



A JOURNAL OF ORTHODOX FAITH AND CULTURE

# ROAD TO EMMAUS

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# INSPIRATION IN THE MAKING

In the summer of 2011, Andrew and Georgia Williams introduced *Road to Emmaus* to a remarkable community outside of Moscow called “Inspiration”. Founded a decade ago by Father Ilya and Matushka Nadezhda Dorogochenko to assist children from a local psycho-neurological orphanage, Inspiration now includes orphans and orphan graduates from a variety of institutions, families with disabled children, and infants left at the local maternity hospital. Georgia remarks, “Inspiration shattered my belief that a successful community doing this kind of work could only sustain about fifteen or twenty people. Here there are hundreds. They are not here all at one time, but they come and go while living a close-knit community life that shares a pure common spirit. There’s no pretence and no insistence that people have a certain kind of faith... nonetheless, real faith is here strongly, almost because there is no insistence. This is an example of people really being free and the love that results from that freedom...”

MAT. NADEZHDA: In the 1990’s, my husband, Father Ilya Dorogochenko, restored and served at a church on Rublyovskoye Shosse in a wealthy Moscow neighborhood. At the same time he was particularly concerned about the conditions in children’s psychiatric hospitals. God heard his prayers and eventually we were transferred from Rublyovka to the village of Nikolsky in the Ruza district not far from Moscow to restore another ruined church, and this time there was a children’s psycho-neurological facility nearby. Father Ilya dreamed of helping these children re-engage in life and so we began to work with them informally. Later, we were able to buy property and in 2001 began building with the help of donors. Now we have houses, workshops, gyms, a theatre, barns, a dairy, gardens, storehouses and kitchens.

We have about thirty children here now from various backgrounds. Mothers sometimes give their babies up at birth, but because there is no foundling home in this region, I take them from the hospital as their legal guardian. In five years we have had thirty-nine children adopted by Russian families, and we now have eight children under our care for whom we are searching for families.

RTE: I see that you have some parents and children here as well.

*Opposite: Orphanage worker with baby, Inspiration Community near Ruza, Russia, 2011.*

MAT. NADEZHDA: Yes, we have families with disabled children who live with us for a few weeks or months. This is a way for parents to learn to work with their child and to have the support of other families in the same situation. A few weeks ago there were ten families; now we have six. They stay as long as they need to, to complete a course of therapy.

We also bring children here from regular state orphanages in Tuchkova, Ruza, Moscow, and Pskov-Pechory for two-week cultural programs and week-end visits where the children are exposed to the farm, to nature, to art, music, theatre, and to the life of the community. Some of the graduates of our local psycho-neurological orphanage also help out here on the farm. We are now building a new post-orphanage center with individual apartments, where children who have left the orphanage at age eighteen will be able to learn skills to get a job in the community or to stay and work with us if they wish. We hope to double the number of residents.

We also recently had three teen-age mothers who are orphans themselves. Two of them have married and now there is a father for these families. The third has become a hairdresser and is trying to figure out what to do with her life. Sometimes when people have become used to an institutional environment where everything is provided for them, it is difficult for them to learn to do things to make life go forward. We tell them, "We are ready to help you, but if you don't want the help, you are free to leave." There were instances when we chased after people to help them, but we found this was of no use. If they do want help, we try to guide their activities, to make suggestions. In fact, it is very much like raising our own children; we live alongside them, we praise them and tell them off. We want them to understand that we think they are valuable and that we love them, but this isn't a passive process. They also have to learn to value other people and to serve them as well.

## The Beauty and Depth of Life

We want to show these children how learning relates to the beauty and depth of life. Even if there is no mother or father, there is God. Our idea is not just to have "orphan programs," but to mix lots of different kinds of people of different ages, abilities, and backgrounds, so that it is like a big family. When orphanage children, who have never experienced the warmth and love of family, visit us and see how the mothers helping their disabled children live entirely for these children, they begin to understand how they should

live as well. This isn't a reservation of one type of person, but a community of many. When you have a mixture of people, the prejudices are annulled.

RTE: You also have physically disabled children who can't walk. Will you talk about the unique therapy you provide for them?

MAT. NADEZHDA: Yes. One of the special things we offer here is *hippotherapy* (from the Greek hippo for "horse"). It helps disabled children even if they can only ride by lying on the horse. Trained specialists know how to mount these physically handicapped children onto the horse, how to adapt the gait of the horse to the child's needs, and how their spines and muscles respond in different positions to encourage them to move and walk.

RTE: From what I've read, the movement of the horse leads to a corresponding movement in the rider's pelvis, which is similar to patterns of human walking, and "horse therapy" is now being increasingly used by physical and occupational therapists for developmental problems.

MAT. NADEZHDA: Interaction with animals and nature is important for all children, but particularly for those who can't walk and who live mostly indoors or confined to wheelchairs.

But it's not only animal therapy or nature play; helping with the younger children is just as important because it balances the psyche. Older orphans are almost always focused on themselves, but when someone depends on you, you forget about yourself and at that moment, you feel happiness. This is why it is important to have all parts of society here: the elderly, adults, teenagers, children, orphans, workers, clergy, families.

RTE: Speaking of ties to nature, I should tell our readers that you have laid a beautiful tea table for us. There is fresh rye bread, butter, farmer's cheese, sour cream, yellow cheese, eggs, strawberry and apple jam, golden honey, a wonderful fish soup, new potatoes, and warm piroshki. Is this all your own produce?



*Mat. Nadezhda Dorogochenko.*





MAT. NADEZHDA: Yes, we grow the food here and we have cooks who love their work. We have cows, horses, goats, pigs, rabbits, turkeys, ducks, geese, chickens, a large vegetable garden, fruit trees, hay meadows, and we are making a large fish pond. Eating good natural food makes a person kinder.

RTE: Even the buildings here are beautiful and they are inter-connected in an extraordinarily creative way. From the outside, “Inspiration” looks like a fairy-tale with turrets and towers on the rooftops. Inside, each house has



*Father Ilya Dorogochenko.*

wonderful nooks and crannies, winding passages, and one hallway with hanging ropes to climb on. There are rooms with simple hand-worked Russian doors, wooden bookcases filled with interesting books, games, and art, snug little window-seats filled with plants, flowers and toys. My favorite corner is your secret bookcase that opens out of the wall onto stairs leading down to a cozy living-room and a theater stage. I can't imagine anything further from an institution.

MAT. NADEZHDA: Father Ilya likes fairy-tales very much, so he built this as a fairy-tale for the children—a place that would be exactly what they want: wonderful adventures, something secret, a little mystery...

RTE: You have thirty children and six families here, but obviously with this extensive farm, you need help to keep Inspiration going.

MAT. NADEZHDA: We have about twenty workers—farm workers, cooks, cleaning people, a bookkeeper, house parents for the older children and for the babies, construction workers, handymen, and even someone in charge of safety and fire regulations. Some of these people live in the village and come here during the day; others live with us. For example, we have a Ukrainian electrician who has been here for twelve years and is also our beekeeper and the godfather of one of our little children. He is like an angel. We are a family and people who are meant to be here understand this quickly.

RTE: Do the children help out as well?



MAT. NADEZHDA: Yes. The boys help with harvesting hay and the girls help in the kitchen. They both help with the animals. The bigger children take care of their own rooms, houses, and the grounds, as do those who visit for a few weeks from other orphanages. There was a period when we basically served the kids, and then we understood that this wasn't useful; we should live with them instead.

RTE: Do you have regular sponsors?

MAT. NADEZHDA: We have a few regular sponsors who help with utilities and part of the salaries, and we've had some generous grants that have covered things like generators for heat in the cold Russian winter. Several years ago, we had a big miracle. In the winter, when a regular sponsor wasn't able to pay for the heating, we went to an Orthodox charity to ask for help. They said, "Fine, we'll help with the heat and we'll also build a church for you!" We've dedicated the church to the Mother of God of Unexpected Joy. Unfortunately, the builders did a bad job and if you stand in the middle of the floor and bounce up and down a bit, the walls shake. The charity fund is going to rebuild it.

RTE: When I asked if you received government aid, one of your staff humorously said that their main support is that the government is not causing trouble for you. This is a real gift because it's rare for local or national government administrators to circumvent their own red tape to smooth your way. Georgia Williams from ROOF once said that you are doing what the state promises to do, but without the spirit of love and freedom that you have, it is much harder for the state. I can't help but think that they are grateful for your work.

MAT. NADEZHDA: Yes, and we are grateful for all of the co-operation we receive.

## Faith and Adoption

RTE: Do you and Father Ilya live here, and how do your children fit into this?

MAT. NADEZHDA: We still have our house in the village so that we don't take up space that can be used for the children, and from the beginning, we've often been here daily with our own five children who are now teenagers and young adults. Our family is also a small choir. Today, for example, we are





putting on an informal concert and Timothy, our eldest, is going to play Beethoven's Fourth Piano Concerto. Our son-in-law, Vladimir, is also here every day as an integral part of the community.

Father Ilya now serves in another diocese. His is a very light personality, always bright and sunny, very joyful. He never sells anything in church, nor does he charge for baptisms or weddings. Thousands of people came to him from Moscow, but his desire to be Christ-like upset the way things are run. The person is the valuable thing for him, and he couldn't always do things the way the authorities wanted. His way is always love and freedom. For example, people often say, "Baptize all of the children," but we would answer, "That's not our right. We are giving the children to an adopting family and the family has a free choice because they are going to raise the child in their own way. It has to be their choice."

RTE: Can you explain this further?

MAT. NADEZHDA: Faith comes through experience. If a couple decides that they are going to adopt an orphan child and love him, this is their road to God. If we are in contact with them and they feel light and life from us as Orthodox people, then that is the beginning of the road. But the road has to be their road.

RTE: How would you answer Orthodox who are unhappy at the idea of children from Russia and Eastern Europe being adopted by foreigners who aren't Orthodox. Although adopting parents take these children in with great love, there's often little chance that they will be exposed to the Church.

MAT. NADEZHDA: Who was Christ? Was He Orthodox? If pressure on people is the main thing, then nothing of life and light can actually develop. Instead, the pressure of Orthodoxy will be like a fist that closes things down and narrows people's vision. I sometimes wonder if these people have read the Gospel.

I love the Gospel, and it says, "Don't judge." For example, our great writer Gogol became a Catholic, and that was his road. God will judge him. It's better that a soul should suffer than be indifferent. Christ is among us, and Christ is in the love we show other people. The main factor here is serving the other person.

RTE: It seems that more Russians are now considering adoption.

MAT. NADEZHDA: Yes, but adoptive parents here are often afraid to even say that their child is adopted. The general prejudice that orphans from institutions are usually feeble-minded and won't end well is still strong. There are many people in Russia who would like to do work like ours, but they need leaders to break out of this mentality, to show that there is another way of doing things. If someone like the president would suddenly adopt five children, it could immediately break all of those prejudices. I know that in the 1950's you had similar problems in America with social stigmas and prejudice attached to institutionalized people with disabilities; we are still fighting this approach that tries to isolate certain people from the rest of society. Did you know that in tsarist Russia there were no orphanages? All orphans were given to families.

RTE: How can that be? I've seen many pre-revolutionary photos of monasteries where there were orphans in the front rows with the monastics.

MAT. NADEZHDA: They were only in the monasteries temporarily until the monks or nuns found a family for the children to go to. They understood that a child had to grow up in a family in order to later have his own family. The family is an example of how to live.

The Russian government already supports multi-children families, but we'd like to see it take the next step of making television programs and articles in the mass media that support not just the idea that that family life is beautiful, but also pushes for the idea of self-sacrifice and real help for families that can't afford to care for their children. Our center is here to encourage people that the best life is like this: you live with people, close to the earth. In this way you support each other and grow together. It's not only possible, it's the only possible way.

We must not forget that we live in order to warm other people. It's not only we who are helping the children; the children also save us. We are saving each other. We understand that God is always with us, and that this is what truly saves humanity. There is a humorous expression in Russia, "the 101st kilometer", which implies that all of the dross of life, everything that is tragic or has gone wrong, ends there. Inspiration is located precisely at 101 kilometers from the Kremlin, but, with God's help, it's a proof of hope in life. ✦

Donations to Inspiration can be made online at [www.roofnet.org](http://www.roofnet.org), or by check or postal money order to: Russian Orphan Opportunity Fund, 5200 Wind Point Drive, Racine, Wisconsin 53402, U.S.A. (Note in the online "Comments" box, or on the check that this is for the Inspiration Community.)



