

Russian patriarch wants former gulag turned into a spiritual center: Patriarch's grandfather was a prisoner there

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The new patriarch of the Russian Orthodox Church said that he would like to see a former Soviet gulag on the Solovetsky Islands off the northern coast of Russia transformed into a spiritual center.

Patriarch Kirill I said that his grandfather, a priest, was a prisoner in the island camp, whose cruelty was immortalized in dissident Alexander Solzhenitsyn's book *The Gulag Archipelago*.

Kirill said it was a miracle that his grandfather, Vasily Gundyayev, survived. At an August 22 memorial service at the site, Kirill spoke of the spiritual strength that was demonstrated on the islands during the Soviet era.

"We believe that these sufferings and torments have strengthened the power of the Church as it grows with a divine power rather than with a human one," the patriarch said at the Golgotha-Crucifixion Hermitage on Anzer Island, where sick gulag prisoners were sent to die.

When the Solovetsky Islands were seized by the Bolsheviks after the 1917 Russian Revolution, its monks became prisoners. They were joined by thousands of other clergy, believers, intellectuals and aristocrats whom the new regime wanted to eradicate.

"The Lord himself chose this deserted island, so that his death and resurrection were specially commemorated here; the Lord himself chose this place for people to take incomparable sufferings and torments," Kirill said.

While on the islands, Kirill called on Moscow to turn over all the property of the monastery to the Russian Orthodox Church to allow it to complete the restoration of the complex and open an Orthodox educational institution there.

Solovki, as the islands and monastery are known, has in recent years witnessed disputes between the church, museum workers and nongovernmental organizations on how such monuments should be run. The monastery and grounds are shared by the church and a government-run museum.

A growing number of pilgrims and tourists have been coming to Solovki, which, despite the isolation of the area, is famous for its scenery and marine life.

“It would be good if here, on Solovki, a national center for the study of the feat of the Russian church in the 20th century, the feat of the martyrs and confessors, was created,” the patriarch said at a meeting with the monastery’s monks and board of trustees. *-Religion News Service, Ecumenical News International*