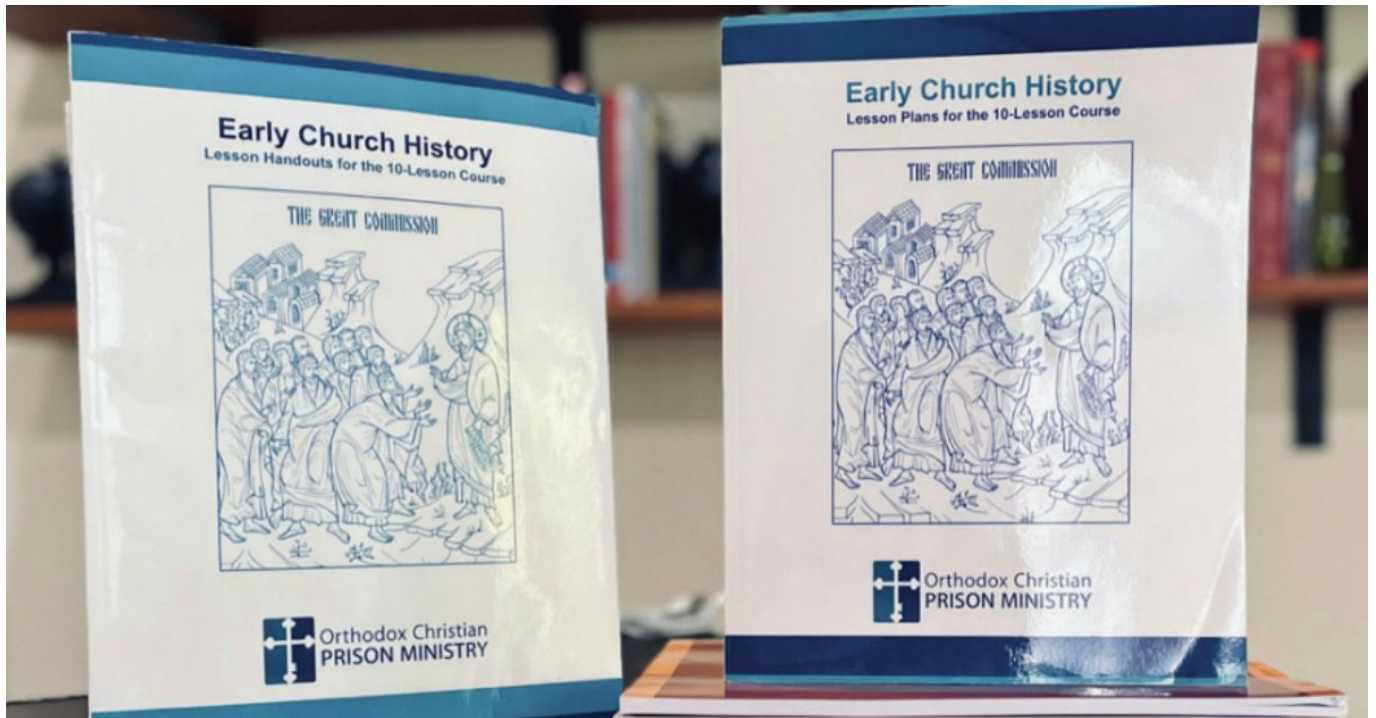


Early Church History: Receiving the Ancient Faith Behind Bars



Holy Transfiguration Orthodox Church in Meridian, Idaho, is quickly becoming a model parish for Orthodox prison ministry. Among the 200 people that regularly attend services, at least a quarter of their parishioners are involved in prison ministry. “Oh my gosh, the attitude and response of my parish has been fantastic!” says Donna Allee, Prison Ministry Coordinator at Holy Transfiguration. “Even the children and other adults prepare Christmas and Pascha cards for the inmates.”

OCPM’s Church Programs Manager, Mark Santana, met with Holy Transfiguration over Zoom last spring to discern a way forward for their parish ministry. The widespread enthusiasm of their many volunteers made their parish an easy recommendation to pilot OCPM’s curriculum, Early Church History: Receiving the Ancient Faith Behind Bars. This new course has been created specifically for the prison audience, to serve people of all faith backgrounds. Mark and Fr. Stephen Powley flew to Idaho to train volunteers in person with a weekend seminar.

At first, Donna had a hard time getting the ISCI prison staff on board with the idea, but Donna’s persistence made the difference. After receiving no reply for weeks, Donna drove to the prison doors herself, class materials in hand, to schedule her first meeting. “They wanted to know if we were serious,” she says, “if we would be

consistent and faithful.”

Once they were approved to teach the course, the parish saw the importance of having a hospitality team alongside their three committed teachers to welcome inmates inside the classroom and increase the likelihood of making real connections. “The most memorable moments for me are when I get to visit with the guys one-on-one,” Donna says. “They shed tears, share a little bit about their lives, and say that they really want a deeper relationship with God and to mend relationships with their loved ones.”

Offering a class inside of a prison facility always comes with its own challenges. During one of the first classes, the facility had an inmate count, which delayed all the students from arriving to the class for nearly an hour. Once the class finally started, it was cut off again by another count only fifteen minutes later. And yet, “it was the largest class we’ve had to date,” says Donna.

Early Church History is uniquely beneficial behind bars, because “the informative nature of the class seems to minimize whatever contentiousness or hostility might otherwise be present from those with differing beliefs. At the same time, the teachers don’t attempt to water down or trim the content to appeal to other worldviews,” she says. “This honesty and boldness is appreciated by the students and allows more for an atmosphere of openness.” But Donna confesses the class isn’t really about history. “The point is not the material. It’s about sharing Christ and connecting with people.”

Holy Transfiguration is already on its second cycle of Early Church History after giving completion certificates to four students in the last cohort. Mark Santana is returning to Idaho this month to check up on the program, and he and Donna email back and forth about the class at least weekly.

What do the volunteers from Holy Transfiguration have to say for those considering bringing Early Church History to a facility near them? “You have to be flexible. Even though it is kind of hard for us to take the time and energy to drive out to the prison every Tuesday afternoon or evening, we are all so blessed. We love these guys. They are awesome and so appreciative. They help make us better people.”

Since bringing Early Church History to ISCI, Fr. Mark is now offering Vespers inside the facility and several inmates are corresponding with Fr. Michael Pejovic, OCPM Prison Relationship Manager. Some have even asked for A Seeker of Truth, the first text of the OCPM Correspondence Catechism Course. “I think that sometimes we get so excited about becoming Orthodox and living in such a loving community

with caring people that we sometimes forget that we need to reach out to the world around us with God's divine love," Donna says. "This is part of our salvation." OCPM is so grateful for the willingness of this parish to bring the Ancient Faith behind bars. Who knows how wide their healing presence will spread?

For more information on how you and your parish can get involved with OCPM, visit theocpm.org/volunteer.

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