

**Department of Pastoral Life Ministries,
Department of Christian Witness
Marymount University,
Arlington, Virginia,
25-28 July, 2007
Words at the Skills Conference**

“The Heart Assured: Works of Love in Deed and Truth”

Outreach in a Healthy Parish

What does this expression mean: “a healthy parish”? Before we can discuss outreach, we have first to examine what a healthy parish could be like. A major part of this consideration will depend upon the contents of the Apostle Paul’s letter to the Romans, Chapter 12. Also, the context of our consideration will have to be the understanding that the parish is a hospital for sinners. Let us also remember that since Orthodoxy is all about the natural consequences of the Incarnation of the Word, the Love, of God, as shown also in iconography, so everything else about all of our Christian life is about our yes being yes, our no being no, about doing what we say, about an integrated life, about “putting our money where our mouth is”, as the slang saying goes.

Let’s begin first, as in the Gospels, with the “r” word. This word, repentance, has to be at the heart of every person’s life in such a healthy parish. For healthy Christian living, this turning around, this choosing Christ, this choosing life, this choosing love, in truth, this spiritual warfare, must be a factor of every day of the Faithful Indeed, this particular choice has to be the characteristic of even every moment. And this choice cannot be simply an intellectual kind of exercise, because if it were that, one would quickly short-circuit. It is a choice of the heart, a heart in communion of love with the Lord. And when there is a fall, as is regularly the case with each of us, this repentance must be quick. We have to recognise our vulnerability to the Tempter, our weakness, and our need constantly to be calling to the Lord for help in everything, and knowing how to listen to the heart. So this is the hospital-for-sinners factor. If we as a parish are, indeed, a bunch of hypocrites, then it is realistic. But this hypocrisy is at least in the context of repentance. And, as in the twelve-step programmes, everything begins with admitting that we can do nothing at all without the Lord, without constantly calling to Him for help. If we really want to be honest, too, we could go so far as to admit that we are addicts. We are addicts to sin. We are addicted to ourselves, in this respect, and we need the Lord’s help to get out of that quagmire. All of this, in the context of repentance, gives a good context for everything else. In this atmosphere, in this disposition, we may more easily see Christ in the other, and may more easily hear Him speak to us through the other. So we must constantly be turning around, which is the meaning of repentance, turning around from death to life, turning around from selfishness to selflessness, turning around from darkness to light.

There is also a concern I have about an ecclesiological-related misunderstanding, which seems to be infecting the disposition of various persons in various parts of the Church, not even

only here in North America. The misunderstanding to which I refer has to do with the difference between power and authority, in interpreting life in a hierarchical environment, which certainly is that of the Orthodox Church.

Power has to do with the use of force, or manipulation by the higher upon the lower. In mentality, one might say that one treats the structure of the Church as simply being like a secular organisation, a political creature. And power really is the environment of secular politics. In such an environment, one will be told that the Church is like a pyramid, with the lay-people at the bottom, forming the broad base, and the higher authorities above them, and the highest at the top, all the way to the Patriarch of Constantinople, who is, truly, the last court of appeal in the Orthodox Church. The various ranks in which we serve are, in this schema, compared to the ranks of soldiers in an army. Shepherding of sheep is treated in the western manner, in which the shepherd, assisted by dogs, from behind the sheep, drives them in the direction he wishes them to go. The Church is understood to be an institution, and life in the Church is often treated as if it were a human invention, a business, a club. Leaders are officials. One could apply the saying: Don't do as I do, do as I say. The Church is often treated as if it were the society of the holy persons, of the just (another word that we ought not to use). Indeed, this environment of manipulation can be described as dysfunctional, and rather similar to the spiritual condition of addicted persons, who, living in fear, feel they need to control their environment for their own protection.

Authority, by contrast, treats all the same elements of structure with a different spirit. It is an environment derived from the relationship of love in Christ. Following the Lord's parables in the Gospel, the person with greater authority is properly compared to a shepherd in the Palestinian manner. Because of personal experience, and because of having achieved this experience through loving emulation, the person in authority knows the way to go, and moves in that direction. The sheep follow, because they know the shepherd's voice, and trust his love for them, to lead them well. The shepherd knows the sheep by name. Authority is exercised on the basis of a trusting relationship of love, and the providing of a good example. The person who exercises leadership does so by example, as a parent. Everything is done in the context of loving, trusting, relationships. The Church is understood to be a living organism. The Church is understood to be a family made up of sick persons, desiring to be healed, desiring to become righteous. If we want to use a diagram for describing authority, one might use a circle, or a sphere. The chief authority is in the centre, and the associated and derivative authorities surround this centre. Even this illustration is not sufficient, but it may be helpful. The exercise of authority in a distorted manner, as a result of temptation, and of sin, means a person tries to take short cuts, sometimes from simple impatience, and to try to force others to go in a particular direction. This distorts authority into power. But that does not mean that the misuse of authority changes what it is. Regardless of our temptations, of our falls, authority is the loving exercise of a God-given responsibility, always in the context of Christ, His love, His will, and discerning His will. When we constantly repeat in Matins and Molebens : "the Lord is God, and has revealed Himself to us", we are reminding ourselves of what we must daily remember, and that we must always look to Him.

Now, having begun with all this, let us next begin with the head of the parish. This head, the parish priest, the Rector if there be more than one, has the responsibility of leading the parish, as given to him from the Bishop. This priest, this shepherd, this father, is given this responsibility by the bishop, and with the bishop, he too has to re-present Christ to the people, to be the head of this parish community, this parish family, in a way showing how Christ is the Head of the Church, of the Body of Christ. When the priest is ordained, according to the recent Russian custom, he is given a simple Cross, on the back of which are inscribed words of the Apostle Paul to Timothy: “Set the believers an example in speech, and conduct, in faith, in love, in purity” (1Timothy 4,12). In the same vein, there is a true saying: As is the priest, so is the parish. There is another, more cynical saying, also: The fish stinks from the head. It is nevertheless true. For good, or for ill, the character of a parish is very much dependent upon the character of the priest. If his own spiritual condition is healthy, if he is living a repentant life, if his life is characterised by Christ’s love, if he, together with his family, is praying morning and evening, and before and after meals, if he is welcoming, if he is caring, if he is visiting the homes of his sheep, and knows his sheep by name, if he regularly intercedes for the members of his flock, then the flock is likely to be healthy. As the priest is living a life in love with, and imitation of Christ, so the faithful flock will more and more follow this example.

So if we have a healthy priest, who is leading his flock in a proper Orthodox environment of love, and of course of repentance, then we can have, despite temptations, a stable Christian parish family. In this family, suffice it to say that we have all been given by the Lord various gifts, and responsibilities. We have each also been called by Him to use these gifts in love, according to the manner in which He has given them, and in the context of His call to us. These gifts are given never for ourselves alone, but for all around us. Life in Christ’s love is always reaching out, is always concerned with the other, is always concerned, too, with the physical environment. I remember from long ago in my life, reading stories about Anglican clerics who, more than a century ago, actively shared their love of Christ with the poor, and the destitute of the Docks area of London. It was invariably the case that those who began to live in the love of Christ changed their surroundings. It was their homes that became clean and orderly, and it was their homes that had flower-boxes at the windows. This was the spontaneous expression of their new hope, which affected everything. The personal relationship with Christ always bears fruit, it always gives life. The Saviour’s words as given to us by the Evangelist Matthew (12.30) are important to remember: He who is not with me is against me, and he who does not gather with me scatters. These are important, crucial, words for us to keep always at heart. In Christ, we must gather, we must welcome, we must be hospitable, we must be open, we must be embracing. His love always is so, feeding, healing, giving life.

So, at last I get to addressing more specifically outreach.

The Apostle Paul’s words in his letters to the Romans (12), and to the Corinthians (1C12-13) are useful to re-read frequently, so that we keep in focus. We must always remember that we are living in a cultural context in North America that is definitely not Orthodox, and that our self-perception as Orthodox here is easily distorted by the misconceptions of our societies. We have a responsibility to know ourselves correctly as Orthodox Christians in Christ, and to live as a

positive contribution to this society, helping the Lord to correct these misconceptions.

The Lord, Himself, always, and everywhere, has been bringing life to those around. He brings healing. He brings hope. As He does this, so must we be doing, because we who have been baptised into Christ have put on Christ. The Apostle reminds us that we are members of the Body of Christ, and that by the Grace of the Holy Spirit, we have been given the gifts, each of us according to the Lord's love, in order to function according to where we are situated in this Body, again according to the Lord's will, and direction. He reminds us that we have to be ready always to exercise these gifts. We have to remember that we each, each one of us, have our particular gifts and responsibilities given to us by the Lord, and that it is our responsibility also to come to know ourselves in the Lord, so that we will be ready to exercise these gifts. Sometimes the Lord does not give us just one or two gifts for the whole course of our lives. Rather, He gives us different gifts at different times, according to the needs of various persons, and various situations. Knowing our hearts, knowing ourselves, knowing ourselves in the context of a clear and healthy relationship with the Lord, is very important. It is important, because the Lord is asking us to be reaching out, just as He always has been doing, at all times, to each person that comes to us every day, and in every situation. The love of the Lord Jesus Christ informs everything that we are, and that we do. So we have the practical connexion that Orthodox Christians are familiar with - the connexion between the Holy Table of the Temple, and the Dining Room Table of our homes, through which our homes also become a little Church, and our daily meals are extension of the Eucharistic meal.

So the Apostle tells us to practice hospitality. This is truly a basic characteristic of all Orthodox Christians, always, and everywhere. This hospitality is not expressed only in Church, although it is truly important there. It is expressed daily in our home life. Hence, again the balance, the connexion between home and Temple, between the corporate expression of the Body of Christ at worship, and at work in daily life. All is in balance, all is connected. This is one reason, as was explained to me by a grandmother, that Orthodox meals presented to visitors are often not so harmonious, but even excessive. The host should bring forth everything possible, so the guest may find something pleasing among the choices, and the guest may have enough to eat. An Abbess, the spiritual daughter of a New-Martyr Metropolitan of Kremnets, Ukraine, was taught by him that the host should make such an offering to a guest, and that the guest should taste something from everything on the table, but not eat everything. How often I have had to remember this lesson in my travels, as the very poor have offered everything to the stranger, to the foreigner, for the love of Christ. It is in this same light that many an Orthodox family may have the custom of preparing extra food, even setting an extra place at meals, in case someone may arrive unexpectedly. Many people always keep something special, something nice, aside, waiting for the unexpected guest. Such was also the case in my childhood, along with many other families, because in those days people often did appear like that. And it is still so in many parts of the world. An appointment to appear is not required. In this environment of loving generosity, too, lives the custom of not arriving at a home empty-handed, but always bringing something for the host. We respect the presence of Christ, the image of Christ, in each other. It would not hurt us to remember that St John Chrysostom suggests that we even prostrate ourselves before each other after receiving Holy Communion, just because of this Presence.

If we are going to reach out beyond ourselves as an Orthodox Community, then we have to be visible, first. People have to be able to find us at the right time. So our Temple must be listed in phone-books and other directories. The Internet is very useful nowadays, although it has to be kept current. Our Temple has to be kept up in such a way that it shows that we care about it. Here, too, we need to be mindful of our various gifts, and exercising them all together, so that none of us has to work too hard. And the approach, and the surroundings, should be as orderly, as beautiful, and as inviting as possible. When a person may come to enter the door of our Temple, that person should not be swarmed, nor pounced on. This is scary, and it makes us look desperate. We should simply, and responding to the Lord's love in our heart, receive the person respectfully, and supportingly, without applying the Grand Inquisition. And this reception has to be without distinction, too.

I know well how Faithful have tried hard to present themselves to their near neighbours, using one technique or another, and how they have often been disappointed with the nature of the response, or non-response. Instead, the Lord has sent the unexpected to them, persons most unlikely to fit, and hard to accept. In one case, they have seen how the Lord has sent aboriginal persons to them. These, they have received with love, and have fed them. Some have entered the Orthodox Church completely, and all show they feel that they know they are welcomed and loved. In another case, it is a particular Mussulman who is presented to be received similarly. With the attitude of the Lord upon the Cross, we reach out, we embrace. Then we must be ready to receive whomever the Lord may send. We cannot pick and choose. The Lord Himself shows us how our breadth and depth of love has to be ready to encompass every human being that the Lord has created, regardless of wealth or poverty, health or illness, wholeness or brokenness or deformity. In exactly the same way that we are born into our families as they are, and we do not have a choice as to who are our parents, siblings, relatives, and ancestors, or their state in society, so we are, as members of the Body of Christ, members of a family, a very far-flung, and richly various family, a family with some very difficult, eccentric, and eclectic members, and some very healthy, and strong members. The Lord encourages us to love each one uniquely, just as He loves each one of us uniquely, with infinite love, and with infinite patience.

And in all of this loving relationship, the Lord continues to work the wonder: the more we work in loving, the more the Lord gives us this love. In its exercise, our capacity to love increases infinitely. This is in itself a taste of Heaven. And that is what our parish gatherings to worship are to be about - tastes of Heaven. In Heaven, in this atmosphere of love in and of Christ, we increase in love endlessly and unto ages of ages. This ages of ages is in itself an expression of inability to express the greatness, the wonder, the immensity, of the Lord and His love.

The long and the short of what it seems to me constitutes outreach in a healthy parish is this: that, although we may be aware of certain techniques and methods, everything must be natural, everything must be honest. Because of the ways of secular society, people can easily perceive when they are having techniques applied to them. I have just poured out a pile of words. In our day, words are like the waters flowing mightily at Niagara. But these words have lost the

stability of their meaning. Talk is cheap, we say. Our yes must simply be yes, and our no, no, as we have been exhorted. Our love, and our relationship in Christ with each other, must be genuine. So you are right to look at me, and these words, and ask yourself if my life seems to be in harmony with all this. Is there more here than just the words? Does this speaker seem himself, to behave as he says? When the Lord washed the feet of the Apostles, He told them that they would have to do the same for each other. He reminds us all that we, as He, are here in the world to serve, not to be served. This is the characteristic always of Orthodox Christians. So if we always have this attitude, then the Grace of the Holy Spirit may flow through us, and our service, and touch those around us with the love of Jesus Christ. We may know all sorts of techniques, and that is good. These techniques themselves are expressions of spiritual gifts. But the know-how must be acted upon, and flowing, not artificially, not manipulatively, but naturally, borne upon, and informed by, the love of Christ, and alive in the Grace of the Holy Spirit. Everything about us must be as natural, as honest, as harmonious, as clear, as clean, as possible. Everything about us, even without words, should be able to reveal the love of Christ to those we encounter. In this, truly we can reach out in an honest way, and in this, truly we can be yeast and salt as the Saviour has said we must be. In this, truly we will live what we proclaim - that Jesus is Lord, glorified together with the Father, and the Holy Spirit, always, now, and ever, and unto the ages of ages.

**CHART FOR ASSESSING
MINISTRY READINESS
AT ANY LEVEL OF CHURCH LIFE**

*Pastoral Ministries Conference,
26-27 July, 2007
Arlington, Virginia, USA*

The following diagram provides a convenient scheme for examining resources, and “interest” in preparation for beginning any ministry, changing the direction of a ministry, or bringing a completed ministry to a conclusion.

**ALWAYS BEGIN WITH PRAYER, AND WITH A BLESSING.
ALWAYS BEGIN IN A SMALL WAY.**

Resources AVAILABLE		Resources UNAVAILABLE	
Some Interest	Ministry Readiness	No Interest	Missing Tools/Resources
Some Interest	Lacking heart, or Ministry ended, or Ministry reworking needed	No Interest	Impoverished

Archbishop Seraphim keynote speaker at Parish Ministries Conference July 25-28, 2007

His Eminence, Archbishop Seraphim of Ottawa and Canada was the keynote speaker at the Orthodox Church in America's Parish Ministries Conference at Marymount University July 25-28, 2007.

Archbishop Seraphim initiated reflections on the conference theme, "The Heart Assured: Works of Love in Deed and Truth," in his talk, titled "Outreach in the Healthy Parish," at the opening session on Wednesday, July 25.

On July 26, the Very Rev. Andrew Morbey, dean of Saint Mary Cathedral, Minneapolis, MN and chairman of the OCA's Department of Pastoral Life and Ministry, spoke on "Clergy/Laity Expectations of One Another." Responding to his presentation from the point of view of the laity was Mr. John Rybicki, director of adult religious education at Saint Luke Parish, McLean, VA, and founding member of the parish's FaithinAction Team.

The final keynote was delivered on July 27 by Nancy VanDyken, a member of Saint Anthony the Great Mission, Bozeman, MT and executive director of Gallatin County Love, Inc., an organization that trains people for ministry to the poor and marginalized.

Several workshops on a variety of topics were presented throughout the conference.

PARISH MINISTRIES CONFERENCE SCHEDULE

Wednesday, July 25, 2007

4:00 – 10:00 pm	Registration
5:30 pm	Vespers
6:30 pm	Informal Dinner
7:30 pm	Welcome
8:00 pm	Keynote I/ Archbishop Seraphim: "Outreach in the Healthy Parish"
9:15 pm	Wine and Cheese

Thursday, July 26, 2007

7:30 am	Matins
8:15 am	Breakfast
9:00 am	Keynote II/ Father Andrew Morbey; Mr. John Rybicki, responder
	"Clergy/Laity Expectations of One Another"
10:30 am	Coffee Break
11:00 am	Keynote II Breakout Session
12:30 pm	Lunch
1:30 pm	"Helping Those in Need"
2:15 pm	Breakout Session
3:00 pm	Workshops I (Two workshops will be offered in each time period)

4:00 pm Break
4:15 pm Workshops II
5:15 pm Vespers
6:30 pm Dinner
8:00 pm International and Pan-Orthodox Outreach

Friday, July 27, 2007

7:30 am Prayer Service with Anointing
8:00 am Breakfast
9:00 am **Keynote III/ Nancy VanDyken: "Expanding Our Parish
Life; Including Those Too Often Left Out"**
10:30 am Coffee Break
11:00 am Keynote III Breakout Session
12:30 pm Lunch
2:00 pm Workshops III
3:15 pm Break
3:30 pm Workshops IV
4:45 pm Leave for Vespers and Dinner at Saint Nicholas Cathedral,
Washington, DC
Evening Trolley Tour of Area

Saturday, July 28, 2007

9:00 am Divine Liturgy and Brunch at a Local Parish
Closing Remarks