

Book Reviews

Cattolici in Siberia: le origini, le persecuzioni, l'oggi, by Paolo Pezzi. Bergamo: Edizioni La Casa di Matriona, 1999. 104 pp., 19,000 lire.

This succinct, attractively presented survey was written for general, not academic, readership, but utilises deftly selected material largely from Russian sources not available in translation in the West. Pezzi is a priest in the Order of St Charles Borromeo who worked in Novosibirsk from 1993 to 1998. He is obviously an ardent supporter of the *Comunione e Liberazione* movement which has provided the impetus for so many Italians, laypeople as well as clergy, to get involved in mission and outreach in Siberia. He is strong on the history and continuity of Catholic settlement there, whether voluntary or forced.

Such a short work cannot attempt to provide a comprehensive survey (it mainly covers German communities) but its very personal records will move readers who may never before have read just how dire were the deportations and persecution. We read of the zealous Fr Iosif Svidnitsky, for instance, a Ukrainian engineer, ordained clandestinely, who after being chased out of one Central Asian republic after another ended up in Novosibirsk. There his revival of the congregation was so successful that as recently as 1985 he was sentenced to three years in a prison built for 1000 men, crammed with 5000, with no heating and temperatures of 50 degrees below zero. A crowd of 500 people, including Protestants and Orthodox, waited outside as he emerged from his trial, one of whom shouted 'Father Iosif, we are all behind you'. Though Pezzi refers to telling cases of local authority obstruction with respect to the reclamation of church property he implies that relations with the Orthodox, priests included, have often been warm at the local level.

With the men so often missing, it was women who were largely responsible for passing on the faith. Perhaps the most impressive of the saintly persons who played key roles in preserving the Catholic Church in Siberia was Gertrud Dotzel, who died in 1971 after preparing hundreds of people for the sacraments; her beatification process started in 1996. One of a pious family of 17 in the Caucasus, the teenage Gertrud confided in her priest the cross she had to bear: she was unable, as a woman, to become a priest. In fact, she was called upon to do everything except celebrate mass and all who met her, prison governors included, testified that they had never met anyone to equal her. My own personal opinion, held now for a long time, is that far fewer souls would have been lost in the USSR had the Catholic Church seen fit to borrow the Orthodox doctrine of economy in order to justify the ordination of women to feed the hungry.

Nationality, sadly, made individual diaspora Catholics easy targets for intimidation. Congregations which had been reestablished and seemed to be flourishing, thanks to the survival of a nucleus of elderly devout folk and the arrival of an

itinerant priest, were often dissipated within a very short time after his departure to prison or elsewhere. The new congregations are based largely on a few aged survivors joined by young people who find that the approach, understanding and methods of theologically literate Catholic priests meet their needs and answer their questions in a way many Orthodox priests do not. It is the middle generation which has largely fallen away. Pezzi avoids raising current controversies or problems caused by new legislation.

The first edition of this book, which ought to be translated into other western languages to reach a wider Catholic readership, was completely sold out.

JANICE BROWN

Reflections on the Russian Soul: a Memoir, by Dmitry S. Likhachev. Budapest: Central European University Press, 2000. xvii + 296 pp.

Dmitry Sergeyeovich Likhachev died only in 1999, aged 92, but his life spanned the whole gamut of cataclysmic events which engulfed his country over the last century. His memoirs have something of the quality of a necrology, albeit an autobiographical one. They are also a double obituary: for the vanished Russia of the prerevolutionary period, so vividly evoked here, and of the Soviet Union itself. The life of others has spanned the twentieth century in Russia, but few have chronicled it from beginning to end.

It may be that, for the reader of the new century, it is the very earliest passages that throb with most passion and colour. The evocation of St Petersburg in the years before 1917 and of the holidays taken by a family in comfortable circumstances, childhood memories of a boy up to his eleventh year, are in the great tradition of literature written in or about the former Russian capital (pp. 18–28).

The sound of military bands was very often heard in the street. Sometimes, on a festival or a Sunday, a regiment would be on church parade; sometimes it would be the funeral of a general. ... All the small boys would run to the sound of the band; there was a great demand for music. It was particularly interesting when soldiers detailed for a funeral were returning from the cemetery: then they were supposed to play cheerful music. (p. 23)

We did not know that, did we?

Likhachev came from a religious family, his mother being of the Old Believer tradition, much of which lived on in the family home. His paternal Uncle Vasya, who was devoted to St Serafim of Sarov, exerted a strong but more conventional influence. His father was the first person to light a church by electricity.

Likhachev devotes the central and longest section of his book to his life in the monastery-prison of Solovki, to which he was condemned in 1928, when he was only 21. He had preserved his faith during his school and university days, as the net of atheism tightened around him, but as an active member of the 'Brotherhood of St Serafim of Sarov' he was in mortal danger and could not long survive at liberty during the Bolshevik period.

The Solovki chapters are fascinating, particularly the account of how much

intellectual and religious activity managed to cling precariously to the margins of life in impossibly hostile conditions. When I was in the Russian Arctic twice in the summer of 2001 making a programme about Solovki for the BBC, I was reading Likhachev's story and wishing that there was space to incorporate something of it and of his survival into the script.

Likhachev was one of the few lucky ones to be released after only four years of imprisonment, the last year spent further south on the construction of the White Sea Canal. Ten years later his conviction was quashed retrospectively, but full rehabilitation had to wait fifty years until 1992. By this time, however, he had long been acknowledged as a great master in his eventual career as an expert on medieval Russian literature.

Sadly, however, *Reflections on the Russian Soul* (not Likhachev's own title, incidentally) loses focus when recounting this main period of his life, which fills a mere 80 pages. Perhaps at one time he envisaged a second volume, which in the end he never wrote. An account of how he worked and how he preserved his integrity and his faith during these (for the church) roller-coaster years would have been of the highest interest. He became Mikhail Gorbachev's appointee as chairman of the Soviet Cultural Fund in the late 1980s, but this is not recounted, even though the book was apparently written later – or perhaps Likhachev wrote the bulk of the manuscript during the difficult years and secreted it in the bottom drawer.

What Likhachev does do, however, is to recount his subsequent two visits to Solovki as a free man, the first in 1966, the second (the very last section of the book) less than a sketchy page on a later visit to make a television film about the former prison. As there is no date or mention of the return of monastic life to what is now again a great centre of pilgrimage, this must have been in the late 1980s, rather than the 1990s.

The *Memoir* was published in St Petersburg in 1995, four years before Likhachev's death, but the English translation was posthumous. The Central European University Press, Budapest, has done good service bringing it out in a hardback edition translated by Bernard Adams and giving it an interesting cross-cultural introduction by the Hungarian Miklós Kun. It is a pity that the English-language edition has scarcely been reviewed or noticed in this country.

MICHAEL BOURDEAUX