

Notes from the Edge of the World

Rev. Matthew Heise

March 2009



Above: Lady Maslenitsa signifies the beginning of Lent in Russia

After a two week extended stay in the States due to visa issues, I had finally got back into the seminary community of the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Ingria with a course on Galatians. I'm grateful to my folks for putting me up, or is that putting up with me? It was also good to get acquainted with the good people at Christ Our Savior Lutheran in Livonia, MI., who allowed me to share with them on February 3 the work that is going on in the field of Eurasia.

As I write to you, I am now back in Georgia with our upcoming women's health seminar slated for March 17-20. It will be timely in more ways than one as our deaconess Tea Charkviani is just now finishing surgery for female health problems. We pray for a full and quick recovery for Tea. She and her husband Zviadi are now resting at my place in Tbilisi. Unfortunately my delayed departure meant that for the first time in about five years, I was unable to attend the graduation of our Ingrian seminary graduates in Russia. I did receive some pictures of their special day and will also list for you the topic of each student's dissertation, which he is required to defend before receiving the diploma. So as per custom, here are some thumbnail sketches of the graduates:

The Eucharist and the Concept of Sacrifice-Mikhail Ivanov



Above: Mikhail with his parents on Graduation Day

Mikhail, or Misha, as we know him on campus, is one of the youngest students but reflects a maturity beyond his years. He is a deacon at St. Michael's Lutheran in St. Petersburg. St. Michael's is by far one of the largest and most vibrant Ingrian Lutheran congregations due to the energy and spiritual vitality of head Pastor Sergey Tatarenko. When I visited the church last week to see the progress of an LCMS-funded reconstruction of St. Michael's, I saw that Misha had his office right near the front door of the church. As there is a lot of foot traffic along the street, with people coming in and out of the church due to curiosity, Misha is a good candidate to share with them the beliefs of the Lutheran church in Russia. When I left him last week, he was beginning to engage a young woman in conversation who had been enticed by Eastern religions.

The Paganism of the Mari People- Vyacheslav (Slava) Abdulinin



I have shared with my readers in the past Slava's unique conversion from paganism to Christianity. In short, Slava was a high school teacher but also a practitioner of the ancient tree-worshipping religion of his own Mari people in central Russia. A serious leg infection, which couldn't be healed by any of his potions or remedies, led him to accept the prayers of Finnish Lutheran missionaries. When he was healed after their prayers, he became eager to learn more about this Jesus of whom they spoke. He soon became a believer in Jesus Christ as Lord and decided to enter the Ingrian Lutheran seminary. Slava is committed to reaching not only the pagans among the Mari people, he also has a desire to reach out to Muslims. He will help host an LCMS-directed conference on Muslim evangelization next month.

Above: Slava (right) is congratulated by Rector Fyodor Tulinin

An Apology on Millenarianism- Vitaly Luchagov



Above: Vitaly after defending his dissertation

Vitaly is originally from Ulan Ude in the Buryatian Republic located in Siberia. His call is to a congregation in Minusinsk, also in Siberia and situated between the cities of Novosibirsk and Krasnoyarsk. This community consists of many Germans who were relocated in the former days of the Soviet Union and this has provided an opportunity for outreach. The LCMS is currently seeking ways to help build a church building for the congregation there. Vitaly and his wife Antonina are parents of four children including my godson Aleksey. They are committed to working not only in Minusinsk but in the surrounding villages in Siberia where there are many Latvian and Estonian exiles.



Above: A sleigh ride is a Russian tradition on Maslenitsa Sunday

Maslenitsa

Just as the Lenten season is preceded by Fat Tuesday or Mardi Gras in the United States, so is Russia's Lenten season greeted by a tradition known as Maslenitsa Sunday.

Although Russia's Lenten fasting period begins on a Monday rather than a Wednesday, like so much in Russian religion today Maslenitsa is a blend of Christian and pagan traditions. In the ancient pagan days of Russia, Maslenitsa celebrated the end of winter and the coming of the sun. Thus the ubiquitous bliny, similar to a thin pancake and fashioned into the shape of the sun, is by custom consumed at this time in generous quantities with jam or honey.

The picture you saw at the beginning of this newsletter was taken right in front of Red Square in Moscow on Maslenitsa Sunday. There you see an effigy of Lady Maslenitsa or Kostroma, as she was known in ancient times. According to the tradition she was burned on this day since her ashes were thought to ensure the fertilization of the soil for the fast-approaching Spring. In more recent Soviet times, Maslenitsa was officially forbidden. So now as this old village tradition is returning to Russia, many Christians are trying to emphasize the Christian aspects of the holiday that have been forgotten over the past seventy years. Some Christians will throw a list of sins into the fire, symbolizing their desire for a fresh start in their spiritual lives. In tune with that reflection, this last Sunday before Lent is also known as Forgiveness Sunday, where people ask forgiveness of each other for their sins.

I just happened to be in Koltushi at the seminary on Maslenitsa and so had a chance to see how the holiday was celebrated in this Lutheran enclave of Russia. (Just in case there is some confusion, I better clarify that I am not omnipresent and therefore do not have the

ability to be in two places at once. The picture of Lady Maslenitsa in Moscow was taken one week later as Orthodox believers follow a different liturgical calendar than Protestants and Catholics). The above and below pictures illustrate how many of the accompanying traditions survive in Russian village life to this day. Sleigh rides are characteristic of this day and the kids always have a lot of fun with that. The picture below shows young girls competing in sack races as well as a tug-of-war between two fellows, which I'm sorry to say our student Oleg Zyatikov lost (but you can see him grimacing with all his might in a futile cause; he's in the black shirt and pants). Most importantly, Deacon Ivan Laptev, whom I just taught in my Galatians course, reminded the people of the true sacrifice that brings about reconciliation with God. All of these traditions are nice, some are even tasty, but the real message of Lent is the sacrifice which our Lord Jesus Christ made on our behalf. Jesus' path to the cross reminds us of the poverty of our attempts to become right with God absent Christ's atoning blood. As we in the Russian and Georgian Lutheran churches begin this spiritual season, we pray for the Lord's insight into how we can best proclaim His Word to those who do not often venture beyond the veil of human traditions. May His grace and peace be with you during Lent.



Prayer Requests:

Thank the Lord with me for safe travels to and from Russia, to Germany, and back to Georgia.

Please pray for God's blessings upon the ministries of the recent Ingrian Lutheran seminary graduates.

Please pray for deaconess Tea Charkviani, recovering from surgery.

Please pray for our upcoming women's health clinic seminar in Kutaisi, sponsored by LIMM (Lutheran in Medical Mission), LCMS World Relief and LCMS World Mission. Pray for our preparations and the participation of refugees, especially our refugee translators.

Please pray for preparations on a Muslim evangelism conference in Russia in April and for my preparations to teach in Mongolia in May.

E-mail: matveih@yahoo.com --Mailing address - **Evangelical Lutheran Ministries; Attn: Matthew Heise, International Post Office, Box 76; 37 Varshavskoye Shosse; 104000 Moscow, RUSSIA. To support my work financially, you may send a tax-deductible gift to: LCMS World Mission, 1333 S. Kirkwood Rd., St. Louis, MO 63122-7295. Make checks payable to LCMS World Mission. Mark checks "Support of Matthew Heise."** If you would like to partner with me in this ministry with ongoing support as an individual or congregation, please contact Debra Feenstra for information on Together in Mission or Mission Senders at 1-800-248-1930 Ext. 1651 or Debra.Feenstra@lcms.org Thank you and God bless you in Lent!