

“LOVING AND SERVING GOD IN OUR NEIGHBOR”
The Genesis of
AN ORTHODOX CHRISTIAN MATERNITY HOME

By Sarah Elisabet Oftedal, House-mother.

By the grace of God and with the blessing of His Grace Bishop Tikhon, Martha and Mary House, an Orthodox Christian Maternity Home, was incorporated as a non-profit Religious Institution in the Orthodox Church of America (OCA), the Diocese of the West on November 21, 2001.

Our Purpose is to be a witness of the historic Orthodox Christian faith - in obedience to the command of Our Lord Jesus Christ, to worship God and to love and serve Him in our neighbor, according to the Holy Scriptures and the Tradition of the Holy Orthodox Church.

Our Mission as an Orthodox Christian Maternity Home is to be here for women in crisis who are pregnant, homeless and without resources or family support, and who have chosen to give life to their unborn child rather than have an abortion. We provide family style housing with resident house-mother(s) for up to four pregnant women, practical, emotional and spiritual support throughout the pregnancy, as well as counseling with regard to choosing options for the future of mother and child. We recognize the sanctity of life and that each expectant Mom who comes to us - and her unborn child - is a unique and precious individual, created in the image of God and loved by Him. We pray that each Mom may discover her God-given personal resources and how to develop them. That she may come to know herself as a child of God and seek His will for herself and the child God has entrusted to her. Expectant Moms who have suffered abortion loss in the past are provided post-abortion grief and reconciliation counseling. Working with local agencies and volunteers we strive to facilitate a healthy birth for the babies and a healthy spiritual re-birth for the new mothers.

Our Inter-Orthodox Board of Directors is headed by His Grace Bishop Tikhon of the Diocese of the West, with members from the OCA, Greek Orthodox and Antiochian Orthodox parishes in San Diego. On our Advisory Board are also members from Roman Catholic and Protestant local churches. Volunteers include Christians from other churches. Many have never encountered Orthodox Christianity before. We are primarily funded by private contributions from individuals and churches, Orthodox and others.

Our Beginning;

How Martha and Mary House got started is inevitably linked to my personal journey; from childhood in Lutheran Norway, teen-age rebellion rejecting my faith, extolling atheism and a lifestyle that resulted in abortion. At twenty one I came to this country, a restless fugitive from myself, got pregnant again, but the doctor I turned to refused to

perform an illegal abortion. As an immigrant I would not jeopardize my stay in the U.S. by breaking the law. A Salvation Army Maternity Home became my refuge - there my first living child was born. Four months later I married a man who adopted my son. We had three more children in rapid succession. Busy with family and a writing career I ignored the secret pain in my heart; a black hole I was increasingly fearful of falling into. A feminist and political activist in the civil rights movement, at thirty two I was outwardly coping, inwardly panicking, not having found meaning or purpose in living and fearing there was none. Grasping at a last straw, I accepted the invitation to an evangelical Christian Church. Three months later I felt a glimmer of hope that Christianity was real and could save me from nothingness. Since I could not prove it false, I made a desperate leap of faith across the abyss of what seemed absurd and promised God that I would live the rest of my life as if He was there. I would read the Bible as if it were true and obey it. At least there would be some consistency in my life. That was in 1966. I saw myself as a generic Christian and my work as a writer took me to many denominations, but gradually I was drawn to the Sacraments, first in the Lutheran Church of my childhood, then in 1979 to the Episcopal Church. My priest called himself Anglo-orthodox and introduced me to the Sacrament of Confession, a daily Rule of prayer, the Jesus Prayer and the writings of the early Church Fathers.

Gradually the love and light of God's mercy illumined and healed the dark wound of my heart inflicted by abortion 35 years ago. I grieved my loss and reconciled at last with God, my children among the martyred Holy Innocents, and finally myself in a 1987 post abortion workshop. The next year four of us founded Abortion Survivors Anonymous, a 12 Step Post Abortion grief and reconciliation program in San Diego. I wrote the workbook and facilitated groups.

Then in my fifties, I lived alone near my children and grandchildren. I believed that the fragmenting of the traditional family was a contributing factor to the epidemic of "free" sex with subsequent pregnancies and abortions. The young were leaving home, living unprotected and vulnerable with no boundaries or restrictions but their own. Exercising 'freedom of choice', only to find that the consequences of our choices are not optional.

For some time I had felt a need or call to live in some sort of Christian community or house with accountability, direction and opportunity for healing the wounds of wrong choices. Perhaps a house where older women could teach or 'mother' younger women, as Saint Paul suggested to Titus. In the early Church, single women, whether unmarried or widowed, lived with family or in community. It was dangerous to live alone, without protection. Our culture is equally dangerous and the victims are multiplying.

Without a husband I felt vulnerable, even with a spiritual father in my Episcopal priest and obedience to God's Word in the Church as a safeguard. But some Episcopal Bishops questioned the relevance and meaning of that Word. In 1992 I joined the traditionalist Franciscan Third Order of Divine Compassion, making a vow of simplicity, purity and fidelity. I was committed to a rule of prayer, and to serve and love God in my neighbor. Those suffering the wounds of abortion were among them. In 1994 I completed the two year novitiate. That year the Church of England chose to follow the example of the Episcopal Church, USA in ordaining women to the priesthood. Three of

us in my parish felt so strongly that the Anglican Church was no longer the true Church that we attended *Introduction to Orthodoxy* classes during Lent at Saint John of Damascus Orthodox Church in Poway, California. I was chrismated in January 1995. My friends had preceded me by a few months, each of us in a separate jurisdiction; Greek, Antiochian and OCA, but we were now home together in the One Holy Catholic and Apostolic Church.

Now I was under authority and felt safe. With the blessing of Bishop Tikhon I continued to facilitate Abortion Survivors Anonymous groups. The need or call to live in a house with other Orthodox women, perhaps in a monastic community, or with an open door to younger women caught in the consequences of 'freedom of choice', grew stronger. My priest told me to write our Bishop. I did, telling of my journey, asking His blessing. Visiting monastic communities I spoke with nuns and elders, seeking to do God's will, and was coming to understand that His will is found through obedience. A nun, who found time in her busy day to respond to my questions, taught me an important lesson. She said, "Your need is my obedience." The need of abortion survivors was an obedience I could not ignore.

Annually in the U.S. 1.3 million unborn children, each bearing the image of God, are legally killed in the womb. Around the world an additional 50 million children are aborted each year. The Church believes that those children are among the Holy Innocents, martyred saints who pray for us. May their memory be eternal! But the impact of post abortion grief and trauma remains for their parents and surviving siblings, causing physical, emotional and spiritual damage to families. In our groups I saw both the tragedies of post abortion and the healing of lives and relationships through reconciliation with God, their aborted children and finally themselves. But how much better to prevent the loss in the first place? Reaching out to pregnant women at risk and provide the support they needed to carry their child to term rather than choose abortion. That was another need I felt I must obey.

The vision of a House of healing grew stronger and more focused. There would be room for expectant mothers, especially those who had suffered abortion loss. Other Orthodox women living alone joined me in praying for a house, but did not share my call to live there, at least not yet. I continued to wait 'on the Lord'.

My patron Saint was **New Martyr, Grand Duchess Elizabeth of Russia, who founded the Martha and Mary Convent of Love and Mercy in Moscow in 1909** amidst a rising tide of the anti-God communist revolution. Today our post-sexual revolution society is also increasingly anti-God as well as anti-traditional marriage and two parent families. New Martyr Elizabeth's relics were in the altar at St. John of Damascus Orthodox Church in Poway, California. Reading her biography, *An Unbroken Unity*, by E.M. Almedingen, I learned that in a conversation with her brother, Grand Duke Ernest of Hesse, Elizabeth had said, "everybody has to have an ideal if they wish to live in fullness (amplitude)." She feared hers would be the hardest of all to attain since she longed to become "perfect woman", which required that she must "first - and with full understanding - learn how to forgive everything." (p.55) In 1969 I had asked God's forgiveness for my feminist rebellion against His design for woman as wife and mother outlined in the Bible. I had prayed to 'live the fullness of womanhood' as God meant it, even if that meant obedience to what Saint Paul had said! Learning that

my heart's desire echoed that of my patron Saint, I now prayed: "By the prayers of the Theotokos, and Saint Elizabeth New Martyr, help me be obedient to Thy will."

Our capacity for birth-giving is at the core of who we are as women. Saint Elizabeth did not give birth to a biological child, but she and her husband raised two adopted children, and she was a spiritual Mother and nurturer of many more. Martha and Mary House would be an appropriate name, and New Martyr Elizabeth a fitting patron for a house of healing for women who had aborted their children - and for pregnant women in crisis who had chosen to give life instead.

When a child is conceived in us - and then dies by abortion, our womb becomes the killing field. The core of who we are as women and mothers is wounded, and so is the heart of the men and fathers of our aborted children. By the mercy of God our children, martyred saints, pray for us. We can cry out to God, 'Heal my soul for I have sinned against You'. Death does not sever the bonds of love between parents and child. For parents of aborted children, pain has seemed the only bond between them and their child. The only way of remembrance. But in forgiveness and reconciliation the pain is transformed. Father Alexander Schmemmann said, "To love is to remember". God loves and promises never to forget our children. In Isaiah 49: 14,15 we are reminded: "Can a woman forget the child of her womb? Even if she forgets, I do not forget you, says the Lord, I have inscribed you on the palm of my hand." In the Orthodox Church we who lost our children by choice may weep in joyful sorrow, remembering and loving them each time we celebrate the Divine Liturgy! With the martyred Saints their memory is eternal!

Martha and Mary House would bear the name of the sisters of Lazarus of Bethany. Theirs was a house of prayer, hospitality and charity where Jesus often was guest. Might He also be our guest as we sought to love Him in all who came to our Martha and Mary House.

In 1997 an inheritance and a generous donation brought the dream of a house closer. In faith, and with the knowledge of my priest and Bishop, I began looking and asking advice from people who worked with women in crisis. Was there a need for a maternity home in our area? There were shelters for homeless, for victims of domestic violence, for drug and alcohol rehabilitation run by professionals. We would function like an Orthodox Christian family, with ties to one or more parishes. Pregnant women in crisis - of any ethnic or religious background - would be welcome, although we would not be qualified to deal with rehabilitation or serious psychiatric needs. Father David Lowell, director of Raphael House in San Francisco, stressed the importance of focusing on a specific program to meet a specific need. Find our niche. In California a house with no more than six unrelated adult residents does not require a special use permit. The founder of Saint Claire Homes in Escondido for homeless women with drug or alcohol problems advised us to start with one house, adding others later, if necessary. A local protestant group had researched the need for maternity homes in the area and were happy to share their findings. With more than a dozen crisis pregnancy centers in San Diego County, the need appeared obvious.

The founders of Project Mexico and Zoe for Life encouraged us to form a non-profit religious corporation under the umbrella of the Orthodox Church. They were both

under the Standing Conference of Orthodox Bishops (SCOBA).

Still, I had not found another woman ready to join in starting the house. Frustrated, I feared I was being presumptuous instead of waiting for God to open a door. I stopped looking for a house, committing myself once again to obedience to the circumstances God put before me. My spiritual father, Archimandrite Zacharias Zacharou was a elder in the Monastery of Saint John the Baptist in Essex, England. In 1996 and 1997 I visited there and told him of my dreams of a house, about the work with abortion survivors, and my fear of disobeying a call to the monastery. He advised me to continue the work I was doing in prayer and obedience to what God put before me, and cautioned that it was possible to be in a monastery with a heart in the world, and in the world with the heart of a monastic. I had much to live and learn about obedience in the Orthodox Church, in prayer, practice and patience. When a small cottage became available for rent, I moved in, reducing my belongings to fit the space, living a rule of prayer, participating in my parish and continuing with Post Abortion groups, teaching sculpting and creative writing. From time to time I wrote Bishop Tikhon, up-dating him and asking His blessing. In 2000 I visited my spiritual Father in England again. He encouraged me to keep on doing what I was doing. The way would become clearer as I walked it.

I had long thought of Martha and Mary House as multi generational, with room for at least one older Orthodox woman in need of 'family', who could 'grandmother' the younger women in crisis. In the spring of 2001 one of our older parishioners who had no immediate family, needed a place to stay. I felt that her need was my obedience. Our priest asked if I was looking for a Martha and Mary House. I wasn't and he suggested, "Why don't you." Over coffee I mentioned it to a new parishioner, a younger woman who had been a postulant in a monastery, and had worked with homeless women in another state. She said, "I would love to be a part of a Martha and Mary House. Count me in." Friends in our own and other Orthodox parishes in San Diego were now eager to help. We called an organizational meeting to talk about a vision for a House, and to appoint an interim Board to work on articles of incorporation and by-laws, all subject to the blessing of Bishop Tikhon.

The meeting was held at Saint John of Damascus Orthodox Church in Poway in April, 2001. Present were members of the two OCA parishes in San Diego, and of Antiochian and Greek Orthodox parishes. The chairman of the Board of the Protestant Maternity Home - their plans now on hold - was invited to share their experience and outlook.

Volunteers from the four parishes represented at the meeting agreed to serve on the interim Board of Directors, headed by chairman William Moision, a founding member of the Parish of Saint John of Damascus. We met in July and armed with The California Nonprofit Corporation Kit, drafted Articles of Incorporation and By-Laws to be reviewed by our Diocesan attorney and submitted to Bishop Tikhon for his approval and blessing. He and the chancellor of the Diocese of the West, Archimandrite Nikolai Soraich, were kept informed of our efforts, The Martha and Mary House would be

incorporated as an Institution in Diocese of the West, the Orthodox Church in America, and subject to the Statute of the OCA and the Bylaws and the administrative authority of the Diocese. The Bishop would be represented on the Board of Directors. Other board members were from Saint John of Damascus, OCA, in Poway, from Saint Nicholas, OCA, in San Diego, from Saint Anthony the Great Antiochian Orthodox Church in La Jolla, and from Saint Gregory of Nyssa Greek Orthodox Church in El Cajon.

In August we found our 'perfect house' - an older, four bedroom, two and a half bath home on a third acre in a quiet residential neighborhood. I moved in as housemother September 8. Our elderly parishioner would join me two days later. Instead she suffered a stroke and was moved to a nursing home. September 11 brought the terrorist attack on the World Trade Towers in New York. More than ever we realized our need to depend on God for provision and security. Word went out to parishes in San Diego - Orthodox, Roman Catholic and Protestant: Martha and Mary House needed furniture. Over the next three months God furnished the house beautifully. The overflow filled our garage for a giant sale!

The bedrooms for our pregnant Moms are each named for a saint, some by the family who furnished the room. Saint Anna's room for the mother of the Theotokos. Others for Saint Mary of Egypt and Saint Elizabeth New Martyr. Our Abortion Survivor Group meets around a table donated by one of them in the library/prayer room, named for Saint Mary, while the kitchen/ dining room, of course, is named for Saint Martha.

In October our Articles of Incorporation were approved and blessed by Bishop Tikhon and submitted to the Secretary of State of California. In November they were filed. In December our Bylaws, reviewed and fine-tuned by our Diocesan attorney, were approved by Bishop Tikhon with His blessing. He agreed that it "was time to proceed with all due speed with the final steps in the realization of the (Martha and Mary House) project." We would have an open house and House Blessing on Theophany, January 6th, 2002. Bishop Tikhon wrote: "I look forward to Theophany with great joy."

More than fifty guests from local Orthodox, Roman Catholic and Protestant churches, as well as ASA (Abortion Survivors Anonymous) and the Pro Life community joined us for the House Blessing. In early February, our first expectant mother arrived. Our learning curve would be steep.

Zoe for Life emphasized the need for structure. Women would come to us in crisis, lacking financial, emotional or spiritual resources to be self sufficient, their lives dysfunctional and undisciplined. Rules provide boundaries and hopefully help develop self discipline. Our goal for each 'Daughter's' stay with us is that she will come to know herself as a child of God, loved by Him, with unique qualities and potential. Knowing herself, she will be better equipped to make healthy decisions and choices that are in God's will for herself and her child. Based on samples furnished by Zoe for Life, we developed an Application for Housing form, a Housing Admission Agreement and Family Guidelines and House Rules. All forms were reviewed by our Diocesan attorney and approved. As a condition for admission, the 'Daughter' agrees to cooperate fully with the program for a healthy birth for her baby and spiritual re-birth for herself. She

embraces the Martha and Mary House mission and goals by signing the documents and a contract waiver before moving in for a three week trial period. From our perspective of inexperience, the rules seemed extensive and detailed, but we agreed it was better to have rules that could be adapted than not to have them. Better for our 'Daughters' to know what to expect and what was expected of them. Knowingly breaking the rules would be her choice, letting us know she was not comfortable and preferred to leave. (Two years later, from a perspective of some experience, and recognizing we can expect the unexpected, we have already added to and narrowed down some of our rules and guidelines!)

A summary of our Martha and Mary House 'Daughter's requirements reads;

We welcome pregnant women of all ethnic, cultural, religious and social backgrounds, but the women must be in crisis, with nowhere else to go. While at Martha and Mary House, they must be enrolled in a study program or in vocational training, actively seeking employment or be employed. They will be responsible for housekeeping duties, required to live by the House Rules and participate in Martha and Mary House programs which include morning and evening prayer, Bible study and Church attendance, pre-natal and child care classes and counseling as advised by their doctor or Martha and Mary House.

Healing the wounds of past abortions

In our pro-abortion culture it is not unusual for women in a crisis pregnancy to have suffered abortion loss in the past. At Martha and Mary House she is provided post-abortion grief and reconciliation counseling through Abortion Survivors Anonymous. Unresolved abortion guilt and grief impacts relationship and bonding with living children, and puts future pregnancies and parenting at risk. God is merciful. He heals our sin-sick souls when we turn to Him. Grieving and reconciling with our children who died before birth, we are set free to truly love our living children and make better parenting choices for them.

Teaching God's Design for the Nurture of Children

At Martha and Mary House our goal is to teach God's design for purity before marriage and for nurturing children in the context of two parent families. The expectant mother who comes to stay with us has chosen to give birth, thanks be to God, but the unborn child growing in her womb was in most cases not planned. The pregnant Mom is in crisis, alone and not prepared for self sufficiency. The father - the seed-giver - the traditional protector and provider, is missing. His identity may be unknown. For a single mother and her child the future is full of uncertainties, but when asked her plan for her child, the answer is usually, "I'm going to keep my baby!" Our culture encourages single motherhood and accepts the lifestyle that spawns it; casual sex outside marriage, easy divorce and abortion. Purity, traditional life-long marriage and two parent families are no longer considered the norm or necessary for the nurture of children. Counseling in Pro Life Pregnancy Centers have focused primarily on encouraging single moms to keep their babies as an alternative to abortion. Adoption is often seen as a negative option.

The result has been an epidemic of single mothering. Back in the late fifties, 5% of children in the U.S. were born to unmarried mothers, and only one in ten of them chose to single parent. The rest either married or placed their child in a two parent adoptive family. Today 33% - 1.3 million children are born out of wedlock in the U.S., but less than 2% are placed for adoption. In the fifties illegitimacy was unacceptable. Today it is an 'accepted American way of families', wrote Washington Times Columnist Suzanne Fields in 2001. "Fatherlessness is rampant and Americans treat the crisis with complacency and indifference." The children are the ones who suffer the consequences. A child raised by a single mother is 6 times likelier to be in poverty than a child of married parents, 3 times as likely to repeat a grade or to become pregnant as a teenager, and 22 times more likely to be incarcerated than a child from an intact home. 85% of the current U.S. prison population was raised by single parents. Before Roe vs. Wade made abortion easily available, adoption was still a preferred option for unwed mothers. 400,000 babies were born out of wedlock in 1970, and 1 in 5 - 71,000 were adopted. In 1999, with illegitimacy risen to 1.3 million, only 23,537 infants were adopted.

In California single moms are eligible for Cal-Works, a welfare-to-work program with minimal income that requires her to place her baby in day care at 12 weeks, while she goes to work or school. A Health and Human Services case worker noted that 90% of their clients are single mothers, unwed or divorced. "We see the tragedies of the children daily," he said. In contrast, statistics show adopted children doing on the average better in school and later in life than children from intact biological families. Only 7 percent of adolescents adopted in the first year of life repeated a grade in school compared with 12 percent of those living with both birth parents and 30 percent of kids with a single parent. Adopted adolescents have higher self esteem than a national sample of teenagers and are much less likely to see their parents divorce (11% vs. 28%). Further, mothers who place their children for adoption are more likely to graduate, be employed and to marry.

As an Orthodox Christian Maternity Home our purpose is to provide an alternative to abortion and we thank God that our Martha and Mary House 'daughters' have chosen to give life and birth. But we do not encourage single motherhood. We encourage birth fathers to accept responsibility for their children, and if possible, together with the mother, make a commitment to marriage and family. We hope to teach them God's plan for the nurture and education of children in intact families with mother and father committed in a lifelong marriage. Our 'daughters' read the Bible and other Orthodox Christian material about courtship and marriage and what it means to be woman, wife, birth-giver and mother. They are challenged to consider how their own past choices contributed to the difficult situation they are in, and how their present choices may affect their future and that of their children. Spiritual and psychological counseling is made available to help them in the discernment process. We pray that they may come to see that their unborn children belong to God, and are entrusted to their care. That God has made them responsible as mothers for making the best parenting choice for their children.

Looking at Three Parenting Options.

We look at the pro's and con's of : **1: Marriage** to the father of the child (or other committed man) who offers to protect, provide and care for mother and child. He is invited to join in studying God's design for marriage and family, to attend pre-natal and Lamaze classes, and marriage counseling with an Orthodox Priest and therapist who joins us for weekly morning prayer.

2: Choosing a Christian adoptive family as a loving, sacrificial alternative to single parenting. We use video's and work-books on adoption, and work with Zoe for Life, or other Christian adoption agency and a local Christian adoption attorney who can provide contact with potential adoptive families.

3: Choosing to single parent. Martha and Mary House 'daughters' who choose to single parent, are offered counseling and are responsible for developing a plan for housing, work/school, transportation and child-care in advance of the birth of their babies.

For the 'daughters' who place for adoption our goal is to provide Orthodox Christian host families where they can experience a stable family life with boundaries, love and guidance as they work toward their goal in education or job.

Practicing Our Faith in Works of Love

We pray to be obedient to the needs God puts before us in daily living in a Maternity Home with its crisis and joys. In her Rule for the Martha and Mary Convent of Mercy in Moscow, Saint Elizabeth New Martyr wrote: "We realize that it is necessary to base all doing of spiritual works on gratitude to the Lord, in so far as He permits us to serve Him, through our neighbor...We should not count how many souls we have saved or how many people we have helped. We must rise above this suffering world to heaven and rejoice with the angels over one soul that is saved, over one cup of cold water given in the name of Christ.... *'In as much as ye have done it unto one of the least of these My brethren, ye have done it unto Me.'*"(Matt. 25:40)

What we do in Martha and Mary House we do in the name of Christ. As an Orthodox Christian Maternity Home we are set apart. Broken families are a norm in our society, fatherlessness is rampant in single parent families. There is a fullness in Orthodoxy that gives a potential for healing and building lasting marriages and relationships. The women who have come to us were not Orthodox, but life here is saturated with Orthodox prayers, our own and those of our prayer partners - friends, parishes and several monastic communities who are kept informed of special needs and remember us daily. We have icons in every room and observe Feasts and (modified) fasting. Father George Morelli, Ph.D., Antiochian Orthodox Priest, licensed psychologist and cognitive behavioral therapist, is on our Advisory Board and joins us for Morning Prayer once a week. He is available for conversation and counseling. Each of our girls gets an Orthodox Study Bible for their own and we read Orthodox literature about marriage and family life. Some of our girls choose to attend Orthodox Church. Two birth-mothers chose Orthodox Adoptive families for their babies this past year. They came from broken families and wanted their children to grow up with a father and mother. They felt Orthodox families were more likely to stay together. We pray for those

birth-mothers and adoptive families daily. One of the mothers is a catechumen, lives in an Orthodox Host home and will be baptized this Pascha. Glory be to God!

In the letter of Saint James we read: "Be doers of the word, and not hearers only' deceiving yourself...Faith without works are dead... I will show you my faith by my works."

Faith is a seed, planted in our hearts by the Sower. We are workers in the garden, cultivating, watering, weeding. Faith grows with the doing; seeds yielding fruit; ten-fold, thirty-fold, a hundred-fold.

Faith is a gift; a talent. Unless it is put to work it does nothing but rot in the ground. And worse; The Master trusted each of us with one or more talents, however small, and I am accountable for mine. The parables of the talents quicken the fear of God in me. Especially the fate of the steward who buried his one talent for fear he would not be able to use it to the satisfaction of His Master. He was called 'faithless and slothful'. Like him I am guilty of burying my talent, afraid it is not good enough, afraid of failure, not trusting that God, Who knows our limitations, has equipped us to do what He calls us to do. The little boy with his lunch of 5 loaves and 2 fishes brought what he had to Jesus, who blessed it and fed 5000, with twelve baskets left over!

In Orthodoxy the marriage between faith and praxis - the synergy - Christ the Bridegroom and His Church the Bride - is complete. "As Orthodox Christians, we profess the fullness of truth," His Beatitude Metropolitan Herman reminded us in his Archpastoral Message for Sanctity of life Sunday. "As such it is our calling to affirm the sanctity of life, not only with our words but also in our deeds....Engage in ministries which proclaim the sanctity of life to others who, without our efforts, may never hear the truth. Support those who have devoted themselves to wrestling with the spirit of our time which rejects the very "Lord, the Giver of Life." Comfort those who have fallen victim to abortion, offering a sign of divine hope and reconciliation. And strive, each and every day, to be an example of that joyful life so abundantly given to us as God's People, that those who have yet to experience God's countless gifts may "turn to Him and live". Working and praying together, may we open the eyes and hearts of those who have yet to embrace the Lord, the Giver of Life to see that life is indeed a sacred gift worth accepting and defending."

Our Patron Saint Elizabeth New Martyr also wrote: "It is easier for feeble straw to resist a mighty fire than for the nature of sin to resist the power of love. We must cultivate this love in our souls, that we may take our place with all the saints, for they were all-pleasing unto God through their love for their neighbor."

Asking the prayers of New Martyr Elizabeth and those of Saints Martha and Mary, we pray to grow in love through practice of our faith, serving Christ in those He brings to Martha and Mary House.