“Let this mind be in you, which was also in Christ Jesus: who, being in the form of God, thought it not robbery to be equal with God: But made himself of no reputation, and took upon him the form of a servant, and was made in the likeness of men: And being formed in fashion as a man, he humbled himself, and became obedient unto death, even the death of a cross” (Phil. 2:5-8).

The Cab Ride:

Last month, I was hurrying to Christ the Savior Church on Anza Street for their parish feast day and I needed a cab. After some wait, a cab pulled up and we began our trip across town from Raphael House. After one or two blocks, the cab driver began to engage me in a conversation about who I was and what I, as an Orthodox Christian, believed. The conversation quickly went to the heart of the matter: Who is this Jesus of Nazareth? As it turned out the cabbie was a Muslim and it quickly became clear he saw Jesus as a prophet, a human being and nothing more, while I know Him to be both what I am and what God is. Then he said these very thought provoking words: “Don’t you think it is rather degrading for God to take on human flesh?” And there was the difference. His God was the God of “surrender” and “submission”. But, the God I worship loves mankind so much that He took upon Himself our broken, wounded humanity and made it His own. Like a parent whose child has fallen into a muddy puddle, He could not and cannot bear to see His beloved creatures perish. Rather, He stepped into the muck to rescue what is precious to Him and became what we are. We follow God’s law, His commandments, not because we fear He will obliterate us, but because we love Him. I prefer our God.

Back in January of 2006, I met and spoke with Archpriest Alexander Tkachenko, Director of the Children’s Hospice in St. Petersburg, who was visiting in the Seattle area. Fr. Alexander had been part of a hospital chaplaincy program in Seattle and is well known to the Orthodox clergy of the area. Having finished his training in Seattle, Fr. Alexander saw a great need in the area of special care for seriously ill children in Russia. Over the course of several years, a hospice program for seriously ill and dying children came into being.

The Hospice provides not only medical care, but psychological, nutritional and spiritual care for the patients and their families. It seemed to me the Hospice provided us, and especially our own children, with a golden opportunity to reach out and help others. We could certainly provide some necessary funds, but they could provide our children with a window into the lives of other children far away in Russia, Orthodox children, who had very serious needs. What a wonderful thing it would be if our children made friends and pen pals with the children of the Hospice. What a wonderful thing it would be for our children to learn the joy of opening their hearts to others and the joy of giving.

I am grateful to Fr. Michael Anderson who helped design the project: “Youth Making Change with Change”. It was our first attempt to involve children directly in raising funds to help other children get badly needed pain medication, medical procedures, nutrition and other items which could bring them some physical comfort. We also wanted to let the Russian children know something about what it is like to be an Orthodox Christian in America, to open their sense of the world by bringing them into direct contact with our children through photo journals and letters. [For related story, see page ____]

I am so glad to report, our children, with help from
adults, raised $9,881.05 in just a few months. This money was sent directly to the Hospice and, as Fr. Alexander reported in an email in August: “This is a great help for our Children’s Hospice. With these funds we can pay salaries for 2 physicians during a year.” I am grateful to God for all those who participated in anyway to this drive. If children can make this kind of difference, think what adults can do. May God richly bless everyone who gave of their time and talents to help the seriously ill children of the St. Petersburg Children’s Hospice.

+Bishop Benjamin

_Eis Polli Eti Despotas!

We are pleased to announce . . . our New Advertisement Plan

Content and Style-Appropriate Ads may be run in the _Vision_ at the following rates:

Ministries, Department, Monasteries, etc., of The Diocese of the West:
- no charge

Entities outside of The Diocese of the West:
- Full page one issue: $250
- Half page one issue: $135
- Quarter page: $70
- Business card: $35

The above rates are subject to requirements and/or incurred costs from printing.

Placement of ads is subject to considerations of space, and discretion of the Publisher.
**WANTED**

Orthodox Couple to live at Orthodox Retreat Center
Life-Giving Spring Retreat Center - Boulder City, NV
Retired Orthodox couple to live at the Life-Giving Spring Retreat Center in Boulder City, NV and oversee the facility. Responsibilities include reporting problems to the Director; supervising the cook, housekeeper and gardener when the Director is away; and greeting retreat coordinators when they arrive with their groups. The position also includes the opportunity for paid part-time work if desired, but the option is not required.

The couple will receive a three-bedroom apartment attached to the Retreat Center rent-free with utilities included at no charge. The apartment is on the ground level with its own entrance and located in Boulder City, Nevada, one of the most charming towns in the West. Parks and shopping are within easy walking distance and it is only 25 minutes driving time to St. Paul the Apostle Orthodox Church in Las Vegas.

For more information about Boulder City, NV, please visit http://www.bouldercitychamber.com/

To learn more about Life-Giving Spring Retreat Center, please visit the website at http://www.lasvegasorthodox.com/RetreatCenter/

Contact Information: Kathryn Short - Executive Director--702.280.1192.

---

**The Orthodox Vision** is published three times a year by The Diocese of the West. It is free to all parish members and for outreach within the Diocese.

The articles contained herein do not necessarily reflect the views or policies of the Diocese or the editors. The advertisements contained herein are not necessarily endorsed by the Diocese or Editorial Staff.
Headwaters of the Missouri River Blessed!

Established where Lewis and Clark discovered the Jefferson, Madison, and Gallatin rivers joining to form the Missouri River, Missouri Headwaters was a geographical focal point important to early Native Americans, trappers, traders, and settlers. The length of the combined Missouri-Mississippi system from the headwaters of the Missouri to the mouth of the Mississippi is about 3,740 miles (6,020 km), making it the world’s third longest river after the Nile and the Amazon.

It takes approximately 57 Days for water from the headwaters to reach the Gulf. On Theophany 2006 Archpriest John Mancantelli and members of the mission went to the Headwaters of the Missouri River to bless this body of water. This is the first time in History that an Orthodox priest has blessed this body of water which ultimately becomes the Mississippi river and flows into the gulf of Mexico.

Submitted by Jerry and Connie Hutch, of the Orthodox Mission of Helena, Montana

BENJAMIN visits St. Christina Mission, Fremont, CA, May 21st

VESTMENTS & CHURCH GOODS FROM RUSSIA

Made in the workshops of Valaam Monastery

Very Affordable Prices

Byzantine Style Icons Painted on Commission

Orthodox Books, Cards & Music

MONASTERY OF ST. JOHN BOOKSTORE
Anyone who has grown up in one of several Russian communities on the West Coast has come across individuals and whole families, European in appearance, who claim China as their birthplace. "Funny, you don’t look Chinese" would not be a typical reaction here, as it would in the case of someone encountering for the first time an individual with a European accent, perhaps blond and blue-eyed, saying "I was born in Manchuria." In fact, a significant portion of Russian citizens fleeing the advent of Communism headed east and eventually settled in the major urban centers of China, such as Shanghai, Peking, and Tientsin. But for many the most desirable destination was the brand new city of Harbin in Manchuria, which was for all practical purposes a Russian city outside Russia proper, a haven for those not wishing to subject themselves to the Soviet government and yearning to retain their political, economic, and religious freedom. For many of those who settled there it reflected a vision of what life in Russia could have become had there been no Communist takeover.

How did this ready-made Russian city come about? If we look at the map of Manchuria we can see that this territory sticks out like a large thumb extending northward from mainland China into Russian territory. Siberia lies to its north and west, while the area to the east, reaching to the Pacific coast, is known as the Ussurian Region and includes the port city of Vladivostok. In the heady, economically optimistic 1890's, with the ascent of the young Emperor Nicholas II to the throne, Russia was in the process of building the 3,000 mile Trans-Siberian Railroad, providing a direct rail link from the Ural Mountains to Vladivostok. The only snag in this project was the fact that the Chinese province of Manchuria lay precisely where the last leg of this railway, connecting the Siberian and Ussurian Railways, would need to be built. It so happened that in 1895 Japan defeated China in the Sino-Japanese War, after which Russia, along with France and Germany, was able to persuade Japan not to take over a part of Manchuria it got in a post-war treaty. In return for this favor Russia, in the person of Count Sergei Witte, her illustrious Finance Minister, asked for and received permission to build the Chinese Eastern Railroad (CER) across Manchuria. In 1896 a contract was signed between the Chinese government and the Russo-Chinese Bank allowing not only for the building and exploitation of the railway, but also for a rather wide strip of land on both sides of the Railway line to be placed under Russian administration. This was to remain in force for 80 years following the completion of the line, with the proviso that China could buy back the railroad in 36 years.

After a year of intensive surveying, it was decided to move the railway headquarters from Vladivostok to the Manchurian interior, in order to allow for building of the railroad from its center, and a party of engineers was dispatched to where the Sungari river crossed the projected line. Among the various fishing villages in a swampy area called "Khaabin" (a Manchu word meaning "a place for drying fishing nets") an abandoned distillery was found and purchased, becoming the new headquarters for the construction administration, which arrived at that location on June 9, 1898, generally considered to be Harbin's "birthday."

From that point on Harbin and other communities along the line started growing by leaps and bounds. By 1900, when the construction of permanent housing began, there were already 5,000 Russians living in Harbin. While the total number of Chinese workers on the railroad had increased by then to 75,000 from the initial 15,000 that had arrived two years before, 12,000 of these were living in Harbin in 1901. An urban development plan was drawn up for the Sungari section, later to be known as the New Town District, producing an instant city, with the new CER headquarters, a grandiose train station, and the
wooden St. Nicholas Church (later to become the Cathedral) as its principal landmarks. What emerged was a singularly contemporary city, with public buildings in the art nouveau style that was being favored for new construction in such cities as London, Paris, or Vienna. The 1903 completion of the CER and the aggressive colonization policy of the Russian government guaranteed a steady rise in Harbin’s Russian population, to about 40,000 at the outbreak of World War I.

It was in this period between 1903 and 1917 that Harbin was transformed from a chaotic boomtown into a rather sophisticated European-like city with all the requisite cultural, educational, religious, and social institutions. These were already in place when the cataclysmic events besetting Russia between 1917 and 1920 tripled the city’s Russian population to 120,000 by 1922, and it was to remain near that level for the next two decades. The administrative structures that had been in place for the Russian population along the railroad line were replaced, first by an Inter-Allied Committee and later by the Chinese military, albeit with White Russian technical management in place. But in 1924 China signed an agreement with the Soviet Union for joint management of the CER, with the latter as the dominant partner. This brought about a tremendous influx of Soviet citizens as well as pressure on those Russians who had been working for the railroad to apply for Soviet citizenship. With the 1927 victory of the anti-foreign Kuomintang Party in China the Sino-Soviet partnership soured, leaving a great degree of administrative and political chaos in Harbin as the three basic forces—Soviet, anti-Soviet, and nationalist Chinese—vied for power. Discovering evidence that the Soviet leadership in the city was working toward the eventual domination of Manchuria by the Soviet Union, the Chinese arrested and deported many top local Soviet officials, bringing about threats of sabotage and armed intervention in certain areas by Soviet troops. There were even instances of massacres and forced repatriations.

In spite of this, the 1920’s could be regarded as the heyday of Russian Harbin. Just about every aspect of life in Russia was transplanted to this ready-made city; it was truly a “community in exile”, set apart from the surrounding Chinese society in many respects.

A newspaper article from the period could justifiably claim: "We have created an il-

Our Lady of Iviron Church

Church of the Annunciation

Saint Nicholas Cathedral

(Harbin, continued on next page.)
The Orthodox Church was very much in evidence; in addition to the aforementioned St. Nicholas Cathedral in the center of town, Harbin had 22 churches by the 1930’s, and the rest of the Manchurian Diocese had 24. Originally an outgrowth of the Russian Church’s Peking Mission, Manchuria’s churches were incorporated into the Vladivostok Diocese in 1907. And in 1922, when all the Russian churches in China ended up in the jurisdiction of the Russian Orthodox Church Outside Russia, they were granted the status of a Metropolitanate, with a Metropolitan in Harbin and two auxiliary bishops. In addition, two monasteries were founded in 1924, one for men and another for women, and the diocese established pastoral theological courses, as well as a Theological Seminary and the St. Vladimir Institute of Theology. The men’s monastery had a fully equipped printing press which produced service books and a periodical entitled The Heavenly Bread, dealing with various church-related issues.

The influx of refugees from Communism inevitably created a need for charitable services, and it was here that the Orthodox churches played a leading role. Just about each parish had something to offer in this regard: helping the poor, the aged, the infirm, and orphans became a priority for them. And larger-scale projects were initiated by the Church’s hierarchy, especially by the first Metropolitan of Harbin, Methodius (Gerasimov) and his auxiliary, Bishop Nestor (Anisimov), both of whom worked hard to ease the lot of their countrymen. (see boxes)

The situation of the Russian population of Harbin underwent another great change when the Japanese overtook the city on February 5, 1932, having gradually overtaken the rest of Manchuria since the previous fall. Manchuria was now Manchukuo, and a puppet Chinese government formally headed by the child emperor Pu Yi of The Last Emperor fame. The Soviet Union sold the CER to Japan, and 20,000 Soviet railroad employees (13,000 of them Harbin residents) were returned to their homeland. But for the remaining non-Soviet Russians life under the Japanese was no piece of cake, and Harbin in the 1930’s was described as “a worn-out, decadent, almost desperate, but still charming beauty, clinging to her reputation as the Paris of the Far East, but step by step being taken over by the new Japanese masters.” There was an aggressive policy of Japanese settlement, with the best jobs, including, of course, those on the railroad, going to the Japanese. And a number of non-Soviet Russians fell victim to Japanese red-baiting; there were political repression and arrests. It is no wonder that by 1939 only 28,000 Russians remained in Harbin, for by then the rest had immigrated either to North or South America, or to major Chinese cities such as Shanghai, Tianjin, and Peking.

As difficult as life was under the Japanese, the final blow for the Russian community in Harbin came in 1945 with the Soviet occupation following Japan’s defeat, and the takeover of Harbin by Red China the following year. Now just about everyone was striving to leave Harbin, but these efforts were generally frustrated by an uncooperative Soviet consulate. Throughout the next few decades the remaining Russians did get out little by little, usually after overcoming immense obstacles. And not all of them headed for the “free world”; a significant number, including Metropolitan Nestor (see inset), fell prey to Soviet persuasion and patriotic fervor, returning to the Soviet Union, for which they paid a heavy price. By then the church situation had completely deteriorated, as church after church was closed down. St. Nicholas Cathedral was razed in 1966, and another church was turned into a circus. According to the most recent report, ten of the 23 churches are still standing, but only one is functioning.

But the memory of this unique city remained fresh in the minds of those hundreds of Harbin natives who ended

---

1 Elena Taskina, Neizvestnyi Kharbin (Moscow: Prometei,1994) p. 28
2 G.V. Melikhov, Rossiskaiia Emigratsiiia v Kitae (Moscow: Institut rossiiskoi istorii RAN, 1997) pp. 66-67
up mostly in the various urban centers of the West Coast, whether it was in the twenties and thirties, or after the war, after a stopover in mainland China, Australia, or South America. Many of them were instrumental in the establishment and development of various Orthodox parishes, including several of our diocesan parishes and were active in diocesan affairs; C. Chekene and K. Tsenin in San Francisco and L. V. Leonard and L. Golitzin in Los Angeles come to mind, and this is just the tip of the iceberg. Others, who had either already made a name for themselves in Harbin or were raised there were able to make significant contributions to the cultural, intellectual, and economic life in their adopted countries in the Western Hemisphere. Just one example of this is the Riasonovsky family; Valentin, the father, was an expert on Mongol law and taught at Harbin’s Polytechnic Institute. His book on the subject was published by Indiana University Press. Antonina, the mother, wrote two novels (under the pen name Nina Fedorova) about the lives of Russians in Harbin, the first of which, *The Family*, won the a prize from Atlantic Monthly in 1940 and went on to become an American best seller. And their sons, both of whom spent their boyhood years in Harbin, went on to become distinguished Russian history professors. Nicholas, an active member of St. John the Baptist Church in Berkeley and now retired from U. C. Berkeley, authored the classic *A History of Russia*, while Alexander just retired from Pennsylvania University and is also a poet.

In the 1980’s it became possible for U. S. citizens to visit Harbin, as well as other Chinese cities. Visitors found very few vestiges of Russian presence, and only a handful of elderly Russians. By 1988, according to one report, only 30 Russians remained in the city. Today Harbin is a thriving and entirely Chinese industrial city, and has been characterized as "the political, economic, scientific, cultural and communications mecca of Northeast China," with a population approaching one million. But it still bears traces of its Russian past in its architecture, availability of certain foods, and availability of Russian-made items in its stores.

**NOTABLE HARBIN HIERARCHS:**

**Metropolitan Methodius (Gerasimov) (1857-1931)**

He was the first to occupy the newly-formed see of Harbin and Manchuria and successfully met the challenges of bringing together all the Orthodox of Harbin at a time when Harbin was inundated with immigrants from Russia and making the Church the center of their lives. His top priority was the extension of aid to the least fortunate, and he went ahead in 1929 with building a church-sponsored home (later named The Metropolitan Methodius Shelter) to take care of the needs of the elderly and young orphans, which opened its doors to around 500 even before its completion.

**Metropolitan Nestor (Anisimov) (1884-1962)**

From his earliest days Metropolitan Nestor displayed a great deal of missionary zeal. After completing missionary courses at the Kazan Theological Academy, he was tonsured and ordained to the priesthood at the age of 23 and went to a remote village on the Kamchatka Peninsula, where he immersed himself in missionary work, establish-

ing schools and clinics, dealing with widespread alcoholism, going from village to village by dog or reindeer sleds converting thousands of natives in this pagan land. He learned a number of native languages and translated the Liturgy, parts of the Gospel, and various prayers into the native languages. And his efforts brought about the Kamchatka Charitable Brotherhood to promote church growth and basic human services on the Kamchatka Peninsula. This body’s membership grew into the thousands and its principal benefactor was Czar Nicholas II himself, who made an annual commitment of school supplies, church furnishings, medications, and other donations for the region. By 1917, thanks to Fr. Nestor’s efforts, there were 35 churches, 38 chapels, and 42 schools all over Kamchatka.

Fr. Nestor spent the World war as a volunteer medical corps chaplain and in late 1916 was consecrated Bishop of Kamchatka and Petropavlovsk. Soon after his return he took part in the All-Russian Church Council, after which he was not able to return to his diocese due to the Communist takeover, and ended up in Harbin, where he became auxiliary to Metropolitan Methodius. Here he resumed his charitable work, eventually building the much-needed Home of Mercy which housed orphans, the elderly, and the disabled, providing them with a whole array of opportunities to engage in productive activity—through workshops featuring iconography, carpentry, bookbinding, sewing, embroidery, and various crafts. It also housed a school, an outpatient clinic, a small hospital, a library, its own bakery, and a candle making plant. And a church in honor of the icon of the Mother of God “Joy of All Who Sorrow” was erected on the site.

In 1948, after being elevated to Metropolitan, Vladyka Nestor decided to return to Russia, and was promptly sent to the gulag. Upon his 1954 release he served in the dioceses of Novosibirsk and Kirovograd, reposing in 1962, and was buried in Peredelkino, behind the altar of a metochion church of the Trinity-St. Sergius Lavra.

Metropolitan Melety (Zaborovsky)—The Hierarch Who Stood Up to the Japanese

Metropolitan Methodius was followed in 1931 as ruling hierarch by this worthy successor, who had the unenviable task of guiding the Church in Harbin and all of Japanese occupied Manchuria at a period when it was under great pressure, up to the time of the Soviet takeover, which he survived for less than a year. His unequivocal defense of Orthodoxy was demonstrated by his response to the Japa-

Memory Eternal!

Nikolette Markovna Harris, a parishioner of St. Nicholas Church in Portland, OR, fell asleep in the Lord on Friday, January 24th, after a lifelong battle with cancer. She was 12. She suffered from leukemia as an infant, which went into remission after treatment. She became ill again at age 9. Despite a two year remission, the cancer returned a year ago. It returned a year ago. Her surviving family includes her mother, Irina, father, March, and brother, Theodore.

George Tosi, 73, a veteran of the United States Marine Corps, fell asleep in the Lord on Monday, February 20th. He served as a sergeant in the Korean War and a Captain in the Vietnam War. He was awarded two Purple Hearts, and received numerous personal and unit citations for his service to this country. He was given a special award from the government of South Korea and twice awarded citations from the Governor of New Jersey for his service to state and country. He was a graduate of Fairleigh Dickinson University and Georgetown University School of Law.

George was a longtime attorney in Passaic and Essex Counties. He served as Deputy First Assistant Prosecutor in the Passaic County Prosecutors’ Office and First Assistant Public Defender in Passaic County. He also served as a public defender and prosecutor in Essex County. He was the prosecutor for the Township of Little Falls as well as having private practice. Recently he was Of Counsel for Warren and Tosi Law Firm in Little Falls, NJ.

George was a member of the Marine Corps League, American Legion Post 121, Veterans of Foreign War, The Military Order of the Purple Heart, the Disabled American Veterans, and both the New Jersey and Florida Bar. He served as school board member for Passaic Valley Board of Education, various committees in Little Falls, including past president of the Little Falls Athletic Club, and coached football teams and youth activities in town.

He was an active member of Holy Resurrection Orthodox Church in Wayne, New Jersey and an assisting church member throughout the country. He is survived by his wife of 48 years, Evelyn Tosi, four children (David, Lawrence, Fr. Eric and Major Sharon Moore), 12 grandchildren and many friends. He inspired and touched with his humor, service and love for God, family and country. He served his fellow man and sought to lift those who were down.

Funeral Services were held at Holy Resurrection Orthodox Church in Wayne. The family asked that donations be made to Holy Resurrection Church to be used for the work of the church and missions.

Matushka Margarita Gisetti, wife of Archpriest Dmitri Gisetti and long time pastor of Holy Virgin Mary Cathedral in Los Angeles, fell asleep in the Lord at about 12:05 p.m. on Thursday, April 6th. May her memory be eternal!
In visits to Orthodox countries I have witnessed numerous Orthodox monasteries in close proximity to local communities, and wondered, perhaps with some envy, what it must be like for an Orthodox Christian to enjoy such a spiritual blessing to have easy access to a monastic community close to home. For many years, the closest OCA monastery for me was St. John of Shanghai Monastery in Pt. Reyes Station, CA over 350 miles away; that is, until three years ago when I became the deacon at St. Herman Orthodox Church in Oxnard, CA. My first week at St. Herman’s, the pastor, Fr. Paul Waïsanen, invited me to join him and many other parishioners to attend the monthly gathering of the Friends of St. Barbary Monastery where I think it was Fr. Lawrence Russell, the monastery’s chaplain, who was slated to give a talk on a spiritual topic preceded by Vespers and a potluck meal. Talk about surprise, talk about shock!! Fr. Paul tells me that OCA, ROCOR, Antiochian, and Greek pastors, deacons and parishioners regularly attend these monthly gatherings for a fellowship meal, Vespers, dessert and an Orthodox spiritual talk. Pinch me! Is this for real?? I was about to find out what it was like, American-style, to have an Orthodox monastic community close to home, just like in the Orthodox countries.

Sorry, but for your better understanding, I need at this point to provide a brief history of this monastery before I continue. From the outset in 1992, our bishop, His Grace, Tikhon, had the vision to form a monastery with the current Mother Victoria as Abbess. First year struggles required Mother Victoria to survive by working outside the monastery, a situation that finally ended in 1998, a few years after the Friends of St. Barbara Monastery was formed. The original monastic home was a small cottage in Santa Barbara followed soon after the first year with a rental house in Santa Barbara. This worked out fine for the monastery, during which the Friends were formed in 1995. Finally, in 1999 the Goleta (suburb of Santa Barbara) residence was purchased, and the monthly gatherings could occur in Santa Barbara style ala backyard patio events. In the meantime, only three nuns could reside in the residence due to its size, although many sincere Orthodox lay women had expressed interest. The sisters supported their endeavors beyond the financial support of the Friends by operating their bookstore, helping at the local Orthodox elementary school, giving retreats and presentations to church groups, producing greeting cards, laminated icons and magnets, etc.

This brings you up to date up to the point when I first met the three nuns three years ago. Fifty to 100 Orthodox Christians of all ethnic groups (including Ethiopians like Tsige-Roman Gobezie whom I wrote about in the Spring, 2005 Orthodox Vision article) frequent the monthly meetings with talks given by the likes of Bishop Basil Essey, our Bishop Benjamin, my pastor, Fr. Paul Waïsanen deacons, subdeacons, Orthodox lay persons, and even Mother Melania of the monastery. I have yet to hear Mother Victoria give a talk, though I am sure she has, given that she is a St. Vladimir’s graduate. What a great blessing these monthly Orthodox talks are for those of us in Southern California who can attend!!

Since I have attended these monthly meetings, the nuns purchased another nearby residence and increased in size to 6 nuns. The sisters have always envisioned a monastic setting where space would be available for many more nuns and guests, but the Santa Barbara locale just did not seem conducive for this. And then, just as they reached maximum capacity, His Grace, Bishop Tikhon assigned a full-time chaplain to them, Archpriest Alexander Lisenko. What an answer to prayers, almost beyond their expectations!

(St. Barbara’s, continued on next page.)
What to do? Here, after all these years of reader services they have a full-time chaplain!

I like to describe what happened next in terms of a different paradigm, thinking outside the box. A major subgroup within the Friends has been members of St. Athanasius Antiochian Church in Goleta, the nearest Orthodox parish, headed by Archpriest Nicholas Speier. Without a doubt they have been the greatest financial supporters and physical help supporters within the Friends. One of their deacon’s wives is a realtor who assisted in the acquisition of a three acre property in Santa Paula, a nearby community 25 miles away in Ventura County that was ideal for the nuns. Considering the recent sizeable real estate property value increase that had occurred in Santa Barbara, this seemed a propitious time to make such a move for the nuns. It would no longer be St. Barbara Monastery of Santa Barbara in Santa Barbara County, but so what? After considerable prayer and Bishop Tikhon’s blessing, the nuns proceeded to purchase the property.

On the Feast of St. Barbara, December 4, 2005, His Grace, Bishop Benjamin, celebrated an hierarchical Liturgy at the new monastery location, 15799 Ojai Road, Santa Paula, CA 93060, and blessed the property. We at St. Herman Parish are proud to be the closest Orthodox parish to the monastery. While the residence is quite large, it is still necessary to borrow 8 RVs from Orthodox friends until such time as expansion can occur. The Friends gatherings are now on the second Sunday afternoon each month to accommodate travel considerations. The Friends have been a tremendous help with work project sessions at the monastery and the monastery continues to provide the same services for support of the monastery.

The monastery cannot continue, however, to have some of the nuns live in RVs, and expansion plans are in progress for the current site with an Orthodox contractor eager to proceed to house many more sisters and provide for a suitable Orthodox chapel. The future looks very positive for the Community of St. Barbara Monastery. At present, in addition to the Abbess, Mother Victoria, there are three other tonsured lesser schema nuns and four novices. Room permitting with expansion plans, Mother Victoria has many other vocation prospects waiting.

While the Friends and their own efforts continue to financially support the monastery, the sisters really cannot proceed with the necessary expansion plans for space for the current and future sisters without outside help. Our bishops and the Diocesan Council have given permission for the sisters to send letters requesting donations and they have been a tr

In Japan, there was a high degree of obedience and the Japanese insisted that the goddess Amaterasu be conducted in Orthodox Churches. On January 30, 1944 (o.s.) he issued a ringing statement condemning such practice, and also sent a protest to the local authorities. This substantially lifted the spirits of the entire Orthodox population of Manchuria and was successful in preventing its spiritual enslavement, for this requirement was withdrawn, as if nothing had ever happened.

The Harbin Train Station and St. Nicholas

This ornate landmark in the center of town featured something that no other train station had at the time: a large, prominently displayed icon of St. Nicholas. But in 1924 the CER was placed under Sino-Soviet management and everything under its control was secularized at the insistence of the Soviets. The Chinese generally went along with this policy, but refused to allow the removal of the icon from the station in the grounds that it was held in esteem not only by Russians but by the Chinese as well. One of the top Chinese officials of the railroad, in fact, said at the time "This old man has been standing here for a long time already, he is a kind and good old man, so let him stay." And a Chinese tradesman, who had been caught in a storm while swimming in the Sungari River, was rescued after praying to St. Nicholas and from then on would come to the station to light candles and pray before the icon.3

3 Bishop Nestor, Manchuria—Kharbin (Belgrade, 1933) pp. 38-39

BIBLIOGRAPHY


Cohn-Lieber, Zina, My Years in Harbin Manchuria, London, 1997

Melikhov, G. V., Rossiiskaia Emigratsiia V. Kitae, Moscow: Institut Rossiiskoi Istori RAN, 1997.

Nestor, Bishop, Man chzburiaNKhbarin, Belgrade: 1933.


Sannikov, Viktor, Pod Znakom Voškodiashchego Solntsa v Man’chzurii, Sydney, 1990

Taskina, Elena, Neizvestnyi Kharbin, Moscow: Prometei, 1994

STEWARDS OF THE WEST
August 16, 2004 through August 15, 2005
$43,459 raised for Outreach Activities

Torch Bearers
Anderson, Bradley
Caetta, Mary Louise
Evans, Andrew
Geis, Lyman
Hartman, The Rev. Kirill
Holy Trinity Cathedral, San Francisco
Hughes, Robert P. & Olga R.
Lowell, Fr. David & Elaine
Schwalbenberg, Peter
St. John of Damascus Church

Standard Bearers
Diedrich, Brian & Cristina
Hayashi, George & Kaleria
Kasperovich, Vitaly
Nowik, Eugene & Dorothy
Our Lady of Kazan Skete
Prescop, Alex & Bonnie
Prybyla, Paul & Many
Roubal, Ivan
Sayre, Craig
Skikos, Andrew & Kathrin
Solodow, Robert

Sustaining Members
Adams, Scott & Kateryna
Ambrozjak, Demitro
Anderson, Scott
Anderson, The Rev John
Anonymous
Artemoff, George & Svetlana
Baranoff, Constantine & Olga
Berg, Rodney & Bodil
Bishop Tikhon (Fitzgerald)
Booriakin, Walter & Tania
Brown, Craig & Natalya
Carey, Robert
Carr, Nicholas & Esther
Chakourski, Valeri
Craig, Dr. William
Czyzoversky, Sonja
Damerou, Richard & Anastasia
de Somov, Madeleine
Dirks, John & Camilla
Dorning, Luke & Susan
Duffy, Kevin & Sinead
Duncan, Cary
Erofejev, Valentina
Fabula, Dn David and Janet
Gerasimov, Gregg and Kira
Giritsky, Katya
Gisetti, Margarita
Gogol, Lew & Valentina
Golitzin, George & Margaret
Greene, Judy
Gromadski, Victor
Hajdu-Cronin, Yoon
Hatch, Michael & Anna
Herring, Lois Mary
Hicks, David V
Holmes, Scott & Esther
Holowach, Gary S. & Kathleen
Homiak, Daniel & Dominique
Homyak, Harold
Hunt, Robert & Kathy
Jones, Russell & Lynn
Kaliakin, Nikolai & Inna
Kautsky, Mark & Elizabeth
Kharitonoff, Alexander & Sara
Kluge, JoAnn
Krupenkin, Gai & Tamara
Kuolt, Fr. Damian & Joanna
Langley, Alexander
Letten, Fr. Nicholas & Barbara
Lien, The Rev. Kevin, & Elizabeth
Lisenko, Fr. Alexander
Lofft, Natasha
Los Angeles Orthodox Club No. 155
Lozano, Anna
MacKinnon, Father Ian & Nina
Merculief, Kathi & Joe
Mikita, Joseph & Joyce
Miklasevitch, Fred
Morse, Charles
Olenicoff, Igor
Osolinsky, William & Rosemarie
Owens, Barbara
Palmer, Daniel C
Patell, Ronald
Patterson, John & Anna
Peachey, John
Popoff, Jr., Alexander & Maria
Popov, Alexis
Pouschine, Ivan & Helen
Riasanovsky, Nicholas & Arlene
Riazance, Andre & Anna
Sustaining Members (Continued)
Richardson, Allen
Rome, The Rev. Michael & Rachel
Roufail, Fouad & Samira
Sabel, Kenneth & Carolyn

(Stewards, continued on next page.)

Stanciulescu, Maria
Starr, Catherine
Stasevich, Konstantyn & Elizabeth
Stickel, Marianne
Studentzoff, Julie
Tar, Natalie & Michael
Telles, Kenneth & Kathy
Teter, Gregory & Mary
Thong, Elizabeth
Todd, Allen & Lois
Tokmakoff, Andrew & Galina
Torgerson, Kaliopi
Tretiakoff, Dimitri
Tucker, Symeon & Eleni
Uliantzeff, Tamara
Unknown
Volk, Clara
Wiles, Ioannis & Photini
Wilson, Richard
Wingate, Dave
Zadorozny, Helen
Zelesnik, Michael
Zhang, Douglas & Joanne
Zhang, Joanne
Kerins, Deacon Joseph & Elizabeth
Kerns, Michael & Sharon
Klavzar, Edward & Vera
Kojin, Kenneth & Nonna
Kreel, Joseph & Caroline
Kurowski, Joseph & Rose
LaCondo, Rosemary
Leonoff, Irene
Levenetz, Boris & Alexandra
Loboda, Raisa
Marich, Maria
Martin, Linda L.
May, Tamara
Meko, Michael & Stacy
Molnar, Julie
Morse, Allen(Johann) & Helen
Moskal, Cheryl
Nash, Shirley
Newmaster, John & Sandra
Oftedal, Sarah
Pashkov, Vladimir & Svetlana
Pekovich, Anne
Penco, Clemente & Lubov
Pentikis, A. P.
Pierce, Fr. John & Katherine
Pike, Dn R Gabriel
Read, Jack & Danica
Relucio, Karen
Reynolds, David & Irina
Reynolds, Paul & Susan
Richards, Ken
Rodak, David
Saadeh, Mary
Safonov, Richard
Schnitike, Ekaterina
Schreiber, Tatiana & Will
Schumacher, Stephen
Scott, Leila
Sechrist, Christine
Shalygina, Aleksandra
Shank, Father David & Constanza
Shmelev, Anatol & Julia
Sinelnikov, Boris
Spanu, Christian & Mariana

WWW.OCADOW.ORG
For the latest information on The Diocese of the West
Information on parishes, institutions and departments
Archived issues of The Orthodox Vision
Complete letters of instruction from His Grace

Stewards of the West

Make checks payable to:
Diocese of the West
Office of the Treasurer
25 Captains Cove
Oakland, CA 94618-2311

MONASTERY OF ST. JOHN
P.O. Box 563/135 Balboa Avenue
Point Reyes Station, California 94956
Phone (415) 663-1705
office@monasteryofstjohn.org
www.monasteryofstjohn.org
Interview with Fr. Victor Sokolov

Part 1

The following is first in a series of excerpts from an interview conducted with Archpriest Victor Sokolov, conducted at his home in Healdsburg, California on Friday, September 23, 2005. The interview was transcribed by Jan Bear, St. Nicholas Church, Portland, OR and edited for publication by Barbara Sokolov. The interviewer was Fr. Isaac Skidmore, Archangel Gabriel Church, Ashland, OR.

FR. ISAAC: Father Victor, could you please describe your upbringing, your family of origin and how you were raised. What was your childhood like?

FR. VICTOR: I was born in Russia, in the Soviet Union, in 1947. It was just two years, less than two years actually, after the conclusion of World War II. So life was very difficult, not much to eat, lots of ruins, lots of wounds from the war. I was born and raised in Kalinin, now called Tver. The city was located right where the German troops stopped in their advance on Moscow, so there were many visible traces of World War II. At the conclusion of World War II my father was wounded, but he survived the war.

FR. ISAAC: What kind of work did your parents do?

FR. VICTOR: My mother worked as a bookkeeper and a saleswoman. My father was an electrician and worked in a factory during the day. At night he worked at home fixing things. He was very handy and could repair anything: radios, hotplates; you name it, he could fix it. So, as a toddler, my first playpen was his workbench, and I sat right there by my father playing with transformers, condensers, and resistors. My first toys were all sorts of electronic parts, which were bright and of different shapes.

Living like this, raised like this, you become aware of the oneness of the family. There was less separation of tasks or duties in the family than we have today. We all worked together, and this was essential for the survival of the family. For example our heating came from a wood-burning stove, so we had to chop the wood. That was something that Father and I would do. This task created a close bond between us. We were engaged in doing something meaningful together. It was not superfluous, not scheduled “quality time” that dad and son would spend together. No, it was just natural that we were working side by side. To cut enough wood for the whole winter was a long, long job, and so during this monotonous kind of labor, there was time for talking, time of asking questions, time of bonding together.

Another task was preparing food, like chopping cabbage and making sauerkraut. Huge barrels would have to be filled with the chopped cabbage. Again, it was a task for the whole family, a task of several evenings — all together we were working to chop enough cabbage to supply the family with vegetables during the winter.

FR. ISAAC: And did you have brothers and sisters?

FR. VICTOR: I had a brother and sister from my father’s first marriage, and a younger sister from my mother. I also had a cousin that I was close to.

Hunger was one of the prevailing conditions of the post war years. We felt hungry constantly. At that time my cousin and I would simply go out of town and find something to eat in the fields, berries, mushrooms… or steal cucumbers or tomatoes or potatoes, you know, from the fields. Also, early in the spring, while there was still snow in the forest, we would help our families by gathering sundrops, the very first flowers that appear in the forest, and bringing them home. Then our mothers would go and sell them in the streets. The family economy was one, you know, family life was one, inseparable. And so this is what it was like.

FR. ISAAC: What was school like in your childhood years?

FR. VICTOR: My school experience was very unique because, even though I belonged to a blue-collar family, we happened to live around the corner from the mansion — actually an apartment house that looked like a mansion — where all the party apparatchiks, all the bosses of the city, were living. So, because children attended neighborhood schools, I happened to be in the same class as the children of the first secretary of the Communist Party of the region, of the city mayor, of the chairman of the city Soviets… Of course these children of the Communist Elite did not know what hunger meant. They didn’t know what it was like to wear one pair of shoes for several years, you know; they were living in a totally different world. And so I guess that from that time on I became aware of the lie of communist
egalitarianism, and I started on the path of becoming a dissident.

I was constantly singled out for punishment at school. When something happened in the classroom, some kind of prank, or a disciplinary problem, the teachers would not dare to punish the children of the party bosses. But there I was, an easy and obvious target for their disciplinary actions. Not that I would say that I was an angel — I actually was the one who often did pranks, but it was still kind of unfair to punish me alone.

FR. ISAAC: Can you give an example of one of your pranks?

FR. VICTOR: You see, I was an electrician’s son, so from the beginning I knew a lot and was very comfortable with electricity. Schools were few, and there were many children after the war, so classes were held in shifts. One semester you would go to school during the morning shift, and the next semester your classes were held in the afternoon. Winters in Russia are dark, and darkness comes very early. Already by 3:00 o’clock in the afternoon it was dark. So there were many pranks. You could chew bits of paper, putting the moistened paper inside of the sockets, and screwing in the light bulbs. Then, when it was growing dark and the teacher turned on the lights, everything seemed normal at first because the moist paper conducted the electricity, but as the paper dried out, one light after another would go out. The teacher didn’t know what to do, so the classes had to be sent home, because you could not study in the dark. That was one prank.

FR. ISAAC: Can you describe your attitude towards religion when you were young?

FR. VICTOR: There was no attitude unfortunately. Unfortunately, religion didn’t exist in my world when I was young. However, in retrospect, when I looked back on my childhood years, especially after I had been baptized, and

conscious...
FR. ISAAC: Did authorities in your life enforce this indifference towards religion?

FR. VICTOR: We’re talking about the time when I was a young kid, so naturally I wasn’t really conscious of what the authorities were enforcing or not enforcing. But of course, all the textbooks were militantly atheistic, and…

FR. ISAAC: Explicitly so?

FR. VICTOR: Yes. There was a subject in the schools called “scientific atheism.” Once, when I was already in America, I looked through my records — you know, school records and university records, and I was amazed by the humongous chunk of academic time spent on this subject. Funny, I don’t remember anything about those studies, those classes. Some teachers and professors I remember, others I don’t. But “scientific atheism” and those teachers didn’t leave any imprint on me.

You know, there was a cliché, a saying, about the economics of Soviet Russia: “They pretend to pay us; we pretend to work.” The same thing could be applied to education. “They pretend to teach us; we pretend to learn.” And everybody’s satisfied. As long as you didn’t ask any questions, as long as you simply repeated what they said, you were the best student possible. Nobody wanted any troubles.

FR. ISAAC: So this indifference to religion remained your attitude up through adolescence as well?

FR. VICTOR: Probably yes. I’ve tried to figure out when and how I started thinking about God or about the purpose of life. Of course, like every teenager, I was fascinated with things, with the world, the cosmos. I remember very well, for example, one incident in the dormitory with my roommate, Misha. We were kind of talking all night about how amazing everything is, how great the world is. We didn’t speak it in terms of religion or in terms of God, but looking up into the starry sky, into the clear, dark sky, we could see so many specks of light. What were they? And we wondered; if I am made of molecules, atoms, could it be that the earth is just like a wondrous molecule of something grander, bigger? So we talked about this kind of speculation which can make you dizzy — but we were not focused on God as such.

FR. ISAAC: Do you remember when you started to think about God?

FR. VICTOR: Yes, and I know, for example, exactly when and why I took the Gospel in my hands for the first time. It was as a result of the underground appearance of the rock opera, Jesus Christ Superstar. This contraband album was extremely popular in the Soviet Union, but I didn’t understand what it was about. I remember how I asked my friend, Sasha, who knew languages, to translate the the insert for me. He did, but I couldn’t make much sense of it. So I had to get the Gospel. That’s how it was, you know.

Years later, when I came to the States, people were amazed to hear that, interestingly enough, Jesus Christ Superstar had a profound effect on Russian youth. This was because, for the first time, many young men and women started thinking about Christ, started reading the Gospel. People here couldn’t believe it, but for us, this rock opera was really a revelation. Nothing else.

Later on, I couldn’t help but ask myself, in retrospect of course, how I had read Russian literature for the first time? When reading Chekhov, Tolstoy, Dostoevsky, surely I could not have failed to understand something — Okay, Dostoevsky was a problem; Dostoevsky was forbidden, not allowed in the school curriculum. He was almost underground, kind of. But still there were things in Russian literature which clearly pointed towards God and towards His Creation. I guess somehow, reading Russian literature, I absorbed something deeply Christian in traditional Russian culture. It was preparation for the future, kind of.

I remember that I first started thinking about this in America in 1976. We were decorating the temple for a feast day at St. Nicholas in Saratoga with Matushka Helen...
Benigsen. I don’t remember which feast. One of the men who was involved in the decoration was walking across the temple and whistling. Matushka Benigsen just jumped and screamed, “Ee! Don’t do that!” “Don’t whistle in the church!”

“Why?” he asked, and she didn’t really know how to explain why, but I understood her. And I remember asking myself how I knew that this is not done in church. Certainly, I hadn’t had Sunday school or a grandma who had taught me things like this. I wondered; how did I just seem to know that you don’t stand in church with your hands in your pockets? You don’t whistle. You don’t go into church with a hat on, you know. You don’t chew gum in the church. But where did I learn these things? Nobody taught me specifically, but somehow — I guess it was in the culture.

I’m probably jumping, but I would like to say that on every Pascha night, all of us young people would go to the churches. There were some horrible stories about how young Communists would purposely go and raid the feast, trying to spoil it, but I don’t remember us doing that. We were going simply — I don’t know why — in search of tradition, of some festivities, in search of something bright, unusual. We went to shout together with everybody else, “Christ is Risen!” “Indeed He is Risen!” and to kiss strangers. It had nothing to do with church; it had nothing to do with religion. But still, just once a year, almost everyone would go to church for this observance. That was remarkable, you know, and it is something that I remember doing in every place I lived. And I lived in many places.

FR. ISAAC: That’s amazing. Can you now begin describing your sojourn to Orthodoxy?

FR. VICTOR: I have — I have been very blessed with people in my life. I have been unusually blessed with wonderful, great people in my life. That is my real source of wealth — the people who influenced me and enriched my life. The famous Russian poet, Bulat Okudjava, was my friend. I think that I was in the Soviet army at the time when he sent me his latest book, and one of the poems was dedicated to Vladimir Maximov.

FR. ISAAC: You say you were serving in the army at this time?

FR. VICTOR: Yes, I served three years in the army. Well… so I read this poem — a very, very powerful poem — but the name didn’t tell me anything, so in my next letter to Bulat I said, “By the way, who is Vladimir Maximov?” He replied that Vladimir Maximov was probably the only member of the Union of Soviet Writers who was openly a believer in God. So, as you can imagine, this was impressive.

Some time later, when I went on leave to Moscow, Bulat Okudjava gave me Maximov’s phone number. I called him, and he invited me to come over. So I went, and we became acquainted. We remained friends until he died many years later in Paris. In his writings, the questions of why — Why are we here? What is the value of life? — these questions of such importance were obvious and apparent. So this meeting with Maximov was one milestone on my path towards Orthodoxy. Eventually, through Maximov, I met other people who were believers and churchgoers. Until then, such people did not exist in my life.

FR. ISAAC: Were they living somewhat underground?

FR. VICTOR: No, no, well, in one sense they were living normal lives. For instance Maximov was a writer, yet he was a believer. There was another man, Igor, who was a carpenter, but he too was a believer. So you could say that people were living double lives, kind of. In that sense perhaps, they were underground.

So now it became known to me that there were believers; and a whole new world opened for me, the world of faith, of church, of a new kind of life that had been unknown to me previously.

I experienced lots of cynicism in my life, beginning in my early childhood when I saw the doors to the apartment house of those Party kids guarded by militia men. They were living behind tall fences, and every day the trucks would come and deliver special foods for them, special clothing. I saw this kind of false existence from an early age.

I went through many different stages in my life — stages of cynicism, of very sinful living, of living by compromises, of everything. And after trying all these things, I discovered that nothing worked, nothing could bring peace or comfort, or — you know — stability, to the soul. In Soviet life, it was very easy to become an alcoholic or drug addict, and uh — to end your life - very unpleasantly. I have seen this, and I have seen myself going in that direction. But this meeting with people of faith opened another door to me, another opportunity, another possible way of life.

(In the next issue we will continue our interview with Father Victor, beginning at the point where he describes his decision to be baptized.)
Announcements

Effective December 22, 2005, Priest Sergius Nauman is relieved of all responsibility for the Mission in Kona, Hawaii and transferred to the omophorion of the Right Rev. NIKOLAI of Sitka, Alaska. The mission in Kona is to be administered by Archpriest Matthew Tate, Missionary Dean, who takes custody of the sacred items.

Effective January 27, 2006, the Orthodox mission in Redding, California is named after Our Father among the Saints Nicholas of Japan, whose feast day is February 3rd.

San Jose Candle Company
Church Supplies Since 1947
WWW.sanjosecandle.com/
Pure Hand-dipped Beeswax Candles

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Size</th>
<th>Qty / Box</th>
<th>Price</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1/4” X 10”</td>
<td>1000</td>
<td>160.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3/8” X 10”</td>
<td>600</td>
<td>145.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1/2” X 12”</td>
<td>300</td>
<td>145.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1/4” X 12”</td>
<td>1000</td>
<td>175.00</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

All prices are based on $7 per pound. Shipping free with order of 2 boxes or more. Other sizes available.

To Order or Inquire Please contact Dn Elias Union
toll free 1-877-984-1729

Youth Reach Out to Children in Russian Hospice

At the initiative of His Grace Bishop BENJAMIN of Berkeley, youth from throughout the Diocese of the West gave of themselves to reach out to the residents of the Children’s Hospice in St Petersburg Russia this past Spring.

Youth from the Diocese collected change, held bake sales, and pledged allowance money to help the ministry of the Hospice. Anna Kasperovich, a seven-year old girl from Holy Apostles Church in Portland Oregon made over $300 for the Hospice by making and selling greetings cards. Other parish youth groups prepared photo journals about themselves and their life as Orthodox Christians in America in order to become new “photo pen pals.” In total, the youth of the Diocese raised almost $10,000 to support the ministry of the hospice.

“For our children it really feels as if you opened doors to the world for them. All the children are very happy to have new friends in the United States,” said Fr. Alexander Tkachenko, Executive Director of the hospice. Now in its third year of existence, the Children’s Hospice of St. Petersburg was the first of its kind in all of Russia to provide for the needs of terminally ill children. Their efforts include assisting with the cost of expense medications, offering joyful, fun activities for residents, as well as providing regular housing for children and parents who live outside the city and cannot travel back and forth to the city for treatment.

A resident of the Children’s Hospice takes part in the hospice’s “Share Your Hope” project in which they launched 1000 paper cranes as a sign of hope and joy.

Children for St. Christina of Tyre Mission Prepared Food for and ran a bake sale as part of their project to help the hospice.
have done so. An estimated half a million dollars is needed to be raised and they are far from this goal. With sufficient donations they could qualify for a loan to proceed with construction. You can be assured that the Friends of St. Barbara Monastery will donate for this worthy cause, but considerably more will be needed. Please help by sending donations to the address mentioned above. This is our Diocese’s opportunity to have a large community of nuns praying for us in an established Orthodox monastery as we see throughout Orthodox countries. Why should America have less?

---

**tv and boredom**

**One Orthodox Christian Mother Speaks**

by Matushka Thea Swanson, St. Elizabeth Mission, Poulsbo, WA

We need excitement, don’t we. It’s everywhere, so hard to ignore. It’s even finally arrived in the remote country of Bhutan, in the form of a TV, where up until 1999 television and the internet were nonexistent, even illegal. Bhutan probably has more Buddhist monks than any other place in the world, where not a chain restaurant can be found, and where airplanes hadn’t arrived until the ’70s and even so, their airport today has no more than two airplanes. It’s a country of almost total isolation and natural beauty. Today, who used to play creatively and were happy outdoors, are in the trance: fixed on technologically-altered images and image-creating products thrust at them from the magic screen. If we look back at the effects that the new invention—TV—had on the American home in the “modern” ’40s—when The Ed Sullivan Show was one of the more provocative ones, compelling family members to dine at TV tables—we can draw a parallel and begin to comprehend the stun-gun magnitude of today’s violent and explicit broadcasts on such an untainted population.

When I saw the broadcast two years ago that aired the Bhutan story, I was saddened. How can any Christian, or especially in this case, a Buddhist, not be? I can recall that when interviewed, one Buddhist monk in Bhutan said the TV was distracting him from his prayers.

When commercialization reaches a previously virginal territory, something great is lost. Contradictory, I am. I type on my up-to-date computer and am very glad to do

---

(T.V., continued from previous page.)

I also know what it does to me. As much as I say I hate it, if I should walk in the room at 11:00pm and Seinfeld is on, I’m going to stop and watch. It’s a funny show, no doubt about it. That’s a half hour of time better spent sleeping. And I am a sucker for Masterpiece Theatre. So then I’m in John’s shoes anticipating next week’s segment. Is there really anything wrong with that? After all, Masterpiece Theatre is often dramatized literature. Or is it? Is it really often just a hoity-toity soap opera? I’m compelled to watch the next episode to find out if he really loves her. Blah, blah, blah. When the show ends, I inevitably feel that it was a diversion from reality which I personally feel driven to face. If I had made a conscious decision, if I had set out to watch the mini-series, it wouldn’t quite feel like that, it would feel more like a vacation. But I never schedule in sit-coms or love connections because I know—before I take the bait—it’s not really the best thing for me.

There are those that say, “you have to relax sometimes.” Yes, you do, but you don’t have to do it this way. Relaxing doesn’t have to be a spontaneous distraction from life. I’ve been to the movie theater once in ten years, the age of my first child. It’s not that I’m intentionally avoiding it, it’s just that there is too much else to do. I’m not going to suddenly go see a movie. There is this thing, life. Know, however, that I continue to be contradictory. We have rented movies during these ten years. I’m an easy target for independent films and romantic comedies. Aggh, it’s almost hopeless…

At the very least, I think everyone would agree that television breaks up the day. Unless you are so infected that your day breaks up your TV. Are people bored? And what is it with boredom? When did boredom begin? Let me pop in my OED on CD: “The state of being bored, tedious, ennui.” The earliest example entry in written English for any one of these synonyms is 17th century. So no one got bored before then? Or were they just too weary with their tedious tasks to write about it? Let’s go back further. Did Moses get bored? Probably not very often, after all, he was Moses. How about the others? Did all the chaos occur at the base of Mount Sinai because they were bored? Scripture says, “When the people saw that Moses delayed to come down from the mountain, the people gathered themselves together to Aaron, and said to him, “Up, make us gods, who shall go before us; as for this Moses, the man who brought us up out of the land of Egypt, we do not know what is become of him.” (Ex 32.1)

Sounds like boredom to me. They chose a calf to put before them. We chose the TV.

It appears by that example and hundreds of others even in our own lives, we need God and order and work to keep us on track. When left to ourselves, our minds start to wander. Quick fix? Television; it does the wandering for us. We don’t have to actually think up and create horrible or meaningless things; they are already thought up and created for us. We just have to look at them. We wouldn’t want to guard our purity. I have this idea. I want to stay as pure as I can as a tiny offering to our Lord Jesus Christ. I think He would like it. I know He doesn’t need it. But He knows I need it. I need to stay as pure as I can for me. I think He might appreciate it if I try to keep the yucky stuff away. I am imperfect, and I know that all the garbage that enters my mind and heart isn’t 100% recyclable. I try to toss it outside, but I look and it’s still there. I know it’s the state of my soul that requires me to walk away from the trash. I’m too easily swayed and start digging in the garbage, so I’d rather keep it out of the house altogether. If it isn’t there, I won’t miss it. I see my children. I see their precious, spongy minds sopping everything up. How can I expect them to discern if I’m so weak? I must try to be strong so they can be too. I want my children to hardly ever think about television. I want them to think about what is going on in their lives and in those around them. I want them to think and I want them to create. That stops happening at least to some degree if the thinking and creating is being done for them by the aardvark or the dinosaur.

Church is repetitive. I have never found it boring. Maybe this is because I keep my home life boring, so when I step through the doors of the narthex it’s St. Vladimir’s ambassadors stepping into Hagia Sophia all over again: “We did not know whether we were on the earth or in Heaven during the service,” they said. I think this is a good thing, to keep life simple so that we may appreciate truth and beauty. If my children’s heads are filled with video dancing and pop music, they’re going to experience conflicts, little battles. Church is probably at least a bit boring for kids today, even ones like mine who are currently kept away from most TV and popular music. For me, church is a relief; for them, perhaps it is sometimes a distraction from their mounds of toys and books. I try to give them chores, but really, how much can an seven-year-old do in a modern home?

And even if I can give them more to do, I want them to enjoy their childhood. This is their time to play, to run. It’s a matter of the right balance, and I try to provide that. Should I do more? Should I throw out a bunch of their toys, even if they were gifts, in order to simplify their lives, to ensure that their desire to create isn’t squelched? We
some of his stash, and it’s worked. When John is sourly disobedient even after a warning, a toy gets put in a “give-away” box which makes its way to the Goodwill. He gets to choose the toy, most of the time. If the crime is really bad, I choose it. He once handed me to throw out, teary-eyed, a piece of wrapping paper he saved. I accepted it, trying fiercely to disguise my smile. John has a thing for the packages toys come in. I have to secretly gather the cardboard-box pieces he cuts out, and the how-to instructions, and send them off to recycling. It’s bad enough when your children have too many toys, but to have the boxes they come in makes your head spin a little.

Another approach which might be less painful which I’ve implemented last Christmas is a no-more-toys-thank-you, policy. “THE KIDS OFFICIALLY HAVE ENOUGH TOYS,” I proclaimed. All future gifts can be in the form of savings bonds, or cash for college savings, or clothes, or something that isn’t a toy or a toy disguised as an activity. How many beads can a girl own? Some activities are worth giving, but for the most part, especially in the big toy stores, they’re of low quality and the box looks better than the product. Nice drawing pencils, an eraser and a special art pad from an art store might be all the child needs this year for her birthday (along with cake and ice-cream). She will feel it’s very special and important to receive a grown-up gift, and maybe will take better care of it. How about ten dollars to save and add to for a plane ticket to see Grandma during the summer? Literature and books about saints are always good. Eventually, all those toys will leave the house as everyone ages, but let us guard their appreciation for what is around them now. If they have everything, they will be interested in nothing. They will be numbed and will lose their innate desire to create.

When my daughter Alexandra was going on three, she would play “pay lady” at the kitchen counter. The counter to her was a grocery store check-out. I was to purchase imaginary items and give her imaginary money. She could do it again and again and was happy and satisfied with our transactions. Come Christmas-time, I saw a toy cash-register in a catalog and excitedly mentioned to my mother-in-law that that would be a great gift for my little cashier. Babci (grandma, in Polish) always comes through. Allie opened her present, and seemed to enjoy it well enough as I told her how she could really be a pay lady now. After that, the register’s buttons were pushed for a minute or two here and there by her and others to hear the ca-ching, mostly. But that was it. It was the last I saw of my pay lady. She never returned again.
