

Parishes Need Christ in Order to Grow

“Human pride, in its individual, social or racial expression, poisons and destroys life in the world at large or in the small communities in which we live.” (Archbishop Anastasios Yannoulatos, *Mission in Christ’s Way*)

An anthropology professor once said, “America is not really a melting pot it is more like a salad bowl.” The Church can be understood as a melting pot. The flame which melds people from every race and even creeds into a unified congregation is God’s love. Christ taught that we are a new people, who have been grafted into the body of Christ and adopted as the children of God. Life as a living relationship and communion with God is realized when human pride is transformed by Grace into universal love. Archbishop Yannoulatos writes that, “The realization that ... the plan of God is to ‘unite (gather together) all things in Him, things in heaven, and things on earth (Eph 1:10),’ compels the believer to free himself from provincialism and narrow mindedness so that he may live in longing and prayer for the gathering together of all things in Christ. This deep longing cannot remain simply on the surface, as sentimentality and anticipation, but is expressed as active participation in a living call, in the continuous growth of the ‘mystical Body of Christ.’” When God is realized in our hearts as the Father of us all He appears in the form of universal love.

This divine love is a compelling force which creates the desire to pray for and reach out towards those outside our Greek Orthodox communities. The petitions of the liturgy and the prayers of the priest affirm that the mission of the Church is towards the entire world and not just the present members. There is an alarming amount of hatred and polarization today that is deceptively disguised as a self-righteous and even pious indignation leveled by Christians against everyone and everything (ideology) that is labeled as “not Christian.” One might call people who espouse such a view secularist Christians. The attitude they convey is an absence of love which obliterates humanity and is a denial of the gospel of Jesus Christ.

It is a manifestation of human pride as the new heresy of secularism, the choosing of a particular way seeing others that is in opposition to the Truth. Archbishop Yannoulatos writes: “But the most crucial subject for modern Orthodox theology is the phenomenon of secularism, the absorption of man by the enticements of ‘the world’ and of ‘this age.’ Egocentric anthropocentrism (the assessment of reality through an exclusively human perspective as opposed to Christ’s) by ignoring all transcendental values (those values empowered by faith which take us beyond human limitations, like loving one’s enemies), draws into its whirlpool the universal thought and consciousness, the criteria for evaluating life, and all social, political, economic and cultural structures. This is a new type of “heresy” which radically alters the whole meaning of the world and of man.”(Yannoulatos, *Mission in Christ’s Way*) Secularist Christians adopt an “us” versus “them” mentality and fail to see the entirety of humanity as the object of conversion

and mission or even worse, they see humanity as the enemy of the very gospel that we are called to share with them.

In his book, *Mission in Christ's Way*, Archbishop Anastasios notes the complex existence in the modern world of various religious systems which the Church is called not to condemn or ignore but in fact "to testify to the Gospel of the grace of God." (Acts 20:24) He makes a positive statement of how to perceive the various religious systems and ideologies today. "To most Orthodox, religions represent humankind's persistent search for the highest reality and the profound mystery of his existence. They bear some traces of God's manifestation (theophany), but also many signs of deterioration and demonic influences. They are, to my mind, akin to accumulators of vital experience, intuitions, and sublime inspirations that have been charged with the rays of the Sun of Righteousness. They have helped many people to have a little light, or at least a reflection of the light on their path." It can be said that all of the various forms of searching for a higher reality are a God-implanted desire embedded within the fiber of a human soul that is manifested as a thirsting.

I was recently reminded of this when watching the movie *Blood Into Wine*. Hearing a former rock star (Maynard James Keenan) describe the experience of wine-making in Arizona was like listening to a thirsting soul wanting to transcend to a higher reality. At one time, music was his tool for inner growth but once he progressed to a point, he yearned for something more. For him it was creating wine. Christ took water and changed it into wine in order to make the festive celebration complete because of what was lacking – they had run out. Entering into the abundant Life is ultimately a quest to quench inner thirst for a life in communion with God.

Greek Orthodox communities have great potential for becoming heralds of transforming Churches from salad bowls into melting pots. Much of this potential is embedded in the character of immigrants who left hopeless poverty and ascended to the highest positions of leadership in America. Communities change their perspective when priests, supported by their Metropolitans take their pastoral responsibility seriously. "The Church grows both by acquiring new members and by enabling those already baptized to acquire a deeper experience of the mysteries of life and love." (Yannoulatos) This means the pastoral responsibility of the Church is always directed towards the faithful living a life in Christ and His Holy Spirit so that they can in turn have the faith, desire and longing to want to grow the Church. The most simple and effective change that transforms communities into committed participants in the life of Christ is offering an engaging worship experience that is in the language of the people. Spectator liturgies create passive nominal Christians. After seventeen years of ministry in one place, I have witnessed countless examples of non-Greek Orthodox spouses embrace the Greek Orthodox Church once they participated in a Liturgy that was conducted in English with people in the pews actively participating. These "lifelong catechumens" did so even after having come faithfully for over 40 years as "non-communing"

stewards of the church. In order to acquire a deeper experience of the mysteries of life and love, worship must become a place where a thirsting people find refreshment and inspiration to transcend the mundane secularism.

Church growth is limited most by the priest's lack of support and in some unfortunate cases lack of concern for the spiritual development of his flock. As long as the spiritual well-being of the faithful is neglected, communities will be plagued with all the "problems." There are many communities who say they cannot afford a second priest but in reality they cannot afford not to have one. A single priest in a community of 500 to 1200 families cannot tend to the spiritual needs of a parish effectively enough to make any noted progress in the growth of their communities. If it was effective, there would be new parishes being planted nearby existing parishes because they simply have outgrown their facilities. When faith develops, the primary reason for coming to Church is to quench spiritual thirst and everything else changes. Newcomers encounter Christ-filled witnesses to the reality of a risen Christ. When they are welcomed with open hearts and arms, the church grows. When people from different races actually see a mix of races in the pews, the church has become a melting pot.

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