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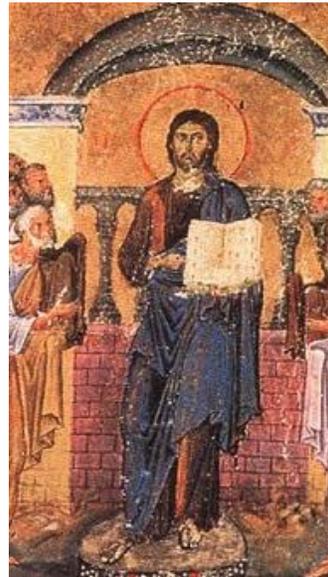
EVANGELISM AND DESPAIR

by Archpriest Eric G. Tosi

"The Spirit of the Lord is upon Me, Because He has anointed Me to preach the gospel to the poor; He has sent Me to heal the brokenhearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to set at liberty those who are oppressed; to proclaim the acceptable year of the Lord."

Isaiah 61:1-2

It may seem strange to think of evangelism through the prism of despair; but it is precisely at that intersection between despair and hope that the Church must place Herself. Despair can be crippling, damaging and ultimately destructive, because it eats away at the soul. It is only by looking towards hope and through hope that we discover God in the midst of despair. Sadly, and far too often, people are unable or unwilling to see through despair, preferring to wallow in it, rather than discovering that there is a



way through it. They abandon God because they perceive that God has abandoned them. It is at that intersection where we can be most effective and bring people to a new understanding of God.

We as Orthodox Christians must point to another way, another reality. It is precisely to those who are in despair and have abandoned hope that we must reach out as individuals and as a community. Our evangelism is to those people who are unable or even unwilling to see hope

and to bring them to the realization that God can give us hope. We do this by being a witness to hope in our own lives and demonstrating that there is a different way. We also point to the plethora of examples in the Church in which hope has overcome despair – examples from the Gospel, from the lives of the saints, even from the Church's liturgical life. We show that the Church can point us to a better reality.

So, be that witness for hope; and go to those who are in despair. The world desperately needs your hope-filled presence, in order to overcome its destructive nature. Draw those who despair into a new life and a new reality, so they may learn the love of God. We do this, as the Apostle Paul writes in Romans 12:12, "*rejoicing in hope, patient in tribulation, continuing steadfastly in prayer.*" And the light will shine in the darkness.

Attitude: Seeing Things More Clearly

Our society places a great deal of emphasis on the importance of attitude. Our attitudes determine the things that we do and how well we do them. In many instances, we are judged not so much by our actions but rather by the attitudes that generate those actions.

“Our attitude must reflect the mind of Christ, while our motivating spirit must be the Holy Spirit.”

In the Church, the attitude or spirit that motivates our actions is of paramount importance. Our attitude must reflect the mind of Christ, while our motivating spirit must be the Holy Spirit...

Prior to the Day of Pentecost, the apostles were not exactly receptive to the idea of proclaiming the

risen Christ and the establishment of His Kingdom publicly. In a sense, they were “unfit for true service.” Their attitude quickly changed, however, when they received the “spiritual saving seal” calling as Orthodox Christians of the Holy Spirit who motivated them to live their faith and enthusiastically share it with others. Their newly-acquired attitude reflected the mind of Christ and dictated, even in our own day, the ongoing mind of the Church.

The attitudes that motivate us to serve as stewards, disciples, evangelizers, ambassadors, and Christ’s

coworkers are just as important as the actions that these attitudes produce. “Whatever you do, in word or deed,” Saint Paul writes, “do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through Him.” (Colossians 3:17) Herein lies the key to a proper attitude towards our common calling as Orthodox Christians.

From Fr. John Matusiak in *Church Growth and Evangelization, OCA* (1986), p. 19.

St. Barsanuphius of Optina on Despair

Life is blessedness! These words might seem strange. How can one call life blessedness when at every step one encounters failures, disappointments, and grief? How much sorrow do people endure? Life, people say, is labor, and often thankless labor – what kind of blessedness is there in this? And all the same I repeat: life is blessedness. Life becomes blessedness for us when we learn to fulfill Christ’s commandments and to love Christ. Then it will be a joy to live, a joy to endure the afflictions that come upon us, while before us will glow the ineffable light of the Sun of Righteousness – the Lord. All the Gospel commandments begin with the

word, “blessed”: blessed are the meek, blessed are the merciful, blessed are the peacemakers ... From this it follows, as a truth, that the fulfilling of the commandment offers people the highest happiness ...

You need not be despondent. Let those be despondent who do not believe in God. For them sorrow is burdensome, of course, because besides earthly enjoyment they have nothing. But believers must not be despondent, for through sorrows they receive the right of sonship, without which it is impossible to enter the Kingdom of Heaven.



“Discovering the Missionary Ethos” by Archbishop Anastasios of Albania

In the Eastern Church, one finds a strong existential understanding of the concept, *“My power is made perfect in weakness”* (2 Cor 12:9). This leads to a serene freedom from “power” complexes and anxiety-for-success which often torments “missionaries” and “missionary societies.” There is an awareness that often what may appear as failure is only the death of the seed of wheat that falls on the earth and brings much fruit later. If the unsurpassed missionary epic of the brothers from Thessaloniki, Cyril and Methodios, were to be judged, for example, by the direct fruits of their work at the beginning of the tenth century, we would have to characterize it as a failure. Their work collapsed in Moravia. Later, however, with the dispersion of their disciples to the land of the southern Slavs, to Bulgaria, and then the spread of their work into Russia, their life sealed the history of the Slavic lands and to a great extent the history of the world.

Each day, at the time of prayer, we Orthodox



direct our thoughts and hymns toward concrete persons, apostles, confessors, martyrs. Many of them, according to the criteria of their time, had completed their lives in some tragedy. And yet in the apparent “failure” of their lives, the Church found support. There is a direct relationship between witnessing for Christ and the acceptance of the external powerlessness of martyrdom for His sake, for the love of His Church, and having always the living hope which “does not disappoint” (Rom 5:4).

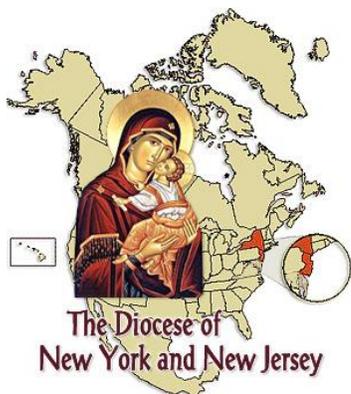
Seeking no worldly influence or glory, many saints have remained entirely unknown to history. But the genuineness of their lives and their unyielding

love of God profoundly affected the souls of the anonymous people who knew and loved them. Many carried on missionary work without being aware of it. They did immense good just by simply existing. They lived in freedom: freedom from the desire for wealth, for fame, for power and from the fear of human failure. The daily contact of the Orthodox believer with all these saints, who lived constantly and doxologically with Christ’s first and final coming, with a spirit of joyful praise, gives shape and form to the Orthodox ethos.

This liturgical, ascetical, social, and martyr-like ethos is still at work. It is a kind of ethos that offers to missionary work a special quality of expression and presence, an invincible endurance and joyful freedom.

From “Discovering the Missionary Ethos” in *Mission in Christ’s Way* by Archbishop Anastasios (Yannoulatos) (Holy Cross Orthodox Press: Brookline, MA 2010), pp 133-134.

“There is a direct relationship between witnessing for Christ and the acceptance of the external powerlessness of martyrdom for His sake, for the love of His Church, and having always the living hope which ‘does not disappoint’ (Romans 5:4).”



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St. Olympia Mission Finds A Home by Peggy Wheeler



Saint Olympia Church has come a long way since February 2012, when we held our first regular Liturgies on the campus of SUNY Potsdam, and had to bring in and set up the altar, icon screen, and all items necessary for each Liturgy. In the past eight years, we have prayed with, taken Holy Eucharist with, and ministered to many people: old friends and new, long-time residents of St. Lawrence County and new additions to our community – especially college students, both “cradle” Orthodox and converts.

Within four years, we grew from having Divine Liturgy twice per month, to having Liturgy every Sunday! Early on, we moved from the campus to a private chapel where we still worship today. Soon, we included Matins on Sunday mornings,

and we were able to add Great Vespers on Saturdays in the summer of 2017. We were starting to worship like a regular Orthodox church!

Our Lord continues to move in the St. Olympia parish beyond our own limited vision. Two years ago, if someone had asked us when we would have a resident priest, we would probably have answered, “years from now.” It was barely a dream. Yet by the following summer, His Eminence, Archbishop Michael, had sent Father Peter Irfan to us. Similarly, when we began our first stewardship drive for 2017, we established a building fund. We thought that it would take years to grow the funds necessary for acquiring (much less renovating and maintaining) our own building. Nevertheless, the Lord preempted our timeline again! In April 2019, we were approached by the Congregational Church of Norwood, NY, located about six miles north of Potsdam. This congregation was founded in 1858 and the church building was dedicated in 1862.

Trustees of this parish’s diminishing population were convinced that the church

must remain a sacred space; they wanted their sanctuary to transfer to another church rather than have the property become a business establishment: they wanted to *give* us their building! Archbishop Michael met with our parish last October, and with his blessing, we began the legal process of acquiring the building. We have completed all of the paperwork for the transfer of property, and are waiting to hear from the State.

Converting the building into an Orthodox worship space will take some time. Beneath the deferred maintenance, needed repairs, aged systems and necessary renovations is a building with a strong foundation. With the support of Archbishop Michael, much of the repair work can be completed by teams of volunteers from the Diocese. Of course, all such plans are on hold during the pandemic. Meanwhile, though, we continue to enjoy our beautiful chapel at the home of one of our parishioners.

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<https://www.nynjoca.org>