



A JOURNAL OF ORTHODOX FAITH AND CULTURE

ROAD TO EMMAUS

Help support
Road to Emmaus
Journal.

The *Road to Emmaus* staff hopes that you find our journal inspiring and useful. While we offer our past articles on-line free of charge, we would warmly appreciate your help in covering the costs of producing this non-profit journal, so that we may continue to bring you quality articles on Orthodox Christianity, past and present, around the world. Thank you for your support.

Please consider a donation to Road to Emmaus by visiting the Donate page on our website.



TOUS LES SAINTS: AN IMMIGRANT PARISH AND THE MOMENTUM OF GIVING

A remarkable interview with lawyer Sergiy Volosenko, personal assistant to the rector of the Russian Orthodox Church of All Saints in Strasbourg, on the inner workings of this new international parish. Even as the immigrant community struggles with new languages and cultures, they give what they can in time, energy, and prayer to build a grace-filled, self-sufficient parish. The results are astonishing.

RTE: Sergiy, can you please tell us about yourself?

SERGIY: I'm thirty-nine years old and a native of Ukraine where I did a Master's Degree in law and then worked as a lawyer until I decided to serve at the European Court of Human Rights in Strasbourg. Ukraine's degrees were not yet recognized in Europe, so to do this I had to repeat law school over again at Freiburg University in Germany. When I finished, I came to Strasbourg in April 2011 for an internship at the Court.

At my first liturgy at the Church of All Saints, I had a wonderful feeling of joy and the unmistakable conviction that I hadn't just "found" the parish but that I'd been guided by someone unseen. I still remember this feeling. At that time, the parish rented a garage on the Rue de Niederbronn near the train station for a chapel. Although that sounds bleak, there were skylights in the roof, it had been carefully cleaned and painted, and it felt very light. On the way home, God's presence seemed so close that I was almost afraid of this

Opposite: Russian Orthodox Church of All Saints in Strasbourg.

overwhelming clarity and brightness. I knew I was meant to be there and continued to attend on Sundays, although I lived fifty miles away in Germany.

Then I started coming to weekday services before work where it was often just the priest, myself, and two or three women. Father Philip Ryabykh arrived in Strasbourg just a few weeks after I came to the parish (in fact, on July 11, my birthday). He invited me to assist in the altar, and then I began helping him with paperwork, legal issues, and generally became immersed in the work of the parish.

Father Philip's arrival was the beginning of a new life for the parish. He began serving liturgy more often, encouraged people to participate in the sacraments regularly, and because our church is All Saints, he put up icons everywhere. One thing that I particularly like is that our parishioners are from many different countries and cultural backgrounds, so they've brought their own icons and traditions of saints.

In the early years, we had about twenty to twenty-five people participating in Sunday services. But after 2011 it grew quickly and, although we had worked hard to make the chapel a beautiful and comfortable place, the services became so crowded on Sundays that even with the windows open it was difficult to breath in the hot humid summers.

Beginning with Symmetry

The community began searching for an affordable piece of land where they could build a church, but it was only after Patriarch Alexis II visited Strasbourg and had a meeting with the mayor and other officials that there was some movement. The piece of city-owned land that we are on now was occupied by abandoned tennis courts at the junction of two canals. The city sold part of the land to developers who built apartment buildings next door and we have been allowed to rent the rest. This is a very great gift, because, as you can see, we are in an old, peaceful neighborhood with water on two sides, almost as if we are on a peninsula. We are very close to the European Court of Human Rights, the European Council and the European Parliament. Everything is right here.

So, when Fr. Philip arrived, the parish already had the piece of land assigned by the city council for a nominal rent per year, preliminary permission to build, and approval of the basic size and general architectural style of the church and hall. The original Russian architect so loved the fact that we

are almost surrounded by water that he was inspired to build a copy of the beautiful St. Nicholas Skete island church on Valaam with its elaborate decorative stonework, but this proved so costly and unworkable that the plans had to be altered. It took us until 2013 to redesign the plans, raise money, receive the permits, and build the temporary construction offices. Another city requirement was to get the agreement of everyone in the neighborhood to our building the church here.

During this time, we received a proposal from another talented Russian architect, Dmitri Pshenichnikov, who offered a plan that Fr. Philip liked very much. This was not just a modification, but a new plan.

RTE: The church and parish hall are stunning.

SERGIY: Yes. With this new plan, the architecture itself became the decoration, marked by its beauty and simplicity: white walls with a pale sea-green roof and golden edgings on the curves. They settled on a structure that was modest, light, and graceful. Although Fr. Philip's degrees are in theology and international relations, he has a deep feeling for harmony and symmetry and the church reflects this.

This type of church architecture, called the "tent style," was typical for fifteenth- and sixteenth-century Russia. Uniquely in our church, there are no columns inside. The architect's idea was to have three levels of octagonal shapes: one on the foundation, another at the middle level, and the third at the level of the roof windows. Each octagon is slightly rotated to provide stability and because of this we didn't need columns, resulting in an interior that is light, open, and unobstructed.

This is also why we chose not to have a *panecadelon*, the large chandelier that usually hangs in the center of the church. They are common but not obligatory in Orthodox churches and we didn't want to disrupt the beauty of this wonderful space. Instead we have hidden sources of light which come from behind the walls. You come in, you see light, you see some windows high up, but you don't quite know where the light comes from. People often say, "You have so much light here. The church is so bright."

The parish hall is beautiful in a more classical western type of way, that fits with the church. The plans for the parish house were unaltered except for narrowing the windows to bring them into harmony with those of the church. Because they are so tall, they still let in a great amount of light.

RTE: Can you say more about this feeling of harmony?

SERGIY: Father Philip loves to unite harmony and meaning. For instance, we had three proposed sketches for the church roof – one blue, one gold, and one light green. He said, “We are the stavropegial parish of All Saints, the vestments we wear on Pentecost are green, the symbolic color of the Patriarch of Russia is green, while that of the saints is gold, so we will have golden domes and a green roof.

RTE: It’s a beautiful green and remarkably French. It’s a color you would see along the Mediterranean shore, a quite light and watery green. I find it impossible to take an accurate photo of it. Is it copper?

SERGIY: Yes, it is a copper roof brought from Finland. The original color of copper is reddish, of course, but as it weathers over decades, it turns green – and in the city center of Strasbourg you can see many of these old oxidized copper roofs. Now you can buy metal that has been pre-oxidized to a particular uniform shade by a faster method than just weathering. If you view the church from the other side of the canal, it is amazing. At sunset, the walls turn pink and the tops of the smaller domes and crosses, reddish-gold.

RTE: The other thing I love is that walking toward the church from any direction, even from the curving side streets, you see it at the end. Every street leads to it, and it fits in so beautifully with the neighborhood that it feels as if it’s been here for centuries. It is unmistakably Russian, but with French grace and elegance.

SERGIY: During construction, we met with the district council and they were very positive about what we were doing. Because construction was going on, we legally couldn’t allow anyone but workers inside the site, but everyone on the council badly wanted to come in and look. They told us that they were very happy to have this church and very much liked the architecture, which we had tried to make fit this neighborhood.

When a Russian art historian visited, she went up to the choir loft to view the interior of the church and said, “This is amazing, you have Gothic elements here; you must have been inspired by just being here, as France is the birthplace of Gothic architecture.” Although we didn’t intend such a paral-

Opposite: Details of roof design. Church of All Saints, Strasbourg.





lel, she herself saw a relationship between our being in France and how the church turned out.

The French construction workers who built it had no experience whatsoever with Orthodox churches, so they used special computer models to simulate the construction in order to grasp the plans, as well as to prepare the special forms and frames needed for the walls and other unique elements. The iron frames under the domes, the golden domes, and the crosses were all made in Russia, but everything else was done here by local construction companies, including one based in Eschau.

Our French architect Michel Arnold is also from Eschau and, if you remember, Eschau is coincidentally the small French village that has had the holy relics of St. Sophia and her three daughters since the eighth century. We know that they were watching over the construction.

Sacrifices

When I began helping Fr. Philip, I saw that he was sacrificing his life for this church. Every single day, whether in rain, snow, or summer heat, he went to see how the construction was progressing. Even on our monthly trips to Brussels (he is also the Russian Orthodox Church's representative to the European Union), when we came back late in the evening he would have to go look at the day's work before going to sleep. He did this every day for the five years of construction unless he was very ill or away from France. I remember days when it was pouring rain and there was mud everywhere; he was still out in raingear and rubber boots checking the site, and, of course, praying.

He wanted to be sure we prayed during the construction, so one of the first things we did was to put up a marble cross on a corner of the site. On feast days after liturgy the parish would come here for processions and molebens. The Kursk Root icon was brought to us twice, and with it, the help of the Mother of God. We felt her presence so strongly, and almost all of our contracts and details of construction were finalized on feasts of the Mother of God without us planning this. The day they finished pouring the concrete dome of the church, we climbed the scaffolding to walk around it. The concrete was still wet, of course, and Fr. Philip wrote the date in it: "5 August," the feast of the Pochaev Mother of God.

Opposite: Reflection of All Saints Church in the canal bordering the church property.

At the beginning of the work, Father Philip printed a prayer for the construction of the church that we distributed among our parishioners, and which we all prayed daily. I was very touched once when Fr. Philip's father, Anatoly, visited us from Russia. We had finished morning prayers in church and were about to say the construction prayer, when we realized that we didn't have a copy at the reader's stand. Suddenly, Anatoly began reciting it from memory. This was his prayer, his contribution. Although he grew up in the USSR in a period of extreme atheism, he is now very faithful and comes often to help. When he visits, he is up before any of us and starts working even before breakfast. These things are important.

RTE: Wonderful. During the construction, were you still practicing law?

SERGIY: When my internship ended, I went through a complicated selection process and was offered a contract to stay on as a lawyer, so from 2012 to 2016 I continued to work for the European Court of Human Rights. Most contracts in the Court are for four years, and they cannot be extended. When my contract was due to expire, Fr. Philip asked if I would come to work here and I accepted.

RTE: You have sacrificed as well. Did you regret leaving the Court?

SERGIY: I loved what I was doing and was honored to work for the Court. It is a great institution; we made many very good decisions and helped a lot of people. I enjoyed every single day of it, but working here is something different. I had the feeling that I needed to take another path, and didn't ever feel locked into law as a career. I've been there, tried that, and I'm happy that I did, but I knew that I had to move on. What I am doing here is obviously less prestigious and we don't have a lawyer's salary (*Laughter*) ...but the things we are accomplishing are personally very satisfying.

All Saint's Parish and the Council of Europe

SERGIY: Officially, I'm a personal assistant to Fr. Philip, who is not only the rector of the parish but also serves as a church diplomat. He is the representative of the Russian Orthodox Church in Strasbourg to the Council of Europe, and since 2016, as I said, he has also been their representative to the European Union and other international European institutions.

Another quality of All Saints Parish that I want to mention mirrors the city itself. Strasbourg was built at a crossroads, and when you live here, you feel this. It is a very international city and because it is on the border it has gone back and forth for centuries being French territory, then German, then French again. I felt this transient character particularly in the European Court and other institutions – diplomats and lawyers come for five years or so and then leave and someone new comes.

This is also true for our parish. People come, we get to know them, we love them, they help, they sing, and then they say, "My contract is expiring, I have to leave." Then someone else comes.

RTE: How does the Council of Europe differ from the European Union?

SERGIY: The European Union has fewer members, but these share a unified legislation, economy, and currency; it's a very close cooperation. The Council of Europe is a wider platform that covers not only the EU, but countries such as Russia, Ukraine, Georgia, Azerbaijan, Turkey, Norway, and Switzerland. We also have observers to the Council of Europe from Mexico and Canada, so the pool of the countries involved is much larger.

RTE: We don't think of Europe as being that far east.

SERGIY: Yes, after the collapse of the Soviet Union, when democracy was only on paper and the Warsaw Pact had ended, many of the former Soviet republics that fell fully or partially within geographical Europe joined the Council of Europe, which was partially set up to help them become democratic.

Of course, the European Court of Human Rights is an integral part of the Council of Europe, and for countries that do not belong to the EU and may not have such legal standards yet, the Court is a very important international institution protecting human rights. I can particularly speak about Ukraine here because I am a Ukrainian citizen and a Ukrainian lawyer. The court system in Ukraine is unfortunately very corrupt and people sometimes do not have a chance to obtain real justice, so their last resort is often the European Court of Human Rights in Strasbourg.

Father Philip also deals with issues involving the rights of Christians, particularly of Orthodox Christians. We do a lot of work in Brussels with the Committee of Representatives of Orthodox Churches to the European

Union (CROCEU) who discuss various problems and propose modifications for pieces of legislation before the EU. So, there are two levels: the European Union and the broader Council of Europe.

RTE: Being a lawyer must be a great asset.

SERGIY: Yes, it helps me to have a way to apply my skills, and of course it helps the parish.

Teaching and Catechism

RTE: Along with assisting Fr. Philip in this way, and helping with construction, what else do you do?

SERGIY: I'm also engaged in catechism. When people want to be baptized or married in our church, or to baptize their children, we speak with them to understand what they expect from baptism or marriage, how and what they believe, and what they want from the Church. We want to be sure that people have a chance to learn about Orthodoxy. These aren't so much classes as they are direct preparatory talks with the people involved. If they are regular churchgoers who confess and receive Holy Communion regularly, we just discuss the procedure of performing the sacrament, but if this is someone I don't know, such as people from other cities or towns in Germany, Switzerland and France, we have lengthier talks. Ours is the only purpose-built Orthodox church in this region. The nearest Orthodox church is in Baden-Baden in Germany, which is also Russian.

RTE: So, the Greeks don't have any church buildings of their own in eastern France?

SERGIY: No, they don't. So, when people come, I sometimes ask them, "Tell me something that you know about Jesus Christ." Often, there is just silence. "Have you ever read the Bible?" "No." "Have you ever opened the Bible?" "No." For many people, the Church is only important for baptizing their children and for cultural connections, and it shouldn't be like this.

Many people use the argument, "But I came, I'm here. Isn't that enough?" I respond, "Of course, this is good, but it is not enough. Of course, God sees that you have made an effort to come, but because during the sacrament of baptism we process around the font singing, 'Everyone who has been bap-

tized in Christ has put on Christ,' what do you know about Christ? If you know nothing about Him, if you have no interest in knowing Him, what do you expect will be different after you or your children are baptized?"

It is irritating for some people that we ask for another meeting and sometimes they do not return. Also, baptisms in our parish are free of charge, which is extremely important to Fr. Philip. Our practice is that if people want to donate something, they are free to do so, but we don't have a list of required donations or set fees.

It is painful to me that we have these adults who aren't willing to learn. Many people only come to baptize their children because they don't want something bad to befall them, which is a bit superstitious. When they say this, I tell them, "Of course, God gives protection after the baptism. Of course, the guardian angel is protecting your son or daughter, but how do you plan to live after the baptism? Are you planning to come to church? Will you be taking Holy Communion regularly? Do you know what Holy Communion is?" Unfortunately, many people don't know. They may seem very pious and have icons, but then you discover that they have never participated in confession or Holy Communion.

RTE: Is this because when their parents emigrated from the USSR there were so few Orthodox churches? Most exiles and immigrants had to take work anywhere they could find it.

SERGIY: Yes, this is exactly the case. Many of these people or their parents grew up in the Soviet period and had no experience of Christian spiritual life, nor were they in Russia to see the renewal of church life. So, they come here out of a cultural memory, or perhaps because they do feel a need for spirituality. Sometimes they cannot explain why they have come. Our work here is to help, to teach, to make it understandable, and to guide people to Christ.

Catechesis: The Saturday School

RTE: Do you catechize the children as well?

SERGIY: Yes. We have four groups: six- to ten-year-olds and ten- to fourteen-year-olds in Russian. Then we have a German-speaking group and a French-speaking group. This is because many of our Russian émigré children who were born in France or Germany do not understand Russian, or they may be children of mixed marriages where they don't speak much Russian at home.



When we started this in 2014, we only had Russian-speaking groups divided by age. Their parents insisted on having the classes in Russian so that the children could improve their Russian skills, and we went along with this until I understood that I was not teaching about Orthodoxy most of the time, but explaining the meaning of the Russian words. The vocabulary I had to use to explain basic Orthodox dogma was too complicated for them, so I was translating almost every single concept into German. Finally, I said, “This doesn’t make sense. We are not a language school. If you want your son or daughter to learn Russian, you can send them to classes or hire a teacher, but this is not our aim. We want them to learn about Orthodoxy.”

So, we added French and German groups and these children opened like flowers. Previously they were silent and didn’t interact, but once we switched to their own languages, they relaxed and began asking deep and meaningful questions. It is a blessing from God to have these children here. They are young and sometimes very naïve, but the questions they ask and their sincerity and deep belief is moving. Every day that I teach, I have this amazing experience with the children, even the smallest ones.

I teach the fundamentals of Orthodoxy, and Tatiana, a Moldavian parishioner, teaches the basics of prayer. Then we have a handicraft class with two art teachers, as well as a pottery class where they learn to make bowls and cups. We also have an art historian, Irina, who teaches a class on Christian culture that includes Christianity in the history of mankind. She and the children discuss paintings and talk about how Christianity has influenced the way we think and live now. She is very passionate about art and tries to find ways to bring these young ones into our rich Christian heritage. We also have a children’s choir class, where they learn to sing pieces of liturgical music. So, we have about eight teachers, all of whom work on a volunteer basis. This little school is important.

Our catechism is a half-day school on Saturday. This was Fr. Philip’s idea to also help the parents because in France the stores all close on Sunday, and if you work during the week, Saturday is the only day on which you can shop. So, they bring their children at 2:00 pm, when they have two classes. Then we all eat a hot lunch together and they have a half-hour to play outside. This is followed by two more classes until 6:00 pm or a little after. In the meantime, we’ve started vespers and matins in the church, so when the

Opposite: Children’s singing lesson in the grand salon.

last class finishes it is time for the anointing and they end the day by going to church to be blessed.

RTE: You would think that every parent would love this.

SERGIY: Yes, we say, “You are free, you have a free afternoon. You can do whatever you like and we will take care of your children.” The church territory is behind a high, beautiful, wrought-iron fence, so it is secure, and it is also very important that the children interact and play with each other so that they know there are other Orthodox children like themselves.

One of our teenage girls, Anastasia, lives two and a half hours from here on the border of Switzerland. Her Orthodox mother brings her every Saturday and says that because her daughter is the only Orthodox girl in her public school, this is the only place where she can see that she is not the only Orthodox girl in the world. She sees other girls and boys of the same age who are also Orthodox, who wear a cross and pray. Coming here, she understands that her faith is not something extraordinary. Just imagine being a teenage girl and not only the only Orthodox student in your school, but you and your mother are the only Orthodox Christians in your village. So, this is not only about education, but about being with children like yourself.

RTE: What do you do for the teenagers who are over fourteen?

SERGIY: We used to have meetings and “tea hours” with Fr. Philip for those over fourteen. They had tea and snacks, and sometimes they watched and discussed a short film, or went for a walk around the park. In the final stage of construction, we weren’t able to continue, but we plan on reintroducing this club for the older youth soon. We are very concerned about this, and think about it all of the time. It is not only about coming into adulthood, but also because many of these young people from Germany do not understand our Church Slavonic. They know some of the major prayers, but the more complex parts of the liturgy are not accessible to them.

RTE: Aren’t they able to follow German and French translations?

SERGIY: Some of our French and German converts bring translations, but these children do not. Many of them know their basic catechism, the impor-

Opposite: Lenten weekday service. All Saints Church.



tance of Holy Communion, of prayer, but not the more complex services. We hope to change that.

RTE: I remember that Roman Catholic children in the 1950's and 60's had classes that taught them phrase by phrase what the Latin mass meant in their own language, and what was happening spiritually.

SERGIY: Yes, of course, and we do this now in our classes as well. We are also trying to follow the calendar of the Church together. In Great Lent we go into the meaning of the fast and the Pre-Sanctified Liturgy, and how it differs from the regular Sunday liturgies. The older ones get more theological information, of course.

The youngest group of six- to ten-year-olds has a class with me at the end of the day, so by then they are often tired and can hardly concentrate. They attend their French or German schools from Monday to Friday, and now they have another half-day with us. I always tell them, "This is what you are doing for God. This is how you show Him that you want to learn about Him. We all have to learn how to love Christ, not just say that we do. We have to learn what He said and what He wants us to do, so what you are doing today is adding a brick to the building of your own church." They understand this, and it is a real sacrifice on their parts. They acknowledge that very often they do want to stay home and play computer games, but they come as a conscious act for God. There is something amazing in this to me.

I try to reinforce this: "What you are doing is very important. This is your step towards God, and then God will make a step towards you." We also try to teach them to make prayer part of their everyday life. I want them not only to learn the Church's prayers by heart, or how to pray with their prayer books, but also to pray in their own words so that they understand that prayer is not only about asking for something but talking to God – explaining your problems, your needs your feelings, your hopes to him. They understand this.

Once when I had this young class in the evening, the theme was the parable of the prodigal son, and they were so tired that they just weren't listening. Then, out of nowhere, I had the idea to tell them the parable as if it was fairy-tale, where the characters in the story had the same names as the children in class. Suddenly, I saw them waking up. Silence settled over the classroom and they all began to listen intently. When they heard their own names, they began smiling. Needless to say, I had to introduce a princess and her friends

for the girls – we sometimes have to adjust. (*Laughter*) This works well for the smallest children.

Also, we are living in 21st-century Europe, where most children absorb information through images. This is why we use pictures and have video screens to show short cartoons. I see that they have difficulty concentrating on reading because they would rather watch something. This is the reality we have now, and I think that it is like this all over the world. They all know how to search for videos on You Tube.

For me, this half-day church school is an endless source of inspiration, and as I said, I am amazed at the thoughts and questions they have. Once I was telling the parable of how Christ healed the young man who was blind from birth – that He took some earth and spit on it to put onto the man's eyes. I asked one of the classes, "Why do you think Jesus Christ had to spit on this earth? Doesn't it seem strange to make this clay?" One extremely active boy who could never sit still in class, said, "I think that Jesus Christ wanted there to be something from Himself, some part of Him in this clay."

For me, this was the perfect explanation, and from a small six-year-old boy that you could never imagine being capable of this kind of thought. If you ask them questions, they think and analyze. Very often their replies are extremely Orthodox. Without knowing the teaching of the Holy Fathers or the Church on these subjects, they instinctively reply in a very Orthodox way. We have so many children. I wish you could see them.

Of course, we also continue working with the grown-ups. This is more individual, but there are adults who want more. For a while, we had meetings on Saturdays for those who wanted to study the Holy Gospel with one of the priests or with a member of our parish, but Saturdays are difficult as I said before. We plan to change this to a weekday evening. The other real opportunity for teaching adults is Fr. Philip's sermons.

RTE: I've noticed that although his sermons are long, everyone listens closely. The church is full, yet the parishioners all crowd up to the front as if not to miss a word, and no one moves while he is speaking.

SERGIY: Yes, they are sometimes up to thirty minutes long, and this is quite unusual, but he seems to feel the people and sees when it is enough. It is a mystery for us how he gauges this. For him the sermon is not a formality or a ritual. It's concentration, prayer, reading passages from the gospel or the

Holy Fathers beforehand, and then thinking about what would be useful to say. He also uses this as an occasion for educating people about the Church, about children and family, about living as an Orthodox Christian in society, and they love these sermons. Every week I see many people recording with their mobile phones to share them with others, and there are lots of requests for transcripts and to put them online. They are deep and meaningful, and I am glad that people appreciate them.

RTE: I have also seen your announcements about parish pilgrimages.

SERGIY: Yes, we have a very popular program of pilgrimages with our assistant priest. With a small van he can take up to eight people on a two- to three-day pilgrimage. Once a month, he and his matushka find an interesting destination for our parishioners somewhere in Europe. Our ladies, for instance, enjoy visiting women's monasteries in Bussey (France) or Munich (Germany). There are also pilgrimages to Italy or to nearby Saint-Nicolas-de-Ports to the relics of St. Nicholas. We had to interrupt these tours for technical reasons, but they will be starting again soon.

An International Community

SERGIY: Many of our parish members are Russian, and often they have moved here because they have a French or German spouse. About 30-40% of those who come are from Germany because Strasbourg is much closer than Baden-Baden, where the other Russian church is. Another interesting group are German by origin. Their grandparents and great-grandparents were merchants in Russia who were forcibly relocated by the Soviets from the pre-revolutionary German-speaking area on the Volga to Kazakhstan, Siberia, and Uzbekistan. After the fall of communism, it became possible for them to return to Germany, but because they were born in these regions, they are Orthodox and many come to us. A third group of Russians are those who are here on diplomatic or administrative assignments with the Council of Europe.

We also have a large Georgian community. There is now a Georgian chapel in Strasbourg, but because liturgies in Georgian are infrequent, they usually come to us for Sundays and feasts.

We also have people from Moldova, a former Soviet republic near the Romanian border. Because the Romanian language is rather close to French,

it is easy for them to speak French and thus many of them come here to work. While there is a Romanian Church in Strasbourg, the Orthodox tradition of Moldova is closer to that of the Russian Orthodox Church because we are both on the Old Calendar.

In short, we have parishioners from most of the former Soviet Union countries – although not so many from Latvia, Estonia, and Lithuania because they are more Protestant, although we do have three parishioners from Latvia.

There are also parishioners who were born and raised in Kazakhstan, particularly in Karaganda, and some from Uzbekistan. We also have Albanians, and we used to have some Greeks as well. There are also a number of Serbs who come to us because the Serbian priest serves five parishes and can only come once a month or so. We now have about 120-150 people who attend Sunday liturgy each week, and double that number at Christmas and Pascha.

So, in Strasbourg there is a Bulgarian parish in rented space, a Serbian parish (a house-church), Romanian (in a Catholic Chapel), a Georgian chapel; and a small Greek parish (although the priest is often away because he is a professor in Thessaloniki). There is also a very interesting French-speaking community with a chapel in a storefront near the old part of Strasbourg. This is a sister church to us, under the Russian Orthodox Church and the Diocese of Paris.

The parish of All Saints is *stavropegial*, meaning that we are not under the supervision of the Russian Bishop of Paris, but of the Patriarch of Russia. This happened in 2014 after it was decided to have a permanent representation of the Russian Orthodox Church to the Council of Europe. Because Fr. Philip is the representative for the Russian Church, it was decided that the parish would be directly under the Patriarch.

RTE: What is your experience of French and German converts to Orthodoxy? Are they mostly people who have married Orthodox spouses, or do they come to Orthodoxy after a spiritual search?

SERGIY: We have both. Most converts are husbands of Orthodox women and were also spiritually searching, but I see that the long fasts, the traditions, the calendar, are very different from what they know. Some of these people go to the French-speaking parish, but we do have native Germans and French here as well, who often come with liturgical books in their own language to follow along. Sometimes they also try to introduce their vision of how things should be done, so I try to explain our tradition and theology

as I learn more about their backgrounds. I like it when people ask questions, because it means that they are trying to understand. It is because of these converts that we have introduced French-language liturgies once a month.

RTE: What is particularly impressive to an outsider is that everyone gets along so well. There are cultural differences, but a distinct lack of tension.

SERGIY: Yes, we all live in very turbulent times now. People watch television, use the internet, read newspapers, and this inevitably affects our spirit, excites us, and makes us angry or irritated. I think that for our community, which is very multi-cultural and multi-national, the only possible way to go forward is to be united around Jesus Christ and to serve each other with love and care. I am glad that we don't hear any political messages during the sermons, and am grateful to Father Philip for his wise approach to this sensitive issue. Each person has the right to his or her own opinion and political view, but when we come to the Church, to venerate Christ, all of this needs to be left outside. In our parish we try to celebrate local saints (for instance, St. Gabriel of Samtavro from Georgia, St. Savva from Serbia, and St. Stephan the Great from Moldova are all known and loved by our parishioners), we show interest in local languages and traditions and during the liturgy in our church you can hear prayers in German, Georgian, Romanian, and French.

RTE: How do the local residents view you? You said that the neighborhood had to formally accept the church before you started building.

SERGIY: French people in general are very positive about our presence. As you see, people walking by are often very interested in the church and there is a huge demand for tours. We have guided tours for groups during the week and also on Sundays.

RTE: Since I've been here, they often seem back to back, with tour buses parked outside, which is quite unusual for any church.

SERGIY: Yes, sometimes there are many such requests for organized tours. I often speak to these people and usually their interest is cultural rather than spiritual. They admire the church, the architecture, and they have heard a lot about icons. Many of them have visited Moscow or St. Petersburg and they like Orthodox art and singing.

Opposite: Dimitri Pipchin painting icon of St. Odile.





But there are those who are searching, and say things like, “I don’t belong to any confession, but I believe in God” or “I’m searching for God and I’ve come to see what Orthodoxy has to offer.” We have to be ready for these people – to welcome them in such a way that they can experience prayer in the church. This is why the church is open now every day from 9:00 am to 6:00 pm. We also have daily services and liturgies two or three times a week outside of Great Lent. During Great Lent, of course, we have the Pre-Sanctified liturgy on Wednesday and Friday, and we have a moleben or a vigil with vespers and matins each evening. We try to have services every day of the week, so that people can come either in the morning or in the evening. We are fortunate to have two priests: Archimandrite Philip Ryabkh, the rector, and Fr. Eugene Makushkin. Our community also includes two nuns who come from Russia to help out (for several weeks or months, depending on their visas), as well French, Russian, and Ukrainian live-in volunteers.

Support and Self-Sufficiency

RTE: So, how do you maintain yourselves? You really feel the momentum here of giving and receiving, but volunteer labor can’t provide everything.

SERGIY: Yes. So far, we live on one-time or weekly donations and do not have any regular sponsors, although of course, we had marvelous ones for the church construction. Our mostly immigrant parishioners cannot donate much in euros, but, as you say, many are eager to help.

Until now, almost everything has been done by these parish volunteers, such as the cleaning of the church and manning the bookstores. As you can see, we have a large number of visitors who come not only to pray, but they also need to use the lavatory, perhaps have coffee and tea, and in the winter the polished stone floors quickly become muddy, so all of these areas have to be continually cared for. There are others who help in the church or in the shop selling candles, books, and icons, run the small café on Sundays, or who help with the gardening. We do have a paid full-time secretary, and a daytime gatekeeper.

As generous as parishioners are with their time, we do need to hire people, because you cannot count on volunteers all of the time. They call and say, “I can’t come, I’m sick,” or “My child is sick,” or “I have other things I have to

All Saints Church from the canal.

do.” Of course, there is no obligation to come, but if we announce that we are open daily from 9:00 am to 6:00 pm, we have to be open. We have to be responsible and, of course, this cannot be done only with volunteers. People are ready to help, they are even ready to receive a lower salary than they might be paid professionally, but they do need money.

RTE: Behind the church, I see that you are planting trees and vegetable gardens. Is this part of the plan to become self-sufficient?

SERGIY: Yes, this is Fr. Philip’s idea. We are growing things that we can use – fruit and vegetables for food, and flowers for the church. Being a monk, Fr. Philip tries to take the Benedictine approach: *Ora et labora* (Pray and work). For him, this means dividing the day into times of prayer, administration and paperwork, and working with his hands – especially in the garden behind the church. He has planted apple, peach, apricot, cherry and fig trees, and although we don’t have the climate of the south of France, the figs are juicy and sweet. These are all trees that were bred to not branch out to the side but grow upwards, so that we can do more with our small piece of land. If we were to plant the branching trees, in fifteen years there wouldn’t be space for them all, but these will work well.

Of course, he also plants things like tomatoes, garlic, onions, cucumbers, peppers, herbs for cooking and for tea and, because we have Georgians here, we even have a small vineyard with black and white wine grapes. The commonplace that Georgians love their vineyards seems a cliché, but there is a retired Georgian man in our parish, now handicapped, who told me, “You know, Sergiy, the only time I have no pain is when I work in this garden.” I see him spending hours with the grapes – tying them up, weeding, and trimming them. Georgians and wine: it’s a love story.

Everything in the garden is maintained by our parish members. They volunteer to work, they donate plants, trees and flowers. The idea was not only to grow a garden but to grow things we can use ourselves – fruit and vegetables to eat, flowers for church. Father Philip is about to fulfill a long-time dream because we have just bought potato seeds. For Russians and Ukrainians, growing potatoes is a part of life. Almost every family has a small dacha plot and we all grew up with gardens. It’s in our blood.

You can also see a small hill at the corner of our land where we planted the marble cross. We aren’t sure how it came to be – perhaps when the old tennis courts were built, they left some earth at that corner. Father Philip’s idea

is to have it as a small symbolic “Mount Tabor,” so on that hillside are things that grow in the Holy Land; a biblical garden with herbs, fig and olive trees, and other such plants.

RTE: Can you tell us now about what goes on in the parish house? You’ve already mentioned the Saturday catechism classes.

The Parish House

SERGIY: On the ground floor is the great hall where we host the talks for tours, hold parish meetings, public lectures and concerts, and where our choir practices. It seats about one hundred. We have a century-old grand piano that was donated to us. Also, on the ground floor are the small meeting rooms where we teach catechism.

On the floor above is an open high-ceilinged library that looks out onto the church. The space rises straight up to the roof, encompassing two floors – the lower floor has books, reading tables and an exhibition area. The upper loft-type floor has more books and individual reading tables. There is also a painting, pottery, and craft room for the children and for our iconographers, two official meeting rooms, and the church offices.

The top floor has a common kitchen and community dining room with four blocks of residential rooms. In each block are two rooms with a shared bathroom. Father Philip has two rooms to himself, two are reserved as guest rooms. The other rooms are for those who are working in the church temporarily or permanently. The idea was to provide a place to live for those who work here as full-time volunteers.

RTE: Who lives here at present?

SERGIY: We have Fr. Philip, myself, and Kyril, a mathematician, who is here for an internship in International Relations and Diplomacy. He is working with Fr. Philip on the human rights issues affecting Orthodox Christians in Europe. We also have Dmitri, an iconographer from Donesk, Ukraine, who is here for several months painting icons for our church, especially the larger ones that would be difficult to transport. Matushka Justina, an Orthodox nun who lived for many years at the Russian Orthodox Ecclesiastical Mission in the Holy Land, is here now and cooks for our live-in community and daytime staff, although she can only come in three-month intervals due to

visa regulations. Another great help is our friend Irina who sings in the choir and helps Matushka Justina with the cooking. Last but not least, is Marie, a French Orthodox convert and the person I call our guardian angel. For me she is an example of a very helpful and faithful person. She was a French schoolteacher and, after she retired last year, we invited her to join us to live here. Although 75, she works and works. I don't understand how she has all of this energy.

Then we have people who live elsewhere, but come to help during the day such as our wonderful secretary Svetlana; Oleg, our mosaicist; Dimitry and Yuri, the gatekeepers; and Vuk, who is a chemist by profession, but is now leading the choir and helping out in other ways as he looks for a job. Our choir is a major concern, as none of us are musically trained except Vuk, and to get choir members all together for rehearsals and to learn these difficult pieces of music is not easy. It's not like Russia or Ukraine where trained Orthodox musicians are easy to find.

Finally, in the basement of the parish house, which is partly underground, we have built storage rooms, a small official dining room for special events, a professional kitchen, and the rest of the space is a very large dining room that we hope to open as a public restaurant.

RTE: Can you tell us more about the restaurant?

SERGIY: The original plan was that the basement was to be a garage. When Fr. Philip came and saw the plan, he said, "Why do we need a whole underground garage? We don't even have a car, and even if we did, the climate here is not severe." (The car that we use now is my own private car.) So, his idea was to make the basement into a single large room that in the future would be a restaurant. We installed a ventilation system and finished a back room to use as a kitchen. The dining area is now fully finished as a restaurant with alcoves, tables, and a main dining room decorated with Russian-themed pictures of landscapes, ballet, the last Russian Royal family, and so on.

The idea was to serve European and also Russian, Eastern European, and Georgian cuisine which would also follow the fasting periods. That is, we will not only have a regular menu but will add a fasting menu for those days and seasons. We hope to begin on this after the church is consecrated.

We already have a small café for our parishioners in the basement of the church, where parishioners cook in turns. After liturgy we sell soup,

pelmeni, *pirozhki*, blini, and other baked goods, as well as tea and coffee, at very moderate prices.

RTE: For readers who don't know, *pelmeni* are similar to a slightly large ravioli, stuffed with ground meat, or sometimes a fish mixture. It is one of the most time-consuming things to cook as each *pelmeni* has to be hand-built. *Pirozhki*, of course, are buns filled with meat, vegetables, a soft cheese, or jam.

SERGIY: Yes. A woman in Germany makes *pelmeni* during the week, I go and pick them up frozen, and we cook them after the service. This small café is important both as a place to meet and because some people drive for two or more hours to church, and they have been fasting from the night before.

We see that this café is good, it works, but the idea for the parish hall is to have a proper restaurant so that the public can come to eat quality Eastern European cuisine. This was one idea to support us financially.

We are very grateful to a generous Moscow couple who donated a large sum to buy the professional stoves, refrigerators, microwave, and other equipment needed to run a public restaurant. Not only do they have to be approved as restaurant-grade, but they need to handle large quantities and frequent use, such as running the dishwasher twenty or thirty times a day. These appliances are usually five to ten times the price of a new home appliance of the same type. The simplest professional microwave, for example, was €1500. My favorite appliance is the dishwasher. A home dishwasher will take an hour to wash dishes and two or three in "eco-mode," but this one takes only three minutes. It's fantastic, but the price was €8000. Without this generous family, we would not have been able to put in this kitchen.

Of course, it will take balance to maintain such a business since we are first of all a praying community centered on a church. We need money to exist, but people "are not fed by bread alone."

Gratitude

RTE: What are you grateful for?

SERGIY: First of all, to God and the saints, of course. We are also very grateful to our donors, both for the church construction and after. We keep track of everyone who gives, both public and private, so that we can permanently



pray for them. Sometimes they ask us to pray for their families or colleagues as well. This is besides the usual weekly lists that parishioners or visitors submit of names of the living and departed.

We have a person who keeps track of these names sent by donors and we take this seriously as a way to express our gratitude. We've had money donated from Russia, Japan, Canada, France, and many other places. Sometimes we receive a letter that reads, "I am French, I am not Orthodox, I have no connection to Russia or Russian culture, but I heard you were constructing this church. I like the church, so please accept my donation." We don't know how this happens. It is usually fifty or one hundred euros, and we are very touched by these people.

We have more than a thousand names in this book, and we read these names at every liturgy. We need two altar attendants to help the priest at *proskomedia* because this is a very long list of names for each service: one reads the left page while the other reads the right page.

Everyone who visits for even a few days cannot forget this church, and we call them our "long-distance parishioners." They follow our life while living in Russia, Ukraine, Georgia, Canada, the United States.... I often ask myself, "How does this work, how is it possible?"

RTE: When you first see the church, there is an elegance and beauty that comforts the soul, but to combine that with an effective, compassionate, and energetic pastor and a marvelously giving group of parishioners is rare. There is a sense of harmony here that doesn't feel planned, stylized, or pretentious.

SERGIY: It is the grace of God for us to have this church here and to belong to this parish. I also often say to myself, "Who would have thought that I would have ended up in Strasbourg working for this parish?" The ways of God are so mysterious.

"*Magnifique*" is the word I hear most often from French visitors. In the summer we eat outside in the evening at a table near the stone wall, and although they can't see us, the most-pronounced word we hear as people pass by on the other side is "Magnifique!" They all appreciate the beauty of the church.

Opposite: Sergiy Volosenko.

RTE: What would you like to see for the future of the parish?

SERGIY: I would like to see it continue and develop. As long as I am here, I want to concentrate on creating opportunities for children and adults to learn more about Orthodoxy. I expect that rather soon the parish will be even more accessible for French people as well, as we will organize seminars and lectures in French and Russian, as well as having guided tours. The European Parliament has a weekly prayer breakfast and have told us that they would like to come one Sunday to see the church and learn something about Orthodoxy.

I hope that our children will find comfort and inspiration here, and that they will find guidance for their entire lives. This also means more services in French, and later, hopefully, in German. I would also love to serve the entire daily cycle of services here.

RTE: And to end?

SERGIY: I thank God for making me a part of this community. It is a true blessing for me to work together with Father Philip and other parishioners for God's sake and for His glory. I am happy to be able to make my personal contribution to the construction of this church and of this parish. ✝

To donate to the Church of All Saints in Strasbourg:

Church of All Saints
106 Rue du Général Conrad, 67000 Strasbourg, France

Phone: +33 6 24 86 06 93
Website: www.ruhram.eu
E-mail: info@ruhram.eu
Donate: http://www.ruhram.eu/fr/includes/sidebar/Compte_bancaire.html

Opposite: Wrought iron work at church entrance.

