

**At the November 2011 All American Council in Seattle, Fr. Eric Tosi, Secretary of the OCA, presented a workshop on Orthodox evangelism. The editors at oca.org interviewed Fr. Eric and learned that his interest in evangelism grew not only out of his experiences in the Church as a parish priest, but also through his academic studies and his interaction with spiritual seekers in the military.**

**Oca.org: Tell us a bit about your academic and pastoral background. How did your interest in Orthodox evangelism develop?**

**Fr. Eric:** I grew up in the Orthodox faith; in fact I am 4<sup>th</sup> generation in the Metropolia/OCA. I had a wonderful formation in my home parish in Wayne, NJ and first began to really learn about my faith as a teen worker for the Church. As I learned more about the Faith, I was asked more questions about the Church from non-Orthodox. So my first experience with evangelism was really in the form of apologetics. I went to Fordham University and received a degree in history and economics. It was through my historical studies that I was to gain a deeper appreciation for the deep and rich history. After graduation, I served in the US Army in Germany. The closest chaplain was a few hours away (when we had one) so I also began to realize the need for small group worship in isolated areas.

I completed a Masters Degree in European History from Fordham after my years in the military and began to make a deep connection between the historical Faith and the events in Europe. I decided to attend St. Vladimir's Seminary with the intent to deepen my understanding of the Faith and connecting it to a historical context. But it was while I was at Seminary that I began to realize a deeper and deeper interest in mission work and evangelism. Upon graduation, I accepted a mission in Billings, Montana that was on the new planting grant program. I was excited to do work in the field where theoria was not so much disconnected from praxis. In the mission field, one had put in practice the principles of evangelism in a very concrete manner or the mission would either flounder or collapse. The mission in Billings became my classroom. It was there in working with the mission that I learned not just about parish management and pastoral care, but what was it that people were looking for and how do we connect people to God through the Church. It became clear to me that real evangelism is through the Church. It is not an isolated, personal event but rather a corporeal reality that links people together in communion with God and each other. It is a koinonetic reality.

I also started other missions in the region before being asked to go to Las Vegas and be the priest in a very large and very eclectic parish. This was a parish that had every possible group including a large number of Eritreans and Russian immigrants. How did we put these disparate groups together with American Orthodox and converts to the Faith? It also became my classroom as I learned that the Church was really a mosaic in which so many different pieces were fitted together to form this beautiful picture. Different groups had different needs but in the end they were all seeking the same thing, a closer relationship with Christ through the Church. It was at this time that I was asked to chair the Department of Evangelization for the OCA. I served in that position for seven years and helped establish missions throughout North America as well as write the policies for missions. Through my work in the parish and department, it became increasingly clear to me that we Orthodox speak of evangelism but really do not understand what it really means. We use methods and theories from differing Faith traditions but rarely do we look at our own history and theology. We have this incredible repository of saints and missionaries, even in North America, but yet never really examine what they did and what made it particularly "Orthodox." In other words, what is theology and practice of evangelism in the Orthodox Church?

I decided to do doctoral work in this area and begin to answer that question. I was accepted in the Doctor of Ministry program at the University of Toronto in conjunction with the Toronto School of Theology and Trinity College. Over the past three years, I have been examining that very question, but not just in some dry theoretical manner, but rather I've been looking at how the rich and deep theology of evangelism in the Orthodox Church can be applied to practical and pragmatic parish life. In the end, when my dissertation is completed, I hope that I will have some answers and be able to provide a more complete assistance to parishes and missions. Of course, my job as Secretary of the OCA enables me to examine this question in an

administrative manner. I do believe that whatever the job is that we have, whether we are a parish priest, seminary teacher, administrator, clergymen, layperson, young or old...will provide new and varied inputs into evangelism. And we should all be evangelists in everything we do for God and the Church. Evangelism is the very lifeblood of the Church.

**Oca.org: How is evangelism both "external" and "internal?" Why do we need both?**

**Fr. Eric:** This concept has been around for some time among contemporary evangelists. External basically means that we are reaching out to those who are seeking Christ and drawing them into the Church. It is what we would typically see in evangelistic efforts. How are we reaching out to the world, how are we drawing people into the net as good fishermen? And ultimately, a church or a parish that does not reach outward is not fulfilling the commission that Christ gives to us. The Church from the very beginning reached outward and was bold in going out into the world.

But we must also look inward to the flock that Christ has entrusted to us. As John 10 states, the shepherd knows his sheep. We must always look to the needs of the parish; the people in the parish need to be filled and need to grow. A dynamic inward evangelism that teaches the Faith and enables the community to grow, naturally turns outward and shares that Faith. So we need to have healthy internal evangelism in order to have healthy external evangelism (and probably vice versa). And this applies equally to the self. We cannot give what we do not have so we need to grow as Christians and understand our Faith in order to share that Faith with others. Fr Alexander Schmemmann once wrote that I am sent to myself first before I am sent to others.

I would also add two other categories, active and passive. Active evangelism is just what you think it is...going forth and preaching and teaching the Gospel though it is much more than that. It is also serving the community, confessing the Faith, witnessing to its truth, defending the Faith, sometimes when called upon with our very lives. It is dynamic and engaging.

But there is another side and one in which we see so evident in the lives of the saints. Sometimes evangelism is passive, by which I mean it is by and through living our lives as Orthodox Christians that others are drawn to the Faith. Some of the greatest evangelists in the Church's history were those who lived simple yet powerful Christian lives. St. Herman of Alaska is one of the greatest examples. His simple caring, loving, and praying, drew those around him into a deeper relationship with God and the Church. The memory of this still pervades the people of Alaska and the OCA to this day. Passive evangelism is as powerful as active evangelism.

**Oca.org: Many Orthodox converts come out of churches that employ aggressive evangelism and outreach methods. How is Orthodox evangelism different?**

**Fr. Eric:** The Orthodox Church in America has evolved in a particular manner, but is still is very much tied to and part of the universal Orthodox Church. Her Faith and Traditions are part of her very nature. This can be summed up in the word "fullness;" the Orthodox Church is the fullness of the Faith. While people may be grafted unto the Church, they will bring many good ideas and experiences. But they are really rounded out in the fullness that is the Orthodox Church. Whatever manner or methods that can be brought to bear which are good, right, and holy; then we rejoice.

But to be Orthodox means that we are joined to a community. No Orthodox can be Orthodox without being part of the dynamics which are actualized around the Eucharistic table. We are Orthodox because we have been baptized, chrismated and ultimately communed in the Orthodox Church. In this lies the very real nature of evangelism in the Orthodox Church. We are not looking for people to have an "altar call" and have that singular event of confessing Christ as their personal Savior, though confessing Christ is critical in evangelism. Nor are we trying to make someone Orthodox by having them become part of some monolithic structure. Rather we are asking them to be Orthodox by becoming a person of God who communes with God through the Sacraments. One Orthodox author even went so far as to say that we don't evangelize as much as we

sacramentalize. The key is again that word *koinonia*. We are to form a communion with God just as God Himself is a communion in the Trinity. This, in turn, is reflected in the communion that is the community gathered around that Eucharist. If there is something that sets us apart, in our thinking and our methods, it is that the Orthodox evangelists went forth to establish Eucharistic communities that formed the Church. Thus, the Church grew not just through individuals but through communities. We may preach, teach, serve, defend, witness and confess but it is only made real through our participation with one another as a community. If there is something that really sets the Orthodox apart, it is how this is actualized through our liturgy, our art, our sacraments, canons, traditions and so on. All of these form our community and in turn lead us into a deeper communion.

**Oca.org: When parishes adopt a Biblical, Church-centered approach to evangelism, what does this look like?**

**Fr. Eric:** There is a simple answer to this. They have two very clear dimensions. First they are a community of love. It is a place where people are guided by love; the love of Christ. This love formulates and actuates their actions. They feel loved and likewise share that love with others. Love always moves outward and draws people to it because it is precisely a reflection of the love that God has for all of His creation. So they are ultimately vessels of love incarnated.

The second is how that love is incarnated, which is by being the Church. The parish lives the life of the Church. It serves the divine services, it utilizes the gifts of the sacraments, and it leads people to repentance and life in Christ. We Orthodox rejoice in the beauty of our Liturgy but we also need to hear the words of the services to see how clear and deep the message is that is being put forth. The Church is at its best when we live the life that Church asks of us, through feasts and fasts, in the joy of birth and the transition to death. All the moments of our life are fed by the Church and the services. We learn to live a cycle that draws back again to the central message of Christ and His Resurrection. We also learn to pass through this life as creature of God given the royal dignity of his children. All of this is found at its very best when the Church acts like the Church and lives the life of the Church.

Ultimately, that is the message of the Bible. In fact, I would even go so far as to say that the services of the Church are one long Biblical meditation that we need to participate in with our very lives.

**Oca.org: What feedback did you receive from your AAC workshop participants? In general, what are the greatest obstacles American Orthodox Christians face as we seek to evangelize?**

**Fr. Eric:** It was a small but dedicated group. They are all looking for the same thing; how do we present to the world this gift of the Orthodox Church? I think that many people have a misunderstanding about what evangelism is and very often in such workshops, much time is spent alleviating those misunderstandings. For example, evangelism is not marketing. We are not trying to get someone to buy something. Instead we are looking to present the Gospel of Jesus Christ and bring people into a deeper relationship with Him through the Church. Another misunderstanding is that evangelism is a program. If we do XYZ then we will grow as a Church. Programs may be helpful and useful but ultimately it is not a business plan to grow. It is being the Church and living the life of the Church. Another misunderstanding, and this is a bit controversial, is that evangelism is meant to grow your church and if successful evangelist have big churches. I would disagree. Church growth may be an offshoot of good evangelism, albeit a desirable one, but evangelism is not just about growing the Church. It is about growing in Faith and communion with God. There are some wonderful evangelistic parishes which are small and dynamic while there are some large parishes which are simply stale. In the ideal world, an evangelistic parish is growing but sometimes there is just as much vibrant spiritual life in smaller prayerful communities.

There was another interesting topic which was on what I would term the “issue mission.” That is a mission which takes up a particular cause or issue and makes this the reason for their existence. These almost always

fail in the long run. People think that they can be “really” Orthodox if they champion one particular cause or issue. But the Church is far larger than one cause or issue; rather it is fullness. As the Apostle Paul states, “be all things to all people to save some.” Be a mission that is full rather than singular. Usually the “issue mission” will only attract one type of person and drive away so many others who are looking for the Truth. Teach the teachings of the Church, live the life of the Church, and immerse the community in Holy Traditions. All the other “issues” will be driven away by such simple Faith.

**Oca.org: Which OCA resources have been most effective at supporting the clergy and faithful in their evangelism efforts at the local level?**

**Fr. Eric:** The OCA has a very successful Planting Grant program. Over the years, it has assisted many missions to blossom into parishes with a full-time resident priest. I would first suggest giving to the Mission Appeal to keep such a successful and valuable program going. The OCA is exploring ways to expand that to revitalize declining parishes and give them the boost to succeed.

There is the Mission Handbook which has been on the frontline of assisting missions. It is also a valuable tool.

There are also new books coming out in the Orthodox world on the topic of evangelism. We are only really getting started on this topic.

I would also recommend supporting OCMC and their efforts. Be on a mission team, support their work financially, bring in a mission priest to talk to the parish. They do great work and the more we reach outward, the stronger our witness to the world.

Finally, and most importantly, pray. Pray is the most effective and powerful tool we have as Christians. It alone can move mountains and change hearts. In St Innocent’s Instructions to Missionaries, his first instruction, is just that. Pray. Begin all work and dedicate all work through prayer. Our success as evangelist will rest on this simple, primary rule.