

January 7, 2022

Dear friends,

Today is Christmas again for our sisters and brothers in Christ in Russia, Ukraine, and Belarus, particularly for the Orthodox. At the time of the revolution, Russia and its neighbors were still on the Julian calendar. When the Soviet Union came into being, they switched to the Gregorian calendar. The differences between the Julian and Gregorian calendars, shifted Christmas to January 7. I have always found it good to be able to celebrate Christmas twice.

The Eastern Christmas is a holy festival, gift giving having been shifted to New Year's Day by the same Soviets (secularization all of the traditions). Santa Clause became Father Frost, visiting children with his granddaughter, Snowflake. The Christmas tree became the New Year's tree. For some, New Year's Day is also celebrated twice – January 1 with the rest of the world, and January 13 as Old New Year (New Year by the Julian calendar).

For those of you who take the polar plunge with the New Year, January 19 is the celebration of the Baptism of Christ and is often observed by the brave and hearty with a plunge through a hole cut in the ice on rivers or lakes, remembering their baptisms. February 2 is the feast of the Presentation in the Temple, the meeting with Simeon and Anna. One of the churches we work with has used this feast day to celebrate the elderly members of their church, those who kept the faith during the difficult days of Communism. I have come to appreciate the liturgical calendar.



**Father Frost and Snowflake (and Pastor Vladimir Tatarnikov)**



**Belarus, Grodno - visiting the refugees for New Year**

With the New Years and Christmas season, our colleagues in Eastern Europe have been busy with outreach. The Roma congregation in Kursk held a Christmas celebration for the children in their community, gathering gift bags and preparing a program for them. The Roma families tend to be among the poorest of the poor. Their celebration was humbler than many, but it was a festive day with all the aunts and uncles (not just biological) of their own community. Love is always bountiful in this church.



**Russia, Kursk - some of the Roma children gathered for the Christmas celebration**

In Kyiv, the Community of St. Egidio has been feeding the homeless through all the months of COVID. During lockdown, they made sandwiches at home and carried them out to the homeless that lived near them. At other times, they have had larger feeding points at different locations in Kyiv. For New Year, they organized a special celebration for the homeless, gathering people in a warming tent, letting them decorate the New Year's tree, sharing a meal and good fellowship. The homeless grew up in homes with families. They have memories of decorating trees as children. People so often forget the humanity of those who live on the street. Today, the community gathered again with their friends from the street, remembering that Christ too was homeless and poor. One member shared, "Today he was born. And indeed, born in simplicity and poverty - on the hay by the lambs.



**Ukraine - the New Year's celebration in the warming tent**

And the greatest wealth he gave us is love. It really is such an incredible power! And where there is love, there is kindness.

And what will good do?... right, good will overcome evil!“ Many young adults are members of this community. Their lives have been transformed by the shared ministry and common purpose and by the friendships they have developed with the poor and with one another.

In Belarus, the Lutheran congregation in Grodno, a city on the border with Poland, has for many weeks been working with Caritas to care for the refugees brought to Belarus from the Middle East. They have been gathering food and warm clothes. For New Years, they visited the camps for refugees with Father Frost and Snowflake, carrying gifts for everyone. The refugees are now in camps, rather than out in the elements at the border, but it is still a very hard situation. Vladimir Tatarnikov is an old friend, having studied at the Lutheran seminary in St. Petersburg and served as an intern with Moscow Protestant Chaplaincy.

In Eastern Europe, the Christmas season begins on Christmas day. The celebration continues throughout January. May we all keep the warmth of Christmas in our hearts not just for January, but for the year before us.

Wishing you all a blessed New Year!

Ellen