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Alexey's dream

By reading between the lines of an atheistic periodical in Soviet Russia when he was a teen, he made acquaintance with the Christian faith. Now he's a 33-year-old deacon slated to be ordained to the priesthood next June. Alexey Yandushev-Rumiantsev's dream is to help his country as a Catholic priest.

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Alexey was born into an Orthodox family in St. Petersburg when it was still called Leningrad. He received no

religious instruction at home, but learned to speak five languages and took degrees in engineering and later on in theology and philosophy. He also wants to learn Portuguese, the language spoken in Fatima. After his ordination, he plans to take his parish to visit that Marian shrine, so closely linked to Russia's recent history.

How did you discover your calling to be a Christian and then to be a priest?

That's a long story. My Orthodox parents are not very observant. When I was born, in 1973, my father had just found work in a chain of supermarkets and was afraid that if I were baptized--given the situation of my country in those years--it would endanger the whole family. Whoever requested baptism had to apply for a passport; that information was then passed on to political authorities and

the secret police. After weighing the matter, my parents preferred not to have me baptized.

So your family was not practicing their faith?

Right; my parents believed in God, but they didn't do anything in particular for my religious formation. They kept up some traditions, went to church a few times a year, and there were religious icons in the house, but nothing beyond that.

Then how did you come to be interested in religion?

On my own. I was 12 when I started to think about faith. I believed there was "Someone"--not something--to whom I could go. One day I came across a periodical, "Science and Religion," published by the Atheistic Society of the Soviet Union. Nobody read a publication like that, but it

was a topic I was very interested in. It seemed to me the only way I could learn something more about religion. I subscribed to it and for five years had to read "between the lines" what was in that periodical.

What was that atheistic propaganda like?

Basically, all the communications media were engaged in a continuous attack on religion. The point was to make people believe that the churches were trying to perpetuate an ancient mythology with no scientific foundation in order to control people's minds and take their money.

What does it mean, reading that atheistic publication "between the lines"?

It was religion that interested me, not atheism. The articles attacking religion quoted from Scripture and

spoke of the Church and of Jesus Christ. Since I had no access to other sources, I had to make do with that. I started by thinking that if bad things are said about something or someone, it may be because that thing or person isn't really so bad. That could be the case with Opus Dei, too. Once I saw a book that strongly criticized the Knights of Malta, as well. The author called Opus Dei a dangerous organization, and yet he described its foundation and even gave the address where its "leader" lived. So I decided to write for more information, but this was after I had become a Catholic.

Like a typical adolescent, you had a lot of critical spirit?

Looking back, I see that it was Our Lord who was leading me along that path. I knew that I couldn't speak about these matters, and so I didn't bring them up with anyone; but my

interest kept growing. When I got to be 15, I told my father I wanted to be baptized into the Orthodox Church. He didn't oppose it, and even contacted a friend of his, an Orthodox priest who worked as a mechanic in Leningrad. That way, I could be baptized secretly.

How did you enter the Catholic Church?

Precisely because such bad things were said about it, I wanted to see for myself. In the telephone directory I found the address of the Catholic community of St. Petersburg, but the Church was always closed. After several attempts, I managed to meet that community, but the priest was suspicious of me. He realized that I might have been a young KGB spy. There were plenty of spies in those years. But when he saw me come often to the church, he made an appointment with me: After Mass

one day, the agreement was that I would follow him for several blocks to a place remote from the parish where we could easily talk. It was 1989, a period of political uncertainty. And so, after a period of formation I asked to enter into full communion with the Catholic Church.

But why the Catholic Church?

People were always speaking to me about "churches," in the plural. But I was asking which was the true one. Searching the Gospel, I saw that Jesus had founded only one Church, and that he prayed for its unity. I also saw that Christ Himself had placed St. Peter at the head of that one Church. If the Pope is Peter's successor, the rest follows.

What happened next?

When I finished school, I enrolled in the Leningrad University. I

completed a degree in engineering and after that began studying the history of the Church and philosophy in the Catholic College of St. Thomas Aquinas. I was happy, at last, to be immersed in continuing formation. That is when I made contact with Opus Dei, astonished at the hostile campaign aimed at that institution.

What were your first impressions?

Very good ones. I met people who didn't "make propaganda," people for whom the meaning of the Christian life was both simple and profound. In Russia we have a real need to know the Gospel of work, to know God in ordinary life by means of things well done. I'm sure that the Work will be able to do my people a lot of good. The idea of ongoing Christian formation is very attractive. We need it.

How did you decide to enter the seminary?

Although I hadn't spoken with anyone, it was an idea I had been turning over in my mind for some time. I thought that I might lack the capacity or the conditions needed for such a strong commitment. I had already completed my studies and was working. I had even spent a year abroad--studying phenomenology in Liechtenstein [at the International Academy of Philosophy]. But one day out of the blue a priest asked me, "Do you want to be a priest?" My immediate response was No, but I was wide awake that whole night. I went back to speak with that priest, and in all sincerity told him I had been thinking of it but didn't feel worthy or strong enough to do it. He explained to me that God provides the strength, so at the end of that year (2000), I entered the seminary. Next year, God willing, I'll be a priest.

What is the religious situation in Russia today?

After the fall of communism in 1989, we began to experience a true spiritual springtime. Today that phenomenon has reached its true dimensions; that is, once the emotions of the first moments passed, only those who were truly committed remained. All in all, it must be recognized that there are many who show real interest in "the things of God."

How do the Orthodox and Catholics get along?

A lot depends on people and places. In St. Petersburg, for example, there is a long tradition of toleration and willingness to dialogue. Perhaps such a thing does not exist in other cities. Last year, communications improved, and this gives us great hope.

Is there prejudice against Catholics?

More than anything, there are myths, stereotypes. For example, "The Da Vinci Code" left no doubts concerning the Gospel, but it did increase suspicions about the Catholic Church. Nevertheless, with conversation and patience, much of the misunderstanding is disappearing.

What is your dream now?

To serve Russia as a Catholic priest.

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