



THE HOLY METROPOLIS OF NEAPOLI & STAVROUPOLI
NEAR THE ROMA OF THE WESTERN THESSALONIKI
TOWARDS THE FELLOW-MAN
ACCEPTANCE AND SUPPORT OF ALTERITY

Thank you very much for giving me the opportunity to share with you my experiences of the parish of St. Nectarios of Dendropotamos , where I am in the last ten years in a special mission , in accordance with the prompt and the blessing of His Eminence Metropolitan of Neapoli and Stavroupoli Mr. Barnabas , celebrating with my co-worker, after the Divine Liturgy on the altar, another function in the table of love, where in these rituals are involved the deaconesses of love, and the army of other volunteers, and parishioners, and not only, to offer the abundance of our hearts to our helpless brothers

Along with their immersion in the spirituality of our church, we thought how we will drive the footsteps of their children in their schools. Approximately four out of five thousand inhabitants of this settlement are Roma, while one fifth of all the children. Apart from the Roma, who are native speakers of the Romany, there are few "Balamos" speaking Greek, while far fewer are economic migrants from Albania and new-immigrants from countries of Pontos and the East in general.

Thus the demographic landscape of Dendropotamos has a multicultural character with dominant cultural the element of Roma, who, it should be noted, are not recorded as a single compact racial group, but as a set of at least three subgroups with intense competition and problematic relations between them. We should also mention here the existence of the camp at the foot of the bed Ehedoros River, about 5 km from Dendropotamos, which housed the last tent-dwelling Roma, before about 18 years, in hutches -like containers. One of them stood in as a temple to serve the religious needs, to have a place to pray, to have a space to adorn their makeshift Funeral Oration, which we roam with reverence among the mud flats and dumps.

Coming in this particular region of Western Thessaloniki, the parish of St. Nectarios in Dendropotamos in Thessaloniki, that is characterized by extremely high crime rates, our primary concern was to investigate and document the individual causes that constitute the major problem of school dropouts, which concerns mainly Roma children, for which the voices of some sensitive educators had reached the ears of our Bishop. Continuous observation, participatory or non- participatory, and free interviews, individual and collective, in a natural and effortless way and in a familiar and encouraging environment, were and are the core of our work, aiming to create a two-way bridge of communication with the local population. It took patience, persistence and consistency to win their trust and our open their homes and their hearts. I had to become one with them.

Through collecting and understanding the data related to Roma, a number of issues like this have emerged, like one regarding their religious beliefs, which reflects exactly their thousand-year course from India to the West initially, and from there to around the world. Particularly, their religious beliefs are an alloy of eastern pagan origin theories, mingled with Christian doctrines. For this reason the devotional practices have a dual origin. That, along with the prevailing Greek Orthodox, which they apply with remarkable devotion, those who have preserved the authentic traditions of the mystical East are also met.

The parish of St. Nectarios Dendropotamos is known for its largest Roma communities throughout Northern Greece, but also for its exquisite temple, the dome which dominates the surrounding area. However, the Roma do not systematically appear, they only appear occasionally on Sunday functions, although the sequences of the Bridegroom attendance is overwhelming. Quickly we found that a very basic problem, which we will find it again before us, is the fact that that race wakes up late and is activated later. Children who appear on Sunday mornings with pajamas and slippers in the Sanctuary, to become "altar boys" arrange to wash themselves and prepare appropriately to taste the joy of participation in common worship and prayer and rewarded for daring to escape from a house where everyone is asleep.

In general, the poverty that affects most families, mostly large families, implies poor nutrition and lack of sanitation in the area of residence, which in turn are responsible for the poor state of health. Furthermore illiteracy and generally very low educational level hinder social integration and vocational rehabilitation resulting in their strong propensity to form every form of delinquency, with a more typical handling of addictive substances.

Regarding directly the school dropout, which, noteworthy, in girls occurs in a much higher rate, the above should be added that the tribe wakes up, as we have mentioned, late, while education and self-development in general are not in the scale of their values. That means that when a small child must go to school, it must wake up by itself, prepare accordingly and literally escape from a house without waking anyone to help them. But how would a little helpless child do that inside a house that is cold, dark and messy, and overcoming the human mosaic that lies on the floor?

It was clear, therefore, that the admonitions and exhortations for the parents to get their children the way to the desks would not suffice. The need for immediate and drastic intervention was imperative for forming a family environment for abandoned children, but also for creating an appropriate social context and conditions conducive to education, health care and reduce the rate of delinquency in order to lead as many children as possible in the bright side of the streets. We mapped the children's homes and started from door to door and from alley to alley to wake up every day children and care for each one separately to be washed properly, wear clean clothes, have breakfast and be provided with the necessary school supplies for their seamless monitoring of courses. After finishing school, we were careful to prepare hot freshly cooked food

for those children who cannot find it in their home or for those who wanted to share their lunch meal with us.

Our need to enshrine the right to see the face of God during the celebration of the Divine Liturgy, led us to drastic measures, which are dictated by the Gospel of Judgement. According to them, we should first take care of the starving and thirsty, the naked or sick, and the imprisoned brothers and then give them the opportunity to ask where does all this our interest come for them. Then and only then is the right time to teach the word of our Lord, when it will be only their own inner need.

At first alone, then aided by my co-worker Father Lazarus, and a group of conscious and concerned parishioners and our fellow citizens, who began arriving from the nearest settlements, but also from the region of Thessaloniki. They are teachers or students, psychologists, doctors, nurses, lawyers, writers or artists, carriers or manufacturers, farmers and fishermen, self-employed, private and public employees, workers or pensioners.

Apart from individuals working with us there are teams like Greek Society for Social Pediatrics and Health Promotion of Northern Greece, Society for the Protection of Minors of Thessaloniki, the Arsakeia Schools, the Anatolia College, the Educational Agency eduACT, Team Privacy Policy of Thermi, The Raft in City, students of Theatre School of Aristotle University of Thessaloniki, the Office of Environmental Development of University of Macedonia, and Charitable Fraternity Men of Thessaloniki.

Thanks to the strong presence of these active citizens, volunteers or donors who have embraced our vision for the children of Dendropotamos, created the parish of St. Nectarios the Educational group " FAROS TOU KOSMOU", which was situated originally on the catacomb of the parish church, while, in the last eighteen months, a ground floor house with a courtyard in the center of the settlement, having it, to our good fortune, granted to us for its heirs for indefinitely use. In such areas infrastructures were set up gradually for the operation of a common meal, while also food and medicines, clothing and shoes, toys and school equipment banks, library and reading rooms, and classrooms, but also entertainment and sports rooms were founded.

Today in the traditional house are hosted six minor children I have in my custody with a court order, while in the church's catacomb, under St. Nectarios, headquarters the Day Centre , where all the neighborhood kids are involved in activities that are offered . It is our primary concern the existence of alternating themes of continuing creative preoccupation in our place, in order to keep the children close to us, so they do not loiter in the neighborhood, where unscrupulous promoters of crime lurk to enlist them in the service of their interests.

Specifically, apart from remedial teaching in school subjects, foreign languages, guitar lessons and traditional dances, theatrical performances and concerts take place which are strongly associated with the

culture of Roma and their native language as well. In addition, there are three football teams for elementary and high school children which take participation in parish football tournament organized by the Holy Metropolis of us annually, winning major awards. It is remarkable that these teams are trained by amateurs Roma. There are also MMA (Mixed Martial Arts) courses as well as many additional interesting activities which contribute a lot by leading our children's steps in "Faros tou Kosmou".

In addition, frequent trips are organized away from our entrenched by airlifts, highways and rail lines neighborhood, through which we attempt to enrich our children's experiences regarding the outside world seeking or reproducing essentially a series of informal courses such as book fairs, photography or painting, natural history museums or art history, but also exploratory trips or summer camps.

It is also worth mentioning our participation in the pilot program FUTURE SCHOOL, organized by the Educational Agency EDUACT in collaboration with the American College ANATOLIA, whose aim is to prescribe and describe the school of the future based on the expressed and identified needs of students. In realizing this goal, our students, in collaboration with those who are responsible for the program, prepare questionnaires and interview everyone involved in the education issue, such as parents, teachers and students, while they communicate each other in order to exchange opinions, through live internet connections with children in another European cities, where this program is running as well. Thus, by playing the role of student and researcher at the same time, through "action research" carried out, children become more cooperative, responsible and optimistic.

It is a historic moment for "Faros tou Kosmou" the fact that this year the first high school graduates arrived at the gates of higher educational institutions of our country, while an 18 years old Roma girl is already a student of Aristotle University of Thessaloniki. Today three of our children, having gained scholarships in Private Educational Institutes (IIEK), are studying due to the sensitivity of some individuals who were touched by the progress of our young Roma, who, while, until yesterday, could not even go to school, today they are able to make a remarkable difference.

Finally, I would like to mention the unique experience that children of St. Nectarios gained from their involvement with the science of robotics. While they first met robotics previous September through their participation in the FIRST LEGO LEAGUE GREECE contest, which is under the auspices of the Holy Metropolis of Neapolis and Stavropolis, the previous month our children traveled to St. Louis, Missouri, USA having been invited by the organizers of the robotics competition, where they had the opportunity to enjoy the hospitality of the Greek Diaspora from 21 to 30 of April. More specific, apart from the first prize that our children won within the FIRST LEGO LEAGUE GREECE competition in the CORE VALUES category in Greece, they have been chosen by the international event observers for the honorary distinction which is given to just one team globally. This honorable mention is given to that team which stands out for its ingenuity, fighting spirit and development prospects of children and rewarded just for the quality and

dynamics, representing the hope for children throughout the world, especially for those who lack opportunities and struggling to escape from the sidelines. I am very proud of having accompanied children of St. Nektarios, these young ambassadors of peace and budding scientists in the United States of America.

In recent years, the large immigration wave, which consists mainly of economic migrants, has turned the European urban centers in multicultural societies. The dominant cultural group in the host country has usually a tendency to absorb smaller, by swallowing and obscuring them. On the other hand, the smaller groups have a desire to keep alive and intact their identity. The new trends in educational issues, which are formed through continuous scientific researches, promote intercultural and inclusive educational models, which are essentially two sides of the same coin and are found very high on the European agenda and the developed world in general.

"Faros tou kosmou", following the word of the Gospel, attempts to apply these modern educational trends, which advocate mutual respect and understanding and, in parallel, promote interaction between individuals or groups with different origins through the development of critical thinking, which can contribute to the overcome of fears and prejudices about the "other", the unknown. This diversity should be faced as a source of knowledge and enrichment, not as an obstacle to progress. Could you find, respected fathers, a difference in the words of our Lord? The Gospel does not consider the "other" as a problem and sees it as the image of God. Thus, it is essential for all of us not only to accept but to love it as himself. Because "GOD is love."

Thank you very much for your attention

Archimandrite Athinagoras Loukataris