The way is love

By Niko Patitsas, CrossRoad 2007

I still question my place in this world. Do you? There must be a way to find happiness and fulfillment in our studies, careers, and relationships. What is the way?

As I look into my past, I can see the dots that led me to become the person I am today. When I think ahead, I can see my hopes take form, but I cannot fathom the dots that will lead me there.

Recently I saw a truly spectacular movie called “The Tree of Life.” In it, the mother of the divided O’Brien family teaches her children that “the only way to be happy is to love. Unless you love, your life will flash by.”

Amidst scenes of awesome, galactic movement counterbalanced by delicate, cellular jostling depicting the Creation, Mrs. O’Brien’s voice commands her children, “Help each other. Love everyone. Every leaf. Every ray of light. Forgive.” Through “The Tree of Life,” God taught me once again that the way is love.

But what is this love? Can love speak to us? Yes, Christ is love, and He speaks to us: “I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me.” (John 13:6) God lays the dots before us, and I suppose we will see them in His time.

God makes living by love really fun. We get to be with all kinds of people, enjoy the outdoors, sing, dance, feast, make beautiful things, make babies. I can’t help but smile when, in the words of Saint Patrick of Ireland, I feel

Christ with me, Christ before me,
Christ behind me, Christ in me,
Christ beneath me, Christ above me,
Christ on my right, Christ on my left,
Christ when I lie down,
Christ when I sit down,
Christ in the heart of every man who
thinks of me,
Christ in the mouth of every man who
speaks of me,
Christ in the eye that sees me,
Christ in the ear that hears me.

But I don’t feel Christ all the time. That’s how I know that I have so far to go. Christ whispers in our ears every day, “If you love me, keep my commands.” (John 13:15) After loving God with your entire being, the second command of God is to love your neighbor as yourself. “There is no commandment greater than these” (Mark 12:31). Often we make life complicated, but the Way is simple: love God and love your neighbor.

I pray that God helps us all find the will and the strength to follow His Way. To Him be the glory, amen.
In CrossRoad we experienced the power of loving our neighbor by conversing with the homeless and listening to the elderly. We were profoundly impacted by these experiences and I’m sure I speak for many of you when I say that my compassion for the marginalized is deep. I can look at their suffering and see the face of Christ, and yet in the same moment I find myself condemning those that cause the suffering.

We watch the news and feel sorry for those who have been robbed, raped, and killed, but what do we feel towards those who do the robbing, raping, and killing? Do we see Christ in the face of those neighbors? Or what about those who wrong us? Do we love the people who cause us distress?

We hear over and over again the call to “love your neighbor” and in our CrossRoad community we have learned to define that neighbor as not just our family and friends but as the oppressed, the suffering, the homeless and the helpless; but could this possibly include the criminal? Are we really expected to love those who harm others and offend us?

Christ did in fact preach that we are to love our enemies. As He hung on the cross, Christ lived His instructions when He asked His father to forgive the very men who beat, spit upon, and nailed him to the cross. He spent time with not only the sick but He dwelt in the homes of tax collectors. We too are called to love our enemies.

How do we even begin to see Christ in the face of criminals? We begin by realizing that they, like each one of us, have a story. We all have lives full of experiences and relationships, both positive and negative, that have shaped us into the people we are at this moment.

Many people have had to live through a series of tragedies, many have suffered abuse, and many have limited experiences of receiving love. How can they possibly know how to treat others if they have been treated horribly themselves?

We cannot judge or condemn anyone for we do not know where they have been and how they are broken.

We cannot judge or condemn anyone for we do not know where they have been and how they are broken. Just as we hope to be loved even in our darkest moments, we must strive to have compassion on our enemies and realize that these people also bear the image and likeness of Christ; they are treasured children of God.

Yes, we are called to love the persecuted and those who persecute. All of humanity is a living breath of God and we are called to treat each one accordingly. It sounds reasonable to acquire compassion for the suffering, but it seems like lunacy to love criminals; yet this is our call. “But I say unto you, Love your enemies, bless them that curse you, do good to them that hate you, and pray for them which despitefully use you, and persecute you” (Matthew 5:44).
When I sat down to think about finding Christ in the face of a neighbor, the experience of my friend Rebecca with her older sister Agatha came to mind. Born three years apart, these two girls grew up close friends, until at age 13 Agatha suffered the onset of a severe mental illness. Rebecca relates, “One day I got home from elementary school and found Agatha crying hysterically. She looked into my broken face, and I asked her where the thermometer was to try to take her temperature. She looked into my eyes and said seriously that it had broken on the day I got married.”

Rebecca was terrified by this metal instability in her sister, whom she had always looked up to and wanted to emulate. She was angry both at God and Agatha, and distanced herself from the alien being she no longer recognized as a full person. Rebecca recalls how one day she came to a change of mind:

“I was standing uncomfortably in the hallway as Agatha talked to me about the novel she was writing. I was pretending to listen but really just waiting for her to finish and let me get away. She went on and on, talking about how she wanted her novel to be psalmaic, speak to people about moral truths, and bring them to God. I found myself becoming increasingly frustrated with her, as if her words or tone were assaulting me. I tried to diagnose the problem, wondering if it was her self-rightnesses, or perhaps self-deprecation, that was making her so intolerable. As I actually began to listen to her, and hear the voice crying behind her words, I was struck with a sudden realization. The ‘tone’ which felt so excruciating to me was nothing other than a pure cry of anguish and isolation. ‘Listen to me,’ her voice pleaded, ‘hear me, accept me! I’ve lost my mind and no one takes me seriously anymore. Please tell me I’m still of value, tell me you see recognize something in what I’m saying!’ I began to cry, and suddenly I realized why listening to her hurt so much. It was because her explicit suffering struck to the core of insecurity and pain buried in my own soul, to the broken place in my heart that, unsure of my worth and God’s love, cries out for validation and love in just the same way.”

Over the decade of Agatha’s continued illness, the two sisters have grown a new connection. They often go for walks on the road with their arms linked around each other. Whenever a car comes, Agatha insists that Rebecca drop their connection and walk single file with her on the edge of the road. Rebecca says that when she sometimes pridefully tries to resist these precautions, Agatha won’t let her get away with it. “Her stubborn chin juts at me, ‘I’m still your big sister, and I refuse to let you be unsafe!’” Rebecca says. In moments like this, Agatha’s distinctive love and strength shine as a ray from the behind the dark cloud of her illness. Rebecca tells me that over the years she has been changed and humbled by her interactions with Agatha. She has come to recognize in her sister both a fellow human sufferer and the philial love and image of Christ.

Anna is currently working towards her Master of Divinity at Holy Cross. She is focusing her studies in youth ministry. She is staying involved in the OVM by leading a “Women in Leadership and Service” group for the females in Hellenic College and through her work on staff for CrossRoad.

Ellie received her master’s degree in Social Work in May 2010 and married Eleftherios Constantine in July 2010. Both of them studied at Holy Cross, Ellie in the M.T.S. Program and Eleftherios in the M.Div., and they graduated together in 2011. They now live in Mobile, Alabama, where Elef is the Pastoral Assistant at the Annunciation Greek Orthodox Church. He is doing excellent work and is loving his job. Ellie currently volunteers at a domestic violence shelter called Penelope House, and her best friend there is Big Al, a twelve-foot alligator! Life is good.

Greg Abdalah is still working as the Youth Director at St. George Cathedral in Worcester, Massachusetts. He is fortunate to be working under the guidance of the former CrossRoad staff all-star, Fr. Milad Selim, and they share their CR memories over hot cocoa at their parish office Christmas party.

During my travels, it seems that I’ve only just begun to realize the beauty of God’s creation and the amazing diversity of His people: I’ve seen just how “other” the other can be! I hope that, through your prayers, Christ continues to teach me many things on this journey, most importantly how to continue to respond to Him, and how to love others (yes, I’m always thinking about vocation!).

I encourage you all to also invite Christ to be your companion on your various journeys in life. As we celebrate His incarnation into this world is proof that we experience that He wants to be with us and will do whatever it takes to accomplish that. I pray that His light illumines your hearts and minds, and that His peace surrounds you. Blessed journey to you all!

Much love,
Mary”

Staff Updates

Anna Colis (CR Staff ’11)
Anna is currently working towards her Master of Divinity at Holy Cross. She is focusing her studies in youth ministry. She is staying involved in the OVM by leading a “Women in Leadership and Service” group for the females in Hellenic College and through her work on staff for CrossRoad.

Ellie Mellas (CR Staff ’07)
Ellie received her master’s degree in Social Work in May 2010 and married Eleftherios Constantine in July 2010. Both of them studied at Holy Cross, Ellie in the M.T.S. Program and Eleftherios in the M.Div., and they graduated together in 2011. They now live in Mobile, Alabama, where Elef is the Pastoral Assistant at the Annunciation Greek Orthodox Church. He is doing excellent work and is loving his job. Ellie currently volunteers at a domestic violence shelter called the Penelope House, and her best friend there is Big Al, a twelve-foot alligator! Life is good.

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Mary Long (CR Director ’09, ’10, ’11)
“Greetings, CrossRoad alumni! I have been traveling the past several weeks and have been thinking of you. I have asked Christ to be my companion as I travel, but I also feel that in many ways, you also are my companions, since you have become a part of me.

During my travels, it seems that I’ve only just begun to realize the beauty of God’s creation and the amazing diversity of His people: I’ve seen just how “other” the other can be! I hope that, through your prayers, Christ continues to teach me many things on this journey, most importantly how to continue to respond to Him, and how to love others (yes, I’m always thinking about vocation!).

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Much love,
Mary”
I once was blind, but now I love

By Michael Tishel, CrossRoad Director

Sight is a funny thing. People who discover that they need eyeglasses can tell you that these two small “windows” make a world of difference. In fact, if someone with poor eyesight puts on a pair of glasses, it is as if that person’s whole reality suddenly changes; the world becomes more crisp, clear and “readable.” Objective reality is quite subjective when it comes to sight; our ability (or lack thereof) to see strongly affects what it is that we are seeing and how it looks to us.

Christ and his followers often used physical sight and blindness as symbols and clues to the realm of spiritual vision. The two aspects of our reality—the physical and spiritual—are deeply connected, but not identical. While we often depend on eyeglasses to see the physical world, our spiritual sight is most importantly attached to and dependent on the condition of our heart: blessed are the pure in heart for they will see God (Matthew 5:8). Christ shows this by healing a blind man in the following way:

“They came to Bethsaida, and some people brought a blind man and begged Jesus to touch him. He took the blind man by the hand and led him outside the village. When he had spit on the man’s eyes and put his hands on him, Jesus asked, “Do you see anything?”

He looked up and said, “I see people; they look like trees walking around.”

Once more Jesus put his hands on the man’s eyes. Then his eyes were opened, his sight was restored, and he saw everything clearly” (Mark 8:22-25).

I don’t know about you, but nine times out of ten, I feel like the blind man after Jesus healed him the first time. In other words, I often see people not as they actually are but as I understand them to be in my state of semi-blindness.

When I was younger, my mom or dad would come into my room before bedtime to wish me “goodnight.” Because it was dark, I would sometimes look at them and get scared; the darkness distorted their faces, and to the five-year-old Mikey they looked like scary monsters. Just as soon as they approached my bed, however, and the true form of their faces was revealed by the light of my bedside lamp, I realized that it was not a monster after all.

Are people actually “trees walking around,” as the blind man says? Are they distorted in form or does our inner blindness distort them? Was my mom really a monster, or was it just that my eyes weren’t strong enough to see her clearly, enshrouded in the evening darkness?

Perhaps, due to the blindness of my heart, darkened by egotism, irritability, and judgments, I see people not for what they actually are—beloved children of God, made in His image and likeness—but as my blindness perceives them to be: sources of anger, annoyance, and often even hatred. How can I stop seeing people as extensions of my own inner confusion, sadness or blindness, and begin to see them as all that is of Christ? Is it just a mental decision that I have to make?

Once we understand our inability to see Christ in our neighbor, let alone to love him or her, we can and must ask Christ to heal us. In this situation, we see ourselves as we truly are.

Just as Rome wasn’t built in a day, in a similar way Christ, the ultimate Physician, does not often heal our spiritual blindness overnight. But we must trust that he can heal it, and that he will heal it in his good time. If you recall, pretty much all of the healing accounts in the Gospel of Mark are sealed by the patient faith of whoever is seeking to be made whole.

So, let’s take courage from the fact that simply admitting that we are blind is half the battle. Once we understand our inability to see Christ in our neighbor, let alone to love him or her, we can and must ask Christ to heal us. In this situation, we see ourselves as we truly are. We neither see ourselves as perfect angels, nor as hopeless, wretched demons. No, we see that as human beings and children of God we have much potential, but in stumbling off the path, we have lost our way and can only find it again by the mercy of our loving Father.

When the Father’s mercy comes, instead of seeing our neighbor as an extension of our own spiritual confusion and brokenness, cast in the shadow of our semi-blindness, we will see him or her robed in the brilliance of the light of Christ, radiating with love and paschal joy. Yes, we can see this even, and especially, in the putrid smells of the unkempt homeless person, as many of you discovered in CrossRoad. For, as we hear in the Liturgy of the Presanctified Gifts, “the light of Christ illuminates all.”

So, let us not give up hope, and let us not despair that we are unable to see Christ in the face of our neighbor, that we often see a reflection of our own spiritual poverty instead. Rather, let us rejoice that Christ, as with the blind man in the Gospel, desires to restore our ability to see, and thus our ability to love, if we would only approach him with faith.

So the next time we look at someone—whether it be our parents, siblings, someone in school or on the street—let us remember that any thought telling us that they are less than an angel in our midst is simply a reflection of our own blindness. In that moment, let us humbly beseech the Lord to heal us so that we may clearly see this person as he or she really is—as an angel of the Lord, and even as Christ Himself!
Emptying ourselves

By Photini Petrides, CrossRoad July 2010

In emptying ourselves we are filled with Christ. As Christians we are Christ to our neighbor and he, in turn, is Christ to us. In our introduction to Stage Three of CrossRoad, they told us that in order to see Christ in others we must empty ourselves, which means that we cut off our will and give of ourselves for the benefit of someone else.

After sleeping on these words, we left early for the breakfast search the next morning. Even though we were “emptying myself.” I thought I just had to get out of bed earlier and wait to eat breakfast because that is what the CrossRoad itinerary said.

On our breakfast search our group met a man named Todd. Todd was a chef who became homeless after leaving his wife and children in upstate New York when he found out that she had been cheating on him. He decided to move back to Boston and live with his family until he could sort out his life. When he got to Boston he found out that all of his family had left and his mother had passed away. With nowhere to go, Todd spent all of his money trying to figure out what he was going to do. After having all of his teeth pulled because they were so badly rotten, he eventually had to sell his car.

When we met him, Todd had nothing but hope left. He hoped that he would be able to find a safe place to spend the night, that he would be able to talk to his kids when he called them that day (just like he had done every day for a year), and he hoped that he would be able to hitchhike safely back to New York for their birthdays.

Even though he didn’t have a single possession registered in his name, he still had not given up, much like the woman in the Bible who touched Jesus’ robe to stop her sickness. In fact, Todd’s persistence even resembles the way that God never gives up on us.

In order to see people in a deeper way, as I came to see Todd, you have to put yourself out there. You have to change your routine; talk to people that you wouldn’t usually talk to, do things that are out of your comfort zone.

Looking back, I realize that every time I have seen Christ’s love and peace in someone’s face, it has always been when I was doing things that I knew were not meant to benefit me. I believe that in order for your heart to be open and able to feel Christ, you must be giving of yourself in a way that you know you will be getting no physical benefit in return. Only then will you empty yourself and be “filled with Christ.”

You have to put yourself out there. You have to change your routine; talk to people that you wouldn’t usually talk to, do things that are out of your comfort zone.

With love and prayer,
Dr. R*

FR. EUGEN PENTIUC (CR Professor ’05, ’07, ’09)
Fr. Eugen has been awarded two faculty fellowships in the past few years including a Fulbright Scholar Fellowship at the University of Athens, Greece, and a Lilly Faculty Fellowship in conjunction with the Association of Theological Schools in America and Canada. In 2011, he was invited as an international expert by the Romanian Ministry of Education to assess the doctoral programs in theology in the Romanian universities in Bucharest. In the spring of 2010, he was invited to be a visiting professor at the Ecole biblique et archeologique francaise in Jerusalem, Israel. He has given many papers over the past few years, the most recent of which was titled “The Nature of the Resurrected Bodies and 2 Baruch and New Testament” (presented at the Sixth Enoch Seminar, Milan, Italy, June 2011). Lastly, in 2010 he became the director of the Th.M. program at Holy Cross.

Professor Updates

DR. MICHAEL LEGASPI (CR Professor ’11)
“This fall, I began my second year as an instructor in philosophy and religious studies at Phillips Academy in Andover, Massachusetts. Living and working at Phillips Academy has been a great experience so far. At Andover, I enjoy teaching courses in Scripture, the Abrahamic religions, and philosophy courses that deal with ethics, science, technology, and questions of human nature. It has also been fun to have two of my four kids as students at the school. In addition to my work at Andover, I have had the opportunity to present papers at conferences and give lectures at the University of Notre Dame and Wycliffe College in Toronto. Staying active in the wider academic world has been a challenge, but it provides a nice balance to my work and gives me opportunities to stay engaged with biblical scholars all over the world. More trips are planned for the spring. I look forward to sharing what I learn with my students and, God willing, future CrossRoad participants!”

DR. ALBERT ROSSI (CR Professor ’04 - present)
“I gave a retreat in St. Louis recently and five CrossRoaders, from three universities, came to the retreat as a sort of mini-reunion. I was reunited with them in love and affection. CrossRoaders cross my road often and fondly. I was also reunited to all of you through them as my memory went back to my many, many sessions with so, so many of you. Please know that you have enriched my life in ways I cannot describe. You live in my heart.

With love and prayer,
Dr. R*”

Dr. Michael Legaspi
Phillips Academy
Andover, Massachusetts
Visit your career services office

By Dr. Ann Bezzerides, Director of the Office of Vocation & Ministry

We hope you know full well from your time at CrossRoad that life is not about a title, but it is about a person—the person of Jesus Christ—and the people that each of you are in relationship to Him. It is not about WHAT you do, but WHO you are.

We’ve said that. Now you’re CrossRoad alumni. And guess what we want to tell you? Visit your Career Services office at your college! (And even if you’re out of college and struggling with a career decision, your college career services office should still be able to help you.) Pursue every available resource that they have to offer you about choosing your major and getting summer internships.

Take the personality or career related inventories that they have available. Consider meeting with experienced career counselors who can review these inventories with you and advise on fields that you are best matched to pursue.

Do your own research online about different career possibilities; you may want to check out Orthodoxjobs.com where we are posting new resources weekly, including life stories about Orthodox Christians in a variety of career fields.

Ask adults around you about what they do. Talk to people who know you well and whom you trust (parents, grandparents, Godparents, fellow parishioners, your priest) about ideas you may be having for your future, to get their feedback. All of this is, we believe, simply a wise use of the time and resources that you have available to you.

God has given us freedom to choose, and we should make decisions wisely, based on the unique ways he has created us and the realities of our circumstances. The reality of our world is that you may face times of unemployment or times in jobs that you do not find satisfying. This is the time to think wisely now about your future and use the resources available.

The great news is that the vocational message of CrossRoad will always be true: in whatever you do, with Christ as your focus, you will have opportunities to serve and love the neighbor in countless ways.

Christ in all

By Michelle Ibrahim, CrossRoad 2011

I have always looked up to people like my mother, my Sunday school teacher, and others, and have tried to imitate them to become a better person. I like to have a good image, a good example to follow so that one day I can be an example for others. The Church offers me so many saints and holy men and women to learn from.

Mother Gavrilia is the first that comes to my mind as someone who could see Christ in the face of the neighbor. After reading her biography, The Ascetic of Love, I felt that I had truly learned what it is to love my brethren. She traveled to India to work with the poorest of the poor, staying in a colony of lepers for five years. Her whole life was focused on loving God and His people.

Through my experience at CrossRoad and my reading of her book, I have a greater understanding of Christ’s presence in us all. On the first day of CrossRoad, we were all sitting together waiting for all the participants to arrive. While the others were conversing and getting to know each other, I sat there pondering on a question: “Where have I seen these people before?” I could not find an answer to my question. After a few days, I came to realize that I recognized Christ in each one of my fellow friends. Christ was present in all of them and that is why I thought I knew them from before.

Sometimes it is easier to see Christ in another person because of their kind actions, but when we see a drunken, homeless man we turn our backs and walk away. Unfortunately, I am guilty of that. But why is it so hard for me to acknowledge that person? Isn’t Christ everywhere and in all? We have to see Christ as the other and the other as Christ. Jesus Christ himself teaches us this with the parable of the sheep and the goats, saying, “Inasmuch as ye have done it unto one of the least of these my brethren, ye have done it unto me” (Matthew 25:40). Would I walk away if that was Jesus Christ sitting on the side of the road?

The two greatest commandments according to Christ are: “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind’ and ‘you shall love your neighbor as yourself’” (Luke 10:27). These commandments are intertwined; you cannot do one without the other.

Therefore, I act hypocritically when I go to church on Sunday praising and worshiping God, yet I sit there judging others. How can I hate my neighbor who is made in the image and likeness of God when I say that I love God?

Mother Gavrilia is a perfect example of showing true love towards all her neighbors. I have to learn how to seek Christ in the face of my neighbors, whether it is one of my family members, a friend, or even a stranger. All are sent by God!
Stranger danger

By Michelle McAllister, CrossRoad 2011

While I was growing up, my mother always told me not to talk to strangers. I feel as if most kids are told this at least once in their lifetime from their parents or from “Stranger Danger” programs in elementary schools.

It became repetitive after a while and I just became accustomed to the idea of shutting off the world around me. I would go on outings with my mother at a young age and she would always lock the car doors when we passed a homeless person or drove through a neighborhood that wasn’t well-kept.

I remained secluded in my own world with my material problems that ranged from what shoes to wear to when my next math test was. I picked up the habits of those in my suburban neighborhood where I overlooked those whom many consider to be the “less fortunate” members of society. Looking back on this mentality, I realize that it was not my place to stereotype these people or to view them as less valuable than I am.

I have also come to realize that I can learn a lot from these people when it comes to service and truly reaching out to others.

I was amazed at the generosity of these people who didn’t have much for themselves yet willingly donated to our cause.

I attend a small Christian college in western Texas where all incoming freshmen are required to participate in a canned food drive together. My group, which included myself and five other freshmen, went door-to-door in a neighborhood where the residents looked as if they might have been food bank recipients themselves.

I remember being pessimistic about finding any donations in this area, but I still went from house to house asking for donations. I was amazed at the generosity of these people who didn’t have much for themselves yet willingly donated to our cause.

I could truly see Christ in these people as they gave us a few cans with smiles on their faces knowing they had helped someone.

This adventure of collecting cans one afternoon reminded me of a valuable lesson that I think everyone should remember. Even those who need help in their own situations may still have the desire to help others and reach out to the best of their ability. Even the smallest acts of kindness are appreciated and often come from where we least expect.

Professor Updates

DR. DEMETRIOS KATOS (CR Professor ’05, ’07, ’10)
Dr. Demetrios Katos was appointed Dean of Hellenic College in May 2011. He recently completed his book Palladius of Helenopolis: The Origenist Advocate, which was published this past November by Oxford University Press.

DR. JIM SKEDROS (CR Professor ’09 & ’11)
“I am happy to see a busy fall semester come to an end. I attended the annual Byzantine Studies Conference at DePaul University (Chicago) in October where I gave a paper titled “Having Remembered all the Saints: Liturgical Commemoration and the Cult of the Saints.” In November, I was on a panel at the Annual Meeting of the American Academy of Religion in San Francisco where I reviewed the three-volume work, The Popes of Egypt, a marvelous historical study of the Coptic Orthodox Church. My article, “Sanctity, Asceticism and the Environment” was published in a Festschrift in honor of the twentieth anniversary of Patriarch Bartholomew’s enthronement as patriarch of Constantinople. Gratefully, I will be on sabbatical during the spring of 2012 working on a book on Byzantine saints. My best wishes to all CrossRoaders.”

FR. STAVROS & OURANIA CHATZIS (CR Staff ’04 & ’05) Fr. Stavros and Presbytera Ourania with their two children, Evangelos Michael and Anna, are now living in Windsor, Ontario, and serving the parish of Holy Cross Greek Orthodox Church. They are very busy with a prospective new building project and simply serving the needs of their Christian Community.

FR. LUKE VERONIS (CR Professor ’06)
Fr. Luke A. Veronis continues as Director for the Missions Institute of Orthodox Christianity (www.MissionsInstitute.org). Through this Institute, he offered The Missiology of Archbishop Anastasios, a summer class and missions practicum to Albania for 13 seminarians from Holy Cross, St. Vladimir’s Seminary, and St. Tikhon’s. The Institute’s goal is to create inspiring, educational programs to enlighten the minds of Orthodox seminarians from around the country to the imperative command of missions and evangelism. Fr. Luke teaches mission classes both at Holy Cross School of Theology and Hellenic College each semester. He also pastors the Saints Constantine and Helen Greek Orthodox Church in Webster, Massachusetts, which has grown from 90 families to 180 over the past seven years.
Good for goodness’ sake?

By Dn. Nick Belcher, Former CrossRoad Director 2006-2008

The theme of our newsletter this year is “finding Christ in the face of our neighbor.” A reader may ask, “what does Christ necessarily have to do with it? Can we not simply love and serve our neighbor just for goodness’ sake?”

Over all the years of hearing the plea to be “good for goodness’ sake” in the song “Santa Claus is Coming to Town,” I never put much thought into those words, because the idea of doing good for the sake of goodness sounded laudable and downright altruistic.

I recently read an interesting lecture titled “Gospel Love and Contemporary Morality,” given years ago by Archbishop Averky, an abbot of the Holy Trinity Monastery in Jordanville, New York, who reposed in 1976. The article has made me reconsider the Christian concept of love and remember why love and service to our neighbor must be centered in our relationship with Jesus Christ.

The Archbishop describes the love Christ commands of us as “a powerful force, all conquering and dominating over our instincts, even over our strongest instinct of self-preservation.” There are two major pitfalls on the way to obtaining that kind of all-encompassing love in attempting to “be good for goodness’ sake.”

Firstly, because the concept itself is too vague to overcome our “inborn egoism,” people tend to fall into a lowest common denominator type of morality that the Archbishop describes as: “I help my neighbor, expecting that later on he will help me, when I am in need. I do no harm to anyone to avoid being harmed in return.”

The second, more insidious pitfall is the doing of good for one’s own vanity. As the Archbishop says, “Good deeds are done in order to achieve glory and respect from others, or to make a good name for oneself and gain a reputation as a benefactor and helper of the needy.” The end result can be sincere but deluded—people “getting teary eyed over their own goodness.”

In order to truly love and serve our neighbor in the humble and radical manner commanded by Christ in the Gospels, we must come to know Him in the life of the Church—repenting of our sins, being healed of our passions, and receiving the grace given through prayer and the receiving of the Holy Mysteries. Only with hearts softened and purified by God’s love can we truly see that very same Christ in the face of our neighbors, allowing us to truly love and serve them.

Dn. Nick is the current Dean of Students at Hellenic College/Holy Cross Greek Orthodox School of Theology in Brookline, Mass.

A message from your CrossRoad ‘mom’

By Stephanie Skedros, OVM/CrossRoad Development Director

As I begin to pen my annual sharing for the alumni newsletter, I start my process with the usual gaze out the window, a search for a Bible reference, and the feverish jotting down of notes and thoughts.

I usually use my block in the newsletter to share my personal experience of being a mother of three daughters trying to parent them in a challenging world. While my initial thoughts strayed me from this approach, I found my way back to my perspective as a mom.

Our theme, finding Christ in the neighbor may return many of you to Stage Three of CrossRoad when you spent time with a person who was homeless or visited an elderly person in a nursing home. That stage of the program focuses on the realization that the road of the Cross only has meaning if one encounters Christ and encounters Christ in their neighbor.

The parable of the Good Samaritan is told in response to the question asked of Jesus “Who is my neighbor”. In the story, none of the three passersby went out looking for their “neighbor”; they just happened upon him.

As a mom, wife, daughter and sister, I often come into contact with my own family members in sort of a “happen upon” manner. With three daughters this usually occurs while sharing a mirror in our bathroom with them while getting ready in the morning.

These times while in rushed and cramped quarters provide unique opportunities for me to listen to and love my children. Many times, I start my day with the regret of not taking more time to answer a question or more importantly listen.

Our daily lives are filled with people we just “happen upon” at home, school, and, even like the Samaritan, while walking down the street. We are constantly provided opportunities to love God with all our heart, soul, strength and mind, and our neighbor as our self.

As CrossRoad alumni who explored your vocation here on campus for those ten days, I now pray that you continue to explore your vocation as you encounter Christ in the face of your sibling, parent, teacher, and the neighbor you have yet to “happen upon.”
As Christians living in the twenty-first century, encountering a variety of people and circumstances, the staff of CrossRoad continually puts great effort and energy into clearly showing us the Christian way of life. Much time has passed since I worked directly with this group, and I feel honored that they have asked me to contribute to this newsletter, which has as its theme: Finding Christ in the Face of the Neighbor.

At first, it should be expected that many images and stories come to mind when we hear such a topic. Perhaps we might not quite remember them entirely, which is common. This might lead us to searching through the pages of our books and notes, or even searching electronically.

Whether we make them public or not, I’m sure we all have our favorite quotes and sayings. As humans, it seems only natural that we deeply cherish extracts from literature, music and film, since they help depict our personalities and understanding of the world. Even on Facebook, the favorite quotations section is placed under our personal philosophy.

And yes, we base these treasured references on our experiences. They make a deep impression on our minds at some point and have the power to radically renew our outlook on life. These become something like our own logical icons and help us respond to difficult circumstances, sometimes even unknowingly. We see truth in them and feel that they accurately portray our beliefs and ideals. Through them we find coherence and meaning in the past, present and future.

Likewise, we should expect to find the same in the lives and writings of saints. This is a natural tendency and they have their own favorite extracts too. This is definitely true for one of our most honored saints, the one we describe as the Chrysostom, literally meaning the Golden Mouth in English. His great power and eloquence as an orator and writer gives us more than enough reason to consult him as we continually seek to discover more logical gold.

St. John Chrysostom is open and direct about the passage he treasures most, one he calls the “sweetest passage”: Matthew 25:31-46. The German professor Rudolf Brändle highlights this “sweetest passage” in Chrysostom’s writings, explaining that throughout Chrysostom’s life, he frequently brought Matthew 25:31-46 to the conscious mind of his listeners.

Let us now direct our attention to the “sweetest passage.” Offhand, I can remember reading a great introduction to the liturgical context of this passage, which is read on Judgment Sunday or Meatfare Sunday, in the late Fr. Alexander Schmemann’s well-known book Great Lent. In this passage of the Gospel, it seems that Christ is talking to His disciples privately, warning them of the judgment to come at the end of the world.

What does Chrysostom have to say about this? Is Christ the King out to punish the bad people? Chrysostom is clear on this point in his homily dedicated to the passage: God is not out to punish anyone! Rather, this is a result of each person’s disposition, more like a particular condition or state of being that each is in, what each person has become.

Also, I recall that another highly educated Christian is in full agreement with Chrysostom on this point. His name is also John, and he too is known for his own golden qualities. No, he is not known as the Golden Mouth, but rather he has been given the distinctive title “Streaming with Gold,” almost as if he is a continuous flow of gold. Born and raised in Damascus as the city was going through a major transition, and being a monk from Mar Saba, we commonly know him as St. John of Damascus or the Damascene.

I learned about the Damascene’s viewpoint from a Greek professor, the late Nikos Matsoukas, who closely examined the writings and thought of this Father of the Church. Matsoukas uses the position of the Damascene and builds upon it, describing heavenly life as friendship, love and communion in relation to both God and our fellow man. In this case, Hell is exactly the opposite—a life without communion, without friendship and love, cut off from both God and our fellow man.
The golden rule to life-giving relationships

By Katherine Katsivalis, CrossRoad 2011

Forming friendly relationships in college is not always easy, especially at universities where diversity is everything. In the face of so much diversity, I have come to realize that there are really only two types of people you come in contact with: there are people with whom forming friendly relationships comes quickly and easily, and then there are people whom you have to warm up to. In both types of people, seeing Christ in the face of the neighbor is not only important, but it is also a key to forming life-giving relationships.

It is easy to see Christ in the face of neighbors with whom you easily get along. You understand that you are blessed to have them in your life, and it is easy to treat them with the same kindness they offer you. When you look into the eyes of these people, you cannot help but see the beauty of their souls. Christ can especially be seen in the face of the neighbor whom you befriend by chance or coincidence.

At CrossRoad, a very wise friend explained to me that coincidences are God’s way of remaining anonymous. When these coincidences occur, it is hard to deny that Christ sends us particular neighbors at specific times in order to help us through our struggles.

These blessings are like a helping hand when we can’t admit we need one, a friendly smile when we are only pretending to have a good day, a compliment when we thought we didn’t need one, and a surprise hug that comes our way. Seeing Christ in the face of the neighbors with whom you easily get along is not hard to do because these people radiate Christ’s kindness and His love.

When there are people who come into our lives with whom we do not necessarily get along, and remembering that these people are also our neighbors in Christ is not always easy. However, remembering that we are all Christ’s children can help us to turn initially rocky relationships into something special. First impressions can be deceiving.

Harsh words are exchanged when people are having bad days. A personal situation can negatively affect a person’s behavior. These things happen.

By understanding that people are just human, we can learn valuable lessons in forgiveness and compassion. When we do that, Christ’s love can shine from even the most surprising neighbors.

Who is my neighbor?

By Jonathan Resmini, CrossRoad 2004 & CrossRoad Staff 2010

“And who is my neighbor?” These are the words spoken by the lawyer in the parable of the Good Samaritan. We may recall that upon concluding the story Christ asks the lawyer, “So which of these three do you think was neighbor to him who fell among the thieves?”

I found myself struck by this question and the response that the lawyer provides. He answers, “He who showed mercy on him” (Luke 10:36-37). It is interesting to note that his response was not the man who suffered at the hands of the thief, but rather the one who showed mercy. To the lawyer, the merciful man, the good Samaritan, would have been someone akin to an untouchable because he was a Samaritan. Thus, the Lord reveals that our neighbor is whoever enters into our midst, even the undesirables.

Who are the undesirables in our lives? Who is it that we have been taught by society to avoid? I had the opportunity over the past few months to observe regularly a twelve-step program for people struggling with drug and alcohol addiction as part of my pastoral ministry training. These people are often stigmatized and placed on the fringes of society as the untouchables, unrelatable, and sometimes the unloved. Yet when we see them through the lens of Christ we realize that they are the very people whom Christ calls us to love.

If we were to take this a step further, who is the Samaritan neighbor in the passage? Many of the Fathers interpret this character to be a type of Christ, coming to mercifully heal the wounds of our souls. Following our original analysis we see that not only are the undesirables—those I encountered at the twelve-step program—our neighbors, but they are Christ. In this passage Christ reveals that he wishes to be called our neighbor.

When I walked into the meeting, I had an innate feeling that there was a division between those in attendance and me. As each person spoke, that division became less apparent. Ultimately, it was revealed for what it was: a construct of my mind. I did not want to admit that there was far less distinction between them and me than I had originally perceived. All of us were neighbors and thus each of us serves as Christ to one another. We are called, therefore, to prove ourselves to be so.
Facing the board

By Nikolia Rallis, CrossRoad 2004

In June 2009, I found myself pulling into a parking lot to confront a ramshackle school building, nearly one hundred years old, and a condemned chapel. I needed a job and they needed a math teacher. My stomach lurched when I realized I had built a Habitat for Humanity house in the same neighborhood. What was I getting myself into?

I knew math, but I wasn’t prepared for the students. Looking at the neighborhood, I expected a certain type of kid: rough, rude, uninterested in school, troublemakers who weren’t taken at the public school. I could write this article about how most of my students weren’t that type at all, but instead, I want to talk about a student who changed the way I perceive my neighbor. I never thought that I would consider my students my neighbors, but I found that unless I did, none of us would make any progress, academically or spiritually.

Tony was a rough-and-tumble kid who hated school, hated math, and hated his classmates (turns out his classmates didn’t think much of him either). The first time I handed out a test, Tony pushed it to the other side of the table and fell asleep. I had no idea what to do, so I took the advice of an experienced teacher: face the board, say the Jesus Prayer, and then deal with the situation. I spent most of my first year facing the board!

Always asking God for strength before dealing with Tony brought me closer to Him. Asking God for strength allowed me to calm down, see God’s image in Tony and try to draw him out of his hard shell. Asking for strength increased my prayer life exponentially: the more I prayed silently in class, the more I wanted to pray in class because it kept me calm.

If you had a recording of me talking to Tony, you never would have guessed he was sixteen. “Tony,” I would say, “your behavior right now is inappropriate because it tells me you are not paying attention. Please pick your head up.” "Tony, I feel disrespected when you listen to your iPod in class. Please put it away.” “Tony, please bring me your assignment book so I can write your mother a note.” Finally, I had a breakthrough with Tony while working on a project about increases in product prices. Not only did Tony turn in his project, but he expressed enthusiasm about the project, saying, “It was cool to see how much prices went up in twenty years.”

After that, Tony did alright in my class. He wasn’t a star student, largely because Tony was angry, which got in the way of his progress. But fighting anger with anger didn’t work. Fighting anger with love and patience was the only thing I could do to get through to him. Tony didn’t fight me anymore. It was a small victory, brought about by trying to see the good in him. Ultimately, Tony failed my class and was dismissed from our school. I won’t see Tony graduate, but I know that God put me on the path beside him for a little while, and I tried to live out my vocation even while “facing the board.”

Elder Porphyrios (+1991) advised teachers, “Be prepared and say everything with love and above all with joy.” In my job, being prepared usually means having lesson plans. Saying things with love and joy means deciding every period of the day to smile at my students, see them as people made in the image and likeness of God, and above all, to remember my “CR verse” from the Gospel of John: “Love one another as I have loved you” (John 15:12).

Every time I cut my own will by keeping in a sarcastic remark, not yelling, or facing the board to say a prayer, my own will is dying. This is hard, but this is also necessary for me to live out my vocation as a teacher.

This means I need to die for my students. Every time I cut my own will by keeping in a sarcastic remark, not yelling, or facing the board to say a prayer, my own will is dying. This is hard, but this is also necessary for me to live out my vocation as a teacher.

In time, I hope to rely on God more and more while I talk to students. I pray that I will be able to see His image in each of them and spend the little time I have with them in a useful way. I want to spend less time facing the board and more time facing my neighbor.

About Down the Road

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