

St. Paul's Serving the Homeless at St. Anselm's Episcopal Church



This is part of our work crew in the kitchen before the meal.

*From left to right: **Elvira Opran** (coordinator and crew leader), unknown friend of Elvira, **Catherine Hubbard** (Elvira's granddaughter), **Ionela Hubbard** (Elvira's daughter), **Liana Risnoveanu**, **Jennifer Hampson**, & **Claire Pearson**.*

On Tuesday, November 23, 2010, about a dozen volunteers from St. Paul's Greek Orthodox Church of Irvine gathered at St. Anselm's Episcopal Church in Garden Grove to feed homeless people from the surrounding area. I had done this activity about 18 months before with St. Barnabas' Orthodox Church, but this experience was different because my 13-year-old daughter, Claire, came at my request to complete a service hour requirement for Honor Society. Our chief organizer and crew leader was a 74-year-old lady from St. Paul's, Elvira Opran, who, since March 2010, has assembled volunteers for this project of feeding the homeless one day each month. Ms. Opran is a soft-spoken, well-educated Romanian woman who fled Romania and its Communist regime with her daughter, Ionela, many years ago. She once told my mother that she had been a refugee herself, so she knew what it was like to be hungry. Thus, she felt called to share with those in need as others had done for her in the past.

My daughter and I arrived around 12:30 PM for a 1:30 PM dinner. A trusted mutual friend, Margaret, and I unloaded food and paper goods from Ms. Opran's car. Together with two other people, Claire and I made about 80 place settings at assorted tables in the parish center. Others poured juice, milk and prepared



coffee at a table for drinks. A couple of people created a dessert table of apple strudel, assorted cookies and blueberry muffins. Ms. Opran had cooked a 16-pound turkey, and sliced two trays of ham at her home which we warmed in the parish

kitchen oven. She boned the turkey, while her daughter and another woman prepared a wash basin of instant mashed potatoes with cubes of butter. Claire went on to help in the kitchen preparing salad and individual plates of meals.

Around 1 PM, Ms. Opran called all the volunteers in to the kitchen to kiss the icon of the Theotokos and Christ and recite the Lord's Prayer. After this she reminded us gently that everyone coming today was our guest, as if they were in our own home, and we should treat them accordingly. She did not like to be referred to as our "leader" or the person "in charge." She wanted us to think of ourselves as equals. I wanted her to know how much I respected her and that I had no problem acknowledging her leadership when I told her, "But Elvira, someone has to be in charge -- and that is definitely okay." She smiled.

At about 1:40 PM, we let our guests into the building. On this day, only 15 adults come to the dinner we prepared. We had hoped for more, but since this was not the usual day of the week for this meal service, many homeless people did not know about it and did not attend. Those who did come were kind and appreciative. Everyone staked out their own spot at a table, some together, some separately, and then went to the pass through window to sign in and receive a meal. Anyone who wanted second helpings could go to the same window to get another plate, but they had to sign in again. There was a man who brought his two pet Chihuahuas in a pet carrier, who also stayed at the end to help clean up. There was an elderly woman who let me help her carry her food to the table because she had knee trouble. One man didn't want dessert served to him until he finished his meal -- an attitude most mothers of small children would have sincerely appreciated. Some guests were dirty and smelled bad, but most were clean and neat. Apart from the abundance of overfilled bags they carried, it was not immediately obvious that these people were homeless.

The meal service ended just after 2:15 PM. We had quite a bit a food left, and food laws prohibit giving the leftovers to those who come to eat, so we packaged everything for Ms. Opran to deliver to Grandma's House of Hope in Anaheim where it was well received by the ladies who live there.

This opportunity to feed the homeless gave me the same sense of satisfaction I had previously experienced when I performed this service over a year ago. Then, as now, I believed I had done something good, something sanctified. I felt I was a representative for those of my family who were unable to attend: my husband who has to work every day, and my son who is simply too young to do this work right now. I also knew that what I had done was so little, so insignificant, that I would have to spend the rest of my life doing this work as often as I possibly could to make any kind of difference, if at all. This was not a feeling of defeat, but one of calling. While I have no desire to be a social worker, I would like to be able

to connect with all people much better than I do, and this experience suits that purpose. But my daughter's response was the most gratifying for me. She had come to this event ready to help, but frightened that she would be verbally or physically assaulted by a mentally ill homeless person. Within an hour of arrival, she was relieved and happy to find that she not only enjoyed the work but told me cheerfully, "I want to do this again." We plan to return to assist Ms. Opran and her team in 2011.

As a parent I believe the purpose of a religious education is to provide my child with knowledge of an ethical system for living, and a sense of humility through increased awareness of our tiny, unique existence in God's great and vast creation. Almost two millennia ago, Pliny the Elder said, "Experience is the most efficient teacher in all things." The experience of community service, of finding a need and fulfilling it while overcoming one's own fears and prejudices, will certainly enhance the objectives of the best religious upbringing. Perhaps we will produce more children poised with the self-discipline and sensitivity to create a better future for all.

Lydia Pearson

December 6, 2010

"I was hungry and you fed me.

I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink."

- Matthew 25:35

Since March 2010, Evira Opran and her group from St. Paul's Greek Orthodox Church of Irvine and St. Mary's Romanian Church of Anaheim have served over 700 meals to the homeless through St. Anselm's Episcopal Church in Garden Grove. Anyone who would like to assist Ms. Opran and her team in their ministry should contact her at (714) 828-0650. Any donations of food or money are greatly needed and appreciated at this time.