

Brief history of my stay in Russia

This is how it started: I was stationed in Warsaw at the time when *Fr. Jakub Blaszczyzyn svd*, now the superior of the Ural Region, earlier a student of mine when I acted as teacher and formator of Polish SVD-seminarians in Nysa, Poland, came for a visit (SVD stands for *Societas Verbi Divini*- the Society of the Divine Word, which is an international missionary congregations founded in 1875 by Saint Arnold Janssen). He turned to me with an offer of coming to Russia and taking up work there. That was something that I kind of least expected. It is not because I was prejudiced against the Russians, which – in fact – I was not, but because I thought that making decisions like that in my age (nearly 62!) was not quite appropriate. Well, he sounded quite convincing while telling me that there was still a lot I could do despite my age and not the best health condition. So I gave in and set off for this vast country, for Saint Petersburg, exactly speaking, which is the second biggest city of Russia and its cultural capital, as it is often called. “Peter”, as it is briefly referred to by the Russians, impressed me a lot, it is beautiful and famous for its numerous historical monuments, rivers and canals, which have made it known as the “Venice of the North”; but I did not come there to visit its museums and other attractions, but to do some Church work, which – in my case – consisted in taking pastoral care of Catholic Indian medical students (see the attachment *below*), teaching English to the Russian priest candidates in the only Catholic seminary of Russia, running the regional superior’s office, doing translations and responding to the correspondence from the SVD-Generalate in Rome and from the other provinces of the Society. I attended a two-and-a half-month-course of the Russian language and then took up work to which I had been assigned.

During the course I had a chance to talk not only to the other members of the group I was in, but to the teachers as well, and I could easily see how much they were still affected by the Soviet indoctrination process of the previous era, how much their mentality was still Soviet. Their views seemed strange, they were still thinking in the categories of the Russian imperial ambitions and were convinced about their superiority to the Western civilization in many respects. An open discussion was kind of hard. On the other hand, some of them were kind of sad which testifies to the fact that after the Soviet era not very much was left of their previous ideology they had attempted to live by, so they live in a kind of ideological vacuum which does not provide them with any secure basis to build their life upon. Regardless of their attitude towards the West they very much attempt to copy it, which sometimes looks funny in the eyes of Western Europeans. Their present “rulers”, especially Putin, Russia’s most powerful man, tend to long for the previous system which they’d like to bring back

over their country, which – fortunately – is not possible in its original shape, so at least they try to give the Russians a sense of national pride by fostering nationalistic ideals and patterns. The fall of the Soviet State, that supported and instilled the atheist system, produced a tragic ideological, cultural and ethical gap. Right after the fall of communism (1988-1992) public opinion regarded religion as something that could bring back a sense of life and hope in the future. After 1992 the tendency changed. The enthusiasm for religions and western-like democracy gave way to indifference. Just as in the other European countries, practical materialism, consumerism and common relativism prevailed.

There are about 1 million Catholics in the whole of Russia, out of the population counting about 140 million. There seem to be many more Orthodox Christians, but – according to the statistics – only 3.5 per cent of them attend Sunday services regularly. Therefore, they are often labelled as “Orthodox atheists”. Russia does not have enough native priests, most of the Catholic bishops are non-Russians. All Christian churches present here are working hard on the people, but it will surely take generations till “the face of this earth” is changed. Russia and its people is in the need of prayer, so I would like to ask all of you for that intention. Praised be Jesus Christ!

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