




A JOURNAL OF ORTHODOX FAITH AND CULTURE

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THE PEARL OF GREAT PRICE: RESURRECTING ORTHODOXY IN CHINA

Fr. Dionisy Pozdnyaev, a Moscow Patriarchal priest now on mission in Hong Kong, has worked closely with *Road to Emmaus* staff since the journal's inception. His life-long interest in China and Chinese Orthodoxy sparked a warm response in *Road to Emmaus'* staff, publishers, and readers who have assisted Chinese seminarians and their families since 2002. In response to the inquiries of many readers, in this interview Fr. Dionisy brings us up to date on the political and spiritual condition of Chinese Orthodoxy, and his hopes for the future.

RTE: In 2003, *Road to Emmaus* did a lengthy interview with Ioannis Chen, an Orthodox Christian from Shanghai, on Chinese Orthodoxy and Christianity in general¹. How has the Chinese mission grown since then?

FR. DIONISY: I cannot speak about real missionary work yet; we are still preparing for missionary work. We must lay the groundwork and prepare the missionaries, and we have just begun.

Two years ago, I moved to Hong Kong from Moscow to be closer to mainland China. It's much easier to visit from Hong Kong because of visa regulations, expense, and distance, and, of course, Hong Kong is already the Chinese world.

When I arrived, I served for a year in Metropolitan Nikitas' church, who oversees the Asian missions of the Ecumenical Patriarchate. We have good relations and this is important, as it is always a shame when interjurisdic-

¹ For a comprehensive overview of the history and current status of Orthodoxy in China, see *Road to Emmaus*, Spring 2003: "Beyond the Great Wall: Orthodoxy in China," an interview with Chinese Orthodox Christian Ioannes Chen.

tional problems influence missionary work. I would like to see good relations among all Orthodox – Constantinople, Tokyo, Moscow, China, and throughout Asia. In my opinion the only way to do missionary work in China is for all Orthodox to recognize the previously established autonomous Chinese Orthodox Church, and work together towards full recognition by the Chinese government.

RTE: You have your own church now in Hong Kong?

FR. DIONISY: Yes. There was a long-standing Moscow Patriarchal parish in Hong Kong, but the priest died in 1971 and no one was sent to take his place. So, this is a reopened parish of the Moscow Patriarchate, which has a long tradition here. Part of the old Anglican cemetery was set aside long ago and consecrated for Orthodox believers and Orthodox priests.

We now have a house church in the center of Hong Kong, dedicated to Sts. Peter and Paul. Our parishioners rent an apartment and the church is open not only to Russians, but to all foreigners, as well as to the Hong Kong Chinese.

RTE: Services are in Slavonic?

FR. DIONISY: Services are in Slavonic and English, and sometimes, if there are Chinese Orthodox, we do the hours or the Six Psalms in Chinese. It depends on who is there. If there are more Slavs, we use Slavonic; more English-speaking foreigners, we do more in English. We just began a year ago, and have a long way to go.

We've also opened a parish dedicated to St. Sergius of Radonezh in mainland China, in Shenzhen. This is quite a big city and rather near the border – it's a half an hour by train from the Hong Kong city-center to the border – and the population of Shenzhen is seven million. There are many foreigners there, as it was the first free-trade zone in mainland China under the new economic reforms. Thirty-five years ago it was a very small village, now it is a very large city.

RTE: Is the church in Shenzhen also a house church?

FR. DIONISY: Yes. We have permission from local authorities to celebrate services for expatriate Orthodox because there are many foreigners in Shenzhen from Russia, Ukraine, the U.S., Serbia, and Romania. We do not

yet have permission to do missionary work with the mainland Chinese, so we cannot invite them to church services, although we can speak to them on the cultural level. We can invite them to tea, to discuss different questions of cultural exchange and cooperation between the Orthodox world and China. In the area of international relations, we can do joint projects. We cannot teach religion outright, but we can teach Russian language and culture classes, for example, and if the students are interested, through this they will get some knowledge of Orthodoxy.

RTE: If any of them wanted to come to your church could they come openly, or would they have to come quietly?

FR. DIONISY: Quietly. We have promised the authorities that we won't proselytize – this is a condition of our being in China – and if we violate this it might cause problems not only for us, but for them in the future.

I can say, though, that mainland China is now more and more open to Christianity and we have a very good example in the work of Catholic missionaries in mainland China.

They are working there now as they did a hundred years ago, as scholars in universities that offer studies in western Christianity. They have Chinese students and professors involved in this work because they have many resources, and this is real missionary work, under the umbrella of academia.

RTE: My understanding is that once the Chinese Orthodox Church is officially given the recognition it had before the Cultural Revolution², and when you have native clergy, they will be free to teach openly.

² The Cultural Revolution (1966-1976) was launched by Mao Zedong, who had risen to power with the Communists in 1949, in a move to "purify" the Communist party. The revolution saw the growth of the Red Guard Movement among Chinese youth, and the government worked through schools, widespread propaganda, and compulsory reeducation to inculcate Mao's atheistic philosophy. Chinese cultural traditions were uprooted and all temples, churches, synagogues and mosques that had not been destroyed in the earlier Communist period were closed. According to some historical analysts, between 1966 and 1968 alone, over 400,000 politically or philosophically dissident Chinese were killed. Among them were Christians of all denominations.



Fr. Dionisy Pozdnaev and Subdeacon Papi.



FR. DIONISY: This question is not clear for us now, but certainly it is a condition that there must be native clergy in order to have services. We are preparing two seminary students for ordination now, and it will be very important for them to be recognized by the Chinese government. This is absolutely an internal Chinese decision. We cannot insist on this, but we are waiting for it.

RTE: Since they've allowed the Catholics to have their national Chinese Church, and recognized many Chinese Protestant groups, it seems reasonable that the Orthodox autonomy, originally recognized by the Communist regime, will be renewed.

FR. DIONISY: We hope so, but another factor is that Orthodox Christianity is now recognized only as the religion of the Russian ethnic minority in northern China. I believe it is very important to change the attitude of the Chinese authorities, that they recognize Orthodoxy not only as the religion of Russians, so that it can be open to all nationalities. Certainly, their current recognition of Orthodoxy as the religion of an ethnic minority within China is a chance for us now, but in the future this approach should change. We need to create a real Chinese Orthodox Church, with Chinese language and ways of expression in iconography and church music. The Chinese themselves will create this expression.

I also believe that missionary work in China should be done by native Chinese. As foreigners, we can only help them. We can orient them, educate them about Orthodoxy and prepare them to teach. Of course, the best variant would be to open a theological school in mainland China, but political restrictions make this impossible now, so the only possibility to give students experience of church life and a basic knowledge of Orthodox theology is to invite them to our own seminaries and church schools.

RTE: Would you speak a little about your own interest in China? Was this something that was with you from a young age?

FR. DIONISY: Yes, I've been interested in Chinese culture since childhood. I remember being five years old and trying to copy Chinese characters. When I was about ten years old we had a Chinese neighbor. He was a friend, and we discussed many things, including spiritual life. After I became a

Opposite: Holy Trinity – St. Sergius Lavra.

priest he came to me and said that he had known me for a long time, that he understood that Orthodoxy was a real religious system, and that he had a great respect for the Orthodox Church; he asked to be baptized. I baptized him, and then he invited me to visit his family in mainland China. It was my first trip abroad, about ten years ago. Since then, many people in different ways have broadened my knowledge of China, and my understanding of the Russian Orthodox presence there. I found some historical documents relating to this in the archives, and this theme has been very interesting for me. Later, I was able to serve at the chapel of the Russian embassy in Beijing.

RTE: Are you still serving there?

FR. DIONISY: Every month. This is a diplomatic privilege, as the embassy is sovereign Russian territory. The embassy itself is located on the territory of the former Russian Ecclesiastical Mission, but when it came under the jurisdiction of the Soviet embassy, the church was destroyed. A second church in Beijing was later closed by order of the Chinese authorities. This year the Russian embassy will begin reconstructing the church on the grounds of the embassy. It may be a new wooden chapel or a replica of the old stone church that was here before; we are still negotiating with our foreign minister.

Beijing is one of the few world capitals that doesn't have an Orthodox church. This is a problem not only for Chinese believers, but also for expatriates and for Russians. The only possibility to attend church services now in Beijing is at the Russian embassy, but this is limited to Russian expatriates. Under Chinese law, the Chinese cannot attend.

RTE: I've heard that President Putin may put in a word for you when he meets with the Chinese authorities later this year.

FR. DIONISY: Yes. We don't know precisely what he will talk about, but we have submitted this question to the Russian foreign minister and to the president and we hope that he will have time to discuss it with the authorities: Orthodoxy as the religion of Russian ethnic minorities, and the reinstatement of Orthodoxy under the autonomous Chinese Orthodox Church.

RTE: For our readers who may not know, the Moscow Patriarchate gave autonomy to the Chinese Church in 1957.

FR. DIONISY: Yes, under the Chinese communists. There was no choice. The only way for the Church to keep functioning in China was to give it autonomy. The Chinese Orthodox were perhaps not ready for it, but there was no alternative. They ended up with two bishops and several priests. One of the bishops died before they were able to consecrate a third, and there were never any synodal councils of the Chinese Orthodox Church.

During the Cultural Revolution, the canonical structure of the Church and all outward forms of religion were destroyed. The last active priest, Fr. Alexander Du died this past year. He wasn't serving, but he did come to the Russian embassy to receive Holy Communion. He had been ordained in Beijing by Archbishop Victor Sviatin who was the head of the last Russian Ecclesiastical Mission in Beijing and Archbishop of Beijing and All-China. After the Cultural Revolution, Fr. Alexander repeatedly asked the local Beijing government to open one of the old churches for the small community of Orthodox believers, but never received a reply.



Moscow Patriarchal hierarchs in China including Patriarchal Exarch Victor (left) and Bishop Simeon of Shanghai (right), circa 1947.

RTE: And when Fr. Alexander died, you were able to serve his funeral.

FR. DIONISY: Yes, it was held in the Catholic cathedral, and I was able to serve. The Catholic Archbishop of Beijing of the National Chinese Catholic Church was close to Fr. Alexander. He is quite a powerful man and was able to give this permission.

Papiy, a subdeacon from before the Cultural Revolution, is now studying for the diaconate at Holy Trinity – St. Sergius Lavra, near Moscow. There is only one old priest left in Shanghai, very ill, who hasn't served for several decades. I don't even know his name because he and his family are so afraid to have contact with foreigners that he sees no one. There is an old deacon, also, Fr. Evangelos, but of course he cannot serve alone.

RTE: Have you met any lay Orthodox Chinese who were able to keep their faith

alive by doing reader's services privately, or were things so difficult, like in Albania, that they couldn't speak about the faith even in their own families?

FR. DIONISY: Even now, they are afraid, and won't speak openly about those times or their beliefs. Particularly to foreigners. This subject is quite private even now.

RTE: I remember reading a story about an Albazinian woman³ near the Chinese border, whose Orthodox name was Matrona. She said that when she was small, the family's faith was kept a secret even from her.

FR. DIONISY: Yes. This is all history, and now we have to prepare absolutely new ground for new Orthodox believers.

RTE: How many Chinese consider themselves Orthodox now, either through ancestry, pre-communist baptism, or who have managed to be baptized recently?

FR. DIONISY: It is hard to say, because the younger generations are not baptized, although they call themselves Orthodox because of their family tradition. I think probably about 10,000 on the northern borders of China would claim to be Orthodox. In Beijing maybe 250, in Shanghai even less, perhaps fifty.

RTE: Without going into details that may cause political problems, have any of these people been able to receive sacraments in the past few years?

FR. DIONISY: Sometimes. I've baptized some of them, and I've celebrated liturgy in Shanghai. I know that a few other visiting priests have celebrated there, for example from the Russian Orthodox Church Abroad, and from the Constantinople Patriarchate visiting from Taipei. Occasionally there is a liturgy, and some groups of people take Holy Communion.

RTE: And this is kept secret from the government.

FR. DIONISY: I wouldn't say secret, we cannot announce it as a public service, because it can be construed as missionary work.

³ Albazinians: Chinese descendants of Russian soldiers of Tsar Peter the Great, who were taken to Beijing in the 17th century as prisoners-of-war. When freed by the Chinese emperor, many elected to stay in China where they were given land, allowed to intermarry, and freely practice their Orthodox faith.

Opposite: Picking tea leaves on Lushan, China, May 2003.



Photo courtesy Fr. D. Christensen

RTE: Have you had any contact yourself with the government about this?

FR. DIONISY: Yes, in fact the deputy-chairman of the Moscow Patriarchal Department of External Church Relations, Bishop Mark of Yegorevsk, is now in China conferring with the authorities on the practice of Orthodoxy.

RTE: You mentioned that you already have Chinese seminarians in Moscow and St. Petersburg.

FR. DIONISY: Yes, about eighteen, and the Chinese authorities know that we have these students. Their coming was the students' personal choice. A few months ago Metropolitan Kyrill visited the Chinese embassy and introduced some of the students to the Chinese ambassador, and we announced it also in Beijing, to the Religious Affairs Bureau. It is better to do so now because they will eventually have to be recognized by the Chinese government. We not only have men, we also have Chinese women students, who are studying choir directing and icon-painting.

RTE: Do you see the women also being catechists?

FR. DIONISY: Yes, of course, it's a very real possibility for them to become catechists. In this context there is no difference between women and men. Also, we hope that some of the women will become interested in monasticism and will want to help begin monasticism in China.

Another quite important need is priests who can speak Chinese to help train Chinese seminarians and catechists. This year we sent four of our Russian seminarians, whom we hope to eventually ordain, to Taipei to study Chinese in Taiwan. Of course, we would prefer mainland China, but the Chinese government hasn't offered any stipends or support for their education, while Taiwan did. Also, a Russian woman is going to teach Russian language and culture in Chinese in Taiwan, a civil project sponsored by the university. This is a good opportunity to introduce Orthodoxy.

We have some Russian Chinese-speakers who could become catechists and teachers of catechists, but we need to find a way to support them and their families. Unfortunately, the Moscow Patriarchate cannot financially support this now, so a better variant would be for someone to have a civil job, such as teaching English, and then to do missionary work in their free time.

Rte: Wouldn't that conflict with government policy?

FR. DIONISY: No, because the primary missionary task ahead of us now is translation, and there are no difficulties with that.

RTE: I'm amazed at the number of Russians I've met who have studied Chinese or are academic sinologists.

FR. DIONISY: Yes, and many of them are Orthodox and would be glad to help – the opportunity just isn't there yet.

RTE: Can you tell us more about the translation and publishing efforts?

FR. DIONISY: Our first need is to create a Chinese dictionary of precise Orthodox terms for the use of translators and believers. This is extremely necessary as a foundation for all good translations for the future, not only in China, but in Chinese communities in Russia, Europe, Australia, and in the U.S.

RTE: Will you try to go for an older, more formal feeling in the Chinese, or would it lean towards contemporary speech?

FR. DIONISY: Because of my Slavonic background, I prefer a more classical, conservative translation into Chinese, but I think this is a question for the Chinese believers themselves. What can they accept and what will be useful for them? As foreigners, we cannot dictate this.

RTE: But I imagine they also would prefer something high and beautiful as opposed to more common usage.

FR. DIONISY: Yes, of course, it should never be everyday speech. The Chinese language, however, is quite complicated and has very different levels, even in contemporary life. The literary levels of official documents and that of everyday speech, for example, are very different.

RTE: In English, we still don't have lexical norms for many church words. We often use Greek or Russian words, when the English equivalent doesn't quite



1947 issue of the Moscow Patriarchal journal, "Chinese Good News: Journal of the Russian Spiritual Mission to China."

fit. For example, not only complex theological concepts, but even the particular items of vestments and clerical garb differ somewhat in the Catholic and Anglican churches from the Orthodox, so their English words aren't quite applicable. In our ecclesiology as well, something as simple as the Catholic feast of Epiphany has a different emphasis from the Orthodox Theophany which occurs at the same time. All of these things have to be explained.

FR. DIONISY: Yes, but in Chinese we don't have that problem because we have very few foreign words. Each word in Chinese has its own particular meaning, and nothing else, but you have to find it. You can also make up new words, but these should be made up carefully, to precisely express the idea.

The two Chinese Orthodox philologists working on the dictionary are a Chinese English-speaking woman from Hong Kong, and Ioannis Chen, whom you interviewed two years ago. From the Russian side, we have two Russian sinologists, a woman from Moscow, and a man from Vladivostok. Fortunately, the internet is giving us the possibility to create a network of trained linguists.

RTE: Were there any Chinese liturgies in use before the Cultural Revolution, or were they all Slavonic?

FR. DIONISY: After 1905, most of the services of the Russian Ecclesiastical Mission were in Chinese. Churches that had large Russian populations, like in Harbin, celebrated in Slavonic, but the Ecclesiastical Mission in Beijing did the liturgy, vespers, and matins in Chinese. After we restore these old texts and make some corrections, they may be republished, but corrections are certainly needed because the Chinese language changes rapidly, much more quickly than western European languages. What worked at the beginning of the century doesn't work now.

Of course, educated people can read and understand the older language, but not country people or those in remote regions. Since 65 percent of the Chinese population lives outside the cities and large towns, we have to take them into account in any translation.

RTE: Once the forthcoming dictionary establishes the lexical norms, what will follow?

Opposite: Shanghai Cathedral – Orthodox Cathedral of the Most Holy Mother of God, "Surety of Sinners," Shanghai, May 2004. Bought from Chinese government by private businessmen and now used as a restaurant.



Photo courtesy Fr. D. Christensen

FR. DIONISY: A service book and a prayer book. The prayer book will be the common prayers and liturgy for lay-people, and the service book will be the services for clergy. Later, we plan to do the Octoechos, then the Horologion, Festal Menaion, Lenten Triodion, as usual...

We already have an horologion that was translated in 1913. Once we've established the norms, we can publish it as an old variant with some corrections to make the translation more accurate and readable.

We also have a translation of a book by Elder Sophrony, *The Life of Elder Silouan*, that is ready for publication. The translation was made by a Chinese scholar of Russian in mainland China, but it can't be published there yet. It would be quite expensive to print it in Hong Kong, so my idea is to print it in Russia, and bring it in.

RTE: Why was *The Life of Elder Silouan* chosen? Is there something about Fr. Sophrony's writing that you think will be particularly interesting to the Chinese?

FR. DIONISY: My own experience is that during the Soviet period in Russia, this book was very important for Russian Orthodox believers, and even non-believers. I know many people who, previously knowing little about Orthodoxy, read this book and developed not only an interest in tradition but in real spiritual life. It is important to be within the tradition, but that isn't everything. The traditional forms have to be filled with real spiritual life, and this book is particularly effective at attracting people to a deeper belief.

Also, a further step in publishing spiritual literature would be some good general books on Orthodoxy. I'm not sure about the Church Fathers at the beginning; much depends on the language, which can be quite difficult. One has to be prepared both to translate and to read the fathers ... But, there is no doubt that we need good literature now. We've begun collecting English books in a small library in Hong Kong. Fr. Sophrony's monastery in Essex donated books, as did the St. Herman of Alaska Brotherhood in Platina, California.

We would also be very happy to have the resources to translate from English into Chinese. We don't have to translate from Russian only. The goal is to translate and publish good Orthodox material in the Chinese language. My long-term hope is to organize Orthodox education in mainland China.

RTE: Informally, with low-key house classes, or as something more public, like an institution?

FR. DIONISY: Step-by-step, we will have to bring this question before the Chinese authorities. If the Chinese Orthodox Church is recognized inside China, if the government permits our proposal, and if we can raise funds, we will begin by inviting teachers from abroad to teach theology, catechesis, church history, etc., until we can educate native Chinese to take over. This is a realistic approach.

In the future it may be possible to open a seminary in mainland China, but before this happens we have to begin thinking about textbooks in the Chinese language for these students. We have to find good course books and books of lectures on these topics in Russian or English to translate into Chinese: church history, liturgics, dogmatics.

If people were interested in sponsoring high-quality translations of these things, we could have them printed in Russia. We have ways of distributing them in mainland China, but we need Orthodox translators who have a feel for what they are translating, and who can follow the lexical norms, once they are set. And, of course, we need to help support them as they translate.



Fr. Dionisy with Chinese seminarians and translators, Holy Trinity - St. Sergius Lavra

RTE: And these books would be distributed for free? An average Chinese salary is low by our standards.

FR. DIONISY: Yes, of course. But we don't need so many to begin with. Just a few thousand copies of each book. Also, we will put all translations on the internet, so that these Orthodox texts will be available without charge to Chinese speakers around the world.

RTE: What is it about Orthodoxy that is most attractive to Chinese believers?

FR. DIONISY: The main attraction is the feeling of truth. This feeling should be the main reason for belief. Being attracted by traditionalism or non-traditionalism is important, but it is not the chief thing. The impression of



Photo courtesy Fr. D. Christensen

Orthodox services will be very important to the Chinese, because they can understand liturgy through experiencing it, not through the mind, or philosophy. They can look at it and feel something. We have to involve the mind in this process, of course, but tradition by itself is not enough. Buddhism is also very traditional and even older, as is Judaism, but their traditionalism isn't enough of a reason to choose them.

If we can present the cycle of services: vespers, matins, hours, and liturgy in the Chinese language, in a traditional Orthodox style of reverent usage, it will be very attractive. As I said, our first translating task is to create lexical norms in Chinese for both the church services and other reading, so that the translations will be uniform and of high quality.

Perhaps the Chinese government will finally allow Orthodoxy because of the close historical links between China and Russia. And this is not bad. In Russia, Orthodoxy was also chosen under the influence of political reasons. It was the personal choice of St. Vladimir because of his personal experience of Orthodoxy's spirituality, but his ambassadors to different countries advised him to choose Orthodoxy because of quite simple impressions, not because of any philosophy. The emphasis in Russian Orthodoxy is often on attention to form, to details. Sometimes this is very good, but sometimes it can create a lot of difficulties, as we see in the Old Believer's Schism.

But there is already a beginning – the government has helped build three new Orthodox churches in mainland China.

RTE: They were built in response to people asking for compensation for their ruined churches during the Cultural Revolution?

FR. DIONISY: Yes. Two have been built in Xinjiang, in the Autonomous Region in Inner Mongolia, and the Orthodox community in Chuguchak City, near the China-Kazakhstan border, has received permission to construct a new church. Also, an old church has been reopened in Harbin.

RTE: Do they also have permission to hold services?

FR. DIONISY: That is another question. The government may give the money to reconstruct the buildings, but if the community is not ready for services and if there aren't recognized native clergy, the government can do nothing.

Opposite: Imperial Rock Garden, Shanghai.

RTE: What do they do about icons, vestments, and church supplies?

FR. DIONISY: Sometimes they buy paper icons from abroad, from Russia or Australia, for the iconostasis. There are also many old items from Orthodox churches in the storerooms of the Chinese Ministry of Cultural Affairs that were confiscated during the Cultural Revolution. They have many icons and church goods from Beijing, Harbin, Tianjin, but no one has yet begun negotiations for them.

RTE: I know that there have been at least two icons painted in a rather Chinese style of the Lord and of New Martyr Mitrophan, which have been distributed by the Greek Archdiocese in Hong Kong. Were these done by a Chinese iconographer, or painted somewhere else?



Agios Nikolaos: St Nicholas in Yining (Kuljha), Xinjiang.

FR. DIONISY: We can't really speak of Chinese iconography yet. Perhaps it will exist in the future when there will be Chinese masters who can find a way to create Chinese iconography with a traditional Orthodox understanding according

to all the canons. It's a problem because now in iconography we have much copying of old icons, but few real new icon painters.

This may be a question for one of our Chinese students at St. Sergius Lavra, who already has an M.A., with her thesis on iconography. Once she is trained as a painter at the Lavra, perhaps she can begin to think about the specifics of Chinese iconography.

RTE: So, if everything goes well and the Chinese government recognizes the future ordination of the seminarians, how soon will they begin serving?

FR. DIONISY: I hope we can ordain two students as deacons at St. Sergius Lavra this year, but they will need to continue their education there, and afterwards have some pastoral practice in a Russian diocese near the border to gain experience. It will be the decision of the bishops, of course, but it would be my suggestion to send them to Chita just on the Russian side

of the Russian-Chinese border, or to Kharbarovsk or Vladivostok to get some real practice and to have the possibility of crossing over into mainland China, once they are recognized. Also, they will be protected there.

If the Chinese government does not recognize them, we will send them to these Russian border areas to serve anyhow. There are many Chinese communities now in the Russian Far-East, workers that have come to take jobs that the Russians don't want. Economic conditions are very poor in most of China, particularly in the countryside. People perhaps have their daily food, but nothing else. No income, no possibility for a good education or for medical care. There is a huge difference between the wealthy cities like Shanghai and Guangzhou, and the sixty-five percent of the population outside the cities. There are 250,000,000 jobless in mainland China.

RTE: How many Chinese are there now in Russia?

FR. DIONISY: We have 70,000 Chinese in Moscow and the Moscow region now. But that is not many compared to Paris, which has 450,000 Chinese. In all of Siberia, we do not have as many Chinese as there are in the city of Paris. The main wave

of immigration from mainland China now is to Australia and Canada, not to Russia. Those who do come to Russia are from northeastern China only. Siberia has a very harsh climate and the economy is very poor; we see their presence in Siberia as an impact only because the population of China is ten times that of Russia – China has 1.3 billion people, over a sixth of the world's population. The Chinese themselves prefer to emigrate to North America, Europe, or Australia.

Another difficulty is that the Siberian Russian population is very against the Chinese. We have a lot of nationalism now in Russia, and this is particularly a problem for Asians.

Nationalism is a problem for the church in many countries. For example, one Greek businessman in Hong Kong donated his office for church use, but



Chinese students with visiting American Orthodox priest, Fr. Damascene Christensen, Institute of Sino-Christian Studies, Hong Kong.

never visits the church himself. People are sometimes content to support the Church as part of the nation-state, as part of the national identity, but this is a pagan view. I call it pagan patriotism, because there is a difference between pagan and Christian patriotism.

A lot of people now talk about the renaissance of Orthodox Christianity in Russia. Quite often I hear people say that the Russian Orthodox Church should serve Russia. This is not correct. Russia should serve the Church; then it will have a true sense of itself. It is absolutely wrong to say that the Greek Church should serve Greece, and the Russian Church should serve Russia.

RTE: How would you reach out to a Chinese person coming to you who says they are interested in religion? China is a different culture, surely, but is the approach to belief so different?

FR. DIONISY: No, the difference is not great. People are the same, and they all look for the same thing – truth. The difference is only in language, perhaps in the means of expression. You can use different images to present Christianity to different ethnic groups, but there really aren't such huge differences in comprehension or outlook. This is one of the positive effects of globalization, that we can understand each other in a way that very isolated ethnic groups may not have been able to a century ago.

A friend of mine once said that the first globalization process was the Roman Empire, and because of that Christianity spread throughout the Mediterranean and further. This was not by chance. Of course, globalization has bad elements, but it also creates positive possibilities. This is a new time and we have to take advantage of the opportunities we have. This time and these possibilities will be our judges. Do we have the strength to present the spirit of Orthodoxy to the contemporary world? There are more possibilities now than ever before.

RTE: Are people in mainland China finding out about Orthodoxy through the internet?

FR. DIONISY: I've met many Chinese people via internet, and for most of them this was the only possibility to come into contact with someone Orthodox and to receive information about Orthodoxy. For example, a few

Opposite: St. Nicholas Church in Shanghai, May 2004, also bought from the government by private businessmen, now used as a restaurant.



Photo courtesy Fr. D. Christensen

months ago I met a Chinese man in Malaysia. He had received information about Orthodoxy only via internet, and finally became Orthodox.

RTE: So you see the internet as a good resource in making Orthodox writings available to the Chinese. If these writings are available world-wide, it doesn't seem that the Chinese government could complain that you are specifically proselytizing the mainland Chinese.

FR. DIONISY: Yes, it should be fine, particularly because we do not speak against the government. It's absolutely a parallel world. For example, we don't talk about the "persecution of Christians." This has been a traditional theme for the western world, which uses religious topics to force change. Western Christian churches quite often openly accuse the government and use exposure and verbal pressure to force policy changes.

RTE: And you wouldn't do that?

FR. DIONISY: If we needed to discuss this question, we would never discuss it openly. It would be a closed discussion with the proper officials. Embarrassing them publicly brings no result, and even hinders the process. Also, this is not our main focus. There may be problems like this, but they exist all over the world. The greater problem is spiritual hunger.

RTE: Have many mainland Chinese returned to their older traditions of Buddhism and Taoism since the Cultural Revolution?

FR. DIONISY: Yes, there has been a great renewal of interest in religious life in mainland China in the past decade, and it seems to be getting stronger. The Protestant population is increasing 13 percent per year, the Catholics by 9 percent per year. I'm not sure about the Buddhists or Taoists, but I understand they are growing as well; after the collapse of Marxist ideology, there was a vacuum.

A parallel force is secularization. The whole world is now very materialistic, and countries have become secularized by different means – the West by one road, Russia by another. China has been prepared for it in yet another way, but every country now experiences the same problems, materialism and secularization, while at the same time, they are talking about trying to protect human rights. It's a time of polarization.

RTE: Have you had any contact with Mongolia? I remember that Mongolia had a strong Nestorian Christian presence around the 11th to the 13th centuries near Lake Baikal, which later disappeared. Was there any Orthodox influence, or was it limited to northern China?

FR. DIONISY: I've been to Outer Mongolia twice, and we have reopened one church there and begun constructing a new church in Ulaan Baator, where there is a Russian priest, although most of the believers are Russian, not Mongolian.

In the Russian Institute of Oriental Studies, however, they have Mongolian Orthodox liturgical texts translated over a century ago, so there were Mongolian Orthodox believers. No one is yet able to take up this work in the Mongolian world, but it is a very interesting subject. Mongolia would be very open to it, but we don't have anyone who can speak Mongolian to send. Even in Buryatia, I only know one or two Buryatian priests. They do what they can, but the resurgence of Buddhism is very rapid in Buryatia and Mongolia. It was the tradition of generations and is part of the national self-identification.



"Chinese Good News," 1951.

Any missionary must be ready to support the local culture. He shouldn't inculturate Mongols or Buriats as Russian Orthodox; he should be able to think about the creation of an authentic Mongolian Orthodox culture. We shouldn't destroy original culture. Orthodoxy doesn't destroy culture, it creates culture. This means that we must have authentic Mongolian, Chinese, Japanese, Korean, Indonesian Orthodox cultures.

RTE: At St. Sergius Lavra, you also have some North Korean and several Indonesian students in different seminaries.

FR. DIONISY: Yes, and several of the Indonesians have already been ordained. The North Koreans are not the classical type of seminarians. They

are with us because of the decision of Kim Jong-Il, the President of North Korea, to build an Orthodox church in Pin Yang.

RTE: What is his interest in Orthodoxy?

FR. DIONISY: It was a political decision because he's looking for protection from Russia and he understands that constructing an Orthodox church is a symbol of respect for Russia in general. I'm not sure what he expects the political result of this to be, but in any case, we told him, "Alright, so you will have a church in Pyongyang, but this is only a building. If you don't have real church services, it will just be an empty building." I proposed that he send some Koreans to study in our seminary, and I asked that he accept two of our Russian seminarians to study Korean in Pyongyang. He agreed to this and sent us four North Korean students. They've already been here one year, and the teachers say that they are quite good students.

RTE: Were they Orthodox when they came?

FR. DIONISY: It was a great exception for our seminary, the first time that we'd invited non-Orthodox students to study with us. They were baptized after they arrived.

RTE: And they were willing to do this, they understood what they were doing?

FR. DIONISY: Yes, I believe so, but you must understand that the North Korean mentality is very unusual for us. They will do anything that the government decides, and they will do it with their whole heart. If the government says, "You are to be Orthodox," they do it willingly.

RTE: So your problem is getting them to go beyond that obedience, to make sure that Orthodoxy is something that is really a part of them?

FR. DIONISY: It's not that simple. This is not just obedience to the government, it's an aspect of all traditional Asian societies, where society and government have much more power than the person. This is a much different attitude than in the West and it was only Christianity that gave the world the understanding of the value of the person. This is now a big question for Asian societies that are becoming aware of the idea of the value of the person. This is new for them, and they will have to decide what to do with

Opposite: Lake on Lushan, China.

the philosophy of the value of the individual. Asian societies are very old and complex systems that will need a long time to change. Sadly, even in western societies where they have had a sense of the value of the person, step by step, the mind is changing to that of the former pagan world. In the pagan world the value of society was definitely higher than that of the individual; our contemporary societies are returning to that.

RTE: Is there anything else you would like to say to our readers?

FR. DIONISY: I think one of the most important things for westerners is not only to assist with missionary work in mainland China, but for American, European, and Australian Orthodox sinologists to do missionary work with the Chinese communities in their own countries. The translations and publishing that we are working on here can benefit Chinese all over the world. My hope is that interest in Orthodox missionary work for China, and for the Church in China, will increase. China needs spiritual support as well as material support. The Church in China has few resources, but I believe it has a future. ✦



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