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THE VILLAGE CHURCH OF YEGORIEVKA

PART I

For years, friends of *Road to Emmaus* staff correspondent Thomas Hulbert and his wife Sonia have avidly followed their chronicle of Siberian parish life in Altai, the remote region of Sonia's childhood, and Fr. Alexander Popov, the remarkable young priest of Yegorievka.

JANUARY, 2003

Dear Friends,

Last summer, my wife Sonia (Sophia) and I visited her parents in the village of Rubtsovsk in the Altai Region of the Russian East, close to the Mongolian and Kazakhstani borders. While there we made a tour of the countryside, visiting several collective farm villages en route. In one village, Yegorievka (literally 'the village of St. George') we saw a church dedicated to St. Nicholas being built by a young local priest, thirty-year-old Fr. Alexander Popov. Despite its remote location, it was a familiar sight – a half-constructed frame building already being used as a place of worship.

There are not many local churches in the outlying areas of this region, where the native population began to be converted only shortly before the Russian revolution, and the sight of a new church going up is inspiring. Fr. Alexander began construction two years ago, with only faith as his capital. The diocese gives what it can, but this is little and irregular, and although most of the villagers still work for the collective farm, they are poorly paid, and barely feed and clothe themselves. This hasn't stopped Fr. Alexander. He is committed to his mission of worshipping God and educating simple people in the faith in this isolated Siberian region.





Unfinished Church of St. Nicholas, Yegorievka, Siberia.

Fr. Alexander, like nearly all of the young people in Soviet Altai, was brought up without any religious background. When he was eighteen, as he returned home one night, he saw his six-year-old sister, Alicia, hit by a car in front of their home. As he carried her to the hospital, she died in his arms. It was the most difficult moment of his life. He didn't know anything about God, but he remembers promising as he carried her to the hospital: "If she can't walk, I will take care of her for the rest of her life." Alicia died, but from that moment his search for God began.

He first attended a local Baptist church, which satisfied his initial hunger to know Christ, and he quickly became a youth pastor and missionary. He recalls that even as a Baptist he and another young church leader were strongly drawn to Orthodoxy and in their spare time would read Orthodox books and listen to tapes of Russian chant. It was also at the Baptist church that he met his future wife, Daria, who was also spiritually inclined. The young people shared their enthusiasm and became friends. Church members, however, were against their friendship and insisted that the only way they could continue their acquaintance was to marry immediately. While both Alexander and Daria had a genuine liking for each other, neither was ready to marry on such short notice. Despite their youth and newness to the

faith, this sudden, unrealistic pressure confirmed their growing impression of the external, rootless character of the Russian Baptist religious experience, and made their unanswered questions even more urgent. It was then that they decided to visit an Orthodox church. Both were impressed by the depth of Orthodoxy, particularly in the divine services. They began to sing in the choir and were confirmed in the Orthodox faith. In time, they felt that their spiritual paths were indeed interwoven and decided to marry.

Fr. Alexander says, "My wife is my closest helper and companion. When I come home tired, and many times discouraged after trying to help solve people's many problems, Daria notices and takes me by the hand and leads me to the icon-corner, where we pray the Akathist together until my heart is light again."

Two years after their marriage, Fr. Alexander completed his education through a correspondence course with the Tobolsk archdiocesan seminary, was ordained in the Moscow Patriarchate, and began serving as an assistant priest in the town of Rubtsovsk. Soon after, Matushka Daria gave birth to a son, Dimitri.

A Miracle of Baptism

Several years after his ordination, Fr. Alexander received a call from a local hospital about an infant that had been abandoned by its mother. The little boy had seemingly been born healthy, but then took a turn for the worse and was certain to die. The Orthodox nurses at the hospital called for a priest to baptize the child before the end. When Fr. Alexander arrived, the baby was on life support, breathing with difficulty, and his little arms and legs had already turned blue. Fr. Alexander began the baptism immediately, and to everyone's amazement, as the baptism progressed, the baby's condition began to improve. In a matter of moments he had regained a healthy pink color, moving around and making small noises like any healthy baby. So touched were Fr. Alexander and Matushka Daria by this miraculous recovery that they visited him daily and after a month decided to adopt the child as their own. This, too, was a miracle, because adoption in Russia is extremely rare. The little boy, baptized Michael, after the Archangel, is now two years old and appears fairly healthy, although recently they have discovered that he has a brain tumor, which they hope is benign. This past year



Unfinished nave of St. Nicholas Church.

the Popovs also had another little son, Seraphim, who is now approaching his first birthday, but is ill with a heart problem.

Fr. Alexander's Mission and Housing

Throughout Altai, priests face two great challenges: the spiritual and the material impoverishment of their parishes. At ordination they are given the grace to begin filling the spiritual needs of their flock, but are often hindered through desperate financial lack. Priests in the Altai archdiocese earn about 500 rubles a month (less than \$20). Needless to say, this doesn't begin to pay for food or clothes. In addition, almost all of the village priests are forced to live apart from their wives and families because people cannot easily move from one place to another, particularly if they already have a registered apartment in a town. Not only do many villages lack schools and medical services, but along with the problem of registration in a new location, it is extremely rare to find a village house available for an entire family.

Fr. Alexander's family has been an exception to this rule and he has, almost miraculously, managed to live with his matushka and children in the village where he serves. When they first moved to Yegorievka, the Popovs

lived in a single rented room in one of the village homes with the resident family. They had no money and, surprisingly, none of the villagers brought them anything to eat, although it is a Russian village tradition that everyone tries to help the priest's family with food: a few potatoes, a loaf of bread, some apples or carrots.

After a few days, the food they had brought ran out and because it was too late to grow a garden, they had nothing at all with which to feed their three small sons. Fr. Alexander and his wife prayed, and within an hour one of the village women crossed into their yard with a chicken, asking him very dubiously if he could use it. He said yes, that he could use it very well, and thanked her. She told him that a rumor had circulated through the village that his father was wealthy and that he didn't need anything, so no one had come forth. Seeing their bare room, she realized the mistake and a few villagers began helping.

Fr. Alexander came to the village with a minimum of church goods – one set of threadbare vestments, a chalice and paten, and a few service books, but no candles or sheet music for the choir. His previous parish in Rubtsovsk collected donations until they were able to buy fabric to sew him a new set of vestments.

Some months later Fr. Alexander and his family were forced to vacate their rented room and move in with a second family. Fortunately, within a short time he was able to borrow \$3,000 to buy a three-room wooden house. Having a house in the village allows them to not only live together, but to grow a garden to feed themselves, and they hope to buy a cow so that they can have milk and cheese for their family and a surplus to sell in the village. Unfortunately, with his small stipend, Fr. Alexander has no means to repay the loan or buy a calf, and is trusting that God will help.

As we mentioned, the church also remains half-finished because of a lack of funds for building materials, and is now furnished with a simple wooden altar and paper icons. Fr. Alexander hopes to build a one-room addition to the church where parishioners can meet socially after services and he can conduct catechism and Bible studies for both adults and children. Since his arrival in the village, the number of regular church-goers has increased from eight to almost sixty.

Fr. Alexander also serves in several small villages within a fifty-kilometer radius from his own village. He was loaned a very old car that was on its last legs months ago, and which we recently hear has broken down again. He is worried about being able to get to the sick and dying this winter.



St. Nicholas Church.

In this region he has recently discovered a secluded state institution that cares for children with Down's Syndrome and other mental disabilities. These children are brought from all over western Siberia, some as early as five years old, and stay until they are adults. He has visited the home once and is planning to baptize and regularly bring the sacraments to these children.

May God grant the increase!

Thomas and Sonia (Sophia) Hulbert

AUGUST, 2003

Dear Friends,

This year we were able to bring Fr. Alexander Popov and his seven-year-old son Dimitri to Moscow on pilgrimage. This is the first time he has been out of Altai, Siberia, and he was very happy at the possibility of venerating the relics of St. Seraphim, visiting Optina Monastery, Sergiev Posad, and serving with and speaking to respected spiritual fathers, who could answer his own pastoral questions. With few physical resources, he has struggled on

in the belief that God will help bring the plans for the church to completion. In addition, he has a practical common sense that allows him to accomplish things step-by-step, and to search for alternatives when plans go awry. His hopes for a small church and iconostasis, vestments and church goods, and for a classroom adjoining the church are modest and workable.

Our impression of Fr. Alexander during his stay in Moscow was that of a soft-spoken, warm-hearted, and dedicated young priest who is intent on serving God and his parishioners. His two years in the village have shown that he is capable of designing and implementing simple building plans for the church and drawing people to it. Sonia's mother tells us that he has earned the love and trust of the initially suspicious villagers, who are now eager to help him – not an easy task in a desperately poor Siberian village.

Heating the Church

Recently, Sonia's mother told us how Fr. Alexander realized his hope of heating the church last winter. In previous winters the only heat was an inadequate cast-iron wood stove. Worshippers stood through the long services wrapped in winter coats, muffled and hooded against the -35 C temperatures. Finally, Fr. Alexander was given a donation of some rusty cast-off steam radiators. His village is one of the few in the area that is able to generate its own hot water for steam heating and he spent weeks salvaging, patching, and painting the donated radiators himself. Later, with the help of another villager, he laid the pipes from the village steam generator to the church, working quickly, as it was already September and temperatures were dropping rapidly. The day they finished laying and soldering the pipes, they turned on the water. From each radiator sprang dozens of small pin-hole leaks, unnoticeable to the naked eye, and the church was flooded within minutes. They quickly marked the leaky spots, took the radiators apart, and painstakingly patched them one by one. After two subsequent floodings the home-made system was operable, and thus, for the first time, the partially-finished church had heat.

Fr. Alexander's needs now include finishing the interior and exterior of the church and classroom, building a permanent iconostasis, obtaining icons, candle stands, vestments, service books, sheet music for the choir, and Orthodox materials to catechize the village. Of special urgency is a car, so that he can visit surrounding villages and the children's hospital. An old car he'd been loaned broke down for good several months ago. In Siberia, a used car

that can last on the rugged Russian dirt roads is relatively inexpensive, although most are driven until they fall apart, or are passed on to relatives.

The Golden Cross

Misha (Michael), the baby Fr. Alexander and Matushka Daria adopted, has been a part of their family for two years now. Soon after taking him they learned that Misha's natural parents were drug addicts. The difficulty of fostering a drug-addicted child is well-known in the West, but drug addiction has just come to Russia, and although children suffering from alcohol-related problems are common, drug-addicted babies have never been seen here before.

For two years after his miraculous survival, Misha almost never slept. He cried continually and Fr. Alexander and Matushka Daria took turns holding him in three-hour shifts; they didn't sleep at the same time for almost a year and a half. One night, exhausted from walking with the baby, Fr. Alexander sat down to rock him in his arms, and had what the Russians call, "a thin dream," that is, one with an obvious message, that seems to be more than a dream. He was half awake and half asleep, and when he looked down at the baby, he saw he was rocking, not a child, but a golden cross. It was as big as the baby, but very heavy, and the words came to his mind, "This baby is your cross." He woke up and realized, "Yes, I'm not just caring for this child. I have promised God that I will raise him as a Christian."

Fr. Alexander's own situation, he insists, is fine, but when we visited last year, we saw that he, his wife and three sons live in a small three-room house with two make-shift beds, a wooden table, a few stools and benches, dishes and pans, and some books. Matushka Daria has tried to brighten the house up with some scraps of cloth, paper icons and pictures and some plants. Being from a good-sized town, they were both used to a tiny apartment with electricity and hot water. Their village house has electricity, but no indoor plumbing. A pump on the street provides the neighborhood with water. As always, we were moved by their quiet cheerfulness and gratitude for all they've been given, and the steady progress on the church.

Thomas and Sonia Hulbert ✦

... to be continued in our Summer, 2005 issue