

KOINONIA: A Publication of the Diocese of New York and New Jersey

INSIDE THIS ISSUE:

Finding the Lost Sheep	1
The Lost Sheep	2
The Lost Sheep Program	2
The Lost Sheep and the Lost Drachma by Protopresbyter Alexander Schmemmann	3
Holy Apostles Mission is a Family	4

Finding the Lost Sheep by Archpriest Eric G. Tosi

“What do you think? If a man owns a hundred sheep, and one of them wanders away, will he not leave the ninety-nine on the hills and go to look for the one that wandered off? And if he finds it, truly I tell you, he is happier about that one sheep than about the ninety-nine that did not wander off. In the same way your Father in heaven is not willing that any of these little ones should perish.”

Matthew 18:12-14

Great Lent is a time of return. Each of the Pre-Lenten Sundays follow the theme of being lost and through Christ being able to find a way back to God. Time and again we are reminded that we are all lost and Christ calls us back to Him. The many parables and examples in the Bible demonstrate that Christ calls us all to look for those who have strayed (just read Luke 15 for the many examples). We should all take this time of Great Lent to search for the Lost Sheep or perhaps better phrased inactive Christians of our parishes and provide them an opportunity to return.

There are, of course, many reasons why people drift from a parish and become inactive



such as disillusionment, lack of conviction, personality clashes or lack of understanding about the Church. That should not deter us but rather give us more determination that in love we should reach out to them. So often these inactive Christians feel disconnected from their Church community or even embarrassed to return to the community after being away for some time. In the end it does not matter what is the reason for being separated but rather that we give them the opportunity to return without judgement or conditions. Our parishes should provide the means for them to return and we need to be open to them when they do return.

Opening the doors can be accomplished through a concerted effort by members of the parish to

kindly and lovingly reach out to the inactive members of the parish and gently invite them to come back. Very often that personal contact can be the door that the inactive parishioner is waiting for; a simple invitation to come home. Other methods may be utilized such as a call or note, open houses, mailings or a simple get-together.

Of course, be prepared for a negative reaction or even rejection. It does not matter as long as the invitation is done with love, kindness and gentleness. Open the door and give the people the opportunity and receive them as the Father in the Parable of the Prodigal Son: *“But we had to celebrate and be glad, because this brother of yours was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found.”* (Luke 15:32)

The Lost Sheep

Lost sheep. Burn-outs. The once-a-year gang. Easter Orthodox Christians

Regardless of how we unfairly label them, every parish has its share of *inactive* individuals and families who are more likely to appear on the books than in *the nave*.

An outreach ministry to *inactive Orthodox Christians* is but one form of *internal parish evangelization*. Despite the pervading tendency to drop or exclude inactive members, such policies only serve to dis-



member rather than *re-member* the Church and have no place in a growing, convinced parish. We are called to seek the inactive and the lost with the intention of *returning them* to communion with God and His people since every inactive Orthodox Christian has the potential of becoming an active and convinced Orthodox Christian.

From Fr. John Matusiak in *Church Growth and Evangelization*, OCA (1986), p. 69.

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The Lost Sheep Program

A ministry to the *lost sheep* is effectively designed to provide:

- *a point of contact* with those who, for whatever reasons, have become inactive in the Church or have severed their ties with the Church altogether;
- *an opportunity for inviting inactives to take another look* at their personal faith and experience and that of the Christian community; and
- *the support, encouragement, and plans* necessary for re-incorporating inactives into the

life of the Church in general and the parish in particular.

The Lost Sheep Ministry, then, is not so much concerned with *gaining new members* as it is with offering inactive Orthodox Christians an opportunity to strengthen their relationships with God, His people, and themselves.

In implementing a ministry to inactive Orthodox Christians, active parishioners must

- take *ministry* to inactive Orthodox Christians seriously;
- take *the image of the Good Shepherd* more seriously;
- take *themselves* less seriously;

- display *concern* for the inactives' return;
- perceive inactives as *potentially convinced* followers of Christ *rather than* as sources for increasing the parish's income or membership statistics;
- be *sensitive* to past hurts, whether real or perceived;
- be willing and ready to *listen*; and
- address the spiritual, personal, and social *needs* of the inactives.

From Fr. John Matusiak in *Church Growth and Evangelization*, OCA (1986), p. 69.

“The Lost Sheep Ministry, then, is not so much concerned with gaining new members as it is with offering inactive Orthodox Christians an opportunity to strengthen their relationships with God, His people, and themselves.”

The Lost Sheep and the Lost Drachma

by Protopresbyter Alexander Schmemmann

We find the parables of the "lost sheep" and the "lost drachma" in the Gospel according to Luke:

"What man of you, having a hundred sheep, if he loses one of them, does not leave the ninety and nine in the wilderness, and go after that which is lost, until he finds it? And when he has found it, he lays it on his shoulders, rejoicing. And when he comes home, he calls together his friends and neighbors, saying unto them, Rejoice with me; for I have found my sheep which was lost. I say unto you, that likewise joy shall be in heaven over one sinner that repents, more than over ninety and nine just persons, which need no repentance. Either what woman having ten pieces of silver [drachmas], if she loses one piece [drachma], does not light a candle, and sweep the house, and seek diligently till she finds it? And when she has found it, she calls her friends and her neighbors together, saying, Rejoice with me; for I have found the piece [drachma] which I had lost. Likewise, I say unto you, there is joy in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner that repents." (Luke 14:4-10).

The parables of the lost sheep and the lost drachma depict the Lord's true concern for the conversion of a sinner, and the joy in the heavens for those who repent. These parables emphasize that

God Himself seeks out the sinner to save him. This Christ speaks in other places in the Gospel: *"For the Son of man is come to seek and to save that which was lost"* (Luke 19:10; Matthew 18:11) and to *"call . . . sinners to repentance"* (Matthew 9:13) ...

Further, Jesus offers to them the parable of the lost sheep and the lost coin. *"What man of you, having a hundred sheep, if he loses one of them, doth not leave the ninety and nine in the wilderness, and go after that which is lost, until he finds it? Either what woman having ten pieces of silver [drachmas], if she loses one piece [drachma], doth not light a candle, and sweep the house, and seek diligently till she finds it?"* If you act that way on losing your property, Christ further says, as it were, then why do you reproach Me, when I am saving men who have fallen away from God, their Father. A responsible, good shepherd, on finding a lost sheep, does not punish it because it fell away from the flock, does not even drive it back to the flock; but, rejoicing that he found it, takes it on his dependable shoulders and bears it home; he calls his friends and says to them: *"Rejoice with me; for I have found my sheep which was lost. I say unto you, that likewise joy shall be in heaven over one sinner that repenteth, more than over ninety and nine just*

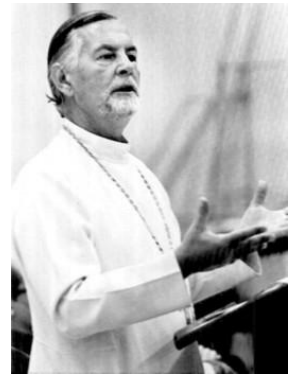
persons, who need no repentance." This is how God rejoices to return the lost sheep to the flock of salvation...

The Lord shows great care for lost souls, whom He boundlessly loves. God loves the world so much *"that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have everlasting life"* (John 3:16). And after His Ascension to heaven, His Providence cares for the Church that calls sinners to repentance.

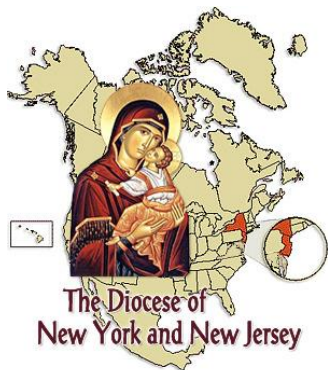
The shepherd who discovers the lost sheep, does not drive it back to the flock, but takes it on his shoulders and joyfully bears it home. Here the compassionate Shepherd Jesus Christ strengthens him who has freely decided to seek salvation. The sinner goes not alone on the new path, but with Christ. If he falls on the way, Christ will take him onto His shoulders, encourage and comfort him, for He said: *"Come unto me, all ye who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest"* (Matthew 11:28) ...

For the full sermon by Fr. Alexander Schmemmann go to

https://www.fatheralexander.org/booklets/english/parables_potapov.htm#15



"The shepherd who discovers the lost sheep, does not drive it back to the flock, but takes it on his shoulders and joyfully bears it home..."



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Holy Apostles Mission is a Family by Fr. Joel Brady

When people tell me what they love about Holy Apostles Mission, there are certain themes that seem always to come up. "There's such a sense of community here." "It feels like a family." "It's so welcoming." "It feels like home." I hear these things from long-time parishioners and from people just getting integrated into the life of the mission. And it's true: loving fellowship with one another is a real part of our life here. People genuinely like and want to spend time with each other and with whoever may have come around to visit. After nearly every service or parish study group, people stay a while to enjoy one another's company, and I often hear them mention time they've chosen to spend together outside of church. We hear a lot these days about social isolation as a part of our modern predicament, and we understandably think of the community in the Church as an antidote to that isolation. People are so isolated, and we in the Church have precisely what they need. This is a real connection between the notions of "mission" and "community," and it's relevant that our diocesan missions journal is called *Koinonia*: the Greek word for "communion" or "community."

So, it's essential for our community life and



fellowship to revolve around the Liturgy, around the feasts and fasts, around study of the Word of God. That doesn't mean we can only get together for "religious events," but it's essential that our fellowship grows naturally out of our sharing in the liturgical life of the Church.

But an equally important thing is that the community has to be genuine. Recognizing that people have a deep and increasingly-unmet need for community, we can try in all sorts of ways to put on an appearance of community – to manipulate people's felt need for community into a way of growing our membership rolls. Isolated and desperate as they may be, people are too smart for that. They need the real experience of community and of communion that come from genuine love inspired by a life in Christ.



Of course, we spend time thinking about how to make the place feel welcoming: that's what a loving community would naturally do. But "feeling welcoming" can never be a marketing gimmick. It has ultimate meaning only if it's an outgrowth of our recognizing the call to grow ever deeper in loving communion with God and each other. And it's our recognition of that call that allows us to invite and welcome others, not just out of a drive to grow our membership numbers, but because what we've been given and called to is so beautiful that we can't keep ourselves from talking about it.

At our recent annual meeting, our Senior Warden commented on Holy Apostles as "a place we can feel good about inviting people." But it's that way not because we've carefully engineered it according to what people want. It's that way because we're striving, as best we can, to live the life of communion with God and one another made manifest in the Liturgy. In spite of the challenges of a highly transient population and aggressive secularism in the Ithaca area, God has worked through our striving to bring about slow but steady growth. I'm continually humbled to be a part of it.

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