

Emmaus House and Orthodoxy: Living with the Poor

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In 1963, when Patriarch Maximos ordained Father David Kirk in the Melkite Church of Saint Anne in Jerusalem, he said “You are ordained for the Church of God,” and he added the words, “for the poor, and for the unity of Christians.” These words laid the cornerstone for what was to become Father David’s lifelong ministry as an Orthodox priest, of working side by side with the poor in Harlem, until he died in May of 2007. His legacy lives on through the Emmaus House, a house of hospitality for the poor. In conversations with my husband Albert and I during the last two years of his life, Father David shared the hope that his work would continue to grow and develop after his death and that Orthodox Christians would be inspired to take on this kind of ministry in their service to God.

I want to thank The Sophia Institute for inviting me to share a brief history of Father David’s life and work in order to explore ways for Orthodox Christians to take up his challenge to use Emmaus House as a vehicle for helping others. As a youth, Father David was sensitized to racism when he spent two weeks as a high school news reporter collecting data in an all black high school in Alabama. Radicalized by the vast inequities that he witnessed, he wrote William Faulkner and their correspondence helped contain his turbulent thoughts that would have been too dangerous to express openly in the Deep South. He hitchhiked to Birmingham just before the first bus boycott in Montgomery that publicly launched the Civil Rights Movement. He gave up his teaching post, his car and his possessions when Dorothy Day beckoned him to come north to experience her work at the Catholic Worker where he lived while he earned a Master’s degree at Columbia University in Social Thought.

Called to the priesthood, he went to Rome to attend Beda College, and was ordained as a Melkite Catholic priest three years later in Jerusalem. Then, Father David returned to Birmingham, Alabama to fulfill a pastoral internship under Bishop Joseph Raya, a brilliant mentor of courage and wisdom. Father David preached at the 16th street Baptist Church one week before the Ku Klux Klan bombed this African-American church, killing four teen-aged girls. Again Dorothy directed Father David north urging him to go to Harlem in order to define his own way of serving the homeless. In Harlem, he dedicated himself to a ministry called Emmaus House; this ministry consumed him for the rest of his life.

Father David discovered that the homeless youth in the streets of Harlem offered a very different challenge than that posed by the older men and women on the Bowery who were being served by the Catholic Worker. He developed a ministry to empower these youth, who were often addicted, by getting them to take ownership of their lives. In order to live in the Emmaus House community, the youth had to be drug free, work on a new life, get into a discipline, improve their education and pursue a “place of hope” either religious or cultural in nature. Father David challenged their life attitudes, encouraged new skills and deepened their spiritual self worth. All the members within the community made decisions regarding life in the Emmaus House.

In the seventies and eighties, Emmaus House’s major projects included two Community Guesthouses (for overnight guests), a “Ragpickers,” a Thrift Shop, a Traveling Kitchen to feed the poor out on the street, Emmaus Inns to house those with AIDS, Stand-Up Women’s Project for crack addicted women, and a Legal Aid Service that became the Urban Justice Center and Emmaus/Jericho where construction skills were taught. Famous contributors, such as Odetta, Bette Midler, Martin Sheen and Mario Van Peebles gave generously to the Emmaus House. Only once were government funds taken and that contract was broken two months later because it proved counterproductive to the Emmaus House vision. Individual donors and foundation grants supported this thriving community as well. At this time, Emmaus House

was something like an underground version of Saint Basil's "City of Hospitality." During lean times, they adopted the "ragpicker" mentality of begging and doing without, a phrase derived from Abbe Pierre of Emmaus International. Father David's weekly stipend was twenty-four dollars, the same as that of the men and women he lived with.

In the mid-nineties, Father David's health declined and he had to cut back on the scope of his ministry. He sold the hotel-sized building in East Harlem and moved into the brownstone in West Harlem taking a dozen or so residents with him. The work of Emmaus House continued but now the residents, in addition to providing services to the poor, were ministering to him as well, helping him up and down the stairs for his dialysis treatment and to the evening family meals. Many of these same residents kept the ministry going with some supervision for more than two years after he passed in May of 2007. But, both due to a lack of funds and lack of a live-in, full time director, Emmaus House, as envisioned and engendered by Father David, closed its doors June of 2009. This was very painful to the residents, especially since they had bonded together as family. Many of them still stay in touch with each other. One of the members of Emmaus House transitioned into a job at another Christ centered ministry so he could continue to serve the poor.

After a summer of prayer and reflection, Emmaus House reopened its doors on October 29, 2009 with a traveling soup run. When our white van pulled up to a curb near Penn Station, it was recognized at once and subsequently deluged with homeless people. Serving that night was our dedicated and talented cook, an Orthodox priest and one of his altar servers, and a house director. We, in turn, were so happy to see them that we gave out double servings of the hot chicken soup and didn't have enough for all four locations on our run! Heart to heart talks, prayers and clothing distribution followed. It marked a modest beginning and a reunion that filled us with joy and hope. During these four past months of serving, we have been alarmed by the homeless centers that are being closed down in Manhattan, especially since homelessness is sharply increasing in our country. The need for works of mercy has become a mandate.

On the day before he passed, Father David had these words to say to the interviewer from the publication *The Road to Emmaus*, “What I always wanted was a core of deeply religious and committed people, committed to the poor, committed to God, committed to community life. Individuals came, but that solid core never materialized,” and then he added, “To fulfill something like this, you need to have a firmly Orthodox Christian group, with a total life commitment, that believes these things can be done without money. You have to totally put your life into God’s hands. Saint Isaac of Nineveh, who has a very clear view of how to live with the poor, says that to really be of help, your own lifestyle can’t be too distant from theirs. It has to be in solidarity with them.”

And these words bring us to the present moment, to you and to me in today’s world as we wrestle with the question of how live out the teachings in twenty-fifth chapter of the Gospel according to Matthew. Are we open to consider his challenge and to receive the vision of his legacy and the gift of his house? The need to help the “material poor” is greater than ever. The need to have a place to address our spiritual poverty is great as well, especially for those of us who have the noose of materialist consumerism hanging around our necks. As the Emmaus House resurrects itself, the following things will form the cornerstone of its ministry. First, the Emmaus House wants to revitalize a small, intentional Christian community to live in the House as a community that prays together and serves the poor within our doors. Secondly, the Emmaus House wants to continue to expand outreach services to the poor, both in the Harlem neighborhood and in their night run. Thirdly, the Emmaus House plans to function as a learning lab for others in the Orthodox community through hosting youth, seminarians, clergy, volunteers, children and lay folk to engage in our ministry. Fourthly, the Emmaus House wants to be open to engaging folks in other religious walks of life. Furthermore, the Emmaus House wants to develop a support network of donors, volunteers and affiliated agencies. Lastly, the Emmaus House aims to fill the “Christ the Homeless” Chapel with prayer services and, if God allows, a priest to serve Divine Liturgy and offer pastoral care. We invite you all to be part of this family ministry.

Call us, pray with us, care with us, and serve with us. Join us in making Emmaus House hospitality a way of life. In serving the poor, we also are served, enabling us to find our spiritual commonality.

Emmaus House can be contacted in the person of its new Director, at Juliademaree@gmail.com