

Coney Island History Project Oral History Archive

Interviewee: Father Maxim Pliskov

Interviewer: Julia Kanin

<http://www.coneyislandhistory.org/oral-history-archive/father-maxim-pliskov>

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Julia Kanin: This is the Coney Island History Project, my name is Julia Kanin, and today we are talking to...

Maxim Pliskov: ... Father Maksim Pliskov.

JK: Tell us a little bit about yourself and how you came to be a priest?

MP: Well, you know, all this probably started in childhood. My grandmother sang in the choir. I am from Belarus. This is the Gomel Diocese. There is a small town Rogachev. And she sang there in the choir. And when we were coming to visit her with my sister, we always went with her to the church. And this love for the church, love for God, for singing, for the service of God, was instilled in me by my grandmother from my early childhood. The most interesting thing is that my service to God began at the altar. I was 11 years old. I started helping, began doing the job of an altar boy. It was a service to God and a help to the clergy in the church.

JK: Tell us about your role as a priest in the Orthodox Church, about your mission.

MP: First of all, it's being a missionary, of course. A sermon. A sermon, the word of God. A Sermon. We clergymen preach the word of God. The word of speaks about love. That is, the Lord is love. We must preach about love for our neighbor, about love for God. Actually, there are many areas of service. There is social service, and there is even prison service. There are many types of service. But first of all, it is, of course, service and preaching. A sermon, the word of God.

JK: How and when did you come to Coney Island?

MP: I was a visiting cleric of the Russian Orthodox Church. And I came to visit as a guest. The Lord ruled that I would meet Father Vadim and Father Vladimir. This is the Russian Orthodox Church Abroad. They told me about the House of Loving Work [as the St. John of Kronstadt House for the Homeless is called.] I was living at Brighton when I had arrived. And I found out about this House. I was invited to the liturgy. First – just to sing. They must have been checking me out. And then there's this interesting cleric, Father Nikadim [Abbot Nicodemus Balyasnikov]. He is an influential figure, and the director, of course. Naturally, he is the director. He is the secretary to Bishop Matthew of Sourozh, the Administrator of the Patriarchal Parishes in the United States. And they accepted me into their group. And the chapel located in this house is under the jurisdiction of the Russian Orthodox Church, Patriarchal Parishes of the Moscow Patriarchate. And it so happened that religious services were not always provided as Father Nikadim wasn't able to come. And, of course, he was also interested in having a clergyman here. The Lord ruled that since the end of August that I serve here and live here in the Church, in this House.

JK: When was the St. John of Kronstadt Chapel founded and how did it come to be in Coney Island?

MP: It was actually very difficult to find a place in Brighton for this project, for the House of Loving Work project. It so happened that it was here, the owner of this house made some concessions. Some conditions, some contracts were signed. And it just happened to be at Coney Island. Not anywhere else but here. That's how it happened.

JK: How long has it been around?

MP: How long? The House of Loving Work has been in existence since November 1, 2017. There was an anniversary recently. The keys to this house were given [to us] on the Feast Day of the Glorification of St. John of Kronstadt. It's such an interesting miracle because we'd been searching for a very long time, and praying, and asking. And that's how the Lord ruled that it was on this day.

JK: And what is the mission of the Giving Hope Foundation?

MP: Well, first, it is, of course, to help those in need, who not only need some material support, but also spiritual support. Because the Foundation itself has this Chapel: the Foundation includes this Church. There are services taking place at the Foundation. You know, it is very important, of course, to help the body when a person needs some material goods. But we shouldn't forget about the spiritual. There should be harmony. We live and take care of our bodies. So, for example, we want to eat – we feed the body, if we're sick – we heal it, if we get cold – we clothe it. But it happens we forget to take care of our soul. And the basis of this Foundation is just the spiritual formation. First, a person must recover spiritually, recover from this depression, from this despondency, to come to a normal spiritual state. Therefore, a prayer, a fast, some Orthodox deeds are of help here.

JK: Can you tell us about the icons and relics that are located here?

MP: Yes, there are many relics of Kyiv Pechersk saints in our church. [Note: The Kyiv Monastery of the Caves is an historic Orthodox Christian monastery which has been a preeminent center of Eastern Orthodox Christianity in Eastern Europe since it was founded in 1051.] They were donated by the Russian Orthodox Church Outside of Russia [ROCOR]. Father Vladimir Zgoba contributed to it in part. He is such a good priest, who helped and served, and visited, even while being a cleric of the ROCOR. He spiritually nourished, helped brothers from the Russian Orthodox Church, communicated with brothers, and also conducted liturgies, received communion. And so, he helped, and thanks to him the House of Loving Work and our Church in particular gives us an opportunity to worship the relics of these saints. Not every church, even in Belarus, has relics. This is a great shrine for the church. It's such an inspiration, I can probably say. And, of course, this cleric, Father Vladimir, he came not only to serve. You see, he helped with icons and literature. It's spiritual nourishment.

JK: As I understand, one of the missions is to help homeless people, those who happen to be in a difficult situation. How many homeless people are on the streets of Coney Island?

MP: Well, I've seen so many, but it's very hard to find anyone right now. We're trying to feed (the homeless), but it's already cold, and these homeless people are hiding in the subway cars. Or somewhere in other warm places. But in the summer a very large number of Russian speaking people were coming, and Poles, and Spanish speakers, and even Uzbeks. I think around 20-25 people were regularly coming to meal sites in the summer. These are people who really don't have a roof over their heads, who have to hide somewhere in this cold period, seeking shelter and hot food. Serving meals itself makes one feel like you're doing God's work. When you see these people, you start realizing that they really need it. But even more so, we have a conversation with them during the meal service. It's not just a matter of serving meals when you come and hand out [food]. We pray, we have our iconostasis [Note: portable icon stand], we bring out icons, we have a certain prayer rule. They pray with us standing in front of this iconostasis, in front of the icons (all of them are transportable). They pray with us, and then they ask questions. Some people have some routine problems, which the Foundation may try and sometimes is able to resolve. Some come with a spiritual question seeking advice from the priest. How to live in a particular situation, what to do, and how, for example, to pray correctly. People feel, after all, that the Lord has not yet left them, He gives them some chance. Maybe even it's in the face of the Orthodox Church, that here, come, we are here to feed you, and help you in any way we can, because the Foundation itself and the House is engaged in helping to get people into detox programs in rehabilitation centers. We're trying to arrange it, bring them there. Sometimes we see that some people who were coming for the meals are no longer here. And we're starting to worry, where did they go? Someone said that he has seen him [that person] there, and now that man started drinking again. We are worried about them, and if they are found, we persuade them to come to the House. We even let them spend the night here sometimes because this person may not come in the morning. We leave that person for the night, he sleeps here. We put this man in clean clothes, wash him and give him a bath. And in the morning the brothers bring this man to the detox program. Here we have a program nearby for people who are trying to overcome the malady of drunkenness and drug addiction. It's all right here. Somehow the Lord ruled that the program is located right next door. It's a small miracle, too.

JK: How many have already been helped?

MP: You know, there are actually a lot of graduates from this House. These are people who have already integrated normally into society, who work, got a job, some have already found housing. They visit us, tell their life stories, how the House of Loving Work, and the Church helped them, how the Lord directed them. There are even those who got married. Yes, it's very interesting. We have one man, Sergei, his wife is a Belarussian, but nevertheless, they found each other, they were able to find a house. A considerable, considerable number of graduates are already living a settled life thanks to the House, thanks to the Foundation, thanks to God, services, well, and the program, of course. You know, we don't even call it the House of Loving Work. We're saying it's a brotherhood here. A brotherhood. We're acting like brothers here. We support each other with brotherly love. When a man comes, and we see that there was something with him... We normally say that this is depression, but for a believer it is despondency. A man that has fallen into despondency. The devil possessed this man, this ailment overcame him. And we try to embrace him with brotherly love and talk to him. To help.

JK: Do you find people yourself or do they come to you?

MP: I've seen people coming here themselves. People already know that there is a House of Loving Work. They know that they can get into a detox with the help of the House and the brotherhood. They don't see a way out. Coming to an extreme point in their life brought them to this House. And they know that they can get help here. And there are some who we find. yes, we do. For example, Inessa was a woman who recently went through a detox. And I think she's been sent to rehab. She's a completely different person now in the photos. And we found her here at Ocean Parkway station. Different situations happen. Sometimes they come by themselves, sometimes we find them. We find them, communicate, ask, persuade, offer. Sometimes people say, "We'll think about it." And they come in a day or two. They no longer see further development of their lives. They have to stop somehow. They begin to realize, to understand. And the House, the brotherhood and the Foundation help them in this.

JK: Do they come and live here in the House of Loving Work?

MP: You know, first a person has to go through detox, rehab. And he can stay in the brotherhood if he would like to. But there are people who have gone through all these stages of rehabilitation and didn't stay here to live, but they come to the Church to pray, to sing. We have people who live in the shelter, and they come. They live there, lead a sober life, they abstain, but come to the church. For example, we had a very talented singer today with a musical education from Kyiv. He is from Ukraine. And he doesn't live in the House, but comes, helps us with singing. And there are a large number of such people.

JK: How does the Coney Island community help you?

MP: We have a number of people who contribute and help, help with products, and serving meals, and cooking. They come and help to make hot soup. They help with vehicles: for example, bringing the soup to the meal sites that are far away. Some do not cook here, in the House of Loving Work, but at home. There is a schedule. We have a cooking supervisor, Julia. And she makes a monthly schedule. People are coordinating their time with her and trying to create a comfortable situation for everyone. So, it would be convenient for them and the House and people are not left on the streets without at least hot food and some spiritual conversation. It is good that there are people who are not indifferent. Some even see homeless people on the street and try to provide some help. This is also very important. You know, people think they can give to a man who is sitting and begging on the street somewhere near the church. And sometimes we absolve ourselves of responsibility by giving a penny to this person. We don't bring this man to a store, "What do you need, brother? Come on, do you need shampoo? Let's get the shampoo. Do you need warm socks? Let's buy you some socks!" We give money to this person and he might be tempted to buy alcohol. Or, God forbid, drugs. We absolve ourselves [of responsibility] and give him a reason to be tempted by this. And the Lord says that we should be engaged, we should love – truly love, help – truly help, not just absolve ourselves of this responsibility. We shouldn't be afraid of that... yes, we say, a man is unclean, but so what? We are all created in the image and likeness of God. God created us the way he looks. What does that mean? He has two hands, two legs, a head. And that's already the reason why we have to love each other because we're made in the image and likeness

of God. So, it is very important for a person. Imagine, he wasn't just given money, but someone said "Come on, let's go, let's go, I'll help you, I'll buy you something. I'll buy this, I'll buy that." Maybe not everything, of course, you understand that it is impossible to gift and give him everything. But if possible, at least something. You know, there's a saying: "You can get a poor man a shirt by getting a thread from (each person in) the world." That's the way it is.

JK: How does faith help them along the way? And how important is Sunday's liturgy?

MP: A man cannot do anything in life without God. God himself says: "Without Me you can do nothing." And it's important for a person to know and understand that the Lord guides him in life and arranges his life only as a loving father. Yes, a man stumbles, he sins sometimes. But there is no victory without the fight. A man must always fight in this life. Fight not only against a disease or a desire but to fight against his own sins. Spiritual life is very important for a person. This is an important part of a man. As we say, a man has a body, spirit, and soul. The soul is immortal. And a man must take care of his soul. And worshipping nurtures it. A prayer. And the man who receives the sacraments, goes to confession, to the service... I see when these guys take communion, they start to communicate and speak differently. We make morning and evening rules in addition to the liturgy, in addition to worship. There is a morning prayer and an evening prayer in the Orthodox Church. And the guys are praying in the morning and in the evening. They begin the day with a prayer in the morning. They ask the Lord to guide them, to strengthen them on this day. They thank him for the day in the evening. And they ask for a peaceful night. All with prayers. All with prayers. You know, old people used to say: "you can't even reach the doorstep without God." Nothing can be done without him. And no matter how much a man tries to deny God and the existence of God, the Lord exists, and he will not cease to exist if a man denies it. These guys understand this, and they perform this service with such passion. They wonder, they worry. "Who eats today? And who will eat tomorrow?" They worry if there will be cups or bread. They are taking such an initiative. And you see that they care. But this worship, the reading of Evangelie [The Gospel], the instilment of this orthodoxy, the love for one's neighbor, it leaves an influence. People show this love for their neighbor. They care. We go to serve meals, we drive up, the guys say "Oh, that [person] is no more, no more. Where did he go? Where did he go? Such a pity. We have to call someone and ask where this person has gone." These are people who used to live like that. Here we have people who used to live on the streets, that's why they care. They worry because when it's cold they ask "where are they going to be? Why didn't they come to eat? Or maybe something happened?" This is true brotherly love.

JK: How often are meals served?

MP: Now we serve meals three times a week. We serve meals on Sundays, Tuesdays, and Fridays. There were also meals arranged by Georgians, the Georgian Orthodox Church, and by Catholics. Well, I don't know where they are now and whether they're still serving meals. I haven't seen them in a while. Well, we're doing it for three days. I think maybe we can do it more often in the future and cover more days.

JK: Do the brothers who live here in the House also help to cook and serve meals?

MP: Yes, first of all, of course, we try to get them [the brotherhood] involved in cooking and serving meals. We only serve meals with them because they know all these guys. They all know each other. They speak their language. Somehow, they understand their problems. A man who used to live there, on the streets, and now lives in the house, can understand the person who now lives on the streets. He's been through this. Either way, we're engaging them in this. We engage them in what we call obedience. There is obedience in a monastery when a man is doing some work. Well, this is a kind of service, I would say, social service. This is a service to God. To a neighbor and God. The Lord said "I was hungry, and you nourished me. I was ill and you came and visited me. I was imprisoned and you visited me." So, this service to a neighbor is a service to God. You have to see God in that person. And serve him as if Jesus Christ would have been in front of you.

JK: How has working at the Foundation changed and strengthened your faith?

MP: It's a unique experience really. This is the experience of service, service to God, service to one's neighbor. You know, there are all kinds of days. We're all human, we all stumble. Everyone has their own feelings, emotions. Maybe even some... well I can't say a moan, but sort of like... "Lord, help me, give me strength. I'm exhausted!" I get tired sometimes. It's hard because there are people who have been affected by that addiction, that desire. It has left this imprint on them. It's a spiritual and mental imprint. A man can be short-tempered. I can't say that they are aggressive guys, but there is that temper. A man can lose his temper in half a second! Then he remembers and calms down. He understands that there is a clergyman standing in front of him. And I say to them, "Guys, always remember that you are first and foremost Orthodox Christians. And you show what we are by the way you behave." They are trying. You can see they're trying. It's not just indifference, that one can come, live here and that's the end of it. And you can see that, you realize that they might be spiritually stronger than I am. They're fighting against it. They're fighting. There is this eternal fight against this desire. And that inspires me, too. I see these people falling down, I see them rising. I see their struggle. Eternal struggle. Daily struggle. And that probably strengthens my faith, too, because the Lord does not leave them and probably even shows me that "Look! What's the matter with you? Look at how people are fighting. And what do you have here? What's your problem? What kind of struggle do you have?" We should fight, but I don't have this spiritual fight against evil forces if I can say it. But these guys are trying. They fight against their desires.

JK: Are there any further plans for the development and expansion of the Foundation?

MP: Yes. We are looking for a place for worship at the moment. We have a small place here. People have started coming, people are becoming aware. We have new members. They're coming in small groups, and yet people have become aware. We have a project; the guys affectionately call it "Project Fazenda." [Note: The Portuguese term *fazenda* was popularized in Russia in the 80's and 90's after some popular Brazilian TV shows. It means a dacha, or large house in the countryside.] It's going to be a country house. There's going to be a farm. You know, we're going to instill love of labor. Maybe get some poultry, get chickens. Maybe we'll grow something. We're going to do this upstate. It's just a preliminary plan for the project. Now we are looking for a mobile home of some kind, which can be brought there, and we will be bringing guys there in

shifts. It's beautiful there. I was there yesterday, it's amazing. It's 2.5-hour drive, but it's incredible. The air is different. I think it can be beneficial for the guys. We have other ideas, this project, with a country house, with expansion and expanded meal service. We are also considering covering additional locations. We're scouting now, looking where people are gathering. There was one place in the summer, but we stopped going there. We check it out sometimes just in case someone is there. But nobody is there now. People left for warm places. Well, when it's warmer, we're going to resume our trips to that new place. We want to grow. I want to develop my ministry. Guys are interested, they like it. There are even guys who are working already. They have been here just recently, they couldn't make it, they went through this detox, came to the House of Loving Work, and have now found jobs. They dutifully try to help out at the House and even (volunteer) to come back and do some work.