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July 17, 2013

Dear Friends and Family,

Greetings once again from Vladivostok, Russia! Sr. Catherine Marie and I have been back in Russia since June 7, but have only been in Vladivostok for a few weeks. Our bishop, who resides in Irkutsk, a four hour flight west of here, invited all the priests and sisters of the diocese for a four day conference. It was a great blessing for us to meet priests and sisters for the first time who have been serving for many years in remote towns and cities throughout the Russian Far East (an area the size of the US and Canada combined!). About 60 of us were able to come to Irkutsk for the gathering. After the conference, Sister and I were able to see Lake Baikal, the deepest freshwater lake in the world, and then visited several orders of sisters in Irkutsk and two nearby towns—Usole-Sibirsk, and Angarsk. Sisters run after-school centers for children in each of those towns, and there is also a cloistered Carmelite convent in Usole-Sibirsk. We ended up making our annual retreat there before continuing on to Vladivostok.

It is so good to be back in Vladivostok. Our brother community now has six novices, and in addition to language study, they are also going to the orphanage and home for the elderly poor. One brother was able to visit the elderly every day for the last three months, and it has helped the residents tremendously. Now, when we come, they are more alert and are even interested in praying with us sometimes! Baba Maria, who is in a lot of pain, shared with me that even though she has had a very difficult life (her father died in WWII, orphaned soon after that, married an alcoholic), she always remembers a time when God saved her life. She was 14 years old, an orphan, and received something like food stamps. This time, she was still 8 rubles short in order to buy bread. She was starving, and she went to the bakery to see if she could get bread anyway. She was turned away, and started sobbing as she walked, not knowing how she could survive. Through her tears, she saw a 5 ruble coin, and 3 one ruble coins next to it on the ground. The street was deserted. She picked them up, took them home and cleaned them, and then returned to the bakery for her bread. Her eyes still filled with tears as she told me the story. She is praying that God will take her life and spare her grandson, who was recently injured in the army.

It is great to be back with the little children and babies at the orphanage, too! Now we are preparing for a five day summer camp with disadvantaged children in Lesozavodsk (July 21-25) and then the annual Far Eastern Catholic Young Adult conference (July 28-August 4). Our convent, Dom Marii (House of Mary) on Russian Island is also progressing—the plumbing is almost fixed and the heat pipes, too. We're so excited about the Friends of the Missions team that's coming to work on our future retreat center, student center, and prolife center this September. We're attaching the brochure for that project to this email.

We are very aware that your prayers are with us. Please keep them coming.

In Christ's Love,

Sr. Maria Stella and Sr. Catherine Marie

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