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July 8, 2011

Dear Family and Friends,

Greetings from Vladivostok! Sr. Catherine Marie, Erica, and Sr. Maria Stella have been here since May 30, and will be here until August 24. Katherine, a volunteer from Virginia, joined us on June 16, and Hannah, from Minnesota, arrived on June 29. Time is flying by!

We have been assisting here in various ways: organ, flute, harp, singing the psalm, and sometimes directing the choir here at Most Holy Mother of God Catholic Church, attending some Russian Orthodox liturgies and discussing the faith with Orthodox priests and nuns, preparing for a kids camp (ages 10-14) that we'll be leading in Lesozavodsk July 18-21, and helping select hymns for the latest edition of the parish hymnal. We were all part of a Rachel's Vineyard retreat here for post-abortion healing early in June—Sr. Catherine Marie and Sr. Maria Stella helped to lead the retreat, and Erica and Katherine were the cooks for the entire weekend. Most days (except Thursday and Sunday), we've been going to the orphanage or hospice. We have also helped a bit in the parish garden.

At the orphanage, we help feed the babies (ages 0-3 years), play with them, and hold them. We have been helping on the floor with the smallest children (up to 18 months). About seven babies share a room; each has his or her own crib. It's been nice to return to the same floor each time and to get to know each of the children. One little girl, Sofia, is about three, but she cannot walk or sit up on her own. Her spine is noticeably curved, and her breathing is very labored. Any time she is fed, the food goes to her lungs, and it can be heard when she breathes, making it sound like she's very congested. But she is a light in the darkness. All the nurses take gentle care of Sofia. She has the most beautiful clear eyes. Any time you touch her, her face lights up. She smiles and looks perfectly content.

Because of the weather and limited staff, the babies rarely go outside. But lately, we have been getting to take the babies outside to the playground! Now that there are five of us, the nurses are especially grateful that so many babies get to go outside—a rare occurrence, since they are on the third floor without an elevator. Earlier this week, we had seven babies on the playground, with a few strollers, a walker, and a play-pen, and then we took a second group out, too.

At the hospice we are especially appreciated by the staff and patients alike. Recently the number of staff was cut in half and the pay of the remaining workers was also cut in half. On top of the cut in staff in funding, the number of patients unable to feed themselves has tripled. They have two nurses, two nurse aids, one doctor, and about 30 patients. Sixteen of the patients are unable to feed themselves and the nurses and aids work long shifts. We help feed the patients, and this week, we also brought our instruments and sang for the patients, which they loved! We sang Russian folk songs and church hymns. Brother Inno, a novice with the Canons Regular of Jesus the Lord, our brother community, came with us.

On Sunday afternoons we go with Fr. Myron or Fr. Dan to their satellite parishes to help with music at the Masses there. At St. Joseph's parish in Second River, across the city of Vladivostok, there is a family of six children, a rarity in Russia. Before Mass begins, the children help Father set up the chapel and then have choir practice with us. During the Mass, the children lead the psalm and sing the alleluia verse. They love singing and playing musical instruments and are all eyes, ears, and questions when Mass is over. They want to touch the instruments, ask questions about them, and then they eagerly help us carry our equipment outside to the car when it is time to leave. It is wonderful to see how open they are. They love our habits and enjoy playing with us while we wait for Father. Spending time with them, and sharing our faith with the little ones is a blessing.

On July 4, we were invited to a gathering on board the USS Ford, docked in Vladivostok! It was such a treat to celebrate with our fellow Americans and also to get a glimpse of the sacrifices that our men in the Navy make to protect our country. Most of the sailors we met are married with children, and will not return to the US until November.

Each night we've been discussing where we saw Jesus that day, and it is such a blessing to be aware of His presence with us. You are in our daily thoughts and prayers!

In Christ's Love,

Sr. Maria Stella, CJD, Sr. Catherine Marie, CJD, and Erica (postulant)