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# 31<sup>ST</sup> AND TROOST: FROM DIVIDING LINE TO GATHERING PLACE



Fr. Paisius Altschul, a Serbian Orthodox priest from Kansas City, Missouri, on his multicultural parish of St. Mary of Egypt, the needs of their inner-city neighborhood, and the patristic and contemporary Orthodox witness that has inspired this parish of Orthodox converts to step into the gap.

**RTE:** In relating his journey from Rastafarianism to Orthodoxy, Michael Wilson said that one of the reasons he attends St. Mary's is because it's a multicultural home for all kinds of people. You seem to have everyone: young families, social workers, doctors, counter-culture folk, middle-class white retirees, ex-Rastafarians, Latinos, African-Americans, Ethiopian and Eritrean immigrants who have become Orthodox, street folk who drop in from the neighborhood, children of all ages and ethnicities, and even a small skete of nuns. What is it that draws people here, and as an American Orthodox priest from a Protestant background, how have you arrived at this?

**FR. PAISIUS:** I believe that there is a real opportunity now in America to reflect historic Orthodox values. We say that we believe in the "One, Holy, Catholic and Apostolic Church." The word "catholic," of course, means universal, both in the sense of including every human being, and also, of one ethnic group not being exalted over another.

The predominant model of ethnic blending in the United States has been that of a melting pot, where, if you wanted to be American, you had to fit in with northern Anglo-European Protestant culture. Those cultural norms

were pretty much expected of everyone else. Since the 1960's, though, we've had a very large influx of immigrants from Latin America, the Middle East, Asia, Africa, and Eastern Europe. Within the next forty years, it's thought that the European, white, Anglo-Saxon Protestant population will be a minority in the United States. Necessity will require us to redefine ourselves.

Canada has great cultural diversity also, but there, the image is not so much a "melting pot" as a "salad bowl," in which people retain more of their national and ethnic identities. We respect each person for who they are, and hopefully, realize the pleasure of being together.

The heart of the issue here is mutual respect, and I think that Orthodoxy has an opportunity to take the lead in this because, for centuries, Orthodox Christians have coexisted under many difficult conditions – with Islam, under communism – and still maintained the faith. There is much to be learned from their experience about how to flourish in a multi-faith, multi-cultural context.

The Orthodox convert movement is growing in America, but if you have convert communities who are trying to become "really" Orthodox, to develop an Orthodox worldview, what models are they looking at? Often, they look to the immigrant Orthodox communities who, for survival, had to quickly adapt themselves to the majority culture – the white, northern European model of what it means to be American. In doing so they left behind some of the most important historic qualities that were present in Orthodoxy in their own countries. For instance, although Orthodox Christianity had been present in the continental United States for hundreds of years, there was no Orthodox monasticism to speak of until the past two decades. Many American-born Greeks, Russians, and Antiochian Orthodox were quite unaware of its importance. One of the most vital parts of the Orthodox heritage simply didn't transfer for decades of immigrants and their children.

### The Freedom of the Holy Spirit

So, where do we gather our inspiration from? For me, one of the great contemporary lights of the Orthodox Church is Archbishop Anastasios of Albania, who, through his leadership and writings, provides a tremendous example of faith in action. The way he treats people, whether they be Muslim or Christian, black or white, is a model we can use in coming to

terms with our own multicultural society.<sup>1</sup>

Other inspirations are simple things such as praying, "O Heavenly King, Comforter, Spirit of Truth, Who art everywhere present and fillest all things..." remembering that the Holy Spirit is truly everywhere and fills everything. This includes human beings, it includes cultures. It means that people can change, and that people who haven't been baptized and aren't yet Christian can still be influenced by the Holy Spirit towards love, truth, and righteousness.

I'm not speaking here about the presence of the Holy Spirit in terms of the sacraments and the working-out of salvation, but when the Lord speaks of the sun shining on the evil and the good, and the rain falling on the just and the unjust, this is a quality of the Holy Spirit that is very indiscriminate, that He makes available to all mankind. When the Lord healed the ten lepers, there was only one who turned back to give thanks, although all ten were healed. So there is a goodness from God that is expressed by Jesus saying, "Lend, expecting nothing in return." This is how the Lord acts. He doesn't hold a stick over us to make sure that we do His will; He gives us a tremendous freedom, and this is one of the effects of being made in His image and likeness. What we do with that freedom is another thing. Will we turn back to God and acknowledge Him, or do we just go on our way?



Archbishop Anastasios  
of Albania

This quality of the freedom of the Holy Spirit is very present in Archbishop Anastasios' writings. In one place he says that the fruit of the Holy Spirit is given indiscriminately *because* it is the fruit of the Holy Spirit. It isn't given only to Christians, it is given to anyone who cooperates with the Holy Spirit. That, in itself, changed my perspective on working with a wider audience in our neighborhood. As Orthodox Christians, as an Orthodox priest, as an Orthodox parish, our goal is not only to help those who are Orthodox, but *because* we are Orthodox we are meant to be a light in the neighborhood.

<sup>1</sup> See *Road to Emmaus*, #16, Winter 2004, for an in-depth look at contemporary Orthodoxy in Albania. Also see Archbishop Anastasios (Yannoulatos), *Facing the World: Orthodox Christian Essays on Global Concerns*, SVS Press, New York, 2003.

Archbishop Anastasios has also quoted from the Three Holy Hierarchs<sup>2</sup>, that in the light of the Resurrection we must express ongoing goodness, like a reverberation of the Resurrection. The Resurrection impels us to continue to improve things here on earth because Christ is risen. Instead of moving into fearful enclaves where we curse the darkness, we are called to spread goodness; to do everything we can to improve situations for individuals, for families, for cultures, for society. This is a different point of view. We don't become isolated from other people, but are involved with dynamism and love.

Another inspiration was when I went to Mount Sinai and spoke to the Bedouin people who live around the monastery. They told me over and over that when they have disputes or problems, they go to Archbishop Damaskinos of St. Catherine's Monastery. Although they are Moslem, they bring their problems to him and he settles them. For me, this says that if we are going to be Christians in this world, we don't pick and choose who God sends to us. We try to respect each person as sent by Christ, and help them take the next step forward from where they are. In looking for the fruit of the Holy Spirit – righteousness, joy, peace, love – you'll find Christ in each situation.

RTE: Yes. I recall that in 2004, when several churches and mosques were burnt down in Albania, Archbishop Anastasios offered \$600,000 from the building fund that had been set up to reconstruct the Orthodox cathedral destroyed by the Albanian communists. He offered this money to rebuild a church and a mosque, or a youth center that would promote peaceful coexistence. This is the kind of unexpected, vital Christian response (and sacrifice) that has the mark of being from the Holy Spirit.

However, if we do open ourselves to the world and its needs, what will prevent us from finding ourselves in the same situation as western Christian churches, who since the 1960's have been heavily involved in organized social work? They are a real witness to Christian charity, but often seem to have lost a sense of themselves as part of the deeply-rooted Christian tradition. How do we keep that ascetic, traditional Orthodox otherworldliness as we reach out?

FR. PAISIUS: That's a good question, and it points to what Orthodoxy has to offer the West spiritually, which is a connection to 2,000 years of an

apostolic, spiritual tradition that most western people don't have. Who do people usually turn to when they want to learn about meditation?

RTE: Twenty years ago, eastern gurus.

FR. PAISIUS: Exactly. Even now, the typical models for meditation are offshoots of either Buddhism or Hinduism. People have not paid much attention to Christian spirituality because they thought it was too mental, too pragmatic, too much of this world. In the East we have the tradition of the Jesus Prayer, the ascetic struggle, the path that has been laid out for us by the monasteries, so that even among laity there is an ongoing opportunity to know oneself and to grow in the grace of God. The Church stays connected to tradition through individual personal struggle and exposure to the monastic experience of spiritual life. So, if the monasteries stay rooted and the local churches in the cities stay connected to the monasteries, then you have the opportunity for the earthly Church to be what it should have been all along, which is a conduit of grace flowing into the world.

### St. Mary's and the Troost Street Community

RTE: Does your parish have a full prayer cycle?

FR. PAISIUS: Although at this stage our sisters are doing a slightly shortened cycle of services with the midnight office, matins, hours, vespers, and compline, I'm hoping we can return to including daily liturgy. We had that for years as a spiritual basis and it's awesome.

RTE: Your ministry is now setting up a counseling service with a foundation of Orthodox ethics. You've just finished your Master's in Social Work; Orthodox social workers, psychologists, and substance abuse counselors are moving here to join the community; and the parish is running Alcoholics Anonymous, Narcotics Anonymous, and Cocaine Anonymous support groups in the church bookstore. You have a soup kitchen, and the counseling center is close to being functional. How does all this fit with your calling as a priest and why do you feel you must do this?

FR. PAISIUS: I often think of St. John of Kronstadt. He saw all of Kronstadt as his parish. He didn't only minister to the people who were coming to church, but he also reached out to those who weren't coming. People come to us for

<sup>2</sup> Three Holy Hierarchs: St. Basil the Great, St. Gregory the Theologian, St. John Chrysostom

different needs, and the most common things we weren't effectively addressing were substance abuse, mental illness, and the many things that were related to trauma: domestic violence, sexual abuse, child abuse, and refugees that had been physically tortured or traumatized in the places they'd left.

RTE: But why does your parish feel that you have to help address these needs? Aren't there existing social services to refer people to?

FR. PAISIUS: With the closing of many federally-funded neighborhood social service agencies (including basic emergency mental health services) under the Bush administration and state cut-backs under Governor Blunt, these needs are either poorly or completely unmet in our area. Missouri has one of the worst records in the nation on cutbacks for the poor.

The other thing that we deal with in our neighborhood is that Troost Avenue, the street we are on, has been historically, and still remains, the racial dividing line of the city. The breakdown was phenomenal: east of Troost was African-American, west of Troost was primarily white, and much of this was due to real estate red-lining since the 1950's. Realtors frightened middle-class white Americans east of Troost to move out by telling them that property values were sure to go down. This was a deliberate attempt to create blight by the realtors, who, during that period, made fortunes by turning over existing properties and developing new areas based on racial fear. This wasn't the only cause of segregation, but in Kansas City this property manipulation was unique.<sup>3</sup>

Now there is a call by many people on both sides to change the definition of Troost from a dividing line to a gathering place, with the emphasis on helping people as individuals, as families, and as a community. So, I don't see these things as distinct from my duty as a priest. My duty as a priest is to pray, my duty as a priest is to teach, and in terms of pastoral care, I need to take part in these other pressing needs as well.

RTE: How have other social workers and mental health professionals responded to you?

FR. PAISIUS: I will soon be a licensed clinical social worker, which I mention because during my own training, I've seen a substantial change in the social work climate. In the past, spirituality wasn't something social workers felt

they needed to take into account when working with a client. Psychologists, psychiatrists, and social workers looked at these as medical, psychological, and social problems. However, in the past few years they've begun to recognize what they call a "faith perspective," that is, for many people in difficult circumstances, their strongest asset is their faith, and if you take faith away, you've removed the most valuable part of their support. This being understood, Orthodoxy has much to offer these professional health workers as they begin to develop an understanding of human spirituality.

Something that is now being utilized in the social work field is what they call "mindfulness techniques," practices they have culled from Zen Buddhism. Social workers encourage people to meditate with music, with aromas, with visual and tactile responses as a way to become more focused and attentive. In class and in social work forums, I've explained what happens when you come into an Orthodox Church: the first thing you hear is chanting, you smell the incense, you see beautiful icons that take you to another realm – and when you venerate, you bow and touch the ground that you've come from. You kiss an icon, and if you are baptized, you actually taste Holy Communion. Orthodox worship not only enables a person to be grounded, but uplifted. This is what they are beginning to talk about, and we have 2,000 years of tradition to help them with it. So, I believe we have a huge opportunity here.

To help with this in a concrete way we are developing Reconciliation Services, the social service arm of our parish, which, as you mentioned earlier, is bringing in trained therapists who subscribe to Orthodox social teaching to handle counseling, substance abuse and reconciling broken families. Our board of directors and advisory council include representatives from Orthodox parishes throughout the metropolitan Kansas City area, which is a great support. As Orthodox Christians with a living tradition, we can introduce people to the grace that comes from living a spiritual life. An integrated, holistic Orthodox Christian worldview emphasizes each person as an icon of God, and we believe we're bringing a unique contribution.

RTE: And the counselors will all be Orthodox?

FR. PAISIUS: Mostly. Those who aren't will still subscribe to Orthodox Christian ethics so there won't be any cross-currents. The main thing for people is that they need to realize we are with them.

<sup>3</sup> Longer term issues of racial prejudice and corresponding neighborhood segregation are found in recent works by Kevin F. Gotham and Sherry L. Schirmer, dealing with the hyper-segregation of Kansas City.

## Charity and Justice

RTE: But, if we've never missed a meal through poverty, been out on the street, or been involved in substance abuse, how can we really be with them?

FR. PAISIUS: When we come to know our sins and our own pain, we can begin to have a relationship. Isaiah the Prophet said, "Share your bread with the hungry, bring them into your house..." but then he added, "Give yourself to the hungry and satisfy the afflicted." It's easy to give bread to the hungry.

There's a big difference between charity and justice. Charity in the western sense is doing something kind for people, something extra. But justice means that it's only right that this be done. In dealing with effects from unfair situations in the past, it's a means of leveling the score. This is how I view a lot of the services we are called to engage in.

RTE: Many churches that offer social services follow an institutional social work model, but it's a little different here. You don't seem so intent on efficiency.

FR. PAISIUS: We don't try to organize, we try to recognize what is happening with people, and not just fit them into our program. There is some order to what we do, but the first thing is "heart," the second thing is "head." First comes the person, and next is where the person fits into the community or the organization.

For instance, we are trying to change the atmosphere downstairs where people first come in, to a casual, coffee-shop feeling – an environment where people can talk with someone in a relaxed way. Then, when that person sees what they've come for, we can hook them up with someone who can help in a more direct way. Besides counseling and support groups, we try to get them involved in the Friday night community meal and movie, and with the art project that is happening next door. One of the professors at the art institute is making himself available to guide this, and we are planning dance, theatre, photography, ceramics workshops and so on. Most of this is driven by community people at a grass roots level, with an emphasis on building from the bottom up.

RTE: Speaking of grass roots, I know that the sisters of your skete of St. Moses the Black turned their home into a small community school a few years ago, with themselves as teachers. How did that come about, and how did it work out?

<sup>4</sup> Isaiah 58:3-8

FR. PAISIUS: During the late 90s, the Kansas City Missouri School District lost its state accreditation due to poor achievement scores. Since most of the children in our parish were in that district, we decided to open St. Mary's Academy to fill the gap until something else emerged. Later, a charter school program developed that enabled the children to get into better learning environments, but that year was one of our major growth experiences.

The nuns of St. Xenia Sisterhood, located at St. Moses House only two blocks from the church, opened their home as the site of the school. We had morning prayers, followed by classes – kindergarten through 12th grade. The sisters and two parishioners did the teaching, the preparation of the meals, the discipline, the consoling, and the administration. They were assisted by some of the parents who came to encourage and act as teachers' aides. As a priest, I filled in with religion and church history classes. Although it stretched us to the max in terms of strength and capacity, to this day the children involved still talk about how much it meant to them. It was a reflection of being a community – sharing what little we have with each other for the common good.

RTE: Are you also involved with other churches in the community? What are your relations to them?

FR. PAISIUS: Absolutely. We are a part of Troost Alliance, which is an active group of collaborating churches and social service providers who share ideas and programs to meet the needs of the residents in our community. We participate in mutual service and dialogue, but not in joint worship services. Because of the differences in belief and worship, we've just agreed to respect one other.

RTE: Do you have any contacts with local businessmen through the neighborhood association? Churches are often fairly isolated from area merchants.

FR. PAISIUS: Yes, we also participate in the Troost Merchants Association. St. Mary of Egypt parish sponsors the Desert Wisdom bookstore, so that's our "business connection." Interestingly, our building used to be the President's Shirt Shop, where Eddie Jacobson (a good friend of President Harry Truman) had a store. In the 1920's, there were nearly 200 businesses within two blocks of our corner.

Now there is an entirely new initiative. Based on the Mondragon Community Cooperative in the Basque region of Spain, a group of us have

been inspired to encourage economic cooperatives. Mondragon was started in the 1950's by a group of young men who were working with Fr. Don Jose Maria Arizmendiarieta. Most of the profits were locally shared, there was a lid on how much more management could make than workers, and ten percent was reinvested back into the community. Now, it's the tenth largest firm in Spain with \$13 billion in assets. So, some friends here in Kansas City have formed "Conomics," where only 30% of the profits will go to outside investors, 30% goes to management, 30% goes to the workers, and the remaining 10% is reinvested into community development. A local fashion designer has brought together a team of artists, tailors and seamstresses who are designing and manufacturing clothes at 11-11 Apparel, located at 31st and Troost, in the building connected to our own! Several well-known clothing companies have contacted them for their product. So, my hope is that rather than depending on government programs, models will emerge of what sociologist Robert Putnam calls "social capital," emphasizing the value of community and positive human relationships as the foundation of economic capital.

RTE: The other thing that is surprising is that although your parish is very small, parishioners have reached out, not just in donations or canned food drives, but in taking families into their homes, sometimes for years, and giving up part of Thanksgiving and new-calendar Christmas to make sure people in the neighborhood are taken care of.

FR. PAISIUS: Yes, we're on the old calendar, so that makes it easier with holidays. Going back to the verse from Isaiah 58, the Sermon on the Mount, and the teaching of Christ on the "least of these," as Christians we can never minimize the importance of love to the success of a project. If we take this as a way of life, we encounter the person of Christ in the person in front of us.

RTE: Earlier you used the image of a salad bowl, but one of the interesting things about your parish, which must make this even more of a challenge, is that not everyone's contribution is crisp and clean with beautifully mixed colors. You've got some people who are really hurt. There were a few in church this morning who seemed to be pretty much off the street, and hardly functioning at all. Yet your parishioners make room for them. In almost any Orthodox church, parishioners would try to be kind, but being around people like this is often a little frightening if you don't know how to help.

FR. PAISIUS: Those that you are referring to have co-occurring disorders, both substance abuse and mental health problems. Part of our response is to simply remember how the Lord sees the human person, that every one of us is an icon. We are all made in the image of God, and the likeness of God is being restored in each of us. Our job is not to force, but to expose people to the light and truth, to allow each soul to respond as they are able.

A man who had a homeless shelter for many years once shared with me that if you picture a graph from 0 to 10, often people start judging growth at 0, but many people are actually at -10, and although they may progress from -10 to -8, others only see that they haven't yet reached 0, while in fact they've made significant advances to get to -8. So we try to figure out not where we want them to be, but where they are, and then discover what steps they need to start moving forward. Still, some people we are dealing with have serious disabilities, and in these instances, we try to connect them with services that can help.

RTE: Michael Wilson mentioned that he appreciates St. Mary's "revolving doors." It seems to be alright with you if people come for awhile and then leave, and come back again later. You don't try to hold them.

FR. PAISIUS: The freedom that we have as human beings is one of the greatest gifts God has given us. If He deals with us so freely, who are we to constrain one another? Orthodoxy doesn't force spirituality. Ironically, this sense of freedom is lacking among converts when we bring our western sense of guilt and force with us to Orthodoxy. I have often been amazed at how people raised in historically Orthodox countries, often under enslaved political regimes, are able to more clearly express this personal sense of freedom than western Christians who boast of being free.

RTE: What would you suggest for those of us from more typical parishes that now have immigrants moving in? This can be a big change for a small, close community, and many of us are a little shy about how to bridge those ethnic and cultural gaps. Frankly, after services, sometimes it's easier just to have a quiet conversation with someone whom you've known for years than to venture into unknown seas.

FR. PAISIUS: We are always growing and learning how to make people feel welcome, because our tendency as human beings is to isolate and be safe

with those who are like us. A few years ago, I had a mental picture of two men praying the Lord's prayer together. Both were praying "Our Father," both were praying, "Give us this day our daily bread." In my mind's eye I saw two loaves of bread being given to one of the brothers and the other brother didn't get anything at all. I felt as if the Holy Spirit was asking me, "Did I answer their prayer?"

I thought about that a lot because I realized that in much of today's popular American religion, the brother who has two loaves would say, "Praise the Lord! God answered my prayer!" then, as he leaves, he would turn to the other brother and say, "Just keep praying, you'll get yours, too."

This is one scenario that explains what is happening in America. The other possible light on this story, however, is that they were praying "Our Father" and "Give us this day, our daily bread." It gets down to "we" rather than "me." It's not "my Father," it's "our Father."

St. John the Baptist taught us, "Let him that has two coats share with him that has none and let him that has food do likewise." We are our brother's keeper, we are in this together because we are human beings sharing a common nature. If you view mankind in this way, it begins to change the way we treat each other. You recognize the providence of God in the fact that "this person has come to our church," and instead of seeing them as "the other," you realize that they are very much like us, with some cultural variations. You can use this as an opportunity to learn about this person's life and their culture without first trying to force them into your perspective. You take a step at a time. Find out what their goals are – maybe they are just coming here to learn, because they've heard that the Orthodox Church is filled with spiritual truth, that it is the way to God. So you want to make sure that you are loving that person, and that they feel that love and connection, so they can continue to grow.

The Lord said they would know we are Christians by our love. If that's not the first thing that people feel, they aren't going to want to stay. The other side of this is that we need to learn what makes people tick without judging; to have an acceptance of where they are that will allow them to come closer to the Church.

The second element for parishes has to do with how well-trained the church greeters are. As small as our parish is, even we have them. The greeters should be trained to reach out to people who are different, so that the feeling of being welcome is natural.

## Orthodox Outreach and Reconciliation

Another thing we do in Kansas City is to work together with other Orthodox churches to keep our soup kitchen going, because our small parish is spread too thin. This also supports the desire for social outreach on the part of Orthodox who don't have that opportunity in their own neighborhoods. Other Orthodox churches in town take turns coming down to Troost to prepare our Friday night meal. They cook it, serve it, and they interact with the people. This provides an entrance into relationship, which brings us to the third element, and the most important – basic relationship. Enduring change is only going to take place if you have a relationship.

RTE: In St. Basil's *Life*, he not only insisted that the wealthy sell their riches to feed the hungry during the Cappadocian famine, but he also told the poor, "If you have one piece of bread left, share it with your brother." He didn't leave room for anyone to say, "I don't have anything to give."

FR. PAISIUS: Yes, and as you begin to grow, your gifts grow at the same time. You don't wait until you are fully grown before you start to share. But we also have to remember where many Orthodox are coming from. Two years ago, when one of the Greek parishes was preparing food for the Friday night soup kitchen, a young man asked his grandmother, "Why didn't the Greek Orthodox do this before?" She replied, "Because *we* were the poor!" I think this reveals the reality of life for many Orthodox immigrants in the U.S. The first two generations were spent trying to survive. Now, they have the opportunity to give, and are doing so willingly.

My matushka has been in the hospital many times, and she could have approached it from the standpoint of "woe is me," but she coped with it by saying, "I wonder who the Lord has for me to pray for this time?" Every time she went to the hospital there was someone next to her who needed prayer more than she did. So, although she was ill, her problems opened the door for something else to happen. To be able to use a problem as an opportunity is very empowering.

RTE: As an Orthodox Christian, it's often much harder to cross the educational and social boundaries, than those of color and nationality. An educated parishioner who reads the Church fathers, is aware of Orthodox tradition, and has a professional skill, will almost always be able

to relate to someone of another ethnic group or nationality with the same background. But relating to someone from the street, or who is perhaps from a Protestant fundamentalist background, might be a more difficult gap to bridge than black and white.

FR. PAISIUS: Part of that is learning different people's cultural languages. We have to learn not only that they are Serbian, Greek, Ethiopian, and so on, but we have to take time to find out what they are saying, and how they express it. Our big problem as Americans is time, and we often don't take time with each other. We need to listen and find out each other's stories.

In many eastern cultures, a sense of self is not described as "me," but "us." Who I am is not just me, it's also family and community. This kind of view explains how St. Vladimir could have had the Russian people baptized *en masse*. If their sense of self is connected to the community, it makes perfect sense.

RTE: Yes, the Orthodox theologian Nicholas Zernov says that Eastern Christendom is clear that salvation is not about an individual soul returning to its maker, but part of the transfiguration of the whole cosmos, that salvation for an individual means to be part of a redeemed community. One isn't saved apart from others.

Speaking of lack of time, do you have a suggestion for the usual American dilemma of Orthodox people who often live an hour or more away from church? By the time liturgy is over and they go to coffee hour for a bit, they drive home with just a few hours left for a family day. The problem of time is real.

FR. PAISIUS: Some of our parishioners live fairly far north of Kansas City, so we have encouraged them to get together during the week to support one another. They have a little community up there where they gather to do an akathist, talk, share food. Others who live further west are also doing this, as are some in the city. There are many single people, and single parents with children, who need more support than they get at church once a week.

RTE: With all this diversity, how do you agree in parish matters? Is there difficulty in getting things done?

FR. PAISIUS: Surprisingly, we have started having parish meetings, and we strive for unanimity in parish decisions. Everyone who comes is free to

make recommendations. Not long ago we did a survey of everyone attending, and shared that input with the parish board to improve how we did things and to be more sensitive to those who were having problems. That kind of feedback always adds to the strength of the community.

RTE: You've mentioned building community, and one of your recent endeavors was the Troost Festival, which was a community gathering from both sides of the dividing line that included not only the expected reggae, hip hop, and drumming, but opera....

FR. PAISIUS: ... and New Orleans singing, gospel, blues, classical, and jazz. There was constant music. There was also an art show, and African-American cowboys who came and gave horseback rides to the kids. There were people from both sides of Troost, and many were surprised at what a good time they had. It was a catalyst to show what we could do together. Part of community-building, whether it's a parish community or a sense of village in your area of a big city, is to find out what things are keeping community from happening.

Sometimes, this is something from the past; the effect of both sin and virtue can echo for centuries. One of the things that our community group discovered was that Troost Avenue was the trail that the Osage Indians took to the Missouri River 200 years ago. They hunted and camped in the woods all along what is now the avenue. When European settlers came, the Osage were forced out of the region and onto reservations in Oklahoma where they've lived ever since.

Last year we proposed that the City Council pass a resolution acknowledging their contribution to this area. So, the community invited the Osage elders to come here, to publicly ask their forgiveness on behalf of the European settlers for displacing them and for failing to appreciate their place here. This attentiveness to history is a part of building a sense of community. We aren't isolated; we are also affected by what has gone on before us.

### African Roots of Ancient Christianity

RTE: And you've tried to do that for the African-American community here as well. This will be the 13th year you've held the African Roots of Ancient Christianity Conference. Will you describe that for us?

FR. PAISIUS: The conferences, which are sponsored by the Brotherhood of St. Moses the Black, began in 1994. The theme that year was 200 years of Orthodoxy in America with the Russian-American mission of St. Herman to Alaska. My godfather, Abbot Gerasim of St. Herman of Alaska Monastery, encouraged me to introduce Orthodoxy to African-Americans, and European Orthodox to Orthodox African traditions, so we came together at that first conference to look at different African saints and church history. We've had twelve conferences now. The first nine were held in Kansas City, but for the last few we've moved out to different cities around the country to make it more accessible.<sup>5</sup> Much of this effort has been spearheaded by Fr. Moses Berry, president of St. Moses the Black Brotherhood in Ash Grove, Missouri.

RTE: Surprisingly, half of those who attend every year are white.

FR. PAISIUS: Sometimes more. The conference isn't just to acquaint African Americans with the roots of the faith in Africa. It's also to acquaint European Americans with the roots of their faith in Africa. We have a huge legacy from St. Anthony the Great, St. Athanasius the Great, the desert fathers and mothers, and so on. Egypt, Ethiopia, and much of Sudan and Libya were Christianized very early, and although northern Africa had a large Greek influence, there has always been a substantial movement of people back and forth from Upper Egypt to sub-Saharan Africa.

Also, for Americans and Europeans, in healing our national fiber it's important to face the pain and sins of the past. Slavery was vital to our economy during the first 150 years of our nation, and we need to recognize the effects that still linger.

During the period of American slavery, slave masters were teaching a hybrid form of Christianity to keep the slaves docile, but the slaves themselves picked up a sense of suffering Christianity that was very akin to Orthodoxy. There were even slave martyrs, people who were killed for following their Christian faith.<sup>6</sup> So another work of these conferences is to acquaint people with the wealth of spiritual struggle in the lives of these African Americans.

There is also a common denominator here between Christians who have

5 For information on the conferences, see [www.stmaryofegypt.net](http://www.stmaryofegypt.net)

6 See 1) Dr. Albert J. Raboteau, *Slave Religion*, Oxford Univ. Press, 1980. 2) *An Unbroken Circle: Linking Ancient African Christianity to the African-American Experience*, St. Moses the Black Brotherhood, St. Louis, MO 1998. , and 3) Fr. Paisius Altschul, *Wade in the River: The Story of the African Christian Faith*, CrossBearers, 2002

suffered under Islam and communism. The same is true of the Aleut people and other native Americans who had accepted Orthodoxy in Alaska as part of their indigenous cultures. The Protestant missionaries who arrived after the territory was sold to America discouraged, and even forbade, Orthodox practice. Children were taken to Protestant mission schools and not allowed to speak their native languages or to worship in their Orthodox churches. The Protestant missionaries saw Orthodoxy as a native American religion, not as Christianity. The Orthodox indigenous people of southern Alaska still remember this, and will still say, "to be native, is to be Orthodox."

Since World War I, when European colonialism began to shift in Africa and Asia, people began looking for a Christianity that was not so formed by colonialism. One of the places this happened was in Jamaica with Marcus Garvey and his United Negro Improvement Association and the Back to Africa movement, and later with the Rastafarians, who looked to Ethiopia. Then in the 1920's, Africans searching for a more indigenous expression of Christianity were inspired to form the African Orthodox Church. Although at first this was not a canonical branch of Orthodoxy, it later merged with the Greek Orthodox Patriarchate of Alexandria. Today, there are thousands of African Orthodox Christians, and even our little parish here has had indirect contact with Bishop Jonah Lwanga of Uganda, and direct contact with Archimandrite Neophytos Kongai from Kenya, and Fr. Athanasius Akundain in South Africa. The emergence of Orthodoxy in Africa was a real movement of the Holy Spirit.

RTE: I agree that as the dominant culture in America and Europe, it's necessary for us to make the first move in asking forgiveness and healing our sins of the past, and we must respond to the needs of the people around us. At the same time, I think we need to remember that northern European Christians themselves suffered terribly during the centuries that slavery existed in America.

For example, all of northern Europe saw its heritage of traditional Christianity dismantled and laid waste in the Reformation. Also, in the 18th and 19th centuries, Irish Catholics were devastated as a people and a culture, both from British occupation policies and from famine, and those who survived the emigration to America faced riots to prevent their settling. In their recurring revolutions, French Catholic Christians endured periods of persecution as harsh as anything under communism, their monastics and

clergy were exiled and martyred, and churches and relics were desecrated. Millions of Christians, both Armenian and Orthodox, died violently in Turkish Asia Minor at the beginning of the 20th century. Because these catastrophes are either praised (as with the French Revolution), ignored, or treated neutrally in school history courses, we forget that these were tragic times for the people who lived through them, and their effects can be seen today in the increasingly secular societies of the West. If we look to the past, we've all suffered.

FR. PAISIUS: Coming to know our particular history and previous oppression can make us more sensitive to the needs of others. The Prophet Jeremiah was told by the Lord, "When you can extract the precious from the worthless, then you will be my spokesman"(Jer. 15:9). Coming to know ourselves includes learning about our family and cultural history, and examining it all in the light of Christ.

RTE: As a final question, how do you introduce people to Orthodoxy? I know some priests have a classic "come and see" approach.

FR. PAISIUS: It depends on the soul. If a person is more intellectually stimulated, something to read is very helpful. I approached Orthodoxy completely through study, and after a few years of reading, when I finally went to an Orthodox service, my wife came with me. In the middle of the liturgy, she turned to me with a look of rapture on her face and said, "I don't know about you, but I'm becoming Orthodox." She hadn't read anything. The Holy Spirit touches souls in many ways, and you need to make many different avenues available, whether through church services, reading, bible study, or social outreach. Let's just live the life of Christians and see who the Lord gathers.

RTE: And in the midst of this, how do you make time to keep that deeper sense of Orthodoxy alive in yourself?

FR. PAISIUS: For me, the Jesus prayer is the primary source. Beyond that I try to stay in touch with Fr. Moses Berry and the nuns, who help me stay focused. Also, being with people is pretty sacramental for me. I think a lot about the iconic view of a person. When you are with another person you discover how the Holy Spirit is working there, and if you pray with them, it's wonderful to see what's already taking place. +