

Love without Judgment



In September of 2009, after checking out St. John the Compassionate Mission earlier in the spring, and after receiving a blessing from her bishop, our daughter Naomi flew to Toronto to begin a year's worth of work there. Being prairie folk and never having visited Toronto before, my wife and I dropped into Toronto for a few hours on our way out to the Maritimes last summer to see what our daughter was getting herself into. We met Fr. Roberto and Sub-Dn. Pawel, had a tour of the mission and environs, and were cautiously satisfied that this could qualify as an OK place for Naomi to spend a year. After Presbytera Linda visited our daughter in November, I decided to spend some time there myself, so I flew to Toronto early in the morning of Bright Monday.

I not only wanted to spend some time with our daughter, but I also wanted to poke around and take in the atmosphere, meet some of the people who came to the mission, see how it was run and just get a feel for the ethos of the mission. I'd been thinking for some years already that we needed to do some kind of mission outreach in Saskatoon, and I felt that this could be a good experience to help me understand what this type of mission is all about.

I had some preconceived ideas of what a mission should be like, but I wanted to know what constituted an Orthodox street mission as opposed to, let's say, a Salvation Army street mission. I had recently dropped into a mission in Saskatoon with a couple of parishioners but came away quite confused and disappointed with what I saw.

After spending a few days walking along endless Toronto streets with Naomi, visiting a niece, and seeing an old friend, I spent several days hanging out at the mission, visiting with the people who came there, and generally seeing what could be seen. As well, I spent four nights at Lourmel house, home of the Lived Theology School as well as visiting with Fr. Roberto and Sub-Dn. Pawel.

During my time at the mission I noticed a Muslim woman answering Fr. Roberto's personal office telephone, and then I got speaking with a Caribbean man who was mopping the floors after lunch who said he was from a Roman Catholic background. At lunch I sat across from Heather and her husband who were from some Protestant evangelical background. And then there was Elizabeth, a delightful Hungarian woman with whom I exchanged a few Hungarian greetings as well as some wonderful conversation. None of this variety seemed to matter to anyone. There were those there who, it appeared, didn't even really need the services of the mission. There was someone there from almost every conceivable background, and they were all part of the fabric of St. John the Compassionate Mission.

In my purist type mentality, I was expecting the Orthodox to be serving the poor, but I saw hardly any of that. Instead, I saw that there was a community of human beings, from every conceivable religious and nonreligious background, needy ones and some not so needy, working together in a communion of love, manifesting that which they probably wouldn't have identified as love, but truly was.

And what I saw from those who administer St. John was love without judgment and love expecting nothing in return. These were not some holy persons serving some unholy persons. There didn't appear to be any 'top down' mentality here; rather, it was everyone serving/loving everyone else without judgment. Everyone was welcome whether they really needed the services of St. John or not. No one was judged.

When I was a young Pentecostal pastor in the mid-seventies, Fred Valuck was one of my parishioners. Fred had an incredible ministry in the two native reserves close to our church. Fred lived like the people in the reserves; He farmed like they did; he dressed like they did; he drove the types of vehicles and farm equipment that they drove; He went to their weddings, wakes and funerals, prayed with them and ate their food. In short he was one of them, and they loved him deeply and when Fred died, they all came to his funeral and grieved his passing.

At St. John the Compassionate Mission, I see something similar to this. There is no 'top down' 'we can help you' mentality, only 'Love without Judgment'. That's the phrase that keeps returning to my mind whenever I think about my time at the Mission.

-Fr. Bernard Funk, Saskatoon