

Prison Ministry Update

"90% of life is just showing up".

"Whatever crosses your path".

Sept 17/30 Saints and Martyrs Sophia, Faith, Hope and Love.

Dear in Christ ...¹

I want to thank you for your donation to our prison ministry. I also want to take the opportunity to update you on what is going on in our ministry. There are positive changes, and mountains to climb, every week.

Before I get started, I want to ask you to send me the names of your immediate family, with those who are Orthodox marked. Send them to seraphim@orthodox.net. I pray for all of our benefactors and their immediate family, and in addition, commemorate all those who are Orthodox in the Divine Liturgy (our custom is to take out a particle of bread for each Orthodox person, as we pray for them, and put it on the diskos, as part of the -preparation prayers for divine Liturgy. At the end of the liturgy, all these particles are poured into the chalice, with the prayer: "By Thy precious Blood, O Lord, wash away the sins of those here commemorated, through the intercessions of Thy saints").

I started this long ago when we were building our little church, and were in danger of being like the man in the Gospel, who began to build before counting the cost, and ran out of funds. I did not want to just ask people for money, without giving anything in return. Therefore, I thought I would try to emulate the Apostle Peter, who once said to a paralytic "Silver and gold have I none; but such as I have give I thee..." (Acts 3:6). I reasoned that all I could really give is my poor personal prayers, and also to commemorate the Orthodox in the Divine Liturgy. So I have extensive, permanent dyptychs for building fund donors, and a less organized set of diptychs for those who donate to the prison ministry. It is always my intent to make this latter list more organized and permanent. This is another "detail", of which I will speak of in more "detail" below.

I try to do double duty with the letters I write regarding the prison ministry, so I plan to publish my letter to you, but will remove any personal references. I have learned that the more I talk about the ministry, and the more I publish things about it, the more it is supported, and the more it grows. I suppose this is my attempt at "networking".

By the way, I sometimes do audio reports about prison visits and publish the letters I send to the men (with personal references removed). You can see them at:

http://www.orthodox.net/sermons/index.html#PRISON_MINISTRY

Matters Large and small.

My intentions are always above my abilities in my ministry. There are many details in all aspects of the pastoral work of an Orthodox priest, and when it comes to details, I feel much like Winnie the Pooh - a bear with very little brain.

¹ This article is taken from a personal letter to a prison ministry donor.

With God's help, I am trying to do, in my imperfect way, the "one thing needful", in obedience to the Gospel, but also remembering that the Lord once rebuked the Pharisees and their tithing of herbs and their hypocrisy about greater things:

"But woe unto you, Pharisees! for ye tithe mint and rue and all manner of herbs, and pass over judgment and the love of God: these ought ye to have done, and not to leave the other undone." (Luke 11:42)

The "little things" *must also be done*, and I struggle mightily to do them. Among these "little things" I count: Thank you letters, bookkeeping, reports on the prison ministry, buying books (we try to supply everyone with a "Jordanville" prayer book, the "Boston" Psalter, and the "Orthodox study bible"), correspondence with the Texas chaplaincy (there are always bureaucratic hoops to jump through to get my flock things they need one example is prayer ropes - the hoops for this item are quite large and tend to move just as I get ready to jump through them).

The weightier matters are taken care of, for the most part. The most important of these is to know all my men, have their names written down in diptychs, and pray for them daily. The next is to show up regularly in prison to see them, and to celebrate the liturgy at least once a month. Another is to write letters to them regularly, including private letters. It is this last item that I am way behind in accomplishing.

"90% of life is just showing up

There are two truths which guide my prison ministry, and indeed, all that a priest does. One is the aphorism: **"90% of life is just showing up"**. I show up in each prison I visit (there are three) twice a month. One of these days I celebrate liturgy, and the other day is dedicated to teaching. Somehow, confession, private conversations, catechism and baptisms must be squeezed in. I cannot say with certainty that I am always well prepared to teach, but I show up, and stuff gets done. There is always something worthwhile and important and unexpected when I see the men.

In a perfect year, I will have visited the prison flock 24 times, but no year is close to perfect. There are prison lockdowns, holidays, and other things, including, I sometimes think, sunspots and other mysterious things, that make my men unavailable to me and I am either told not to come for a scheduled visit, or a significant amount of the time, I drive three hours, and cannot see all or most of my men because of a security problem or some other such thing. I also must sometimes cancel when a feast day occurs on a visit day, such as the Nativity of the Lord. There is almost zero flexibility to change a visit from one day to another. If I miss it, either because I have other pastoral duties, or the prison has something else going on, it is gone forever. I estimate that I get to see my flock in the flesh perhaps 16 times a year.

The prayer for patience is always answered. It is a very dangerous prayer. For me, one of the loudest answers was "Go into prison ministry".

Whatever crosses your path

The other guiding principle in my ministry is **"Whatever crosses your path"**. I know that is an incomplete sentence, but I like it better expressed like that, because life is always incomplete. I try to react to what is put in front of me. The entire reason I got into prison ministry is that someone came to me for counseling, and a few days later, in a complete surprise to me, was arrested. I followed him into the jail system, just because he had crossed my path. After several years, he was baptized. That is a

wonderful result, but it was not my primary intent. All I did was react to somebody who crossed my path. I tell the story of my entry into prison ministry here: <http://www.orthodox.net/ministries/orthodox-prison-ministry.doc>. I apologize that it is not up to date. That is on my "list".

Here is a little update about what has gone on and is going on currently.

There have been 9 baptisms.

There is a baptism scheduled at the end of October. There are 6 more catechumens.

I celebrate liturgy once a month in two prisons and will start liturgy in another in October.

I visit three prisons, twice each month, on Wednesdays. On the first and third Wednesday, I go to the Michael unit and then the Powledge unit, which is (mercifully) close by. On the 2nd and 4th Wednesday, I go to the Hughes unit. Each is a long drive, and by the end of the day, I have racked up over 350 miles.

Most of the guys have a Jordanville prayer book, Boston Psalter and Orthodox study bible. I buy these items regularly. I talk incessantly about reading the Gospel and the Psalter, and I dare to say that many of the guys are following my advice.

There are other volunteers who go with me regularly to the prison, usually on liturgy days.

As a result of our ministry, I dare to count as a missionary offshoot the work of Fr Cassian Sibley, who regularly teaches and celebrates liturgy at a prison relatively near (by Texas standards) College-station. we were involved in making Fr Cassian of the need, and he took care of what crossed his path.

Our patron and protector is a certain notable former prisoner, [Patriarch Joseph the All-Comely](#) (see his story in Genesis 37-50). By his prayers we work, and our feeble attempts and inarticulate words are blessed and our ministry continues.

There have been many joys and sorrows in our ministry. I cannot speak specifically about them all, partly because they are things that are in my heart, and partially to keep things confidential.

We pray for an Orthodox Christian who died in prison. He was a very gentle man who whose life was eaten up by drugs. He was stone cold sober in prison. He loved his family and was loved by them. There was a summer in which it was so hot that he had a heat stroke, and heart attack. The prison cells are not air conditioned, and there is sometimes not a lot of air flow. I was sad to find out about his death weeks after it happened. His remains were cremated, and he did not have an Orthodox funeral, but I pray for him in every liturgy. May his memory be eternal.

His death brings to mind another "detail" of prison ministry. I need to find a way to get the authorities to contact me immediately when someone is very sick or dies, so that I can come to them. There is a ton of red tape involved in serving a funeral, and some day I will "slay that dragon". I must admit, I am hoping that somebody will "fall from heaven" who competent and motivated to deal with all these sorts of things.

I have seen people come and go, and it is always sad to see them go. Sometimes they are transferred to another prison, out of my reach, and sometimes they succumb to the incredible pressures of prison life, and lose the will to continue coming. Sometimes they come back, and this gives a person an experiential knowledge of the parable about the 100 sheep.

I will baptize soon an old man who is a treasure. He would say to me many times: "Fr Holland" (I hate that way of address, but the prison encourages it, although none of my parishioners on the outside would dare to call me by anything but the name of my patron, Seraphim), "I love your services, but I will always be a Baptist". He came faithfully, and always had something edifying to say. When I made some Scriptural point, and the other guys all had that look in their eyes that showed me they did not understand the reference, he would always be shaking his head in agreement.

This life-long Baptist recently wrote me a letter begging for baptism, and then backed it up by asking me in person. I feel this is a situation akin to the one the Apostle Philip encountered with the Ethiopian eunuch, so I plan to baptize him right away. His faith is pure, and he has a gentleness and wisdom about him that everyone notices. He is also living with a lot of health problems. His physical heart has problems too, but in a spiritual sense his heart is very large and good. Meeting people like him makes prison ministry very worthwhile.

I have been to isolation wings of the prison. They are dark and depressing places. The spiritual warfare these men endure is immense. I do not care if they are innocent or guilty of the crimes they are accused of. I do not take any time to think if there prison sentence is just. All I care about is that they find purpose in their lives and happiness, if not fully in this life, then fully in the next. I have only seen a little of their life, but it is hard. This is why it is very important that they are visited and prayed for.

May God bless your generosity, and help you in all things. If you would pray for our ministry, I would be very grateful. Please contact me if you want to know anything about our ministry.

Priest Seraphim Holland 2015

[St Nicholas Russian Orthodox Church, McKinney, Texas](#)

This article is at:

http://www.orthodox.net/full-voice/prison-ministry-letters_2015-09-30+prison-ministry-update.rtf

http://www.orthodox.net/full-voice/prison-ministry-letters_2015-09-30+prison-ministry-update.html

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