



A JOURNAL OF ORTHODOX FAITH AND CULTURE

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# A SHORT HISTORY OF THE FINNISH ORTHODOX CHURCH

Orthodox Christianity first spread to eastern Finland from Novgorod over a thousand years ago through monks and traders. Monasteries founded on the islands of Lake Ladoga contributed significantly to the establishment of the Orthodox faith in eastern Finland and Russia, chief among them being Valaam, founded by a Greek-born monk, St. Sergius, and a local Karelian, St. Herman. Other important monasteries were Konevitsa, founded in the 14th century by another Greek monastic, St. Arsenius, and Petsamo (Pechenga) near the Arctic Ocean, a 16th century foundation of St. Tryphon of Novgorod, who converted the Skolt Sami Lapps. By the end of the 16th-century, village churches and small wilderness monasteries flourished throughout the region.

Some of the earliest traces of Christianity in Finland are of Orthodox Christian origin. Excavated crosses found in Finland date to the 11th century, and are similar to a type found in Novgorod and Kiev, and most Finnish Christian words appear to be loans from an early East Slavic language, which in turn borrowed them from Greek. Central and western Finnish peoples participated less in this Orthodox tradition, being primarily converted by Roman Catholic missionaries from Sweden.

All of these early monasteries were destroyed in 16th and 17th century wars, in the course of which parts of western Karelia were incorporated into

*Opposite: Uusi (New) Valamo Monastery, Church of the Transfiguration of Christ.*

the Kingdom of Sweden. The Lutheran Swedes pressured the local Orthodox population to convert, and many Orthodox Karelians moved to central Russia at this time. When the territories around Lake Ladoga were recaptured by Peter the Great in the early 18th century, the Orthodox Church regained its status in the area, and the monasteries of Valaam and Konevitsa were rebuilt on their historic sites. In 1809 the whole of Finland was attached to the Russian Empire as an autonomous Grand Duchy, and the Orthodox population increased ten-fold. The northern monastery of Petsamo was re-established at the end of the 19th century, and a Karelian women's monastery was founded, which is now Lintula Convent. The Christians of central and western Finland continued their allegiance to the Lutheran state church, while Karelia regained and strengthened its Orthodoxy as part of the larger Grand Duchy of Russia.

From early times, the Orthodox Church in Finland was administratively under the Archbishop of Novgorod, but when Finland was annexed by Russia in the 18th century, local parishes were joined to the Diocese of St. Petersburg. In the late 18th and mid-19th centuries, the Russian Orthodox Church made great efforts to catechize the Orthodox populations in these border regions and remote areas, and the Russian Holy Synod decreed that services in Finnish parishes should be conducted in Finnish. In 1892, a separate church administration for Finland was set up under the Diocese of St. Petersburg, and in 1892 this became the independent Diocese of Finland and Viipuri (Vyburg), serving Russians, Finns and the Skolt-Sami Laplanders.

Finland gained its independence as a result of the Russian Revolution, and in 1918, the Finnish Senate officially named the Orthodox Church as Finland's second state church, equal in rights to the Lutheran Church. Patriarch Tikhon of Russia confirmed the autonomy of the Orthodox Church of Finland in 1921. Because of political turmoil and the difficulty of maintaining contact with the Soviet-persecuted Russian Church, the Orthodox Church of Finland was accepted under the protection of the Ecumenical Patriarchate of Constantinople in 1923, which continues to confirm the election of Finland's archbishops. When the Ecumenical Patriarchate adopted the Gregorian calendar in that same year, the Finnish Orthodox Church did so as well.

The Second World War turned the Orthodox Church of Finland into a church of refugees. After the Winter War of 1939-40, Finland was obliged to cede Sortavala and all of Ladoga Karelia to the Soviet Union. The Finnish Orthodox Church lost 90% of its property, and 70% of its members were

evacuated from their homes. The Orthodox refugee population of 400,000 was dispersed throughout Finland, and the monasteries of Karelia were re-founded at new locations. Valaam Monastery on Lake Ladoga was among those evacuated, and the monastery of New Valamo was founded in 1941 at Heinävesi, on the Finnish side of the new border. Later, monks from Konevitsa and Petsamo monasteries joined the monks at New Valamo, and by the 1970s, Finnish novices began to arrive. Nuns from the Lintula Holy Trinity Convent at Kivennapa (Karelian Isthmus) re-established their convent near New Valamo in Heinävesi in 1946. With the fall of communism, Old Valaam monastery on Lake Ladoga was re-established in Russian Karelia in 1989, followed by the monasteries of Konevitsa (Konevitz) and Petsamo (Pechenga). The two Valamo foundations in Russia and Finland maintain brotherly relations.

The founding of new parishes throughout Finland began in the 1950s and today the Finnish Orthodox Church has 62,000 members and is growing steadily. Finnish Orthodox Christians worship within the three dioceses of Karelia, Helsinki, and Oulu. These dioceses are further broken down into 25 parishes that administer Finland's 125 churches and chapels. ✦