

## VISIT TO OUR DAUGHTER IN VLADIVOSTOK—May 2014

by Donnita and Henry Whittier

On May 5<sup>th</sup>, after celebrating my mother's 90<sup>th</sup> birthday in California, Hank and I headed to the LA airport with 6 suitcases, a dulcimer, a backpack, and a purse bound for Russia and filled with excitement to be traveling for the first time to Vladivostok to visit our daughter, Sr. Maria Stella, CJD whom we had not seen in almost a year. After a 21 hour voyage via Seoul, we arrived on May 7<sup>th</sup>, having crossed the international dateline and losing a day.

Srs. Maria Stella and Catherine Marie picked us up in a borrowed van and drove us 40 miles to their new home on Russian Island where they have lived since mid-January. We rode on a two-lane divided highway built in 2012 for the Asian Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) Conference and crossed the new largest suspension bridge in the world which joins the mainland with Russian Island. After passing the new 30,000 student Far Eastern Federal University campus, we turned onto a dirt road for another mile or two.

We felt the sisters' pioneering spirit when we met Sr. Faustina Marie who had just finished gardening in their vegetable plot in front of their 100 year old red brick apartment building. We climbed up the stairs to the 600 sq ft. convent on the second floor and admired the renovations to the second apt. that had been made recently. However, despite best intentions, the hot water was not hooked up yet and the furnishings were sparse, so we decided to stay at the Novik Lodge down the road rather than in the convent.

We enjoyed following the sisters on their daily activities travelling 20 miles back and forth to the mainland in their compact Nissan often to the Most Holy Mother of God Church for Mass, Benediction, Confession, choir practice, musical rehearsals and youth group, but also to an orphanage, a nursing home, and a women's support center they are involved with.

We marveled at their ability to navigate the reckless traffic despite having a steering wheel on the right and driving on the right. This is common because so many cars in Russia are imported from Japan where they drive on the left as in the UK. The steep hills of Vladivostok, called the San Francisco of Russia, added to the challenge, even with no ice on the roads when we were there.

The sisters graciously carved out some time out from their busy schedules to show us around their island where we saw Russian families grilling out shashlik, or shish kebab, on pebbly beaches. We later climbed down into old fortifications built to protect the city from attack from the sea. The sisters often drew the attention of strangers who were eager to talk to them and often asked to be photographed with them, apparently viewing them as a sign of God's blessing.

The sisters' language abilities were very impressive. Whenever we toured museums, Sr. Stella translated the guides' narratives fluently into English, and all three sisters had

excellent accents in Russian and sang and prayed the liturgy with ease. During our encounters with parishioners, we heard many well-deserved compliments on the sisters' musical contributions to the parish. In addition to singing, Sr. Catherine leads the choir and plays the dulcimer, Sr. Stella plays the organ and harp, and Srs. Faustina and Catherine play the flute. We were very fortunate to attend the annual Spring Concert at the church where the sisters sang and played alongside professional singers and instrumentalists.

Our orphanage visit was limited to taking several infants and toddlers in strollers to the playground because of restrictions by the staff. The sisters are often told that they cannot even come to the orphanage because of quarantine, so it has been hard for Sr. Faustina to maintain continuous Montessori lessons with them. I was shocked to learn that little Tanya, who weighed about 15 lb. was actually 2 years old. She had a birth disorder which prevented her from walking, but she smiled when the warm sun hit her face and we played with her.

We had a very informative tour of the Women's Support Center in Maternity Clinic #4 run by Yulia, a recent convert to Catholicism, who counsels pregnant women part-time in addition to her full-time job. Yulia said that pregnant women make appointments with her eagerly and are very appreciative of the instructions they receive because the government staff is very harsh and unsympathetic to them. Since there are also abortions being performed in this building, having a friendly person to go to sometimes leads to a changed mind, and Yulia was proud to point to the tree of saved babies on the wall. She also told us about many items they could use ranging from instructional materials to medical equipment..

A very moving visit was to the nursing home where we assisted the sisters in feeding almost toothless patients who had to eat flat on their backs because none of the beds cranked up. It was a special day because Darya, a young Russian woman from the youth group, came to help, something the sisters had been hoping would happen for a long time. Because of the sisters' example and encouragement Russians are slowly beginning to help each other more.

Back home in Bluffton, SC we felt overwhelmed thinking about all the needs we had seen in the places we had visited. We especially thought about the things the sisters need to be able to maintain and expand their ministry: desks for their bedrooms, a dining room table and chairs, a second car so they can go to separate activities, and lots of money to buy two more apartments in their building for a retreat center.

However, when we reflected on our three-week 18,000 mile journey, we realized that the most important thing we witnessed was how grateful the Russians are that the Sisters in Jesus the Lord are joyfully bringing God's love to their God-deprived country despite the many challenges they face in this very difficult mission field.