

August 22, 2011

Dear Friends and Family,

How these three months in Russia have flown by! We will be back in Kansas City, Missouri, on Friday, August 26. Here are a few highlights since our first update: In July, a mission team of 9 men and seven women university students from FOCUS (Fellowship of Catholic University Students) came to Vladivostok for two weeks. During the first week, half of the group volunteered at the orphanage and hospice, and the other half joined us to lead a four-day children's camp in Lesozavodsk, a village seven hours north of Vladivostok.

The children at the camp ranged in age from five to fifteen. We started each day with children's church songs accompanied with the harp. The children loved to sing and requested to sing more each day. After music, the boys and girls separated. The girls did crafts including origami, tissue paper flowers, and friendship bracelets, gave talks about God's love, honesty, respect, and modesty, played by the river, and even gave a lesson on how to brush teeth. Most of the children present had never been to church and came from families broken by alcoholism and/or divorce. It was neat to see the children blossom in the few days we had with them. One twelve-year-old girl, Alena, was shy and rarely smiled on the first day. By the last day, she showed her beautiful smile frequently and told us that it was the first time she had heard that God loves her.

The day after the camp in Lesozavodsk, we traveled by bus with the FOCUS missionaries to the Far-Eastern Young Adult Camp in Nakhodka, four hours east of Vladivostok. It was such a blessed week to be with Catholic young adults (ages 16-30) from the entire Diocese of Irkutsk. Some people had traveled four days by train in order to come to the conference—they were from Yakutsk, the coldest continually inhabited place on earth. There were a total of 43 people at the conference including priests from Blagoveshchensk, Arsenev, Nakhodka, Yakutsk, and Vladivostok; several sisters including Sr. Roberta of the Sisters of the Charity of St. Ann and the three of us; and many young Russians and Americans! The theme was "How to Live as Christians in the 21st Century," and each day included excellent talks on themes such as marriage, prayer, life-issues, and church history. We sang the liturgy of the hours together, celebrated daily Mass, and the very last night we had all night adoration. Each afternoon the participants had three options—choir, theater or a journalism group. There was also time at the ocean. Mid-week we enjoyed a bonfire with American s'mores provided by the FOCUS team—a first for all the Russians present. Several of the participants mentioned to us that they feel called to religious life or the priesthood—please pray for Russia!

It has been wonderful to share the gift of music with the elderly this summer here in Vladivostok. We played and sang two informal concerts at the hospice, and also at the cafeteria near the train station where the elderly who qualify receive two free meals a week. You rarely ever hear a radio playing at the hospice, and only one patient has a television. Most of the day, the residents are confined to their beds, and can only go outside if someone is available to lift them into a wheelchair.

At our first concert at the hospice in July, we went from room to room singing Russian folk songs, and hymns from our Catholic hymnal. We also played pieces for harp and flute. The thing the patients loved best was to sing the Russian folk songs with us—they said “You know our songs—the songs of our youth!” Our two American volunteers sang with us—Hannah and Katherine, and Brother Innocentius of the Canons Regular of Jesus the Lord, our brother community. At the second concert, a ten year old parishioner, Angelina, joined us on the “dombra,” a Russian folk instrument similar to a mandolin. Brother Arnulfo of the Canons Regular of Jesus the Lord sang with us.

We continue to marvel at the progress of the orphans this summer. After being held and played with one-on-one several times a week, they responded immediately to being picked up and smiled much more readily. We are going to greatly miss being with those little ones—on our last day, we even got to feed a little baby who was just born on July 31.

Monday, August 15, the Feast of the Assumption of Mary, was made extra special this year as Sister Catherine Marie, CJD, renewed her vows for one year, and Brother Arnulfo, CJD, made his first vows! It was so moving that these vows were able to take place here in the beautiful Most Holy Mother of God Church. You were with us in our hearts. Thank you for all your prayers for us.

In the hearts of Jesus and Mary,

Sr. Maria Stella, CJD, Sr. Catherine Marie, CJD, and Erica, Sisters in Jesus the Lord