

29 July, 2008

Dear Fr. Thomas and Friends at Holy Apostles,

It is hard to believe that it has already been one month since my short-term teaching mission to South Africa with the Orthodox Christian Mission Center. I considered sending out an update and letter of thanks immediately after my return to the United States, but I found it difficult to put into words my experience serving the Church in South Africa. Having reflected upon the trip for a month now, I still find myself at a loss for words. I do, however, feel that I can convey some important lessons learned and share a few pertinent anecdotes from the trip.

The purpose of my trip was to teach the faithful in South Africa about our Orthodox Christian faith. I and five other short-term missionaries travelled from Jacksonville, FL to Johannesburg, South Africa, and we were greeted at the airport by His Eminence, Archbishop SERAPHIM of Johannesburg. Upon our arrival, Archbishop Seraphim commissioned us to teach throughout his diocese at places and times that he selected for us before our arrival. I must admit that I was skeptical when I saw the schedule – many of our teaching engagements were scheduled in Greek expatriate communities throughout the diocese. We had been informed, prior to our departure, that our primary audience would be the mission communities of native South Africans in the diocese, and this “more obscure” audience seemed, to me, the more appropriate audience. Lesson #1: trust that the bishop knows his flock and the needs of his diocese. While we were able to spend time in rural townships and villages teaching and praying with the African community, some of our most fruitful conversations and teaching sessions happened in large cathedral communities in very “Western” settings.

It became apparent to me (both during our trip and upon my return) that the bishop was not neglecting the indigenous Orthodox communities in his diocese, but that he is approaching the work on his plate in a holistic manner. Unless the larger, established Greek expatriate communities are instructed in the essentials of their faith and made aware of the needs of the growing indigenous Orthodox community in South Africa, the Church in South Africa will fail to present the body of Christ, in its fullness, to the broader South African community.

The country of South Africa is wounded and hemorrhaging after decades of government sanctioned racism and discrimination. It is a country that has largely embraced the freedom of all individuals but has not figured out how to live with the new paradigm of freedom. We were told that crime rates in South Africa were the highest in the world among countries that are not engaged in an active war. The rape and murder rates are astronomical, and everyone we met had been a victim of violent crime in one way or another – what would be unacceptable in the rest of the world is accepted as normal in South Africa. I asked His Eminence about the problem of crime in his country, and without much hesitation he attributed the problem to the absence of Christ. “These people,” he said, “need Christ. Without Christ we cannot overcome these problems of violent crime.” And this is the mission of the Church in South Africa, to bring Christ to a ravaged and hurting population. This was Lesson #2 for me: The true needs of the most afflicted people in the world can be met by Christ.

The “mission” of the South African Church is in its infancy right now. Just six years ago there were few attempts to offer the Orthodox faith to those outside of traditionally Orthodox communities. The Russians, Greeks, Romanians and Serbs were Orthodox, but that was about it. At the initiative of His Eminence,

SERAPHIM, a Catechetical School (Seminary) was started in Johannesburg in order to train young men to start a formal mission to the indigenous population of South Africa. The seminary has graduated one class, and already mission communities are popping up in the depressed, black townships around Johannesburg. Young black priests who were students just a few years ago are now ministering to communities of hundreds of black South Africans – it was amazing to witness the vibrant faith of these young communities. The liturgy is served in multiple, indigenous languages throughout the diocese as a result of the diligent work of committed priests who desire to offer Christ to the people, not as the “God of another culture” but a God who hears our prayers in our native tongue.

I could go on for pages, but I will spare you my rambling. I will, however, leave you with some matters that I ask you to commit to prayer as the Diocese of Johannesburg and the OCMC continue missionary work in South Africa.

- 1) The Seminary of Patriarch Petros VII of Alexandria is about to graduate its second class of students. But, the seminary struggles to meet simple expenses. There is no internet connection at the seminary, the library is lacking, and there is little money for things that you and I would consider to be necessities. Further, the neighborhood where the seminary is located is far too dangerous for the students to leave the walled confines of the seminary with any regularity. Please pray for these young men and the Dean of the Seminary, Fr. Athanasios Akunda, as they prepare to enter the mission field. If you would like to assist the seminary with specific needs, please feel free to contact me.
- 2) Mission communities are popping up throughout South Africa, but there are particular needs in the townships of Sashanguve and El Dorado. The Sashanguve mission has purchased land, and its priest, Fr. Marcos, is ministering to a large and scattered population of Orthodox Christians. Our team visited Sashanguve on a weekday during work hours, and we were still greeted by scores of smiling faces – if you are interested in helping to establish a more permanent facility for the Sashanguve mission or in providing educational materials for the El Dorado mission, please let me know.

Please know that your support enabled me to receive much more than I was able to offer the South Africans to whom I ministered. Thank you! I am committed, however, to seeing the missionary work in South Africa continue to the point where the South African Orthodox are able to carry out the work of evangelization themselves. I would be glad, if possible, to visit your community to share photos and talk about my experiences with your parishioners. At the very least, I would ask you to share the needs of the South African Orthodox with your parishioners and friends so that they, too, can pray for the work being done there.

Sincerely In Christ,

Deacon Peter Robichau
St. Vladimir's Orthodox Theological Seminary
575 Scarsdale Rd.
Crestwood, NY 10707