

22 September 2004

CHINA: Will Orthodox Christians soon be allowed priests?

By Geraldine Fagan, Forum 18

China's estimated 3,000 scattered Orthodox Christians may soon be able to have their own priests once again. Since 2003, 18 Chinese Orthodox have been studying in Orthodox seminaries in Russia with the permission of China's State Administration of Religious Affairs. "Now they are happy for Chinese to become priests," an Orthodox source from Shanghai told Forum 18 News Service. But Hong Kong-based Russian Orthodox priest Fr Dionisy Pozdnyayev told Forum 18 it has yet to be decided whether these seminarians will be allowed to become priests in China when they complete their theological education. Fr Dionisy can minister only to foreign citizens in Beijing and Shenzhen, but a Russian priest spent two weeks in June ministering to local Orthodox in Harbin with official permission.

A notable improvement in the situation for China's Orthodox may be traced to the installation of Hu Jintao as the country's leader in 2002, a Chinese Orthodox source from the southern coastal city of Shanghai has maintained to Forum 18 News Service. Russian Orthodox priest Fr Dionisy Pozdnyayev, based at the Institute for Sino-Christian Studies in Hong Kong, is similarly hopeful that life for Chinese Orthodox is beginning to improve. "Things are opening up gradually under the new younger leadership," he remarked to Forum 18 on 18 September. "Not as fast as we would like, but changes are taking place".

The Chinese Orthodox Church, founded on the work of a Russian Orthodox mission, was granted autonomy by the Moscow Patriarchate in 1957. However, the Cultural Revolution of 1966-76 soon brought its activities to a halt. Orthodox churches – like places of worship of all other faiths – were systematically destroyed across China. Only after the Cultural Revolution was over did certain religious communities have the opportunity to reopen places of worship, though under tight government control.

One obvious new development for the Orthodox is the possibility of new clergy. After the death on 16 December 2003 in the capital Beijing of 80-year-old Fr Aleksandr Du Lifu, the only indigenous Orthodox clergy in China are Fr Mikhail Wan and Protodeacon Evangel Lu in Shanghai. But, in addition to their advanced years, the absence of an officially recognised Orthodox community in their city and the harrowing experiences the pair suffered during the Cultural Revolution mean that they do not perform services, Fr Dionisy told Forum 18.

Since 2003, however, 18 Chinese Orthodox have been studying in several Orthodox theological seminaries in Russia with the permission of China's State Administration of Religious Affairs. "Now they are happy for Chinese to become priests," the Shanghai Orthodox source remarked to Forum 18 regarding this development.

While consultations with the Chinese authorities on the issue are indeed continuing, according to Fr Dionisy, it has yet to be decided whether the Chinese seminarians currently in Russia will be allowed to become priests in China when they complete their theological education. "They could also serve in the Chinese diaspora in the Russian Far East," he pointed out to Forum 18. "The main thing is to have them ready."

In the meantime, while Fr Dionisy serves the liturgy in the Russian embassy in Beijing approximately every six weeks, "Chinese citizens are not permitted to attend," he told Forum 18. On 11 April, for example, Russian television news reported that citizens of Russia, Ukraine, Bulgaria, Macedonia, Serbia & Montenegro and Ethiopia attended the Easter liturgy at the Beijing embassy. Fr Dionisy additionally ministers to an Orthodox community of foreign citizens in Shenzhen in the southern coastal Guangdong Province, some 30 minutes by suburban train from Hong Kong.

The Orthodox Ecumenical Patriarchate is also active in the region. Metropolitan Nikitas (Loulas) of Hong Kong and South East Asia told Forum 18 on 29 June that his Church has two parishes in Hong Kong and Taipei, where "ethnic Chinese are Orthodox Christians and active participants in the life of the Church".

It is however possible for foreign religious personnel to minister to citizens of mainland China if they are invited by an officially recognised religious community and have the special permission of the state authorities, Fr Dionisy assured Forum 18. One example was on 18 December 2003, when Fr Dionisy conducted Fr Aleksandr Du Lifu's funeral in Beijing's Catholic cathedral with the permission of the local Patriotic Catholic bishop, Michael Fu Tieshan (see F18News 18 December 2003 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=216).

More recently, Yekaterinburg and Verkhoturys Orthodox diocesan newspaper reported on 8 July that Abbot Moisei (Pilats) of the Monastery of the New Russian Martyrs in Alapayevsk, some 120 kilometres (75 miles) north-east of the Russian city of Yekaterinburg, spent two weeks in June ministering to the Parish of the Protecting Veil of the Mother of God in Harbin. Having studied Chinese independently, the newspaper reported, Fr Moisei was able to hear confessions in both Russian and Chinese. According to Fr Dionisy, this visit took place with the permission of the local state religious affairs department.

By contrast, the Chinese state authorities appear particularly sensitive towards foreign citizens engaging in unsanctioned ministry to their nationals. Fr Vianor Ivanov, a Russian Orthodox dean from Kazakhstan, was kept under house arrest for a week in December 2003 by officials in the north-western region of Xinjiang after bringing Orthodox literature and baptismal crosses into the country, baptising local Russians and dedicating the Orthodox church in Ghulja (Yining) (see F18News 9 September 2004 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=406).

In addition to those in Harbin and Ghulja (Yining), two other Orthodox churches are currently open to Chinese nationals in Urumqi and Labdarin (Inner Mongolia). According to the Shanghai Orthodox source, these all open to believers for prayers on Sundays and a few major feast days, and are the only locations of Orthodox icons in China. A second church in Harbin, St Sophia's, has been restored by the state authorities but currently houses a museum, while in Shanghai, local Orthodox are reportedly unhappy that the two surviving historical churches house restaurants.

Fr Dionisy told Forum 18 that while discussions continue with the Shanghai authorities about turning the restaurants into museums, these have not so far touched upon the possibility of opening them up for worship. He was unable to confirm whether a new Orthodox church might soon be built in Beijing. "The primary issue is restoration of the church on embassy grounds, but the Chinese authorities will have to address this question at some point, especially with the 2008 Olympics, when there will be many Orthodox guests."

For those Orthodox without a church, the only possibility for worship is private prayer. "You can pray at home with your family – maybe 5 or 6 people – but a gathering of 20 or 30 in a private home wouldn't be allowed," the Shanghai Orthodox source told Forum 18. "They [the authorities] would start asking questions. But they turn a blind eye up to a certain point."

He estimated there to be 3,000, mostly elderly, Orthodox in China, including some 500 in Urumqi and 200 in Beijing. While most of the 50 who attend prayers in the Harbin church and many of those in Xinjiang look Russian but have Chinese citizenship, he said, others – including those elsewhere in Manchuria and in Shanghai – vary from being half Chinese, half Russian to looking entirely Chinese but identifying themselves as Orthodox because a grandparent was Orthodox. According to Fr Dionisy, those in Labdarin have Russian roots and speak Russian, while the younger generation speaks Chinese: "For most Chinese Orthodox, Chinese is more important, they have preserved traditional connections with Russia but their mentality, lifestyle and everyday language is Chinese."

One outstanding problem for Chinese Orthodox is a shortage of liturgical texts, according to the Shanghai source. Those used by the psalm-reader in the Harbin church are in Old Chinese and Church Slavonic (the liturgical language of the Russian Orthodox Church). But, he said, the prayers used by Chinese Orthodox at home are all in an antiquated translation last fully intelligible 70 years ago, which younger people find especially difficult to understand. Forum 18 has viewed one such prayerbook, printed by the Russian Orthodox Church Abroad's Holy Trinity Monastery in Jordanville, near New York, in 1985. According to the source, such texts began to circulate in China only around 1999.

A printer-friendly map of China is available from <http://www.nationalgeographic.com/xpeditions/atlas/index.html?Parent=asia&Rootmap=china>

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