

Fr. David Kirk and His Legacy of Hope

by Julia and Albert Raboteau

We appreciated Fr. John Garvey's article about the late Fr. David Kirk in the Summer Issue of the Orthodox Peace Fellowship's journal "In Communion," and eagerly await Mother Nectaria McLees' interview with Fr. David soon to be published in "Road to Emmaus." Albert and I would like to take this opportunity to share our memories of him with the readers of "Jacob's Well," and to include an update on recent developments at Emmaus, the house of hospitality he founded, forty-three years ago in Harlem.

We got to know Fr. David near the end of his life when his physical health was compromised by advanced kidney disease, but while his spirit was still as strong as iron and as gentle as silk.



Fr. David was canonically received into the Orthodox Church in America in 2004 and attached to Saint Sergius Chapel, Syosset. He fell asleep in the Lord on May 29, 2007.

His obituary is available at: oca.org - "In Memoriam" sidebar.

He was a large burly man whose speaking voice was surprisingly gentle but firm and tempered with a soft Southern accent. His manner of speaking also betrayed his Southern roots. Contrary to our linear style of speech, he spoke by circling around a topic, as if we had all the time in the world. Sitting there with him, keenly aware of his debilitated state, we were amazed at the slow richness of his talk. With great expansiveness he would delineate the actual event or person being discussed. He spoke in stories, delightfully entertaining, but craftily aimed stories. We would wonder "Where is he heading?" and suddenly be brought up short by the aptness of the comment he was making right to the point. For Father David the art of conversation was a form of communion. One drank from his "well."

After his death, Emmaus House staff and friends of Fr. David told story after story, some poignant with grief but others filled with humor. Two consistent themes kept repeating over and over. We would hear that this father had an amazing ability to forgive, to forgive all and to forgive repeatedly even those who stole from him, betrayed him and who were ungrateful to him. He always forgave, and was known to give second and third chances, a wondrous sort of hospitality to the down and out. Also, he had the ability to see in them the beauty and goodness that they often could not see in

themselves. The fruits of these two gifts have taken root in the present residents who continue running Emmaus House without him.

As we walked up the stairs to the third floor to visit him, we would pass yellowing framed photos of his mentors, Gandhi, Abbe Pierre, Martin Luther King, Jr., and Dorothy Day. Her photos often had notes scribbled on them to him. When we got nestled into our seats, he would tell us what a big influence Dorothy had been on his life. It was she who encouraged him to come to New York from Alabama and she who encouraged him to go north again from the Bowery to Harlem where "the poor were." He deliberately bought a plot for himself close to her grave at Holy Resurrection Cemetery on Staten Island. It was fitting and touching that we were able to place a wreath from his grave onto hers a few paces away. He recalled that during his first days at the Catholic Worker House in New York, he simply followed her around, observing closely everything she did from peeling potatoes to welcoming guests. Finally someone observed "Kirk, you don't do any work." He told us "I was determined to model myself after Dorothy."

There is a beautiful Orthodox chapel, dedicated to Christ of the Poor, just as you come into Emmaus House. Fr. David's large black cassock still hangs on a hook on the back of the door, a reminder that this house of hospitality was led by a man of the cloth, a priestly father whose word was imbued with a spiritual dimension to heal and empower his God-given charges. Nowadays, another cassock hangs in that room, used by Father John Garvey when he comes every Thursday to hold a Vespers Service. We all gather in the small space thankful to be knit together in prayer. Fr. John's homilies respectfully and pointedly shed light on and give support to the ongoing struggle of being poor in an increasingly greedy world. Father John's gifts to us and to the house give form to passing on the spirit of his old friend's legacy. As one resident expresses it "God has his finger in this."

As Albert and I spend more time at the house making time to visit with each resident, we see how fatherly Fr. David was to a diverse and occasionally fractious community. Like all good fathers, he wanted his "children" to do well, personally challenging and directing their potential, encouraging them to reach further than they thought they could go and making these goals possible with concrete suggestions. Today, although still without a director, they are adhering to his expectations. For their person-

al growth they continue to hold an early morning community meeting, complete their daily chores, eat supper in common, attend evening education classes, pursue their GEDs, and look for a “place of hope” on weekends. As a community ministry, they maintain a weekly food pantry, provide a traveling kitchen from their van to feed the homeless, and either offer overnight hospitality or arrange referrals for those living on the streets. On a light note, Father David made a special contribution in the area of food. He often hung around the kitchen, wondering what was cooking, offering Southern recipes, and relishing Popeye’s fried chicken (Cajun-style chicken fried in cayenne pepper batter) whenever he could get it. He also watched classic black and white films with the residents. Emmaus House was a Home in every respect

Fr. David frequently spoke about the need to recall the social justice tradition of Orthodoxy, a tradition that he observed in the ancient church fathers’ adamant concern for the poor. For years he had followed the Catholic Church’s practice of the works of mercy and was especially fired up by Dorothy’s lifelong dedication to the poor as well as her commitment to the sanctity of all life. In our talks together during the last days of his life, he would return again and again to his hope that the Orthodox Church would make a similar commitment and that the model of Emmaus House could help Orthodoxy in America to recover its roots in “doing for the least of these.”

A few months ago, Albert and I became co-chairs of the Board of Directors for Emmaus House. This role has developed into a kind of interim co-directorship as well. We work closely with three residents who assume various responsibilities for the house’s day to day management, community outreach and administrative business. They are a valiant trio and help us to help them! More and more we are spending our time listening to individual residents sort through the difficulties of their own lives. Recently, we realized that we need to add “conflict resolution” sessions to our work to more directly address the complexities of living in community. Frequently we wish we could hang a sign from the clouds advertising for a full time director! We pray daily for someone who is inspired by this particular legacy, a person who feels called to bring his or her own gifts to Emmaus House’s communal life and mission to the poor. Meanwhile, it is a great joy to carry on in our limited way. Albert and I are convinced, as Fr. John Garvey puts it, that in our experience with Emmaus, we have been touched by grace.

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Jersey City Parish Celebrates 100 Years

SS Peter and Paul Church of Jersey City, NJ celebrated its 100th anniversary on May 6, 2007 as well as the completion of a five-year 1.2 million dollar restoration of the church exterior. The city of Jersey City presented a resolution during a banquet, which followed honoring the contribution of its pastors and faithful to the city, and decreed that the street where he church is located shall be named, “Saint Alexander Way” in honor of St. Alexander Hotovitsky. Three matching grants were awarded to the parish by the New Jersey Historic Trust and Preservation to assist in the restoration, and was awarded later in spring by the Jersey City Conservancy for an outstanding effort of preservation.

His Beatitude, Metropolitan Herman, celebrated the Hierarchical Divine Liturgy with the parish rector, Archpriest Joseph Lickwar, Archpriest Samuel Kedala, Dean of New Jersey, Archpriest Daniel Hubiak, previous rector of the parish, Archpriest Sergius Kuharsky, Archpriest Daniel Ressetar, Archpriest Vasily Lickwar, Archpriest Daniel Skvir, Priest Justin Paterson, Priest Hermogen Holste, Archdeacon Alexei Klimitchev and Subdeacons Gregory Sulich and Peter Ilchuk. Fathers Patterson and Holste had been attached to the parish as student interns and Fathers Skvir and Ressetar’s fathers had been rectors of the parish. The choir was led by, Alexei V. Shipovalnikov, the parish Director of Music. Father Skvir was the toastmaster at the dinner, which was also attended by Archpriests John Nehrebecki and Arkardy Mironko.

Following the Divine Liturgy, His Beatitude, presented a Grammota to the parish and an icon of St. Herman to Father Joseph, and an icon of St. Herman to Alexei V. Shipovalnikov, Director of Music.

In preparation for the anniversary a fund raising program, “1907 Giving the Past a Future 2007” was launched to restore the church’s interior.

The church located in the historic neighborhood of Paulus Hook has enjoyed a long association with the Jersey City community. The Orthodox congregation in 1907 purchased the church, which was completed as the First Reformed Dutch Church in 1859 on land given in 1830 by the developers, the Jersey Associates. Among the clergy who served the Orthodox parish were: Archpriest Alexander Hotovitzky (Glorified by the Russian Orthodox Church), Archpriest John Adamiak, Archpriest Emilian Skuby, Archpriest Michael Dziama, Archpriest Dimitri Ressetar, Mitred Archpriest John Skvir, and Archpriest Daniel Hubiak. The present pastor, Very Rev. Joseph Lickwar was appointed rector in 1991.

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