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EPARCH OF STAMFORD
Serving One's Neighbor- Diakonia

In this month's issue of *The Sower* we continue our reading of His Beatitude Sviatoslav's Pastoral Letter: "The Vibrant Parish – A Place to Encounter the Living Christ" in preparation for the Eparchial Sobor, which will quickly be upon us. Today we will spend some time meditating upon the third vital element mentioned in the letter – "Serving One's Neighbor" – Diakonia.

As it happens, I am writing this column on Meatfare Sunday, one of the four Sundays that fall immediately prior to the beginning of Great Lent, the Gospel lessons of which help us to prepare for the spiritual rigours we are to encounter during this annual time of renewal. The Gospel reading for Meatfare Sunday, which was proclaimed during the Divine Liturgy this morning, is still fresh in my mind and it speaks directly to our theme today – Service.

If we recall, the reading is taken from the 25th Chapter of the Gospel of Matthew and paints for us terrifying scenes of the day of the Last Judgment: the river of fire, the trumpeting angels, the separation of the sheep from the goats. But the most terrifying, at least for me, are words that Christ will address to each of us: Did you offer me something to eat when I was hungry, a glass of water when I was thirsty, clothing when I was naked, shelter when I was homeless? Did you visit me when I was sick or in prison?

These are the questions Christ will pose to each of us on that day. He will not ask whether we have fattened our bank accounts or increased our market share or extended our property holdings during our lifetime. Neither will he ask us if we have the latest smart phone, the most stylish coiffure and clothes or the most influential friends. No. He will ask us how we have treated those with whom we share a common humanity, our companions journeying with us along the road of earthly life – our neighbours, our brothers and sisters, and in particular those less fortunate. This is the only measure by which we will be judged.

But more than this, the Just Judge will be able to read the intentions of our heart. Nothing will be hidden from Him. He will know if we performed even the smallest act of service out of true compassion and love or simply out of a self-serving motive.

St. Paul reminds us: "If I give away everything I own, and even if I hand my body over to be burned, but do not have love, I gain nothing." (1Cor. 13:3) In effect, St. Paul is saying here that we can willingly give up our lives as martyrs for the Faith, but if we do it only out of the desire for the glory that will come to us, albeit posthumously, rather than out of true love for Christ and the Church, then it will be all for naught. These are indeed sobering words that give us a lot to meditate upon during the days of Lent that lie ahead of us!

Thankfully, God presents us with many opportunities each and every day to perform acts of service, and, through prayer, patience and repetition, to learn to make them true acts of selfless love. They need not be acts of stupendous proportions trumpeted from front page headlines. These kinds of opportunities come but rarely, if ever to us. For us rather, it is the mundane, insignificant, hidden opportunities for service that sneak up on us every day if we are attentive to them. Even the ordinary shouldering of our daily responsibilities done without shirking, while always armed with a smile on our face, encouraging words on our lips and the best of thoughts as we interact with those with we meet during the course of our day, can be considered a true act of love and service.

Sometimes however, dire and extraordinary situations present themselves, in which entire communities are called upon to respond with acts of service. Hurricane Sandy, which recently struck the coastal areas of the eastern seaboard of the United States, is a memorable example of this. The lives of many millions of people were adversely affected by this powerful storm, among them, Ukrainian Catholic faithful of the Stamford Eparchy. Thankfully, none of our church buildings sustained significant damage. But the pastors of several of our parishes situated along the ocean shore, in particular, on Long Island and Staten Island, were quick to report that such was not the case for all of their parishioners. The homes of a number of their faithful were severely hit by flooding and wind damage.

Practical aid for those in affected was provided by government and charitable agencies. Besides our prayers for them, how could we, then, the faithful of the Stamford Eparchy help our distressed brothers and sisters? How could we demonstrate to them, in a tangible way, that they were not faceless people in the crowd, that they were not forgotten? How could we provide for them the roof, the glass of water, the hot meal that Christ speaks of in the Gospel reading for Meatfare Sunday?

The call went out throughout the parishes of the Eparchy for a special collection to offer a gift of financial aid, a gift of love for those whose lives had been disrupted. Our priests and faithful have responded generously. To date around \$30,000 has been gathered in this special collection and forwarded to the chancery office and from there, distributed directly to those worst affected, the names and addresses of whom were provided by the local parish priest.

Most, but not all of the recipients were members of Holy Family Church in Lindenhurst, Long Island where Fr. Olvian Popovici is pastor, and Holy Trinity Church in Staten Island where Fr. Vasile Godenciuc is pastor. Each family has received \$1,000 from what was collected, certainly not enough to rebuild their lives completely, but hopefully, enough to provide one or two 'bricks in the wall' to help them in plugging some of the holes in their lives left by the storm.

I would like to share with the readers of *The Sower* a sampling of the many expressions of gratitude that I have received in the past several weeks from the recipients of our gift of love:

“Dear Bishop Paul and brothers and sisters in Christ. Several days ago we received your financial aid. Many thanks for your support in this difficult time for our family. We sincerely thank you, who did not remain indifferent to our distress. May God keep you!”

“Дякуємо за допомогу Стемфордській Єпархії, котра відгукнулася на наше горе. Зичимо Вам всім здоров’я, злагоди та благополуччя. Нехай біда оминає Ваші оселі, Ісус Христос охороняє, а Матір Божа здоров’я посиляє!”

“We thank you and all those who contributed from the bottom of our hearts. The \$1,000 will be used towards the renovation of the first floor of our home, which was completely destroyed by flooding.” (A photograph of the first floor of the home, completely destroyed by flooding, was forwarded along with the letter.)

“Прийміть від мене найщиріші слова вдячності за Вашу великодушність, розуміння, співчуття і чуйність в цей тяжкий період в моєму житті, коли страшна стихія повністю залила моє помешкання. Ця Ваша моральна і матеріальна підтримка дуже допомагає мені, бо теплота Ваших сердець зігріває і тримає мене на душі...”

I would also like to take this opportunity to acknowledge a financial gift of aid from a church community outside the Eparchy of Stamford. This generous gift of love was received from the parishioners of St. Andrew, the Apostle Ruthenian Catholic Church in Westbury, Long Island, where Fr. John Custer is pastor.

These letters of thanks, and other that I could cite, fill us with a sense of satisfaction that we have done a good deed. But, there is something greater here than simply this. To these suffering families to whom a helping hand has been outstretched, the faithful of the Stamford Eparchy have revealed the maternal face of the Church and they have, at the same time, become a living sign of the presence of God in the world, which is the essence of any service we can offer.

During this time of Great Lent and beyond, let us strive, as individuals and parish communities, through our loving service as God’s instruments for good, to always be signs of His loving presence in our world.