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What is in a Word? By Archpriest Eric G. Tosi

There always seems to be a reaction to the word "evangelism". Sometimes that reaction is positive in that we as Orthodox need to do evangelism and present the Good News of Christ to a thirsty and hurting world. Other times "evangelism" evokes a negative reaction in those who have encountered someone who pushed their version of the Gospel at them. The reason is probably because that word, evangelism, has been so misused or misunderstood. In fact, it has been defined in so many different ways that, for many people, the word has lost all meaning. Some see it as active proselytism, in which a self-styled "evangelist" or group of evangelists preaches about Jesus Christ on a street corner...goes door to door speaking about Jesus Christ...or even tries to entice or coerce someone into accepting Jesus Christ. But it really is none of these things.

The Orthodox need to recover this word and be unashamed in using it in their parish community. Evangelism is more than proclamations about Christ. It is about living a life in Christ not only as an individual but as a community. The community is where true



evangelism comes to light. Evangelism may involve individual actions (teaching, preaching, caring for the needy) but it really is a communal activity. It means drawing people into a sacramental relationship with Christ and His Church which is only found in the Church community. What we do as a community is sacrament: how we reach out to others, how we draw people into the Church community, and how we sustain every soul in that Church community is paramount. We don't only go out into the world to bring people to Jesus Christ, we go out to open the doors for people to have a living and sacramental relationship with Jesus Christ.

So each of us needs to discover how evangelism operates in our own Church community. What do we do to open the

doors of the Church to others? How do we receive those who are looking for Jesus Christ? What individual actions do we do to make the Light of Jesus Christ shine before others? And, most importantly, how does our own Church community radiate the love, joy, peace and light of Jesus Christ? Do not be afraid of that word "evangelization" in your community, but rather encourage your community to discuss what it really means to be an evangelizing community. This issue gives some ideas and examples of how an evangelizing community can be made real. As the Evangelist Matthew states, *"Let your light so shine before men, that they may see your good works and glorify your Father in heaven."* (Matthew 5:16).

That Term “Evangelism”

Evangelize. Evangelism. Evangelization.

These terms are sometimes misunderstood by Orthodox Christians. Evangelization is not:

- “something Protestants do”;

- A gimmick by which the unsuspecting are coerced into making commitments for which they are not prepared; or

- Just “another facet” of Christian life.

To the contrary, evangelization *is* – and

always has been – at the very heart of the Church’s life and experience.

Let us note that the very tradition, teaching, and faith of the Church which the Lord gave was, from the beginning, preached by the apostles and preserved by the Fathers. On this the Church was founded...The Lord sent out apostles and commanded them to make the foundation of the Church by saying “Go out and teach all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.”

Saint Athanasius

Evangelization, then, is

- *the sharing of the Good News* of the risen Christ with others

- *the utilization and application of our faith* in our day-to-day activities, behavior, and relationships; and

- *the calling* of every Orthodox Christian

From Fr. John Matusiak in *Church Growth and Evangelization, OCA (1986), p. 11.*

“To the contrary, evangelization is – and always has been – at the very heart of the Church’s life and experience.”

On Christian Mission, Evangelism and Philanthropy By Protopresbyter Thomas Hopko

Real Christians are convinced that since God exists and God is love and human beings are made in the image and likeness of Love, the only choice for human beings is to love. They accept God’s love and love God in return by loving their neighbors, including their enemies, as their very selves. Scriptures attest to this obedience, servitude, and singular human choice: to return love to God, who creates, redeems, sanctifies, and glorifies (and we Orthodox always add *deifies*) all human beings and all of creation. Real Christians accept and return God’s love by loving

their neighbors, including their worst enemies, as their very selves.

Christians hold this convicting truth as the source, content, and goal of their mission in the world, their sole reason for being, until Christ comes in glory. They identify themselves as a people called, chosen, commissioned, and empowered by the living presence of Christ and the Spirit in their lives, to bring God who is love to all peoples and things. Their mission is to love with God’s love in every possible way. “As the Father has sent me, even so I send you,” says Christ the Lord (Jn 20:21). Christians accomplish their

mission of love primarily through works of evangelism and philanthropy...This mission is accomplished in *words* by the proclamation of God’s gospel and Christ to all peoples and nations. This Christian *evangelism* is always accompanied by teaching (*didaskalia*) and confession (*homologia*) and defense (*apologia*) and witness (*martyria*). And it is accomplished in *works* of love for human beings performed in concrete acts of mercy without condition or discrimination.

From *Speaking the Truth in Love*, SVS Press (2004), pp. 69-70.

“Christians hold this convicting truth as the source, content, and goal of their mission in the world, their sole reason for being, until Christ comes in glory.”

St. Innocent on Evangelism

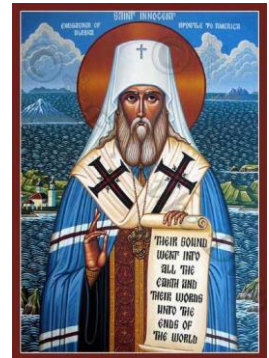
What, then, shall we do? How ought we to proceed when, in the words of the Gospel, the harvest is great in our country (i.e., many remain unconverted to Jesus Christ)? “Pray to the Lord of the harvest,” Jesus Himself teaches us [Mt. 9:38]. Thus, first and foremost, we must pray. If even in everyday matters people fall back upon prayer – asking God’s blessing at the beginning of some work and then throughout asking for renewal and strengthening of the work’s might (where prayer means nothing

more than help), here, in the matter of conversion, prayer becomes the means itself – and a most effectual of means, for without prayer one cannot expect success even under the most perfect of circumstances.

Thus, it is not our missionaries alone who must pray; no, we their brethren must further their work by our own prayers. And what ought we to pray for? First, that the Lord will send workers into His harvest; second, that He will open the hearts of

those who listen to the Word of the Gospel; third, that He will increase our Society’s numbers more and more; and finally that He will strengthen and confirm in us the desire we all now feel to further this work to the attaining of our goal.

Address of Metropolitan Innocent Veniaminov to the Organizational Meeting of the Orthodox Missionary Society, 1868 from *Alaskan Missionary Spirituality*, SVS Press (2010), pp. 141-142.



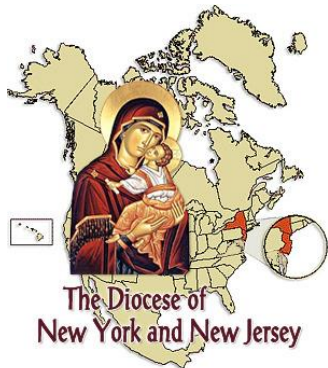
A Reflection on Evangelism

If evangelism is an invitation to become a believer, then the invitation must extend to become members of a community. Membership in that community begins with baptism (a response to that invitation) and is fulfilled in being in sacramental communion with the Church. In the Orthodox Church this would be manifested locally in the Orthodox parish. This is the place where believers encounter Christ in His fullness while they gather as the sacramental Body of Christ and are nourished with His Body and Blood. For an Orthodox Christian, this enculturation into the Body of Christ is to be received as a full participant into a local

Eucharistic community, which in turn puts one in communion with the entire Orthodox Church. As such, the communal liturgical experience becomes the center of one’s life as Orthodoxy believes that “worship is the center of the life of the Church, but it should also determine the whole life of every Christian.” (Paul Fueter, *Confessing Christ Through the Liturgy*) By focusing one’s spiritual life through the participation in a cycle of services, an Orthodox Christian becomes part of that Body of Christ which is entered through the sacrament of baptism and/or chrismation. It goes beyond a simple gathering of people as a community, rather it is through the

active involvement in that life as a parish that a simple community of people becomes the Body of Christ. Plainly stated, the goal of evangelism in the Orthodox Church is to integrate a person into the Body of Christ through the diverse ways that parish manifests itself. As has been pointed out, “Prayer, worship and communion have always formed the context for the witness of faith, including evangelism, mission and church life.” (Ion Bria, *Liturgy After the Liturgy*) Therefore, the goal of evangelism is not personal conversion to an individual and privatized faith but rather becoming a full member of a worshipping community.

“Prayer, worship and communion have always formed the context for the witness of faith, including evangelism, mission and church life.”



**Diocese of New York
and New Jersey**
His Eminence
Archbishop Michael
33 Hewitt Avenue
Bronxville, NY 10708

Phone 914 779 6580
Fax 914 779 6581

**Commission on
Missions and
Evangelism**
Archpriest Eric G. Tosi
1500 Route 376
Wappingers Falls, NY,
12590

Phone 845 462 3887
Cell 516 314 0836
Email egtosi@gmail.com

St. Innocent Mission Moves Forward

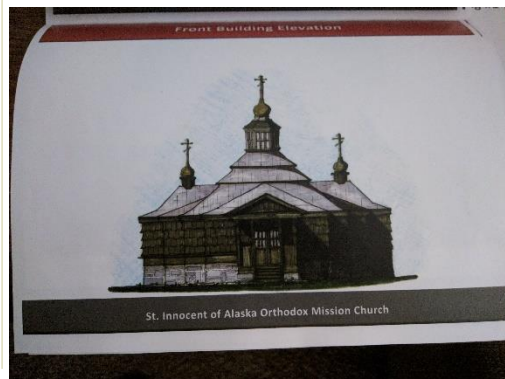
The mission in Oneonta has made some major strides forward. In September, the Parish Council voted to hire an architectural firm, Jaeger, Nikola, Kuhlman and Associates from Chicago, Illinois, to begin making a preliminary site plan and graphic renderings of the future church.

The president of JNKA, David Kuhlman, visited the mission to join the faithful for a “kick-off” meeting and to personally assess the ten acres of land recently acquired by the mission. The land was deemed suitable to build upon and Mr. Kuhlman submitted a first version of the graphic renderings and site plan. The mission looks forward to settling on the final design for the



proposed future church.

Other events in the mission include receiving a catechumen, and celebrating the mission’s first wedding. The mission also received a relic of St. Alexis of Wilkes-Barre and commissioned an icon to enshrine the relic. Finally, the mission took a pilgrimage trip to St. George Orthodox Church in Taylor, Pennsylvania on October 9th to pray before the myrrh-gushing icon of the Most Holy Theotokos where Fr. Vasil celebrated a moleben before the icon. His Eminence Archbishop Michael also made an Archpastoral visit to the mission this Fall. Momentum is building at the mission in Oneonta.



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