



Archimandrite Panteleimon Shatov: 'It is very gratifying that we have so many good and selfless people'

Archimandrite Panteleimon Shatov, head of the Department for Church Charity and Social Service, tells the editor-in-chief of Neskuchny sad magazine about the progress in collecting aid to victims of wildfires.

- Father Panteleimon, today's actions of the Church for collecting aid to victims of wildfires are the largest ones in scale in the modern history. How this aid has been organized?

- Immediately after His Holiness the Patriarch appealed to the people, we in the department began receiving clothes and other things for the victims. We reported about it on our website Miloserdie.ru and tried to spread the information as broadly as possible. Very quickly the cell of our building was filled up and we began to receive aid in our large yard. We called volunteers to help us sort out the aid, and people responded with extraordinary zeal. From early in the morning till late at night people come to us, bringing all that is necessary for victims. We have calculated: some 500 people bring aid daily and about 170 people remain with us to help sort out and load the aid. Initially we collected clothes and bed linen. When there were enough clothes, we began collecting drinking water, canned food and all that is necessary for firefighting including respirators, spades, gloves, pumps, as well as hygienic things. The situation keeps changing, and we try to react as quickly as possible.

There is a continuous flow of cars as Muscovites use their own cars to take aid to places where it is needed, namely, to the regions of Nizhny Novgorod, Ryazan, Vladimir, Lipetsk, Voronezh and Moscow, even to Mordovia 500 kilometers away. We have already sent out about 150 tons of aid.

The department worked round the clock during the first days of collection. Now we work from 9 a.m. to 9 p.m., though at night we always have people on duty, both volunteers and staff.

- The secular mass media have noticed an extraordinary congruence in the actions of the department and volunteers. How do you manage to achieve it?

- From the very beginning we tried to systematize our work with the incoming information, building a system from a chaos. For us it was the first experience of emergency operation. From the information provided by the Emergencies Ministry and the Public Chamber of the Central Federal District, we have created a computer database about concrete settlements, and a volunteer updates it online. Some volunteers became our 'intelligence agents'. They went afield on their own car, carrying a basic aid kit

including water, food and hygienic things, and made upon return a detailed report about what exactly was needed locally, how many affected people there were and where they were put up and with whom we should keep contact locally. Our database has 210 spots; they are small villages and aid stations in regional and local centers. As of today, our volunteers have been to 160 of them.

It seems to me that those who have gathered around the department are the best people in Moscow. They are people of diverse walks of life and ages including office workers, managers, businessmen, photographers, policemen, housewives, who want to help people in trouble in their spare time. They worked in smoke-stricken and burnt-out places in the hottest of the days. There are many young people. There are also people of very extraordinary appearance, for instance, punks.

Our today's disaster is nationwide. As His Holiness the Patriarch said on August 1 at Diveyevo, it 'concerns everyone, even those who are far from the fires and those who seem to be safe'. In this hard situation, it is very gratifying to see so many selfless people. We have a lot of examples to prove it.

One girl went on her jeep to the Ivanovo region, then came back, loaded oneself again and set off to the same place again and after that wrote a detailed instruction for an 'intelligence' volunteer. One volunteer went to the Tula regions, where there are affected villages too, together with his teenage son and brought back a detailed report as well together with a map. Once young people from an Emergencies Ministry unit came and asked, 'How can we help?' After the end of their shift the next day, they drove in a whole van with foodstuffs they clubbed together to buy. Somebody from the town of Kimry sent in a 20-ton truck from their company. We loaded and sent it to the Nizhny Novgorod region. One priest from Sergiev Posad comes every night with his wife to help load the aid. He also took clothes on his own car to homeless victims of fires in the Nizhny Novgorod region. Volunteers still remember him as he used to bring cold kvass to them and treated everybody to a lot of ice-cream and emanated goodness and joy in Christ.

In the department itself the work is divided: some coordinators are engaged in unloading, loading and sorting out the aid, while others are responsible for answering calls, issuing covering papers, registering all those who want to go to regions and supporting the database.

We seek to do all that is possible to support our volunteers. We always have cold milk and water for them, and our staff makes sandwiches for them. An amazing atmosphere has developed in the department. We give volunteers magnets with a motto 'There is love in this world', made by another volunteer for us. We can see that it's true every day.

- Are your helpers mostly believers?

- There are believers and non-believers as well as people of other faiths, Muslims, for instance. One volunteer wrote in his blog, 'I don't very much like the Church in general and the ROC in particular. But what can I say about the organization? To my mind, everything is all right. People work calmly. Everything is calm and business-like'.

Several times we arranged for all who wished to come an evening service at night on the meadow behind the department and prayed together for rain and victims. Many volunteers made confessions for the first time in their life.

A riot police's truck with aid collected by the department came to the local diocesan aid station in Ryazan. The church workers fed up the riot police workers immediately upon their arrival. Two policemen came in the church for the first time in his life. One of them proved to be non-baptized and said he wanted to be baptized. The old women in the church immediately surrounded him and proposed that he be baptized right away and that the priest be summoned. But the boy decided to put off the baptism till a more peaceful time.

In general, aid comes from everywhere, from companies and organizations as well. The Central Telegraph installed a multi-channel hotline for us (495) 542-0000; the Moscow Riot Police provided their trucks. Four of them were loaded by the department and three more by the Moscow police. Aid is provided by large companies: Deutsche Leasing East bought household articles worth of 1 million roubles; French Naval Durlevan bought 24 thousands respirators. Aid is coming from the Netherland and Ukraine...

- How is fund-raising going on?

- As of the morning of August 12 we raised 15 million 679 thousand roubles, 7 thousand dollars and 888 euros. Funds are coming to the department's account (published on the department's website). There is also an opportunity to make an SMS-donation to 7715 with the word 'pozhar'. It is a joint program with the National Charity Foundation.

Large donations were made on August 10 by St. Sergius' Laura of the Trinity and on August 11 by the Intercession Convent in Moscow (1 million roubles each). The Fund of Assistance to the ROCOR has transferred 5 thousand dollars; the Orthodox parish in Thailand over 1,500\$. Some 600 thousand roubles were raised during the last weekend alone. Besides, students of the Kaluga Seminary collected 105 thousand roubles and sent them to the department's account. Metropolitan Nikolaos of Messogaia and Lavreotiki gave us 200 thousand roubles from the Greek Orthodox Church. Along with large donations, people send small donations of 200, 500 or 1000 roubles. People trust the Church; that is why the Church has become one of the major coordinators of the aid.

Of the funds received we have already spent 2 million 730 thousand roubles to buy drinking water, foodstuffs, fire fighting appliances, such as fire hoses, fire extinguishers, monoblock pumps, masks, and respirators.

I would like to stress that we do not accept cash to exclude any possibility of abuse. Detailed reports about donations are published on the department's website. A donor will easily see that the money has been received. In the same manner we account for the costs.

I would like to emphasize it because, as we are told, there are already swindlers who call at people's places and collect cash for aid to homeless victims of fires on behalf of the department. The Church does not collect money at homes. Be on the outlook!

The only fund-raising campaign is held with the blessing of His Holiness the Patriarch throughout Russia in churches during the three Sunday services on August 8, 15 and 22.

- How is aid organized by the affected dioceses themselves to which His Holiness the Patriarch has given a special instruction? Indeed, it is not only Moscow that helps?

- Dioceses have set up working groups to raise funds and deliver aid. There are hotlines. As a rule, these are telephones of Diocesan Administrations. The diocese of Vladimir immediately allocated 100 000 rubles for aid to homeless victims of fires; the diocese of Lipetsk 70 000 roubles, as well as clothes and foodstuffs. The diocese of Voronezh and Tambov give designated aid depending on the needs of the victims. In the diocese of Voronezh, aid is arranged by a diocesan women's committee consisting of priests' wives. The diocese of Tula decided to send most of the aid to the neighbouring diocese of Ryazan. In the diocese of Nizhny Novgorod, an aid collection and distribution station has been arranged at the diocesan college in Vyksa, the most affected place in the region. We maintain operative communication with them.

- What kind of aid is needed now?

- The need for clothes and essentials for homeless victims of fires has been met for a start. Now there is a need for everything for firefighting including spades, protective clothing, monoblock pumps and fire backpacks. In the absence of heavy rains it is very difficult to contain fire and firefighters need help from volunteers. The quicker we cope with fire the fewer the homeless victims of fires. Yesterday we received a report from one of the regions that another village was burnt out because of the lack of pumps! So we have decided to buy pumps and equipment for extinguishing fire. There is also a need for canned food.

Besides, we very much need volunteers to coordinate office work and to sort out cargos, to receive calls, to renew the database from local reports, to register new volunteers with cars, to draft covering papers, to collect and send designated aid. We need 12 people ready to work in shifts: four people for each shift; the first one from 8 a.m. to 13 p.m., the second one from noon to 6 p.m.; the third one from 5 p.m. to 11 p.m. All those who wish to help with office work should call to my deputy Marina Vasilyevna at +79035357777.

The address of the Synodal Department for Church Charity and Social Service: Rimskaya Metro Station, Nikoloyamskaya ulitsa, 57, Build. 7.

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