

Mission Work Now and Forever...

An Orthodox Perspective on Service to Others

By Fr. Daniel Mathewson

I have not come to impose my will on anyone else, but with Christ as example to serve others.

- Elder Sophrony

A Foundation for Service

I remember the days of church youth camp, you pack up, leave your parents, and set off on a week of fun and challenge, and inevitably I would come home a changed person. Fifty-two weeks of the year, and one of those weeks you spent in this intensified situation made up of mainly deep prayers, worship each day and spiritual contemplation, which by the end of the week causes this amazing paradigm shift or "conversion" if you will, an act of repentance occurs in you. You are changed, you are different, and you want to continue that different way of being when you return home to your everyday situation.

My own calling to the Holy Priesthood was begun on a youth retreat at age 16, where I felt the call to serve God and devote my efforts to serve in his work for my whole life. My father being a pastor, and my mother, having been a missionary, planted the seeds in me to see the needs of others. As a high school student I worked with a local youth outreach program in my city, and also through my High School, College and pastoral service took subsequent mission trips to the Dominican Republic, Bahamas, Guatemala, the Hopi, Potawatomi, and Navajo reservations and many other short term service experiences here in the states. Through this my calling has been confirmed. Still to this day I am given confirmation as I speak with someone at the gas station or a park and share the love of Christ and His blessedness.

Looking back, I see that these interactions and service trips to others have helped to shape my own perspective of how to love without words, and to simply share with a community or one person even a visible and invisible Gospel through love and service. As St. Herman and his companions set off on their missions trip to the Aleutian Islands and as they were sent, they simply prayed, loved and preached the gospel, built Churches and started schools, and the spirit of their holy zeal continues today.

In 1983 I remember one boy in a Haitian refugee work camp in the D.R. named Jose who became attached to me. Knowing very little Creole, and he no English, we communicated by playing soccer and hand gestures, but love was expressed and the message of the Cross communicated. He gave me his only treasured possession, a Spanish English dictionary beat up and tattered. I did not want to take it, but he insisted. Giving what he had was a deep part of his expression of love. Perhaps Jose was there to change me more than I to change him. Because of the work of the Holy Spirit, the Comforter, the Spirit of Truth sometimes little insignificant encounters can change lives more than the planned work of men.

Being a Missionary – Close to Home

Conversion of course is a life long act of the will, and there are many through our lives. This vision to equip believers to share and live the gospel through mission service is already in place by the Orthodox Christian Mission Center, International Orthodox Charities and they offer very good experiences that have the same goal.

Learning from their blessed work, and as a parish priest, God has continued to lead me in my own life and to guide those under my care. Under the guidance of my local bishop in the Eastern and Western dioceses of Pennsylvania I have been training students and families on a more local trips, to serve and to obey the commands of Christ serving others where needed. While at the same time through these short-term trips I have been providing experiences for young people to explore their own calling to missionary and full-time Christian service.



Go into all the world and preach the gospel to every creature (St. Mark 16:15).

North Carolina

Under the Direction His Beatitude Tikhon, then Bishop of Eastern PA, our first trip in 2011 we took as our theme meditation from Words of Life the sayings of Elder Sophrony, thinking on these wise and penetrating words, "I have not come to impose my will on anyone else, but with Christ as example to serve others." We served in a very non-Orthodox part of the country, where we had to show love while not always being able to use words. That trip took us to rural Spruce Pine, North Carolina working with FOCUS North America. Metropolitan Tikhon blessed us to go there, but asked that we do work for the faithful of our own diocese who need help, in subsequent years.

South Philadelphia

The following year we served Holy Assumption Church in South Philadelphia with a team of 20+ we fixed a leaking roof, repaired the ceiling and cupolas as well as landscaping and trimming trees around the parish. Again reflecting on the words of the Elder: "Unless we acquire the sense of service to others our life will be useless", we sought to reach out to the poor and needy in this difficult neighborhood. Thanks be to God, under the Direction of Archbishop Mark the faithful were revived and thankful. We saw in our service this year the need to encourage the faithful Orthodox Christians present in this parish. We taught and showed



that they can speak to their neighbors and show love in action by just doing the little things. Sometimes a simple “Hello”, and “Would you like to come to Church” is all that is needed, as so many people are just looking for somewhere to belong.

Boswell PA

Last year under the Direction and Blessing of his Eminence Archbishop Melchisedek, 15 faithful team members from three dioceses continued the work moving to Western Pa, in Boswell. We gave a facelift to the vacant parish house badly in need of repair. As we learned together, and met the local neighbors of this parish property, we loved and shared Christ as we worked. We learned that we don't need fancy words, as again the Elder instructs us, “Serving other people has a saving power which is much greater than any theoretical theology whatsoever.”

West Brownsville PA

This year from June 15th to 19th, again with the blessing of the Archbishop, 19 faithful Orthodox youth and families, from multiple dioceses, went on a week of struggle, a week of love and a week of hope serving Holy



Resurrection Church in West Brownsville Pennsylvania. We prayed together daily for the community, and repaired and painted the parish grounds and buildings. These committed faithful from the diocese of Western Pa. and the Diocese of the Midwest, got down on their hands and knees and labored, took time to pray each day, and gave freely out of love. Led by Father Daniel Mathewson from Crossingville Pennsylvania serving at St. Peter and Paul Orthodox Church, the team set out with the inspiration from St. Paul, “to live is Christ and to die is gain” as a starting point throughout the week. The team studied the Letter to the Philippians in the evenings and held vespers each night.

Person to Person Encounters

Our first person to person mission encounter of the week came mid week as a young man named Peter wandered on the property to see what we were doing. He only lived about two blocks away and was a recent college graduate living alone looking for a connection and family. He was interested and encouraged to come back for a visit. The woman who was renting the parish house wished to have a parish tour while we worked, and had never seen the inside of the parish! After seeing inside of the parish she began to weep tears for the beauty that she saw inside Holy Resurrection parish. We also befriended a local electrician and his apprentice, sharing again the gospel through love and cooperation in peace. Holy Resurrection is presently without a priest and functions with 22 people remaining in the parish, of which the youngest is in his 50's.

We must die to ourselves so that others may live. -Elder Sophrony

These kind of parishes, beautiful and yet with few still attending, are the norm across Pennsylvania and much of the New York and New Jersey areas and any other parishes in the larger ethnic cities. No less though are these beautiful people who love the Lord, who serve their church, and who honestly wish to see young people return to the Church, but due to demographics and many other complexities find it difficult to overcome.

Serving in a Practical Way

These Missions Trips have spurred others to serve here in the Western Diocese, and we are gaining momentum, and others are enquiring and desiring to be apart of this service to our brothers and sisters in Christ. So many are saying, "instead of talking about it let's do it!", all in the spirit of the Holy Apostles. Those who served have lived this act of love and expressed Christ and his love to those in need. Just look at the affection that the Apostle Paul has in his letters at the beginning and end of his epistles for these local parishes, some booming some struggling.

Many times in our Orthodox world we speak and talk about a lot of things, we are a lot of talk, but we're very little action. The goal and purpose of these mission experiences is to give the faithful an opportunity to serve in a practical way and to create a team bond as well. The gospel is made alive through true and living love, love that's expressed in person, face-to-face, in hands-on-love.



On each trip the physical work is different but plentiful!

Our physical work of course on each trip is different. We have done everything from scraping, prepping, priming and painting the exterior windows of a parish, to repairing and reroofing, to building handicap ramps, to replacing doors. We have landscaped and refurbished an entire cemetery, and cut down trees blocking the view of a parish, and many other projects. Those attending the trips range in age from 5 to 91 and whole families serving together has become the norm.

Our week this summer was protected even though we were struck by lightning the first night before we started. The strike knocked out the phone and the chandelier dimmer. No one was hurt! There were volunteers from as far as North Carolina, and from the Diocese of the Midwest from Holy Assumption in Canton, Ohio. Holy Ghost in Ambridge, and St John's in Canonsburg, with others from Sts. Peter and Paul in Crossingville, as well there were other volunteers from New Salem, and from Holy Resurrection parish. The West Brownsville parish ladies provided the meals daily for the team while they worked from 8-5 each Day.

Now hope does not disappoint, because the love of God has been poured out in our hearts by the Holy Spirit who was given to us (Romans 5:5)

Show Love and Give Hope

These mission teams' purposes were not to change the world or to manifest some miracle, but simply to show love and to give hope. Many times that is what the faithful people need most of all. Sometimes simple hope can inspire parishes to actually grow by getting to know their neighborhood and becoming alive with zeal again the gospel of Jesus Christ. Holy Transfiguration parish in Steubenville Ohio is a perfect example of one where the parish was dwindling and had no hope. But a priest willing to get into the community to meet new people, and parish faithful not afraid of their neighbors, and acting with love resulted in becoming an organic part of the local area, rather than something that just stuck out in the middle of nowhere. Through this active participation in the community they have transformed the parish, doubling in size in a

very short period of time. This is the possibility, and this is what hope is all about.



Showing Love and hope through prayer & physical labor

As Christ said: 'Do not be afraid to lose your life in this service'. He who serves others save his soul for eternal life." –Elder Sophrony

Revitalization does begin with sitting down and talking strategies, preparing and looking at demographics and local statistics, but if it just stays there in our minds and on paper it is vain and worthless. There's a Latin saying used in equity jurisprudence that one must act *in personum*, in person, face to face, working together. This service of love begins as we serve the Divine Liturgy -- and is for the faithful, as they/we are our first neighbor. Then our focus turns to those who live near by, and then to the larger community -- this should be our gospel strategy. One of our greatest weakness in these difficult communities is just "being known". Expressing that we exist, and becoming visible and making available the blessed life of the Holy Orthodox Church should also be a priority. Good Signage and advertisements are a good beginning. We should be regularly holding community events -- not to make money - - but to give back to the community, to offer hospitality to show love. Some years ago I would take my youth group out and we would do "random acts of kindness". Some years

ago, in my youth ministry, we bought many cases of drink boxes and gave them away at little league games near us. The juice box came with a little card that said "God love you and so do we with our Church name and info. Simple but effective. The ministry of care through hospitality is key in any parish community. In addition to being known for a place to buy good food, more importantly we should be known by our love and hospitality. There is a powerful union of love and a sense of grace that you feel as you work together and serve others. It is blessing.

Future Trips

The hope is to continue these trips through the years in our diocese, having representatives from each parish, and even multiple teams to go out and to give hope, to give hands-on help, and do it in grace and the love of Christ. In addition to serving our orthodox brothers and sisters through our mutual love for Christ, the team members also get to experience a little taste of what the apostles or other missionaries felt as they entered a new land and were sent out.

Getting involved in these trips allows a bond between team members and a strong sense of purpose and heart felt unity in Christ. This week is also designed to inspire the youth and families who attend to give time to their own parishes and serve them with the same zeal and hope. Priests can "equip" the faithful, but the faithful are the ones who truly make up the body and do the work.

The little things matter. Making sure the garbage goes out, turning off lights, arriving early and assisting the priest for services, and loving the neighbors right around your parish are essential to the healthy functioning of the body of Christ. *How will people come and stay in our parishes?* If they see love, vulnerability, and lack of fear. In this virtual world we are surrounded with more and more we must act *in person*, with intention bringing an invitation to come and see, this alone can turn many in darkness to the way of repentance and belonging.

<p><i>There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called in one hope of your calling (Eph. 4:4).</i></p>

The other reflection on this wonderful week is the way we mirrored Christ. Our Sunday Gospel readings are mostly the actions of Christ expressed in real time and in real love. As we stood on ladders, scraped primed, repaired, and painted, and cared for a temple of worship those driving by were given the gospel simply through just noticing our actions. This becomes a reality in my experience after you spend a week in your parish community. Especially when you camp out in the back yard of the parish!

People are quick to condemn "bad neighborhoods" near parishes -- but after living in many personally, I have found there is more good than bad. The Orthodox reality is there should be no fear of dying due to our redemption in Christ, and in the example of the blessed martyrs. As a result we need not be afraid to be near people who need a Savior. Perhaps we are afraid? After studying the gospels I saw that an overwhelming command of Christ surfaced as the most given by the Lord: "Do not be afraid!"

As we choose to stay in these broken communities, the clergy and the faithful must live as the saints and apostles, willing to risk it all and to “give up even mother or father”, or letting “the dead bury the dead” and follow Christ. We must go to the precious souls made in Gods image and call them. The Lord said if the faithful and invited ones will not come, invite new ones, and if they do not come go to the hedges and the byways and compel them to come to the banquet. Unless we acquire the sense of service to others our life will be useless.