

## BIOGRAPHY OF PASTOR ALEXANDER LAPOCHENKO

I was born in a small city of Ust-Omchug in the northeast Russian state (oblast) in 1976. They have a saying about this extremely northern region: "there are 9 months are winter, but the rest is summer!" It wasn't unusual to have freezing temperatures for 6 months of the year, with lows in the -40s. In our isolated region of the USSR, there were no churches at all.

My parents worked in gold mining enterprises - my father was a welder and my mother worked in a warehouse of spare parts for mining equipment. So, I had the happiest of Soviet childhoods, as they say, without "opium" of religion. Despite this, however, I found myself increasingly interested in religion. The most information I could get at the time, though was my 5<sup>th</sup> grade history textbook, which told about the emergence of religions, the development of pagan cults, and finally, the birth and history of Christianity.

Despite the negative bias in the historical analysis of Soviet historians, I had a great desire to read the Bible, but I couldn't find one anywhere. My best source of information was my father's big, old radio from the fifties that he kept in the garage. I used to go there and, turning the tuning knob, listened to the world. And then one day I heard unusual singing over the radio waves; as it turned out, it was coming from a Christian radio station broadcasting in Russian from the island of Saipan, USA.

Once I heard that singing, I found myself almost every evening in the garage...until I persuaded my parents to let me move the "antique" into our home. A little bit later, perestroika and glasnost began and, gradually, religious literature began to appear in our town's bookstore. Soon after, missionaries flocked to the Magadan Region. I think I visited with every last one of them.

I was given my first New Testament by a charismatic preacher from Finland; later I got a Bible from an American Adventist. I was like a sponge for everything that related to religion, mysticism and even occultism. In those years, I had the Bible, the Bhagavad Gita, the Koran, and a textbook on Astrology next to me on my bookshelf. Of course, now it looks a little strange, then it was all serious for me! When I finished school, I already had a strong desire to become a priest.

By this time the first Orthodox Church had opened in Magadan, and after talking with the priests, I began to prepare documents for the Tobolsk Theological Seminary. Of course, when I entered the seminary, I had basically zero church experience. I had such a mess in my head that I still wonder how I was even accepted to study there.

And as a student in 1993, I naturally experienced a huge shock. From the first days of my studies, my ideas about the Church collided with the realities of Orthodox Church life. I have no desire to describe here all the "concentration camp" order that prevailed in this educational institution. However, I got a full dose of humiliation, slave-like labor conditions, and bullying, which were all justified by the need for "humility and obedience."

Having entered the second year, I already decided that I would never become an Orthodox priest, and by the middle of the third year I had to leave. After the seminary, I was in a deep

spiritual crisis, as Mikhail Lomonosov said back in the 18th century: "Blessed are those who have graduated from seminary and have preserved the faith." I had kept the faith, but I was disappointed in the Church ...

After that I lived an ordinary "worldly" life, working as a mechanic in Tobolsk, and got married. In 1998 we moved to Primorsky Krai. Just then my parents were planning to move further south, to the city of Arseniev. We bought a one-room apartment for all four of us and had hoped to buy a second one for my wife and me, but then there was a financial crisis, and our young family had to face great difficulties. We got no salary for months at a time; my wife could find no work, and then our son Kostya was born. However, despite the difficulties, I did not stop my spiritual search. One day I saw an advertisement in a local newspaper that the Catholic parish of the Holy Mother of God of Vladivostok invites everyone to worship. Well, where can a disaffected Orthodox Christian go if not to the Catholics?

True, at first, I came to Mass with great caution; I had been warned to distrust them. By the way, it should be noted that, despite my bad experience in the seminary, I am grateful to the Orthodox Church for a good theoretical education. Very quickly I was noticed by the Catholic priest, Fr. Myron. He very unobtrusively invited me to help him in his ministry.

It was thanks to his efforts that I gradually began to "thaw out" in a spiritual sense. I was surprised to learn that I did not die after I first received the sacrament from the "heretics." I had always liked Western liturgy, organ music, and most importantly, it was in the Catholic Church that I felt like a man and not a "God's slave."

It was with great pleasure that I began serving at Mass, reading Western spiritual literature and theological works. It was then that I realized that the Church is not limited to Orthodoxy, that Christ is "where two or three are gathered in His Name." At about the same time, I met the Lutherans and made friends with the first pastor of the St. Luke Lutheran in Arseniev, Viktor Tselinko.

In 2001 our family fell apart. My wife, unable to withstand the difficulties of life, took our son and returned to Tobolsk. I must say that after the seminary I had no life experience, and I married the first girl I liked just three months after we met. Almost immediately after the marriage, conflicts began, but I, accustomed to humility, endured everything. In the end, though, my wife could not stand it. So I strongly advise young people to take marriage very seriously.

In general, being left alone, I decided to devote myself to spiritual service, and Father Myron also saw in me a good priest. I went to study in the city of Lvov in Western Ukraine at the Academy of St. Thomas Aquinas. After a while I transferred to Kiev, to the academy of the Greco-Catholic Church.

I could not study in "Latin" educational institutions because I had been married. A year later, though, the cardinal of Western Ukraine also forbade married people to study in theological institutions. This was a necessary step because there were not enough resources or places for Eastern Rite Catholic priests. So I had to return to Arseniev.

Having a great desire to serve God and not seeing any prospect of doing so in the Catholic Church, I made the decision to come to the Evangelical Lutheran Church. I began to help Pastor Viktor Tselinko in his ministry, and met the Dean of the Far East, Manfred Brockman. Together with him I began to study the theology of the Reformation and realized that I had found what I had been looking for for a long time . Namely, the answers to the questions that I think all spiritually seeking people ask themselves: the doctrine of "justification", "the theology of the cross", the teaching of Luther "about two kingdoms," and many other things so touched me and amazed me that I finally realized that I had found my place.

In 2003 I entered the off-site program of the Novosaratovka Theological Seminary of the ELC. I did an internship in the communities of Chita and Vladivostok. When Pastor Viktor Tselinko left for Ukraine, I began serving in what had become my home congregation in Arsenyev. In February 2008, I passed my final exams with a good grade and received a bachelor's degree in theology. In October of the same year I was ordained in Omsk and then installed as pastor of St. Luke's. I have served primarily there since then, though I have also helped in other congregations of the deanery, as needed. I stayed very busy with my ministry, but I also was blessed in my personal life when I met Oksana, my wife since 2018. When we married, I immediately became a father of three more children! Oksana has become a partner with me in my work; she decided to study theology and just recently she began her internship in our congregation.

Our congregation is wonderful and unique. Unlike many ELCUSFE congregations, ours has no German roots. The missionary efforts of Manfred Brockman and Pastor Viktor Tselinko were what brought people to the congregation, where the liturgy has always been in Russian and where members have always been people of various nationalities.

The congregation quickly bought a private home that it converted into a church building. Thanks to help from partners in the ELCA Central States Synod congregation, in particular Trinity Lutheran in Great Bend, Kansas, congregational members put their "sweat equity" into making constant repairs and improvements to the building, which became a "House of God" for many. The building has hosted various ministries throughout the years, including in the areas of music, education, and ecumenical relations. In these last months, however, it has become much more difficult to carry out ministry in the church building. A problem that has been clear from the beginning – the swampy soil underneath the foundation – has become only worse. Despite efforts to free the building from moisture, mold and fungus has attacked the walls of the building in such a way that it is a threat to the building's structural safety. We are exploring our options regarding the next steps we can take to sustain a thriving ministry at St. Luke's ministry into the decades ahead.

What else can I write about myself? Probably just this - let me be judged by the people to whom I devote myself entirely. In the end, I can wish every spiritually seeker that she or he finds how Christ and the Gospel touches our hearts.