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YURI GAGARIN'S FLIGHT TO THE HEAVENS: RUSSIA'S BELIEVING COSMONAUTS

Russian Cosmonaut Yuri Gagarin, the world's first man in space, was often quoted as saying from orbit, "I don't see any God up here." The remark did not appear in verbatim transcripts of his flight, however, and even after the transcripts were made public, the discrepancy went unnoted in the West, where the quote was ascribed to him for decades. Gagarin died in 1968, 34 years old, in a flight training crash. In 2006, Colonel Valentin Vasilyevich Petrov, associate professor at the Gagarin Air Force Academy and a personal friend of Gagarin, gave a public interview to set the record straight and to recount his own clandestine role in encouraging belief under an atheist regime.¹

On April 12, 1961, 27-year-old Russian Yuri Gagarin was the world's first man in space and the first to orbit the earth. What is not so well-known is that even as the Soviet state waged its intensive struggle with religion and Khrushchev promised to show "the last priest in Russia"² on television, there were frequent visits to Orthodox churches and monasteries by the Russian space program's elite corps of cosmonauts. This unknown chapter in the

¹ Adapted and translated with permission from Foma: An Orthodox Christian Journal for Doubting Thomases, (in Russian), Issue #36, April 2006. Translated by Inna Belova.

² In the early 1960's Soviet Premier, Nikita Khrushchev (1958-1964), a strong supporter of Communist atheism, instigated a new phase of anti-religious indoctrination and promised to show "the last priest in Russia" on state television.

history of Russian space flight was recently related to the Russian news agency, Interfax-Religion by one of the era's principal eyewitnesses, Colonel Valentin Petrov, a long-time professor at the Gagarin Air Force Academy:

Question: Valentin Vasilyevich, you were close friends with Yuri Gagarin, the first cosmonaut in space, and some say that he believed in God. Was the Orthodox faith a hidden bond of friendship between you two young Soviet aviators during the difficult years of state atheism?



Yuri Gagarin.

As with almost everyone in Russia, Yuri Alekseyevich Gagarin was baptized and I know that he believed in God. I will never forget our trip to Holy Trinity–St. Sergius Lavra back in 1964, on the day he turned 30. A very lively man, he asked me quite openly if I had been to the Lavra, and when I said yes, he suggested that we go again together. We left that same evening after changing into civilian clothes. It was a silly thing to do, of course, because Gagarin was recog-

nizable no matter what he wore. As soon as we arrived at the Lavra, a crowd of people surrounded him, asking for his autograph. The church service had hardly ended when, hearing that he was there, everyone rushed to meet him. Yuri had such love for people that he couldn't refuse anyone.

Yuri Alekseyevich had a unique personality and his fame didn't make him the least bit conceited, nor were his children ever arrogant over the fact that their father was the first cosmonaut. When you spoke to him he saw no one else and listened only to you.

That day in the Lavra we, particularly Gagarin, were finally rescued by the abbot. He led us into his cell and, observing Russian tradition, filled glasses all around. After the third glass he said, "Who will believe me when I say that I had Gagarin in my cell?" And Gagarin replied, also with humor: "Well, this is for those who will not believe." Then, he took out a photo of himself and wrote "To Father Superior from Gagarin, with best wishes," and gave it to him. The abbot said: "This has to be toasted!" And it was!

Then the abbot suggested that we visit TsAG, the Church Archaeology Museum of the Moscow Theological Academy, whose abbreviation [in Russian] is the same as that of our Central Institute of Aerohydrodynamics. Thinking that he meant our training institute, we assured him: "Of course we have been there!" but when we understood what he meant, we went to visit the museum. While we were there, something happened that absolutely amazed me. We came to a small model of Christ the Savior Cathedral, and looking inside it, Yury said to me: "Valentin look, what a lovely thing has been destroyed!" He stood gazing at it for a long, long time...³

On our way back from the Lavra we were very much under the impression of what we had seen, as if we had been hypnotized. Quite unexpectedly, Yuri said, "Valentin, just think over the words, 'Who art in heaven.'" I stared at him wide-eyed: "Yuri, do you know that prayer?" He replied, "Do you think you are the only one who knows it? Well, you also know how to keep quiet." This was 1964, the year that Khrushchev publicly promised to show us "the last priest."



Colonel Valentin Petrov.

For me, the trip to the Lavra had repercussions. I was accused of "dragging Gagarin into religion." But Gagarin himself saved me saying: "What does this mean – a captain dragging a colonel into religion? He didn't take me there, we drove in my car." In the end, I received an official Party reprimand for "having led Gagarin into Orthodoxy," of which I am very proud.

Some time after that trip, when Yuri Gagarin spoke at the Party's Central Committee plenary meeting on the education of youth, he openly suggested restoring Christ the Savior Cathedral as a monument of military glory and

³ Moscow's monumental Christ the Saviour Cathedral was first consecrated in 1883 as a memorial to the 1812 defeat of Napoleon by the Russian army. It was blown up in 1931 on the orders of Josef Stalin, rebuilt after the fall of communism, and reconsecrated in 2000.

The building of Christ the Saviour Cathedral was initiated by Tsar Alexander I in 1812 after Napoleon's army left Moscow, in thanksgiving for Russia's deliverance and to commemorate the sacrifices of the Russian people. It was consecrated in 1883, and stood as the tallest Orthodox cathedral in the world until 1931, when it was dynamited by the order of Stalin's minister, Lazar Kaganovich, but Soviet officials were never able to build on the spot. The cathedral was rebuilt in its original style after the fall of the Soviet Union and consecrated in 2000.

an outstanding Orthodox work of art.⁴ He also suggested that the Triumphal Arch, which lay in ruins at the time, be restored as well. His motive was simple: we couldn't be patriotic without knowing our historical roots, and as Christ the Savior Cathedral was a monument of military glory, those who are to defend their Motherland should know about it.

Not a single person at the meeting expected such a statement from the first cosmonaut, and the reaction was astounding — the audience burst into applause. Those presiding were seriously frightened, of course, but they could do nothing against Yuri Gagarin.

And what about his supposed words: "I flew into space but have not seen God"? Those words were quite definitely Khrushchev's, not Gagarin's! They were first spoken at a Central Committee plenary meeting dealing with the problems of atheist propaganda, where Khrushchev set the task of raising the propaganda level for the Communist Party and Komsomol organizations. He stormed: "Why are you clutching at God? Take Gagarin — he flew into space but saw no God." Later, those words were presented differently: they were quoted as coming from Gagarin, not Khrushchev, for Gagarin was greatly loved by the people and such a phrase from him would have been of great importance. People didn't really believe Khrushchev but they would certainly believe Gagarin. But Gagarin never said that, he simply could not have uttered such words.

After that first trip to the Lavra, I went again with Cosmonaut Gherman Titov⁵ who, by the way, was also Orthodox. When we were in St. Petersburg together, the first thing he asked was that I take him to St. Alexander Nevsky Lavra, and afterwards, deeply impressed by our visit there, he asked me to go with him to Zagorsk.⁶ Titov and I also visited Patriarch Alexy II before his patriarchal enthronement, when His Holiness served as Metropolitan of St. Petersburg (then Leningrad).

4 "Who art in heaven," in Slavonic and Russian, is more properly translated as "Who art in the heavens..." meaning both the spiritual and physical heavens, thus the double significance for the astronauts.

5 Gherman (Herman) Titov: On August 6, 1961, 25 year-old Herman Titov blasted into space aboard a one-person Vostok 2 spacecraft, four months after Yuri Gagarin made the first manned flight into space and three months after Alan Shepard became the first American in space. While Gagarin completed a single orbit of the earth, Titov circled the planet for a day, making 17 orbits, and was the first to attempt such activities as exercising, sleeping, and eating. He also used a movie camera to document his journey. Russian space officials later said, "If Gagarin was the first to have flown in space, Titov was the first to have lived there." The U.S. logged its first day-long mission almost two years later, in 1963. After his retirement from the Russian space program, Titov worked for the Russian Ministry of Defense and was elected to the Russian Duma (parliament) in 1995. He reposed on Sept. 21, 2000.

6 Zagorsk: the Soviet era name for Sergiyev Posad, the location of Holy Trinity-St.Sergius Lavra.

I was constantly reprimanded by the Party. But they couldn't expel me because by that time I was a well-known teacher and the cosmonauts stood by me. When they tried to fire me, the cosmonauts would say: "Let anyone else leave, but not him." When the chief of one of the crews found out what a cheeky fellow I was, taking everyone to monasteries, a small scandal broke out, and the fact that I taught a philosophy course at the Air Force Academy aggravated the situation. With atheism as the official ideology, speaking about Orthodoxy was like a high-wire act, a life-threatening performance, but I went on training cosmonauts and taking them to monasteries. Many times, the Party bosses wanted to knock my head off.

Once I had the idea of taking American astronauts out to the Lavra — this was in 1975, when we had the joint *Soyuz-Apollo* flight. And so we went, right before the flight, our cosmonaut detachment and the Americans. In the end, we gave the official interpreter so much to drink that one of the monks finally had to translate. We took a wonderful photo during the trip and put it up on the wall in the Moscow Patriarchate. So when foreign delegations came saying that ours was an atheist state, we replied, "Atheist indeed! Look at our cosmonauts and the American astronauts here at the Lavra!" And they had nothing to say to that.

This tradition of my taking all of the crews that I prepared for spaceflights to Holy Trinity-St. Sergius Lavra and Danilov Monastery dated back to the 1960's with Yuri Gagarin. The abbot of Danilov Monastery was a friend of mine, and I became a catechist, instructing the young ones as I continued learning myself.

Later, in 1988, there was another remarkable event: the entire country was congratulated from space on the Millennium of the Baptism of Russia. When Volodya Titov⁷ was to orbit in space for a year, I took him first to the Church Archaeology Study Center and then to Danilov Monastery. He was

7 Vladimir (Volodya) Titov: the second Russian cosmonaut to fly on an American space shuttle and was a mission specialist on the first shuttle to rendezvous and fly around Mir. He flew again on STS-86, the seventh shuttle mission to dock with Mir, and the fourth involving the transfer of astronauts living on the station. He also participated in a spacewalk with crewmate Scott Parazynski. In 1988, Titov set a record for longevity in space by living at the Mir station for over a year.



to be in space throughout the entire millenium anniversary year, leaving December 21, 1987 and coming back exactly 12 months later. When he received the news that he had been chosen for the flight, he wanted a blessing for it, so late that evening, I drove him to Metropolitan Philaret, the chairman of the Department of External Relations of the Moscow Patriarchate. It was an incredible meeting. Volodya received a church calendar commemorating the anniversary of Christianity in Russia and many icons. Volodya very much liked the tea we drank there, so His Eminence ordered that several boxes be packed for him, and all that year my friend drank the metropolitan's tea in orbit.

When Volodya congratulated the entire Soviet Union on the Millenium of the Baptism of Russia from space, people just were stunned: how could he have known about it in space? But he had a church calendar with him in orbit.

The authorities were about to tear my head off, and I was immediately sacked and banned everywhere, but the very next day Gorbachev met with Patriarch Pimen and other hierarchs in connection with the millenium, and afterwards the accusations against me were lifted.

Some time later, our patriarch reached an agreement with the Minister of Culture about teaching Orthodox culture in military academies. I was the only military man in the first class of the Catechesis Department of St. Tikhon's Theological Institute. It has been ten years since I successfully finished my catechesis studies, and when I graduated, the patriarch himself handed me the diploma.

I believe that it is absolutely impossible to study Russian history apart from the history of the Russian Orthodox Church and the basics of the Orthodox faith. We find countless examples testifying to this fact! Holy Trinity-St. Sergius Lavra itself withstood the Polish blockade for 16 months, and how can a military man be fully trained without knowing this?!

A pilot's or cosmonaut's life is in constant danger and willingly or unwillingly, he comes to the Lord. The faith that a military man acquires in such situations is genuine and true. I think it is necessary to bring up my students in the Orthodox spirit. I don't take them by the hand and drag them to the baptismal font by force. One cannot be forced to believe, just as one cannot be forced to love, but in the process of their studies many students of our academy decide to be baptized. ✚