Pilgrimage of Hope

January 2025
A Reflection
By Linda Dudar

St. Stephen's Pilgrims of Hope

We ask ourselves ...."How is it that this just happened?"
We quickly realize.... "It was simply meant to be."

Last November 2024, amid Christmas music preparation for liturgical services and celebrations, the phone rang. It was from Honolulu. Honolulu is not a call display that one sees very often.

Leo Hura was the familiar voice on the other end of the phone. Leo and I had worked together exactly 15 years ago. Leo's expertise was in media and production. He has always had a deep passion for the Ukrainian Catholic faith, for Ukrainian culture, and for helping others.

After a few minutes of catching up, Leo got right to the point. He asked if it would be possible for me to support him, and St. Sophia's Ukrainian Catholic mission church in Honolulu, with the first Polynesian Ukrainian Christmas Carol Festival on the Hawaiian Islands

I was not sure if Leo's "ask" was really "a thing", but somehow, I knew the answer.

Leo shared that over the last several months, the Hawaiian Islands had welcomed almost 2000 Ukrainian newcomers. The idea and intent of a Ukrainian Christmas Carol Festival would be to bring the Ukrainian community together in their new home, to celebrate familiar Ukrainian Christmas traditions, and to welcome others to join them.

Christmas is always a busy time for everyone, and especially for our St. Stephen's choir. There were many reasons why Leo's invitation would be declined. But when this "ask" was brought forward to the choir-at-large and to Father Janko, the resounding answer was, "Yes, we want to help! How can we help? We should help! And what a perfect surprise, and beautiful Christmas present, it would be from our St. Stephen's in Calgary to the Ukrainian people in Hawaii!"

Suddenly, there were many questions to be answered. How many choir members would participate? Where would everyone stay? What church would hold the carol festival?
And the bigger question still lingered: "Was this meant to be?"

This is where "hope" begins!
Yes, this would be our "Pilgrimage of Hope",

Our Calgary St. Stephen's choir family is known for its legacy of faith and commitment to our own parish and beyond. The choir's vocation is always to sing, to praise God, and to serve others. Would it also include singing, praising, serving, and flying across the ocean to do this? And to go where we did not know... to do what others may not do.... for those we have not met before?
Apparently..... "Yes!"

Very quickly, plans were in place in Hawaii. The carol festival would happen during the Malanka celebrations in January. It would be held in a church, and would be open to anyone, and everyone, who wished to participate. Thanks to Abbott Damian Higgins (an iconographer and friend to many at St. Stephen's), the carol festival would include a presentation on iconography.

In a short time, over 20 choir members and spouses, signed up to travel to Hawaii, accompanied by Father Janko and Ana, and Subdeacon Bill and Theresa. As plans unfolded, a local retreat centre would be available for lodging for the pilgrims and a beautiful church was secured for the festival, thanks to the generosity of their local Catholic Bishop.

Spreading the word through Hawaii would transpire through media announcements, website notifications, and ongoing word-of-mouth through the local Hawaiian churches.

Thanks to five choir gentlemen, arrangements for transportation, including vans and drivers, were in place.

And our gratitude to Fr. Mark Bayrock, for his help with music, communication, and his never-ending support for St. Stephen's Choir and our parish.

Ladies and gentlemen..... we are going to Hawaii.....for real!

And so, we travelled.... with "hope" in our hearts, with Bishop David's blessing, and with the supportive prayers of many. We also tucked in a choir book and a Ukrainian shirt.

Our "hope" would be:

1. To promote our Ukrainian Catholic faith by celebrating our liturgies and Christmas traditions.
   (Thank you, clergy and choir!)
2. To share our gift of music... in song and story.
   (Thanks to our choir and incredible M.C.s, Father Janko and Subdeacon Bill.)
3. To share our energy and love in supporting the growth of St. Sophia's mission parish. (Thank you to our choir and those who joined us from Ukraine and St. Sophia's parish.)
4. To share our traditions and Ukrainian culture.
   (Thank you to Leo, Tim D. and their local Bishop.)
5. To share our hospitality by welcoming Ukrainian newcomers to join us as we share Kolyady.
   (Thank you to everyone.)

And that is exactly what transpired!
However, there was one more surprise.

This surprise came from Fr. Nectarios of the Russian Orthodox Church in Honolulu. It was a "welcome", and "an invitation" to join him..... to pray, to witness and to be anointed with the streaming myrrh of the Icon of the Blessed Virgin Mary, the Wonderworker.

The prayers were for peace in the world and for all those impacted in Ukraine and Russia, as well as many other war-torn countries throughout the world.

We were reminded that not only at Christmas, but every day in our lives, the Blessed Mother is there for everyone, and the Holy Theotokos lovingly waits for us to be present with her anywhere in the world.

There were, and still are, no words to describe the miraculous flow of holy myrrh from a simple icon. How is it that we can see, with our very own eyes, the streaming myrrh on the face of the Holy Theotokos and watch it pour from its frame onto the heads of those who await her blessing?

Truly wonder and awe! Praise be to God!

And now we are back in Calgary and wonder what more God has in store for us.

It happens to be another invitation.
This time it's an invitation to join Bishop David on a "Canadian" Pilgrimage of Hope to the Bishop Velychkovsky National Martyr's Shrine in Winnipeg, May 2 – 4, 2025.

Pope Francis has designated 2025 the Jubilee Year of Hope and encourages all faithful to embark on pilgrimages.... to come together, to pray, to sing, to be a witness of hope, to be strengthened, to renew our faith, to love, to be community, and to remember who we are to each other.... and to others.

We in turn extend this invitation to you..... to join Bishop David... and all of us.... in Winnipeg in May.