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LETTERS FROM A VILLAGE MATUSHKA

by Matushka Inna Belov

Matushka Inna Belov and her husband, Father Victor, have been friends of the *Road to Emmaus* staff for over a decade. Ordained a year and a half ago, Father Victor now serves in the isolated northern Russian region of Ivanovo. *Road to Emmaus* readers will remember Matushka Inna as the mother who was interviewed in the first issue of our journal in the article, "Teaching our Children to Pray." Her little son Nicholas is now four years old and the family is occupied with the great task of rebuilding an Orthodox village church and establishing parish life in the neglected and impoverished area of Palekh. Following are the warm and living letters that Matushka Inna, a professional translator of English and Spanish, has written to friends and sponsors over the past year.

I

1/14 October 2001

Dear Brothers and Sister in Christ,

This letter is from a priest's wife in Russia, whose husband was ordained this past summer and is leaving Moscow to serve in a remote Russian village in the Ivanovo region.

We were married eight years ago, in the Church of St. Philip of Moscow. St. Philip was a metropolitan of Moscow who lived in the time of Ivan the Terrible and was murdered by the tsar's order because the hierarch defend-

Opposite: Father Victor and Matushka Inna Belov.

ed people who had angered him. It so happened that our marriage took place on the day when the Church celebrates St. Philip of Moscow's day, so we took this coincidence as a double blessing from St. Philip and regard him as our family's patron saint.

My husband Victor, an icon painter, told me that a dozen years ago, when he was painting frescoes for a church in a small town, a man came up to him who spent most of his time in the church (who some people thought was a fool-for-Christ) and said, "Young man, do you want to become a priest?" "No," said Victor. "I am not married yet. But why do you ask?" "You will be a priest!" the man replied. "It's not from myself that I am saying this now." When Victor was leaving the church for the final time the same stout man ran after him panting, and said again, "You will be a priest. Remember that." All this happened a long time ago when Christianity was still persecuted in Russia before the fall of Communism, when it was hardly possible to be ordained.

When Victor told me this story I remembered my own dream soon after I was converted at the age of nineteen. I had seen a little old ruined church far away from any town or city, and a few of us were attending liturgy in the church. Stars were shining through the gaps in the walls, and in the silence, quiet prayers resounded and rose to God. I did not know anything about church life then and this romantic view appealed to me, but as I grew older I found that being a Christian is not romantic, that it is hard work, and in many respects routine. But, these recollections made me say, "If you really want to become a priest, let us leave Moscow and go to a village." And Victor said, "That's what I always wanted. I feel lost in the city. In the country I feel closer to God."

Years went by and we sometimes talked about this idea. Then, our son Nicholas was born and Victor had to quit painting icons for the time being to make a living. A friend advised him to study accounting, and Victor finished accounting school and started working. But working in an office, especially when the economy is poor and when many businesses want the accountants to record false information so that they will not be heavily taxed, was very bad for him. He felt sad and nervous at not being able to please both his conscience and his employers.

Then we began to talk again about him becoming a village priest, and finally a friend of ours introduced him to Fr. Zosima, the secretary of Archbishop

Amvrosy of Ivanovo. They discussed Victor's hope of being ordained and one day Victor went to Ivanovo to meet with the archbishop. "Oh, how I like him," said Victor when he came back. "And I think he likes me."

Then there were ten months in which we waited to hear from Archbishop Amvrosy, and lived between heaven and earth. We were also unsure about leaving Moscow, where our old parents live, and from all the habits and ways we thirty-five to forty year-olds have. But still, we knew we wanted something else, and that Moscow was alien to our souls. Then, a few of our close relatives, including my mother and some older friends died. Death suddenly became the main character of our life demanding that something be done with life, in order to face death without despair, without the feeling that everything had been useless.

This past June, Victor went to the monastery in Ivanovo to be ordained. "The Bishop's secretary told me to wait for three or four days," Father Victor told me afterwards. "I sat in my monastery cell, looking at the telephone and waiting for the call from the archbishop inviting me to be ordained the following Sunday. It didn't come. I waited another week, then another. Finally, I jumped to my feet, took my jacket from the hanger, and decided to go back to Moscow. I knew that I was unworthy to be a priest and now it was obviously God's will that I not be ordained. I didn't tell anyone I was leaving, but just as I reached the door, one of the brothers called me back, saying, 'You have a telephone call from Father Zosima.' 'Be ready this Sunday,' Father Zosima said, 'I'm very sorry for the delay.'

"On Sunday I was ordained a deacon. The following Sunday was to be my ordination as a priest, the feast day of the Icon of the Tikhvin Mother of God. I rejoiced at the idea of becoming a priest on that day. I have always loved this icon and knowing that the Tikhvin Mother of God takes special care of infants, I entrusted myself to her as a spiritual baby to his mother. However, on the eve of the feast, they said that circumstances had changed and that I would have to wait one more week. So I did. Before the day of my ordination I looked at the church calendar. The next day, Sunday, July 16, was St. Philip of Moscow's summer feast! I was amazed, and thought, 'St. Philip, you have already given us a double blessing for our marriage. Have I been sitting in my cell for a whole month waiting for this third blessing from you?'

“The only thing that I remember well of the ordination was when they gave me the consecrated *Agnets* [the Lamb] and said, ‘Go into the altar, hold the *Agnets* in your hands and stand and think about the road you have chosen.’ And I stood there with Christ’s Body in my hands and tears running down my face. A stone would have wept in this situation.

“Then there were forty days of serving liturgy. I lost the sense of time and space. Although I’m nervous by nature, nothing distracted me, nothing interfered. I remembered over and over the words of the apostles on Mount Tabor, ‘Lord, it is good for us to be here.’”

Father Victor was appointed the protopriest of the ruined Church of Archangel Michael in the village of Sakhulino, about fifteen kilometers away from the small town of Palekh in the Ivanovo region, where they used to make the beautiful Palekh boxes. “When I came to the village, dressed in civil clothes, and was walking around the church with the *starosta**, people gathered to look at me, and asked, “Is this our batiushka? It has been forty years since we saw a priest in our ruined church. Only this summer, for the first time, did a priest come from Palekh to serve a moleben here.” (After World War II, the church was closed and ruined by the orders of Nikita Khrushchev, who promised to show on television the last priest in the Soviet Union, and tried hard to fulfill his promise.) “The people look intelligent there,” Fr. Victor noted. “They live a hard life, working on their small pieces of land to feed themselves and their children because there is almost no other work in the region. Almost everyone is unemployed and they are unable to pay for the restoration of their beautiful seventeenth-century church.”

“When I saw those who came to look at me, a page from a priest’s manual that I had studied came to my mind. It had classifications of the kinds of people coming to confession. Most of them looked like what the textbook calls, ‘People with a healthy conscience.’ They do not talk much, they have weather-worn and kind faces. Having seen hard times they know a lot about life, their own sins and other people’s souls. I felt like a school-boy in their presence. They call the younger ones, ‘son’ or ‘daughter.’

“There are also children there. The children are shy. The church *starosta* is the director of the school in Palekh, the nearest large town. She found us a house to live in: a woman who has two houses will let us live in one of them

**Starosta*: the head of the committee that petitioned to reopen the church, and who is nominally helping organize restoration.

for awhile. The church itself consists of two buildings: the main church – rather large and beautiful. It has holes in the walls, the roof and domes are caving in, and it needs major repair. There is also a smaller room which adjoins the church and used to be a trapeza. Here the roof is still sound and services can be held, but it needs a door, windows, altar and church furniture, vestments, everything. As for the icons I will paint them myself during the long winter nights. While there is no altar I will serve liturgy on a table inside the trapeza church.” Father Victor also wants to bring a video player to the village and invite people to watch Orthodox video films at his house.

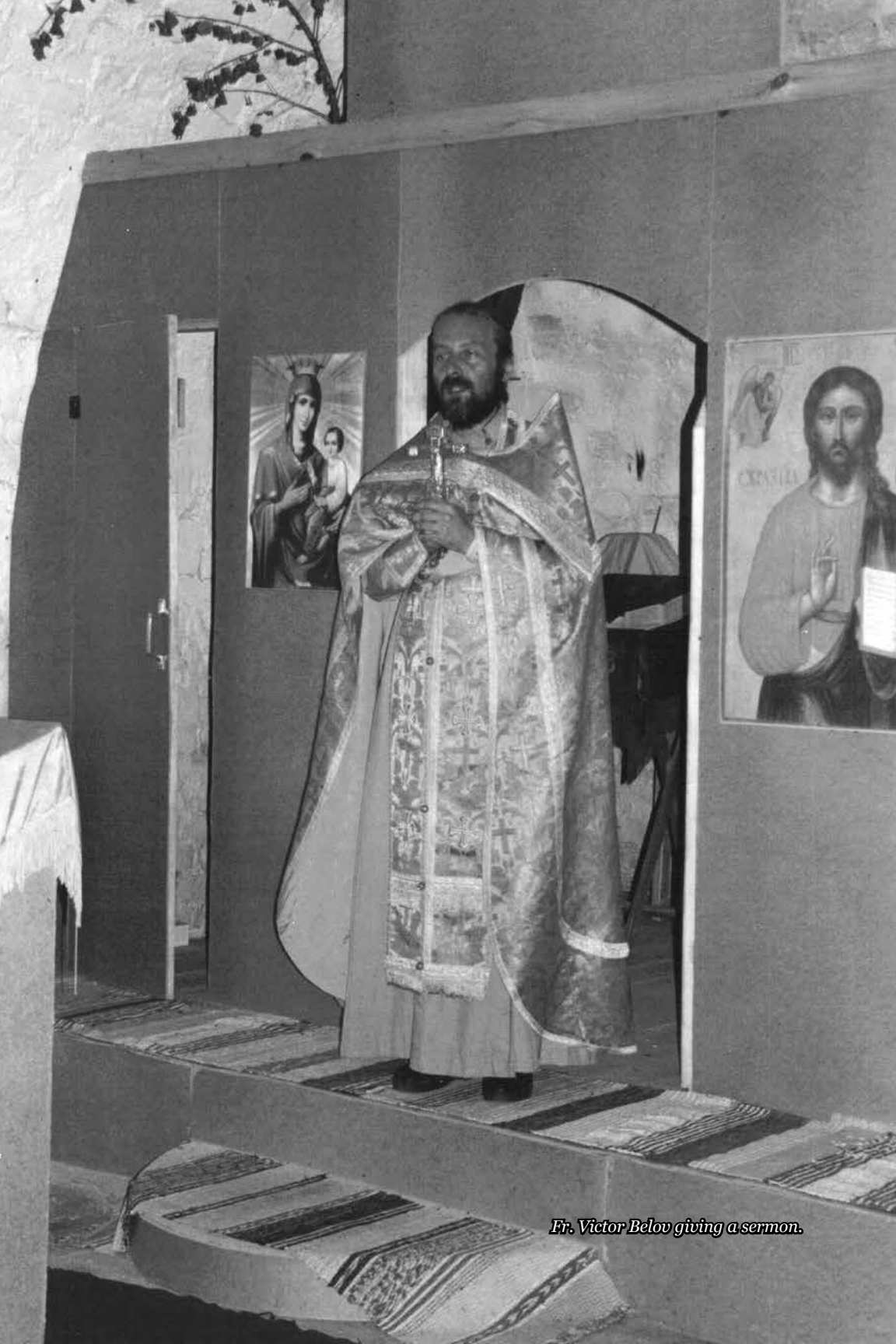
When Fr. Victor first came back to Moscow after his ordination, one of the babushkas in our Moscow parish began to talk about Fr. Victor and his new church, and people began to bring us things: medicine, warm clothes, and tiny household articles that are quite necessary – they think about what is needed with such care. Once a woman came up to him in the church in Moscow and said, “I had a dream last night. I saw a church without doors and windows. Maybe it is yours?” Then she gave him some money for his church. A woman whose name is Galina came to our flat and complained: “My husband and I, we are too old to go restore a village church, but God bless and help you. We want to take part too. Here are 50 rubles [about \$1.70]. Tomorrow we will get our pension and I will bring more. She was so kind. She said we were like children to her, and really, we had a long forgotten feeling of being grown-up children. She came back soon, brought us about 200 rubles and a lot of things including some new long underwear. Dear Galina and all who help us, may God remember your kindness!

As Fr. Victor was preparing to leave for the village, he remembered the problem of the church choir. There isn't any, and no one to give responses in the services. We will pray to God that He help us find young people in the five villages which his church serves who are willing to study church reading and singing, and send them to study in Palekh, or have teachers come to the village for this. Our first thought was to hire singers from Palekh, but the priest there said, “I don't even have enough singers for my own church,” so we have to trust in God.

And now, Fr. Victor is leaving for the village... to baptize and give Holy Communion, to serve funeral and marriage services, and to paint icons. “I feel so awkward,” he says, “I am an ordinary man with sins and funny



Church of Archangel Michael, Sakhulino.



Fr. Victor Belov giving a sermon.

habits, and those who don't know anything about Christianity will judge Christ's church by me. I only hope that God covers my imperfections with His grace. Truthfully, speaking, I'm not very afraid."

To all of those reading this letter, we beg for your prayers, that by God's help we may restore the Church of St. Michael, and bring His sacraments and love to these five villages.

Sincerely,
Matushka Inna Belov
(for Fr. Victor)

II

27 February/12 March 2001

Dear Friends,

We want to express our great gratitude to those of you who have helped us through our first winter and to tell you our news and how things are in general. In autumn, Fr. Victor went to live in Sakhulino, the village where his church is. (Our little son and I stayed in Moscow, as it has been a very harsh winter for us, and there it has been worse.) A friend who had a car helped Fr. Victor deliver the church goods and books for the services, the warm clothes, etc. The next day his friend went back to Moscow and Fr. Victor was left alone with his new life.

Very soon, the evening of his first day, someone came crying and asked him to serve a funeral service. "Let's do it tomorrow in the church," Fr. Victor said, but they insisted it had to be right then. He put on his priest's riassa and went to the church and served. At the meal afterwards at their place, they expected him to say something, and he was at a loss. But as soon as he pronounced the first words he began to speak confidently. "What an unusual thing," he says, "I didn't know how to relieve the relatives' pain or to preach, but God allowed me to put into proper words what I knew from the Holy Fathers and what was in my heart. Everyone understood those words, but I don't quite remember them."

Then he went to the monastery where his bishop is and took Holy Communion back with him to give to the gravely ill and dying in their homes. Once he was invited to serve Communion to a paralyzed old woman who had not been able to move her hands for several years. After taking Holy Communion, she asked for the little cup of water with juice. She was anxious to get it, and when she saw the cup in Fr. Victor's hands, she raised her hand, took it, and drank. Then her hand dropped back, paralyzed again. Everyone gasped. Sometime later, they asked him why this happened, but he didn't say anything, "I'm inexperienced," he thought with regret, "probably I shouldn't discuss things I don't really know about."

In his church, he does the services that can be served without an altar, although he is longing to serve liturgy. After a donation came from some kind friends in Atlanta, Georgia he wanted to go to Palekh and order those things that were his first priority – a door and windows and a wooden altar, but the local men said they would do it for a smaller price. They don't usually go to church and he thought that even if their work was not entirely professional, their attitude and them being involved was precious. "The church is not in the walls, but in the ribs," he remembered.

The villagers built the stove for heating and the big door, and are now trying to put up an iconostasis in front of the very small altar they have inside the church, instead of adding more area to the eastern wall from the outside, which would take more effort. As for the windows, he had to order them to be made in the town of Palekh. After they are done, we are even hoping that some money will be left over.

Father Victor's first months in the village passed and he came to Moscow. He sat quietly in our kitchen, blinking at the lamp. He looked as if someone had hit him with a big sack filled with dust. Then he rose and went to bed. He slept off and on for two days. Then for half a day he ate. Then he took a bath and came back to life. Living alone in a cold little house with snow above the window sill, having to chop firewood, bring water from the well, cook the cabbage, carrots and potatoes that people give him, wash himself and the floor with cold water, and use a shabby wooden outhouse in every weather – and still look dignified, reasonable and priestly all at once, had exhausted him.

But God had mercy on him. God sent him a cell-attendant. When Fr. Victor began to walk and talk again after his first days back in Moscow,

our friend George came to see us. George's father is an old priest in a small town. Looking at his photo he is like a fourth-century hermit, with burning eyes that pierce you to the bone. When Fr. Victor first saw the picture he exclaimed, "Oh George, he is incredible." George told us about his childhood. His father has been a priest all of George's life (28 years), and long before that under the Soviet regime. His mother was a typicon expert, and would set up the services and tell them what to read and sing in church. They never allowed their only child to watch TV or read anything but spiritual books, except at school, and he was to confess to his father for about fifteen minutes at each confession, even as a little boy. Though George complains that now he is "underdeveloped," – the result of such upbringing was not a complete failure. Although not terribly devout, George is very compassionate. His everyday life consists of helping and saving people: feeding and putting someone's children to bed if the parents have to be away, treating the sick (he is a qualified hospital nurse), dragging alcoholics and drug addicts out of their poor state. If you say anything to him about it, he looks at you with the air of a stray teenager caught by a policeman, "Well, of course the fellow shouldn't drink, and I shouldn't care so much, but you know, he's good. I just couldn't leave him like that."

George is a tall man with spectacles, and a high, almost feminine voice that sometimes frightens children. After he came to us he said, "Fr. Victor, bless me to go with you and be your cell-attendant," and so they went together to the village. When George came the villagers liked Fr. Victor even more. They address George as "Doctor." He gives them injections, medicines and good advice, and he sings a little and knows the services well! And he cooks breakfast and dinner for himself and Fr. Victor.

After the second month in the village they came to Moscow smiling and enthusiastic. Fr. Victor told me, "I think, dear, you and Kolya (our three and a half year-old son, Nicholas) should stay in Moscow through the winter. Of course, I miss you both very much, but the child is too young to live in such conditions as we have in the village, and I will be able to devote my time to building the church and not have to worry about you." Now Fr. Victor and George are again in Sakhulino. They left three weeks ago and must come to Moscow at the end of the month for a few days.

Little Kolya draws pictures of his papa: "Look, this is Papa in a boat. He is sailing back from Ivanovo region. He is waving a censer and a brush with

holy water. On his way he sprinkles it on the river, on the fields and on the forests, and look, this is his church,” pointing at a circle – a dome – with a tiny cross over it.

So, this is about all the news. Kolya and I plan to join Fr. Victor in late spring when it is warmer.

May God be with you, your children and your parishes. May the Lord help you go through the days of Lent, and then meet the Risen Lord with refreshed souls and with spiritual joy.

Yours,
Matushka Inna Belov
(for Fr. Victor and myself)

III

14/27 June 2001

Dear Friends,

Here we are with some good news, of which the most joyful is the fact that Fr. Victor’s church has been restored to the point that he can serve liturgy. The rough wooden altar is finished and he is happily serving. Before that he could only serve Communion to sick and dying people at their homes, although he was doing the other services without liturgy.

In February and March when the snow lies deep, he was called to a sick woman living a dozen kilometers away from the church. The roads were covered with snow up to his waist, and although he walks such distances when it is knee-high, he couldn’t make it far through this. It had snowed for the whole previous month and he realized he couldn’t get to the place walking so he asked a tractor driver to take him there. The driver was not morally prepared to do so but finally agreed, shaking his head and trying not to swear. The tractor crawled across the fields with the speed of a lady-bug and both the priest and the driver wondered what they would do if it broke down. But the tractor, like a good Christian, stumbled, grumbled, and groaned angrily, but pulled the load to the end.



Village babushki outside the church after morning service.



Sheep in Fr. Victor's yard.

When the snow melted and the deep mud gave way to grass, two new elderly women began coming to the church. They have to walk for two and a half hours to get there and the same distance back. Fr. Victor says that they are the kindest and most conscientious of all the people and it gives him joy to see them.

How strange to think that a priest should speak of kindness in relation to his parishioners. I always looked at priests with some fear, thinking that they judge us and know how unworthy we are, but obviously they sometimes have the same fear of us, the people. So simple an idea has never occurred to me with such clarity before and now I think we should be kind and condescending to them. But even Nicholas, our very little boy, expects a priest to be perfect. When Fr. Victor once ate a little candy and threw the sticky wrapper on the ground, the child was surprised and reproached him, "In his book, *My First Confession*, Fr. Artemy writes that we should not throw trash on the street. You are a priest and you don't understand such simple things?" Maybe priests sometimes see us as a church full of angry people looking inquiringly at them?

Anyway, Fr. Victor tries to overcome his shyness. Once, after a feast-day service, he went out of the church and saw a few young people passing by. "Today is a big feast," he told them, "and I haven't seen you at the services. We'll be waiting for you next Sunday." Our Russian people are almost all baptized, and such words addressed to strangers do not sound wrong. They smiled, "No, no, we are Moslem." "Oh, I see," sighed Fr. Victor, and strained his brain to remember an appropriate Moslem greeting; then quite unexpectedly even to himself said, "Well, Allah Akbar then," [Praise be to God] and went back into the church. As this Moslem greeting glorifies God the Father (Allah stands for the biblical Eloahim) he thought he could say it. The young people stared at him in amazement.

Thinking afterwards about this episode, Fr. Victor began to study the Koran to be able to talk to the young people, and even wants to take a correspondence course on Islam and Orthodoxy from the St. Sergius Seminary. He liked seeing how different the ideals of the Koran are from the aggressive behavior of its most well-known adepts. "You have to deal with love and understanding with other people's ideas, even if you know they are wrong. 'First love, then criticize' is a principle to be applied to ideas too, not only to their bearers," he said, but I don't know if he is right. (Of course, he doesn't

mean fascist, racist or other man-eating views.) Our friend George (who, you remember, is helping Fr. Victor in the village. He is a priest's son who fell away from the Church), says that he, for example, simply cannot love the idea of eternal hell for sinners – being allergic to it as the cardinal point with which he was raised.

George's mother came to see her son in the village in May. One evening Fr. Victor came home and found George (who is usually extremely talkative) sitting on the front step gloomy and disinclined to communicate. He pointed to the kitchen window. Peeping in, Fr. Victor saw a lady who looked like a sixty year-old George, washing the plates. She turned out to be the nicest-in-the-world matushka, who makes juices for her only child and checks to see if his bedclothes are not creased before he goes to sleep. Father Victor knows it can drive you mad, but having some life experience, he tried to explain to George that it is not the most awful drawback. Oh, dear friends, I wish I'd known it clearly when my own mother was alive... I would never have allowed her to worry about me. It is so easy for children to make their mothers happy.

George's mother stayed for three days, gave them a lot of good advice about how to do the services, read and sang in church, and everybody there pleaded with her not to leave. But she had to. She blessed Fr. Victor to save her son. George says that he wouldn't have come back to church except for Fr. Victor. There probably is some other news to write you about, but I'll do it after Nicholas and I come back from the village in September. Goodbye. God bless you and your close ones.

Inna Belov

IV

1/14 September 2001

Dear Friends,

We hope that this letter finds you all in good health. We are doing well and despite some health problems with Nicholas we are in quite normal moods.

If you are interested in reading about our village life, here is what has happened in the last few months. Our George, who helped Fr. Victor last year, is now living a happy personal life with his wife Natasha in Moscow. She left him a few years ago because he stopped going to church, but now, seeing him back in church and busy with something useful she has taken him back. She says that he has changed, has become mature and she wants him for a husband again. Fr. Victor was so glad to be one of the causes of their reconciliation, but this also meant that he no longer had an assistant and couldn't serve liturgy in the village, as George was the only one who could do the responses and sing. (Only one person in the five villages knows the Creed, a few more know the Our Father. No one knows the Church services.) However, George's happiness matters very much and we are glad for him. As for the rest, we decided to trust in God.

Our Fr. Victor is going to study theology. He has been blessed by the bishop to study at St. Sergius Theological Academy – at least to study their texts while living in the village, then he will go twice a year to Sergei Posad to sit for the exams. He is very happy about this, as it will be something for him to do in the long winter evenings. It was very lonely for him when he was alone in the village last winter before George came as there is no one to talk to who shares his interests or background.

I went to see Fr. Victor again a week ago, leaving Nicholas with his grandfather. I left him with a light heart because on the eve of my departure he asked, "Mama, where will I live when I grow up. There isn't a flat for me." "We will find you a flat," I said. "And why do you ask?" "Well, because I need to live alone." "Why?" "Because others interfere with your life." "How exactly do they interfere?" "They don't let you find your way or look for your own road in life." "In what way, dear?" "Well, in general." After this meaningful conversation with my four-year-old I felt I could easily leave this complex personality demanding independence in advance, and without any pangs of conscience I went to Ivanovo.

The bus ride is five and a half hours from Moscow, then a four hour wait for another bus, another two hour ride and finally a long walk. Fr. Victor met me in Ivanovo and we took a second bus through Palekh, a tiny but fantastically beautiful town with a huge church. Fifteen kilometers further we got off to walk another seven kilometers from the road to the village where his church is. I remembered the American song, "I saw above me the endless skyway, I saw below me a golden valley..." Yes, the greyish-blue

northern sky was endless, and the valley was vast, as far as the eye could see – not golden but green; forests and fields.

Seeing the church always gives a cold blow to my heart. Its dark ruined domes with bent crosses and the crumbling roof are in dissonance to the harmony around it. We went straight to the priest's house (another kilometer and a half beyond the church) that Fr. Victor has been lent by a villager. "This is my estate," Fr. Victor said with pretended importance, pointing with a wide sweep of his hand at the villages scattered over the fields. "How many souls have you got," I asked, going on with his joke. "About fifteen hundred."

Our tale reminded me of my greatgrandfather Mitrophan. He owned an estate in Pskov region in the 19th century and, obeying some inner demand, married Olga, one of his peasant serf-women. Later, he gave his property away to the peasants and his house became the village school. He never knew that a few dozen years later this act would save his children from being executed in the 1917 Revolution. His son, my grandfather Nicholas, joined this revolution seeking justice for all. When the revolution later turned upon its own children he was working peacefully as an agrarian. He wrote books on selecting and growing fruit and vegetables in his experimental orchards and gardens. Many of his scientific colleagues were imprisoned in the 1920's and 30's and died in work camps, but the Cheka (the KGB as it was so-called then) never bothered him.

...So, we arrived at Fr. Victor's "estate" and when we entered the house we unexpectedly found a young monk sitting at the kitchen table reading a book on salvation. His clothes and serious face, with the dark, shining eyes of a true monk were pleasant to look at. "I've been waiting for you, Batiushka!" he said, "I want to work with you. I will help you with the services. Look, I've chopped the firewood. Bless me to stay here with you." There were huge, huge piles of chopped firewood opposite the house, stacked neatly by the fence. "My parents live about ten kilometers away from here," the monk went on, "and I can go to their house to let you have a quiet rest." "Come to services tomorrow, and we'll talk," said Fr. Victor.

The landlady, Lyudmila, who lives next door, brought us some milk. She is about fifty-five and works all day long – cleaning the barn, drying hay for the coming winter, feeding her hens and her seven sheep. Her husband died half a year ago so she has to do everything alone. The seven sheep stood



The Belovs' son, Nicholas (Kolya).



Fr. Victor Belov.

outside watching us with great interest and apprehension. Even Fr. Victor who is indifferent to most animals loves them. “They are so meek. I understand now why Christ spoke about them in the parables. Somehow they are different from other animals.”

In the evening we walked to a village three and a half kilometers away to look at a house we heard was for sale there, as Lyudmila’s has only one room and is too small for a family.

The village was tiny with no fences around the houses, and with miniature plum trees along the road bent to the ground with their abundance of fruit, which never gets completely eaten. We found Babushka Rimma there, Fr. Victor’s favourite. She buried her son ten years ago and his death brought her to church. “I only pray that they don’t close the church. We want it here so much!” Rimma is preoccupied with the idea of writing a letter to our President Putin asking him to send money to help rebuild the church. She showed us the house for sale, which unfortunately also has only one room. She gave us some sweet water to drink and a dozen small branches of plums. Her hands trembled with old age, but her mind seemed to be clearer than mine and Fr. Victor’s taken together. “Please pray for my son,” she asked us as we were leaving.

On our way back, Fr. Victor said that if he had a hundred thousand dollars, he could have rebuilt the church in one night, and people would wake up in the morning to see it shining bright against the blue autumn sky. “But this would not be organic,” he added. “Better to do it slowly and with everyone.” Since he came, the local men have helped build a beautiful, huge wooden church door out of small strips of wood and have made a raised wooden platform with a wall around it for the altar area. There is no work for them anywhere in the area and they were glad for this. Later, it will be decorated as a proper iconostasis and Fr. Victor will paint the frescoes for it.

In the morning we went to the church. The young monk met us on the way riding a bicycle. He introduced himself to me, “My name is Fr. Seraphim. I was tonsured a few years ago and lived in the Monastery of St. Makary of Reshema on the Volga river. They taught us how to catechize people, and I also studied psychology and have a certificate.” It turned out that he was not quite happy about the psychological aspect being paid so much attention to, and after he was ordained a deacon in April this year he left the monastery to look for something more in line with his own type of spirituality. He wanted to find a white (married) priest to serve with, who

would have to spend time with his family so that Fr. Seraphim could live a quiet life filled with work and prayer. He grew up in Ivanovo region, not far from Sakhulino, and wants to help reestablish church life in these remote villages. When Fr. Seraphim told Vladika Amvrosy of Ivanovo of his desire, the hierarch blessed him to go see Fr. Victor.

“Also,” he said, “My parents live near here. My mother is dying of cancer and needs my help. I must be able to bring her and Papa bread and attend to their needs.” Then he said that he knew how to organize a Sunday school and would gladly do so, and that he will also sing for the services and work about the house, and help with the church reconstruction. For us it was like an angel had fallen from heaven.

Father Victor couldn't help smiling broadly although he tried to look strict while giving Fr. Seraphim instructions on what to do in his absence (he was returning to Moscow for a few days with me.) The monk obviously saw his lack of severity and began addressing him as “ti” – the informal personal pronoun like “tu” in French instead of “vy,” the French “vous.” Fr. Victor told him, “Read an akathist or a canon every day in church, give little sermons, talk to people. Clean the house.” Fr. Seraphim said, “I didn't clean it while I was waiting for you because I didn't have your blessing to enter the room.” “So, you lived in the kitchen for three days while I was in Ivanovo?” “Of course.” I thought that Fr. Seraphim must have only eaten potatoes and onions and a little bread, because that was all there was.

The walls of the small winter church are not yet renovated, but I like the way that Fr. Victor and the babushki have fixed it up with simple cloths and paper icons. Even if it is poor you feel love there. It is a real church. The seven babushki in church stood and watched the priest like the seven sheep in Lyudmila's barnyard had watched us the day before, with humble interest and expectation.

Services began. I like the way Fr. Victor serves: simple, intelligible and unobtrusive – it makes you want to pray too. I wanted to take pictures inside the ruins of the main church building, but Fr. Victor said that he had boarded up the doorway leading to the shell of the main church to keep it warmer during services in the coming autumn and winter. Also, the roof of the main church is in danger of coming down.

In the three days he waited for us, clever Fr. Seraphim had already found out everything that Fr. Victor was doing from the people and said that everyone was looking with joy at the things being done and that they very

much want to have the church restored. They only pray that it doesn't stop for some reason. But God is helping us, and we hope it will happen.

Dear friends, just as I was writing this letter, news came on CNN showing the terrorist attack on America. Please accept our condolences. There are tears in the eyes of all who watch it. Words are useless here, but Russians – our neighbors, friends, and relatives – are crying with your people.

God save and bless you.

Inna Belov

From the Editors of Road to Emmaus

We are hoping that *Road to Emmaus* readers might consider using the spiritual and material blessings that have come to them to help this small Russian parish that is in extreme need. Father Victor Belov, who with his wife Matushka Inna have been friends of ours here in Moscow for almost a decade, was ordained by Archbishop Amvrosy of Ivanovo a year and a half ago, and assigned to a small village which, except for a short period after World War II, has not had a priest since the 1917 Bolshevik Revolution.

Father Victor, even during the Communist years, was a fresco iconographer, doing monumental frescoes in the few churches that were allowed to remain open. After the glasnost period he married Inna, and because he didn't want to continue spending months away from his family painting in distant churches, he became a computer graphics designer and later, trained as an accountant. His desire for many years, however, was to be a priest, and he did much studying on his own before he was ordained.

His wife, Matushka Inna, you may know from her translation of Fr. Artemy Vladimirov's *Bless O Lord* prayerbook for young children, published in America, and from her interview in the first issue of *Road to Emmaus*: "Teaching our Children to Pray." Their family consists of themselves, their four year-old son, Nicholas, and Inna's elderly father, Valery, who needs to live near them.

The village of Sakhulino, where Fr. Victor has been assigned, is northeast of Moscow, a seven-hour drive by car or twelve hours by bus. Father Victor's assignment here is a very important step for this part of the region as this particular church is the hub for five villages, all of which have been without

a church or priest for almost eighty years, except for a short time during and after World War II, when Khrushchev closed it again.

The large church of St. Michael that was here before the Revolution still stands, but is in need of major renovation, including rebuilding the crumbling roof. However, attached to it is the shell of a brick trapeza which still has a sound roof, and which Fr. Victor is slowly turning into a small church. Over the past year a door and windows have been built, and the shell of an iconostasis (the facing is to come). With this beginning, Fr. Victor has begun serving liturgy. This small church, also dedicated to Archangel Michael, holds approximately 100 people (standing Russian style), and fills the present needs of the village.

The villagers are extremely happy at having their own priest. There is no house for the priest's family, but one of the women in a nearby village has allowed the Belovs to live in an empty one-room house adjoining her own until they can afford to buy one. Even before he moved there, Fr. Victor had been approached about baptisms, weddings, etc., and there seems to be a conscious desire in the people for the sacraments. The Belovs have plans for catechizing both adults and children. At this point, however, because of her little son's frail health, Matushka Inna spends much of her time in Moscow where he can be close to a doctor, particularly in winter.

The restoration of the small trapeza-church is not expensive by American standards (for example, about \$1,500 for materials and labor to build and install a door and windows, \$800 for heating (building a Russian country stove), and another \$1,500 for materials and labor for a wooden iconostasis, altar table, and side altar table. However, is impossible for Fr. Victor without outside help. Ivanovo is one of the poorest regions in all of Russia, even if work is available, an average local salary hardly covers basic food. As Matushka Inna says, "The people are so poor they can't even afford to buy candles." This difficulty of raising money for materials and labor is compounded by the fact that in Russia, ordained priests are not allowed to work at secular jobs. Therefore, a priest's family's subsistence (about \$200 a month in a village) and any work needed on their church, or church supplies, are entirely dependent on donations. Fr. Victor is the first priest to accept an assignment here, as previous priests who were offered the villages were frightened away by the poverty of the area.

Plans are being laid to begin restoration on the larger church as well. Work on the roof is rather urgent so that it doesn't deteriorate any further.



The Belovs' friend, George.



Father Victor and Matushka Inna.

A great need is a used Russian jeep (about \$3500). The nearest bus passes seven kilometers from Sakhulino and the rest of the journey must be made on foot, unless one owns a car. In the winter this remote area gets chest-high snow, prohibitive to walk through if sacraments are needed in another village, and impossible to carry building supplies or workers without a four-wheel-drive jeep.

Even five years ago, acquiring the needed help in Russia itself would have been easier. Some banks and Russian businessmen were willing to help restore churches, but with so many churches being rebuilt, the rouble drastically dropping in value, and the 40% tax rate that is now being enforced on businesses, the well of benefactors has dried up. Father Victor has been making contact with professional business people, but often those who are Orthodox are already devoting their almsgiving to a specific church or monastery. A few months ago, he was given 10,000 rubles, the largest Russian donation so far, which comes to about \$300, for which he was very grateful. Many local people here in Moscow at his old church, and even neighbors, have been coming with cast-off clothes, books, a little food, anything they can think of to give, but there is little to spare.

We have received some very welcome support on a continuing basis from St. John the Wonderworker Orthodox Church in Atlanta, Georgia, and from several individuals on the West Coast and in the Midwest. We are looking for more individual support for this mission, or even parishes that might be willing to take Sakhulino's new village church on as a "sister-parish," in the same way that we have sister-cities in the United States.

Father Victor and Inna have also suggested that once church life is established they can rent another house in the village for the summer, and Orthodox Christians who would like to visit Russia and have an experience of country village life, could live there with them for a month or two. Matushka Inna speaks very good English, so pilgrims would be well taken care of, and she has also offered to teach elementary Russian to any pilgrims who would like to learn. Fr. Victor is planning to fresco the walls of the church himself and has suggested that there may also be Orthodox Christians interested in coming and learning from him.

We hope that now, at the Christmas season, readers might consider assisting this church and its priest, which serves the sacramental needs of five villages, totaling about fifteen hundred people.

Last fall, when he was first assigned to Sakhulino, Fr. Victor left for the village where he began serving in the unheated church, with only blankets hung over the window frames and empty doorway. We knew the winter would bring below-zero temperatures, but when we suggested that he wait until spring when we could collect a little money to help him start, he said, "I can't wait until I get help. There are people in those villages who are ill and may die this winter, and I am their priest. I must begin now, and God will help."

Please keep Father Victor, Matushka Inna and their villagers in your prayers.

Your brother and sister in Christ,
Richard Betts and Mother Nectaria McLees
Road to Emmaus