

MISSIONARIES FOR RUSSIA

In January Russia is decked out like a bride, snow covering the merciless scars of war, and glistening in the reflection of the sun . . . For the countryside is as beautiful as ever, untouched by politics and strife . . . It is easy to wander back with the mind's eye and see the Russia of Tolstoy, the land so noted for its generosity in the sight of God, that it was called "Holy Russia".

Let us recall that Russia, so as to get a clearer picture of the Russia of today.

It was an Agricultural land, where most of the education still clung to the religious houses, and the rest of the countryside were simple, trusting folk, who loved to see foreigners because they were different and therefore interesting. They were exceedingly hospitable, as all people are in lands where the climate is rigorous: if you do not put up the stranger for the night, and the next village is many a verst away, then he could easily perish, if not from the cold, then from the wolves on the way, which have always been numerous in Russia. As children we used to wonder why our Lady did not come to a Russian Bethlehem, for there was always room for everybody, she would not have been homeless.

How was this managed? Ah, well, in Russia no one is fussy, and the host wanders off and gets some sweet hay, and covers the floor with it, and the guests settle down very comfortably on what I suppose England would call "the dining room floor!" Or else, if it was a peasant household, he would be packed up with the family on the wide shelf above the kitchen stove . . .

Besides strangers, there were the numerous occasions when guests were expected. On the Feast Day of the Saint of the Village, or the Nameday of the lady of the house, on weddings, baptisms, funerals, you would do a lot of cooking beforehand, and then look out and count the troika as they came in to be sure you had enough! (A troika is a Russian sleigh with three horses which relieve each other). Your guest would often come with children, dogs, and even livestock, and when they eventually went away livestock had been exchanged, or sold, marriages arranged among the young folk, and no end of business seen to, and the host of today prepared to be the guest of tomorrow.

Russia has ever been a fertile land, and you seemed to be able to plant a seed and wander off and amuse yourself till Spring and the shoots appeared through the thawing snow. Incidentally, this haphazard way of growing your corn may have facilitated some aspects of the Revolution later.

In the religious houses there was a similar spirit of hospitality.

Outside the precincts of the Monastery was the house of the chaplain, and his family (a Russian explained to me that Monastery chaplains always had to be "solidni", by which he meant a man with a numerous family) and several guest houses. Guests were always put up there for three days free, with their entire family, and whatever animals they had with them. Often they all ate in the one dining room, with the stray pilgrims who spent their lives wandering all over Russia, staying at one religious house after another, and making numerous pilgrimages, particularly to the Holy Land.

These untidy, unkempt beggarly pilgrims were treated with great respect throughout the countryside, several of them revered as Saints by Russians, and occasionally after the death of one or the other the people learnt that the pilgrim had been a person of high rank, doing penance.

Penance in Russia seemed the natural expression of their attitude to God, for religious and layman alike were deeply imbued with a sense of their sinfulness, and God's mercy. They were outstandingly merciful to public sinners, and always ready to forgive even the most heinous crimes, and take the sinner in their midst again.

Russians cannot do things by halves. In Moscow one can still see the Churches built so close to one another that their history is obvious: most of them were built by merchants, in competition with each other. Many a Russian merchant started life like St. Francis of Assisi, and had a gay time, more or less sinful, then in later life he felt compunction, and started a holy rivalry with his neighbour, sometimes ending it all by giving everything up and becoming a religious. All religious in Russia were contemplatives, and lived on the land, some of them painting eikons amid prayer and fasting, others writing, and after many years of life in the cloister they often took to hermit lives, in solitude.

The source of the greatest joy of the Russian was Easter. It must still be so. In the past they had little freedom, now they have none, and Easter is the hope, through Christ, of their eternal freedom. Even though now they believe in secret.

Shrove Tuesday was a day of grandiose eating. I remember some of the dishes: pancakes with fish, jam, cream and savouries, all on the one plate, numberless patties, cakes, and everything that could be devised to use up the eggs, butter, cheese, meat and fish; during the rigorous Lent all these items were eliminated, and everyone had a lean time. In every house there was a corner with most of the family eikons. There was the one the parents had used to bless the happy couple at their engagement, another they had for their wedding, there was the patron Saint of the husband and wife, and each

succeeding child, and numerous others. Before all these eikons a lamp was always lit, and the family said their prayers.

On Good Friday the lamp was put out.

Holy Saturday, at night, there was midnight Liturgy, and the family went to church carrying the Easter fare to be blessed . . . Some would bring a live fowl in a basket, and throughout the service one might hear its piping voice, whether trying to join the singing of the choir or not, I do not know . . . The service is very long. There are no pews in Russian churches, although in most cases the kindly sacristan finds something for the old and the delicate to sit on. The rest either stand, or sit on the floor. There are no organs in the Russian Churches, the music is entirely the work of the priest and the choir master, who between them keep the responses in the right pitch. Russians are good singers, and the result is awe inspiring, for the congregation live their liturgy. So much is singing considered part of the Priest's duties, that unless he has a voice, he is often told he has no vocation!

As near midnight as possible, the priest turns round to the people and sings out: "Christ is Risen!" and everyone responds gladly, "He is truly Risen!" and the kiss of Peace is passed round the entire church, from one to the other, and there is a great joy pervading the atmosphere . . .

When you leave the little church, laden with a smell of incense, and the mass of votive candles the Russians love to light before the many eikons, the snow crunches underfoot, and the air invigorates you, and at the distance you see the first sign of dawn . . . The people pack into the many sleighs, and the little sleighbells go tinkling away, with tiny specks of light showing at the distance . . . Each family bring home a candle, lit with the Blessed light from the Easter candle, to rekindle the lamp before the eikons in the home, a sight never to be forgotten.

But, someone is bound to think by now, how could such people be the same, as we know Communists to be?

It is a difficult point. Among the Twelve Apostles there was Judas. And if you read some passages of Dostoevski, you can see how a so-called normal Russian could be wildly abnormal, how in his very nature there are traits which the Russian himself expresses as "scratch a Russian and you find a Tartar."

In old Russia there was no capital punishment. Maybe there would have been no success at the time of the Bolshevik Revolution otherwise. For many of the instigators were in the past sent to Siberia, and escaped . . .

The Catholic Church in Russia was oppressed by the old régime,

and was tiny. Catholics and Jews were debarred from owning land, and from higher education. In old Russia there was much corruption, side by side with her beauty. An old Jew told me how he completed his University course. Each Easter the students were required to go to confession to the orthodox priest, or be expelled. Each year when his turn came, he went in and said: "Pray for me father, for I am a Jew." Whereupon the priest always answered: "May the Lord forgive thee, my son," and accepted the proffered offering.

In 1917 the whole country was in disorder, the ban on Catholics was lifted, and large numbers were received into the Church. This may have had a lot to do with the attention the Communists paid to the Catholics soon afterwards, for by 1921 persecution was rife. Russian religion went underground. There, the Orthodox, Jews, and Catholics got to know each other well. In the prisons many were received into the Church. It was not a question of Rite, for both the Liturgy and the Mass were said in hiding, without vestments, without books, sometimes without a congregation . . . When an itinerant priest came to an area, he often would give five sacraments to one family: ratify the marriage, baptize the children, hear confessions and give absolution, pray over the dead, give Holy Communion . . . Many of the glorious deeds will not be printed till Communism has had her day, for fear of endangering the living Catholics hidden in Russia today. Some of the most glorious accounts are the heroic deeds of Dominican Tertiary Women, and surely their example and their blood, so willingly shed for Christ, will plant the seed for the dire need for vocations as Missioners for Russia?

Russia has had more martyrs than any other land. The sufferings of her martyrs read like the martyrology, and seem too terrible to describe. Like a child the land was overcome by the insidious disease of Communism, and appreciating this fact, Our Holy Father has made Little Teresa of the Child Jesus the Patroness of the Russian Mission.

There are a few houses "rearing" men to be missionaries for Russia. Very little is done for the women who will be needed there.

We need men and women, lay and cleric, for this vast land, which is about to reopen to Missionaries anew, and we need to be ready to seize this chance, a better chance than we have had since the Schism.

Russia is on the verge of another revolution. Her people have come over her frontiers, and in vast numbers have seen other lands, true freedom. Also her people have discovered their own strength . . .

Communism is not popular in Russia. Some three or four out of every hundred believe in it. The others are now openly beginning to say they are not Communists. Priests, who for years have been hiding, plying most unexpected trades, are repeatedly coming into the open . . . It is the dawn . . .

Alone these heroic missionaries cannot complete their work, for Russia has had no seminaries, no system of religious instruction for so long, that few under forty-five know anything about God. And Russia is a land where so many died in the Revolution, in the famines, shootings, and in this last war, that if you go down the street of any of their big towns, there are few people to be met over fifty, and no really old people. Godless Communism has taught the land terrible things, so that Russia stands as a menace to the world. We must convert her or she will pervert us.

It would be a grand plan if people interested in Russia had a house where they could learn to love the true soul of Russia, learn Russian, read her literature, her history, and find out if they were called to join the heroic missionaries preparing to go there. Such a house is sure to come about, for the need is great. And the whole church is praying, so the vocations will multiply also.

It would be a grand thing to see branches of all our well loved Orders in Russia, and the best way surely would be to prepare now, for the dawning day.

There is no doubt but that the Russian Martyrs will teach us many things, and that, going to Russia to teach them the faith, we will find that in reality we go there to be taught many things we have never guessed. There are those degrees of selfless prayer, and of childlike wonder, so natural to the Russian, so seemingly distant to us, for Russians are natural contemplatives. But we have also something to give them, we have a certain self-control and balance which they admire, and long to attain, and without which they might easily fall a prey to the next "ism" that tries to overcome them.

MARA.

B E V E R I D G E D E B U N K E D ?

THE fashionable Beveridge school of full employment economics is open to a good deal of detailed criticism, and Professor Fisher has made a valiant, if not wholly successful attempt to suggest the greater importance of a different approach.⁽¹⁾ In spite of a number of dexterous jabs the Beveridge school still stands, sore but unshaken; in rightly denying that the New Economics are new, Professor Fisher tends to slip too easily into denying that they are fre-

(1) A. G. B. Fisher: *Economic Progress and Social Security*. (Macmillan; 18s.).