

loved you, that you also love one another. By this all will know that you are My disciples, if you have love for one another.” (John 13:34-35) Or in the words of the Apostle and Evangelist John, “By this we know love, because He laid down His life for us. And we also ought to lay down our lives for the brethren. But whoever has this world’s goods, and sees his brother in need, and shuts up his heart from him, how does the love of God abide in him?” (1 Jn. 3:16-17)

Divine love will move us out of our secure and comfortable churches and into the neighborhoods around us to listen, to serve, and to invite those we find into the loving embrace of the Holy Orthodox Church. “Such are the souls of the saints,” writes St. Peter of Damaskos, “and in this age and in the age to come they put their neighbor first in all things, even though because of his ill-will he may be their enemy. They do not seek recompense from those whom they love, but because they have themselves received, they rejoice in giving to others all that they have, so that they may conform to their Benefactor and imitate His compassion to the best of their ability; ‘for He is bountiful to the thankless and to sinners’ (cf. Luke 6:35).” (“Book I: A Treasury of Divine Knowledge”, *The Philokalia: The Complete Text (Vol. 3)*.)

In conclusion, I want to reiterate that many of our churches are not doing what they should be to evangelize the people of their neighborhoods and have become quite content with the people who look like them, eat like them, and speak like them. The Church has been commissioned to baptize all nations, and we must start in our own neighborhoods. I realize that this message may upset those who want to remain as they are, but in love for all, it’s time for there to be an outcry in our Archdioceses, dioceses, and parishes, and for specific action to be taken to begin once again to baptize our neighborhoods in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.

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A Question for Orthodox Christians:

What are we going to do to get them,
and what are we going to do when they come?

By His Grace Bp. THOMAS (Joseph) and Fr. David Hyatt



“Things are difficult in the world because people are not brethren. Kinship between individuals and nations has been forgotten and people act towards their neighbors as towards strangers in a foreign land.”

St. Nikolai Velimirovich

Recently, one of my brother hierarchs told me a story about an encounter that his priest, at the time, had with a person who looked different, spoke different, and was of a different ethnic background from the members of his congregation. This man approached the priest to inquire about becoming an Orthodox Christian. A bit surprised, the priest asked this man if he thought he would be able to pray, fast, and accept the divine services that the Orthodox Church had to offer. With sincerity, the man answered that indeed he would accept them. Frustrated with this response, the priest handed the inquirer a Bible in a language other than English, and he asked him if he could read it. When the man said that he could not, the priest replied, “Then you cannot be in the Orthodox Church.”

What are we to make of this kind of encounter, and countless others like it, that many who are reading this article have personally experienced or have heard of from those who have? Perhaps you are thinking, “This would never happen in my church!” Or “I know people tell these kinds of stories, but I don’t believe that anything like this has ever happened.” Denying the reality of these kinds of prejudicial attitudes within our parishes only serves to further them and deepen the darkness of our hearts and minds. Withholding the grace of the Holy Spirit from our neighbors because they are different than us, by ignoring or even resisting their entrance into the Holy Orthodox Church, is a very serious sin.

Before the ascension of our Lord, God, and Savior Jesus Christ into heaven, where he is enthroned at the right hand of God the Father, he gave his disciples – and that includes you and me – these instructions:

“All authority has been given to Me in heaven and on earth. Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all things that I have commanded you; and lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age.” (Matt. 28:18-20)

It is important to note that Jesus did not send his disciples only to the house of Israel – their own ethnic and religious group – but to ALL nations. In the original Greek text, it is written, “πάντα τά ἔθνη” or “to all ethnicities”. Through Jesus’ life, death, and resurrection, he has sanctified all human nature and is calling all people to himself. In the Gospel according to St. Luke, we read these words from Jesus to his disciples after his resurrection,

“Thus it is written, and thus it was necessary for the Christ to suffer and to rise from the dead the third day, and that repentance and remission of sins should be preached in His name to all nations, beginning at Jerusalem.” (Lk. 24:46-47, emphasis added)

This is exactly what the disciples did through the power of the Holy Spirit! On the Day of Pentecost, “they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak with other tongues, as the Spirit gave them utterance.” And to whom did they preach? “Devout men, from every nation under heaven.... Parthians and Medes and Elamites, those dwelling in Mesopotamia, Judea and Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia, Phrygia and Pamphylia, Egypt and the parts of Libya adjoining Cyrene, visitors from Rome, both Jews and proselytes, Cretans and Arabs—we hear them speaking in our own tongues the wonderful works of God.” (Acts 2:4, 5, 9-11)

In case there was any doubt that God desires all people to be saved, the First Council of the Holy Orthodox Church was convened in Jerusalem. The details are recorded in the Book of Acts, chapter fifteen. The question that was threatening to divide the Church was

Find ways that you as a parish can engage with your neighborhood through service and outreach. Discover what the needs are in the households around you and find creative ways to assist. And if you are not sure what to do, take the next step (#5)!

5) Ask for help, and humbly receive it.

We are blessed in the Antiochian Archdiocese to have many passionate and insightful people who are prepared to help any parish who desires to live as loving, humble missionaries in their neighborhoods. Our Department of Missions and Evangelism will do anything they can to help and assist us, and to teach us how to reach and receive all people so that our offering will be pleasing to the Lord. My sincere hope is that as you read this article, you will be inspired to go to your bishop, priest, parish council members, and the Department of Missions and Evangelism and ask for their help through instruction, modeling, and resourcing.

In the Dioceses of Oakland, Charleston, and the Mid-Atlantic, one example of doing this work is the parish of St. Moses the Black and the Neighborhood Resilience Project, led by Fr. Paul Abernathy, in the Hill District of Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. Through their service in the surrounding community, they are not only strengthening the physical, mental, and emotional health of their community, but also are living as witnesses of Christ who regularly welcome new members into the Holy Orthodox Church. Fr. Paul and his team are always ready and willing to share what they have learned and offer guidance to those parishes who are seeking to get to know their neighborhoods better and to serve them more effectively.

6) Finally, let Divine Love be your guide.

St. Maximos the Confessor, in his Four Hundred Texts on Love, 1.13, wrote, “The person who loves God cannot help loving every man as himself, even though he is grieved by the passions of those who are not yet purified. But when they amend their lives, his delight is indescribable and knows no bounds.”

This outward focused, self-sacrificing love, to which we are called by our Lord, is the sign that we are children of God. Jesus said to his disciples, “A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another; as I have

could, in the Russian language, as well as having the congregation recite the Lord's Prayer in both English and Russian. They wanted their Russian brothers and sisters to know that this was their home, and that they would be welcomed and loved as members of the parish.

It also is very important that as parishes, we humbly receive the clergy that God has given us, through the direction of our beloved Patriarch, Metropolitan, Archbishop or Bishop, regardless of their racial or ethnic difference from the present makeup of our parish. Judging the acceptability of one of our priests or deacons, simply because they look different, speak differently, or have a different background and life experience, is shortsighted at best and prejudiced at the worst. Many times, through the gifting of the Holy Spirit, it is those clergy who come from a different background than our own who are able to help us the most. They see the world around us through a different lens, as it were, and are often able to offer us new insights and solutions to the problems we and our neighborhoods face. We bless ourselves and thank God that he is pointing out to us that he desires that all nations be baptized in the name of the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit.

4) Actively engage with the neighborhood around your church.

Take a few moments and consider these questions: Other than the fact that our building is located where it is, are we in any way reaching out to the families who live around us? Do our catechumen roles consist of people from the neighborhood? Do the families who live near our church even know we exist, or that the grace of the Holy Spirit is available to them inside our doors? If Jesus were to live in one of the houses around our church, would we even know he was there?

In the Gospel according to St. Luke we read, "And behold, a certain lawyer stood up and tested Him, saying, "Teacher, what shall I do to inherit eternal life?" He said to him, "What is written in the law? What is your reading of it?" So, he answered and said, "'You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your strength, and with all your mind,' and 'your neighbor as yourself.'" And He said to him, "You have answered rightly; do this and you will live." But he, wanting to justify himself, said to Jesus, "And who is my neighbor?" (Lk. 10:25-29) Who is my neighbor? Rather than being a question that seeks to justify my lack of love for those around me, we should be asking this question motivated by love for our neighbors! Who is my neighbor?

whether Gentiles (non-Jews) had to become Jews, through circumcision and adherence to the Law of Moses, in order to be a Christian. We read that "...certain men came down from Judea and taught the brethren, "Unless you are circumcised according to the custom of Moses, you cannot be saved.'" Sts. Paul and Barnabas, who had been witnesses to the salvation of the Gentiles, went up to Jerusalem to seek an agreement in council with the apostles and elders, "and they reported all things that God had done with them."

"Now the apostles and elders came together to consider this matter. And when there had been much dispute, Peter rose up and said to them: "Men and brethren, you know that a good while ago God chose among us, that by my mouth the Gentiles should hear the word of the gospel and believe. So God, who knows the heart, acknowledged them by giving them the Holy Spirit, just as He did to us, and made no distinction between us and them, purifying their hearts by faith. Now therefore, why do you test God by putting a yoke on the neck of the disciples which neither our fathers nor we were able to bear? But we believe that through the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ we shall be saved in the same manner as they." (Acts 15: 2-11)

Then St. James, the brother of our Lord and the first Bishop of Jerusalem, said to the council,

"Men and brethren, listen to me: Simon [Peter] has declared how God at the first visited the Gentiles to take out of them a people for His name. And with this the words of the prophets agree, just as it is written:

'After this I will return And will rebuild the tabernacle of David, which has fallen down; I will rebuild its ruins, And I will set it up; So that the rest of mankind may seek the LORD, Even all the Gentiles who are called by My name, Says the LORD who does all these things.'

Known to God from eternity are all His works. Therefore, I judge that we should not trouble those from among the Gentiles who are turning to God..." (Acts 15:13-19)

St. Paul, in his epistle to the Galatians, reminds us, “For as many of you as were baptized into Christ have put on Christ. There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is neither male nor female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus. And if you are Christ’s, then you are Abraham’s seed, and heirs according to the promise.” (Gal. 3:27-29)

My dear brothers and sisters, we are all undeserving of the grace of the Holy Spirit. Who among us can claim the right to the Gospel of Jesus Christ? Who dare say that they have merited the mercy of God because of the circumstances of their birth? Which one of us has the ability to stand in judgment of God? When we dare to turn our backs on our neighbors, for whatever reason, denying them the opportunity to receive the grace of the Holy Spirit in their lives, we are standing in judgment against the God who calls ALL nations unto himself. I, for one, do not want to be that person!

How then should we live as members of the Body of Christ – the one, holy, catholic, and Apostolic Church? In short, as loving, humble missionaries to all people! To do this, I strongly recommend that we all engage in the following steps:

1) Repent of our sin of racial, ethnic, and socio-economic prejudice.

Due to a variety of circumstances, over time many of our parishes have gone from a community hub, serving the families that live nearby, to commuter parishes providing temporary spiritual nourishment before we retreat back to more desirable neighborhoods. The time has come for us to take a long hard look at ourselves to see if our parishes reflect the demographics of the neighborhood in which our church facilities reside, and if not, why not? The Prophet Samuel, when he was called by God to anoint David as the next king of Israel, said, “For the Lord does not see as man sees; for man looks at the outward appearance, but the Lord looks at the heart.” (1 Kingdoms 16:7)

This should also be the way that we view one another, remembering that every person is created in the image of God and called to grow into his likeness by grace, this includes every race, ethnicity, language and culture of humanity. And when we choose to ignore or reject

various people because they are different than us, for whatever reason, we are guilty of the sin of prejudice of which we must repent.

2) Consider yourself to be the stranger.

St. John Chrysostom wrote, in *On the Statues*, “If you are a Christian, no earthly city is yours. Of our City ‘the Builder and Maker is God.’ Though we may gain possession of the whole world, we are withal but strangers and sojourners in it all. We are enrolled in heaven: our citizenship is there!” Writing of the Saints, St. Paul declares, “These all died in faith, not having received the promises, but having seen them afar off were assured of them, embraced them and confessed that they were strangers and pilgrims on the earth.... But now they desire a better, that is, a heavenly country. Therefore, God is not ashamed to be called their God, for He has prepared a city for them.” (Heb. 11:13, 16)

If we are to take up the mindset of the Saints of our Church, we must begin to see ourselves as citizens of another Kingdom, rather than the kingdoms of this world. And if we do, we will stop seeing those who are different from us as the stranger to be feared or looked down upon. Instead, they will be potential brothers and sisters in the Body of Christ, the Church, who we are called to love!

3) Welcome and include all ethnicities – clergy and laity – into our parishes.

The traditional Orthodox approach to parish life is that the church in each area was to be composed of, and serve, the families who lived in that geographic area. That is quite literally the definition of a ‘parish’. It does not matter what characteristic a person possesses – racial, ethnic, socio-economic, education, etc. – if they live in the geographic area of the church that is their parish where they belong and where they should be welcomed and included.

Many years ago, I heard of a parish that for the most part was made up of people who converted to Orthodoxy from various Protestant denominations. On a certain Sunday, a group of new people came to the Divine Liturgy who spoke primarily Russian. After the liturgy was over, the parish leadership had an emergency meeting to decide what action was to be taken, so these people would feel welcomed and included in the congregation. The decision was made that the following Sunday some of the prayers by the priest and deacon would be said, as best they