

**Editors' Note:** *This article was sent to us from a Priest within the Greek Orthodox Archdiocese of America. He gave us permission to publish it with the understanding we would not disclose his identity. He is personally known to many and we find his article to be of value. He is not the first priest to have done this. We welcome contributions from others as well.*

## **The Challenge of Relevance within the Greek Orthodox Church**

*by Fr. XXXXX XXXXX*

As of late, there have been many reports of a dwindling Parishioner base within the Greek Orthodox Church in America (GOA) with subsequent financial implications. To be fair, this has been seen in other religions and denominations as well. But that larger scope is beyond the purpose of our discussion. Our culture in America has seen a big move away from its Judeo-Christian roots. But for our purposes of highlighting some issues within the GOA, there are consistent themes that surface across our country. These are not mere “trends” -- some Hierarchs of the GOA stated they believe these will just solve themselves-- but tangible and addressable issues that affect the wellness of our Churches in the United States. Hopefully this will help identify a few of the issues

### **The Problem**

It is no surprise to many that apathy and neglect are commonplace. Inconsistent messages are heard weekly from different clergymen – especially in parishes where Clergy transition frequently. Overbearing Fundamentalist messages are loaded upon the shoulders of parishioners who are not monks – but lay parishioners are being told they need to live like monks. Overbearing pressures are transferred to parishioners from some Priests and Lay-leaders who are either burned out, or have a savior complex which masks their overbearing ego.

In a word: *Inspiration is lacking.*

The scene in any Greek Orthodox Church in America is familiar: a great number of people coming in to the Church when the Liturgy is more than half over. The easy thing to do is to blame them. The easy thing to do is to objectify them as people who are not really concerned about the Liturgy or their salvation. Add to this number the *many more* that are not even showing up. The same response is given – blame them and their lackadaisical commitment to Christ. Yet, if one were to actually ask those people about their commitment to Christ, they would say the same thing anyone would: *“although my commitment to Christ can improve, I am nevertheless committed to Christ as He is God and our Savior.”* But no one is asking them. *That* is part of the problem. Perhaps then our Clergy Leaders (at all levels) need to ask themselves: what did they as leaders do wrong? Or, what can they as leaders do better? Why would someone want to ask these questions? *Hopefully so as to better understand how they can better connect with those souls entrusted to their care.* Connecting with those people, and connecting with people in general, is the essence of relevance. Relevance is important, but it is missing in many ways. We need to discuss this for the health and wellness of the ministries of our Orthodox Church.

### **Considerations Regarding Our Clergy**

From the perspective of someone who is a member of the local Church, one realizes that Priests change (i.e., transfer from one parish to another). This happens more often than is generally perceived. By contrast of their attitudes, many times we see that the arriving Priest has his own perspective and message which is different from the one who left. With every new Priest arriving at a Parish, the Parish

members just don't know who they are going to be dealing with. Sometimes the difference in message makes one question if there even is a cohesive sense of community throughout the GOA and especially at the local level. You never know who is leading the community. Is he going to "like" someone because he/she is divorced, a woman, liberal, conservative, rich, poor, politically in or out, etcetera?

A few other factors should be considered as well. Personal connections between the Priest and the Community become handicapped when you have frequent Clergy transitions. Some parishioners even become hesitant to want to get to know him because he might be transferred tomorrow. The situation is far different than the canonical directive that states that a Priest's assignment to a parish is for life, because being a "F/father" is for life. Time is a key factor to many. Is this new Priest going to stay here, or is he leaving in a couple years? Why would one want to entrust themselves to someone who is going to leave soon? Time is also important because the character and the message of the Priest becomes clearer as time unfolds. Is he loving or a hard-nosed fundamentalist that seeks one prospect for the local Monastery?

Also influential are the words and opinions of others. While we should make up our own mind based upon the facts that we ourselves have found, the fact remains that good reports, or bad reports, influence us. Also what is necessary is that parishioners respect the head of their parish. Whatever the cause of the handicap, it creates a disconnect. When a disconnect happens, then it follows that the sense of relevance for the Parishioners is undermined because the lack of cohesiveness and stability is undermined.

It is no surprise that many parishioners consider that relevance is vital to them in order to move them to make the commitment to attend church regularly. One parishioner reported that she feels such a wonderful sense of community *outside* the Church (amongst her fellow Greek Orthodox) which she can not feel *within* the Church (because of money problems, staff problems, and/or problems amongst the administration of the Church or its various organizations). To put it bluntly, she does not need that drama in her life. She represents many who have the exact same feelings. While her statement "If all you see is chaos, why go back?" might be situation-specific to one particular parish, it does speak an important truth: *the culture of the local parish matters*. While we can intellectually rationalize this as missing the real point of having Holy Communion and worshipping God, *we would be foolish to think that the "culture" of the local parish does not influence people*. It does. Healing should start within the Church Community, but all too often it is the Church Community that is wounded. At times it appears to be wounded to the point of being unhealthy, even toxic.

The local parish should be a place of inspiration. This begins at the pulpit, but should also resonate throughout the Community. There is no room for factious leaders who run their ministry group like their own club, or even a fiefdom. Every organization under the umbrella of the local parish must prioritize *inspiration*. Inspiration (like the inspiration of going to the gym) will lead to results. When results show, it follows that inspiration increases. The two will build each other in a virtuous circle. Therefore, inspiration is a vital component that leads to relevance. In the words of a parishioner we consulted "if inspiration can start your week, that would be amazing!"

This message of inspiration and healing needs to be the base message that emanates from the Priest and reverberates throughout the Community. But it's not. Priests and Bishops are not immune from being wounded and blinded by fundamentalist arrogance. This wound from the leader can spread like an infection throughout the entire Community. Priests and Bishops must not be the subjects of scandal

and controversy. Above all else, our Priests and Bishops must be the primary examples and fountainheads of inspiration and love. This loving disposition should be taught and shown to the entire community. Consistently. The Parishioners will get it. In addition to calling this to the attention of our Priests and Bishops, there are things we as Laypeople can do. Briefly put, Parishioners do not care how much information a Priest or Bishop knows; they want to know how much he cares about the people in his community.

### **Some Considerations Regarding Our Laity:**

While many people find it easy to be critical of the Clergy (Bishops and Priests) we must also question the parishioners' understanding of "why" go to Church? Are we supposed to go for the Priest? Of course not. We go to worship the Lord and to receive Holy Communion. But the fact remains, that the person of the Priest (his disposition, his personality, his interpersonal skills) ALL affect the motivation of each and every parishioner. Parishioners need to understand this and keep themselves in check. It is too easy for a parishioner to rationalize their lack of attendance results from any number of reasons. Perhaps the Parishioners should also ask themselves if they themselves are creating an atmosphere of what they dislike?

It is important that we as Laymen question and challenge ourselves. We must see past the silly nonsense that goes along with a congregation of people of various backgrounds, cultures, skillsets, intelligence, emotional disposition, etcetera. In a word, individual parishioners need to **be the change** they hope to see. We become that change when we make a commitment to our Church and make it a priority. Our example might be the only "gospel" some people may ever see. What message do we want to show others? It is too easy to blame others, be they Clergy or Laity. We expect our Clergy to love us all, but are we ready as fellow Christians to love each other the same way? The fact is that the only difference between the Clergy and the Laity, is that the Clergy have the "license" (for lack of a better word) to celebrate the sacraments and services of our Church. As far as everything else, we should all be living the same way, in the footsteps of our Lord.

### **Summary**

One Hierarch actually told his Priests "You preach like these people are actually going to change." Another Priest expects his Parishioners to live, fast, and pray like monks. Obviously these are two extremes that speak of the various problems some Clergymen have – be they burnt-out or arrogant. Laymen are not immune from missing the mark either. We as Clergy and Laity need to re-evaluate ourselves.

A positive culture of inspiration and love is dreadfully needed within the GOA and beyond. Such a culture can consistently provide the necessary inspiration and love within the parish community. It starts when Clergymen lead by example. It increases exponentially when Laymen make a commitment to do the same. There are examples within the GOA that this is already happening. But there are far more examples that illustrate it is not. Be the change you want to see.