

Church has no intent to proselytise in Thailand

The Russian Diaspora in Thailand is steadily growing, which inevitably creates the need for the presence of the Russian Church. Father Oleg, who has lived in Thailand since 1999, talks to RBTH about his mission and how he deals with his parishioners.

What do you consider your task here?

As a priest and as a Christian, I see the very same task in Thailand as I see in every place, in any country. The thing is that from the Christian point of view, a person is saved for eternity by following Christ.

This does not mean that we want to turn the Thai people to Orthodox Christianity at any cost. Religion is not Coca-Cola; it is not a product that requires advertisements.

This is not what Orthodoxy uses. We must give an answer to an individual who is truly asking, prepare him. We must baptise him and teach him how to be a Christian. That is why I am here.

Who are your parishioners?

We have a very multinational flock. If we talk about the priesthood, then we have priests from Russia, Moldova and New Zealand; there are also Thais. And, of course, realising that we are located in Thailand, our Thai priest Fr Daniel has the advantage of honour.

How can you explain the rapid

growth of the Russian Orthodox Church in Thailand?

Theravada is considered to be closer to the original teachings of the Buddha than, say, Tibetan Buddhism. If we speak of convention, then Thai Buddhism is the "orthodoxy" in Buddhism. If someone compares Catholicism, the various currents of Protestantism, and Orthodoxy, then the antiquity and nearness of Orthodoxy to the original source will immediately be evident to him. This is attractive.

Another very important component is that Catholicism and Protestantism followed the colonisation of East Asia by the Western European countries. The feeling that Christianity is the religion of the colonisers is connected to this.

Orthodoxy does not have this handicap. Even in the most favourable time for the Russian empire, the time of the friendship of King Rama V and Tsar Nicholas II, we never sent our priesthood to Siam and always greatly respected that Buddhism – a culture – was the state religion of Thailand. And we are still very sensitive to this as it belongs to the religious choice of each individual and of whole nations.

Once you said that you do not take donations "earned by prostitution, fraud, or in professions that do not comply with Christian values". How do you know for sure where the money comes from?



Russian Orthodox Church was never seen as a colonial religion and only serves its flock.

BRIEF BIO

F Oleg (Cherepanin)



➤ **NATIONALITY:** RUSSIAN

➤ **AGE:** 53

➤ **RANK:** ARCHIMANDRITE

In 1999, F Oleg was sent to the Kingdom of Thailand as the rector of St Nicholas' Chapel in Bangkok. In December 2001 he was appointed Representative of Russian Orthodox Church in Thailand with the mission to give spiritual guidance to the Orthodox flock in Laos and Cambodia. In November 2011, he was awarded the highest order of the Russian Peace Foundation - a golden medal "For peacemaking and charitable activities".

Of course, this is not about the donations that people put into the box inside the church, but about situations when someone wants to donate a large sum, especially when it is a person we do not know. In such a situation, the person writes a receipt indicating what his name is and so on, and he swears on the cross and on the Gospel that this money is honest. Then we accept it. But these were rare occasions that happened in the beginning, because I have been here for 16 years and I know everyone; I know who, and how, and what they earn. There have been instances when we truly refused to accept money. Money is relative for the church, for God. God cannot be bought and donating a lot does not buy you the Kingdom of Heaven.

I have a Ukrainian "den-zhka" [currency note] of small value. When we were collecting monies with which to help our Russian girls that had ended up in difficult situations here, a little boy came up to me in one of the hotels and asked: Would this help them? He was holding it for a very long time. It's clear that mama and papa gave it to him for candy or

ice cream. He had taken care of it; it was folded up... It could not be used, of course, but I saved it for the memory and it is kept in the church.

How would you explain why Russians behave in Thailand in a way that is not the best?

There are good people and bad people.

For example, policemen were killed during the recent protests in Thailand. Families lost breadwinners. They had been doing their job, upholding the law; children were left behind... It took me a few minutes. I called our congregation to Pattaya and we collected Bt400,000 (US\$12,447), giving it to the families of the killed. No one knew those policemen and there was no benefit to be had. Everyone just understood that they needed help; police salaries are not that high... So people see things like this and others.

One of the provisos of our activities is rendering aid to the needy without reference to their religious affiliation. There is a tradition where we give money to poor students and help orphanages.

Interview by
Irina Vinokurova