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Russia/US Covenant Program

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REUNION OF THE ROOTS AND FRUITS OF THE SAME TREE

by Charles D. Rodenbough

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That dreary Moscow day in 1993 bore down on the soul like the overprotecting clothing of the morning which had transformed into the sweaty baggage of the afternoon. Moscow was not a city to gladden the heart but even in its bleakness, there were moments when it could excite the imagination. Father Ioann had taken us into one of the nine churches of the Petrovsky Monastery over which the Patriarch had just given him dominion as Chairman of the Department of Religious Education and Catechism. There was urgency in his explanation that today, in this particular church, he would hold the first Orthodox service since 1932. As six Russian women in boots, wool dresses, aprons and with hair wrapped in flowered scarves, splashed buckets of water across the floor and spread it with "T" shaped mops wrapped in white cloth, we were told that for 61 years this had been a Soviet youth sports hall. Whitewashed walls once displayed scenes of the Old Testament and stories of saints. The great gilded Ikonostasis hung with Ikons five centuries old was lost. Outside, the rusted roof and onion domes sprouted with small trees. But inside, today, there would be simple choral chants and a priest would conduct Vespers in the ancient rites of the Christian church.

The fall of Communism as a political system has been like an overture for the next century. It has set the mood and given glimpses of the melodies that will in time play full blown. And if we complete the analogy, God is the conductor premiering God's own composition before an audience of humankind.

Why is it that Christians in the West have been so meek in proclaiming the hand of God in this climactic event? If Joshua saw the mighty act of God in the crumbling of an earth wall around a pagan city, how can Christians today not see God's direction in the crash of a monstrous iron curtain that for 70 years enslaved a third part of the world's Christians and millions of believers in Islam?

Politically, the West has made the naive assumption that Russia would make a segue way between Communism and western democracy. Economically, western capitalism would fall into the vacated place of discredited Marxism. Such embarrassing naivete has been replaced by the realization that what is emerging in Russia may share the fundamentals of western democracy but it will be a Russian political system. What is taking on some of the character of a free market economy will in the end be a Russian version of that economic option.

Only in the realm of religion have we gone beyond our naive expectations and allowed ignorance to dictate our response to God's innervating action. This particular ignorance has deep

roots in western history. It began in 1054 when the catholic unity of the church divided between Rome and Constantinople. Orthodoxy then slipped away from the western branch of Christendom, which determined the rest of the story of Catholicism and Protestantism.

At the beginning of this century, G. B. H. Bishop, Vicar of Cardington wrote, "it is a striking testimony to our insularity in religious matters that so few of us know anything of the greatest national church in the world." He was speaking of the Russian Orthodox Church and he had prefaced that statement with, the Russian nation has been frequently described as the most religious in Christendom. Whether the statement be in all respects true or not, there can be no doubt that in no other country do the people give a more whole-hearted allegiance to the Catholic Church of Christ in its local embodiment. The Orthodox Church in Russia is not merely national in the technical sense of being the sole historic representative in that land of the one Apostolic Church, but it is also national because it enshrines the deepest convictions of an overwhelming majority of the Russian people.