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NORTH KOREA: Will local Orthodox dare to regularly attend new church?

By Geraldine Fagan, Forum 18 News Service <<http://www.forum18.org>>

Pyongyang, North Korea's capital, has two Protestant and one Catholic church, which are suspected of being "show churches" for display to foreigners, so it remains unclear whether any North Koreans will be able to or will dare to regularly attend an Orthodox church under construction. The building is funded by the North Korean state, and Forum 18 News Service has learnt that it is "65 per cent finished". By the early 1900's, about 10,000 Koreans had converted to Orthodoxy due to Russian missionaries in the now divided Korean peninsula. Dmitry Petrovsky, of the Moscow Patriarchate's Department for External Church Relations, expressed the hope to Forum 18 that links with this past missionary activity remain, as is the case with Orthodox churches in South Korea. Four North Koreans are studying at the Moscow Theological Seminary, and Petrovsky remarked to Forum 18 that they are displaying "zeal and a genuine interest in Orthodoxy".

Consecrated on 24 June 2003 by then Archbishop Kliment (Kapalin) of Kaluga and Borovsk, the Holy Trinity Orthodox church in Pyongyang was "65 per cent finished" by the end of this summer, Fr Dionisy Pozdnyayev, a Russian Orthodox priest who ministers to foreign nationals in the North Korean capital twice a year, told Forum 18 News Service from Hong Kong on 18 September. Construction thus appears to be slightly behind schedule - a 23 June 2003 report by Russian state news agency RIA Novosti reported Chairman of North Korea's Orthodox Committee Ho Il Jin as saying that it would take between nine and 12 months to build.

When finished, the 300-square-metre (3,230 square feet) church should be able to accommodate up to 200 worshippers. It remains unclear if the North Korean authorities will allow local people to attend or whether the church will only serve locally-based Orthodox foreigners. Pyongyang has two Protestant churches and one Catholic church, but many believe these are "show churches" for the benefit of foreign visitors with no regular worship services (see F18News 25 February 2004 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=261).

Completely unknown is how many North Koreans remain Orthodox after decades of state-enforced atheism and whether any would dare to attend the church once it is opened.

According to Fr Dionisy, who led the first ever Orthodox service in the Russian embassy in Pyongyang on 9 October 2002 by invitation of the official Korean Council of Religionists, the new church was largely funded by the North Korean state, with some donations from South Korean Orthodox believers and the governor of Russia's Far Eastern Primorye region. According to the June 2003 RIA Novosti report, construction is taking place under the direction of the Orthodox Committee within the Korean Council of Religionists, with Russian technological assistance employed in the production of its two domes and bells.

In February 2004 the state news agency in Russia's Primorye region covered a two-week visit to Moscow and Vladivostok by a delegation of North Korea's Orthodox Committee led by its chairman, Ho Il Jin. In Russia at the invitation of Patriarch Aleksii II, members of the delegation reportedly "held working consultations with specialists on questions of church construction and Orthodox traditions in church decoration".

In an interview with Russian newspaper Vremya Novostei on 15 October 2002, Fr Dionisy said that the Pyongyang church was "entirely the initiative" of North Korean leader Kim Jong Il, who requested a visit to an Orthodox church while touring Far Eastern Siberia in August 2002.

Present at the June 2003 consecration, Dmitry Petrovsky of the Moscow Patriarchate's Department for External Church Relations told Forum 18 in early 2004 that North Korean representatives had said in their addresses that it was important that Orthodox believers in Pyongyang should have the opportunity to practise their faith and expressed hope that the church would strengthen ties between Russia and North Korea.

Quoted in the June 2003 RIA Novosti report, Russian ambassador to North Korea Andrei Karlov commented that the foundation of the new church was most significant for the development of relations between Russia and the DPRK and marked "the return of Orthodoxy to Korea after a long break". Reporting the 26-28 November 2002 visit by a delegation of the Korean Council of

Religionists to Vladivostok diocese at the invitation of Patriarch Aleksii, a local university website quoted Council chairman Jang Jae On - who also heads that body's Catholic Committee - as similarly saying that North Korea's leadership had decided to build an Orthodox church in Pyongyang "as a sign of Russo-Korean friendship".

Cited in the same report, however, Bishop Veniamin (Pushkar) of Vladivostok and Primorye expressed hope not only that the Pyongyang church would become "a basis for spiritual communication" between the two countries, but that Orthodoxy would "develop in the DPRK". In his 15 October 2002 Vremya Novostei interview, Fr Dionisy Pozdnyayev maintained that - if the North Korean authorities were not opposed - "we will respond to the wishes of Koreans who would like to visit the church" and cited Jang Jae On's promise to do his utmost "to ensure that the Korean people are familiarised with Orthodoxy in depth".

On 18 September he told Forum 18 that it was too early to say whether local North Koreans would be able to visit the church, since it was not yet finished. "I think there will be services in Russian and Korean, but in what form - in a single or in separate services - will depend upon what is most convenient." In his Vremya Novostei interview, Fr Dionisy said that a Russian priest would initially conduct services in the new church in Church Slavonic - the Russian Orthodox liturgical language - and minister to the several hundred Russian, Bulgarian and Romanian expatriates working in Pyongyang.

During his packed three-day visit to Pyongyang as part of the Moscow Patriarchate delegation in June 2003, Petrovsky was unable to get to know Orthodox Committee chairman Ho Il Jin particularly well and did not meet any other indigenous North Korean Orthodox believers, he told Forum 18.

Fr Dionisy similarly told Forum 18 that he does not know any of the Orthodox Committee within the Korean Council of Religionists particularly well, the creation of which approximately 18 months ago he took to be a sign of official recognition of Orthodoxy by the North Korean state. "I don't know when those on the Committee became Orthodox, but I think it was due to personal choice, not family tradition."

The only North Koreans he has mixed with to any extent, Fr Dionisy told Forum 18, are the four who have been studying at Moscow Theological Seminary since April 2003. "While Orthodoxy is not in their family tradition, they are educated, speak Russian, English and Japanese. Their teachers are happy with their progress and it is possible that they will become priests." Although he did not know the North Korean students' religious background, Petrovsky similarly remarked to Forum 18 that they were displaying "zeal and a genuine interest in Orthodoxy".

In a September 2003 interview with a Reuters journalist, Petrovsky remarked that they "mostly concentrate on two things - Russian language, including Church Slavonic, and the catechism to prepare for baptism." Two Russian students from Moscow Theological Academy are also currently studying Korean language and culture at Pyongyang's Kim Il Sung University.

By the early twentieth century an estimated 10,000 Koreans had converted to Orthodoxy due to Russian missionary activity in Seoul (now the capital of South Korea), the eastern coastal town of Wonsan (now in North Korea) - some 150 kilometres (95 miles) east of Pyongyang - and several villages, under the auspices of neighbouring Vladivostok diocese.

Petrovsky believes that links with this past remain in the North as well as in South Korea, where there are currently six Orthodox churches with approximately 2,500 parishioners. These are under the Ecumenical Patriarchate, whose Archbishop Sotirios (Trambas) was appointed head of the refounded diocese of North and South Korea on 20 April 2004 and visited Pyongyang the same month. (An overseas parish of the Moscow Patriarchate, the new Orthodox church in Pyongyang is not part of a local diocese.) Forum 18 has so far received no response from a priest in the Ecumenical Patriarchate Korean diocese to a July query regarding this development.

For more background information see Forum 18's survey of religion in North Korea at http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=261

A printer-friendly map of North Korea is available at

<http://www.nationalgeographic.com/xpeditions/atlas/index.html?Parent=asia&Rootmap=nkorea>

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