

PASTORS TO PASTORS

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No. **VISITATION OF
THE SICK**

by Fr Alexander Garklavs, Editor



**Jesus sent them out to preach
the kingdom of God and to heal
(Luke 9.2)**

The Orthodox pastor's duties require a variety of capabilities. He must be a trained and devoted liturgical celebrant, an articulate and sincere preacher, a dedicated and thoughtful educator, a competent and versatile administrator. There is also another essential pastoral duty: visitation of the sick.

Visitation of the sick is a dimension of pastoral work that is at times ignored or avoided. A priest may never think about omitting a liturgical service or important rubric. He cannot give in to the temptation of skipping a parish council meeting or a parish social function. Yet almost all priests will sometimes question, in their minds, whether or not a visitation to a given sick person is really necessary. Can it wait? Did the person in question come to Church as regularly as he/she should have? Do I need to inconvenience myself if he/she did not attend faithfully? How nice has this person been to me over the years? Perhaps my visit will disturb the sick person? Do I have something more important to accomplish today?

Visitation of the sick is part of the healing ministry that was unequivocally specified by Our Lord in His pastoral admonitions to the disciples. The tenth chapter of St. Matthew's Gospel, which can be read as a precis of pastoral theology, conveys Jesus Christ's instructions, "He called His twelve disciples and gave them authority over unclean spirits, to cast them out, and to heal every disease and every infirmity" (Mt. 10.1). Later He adds, "And preach as you go, 'The kingdom of heaven is at hand.' Heal the sick, raise the dead, cleanse lepers, cast out demons," with the important qualification, "You received without paying, give without pay" (Mt. 10.7,8). Jesus Christ Himself was regarded as a great healer. At the very beginning of His ministry He declares

in the Nazareth synagogue, "Doubtless you will quote to me this proverb, 'Physician, heal yourself; what we have heard you did at Capernaum, do here also in your own country'" (Lk. 4.23). His active period was almost a constant series of healing miracles, to the extent of superseding existing religious conventions (e.g. when Jesus healed on the Sabbath).

Beginning with the apostles and in the early Church, Christian ministry was occupied with the physical as well as spiritual welfare of its people. The ancient tradition of venerating the "unmercenary physicians" testifies of the correlation of the medical and spiritual arenas in the Church. With the imperial recognition of Christianity, the Church administered hospitals and hospices, at monasteries as well as apart from them. In time the Church's direct involvement in the medical welfare of people lessened although, obviously, there are still many Christian hospitals and health-care facilities throughout the world. Yet the essence of pastoral ministry to the sick is the same today as it was in the days of the apostles. It is not the medical cure of individuals. It is the process of enabling the sick to encounter the reality of the Kingdom of God.

Jesus performed His miracles not to establish a reputation as a healer but to alert us to the fact that the "Kingdom of God is at hand." He instructed the apostles to preach the Kingdom and to heal in the same context. Healing, as a Christian pastoral ministry, is the *activity* which is the consequence of the *proclamation* of the Kingdom. In this sense, healing is truly miraculous, not as physical restoration but as the

participation in the life of the Kingdom, in the wholeness, joy, peace, truth and love which abide therein. The miracle of all miracles is the restoration of the human body and soul as an "image of God." St. John Chrysostom comments on the fact that "God made [physical] miracles to cease," in order to direct our attention to the most important needs: the acquisition of virtue, the soul's renewal, the development of spiritual sight. "These are the greatest miracles, these are the wonderful signs. If we go on working these signs, we shall both ourselves be a great and admirable person, and shall win over all the wicked unto virtue, and shall enjoy the life to come." (Commentary on St. Matthew, Hom. 32). The pastoral ministry of healing is therefore a sacramental, and actual, exposure of the life of the Kingdom to someone who may have trouble encountering it otherwise. The priest is both the messenger of (apostle) and the witness to (martyr) of the Kingdom. When he visits the sick person he brings the reality of the heavenly Kingdom with him, as much as he humanly can and with the grace and help of God. While he does pray for physical healing, it is always important, as indeed the prayers of healing verbalize, to remember that it is only to enable one to achieve spiritual restoration.

Pastoral ministry to the sick is not unlike liturgical celebration, which demands preparation, sobriety, chastity and utmost intelligence. Being with ill people can be like a Confession, whether or not the formal Sacrament is administered. Illness is sometimes the means by which people come to confess

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**Sickness which afflicts the body can strengthen the soul.
"Though our outer nature is wasting away, our inner nature
is being renewed every day" (2Cor. 4.16). How is it being
renewed? The soul learns humility, patience, remembrance of
death from which come sincere repentance, prayer, an
indifference to the world and to worldly vanity. O sickness,
you are an unpleasant but blessed occurrence! Just as salt
preserves meats from rotting, so sickness preserves the soul
from the destructive decay of sin and keeps passions away.**

-- St Tikhon of Zadonsk

their transgressions and to contritely partake of the Eucharist with *real* "fear and love of God." Needless to say, the conversations that a priest and sick person have can be extremely personal and sensitive. The same confidentiality that applies to the Confessional should be observed here. The same sensitivity and courage also need be present. A priest would never proceed to hear Confessions without prayer and serious attention to the particularities of each individual. Ministry to the sick and suffering requires the same. Personalities differ, changes affect people differently, a variety of emotional and psychological issues surface during illness, and the spiritual background of individuals varies dramatically.

The limited scope of this article does not permit us to enter into discussion about the Sacrament of Healing (Anointing). Of course, the rigid rubrical actualization of this, with seven priests, is rare. Abbreviated rituals of Anointing still need to be worked out by bishops and liturgical specialists, but priests should anoint sick people when the circumstances call for it. While the distribution of the Holy Eucharist to sick people is a normal pastoral routine, it does require careful consideration and preparation. Factors to bear in mind are the nature of the illness and the spiritual condition of the sick person. Always to be remembered is the fact that the Canons and pastoral tradition dictate that no Orthodox Christian, who is very ill or elderly and has repented, be

denied Communion. For a priest to do so can be a grave offense. However, while visitation to the sick often involves bringing Holy Communion, they are distinct pastoral functions. As important as the Eucharist is, to simply come and give Holy Communion to the sick without any real interaction does not fulfill the pastoral duty.

Visitation to the sick can take the priest into strange places where he can expect the unexpected. Sometimes the homes and habitations of the sick can be extremely distressing. On occasion the priest's visit to the bedside of a sick person is an unpleasant ordeal. The priest may find himself at a total loss of words, the nature of the illness could be horrifying and the pain of the sick person can be agonizing to behold. Then there is the family of the sick person, which may be in emotional upheaval, whose questions about terminating or extending life-support systems can put the priest into a delicate dilemma. The actual medical environment, the hospitals and nursing homes, the doctors, nurses, as well as the blood, liquids, tubes, bottles, ventilators and even the smells can overwhelm some priests. While most ill people gladly welcome the priest, some may be bitter, awkward or ashamed. Perhaps most difficult is ministry to the mentally ill, where all attempts to use words and common sense break apart into bewildered frustration. On rare occasions the priest may be asked to leave, even with anger and vulgarity. The pastor must struggle mightily with his human emotions to overcome the temptation to return unkindness with unkindness.

In all cases the priest remembers that he is merely the visible representative of Christ's invisible presence, and that the Holy Spirit provides him with endurance, wisdom, resolve and compassion. Perseverance, the ability to keep going, quietly, without pretension and without discouragement, is a great virtue that is most necessary for priests in general but especially when it comes to visiting the sick.

At the heart of all pastoral work is love and the visitation of the sick is a dynamic manifestation of love. It is a sacrificial self-giving that is pleasing to God. Sometimes a priest may bring a gift or flowers for the sick, but this is usually unnecessary. The priest brings himself and if he does this sincerely he is also giving of himself in a way that makes for a grace-filled encounter. This kind of offering of the self expresses the mystery of the Cross. Few things in life are more beautiful or meaningful. The priest gives

of himself because God has given everything to him. More often than not, what this means for visitation of the sick is not "giving" of any "thing," but merely being an attentive and charitable listener. This is not easy. You feel a yawn coming on? Resist it. Your eyelids become heavy? Pinch yourself. Your mind drifts to a favorite pastime? Bring it back.

The sick person, especially one with a terminal illness, truly requires nothing more than that you give your complete loving attention. Look carefully at the sick person. Face your own mortality and come to terms with it. Empathize with the confusion and terror that arises now. See the relentless damage of age. Smell the odors of human frailty. Touch that flesh that brings such fleeting happiness and lasting sorrow to us all, that constantly begs the soul to be still, that burdens the heart with obsessive longings for thrills and comforts. Look at that God-created body that we abuse, pamper, pervert, idolize, ignore and cherish. The human being suffering from illness may be confused, depressed or simply unable to pray, the body may be disintegrating, the soul too may be weighed down, too overcome with a grief that precludes devotion. The priest must pray for and *with* the sick person. Without purity of heart and attention, this twofold prayer is impossible.

Human life involves the process of keeping body and soul whole. Jesus Christ is the physician of body and soul. The priest is also concerned about both. He can advise about and encourage physical healing, which is sometimes a very necessary pastoral duty. For this reason the priest should be familiar with current medical techniques and practices. However, of course his most effective and needful ministry is to the soul. At times of illness, the soul needs healing as much as the body.

The priest is often the only instrument of that soul's healing and he must help it! The soul of the sick person needs to know that it exists as a personal being, a uniquely created, loved-by God existence. The priest has a most special obligation: to make the soul feel at ease as its body experiences decay and disintegration, to help the soul find peace in the presence of God, to prepare it for heaven, to announce to it the good news of a blessed eternity.

Today all seminaries include in their formal curriculums some kind of preparation for the pastoral visitation of the sick. Young priests-to-be need to understand the implications and intricacies involved in this part of their vocation. A seminary may offer higher degrees in

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"Thoughts and Recollections"

"Pastors to Pastors" looks to another of the "elders" of the Church for guidance and inspiration. We are pleased herein to share our interview with

Fr Igor Soroka

Pastor of St Nicholas Church, Donora PA

Q. Fr. Igor, you and two of your brothers became Orthodox priests. What in your upbringing contributed to your decision to become a priest.

A. My father, Fr. Gregory Soroka, had a real love and commitment to the Church and this had a profound effect on me. He faced many struggles during the first nine years of his priesthood, as a missionary in the Alberta Province of Canada. Four of his seven children were born there, during a time of economic hardship and an outbreak of the Influenza epidemic that killed thousands of people. Though he had to provide for a large family with meager and limited means, he never lost his enthusiasm and joy in serving God and the various flocks entrusted to him. Having so little, he gave much to others. These acts of kindness and compassion left an indelible mark on me and my brothers, Fr. Leonid, of blessed memory, and Fr. Vladimir. My father never let an opportunity slip by where he didn't extol the priesthood and try to encourage all four of his sons to follow his footsteps. If an additional spark was needed, it was provided by my mother, Matushka Anastasia, of blessed memory, who also sought to guide her sons into the priesthood. Through her example of her total life in the Church, and by her Christian charity and piety, she ingrained in us a love for God and the Church. There were other factors that played a role in my decision to enter into the Holy Priesthood, but the influence and example of my parents, more than anything else, was the spiritual force that led me to follow this path in life.

Q. You are one of the rare priests who have had only one parish assignment (St. Nicholas Church in Donora, PA for almost forty years). What have been some of the highlights and some of the difficulties of your long parish ministry?

A. Upon undertaking my parish duties I became aware of a deep split and division

in the congregation. Because of this division there was much animosity and distrust among the faithful. With patience, prayer and love, little by little, the scars of the split began to disappear. As the healing progressed, the spiritual maturity of the parishioners deepened. Among the highlights was the satisfaction of seeing change in individuals who never appeared to be capable of transformation. It has always been fulfilling to see parishioners respond with genuine concern for families or individuals who are dealing with difficult or tragic circumstances. I have also had the gratification of witnessing the integration of converts into the life of the Church and their enthusiastic participation in our faith. It has been very heartening to see how parish life positively developed, when important issues were discussed and resolved with understanding and tolerance. One of the real rewards has been the joy of watching children, whom I baptized, grow up and go through all the stages of life. Seeing how different generations spiritually mature and take their respective place in the life of the Church has been a treasured highlight that I have experienced and savored.

There have been some difficulties. A few months after arriving here, the local steel mill was shut down. It was like a dark cloud hanging over the parish and it created a difficult morale problem. A number of families moved away to find work. It was also painful to watch the exodus of young college graduates going elsewhere for better opportunities. All of this had a negative effect on the faithful. Another area of difficulty has been in dealing with those who place more emphasis on ethnic and cultural identity rather than on the faith itself. Also, the casual, luke-warm attitude and indifference of some parishioners can be trying and discouraging. Especially troublesome today is the fact that competing activities and pursuits occupy and distract young people as well as adults. All too often, the Church is placed at the bottom of the list. These misplaced

priorities are much more apparent in today's parish life, in comparison with past years.

Q. Prior to becoming a priest you directed choirs in a numbers of parishes. What are some of your recollections about that?

A. The experience and insights gained in serving as a choir director for ten years was very valuable. Following my graduation from St. Tikhon's Seminary, and later from Duquesne University where I majored in music, my involvement in choral directing broadened my view of the Church and its liturgical services. It also enabled me to better visualize the roles and interactions between the clergy and laity.

Much of the time and efforts of the early choir directors was spent writing separate music for each section of the choir -- all by hand. Having a good pen and a supply of ink was vital. When the choir director left for another assignment, the music usually went with him. The new director would have to start from scratch. Then there was the problem of maintaining the delicate balance between Slavonic and English, a problem that still exists today in some parishes.

When I began directing, choirs were larger and rehearsals were better attended. Singers took their membership more seriously. Because more time was devoted to rehearsals, it was possible to concentrate on the fundamentals of good choral singing as well as on preparation for the services. I remember, when I organized the Pittsburgh Diocesan Male Chorus after World War II, we had seventy men on stage for our first performance. Their enthusiasm and love of singing continued for nearly twenty-five years. I also have fond memories of the F.O.C.A. (FROC) National Choir Conferences which I directed for more than twenty years. It was inspiring to see hundreds of choir directors, singers and beginners faithfully

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Visitation of the Sick, continued

pastoral training that could include advancement in this field. It is also noteworthy that many Orthodox priests pursue "Clinical Pastoral Education" programs at hospitals and non-Orthodox institutions, where comprehensive skills are studied and learned in an actual healing environment. This is certainly to be welcomed and encouraged. Progress in modern medicine has raised new ethical issues. Orthodox Christianity has always

maintained a balanced approach, neither shunning medical intervention nor blindly accepting every medical innovation, but it is the "narrow way" and requires spiritual discernment.

Whatever the training, the priest has to begin with the basics and just go and visit the sick! Curiously, some of the most successful pastoral visitations to the sick are done by priests with little or no formal training. St. John Chrysostom says that more important than pastoral knowledge is "the grace of God in good measure, and

an upright character and a pure life." Compassion and patience are virtues, spiritually acquired rather than skills, intellectually learned. The clergy must also work to encourage this ministry among their faithful. Visitation to the sick is not an exclusive enterprise. It is a pastoral duty, but it is also a duty for priests to nurture this necessary ministry in the people of God. When parishioners engage in this activity they bring joy to the sick as well as a sense of blessed fulfillment for themselves.

Though priests may hesitate or avoid visiting the sick they never regret doing so. Visitation of the sick is one of the most rewarding of priestly duties. Perhaps it is because the priest feels here the sense of sincere gratitude. It is also because here the priest's presence and contribution are really necessary. He is functioning as Christ's true minister. His ministry is visitations the priest witnesses the mercy of God among His people. He testifies to the reality of Christian compassion and witnesses to the power of redemption in the glory of the Resurrected Lord. □

Fr Igor Soroka, continued

take part in those choral workshops. Many of those participants are now choir directors in parishes. As director of the Pittsburgh Diocesan Cathedral Choir, an ensemble I organized thirty-five years ago, I find much enjoyment working with singers, striving to perpetuate the beauty of our Orthodox hymnography. I guess the tuning fork has never left my hand.

must always provide the sense that one is in the House of God and not in a concert hall or secular setting. A deep sense of the holy must be the objective as we venture on the path of musical creativity. At the same time, I believe that many of the ancient chant forms will take on new meaning and be used more extensively. More skillful adaptations of the old chant forms will positively impact on the worship of the Church.

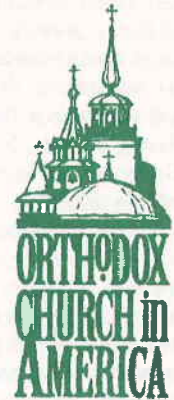
Congregational singing will become more prevalent in parishes where choirs have been reduced to just a few voices. Even where established choirs do exist, a greater sharing of the responses by the congregation will occur. A key element in the future will be not only the training of choir directors in the basic fundamentals of choral singing, but also in the whole area of spirituality and reverence for the divine services. I believe that there is a real need to recapture the seriousness in which the glorious tradition of liturgical singing was held in the past. Without any question, the manner in which our liturgical music and singing manifests itself in the future will have a profound and lasting effect on the growth and vitality of the Orthodox Church in America. □

Q. Your family name is associated with Orthodox Church music in America and you have arranged many settings that are still in use. What thoughts do you have about the future of Orthodox liturgical music in our Church?

A. I believe that in the years to come there will be a slight evolution in our Church music. Undoubtedly, there will be a blend of various Orthodox traditions, styles and chants, along with some subtle contemporary influences. However, I think that this process will occur slowly and will have to be done with care and caution. Anything that is a departure from the spiritual quality of our hymnography would be unacceptable. Liturgical singing

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