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WITNESSES OF THESE THINGS by Archpriest Eric G. Tosi

"Then Jesus said to them, '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. And you are witnesses of these things.'"

Luke 24:46-48

In 2014 I had the great opportunity to travel to Albania to present a paper on evangelism in the Orthodox Church to the Lausanne Orthodox Initiative. This was a gathering of Orthodox and Evangelical leaders seeking to find common ground through dialogue. The keynote speaker was Archbishop Anastasios of Albania, one the greatest living Orthodox evangelists in our generation. His remarks both inspired and challenged the attendees. But there was one comment he made which really stood out to me at the time. He stated that perhaps we should not be thinking exclusively in terms of the Great Commission (Matthew 28:18-20), but rather in terms of



Luke 24, where our Lord calls us to be witnesses to the world and, through our witness, to bring the message of Jesus Christ to those who are seeking Him. His Eminence exhorted us not only to make disciples, but to rethink *how* we present the Gospel in doing so.

I have spent a lot of time unpacking that statement. Firstly, the word "witness" (*martyria* in Greek) has an important connotation in Orthodoxy. It means not only to witness to Christ in our life and actions, but to literally be willing to be put to death for Christ. Certainly, a country like Albania has experienced some of the most devastating martyrdoms in the 20th century, along with many other traditionally

Orthodox countries. But when we think of the great missionaries and evangelists throughout Church history, we find that the idea of witness resonates through the ages. Time and again, people come to Christ by encountering that witness, embodied in Christians – sometimes by seeing believers die for Christ, and at other times by seeing Christ's presence in His followers.

We all should strive to be witnesses to Christ in our daily lives and actions. Our communities must become living icons of how Christians live and pray together. Whether or not God calls us to die as martyrs for Him, each of us is called to witness for the truth of the Faith. In the Great Commission, Christ sends His Apostles – and us – to be witnesses so that all people may come to the knowledge of truth, wherever and however God sends us. *"But you shall receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you shall be witnesses to Me ... to the end of the earth."* (Acts 1:8)

The Necessity of Witness

I would like to underline just two essential elements of our contemporary apostolic responsibility.

First, we must be present as individuals, conscious members of the Church, and, where possible, as a Eucharistic community proclaiming in peace the kingdom of God: present in the countryside, in cities, wherever those who are "outside" gather; present as living members of the Church, at *colloquia*, at meetings both intra-Christian and inter-faith, but also at scholarly, scientific, political, and economic conferences, as a calm and humble presence of the Orthodox view and witness, helping to find worthy solutions to vexing problems. In our day, divine providence has opened for the Orthodox windows onto areas that were previously hermetically sealed. The Orthodox witness should by all means be proclaimed in these instances.

Second, we must share with others whatever we have, whatever possessions God has granted us, both material and spiritual: knowledge, sacred and profane, means, capabilities, talents and aspirations, the experience and power of love, or peace "which passes all understanding." To such

"sharing" belong the innovative ideas and programs for the development of areas dominated by grinding poverty. In Albania, for instance, in conjunction with the restoration of the ruined Orthodox Church, we tried to be a Eucharistic community, open, sharing what we have, and contributing to a suffering society through pilot social programs in health care, education, development and relief efforts, culture, and the environment.

The presence of every member of the Church who is alive in Christ radiates not only thoughts and ideas, but also divine grace, borne within the true believer. The apostolic vocation remains the duty of the Eucharistic community. It must be bound to that community and live through the community. The Church as a community, and I emphasize, the whole Church, in order to remain faithful to her apostolic self-awareness, has no right to be absorbed in introspection, in her internal problems. In each generation, the right people must be sought out and sent out to the exterior world – both in geographical and social terms, both faraway and close by. Those who are chosen for the particular task of mission to the "outside" world

– understood in its geographical, social and ideological meanings – would be well-advised to leave behind simplifications and naive romanticism. As soon as possible, they must get used to being "strangers in a strange land." It will be their lot to be the "other," to live as minorities, sometimes enveloped in a cloud of suspicion and circumspection...

Nonetheless, the Church continues to impart the message of salvation and the grace of the mysteries to all nations; she continues to give meaning to life and death and to the history of the world. Her mission preserves both its historical and eschatological dimensions. *"And this gospel of the kingdom will be preached throughout the whole world, as a testimony to all nations; and then the end will come"* (Matthew 24.14). The failure of all Utopian hopes cannot overshadow the Christian message and the Christian hope. The King came, the Lord Jesus, and His Kingdom shall come.

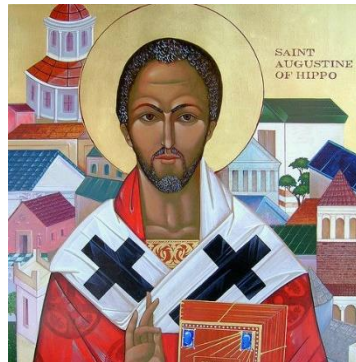
Excerpt from Archbishop Anastasios, "Rediscovering Our Apostolic Identity in the 21st Century", Saint Vladimir's Seminary Quarterly, Vol. 48, No. 1 (2004).

"In each generation, the right people must be sought out and sent out to the exterior world — both in geographical and social terms, both faraway and close by."

From the Fathers: On Witness by St. Augustine of Hippo

And He said to them: What? That thus it behooved. That thus it is written, and thus it behooved. What? That Christ should suffer, and rise from the dead the third day. And this they saw, they saw Him suffering, they saw Him hanging, they saw Him with them alive after His resurrection.

What then did they not see? The Body, that is, the Church. Him they saw, her they saw not. They saw the Bridegroom, the Bride yet lay hid. Let Him promise her too. Thus it is written, and thus it behooved Christ to suffer, and to rise from the dead the third day. This is the Bridegroom, what of the Bride? And that repentance and remission of sins should be preached in His Name among all nations, beginning at Jerusalem. This the disciples did not yet see: they did not yet see the Church throughout all nations, beginning at Jerusalem. They saw the Head, and they believed the Head touching the Body. By this which they saw, they believed that which they saw not. We too are like to them: we see something which they saw not, and something we do not see



which they did see. What do we see, which they saw not? The Church throughout all nations. What do we not see, which they saw? Christ present in the flesh. As they saw Him, and believed concerning the Body, so do we see the Body; let us believe concerning the Head.

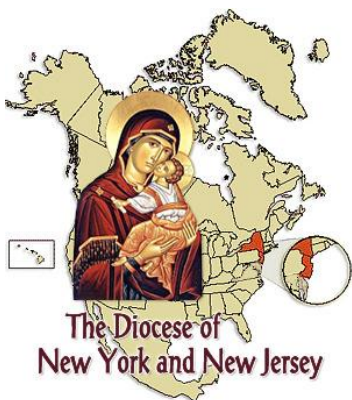
Let what we have respectively seen help us. The sight of Christ helped them to believe the future Church: the sight of the Church helps us to believe that Christ has risen. Their faith was made complete, and ours is made complete also. Their faith was made complete from the sight of the Head, ours is made complete by the sight of the Body. Christ was made known to them wholly, and to us is He so made known: but He was not seen wholly by them, nor by us has He been

wholly seen. By them the Head was seen, the Body believed. By us the Body has been seen, the Head believed. Yet to none is Christ lacking: in all He is complete, though to this day His Body remains imperfect. The Apostles believed; through them many of the inhabitants of Jerusalem believed; Judea believed. Samaria believed. Let the members be added on, the building added on to the foundation. For no other foundation can any man lay, says the Apostle, than that which is laid, which is Christ Jesus ...

Let Stephen be killed, the Church of Jerusalem dispersed in confusion: out of it go forth burning brands, and spread themselves and spread their flame. For in the Church of Jerusalem, as it were, burning brands were set on fire by the Holy Spirit, when they had all one soul, and one heart toward God. When Stephen was stoned, that pile suffered persecution: the brands were dispersed, and the world was set on fire.

*Excerpt from St. Augustine of Hippo, Sermon 66:6, from a commentary on the Gospel of Luke. Translation found at **CHURCH FATHERS: Sermon No. 66 on the New Testament (Augustine) (newadvent.org)***

“What do we see, which they saw not? The Church throughout all nations. What do we not see, which they saw? Christ present in the flesh. As they saw Him, and believed concerning the Body, so do we see the Body; let us believe concerning the Head.”



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New Mission Station in Plattsburgh, New York By Archpriest Terenti Wasielewski

Early in 2022, a relation of mine asked if I would serve the Divine Liturgy in Plattsburgh, New York. Plattsburgh is on Lake Champlain in upstate New York on the Vermont border and about a thirty-minute drive to the Canadian border. It is also the home of SUNY Plattsburgh.

Many of the people in the region have to travel into Canada or Vermont for Church services. So there was a long-time need for an Orthodox Church in the region, and it was a place that His Eminence Archbishop Michael had long ago identified as fitting for a mission. After the call from my family member, I contacted Archbishop Michael, who was very enthusiastic about establishing a Diocesan presence to serve the spiritual needs of the area.

As with many new mission start-ups, we had to establish three important foundations. The first was to make contact with any Orthodox in the area as well as anyone interested in the Orthodox Faith. This was done mostly by modest advertising and "word of mouth." The second task was to find a place to hold services. Third, we had to assemble the items we would need



for worship. We set a day and time for me to visit there and hold services. Thanks especially to the hard work and dedication of laypeople "on the ground", we were able to accomplish all these tasks quickly.

Our first Divine Liturgy was held in the former Air Force chapel on April 30, 2022. Ten people came to the service. As far as we know, this was the first time an Orthodox Divine Liturgy had been celebrated in the area. Afterwards, we gathered at the local diner to get to know one another and to devise a plan of action going forward.

In the early fall, we placed advertisements in the local newspapers. By placing those ads, we

were able to gain more interest. We were welcomed by a local United Methodist Church to use their facilities for services; and we gained two more interested Orthodox Christians in the area.

We had planned to hold services before Christmas, but a winter storm necessitated a new date. At our next meeting on January 27, 2023, we established a schedule of Divine Liturgies on the last Saturday of each month, and discussed the naming of the mission, opening a checking account, and planning for Archbishop Michael's upcoming visit to Plattsburgh. Our most recent Divine Liturgy was celebrated on Saturday, February 25.

There are always many needs for a new mission, and we are beginning with a very modest budget. Any assistance from parishes and individuals in growing the mission will be sincerely appreciated and make a great difference as we strive, with the Lord's help, to continue to plant the Plattsburgh Mission Station, one of the most remote of the Diocese of New York and New Jersey's missions.

Contact Father Terenti at email 1954tlw@gmail.com.

We're on the Web!

<https://www.nynjoca.org>