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New missionary community serves the spiritual needs of the Catholic minority in Russia

By: Dave Borowski

Arlington, Va., Aug 28, 2010 (CNA) - According to the U.S. Department of State, there are more than 100 million Orthodox Christians in Russia. Contrast that with about 600,000 Roman Catholics and you can appreciate the difficult task of tending to the spiritual needs of Catholics in the former Soviet Union.

Sister Maria Stella Whittier came to Holy Trinity Church in Gainesville, Va. last week to speak about the history of Catholic priests and sisters in Russia from 1917 to the present. She also spoke about her work in Vladivostok, in far-eastern Russia, and that of her community, the Sisters in Jesus the Lord.

Sister Maria Stella is the daughter of Holy Trinity parishioners Hank and Donnita Whittier. She graduated from Oakton High School in Vienna and went on to receive a degree from the College of William and Mary in Williamsburg, a master's in sacred music from Emory University in Atlanta and a master's in Catholic studies from the University of St. Thomas in St. Paul, Minn.

Donnita said that her daughter started to realize her vocation when she was 19 years old and went on a mission to a homeless shelter in Philadelphia with others from the Catholic Campus Ministry of William and Mary. Then she went to World Youth Day in Toronto in 2002.

"That's what really did it," Donnita said.

In 2004, Sister Maria Stella was the first postulant to join the Sisters in Jesus the Lord. It's a very new and small order — only five sisters. The order was declared a Public Association of the Faithful in July by Bishop Robert Finn of the Diocese of Kansas City-St. Joseph, Mo.

The order is focused on pro-life work and on reviving the Catholic Church in eastern Russia.

Sister Maria Stella said she became interested in Russia because her mother had a degree in Russian and it was a common topic in the Whittier household.

Persecution

“Can you imagine all the Catholic priests in America being sent to concentration camps, killed or exiled? Imagine living without the Mass, the Eucharist, Confession and the other sacraments for as many as 74 years,” said Sister Maria Stella at the start of her talk.

When the Bolsheviks overthrew the czar in 1917 they established what author Michael Rose called in his book *Priest: Portraits of Ten Good Men Serving the Church Today* “a land without churches in a country that had vanquished God.”

Hundreds of thousands of Orthodox priests, monks and nuns were killed, another half-million were exiled, and tens of thousands of Orthodox churches were closed or converted for secular use.

Catholics didn’t escape the religious persecution. Thousands of priests were killed before 1939 and when the Soviet Union began its expansion into traditionally Roman Catholic countries like Poland, more than 7,000 priests were imprisoned or killed and hundreds of parishes were destroyed. Many Catholics were imprisoned in gulags — Soviet labor camps — where Catholic priests celebrated Mass in secret using prison bread and wine made from raisins.

All in all, 20 million Christians were murdered during Joseph Stalin’s era.

End of the Soviet Union

After the fall of the Soviet Union in 1991, religious persecution ended and people came back to the Church. But according to the State Department many of those who identify with a particular religion in Russia rarely, if ever, attend religious services.

Priests and sisters are working to change that behavior in Catholics.

The sisters work in conjunction with Fathers Daniel Maurer and Myron Effing of their brother community — the Canons Regular of Jesus the Lord.

Sister Maria Stella said the two priests came to Vladivostok in 1992. There was no underground Catholic community in place to build from because, according to Father Maurer, "the persecution lasted too long."

The duo founded or re-founded 12 parishes. They worked to return the Most Holy Mother of God Catholic Church, the oldest surviving Catholic Church in far-eastern Russia to survive the revolution, from government ownership to parish ownership.

Sister Maria Stella said that even though persecution of the Church ended with the fall of the Soviets, it is often difficult for Catholic organizations to get the necessary permits to build.

The sisters pray the Liturgy of the Hours in Russian every morning, work on various projects around the parish, dialogue with local Orthodox clergy and nuns, and conduct Rachel's Vineyard Retreats.

Sister Maria Stella concluded her talk by asking the audience to pray for the priests, sisters and the faithful in Russia. Her community needs women, "to be sisters in the harsh vineyard of Russia today."

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