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Valera: How gracious Christ has been to me

by: Pavel Khramov

Valery (Valera) Gillyazutdinov is a young man of 23 years old. He was born in Krasnoyarsk, but when the time to go to school came, his mother decided to send him to his grandmother. She lived in a small town, Tuim, in Khakassia. Valera studied there for four years. Being a small boy, he didn't ask his mom why she decided to send him to this small town, where schools were normally worse than in big cities. His grandmother took good care of him and he had a lot of friends.

When he was 8-years old, his mother, Svetlana married to Dmitri, and Valera got stepbrother Pavel and stepsister Sophia. At the beginning Valera's relationships with his stepfather were very good; he even called him "dad". But in a couple years Svetlana divorced Dmitri as he started to drink too much and to beat her. In the year of 2000 they began to live together again. Dmitri became a member of Transfiguration Lutheran church in Tuim, and, seemingly, it changed him radically. Their family had moved to Tuim, from Krasnoyarsk because Dmitri wanted to attend church services regularly. (The Siberian Evangelical Lutheran Church did not have a congregation in Krasnoyarsk.) Svetlana started to go to the church a little bit later, in the fall of the same year. Valera continued on page 4



A mother and daughter's journey

by Yu Suhua

I have always admired people whose lives have been changed by virtue of unexpected miracles that led them to the path of a faith. I wish I could have experienced such a miracle or Damascene conversion in my life as well, but my story of how I became a Christian is rather gradual and so when Father Daniel Johnson asked me to share it with my brothers and sisters, I was worried that it would be boring for the reader. But nonetheless I would like to share it with you, as everything in this journey was so worthwhile and meaningful for me and my family.

I was born to Chinese parents in the Primorsky region of Russia, in a small village that can only be found on the most detailed of maps. It was a time of food scarcity and endless time spent queuing in grocery shops on top of the struggles with the language barrier that my parents experienced throughout my childhood. However my parents were very friendly and nice down-to-earth people regardless of the difficulties they regularly encountered; after all, they survived the Chinese Cultural Revolution! I had two little sisters, and all of us were raised like any other soviet children: kindergarten, primary school, October children (Communist organization of young schoolchildren), red neck-ties and and so on.

At the age of fourteen I moved to Novosibirsk, thousands of miles away from home, where I was invited by a renowned school specializing in physics and mathematics. It was very far from my family home but, brushing away tears, my parents accepted my desire to pursue my education there. At continued on page 3



The main treasures in life: the Zinaida Matveyevna story

by: Natalia Sheludyakova

translated by: Alexei Streltsov

[Editor's note: This story was first printed in the SELC newsletter "Faith & Hope" #192. This version has been edited]

Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ,

Today we are going to tell you about the recent funeral of Zinaida Matveyevna, parishioner of the St Andrew's parish in Novosibirsk.

She worked hard all her life, but at the end of her life she didn't have her own home and lived in a nursing home at the outskirts of Novosibirsk. Our Bishop Vsevolod Lytkin says: "The Church accompanies dying with the prayers. In general, the Church surrounds, embraces people by her prayers from the cradle (actually, starting even before birth) to the grave.

"It is because God loves everyone and seeks to save us. And what does it mean -- to save? It means to bring us to the Church that would take care of us. God wants people to be in the Church, because outside of the Church there is no salvation. Outside of the Church there are only our own attempts, attempts to go to heaven doomed to failure. Because without grace we can not do it. And grace is only in the Church, in the Word and the Sacraments. God is seeking to bring people to the Church. And some of us are lucky: we were baptized in infancy, and then we visited every Sunday service with our parents; we prayed and listened to the Scripture together with them, declared the Creed,

and so we grew up as Christians. And some of us are lucky in another manner: we lived in unbelief, but God pulled us out.

"Zinaida Matveyevna came to the Church several years ago, when she was already an adult person. And this is a miracle when a person finds faith and lives with this faith and then dies with this faith. Doesn't die, in fact! I just used the word "die" because of

habit. There is really no death for Christians, because when we close

our eyes here on earth, we immediately open them in the Kingdom of God

"The Church accompanies dying with the prayers, and the best thing is to conduct the funeral

service near the altar. But for reason beyond our control we were unable to do so, it was not permitted; all we could do was only to conduct two short services outside, staying in the snow, the first of these was near the dirty woodshed in the backyard of the nursing home.

"Few watchmen moved the body out of the woodshed and put it in an upside rotten zinc coffin. It was very cold, but many elderly habitants of the nursing home gathered dressed in their dirty clothes. I said to all that the service would be according to the Evangelical Lutheran church order. A short funeral service was conducted. And then we moved to the cemetery for the poor.

"The nursing home is terrible. I think, no wonder that it still bears the name of Mikhail Kalinin:

'Kalinin's nursing home.' Kalinin was Josef Stalin's partner, an absolutely brutal, cowardly and unprincipled man. It was him who in 1934 signed a decree on the establishment of so-called 'Triples' -- Soviet 'courts' where all cases were tried by three communist bosses, without participation of defendant, without advocates, without any possibility of appeal, so the victims were immediately shot.

"Often Triples made one decision on all names on a list: 'to shoot everybody.' Mihail Kalinin is responsible for hundreds of thousands of people who have been murdered. When his own wife was arrested and sent into a camp, Kalinin did not say any word, didn't do anything to protect her, did nothing to save her. She spent 17 years in the Stalin's camps.

"This is real 'Soviet love' (or 'love in a Soviet style'). Many of our fellow citizens must have absorbed this 'Soviet love' from their mother's milk. We are still reaping the fruits of this love and we will continue to do it in our country. It was this 'Soviet love' that we saw in the nursing home.

"It looks that during recent years, life there has become better than before. Now rats do not bite off the fingers of bed-ridden patients anymore. But to perform a funeral service or to bury a person with respect is still forbidden there. It is awful and very shameful.

"Please forgive me for too excessive emotions. I'm just very sorry, very sorry for people who have no other possibility to exist except in those nursing homes."

Valentina Yurganova [Editor's note: see, [SLMS](#) September 2006 newsletter] (parishioner of

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The coffin is carried to the gravesite for burial



Bp. Lytkin prays the graveside liturgy

Journey

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the time I had no idea that this move and the people that it would bring me into contact with would have such a great impact on the development of my perception and the ideas that have since shaped my mind. It was in Novosibirsk that I first met some people from the New Life Christian Organization who were to influence me on this path, and in addition I spent many hours discussing matters of faith with an American girl name Paula.

I have observed that many people come to Jesus at a time of great need or of depression or uncertainty in their lives, but I had loving parents, many friends and was a dedicated student: there was no need for help and most importantly I felt no burden of sin on my shoulders: youth has its own merits: everything seems bright, unique and all people are kind and nice. Many of my New Life friends used to go to Lutheran Church every Sunday; which was located in the Children's Club back then. I was also attending Sunday Liturgy at that time.

Why did I start going to church? I didn't quite understand the reason or my motives back then, but nobody was forcing me to attend. At the time the unfamiliar details and rituals of mass were beyond my ability to fully comprehend, but slowly I got used to the people, singing and procedures. Once in the spring of 1995 my friend Katya Chertova suggested that I get baptized, I thought about it and the idea seemed very good. So on May 21th, 1995 I was baptized and this became a turning point that fixed my life on its present course. Sometimes looking back I realize how influential that moment was in the development of my decision-making process and my attitude towards people, because I believe that by being accepted by Jesus in Holy Baptism, he comes into our lives and helps us to chart our own course.

At the university I was studying in the history department. There were many students belonging to different denominations: Orthodox, Catholic, Baptist etc. We often discussed topics related to faith in the dormitory or during breaks in classes. Gradually through these discussions I came to the realization that there were more commonalities than differences between the different churches and started to comprehend Lutheranism in the context of the history of Christianity.

Time passed and I grew in my faith. After a while I met my future husband. He was raised in Communist China and Confucian ideology. This remains, embedded in his head. Christianity for him is more the faith of his wife (and now his daughter, as well) and he respects that. I hope that there will be a day he will knock on the door and let Jesus come into his life as well.



**Anya's baptism day at
St. Andrew's – Novosibirsk**

The birth of our daughter Anna-Anastasia was a miracle bestowed on us by God. Endless love of God and communication with him is enhanced through children, and as one catholic priest told me: motherhood opens the path to eternity. My child is organizing my daily life, as she is still very young and requires my help, support and guidance. Only until after her birth did the reason why I became a Christian, why I go to church, and why my life is meaningless without faith become clear. I don't remember when exactly, but perhaps from the day of my daughter's birth I read prayers to her every day. She

couldn't yet speak but heard every word of mine.

Once when she was around two years old and had started speaking sentences, I said speculatively: Anya, your mom is tired tonight; could you please read the prayers? To my surprise she knew them by heart already. There are occasions when I don't have time for prayers, but having become accustomed to them every day, she would say, "Mom, why are we not lighting the candle and praying? Mom, tomorrow is Sunday, then we are going to go to church, aren't we?"

When we moved to Moscow from Novosibirsk we first attended the Anglican Church where the services are all conducted in English and everybody in attendance spoke English, as well. I noticed that Anya didn't understand anything there. I had doubts that I was doing the right thing, but now realize that this was an important period for

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her as she came to associate Church with music, Sundays, congregations of people, and other positive aspects, all in spite of the language barrier. By the time we started going to the Russian Lutheran church, she could read fluently in Russian and so could understand everything she hears or reads there. I am so touched--all these years God was present in her life and in her heart.

My story is perhaps similar to many others, but nonetheless it wouldn't have made sense if one day God hadn't have come into my life. He guides me and with his presence my life is filled with love, the almighty power of love. ✕

A Siberian education

Continued from page 1

also began to attend church services. He remembers, that after Dmitri's return, he didn't believe his stepfather's change to be genuine. But for some time everything was very good. He took good care of his stepson, helped and disciplined him. Unfortunately, it didn't last for long. After a couple of years Dmitri stopped coming to the church regularly. He turned back to alcohol, and to abusing his wife. So, Svetlana ousted him again. Valera was very angry at him that time.

After graduating from the secondary school Valera went to Novosibirsk to enter a college. (In Russia one can enter a college for a year after high-school, or for three years after a secondary school. In the latter case that person will finish the school program alongside with completing a college program.) But the school in Tuim wasn't good enough to let him enter such a prestigious college of "informatics," which educates people to work in Information Technology. Valera wanted to stay in Novosibirsk for a year. He planned to spend time preparing to enter the college the next year. But these plans would not work if the church did not give to Valera a place to live. To rent even a small room in Novosibirsk is very expensive for a person, who plans to study most of the time. So, Bishop (then pastor) Lytkin asked the seminary to let Valera live with the students in the seminary apartment. Valera says: "It was my first time being independent. Nobody really checked me, so I could stay up late, get up late, and spend a lot of time outside and so on. Thus, I was not ready for entering exams the next summer, again."

Then Valera went back home to Tuim. There he entered a college in the nearby town of Shira. After three years he graduated from there as a "computer operator". Though it might sound good, in reality it means that he gained only a few very basic skills. Moreover, it would be very problematic

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to find a job in Tuim or Shira. Vitaly Gavrillov, pastor in Tuim, tells: "Most of the young people after school have no perspectives. Some of them try to continue their education in Krasnoyarsk or Abakan, but just a few of them succeed. Many come back after several months of studies. But even those, who graduate from colleges, cannot find a job here. It is even truer about those, who have studied in Shira, because colleges there [in Khakassia Region] produce less qualified people. So, these young men are just surviving, looking for opportunities to work. Many young people keep saying: 'I'll find a job, I'll be cool.' But they do nothing, just

dreaming that their life will be changed somehow.

Moreover, there is nothing to do in their spare time.

"There is a so-called 'culture center,' but the only 'culture events' are 'dancing evenings' twice a week. Young



Valera (left) and Tolik study after classes

people drink a lot of alcohol at these evenings and then entertain themselves with fights. Another way to spend time is to stand near to 'kiosks' drinking beer. If they will not find a job, their place in life, they'll become alcoholics by their mid-thirties."

So, Valera's chances to find a job were very small. And again the church gave him an opportunity. Daria Lytkina (Bishop Vsevolod Lytkin's wife, who holds a Doctorate in Mathematics and teaches at Novosibirsk State University) phoned him and said that he and his friend Anatoly (or Tolik, as friends call him) need to come to Novosibirsk.

The plan was that they will study for a year to be able to pass exams at the university. Daria explains: "I've met Valera and Tolik in campus in Khakassia. We became friends. They are really good boys, and I felt sorry that they had no perspectives in Tuim. They needed a better education to get job in Abakan or Novosibirsk. And I realized that they needed to leave Tuim in order to concentrate on their preparation for exams. That's why I suggested them to come and live at our place." Daria herself and two other ladies, Irina and her daughter Tatiana, were giving "classes" to Valera and Tolik during that year. But the gap left by their school in Tuim happened to be too deep. When they passed exams, the result was not good enough to get free tuition. They needed to find money for their studying. The sum was very large for students from Tuim (about \$2,000 for the first semester for both of them).

Using their savings and with the help of the Lytkins the money was collected. Valera and Tolik started to study archeology at the Novosibirsk State University. Valera says: "Alongside with my interest in computers I also got interested in archeology in Christian camps that I was attending in Khakassia. Every summer we went to the mountains and caves where we were coming across places where ancient people lived.

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Siberian church a community of those who care

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Later on I also was helping pastor Pavel Zaykin in organizing excursions to those places.”

Valera always dreamed of studying in Novosibirsk State University, but he never thought that it would come true. Nevertheless, he was not ready yet for studying at the University. As a matter of fact this university is not so typical for Soviet/Russian style of education. Students here need to discipline themselves, organize their time, do a lot of independent reading and studying. For this reason Valera first felt that it is easy to study at the university. But then he realized that it was a wrong impression. He needed to study much harder during the whole semester. Moreover, Valera and Tolik had understood that they could not afford the tuition. Thus, they decided to quit the university after the first semester and try to pass exams better next summer. (By the end of July it will be clear, whether they passed exams well enough to get a free tuition.)

“My first account with the church happened in 1999 at the VBS. It was in Tuim. I do not remember how I get there. That time I did not understand anything. For example, I felt it absolutely unnecessary to pray before the meal. I wanted to start right now. Next summer I was at VBS again, and my attitude was the same. But in September I started to attend church services, and my mind was changed. My stepfather played an important role in it. That was he who send me to VBS that year, he persuaded me to go to the church regularly. He was preparing me for confirmation, he made me to learn by heart the Small Catechism, to read books on basics of Lutheran faith. When, in two years, he began to drink again and beat my mom, I was very angry at him. Now he has become to me a stranger. I know what he did for me, probably, the most important thing, he brought me to the church, but I can't feel any warmth toward him.

“I was confirmed in December, 2000. I was very active as a young man in the Tuim congregation. I was

attending all services, all Bible studies. Pastor Pavel Zayakin noted this zeal and let me help in different camps and on other occasions.

“Now I realize how drastically I was changed when I came to the church. I was about fourteen. Teenagers of



Valera in procession (second row, right)

that age try to look like grown-ups. They swear, they start to smoke, they taste alcohol. I do remember that when I came to church in the fall of 2000, I lost any wish to swear. I even didn't try to smoke. My schoolmates noted it. They were saying: 'You've changed. Before, you were cool, but now you're

different.' Tuim is a small town, so everybody knew that I go to church. My history teacher called our church a sect. 'Gillyazutdinov, you've joined a sect! It's terrible!' A few

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times our history and biology classes turned into disputes with teachers. They failed to shake my faith, I couldn't explain anything to them, because they didn't want to listen to me. My classmates were very pleased to have *show* instead of classes. But they did not listen to me, either.

“First I was exposed to God's Word in sermons and in Small Catechism. The brightest memory is the parable of a Good Samaritan. I was shocked that he, who was supposed to be an enemy, showed mercy. A comparison would be as if a Chechen person would help a Russian. I asked how many parables were in the Gospels. When I was told that there are a plenty of them, I wanted to learn more.

“Looking back I wonder at how gracious Christ has been to me. He not only forgives my sins, He has brought me to the community where people care. They gave me a chance. They do not say: 'That's your problem.' My chances to become an alcoholic were very high, but now I know that there is a better wine, which gives a better life.” ✕



the parish of St. Andrew in Novosibirsk) says, "End of human life is always a tragedy. A few days ago it was a burial of Zinaida, our parishioner. I can not calm down until

concentration camp in Germany, how they dropped all the bodies in one pit or in a big gas furnace.

"Recently a lonely woman died in an apartment building where I reside, so all her neighbors took care of her burial, and so she was buried as a human, with respect. Even her cat was adopted by somebody, so the cat has not become abandoned. But here I was shocked by this inhuman attitude toward people. Of course, the Soviet times have left such an attitude -- when neither living nor dead people are valued."

Bishop Vsevolod says, "You know, I didn't communicate much with Zinaida Matveevna. It was not I who was her father-confessor.

But I know for sure that she was a true Christian. The main thing that I remember about her, and I will remember forever is that when she was alive she always applied herself to the most of her capacity to go to church.

"How many of our brothers and sisters seek to go to church with such dedication? How many are there among us for whom the liturgy, the Word of God, the Eucharist are the main treasures in life? I dream that -- oh, that! -- we all love the Eucharist so much, as Zinaida Matveevna loved it!

"And the Lord said, Verily I say unto you: He who eats my flesh and drinks my blood has eternal life, and I will raise him on the last day. [John 6: 54] This is His word, and His own words He does not reject." ✕



Zinaida's cross in cemetery for the poor and indigent.

A COFFIN WAS CARRIED OUT TO THE STREET FROM A VERY DIRTY UNLIT WOODSHED. IT WAS VERY COLD BUT ALL PEOPLE WERE FORCED TO WAIT FOR 20 MINUTES UNTIL THE WATCHMEN HASTILY DRESSED HER BODY.

now. Because the burial was held as if she was not a person who worked all her life and left something behind her in this life.

"A coffin was carried out to the street from a very dirty unlit woodshed. It was very cold but all people were forced to wait for 20 minutes until the watchmen hastily dressed her body. The door of the woodshed was open, and we saw how they cut a piece of unclean white tulle to cover the body. Carelessly dressed, dried blood on her face, not wiped. They dressed her in a dirty, rumpled shawl. In her life Zinaida was a neat person, she would not have such a shawl.

"And the most depressing thing was that she was buried where they bury indigents. It was a cemetery for the poor where nobody cares for the graves. Graves and crosses of those previously buried, overgrown with weeds that are higher than those crosses. And no names, only numbers on most of those crosses. I was shocked. I have never seen such a burial. I was shocked by such an indifferent even inhuman attitude. I still think of the other human beings who surrounded Zinaida in the nursing home.

"In the nursing home staff personnel met us so boorishly and rudely that I could not look into the eyes of people who lived in this shelter. I'm sure that such a cruel attitude toward the elderly is a custom there.

"During next two nights I had nightmares about this dirty woodshed and weeds over the crosses in the cemetery where she was buried. The only thing we did, was we recorded the number of "her" grave, and I hope that after the winter ends we can come there.

"This burial reminded me of a time when I toured a

From the Editor: The Siberian Evangelical Lutheran Church (SELC) continues to grow and be a place where the Gospel of Jesus Christ is preached and the Holy Sacraments provided for sinners seeking forgiveness and healing of body and soul. In the newsletters of THE SIBERIAN LUTHERAN MISSION SOCIETY (SLMS) the members of the SELC reveal their faith and hopes. They are Russians seeking an answer to challenges and problems in their lives. They are a people who have been called by Christ in the healing waters of Holy Baptism and fed by the holy precious food of His body and blood. They may speak a different language but they are all baptized in the name of the same LORD and eat and drink the same Jesus. These are a people who know the mission of the Church -- a mission which begins and finds its conclusion in the Word and Sacraments properly administered. We invite you to read this newsletter with a prayer of divine grace for our Lutheran brothers and sisters in Siberia. Their challenges in a land of pagan Buddhism, shamanism, and atheism is great. Your prayers and continuing support is appreciated.

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