

KOINONIA:

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INSIDE THIS ISSUE:

- And Who is Our Neighbor?
By Archpriest Eric G. Tosi 1
- On Serving God and Neighbor
By Elder Thaddeus 2
- Freedom to Love Your Neighbor
By Saint Silouan of Athos 3
- Church Impact On Cities
Interview with FOCUS NA 3
- Mission and Philanthropy
By Protospres. Thomas Hopko 4

And Who is Our Neighbor?

By Archpriest Eric G. Tosi

“Teacher, which is the great commandment in the law?” Jesus said to him, “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind.’ This is the first and great commandment. And the second is like it: ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’ On these two commandments hang all the Law and the Prophets.”

(Matthew 22:36-40)

I was asked to speak at an older urban parish some years ago and the priest, a good and dedicated priest, and I had a serious discussion on the state of the parish. He stated outright that there were no people around (not an uncommon statement) because they all moved away. I took him to the front door and pointed to the many people who were literally walking past his church in their daily commute. I replied to him that what he meant was that the legacy Orthodox were not there, but he had a



whole community of potential Orthodox right outside of his door.

Sadly, what often happens is that we get so narrow in our view that we cannot see what is happening right in front of us. Our neighborhood is our parish. Until we start to think like this then we will fade into obscurity as just another parish along the street. We must, as Christ commanded, love our neighbor as ourselves. And what greater love than to present them Christ!

Some of our older parishes are situated in the heart of an urban area and have some amazing facilities that are hardly used. And whether the

area is gentrifying or dying, those same neighborhoods are in desperate need of precisely what we have. Yet we lock our doors, literally and figuratively, to them. In those same neighborhoods, other denominations are moving in and setting up churches. And we are trying to move out. Does this make sense?

We must begin to see our neighborhood as our parish. Get engaged, get to know the people around you, get involved in their life and show that you actually and truly love them. Do not become just another church along the street that people pass by on their daily commute, but become the haven of peace and sanity so they can experience the love of Christ that we are called to present. They may not be like the former parishioners, but they will be part of the new parish which is founded on the very love we preach. The numbers are limitless—we just need to open those doors and be part of where God planted us. In doing so, we honor those who came before.

On Serving God and Neighbor

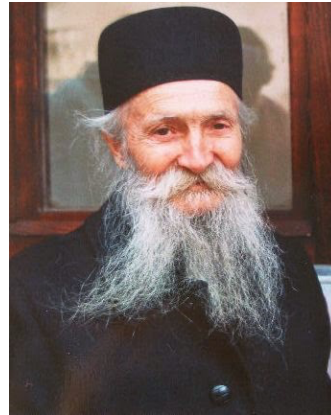
By Elder Thaddeus of Vitovnica

“And when we sin against our neighbor, we are actually sinning against God, for God is everywhere. He dwells in the souls of each and every one of us.”

When we talk to our fellow men and they tell us about their troubles, we will listen to them carefully if we have love for them. We will have compassion for their suffering and pain, for we are God's creatures; we are a manifestation of the love of God. However, we often consider this a great burden, for we are oppressed by our own cares, worries, and weaknesses. We need to rest from all these cares, but only God can give us rest. He is the Bearer of all our infirmities and weaknesses. That is why we must always turn to Him in prayer. That is our only source of comfort. Then we will be relieved of our burdens and the burdens of our neighbors' troubles as well, for we will have taken all of them to the Lord.

If we listen to our neighbor with only half our attention, of course we will not be able to answer them or comfort them [...] We are distracted. They talk, but we do not participate in the conversation; we are immersed in our own thoughts. But if we give them our full attention, then we take up both our own burden and theirs [...]

When our neighbor comes to us with his troubles, we take part in them, but if we do not know how to relax—



to give all our infirmities and those of our neighbor to the Lord—then we bear this cumbersome burden in our own minds and hearts and, over time, we become unbearably stressed and nervous. We become irritable; we cannot stand our own selves, let alone other people around us—our family members and, of course, our co-workers. Our life becomes miserable and stressed, and our nerves become strained. This is because we have not taught ourselves to let go of our thoughts. When our thoughts are at peace, our body rests too.

Our plans and interests often interfere with our lives. We make all these plans, believing that we will never succeed in anything unless we arrange everything meticulously. We truly must try to do everything as our conscience tells us, but we must not do anything in haste. It is when we are in

a hurry that the enemy (Satan) traps us. In haste we cannot be aware of whether we have said something to offend our fellow man or whether we have ignored him, because we have no time to think of him; we are too busy with the plans inside our head. In this manner it is easy to sin against our neighbor. And when we sin against our neighbor, we are actually sinning against God, for God is everywhere. He dwells in the souls of each and every one of us. Our relationship toward our fellow men defines our relationship toward God.

It seems that we do not understand one thing: It is not good when we return the love of those who love us yet hate those who hate us. We are not on the right path if we do this. We are the sons of Light and Love, the sons of God, His children. As such we must have His qualities and His attributes of love, peace and kindness toward all.

Excerpt from Our Thoughts Determine Our Lives: The Life and Teachings of Elder Thaddeus of Vitovnica.

Freedom to Love Your Neighbor

By Saint Silouan of Athos

But if you do good unto your brother you will gain rest in your conscience. If you subdue your own [passions] your enemies will be driven off and you will receive peace in your soul.

And when you humble yourself entirely, you will find perfect rest in God.

Let us love our fellows, and the Lord will love you. Think not, O my soul, that the Lord loves you if you look askance upon any man. Rather is it then that you are beloved of the devils, in that you have

become their servant; but be not slow to repent, and ask the Lord for strength to love your brother, and you will then see that there is peace in your soul.

With all your might ask the Lord for humility and brotherly love, for to him who loves his brother the Lord gives freely of His grace. Make a trial with yourself; ask God one day for brotherly love, and the next day live without love, and you will see the difference. The spiritual fruits of love are plain: peace, and joy in the soul, with all

men dear to you, and you shed abundant tears for your fellow man, and for everything that has breath, and all creation.

Often a single sympathetic greeting will work a happy change in the soul; and, contrawise, one unfriendly look, and grace and the love of God are gone. When that happens make peace to repent, and the peace of God may return to your soul.

Excerpt from Wisdom from Mount Athos: The Writings of Staretz Silouan.

“Often a single sympathetic greeting will work a happy change in the soul.”

Orthodox Church Impact on Cities

An Interview with FOCUS North America

The wave of Orthodox Christians that came to America in the early 1900's were mostly poor, working-class laborers and small business owners looking to build a new life. These Christian migrants built churches, neighborhoods, and lived out their faith in America's industrial cities. Time passed and family businesses became successful, laborers acquired wealth, and the urban landscape changed.

As economic landscapes shifted mid-century, so did the demographic landscapes of cities. New

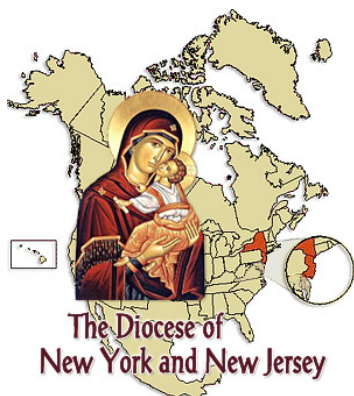
neighbors moved to the neighborhoods that were first built by the Orthodox faithful. Communities who built their churches as the center of their urban lives began to live in the suburbs and commute to the city.

Fr. Tom shares that “a church which is made up of members from outside the area surrounding the church can become insular and isolated. It can focus on itself while ignoring or even fearing those on the ‘outside’ who may not look like them or share their values or culture.”

Today all of our American churches, especially those who find themselves in communities like Fr. Tom described, must challenge themselves to reach out to the neighborhoods surrounding the parish, both to help those in need, and to proclaim the usefulness of the gospel in word and deed to every human person—especially the “least of these.”

For the full interview between Fr. Thomas Soroka, Fr. Paul Abernathy and Kenneth Kidd, go to the FOCUS North America webpage and listen [here](#).

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Strength: Mission and Philanthropy

By Protopresbyter Thomas Hopko

Loving God with all one's strength, particularly according to the Hebrews text of Holy Scripture, means that we are to love God with all that we possess, primarily our money and property. Strength, in this context does not merely mean mental, emotional, or physical might, though these, of course, are not to be excluded from our love for the Lord.

An Orthodox Christian parish, when it is Christ's holy Church, is obliged to use all of its powers for God's glory and the people's good. Christians as individual persons, as well as families, parishes, and dioceses, will have to give account to Christ for how they used their God-given strength. We will have to answer for our use of money and resources, property and possessions, positions and profits. We will be asked how we loved "in deed and truth," and not merely "in word or speech," through concrete acts of charity for the hungry and thirsty, the sick and suffering, the homeless and naked, the persecuted and imprisoned (*cf. 1 Jn. 3:18; Mt. 25:31-46*).

On judgment day, the Lord will not ask us about our parish size and facilities. Nor will He be interested in our liturgical schedule or style. He will not ask us how we dressed or what we



ate. He will be indifferent on how large our church temples were, or where they were located or how they were decorated and appointed. Nor will He ask us to recite the Nicene Creed, or to explain the doctrine of the Holy Trinity. All of these things are essential, but their significance has only one end: the love of God with all one's heart, soul, mind, and strength, expressed as it can only be expressed in this present age, in concrete acts of love for our neighbors, first of all as members of our own families and churches, and most of all for those who hate and oppose us.

Love of God with all our strength through acts of love for our neighbors and enemies is enacted primarily through evangelism and philanthropy. Sacramental participation in an Orthodox parish is strictly reserved for committed Orthodox Christians who take full responsibility for the Church's faith and completely identify with

the Church's path through history; but the philanthropic and evangelical activities of an Orthodox Christian parish, as well as its services of teaching, counseling, and prayerful intercession, have no bounds or limitations. They are to be exercised freely and without discrimination for all people regardless of their religion, nationality, race, sexual behavior, or relation to Christ's Church. The first Christians, as witnessed in the New Testament writings, and such saints as John Chrysostom and Olympia, and Fr. John of Kronstadt and Mother Maria Skobtsova, taught and practiced this Christian truth without the slightest hesitation, equivocation, or compromise.

Excerpt from Protopresbyter Thomas Hopko's Speaking the Truth in Love "The Parish in North America" (pp. 92 – 93).

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