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Young Orthodox Siberian in Celtic costume.

CELTOMANIA IN EASTERN SIBERIA

This Fall, *Road to Emmaus* spoke with Fr. Nicanor Lupeshev, a young priest-monk visiting Moscow from the eastern Siberian city of Khabarovsk, and Geraldine Fagan, a British journalist based in Moscow who first met Fr. Nicanor while on assignment in Khabarovsk and was struck by his parish's unusual devotion to early saints of the British Isles. Discussing C.S. Lewis, J.R.R. Tolkien and Orthodoxy, *Road to Emmaus'* editor and Fr. Nicanor found much common ground – including that they would once have been part of the same huge Siberian-Alaskan diocese.

RTE: Fr. Nicanor, how did you first become interested in British and Irish saints?

FR. NICANOR: I first learned about western saints while reading articles by St. John Maximovitch and Fr. Seraphim Rose, who both mentioned the closeness between Russian and Celtic saints, and the similar kinds of sanctity in both cultures. It was very interesting to read about St. Patrick, St. Brendan, St. Columba, St. Brigid and St. Romanus and St. Lupicinus. In his article, “In Step with Sts. Patrick and Gregory of Tours,” Fr. Seraphim Rose writes about the relevance of their experience for us Christians of today. I began reading about and praying to the Celtic saints, and then, in seminary, a friend gave me Irish music to listen to.

RTE: You are a musician yourself?

FR. NICANOR: Yes, I play the bagpipes, and this Irish music made me feel even closer to the western Orthodox tradition. When I returned to Khabarovsk after attending the Holy Trinity-St. Sergius Theological Academy, I found that some of my old friends had become Celtic enthusiasts. The Russian word is *Celtomania*. But many of them did not know that the people whom we call “Celts” had become Orthodox Christian. They thought that the Celts were all druids. I felt that a way to begin would be to talk about Celtic saints, so we began serving molebens to St. Patrick, St. Brendan, and St. Columba. My friends invited their friends to pray, or just to attend.



Fr. Nicanor Lepeshev

We would sit and drink tea and talk about Irish and British saints, about Christianity, about Orthodoxy, and little by little, most of them became Christian.

RTE: What is it about the early history and culture of the British Isles that makes it so attractive to Russians?

FR. NICANOR: It's the unity between their very deep spiritual experience and active missionary outreach. For Russians, this is very close to our own experience.

We have similar saints: St. Herman of Alaska, St. Stephen of Perm, St. Innocent of Moscow and Alaska.

Another attraction is that Celtic missionary saints never destroyed the culture of the people they preached to. Instead they transfigured it. For me, this leads to the question, "Can we transfigure our modern culture? Is it only anti-Christian or can we find something in it that we can use to help draw people – modern music, art, literature, films..." I think that St. Patrick, St. Columba, and St. Innocent of Moscow all give us very good examples of using aspects of culture to preach about Christ.

RTE: Speaking of St. Innocent, I've just read an article on his visit to the Catholic Franciscan missions in California, in particular his friendship with one of the Spanish priests. St. Innocent liked many of the things the Catholics missionaries were doing, such as establishing Christian villages so that converts would have the support of other native Christians. It's popular now in the American media to brow-beat these Spanish missionaries, but their approach was very close to that of the Russian St. Makary of Altai who, in the same period, was founding native Christian villages in Siberia.

FR. NICANOR: Yes, and today we have a very similar situation because, in spite of globalization, our society consists of many different groups, like tribes, with their very own specific subcultures. Today, especially in the youth sphere in Russia, we find *Celtomaniacs*, or rockers, or bikers ... very different groups, and each group thinks, "Our lifestyle is the best, no group is as good as we are." Perhaps this sounds a bit crazy, but I think that now is the time to go and live *inside* those groups, like St. Patrick or St. Innocent lived with pagan tribes.

RTE: One instance of western Orthodox outreach in a similar spirit was in the early 1990's in California when some young Orthodox monastics, both

monks and nuns, published a "zine" called *Death to the World*. A number of them had come from punk and deconstructionist subcultures themselves and were comfortable spending time with young people in these settings. They had an enormous response.

FR. NICANOR: I know of a few priests who do similar things in Moscow, for example, Fr. Sergi Rybko, who goes to rock clubs and concerts to speak about the foundations of rock music as a protest against the world, which is what Christianity is all about. He became a Christian and a monk after living for years in a hippie community.

There is also an Orthodox café in Moscow, but they are in very bad financial straits. Although we've had the same idea ourselves, it would be difficult to afford the rent on such premises, but we do meet freely in the places we can use. After every event, we sit around and have tea and conversation. We also gather together at our church for talks and films.

RTE: What do you think of Christian heavy metal and acid rock?

FR. NICANOR: I think that rock music in Russia and the West is very different. Here the music is compatible with the Christian texts. We have bands such as Alisa, DDT, Kalinov Most, many groups who write and perform very Christian songs. In Khabarovsk, too, we have Orthodox rock musicians. They never say, "We do Orthodox rock music," but in their lyrics and melodies you can hear it. It's not like a Protestant group that plays during services.

GERALDINE: That's interesting. I've just visited Belarus, where some of the most popular rock groups are Christian. It's extraordinary, because although it is very difficult to preach publicly – the government is very strict – there is a band called "Salvation" at the top of the charts whose music is overtly Christian. Another popular band there, "New Jerusalem," consciously set out as a mission project when they formed nine years ago.

FR. NICANOR: We never use rock music in church, but some of these musicians do make very Christian music. It's not so necessary to sing about Christ and salvation and virtue. They sing about nature, about the sky and mountains, things that reflect a Christian world-view.

RTE: How about the youth subcultures in your own city of Khabarovsk? How do you interact with them?

FR. NICANOR: There are many different youth groups in Khabarovsk – different tribes, we could say, and a few of them I know from the inside because I came from that subculture. Some are rockers, others are Celtomaniacs, and a very large and divergent group are historical or fantasy role-players. So a few of my old friends and myself, who were part of these groups – it’s not very honest to say “were” because I think that somewhere deep inside we still are – decided to create a little project, a creative society called *Imram*. *Imram* is a Celtic word meaning “traveling in search of something unusual, something fantastic.” For example, the travels of St. Brendan were *imram*.

We decided that our society would have two patron saints – one being St. Innocent of Moscow and Alaska and the other St. Brendan. We began putting on programs, although they were not programs in the usual sense,



Fr. Nicanor blessing historical re-inactment.

because we didn’t want to divide the gatherings into performers and audience. We began having molebens for different saints of the East and West, special missionary molebens, which developed into monthly events where we invite different interesting people – musicians, poets, artists, photographers, dancers – such as those who do Irish and Scottish dancing. We also produce a magazine about different saints, historical themes, the phenomena of modern culture and youth culture.

We began by focusing on the unity between Celtic and Russian culture, but over the years, we’ve found many other interesting themes; for example, about Japanese culture and Japanese Christianity, about Christian military culture in different areas, in Japan, Russia, northern Europe, the spirituality of Christian armies. This is not only for those who will become soldiers (we have obligatory military service for young men in Russia) but because all Christians are warriors of Christ. We also began to organize Orthodox role-playing for children and their parents, for youth, for older people.

RTE: What do you role-play?

FR. NICANOR: Our first role-play was based on a Russian epic, *Grad Kitezha*, the mythical Russian city at the bottom of Lake Svetloyar, and our last game was taken from *The Chronicles of Narnia*.

RTE: I know that in Russia and Greece, Orthodox usually consider it unacceptable for an actor to portray the Lord or one of the saints. Is this true for you as well?

FR. NICANOR: Yes, we don’t use any images of saints in our role-playing, and when we did the *Chronicles of Narnia*, we didn’t cast the role of Aslan.

RTE: Because Aslan could be seen as an allegory of Christ?

FR. NICANOR: Yes, but when we put on little Sunday school plays with young children, sometimes they do portray saints.

RTE: We do that also in the West. Part of our European inheritance, of course, are our medieval religious mystery plays and the Passion plays, which were a popular genre for centuries. We are so used to movies about Biblical figures, and even the Lord Himself, that we have to stop and think about why this isn’t acceptable in the Christian East. Do many people attend your events?



FR. NICANOR: Yes, for Khabarovsk, many. Each role-play takes a great deal of preparation and each one has 60 or 70 participants. We invite not only experienced, professional role-players; ours are open to anyone who wants to participate. Some of the participants are rather young, from 15 years old or so. Often younger children come with their parents, and sometimes we even have little babies in the historical re-enactments. There is no upper age limit – we have some older Russians who come as well. We try to make space for communication and conversation between the Orthodox and non-Orthodox. Sometimes the majority is Orthodox, other times it’s half and half, but this depends on the theme of the game or re-enactment. After each role-play we have people who have participated ask to be catechized and baptized.

RTE: What is the difference between an historical re-enactment and a fantasy role-play?

GERALDINE: In role-playing, the subject matter is entirely or mostly fantastical, so you can use your imagination and modern materials to make costumes. Swords and other weapons are made out of foam or rubber, so you can strike someone with them and it won't hurt. The point of historical re-enactment, on the other hand, is to re-create an historical period as accurately as possible using archaeology and manuscripts. Re-enactors use blunt weapons made of real iron in combat displays, and this means that they have to learn how to strike blows without using any force, in a controlled way that poses no danger to the person they are fighting.

FR. NICANOR: I know many people who began as fantasy role-players, and later moved on to historical re-enactment – historical role-playing with



intricate costumes and music from their own Russian Orthodox culture. There are several such historical re-enactment clubs in Khabarovsk. We founded our society *Imram* in conjunction with people from *Grad Kitezsh*. Sometimes it is hard to find the border between the two groups, and I'm not sure that it is necessary.

RTE: For those of us who have never experienced this, how would an historical re-enactment differ, say, from one of our costumed Renaissance Fairs in the West? How would someone prepare for this? Is it performed like a play?

GERALDINE: Serious historical re-enactment took off around the 1970s, as a form of experimental archaeology. It is now incredibly popular all over the world – including in the former Soviet Union – as it is an absorbing hobby, open to anyone and normally not particularly expensive. The most popular periods to re-enact are probably Viking/Anglo-Saxon, the English Civil War and the Napoleonic Wars. The American Civil War also has a strong following, even outside America. A typical event normally involves an encampment where re-enactors display the costumes and equipment that they have made, often over many years, as well as skills authentic to the period, such as music, cooking, embroidery, calligraphy. They usually also re-enact

a particular battle, and sometimes smaller scenes illustrating a particular aspect of the culture of the time. The annual re-enactments of major battles like Hastings, Waterloo, and Borodino here in Russia attract thousands of participants.

RTE: Also, the interest seems to be very cross-cultural. I've heard of at least one group in Russia dedicated to replicating the lifestyles of North American Indian tribes. Geraldine, do you find that historical re-enactments differ between Russia and Great Britain?

GERALDINE: In Britain the emphasis tends to be on combat and, particularly with the Viking/Anglo-Saxon period, the overall visual effect for spectators. Perhaps because they are closer to Scandinavian re-enactors – who are more involved in skilled crafts and living the complete Viking way of life – Russians tend to have more than a token interest in the religious beliefs of the so-called Dark Ages. So while few British re-enactors of that period might develop a really serious interest in Christianity or paganism, this is more likely in Russia. And role-players – perhaps

also in Britain – are much more likely to be attracted to some form of paganism. In Russia, the so-called *Tolkienists*, for example, tend to be very ignorant of Tolkien's Christian world-view. I once watched hundreds of young people gather for one of their role-play meetings in Gorky Park, here in Moscow, and asked a group of them about what they were doing. One girl told me that they were all fans of an English writer called J.R.R. Tolkien, and went on to explain how paganism originated in Ireland, from where it had come to Russia!



RTE: As C.S. Lewis once said, young agnostics [or pagans] can't be too careful. All of that nobility, high virtue and self-sacrifice in Tolkien often leads readers back to Christianity. Fr. Nicanor, you mentioned having role-played *The Chronicles of Narnia*. Have you ever done Tolkien?

FR. NICANOR: We did role-playing based on Tolkien many years ago, before most of us became Christian. It would be a very interesting project, but

today many role-playing groups do games based on Tolkien, so we usually pick other themes. But, of course, we might take it up again in the future.

RTE: What is it that draws Russian young people to Tolkien and Lewis? In the West, of course, it is part of our contemporary literature, but for you it's a little different.

FR. NICANOR: Our youth are cut off from their roots. Many of them aren't interested in their native Russian culture, and when they read Tolkien or Lewis they find something that inspires them, that gives them feelings of something pure and light. They often first enter this realm through these writers. We try to show them that the things they love in Tolkien or Lewis can also be found in their own culture, in the Orthodox Church. It is great to watch them come to it.

There are groups like this now in every major Russian city. On Sakhalin Island, near Japan, for example, there are priests and monks doing such work with young people. There is also a group in St. Petersburg doing things similar to our own. They have now begun a new project: "The Russian Kingdom," reconstructing the period of Ivan the Terrible in his early years, before his excesses. So, from Celtic culture they have moved into Russian projects.

This is a very common transition, and after years of working with this, we understand that we are not alone, that people all over the world have such an interest in Celtic culture. For us, this is because the Celtic culture seems very authentic, genuine, and alive. We have a sense of it as a clear, living tradition, uninterrupted from those early ages until our own days. We feel that it is the same spirit – the sixth century and our century, but in different forms.

After being involved for some time, many of the Russian Celtomaniacs begin asking themselves, "We love the Celtic culture, but if the Celts loved their own culture so much, how should we look at our own?" They start to read, to listen to music, they become interested in historical re-enactment, and slowly our own Russian culture comes alive for them. The Soviet period destroyed our tradition and it is for us to resurrect it.

RTE: It's interesting that you speak of the culture of the British Isles as a genuine, uninterrupted line. History, of course, is part of our common human heritage, but there's also a deeper sense of relationship that we feel with Christians of other times and places that seems to be the result of prayer and the working of the Holy Spirit.

In delving into their culture, Christian historians such as Venerable Bede, Adamnan, and Gildas give us vivid descriptions of events and people, while other sources—for example, some of the early Irish literature—are full of fantastic imagery, interweaving epic poetry and heroic mythological figures (perhaps based on real people, or not) with images of Christian saints' lives. Even some early monastic poetry had this otherworldly imagery, with prophetic salmon in the streams, and so on. Of course, in history we are looking for a chain of actual events, but if we only read their imaginative literature to unravel the threads of "pure fact," I've sometimes wondered if we aren't missing an element that early Christians keenly knew the value of, that even the fantastic elements in later western saints' lives may be part of an older current.

FR. NICANOR: Yes, in the later Russian Lives of Saints, such as those by Metropolitan Makary of Moscow or St. Dimitri of Rostov, the lives were reworked so that only the historically true elements were left in. But we also have many spiritual stories and songs that are not so factual. When I read or listen to such stories, I don't receive them like the *Lives of Saints*, but like another genre that also has a right to exist. Each one says something to our hearts, and although perhaps it doesn't have a very factual basis, or it has too fantastic a form, at the heart of each of these stories is a pearl. If we look through these historically inaccurate accounts, into their depths, we can find many precious jewels.

RTE: Yes. And perhaps it will be the Russians who will teach us to appreciate those elements again. Western conversions are often a mirror image of yours – just as you say that many people in Russia have converted to Orthodoxy through their love of English writers and Celtic culture, we have had many Orthodox converts through Russian literature, particularly Dostoyevsky. To us there also seems to be something pure and deep in the Russian culture that we don't see as clearly in our own society. Some people might think this romantic, but if there are beautiful, noble, and heroic elements in any society, why shouldn't we dwell on them? *