

# Resources for Raising Parish Awareness + Community Building:



**#1 Get to know the press (TV, NEWSPAPER):** Invite them to your parish for a Liturgy, tell them about the history, about something new in the church, anything. See if they bite.

**#2 MEET PEOPLE:** Go to the Newspaper and meet the CEO he/she just might have attended seminary and enjoys religious stories for their traditions and not their exoticness. Inform them often of what you are up to. (Pascha Basket blessing, Cars, Animals, all of it.) Find someone in the parish who can write press releases that don't sound preachy, but share a tradition and how it involved the community, how it helps the city and why they would not want to miss it.

- Visit the people at Museums, Libraries get coffee with the higher-ups and just talk.

**# 3 THE STREET STORE:** [www.TheStreetStore.org](http://www.TheStreetStore.org) - Check it out, invite your parish community, delegate and let the community building happen, have fun with it...and invite the press.

**#4 EXPLORE LOCAL COFFEE SHOPS:** See if they allow presentations and see if they would allow a powerpoint on Iconography, Call it *Early Christian Art and Architecture*, keep it simple and broad to stir up interest and let that be an invitation to non-Orthodox who show up. Inform the Art Departments in the colleges. Give it your all. (Just the other day Photographs of Russian and Slovenian Orthodox Churches were featured in a local non-Orthodox photographers gallery from trips he took around the world in a local coffee shop.)

**#5 SEE IF THE PHILOSOPHY CLASSES HAVE FIELD TRIPS:** Some college World Religion classes require students to visit at least 4 different religious services. Get your parish's name on that list. See if the professors would invite you to come in to offer a presentation on Orthodoxy and its history. I had a full hour at a local College because the professor had this approach as part of his curriculum.

**#6 CONTINUING EDUCATION:** Sign up to offer an Orthodoxy 101 class in the Summer/Fall classes at local colleges. Make prayer ropes and teach about the Jesus Prayer. There are enough free Yoga classes on that list, why not cast the fishing net for those seeking true prayer?

## **#7 FIND AND RESTORE TRADITIONS**

**Bless the river**, get to know the Press, invite other Orthodox churches. (Greek Orthodox locals were touched to see this come back to Rockford in 2014. Belarusian founding members remembered it in the days of the villages and were touched to see it come back too.)

Example: **Flower Arch of Gladiolas:** When our Bishop visited we made flower arches in the nave that His Grace walked under just like in the village. We involved the youth, it helps the service have one more element of experience for them to participate and to remember.

## **#8 INVITE YOUR TOWN** (just for the sake of getting the word out that you are there.)

Invite a Russian Choir: Print up some posters, explain to Starbucks how it is NOT a religious service so they don't hassle you, keep it a "FREE-WILL" offering so they don't hassle you twice. We usually saw 35- 40 people a Sunday in 2014 and the evening we had the Russian choir we had 124 people attend with about 3 pastors of local churches.

**#9 YOU'VE GOT TALENT:** Everyone has talent in the church. Find out what they are, use a stewardship card, ask, have coffee and see how they can pull together to aid in these efforts.

**#10 BE WELCOMING.** If the community is not warm it will not make a difference if a church has the best services, the best iconography, shiniest dome, silk vestments, headscarves, pews or no pews. Remind and encourage faithful to welcoming visitors, "WELCOME HOME" with open arms. Speak of your parish with love and remember no matter what size, it is God's home and it has been entrusted to your care. Warm the parish with love, love the people.

# THE STREET STORE by Fr. Jonathan Bannon (Story #1)

In 1965 the world was shocked because Bob Dylan went electric at the Newport Jazz Festival. Having left his acoustic guitar in its case and the audience's jaws on the floor a new era had dawned for some, and the beginning of a new period of darkness had just begun for others. We are far removed from such alarming news in 2015. Sadly it takes much more immoral and devastating events to capture our attention these days. As the death count of fallen soldiers and innocent people in the Middle East rise, we in the States can often remain largely unaffected as this news becomes common day after day. One can ask, "Is there good news?, Where do I go to hear it amidst this fog of celebrity excess, consumption and social injustice?" Christ's redemption is this good news that our church has cherished for 2000 years and it is most successfully received when shared not through loud speakers and waving the Bible in-front of a big screen with flashing lights, but rather in silence, in love, in peace and action for those in need.

With poverty in Capetown, Africa this group wanted to bridge the gap between the have's and the have not's bringing together those largely marginalized and forgotten, our dear brothers and sisters in our own backyards often called, "the homeless." These folks do not have the same opportunities to pick out a new pair of shoes, to be approached and asked what colors they like with suits and dresses. This truth can leave them feeling like second-class citizens shopping at second hand stores. As the world gets thriftier with hipster fashion such choices are not really options for the homeless as it is all they have and so the Street Store was born. By encouraging faithful to donate clothes and shoes, these items were set up along the side of a road neatly with shirts and outfits hung from a chainlink fence becoming the first pop-up store of its kind for those in need.

Volunteers would become personal shopping assistants helping all who attended pick out three items. The Street Store is free and has little to do with sending people home with bags of clothes and more to do with looking into the eyes of our equals and reminding the world, if not ourselves, we are on the same level of worth in society. This is news that caught the attention of rock-music group U2's front man Bono's ONE campaign and other world-renowned relief efforts all the way down to the local news of Rockford, IL as it came to one of our very own American Carpatho-Russian Orthodox parishes in the West.

As a young priest with a small parish I am eager to jump right in and get to work. However, wondering if there are limits to our community because of necessary

manpower is sometimes on my mind and all such thoughts have been thrown out because of this event put together by a woman. A Cornell graduate, mechanical engineer, 21 years old and Orthodox for just a year, Bethany Sezdiol knocked on the door. Bethany had joined our parish having been relocated because of her job for just one year. With a background in Missions she loves helping the community and saw the Street Store on the Internet and said, "I'd like to bring this to Rockford, will our parish back this?" Agreeing we would, she took the lead pulling together non-Orthodox friends she made at a local swing-dance night in another church, they started coordinating the event, contacting local care-shelters to find the best place to host it. We started inquiring about donated clothes and shoes from our own community. We found these efforts quickly touched the entire spectrum of society. We have a parishioner who runs an eBay store selling shoes who donated 60 pairs. Soon our basement became a shoe renewing factory polishing, scrapping out stones, cleaning blemishes, doing all we could to make these "kicks" look brand new for the big day. Older founding-members of our parish sat beside converts who sat next to non-Orthodox visitors all lending a hand and bringing in items and setting up the day of. Sending in some info to our local news channels and media we found they were interested. A reporter with camera was interviewing Bethany and me in the nave of the church only to get a call later to come down to News headquarters on live TV to talk about this event. At the event, a reporter was asking questions for the local paper making the Sunday news and another television station interviewed her and aired it later that night along with a follow up interview for an electronic newspaper that shares stories about people of faith in the community.

All of this started from one idea in Africa to care for Christ's people and in doing so pulling together an entire parish and local community from oldest members to converts. We hosted 186th Street Store in the world. It has been to Brazil, Canada, Mexico, India, Greece, Peru and now Rockford, IL. So many people in need were touched by this event Bethany reflected as they came to her sharing, "I needed this." When thinking of how to share Orthodoxy with the greater community of Rockford and to let them know Christ's Ancient Faith was alive and well I did not have a note book filled with answers from seminary as we do not have a class on Evangelization. In some ways I looked at this as a blessing seeing that it leaves us with Christ's sole commandment and a hymn I remember from camp fires at Camp Nazareth, "They will know we are Christians by our Love." When we gave this event a try it quickly became a lived message to our community saying no matter how many cracks in the pavement that could divide us, homeless or not we walk the same road in life, we simply have to choose the direction we are going. Are we going to walk past Christ who is naked,

sick, in prison, and hungry as He said? Or will we walk together and rejoice that the Lord calls us sinners home and gives us all we need to get there? As the homeless are vested in our gifts, Christ vests us in the cloak of His very own Light! Could anything be more attractive in our hurting world? Christ is Risen! Amen.

## Jesus Drinks Decaf *(Everyone is a brother or sister) Story #2*

I served Christ coffee 82 times in 30 minutes a year ago this month, the most transactions our store has ever had. In fact He proceeded to order 8 more drinks by the end of the hour and in the morning rush He ordered at least 260 different beverages in the span of 120 minutes. Each time He came to the register He had on a different outfit, a different hairstyle, and a different expression. It can be difficult to see Christ in everyone when the line builds up out the door and the pressure to be less kind and reactionary begins to grow. However, when we do see Christ in each and every person it becomes that much easier to not react, to love honestly, and to turn a deaf ear to the devil who strives to end Christ's love from be shared so freely. One customer really stood out in this attempt when I first started working at Starbucks, in my first week I found him to be the classic "movie customer" the one we hear of but perhaps have never met, the one who would stare plainly as I asked how they were and hoped for a smile. With each passing day I tried to not show frustration and would attempt to not have any stirrings in the heart towards anger but rather express Christ's love as best I knew. I had to try something different. I tried asking how he was which was met with, "I don't like to talk in the morning." The next day I thought I would give "sir" a try, and this too was met with, "Don't call me sir unless the queen knights me." To my amazement I was at a loss for options. Please and thank you's were not working, smiles and questions too were of no use.

Knowing I had only a year at this store [awaiting the Diaconate and Priesthood] and trying to make it as enjoyable as I could, I could not give up on the purpose of living, the purpose Christ the Saviour Seminary tried to foster in my soul and heart. I could not give up on loving others and trying to see God in them and help them experience God in life, even if it was only through a smile. I started smiling more and when he came in one day I just pointed at him while saying loudly, "I'm makin' this guy's drink, right here!" Through this he too began to smile more, and then a week or so later we bumped into each other outside, shared hellos and another customer passed by saying, "Hey Father!" We both looked over and I'm thinking, "No, no I'm only a Subdeacon", as she knew I went to Seminary. He proceeded to ask if I was Orthodox and we soon find out that we share the same Patriarch!

At first I felt worlds apart with George and it was at this moment I discovered the man I judged at first has been my brother in Christ, sharing a family bond closer than any ethnicity or last name, but now of real blood - Christ's very own. Our friendship over the months only deepened as on Christmas Eve while making a hot chocolate I asked him if he was born in Greece. He shared with me he was and as the conversation progressed I discovered he too had shown an interest in monasticism. George had traveled to the very location of my Real Break OCF trip of 2008 and Mount Athos. Again I was amazed at this!

From my first week thinking this man must be the most rude person in the world now is telling me he has met many of the famous holy fathers on the “Mountain” as well. As I finished making my drink, He began to share how he unintentionally met Elder Paisios. The following took place that evening;

Me: “So you met Elder Paisios?”

George: Yes, I had peaches with him. I met him three times...I didn’t even intend to meet him”

Me: “Woah, what do you mean?”

George: “Well I was walking down a path, and I saw a hut, I think that is what they are called, a hut, and there was a swarm of bees and I feared for my life! [hands in the air] I then heard a voice from behind me say, “Do not worry about the bees.” I turned around and it was Elder Paisios.”

Me: “What!? No way! Did you talk with him?”

George: “Yes, For an hour and a half.”

Me: “Was there a crowd of people around you? I only have seen photos of him conversing with a group”

George: “It was just us.”

Me: “What did he talk to you about?”

George: “Mostly spirituality and nationalism”

Me: “Wow, did he joke with you at all, I heard he has at times.”

George: “Yes, he was jovial.

It was at this point in my friendship with George that I began to see customers that walked in with a new lens, and understood that one ever knows where another has been in life, what they are going through, and perhaps walking away from. We are called to not only see God in others but to treat them with the very love God has richly bestowed on us sinners. We can impact peoples lives for better or for worse with even just a glance; of which St. Silouan the Athonite warns against when done with anger. I’ve learned when working in close quarters, we can impact each others’ days with our attitudes towards life from the big things to even the littlest things like the rain.

Some customers would come in and share how their days are crummy because of some rain. The rain is beautiful I would share! Having gone through three years of seminary and still thinking about a thesis all the time while on the job, I never agreed for a second about how the rain can some how equate to a day without joy, without a thought of God’s love for all of humanity, rain or no rain. I would smile and tell them the rain is great while questioning how the spring would be as lush if not for the rain. Other times I would point to my heart and explain that it is more important that the Sun is shining in here, than the rain out there.

We may never know how our attitude or the way we carry ourselves may impact another’s life and day. Even a small pebble dropped in a lake causes ripples in the water. The ramifications can be endless.

Even if we only see someone for 30 seconds and never again, there is an opportunity for God's truth to be shared and experienced with them in action borne by love.

The stresses of living today can be very overwhelming from all points of life. One of the strongest helps I have experienced in the work place with regaining a footing in my day is reading the prescribed daily Scripture accounts aside from regular daily prayers. The readings provide the strength I need to power through in this race towards salvation. Sacred scripture can help the day start off right and end well.

His Grace, Bishop Gregory, encouraged us at the Priests Convocation last year to read the Scriptures everyday. The late +Metropolitan Nicholas admonished me when I became Reader at Camp Nazareth saying, "You must now begin to read the Scripture everyday." I have found in the workplace with 2 ten-minute breaks, that making it a habit to read the 'good news' it is such a strength. When I sit in the backroom and read I feel as if I leave work during this time. Where do I go? An island? No... Heaven! It's amazing how the heart's cares and worries subside and the Lord fills the soul with a fresh breath of air to go back into the arena ready to take on Satan, even from within.

I waited for about 6 months since that Christmas Eve to find out just what George learned from Elder Paisios years ago. On an outdoor patio, when our paths crossed at the right time he shared the following with me:

[Looking at my watch and then at my friend George.] "I have 8 minutes...Just what did you learn from your time with Elder Paisios...What did he have to say to you?"

George: "Elder Paisios... we talked"

Me: "What did you talk about?"

George: "Not of theology and all that but of the simple things in life. How to live.. He told me about honey bees and the honey making process. Which bees to keep around...the best kind. And of apricots and jam making. He deflected my theological questions with simple answers about life."

Me: "He deflected your questions?"

George: "He did not deflect them, rather I think he perhaps was trying to answer them with other simple responses that had deeper meanings that I would understand later or perhaps not understand. How apricots that fall from the tree when they are ripe and rotten ones can still be used to make jam...they still have a purpose. You can make jam out of them."

Me: "My gosh that could be a sermon!", I exclaimed in amazement while laughing.

George: "Exactly. So I came back 2 years later with a friend. My friend saw him while he was mending the door to his hut/cave. He got up and came over and my friend was fanatically asking him lots and lots of questions while I stood behind my him. He looked past my friend and saw me and said, 'I've met you

before, you've visited...Have you made any jam?' I told him, "I try to make jam everyday," and he said, 'Good!'"

By this point my 10 minute break was up. Smiling, I shook my friend's hand while taking my apron and going back in the store I said, "Hey! I gotta go make some jam!" Working at Starbucks (or any public service job) for the past 11 months has been a spiritual workout. Seeing Christ in all people can truly force one to flex their spiritual muscles. We do not need to be in a monastery to hear God's voice in our hearts. In fact, you can be making 2-3 drinks at a time on the bar with a line out the door and 6 people waiting for their lattes, each made to order, each with a name, and still hear God in the soul. Only with God can you touch their hearts also. Having served a former NFL Bears 1963 World Champion to the lead actress from My Big Fat Greek Wedding to your average plumber, painter, teacher, moms, dads, grandpas, kids and priests - there is an opportunity to reach out. Perhaps with each profession we may be hired to, as a Christian we should hope to see a job description that indicates "You will share Christ with all people", for truly this is a command from our Lord already. Amen.

## This is My Athos (Story #3)

It was like sailing into a dream that proved to be more of a reality than the secular society I had stepped out for a moment. It took a boat, two planes, two buses and a van to get there. The length of the peninsula was so long... As we drew closer to Mount Athos the world I had known disappeared in the mist behind us and before us appeared Byzantium.

The trip to the Holy Mountain was so monumental how does one share, where does one begin? How does one describe a place that when you return home someone says to you, "You just got back from the Mountain? Can I touch you?" with wide eyes. The answer I discovered was far easier than I thought it could be. This trip with Fr. William George started long before we reached the shores of 1000 year old fortress monasteries adorning the cliffs and beaches of what has been called the Panagia's Garden, in fact it began when I shared with my wife I was done thinking of the Holy Mountain.

I cannot recall the first time I remember hearing of Mount Athos but I do remember the day I stopped thinking of it for good... at least until the Lord presented the opportunity.

It was 9 AM and I had just finished spending a day and a half at a monastery in the lush Catskill Mountains of New York before heading home to become a deacon the next morning at St. John's in Bridgeport, CT in 2013. We had finished Liturgy that morning after starting prayers at 3:15AM and I was eagerly anticipating getting on the road to see my family and prepare for the new day and all that it would bring. Before getting to my car I heard the engine of what looked like a motorcycle-like tractor whiz around the monastery being driven by one of the priest-monks. Hopping off this machine we greeted each other and talked for a bit before I left. I thought I would ask him the one question I asked every person who may have visited the location I was going to mention, "Father, Have you ever been to

Mount Athos?” Pausing for a moment and looking out across the Catskills, sun-lit like one of Monet’s finest paintings, his eyes following the horizon of the monastery, then looking back to mine he said with a smile of admiration and joy, “This is my Athos.” Little did I know I was really asking, “Father... have you ever experienced something that is better than what you already have... as if what you have is not the best.”

Almost a year later now as a priest I began to desire to go to Athos to study Byzantine icon-painting until I said... “I’m done.” because a more desirable thought came to my heart that I just had to share with my wife. Pani Marianna, “I have to tell you something! ...I’m done thinking about Mount Athos.” I exclaimed, “Instead I am going to think about how to facilitate opportunities for people to experience God here at our parish with the same fullness He is experienced and spoken of on Athos so people will say I want to go to Rockford!, before they say I want to go to Athos!” She just smiled.

Excited to look into ways of building such opportunities from book studies to service projects I felt the Lord will take care of Athos in His own time. Within 24 hours I received a phone call from seminarian classmate and friend Fr. William and he tells me, “Fr. Jonathan... you’ve been invited to Mount Athos!” I couldn’t believe it, I had to tell him I just handed thoughts of the Mountain over to God the day before.

Visiting Agios Oros was truly an opportunity to walk where saints have been walking for over 1000 years. The Metropolitan Museum of Art and Chicago Art Institute may boast of having a sections of 4th and 5th century Byzantine floors that you can never walk on again. On Athos we walked on a mosaic tile floor that has never been moved since the 8th century just to go light a candle! We sang Prostopinije (Carpatho-Rusyn Plain Chant) in another Cathedral style church built by Russians with the most amazing acoustics. When we stopped singing our voices continued to pour down from the dome for upon us for some time! Even a whisper in this church became thunderous. There was an iconostasis (icon screen) with 2 tons of gold gilded upon it with three sets of Royal Doors and three altars and it was priceless though today that would cost over \$500 million dollars to prepare. However, the architecture was not so monumental it shadowed the caretakers of these treasures, of these beautiful churches. The very hearts of the monastics, the laborers of the Garden of the Panagia, their eyes and actions reflected the beautiful offerings that these monumental churches spoke of in their columns and domes, in transfigured icons and gold crosses, these were the living icons of transfigured and transformed human souls and it was here I realized.... Mount Athos is not a location as much as it is a love in action.

### **“43 Carpatho-Russian Priests served... and I could not stop weeping.”**

At one monastery we had a chance to meet a monk who was formally a lieutenant in the army explain why it is important to make a reservation by calling ahead. Fr. William and I had just sat down in the receiving room that reminded us of Bishop Nicholas’ parlor in Johnstown, PA, icons and pictures of previous abbots and other religious objects and prayer ropes around a coffee table. It felt as though Bishop Nicholas could be seen passing by at any moment. Two gentlemen came in wondering if they could stay the night without a reservation. This monk began to tell them, “You make a reservation for



the cinema, you make a reservation for dinner, but not our monastery? Come on guys its not 1914 its 2014 we have 160 guests to care for, go to the monastery down the way, they will take you, get out of here! How can you not call? Sit down!” Fr. William and I just sat as still as statues holding our coffee cups watching as this monk proceeded to wait on them with some Turkish delight and two shots welcoming them and being charitable after explaining how important it is to call ahead out of love. Just as we were departing from our stay here this same Lieutenant shared, “Once last year there were 43 Carpatho-Russian priests who came and served a liturgy and it was my week to help in the altar and I was so embarrassed because I could not stop weeping for the whole service! Their singing was so beautiful. I was so thankful to them for what they shared.” Here a lieutenant in the army was found weeping for over an hour because of the chant of the Carpatho-Russian people. Truly a blessing from Athos to hear.

We continued on and I began to learn on Mount Athos though there was such beauty in both the flowers of the fields, the blue mountain that changed hue with each passing hill as her summit grew piercing the heavens there was an even more evident beauty found in the heart, a scent of holiness, the fragrance of the spirituality of those around you. It was so strong it revealed the condition of one’s own heart like putting a wilting rose amid fresh blooming flowers. My Spiritual Father asked me when I returned home, “Jonathan, did you have any bad experiences on the Mountain?” In my elation from the trip none came to mind and I replied,

“I haven’t thought of any... now that I think of it the only bad experience I had was seeing how far my own heart is from where it should be.”

I approached the mountain with expectations, thinking to myself when I saw the first monastery we visited with broken brick quarters long worn falling apart with such a judging eye little did I realize it used to house 800 Russian monks but after WWI it was left almost vacant with twenty monks to care for the grounds. I turned to Fr. William and said, “you know... I think the real treasure of this monastery is inside this Church” we had been walking around waiting to be unlocked. I did not realize this Church happened to be the largest church on Athos where the very skull of St. Andrew the First Called was treasured, the Apostle and 1st Bishop of our Patriarchate. God used Mount Athos to both strike and heal my heart as we pray in our Come to Me prayer books. Like the true Hospital our Church is, she helps us see our illnesses and is quick to offer the cure as she always does.

A Starbucks customer who had been to Athos and met Elder Paisios once told me when I asked him what it was like on Mount Athos, “How can you explain the mystical? You must go there to experience it. The mountains, the trees, walk the trails..” He was really saying, “Come and see!” The Panagia’s Garden is not held back by the Aegean sea, it knows no limits, the saints are just as present in our icons as they are on Athos as our parish in Taylor can testify. With a garden comes expectation, admiration, and anticipation of fruits, flowers and fragrances, and ultimately strength, substance and sustenance. With a garden also comes time, hard work and humility. We can ask ourselves have we as priests and parishioners been so diligent with the plot of that garden given to us by the Lord, the treasure of His Church entrusted to us to care for, plant and nurture so those visiting will encounter Him also! So

parishioners and visitors will encounter Christ not only in the shine of a gold chalice but even more so in the brilliance of an illumined heart!

We often tell people wondering just what the Orthodox Church is to, “Come and see!” for it can be difficult to describe her wonder and beauty just like it can be of Athos. What are they to experience when they visit our parishes but the fullness of Christ’s unchanged church! If you have experienced prayer, if you have experienced the peace and beauty of God, if you have experienced His joy, you have experienced Athos. Everything on Athos benefitted one’s relationship with God and neighbor because it was all done out of love for the Lord.

How rare it is to look out a window these days and see as far as the horizon nothing but the tops of churches and land dedicated to God in one’s visual path like it is on the Mountain. A place without buzzing gas station signs, radios playing and countless temptations and unrequested options. We all can experience Mount Athos every morning like the priest-monk in the Catskills if we look to all things as being the Lord’s and as stewards care for what He has given us and offer it back to Him with thanksgiving as Adam and Eve were assigned in the Beginning! We too can look upon our parishes and see the wonder, the fullness and the beauty of Heaven every Liturgy, every encounter with a brother or sister in Christ if we are constantly saying, “[This](#) is my Athos” with love and not, “This is [MY](#) Athos” with thirst for control and power.

Elder Iakovos of Evia who is to be canonized soon once said, “We are not sanctified by the place in which we live, but by the way we live. We may be on the Holy Mountain but, in our thoughts, be in the world. Or we may be in the world in body, but noetically on the Holy Mountain. If someone is a proper monk, wherever he goes is the Holy Mountain.”

We can say if anyone is a proper Christian so too will he find himself in the Garden of the Panagia enjoying her fruits and sharing them with others. People are thirsty for a drink from the Mountain, rather the true pure waters of Orthodoxy’s endless well. May we draw from this in our hearts where God dwells with His Kingdom and share our Athos, share God’s love, everywhere we go! Amen!