



Lived Theology School

St. Maria of Paris



LTS House Blessing (May 9, 2009)

Firstly on behalf of Fr Roberto and the community that is St John the Compassionate Mission I would like to thank Fr Velichko and Fr Nikolai who have joined us today for the blessing of this special house. It is our joy to have you here. Fr Roberto has asked me to say a few words about this St Maria of Paris Lived Theology School.

On Thursday last, a first-time visitor to the Mission asked me why I came to Canada. I think it had something to do with my accent! Good question as I had no intention of coming to Canada at all – my plans included working for the church in the warm sunny climate of Greece! I am still not sure why I actually contacted Fr Roberto when I saw the advert on orthodoxjobs.org for an intern to work at the Mission, but I did, and here I am! But you might ask yourself why I had to cross the Atlantic in order to find an Orthodox place like St John's.



Once a teacher, always a teacher, so I did my homework on this place called St John the Compassionate Mission. I searched all over the internet and could fairly confidently say that I knew quite a bit **about** this organization. When I had some fairly long talks with Hilda by phone between Toronto and Ljubljana I was encouraged to think that somehow I had an affinity with St John's. After all, I had met with Fr Sophrony, the disciple of St Silouan, and with Fr Lev who had been one of the chaplains of St Maria at Lourmel in Paris, two of the patrons of the Mission. So I came with a sense of knowledge and even of familiarity with the Mission.

But it didn't take long for me to discover that knowing **about** the Mission was very far from **knowing** the Mission and what it lives. Gradually, step by step, I began to glimpse more of what a specifically Orthodox approach to mission is about; to appreciate that an Orthodox approach to

mission is an integrated one. It is not, as has been said to me several times since I have been here, “a church with a soup kitchen”. Nor is it a soup kitchen with a church attached but it is, as any history or life of Orthodox missionaries will tell you, a way of life committed to others. And any way of life can only be understood when it is lived. It is to give to the Orthodox Church as a whole that this Lived Theology School has been founded. To give to the Church people who will have **lived** this life of mission and who will take this experience of living an Orthodox way of mission back to their own communities and live it out in their own places and in their own way. To give one example of such possible fruits of spending time at the Mission: one student from the USA, who came to us with an OCF group and came back again on his own, has now founded his own circle in Chicago of Orthodox students and young professionals which is undertaking its own form of Orthodox mission.

According to Google there are 75.5 million organizations in the world working for the poor. Most of them much bigger and certainly much better financed than St John’s so why has LTS been founded? As Fr Roberto has written recently, the Orthodox Church in North America is facing something of a crisis with regard to “mission” and what it means and how it should be done. The same crisis exists in Western Europe, remember I had to come to Canada. For sure LTS has not been founded to benefit St John’s. At a time when funds are stretched LTS is a considerable financial commitment for the Mission. LTS is a vision for the Church: a vision of a recovered sense and practice of mission that can be implemented by those who have lived the actual experience of mission life.

What LTS is can be seen quite simply through three “things” you will see almost as soon as you enter St John’s: bells, tables and people.

Let’s start with the bells! The bells and the semandron that so frequently breaks through the noise in the Mission to call to prayer, to what Archbishop Hilarion calls the “school of theology” that is our Orthodox liturgy. That liturgy that teaches us who our God is. That same God who humbled Himself to serve. That same God who inspired St John the Compassionate, St Silouan and St Maria of Paris to serve, to suffer with (the true meaning of compassion) the poor, not as an option but as an essential element of living an Orthodox Christian life.. The same service whether in 7th century north Africa, or on a mountain in Greece or a concentration camp in 20th century Europe or 21st century Toronto. The bell gives us the first pillar of the Lived Theology School – liturgy and prayer.

Then there are the tables.

There are at least 3 tables at St John’s.

- There is the Table of the Lord where the Liturgy is served.
- There are tables in the hall where the poor are served – the diakonia, the service of the Church. These are the two essential tables that St John Chrysostom says every church should have.
- But there are also the tables of teaching, of learning, in the basement. The teaching and learning that is carried on at the Mission through “Bridges” and St John’s Academy.

These last tables are as necessary as the other two. For, as Fr Roberto often reminds us, it is not enough to do something you have to understand **why** you are doing it. That is why the Liturgy calls us to be the “rational sheep” of the Church – even if at times the rationality is not always very evident. So from the tables we have the next two pillars of the Lived Theology School – service and learning, diakonia and study.

The last of the pillars of the Lived Theology School was the one that I did not appreciate before I came here thinking I knew about the Mission. Indeed could not know or understand because you **cannot** know about it until you are actually here. That pillar is community, the people, and I mean **all** the people, at the Mission. Community that is lived on so many different levels

- The common unity of those who work at the Mission.
- The common unity of those who pray and worship in the chapel of St Silouan
- The common unity of those who come to the Mission
- The common unity of those who live at the Mission

It is to give this experience of an Orthodox theology of mission that is known from living, not books; an immersion in a community of service founded on a sure rock of prayer and liturgy for those who will come to it, that LTS has been founded. It is a small seed but one that is based on a life lived at St John's for the last 23 years. St Maria had her Lourmel in Paris. Her Lourmel that was a place of service to the poor and needy; but a place also where some of the greatest theological minds of the Russian emigration in Paris met together to learn and discuss; a place where the Liturgy was prayed; a place of community; a place where compassion could grow; a compassion that was strong enough to overcome the worst that human beings can produce; a compassion that conquered the death camps of Europe. The people, all the people, who make up the common unity at St John's give us the fourth pillar of LTS – a living community.

Today Toronto has had its own "Lourmel" blessed. The seed has been planted and watered, may it grow and flourish!

As is only proper in an Orthodox school of Lived Theology I want to end on a Eucharistic note (also to show I have learned *something* since I came here): to thank all those who have worked so hard to bring this house to its present state

- To Darya and Mark and Jennifer especially
- To Shawn and his cohorts from the Mission
- To Efraim the first resident of the house
- And although he will not thank me for this, most importantly, Fr Roberto without whom none of us would be here today. Fr Roberto whose vision LTS is. Fr Roberto who holds together the community that is St John's. I could say a lot more but even sub-deacons have to know when to stop and so I will. Now!

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