

"Country Club or Church? What's the Difference?"

Every "inactivity" must have an equal and opposite activity. For every missed Sunday, there must be some other activity which has taken its place. For every dollar not spent on Stewardship, there must be thousands of dollars being spent elsewhere. For every opportunity to help someone in need, there must have been countless acts of tending to our own. Will we be ready in two months to begin the planning of our future Church Building, or will we be involved in some other activity?

If there is to be a future for the Orthodox Church in America we need to evaluate where we have placed our hearts. Orthodox communities across the nation are suffering from the disease of an identity crisis - "Country Club or Church?" This disease surfaces in bad habits which are found in all Churches. The following are just some of the symptoms.

- Need a Baptism or Wedding "performed ?" - Time to send a nominal check to the Church.
- What are Your dues? - Time to send the minimum we can get away with.
- Charity Ball to benefit someone else? - Charity begins at home.
- Stewardship? - With all my financial needs I really don't have much left over.
- Volunteers needed? - 'Someone else, who's not as busy as I am will help.
- Church begins at 9:30 a.m.!- What time will communion be served.
- Make a pledge to build a Church? - A great benefactor will come forward and build it - I don't have to make a sacrifice.

The First Church Community in Jerusalem had only one thing - FAITH. It was because they believed in Jesus as the Messiah that they worshipped Him as the True God. It was their FAITH in Christ as God and Savior that inspired Christians to leave their vocations, family and friends in order to fulfill the WILL of GOD. This experience of Christ, Risen from the dead, present in the Eucharistic Assembly changed their lives and DIRECTED them towards GOD'S KINGDOM. If every Sunday at the Creed we confess that: "I believe in the One, Holy, Catholic and Apostolic Church," then before we bring condemnation upon us for our hypocrisy, we ought to strive to encounter the "One, Holy, Catholic and Apostolic Church" on its terms and not on our own.

The terms of the Church have always been those set by Christ Himself. Jesus the Christ, did not assume human nature, suffer the humiliations of a 'rejected king' and be nailed to a cross so that we may come to Church and be comfortable. The saving work of Christ (which He continues today in the many "rebirths") sets the agenda for the Church and its mission to the World. The focus was always to bring Christ to the World. To teach, preach and witness "Christ in our Midst" this is what Church history reveals to even the most casual reader. To accomplish this lofty mission we must imitate the "Author" of our faith and bring our entire lives to Church on Sundays as "living sacrifices" and not as people seeking to be served.

A sacrificial life involves keeping the Fasts, celebrating major Feast Days, Praying, Reading the Word of God, coming to Church at the beginning of the Liturgy, Confessing our sins, attending Great Vespers on Saturday evenings and serving the Church when help is needed. It further means putting up with uncomfortable seats and a crowded Church. It takes a sacrifice to awaken early on Sunday mornings so that not even one prayer of the Liturgy is missed. A sacrificial life means reaching deep into our pockets (our lives) every Sunday and feeling that what we are offering is a sacrifice that means something!

All of these things make us "Orthodox in Good Standing." The expression means literally, "standing in" not outside the Church. The irony of the "Country Club" community is that there will always be factions and rival "ideas" as to how the Church ought to be run. As any Country Club, it's members dictate what ought to happen and because we all have different desires and needs conflicts arise. In a Country Club everything is there to serve our needs. Comfortable pews, ethereal choirs, state of the art facilities, a large "endowment" which takes the concerns about stability away. It is all very comfortable and all very available in any Christian denomination. The latest is the so-called, "theatrical ministry" which brings the Gospel to life through song and dance all under the lights of a stage that would rival the best on Broadway. I believe that the Orthodox Church is safeguarded against "Christianity-Light" as long as the faithful submit themselves to an authentic Orthodox Spiritual struggle to achieve perfection.

We don't run the Church but, rather, we ought to allow the Church Tradition to guide us. When "personal agendas" decide what's important, then the result is a distortion of that Tradition. By regarding "Sunday School" as optional, arriving late to services and inconsistent Sunday attendance we have helped to form a "Country Club" mentality which says: "what's in it for me?"

If there is to be a future for the Orthodox Church tomorrow we need to take it seriously today. We need to stop asking for things from the Church and start offering ourselves to Christ.

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