

23 October 2007

RUSSIA: Orthodox parish forced out of hospital church

By Geraldine Fagan, Forum 18

A Moscow Patriarchate parish in Russia is being forced out of a pre-1917 hospital church, Forum 18 News Service has learnt. St Nicholas' parish, in the Far Eastern city of Khabarovsk, is widely known for its missionary youth work. It has been worshipping in the church, which is part of a hospital complex sold for redevelopment, since 1997. The case is unusual as the parish is being evicted from an historical Orthodox church which had been returned by the state. It seems to be symptomatic, Forum 18 notes, of the commercial pressures beginning to dominate in some parts of Russia. In Orthodoxy, consecration of a church building is irrevocable, so that its secular use is regarded as desecration. Officials have been unsympathetic to the parish's case, one parishioner complaining to Forum 18 that "for government officials, a church doesn't differ from a prayer room, they don't understand its significance." However, a regional official insisted to Forum 18 that a hospital or house church differs from an ordinary parish church. In many parts of Russia, surviving historical Orthodox, Old Believer and Catholic churches have not always been returned.

A Moscow Patriarchate parish in the Far Eastern city of Khabarovsk must vacate a pre-1917 hospital church by the end of October, Forum 18 News Service has learnt. The parish, widely known for its missionary youth work, has been worshipping at St Nicholas' Church in the centrally located Third City Hospital since 1997 under a formal agreement with the local authorities. The case is particularly unusual in that it involves eviction from an historical Orthodox church already returned by the state, Forum 18 notes. It also appears symptomatic of commercial pressures beginning to dominate in newly wealthy parts of Russia.

"For government officials, a church doesn't differ from a prayer room, they don't understand its significance," a member of St Nicholas' parish who preferred not to be named told Forum 18 from Khabarovsk on 12 October. In Orthodoxy, consecration of a church building is irrevocable, so that its secular use is regarded as desecration.

"The term 'consecrated place' is a term for believers, not a secular state," a Khabarovsk regional official who declined to be named remarked to Forum 18 on 22 October. "There is no such legal term." He described how "this blasphemous feature" was prominent in Russia's recent past. "There were so many churches in Russia before the revolution. Look what happened to many of them during the Soviet period." In other cases, the official noted, a building erected as a mosque, for example, might be taken over by another confession which performs its own consecration rite there.

The regional official also insisted to Forum 18 that a hospital or house church differs from an ordinary parish church. "It was built before the revolution to serve the hospital, for religious services [religioznyye uslugi] – if we're using civilised language – to patients and hospital staff," he remarked. "But now the hospital isn't there any more – there are no more patients." The official claimed to have no idea how the church building will be used after the parish leaves. "Only the owner knows that."

Hospital sold

Khabarovsk's Third City Hospital complex was sold in the spring of 2006 for 203 million roubles (approximately 44,187,000 Norwegian Kroner, 5,732,900 Euros or 8,147,400 US Dollars), Interfax reported on 23 August 2007. The St Nicholas' parishioner told Forum 18 that the complex has been bought by a commercial organisation fronted by a Russian director, "but the unofficial owners are in China." While the company trades in clothing and household goods, the parishioner did not know what the hospital church will be used for by the new owner. "There might be some kind of shop there, but it could just as well be trading company offices or a hotel."

The hospital has agreed to move out by 1 November, when the complex's heating and electricity will be switched off and building work begins, according to the St Nicholas' parishioner. Although the church's contents will be transferred to the Second Regional Hospital, also in Khabarovsk, "the parish will fall apart with the move," he told Forum 18. While the city hospital is in an accessible city centre location – as Forum 18 found on a 2004 visit – the regional hospital is much further away and so "appallingly inconvenient" to get to, according to the parishioner.

Archbishop Mark of Khabarovsk and Priamurye has made some attempt to prevent the sale of the hospital church by the regional authorities, the parishioner told Forum 18. "But as Governor Viktor Ishayev is behind the sale, he doesn't want any vocal complaints

about the situation. The governor has helped the diocese with the seminary and cathedral, so our archbishop doesn't want to spoil relations over this."

A 26 August Khabarovsk and Priamurye diocesan website report lists the resolutions of a meeting about the situation chaired by Archbishop Mark and attended by Khabarovsk clergy and parishioners. Among them are "to express gratitude to the leadership of Khabarovsk region, city and the hospital for offering premises to St Nicholas' parish for services and spiritual and social activity" and "to consider the holding of any public actions or speeches in connection with the situation around the parish of St Nicholas in Khabarovsk inappropriate and provocative and also harmful to Christ's Church and the good relations built up between church and secular authorities."

"We would like them all back"

Fr Georgi Ryabykh, who assists Metropolitan Kirill of Smolensk and Kaliningrad as head of the Moscow Patriarchate's Department for External Church Relations, told Forum 18 on 16 October that he was unfamiliar with the Khabarovsk situation and had not heard of any similar cases. On the general situation regarding the return of historical church property, however, he commented that the Russian Orthodox Church does not raise the issue of full restitution with the state authorities. "The Church possessed much land and many buildings before the revolution, but many are houses and suchlike now, so that it's not possible to get them back. But we do raise the issue of partial restitution - what the Church needs today." Here, Fr Georgi maintained, the Church gives priority to cathedrals and churches. "Because they are consecrated, we would like them all back, or at least to have constant access to them, as in the Kremlin."

While most surviving historical Orthodox churches in Moscow have been returned for worship, this is not always the case elsewhere in Russia (see, for example, F18News 24 January 2005 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=496).

Authorities not always sympathetic

The state authorities are not always sympathetic to Orthodox restitution demands. On 26 August 2007 police told 25 Orthodox Christians to disperse when they tried to hold a moleben [prayer service] on Pushkin Square in central Moscow, according to Interfax. The service was for the reconstruction of Christ's Passion Monastery, which stood on Pushkin Square (formerly Passion Square) until its destruction by the Soviet authorities in 1936-7. Three of the group who defied the order were briefly detained for taking part in an unauthorised demonstration, according to Moscow City Police Information and Public Relations Department.

Other confessions frequently having to fight for the return of their historic churches include Old Believers (see F18News 30 March 2005 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=533) and Catholics (see F18News 3 August 2005 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=624). (END)

For a personal commentary by an Old Believer about continuing denial of equality to Russia's religious minorities see F18News http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=570

For more background see Forum 18's Russia religious freedom survey at http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=947

Reports on freedom of thought, conscience and belief in Russia can be found at <http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?query=&religion=all&country=10>

A printer-friendly map of Russia is available at <http://www.nationalgeographic.com/xpeditions/atlas/index.html?Parent=europe&Rootmap=russi>

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