The Habit of Social Justice:

Interview at All Saints' Monastery

Thank you, Gerondissa and Sister, for allowing me to interview you here at your beautiful monastery. To begin, how did you come to be here, both as a community and individually?

ST: I'll give you the *Readers' Digest* version. Our monastery was founded by Sister Ypomoni, who was born in 1917 in Cyprus, and wanted to be a nun from her early twenties. But as the oldest child, she had obligations to her family. She worked as a seamstress to pay her sisters' dowries. Eventually her family left Cyprus and settled in New York. She took care of her nieces and nephews, who were orphaned in early adulthood. So there were many hardships. It wasn't until the age of 80 that she found herself free, having kept this dream of being a nun. But every priest that she approached to help her found a monastery said she was crazy! Then Fr. Vasileios, now our chaplain, agreed to help. They formed a small committee and Sister donated her life savings to purchase the land that we now live on. Then they began building.

Soon after, Sister Ypomoni went to visit Cyprus, where she suffered a stroke which left her unable to walk. But she returned to America and construction continued. She watched her dream come true but was unable to participate. In 2007, the construction was finished, and the committee asked the Archdiocese for some nuns. Because—you know—they have a special closet, where they keep the spare nuns! (*Laughter*)

Gerondissa and I already knew each other from the [Hellenic College-Holy Cross Greek Orthodox] School of Theology. We went our separate ways after graduating, but both ended up in Brooklyn. Our spiritual father told the Archdiocese that he had some spiritual daughters interested in monastic life. We arrived in August 2009 and found out enough about Sister Ypomoni to ask her to join us here in Calverton and be part of our life. After a few big obstacles, such as a broken leg at the age of 91, she came in January 2010. We were tonsured together in April 2010. That's when Sister Ypomoni received her monastic name, which means "patience". She died here a few months later.

What an amazing foundation story! And what have you been doing since then? What ministries is the monastery developing?

ST: You want me to keep going?

GF: Sure, keep going.

ST: I love talking. (*Laughter*) Obviously we have our life of prayer. We say prayers throughout the day. Normally, we get up at 4:15 AM, and say the Midnight Office, Orthros, and the First Hour. Then we have the Hours throughout the day, the Ninth Hour

Note: In February, Gregory Tucker travelled from New York City to All Saints' Monastery, Calverton, N.Y. at the eastern end of Long Island. There he spoke with Gerondissa Foteini and Sister Theonymphi about the foundation of their community and their inspiring work with survivors of human trafficking.

and Vespers at 4:00 PM, dinner, and Compline. And then we do it all again!

When it comes to our projects, we always felt called to contribute to our local community. We didn't know how that would look and didn't have—

GF: —a specific plan.

ST: But we were open to whatever. When we first came, we learned about this organization called Birthright. They try to be supportive to women who are having a "crisis pregnancy."

GF: They provide free clothing, services and supplies. They help with rent. Whatever they can. Whatever the women need.

ST: We collaborated in a very small way, doing things like running a diaper drive. Then several times they approached us for help housing unmarried mothers. There's not much extra room here for additional people on the premises so we had to say no. But they kept asking and said that they would help us with money to set something up if we wanted to run it.

Left to right: Gerontissa Foteini, Sister Theonymphi, and Sister Ypomoni.

We asked a presbytera who lives near us in Southampton, who's also a social worker, what she thought. She said, "What about a home for women who are the victims of sex trafficking?" Our first reaction was, "What? What are you talking about?" All we knew was that sex trafficking happens, you know, elsewhere. Same for Presbytera Anastasia, until Professor Aristotle Papanikolaou from Fordham University—whose father is Presbytera's godfather—talked to her about social issues and kept asking why the church wasn't doing anything about it.

The three of us started having meetings to figure out what this would look like: What would we call it? Would we need a board? How were we going to fund it? That's where the HOPE Project came from. HOPE stands for housing, occupation, potential, and empowerment. The idea is to provide rent-free housing for a small group of women for two years, where they can live and get all the wraparound services they need, including mental healthcare, physical treatment, and education. We also provide them with employment through our business, Whitefield Farm.

A lot of people think that Whitefield Farm funds the HOPE Project, but that's not the case. The farm provides occupation for the HOPE Project women, so that they can get paid something. They gain specific job skills but also general skills, such as working well with other people, coming in on time, and being responsible for something. These are hugely important for these women, who have been controlled and exploited from when they were small kids.

These are women who are trafficked to the United States?

ST: No, but that's what we thought, too, in the beginning.

GF: Initially, we figured, we're going to have to find volunteers who speak Spanish, Chinese. But we discovered that Long Island is one of the worst places for human trafficking in America—and there's not one single social service specifically for human trafficking survivors. The statistic, I think, is that over 90% of these women are American-born citizens. Many were runaways or were in the foster system, and became commercially exploited for sex between the ages of 11 and 14. Their family may have been their original exploiters. They really have absolutely no skills or resources.

How do you first encounter these women?

GF: If a girl is caught prostituting when she's 16—and this is so weird to me, that she would be prosecuted at 16—she is put into the Department of Social Services. She then has shelter and a somewhat stable environment until the age of 21. But if she is over 18 when she is caught, it doesn't matter whether she's been criminally exploited from the age of 11. She is going to be charged with the crime of prostitution. She's going to go to jail and it's going to go on her permanent record and when she leaves the jail, she will have absolutely nothing. That's the group we work with.

Our plan is to buy a home nearby to house the women. This is a part of our struggle. . . .

ST: First of all, to buy a home out here on Long Island, even if it's a junker home in some town that people think is super ghetto, is expensive.

GF: We're talking about half a million dollars.

ST: Even for something that we'd need to fix up.

GF: But we may be able to rent to begin with.

ST: In the meantime, we're pressing ahead with Whitefield Farm, so we can begin to hire women from that group.

GF: To start, we'll work with other organizations, like domestic violence shelters. These organizations don't specialize in dealing with victims of human trafficking, but they do encounter the odd case here and there. Those shelters only receive government funding for each woman for 90 days maximum, so they need longer-term opportunities, which we can help with.

ST: We will be launching the occupation part of the HOPE Project soon. Hopefully we will begin hiring in March. But many of these women are scattered around. They lose their funding, so they go back to the streets and we can't find them again.

What needs to happen to make your vision reality?

ST: We need a huge donation—

GF: —or we need a lot of small donations. If 500 people each give $13 per month, that will cover the mortgage on a house, or the rent if we can't find an appropriate property. We've spoken to some potential donors and seen some properties, but it hasn't fallen into place yet.

Once you have the property, how will it operate? Will someone live there with the women?

GF: We've looked at various models. The best one seems to be that there

would be no "house mother," because authority figures are a trigger for many of these women—many of them have been abused by authority figures their whole life. We plan to let the women work out their own boundaries and rules. This model has been successful in other contexts.

Do you have any sense of why this issue is so invisible in America? People seem to know that sex trafficking happens in, say, Thailand, but not in Long Island. It doesn't seem to be on the social agenda at all. Is it to do with cultural anxieties around discussing sex?

ST: It could be. Also, many people think these women choose this lifestyle, so they ask why we should give them any options.

GF: The attitude we encounter from a lot of people we talk to is, "Well, if the prostitutes don't want to do it, they can stop."

There's no awareness of the structures of power involved.

GF: Right. We met a woman in Tennessee who is now running a housing program similar to what we want the HOPE Project to become. She had been in 13 foster homes as a child and was abused in every one. But I think you're right about the broader society maybe keeping it under the radar.

ST: A social worker also pointed out to us how the normalization of pimp culture contributes to the problem. That kind of behavior is accepted as something people choose. A rapper can go on stage with women in chains and that's thought to be OK. There's also a connection to pornography.

GF: We attended a presentation at the United Nations by an Interpol officer who works on internet pornography crimes across national borders. She said that online, 40% of pornography is child pornography. Sometimes the children are portrayed as adults, so you wouldn't even know that you're watching child pornography. It's not as though everyone is looking for that. Even more disturbing, 10% online is infant pornography. This problem continues to grow. She said her job is like playing whack-a-mole: you hit one target and instantly another one pops up. It's impossible to keep up with it.

It's hard to know what to say. This is obviously really important work. It seems to me that yours is a fairly unusual ministry in the Orthodox world, though. You've mentioned secular organizations that you've worked with, but I don't know of any monasteries doing work quite like this. Is that just my ignorance?

GF: We found other communities . . . but they existed four hundred years ago. (*Laughter*)

ST: There's a saint, Filothei of Athens—

GF: —Her feast day is tomorrow [February 19], actually—

ST: —She lived during the Ottoman era [1522–1589]. She was born to wealthy parents and was forced to marry—basically—this huge jerk. (*Laughter*) He became more abusive, but died soon thereafter, when she was only 17, leaving her a widow with a huge fortune. She founded a monastery in Athens dedicated to St. Andrew, where she became a nun and educated young women. She taught them how to do what was considered women's work, like cleaning, cooking, and embroidery. There were also a lot of harems in Athens then. Women

would escape and go to her, or she would buy them out of slavery, and then she would teach them skills to enable them to support themselves. That's really cool! In the end, she was murdered by the owner of a harem. They came and beat her during a vigil, and she died from the wounds a few months later. I mean, that's big. She was a woman doing something very unusual at that time, under the Ottoman yoke.

But . . . nothing today?

GF: There are communities in Greece that do outreach to women. But Orthodoxy in America is young. We don't have such variety in monastic life yet.

How do you negotiate issues around your Orthodox identity when doing this work? When I was looking at the websites of your two ministries—the HOPE Project and Whitefield Farm—it's not completely obvious, especially to non-Orthodox, that your work is run by monastics. Is that a conscious choice?

GF: With Whitefield Farm, definitely. We have lots of accounts with secular stores. For example, we supply a bookstore in Brookline, MA, which is in a heavily Jewish neighborhood, and I'm not sure they want to advertise that these products are handmade by Orthodox Christian nuns! With the HOPE Project, it's similar. This really confuses the Greek Orthodox community. They keep saying things like, "How are you going to find these Greek girls?" (*Laughter*) Obviously, we will take whoever is in need. There is no religious test. But, of course, our Orthodox faith has formed our perspective on treating the whole person. We don't just want to give someone housing. We also want to give her the tools to build a functional life and to contribute to society. It's important for us to use the models given by our Church and the examples we've found in the past.

Tell me more about Whitefield Farm. What is your vision there? How do you want to see this grow?

GF: With the farm, there is a business model! We don't just say, "Well, this is all in God's hands!" (*Laughter*)
ST: There's marketing to do, right?! Until now, we've done what I call the Summer Schlepping of Soap, across Long Island. There are 14 Greek churches and they all have festivals, great opportunities to sell soap. But it's really tiring, and there is no way for us not to be off schedule when the hours of the festival are 11 to 1—not AM to PM, but AM to AM!

I guess with a small community, you come home and still have all the chores. Nobody has cooked dinner for you.

ST: Right. So now we're trying to go for more wholesale accounts. We've tried a trade show. It will take time for the responses to come in. We've also reached out to stores we found through social media that we think would be interested in our products.

GF: We're really aiming at the boutique market. Our customers are asking about the sources of the ingredients, whether they're tested on animals, whether the packaging is recyclable.

So, changing direction a bit, presumably you already have or will have personal relationships with the women who enter the HOPE Project community. Have you figured out yet the extent to which your faith and monastic life will be foregrounded in those relationships? It seems to me that some women who have

been abused and prostituted probably imagine that the Church will be judgmental. As monastics—even as women monastics—you represent the institution, that "scary thing." What is your experience?

GF: When we first became nuns—oh, I don't know if I should say this . . .

ST: I'll say it! As soon as we put on our habits and went out in public, we noticed that minorities were the nicest to us.

GT: That's interesting. Particular minorities?

ST: There are a lot of Latinos here because there are a lot of rich people. The Latinos are the "help." There are a lot of black people, too. I'm telling you: I would rather be in their community than over in a white neighborhood in the Hamptons, where people assume that I'm a Muslim. I don't know why people treat Muslims as a problem. But the minorities around here are so kind to us. They go out of their way to say "hi" to us. They see us as a fellow minority.

GF: We talked to a trafficking survivor about whether she thought our habits would be an impediment to forming relationships. She said not for her and she didn't really think that it would be for other women. They don't see it as threatening.

ST: We were walking with a trafficking survivor who was going to address the UN. She said, "You guys are just so cool!" And I said, "Well, yeah. I mean, we spend a lot of time working on it!" (*Laughter*) I really think that if you're just genuine, people relate to that, no matter what. We're just going to offer love. That's all. Whatever sticks, sticks. Part of why we have a team is that we know that some survivors will connect better with Presbytera Anastasia, because she's a mom. Having a variety is important. Different priests connect with different kinds of people. It's similar.

This is really intriguing because people tend to say that the church must blend in if it wants to be successful in its mission. But it seems that you've found that the distinctiveness can help reach these different minorities. It's really beautiful and inspiring that the most downtrodden people in this area are able to connect to you.

GF: We were surprised ourselves.

ST: Some Catholics we encounter are, like, "Sister, I haven't seen a whole habit in 50 years . . . It looks good." It's nice! People thank us for just living this life, offering ourselves to the Church—not that we feel that we're doing anything special. These are non-Orthodox people over at Home Depot! (*Laughter*)

It's nine minutes until Vespers is meant to begin. Is there anything you'd like to add—apart from asking someone to give you half a million dollars for the house?!

GF: I would just issue this challenge: Maybe you have a calling to use your talents and strengths in a way new to the Orthodox Church to help your neighbor. Just because the Church wasn't trying to help victims of human trafficking four years ago didn't mean that we couldn't find ways to do that. Just because the Church isn't doing something now doesn't mean that you yourself can't be doing it. ✠