

***"Behold, how good and pleasant it is
for brothers to dwell together in unity!"
Psalm 133:1***

Beginning at the turn of the third Christian millennium in September, 2000, twenty-five parishioners from St. Paul's Greek Orthodox Church and St. John Neumann Roman Catholic Church in Irvine, CA have gathered together once each month for a Christian book club that provides an opportunity to pray and study together, to explore our common roots in the first thousand years of Christian history, and engage in ecumenical dialogue at a grassroots level.

Led by Mr. Eugene O' Toole, the recently retired director of adult ministry from St. John Neumann's, and Father Steven Tsihchlis, the pastor of St. Paul's, these meetings have been a structured attempt to explore a common path for Roman Catholic and Orthodox Christians in living more prayerful, Christ-centered and Spirit-filled lives. Each meeting begins with a half hour of prayer, as Roman Catholic and Orthodox Christians pray the Psalms and read the Scriptures together while remembering the saints of the first millennium that are shared by both communities. Over the years, the group has included people from many different backgrounds: lay leaders from both traditions; former Roman Catholic religious; converts to Orthodoxy from evangelicalism and Pentecostalism; Catholic parochial school teachers; college professors; both Latin and Eastern Rite Catholics; and seekers exploring the wisdom of the ancient Christian faith.

"Roman Catholic and Orthodox Christians have spoken to each other more in the past 50 years, since Vatican II, than in the previous 500," Mr. O' Toole commented. "With the symbolic gesture of lifting the mutual excommunications of 1054 by Pope Paul VI and Patriarch Athenagoras on December 7, 1965, a new era of dialogue began that has been carried forward by Pope John Paul II and Patriarch Demetrios, as well as by Patriarch Bartholomew and Pope Benedict XVI."

Over the past decade more than 60 books have been read by participants in this program. Among them have been modern Roman Catholic writers on the spiritual life like Thomas Merton, Henri Nouwen, Thomas Keating, Basil Pennington, Paula Huston and James Martin, SJ; and contemporary Orthodox writers like Metropolitan Anthony Bloom, Metropolitan Kallistos Ware, Thomas Hopko, Olivier Clement, Jim Forest and Kyriakos Markides.

"We have read books by Pope John Paul II and Pope Benedict XVI as well as by Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew. We have read about St. Maria Skobtsova of Paris and St. Silouan of Mount Athos; St. Edith Stein and Mother Teresa of Calcutta. We have read *The Imitation of Christ* by Thomas a' Kempis and *The Life of St. Francis* by St. Bonaventure; the anonymously written *Way of a Pilgrim* and *The Life of St. Anthony the Great* by St. Athanasios of Alexandria. We've read St. Augustine of Hippo and St. John Chrysostom," said Father Tsihchlis.

Duncan Simcoe, a member of St. Paul's and a professor at California Baptist University in Riverside, CA, added: "It's very humbling to be able to benefit from such a strong and vibrant river of collective wisdom and insight. Having read these books I now feel that I have so many friends who have reached across history and eternity to offer me the most profound kinds of aid in my journey as an Orthodox Christian. This kind of dialogue with our Catholic brothers and sisters is very important for moving beyond an us vs. them way of thinking."

This has borne fruit in a number of ways: *first*, the two parishes began doing ministry and outreach together. The people of St. Paul's have gotten involved in the work of Isaiah House, a Catholic Worker house providing shelter for the homeless in Santa Ana, and hosted a luncheon to provide scholarships to Catholic elementary schools for impoverished children; the people of St. John Neumann have helped raise funds for the building of an Orthodox Church in the Tanzanian village of Kobunshwi by St. Paul's and also for St. Innocent's Orphanage, an Orthodox ministry for homeless boys outside Tijuana, Mexico.

Second, participants have come to recognize the common roots that both traditions have in the first millennium. Jim Cordes, who is a longtime participant in the program and a member of St. John Neumann, said, "I didn't realize how similar we are in our practice of Christianity. I've come to realize that in so many ways we are more similar to one another than we are different." And Dorothea Love, a member of St. Paul's, added "I've had a deep respect for the Roman Catholic faith all my life and as a result of this class my respect and love have only increased. Many of us have been together now for ten years, since the beginning of our study, and we share the love of Christ as brothers and sisters, truly respecting and caring for one another. "

"A quote from one of our recent books comes to mind," Mr. Simcoe recalled: "An elder said: I have fought for twenty years to see all human beings as only one."

Third, in looking more deeply at one another's histories, Roman Catholics have learned of the many challenges that Orthodox Christians have faced practicing their faith in Muslim countries and the terrible persecution of the Church during most of the 20th century under Communism; and Orthodox Christians have learned more about the history of Roman Catholicism and the effects of the 16th century Protestant Reformation on Roman Catholic life, history and thought, as well as the history of western Europe and America.

In addition, the books that have been read have "given me a heightened awareness of how shallow my prayer life was and that I needed to make my relationship with Christ a deeper one," said Ms. Love. "It's changed the way I pray and I now spend greater time in study and reading of the Scriptures."

Doris Wintrobe, a recently retired Catholic high school teacher, summed it all up: "We've all been enriched by our time together. These years of dialogue have been a true gift."