

## A TRUE SAINT OF GOD

My husband, Mark, and I came from such different backgrounds and our life's experiences were also very different. I was raised in the church and have been in law enforcement for over 20 years. Mark was raised in a broken home and was a drug addict for 18 years before Christ turned his life around. Through these differences though, we saw a puzzle coming together that would allow us to minister in unusual ways.



We moved shortly after we married, and it took us several months to find a church home. Many we visited were nice. The people were friendly, the Pastor preached well, and the music was great, but we did not feel God calling us to these churches. One of my husband's coworkers had been trying to get us to visit his church, but we had resisted as it was quite some distance away. Running out of churches around us, we finally agreed to visit his church. Before the service was over we knew that it was the church where God was calling us to attend.

About a month after joining the church we were shocked and amazed to find out that the balcony of

the church was full of Slavic people! You see before even meeting, my husband and I were individually interested in the Slavic people. It was then that God started unfolding His plan for us regarding the Slavic people.

We quickly became friends with many of the Slavic families in the church. The families were not only from Russia, but from the Ukraine, Uzbekistan, and Kazakstan. As our love for the Slavic people grew, we increasingly wanted to go on a mission trip to Russia. Year after year though God shut the door on our going, despite all our prayers. As time went on, we settled into ministering to the Slavic people living in the United States, believing that was the mission field that God wanted us in.

Shortly after a new Ukrainian couple joined the church, Misha and Irena Dubinskiy, we soon counted them as close friends. We discovered that since coming to the United States a few years before, they had been sending boxes of clothes and supplies back to the Ukraine. Excitedly we asked to help, and soon started helping them gather and pack clothes. Things got out of hand quickly as God blessed our efforts so abundantly that we were unsure how we'd get all the boxes to the Ukraine. It was then that God began to speak to each of our hearts and we soon realized that God did not want us to send the boxes to the Ukraine but to take them. We were ecstatic! We were finally going to go!



Our plan was to conduct Bible camps for four days each at three (3) orphanages. During these camps we would hand out the clothes, toys, and other items. We also wanted to visit an elderly home or two while we were there. Isn't it funny how the best laid plans can be changed? God had something else in mind.

We ended up working with six (6) different orphanages, five were one day events while the sixth, Turbov Village was a three day Bible camp. Our trip was not just limited to orphanages though, as we gave testimony at several churches, helped a ministry group serve meals to several mental health wards at the Vinnitsa Hospital, and met with several Pastors and their families.



While in Vinnitsa, we stayed with Pastor Stepan Gonchar and his family; his wife Irena, son Vlad (9) and daughter Vika (4). They had been praying for us for months before our arrival and it seemed like a family homecoming when we arrived. Stepan seemed especially grateful of our arrival as he and Mark spent many hours going over the Bible and talking about the matters of Stepan's church. During one of these discussions Mark told Stepan that he wanted to go with him on some home visits.

As Stepan did not have a vehicle, he had to ride the bus from Vinnitsa to Turbov and then walk through the side to visit his homebound members. This usually only allowed him to visit one at a time. With our resources (money for a vehicle and food) we could help Stepan visit several people. As the plan grew, none of us wanted to be left out.

When the day came to make the visits, our driver and van showed up at Stepan's building bright and early. After driving the 30 minutes to Turbov Village from Vinnitsa, we stopped at a local bazar (market) so that Pastor Stepan Gonchar could purchase some food for the elderly we would be visiting that day. The people there knew right away that we were not Ukrainian. We were healthy, smiled in public and had clean fresh clothes on. We also wore shirts and light jackets unzipped, while many of them were bundled in all the clothes they had. We walked around

and took pictures, talking through our friends Misha & Irena Dubinskiy, while Pastor Stepan purchased bread, sausage, candies, soda, and other items. At first they were wary of us, but soon their curiosity and our smiles broke through their caution. We listened to their stories of hardship, asked questions about their little shop, and laughed with them at our attempts to speak Russian.

Pastor Stepan soon had purchased all we would need for the visits and we were en route to our first house. As we bumped along on the road, Pastor Stepan began to tell us of the woman we would visit. Her name was Fidora and it would soon be a name that would be burned into my memory as one of the most deeply spiritual moments in my life.

Fidora was in her eighties and four (4) years ago she fell while digging up potatoes in her garden, breaking both of her legs. She laid out in the garden in agony for hours, hoping someone would find her, however, when dusk fell near she realized that she probably wouldn't be found. So, with all her strength, she dragged herself towards her house as she tried to block out the pain. Finally, as she neared her home she was discovered.

Medical care in the Ukraine is very different from the United States in that it is years behind in equipment and facilities. Many villages have no hospital, but local doctors who work out of their homes. It is also very costly. There is a charge for every little thing, you must provide your own sheets and food if hospitalized, and Doctors can perform tests and care upon you without your direct permission. This, combined with Fidora's poverty, created a situation where she was not able to receive the needed care for her broken legs . . . and they healed just as they were.

After the accident her son, daughter and daughter-in-law moved themselves into her little country home. They took over the home and forced Fidora into a small closet, giving her only a small pallet (mattress) on the floor to sleep on. Many times they would lock her in the closet, neglecting her. She was provided very little food, and often went without eating for an entire day.

The state sponsored religion in the Ukraine is the Orthodox Church. It is a very hollow religion made up of many rituals, intense politics (communist), and is most often influenced by the mafia, who donates and controls the church. As a Christian, Fidora was persecuted by others before she was injured, especially by her family. Now that she was dependant upon her son, daughter and daughter-in-law, the persecution increased. Fidora was never taken to church (Turbov Village Baptist Church) and if someone offered to pick her up or she wanted to use the bus, her family would prevent her from going.

Pastor Stepan had tried on numerous occasions to visit her, but would not be allowed to see her inside or outside the home. Today, we hoped that 'Americans' showing up at the house would startle and shock the family and they would allow a visit. We had seen this work at several other locations we had visited, and prayed fervently that it would happen again today.

After a few wrong turns and stopping for directions, we finally reached Fidora's house. It was an old little house in the country, down a small very bumpy and muddy lane. There was a make-shift fence around the house composed of stones, concrete blocks, wood, and other items. Thick vines grew all along the fence and over the gate into the lane, blocking the view of the house from the lane. As we came to a halt, we prayed as a group that God would give us the words needed to convince the family to allow a visit. As Stepan exited the vehicle and pushed through the down gate, we began to pray again.

Stepan found Fidora in the yard sitting on a chair and approached her. Hearing voices, the daughter-in-law came out of the house and confronted Stepan; it appeared as if she was the only home with Fidora. We could see them from the knees down through the gate and could hear most of their conversation. Stepan's words were calm and filled with peace, however, the daughter-in-law became agitated during the conversation and we could hear her voice raised in anger. No matter how loud she yelled at Stepan he continued to talk in a peaceful but determined tone. We prayed even more, pleading with God to allow us to visit with Fidora. Then, all of a sudden, we heard the daughter-in-law say something in disgusted defeat which sounded like a "Fine, go ahead and visit!" statement and we were overjoyed!



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As we watched Fidora hobble on her crutches towards the van with Stepan at her side, our great anticipation quickly turned into panic. I looked at my husband and said "What are we going to say to her?" We had spent so much time focusing on getting to visit her that we had not thought an ounce about what we'd say to her. How do you enter someone in this situation? What do you say? Jesus loves you? That sounded so empty as it came across my lips. The woman needed more than mere words. How were we going to express God's love for her? What could we do?

In the midst of our panic and confusion, God always reigns and He has a perfect plan, which we often miss in the middle of our flurry. In this instance, our worry was in vain! As Fidora stepped up to the van, and without preparation for introductions, she began to speak with such a great boldness in Christ that it immediately brought tears to our eyes. She spoke blessing upon us and our families. She spoke blessings upon our ministry in the United States and our churches' ministries. She spoke blessings on our ministry in the Ukraine with the churches, orphanages and a hospital. She spoke blessings upon our visits to the homebound elderly occurring that day. She spoke blessings upon us for leaving our wealth and comfort in the United States and visiting the Ukraine. She spoke blessings upon our visiting her, a small unknown child of God. Why did she deserve a visit from such wonderful people. And we were in utter humility at being in her presence.

It was overwhelming to hear such a strong bold voice coming from such a huddled old woman. She spoke with

confidence and fluidity, as if she had prepared and practiced this speech for months. Among their own tears, and Irena took turns translating for us. From the blessings she poured out upon us, she went into reciting several Psalms for us; chapter by chapter. She went on further by telling us not to worry about her in her little closet. she pointed to the sky with a small weathered little finger, she told us not to worry about her health, or the persecution she was under. . . for one day she would be in heaven with Jesus, her Lord and Savior! Then her face contorted in anguish and she began to cry. She pleaded with us to pray feverently for her family. Her son, daughter and daughter-in-law did not know Christ ! She then led us in prayer to the Father, begging that she would see them of their salvation before she died, that she knew His word did not return void, and that He wanted them more desperately than she did. She thanked God for His faithfulness to her in her life, and that even if she did not see her family come to know Him before her death, that she knew He was a God who heard His children's cries. Although I would not have understood her prayer without the translation, I did understand it fully in spirit.

We were all so humbled and deeply touched by her words, that we sat in silent awe for some time after she uttered "Amen." Finally through my ebbing sobs, I told her that we had come all this way to encourage and bless her and that through her the Lord had blessed us beyond our imagination. I told her of how I had read about the 'Saints' in the Bible . . . of Moses, Abraham, and Paul . . . and how I had respected their endurance under persecution, but today I was in the presence of a true 'Saint' when I looked at her.

Since that day I have shared with many groups and churches of our visit to the Ukraine and of this wonderful woman, Fidora. In America we often think we are persecuted when we are called a 'Bible thumper,' or someone who is mocking and apologizes to us for cursing. Or even we feel persecuted because some don't want us to pray in schools to fight to keep the church out of the state. We know nothing of true persecution!

Would we be able to endure under the persecution Fidora has received? Would we hold true to our Lord after being locked in a closet for years? I know that I can only pray that God would give me the strength, the boldness, and the endurance, if ever I were in such a place.

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