

SERVING THROUGH OUTREACH: A MANIFESTATION OF THE LIFE IN CHRIST

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When the Lord said in the Gospel, “For even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give His life a ransom for many,” (Mark 10:45) He not only described the character of His own mission, He also set down a basic principle for all Christians. Christ came to save us and heal us. His mission was radically other-centred. St. Paul describes His coming as a self-emptying (Philippians 2:7). Having been incorporated into the Body of Christ, we have received His very life and have inherited His mission. Now we must be able to say about ourselves, “We live not to be served, but to serve.” This must also be a governing principle in our parishes, if people outside the Church are to recognize something of the character of Christ in our own communities. The very basic and practical question that comes to mind immediately is, “How do we enter into this spirit of service so that Christ’s principle can be lived concretely on a personal and a corporate level?”

Not by imitation alone

The first thing that must be said about acquiring this spirit of service is that it will not happen by simply reading about Christ’s acts of service in the Gospel and trying, with no preparation, to imitate Him. The fact of the matter is that the Lord did not simply perform acts of service; rather, His deeds of love flowed naturally from His gracious character. His deeds reveal His identity. If we try to analyze the activity of Christ in the Gospel with a view to implementing a programme of Christ-like service to others, we will fail. Acts of service that do not have their origin in a gracious character are not credible and are often undertaken for the wrong reasons. Unfortunately, the wounded human heart is capable of sin even in performing good deeds if it is not being purified, enlightened and strengthened by the Holy Spirit. We come face to face with a fundamental problem: we cannot act as Christ acts through observation and implementation alone. We cannot acquire the spirit of service as we would a skill or a discipline. We must instead receive Christ’s life and then struggle to allow His character to emerge in us. This is why the Orthodox Church carefully distinguishes between the imitation of Christ and the life *in* Christ. The former allows us to learn *about* Christianity; the latter allows us to *become* Christians.

In becoming Christians, in receiving Christ’s life, we discover that we begin to be inclined to do the things that the Lord does, not self-consciously, but naturally. We become the sheep of Christ described in the Gospel, who fed the poor, clothed the naked, visited the sick and the prisoners, and offered hospitality to the stranger (Matthew 25:31-46). When the Lord told them that they had done all these things to Him, they were surprised. They did not set out to serve Christ consciously when they did these things; instead, having the life of Christ already in them, they did *His* works without a second thought and without any expectation of reward or recognition. This is why the Lord calls them “*His* sheep,” while those who rejected His life, and consequently never served Him, are simply called “the goats,” since they chose not to be His.

To serve requires a choice

The Gospel about the Last Judgement, the separation of the sheep from the goats, is both disturbing and encouraging. It disturbs us in the right way by stirring us from lethargy and apathy: there will be a Last Judgement, and each of us will have to give an answer both for what we have done *and* for what we have not done. The goats of the Gospel were not atheists; on the contrary, they knew about Christ and respected Him. They had not, however, received His life, and, as a result, they had not permitted His life to be revealed in them in practical ways. They perhaps did not choose evil, but they failed to choose the good. As Christians, we need to be careful to choose the good while it is still possible for us to do so.

The Gospel is, however, very encouraging, because it demonstrates that it is entirely possible to receive Christ's life and to share His life with others in concrete ways. This is the most fundamental expression of outreach, and it does not require special skills or training; it requires instead a repentant heart. From this point of view, everyone becomes both eligible and called to be among the sheep at Christ's right hand. Finally, the Gospel serves as a "wake-up call," not a pronouncement of condemnation. The Last Judgement is coming, but there is still time to prepare. Repentance is still possible. Christ's life is still being received by the faithful. Furthermore, we have already received Christ's life in Baptism and continue to receive Him in the Holy Eucharist. The struggle is now to permit His life to be manifest in us through repentance, prayer and fasting.

Does everyone in my parish need to visit prisons and hospitals?

No, but each parishioner should become aware that the parish does not exist solely to fulfil his spiritual needs. Every member of the church should desire to receive the life of Christ more fully. Every Orthodox Christian should come to see the "need" to be served as a temptation and the desire to serve as a normal feature of the Christian life. Not everyone in a parish is going to do everything described in the Gospel. On the other hand, the Gospel of the Last Judgement does not provide us with the exhaustive list of every form of Christian service; this is not its objective. There are many more expressions of outreach, some of which are very simple, such as greeting people who are visiting our parishes for the first time. The fact of the matter is that if we *desire* the life of Christ and *choose* to allow His life to be at work in us, we will become immediately aware of many opportunities to serve that are within our abilities, and we will not need to concern ourselves with questions regarding our suitability for them. Of course, God sometimes calls us to types of service that seem completely beyond our abilities, but that is a topic for another discussion. The point that I wish to make here is simple: a parish in which the majority of members are in the process of acquiring the spirit of service and demonstrating it through outreach, is a parish that will reclaim its life, be transformed, and have a substantial impact on the surrounding community. If that is what we truly desire in our communities, then it is easy to see how we might achieve it. On the other hand, if we do not desire this in our communities, then at the very least we need to know that we have lost our way.

In conclusion, I wish to provide two lists of questions for further reflection. Here are some questions for personal consideration:

1. Do you attend church mostly or entirely for the purpose of having your needs (or the needs of your family) met?
2. Do you take note of Christ's approach to others in the Gospel?
3. When you read the lives of the Saints, can you recognize Christ's life in them?
4. Do you understand the Christian life as personal moral improvement or the acquisition of a completely new life?
5. Do you spend most of your time in prayer asking God to address your needs?
6. Do you see a connection between your Baptism and how you live your life now?
7. If you receive Holy Communion often, do you believe that you receive new life through doing so?
8. If you don't receive Holy Communion often, what stops you from doing so?
9. Is the main focus of your confession before a priest to tell him that you have not done anything really serious?
10. Is the giving of alms part of your spiritual discipline?

Here are some questions for the consideration of parishes:

1. Would the majority of parishioners be inclined to greet a visitor coming to the church for the first time?
2. If a visitor innocently takes the place in the church normally occupied by a long-standing parishioner, what are the chances the visitor will be redirected to another spot?
3. Are church events advertised in the community or only internally?
4. Is any part of the annual church budget committed to help other parishes or support mission work?
5. Does the parish have any links with local ministries working to help the poor?
6. Are local community organizations or people living in the neighbourhood aware of the existence of the parish?
7. Is there a study/discussion group in the parish for enquirers?
8. How many adult Baptisms have been celebrated in the parish in the last ten years?
9. How many chrismations have been celebrated in the parish in the last two years?
10. How many people attend services at the church outside of Sunday morning Divine Liturgy?
11. Does your church meet for fellowship or a meal after the celebration of any of the weekly services?
12. What is the typical first impression of the church that an average visitor would have?
13. Do the demographics in the church roughly mirror the demographics in your city or town? If not, how are they different?
14. What percentage of the income in the church's annual budget comes from donations of parishioners?
15. How would the average parishioner perceive your church? As a religious organization? As the Body of Christ?
16. Would the church perceive its outreach as very similar to or qualitatively different from social work?

17. How likely is a parishioner who is grieving the death of a loved one to receive support from other parishioners without the priest arranging for it?
18. Does your parish close down completely when the priest is away?
19. Are the clergy the only people in the church who visit the sick?
20. Would the majority of church members be able to speak simply but meaningfully about the connection between participation in the spiritual life, most especially in the Eucharist, and Christian service and outreach?

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