

The Missionary Imperative of Orthodoxy

What is our Food?

Tribesmen in India's far eastern state of Mizoram suffer an invasion of rats due to the flowering of a particular bamboo plants that happens every 48 years. Once the rats have eaten all of the bamboo, they turn to the crop of the farmers who make up half of the population (around 800,000). The farmers stopped planting crops in 2005 knowing what was coming ahead and was to last into 2008. The risk of famine is great and the government offers money for rats killed - so far over 220,000 have bit the dust. The rat invasion illustrates what happens when the "flower" of sin blooms in our lives as well. Just as the flowering of a bamboo plant multiplies the presence of rats, likewise, the flowerings of sin attract hoards of demons who come to feed on the "pleasure" they derive from our sins. The result of allowing sin to flower is the devastation of the crop of virtues that God wants to plant in our souls.

Sin flowers as passions (habitual behaviors) that are manifested sometimes physically in the form of lust, gluttony or materialism. The non-physical forms of passions include anger, malice, slander, talkativeness, falsehood, despondency, insensitivity, fear, vainglory and pride. All living beings need food to survive. Humans, however, also require spiritual food if they are to flower with virtue and the goodness of God.

Jesus, taught His disciples not to be concerned with food for the body but to seek spiritual food. "Jesus said to them, 'My food is that I be doing the will of Him Who sent Me, and that I should finish His work' (John 4:32)." Doing the will of God gives life to the soul. A soul fed in this way by God is prevented from turning into a feeding ground for demons. So powerful is this "food" that it sustained Christ for 40 days in a total fast (Luke 4:2). The fact that the saints also physically sustained themselves on very little assures us that "spiritual food" is for all to partake.

The context of Jesus' teaching on spiritual food was that he was evangelizing the women at the well who later became known as saint Photini. Jesus was feeding His soul with missionary work. His mission was to bring the sinful women to repentance and open her eyes to the true God. Jesus teaches that missionary work gives life to the souls of Christians and is a.), the Father's will and b.), His work and c.), that requires others to fulfill. These three aspects form the foundation of what is known as the missionary imperative of Christian life. In the words of Fr. Schmemmann, the Orthodox have a "missionary imperative." This means that the very nature of the Church is to be missionary, and that if the Church is not missionary, it has failed to be the Church.

Missionary Work is the Father's Will

It is God's desire, His will that all should be saved and come to the knowledge of the Truth (I Tim 2:4). How people come to the knowledge of Truth (Who is Christ) is

accomplished through the work of missionaries in various ways. Some come to share their love for Christ in foreign countries and inspire others to repentance. Others go out to the streets of their local cities and by providing practical caring for the needs of the poor, minister to them as if they are Christ Himself (Matt. 25) Missionaries educate people about addictions and offer them tools to overcome them. When prayerfully done in the name of Christ, in His presence, and to Him, these acts bring people to faith in God.

As Greek Orthodox communities, we too are called to be missionaries who share the same desire to bring others to Christ by our treating them as if they were Christ. Through our acts of kindness and by God's grace, missionaries help give birth to faith in Christ. The fruit of living as repentant sinners gives birth to sharing this newness of life found in Christ with others. As long as a spiritual life is neglected, the desire to help others come to Christ remains nonexistent. Consequently, the ministries of the Church will fail in their mission if those leading and participating in them are not sharing God's desire to bring other to Him. Whether it is the Choir, Parish Council, Youth Program, FDF, Senior groups or Philoptochos societies, each is called to share in the Father's desire to be missionaries. Yearly, each ministry should evaluate what it is doing, how it is doing it and what is being accomplished. With repentant hearts and a desire to seek God's will for setting goals for these ministries amazing miracles can happen. The miracles are often simple and practical ways of expressing God's love to others.

The Church is God's Co-Worker

The act of bringing people to faith in Christ is God's work. God's love for humankind is constant, unconditional and relentless. The love God has for us is revealed in the person of Christ, His coming to earth, taking the form of a servant, offering His life on the Cross and opening the gates to paradise once again to all. After the resurrection of Christ, it becomes the work of the Holy Spirit, operating in our communities, to accomplish God's work on earth.

The Church is God's co-worker. Ministries flow from Christ, yet we carry them out. Christ is the head celebrant at the Liturgy, yet, bishops and priests manifest His presence at the altar. An angelic choir sings in heaven at the throne of God, yet, we join them in lifting up our voices. God provides in abundance every needed resource for good works; and yet, we are called to share these gifts from God with those in need. This dynamic of God's work being accomplished through Church members expresses the unity between the children of God and our heavenly Father.

The Church finishes God's Work

The reason it is imperative for the Church and its members to be missionary is because without it God's work cannot be completed. What an amazing statement! It is the Church's responsibility to finish the work of God. It means everything flows from God

but its completion flows through the work of faithful disciples. The reason God has established this arrangements is because it best illustrates this synergy - the co-working of mankind with God. If we fail to act, to co-work, God is not limited, He finds others who are willing and uses them. It is a deception for the Orthodox to think that being the "true Church" is enough, for if we are found to be "unavailable" when God needs someone to finish His work we have failed to be the Church.

The Greek Orthodox Church in America must ask itself 'What is our food?' What are we really "getting out" of participating in Church ministries? More importantly, what are we accomplishing in the lives of those who are affected by the ministry we are involved? The answer tells us everything. Fr. Schmemmann writes: "It is the sanctification, the growth in holiness, of both the Christian individual and the Christian community, the acquisition by them of the Holy Spirit, as the ultimate goal of Christian life." Each member of the Church is called to grow in holiness through prayer, fasting, reading the Bible, and confession. If we choose not to utilize these means of acquiring the Holy Spirit, our souls will not receive their proper food and we will go about participating in Church ministries for all the wrong reasons!

Each member of the Church is called to become a missionary of the good news that God's Kingdom is present in our hearts. We proclaim this good news as the Holy Spirit directs us. The manifestation of the mission of the Holy Spirit can only be the product of our cooperation with the Holy Spirit. May God continue to move us to manifest the Grace of His Kingdom to all whose lives we touch. May the joy of that Kingdom abound within us as we leave God's table and continue His mission in the world.

Let is not attract the rats!
+Fr. Andrew Barakos