

Discerning God's Will in an Urban Setting

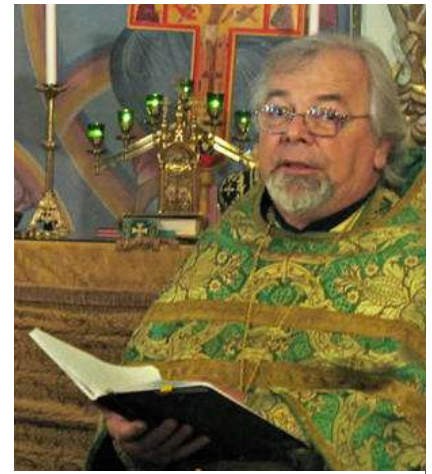
(With no desire to be someplace else)

Remarks by V. Rev. Fr Daniel Rentel at the 2011 Urban Summit

The Imperative

The Gospel is clear in pressing the need to take care of those in need in all kinds of situations.

- One can find in epistles of St. Paul the act of collecting from Christians throughout the Mediterranean to help the Church in Jerusalem.
- Byzantine hospitals under the church's auspices in the 9th Century had a nurse patient ratio of 1 nurse to 8 patients.
- We have St. Herman and the other Russian missionaries absolutely defending natives and caring for children as one of his many calls to live the Gospel. The injunction remains and Christian response endures to our own times.
- An Orthodox nun in Paris during the Second World War, Mother Maria Skobtsova, and others with her cared indiscriminately for all in need, including many Jewish people.
- Mother Theresa is known the world over for reaching out to the poor in Calcutta.



Archpriest Daniel Rentel is the retiring rector of St. Gregory of Nyssa Church, Columbus OH

Orthodoxy, I believe, is moving out of its adolescent ethnic self-absorption to commit to care not only outside Church doors, but increasingly around the globe in direct fashion. SCOBA in the early 90's established the IOCC to extend the church's charitable undertakings to many countries, including those with only minor Orthodox presences. We can now add FOCUS to the list --this Orthodox group whose mission is to help care for needy, hungry and poor. Our outreach program here in Columbus received \$1,000 from them to assist us in our ministry.

But this talk and this Summit is about *micro*, not *macro* charity. How do we carry it out here, wherever "here" is? What are the early prompts that germinate a recognition that we are called to extend ourselves for others? For me, it started when I was around 10.

Christmas Eve

I remember that special Holy Supper we had on Christmas Eve. *(I won't mention specific foods here, but if you'd like my recipe for zaprashka, see me at the break.)*

For me, the genuine excitement had to do with:

- Candles in the windows of every room in the house, just as evening was settling in.
- Waiting for the first star before we ate.
- Straw on the floor.
- Feeding the animals first.
- The mixed aromas of some really unusual dishes which nevertheless were enticing, perhaps because so exotic.

But what I recall the most is that we set *an extra place* at the dinner table, lest any stranger pass by that evening. Although we were very poor ourselves, nonetheless he would be welcomed as a special guest. You know the symbolism: the Christ Child in disguise.

Waiting for a stranger to knock at the door. To this day it leaves a very strong impression with me.

This was way back in Altoona, Pa., a member of SS. Peter & Paul Russian Orthodox Greek Catholic Church of North and South America that gave me-- if not an intellectual understanding of the Faith -- a cultural and behavioral foundation.

First Parish

I was ordained in September of 1962 for [St. John the Baptist Church in Phillipsburg, Pa.](#), a small church out in the boonies. A related memory emerges.

One year on Christmas Day, just after Liturgy there was a knock at the door. A stranger, an itinerant rider of the rails, what we used to call a hobo asked for food and anything else we had. We brought him in, fed him Christmas food, gave him \$5.00 – no small sum at the time. He left us to hop another freight train to go someplace else. Never saw him again. Have no idea really of who he was—was this Christ in disguise? I've often thought about him. But I can tell you that this man was the giver on that day. His gift to me and to my wife far exceeded anything we did that day for him.

The memory held.

Our lives are destined by Creation to reach out and to serve with opportunity to do so

Charity essentially is more about receiving than giving. So good for the soul

Not a platitude, for sure, not a platitude



St John the Baptist Church; Phillipsburg PA

Indiana PA

I worked at a mission in Indiana, Pa. It failed as a church, but it did open up some new opportunities to serve. I was able to work with a wonderful group of students there at Indiana University of Pennsylvania. This chapter of the OCF was very active and was supported by a capable and willing Faculty Advisor and physics professor from Johnstown, with whom I remain in contact to this day. Our OCF meetings got up to 25 students. But here a curious thing happened. There was nearby a halfway house for mentally ill people who were being released from state mental hospitals at the time. Their needs were immense. This halfway house was organized and operated by a Ukrainian Orthodox Priest who was very, very successful in this unlikely undertaking. This was, after all, a population much in need but short on resources. Fr. George started on a shoestring and somehow made it work. Everyone had discouraged him from this undertaking: a difficult population with which to work, lack of funding, stress, etc. But Fr. George did not accept the notion that it couldn't be done. He loved what he was doing. We were able to harness OCF student support and involvement with the Halfway House to a considerable degree.



Eastern Orthodox Foundation; Fr George Hnatko at Cherry Hill Chapel

We often took students out to socialize. One fellow from Pittsburgh took a guitar and we would sing, and the former patients would sing too. Scary for both groups in the beginning. One time we were asked by Fr. George to bring a little cheer to the residents before Christmas. Students did. We strung beads of cranberries and popcorn for the tree. Snacks, real conversations, carol singing and a tree trim.

I'll leave it to you to decide as to who it was that got the greater gift.

Incidentally, this Halfway House (referred to as the [Eastern Orthodox Foundation](#)) remains in business, with Fr. George still at the helm.¹

Service, ministry, success at a local level.

Be open. We have to overcome our fears and apprehensions and come out of our comfort zone.

Never too young to begin.

¹ After googling Eastern Orthodox Foundation it appears the shelter closed in 2011. JK

Cincinnati OH

In Cincinnati, at Christ the Savior/Holy Spirit Church just as we were organizing, one of our first acts was to put a charity basket on the center table. "Not for our use – never." It would go to persons, places, and institutions in need. We were developing an outward direction. This was born of some necessity, as the first building we used was in a neighborhood in need.

This church was made up of folks of Bulgarian descent as well as regular OCA types, plus

many converts. From those good Bulgarians I learned a great deal about hospitality and generosity.

But I believed at that point in my ministry that a problem that plagued Orthodoxy was her insular attitudes. Preservationism was something I also learned about there. People clinging so strongly to some ethnic beliefs and customs and it ultimately drives them away from Orthodox praxis. There were hundreds of Bulgarian/Macedonian families in the area, but precious few attended church services. I heard that their picnics were hugely successful, however. I came to see these ethnic churches as colonial outposts for mother churches far away. This complicates the ability of believers here to identify with the American needs and promise.



A dormant unfinished church Bulgarian Orthodox church building became the first home of the mission in Cincinnati.



Despite makeshift surroundings Cincinnati mission hosts MAXIM Patriarch of Bulgaria. Young(er) Fr. D. Rentel looks on at left. Future SVOTS professor Fr. A Rentel is altar boy at lower right.

Columbus OH

We were given permission in 1983 to start a mission in Columbus near Ohio State University by the late and much loved Bishop BORIS.

From the beginning, it was to be a town and gown situation. Because of our campus affiliation and focus, we were given latitude in the development of parish administration. The way our Parish Council evolved and became structured over time allowed for areas of emphasis not particularly common in ordinary parish environments. And in turn our location allowed us to address the particular needs of our neighbors. If we were to serve OSU students we needed to be accessible to them and thus, be in this general area.

The idea of the charity basket remains intact. Funds from this source are used for a variety of charitable needs within and without the parish. In addition, about 7% of our monthly income is used for contributions to worthy causes locally, nationally and internationally. We have helped Orthodox people in Russia during Communist years, the Indonesian Orthodox church, Project Mexico, children in Ethiopia, an orphanage in the Republic of Georgia, a Bishop in Lebanon, and many who needed money for rent, medications, eye glasses and other health needs.



Present site of St Gregory of Nyssa Orthodox Church

But from our earliest years, our first services, we found poor people waiting outside for handouts, not in great numbers but enough to tax our modest resources. And the numbers were consistent. We first offered cash, then grocery store certificates.

There were times I couldn't get from the Church to the annex for coffee after services because of people asking for aid. Again, the numbers were not great but these folks were persistent.

I tried using deacons. Costs for food certificates were becoming prohibitive and brought no change in behaviors. Sometimes we were scammed. Once or twice someone took money from the charity basket itself.

In the meantime, the parish was growing. We continued to serve town & gown. Many people passed through our doors: guests in town to visit kids in college, the totally awesome experience of an OSU Home game, the Ohio State Fair, attendees at conferences. Our parishioners were both cradle Orthodox and many converts, middle class and upward, immigrants, students both graduate and undergrads. An interesting mix.

Imagine our coffee hour: Faculty members, physicians, business people, college students, and street people, mixed races. And not only did our neighbors appeal to us for help; some also were curious about our services. They actually attended. This was not appealing to some. They were uncomfortable. We had to learn and move above fear rather early on to say "Don't touch the doughnuts. Just tell me what you want."

Big step in process of acclimating and acceptance of on another.

Again, a lot has to do with overcoming fear and some middle class perceptions.

One Sunday -- famous in my mind -- call it the Sandwich Revelation -- Charles Robbins, whom many of you have heard or read articles he has written, offered to make sandwiches plus fruit or something

healthier for people who had real nutrition needs. It was the birth of the Saturday lunch program. It really started very simply: Guests were receiving nutritional food.

Charles took on a ministry. Just one person. More eventually joined him.

We took on parishioner volunteers to cook healthy 'dinner lunches'. This grew and grew. I think we now have 14 sets of cooks/receptionist/pantry clerks

. . . you will be samplers . . .



Charles Robbins

Sit down with guests. >Integration

They are guests, human beings, eager to be treated as such.

And by the way, our neighbors, our guests, are as varied a lot as we are. Some have had difficult early experiences in their lives from which they never recovered. Some are homeless; others live nearby in apartments. Some are mentally ill. Some have addiction issues. Some of the women have no support in caring for their children.

Most have little or no education. Many have chronic health problems. Some are friendly and eager and need a helping hand to get back on track. Others have longer term needs. Some will not be helped in terms of overcoming their problems, but that doesn't mean that their lives have no worth or value.

And how have we managed to overcome our fears? My wife was robbed at gunpoint on her way inside the building.



Parish's "Upper Room", above the church was completed with significant help from neighborhood persons. Parish ministries offer some job skill training for neighbors.

The program would not, will not, succeed without bonds being established.

A decision was made to keep this a parish outreach. We firmly believe that the personal involvement in our Outreach Program is fundamental to the life of the community. As pastor, I've insisted that we keep things at a parochial level of management.

This integration has evolved in ways we could not have imagined. We were extending a helping hand. But the darnedest thing happened. Soon our neighborhood friends were giving helping hands to us. By their desire and respect given them, 80% of the grunt work done in replacing the floor in this Upper Room has been done by them.

Weekly, tasks are completed. Our neighbors helped us remodel our Educational Building. They do a lot to maintain our plants and shrubs. They join us at Coffee Hour on Sunday and I think no one in the parish gives it much thought at all.

We have had to set limits at times. We have often been disappointed.

People have shown up drunk. We've had to call the police. People have had to be removed from services. Some cannot help badgering individuals for money, even though it is well advertised that they should not do so. People have stolen from the Charities Basket... the list is a long one, but not long enough for us to hold back. There is a learning curve here. We've had to adjust, change, adapt.



Neighbors relax after Saturday lunch.

We have been urged, sometimes with great urgency, to give up our urban setting and go elsewhere-- get out to the suburbs. We have had more than a few families who left because they disagreed with our vision. This has been very painful. But the result of their leaving has in part been to solidify our commitment and sense of purpose to the neighborhood where we find ourselves. To move from this beautiful and rewarding space has become unthinkable. We believe humbly that **God has placed us here, baptized the building, and provided us with opportunity to be his ministers.**

I never use the word *volunteer* here. I suggest there is a ministry to be filled. None outranks the other. I think this to be a formidable, sometimes provocative norm.

The wonderful epistle this past Sunday sets the framework for all the people of God. If called, serve, be trustworthy, etc.

Sometimes I've been a priest-functionary, a priest-student, priest-teacher, priest- at-a-distance, always a priest-learner, a priest-with physical limitations, forced me (a gift from God) to respect the abilities of the royal priesthood. I couldn't be all things to all people and I've learned that I should not have had such a thought in my mind. That would not be community.

Postscript

Our religious education program teaches and does works of charity. Every year during Christmas fast . . .

Lenten Project – goes world wide, adopt a country, find a need, spend a great period of time during the Fast to raise money, come to know the peoples of a foreign land, and attempt to find some way to connect with them . . .

Wherever you are there are people at your doorstep literally and figuratively waiting to see Christ alive and you, through you and your community of believers.

Thank you.