

The Vicariate Clergy-Laity Assembly, 7 June 2008

Edited from an article by Graham Whitaker first published on the Vicariate website

www.exarchate-uk.org/Activities/Assembly

The assemblies are held twice a year, and currently take place in London. Inevitably at such meetings there are formalities that have to be observed both in the conduct of the meeting – to establish that it is properly quorate, for example – and in the framing of the agenda.

The report given by Bishop Basil forms a major part of the proceedings. He drew attention to four main matters. The first of these was the work being done by the Panel on Ordination. The second matter raised by Bishop Basil was the relationship with the Archdiocese. The third matter was the recent Conference, and Bishop Basil invited Barbara Bates to review this. She felt that there had been a welcome emphasis on practicality in some of the workshops and discussions. The development of the children's programme was widely welcomed and was now a vital adjunct to the summer camp. The final matter was the Chapel of St Seraphim at Walsingham. Bishop Basil reviewed the history that had led to a trust being formed to purchase and preserve it as an Orthodox presence in an important centre of pilgrimage. The work of the trust was supported by the local community but required further funding; the best form of support was however to go there and visit St Seraphim's.

The finances of the Vicariate are of vital importance at this stage in its existence. Seraphim Alton Honeywell was able to report that the appeal for monthly standing orders to be opened had been successful, to the extent that a regular income was now being received and that this would be boosted now that the Vicariate had been registered as a charity, and could therefore claim Gift Aid. More was needed however to achieve a working income that would fully meet running costs, and he urged members to give if they had not already done so, or to consider increasing their initial donations. A valuable feature of the Assembly is a themed discussion, since it gives both a focus to the meeting and a chance to speakers whose voices might otherwise not be heard to develop the theme in question. On this occasion Alexei Skorobogatov and Giles Milton spoke on what it means to be Orthodox in Britain today. Alexei drew on his experience of 'private' Orthodox practice under the Soviet Union. Giles talked about his experience of small communities faced with less frequent priestly visits.

The lunch-break provides a welcome opportunity to meet with friends from other parishes and communities and to learn about their current experiences or problems, or just to relax in the middle of what can be a lengthy meeting. We were also joined after the break by Father Leonid Kishkovsky, Moderator of the Religions for Peace network who was in London for a meeting at Lambeth Palace.



Vicariate Conference



**"For the Life of the World: Communion and Community",
All Saints Pastoral Centre, London Colney, St Albans May 23-26 2008.**

by Briony Williams

The Annual Conference of the Vicariate took place over the May Bank Holiday weekend, at a Roman Catholic Pastoral Centre near St Albans, Hertfordshire. The Community of Saint Nicholas was well represented: as well as Father Alexander and Matuska Julie, several members of the community also attended. The conference was led by Bishop Basil, and nearly all the clergy of the Vicariate were able to attend.

The theme of the conference was "For the Life of the World: Communion and Community". The focus on building ourselves up into a unified community followed on very well from the conference of 2007 (the first residential conference of the new Vicariate), where those attending had been tremendously encouraged by the sense of sharing, mutual strengthening and new beginnings.

In keeping with the theme of building up community, each parish and eucharistic community had been asked to provide pictures and posters about themselves for an informal exhibition in the cloisters. It was heartening to learn more in this way about the many congregations in the Vicariate that we normally see so little of.



The Pastoral Centre, originally an Anglican convent, had the advantage over last year's venue that it was more suitable for children's activities, and indeed a full children's programme was included this year. This made it possible for more young families to attend, and their presence was very welcome. There was a good mix of age groups, and representatives from all over the country, with a total of nearly two hundred people attending. We were even joined by friends from overseas, most notably Archbishop Gabriel of Comana,

who attended the entire conference and gave a welcoming address at the beginning.

The main building was ranged around a small quadrangle which contained a delightful garden with a pond, very conducive to reflection and quiet discussion. To one side of the building

was the Pastoral Centre's large chapel, designed in Gothic style by Sir Ninian Comper in the early twentieth century. It was here that all the services took place during the conference. The Pastoral Centre was surrounded by extensive grounds, featuring a Prayer Walk. They also contained "Chantry Island", a small knoll amongst woodland, surrounded by streams. A tiny stone monument at the highest point marks the site of the chapel where the priest lived for whom Saint Alban gave his life, in the third century. This significant association was a constant reminder of the antiquity of the Christian faith in the British Isles.

The weekend was a mixture of formal talks, practical workshops, discussion groups, worship, and free time. During the talks, translation into Russian was provided for those who needed it. Two of the talks were given by friends from abroad: Father Sergei Ovsiannikov, from the Netherlands, spoke on "Confession and Communion", while Father Boris Brobrinskoy, from France, spoke on "The Holy Spirit". This was a real link with other parts of the Archdiocese of Parishes of Russian Tradition in Western Europe. The theme of the conference (Communion and Community) was emphasised by Archbishop Gabriel, who commented in his talk: "This story is like an icon of our communities. Everywhere in Europe they are small, but they are real communities. Everyone has to do something, nobody can be there just as a consumer; everyone has to take part. That is how it should always be to be Orthodox, to be a community".

There were also discussion groups, on such subjects as "Conflict and Resolution", and "Living our faith in a secular world", while our own Father Alexander led a discussion group on "The Cosmic Eucharist: Human Responsibility for the Natural World". This latter theme chimes very well with the concern for the natural world held by the Ecumenical Patriarch. There were also practical workshops on "Liturgical singing and structure of services", and "The making and meaning of prosphora". The prosphora made in the latter workshop were used at the Liturgy on the Sunday morning: a very practical outcome indeed! The conference was also honoured by a visit from Archbishop Gregorios of Thyateira, who gave a talk in which he pointed out that we were continuing the work of all Christians who have gone before us, including the saints and martyrs, and so our community in the Church crosses the boundaries of both space and time.

According to the excellent summary of the talks by Candy Charters at the Vicarite website, another aspect of Christian community was the relationship between bishop, priests and laypeople. Wendy Robinson, in her talk on "Trust in God and working with each other", described how the Russian migrant tradition established "a committed, seeking, studying, serving laity", which did not seek "an over-clericalised Church but one in which all were responsible for the life of the Church". She contrasted this with the "post-Constantinian reaction", in which the laypeople relinquished their dignity as a universal priesthood. This "great betrayal of the laity" led to a negative definition of the laity as passive. All this was based on the writings of Paul



Evdokimov, and was reiterated by Father Sergei Ovsiannikov in his talk on "Confession and Communion", where he described the laity as becoming mere consumers.

The final talk, by Irina von Schlippe, was on "The Liturgy after the Liturgy". It focused on what she termed "applied religion", namely the many ways in which we can make present in the world, throughout the week, the Liturgy that we celebrate on Sunday. She described some simple steps that we can take, such as making greater use of traditional customs associated with church feasts. Her suggestions included:

- Help the clergy and those engaged in the permanent work of the Vicariate.
- Learn to delegate.
- Don't just donate to charities, leaving everything to specialists:
do something yourself!

The conference included a bookstall containing several Vicariate publications, such as the Liturgy of St John Chrysostom, hot off the press. Since then, the Vicariate has published a booklet of "The Hours and Typika" for use by individuals and communities. It is clear that publishing is proceeding with great energy.

On the Sunday evening, the children treated us to an entertainment they had been preparing in the children's programme: the life and martyrdom of Saint Alban. The boy playing Saint Alban squeezed the last drop of drama out of his magnificent death scene! Later on the Sunday evening was a social gathering, where several people contributed musical or other offerings.

The conference organisers had, very wisely, allowed several gaps of free time in a very full programme. This made it possible to take a walk in the magnificent grounds, or to get to know other conference attendees in informal conversations. This strengthening of relationships is one of the main aims of a conference of this kind, especially where there are normally so few opportunities for interaction between congregations, and it fitted in very well with the conference theme of "Communion and Community". In all, it was a very enjoyable experience, and I am already looking forward to next year's conference.

Details of the talks can be found at the Vicariate website:

www.exarchate-uk.org/Archive/Conference%202008/Account_Conf08.html

(Quotes from the talks are taken from this web page)

