

Going Forth in Peace

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We discover that He is there in "Gehenna" as He is at the Holy Table. We come to see that even in the moments of overwhelming human sadness He is there, and we must be where He is. When I have met Him there I take a deep breath, cross myself, and say, "It is good to be here. Glory to God Who has become incarnate for the life of the world and its salvation!"

Very Rev. Fr. Jon-Stephen Hedges

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PRIEST *to* PRIEST

A QUARTERLY PUBLICATION FOR ORTHODOX CLERGY

Winter 2020

Going Forth in Peace *Encountering Christ amid Chaos*

Very Rev. Fr. Jon-Stephen Hedges

On our journey to the holy Orthodox Church, we in Santa Barbara were gifted to have the Archimandrite Lazarus Moore (of blessed memory) as a guest in our community. His eyes flashed with joy when he said one day, "We Christians are amphibians... we live between two kingdoms... we go to the Kingdom of Heaven in the Divine Liturgy and then we are commanded to 'go forth in peace' back to the world, carrying the scent of heaven still on us. Especially at this holy season, dare we to see that this path is in the similitude of the Incarnation?" Dare we to see our work in the world as incarnational?

At times I have found myself at the Altar and, like the Disciples on Mt. Tabor, wanted to stay there. Yet in the decades since my friend Fr. Lazarus taught me, I have often asked myself, "What is it we bring when we are sent forth?"

We of the Orthodox Frontline, part of IOCC's US disaster response network, have often been deployed from our home parishes to places where tornados, hurricanes, floods, fires, and human-caused violence have devastated communities: like New Orleans, Moore, Galveston, Prescott, Paradise, Las Vegas. At times it has felt like a journey to Gehenna, to a place of overwhelming sadness. What is it we bring when we go?

While we may sometimes bring the provision of practical things to help in the moment (clean-up and hygiene kits and such), often all we can do is to stand in solidarity with the sufferer. Yet as we listen to them, as we hear their lament in holy silence, we begin to know that, in a mystery, the Lord is there with us to touch and bring grace to that which He created.

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Fr. Jon with New Orleans Chief of Police in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina. IOCC Frontliners offer spiritual and emotional care as communities confront disasters. Photo: Kelley Benham/St. Petersburg Times.



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