

## Don Bosco Salesians in St. Petersburg:

# The Russian Adventure

True to our motto, we Salesians began our "Russian adventure" in Gatchina: We started a joint-venture with an official school there, and integrated a training centre for skilled trades in the technical college. How did this come about? Different Russian concerns had a meeting in Venice in 1991 with their Italian partners. The Russians asked for help in training factory managers and qualified employees. The Italian companies showed their Russian guests a Salesian technical school in Venice and the Russians were very impressed by it. Why weren't there similar schools in Russia? Shortly afterwards we followed up on the invitation to Russia and looked for a place near St. Petersburg to open up our school. This was made possible as the director of a school in Gatschina was willing to co-operate with us.

The Salesian Centre "Don Bosco" which is supported from the Salesian province Venice and the Minister of Culture of the region, opened a college for printing and graphics in 1993, where after three years 80 print and graphic apprentices (men and women) had finished their education. In 1994, due to the support of Swiss friends, the "Business School" (Natschalnaja Schkola Bisnesa) was opened which has two speciality branches: banking and bookkeeping.

The graphical college has modern machinery and tools, which are sometimes used for orders from customers. These commercial orders are a means of generating income for the college. However it is not enough to cover all the running costs, and this work depends too much on chance and the limited possibilities which the teacher-students have, because our teachers were our first apprentices in the college, who now give their knowledge on to the new apprentices, and at the same time further their own studies at the Technical University.

The Salesian Centre "Don Bosco" is not only a school where one can learn languages, the students home beside the school is also supported by us and includes: sport and leisure events, a youth club, summer and weekend activities for children and youth, a language centre with modern computers, advisory services for parents and children, etc.

The Centre has expanded further this year with the opening of a publishing house, which was licensed by the authorities on the 25<sup>th</sup> of March 1999.

Why a new publishing house? What made us Salesians decide to open a publishing house in Russia? What plans for the future could be realised?

The idea came spontaneously after we analysed the situation:

- The school already printed various articles from the Salesians in the east province, and brought out a small magazine. This activity should have a more long-lasting character as more Salesian literature was needed in the Russian language. This however, is a more intern matter.

- The printing machines (all are Heidelbergs) and the other expensive machines were not being used to their fullest capacity, as there were not always enough orders. It was a shame to see them standing idle.

- The school, the teachers and the Salesian community were almost entirely supported from abroad, but (with the modern machinery) there was the possibility to help ourselves if we could use the machines to full capacity.

- Other reasons arise from the present situation in Russia: the complete shortage of good religious literature. One can speak of poverty in this respect too. The Russians read a lot. Their hunger for religious information cannot be satisfied, as there is too little "on the market". The Orthodox often print old books from the beginning of this century. Other books are printed abroad from different organisations and then imported into Russia. The solution however, must be found in Russia, and an additional publishing house can contribute to this.

- We Salesians also like the possibility to have more contact with our own students, with the many boys and girls who live in our area, and to be able to offer them much more. We organise a summer camp every year for hundreds of children between the ages of 9 and 14 and at the weekends there are usually another 30-40 of them in the youth club. So how can we reach all the boy and girls? We would like to publish interesting books for them, and maybe a magazine, to bring to them our ideas and ideals. We also want to offer parents adequate educational material.

- The distribution of good books would increase the effectiveness of the Salesians presence in Russia. In a reality which is being more and more influenced by the media, it is important to have a clear position, to think about possible changes and to start strategically innovative processes. A model could be the example of Johannes Boscos, in the way he analysed the signs of his time: with the means of social communication "to be a school for all classes of society, that creates culture and shows the right way to live". For the Salesians' media involvement today this means: to identify relevant topics and to mediate them, to shape society and to offer models of successful live fulfilment in uncertain times through information and attractive public relations.

- Representatives of all the Salesian media institutions in North and East Europe met in Munich in November 1998, to rethink how their services and help measures could be used in co-operation with other social organisations, to reach certain goals. Organisations are not there for their own purposes, but for the aims decided upon foundation. When thinking about publishing activities it is necessary to put these aims first. Our small publishing house SZDB (Salesianer Centre Don Bosco) puts the main emphasis on the following points, which have arisen automatically from analyses of our previous work:

- Firstly, we want to produce Salesian literature in Russian for the first time. The Salesian community in Gatschina (which are partly made up of Italians) has a standing order in this regard. We want to complete many translations and print them in limited editions. The number of (mostly young) Salesians working in the East European province amounts to around 160.

- Secondly, the education: Now we can help the Russians with our specific Salesian aims. Education is the most important thing for the renewal of Russian society. Different pedagogical brochures and books are being prepared for publishing.

- Thirdly, the catechesis. After a long period of forced atheism, the hunger for religious information

*The Salesian Don Bosco congregation was founded by the Italian priest Johannes Bosco, 130 years ago in Turin. Don Bosco was the first to recognise that the wayward youth could best be helped with a good education and apprenticeship. Today, the Salesians have made it their main task to start up and promote simple craftsmanship training programmes for young men and women.*

*According to the conception of the founder Don Bosco (1815-1888), the Order's values of tolerance and esteem are not only confined to Catholics and Christians. They do not just want to evangelise, but as Don Bosco put it "To be there, to simply be there, with interest". Although Don Bosco was convinced that evangelism is the way, the truth and the life for the whole world. However, the respect for other religions, cultures and ways of thinking, is still the Salesian's main principle.*

*The Salesians don't see themselves as just being development helpers in the Third World, but also as being part of on the spot educational and training programmes. Their main statement concerning their work there is "Education overcomes poverty".*

*Already over 150 job centres have been set up, many combined with basic school education. Help in setting up a livelihood, makes it quite often possible for young people to be self-employed. The Salesians also maintain 935 primary and high schools and 295 secondary schools.*

has raised considerably. The inexperience in all social classes is huge: and so our small publishing house tries to help to fill this gap with the distribution of religious literature. Together with the Catholic Commission for the Catechesis we have published small quantities of some texts, as there are not many Catholics in Russia. However, in the meantime the doors are open for co-operation with the Orthodox.

• Fourthly, let us look at the schools, which have also suffered since the fall of communism. Good didactical books are missing for all subjects. Therefore we are preparing school grammar books for graphic and design together with the St. Petersburg branch of the Moscow University of the press.

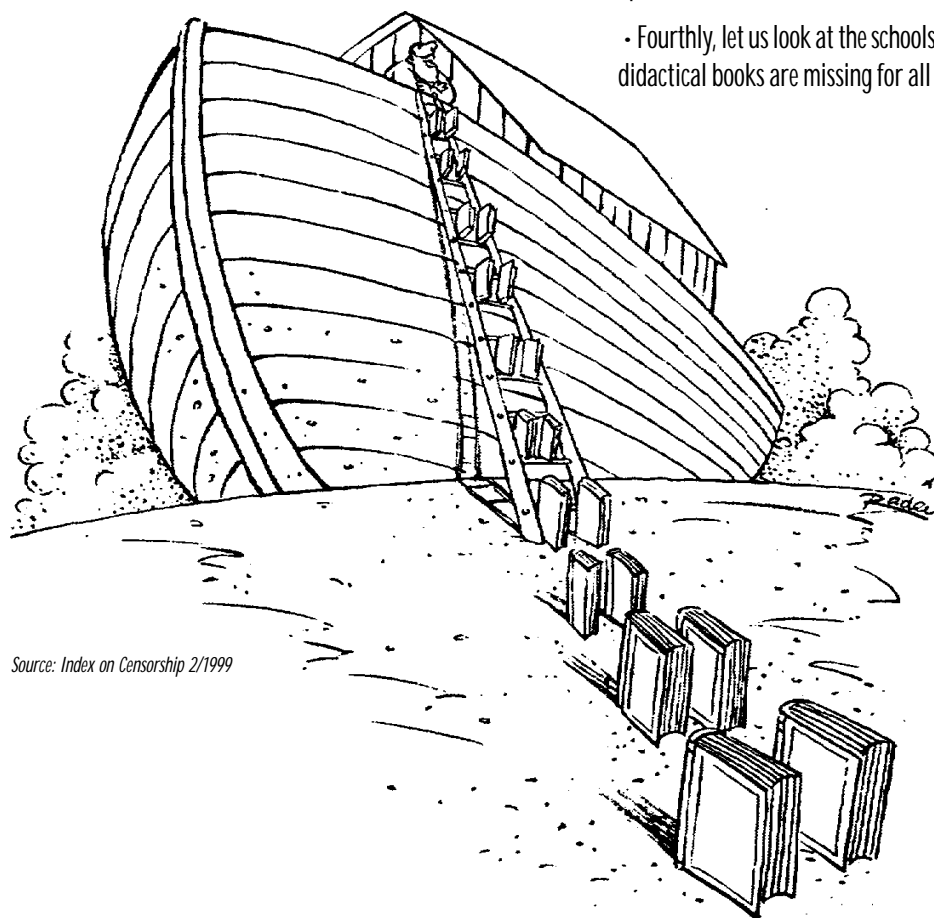
It is like a miracle that shortly after we became our licence for the publishing activities, we unexpectedly received suggestions which we saw as divine providence. We deeply appreciated these proposals as they came from the Orthodox Church. It was the unexpected possibility to work ecumenically, for which we had always wished. After some searching and deliberating we decided to publish books regularly, for the religious education of adults. This seems like a big financial step for our small publishing house, but this didn't stop us as we know that many benefactors are willing to support us. Isn't it strange that a Catholic publishing house produces books for the Orthodox Church? Isn't it wonderful that a tiny new Catholic publishing house can concentrate fully on the education, training and evangelisation of people in the 3<sup>rd</sup> millennium and that in Russia?

The series for the religious education of adults is called "Catechista", the subtitle is Christian Readings. It is issued monthly and each one consists of about 160 pages. The first three issues dealt with acts of the apostles and other

apostolic writings from the New Testament, with liturgy remarks, that make it easier for the Orthodox believers to take part in the liturgy. The next four issues contains the four Gospels in two languages: the old Slavic church language beside the modern Russian texts. These four issues are also meant for lay people who may not understand the special expressions, so that they can take part in the liturgy. For these issues, after a small research, we will dare to print 10,000 copies of each. The series will continue with other Christian themes.

For this project and for others we require financial support. There are many troubles in Russia, but now at the beginning of our publishing activities, it is especially difficult to get by. On the one side we have high production costs because of the low number of copies printed, and on the other side the tremendous poverty in the country, and so we have to sell the books quite cheaply, very often under the production price. In spite of all difficulties, we will go ahead as we are sure that we are on the right road, even if our efforts in the huge areas of Russia are like a drop in the ocean. "The means of social communication (in our case the press) serve human society and social development, the church society and the re-evangelisation." (Aetatis Novae 7-11).

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