

Vesper Service of St. John the Compassionate Mission
November 10, 2018
“Orthodox Christians serving the whole community”
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Through the prayers of St. John the Compassionate who’s feast day we celebrate today....

When we celebrate the feast days of our glorious saints, we take time to pray and reflect on their life and what can we learn from their example.

St. John’s humility and compassion challenged society and upended the priorities by putting care of the poor and needy first. What a prophetic message for us for especially today! His boundless generosity and mercy with material possessions and spiritual help reached beyond his patriarchal see of Alexandria, even into Palestine and other parts of the world at that time. May he continue to guide and intercede for us all and for this holy Mission here.

Ok, so, here’s the first of a few confessions tonight...

I don’t know why I agreed to speak here tonight. I guess I have a hard time saying “no” to Fr. Nicolaie or to Fr. Roberto since first stepping foot here over 18 years ago.

Why am I saying this? Because words, in any language, cannot describe or illustrate the experience of what this place, St. John the Compassionate Mission is in my heart, what a blessing and how transformative it has been to so many people and to me. When I first arrived, I feel in love - I felt like I won the lottery! I had always dreamed about an Orthodox mission in an urban setting. What I didn’t expect was to be so stretched, so humbled and so challenged in my limited understanding of what living an Orthodox Christian life in attempting to be obedient to our loving Lord, through Christ and the lives of his saints as examples.

For tonight, I would like to share with you a reflection: a thank you and love letter to the people of St. John’s Mission.

So, I am going to change the title to from **“Orthodox Christians serving the whole community”** to: **“How the St. John’s Mission community has served and is serving Orthodox Christians, including me”**

I would like to talk about the value and importance of St. John's Mission- in (not to) the people, in the neighborhood, in the Orthodox Church locally and beyond.

As our beloved Mother Maria of Paris said and what is lived out here at SJM is, "The urgency to live out the gospel."

I know I'm preaching to the choir here, but it is important to realize that this place, is holy- set apart from the rest of society. It is not a perfect place or utopia, and I'm not romanticizing the Mission, but this is a place of beauty where God's love abides in the joys and sorrows of each day here.

In the 80's and 90's, there was (is still) a fruitful movement in the Greek Orthodox Church of North America that I was very involved with called the YAL- Young Adult League. Within the life of the church, we participated in four 4 expressions of Orthodox phronema (the way we live out our beliefs): **Liturgy – liturgia, Service – diakonia, Witness- martyria, Fellowship - koinonia**
My experience here at SJM has expanded and challenged me even further on how to live out these four expressions, and for that I am so grateful.

Here's my love letter to you all:

Dear Reverend Fathers, my Brothers and Sisters of St. John's Mission,

Thank you for teaching me that in Liturgy:

- The work (liturgia) of the table continues here after the liturgy of the altar in the divine service.
- Saint John's Mission is so much more than a social service agency with the label of a church stamped on it. It is a place of life, of welcome and of belonging to all who come here from all walks of life.
- Prayer is the center to the life here, together in our worship to God. Whether someone actually comes into the sanctuary or not, whether there are only two people in chapel, we are first present before God as one body. We are connected in prayer, with those on this side of the kingdom and our brothers and sisters who have passed on the other side of the kingdom who we continue to pray for.

Thank you for teaching me in Service:

- Requires action- putting our faith into action.

- As in the parable of the Good Samaritan, we become neighbours when we are willing to cross the road for the another. As Mother Maria teaches us “We must have a heart that gives.”
- There is a mystery in philanthropy- in the relationship with the other and with God.
- It is not just doing for the sake of doing. Not being transactional in our dealings with each other but relational.
- Understanding that having an open hand in giving and receiving, we are only stewarding what God has already given to us.
- In connecting with donors and supporters here at SJM, it is amazing to observe the blurry line of giver and receiver and that is learned and lived here at SJM. We might think that there is a distinction between the receiver and giver, but there is not. Those who give, receive and those who receive, give.

Thank you for teaching me in Witness:

- We are called to be a witness for the love of God, made visible in Christ through His life and example to us.
- The essence of being the Church is being a living witness for Christ in the world, where love abides of God and one other from within.

Thank you for teaching me in Fellowship:

- It’s all about relationships, growing in communion with each other.
- True philanthopia is the love of the person and seeing them in the image and likeness of God.
- What is experienced here at SJM, is the spiritual hospitality of listening-being present with the other.
- How important is the sense of belonging; of truly understanding that we are the beloved sons and daughters of our loving God.
- Through the spiritual discipline of listening, my ego is constantly challenged to be in check so as to better hear the Other. This is experienced at the intimacy of the table.
- Within fellowship, we appreciate beauty- not superficial, maybe seen with the eyes, or ears or touch, but sensed from the heart.

It is truly amazing how God’s love transforms each of us.

A powerful example of God’s transformative love is from our beloved Mother Maria as she lived out the Two Great Commandments.

Mother Maria devoted her earthly life and death to the “Two Great Commandments:” to love God and to love her neighbor by responding with *philanthropia* to the personal relationships that God had set before her. Whether in exile in Paris or in the concentration camps, she served her fellow man creatively, resourcefully, and from her heart. Bearing witness to God’s divine compassion, she brought hope, healing and comfort in the “vineyard” to which she was called – those in need around her.

Mother Maria’s life challenges me, just as it challenged the rich young man who approached the Lord in the Gospel, to give from beyond the “safe” areas of my life. The Lord wanted the rich young man to respond personally to the question, “Who is my neighbor?” and He asks the same of us. Personal failure for Mother Maria was to not respond to the Lord by loving her neighbor. How often do I fall on the wrong side of the fence when fear, apprehension, or even indifference makes me hesitate to take risks in love and action?

Here’s my other confession...We all know the passage in the New Testament about Jesus with Mary and Martha. Well, I was (and still am to a certain extent) a Martha, not taking the time to be present to the icons of Christ in front of me (my brothers and sisters) here. When I first started being a part of the Mission, I shied away from making the time to sit for a meal or coffee and be present with my brothers and sister here at SJM. I guess I had a fear of facing my own vulnerability, that I can’t or won’t be able “help” the other person. I wasn’t ready to face my own poverty, my own brokenness. What I realized over time was that I was missing out of the blessing and opportunity to sit at the feet of Christ in the form of my brothers and sisters here at SJM.

Thank you for the love I receive here. I have gained and learned much from my friends here at SJM. And I am still learning, striving to grow in relationship with our Lord and Saviour!

I am learning about our Lord’s limitless love for each of us.

I am learning about true spirit of generosity when receiving the simplest gift from the biggest heart with great love.

I am learning the value and dignity of all work and the beautiful fruits the labor has yielded, in both the means and the end result.

I am learning that we are all truly invited to be partakers of His Divine Love by Sharing in the Joy of the resurrection of our Lord.

Lastly, I am discovering God’s love and will for me, in loving my neighbor and discovering Christ in them.

I would like to share one of my favorite psalms in deep gratitude to you all:
A Song of Praise for the Lord's Faithfulness to His People

Psalm 100- A Psalm of Thanksgiving.

Make a joyful shout to the Lord, all you lands!

Serve the Lord with gladness;

Come before His presence with singing.

Know that the Lord, He is God;

It is He who has made us, and not we ourselves;

We are His people and the sheep of His pasture.

Enter into His gates with thanksgiving,

And into His courts with praise.

Be thankful to Him and bless His name.

For the Lord is good;

His mercy is everlasting,

And His truth endures to all generations.

May St. John the Compassionate Mission continue to be a blessing to all for many more years!