

## ST. SAVA SERBIAN ORTHODOX CHURCH

ISSAQUAH, WA

PRIEST'S GREETING – MAY 2008

Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ,

Can anyone be a missionary? Yes and no! Fr. David Rucker, associate director of the Orthodox Christian Mission Center, says that, “the relationship between the words in the New Testament for ‘apostle/missionary,’ ‘witness/martyr,’ and ‘disciples’ can be somewhat complicated and confusing... I share the opinion of those who would say that all genuine Christians are disciples and called to be witnesses, but not all are called to be missionaries. The missionary was specifically called out from among the disciples/witnesses, equipped for specific service, and sent by the Church to be a witness by teaching the Faith through the offering of his/her life, and this usually involved crossing cultural and linguistic boundaries. This was not a job for just anyone; God set men and women apart for this service, and the Church blessed what the Holy Spirit manifested.”

When we think about the missionary effort, we quite often think of someone who travels to a faraway land performing missionary work where people are not baptized or if baptized, not particularly "churched" which is to say they have not had the opportunity for intimate, continual contact with the church as a living body of the faithful. However, one doesn't have to travel far to be a witness to what is true and real – the Orthodox Faith. Even in our own community, some people are just beginning to learn about Christ and may have only an inkling of what He is all about.

To be baptized yet not carry out the "mission" Christ commands us to do, "...go therefore and make disciples of all the nations..." (Mt. 28:18-20) results in a person missing out on an important element in his or her life. There can be many reasons for failing to be the missionaries Christ wants us to be, one of which is likely that we are too centered in our own lives and therefore take little or no time to think about others and share our faith through our interactions with them.

Before we can *make* disciples (that is pupils or followers), we first have to *be* disciples ourselves which brings us to a basic question. Are we constantly learning about our Faith, or are we so complacent with our condition that we are not interested in growing in the Faith of our fathers? If we only pick and choose what suits us from the messages we hear, perhaps disregarding the "hard" lessons, then we are not fully hearing God's Word. St. Theophan the Recluse reminds us that, "One can be *counted* as a Christian and not *be* a Christian." To put it another way, *being* a Christian is hard work! But it is rewarding work.

Ultimately, just as in confession, we must start with ourselves. Having just experienced the great Feast of the Resurrection, we should be motivated to be pleasing to God and fulfill His commandments with zeal. We should be hungry to learn and listen to God's preachers. "Christian life is characterized by zeal and the strength to remain in communion with God by means of an active fulfillment of His holy will, according to our faith in our Lord Jesus Christ, and with the help of the grace of God, to the glory of His most holy name," says St. Theophan the Recluse. The history of the Church is full of examples of missionary efforts bearing much fruit because the disciples were eager to learn. Sadly, there are also examples where the apostles (missionaries) were ill-treated and some even martyred because people did not want to understand them.

Every parish is a missionary field in which to plant the good seed as much as any other place in the world. Since parishes are a mixture of baptized and unbaptized people whose interests and desires for both the knowledge *of* and participation *in* the faith range from very low to very high, every priest is challenged in his ministry, yet accepts as part of his ordination vows, to use the time and resources available to the greatest good, hoping that every seed sown will bring parishioners closer to the knowledge of God. Understanding this Christian missionary concept can be a great benefit and help all of us together grow a living and vital relationship with the risen Christ. "Forget those things which are behind, and reach forth unto those things which are ahead..." says St. Paul (Phil 3:13-14 [paraphrased]). However, we should not be mechanical in our zeal simply going through the motions. "For without the spirit of life in Jesus Christ, our zeal becomes soulless," says St. Theophan the Recluse. "If we do not have the true Christian life, we must learn how to begin it, in so far as this depends upon us," concludes St. Theophan. To paraphrase St. Theophan again, being an Orthodox Christian is a lifelong learning process.

Great Lent was the time for reflection and personal examination. Pascha is the time for resurrection. And like spring, it is now the time when first flowers signal the end of our spiritual winter and that the ground is warm enough for sowing. May we all plant seeds that will break through winter's crust, blossom, and bear much fruit!

Your servant in Christ, Fr. Ilija Balach  
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