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CHINA: When will Beijing's Orthodox have church?

By Felix Corley, Forum 18 (https://www.forum18.org)

After today's funeral of Beijing's last Orthodox priest, it is still unknown when the Chinese Autonomous Orthodox Church will have a church in the capital. Visiting Russian Orthodox priest Fr Dionisy Pozdnyayev told Forum 18 News Service that Orthodox believers "have no priest now, no church and nowhere to pray", although he said the authorities were positive about the idea of Chinese Orthodox studying for the priesthood in Russia. The Russian Orthodox Church has being trying to help the Chinese Autonomous Orthodox Church, which the Cultural Revolution decimated, without success asking to send priests to surviving Chinese parishes, Forum 18 has been told. Several parishes still survive in Inner Mongolia and in Xinjiang Province in north west China. The only surviving Chinese local clergy are in the southern city of Shanghai, where St Nicholas' church has been turned into a French restaurant. Elsewhere, Chinese Orthodox churches are also being used for other purposes, in at least one case as a night club.

In the wake of the funeral today (18 December 2003) of the last surviving Orthodox priest in Beijing, it remains unclear when the Orthodox community in the Chinese capital will once again be able to worship freely in its own church. "There are up to 250 Orthodox believers in Beijing," visiting Russian Orthodox priest Fr Dionisy Pozdnyayev told Forum 18 News Service from the city on 18 December, "but the situation for them is so difficult. You cannot even call them an organised community – they have no priest now, no church and nowhere to pray." But he expressed some optimism over the possibility for Chinese Orthodox men to study for the priesthood in Russian theological institutions. "The authorities were positive about this idea."

Asked whether he was optimistic that Beijing's Orthodox will soon be able to have their own church once more after nearly four decades, Fr Pozdnyayev responded: "The situation is very complicated. It is difficult to put any time scale on when they will be able to have their own church."

In the absence of an Orthodox church in Beijing, Fr Pozdnyayev had to conduct the funeral of Fr Aleksandr Du Lifu, who died on 16 December at the age of 80, in the Catholic cathedral, with the permission of the Patriotic Catholic bishop of Beijing, Michael Fu Tieshan.

The Russian Orthodox Church has been trying over the past few years to help the Chinese Autonomous Orthodox Church to revive its activity, which was decimated during the Cultural Revolution. It has requested permission to be allowed to send priests to the surviving parishes, so far in vain. Fr Pozdnyayev told Forum 18 that during his current visit he has met officials of the government's Religious Affairs Bureau to discuss the situation of the Church.

While being prepared to discuss training in Russian theological institutions, officials appeared unwilling to discuss sending priests from Russia. "This issue will be looked at once candidates to study in Russia have been chosen," Fr Pozdnyayev told Forum 18.

The Chinese Orthodox Church, founded on the work of a Russian Orthodox mission, was granted autonomy by the Moscow Patriarchate in 1957. However, the Cultural Revolution of 1966-76 soon brought its activities to a halt. Orthodox churches – like places of worship of all other faiths – were systematically destroyed across China. Only after the Cultural Revolution was over did certain religious communities have the opportunity to reopen places of worship, though under tight government control.

Orthodox in a handful of isolated places were able to reopen surviving churches, although by then many of the Orthodox population, especially those of Russian origin, had left China or had died.

The Moscow Patriarchate notes that Beijing's Orthodox community has been trying since the 1980s to have the opportunity to meet openly for worship again. "Repeated appeals by Fr Aleksandr Du and his Beijing flock to the city authorities with the request to register the community and for permission to conduct public services did not find agreement," it reported on 17 December. "Residents of the Chinese capital have not had the possibility to pray in an Orthodox church since 1966."

While Fr Pozdnyayev estimates that there are up to 250 local Orthodox believers in Beijing, many of them of Russian descent, he said there is a far greater number of resident foreign citizens who are also Orthodox. Although Fr Pozdnyayev and other visiting Russian clerics have been able to hold services inside the Russian embassy on major church feasts since the late 1990s, these

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services are not open to Chinese citizens. "Embassy services are for foreign citizens only," Fr Pozdnyayev told Forum 18. An exception appears to have been made for the late Fr Aleksandr, who was able to attend when his health permitted.

Almost all of China's local Orthodox clergy who were ordained before the Communists came to power or in the early communist years have now died off. The parish of the Protecting Veil of the Mother of God in Harbin in China's north-eastern Heilongjiang Province, the home of many Russian exiles until the 1950s, was the last in China to have its own priest, but with the death in September 2000 of Father Gregory Zhu Shipu has had no priest and no regular services.

Several parishes still struggle to survive in Labdarin (Inner Mongolia) and in Urumqi (Urümqi), Chuguchak and Ghulja [Yining in Chinese]

(Xinjiang Province of north west China), but with no priests cannot hold regular services. In Xinjiang the city of Urumqi's Orthodox church was reopened in 1985, and Orthodox in Yining have been trying in vain to rebuild their destroyed church since the mid-1980s. Local Orthodox have told Forum 18 in Yining that they have given up hope of ever being able to rebuild the church after repeated obstruction from the authorities.

Fr Pozdnyayev told Forum 18 that the only surviving local clergy – a priest and a deacon - are in the southern city of Shanghai. However, the Moscow Patriarchate reports that the city's St Nicholas' church has been turned into a French restaurant. It complains that other Orthodox churches in China are also being used for other purposes, at least one as a night club.

A printer-friendly map of China is available from

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

If you need to contact F18News, please email us at:
f18news @ editor.forum18.org

Forum 18
Postboks 6603
Rodeløkka
N-0502 Oslo
NORWAY

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