

The Great Lent Giveaway 2013
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Great Lent Giveaway 2013

Wish of a Child

Youth Group Session 2 – Who is My Neighbor? - Christian Almsgiving

Part I – Background – by Fr. Robert Holet Ukrainian Orthodox Church Office of Stewardship Leader Packet

Goal - to make youth aware of the plight of the poor and their suffering, leading to the possibility of the charitable engagement, service in love.

Items Needed: Copies of participant worksheets, whiteboard, copies of Take Home Challenge

Note: This session may be done in one meeting or broken into two meetings. You should allow at least twenty minutes per session.

I. Introduction - Background

Great Lent as a call to prayer, fasting and almsgiving. Often we focus on the first two elements, but it is clear from the teaching of the Church and her practice that almsgiving is also a key element of our process of growing in Christ - our focus for Great Lent.

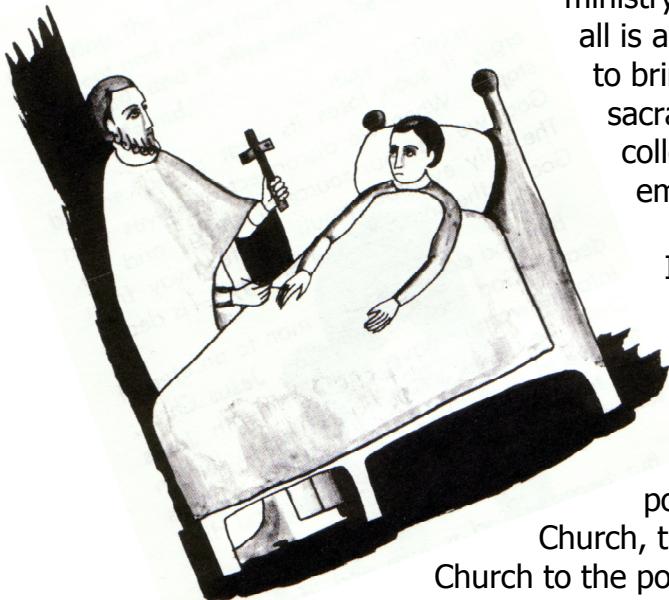
The word alms comes from the Greek word 'eleos' for 'oil', evoking the image of pouring a soothing, healing oil upon an inflamed wound. Every time we pray 'Lord, have mercy', we are using a form of the word, *eleos*, asking for God's mercy.

While it is appropriate to ask for God's mercy on ourselves, Christians are also to be concerned for others, particularly the poor, the downtrodden, the sick, the imprisoned, etc. Traditionally the Church had special ministries for the poor, the widows and for orphans. Our own Ukrainian Orthodox Church has established the Ukrainian orphanage ministry in this spirit.

Hence, our almsgiving is to 'flow' like oil, from our hearts, to others. The story of the Good Samaritan is so helpful to us because the Church traditionally saw Jesus as the one who showed compassion, and stopped by the roadside of broken human life, to lift us out of our misery - including our fallen spiritual state in sin. The



Icon of the Christ Healing the Leper by Archangel Icons



Sacrament of Holy Anointing, which will be celebrated in our Churches on Great and Holy Wednesday is a reminder of this ministry of Christ to us. But this charitable love and service to all is a ministry of the Church as well - so that the Church acts to bring healing to people in many ways - through the sacrament of Anointing/Healing, prayers of intercession, collection of material goods for distribution, counsel and emotional care and support, and in other ways.

If we believe that the Church is to be at the center of Christ's ministry of healing today, then this ministry needs workers! There is no hospital that works to bring healing to others if there are no doctors, nurses, nursing assistants, facility caretakers, laundry workers or admissions people. Every position is important in the hospital. So it is with the Church, that everyone has a role to play in the ministry of the Church to the poor.

Almsgiving, the pouring forth of mercy, happens through the generosity in the heart of each believer and a deep desire to see our neighbors healed. Our mercy is often represented by our financial offerings for the poor, which have not only practical value, but carry with them the spiritual character of mercy (*e/eos*), which brings healing, and love

How do we Identify the Poor and engage with them?

The first thing we must do is identify who the poor person is and then to engage with them. This is not as easy as it might seem because it poses two questions. First, it's easy to 'see' many poor people, suffering around the world, who lack the basic necessities of food, water, shelter, health care, etc. But the sense of the gospel parable of the Good Samaritan is that the opportunity for 'almsgiving' - sharing mercy and love - are often much closer to us than we first realize, and can be ignored by us, especially over time. **At this point ask the participants to recount the parable of the Good Samaritan in their own words.**



The fact that the priest and Levite pass by shows that there are other agendas in life that present themselves to people as more important than stopping to show love or care. But the parable halts this thinking in its tracks, making an example of the priest and Levite, who while they were religious, came up short of what Christ wanted to reveal about the New Covenant that goes beyond a religious legal responsibility of the Jewish law to broad and deep charity toward others, and engagement with others. This is how the *e/eos* of God's mercy is to spread throughout the world, with the Gospel.

Part of the thrust of the First session is to help the youth 'look in the ditches' of life. The struggles of the poor near us are often not visible for many reasons. Ask the youth to provide reasons why we may not "see" the poor around us. Write the responses on a white board or chalk board. No answers are wrong. Below are some answers we are looking for. For those they do not come up with on their own, lead them down the path to discover them:

- We may be self-centered and concerned only about our own agendas, missing the clues that our family members or friends or strangers are in need.

- The person suffering is truly a stranger, and unless their need is obvious we may be unaware of who they are or what their need is.
- They may be suffering from something that we know nothing about - like a disease. A person who struggles with mental illness often is misunderstood by people who have never suffered from deep depression or confusion
- Sometimes we are seemingly 'too close' to a situation. We may see a family in the church day in and day out and just assume nothing is wrong, missing clues to how they may be in need.
- Those who are suffering seem to be 'normal'. A family whose breadwinner has lost his job may be able to hang on for a while, and not lose their house and become homeless, but they are in serious need financially and perhaps emotionally.
- We assume that others are taking care of them. In America we have come to rely on the government or agencies to do much of this work which was historically done by the Church. (This observation is not intended to politicize the question, but simply to unearth what may be our attitude as we assume that the social safety net will take care of people.)
- I may be the only person who becomes aware of the need of someone. It may not be visible or audible to others. Perhaps a friend in school has confided to me that they have a strong desire to harm themselves. This person needs mercy and help! And maybe I am a friend who can bring God's mercy by soliciting the help of others. I am not alone as a helper to those in need.

Almsgiving works not only to bring tangible help to those in need but also serves as a healing remedy for *our* souls, making us more aware and attuned to the needs of others. Often, the more (and more often) we give alms the more we desire to do more and love grows in our hearts. We begin to see the needs of others and respond, not just with a donation, but with part of our hearts. In this way, almsgiving opens the doors of our hearts to heal us from the self-centeredness which is sinful, to receiving the love of Christ within.

Our first call to Almsgiving is to those close to us. We cannot save the world and may be either egotistically proud or foolish to think that our mission is to do so. The focus of this parable is 'Who is my neighbor?' - the person who is close to us, who is nonetheless in need. That person may not be close physically, but close emotionally or spiritually, like a friend that we met in camp who we stay in contact with.