

External Communications of His Eminence

Last Updated Wednesday, 04 August 2010

Letter to his Eminence from John Diamantis of the Oothodox Mission from USA

Eminence Metropolitan Seraphim, Reverend Clergy, and Brothers in Christ:

I thank you for the wonderful opportunity and willingness to share your wisdom, experience and love in the Church of South Africa.

Your Eminence asked us to send some suggestions and thoughts about the condition of the Church in South Africa which I will attempt to do in this message. I humbly ask that you please keep in mind that my experience and time there was very limited.

Before we can understand the Church and it's individuals I think it is important to understand the environment affecting the Church in South Africa. As an outsider it seemed painfully evident that the area of Johannesburg-if not the whole country- is in a state of paralyzing fear. This fear seems to be a result of crime, both violent and otherwise, as well as a mistrust of one's neighbor and the government as a whole. I'm certain there is more to it than this, but this is simply my observation.

It seems to me that the only way to effectively function in an environment like this is to engage it-not withdraw. As it is written in 1 John 4:18 "Perfect love casts out fear." Because the Church is the body of Christ it can only know one way to be itself-that is loving to the point of death on the cross. If the Church ceases to love, even and especially those who wrong Her, She simply ceases being the Church.

How to engage the society can take many forms. I know that there are a handful of people who we were blessed to meet who proactively and intentionally try to go into the community both in direct service to the Church and otherwise. Maria's ministry is a wonderful example of this. I think it would be beneficial both for her ministry, and her safety to have a priest travel with her to these events. One vivid example of a time when the absence of clergy was felt was during our trip to Alex. It saddened me that I had to be the one to offer the prayer for those people who need the intercessions of somebody with more authority before God's throne.

I know that there are many who warn of the dangers of entering areas like that, but honestly I was not scared, just cautious. If a couple of women can go into that environment for an hour or so, there should be no reason for them to go without a male presence and someone who officially represents the Orthodox Church.

This would be a fundamentally simple way of doing ministry and working in outreach/evangelism if one were so inclined. Besides that, there were a number of people who sincerely were spiritually minded there-not all of them, but many. There is almost unlimited potential for doing Bible studies, simply distributing Bibles and paper icons and teaching the people the Orthodox faith. This could have beautiful ramifications with the members of that community, regardless of age or gender.

In all of the communities we visited there is an incredible desire for catechism, if not the need. It seems essential to have a core of people-possibly from the catechetical school-be given the opportunity to teach the Orthodox faith to those who are thirsting for it. Another simple way of accomplishing education in the parishes is to have the services in the native tongue of the people present.

Three good examples of this are in Brixton, where the community has all services in English; Mamelodi where we served the Typica in the native tongue, and Eldorado Park where Fr. Iakov is able and willing to serve in the language of the people of his parish.

Unfortunately, my experience in the Greek parishes was that there are some who are more interested in hearing Greek "because it sounds nicer than English" or because "that's what Orthodoxy is." Even at Sts. Cosmas and Damian for the feast day it was apparent that the psaltis had little/no intention/experience chanting in Greek. This could be another amazing ministry and way of growing the Church in South Africa. There are some amazing chantors who will not be able to chant forever. Have them teach the local people with some musical talent how to chant the tones, and let those people chant the services in English. Even at Sts. Cosmas and Damian, or Pretoria if the litanies, gospel and homily were done in English it would be a big improvement and be helpful for many people. I have even heard the daughter of a deacon say that she wants to go to her friends parish because the services are in English. The youth want to understand and participate but they are not being permitted. I think that point speaks for itself. The Lord tells us that "the gates of hell will not prevail against the Church", but that does not mean that our portion of it will be preserved.

I do not think starting a rival English-speaking parish across from a community like Pretoria or any other community would be a good idea. This will only lead to division and insularity. The devil would have fun with this I think. It is better to heal the wounds of the body than to cut the body in two.

This would be a way of engaging the fear that people have within the walls of the Church-which is also extremely important to do.

I also think it is important to make ministry more reasonable for the clergy to engage in. It is not reasonable to ask people who have nothing to be the ones to offer the most in terms of finances and time.

I do not believe that the idea of a "missionary" priest is someone who serves one ethnic community, regardless of where he is from. Many people had said to me that one priest in particular is a "missionary" because he had traveled to various countries as a priest. Maybe they didn't know that he only served the Greeks in each country. This is not a bad thing, just a mislabeling. For clarity's sake, it would be better to show that he is a traveling priest, rather than a "missionary."

Racism is still a very big problem in South Africa. I truly believe that the best way to fix this within the Church is simply to integrate the parishes. There are whites who dislike blacks and blacks who dislike whites. This should not be so within Christ's body. "A kingdom divided against itself cannot stand." If the Church is to survive (nevermind grow) these issues must be addressed. I think that one practical way of doing this on a small scale is through the youth (university aged to young adult). This can be done with the youth within each parish and/or by joining youth from various communities.

In conclusion, I would say that there are many valuable resources of people within the Church in South Africa. A small, faithful army wants to serve the Lord very strongly and will continue to do just that one way or another. For the well-being of the Church's future I think it is important for those people to be given more resources in terms of people, time and transportation. It's not possible to fight the good fight with both hands tied behind your back, after all. Catechism, access to understanding the services, and the youth are three concrete ways to begin to solidify the core of the Church and prepare Her to receive others from the outside more regularly. If the Church behaves as the body of Christ, there is no home of any sinner that will be too evil, dark, or leprous for Her to enter and show forth God's light and love.

You are all in my prayers and I hope that you will keep us in yours.

The unworthy,
John Diamantis
Letter from : Prof. Alberto Quattrucci of Sant'Egidio Rome
Rome, 15th September 2007

Eminence, We are approaching the days of the International Meeting "BANISHING VIOLENCE FROM THE WORLD: Faiths and Cultures in Dialogue", in Naples on 21-23 October 2007, and the number of personages coming is increasing along with the importance of the event. We would like to provide you with further information on the programme of the Congress, which may be useful to you and facilitate your participation as well as the work of our Secretariat. As you know, the meeting will start in the morning of Sunday 21st October, at 10.00 a.m., with the celebration of the Holy Mass presided over by the Holy Father Benedict XVI, in the presence of the ecumenical representatives. On Sunday afternoon, at 5.00 p.m., there will be the Opening Assembly at the San Carlo Theatre. On Monday and on Tuesday morning there will be a series of round tables on topics of spiritual reflection, cultural insight and relevant contemporary issues. On Tuesday 23rd October, after the prayer for peace, gathered in different places according to the different religious traditions, there will be the Final Ceremony on Piazza del Plebiscito, starting at 7.30 p.m. We remind you that you will be our guest for the days of the Congress (we shall provide you with the name of your hotel upon your arrival). With regard to the programme, we invite you, if it were possible, to be present from Saturday 20th to Wednesday 24th October. We would also like to ask you to inform us as soon as possible concerning the dates of your journey, so that we can organise your transfer to and from the airport to your hotel. The Secretariat of the Congress will be at the Hotel Royal Continental (Naples, Via Partenope 38/44 - tel. +39.081.7644621 - FAX +39.081.744616) starting from Thursday 18th October. Until then please refer to our Secretariat in Rome (tel. +39.06.89922515 / 89922516 - FAX +39.06.89922517 - email ur@santegidio.org). We remind you to send us the text of your contribution (approximately 15 minutes) by the end of the first week in October and to communicate the language of pronunciation, we provide you below with information regarding the Forum. Please contact us if there is any further information you may need. Looking forward to meeting you in Naples, we convey you our best regards.

Prof. Alberto Quattrucci
Community of Sant'Egidio