

ST. JOHN THE COMPASSIONATE  
NEWSLETTER

I believe



I give

*“What can be simpler than giving a glass of water and a piece of bread, yet through such things the Kingdom of God is offered to us.”*

*Philokalia*

**Lent 2008**



Mother Sofia shoveling snow at the  
All Women Retreat  
There were only 2 feet



Rudina, Rev. Beth, Hilda, Elizabeth, Anna, Mary

### Women's Retreat

This year we have hosted a women's retreat at St Mary of Egypt Refuge. Our Retreat Leader was Rev. Elisabeth Wagshall (Luthern).

The Mission regularly takes people out to the country for spiritual and physical rest and renewal.



St Mary of Egypt Refuge, Tweed, Ontario

### Thrift Store

We are in need of excellent gently used clothing, house wares, items of interest and furniture. We **can only pick-up furniture**, please call Christian at 416-968-9848 to make arrangements.

### Women Focus at the Mission

We are beginning to host women-only days at the Mission where issues of concern for women are addressed by guest speakers or resource people. Our first day was dedicated to learn about breast cancer.



### Mother Siluana

from Romania, a well renowned spiritual teacher came to the Mission and spoke about her work with street kids and the need of forgiveness in our lives.

# A Christmas Thank you

This year we served our first Christmas Day dinner. Many people commented how family-like the atmosphere was and how without St John's they would have just stayed home alone. The day was made possible only with the help of a host of people who had come to help. Most had not been at the Mission before but they quickly made themselves at home and set about the task of preparing not only Christmas dinner but food and drinks throughout the day. Some gave a few hours in the midst of their own family's Christmas and others were with us to the end of what was a very long but enjoyable day.



Christmas saw the coming together of people from different nationalities, races, religions (Hindus, Muslims, Lutherans, Anglicans, Catholics, Orthodox) and social backgrounds sharing a common table and a common need to be together in mutual love and respect. Truly God is among us!

Sub-Deacon Pawel

We also want to thank in particular some of the churches and organizations that helped us share Christmas with the poor.

A special thank you to:  
Greek Orthodox Church of the Annunciation  
Fr. Peter Avgeropoulos & Sophie Doyle  
for raising the most money

- ◆ The Star Project of Prophet Elias Church and Presbyteria Melanie for taking care of 10 families and their needs
- ◆ St George's Antiochian Church Sunday School for the gifts given to the homeless
- ◆ St Nectarius Greek Old Calendar Church for food donations
- ◆ St Sophia Ukrainian Catholic School for food donations
- ◆ St Athanasius Brotherhood for food donation



And the countless other people who in big and small ways shared of themselves to manifest the love and goodness of God at this time of year.

# Confessions of A Social Heretic

What I will try to say has been troubling my heart now for several years. I believe I have become a “heretic” when it comes to social doctrines such as drug addiction and homelessness.

That “Canada’s anti-drug strategy is a failure,” as a 2007 CBC story tried to show, is no surprise. That drug consumption among Canadians is, as of 2002, 45% of the population, a 28% increase since 1994, confirms much of my daily experience at the Mission these last years. I am frankly tired of the game of the so-called “trinity” of (1) drug prevention, (2) treatment, and (3) harm reduction.

Every month or so, Craig leaves me a new message, how his worker who is really “supportive” gets first and last month’s rent for him, plus his regular ODSP cheque to bail Craig out of “homelessness.” Of course, Craig then blows his money on crack and ends up “homeless” again. Craig, a few years ago, under the Conservative government’s stringent policy, had actually kicked the habit and was working. The new Liberal government made ODSP easier to get, and this helped Craig return to the “crack community” he had left. I would venture to say it’s thanks to your tax dollars that Craig is kept in that culture.

But the issue is much deeper than the change of a bureaucratic regime. Drugs, whatever they are—alcohol, opium, morphine, cocaine, marijuana—have always been simply the scapegoat of the sickness of a society.

I do agree that addicts are sick and that we need

to understand this and be compassionate. It is also a known fact that it is not drugs that cause addiction.<sup>i</sup> What causes our increasing epidemic of drug addiction is not sick drug users, but a sick culture. Western life has created an environment of rootlessness and spiritual poverty that leads more and more of us to addiction, not only to crack, but to other addictions such as legal drugs, internet, shopping, work, gambling. Let’s face it, addiction is

not the reality of the junkie, but rather the general condition of western society. As Proverbs says, “A people without a vision perishes” (Prov. 29:18).<sup>ii</sup>

Our approach to anti-drug issues does everything except look at the obvious place, at the very core of our Western society. No one questions this fact. But each day I watch

more and more people as their lives are destroyed by chemicals and the rest of us are all kept in this false sense

of security, a game that believes “the drugs are the enemy” and not the collective sense of loss of meaning and, I, as a priest, must add, the collective denial of the presence of God.

Now, homelessness is another of these dogmatic beliefs, the dogma being that all homeless live on the street and are victims. Well, I beg to disagree. Some homeless choose this and society should respect this choice. They teach us what really matters. They disturb our comfort zones. They serve a prophetic role in our rational, domesticated culture. Others are on the street because they have become sick through our sick culture, through this profound loss of meaning, of the spiritual, the human. Broken by life’s

continued on back page



“Everything is not needed to make a world, just love and nothing else.” P. Elwood

## Answered Prayers

Our prayers have been answered and we now have a Book Keeper & Office Administrator. Her name is Rudina Casli. Rudina and her husband Gerhard Sina came to Toronto from Albania in 2004. They have a beautiful boy Kevin who was born in Canada. Rudina worked as Book Keeper & Office Administrator for the International Catholic Migration Commission and comes to us highly recommended with a large experience. Rudina discovered the Orthodox Church in Albania\* during an Easter Vigil, she is a regular communicant at St Silouan the Athonite Church.



Rudina and Gerhard have been very tried by life. Hearing her story, her struggles, her many set backs one is filled with awe at her joy, sense of hope and faith.

Rudina brings all of this to her work at the Mission and we feel blessed by her presence.

Welcome Rudina!

\*Orthodoxalbania.org

## Drug Counselling

Thanks to generous funding from the City of Toronto's Extended Winter Hours Program we have been able this year to include drug counselling in addition to our usual services. Steve Ball who is a qualified drug counsellor runs this program. Almost immediately the counselling was announced Steve was inundated with requests for help. Maggie's story is but one of many.

"Jack took the phone call, 'can I speak with Steve?' Jack gave me the phone and I found myself in conversation with a 75 year old woman. She told me she needed to speak with someone who could help her with her addiction. I told Maggie (not her real name) that the Extended Winter Hours Program offers addiction counselling.

On Sunday evening, Maggie came to see me. I asked her how she found about St. John's and she told me that one of her "user" friends has been going to St. John's for addiction counselling. I sat in the office and listened to Maggie's story. Maggie's story was a story of sadness and pain. She gave me a brief history of her addition and the effect it had on her and the family. I realized while



Maggie was talking how consuming this disease is. The effects are catastrophic and manifest itself in the loss of family, friends, faith and self-respect. During this meeting Maggie expounds on her "crack" use and what she gave up for the all consuming "right". As the session wrapped up I could see that Maggie was enchanted but she seemed more relaxed. She thanked me for listening and expressed her gratitude that the Extended Winter Hours Program provided "one to one counselling". Maggie has come for addiction counselling regularly and is now opening up communications with her family and friends."

Stories like this are happening everyday during the Extended Winter Hours Program. Providing addiction counselling to our brothers and sisters is essential to a healthy community. St John's offers a safe environment to those who are suffering from addiction. But more importantly we recognize the pain and suffering addiction causes and we as a community of faith and love will always embrace our brothers and sisters that come through our doors. It is hoped, funding permitting, that addiction counselling can be offered throughout the year at St John's.

Steve Ball

continued from page 3

irrationality and, at times, by pseudo-mentors and social experts who have fed them more of the same senseless social dogmas. Such homelessness is a symptom of family breakdown and the gradual loss of spiritual and core human values. Building boxes to house such people is not going to “solve the problem.” In general, I find most homeless stay homeless until *they* decide they have had enough.

The real “homeless” are actually “housed.” I mean families, young parents, new immigrants, single parents who live in absolutely abysmal conditions, who have to choose between eating or heating. This is so simply because of excessive greed and speculation that promotes our so-called fair and just system. Does any one question this? Homelessness is sexy, but a poor working family living in a cubby-hole is not.

The guys on the street, I would say, leave us “faith communities” to look after them. Their souls need tending, their hearts hurt, they need God, they need the community of the **church**. The different layers of government, it often seems to me, not only are not helpful, but actually get in the way. Meanwhile the real homeless live in destitution in places known as “communities” that are no such thing. They fear for their kids, who have to spend most of their energy on just paying for the rent. These are the people the city and the governments should be helping. And yes, churches also should not only raise their voices but also put their words into action. These “homeless” don’t often get heard. We should be creatively wrestling with the greed that is often at the core of development and the immoral housing speculation. Policies, laws, could make a real difference here.

I honestly believe too much money is wasted on dealing with symptoms and not with the root

problem—our way of life, increasingly inhuman and God-denying. The churches have absolutely a role to play, not as second-rate social workers, but—as a communist-atheist-feminist friend of mine once said to me—“to be as church a first-class beacon of spirituality!”

Most of the time, I feel we Christians have sold out and we too just want a piece of the spotlight repeating the same slogans as everyone else, afraid that if we don’t we will be sidelined. When we fail to be what we



are meant to be, we have already become useless as salt which has lost its tang. Craig last night left me again an upbeat message: his worker is getting him housed; all is looking good, soon he will be yet again in a treatment centre.

I am looking forward to meeting Craig and telling him to stop the game, that I don’t believe a word he says, that his

worker is wasting society’s money and Craig’s life. I know Craig well enough to remind him that there is hope for him: the moment he allows his heart to again feel love for another. It has worked before. It may even work for his worker and the rest of us.

Paul Evdokimov quoting the communist poet Paul Elwood said, “everything is not needed to make a world, just love and nothing else.”

This is what St Gregory the theologian spoke about as, “the Divine power capable of inventing hope where hope no longer exists and of opening a path amid the impossible.”

For the sake of our drug culture and our own souls we all need to find this path. What better time to do this than Lent? FR

<sup>i</sup> Bruce Alexander “rat trap” study. Simon Fraser University BC

<sup>ii</sup> The Walrus Magazine December 2007 “The Rat Trap” by Robert Herez

*Remember the Mission in your will. Who says you can't take it with you?*

St. John the Compassionate Mission

155 Broadview Ave, Toronto ON M4M 2E9 tel: 416-466-1357 fax: 416-466-3517 Charitable #89328 1832 RR0001  
stjohnsmmission@sympatico.ca www.stjohnsmmission.org