

PASTOR TO PASTOR

Fall 2006

A quarterly newsletter from The Orthodox Church in America's Department of Pastoral Life & Ministry

Glory to Jesus Christ!



This is – at best – an awkward moment in our Church life. Recently I read T.S. Eliot's *To Walter de la Mare* and these lines struck me – “when the familiar scene is suddenly strange / or the well-known is what we have yet to learn.” Some of us are finding the familiar suddenly strange and what we thought we knew to be suddenly disconcerting.

Nonetheless I think we must make the best of things in the face of awkwardness, uncertainty and – who knows? – perhaps worse. I hope that you will agree. After all, as pastors we take the line that any crisis is an opportunity for growth and positive change. I hope that the Department of Pastoral Life and Ministry will afford many opportunities for conversation and mutual support over the coming years. The *Pastor To Pastor* newsletter is meant to foster our network of support. It is one of several projects of the department. In the near future we hope to announce the launch of a departmental web site that will be dedicated to providing resources for the various pastoral ministries taking place in our Church.

Another project involves developing a sort of speakers bureau that will be able to address a range of topics of interest to pastors. We anticipate that this will be of use to our dioceses and our deaneries. A third project involves preparing tools for pastoral self-evaluation and the evaluation of pastoral ministries in our parishes.

Please note that the Seminarian Internship Program is on for 2007.

Let us pray for one another.

Archpriest Andrew Morbey
Department of Pastoral Life and Ministry

Mission and Evangelism in the “Burnt-Over District”

By Fr. Stephen Freeman

There is an area of New York State referred to as the “Burnt-Over District.” The first time I heard the term I assumed it was an area prone to drought. I later learned that it acquired the name because it was once so “burnt over” with successive Protestant revivals that it had become a religiously peculiar area. It is the original home of Mormonism and several other early American cults. Apparently some people had been “saved” at least one too many times. I have entitled this piece “Mission and Evangelism in the Burnt-Over District” not as a discussion about doing mission and evangelism in a particular part of Upstate New York, but as a metaphor for looking at the culture in which we live and in which we all do mission and evangelism – even when we don't know we're doing it. We're all living in a “burnt-over district.”

A few years ago someone asked me why it should matter to the Church what actions they took, but it comes with the territory of being an adult. Being an adult means being a role model. There is no moral free ride. I will say the same thing about mission and evangelism. All churches are proclaiming a Gospel, simply by claiming to be a Christian church. And in proclaiming that Gospel, everyone is doing evangelism. No one gets a free ride. So in a manner, it does not matter what any of us think about the subject of mission – we are engaged in it by virtue of being the Church. We should be settled on this point – mission and evangelism are not options. You are doing them whether you know it or not.

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But why refer to our culture as the “Burnt-Over District”? Think with me about a culture that has heard Christianity in so many forms, with so many twists and turns that the meaning of the Gospel, the Truth of God in the God-Man Christ Jesus, is easily lost or, at best, obscured. I offer several observations and suggestions. The first of them has to do with distortion. Doing evangelism and mission in a burnt-over culture means that we speak and live in a culture where the Gospel is worse than unknown – it is distorted. The strange cults that arose in Upstate New York in the 1840’s did so because a significant segment of the culture was ready to believe certain distortions, no matter how bizarre. G.K. Chesterton once said, “When a man ceases to believe in God, it’s not so much that he believes in nothing, as it is he is willing to believe in anything.”

The distortions of the Gospel in our culture are too many to describe. There are those who believe that the God of the churches is mean, hateful, narrow-minded, angry, or simply institutionalized. There is a growing preference for “spirituality” rather than religion, meaning that the presentation of Christ given by most churches, or assumed to be given by most churches, is running a distant second to something else. This distortion, I believe, is a major source of atheism in our culture – in many cases, the atheism being an effort not so much to reject God as to reject a *false* God. Whenever I have conversations with those who profess no belief in God, my first question is, “Tell me about the God you don’t believe in. I may not believe in that one, either.”

If the Gospel is distorted in the culture around us, then the first task of mission and evangelism is to struggle with the distortions within our own walls. To be Orthodox is to profess “right glory,” “right worship.” It requires that we be always and foremost a Church of repentance, emptying ourselves of the delusions that replace God, and crying out that God create in us a clean heart.

Virtually every service of the Church ends with the reminder that God is a “Good God who loves mankind.” The fullness and the depth of that message need to be engraved on our hearts. Our own minds need to be renewed with the knowledge of the True God. When priest or Church act in such a way that the “Good God who loves mankind” is replaced with something else, then the Gospel has been distorted.

To do mission in a culture where the Gospel has been distorted, it is also necessary for us to be teachers. There are certain basics of the faith that cannot be taught too often or known too well. To correct deep, burnt-over distortions we must emphasize certain basic things – again and again. For a congregation to understand that we are saved by union with Christ and not by the fulfillment of quasi-legal requirements is a huge leap. I frequently repeat the words of the baptismal interrogation in my sermons, “Do you unite yourselves to Christ? Have you united yourselves to Christ?” Finding different ways to say the same thing to help people make connections is essential as we correct the distortions of a Gospel too often twisted beyond recognition.

Finally, I suggest that we always remember to practice hospitality. The Good News of the God who loves mankind can only be distorted if a person’s first encounter with the Church is cold and disdainful. In our parish we teach hospitality with the simple saying, “Everyone who comes through our doors was sent here for our salvation.” Think about it.

We have nothing to offer the world other than Christ himself, and if our lives are not united to His then there will be no evangelism, no mission, only the distortions that already fill the world. As St. Herman said, and I can think of no better words with which to conclude: “From this day forward, let us love God above all else.” This is our mission and our task of evangelism.

Fr Stephen is the Dean of Appalachia, Diocese of the South, and pastor of St. Anne Mission, Oak Ridge, TN. His pastoral blog is called “Glory to God for All Things” and is found at: fatherstephen.wordpress.com. This article was adapted from his 2004 Pastoral Life Ministries Conference talk.

Seminarian Internship Program Resumes

As you will recall, the Seminarian Internship Program has been off and on in recent years. When it has been on it has been a marvelous success. I'd like you to know that it is on again for 2007 – and I hope that you will give very serious consideration to applying for an intern placement as soon as possible. Our program is really a win-win opportunity for pastors, parishes, and seminarians. Seminarians are given invaluable hands-on experience in real parishes, under the supervision of seasoned pastors.

Parishes have the joy of meeting those training for Christian ministry and learning about the larger needs and issues involved in training and nurturing those preparing for ministry. Pastors have the opportunity to renew their own pastoral vision as they pass on a wealth of practical skills. If you haven't already discovered that mentorship offers very real occasions for the mentor's own spiritual growth – here is a fine opportunity!

The relevant materials are available in .pdf form on the OCA web site. If you have any further questions, please contact Father Steven Voytovich, our program coordinator at svoytovich@srhs.org. But above all – for the love of Christ and His Church! – please take up the challenge and opportunities afforded by a program that will contribute to the formation of tomorrow's pastors.

Scenes From Our Church Life

An interview with Archpriest Vadim Pogrebniak



P2P: How would you characterize the parish when you arrived, and what is it like now?

When I arrived at St. Spiridon Cathedral in Seattle 26 years ago, the parish was composed primarily of older Russian-speaking members. Since all of the services were in Church Slavonic, most of the young people left the parish when they married. Today approximately 60 percent of the parish consists of converts to Orthodoxy, and there is an active Sunday-School program for the children.

P2P: What have been some of the important challenges you have faced as a pastor in an urban parish, in an inner-city neighborhood that has certainly changed much over the years?

When St. Spiridon Cathedral was built in the 1930s, the faithful lived in apartment houses near the church. By the time I arrived in 1980, the parishioners had relocated to the suburbs and the area surrounding the church was primarily devoted to small industrial businesses.

With the change in the neighborhood our biggest challenge was security. The property surrounding the church became a breeding area for drugs and prostitution, and the grounds are usually littered with garbage. After several break-ins we realized it was necessary to install security doors and bars on the windows to protect the church building. Also, many of our new neighbors have no respect for the church and even complain when the church bells are rung.

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P2P: Recently you have suffered from some of the medical concerns that a number of middle-aged pastors worry about. While the etiology of such things can be mysterious and varied, do you have any reflections on pastoral ministry and health?

It is important to emphasize that the parish is a family and that if one member is suffering it affects all of us. As soon as we are aware of anyone's illness, their name is immediately added to our prayer list and remembered at every service. With the experience of my own medical problems I'm able to offer advice to individuals in the parish who suffer from the same afflictions.

P2P: As a veritable mother church of Orthodoxy in the Northwest, St. Spiridon has spurred the founding of a number of missions. What have you learned about facilitating the development of new missions?

Too often parishes are reluctant to encourage the opening of a mission because they feel members living close to the mission will leave the established church. While that is often true, my experience has been that new church members will move into the area, and/or prospective converts will begin to attend services. Notwithstanding that St. Spiridon has sponsored two missions in the last seven years, the membership remains constant.

P2P: Have you had success in integrating new immigrants into St. Spiridon? What sort of factors have helped or hindered this outreach?

While we have some new immigrants, most belong to the local ROCOR parish because they prefer services conducted in Church Slavonic and the use of the Julian calendar. Although many were baptized as children they rarely attended church until they moved to this country. As a result, their knowledge of the church consists mostly of customs. One Saturday a month a Divine Liturgy is served completely in Church Slavonic. Also I have instituted a religious education class in Russian. The textbooks used are Fr. Hopko's four-book "The Orthodox Faith" series, and Fr. Schmemmann's "For the Life of the World," all of which have been translated into Russian.

About *Pastor to Pastor*

P2P is a quarterly publication of the Department of Pastoral Life and Ministry of The Orthodox Church in America. The Editor welcomes articles, commentaries, questions, and constructive suggestions. Please send them to Archpriest Andrew Morbey at pastorallife@oca.org.

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