

## **The Antidote of Service and Love for One Another on All Levels:** *An Interview with Father Michael Dahulich*

*[Note: Following his election to the episcopacy but prior to his consecration, Bishop-Elect Michael visited St. Gregory the Theologian Church in Wappingers Falls, New York, where he was interviewed for Jacob's Well by the Very Rev. Archpriest Alexis Vinogradov, pastor. Though this interview took place on December 11, 2009 it is included in this issue to offer our readers a glimpse into the views and perspectives on our Church held by the priest who became bishop.]*

**Fr Alexis Vinogradov [AV]:** Fr Michael, what would you identify as the key factors leading to your acceptance of nomination for bishop of the diocese?

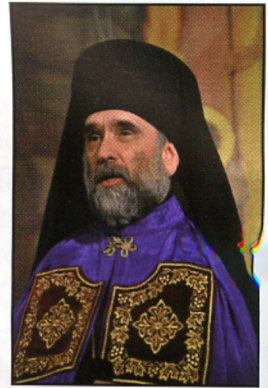
**Fr Michael:** I never seriously thought it would happen; I was truly content in my priestly life. I had wanted marriage and children. I loved being a parish priest. In my work at St. Tikhon's Seminary I enjoyed the challenge of helping to shape future priests. Both Metropolitan Jonah and Bishop Tikhon encouraged me separately to consider responding to the diocese's need for pastoral oversight and love.

**AV:** You are courageous, coming on the heels of difficulties experienced both in the diocese and the OCA. At this point there is good work being done to nurture a deeper understanding of hierarchical conciliarity on the basis of the life of the Holy Trinity. Would you comment on this work and challenge?

**Fr Michael:** The real key is the building of trust. There are several models in the Church's history. The Jerusalem Council in the book of Acts unites the whole Church and truly reflects Trinitarian life. Our own recent time of tensions of power will need the antidote of service and love for one another on all levels. The focus can be neither on me as bishop nor on anyone else except Christ. This will be a time of opportunity to rebuild aspects of Church life with the thinking of architects like Father Alexander Schmemmann who, coming out of the Russian tradition, saw the need to re-establish the Church after the ravages of the Revolution.

**AV:** Fr Michael, in your own ministry, who would you identify as role models?

**Fr Michael:** Before studying theology, I was strongly affected by my pastor, who was not formally a theologian, but it was very clear that he loved being a priest. It was shown in his profound love for the people he served. As a seminarian I visited hospitals with him. I once saw him severely criticized, and I was greatly affected by how calmly he accepted this treatment. He simply said that in the end everyone needs the hand of a pastor to hold. I learned from my seminary professors and Bishop John, who ordained me, that most importantly, you have to love the people. Bishop Basil, speaking at a seminary commencement, also underlined that the real job of the bishop is to love his priests and his people. As a teacher of scripture I am personally drawn to Saint John the Evangelist as my hero, and it turns out that my consecration will be on his feast day! I also teach a course on the theology of Saint Paul, and I hold him very dear as well.



**AV:** In this ministry of love for one another you naturally stress the pastoral dimension of our work, one on one. Could you shed some light on the institutional dimension, our larger witness among churches, to society and other faiths?

**Fr Michael:** It is essential to witness humbly that our faith is a great gift to the world. As we were being taught in seminary, we learned to witness to other faiths, but today the tragedy is that children have grown up without a church altogether. In a recent survey of youngsters, more five-year-olds recognized the McDonald arches than the Cross of our Lord. Our aim is not primarily to grow numerically—that may happen—but we must witness to Christ by the way we live and what we do. People must be drawn to our example, by how they see our attention and attitude towards the “least” in our society.

**AV:** Our communities no longer resemble the village church. Our parishes are far flung and our members commute long distances. This affects the life and shape of our communities; they are less organic and



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more intentional. As you prepare seminarians to be pastors do you find there are elements of that preparation that we have neglected?

**Fr Michael:** We need to develop a pastoral sense for the specific needs of each given local community. There can't be a rigid model. In one place it might be necessary to have classes on a Tuesday night, while another place may have family clusters gathering in parish homes. Our Lord accepted people in their own environment; He went to where they were. The early Christian communities were not identical; Corinth was not Antioch, Ephesus was not Rome. Paul urged us to become all things to all people; we need to understand what that means for us today.

**AV:** We have noticed that seminary students sometimes embrace Orthodoxy in reaction to a *laissez-faire* diluted Christianity of their origins. They find secure certainties in Orthodoxy, and are drawn to the preservation of externals. How does this square with the challenge of openness and adaptability to culture?

**Fr Michael:** I believe that our overall Tradition is sufficiently strong. A visitor entering our churches has an immediate grasp of being in an Orthodox church by the general look, the sounds and smells. We need vigilance not to compromise on the essentials, but we need freedom with forms and ethnic variations. Our own uniqueness in America is that we are still formulating what we believe to be a proper expression in America. It is important that we maintain key reference points to the Tradition. In general, I believe we have a good intuition concerning the parameters that we should not cross.

**AV:** Today, in responding to social and moral issues, the debates within the so-called culture wars, we often resort to simplistic dogmatic assertions, and neglect the pastoral dimension. How do we bring Christ's compassionate love where there is confusion?

**Fr Michael:** We must ask ourselves what we hope to achieve by what we will say. If our hope is to bring the love of Christ it is important to begin where people are in reality. We cannot flaunt "the right way or the highway!" Christ desires us to dwell in the kingdom, but we all fall short of the measure. In a long era of our Tradition, we enjoyed the luxury of being the dominant faith expression. There was the way of the empire or the wrong way. In a pluralistic culture the assertion of one right way will only turn

people away. If we look to the example of the early Church apologists, we see that they were able to recognize and affirm portions of the truth present in non-Christian cultures, and were thus able to motivate people towards the fuller expression within the true Church. The approach was deeply pastoral, rather than polemical.

**AV:** Fr Oleksa showed us this by the way Alaskan missionaries were sensitive to local practices, to acknowledge that the "Holy" has visited this place, missionaries were sensitive to this fact.

**Fr Michael:** The Church in Africa is experiencing this today. It may be appealing to hang on to the past which we received, but our "clients" are not the same.

**AV:** You spoke of the knowledge of Christ given as opportunity rather than requirement. That seems key in light of our history to require minimal sacramental practices such as yearly confession, which do not induce people to grow spiritually.

**Fr Michael:** Well, we certainly need guidelines, but they should open to us the opportunities given in Christ. Confession should of course be encouraged. Those of us raised in the Church know well how the chalice of our soul is cleansed through the forgiveness received in confession, but other traditions lack this experience, so it becomes our pastoral challenge to both encourage and open this experience to them. I only worry that our sacramental life does not lose the understanding of godly awe. To this end, we have to be vigilant in discouraging a casual approach to the sacraments.

**AV:** Father Roman Braga reminds us that in Orthodoxy the rules for monastics are the same as for laypersons. He states affably that the only difference is that the monk "chooses to live in eternity now!" What is our role to light this flame among laypeople?

**Fr Michael:** We need to move past our habitual concerns for the dichotomy of monk and layman and help ignite in people this desire for the kingdom now. Fr Florovsky spoke of inaugurated eschatology, the kingdom experienced here. We see this in our worship patterned after St. John's vision in Revelation. Carrying this sense into the home, we can teach that the combination of church and home life can be a slice of the kingdom, that we can live in beautiful preparation for when the Kingdom truly comes. We are bombarded by distractions which fore-

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He was a servant of the community - in the Temple at Pascha, as well as in chains in prison. His work at Derbe was summarized as making many disciples (14:21). He was incredibly successful at enlarging the local churches by preaching and deepening their faith. In returning to towns previously evangelized like Lystra and Iconium, he strengthened the resolve of the new converts, encouraging them to persevere in faith (14:22). Churches were served and strengthened by the addition of the affluent (17:12) and the educated (17:22). His four missionary journeys brought him to many congregations, which he united and whose faith he increased. We too must be servants - standing at the altar or in the soup kitchen, serving others as our Master did, and bringing others to His Church.

Paul was a colleague in suffering - embracing the lowly and persecuted, the sick and the dying with the joyous message of the Gospel. In response to the Good News, he was driven out of Antioch in Pisidia, mocked by the Athenians, stoned at Lystra, beaten and imprisoned at Philippi, and dragged out of the Temple in Jerusalem. What was his response of encouragement for each of those communities? "Through many tribulations we must enter the kingdom of God" (14:22). His was an asceticism of serving and leaving and starting over, trusting that someone else would build upon his work without worrying about it afterwards. Paul encourages us all as we face difficulties: "For I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worthy to be compared with the glory which shall be revealed to us" (Rom. 8:18).

Indeed, the Apostle's shadow falls upon successive generations of bishops, priests and laypersons.

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stall the urgency of such a life. To Zacchaeus, the Lord said, "I am coming to your house!" If Christ came to us, would he recognize our home as a Christian home at any given time? Would ours be a churchly home or would he find the TV blaring, and could He watch what we are watching? The details demonstrate whether we live in a way in which Christ is present among us.

In his closing remarks, Father Michael, asked that the parish communities hold him in their prayers and not to focus on his specific person, reminding us of the psalmist's injunction not to put trust in princes

His contribution in shaping the type of leaders we need in a renewed Church, as presented so clearly in the Acts of the Apostles, remains a valuable measure of effectiveness for all ages.

As Acts ends with the stirring announcement that Paul brought his work to its destined completion, welcoming all who came to him and preaching the kingdom of God to them (28:30), so it must be for those of us who serve Christ in the 21st century. At the very center of the only civilization he knew, the Apostle to the Gentiles taught about and witnessed to our Lord God and Savior Jesus Christ openly and unhindered. This is the model every Orthodox Christian must follow. Paul's exhortation for all of us to emulate rings across the centuries: "Be imitators of me, as I am of Christ" (I Cor. 11:1).

Paul's theology is central to the Christian Faith; he is a model for members of the Church to this very day. His teaching about the Lord, that spans more than half the New Testament, can be summed up in one sentence - one that we must not only memorize but also emulate daily: "It is no longer I who live, but Christ lives in me ... and the life that I live in the flesh I live in the faith of the Son of God, Who loved me and gave Himself up for me" (Gal. 2:20).

This issue of *Jacob's Well* is reverently dedicated to the memory of this great saint - truly a model for us all. As we begin the new liturgical year, let us recommit ourselves to Christ and His Church, asking for his intercession: "Holy Apostle Paul, pray unto God for us!"

or sons of men. His personal goal as bishop is to model leadership as service, to encourage communities to give glory to God both at the Altar in each church as well as at the altar of the soup kitchen.

**AV:** Thank you, Father Michael. Please be assured that despite our recent difficulties, both clergy and laypeople have a genuine desire to trust our hierarch shepherd, and to rediscover the father who truly loves his flock. We look to you as the sign of our unity, the bearer of catholicity across our large and diverse diocese.

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