

IN-CHURCHING RUSSIA

John P. Burgess journeys through the efforts
of Orthodoxy to return Russia to faith.

On the eve of the Bolshevik Revolution, the Orthodox Church had 50,000 parishes, a thousand men's and women's monasteries, and sixty theological schools. By 1941, Stalin had nearly succeeded in eliminating the Church as a public institution. Perhaps only a hundred and fifty to two hundred churches remained active in the whole country, and every monastery and seminary had been closed. Although Hitler's invasion of Russia caused Stalin abruptly to change course—he turned to the Church to help him mobilize the population for war—the Church nevertheless labored under severe restrictions until the Gorbachev era.

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With the fall of communism in 1991, the Church began to rebuild its devastated institutional life. The number of parishes has grown from 7,000 two decades ago to 30,000 today, monasteries from twenty-two to eight hundred, and seminaries and theological schools from three to more than a hundred. Symbolic of this new era is Christ the Savior Cathedral, razed by Stalin in 1931 and reconstructed in the 1990s at the initiative of President Boris Yeltsin and the mayor of Moscow on its original site on the banks of the Moscow River, close to the Kremlin.

Over the past decade, I have traveled to Russia a dozen times, with stays for an entire year in 2004–2005 and again in 2011–2012. The Western media have reported a good deal about the new cultural and political influence of the Russian Orthodox Church. Many observers believe that Russia is returning to ancient Byzantine notions of a *symphonia*, an approach in which Church and state closely cooperate. Critics claim that the Church is enjoying newfound wealth and social privilege in exchange for supporting the Putin regime.

There is certainly evidence for this assertion. During my stay in 2011–2012, I saw firsthand the gulf between the church hierarchy and the new anti-Putin political movement. Church leaders essentially ordered their flock to avoid the demonstrations that were spilling out onto the streets of Moscow and St. Petersburg. Believers were supposed to stay home and pray. For their part, the protest leaders included no church representatives and did not appeal to the Orthodox faith to justify their stand. As far as they were concerned, the protest movement and the Church had nothing to do with each other. And the Church seemed all too willing to oblige, as when Kirill, Patriarch of Moscow and all Rus', declared his support for Putin in the March 2012 presidential election and condemned the feminist collective Pussy Riot for intruding into Christ the Savior Cathedral to protest the Church's unholy alliance with Putin.

But the story of the Church's rebirth is more complicated than Western analyses suggest. Most Russians now identify themselves as Orthodox and approve of the Church's renewed social prominence. Since the fall of communism, Christmas and Easter have been reestablished as federal holidays, and on these days the churches cannot contain all the worshippers. Thousands of church buildings have been restored to their former glory and again dominate public space. Not only President Putin and Prime Minister Dmitry Medvedev but also regional and local political officials openly profess their Orthodox

faith and appear next to church officials at civic events as well as religious services. In just twenty years, the Church has become Russia's largest and most important nongovernmental organization. Sensing its growing social influence, the Church aspires to achieve nothing less than the re-Christianization of the Russian nation.

What these ambitions mean in practice and whether they will succeed are far from certain. Some assert that Russia wasn't all that Christian prior to the Revolution, and so *re*-Christianization is a misnomer. Others worry that the Church has become just another institution scrambling for social privileges in the post-Soviet system, thus turning people off to its message. Nevertheless, most priests and active Church members I know from my travels in Russia express a hope that Orthodoxy will once again become an essential part of the nation's identity. They dream of a Russia in which church symbols, rituals, moral values, and teachings take hold of popular imagination and play a leading role in shaping society.

The biggest impediment to success is Russians' low rate of active participation. Although as many as 70 to 80 percent call themselves Orthodox and have been baptized, only 2 to 4 percent regularly attend the liturgy. Even fewer keep the Church's fasts. Still, sociological surveys have established that Russia is one of the few places in the developed world where people report that religion is becoming more important to them, not less. I am constantly surprised by Russians like my friend Tanya. A well-educated and professionally successful Moscow resident, she questions the existence of God, never attends church services, and doesn't even know the Lord's Prayer, yet makes pilgrimages to remote Orthodox monasteries, where she says she experiences a holy world that fills her with utter joy and peace. For her, a low rate of everyday participation clearly does not contradict a high degree of affective affiliation. The Church believes that the explanation is both simple and powerful: Orthodoxy helps Russians understand who they are as a people and what makes Russia unique among the world's nations.

Since the enthronement of Kirill as patriarch in 2009, the Church's slogan has become *votserkovlenie*—literally, “in-churching.” Kirill has challenged the Church to see all segments of Russian society—from bikers to rock music fans, from drug addicts to political candidates—as its mission field.

Despite the deep secularization of Russian society under communism, Kirill is confident that re-Christianization will succeed. Orthodox moral

and aesthetic values, he argues, lie at the heart of the nation's historic identity. The Orthodox tradition has embedded itself in the greatest achievements of Russian art, architecture, music, and literature. Russia can be truly Russia only if it acknowledges and affirms its Orthodox roots. This message resonates with many Russians, even those who are otherwise secular in outlook. At the same time, problems remain. Although the Church has succeeded in expanding its presence in all areas of society, that has not meant that people are becoming committed Orthodox disciples in the way the Church wishes.

Sretensky Monastery in Moscow provides a good example of the Church's limited successes in educating people in the faith. Founded in 1397, it was closed by the Soviet regime in 1925 and used by the secret police for imprisonments and executions. Today the reopened monastery is renowned for its outstanding choirs (one sang the national anthem at the opening ceremonies of the Winter Olympic Games in Sochi), entrepreneurial spirit, and close relations with President Putin. Seven hundred or more people regularly attend the Divine Liturgy; on holidays, the crowds spill out into the courtyard. A second church currently under construction will accommodate more than two thousand worshippers. The atmosphere of faith is impressive. Nevertheless, when I lived in Moscow and regularly attended the one weekly adult-education offering, a Bible study, fewer than thirty-five people were present, and the monk's instruction often seemed over their heads.

The monastery's publishing program has had more success, with more than a hundred new titles each year, covering all areas of church life: Christian spirituality, church history, Scripture, church music and arts, Orthodox ascetic practices, monasticism, liturgy and church prayer, and the lives of the saints. Other church presses add to a steady stream of books, brochures, CDs, and DVDs aimed at a popular audience.

The biggest publishing news of recent years has been *Everyday Saints* (literally translated, *Unholy Holy People*), in which Archimandrite Tikhon (Shevkunov), head of Sretensky Monastery and reputed spiritual counselor to President Putin, offers a series of vignettes about his journey from Marxist atheism into Orthodox monasticism. In contrast to Orthodox "getting things right" books, *Everyday Saints* depicts the Church as people with warts and flaws through whom God nevertheless works for good. Though six hundred pages long, the book has sold 1.5 million hard copies, making it one of the

ten best-selling titles in Russia since the end of communism. It has been marketed not only in religious bookstores but also in supermarkets and the Russian equivalents of Barnes and Noble. *Everyday Saints*, which continues to sell well, is by any measure a popular book that has penetrated popular consciousness. But whether the book will draw its non-churched readers into active participation is another question.

The same combination of success and limited results characterizes Russia's first Christian university, St. Tikhon's Orthodox Humanitarian University in Moscow. I was a scholar-in-residence there for the 2011–2012 academic year, lecturing on Reformed theology and researching the operative theology that guides the Russian Orthodox Church's efforts at in-churching today. Originally founded as a theological institute for lay education, the university now boasts ten faculties: theology, missions, history, philology, religious education, church arts, sacred music, sociology, information technology, and applied mathematics. It has been ranked among Russia's best non-state institutions of higher education.

St. Tikhon's mission of training a new intellectual cadre to bring Orthodox values into all areas of Russian society is very compelling, with parallels to what the U.S. Catholic Church hopes of Notre Dame or Catholic University of America. St. Tikhon's faculty boasts some of the Church's premier scholars, and the student body is intellectually curious and hard-working. Nevertheless, I could not escape the feeling that the university was just a tiny Orthodox sanctuary amid the countless profane temples to economic wealth and political power that dominate the new Moscow. The university is striving to overcome the intellectual insularity of the Soviet era, but few of the theology students I met had wrestled with the difficult challenges that have shaped contemporary Western theology, such as historical criticism or theologies of liberation.

St. Tikhon's mission is further hampered by its limited success in placing graduates in jobs. Those seeking church positions are often regarded as too liberal theologically or lacking the ascetical formation emphasized by church seminaries; graduates of departments such as sociology find that employers often prefer students of state universities whose training has been entirely secular. The changing character of the student body also creates difficulties. Since acquiring state accreditation, the university is no longer permitted to require applicants to submit a letter of recommendation from a priest. Even though most students still identify

themselves as Orthodox, many have limited grounding in church doctrine and practice.

The difficulty of educating people in Christian faith is hardly unique to Russia. But the Church's ambitious hopes for in-churching will make little progress without a vibrant intellectual culture alongside its rich liturgical and monastic traditions. The Russian Orthodox Church desperately needs gifted public theologians today if it is to relate Christian faith to its culture. The challenge to developing a public theology comes not only from secularizing forces in society but also from anti-intellectual attitudes within the Church. Too many priests simply want laypeople to submit to church authority and tradition, and too many laypeople regard Orthodoxy as nothing more than a collection of rituals from which they pick and choose what works for them.

After communism, the Orthodox Church quickly revived its long tradition of social ministries. Today monasteries and lay sisterhoods and brotherhoods play an especially important role in providing spiritual and physical care to Russia's sick, abandoned, incarcerated, and unemployed.

Monasteries have always been central to the Russian imagination. Their holy men and women, represented by Fr. Zosima in Dostoevsky's *The Brothers Karamazov*, inspired Russians to repent of their sins and glimpse the mystical interconnection of all life. Some of Russia's greatest writers and artists made pilgrimages to the famous *starsi* (holy elders) at Optina Pustin. Other monasteries have been centers of social ministry.

St. Elizabeth (Romanova) has inspired many of these efforts. Elizabeth was the sister of Alexandra, the last tsaritsa. After her husband's assassination in 1905, Elizabeth abandoned her life of royalty and used her wealth to establish the Martha and Mary Monastery in Moscow. The monastery was a place not only of fervent prayer but also of loving care for the city's poor and needy. The monastery did not last long, however. In 1918 Elizabeth was executed by the Bolsheviks, and in the 1920s her monastery was closed, and its church was converted into a movie theater.

When the Church in the early 1990s began canonizing the new martyrs of the Soviet period, Elizabeth was among the first. Her example of power and beauty humbling themselves to care for society's marginalized again guides ministry in her reopened monastery. Its innovative programs for autistic children and homebound elderly people are models for the new Russia. As one sister told me, "We feel

Elizabeth's presence among us as we work and live where she did." Other monasteries have also taken up Elizabeth's cause.

In the 1990s, a sisterhood in Minsk, Belarus, began ministering to men in one of the city's mental hospitals. As patients were released, the sisters organized work for them in construction, agriculture, and church arts (such as workshops for icons, church furnishings, and church textiles). Profits from these enterprises allowed the sisters to expand their ministry to other unemployed men.

Eventually, the sisters founded a monastery in honor of St. Elizabeth on the outskirts of Minsk. When I visited in 2012, ninety nuns, assisted by two hundred members of the lay sisterhood, were providing work and housing to more than 1,700 men, many of whom labor in the monastery's fields and raise food for the St. Elizabeth community and for sale. The men participate fully in the rhythms of church life and receive spiritual counsel and religious education. Large congregations join the sisters on Sundays and religious holidays, supporting the monastery's work with their offerings and prayers.

By any measure, both the Mary and Martha Monastery and St. Elizabeth's Monastery are great successes, and their witness is especially important in contemporary Russia, where a rapid transition to a market economy left many victims in its wake and state social services underdeveloped. The Church's invitation to *sobornost*, that untranslatable Russian word for deep, intimate communion and mutual care, responds powerfully to the physical needs and spiritual emptiness of people in post-Soviet society.

Patriarch Kirill has requested that every parish and diocese develop ministries that combine social outreach and evangelism. Many Church leaders, however, believe that the state, not the Church, should take responsibility for social services. This response is understandable. Church volunteerism and social ministry are very new in Russia, since under communist rule the state controlled all social work. And they are not just new, but quite small in comparison to the significant problems afflicting Russian society. The Church's department for social ministry has a network of approximately a thousand volunteers in Moscow—a city of more than 12 million.

Nevertheless, public opinion polls indicate that the Church's social outreach meets with widespread approval, which is not surprising given the heroic efforts of the nuns, monks, and lay brothers and sisters on the frontlines. The Church's social initiatives will surely expand. Whether in-churching will result is

less clear. As is true anywhere in the world, the government is concerned with matters of licensing and training and therefore regulating what the Church can or cannot do in its social programs. The Russian situation is further complicated by the Putin regime's suspicion of intermediary organizations and desire to control them.

When it comes to interpreting the communist era and modern Russian history, I discovered that Russians adopt different strategies of selective remembrance.

And they are cautious, especially with me, an outsider—an American. On the one hand, they may have had relatives who suffered loss of life or livelihood because of Soviet repression. On the other, they are proud of their nation's economic and military accomplishments during the communist years.

The Church has a narrative of the twentieth century that focuses on the hundreds of thousands who suffered for their faith. This kind of remembrance is closely linked to in-churching. To atone for the nation's historic sins against the Church, Russians should protect the Church and enter into its life.

Fr. Alexander Mazyrin, a leading voice among a younger generation of church historians, sees the twentieth century as the time of the Russian Church's greatest suffering and also glorification. He invokes Tertullian's dictum, "The blood of the martyrs is the seed of the Church." Many church leaders further suggest that the blood of the martyrs is also the seed of a new Russia. According to this version of historical remembrance, Russians will experience national renewal today if they honor the Church's great sacrifices under communism. Russia can again become great, but only as a Christian, Orthodox nation.

To promote this interpretation of twentieth-century Russian history—and, by implication, Russia's future—the Church has undertaken a series of canonizations. In 2000, a major church council formally recognized the "Congregation of the New Martyrs and Confessors of Russia, Both Known and Unknown," canonizing more than seven hundred persons. Since then, nearly 1,300 additional canonizations have taken place. Almost every parish and monastery in Russia has identified its new martyrs. The Church provides for painting their icons, composing hymns and prayers to them, publishing an official version of their life stories, and venerating their relics (if the communists left anything behind). On the day of a martyr or confessor's death, the Church includes his or her name in the prayers of the liturgy.

Another assertion of historical interpretation occurs at church memorial sites. Butovo was once a killing field on the outskirts of Moscow. Several thousand died here for their faith, along with thousands of other political prisoners. At the end of the communist era, the KGB offered the site to the Church. Researchers have now documented the names of the victims and when they died. Once a year, the patriarch celebrates an open-air liturgy on the site. A large church constructed nearby displays photographs of victims, a small collection of personal items (such as shoes and glasses) recovered from the site's mass graves, and icons of those who have been canonized.

Solovki offers an even more powerful example. An island in the White Sea only a hundred kilometers south of the Arctic Circle, it was once the location of one of Russia's largest and most famous monasteries. In 1924 the Soviets transformed the monastery complex into the first gulag. In cruel irony, it specialized in holding Christian believers. Some victims were bound to trees and left to be eaten to death by mosquitoes. Others died of typhoid or did not survive the harsh winters. Today thousands of pilgrims journey annually to the island to worship at the reestablished monastery and venerate the places of suffering.

The third major pilgrimage site honors the royal family. The Church-on-the-Blood in Yekaterinburg stands on the site of the house in which the royal family was imprisoned and executed. Several miles away, a monastery and memorial chapels have been constructed near the mine shafts into which the Bolsheviks threw the bodies of the tsar, his wife, and his children. Large crowds of Orthodox faithful gather annually on the anniversary of these events.

As powerful as these church commemorations are, other historical narratives compete with them in today's Russia. Putin has emphasized the nation's sacrifice in repelling fascist Germany. Lenin's tomb on Red Square and his ubiquitous statues throughout the land still affirm the achievements of communism. And historical amnesia is also at work. The Church's theology of suffering makes little sense to a society increasingly characterized by the drive to achieve what Russians call a "European" standard of living.

Undoubtedly the greatest barrier to in-churching stems from difficulties in forming Eucharistic community, which should be the central reality of Orthodox life. In large cities like Moscow or St. Petersburg, hundreds of thousands of people live in residential areas that were constructed during the Soviet period and therefore have no churches. For this reason, the

patriarch has announced an initiative, in cooperation with the mayor's office, to erect two hundred new churches in Moscow. Until then, however, liturgical participation will require heroic efforts from the many who live far from a church.

Other impediments stem from distinctive Russian attitudes toward the Eucharist. Traditionally, Russian Orthodox believers have communed only three or four times a year, and sometimes only on Great Thursday of Holy Week. Requirements of personal confession of sin, absolution by a priest, fasting, restoration of broken relationships, and the reading of a long cycle of prayers prior to participation in the Eucharist have discouraged frequent reception. A related problem has been people's tendency to regard Communion in excessively individualistic terms. The holy elements have been understood to guarantee personal well-being, even physical health.

Today many priests, especially in large urban congregations, are trying to change Eucharistic practice. Regular, even weekly, Communion is becoming more common. Preparation has become less onerous. In the parish that I attended in Moscow, people could make confession during the course of the Divine Liturgy: One priest took confessions, while other clergy celebrated the liturgy. Sometimes, the head of the parish offered a general absolution, and a reader chanted the preparatory prayers on the people's behalf. Nevertheless, many Russians still do not understand receiving the Eucharist as incorporation into the Church in its fullness. They may arrive at the last minute just for Communion or leave immediately afterwards. Their goal is simply to receive the bread and wine for their personal benefit.

The quality of relationships within a parish also matters. Vladimir Vorobyov, rector of St. Tikhon's University, has identified "community" as the most pressing task before the Russian Orthodox Church today. And sociological surveys suggest that most Russians do not seek or expect a sense of mutual concern and care in the Church. They prefer just to drop in to light candles or order prayers when they have personal needs. The Church's invitation to "life together" does not interest them.

When Kirill became patriarch five years ago, the prospects for in-churching seemed promising. Hailed as one of Russia's most charismatic public speakers, he enjoyed popular support in the Church and beyond. In the last couple of years, however, the Church has encountered stiff resistance. A new anti-clericalism, as Russians call it, has emerged. The Russian media

regularly portray the Church as obsessed with wealth and privilege rather than good works. Kirill has been taken to task for his own excesses: a \$30,000 Swiss watch, an exclusive apartment along the Moscow River, and skiing vacations in Switzerland. The Church's conservative stances on sexuality and abortion, and its rejection of the democracy movements in Russia and Ukraine, have angered liberally minded Russians, while Orthodox fundamentalists have attacked Kirill for not pressing Putin to forbid pornography and criminalize public belittlement of Orthodox moral values.

Overall, what has occurred so far is less the in-churching of Russian society than the incorporation of the Church into all dimensions of Russian society. The state has actively supported this process of "in-socializing" the Church. Putin affirms the Church's essential place in society by personally returning significant buildings and famous icons that the communists confiscated and by attending the Easter Vigil in Christ the Savior Cathedral. He solicits the Church's opinion on social legislation relating to health and abortion, and promises that the state will protect the Church from slander and defamation. The prosecution of Pussy Riot is one notable example. Moreover, Putin regularly honors the Church's unique place in Russian history and culture. The patriarch sat next to the president in the reviewing stands above Red Square at last year's celebrations of the 825th anniversary of the founding of Moscow.

This effort at re-Christianizing national identity, if not souls, does not necessarily mean that the Church will become a state church. Orthodox leaders regularly affirm the constitution's separation of Church and state. They know that accommodation to state interests can destroy the spiritual freedom of the Church, as happened when Peter the Great abolished the patriarchate and effectively made the Church a department of the state—and as happened again under communism. Moreover, re-Christianization does not require every Russian to become Orthodox. The Church recognizes that Russia is composed of many different ethnic and religious groups, and that individuals should be free in matters of religion. A coerced faith is no faith at all.

Instead, the expansion of the Church into society reflects a belief that Orthodoxy has a powerful and enduring influence over the Russian imagination. The Church today promotes its role as the principal interpreter of the nation's identity with considerable confidence. The Church claims a privileged place in Russian society because it believes that Orthodoxy

best preserves the historic identity and values of the Russian people. No longer pushed to the margins, the Church, with its symbols, rituals, and teachings, believes that it tells Russians who they really are as a nation.

The Holy Trinity-St. Sergius Lavra (a lavra is a major monastery—only four monasteries in Russia have that designation), north of Moscow, is perhaps Russia's most famous pilgrimage site. For generations, Russians have come from all over the country to venerate the monastery's relics, miracle-working icons, and holy waters. Prominent political and intellectual leaders have asked its abbots for spiritual and political guidance. It's in many ways a focal point for the fusion of Christian ideals with Russian identity.

Today's Russia is different from Peter the Great's, different from Tolstoy's, different from Stalin's. But I have joined the thousands of Russians who make pilgrimages to the lavra each year. They take the same roads and pathways as their ancestors. Then, at their destination, they glimpse what many generations have sought and beheld: Holy Rus'. Orthodoxy's vision of divine beauty and truth briefly touches them. They are at once chastened by the pettiness of their worldly loves—and elevated by a sense of divine transcendence that unites them not just with Christ, but also with the highest achievements of Russian culture.

We should not discount these experiences. Russia is a country deeply damaged by decades of communist rule. But Russians think of themselves as a great nation and civilization, not just a second-rate European power still recovering from a failed political experiment. Orthodoxy offers them a sense of what is valuable about their culture and how they are part of, yet different from, the West. This is the deepest source of its power in Russia.

This power comes with great temptation, of course. The Russian Orthodox Church has hoped that its growing social prominence would help it win people to the Gospel, but the opposite may come to pass. The North American experience has taught us that it's only too easy to confound civil religion with Christian faith, thus undermining the Church's loyalty to Christ's kingdom.

Some critics assert that the evidence is already in. They believe that the Russian Orthodox Church has made a pact with the devil, who goes by the name of Vladimir Putin. I have no power of prophecy. I have learned, however, that the Russian Church has many gifts, many strengths. Today the peril in Russia to genuine Christian faith comes not from tsarism or communism but instead from an emerging global culture that reduces human life to material acquisition and consumption. In such a time, appeals to the spiritual greatness of the Russian nation may be an essential witness to the Gospel rather than a capitulation to the powers that be. ■

TE ABSOLVO

Of course we remember everything that ever happened to us.
Sure we do. We can easily make a concerted effort to forget,
And successfully forget from Levels One through Eight, but
You remember, somehow—at the cellular or molecular level
Perhaps, where shame and embarrassment are in cold storage.
The things you most want to forget are the things you cannot.
You can say, as I have, that you have no memory of that evil
Minute when you lied or cheated or dodged responsibility or
Worst of all pinned it on someone else; but of course you do.
One sweet thing about being Catholic is that you can politely
Ask for forgiveness, and be *granted* forgiveness—I mean, *te*
Absolvo, aren't those the two most terse glorious words ever?
But the crucial part of the sacrament that we don't talk about
Is the next part, the part after you leave the church. You walk
To the river and while you are pretending to watch for herons
You envision each person against whose holiness you did sin,
And to each you apologize, and ask for forgiveness. Some of
Them are long gone from this world but not from the Infinite
Mercy who remembers all levels and forgetteth not a sparrow.
You are absolved not when a man says so but when *you* have
Asked, with every fiber of your being, to be forgiven, to walk
Home clean, to start again, to be *possible*. What we really ask
For in the sacrament of reconciliation is to be a question mark
Again, to be a verb, to be not what we did but what we might
Yet be able to do; a map of the unknown, an unfinished song.

—Brian Doyle