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UUSI VALAMO: FINLAND'S NORTHERN LIGHT

After Finland's independence from the Russian Empire in 1917, the monastery of Old Valaam in Lake Ladoga found itself a part of the newly independent state of Finland. The monks knew that if the Soviet Russians retook Karelia during the Winter War, Valaam would meet the same end as had other Russian monasteries: the monks exiled or killed and the monastery despoiled. Tragically, it did. Following is an interview with New Valamo's abbot, Archimandrite Sergei, on monastery life and the Orthodox Church of Finland.

RTE: The history of New Valamo begins, of course, with the Finnish-Russian Winter War of 1939-40 and the incredible migration of two hundred Russian and Finnish monks with forty lorries of church and monastery goods across the icy expanse of Lake Ladoga. What happened next?

ARCHIMANDRITE SERGEI: It has been sixty-eight years now since the monks of Old Valaam made their winter retreat across the ice. Although a few were Finnish-speaking from Karelia, most were Russians from many different areas. Of the two hundred monks who took refuge in Finland, many of the ill and elderly died soon after the evacuation. They lost thirty monks that first winter. Their resting place is in the Lutheran cemetery in Kannonkoski, where they first took refuge, and where there is a memorial to them. Later, the remaining monks moved here to Heinavesi in eastern Finland and founded Uusi (New) Valamo. A convent of nuns from Lintula at Kivennapa (Karelian Isthmus) were also among the refugees, and in 1946, they re-established their monastery in Palokki, not far from New Valamo.

Monks also came to New Valamo from two other monasteries of northern Russia – Petsamo and Konevitsa. The Konevitsa monks came to Finland

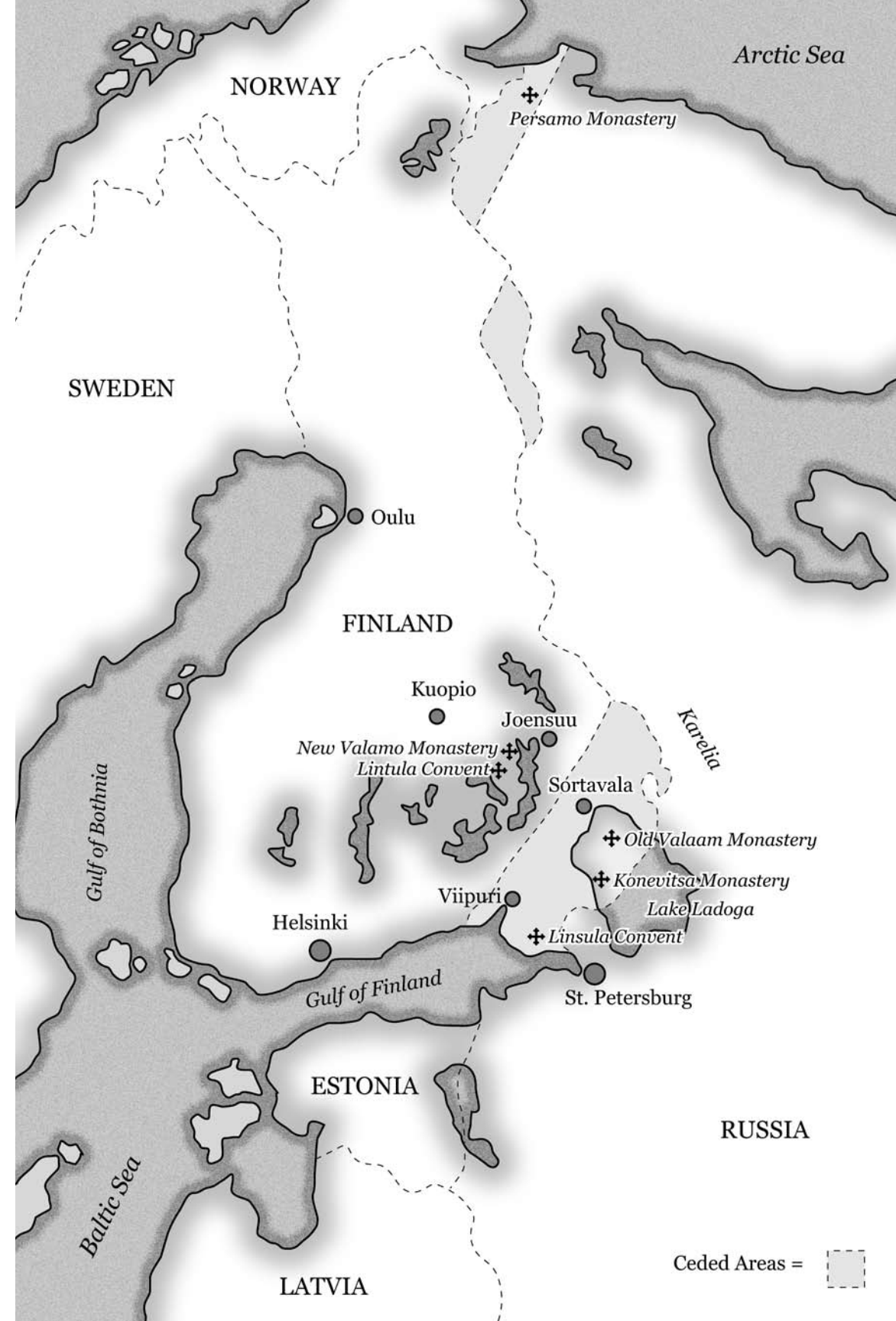
Opposite: Archimandrite Sergei hosting guests in Valamo's old farmhouse.

immediately after the Second World War, first settling in the village of Laka in Kaypera. In 1956, the last ten elderly Konevitsa monks asked to live at New Valamo, and they brought with them the famous miracle-working icon of the Konevitsa Mother of God, which is now on our iconostasis. (Two years ago, I traveled with the icon to the original Monastery of Konevitsa and to St. Petersburg for the first time since the War. Over 35,000 people came to pray in front of it.) Over the decades, the old monks died one by one, but because Valamo was a rather closed Russian-speaking community, young Finnish novices did not join, and during the Soviet period, Russians could not come.

RTE: Why did the monks from Old Valaam decide to settle in Heinavesi?

ARCHIMANDRITE SERGEI: When the monks arrived to look at the property in 1941, they found in this very farmhouse a small, hand-painted icon of St. Sergius and Herman of Valaam, one of hundreds and thousands of copies that the monks of Old Valaam had produced in their icon workshops. But how could it have come here, to this strongly iconoclast Lutheran area? The owner of the house told the monks that twelve years earlier, Prince Hendrik of Holland had visited Finland, from where he made a journey to Old Valaam. The abbot had given Prince Hendrik this icon as a remembrance, but when the prince passed through again on his way back to Denmark, he forgot to take the icon. It was here waiting for the Valaam monks when they bought the property. When they saw the icon, they understood that this was the guidance of Our Lord that the monastery was to be here.

Many people ask where Valaam Monastery is today – in Russia or in Finland – and this is an interesting question. The Russian monks, of course, feel that it is in Old Valaam, but for me this is not such a problem. Of course, we must somehow distinguish between the two monasteries, which is why we say, “New Valaam” and “Old Valaam,” but when the monks came, they felt they were only changing their location. They brought the living monastery with them, and registered it in Finland as Valaam Monastery, which it remains until now. The geographical place-name is Uusi Valamo (Finnish for New Valaam) because the property’s previous Finnish name, *Papiniemi*, “the place of the priest,” was changed when the monks arrived. This old Finnish name referred, perhaps, to a Lutheran priest who had lived here about 300 years ago.



RTE: A pilgrim to Old and New Valaam can feel the tradition strongly in both places. Russian Valaam in Lake Ladoga is a centuries-old foundation on holy ground, yet it was here to New Valamo that the monks brought their monastery icons and church treasures and are themselves buried. There were also wonderful spiritual fathers who lived at New Valamo, such as Elder Michael of Valaam, Abbot Chariton, who compiled *The Art of Prayer*, and Schema-Abbot John, whose letters to spiritual children are collected in *Christ is in Our Midst: Letters from a Russian Monk*.

Karelian Resettlement and the Orthodox State Church

RTE: One of the most astounding things about the Finnish Orthodox Church today is that you receive almost 1,000 converts annually out of a largely Lutheran population of 5,000,000. This would be the equivalent of 60,000 converts a year in the United States. What has brought about these incredible numbers?

ARCHIMANDRITE SERGEI: It hasn't always been this way. The loss of Finnish Karelia to Russia after the 1940 Winter War was a huge blow to Orthodoxy because, along with all of our monasteries, we also lost 98% of our churches. Almost the entire population, 400,000 native Karelians, came to Finland as refugees. Although the Finnish state built fifteen new Orthodox churches in the larger towns, after the Second World War the Lutherans were saying, "The Orthodox Church will die out in Finland," and it really seemed to be so. By the 1970s, there were only four monks left at Valamo, all 80-85 years old. There was even a plan to turn the monastery into a youth camp after their repose, but God had other plans. A few years later, Archbishop Paul, who was a monk of this monastery, organized the Friends of Valamo Society which collected money to build the new church in 1977. This was an important mark in the history of the monastery because, from that time, new Finnish novices started coming. Three of our four Finnish bishops are from this monastery.

RTE: Your experience is also unique in that Finland and Greece are the only two countries that presently have Orthodoxy as a state Church.

ARCHIMANDRITE SERGEI: Yes, and this has been a very great help for us. The Finnish state has supported us, for example, by building the icon-conserva-

Opposite: New Valamo Monastery, original farmhouse.

tion studio and library at Valamo. The state also assesses a church tax from those registered as Lutheran and Orthodox. The Orthodox share goes to Orthodox diocesan expenses, so we are able to do things like support visiting priests for small isolated communities in the north of Finland that wouldn't otherwise have services.

RTE: When isolated Orthodox communities in the West reach out locally, their efforts are often relatively unnoticed in the larger society, whereas because you are the second state church, Lutheran Finns seem to accept Orthodoxy as part of their native soil. You aren't just strange eastern monks.

ARCHIMANDRITE SERGEI: Yes. People are aware of this now, but after the Second World War, the situation was absolutely different. If we had maintained the old calendar and not become a state church, our Orthodox numbers would have been drastically reduced. As it was, after the Second World War we lost over 40,000 Orthodox Christians to the Lutheran Church. From that alone, you can see what a desperate state we were in. Our Karelian families were 100% Orthodox, but when they came as refugees, they were spread all over Finland and often isolated from other Orthodox believers. There were only a few Orthodox churches in central and western Finland, and it was not possible to travel to the bigger towns more than once or twice a year. Orthodox Christians went to the Lutheran churches to have some kind of church life, and in time, many converted. Their children of course, generally grew up and married Lutherans.

Another problem contributing to this confused identity was that during the Second World War, when the German army took the capital of Russian Karelia, Petrozavodsk, and the surrounding areas, the local Orthodox, whose churches had been closed decades earlier by the Soviet state, welcomed the Finnish Lutheran priests who came in to baptize the children. "Finnish Christians have come to help us," they thought, not understanding what kind of priests these were. The Finns brought food and clothes, and the grateful local people, perhaps having heard of Orthodox Finns, didn't know the difference. After the 1940 evacuation, there was much discrimination in Finland against the Finnish-speaking Karelian Orthodox refugees for being "Russian," and strong pressure was put on them to convert to Lutheranism. Lutheran priests frequently refused to bury Orthodox Christians in the Lutheran cemeteries.

Opposite: New Valamo Monastery, Finland.





Particularly in western Finland, if an Orthodox young person wanted to marry a Lutheran, he or she was expected to convert. My old aunt was only able to return to Orthodoxy once her husband died, after fifty years of marriage. But because our grandmother had raised her so traditionally, she always kept icons at home. When I entered the monastery, she came to visit me and she remembered everything. She asked for a blessing, venerated the icons, made the sign of the Cross. It was still alive within her. She spoke with the abbot, and afterwards she came to me and said, “Now, I will come back to the Orthodox Church.” She is 93 years old.

Even today, Karelians often have a misconception that the Orthodox Church is only for Russians, that if you are of Karelian descent you must be Finnish Lutheran or Protestant. For example, eight years ago, the Finnish Orthodox built an Orthodox church in Kalevala, in Russian Karelia, a small village with a very active young Finnish-speaking Orthodox priest. Our monastery helped by painting a new iconostasis. In this small place there is this new Orthodox church, an old Lutheran church and a foreign-funded Pentecostal church. When we visited the Pentecostal parish we found a young Russian Karelian minister. I asked him, “How can you be Pentecostal? Your family was Orthodox for hundreds of years.” He was very surprised to learn that Finland had had many Orthodox Karelians. After some months I heard that he had had a religious crisis and left his church. He is now looking at Orthodoxy.

Now, our relationship with the Lutherans is very different. We cooperate in areas where it is possible, maintain friendly relations, and many Lutheran pastors have converted to Orthodoxy.

Lutheran Conversions and the Skolt-Sami of Lapland

RTE: With over 1,000 Finnish converts a year, are the Lutherans unhappy over their people becoming Orthodox?

ARCHIMANDRITE SERGEI: Of course, they don’t say anything officially and they have a very good attitude towards us. Over 80% of the Finns are still Lutheran, so for them, converts to Orthodoxy are not a big problem. We Orthodox are only 1.2% of the population, 62,000 people.

Opposite: New Valamo Cemetery.

RTE: And how have the Skolt-Sami, the native Orthodox reindeer herders of Lapland, fared?

ARCHIMANDRITE SERGEI: The Skolt-Sami, who live in the far north, only number about 600 or 700 people now. Unfortunately, although their old people still speak their own indigenous language, which is not related to either Russian or Finnish, it is dying out, and most of the Skolt-Sami now live in Helsinki and speak Finnish. Helsinki is growing rapidly, as young people from all over Finland move there, which means that not only the Skolt-Sami, but all of the other Orthodox dioceses, are shrinking. There are also people leaving the Church – second or third generation Karelians who have lost touch with their native Orthodoxy or are becoming more secularized. We hope that they will return. In any case, the total numbers are increasing, which is hopeful. The Lutheran Church is in a much more difficult situation. Last year they lost 30,000 members.

RTE: It must be difficult for them to watch this mass exodus. I imagine that most Finnish Orthodox converts come to Valamo as part of their introduction to the Church. Can you also tell us about the monastery's outreach to the non-Orthodox who come here from Scandinavia, Germany, and other parts of Europe?

Valamo's Outreach to the West

ARCHIMANDRITE SERGEI: Every year we have over 160,000 visitors to our monastery, most of whom are not Orthodox, and also 300 volunteer workers who stay with us for some time. Many people are drawn by our Lay Academy, which has residential courses in Finnish, Swedish, German, and English. We offer 150 courses on different Orthodox spiritual, theological, and cultural themes, as well as practical workshops, and every year we have about 2,500 people who come to the academy for these courses, which last from a few days to several weeks. We also have courses like book-binding, silver-working, landscape painting and stained glass, which are not uniquely Orthodox, but in any case, each guest has a guided tour of the monastery and a rather good general introduction to Orthodoxy.

RTE: When we visited the icon workshop this morning, we were told that almost everyone in this particular session was Swedish Lutheran. It occurred

Opposite: Monks at New Valamo, 1946.





to me that it would be practically impossible for a Protestant to sit here for two weeks painting an icon of the Mother of God and not develop a relationship with her. This is a unique approach to missionary work in secularized countries where people are wary of being preached to.

ARCHIMANDRITE SERGEI: Yes, and when people come to this course, they must carefully read the course material about the particular icon they are painting, which describes the Orthodox theology of the Lord, the Mother of God, and the saints. It is a very good way of teaching, and sooner or later, many become Orthodox.

I know that some Orthodox people are shocked by this. “How can non-Orthodox paint icons? An icon painter must pray, fast, and receive the sacraments in the Orthodox tradition while painting.” But we also see our workshops as a form of teaching. Even those who do not become Orthodox leave with very positive attitudes towards the Church. They tell their friends about their experience, and they display the icon they have painted in their home. I’ve heard many stories of how one such icon in a Protestant home can be of immense importance. Perhaps it is a remembrance from an Orthodox grandparent or friend, something brought back from a visit to a monastery, or the result of one of our workshops. It may be there for decades, but the person sees it every day and slowly becomes interested in Orthodoxy.

RTE: And you have workshops for children as well?

ARCHIMANDRITE SERGEI: Yes, we have icon painting workshops for children. They are attentive and do well. Also, many groups of Finnish schoolchildren come here on school tours. Often, if I ask a Finnish convert about their first experience of the Orthodox Church, they will say, “When I was a child, our school class visited here, and it left a great impression.” We also have many groups visiting from universities and international organizations. More and more of our converts are well-educated professionals.

Another way that converts come to our Church is through Orthodox church music. In Finland, 90% of the Orthodox marry Lutherans or other Protestants, or even people who are completely secular. In former decades, this almost always meant that the children were baptized as Lutherans, but this is now changing. If the Orthodox spouse is active in the parish, many times their husband or wife will also come to services and if they can sing, they

Opposite: New Valamo Church of the Transfiguration of Christ.

may even join the choir. I've heard of situations where someone has sung in the choir for ten or twenty years, and finally become Orthodox. These slow conversions are often deeply-rooted.

Volunteers and Monastic Self-Sufficiency

We also provide young Finnish men with the possibility of doing their required year of military service here, instead of going into the army. We have five of these alternative service workers now, and when they first come, we look at their education and interests in assigning them work. One is now in the library, while others work in the kitchen or on construction projects. A recent alternative service worker who had studied engineering helped us to design and build our new kitchen. Although his service ended a few days ago, he asked to stay on and we have hired him until the end of the year to help with further restoration.

Sooner or later, almost all of these alternative service workers become Orthodox. This is really a miracle, because when they are here they often don't attend church very much. Several strongly Lutheran or secular young men who were doing their alternative service when I first came to the monastery are now Orthodox priests. They change while they are here, and those who become Orthodox as adults take their faith very seriously. After their conversion, members of their family also often become Orthodox.

We also have resident volunteers, who come to live at Valamo for a few weeks or months to be part of our community life. They help with the running of the offices, guesthouses, bookstore and kitchen. This has been an important experience for Orthodox volunteers, because one can form a strong Orthodox identity in a place that holds to Orthodox tradition and practice. So, along with day visits, people can take a lay course, come as a volunteer worker, or just stay in the monastery hotel as a paying guest.

RTE: And although you receive some state help, Valamo is basically self-sufficient?

ARCHIMANDRITE SERGEI: Yes, our main source of income is from summer pilgrims and visitors. We are also the largest wine producer in Finland. A few years ago we began making church wine from grapes grown in Hungary, as well as local berry wines. After the first year, we had to enlarge the factory,

Opposite: Icon of Sts. Sergius and Herman of Valaam in the New Valamo trapeza.



and now we produce 60% of all the church wine sold in Finland. We had no idea it would be so successful.

RTE: Yours is a good example of how an isolated western Orthodox community can maintain their Orthodox traditions, while reaching out to those around them.

ARCHIMANDRITE SERGEI: This is a very open place. For the monks, of course, it can also be difficult. We are never without guests, and sometimes this seems a high price to pay for what we have.

RTE: Old Valaam and the other large Russian monasteries also have thousands of visitors now, as they did before the Russian Revolution, and some of them have special services at midnight or very early in the morning only for the monks.

ARCHIMANDRITE SERGEI: We had something like this fifteen years ago, when we read our evening prayers and compline together. This was the old Valaam tradition. In the old days there were many monks who couldn't read the prayers for themselves, so the entire brotherhood would assemble for this service. We did this also, holding our services in the brothers' trapeza, but our pilgrims and lay workers were so sorrowful that they couldn't participate that we went back to reading compline in church, so that everyone could come.

The Calendar Question

RTE: That was generous. Earlier you mentioned the calendar question. I know that Orthodox must often ask this, but could you explain why Finland is on the new (Gregorian) calendar, even for Pascha? Is this something you feel is a problem, or are you at peace with your inheritance?

ARCHIMANDRITE SERGEI: Of course, I have lived all of my life on the new calendar, which came into use after Finland became independent in 1917, and Orthodoxy was named the second state religion, equal to Lutheranism. In 1923, Finland transferred to the Ecumenical Patriarchate and changed to the new calendar when the Greek Archdiocese and the Ecumenical Patriarchate did so that same year. Patriarch Tikhon of Moscow also endorsed the use of the new calendar in Russia at this time, although he returned the Moscow Patri-

archate to the old calendar a few years later. The use of the western calendar in Finland was also requested by the government, so that the country's two Christian groups wouldn't be divided even further. It's my personal opinion that it would be best if we Orthodox all used the same calendar, because this division is somehow a wound in the body of the Church. If one is to be new calendar, however, I believe that the calendar that we have in the Finnish Orthodox Church is the best variant, not mixed as in Greece, Western Europe, or the U.S., where keeping to the Paschal cycle on the old calendar means that some years you lose most of the Sts. Peter and Paul Fast.

In Finland, this has worked out to our advantage in missionary work. Although we are very much in the minority, at Pascha when the media publicizes Orthodox and Lutheran Pascha celebrations, the Orthodox Church gets most of the attention. Our traditions are very interesting for people and Pascha is a good time for missionary outreach, because what is Lutheran Easter? It's Good Friday, and that's all. Because of the increasing popularity of the Orthodox Pascha services and their attendance by interested Lutherans, the Lutherans themselves have now begun holding Easter vigil services. Also, because the great majority of our marriages are of mixed faiths, the entire family can have Christmas or Easter together, which otherwise would be a problem.

RTE: It is striking that just as Old Valaam sent missionaries eastward to Siberia and Alaska, New Valaam is reaching out to the West as a very accessible Orthodox center for northern Europeans and Scandinavians.

ARCHIMANDRITE SERGEI: Yes, and whenever "super-correct" Orthodox complain of our "contact with heretics," we point out that because of this contact, some of them eventually become Orthodox. As you said, there are about 1,000 people a year converting to Orthodoxy in Finland, and at one point or another, all of them visit Valamo. Last year, there were 912 converts, not including those who have been baptized Orthodox and are returning to the church, as did my aunt, through confession. The openness in our monastery makes it easy for people to come here and see what Orthodoxy is about. ✦