

UK DEANERY, CONFERENCE & FESTIVAL 27-30 MAY 2016
'Orthodox Christianity in Everyday Life'

Jenny Musther was our first contributor, speaking to us on Friday evening: the title of her talk was, 'Orthodoxy Meets Broken Lives', and quoting St Maximos - 'Who loves God, cannot help loving others' - she told us of the time when she and Fr John had run an open house where addicts, ex-prisoners, and people with damaged lives of all kinds had come through the door.

All these visitors had had their basic needs met: no one was judged, and everyone left with a blessing of some kind. Some of these souls had already encountered a type of Christian spirituality, and been led to expect instant results, but instead had met failure: Orthodox Christianity with its vision of the Creation renewed in Christ, and a message of forgiveness for failure - of mercy and compassion - offered help of a rather different kind.

Prayer was at the heart of the open house, including prayer for the departed, which came as a surprise to many of those seeking help, amongst whom were those who were grieving the loss of family members, or friends. When Jenny told us the stories of these 'broken lives' we were reminded that we can only live in the present because the darkness of life has been defeated.

Finally, Jenny paid tribute to Susan - Fr John's sister - who had Down's syndrome. Susan had played an important part in the life of the house, through both her own temperament and by the responses she drew from those around her; and in the discussion that followed the talk, we were introduced to a term used by those with disabilities about those who – apparently – have none, and who are called, 'temporarily-abled'.

The next three sessions were comprised of a series of interviews – a la Parkinson! – conducted by Fr Timothy Curtis: first up was Reader Ian Bromelow, who came to the Orthodox Church from an evangelical background. Ian studied Russian at the University of Exeter, and on a visit to Minsk, he had been impressed by the courage of the evangelical Christians that he met there, but although he admired their enthusiasm he felt a certain lack of substance to their belief.

In daily life, Ian had found that prayer was made easier by the structures, words and thoughts that he had encountered in the Orthodox Church (he became a member of the Exeter parish) and he had not felt excluded by his disability (he has spina bifida) although he now finds prostrations and prolonged standing difficult.

The next interviewee, Elena Narinskaya - who came from an atheistic background - had met some Americans - evangelical Christians - at Moscow State University; they were attractive people who had asked her, 'Invite Jesus into your heart'; but although she did this, she continued to look for an education in Christianity, which was only available (at that time) from the Orthodox Church.

Elena felt that the enthusiasm and directness that she had found in evangelical Christianity was missing in the Orthodox Church; she thinks that there is a need for more effort on the part of Orthodox Christians to deal with a number of issues e.g. what should be the role of women in the Church? (will the forthcoming Great and Holy Synod deal with this?) how does the laity fulfil its role as a royal priesthood when - for example - not all the prayers that are said by the clergy can be heard?

Elena believes that we all – as members of the body of Christ - have a responsibility to serve him in the world around us, and that this is the way that Tradition is made manifest: the life of our communities should be Christocentric, involved with others, and more demanding of our time than

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simply the worship offered in church. Elena also said that she did not want an experience of worship that was theatrical, although she thought that there was a place for aesthetics in the church.

Fr Timothy asked both Ian and Elena about their experience of the diaspora: Elena answered that she believed Britain to be holy soil e.g. saints like St Cuthbert were honoured here long before Russia had begun to be evangelised; and so the Orthodox Christian diaspora to this country has been enriched by being here.

Ian said that he thought that it had been the arrival in Britain of Orthodox Christians from Eastern Europe that had enabled the native inhabitants to discover this part of their heritage, in saints like St Cuthbert and St Dunstan.

In the subsequent time for questions and comments, Archbishop John said (with the help of an interpreter) that we need our communities to be welcoming, accepting and evangelistic - we need both to receive and to give.

Fr Porphyrios – our next interviewee - told us of his mixed family background that was both Anglican and Roman Catholic: he was sent to a Catholic boarding school (at the age of eight years) where he had discovered God as the stable element in his life; and it was his love of liturgy there that had begun to draw him towards ordination.

As a young man, Fr Porphyrios had been impressed by the meeting of Patriarch Athenagoras with Pope Paul VI, and subsequently his eye and ear were caught by anything to do with the Orthodox Church, especially Metropolitan Anthony, who he had seen on television, and who he knew through his writings on prayer.

Whilst training for the priesthood in Rome, Fr Porphyrios attended a Liturgy - by chance celebrated by the Patriarch of Antioch – and had been impressed by it; he also spent one Holy Week in a parish that was a mixture of aristocrats and Greek refugees (from the junta in Greece) as well as regularly worshipping at the 'Russicum'; it was his experience of the Liturgy that had been decisive in bringing him to the Orthodox Church.

After his ordination to the priesthood in the Roman Catholic Church, Fr Porphyrios had worked both in parishes, and as secretary to his bishop, and with prospective ordinands - it was then that he learned the importance of listening to people.

Fr Porphyrios is trained in group analysis, and he told us of his understanding that we are all social beings, that have been formed through our experience within a community; he believes that this is a part of what it means to be made in the likeness of God, who is a community of persons.

The last – but not least! – of our interviewees was Martin Olsson: Martin told us that he had come to the Orthodox Church from an Anglican background; he had had a bad experience of the changes in the Anglican liturgy, and he felt that they had diminished his sense of beauty in worship; through his membership of the Fellowship of St Alban and St Sergius he had been able to explore something of what the Orthodox Church had to offer.

Although Martin had a sense of being at home in the Exeter parish, his experience of the

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Liturgy there was also partly a feeling that this created a bond with other parts of the Orthodox Church, and in particular there was a sense of togetherness with the Orthodox Church in Uganda; links with St Cyprian's Orthodox parish in Uganda had begun with a letter to Protodeacon Peter Scorer in 1990, and at first materials - such as tools and sewing machines - were sent out, but now money is sent, and spent on projects that help the parish there to be self-supporting.

Martin himself has set up a trust to support a Ugandan medical student: parishes both in Greece and in the Greek diaspora had been supporting some Ugandan students through university, but the Greek efforts are now going towards meeting the needs of Greek students, in Greece.

Both Martin and Elena work with people of other faiths: Martin is a volunteer in a hospital chaplaincy team, which is organised on an interfaith basis, and Elena is an academic who works for the Centre for Interreligious Dialogue; she believes that we grow in our own faith through contact and discussion with those of other faiths, but not on a basis of, 'We are all the same really'. Martin said that he had found it easier to talk about some things e.g. fasting, with Muslims, than it was with some other Christians, and Elena deplored the divisions – along many different lines - that exist within the Orthodox Church – and even within many parishes!

Martin shared with us the following quote from Metropolitan Georges (Khodr): 'You are bearers of a great vocation, you are a leaven of salvation. This is so on account of the One whose name you bear, and in whom you have been baptised. You are mistaken, however, in thinking that others can make no progress, as if labels had some meaning in themselves; as if Christ could not, with or without the aid of water, baptise in God anyone to whom he would grant his grace. Certainly, all comes from the Saviour whom you worship: all truth, all purity, all greatness, all that is ideal. There is nothing good in this world that is not in some manner upheld by Christ. But the Lord acts wherever he pleases and you have no say in limiting his work. He promised to shower you with his gifts, but he never told you that you would be the sole beneficiaries. I admonish you: do not be more regal than your King, him who can "from mere stones, raise up children for Abraham."' (Mt 3,9)

In answer to the question of how we could better involve young people in the life of our Deanery, Elena commented that there are more and more young people with careers and concerns that prevent them from finding appropriate suitors: ours is an age of isolation - even with all the time spent on Facebook! – there are more and more lonely people.

On the final – Monday – morning, with our thoughts beginning to turn homewards, we were encouraged to think about our everyday life as a journey, or a kind of pilgrimage: two speakers addressed us, with PowerPoint presentations, both on the theme of pilgrimage generally, and of particular places of pilgrimage.

Firstly, Columba Bruce Clark spoke about St Columba (his patron saint) and we were able to see a picture of the saint's ikon; in particular we learned of the saint's connection with the island of Iona (a small island, off the west coast of Scotland) which has long been a place of pilgrimage; the talk was illustrated with pictures of the island, and of its pilgrims; and we were also told about the group, 'Friends of Orthodoxy on Iona' (of which Columba Bruce is the secretary) and of an attempt to establish an Orthodox Christian monastery on the neighbouring island of Mull, as well as some other initiatives to bring the Orthodox Church to the Western Isles.

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Then Subdeacon Ian Randall addressed us: he used the example of Little Gidding - readers of TS Eliot should know something about this - to say something about pilgrimage in general; and we were presented with pictures of pilgrims in various locations, before he turned our attention to Walsingham; he said that it was a place to which the Mother of God calls pilgrims. We saw pictures of the shrine at Walsingham, and - more especially - some of the Orthodox Christian places of worship, both at the shrine and nearby. Ian urged more parishes to go on pilgrimage, and – should we venture to Walsingham – to join him there, at the Liturgy in the Parish of the Holy Transfiguration.

No report would be complete without mention of both the splendour of the pontifical Liturgy on Sunday morning - and of Archbishop John's simple and direct appeal that we should be people of love - and Sunday evening, which was - as in previous years – a time to relax, and enjoy one another's company, in what could be considered to be a large family party, where we were both amazed and highly entertained by the prodigious talents of the young people. This year saw the largest number of youngsters that we have ever had at this event, as well as at least one baby. The experience of this mixture of ages – the coming together across generations – has helped many of us to reflect on what might be the future for our Deanery.