for Eastern Siberia and the Russian Far East. Our Eastern end of Russia is the poorest and the most needy. We have the fewest number of priests and the least number of churches for such a huge area. He has to start from scratch since he is a new bishop with a new territory. He speaks English, having worked in Africa for three years. He is working out his pastoral plan for his new responsibilities.

- The Russian government has officially reincorporated the Apostolic Administration of Asian Russia under the new law about religion, so it means that the Catholic Church is again official in Russia. Now we have to reincorporate each of our parishes and CARITAS under the new law as part of the newly incorporated diocese.

- Things are stabilizing a bit here with the new government. Some banks are beginning to work again, including ours. People said a long time ago that the time of change for Russia would be very difficult, and so it is. One of the governors said to the President that the government should forbid the existence of the American dollar in Russia. The President then replied, "But Governor, that would mean that we would take the very last thing of value that our people can hang on to!" How difficult it is to begin a government without bribes, without theft, with a market economy, and with freedom of religion when all of this has been absent for so long.

- We celebrated Thanksgiving in each of our Russian parishes. We think it is such a good idea to thank God for the harvest that we've introduced it in every parish. It hasn't become a family day--yet--but a special Sunday Mass of Thanksgiving. After the mass we invite parishioners to bring something from the harvest to share with others. Thanksgiving Day caught on with the Russians right away! We celebrate it on a Sunday of October, since Fall comes earlier in Russia than in America

- Alcoholism is one of the biggest problems in Russia, probably seconded by the problem of absent fathers. We have long distributed the literature of Alcoholics Anonymous and have even produced some of our own brochures about alcoholism and its early warning signs. Now at last we have

an AA meeting once a week here at the church. We'd love to have an experienced AA member from America to come for several months to start ALANON. Volunteers?

- On February 21 Fr Michael Shields, Pastor of Nativity Parish in Magadan, Russia, was our guest speaker in Vladivostok where he gave the sermon and spoke to our parishioners after mass about St Theresa, the Little Flower. He is the coordinator of the pilgrimage of the relics of St Theresa which will tour Russia in April. The relics will arrive in Vladivostok by train from Irkutsk for a special day of prayer. In life she never left the convent but prayed for missionaries. She said that after her death she would go everywhere in support of the missions. As a saint she was named patroness of missionaries, and now her relics tour the world in support of the missionary effort. More news after it all happens in Vladivostok.

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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
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"Vladivostok Mission"
in your will.

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

Dear Sister Susan,

Please send the photos, when you are done to:

Thanks. God bless you. --Fr Myron

Mr Jeff Lang
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About CARITAS Primorye

*by Anastasia Potapenko,
Director of CARITAS Primorye
tr by Olga Chishko*

It is very difficult for me to write about CARITAS. I think that readers need to have an unbiased opinion of CARITAS activities, our projects, and our plans. But I am not able to think of CARITAS objectively, though I try very hard. Two years ago Fr Myron said in jest that CARITAS was like my fourth child. Perhaps at some stage it really was. We started establishing our branch of the international Catholic charity organization CARITAS in Vladivostok from scratch, you see. There was no place, no financing, and most importantly there were no people with "know how", or who even knew what CARITAS is all about. So we had to watch and adjust each step we took, and of course we worried a lot every time when we made an attempt to organize help--how it would turn out.

Nevertheless many things have been changed since then. And this is not only because of the little son, our fourth child, who has recently appeared in our family, which means more attention is required for the family, and it turns out that it is impossible to spend all the time for work. (And is it possible to put CARITAS off to the fifth place?). An additional element, perhaps, is that our CARITAS has developed too. There are branches operating not only in Vladivostok, but also in Blagoveschensk, Khabarovsk, Lesozavodsk, Nakhodka, Bolshoi Kamen, Romanovka, Kamen-Rybolov, and Popov Island. And for more than a year our office has also coordinated all the CARITAS work in Eastern Siberia and the Russian Far East--i.e. nearly half of Russia.

Surely such a development does not mean that we have already overcome all problems. No, we have problems more than enough, and then the current economic situation in Russia brings new problems from day to day. For example, if before we could collect a lot of clothes in Vladivostok to distribute among the poor, now people don't give up old clothes, because they don't buy new clothes due to the crisis. By the way, the word "office" which I used above is just a word, since CARITAS Primorye still doesn't have its own office. The parish in Vladivostok gave us a small room. But how we dream about our own office where people in need can come and get help, where we could gather volunteers for a talk or training, where we could arrange and file documents. Alas! These are only dreams so far.

In return for the five years of its existence CARITAS achieved what is most important: people. And I believe that CARITAS is first of all the people--staff members and volunteers--who make it work. So it is decided: I'll tell about those who work in CARITAS and this will be the best story about our work. Though, in this case you should expect no objectivity from me!

I'll have to start with myself--not a very modest start. Don't you need to know whom you are dealing with? But I promise that this story is going to be the shortest one! I have been working in the parish, as well as in our CARITAS from the very first days of their existence--to be more precise I participated in their establishment. It must be confessed that seven years ago I dreamed of the Catholic church in Vladivostok where I would be able to sit in the corner and pray. Now I fail to sit quietly in the corner--I'll be sure to be found by someone in order to be asked for something. Sometimes I feel sorry that my dream hasn't come true, but more often I don't. It means that I do what people need, doesn't it?

I have passed through all the stages of CARITAS, from the volunteer to director, to board member of the Diocesan CARITAS and CARITAS Russia. At present I have much less simple work than before: meetings with people in need, talks with volunteers, distribution of food and clothes. Basically I deal with the issue of CARITAS development: establishment of new branches, training of staff members, the search for financial means, elaboration of projects, reports. And in addition I have a husband and four children, two daughters and two sons, the youngest son is three months. I love them very much and in essence all my present life is an attempt not to break down and try to work while I'm with the family. Sometimes I have to compromise--I take my older children in turn with me on some business trips. It seems I don't desert my family, we are always together.

The branch of CARITAS in the Vladivostok parish is managed by Lilia Timofeyevna Silina. She is one of the most experienced parishioners. She is a very kind and sympathetic person. With the help of volunteer parishioners she takes care of many old people, handicapped, mothers of large families who have a very hard life at present. Lilia manages to help them due to grants and collected donations: to buy food and medicine, to choose clothes and footwear. There is much work to do and the work is quite varied. Yesterday they dealt with the request to assist in payment for a pensioner's medical treatment, today they were asked to find financial means for Christmas presents for children in the orphanage, tomorrow--to find clothes for a mother and a new-born child who have nothing to wear when leaving the maternity house. And Lilia finds means to help everyone. As far as I can remember she never denied a person who really was in need. Lilia has enlisted the cooperation of all her family. Her daughter helps to organize tea parties and lunches for the poor, and her two granddaughters are involved in the Women's Support Center.

CARITAS Medical Center is our first program and for almost six years it has been managed by Dr Ludmila Mikhailovna, or simply Mila. She has organized the work of all doctors and nurses for the last three years, not only at the Center, but for the Home Program--200 elderly women whom we help at their homes. These programs are usually financed

poorly. Treatment of the elderly and the disabled requires big financing and the return is not big. In our society these people are considered to be second-rate people--they are almost beggars. But every time when money transfers at the bank are delayed--sometimes we don't receive our money for five months due to the crisis--and there is no money to buy medicine and food, none of the volunteers or staff members of the medical program (about 20 persons) quit their work, but

Sergey Akulenko is the Administrator of CARITAS Primorye. He helps with buying goods and distribution of donations, makes reports at the Medical Center and in the Home Service Program, as well as in the new Women's Support Center. For me it is interesting to see how much Sergey has matured during his work in CARITAS. He began as a volunteer--he helped to bring and install the Christmas tree, to fix the lights and sound for the children's Christmas Party. Now he directs the whole staff of volunteers, which is not easy--all of them are so different by age, temper, and education. This is a high stewardship to set things going so that the best talents of each volunteer would be used and so that the help to the people in need would be better organized. I am pleased to think that with the help of CARITAS, Sergey revealed such features of his nature as a knack of working with people, skills of creative thinking and planning.

Olga Berdnikova is our secretary and translator. Originally it was planned that her job would include translation of training and information brochures from English. But little by little it turned out that Olga set about the work of arranging documents about the medical treatment of Russian children abroad, those who could not get such help in Russia. To give information about our work to the mass media is also her responsibility. She is always ready to help, not only with translation, but with typing and documents. She has a nice, sweet manner of receiving visitors, though often there are some visitors with complicated psychoses who need a special approach. Olga finds an individual approach to all of them and can find a way to help everybody.

Zhenya Mazhukin is our driver. One would think that the work of a driver doesn't require one to put heart and soul into anything else besides driving. But Zhenya participates in almost all actions of CARITAS just because it is his nature--he can't remain inactive if help is required and he will definitely offer his assistance. So every day he either carries boxes with gifts to the orphanage, or delivers medicine to single elderly women, or repairs a massage machine in the Medical Center. Frequently he is not satisfied with something and he has his own specific opinion on any issue. It would be great if we had more of such non-indifferent people!

Marina Belikova helps us with accounting. At first sight one may think that charity is not her mission. She is so beautiful and attractive, she'd do better to think of nice clothes and going dancing! However Marina is the soul of kindness. She doesn't only work with documents and make reports, but also she brings clothes from home for people in need and

continue visiting their patients. And of course, it is due to the style of the leader and her personal example. It has even happened that Dr Mila brought portions of lunch cooked for her family and gave them to hungry elderly women, and she shared medicine from her home medicine chest with the patients of the Medical Center.

participates in seminars for volunteers with whom she shares her experiences.

These are all our staff members of CARITAS Primorye--the central or umbrella organization. The staff, of course, is not very big, especially taking into consideration the territory on which we work--from Lake Baikal to the Pacific Ocean, from the northern part of our country to the border with China. But we all are very friendly; we are happy to help each other. If urgent help is needed--for example, to clean in the office or at the home of a sick person, or to sort clothes and toys received as humanitarian help, nobody refuses and nobody will mention his or her position of director or translator, saying it's untidy work and it's none of their business, but everybody will put on their old overalls and start working.

Perhaps, that's why our work is so successful--we can say that without false modesty. In spite of all difficulties--economic difficulties in Russia and financial difficulties in CARITAS itself, a shortage of trained people, etc.--most of our projects work and benefit people! Future difficulties will not make us give up such difficult work when we see how a bedfast child begins running after treatment, how happy the old woman is when the volunteer brings food for her, how the children's eyes sparkle when Santa Claus gives Christmas presents to them.

Children from Lesozovodsk at the CARITAS Christmas party.

The Story of the Birth of the Savior always attracts the kids. Seminarian Zhenya Balanov with kids from the Children's Home in Vladivostok.

Santa put in a guest appearance at the Christmas party in Vladivostok

Children placing the Baby Jesus in the Manger at Midnight Mass in Vladivostok

The children of Russia always dress in costumes for New Year's parties, so the tradition has been carried over to Christmas.

The "Annunciation" in Blagoveschensk. Anastacia Pronina and Alexander Dyou play the parts of Mary and Gabriel.

The founder and Director of CARITAS in the Russian Far East, Anastacia Potopenko and her family, husband Sergei, children Ekaterina, Daria, and Elijah. Since then their son John Paul was born.

Bishop Mazur saying mass in Blagoveschensk

Sunday School class in Vladivostok showing the "Garden of Eden" diorama they made.

Children's Christmas Evangelization, 1998

*by Anastacia Potopenko
Director of CARITAS Primorye
tr by Olga Chishko*

[The Christmas story wasn't told in Russia for many years, and most religious traditions had come to a screeching halt by 1925. Beginning from the first Christmas of our missionaries in Russia when there was a mini-play at Christmas mass in which the costumed children of the parish enacted the manger scene, it has been clear that celebrating Christmas with children has been one way to teach them about the birth of the Messiah in a non-denominational context, but also a good time to bring help to children in need. CARITAS has expanded this Christmas work with Children, and for several years this program has been funded by the Dominican Sisters of Edmonds, Washington. --ed]

The conducting a of children's art contest has been the beginning of preparations for Christmas for CARITAS Primorye for the sixth year already. This competition was held in cooperation with Primorye State Television and Radio Company. The time and terms of the contest were announced on the TV program for children named "Fairytale after Fairytale". Children's art works were accepted for a month and after that the judges had a meeting to determine the winners. As usual the variety of pictures, applique works and articles was striking: the children pictured Christmas in pencil and watercolors, in Indian ink and oils; there were works in clay and cardboard, paper and natural materials. The smallest clay composition would fit in a matchbox, yet all details and precision of the works were striking! And the work of the Arsenyev Orphanage group, "The Christmas Angel", was sent in a TV packing box. Most of the works were of the highest grade of craftsmanship and fineness of detail. That's why the task for the judges was rather difficult: to select the best works and to name the winners. There were many works deserving of awards. However, five winners were recognized and awarded with drawing sets, books and toys.

Winners of Christmas Competition of Children's Art Works '98:

1st place: - The Makarenko Children's Club (three-dimensional compositions made of cardboard)
2nd place: - Inna and Zhenya Shakhov, Vladivostok
3rd place: - Olya Sugak, Blagodatnoye village
4th place: - Oleg Ivanishev, Vladivostok
5th place: - Masha Migunova, Arsenyev
Incentive prize: - Natasha Molotkova, Steklyanukha Village

Twelve more children were awarded with special prizes of encouragement: books, paints and toys. Among them were

the works of Natasha Molotkova, a disabled girl, awarded with a special prize. Olya Sugak from a small town near Arsenyev has taken part in the competition for several years and every time her pictures are very expressive. Also for five years in succession the sisters and the brother of the Potapenko

The next stage of the Christmas celebration is to arrange for the Children's Christmas Parties. This year we were able to expand our area of service by arranging Christmas parties for children in Vladivostok, Nakhodka, Romanovka, Arcenyev, Lesozovodsk, and Blagoveschensk, thanks to grants from the Dominican Sisters of Edmonds, Washington who have sponsored our Christmas programs already for three years.

In Vladivostok we had to work out the scenario together with masters of ceremonies and actors, to purchase gifts and prizes for the children, to decorate the hall in the Center for Children and Youth, to make colorful decorations and garlands, and the Christmas tree of six meters height and several small ones were bought from the villages around the city. The Christmas trees were in the hall and showcases of the Center and attracted people's attention.

80 children from poor or large families, as well as 30 disabled children were invited to the morning party. The program included the first-hand view of the Christmas story, the interesting story about the birth of Jesus, about the Magi who brought Him their gifts, about the wondrous star of Christmas, and games with the participation of Santa Claus. There were games, attractions, and competitions during the party. It was very joyful and interesting.

Especially we would like to note the wonderful masters of ceremonies. Having played this role for the first time, Julia Fidenko told the children a story about Christmas with inspiration and enthusiasm, and sang and played with the children. For the third year actor Stanislav Maltsev has participated in the Christmas party as Santa Claus, and visited orphanages and hospitals together with our volunteers, greeting the children with "Merry Christmas". Not only the children, but even adults and teachers who were involved in games and dances with children liked him very much. The children were so delighted when, in the end of the party, Santa Claus gave them presents--toys and chocolate figures.

The group of children who were unable to leave their homes and participate in the parties because of their health received gifts as well. CARITAS together with the handicapped children's society called "Childhood" greeted the children at their homes and presented them with packages with candy. Also, Children's Orphanage No1, the City Children's Hospital, the Children's Home for children with eyesight problems, the Home for children suffering from infantile paralysis and poliomyelitis were visited, and everywhere to the fullest extent possible the children were given an improvised party. The winners and participants of the Christmas competition got the deserved prizes and all children got Christmas presents.

family have sent their works for the competition and each of them makes the works in their own manner: Ilya makes works of clay, Dasha does appliques, and Katya draws. All art objects sent for the competition were shown on TV.

Summing up the work done within the framework of the Christmas program for children, one can say that a big development has taken place, and not only in respect of quantity, but in respect of quality, too. There were more children participating in the Christmas competition and, thanks to the cooperation with the Television and Radio Company, more and more children from out-of-the-way places of Primorye got acquainted with the Bible story of Christmas. Cooperation with the television company is very fruitful, so next year we would like to plan not only to continue carrying on the mutual competition but to help make programs telling about Christmas, Christmas customs, and Christmas traditions in different countries a part of every year's Christmas experience. Taped versions could be shown in other cities, if we cannot do live performances there.

As for the Christmas art contest, we would like to involve the art schools and colleges and the Children's Art Gallery so that we can arrange the public exhibition of the works during January. In our opinion, not only the quantity of children involved in program will increase, but the quality of the program will still be increasing in the years ahead.