

Four reflections

By Brother Luke (Gary O'Neil), October 2020

“A rain freely given has He ordained . . . He has freely given to the poor . . .” (Psalm 112)

In a couple of days, the Holy Church will be celebrating the memory of St. Francis of Assisi (October 4th). A couple of days ago they celebrated the memory of Gregory, the Illuminator of Armenia (September 30th), who was thrown into a pit with reptiles and decomposing garbage for fifteen years. Francis began his new life with a recognition that “the church was in ruins” and the resolution that “he would rebuild the church.” St. Gregory, on being drawn from the pit, restored the court and society to sanity by enabling the deformed king and his companions to dig reliquaries for the saints that they had killed. With their own hands, the nobles dug the foundation of these buildings. The high court women carried the dirt in the hems of their dresses.

In Gregory's story, this work of rebuilding the church, along with the prayers of the saint, leads to their recovery. In this work they recover their sanity, and they lose the claws and marks of animality that had come to disfigure them.

We have seen in past months how uncertain everything can be. How even the foundations of our daily lives and routines can be shaken to their foundations, and the Church has basically conceded that it is not “essential.” We look to our friends on the floor and the walls of the Mission — friends on earth and friends above — to remind us of what is lasting and true.

There is Dan digging in the earth in the smoking area to clean the cigarette butts away, with his scabbed and sore hands, one-by-one. Laura comes by and shares something she noticed. “I've been reflecting,” she says, “about a homeless man I saw eating out of the garbage bins after the Mission had closed. We should have a hunger day where we don't eat anything.”

So many little, unremembered acts of kindness and of love that make the fabric of our lives together. Bernie waits around patiently most of the day to talk with Murray, and paint some trail markers upstairs. A crowd of Nigerian mothers comes from Scarborough in the afternoon to pick up gift cards. We get to watch their disposition gradually change as they come from the street to the warmth of the church, full of baked goods, coffee, and tea. From confusion and mutual incomprehension come warmth. They eventually leave their babies in their strollers to venture into the dim unknown cavern of the church. Joanna shouts greetings, picks peppers from the front garden, and distributes to the visitors.

The bells sound the hours of prayer. You never know who will arrive to keep company. Saints? Strangers? Who is stranger to us, I wonder? Tea time comes — properly spaced — for the volunteers, and we sit in a circle in the quiet hall. We learn surprising things about one another. We are surprised how deep the roots go to this place, and the paths that have brought us here. Volunteers reveal surprising things about themselves. People who have lived at the Mission for ten, or thirty, years sit beside those who have just walked in off the street, or just responded to a post on ‘Volunteer Toronto.’

In the morning, we find needles in the bathroom and the hall is heavy with depression and testiness. In the afternoon, a burst of children take advantage of their mothers having to respect the COVID screening at the door of the Mission, and run freely inside the nearly empty church. Enjoying their freedom from supervision and constraint, they dance and scream joyously around, mashing the piano keys and laughing with one another. A quiet man comes to the front of the building and peels off his mask to confide in us that he is caring for an elderly woman on his street and about his prayer life.

“Tear down this temple,” the Lord says, “and I will rebuild it in three days.”

Prayer

We say a prayer in the chapel daily, asking God to make “this lowly church a house of prayer for all nations.”

This is a continuing thought for us. I've been thinking about how we introduce the place to new volunteers. Volunteers come from all backgrounds and places to the Mission. It has always been a tension for us in the community. On one hand, we want to make them feel welcome and invited to prayer, yet not wanting them to

feel obliged. This is always full of surprises. One day, for instance, a shy woman came into Good Neighbours who appeared to be Muslim, with a Persian name. She ended up decorating a board that we bang for prayer, walking around the intersection banging it with me for prayer, holding a sign, and then joining us. We were somewhat surprised that she did all this. She comes back every week and participates in our activities and seems happy. I haven't been brave enough to ask her about her religious background yet, or how she thinks about it. And why should she think about it, I wonder? We can often overthink it; this seems often the case. Some of the rarest moments are when you meet someone in the main hall who shares something difficult from their life and together you go to the chapel to share it with Christ. I've come to see that it is a real act of vulnerability to venture behind those seraphim-guarded doors into the dark unknown. People usually are not willing to do this unless they trust you, or have been brought very low.

If we believe that prayer is the most radical act, and the heart of the Mission's life, it seems that people should be invited into this life. But the more time I spend here, the trickier this seems to me. Is there a difference between a house of prayer and a church, or are the two synonymous? We usually describe ourselves as a church, but I think most of the people have a sense that we are describing an identity that they don't share, or that they can clear up the confusion of the invitation by telling me what they are already, e.g. Roman Catholic, Pentecostal, Buddhist, "not religious."

I think if we thought of prayer as essential work of the Mission, that people (anyone) has a capacity to do, it would open things up a bit. I feel more confident telling people, "If you pray, come and join us," than "come and join our Orthodox prayer service."

Father Roberto told me that if there is one monk in a religious community praying, then all the brothers are praying, because he is praying for them and on behalf of them. I often find joy in this idea. It takes the pressure off filling the chapel. It makes the person praying more important. I notice that many people will come for a service with lots of people, but fewer will come to pray alone with the saints or one or two other people.

Some friends of the Mission live nearby, and have two young children. They recently left the city to work remotely near relatives on the east coast in Halifax. When I tell them about what happens on Wednesday night at Bridges at the Mission, they are quite impressed. I tell them about how the noise of the day (beginning at 5 a.m.) begins to die down around 5 p.m., and the chapel becomes quiet and hushed, and the church-goers and community members begin filtering in quietly through the backdoors for prayer, a silent meal, silent time in the church, then a short reflection, and then compline, followed by more silence. My friends tell me that because of COVID this year, the mosques in the area broadcast the prayer services aloud from speakers into the street. They said that it sounded beautiful. They loved knowing that prayer was taking place around them even if they had hardly any time for it with their kids and jobs. Even if people are unable to participate for whatever reason, it is important that they know that prayer is happening, especially in a hectic city like Toronto.

Father Nicolaie on the Floor

This summer, many members of the Mission community departed three hours northeast of the city, to a property in the marshy bush of Ontario that is named the Refuge. This is a yearly occurrence. Only a skeleton crew stayed behind to keep the early morning breakfasts going. The rest of us headed up, usually to run summer camps for youth from the city (O·W·L Camps), but this year for something quite different, owing to COVID.

We spent the summer working, praying, celebrating, and enjoying life together in our small little bubble. One of the perennial tasks of the summer is cutting back the encroaching forest, and clearing out forest close to the cabins so that the light would come through and dry the ground (and discourage mosquitoes). Many members of the community would work with machetes or with a tell scissor-like tool capable of cutting branches high into the air. Father Nicolaie told us to "start with areas closest to us, and to work our way out."

Now, back in the city, I vividly recall this work. COVID has returned us to many of the basics. It has reined us in from our free-ranging days of visiting apartments, and starting prison and nursing-home ministries. We are back to the basics of sitting in a room with whoever comes, prayer, caring for the place we have. There is so much here. In the church readings pertaining to the Theotokos, we often here about Jacob's Ladder, and the conclusion to that passage seems very apt these days: "What an awesome place this is! It is none other than the house of God, the very gateway to heaven!"

The other day, I was on the main floor where coffee and meals were being served to people who are allowed to sit inside the building. I was struck by the scene. Father Nicolaie was sitting in the middle of the room surrounded by people on chairs spaced six feet or so apart. He was just sitting there; I don't think he was talking to anyone in particular. He was just sitting in a small, warm, mass of familiar yet strange humanity. People eating their breakfast, putting stuff in bags, twisting around in their chairs to talk to so-and-so. People with their faces flat in their pancakes, people twerking and writhing from drugs. In the corner, a tiny old person sits, quietly rocking back-and-forth, eating her yogurt. It reminded me of one of those old pictures of Saint Anthony the Great. The ones where he is lying in the cave surrounded by all kinds of figures and creatures each moving in their own way. Slithering, hopping, crawling, snoring, wheezing, lumbering. He seemed out of place in a way, like he didn't fit in. He also seemed strangely safe somehow.

I wondered if there is any better place to be when the trumpet sounds, and the moon turns red with blood.

Black Sheep

On Moses the Black's day, we read some of his life during the service. At breakfast, in the cool morning air over hard peasant-bread and jam, some in the community took issue with some of the racial imagery that he used, and how he was characterized in the hagiography. It made for an interesting discussion, and I thought some good points were made.

This made me think of heroes from the 'Underground Railroad,' like Sojourner Truth and Harriet Tubman, some of whose language and attitudes rub us the wrong way, while their holiness is beyond question. There are lots of people at the Mission, with a wide range of views on everything. One thing I've noticed, though, is that many of the people at the heart of the Mission and who have stayed here a long time, are more of the diamond-in-the-rough types. The smoother types tend to pass along, I notice.

For example, before we left for summer break, we had a glut of volunteers. This crop of volunteers was very exciting and attractive, because many were college students looking for something to do during COVID. They were bright, they were polite, engaging, diplomatic, etc. When we returned from the north, almost all of them had disappeared. Some had gone back to school, others had moved on, and some still come back periodically.

Of this crop, there was one young man who stood out like a sore thumb. He was quite socially insensitive and abrupt with people. He did not have a 'delicate way' with the guests, shall we say. When we returned, he was the only one who had remained and consistently came for his hours. I was quite surprised by this. Then COVID spiked again, and suddenly this man became very indispensable. His sharp nature was very effective in the screening position at the front door, where he would get people's attention and make sure things were being done safely. He was not afraid to bellow into the hall when he needed food, even though this sometimes brought people in long gowns running from the chapel thinking that a fight had broken out or such like – false alarm! I was standing beside him on the front porch while he was screening, and I asked a guest about their family. He suddenly blurted out that he had no family at all, no mother, no father, no brothers, no sisters, no aunts or uncles. In that instant, I recognized him as someone who understood the mission at a deeper level than the other volunteers, and perhaps had more of a right of belonging there. I also recognized a goodness in him that I didn't see at first when he was part of the dazzling cohort of COVID volunteers.

This may be a bit of a stretch, but it made me think about some of the stories of the Desert Fathers, and how rough, crude, and unlettered they appeared to the world. Living in a cave their whole life, they surely weren't as sensitive and cosmopolitan as others living in Egypt at that time. Yet, they were legitimately strange and good, for all their rusticity.

This reminds me of another time that a pimp came into the mission in the early morning, with two young kids. The kids were barely-dressed, high on drugs, and causing all kinds of ruckus. I gave one of them my jacket because she was almost naked. The kids were busy and disruptive. The pimp was calm and polite. I barely noticed him. All the time I was thinking, "How are we going to deal with these disruptive youngsters?" Father Roberto said that The Devil is the master of distraction.