

## **The Poor - I am one of them**

by Aida Albu

Two years ago I heard beautiful words, from my friends, about St. John the Compassionate Mission, about Father Roberto and his parish. I came to visit this place one day and I was touched by the simplicity and the hospitality - there are three doors to get to the Chapel, they are most of the time physically closed, but they seem open.

Since then I try my best to come to St. Silouan almost every Sunday and during the week if there is service.

Coming just for the services was not enough though, the word Mission is even in the name of the Parish – St. Silouan the Athonite Mission - most



probably not accidentally. Something was missing... I had the feeling I was not doing enough... being busy between work, family and Church, even if I got exhausted at the end of the day, paradoxically felt like laziness... it was a lot more to be discovered. I was missing out the life at the Mission - eating in the trapezia every Sunday with the group of St. Silouan and knowing that during the week the needy were also coming there to eat in the same place, a part of me wanted to meet them.

More than a year ago the LTS program was put together and I remember the invitation that Father Roberto made: “Do you have a year to give?” I wished very much I could join the program ... At the end of the spring of this year things changed in a way that allowed me to fulfill my wish – today I am part of this program. I cannot afford one full year because of the responsibilities I have with my family but I am very glad I can be here every day for the summer at least. I do not know where and when two months just disappeared..., I only have one month to go... I already miss the Mission...

The Mission is like a bee hive. The kitchen is always full of people, preparing, serving the food or washing the dishes, the trapezia gets full as well during meals, the hallway is most of the time jammed with people coming and going. Father Roberto’s office is busy also with meetings after meetings. Downstairs is a bit

quieter but not on Wednesdays when we have the food bank for families. The quietest place at the Mission remains the Chapel.

At the Mission you have two options: you ask for something to do and/or you talk, listen to people. In the beginning it was easier for me to do something instead of talking to someone but I was still missing what I was looking for and did not know exactly what... until I sit at the table with strangers one day during lunch. Hearing their stories, listening to these people I never met in my life I felt like I knew them already, like they were part of me, like I was connected to them already before that time. I had this feeling before, I remember one winter day when I was feeling very low and walked through the streets alone..., I remember how I could identify myself with each one of the beggars and I talked to them, I was one of them, I had the very deep feeling I was at home on the streets with these people and I did not want to return to my actual home. These were the people who were able to see me, whom I was able to connect with.

Now I discover I am one of them all the time, whether I feel low or just fine. Where there is vulnerability, where people do not wear masks, there the connection with the other is possible.

I asked myself in the beginning what can I do for the poor and needy, how can I help them; I was feeling guilty for not being able to do much... now I am a bit more at peace. There is nothing to be fixed; it is not me who can/should fix anything anyway.

Whenever I try to give myself and my heart to the other, whenever I try to forget about myself and about what I want or like, I discover I do not miss anything anymore and then I find peace. There is still so much to learn about how to love and for that I need all my life...

I do not love - I only try to love; I do not give myself - I only try to give my heart...

I am going to miss the Mission, I am going to miss the people and all the friends I made. I will still come once in a while. I will be at the Parish, I will be exactly in the same place still I will be so far away from what the Mission life is. There is a gap between the Parish and the Mission but there is also a bridge. I am very glad I did cross this bridge, even if it was for a short period of time.

I already miss sitting at the table with the poor, broken, homeless, I miss the vulnerability, I miss the union between souls, the communion that lasts forever, the very deep place where we can all meet and become one but I have hope: I know I can still be at the Mission even if I am not at the Mission, if I do, wherever I am, what I learned here.