

REPORT FROM MARIUPOL, UKRAINE

September 6, 2005

Dear Brethren,

I apologize once again for the lateness of this report. As it turns out, the past few weeks have been among the most difficult I have spent in my entire time overseas. As a result, there have been numerous demands on my time that would not have otherwise been the case.

It all started with my meeting with Alexandra which I mentioned in my previous report. There are some of you who have spent more time with her than I have and come away with a different impression. However, I have not been impressed with her at all since I started working here and this meeting certainly did nothing to change my opinion.

Although I repeatedly stressed the need for reconciliation, forgiveness, and repentance, she continued to insist that she had never done anything wrong and that the other brethren were “a bunch of kindergarteners” who maliciously attacked her “for no reason.” Besides failing to realize that she is still doing the very thing she accuses them of (being spiteful and name calling), the examples she gave to back up her assessments of their character revealed that she was being hypersensitive – taking offense at the slightest comment that came her way. This also says nothing of the pride she demonstrated in asserting that she was a spiritual giant compared to them and that they “basically know nothing about the Bible”...more on that in a moment.

As it turned out, the reason she requested the meeting had to do with her daughter and son-in-law who are now back in Mariupol after spending the last several years in Argentina. However, in order to return they all had to go into considerable debt and are now faced with having to pay it off. Thus it is necessary for her son-in-law to go back to work as a sailor (apparently the only profession that pays enough for them to eventually pay off the debt). This wouldn't be a problem except he also preaches for them (just their immediate family) and if he is away for several weeks at a time that would leave them on their own.

I of course, gladly offered to preach for them on the Sundays he was away (in hopes that I could teach them enough so that reconciliation would eventually be possible). This was not exactly what they were hoping for. They thought that I could appeal to the brethren in the states so that he could be supported as a preacher so that he wouldn't have to get another job. I, of course, had to explain that one of the reasons the brethren are supporting me to be here is to try to heal the division in the church that had already occurred. I seriously doubt they would want to subsidize it by supporting a someone to preach for a second group that shouldn't have broken away in the first place.

This request was also rather comical given that in just a few minutes of conversation, this man, who had reportedly been a Christian for several years, knew next to nothing about the scriptures. His idea of quoting from the Bible seems to be making up trite, self evident, platitudes and then attributing them to an apostle:

Sasha: “As the apostle Paul said, 15 minutes of good teaching is worth two hours of talking nonsense.”

Matt: “Interesting, I don't remember Paul saying that.”

Sasha: “It's in Second Corinthians.”

Matt: “Well it's been a little while since I read Second Corinthians, but I don't remember that being in there.”

Sasha: “Chapter 13”

Matt: “I see.”

I decided not to embarrass him by pulling out the Bible I had in my bag and asking him to find it. With this scholar preaching for her, I have little doubt as who knows more about the scriptures between Alexandra and the group I've been teaching intensively for the past year.

However, at the end of the meeting, Alexandra dropped a bomb that I've been trying to deal with ever since: “Well did you know that on the days you aren't there they are practicing black magic in that apartment?” I doubted this very seriously, but assured her that I would investigate and put a stop to it if it was going on. With that, the meeting ended and I have not heard from her since.

The next day being Sunday, I went to worship determined to find out what exactly was going on that would cause Alexandra to make such a charge. As soon as worship was over I had everyone sit back down so that I could question them. Predictably, what was actually going on was neither quite as bad or as frequent Alexandra made it out to be – but it wasn't too good either.

A woman claiming to be a parapsychic healer met Monsour (who has cerebral palsy and frequent seizures) in the street and “healed” him by causing him to be calmer after he has a seizure. His mother, Elnora, and Galina, who witnessed this “healing” talked with this woman further and discovered that she was also a licensed physician. Thus, since she was licensed as a medical doctor, wasn't a fortune-teller as such, and was able to advise them on some of their own medical problems and prescribe medicine that helped them, Galina offered the use of her room for her to treat people. Because people were coming from all over the city to be “treated,” word got around in the community that this was a place where black magic was practiced.

I was able to put a stop to this and explain why this shouldn't be going on. I am, however, convinced that what they did, they did in ignorance with good intentions. Thus, although it wasn't quite as black as Alexandra made it out to be, the reputation of the place has been so tainted that we are going to have to find another meeting place. This has proven difficult and we are still looking. Between looking for another place and my regular teaching duties I was already a little pressed for time. Then... my pipes started leaking.

The past month has made me greatly regret that I know very little about plumbing because finding a plumber to do a small job during the summer is next to IMPOSSIBLE. The initial leak started August 9. It was finally fixed Sunday afternoon. I did manage a temporary fix that at least allowed me to use the water. However, the leak I fixed created another one. Thus, my bathroom water fixtures had to sit in the bathtub so that they wouldn't flood the place. The only other option was to turn the water off altogether. Thankfully, I now know a reliable person who can take care of this sort of thing in the future. I'm

also thankful that I'm able to take showers at home again (considering there are a lot of people who don't even have homes right now, I am even more grateful and consider the ordeal much less of an inconvenience than I did previously).

Unfortunately, in Ukraine, laziness and incompetence does not stop with plumbers. You may remember that Teresa was hospitalized late last year and required a rather serious operation. She has since recovered and has been living normally. However, recently she began to complain of terrible pains in her side. When a doctor examined her he discovered that a sponge and some tubing from her previous operation had been left inside her! She, of course, called and demanded an explanation from the doctor who operated. He replied, "Oh, I didn't think you were going to live long enough to notice anyway!!" Doctors in America get sued for this sort of thing. Here, there are no real penalties for what seems to be a regular occurrence. Valentin told me recently that the best way to stay alive around here is just not to get sick – because if you go to the doctor, he's going to find a way kill you.

Thus, Teresa had to be operated on a second time in order to remove the materials that should never have been left in there in the first place. Even worse, the whole experience apparently drove her back to her old habit of drinking which has caused the brethren here to decide to cut off further benevolent help to her (we paid for the surgery) until she gets the problem under control.

Finally, Valentin seems to have suffered some kind of stroke that left him temporarily unable to get out of bed. He seems to have recovered somewhat now and has returned to work although he appears weak. I am hopeful he will make a full recovery but he could certainly use prayers at this time.

Lest I get the reputation of being nothing but the bearer of bad news, I have several exciting things to report. First, Vera (my interpreter and Russian teacher) has finally consented to study the Bible with me. (Those of you who have her e-mail address, please don't contact her yet – she does not respond well at ALL to feeling pressured. I'll let you know as soon as I have more information). This is particularly gratifying for me as it represents over a year of work – just to get her to this point. Please pray for her.

Second, Lee Fenner, whom I visited in Lithuania earlier this year is hoping to return the favor and visit me in October. We are hoping to hold public lectures when he comes down and expect to have more visitors than in our previous effort last summer because we should be allowed to advertise in the newspaper this time. If you would like to help with this effort, please let me know and I will provide you with specifics.

Third, Roman Georgiev, who used to preach for the extremely small group in Moscow, has moved to a small village near Odessa (in southwestern Ukraine) in hopes of starting a congregation there. I hope to either visit him or have him visit me as soon as possible so that I might get to know him and help him in any way I can.

Fourth, Slava Moskvina, who is a member of the church in Nizhniy Novgorod, Russia has decided that he is going to preach the gospel full time. As a result, he will soon be traveling to Almaty, Kazakhstan in order to spend about 7 months studying with Charles Gant and Michael Connolly in order to prepare himself for this work. He is a very good man with a lot of zeal for the Lord and an amazing personal story – for those of you who don't know, he was a career criminal before Charles converted him. I am convinced that he will do very well working in the Lord's vineyard. Please pray for him as he prepares himself.

Finally, my brother in law, Lee Tosti is planning a month-long visit to Yaroslavl, Russia in December... and he's taking my sister and his parents with him. This is especially important because the majority of the congregation there is comprised of women (especially young women) who have had very little contact with other mature Christian women. This trip will expose them to a mature Christian their own age (Marcie) and one who is older and more experienced (Selma). This aspect of the trip alone is very exciting. In addition, Lee intends to conduct public lectures as well as private classes there in an effort to reach out to the community and strengthen the saints who have been struggling along on their own for the past several years. Finally, another reason for this trip is to determine whether the two of them (Lee and Marcie) can live in Russia. Keep in mind they are only recently married - May of this year. Few husbands I know would even think about taking their new wife to a place like Russia in December. Brave isn't the word for it.

However, knowing my sister as I do, I am confident that she will do quite well and the answer to the question will be an unqualified yes. In any case, in order to make this trip, they need to raise around \$6000 (possibly more if gas prices continue to rise). To all those of you who asked me what you could do to help... this is something you can do. You may contact him at xntoc@usa.net and he will send any relevant information you need to make a decision.

As always, there many more things for me to be excited about and grateful for than there are disappointments and discouragements. There is no promise that being a servant of the Most High will always be easy, and enjoyable. But there is the promise of His help and consolation when it is not – and that is a comforting thought.

In Him,

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