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UZBEKISTAN: Saints and martyrs relics banned

By Igor Rotar, Forum 18

Uzbek authorities have banned the relics of two saints, recognised by the Russian Orthodox Church, from entering the country. The two saints, Grand Duchess Elizaveta Fyodorovna and a lay-sister Varvara, were both nuns martyred by Communists in 1918, by being thrown alive down a mine shaft. The Russian Orthodox diocese of Central Asia told Forum 18 News Service that "we cannot understand why the Uzbek authorities have deprived [Orthodox believers] of the opportunity of venerating the holy relics." The relics have already been brought to eight other former Soviet republics. Shoazim Minovarov, chairman of the Committee for Religious Affairs, whose committee was asked to allow the relics to enter, categorically refused to comment to Forum 18 on the ban, saying "You can think what you want! I don't wish to express my opinion on this question. After all, you don't need to receive a comment at a ministerial level every time!"

Archpriest Nikolai Rybchinsky, press secretary of the Russian Orthodox diocese of Central Asia, describes as "hard to explain" the refusal by the Uzbek authorities to allow the relics of two saints and martyrs, Grand Duchess Elizaveta Fyodorovna and her novice lay-sister Varvara, to be brought into the country in January. "Over two million Orthodox believers live in Uzbekistan and we cannot understand why the Uzbek authorities have deprived them of the opportunity of venerating the holy relics," he told Forum 18 on 7 February in the capital Tashkent. The relics have already been brought to eight other former Soviet republics over the past half year.

Fr Rybchinsky told Forum 18 that the Central Asian diocese had sent an official letter to the government's Committee for Religious Affairs asking for permission to bring the relics into the country so that local Orthodox believers could venerate them. He reported that the diocese never received an official reply in writing, but that Metropolitan Vladimir of Central Asia, during a conversation with "a very high-ranking Uzbek official", was told that the authorities considered it "inappropriate" for the relics to be brought into the country. "Although formally speaking, this statement could not be regarded as an official refusal, we did not insist on a written reply and simply abandoned the idea of showing the holy relics to the Orthodox believers of Uzbekistan."

Reached at his office in Tashkent on 7 February, Shoazim Minovarov, chairman of the Committee for Religious Affairs, categorically refused to comment to Forum 18 on the authorities' ban on the entry of the Orthodox relics. In response to Forum 18's comment that given that the Orthodox diocese had addressed its request specifically to the Council for Religious Affairs, it was strange that the chairman of that organisation was refusing all comment on the subject, Minovarov replied: "You can think what you want! I don't wish to express my opinion on this question. After all, you don't need to receive a comment at a ministerial level every time!"

Grand Duchess Elizaveta Fyodorovna was the first martyr of the Imperial Family to die at the hands of the Bolshevik authorities. Born in Germany in 1864 into the family of Ludwig IV, Grand Duke of Hesse-Darmstadt, she was a grand-daughter of the English Queen Victoria and sister to the last Empress of Russia, Alexandra Fyodorovna. On marrying Grand Duke Sergei Romanov, she left the Lutheran Church and converted to Orthodoxy of her own free will.

During the First World War, the Grand Duchess founded the Convent of Martha and Mary in Moscow where she and the other nuns nursed wounded soldiers and the poor. In spring 1918, within months of the Bolsheviks' seizure of power, the Grand Duchess was arrested, together with one of her novices, lay-sister Varvara. On 18 July of the same year, they were thrown, while still alive, down a mine shaft at Nizhne-selimsk, not far from the small town of Alapaevsk in the Urals.

In 1921 the Grand Duchess' remains were secretly taken to Jerusalem and deposited in the burial vault of the Church of St Mary Magdalen. In 1981 the Russian Orthodox Church Outside Russia (ROCOR), which is not part of the Moscow Patriarchate, recognised the Grand Duchess Elizaveta Fyodorovna and lay-sister Varvara as holy martyrs. Their official proclamation as saints of the Russian Orthodox Church took place in 1992.

At the beginning of 2004, ROCOR's Synod, responding to a request from the Moscow-based Fund of St Andrew First of the Apostles, decided to send the relics of the two martyrs to the post-Soviet countries for six months. Over four months, the relics were taken to practically all regions of the Russian Federation. In addition, with the official agreement of the local authorities, the relics were taken to Belarus, all three Baltic states and also to Kyrgyzstan, Kazakhstan and Azerbaijan.

Fr Rybchinsky told Forum 18 that the Central Asian diocese – which also includes Orthodox communities in neighbouring Turkmenistan – had not asked the authorities for permission to take the relics there as "practically no Orthodox believers are left in Turkmenistan". (END)

For background information, see Forum 18's Uzbekistan religious freedom

survey at http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=105 .

A printer-friendly map of Uzbekistan is available at

<http://www.nationalgeographic.com/xpeditions/atlas/index.html?Parent=asia&Rootmap=uzbeki>

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