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Painting for the poor in St. Petersburg

Each year a group of Irish students organizes a work camp to help needy people in St. Petersburg by refurbishing their dwellings. The work camp has also included students from Finland, the U.S., Lithuania, and Latvia. Joe Flanagan relates his memories of the camp.

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"You're going where for two weeks?"

"Russia."

"And you're going with a group of 12 students to decorate apartments for needy Russian families?"

"Exactly. And none of us speaks a word of Russian."

"You must be absolutely crazy!"

This was the reaction many of us got when we told our friends earlier this year that we were planning a two-week trip to St. Petersburg in July to take part in a service project with the Dom Miloserdia Centre, a charity agency of the Russian Orthodox Church in St. Petersburg. Along with another teacher friend of mine, the two of us linked up with an international effort organised by the European Training Centre of Helsinki in cooperation with an Opus Dei student centre in the Finnish capital.

In many ways what we set out to do was crazy and over-ambitious. But perhaps it was just this sense of

adventure and craziness which appealed to the dozen Irish 16-18 year olds taking part. The objective was to decorate 5 apartments in the centre of the city for poor Russian families identified by the charity agency in the city. One or two of us had painted walls and hung wallpaper before but after that the skills of the group were limited enough. John Cahalin, a 17 year old from Knocklyon in Dublin and student of Rockbrook Park School was to save the day for us on many occasions as he had been working part-time for a painter and decorator. However, what the rest of the lads lacked in technical skills, they made up for in enthusiasm and a readiness to get stuck in to the toughest of jobs and a passion to see the job through to the very end.

We set off from Dublin on 25 June and after two days in Helsinki made our way by train to St Petersburg. We

were all struck by the sheer scale of this city of 5 million people, most of whom live in high-rise apartments which show obvious signs of neglect and decay. We received a great welcome from our Russian hosts at the Orthodox charity centre on Vassilevsky Island. It was there we also met for the first time the group of Latvian, Lithuanian and American students who would be joining us in the workcamp, bringing the total group to about 24.

If you think what we set out to do was daft – travelling like Napoleon half way across Europe – to do some DIY in 5 apartments in a city of 5 million people, then you should have been with us on the first morning in the hardware store as we tried to buy all the paraphernalia of painting and decorating through our Russian translator Alexander, while we busied ourselves with calculators converting roubles to dollars, to Irish

punts and back to roubles again! But we did manage it, although it took twice as long as going to your local DIY store. Armed with scrapers, paintbrushes and mix-and-match Russian paint and with some trepidation we set off in groups for our first assignments.

As it worked out, the Irish party divided into two groups, headed up by John and me. Between us, we decorated three small apartments for very poor but immensely appreciative Russian families. A 16 year old Russian teenager, Dmitri, joined us in the decoration of his family's tiny apartment and showed himself to be a lad of some skill and practical ability. It was the same story in Nicholai's apartment, where John and his team were working. In failing health as a result of a heart condition which had left him on the flat of his back for 7 years, Nicolai and his wife and children were living

in a very run-down, high-rise flat. Here also, we had the good fortune to be helped out by a local St Petersburg student, Kolia, who was very keen to get involved and worked with great spirit alongside the stalwart Irishmen. John was quite daunted on day one by the scale of the decoration job to be done but within days, his team had totally transformed the flat and become life-long friends of Nicolai and all his family in the process.

In truth, the biggest changes we made in Russia were not to the walls and ceilings of former Soviet apartments, but rather we helped to bring hope to a group of Russian families who have suffered a great deal of hardship and who probably do not fully comprehend the Christian charity which was shown them by a group of wild Irishmen. These same Irish lads were conscious of the opportunity they had been

provided with of thinking about others in a totally altruistic way and of appreciating their own blessings more deeply. While the White Nights and fabulous architecture impressed everyone, a more lasting impression was made by the contribution which we felt had been made in bringing hope and support to some ordinary Russians. As Eoin, a 17 year old Dubliner, commented on the way home: "I'd go again even if it was only to see the look of gratitude and appreciation on Nicolai's face, as we finished the job in his flat."

At the reception which the Russian Orthodox charity centre organised for us, Vladislav, the head of the centre, commented that it was a healthy sign that our two churches, Roman Catholic and Orthodox, would be united in a common task of Christian charity despite all the centuries of division.

In addition to the daily work, we managed to organise musical concerts and play football in the jails of Kolpino and Tikhvin, but Ger's best selection was not sufficient to carry the honours in either institution.

So, all in all, the St. Petersburg work camp was a rather unique experience and this particular group of Irishmen are very glad they travelled. They will be talking about it for a long time to come and are already looking forward to going back next year.