

Divine Liturgy at the Powledge Unit

Baptism at the Michael Unit.

Wed, Nov 5/18 2015

We served the first liturgy at the Powledge Unit in Palestine Texas, since the Big Bang.

There were many moving parts, and thank God that we were able to serve. I had called last week and this week to set up the time for me to come serve - 8AM. I was told everything is ready. It was not. This was not a surprise to me.

I did not fall off the turnip truck yesterday, so I came very early. I reported to the guard tower at 6:45 am. It is one of those old fashioned ones where the guard lets down a little bucket to get your id. She had no paperwork on me coming at 8 am. I have come at 11 in the past, and she only had that paperwork. To compound the difficulty, the Chaplain was not in. I waited a long time, and then the guard, who was quite polite and hard working, received authorization for me to go in.

I finally entered the facility at about 7:30. There would still be time to serve proskimidie before the men arrived at 8. Unfortunately, I was not allowed in until after 8, because the gym was being used for recreation. There is not chapel per-se. We have classes and services in the gym, but the chaplain has kindly allowed me to have classes and services in a small closet used to store music supplies. We move them out, and have a nice quiet room with less distractions.

The men arrived when I did, at about 8. I explained things to them, then made them vamoose and read the hours (3 and 6), in another part of the gym, while I served proskimidie as fast as I could, and then heard the confession of one of the men. He was the only communicant, because the other Orthodox Christian got hung up "at the house". this kind of thing happens frequently. there are 3 other men who want to be baptized. Two have already been made catechumens, and the third will be as soon as I can get a little teaching done. The men are bringing their friends to the services, and we are forming a nucleus of 7 men.

I started the liturgy late, but we "got er done" in time, even though I do not shorten the liturgy, with the exception that I shorten the first psalm a little bit.

The singing was a little rough, but we get through it. I sing as much as I can. There is not enough time to teach, teach music, and serve the services. Any teaching about music, which is not really in my wheelhouse, takes away for important theological teaching and discussion, which they need and crave. We do what we can.

I preached about the Exorcism of the legion of demons at the Gadarenes, which was last Sunday's gospel. They obviously never have liturgy on Sunday, and I take the liberty many times of reading the previous Sunday's gospel if it is especially powerful. This is just one example of how the typicon in prison may be a little different from the one used outside of prison. I also simplify the troparia, and always sing the resurrection troparia of the current tone. I always preach a sermon, and the feeling is very intimate, since I am talking to people that I literally can reach out and touch. There are other differences that make the liturgy in prison very intimate. Since they cannot sing real well, they do not know how to "fill" silences, so I just say all the secret prayers aloud. In normal usage, the congregation cannot easily hear the prayers, but in a prison environment, the congregation is literally right behind me, so they hear everything. I must admit I like the feel of these liturgies.

There are many distractions in prison services. Time is often of the essence. I was saying the entrance prayers and lighting the censer at the same time. Sometimes one needs to multitask - something that never happens in a parish environment. The important thing is to serve liturgy in the prison each month, because great things happen when we serve it. This is the most important part of my ministry. It is the bedrock on which we stand.

I am amazed that we were able to serve the liturgy, because the chaplain was not there the entire time, and often things do not go well if a chaplain is not there.

After serving in the Powledge unit, I rushed to the Michael unit for a baptism service. We had two time limitations. One was that we had to be done by 1 pm, no matter what, because the men had to be out of the gym before count time. The other was that John, a very faithful lay volunteer, who sees the men twice a month (on different days) just like I do, is the sponsor of the newly illumined James. He teaches at a college in Tyler, and could not be at the prison earlier than noon. I heard James's confession, and then blessed the water and the oil, and waited for John to arrive. As we waited, I talked at length about the most important Scripture about baptism - found in Romans chapter 6. When John arrived, we completed the baptism. In every baptism I have performed (I believe the number is now 11), the baptized has been fully immersed. I was told that a certain church group made portable baptismal fonts for all the prisons in Texas. I have used them at the Hughes and Michael unit. I time, I will use one at the Powledge unit. there is no reason be lazy and not do full immersion baptism in Texas. The only thing that will stop a priest is his own will.

I make an editorial comment here. We can do full immersions baptisms in prison in Texas! What excuse do the clergy have in this country and in Russia, who have the means, but do not bother to do full immersion baptism as our canons and tradition prescribe? We should do things correctly, and only deviate from the normal baptism services when there is an absolute need. Sloppiness in the performance of the services is always related to sloppy theology.

Michael has two catechumens who will be baptized in due course. We are in a bit of a growth spurt in all the 3 prisons I visit.

We will continue to plant and water, and pray that God continues to make things grow.

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