

Is The Greek Orthodox Church In America Dead Or Alive?

The Renewal of Orthodoxy in America

In the form of a question, our Lord warns us that towards the end of human history many shall fall away from the church. He asks in Luke 18:8, "...when the Son of Man comes, shall He find the faith on the earth? (Lk. 18:8)." The Orthodox New Testament translates this verse not as "faith" but "the faith." In other words, shall He find His Church, the Orthodox Church which He planted as *the* faith, *the* truth, as *the* light of the world? The passage is a warning to us. St Cyril comments on this passage and says, "The Lord tells us that the love of the multitude shall be made cold, and that in latter times some shall apostatize from the faith, giving heed to deceiving spirits and teachings of demons, speaking lies in hypocrisy, having been branded as to their own conscience." The forewarning is made in the context of a teaching that the Disciples of Christ must be people of continual and vigilant prayer. Living a life of prayer protects Christians from falling away from the true Life.

Our Lord said, "It is needful to be praying always, and not to be fainthearted (Luke 18:1)." If communal prayer (as is done in Sunday worship) is lacking, everything else in the life of the Church suffers. A Church not sustained by prayer cannot know its mission and purpose. Consequently, a community becomes lukewarm towards God and deaf to His calling for a Church to move forward. Without the guidance of the Holy Spirit, Christians fail to fulfill their prophetic role in the world. The result is self-guided communities that are subject to deception, false teachings, and lawlessness – an anything goes mentality. Communal prayer not only unites the members of the Church with the mind of Christ, by God's grace it makes it possible for us to cry out, "That with one mind and one heart we may say, ...One is holy, one is God, Jesus Christ, and holy Spirit, the trinity, one in essence and inseparable." Faintheartedness will cripple a Church.

In looking at the Greek Orthodox Church in America over the past several decades, the lack of growth raises several questions. Perhaps many attribute the lack of growth to the fact that the Orthodox Church is not "Christianity Light" - the idea of working out one's salvation with fear and trembling is not always appealing to contemporary Christians today. It is much easier to attend the latest mega Church, receive an inspirational message and go on with life never to hear a call to struggle against sin. No longer can we be satisfied with this explanation. It seems that at the root of a lack of growth is the *soil* of our souls.

The Orthodox Church has kept the message and *the* Faith intact, the problem confronting us today is the lack of a desire to bring it to the American culture. The statistics are grim. The Archdiocese claims 1.5 million faithful Greek Orthodox Christians in the United States. The Yearbook of the Archdiocese says, "There are 540 parishes, 800 priests and approximately 1.5 million faithful in the Greek Orthodox Archdiocese of America." 1.5 million, faithful Greek Orthodox in the United States means that the

average church would have a membership of 2,777 individuals. Of course, perhaps every Easter and Christmas these "faithful" do show up to be counted; but is this who we are?

A pledging Steward has become the barometer for measuring church membership today. The members of parishes who are registered as stewards generate the mailing list for our national publication, [*The Orthodox Observer*](#). The current circulation of the *Orthodox Observer* is 140,000. This translates into an average Greek Orthodox community of 260 families. In reality, the average membership (individuals) in a Greek Orthodox Church is probably around 500-700, which would translate into around 350,000 faithful or active Greek Orthodox in the United States.

In the official Registry of the Archdiocese, which records Baptisms and Chrismations for the past 25 years, the picture does not improve. The first shocking statistic is that baptisms peaked in 1976 with 9,955 recorded. In 2000, the annual number of baptisms declined to 7,300 - a drop of 27%. Secondly, over the past 25 years, the number of converts joining the Greek Orthodox Church has remained the same at 912 per year. This means that of the 540 parishes each receives less than two converts a year. This is not a growing Church. The onus is on us to answer why this is the situation. A great deal does depend on *how we do Church today*. There are several things, which work against growth in our communities. The Greek Orthodox communities are in need of renewal and commitment to living the Gospel of Christ.

The Church has one goal and it is to cultivate faithfulness to God. Fr. Hopko prophetically offers the first three principles of creating a renewed faithfulness in the Orthodox Church:

First Principle: We must compel ourselves to put Christ, and only Christ and His Gospel, at the center of our concerns, and do only that which is pleasing to the Holy Spirit and according to the mind of Christ (Acts 15:28, 1 Cor. 2:26).

Christ and His Apostles went to the Synagogue and participated in worship at specified times, the Gospels also record that Jesus went alone to pray on many occasions. In order to make Christ the *center of our concerns*, Sunday worship and personal prayer remain as *the way* it is accomplished. Worshiping on a regular basis and praying at home, leads to the reading of scripture, experiencing renewal in Confession, attending the study of Scripture, reading the lives of the saints, doing good works, and the loving of one's neighbor. Christ has become the center of one's life, when St. Paul's words become our own. He said, "I have been crucified with Christ (or I am wanting to be); it is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me; and the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me (Gal 2:20)." The life of Christ becomes a living reality when prayer and worship remain the center of what we do as Christians living in the world.

Second Principle: We must practice conciliarity, the principle of working together, which is one of the defining truths of authentic Orthodoxy. Working together and dying to our own narrow, selfish interests for the sake of Christ and the Gospel.

There cannot exist an “us” versus “them” mentality in our Churches. Tragically, when Christ is not at the *center of our concerns*, the cancer of divisiveness results because personal concerns come to the forefront of what individuals do. Contentions result that destroys all that is good, divisiveness places people at odds with one another, jealousy shows a lack of peace in Christ, and factions that create "camps," or "alliances," that spoil and create uncooperative communities. Zealous convert priests and converts desire to create “perfect” culturally neutral Orthodox communities completely disconnected from neighboring Orthodox communities. Furthermore, Orthodox bishops unknowingly (or even worse knowingly) exacerbate the problem by listening to malcontents from one jurisdiction and start missions down the street from their own churches in the name of creating an “American Orthodox Church.” Instead of transforming the influences of our secular protestant “I do it my way” Christian culture, we perpetuate it. Christ’s call for the Church to be one – as God is one can never happen under these circumstances.

When Orthodox bishops begin to work together on all aspects of Church life then there will be a chance for an administrative unity in America. Presently the road to ordination differs from one jurisdiction to another. In one Church, an Orthodox priest has graduated from an accredited Orthodox School of Theology and the Orthodox priest next door has a Protestant or Roman Catholic education. The issue of perpetuating any particular cultural heritage at the expense of alienated those from other cultures is a heresy to be done away with. There is a way to respect cultural influences without alienating parishioners – it happens when the Gospel comes first.

Third Principle: We must abandon the lie that we can live by Christ's Gospel and still retain all the riches and glories of our respective ethnic cultures and identities here in America...keeping the priorities straight is of immense importance for the universal mission of Orthodoxy in America.

The final change that must occur in the Greek Orthodox Church in America is that the Gospel of Jesus Christ must take precedence over preserving watered down aspects of particular old world cultures. Whether they are Hellenic, Russian, Romanian, Antiochian or Serbian, the walls we create by worshiping in a language very few understands hinders the Gospel. The vast amount of Christians who are marrying into Orthodox families will embrace the Orthodox Church the moment they hear it in their own language and they encounter Christ in the people who worship there. Historically, the Gospel of Christ has been a transforming influence on culture. Everyone brings with them a particular culture. All cultures must respect each other’s and find unity in serving Christ, Who makes us one.

The way in which we *do* liturgy is perhaps the most important change that needs to take place today. A choir that performs for congregations who sit passively and listen robs them of an opportunity for authentic worship. Priests need to be aware of who is *not* in their pews and adjust how much Greek they decide to use. In addition, priests need to be aware of who *is* in their pews. On any given Sunday, a significant percentage may be protestant, catholic and even non-Christian. When giving sermons are we always sensitive when we speak about those who are on the outside? Liturgical renewal also means *knowing* what we are doing at a liturgy.

Liturgical education of the faithful needs to become a priority for individuals and for priests if there is hope for the future. Presently, any Orthodox Bookstore has resources available that can help the faithful understand their role in worship. Classes are offered as well that need to be utilized.

In the words of Archbishop Lazar Puhalo recently said, "The Church needs to get out of the restaurant business." Many Orthodox communities have turned to the restaurant business (Food Festivals) in order to fund ministries that they are personally responsible for- this is fundamentally wrong! We are called to be stewards of God's Church. It is our responsibility to support it with our time, talent and treasure and not to go into the pockets of others to do so. Churches in the United States that rely 100% on Stewardship to fund the ministries of the church are rare but it is not impossible - Assumption is such an example.

Any chance at renewing a fainthearted Church begins with repentance. When Jesus Christ returns will He find *the* Faith on the earth? The Greek Orthodox Church in America has made many advances in making the Gospel a priority. The Gospel is at the forefront of the Clergy-Laity Assemblies and on the lips of our Metropolitans and Archbishop. Many of our communities are alive with a spirit of the Gospel and Christ's message of love. May our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ take from us all faintheartedness and renew our spirits within us!

+ Fr. Andrew