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RUSSIA: Altai officials prefer eyedrops and cattle to Catholics

By Geraldine Fagan, Forum 18 (<https://www.forum18.org>)

In the Siberian Altai region, Catholics have encountered persistent obstacles, Forum 18 News Service has found. The Catholic parish in Barnaul's attempts to regain its church – dating from 1908 – have been blocked since 1992. After the parish began its struggle with the local authority, a café was built onto the church and on top of the cemetery, along with an Orthodox chapel. The local governor claimed his main contribution to Orthodoxy had been in keeping Catholics out. The authorities in the neighbouring Altai Republic have similarly barred a Catholic church being built, despite local support for the church, citing the negative attitude of the Russian Orthodox Church who are "tired from the dominance of sects." In a striking contrast, the Moscow Patriarchate is currently seeking to build churches in the predominantly Catholic Irish cities of Galway and Limerick, where the first-ever Russian Orthodox liturgy was held in a Catholic church in 2002. Reasons given to the Irish ambassador for the Galway plan, to build a traditional Russian wooden church, were tourism and bearing "witness to Orthodox tradition and culture" to immigrants "and to Irish people."

The 100-strong Catholic parish of Christ the King in the southern Siberian city of Barnaul has been petitioning the authorities in Altai Region for the return of its pre-1917 church for 13 years without success, Forum 18 News Service has learnt. Showing Forum 18 the building in central Lenin Street on 23 June, Polish parish priest Fr Roman Caly said that his community will continue to insist upon its return: "We can prove it was ours historically, and there is no serious reason to withhold it from us."

Built between 1908 and 1913, the church was closed in 1932 and has served as Barnaul's Chemist [Drug Store] No. 4 since 1937. In a thick file of correspondence on the issue with the local authorities, Fr Roman showed Forum 18 a typical response from the municipal administration to the parish's requests. Dated 7 June 2000, the building cannot be returned to the church, it maintains, because the chemist's serves 13 nearby medical points, four regional medical institutions and over 30,000 local residents, as well as being the only stockist of particular eyedrops.

Although the head of Altai Regional Administration, Aleksandr Surikov, issued a decree in July 1993 promising the return of historical houses of worship and related property to religious organisations between 1995 and 2000, another letter from the authorities in the file notes that a January 2000 instruction postponed this deadline to the first half of 2003. In that year, Fr Roman told Forum 18, officials announced that the promised return had again been postponed: "They keep giving us the right to claim the building and then taking it away again. The current position is that there is no possibility of positively resolving the issue of returning it to us."

Fr Roman also told Forum 18 that other establishments began to be built onto the former church soon after the parish first began to campaign for its return in 1992, and that this has both complicated the claim and disturbed the remains of the surrounding Catholic cemetery. In response to his May 2000 query about a café built adjoining the building and on top of the cemetery. However, the then mayor of Barnaul, Vladimir Bavarin, wrote: "You are deeply mistaken regarding the interests of the city administration regarding the return of the building to your community. Sometimes one hears undeserved accusations and suppositions from insufficiently informed persons, and this is very offensive and painful, but when heard from you, a priest, a person whose calling is to serve by high moral example, then it is doubly offensive."

Forum 18 saw that the rear of the former Catholic church has also been extended to house the Siberian Institute for Human Reproduction and Genetics, while, a few metres from the stump of the only remaining cemetery cross, Fr Roman pointed out a tiny Orthodox chapel built approximately a year ago. Although the parish could pursue its claim via the courts, he said, "it could take another ten years," and the law has so far proved to be "irrelevant".

In March 2003, the local Altai Daily Review reported Altai Region's government chairman, Aleksandr Nazarchuk, as stating that his main contribution to Orthodoxy had been in keeping Catholic representatives out of Altai Region. The authorities in the neighbouring Altai Republic have similarly barred a Catholic construction project, Fr Roman confirmed to Forum 18, although he stressed that the initiative concerned is entirely independent of his Novosibirsk-based diocese.

Thus, in her 1999 book "Church for All Nations", Austrian Catholic Agnes Ritter writes that she has received visions of the Virgin Mary since 1975 directing her to build a Catholic church and pilgrimage centre on the banks of Lake Teletskoye in the Altai

Republic. According to Fr Roman, the Turachak district authorities at the northern end of this lake, which has a small Catholic parish in Logach village, initially supported the project, but then blocked construction citing opposition from local residents.

Writing in the local weekly newspaper Postsriptum, in April 2002, Galina Maseyeva noted that between 2000 and 2002 Altai Republic's administration allocated land and approved building plans for the Austrian project. Although an opinion poll conducted among two-thirds of local residents showed that 798 out of 838 supported construction, a late March 2002 statement by local ministers noted that "in connection with the negative public reaction in Turachak district the construction of the Catholic church must be stopped the need for a Catholic church in Turachak district should be assessed. In examining this issue the strong ideological influence of the West on the local population via the media should be taken into account."

Cited at a subsequent meeting with local residents, Altai Republic's religious affairs official Svetlana Pustogacheva warned that grazing pasture for cattle would be removed, that there was no mechanism for controlling the work of the Catholic Church and that "free cheese is found only in a mousetrap." Maseyeva, however, indicates that most of the local residents who addressed the meeting were unopposed to the Catholic presence, referring to the desperately needed employment opportunities and increase in foreign visitors that it would bring. In May 2002 the newspaper of Altai State University, For Science, announced that head of Altai Republic Mikhail Lapshin had cancelled the project nevertheless. At a recent Moscow press conference, it reported him as saying that the issue would be considered only "when the pope and the patriarch of Moscow and All Rus' make up," adding that he did not want Catholics coming to his region and "abusing children, like in America."

On 25 March 2005, Anton Barykin reported in the Novosibirsk-based Chestnoye Slovo newspaper that the administration of Altai Republic had again rejected the idea of building a "Church for All Nations" on the shores of Teletskoye Lake. This time, the reason given was the negative attitude of the Russian Orthodox Church and other social organisations, who were "tired from the dominance of sects."

The Moscow Patriarchate has repeatedly strongly condemned what it describes as Catholic "proselytism" and is opposed to a prominent Catholic construction project in an area of Russia where the Catholic community is small. But it is currently seeking to do some similar building projects itself in a predominantly Catholic country, where the first-ever Russian Orthodox church was consecrated in 2003. On 29 June 2005, the Pravoslavie.ru Orthodox website outlined a Moscow meeting between the Patriarchate's head of External Church Relations, Metropolitan Kirill of Smolensk and Kaliningrad, and Irish ambassador to Russia Justin Harman. At this meeting, Dublin-based Russian Orthodox priest Fr Georgi Zavershinsky reportedly brought up the question of building a traditional Russian wooden church in the western, predominantly Catholic, Irish city of Galway, which "would adorn the tourist centre of the city and bear vivid witness to Orthodox tradition and culture, both to immigrants from the CIS and to Irish people living on the Atlantic coast."

The first-ever Russian Orthodox liturgy in the also predominantly Catholic Irish city of Limerick was celebrated in October 2002, in a Catholic church. The Limerick Leader newspaper reported, on 26 October 2002, a plan for an Orthodox church originating with Russian immigrants to Limerick, quoting local Roman Catholic Bishop Donal Murray as giving his full backing to the plan, saying that he "would love to do something for them [the Russian Orthodox]." Russian Orthodox services are held in Limerick's [Catholic] Augustinian Church, and Joe McGlynn, Augustinian pastoral co-ordinator, told the Limerick Leader that "we are delighted to host these services until they find their own church." Other Orthodox parishes have also been established in Ireland, with the help of both the [Anglican] Church of Ireland and the Roman Catholic Church.

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=509

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If you need to contact F18News, please email us at:
f18news @ editor.forum18.org

Forum 18
Postboks 6603
Rodeløkka
N-0502 Oslo
NORWAY