

French seminary trains for Orthodox resurgence

Elizabeth Bryant Religion News Service | Jan. 5, 2010

EPINAY-SOUS-SENART, France -- Inside a plain stone building that was once a Catholic convent in the center of town, a dozen black-robed seminarians struggle over French theological phrases.

The nuns are long gone, their Catholic crucifixes replaced by Russian icons and incense that form the trappings of a bold experiment: the Russian Orthodox Church's first seminary outside the former Soviet Union.

Officially launched in November, the small Paris-area school nurses big ambitions: to train a new generation of Orthodox priests capable of serving Russia's growing Diaspora. Even more, the school hopes to foster exchanges between Europe's Christian East and West; and, more specifically, help nurture warming ties between Moscow and the Vatican.

"The Russian Orthodox Church needs good specialists who know foreign languages and the life of Christian churches in the West and how they face secularization," said the Rev. Alexander Siniakov, the seminary's affable young director, who is also the Russian church's point person for interchurch relations in France.

"Our seminary," he added, "is sort of a bridge between the Western Christian culture and the Eastern Orthodox one."

The pupils enrolled in the school's five-year program hail mostly from Russia and former Soviet republics. There are plans to diversify and grow the student body to 40 over the next few years, with the seminarians also earning master's degrees in theology from the Sorbonne in Paris.

"It's a nice possibility to study French and to know how Western people live in France and in other Western countries," said Andrew Serebrych Anekandrovich, a 25-year-old seminarian from Ukraine, who sports a dark ponytail and spectacles.

Some graduates will return to parishes in their home countries. But others are being groomed to serve Russia's far-flung Diaspora that has ballooned since the collapse of the Soviet Union. The seminary is the brainchild of Patriarch Kirill, who was elected head of the Moscow Patriarchate last February.

"When the Iron Curtain fell, the Russians went everywhere," said the Rev. Stephen Headley, a Russian Orthodox priest and researcher on Russian Orthodoxy at the French National Center for Scientific Research.

Kirill's idea was to "follow our people and open Orthodox churches for them wherever they are," said Headley, who also teaches at the seminary. That meant training priests qualified to serve them.

Millions of Russians settled in western Europe, bringing their newly rediscovered faith with them. But their culture and practices often clashed with Russia's more established expatriate population, who fled the 1917 Bolshevik revolution.

Many of the earlier ex-pats joined the New York-based Russian Orthodox Church Outside Russia, which formally reconciled with Moscow in 2007 after 90 years of mutual suspicion. But others switched allegiance to the rival Patriarchate of Constantinople, based in modern-day Istanbul, which is seen as the spiritual heart of much of Eastern Orthodoxy.

Tensions between Moscow and Istanbul peaked a few years ago in London, home to some 200,000 new Russian expatriates. Kirill's hardline predecessor, Patriarch Alexy II, forcibly retired the head of the Russian Orthodox Cathedral in London, after he indicated he wanted to join the Constantinople branch.

"They are Russian nationalists, basically," said Michael Bourdeaux, president of the Keston Institute in Oxford, England, and an expert on Russian Orthodoxy. The new emigres "want Russian services for Russian people. They don't want to make any compromises with local languages."

Relations between the ex-pat groups are also bumpy in France, where a large slice of the Russian community hails from the Soviet era and is affiliated with Constantinople.

But at the Epinay-Sous-Senart seminary, Siniakov appears to be trying to heal the rift. Instructors of a Constantinople-affiliated institute in Paris now teach at the seminary. And, Siniakov said, the seminary is open to students from all Orthodox churches.

"It offers the possibility for them to know more about our Russian Orthodox tradition," he said.

Anton Sidenko, a tall, lanky seminarian in his early 20s, said he was particularly interested in learning about the history of other Orthodox churches. Speaking shyly in French, he described an earlier stint in France where he studied engineering.

"There's a big respect for the church in Russia," Sidenko said. "Here, the view of the church is more based on tradition."

Divisions between Moscow and the Vatican are far more sizable and stretch back centuries. Even so, Moscow reached out to French Catholic bishops for help establishing the seminary, a gesture underscoring warming ties between the two churches, particularly under their current leaders, Kirill and Pope Benedict XVI.

The French bishops put the Russians in touch with elderly nuns in Epinay-Sous-Senart, who were moving out of their convent. The nuns now return to teach the seminarians French.

"We need, as Europeans, as Christians, to gather all the Christian churches of all European countries," said Catholic Bishop Michel Dubost, who leads the local Evry-Corbeil-Essonnes diocese. Dubost has visited the seminary and will host the students at his cathedral in the coming weeks.

"Clearly there are differences," he added. "But we need to know each other, to build something together."

The foundations are being reinforced on a larger scale. Kirill and Benedict, who have met several times in the past, hold similarly conservative views on matters like euthanasia, abortion and homosexuality. Both have urged Europeans to reclaim their Christian heritage at a time when secularity and immigration are transforming the region.

"I think there was a conscious decision on the part of the Vatican and the Moscow patriarchate to try to cooperate on the social level, which talks about the ... Christian roots of western Europe," said Headley, the Orthodox priest.

"There's a political side to this," Headley added of Kirill and Benedict. "They both have strong lobbies at the Council of Europe and the European Union ... when key issues come up, they can lobby together and have more influence."

Bourdeaux, the Oxford scholar, agreed.

"If the Catholic and Orthodox churches came closer together," he said, "they would form a huge beacon for conservatism in the world today."

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