

Americans leaving Church – GOA has Accelerants to the Exodus

The Landscape

During the last few decades in the America, there has been a significant change in the religious landscape. The numbers indicate people are leaving the Church, but the numbers appear to be higher within the Greek Orthodox Archdiocese (GOA). In America, those who consider themselves “unaffiliated” (also known as “nones”) has risen from **6%** in 1991, but as of September 2016 that number has risen to **25%** which makes this group *the single largest religious group in America*. (PRRI, Sept.2016, “Exodus: Why Americans are Leaving Religion – and Why They’re Unlikely to Come Back” <http://wwrn.org/articles/46295/>) This number is particularly distressing amongst young adults (18-29) where 39% are reported to be unaffiliated with any religion.

Most are reported to have left for the following reasons: 1) they stopped believing in the religion’s teachings, 2) their family was never religious when they were growing up, 3) scandals & mistreatment of people in the Church, 4) a traumatic event in their life, and 5) too much local Church politics. An interesting phenomenon concerns a rise amongst some who maintain their religious affiliation merely because of ancestry and/or culture, and not necessarily because they believe in the religion’s teachings. (Pew Research Center “Who Are Cultural Catholics?”, Sept 2015, David Masci, <http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2015/09/03/who-are-cultural-catholics/>) While this study focused on Catholics, many believe the same is happening within the Greek Orthodox Church, particularly with the significant reasons (as mentioned above and more) that lead to people choosing to be “dis-affiliated” with the Church. There are supporting studies *within* the Greek Orthodox Church which indicate this, that will be mentioned shortly. With the number of “nones” growing (i.e. those “dis-affiliated” with religion) it stands to reason that The Pew Research Center also found that the “nones” have become more secular in their beliefs and practices (fewer believe in God, fewer pray daily, fewer consider religion important, and fewer attend Church at least monthly). (Pew Research Center, “5 Key Findings about religiosity in the U.S. – and how it’s changing”, Michael Lipka, <http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2015/11/03/5-key-findings-about-religiosity-in-the-u-s-and-how-its-changing/> , and, “Religious ‘nones’ are not only growing, they’re becoming more secular”, <http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2015/11/11/religious-nones-are-not-only-growing-theyre-becoming-more-secular/>)

As for the Orthodox Christians in America

The Krindatch Report

In 2008 the Krindatch report found that the average age of the active parishioner is 54 years old (in the GOA and the Orthodox Church of America (OCA)). (Alexei Krindatch, Patriarch Athenagoras Institute, 2008). That number is more than likely higher today. That number also suggests that membership may be unsustainable. Originally, Krindatch’s report was accessible via the Patriarch Athenagoras Institute, from where it hailed. However, this is no longer the case. We have wondered why their website was restructured and no longer makes this publication available. Then we discovered that the report was pulled from another website of “The Association of Religious Data Archives” also known as “The ARDA”. While the report is referenced at <http://www.thearda.com/Archive/Files/Descriptions/ORTHODOX.asp>, the bottom link for the complete Krindatch report (under Related Publications section) leads to a blank page. *It was also pulled* from yet another website OrthodoxyToday.org. (<http://www.orthodoxytoday.org/articles8/Krindatch-The-Orthodox-Church-Today.php>) The watered-down highlights given by OrthodoxyToday.org do not reflect the sobering findings of the Krindatch report. The links here for the report also lead to a blank page.

It leads one to believe it was intentionally pulled. The links point to the Patriarch Athenagoras Institute. But the results are a blank page. The obvious question is “why would this valuable piece of scholarship be removed?” Dr. Krindatch employed sound statistical methodology from a very large sample and was objectively held in high regard. To pull this report suggests it was either unsound, or, sadly someone is trying to hide something. We recognize that his report is sound.

Fortunately, this report (that was published royalty-free on the internet and hard-copied) is still accessible through two websites. 1. The Hartford Institute For Religious Research (www.HartfordInstitute.org) The link does NOT point to the Patriarch Athenagoras Institute, but actually has the report on their server located at <http://www.hartfordinstitute.org/research/orthchurchfullreport.pdf> 2. We Are Orthodox – a website founded to bring to light the

concerns of the people in America. The website is found at www.WeAreOrthodox.com but the full report is located on their server located at <http://weareorthodox.com/ourblog/ignoring/>. A sobering essay is also presented.

Peter Kehayes Article from the GOA Website

Peter Kehayes also suggests supporting data that further illustrates this problem of people leaving the GOA. He wrote that “*In a startling find, statistics disclose over 60% of Greek Orthodox families of the last generation and 90% of Americans with Greek roots are no longer in communion with the Church*”. This is found at <http://www.goarch.org/archdiocese/departments/marriage/interfaith/guest-writers/challengeforGOC> and in case it is ever removed from the GOA website, it can be found at <http://weareorthodox.com/ourblog/orthodoxys-sad-decline-in-america/>.

Antonis Diamantaris Article from The National Herald

The June 5th Edition (2015) of The National Herald has an editorial by A.H. Diamantaris entitled “**Orthodoxy’s Sad Decline in America.**” This commentary offers reflection based on the Pew Report. The article states that “A Pew Research Center on the future of religion has disturbing findings for Orthodoxy, which is in an advanced stage of crisis that should worry the Church.” He states that Pew discovered that nearly half of all Orthodox Christians leave the religion once they become adults. On top of this Diamantaris states that other sources, from 2010 to 2015 the Greek Orthodox paid membership has fallen dramatically about 38%. (<http://www.weareorthodox.com/usersubmissions/TNH-Diamantaris-Editorial-on-Orthodoxys-Sad-Decline-in-America.pdf>) Pew study was at <http://www.pewforum.org/files/2015/05/RLS-05-08-full-report.pdf>. It has since been moved and/or combined with other studies.

These are but a few items that point to our crisis in America. *But wait, there’s more.*

The GOA Brings Accelerants to the Exodus of Parishioners

As mentioned earlier, Pew indicated that people leave their religion, or in our case, the Greek Orthodox Church for several reasons: 1. They were not raised in a family that regularly went to Church, 2. Scandals & mistreatment of people in the Church by other Church people, a traumatic event in their life (example: divorce, the death of a loved one, etc), and 3. Too much Church politics.

It is no different for us. In addition to these reasons, we have our share of things that have led people to leave the Church:

1. Hierarchs not addressing real life issues that are hurting the faithful. For example:
 - a. **Hierarchs remaining silent about the heresy of Aerial Tollhouses.** This heresy alleges the demons interrogate the individual’s soul upon his/her death in a series of Tollhouses where various sins are examined. The Monasteries of Elder Ephraim openly espouse this. Numerous Priests of the GOA have espoused this. None of them see it as a huge insult to Christ’s sacrifice on the Cross. If we were to be examined, we would ALL be found guilty. Our only hope is the Grace of our Lord. One would think this is a major theological issue of our Church. People have left the GOA because of this heresy, coupled with the inaction of our Hierarchs. This heresy insults (if not nullifies) Christ’s sacrifice on the Cross, and dismisses the saving Grace of our Lord. It leads one to conclude that salvation is in the hands of the demons, and not Christ. It calls to question if we are Christian at all. It baffles the mind that Hierarchs are silent on this heresy. To be fair, thank God there are many Clergy that do not espouse this heresy.
 - b. Punishing priests that are honest and open about reporting indiscretions (financial and otherwise) of other clergymen. Take the case of the well-respected Fr. Angelo Artemas as a prolific example.
 - c. Insisting on an outdated and contradictory “Spiritual Court” mandate. It is stated that the reason for the Spiritual Court is to explore the possibility of reconciliation. But the pre-requisite for having one is that the couple must have a civil divorce first. So what’s the point? The very nomenclature itself “Spiritual Court” alone is enough to make people say “forget it.” If per chance an individual is brave enough to attend a “Spiritual Court”, they are many times bombarded by various questions by clergymen they may not even know, like “how was your sex life?” Really? Not all jurisdictions follow this methodology.

- d. The issue of some clergymen forcing Monastic disciplines upon laymen who have no desire to be monks. In the words of the well-respected theologian and former Dean of the Seminary, Fr. Alkiviades Calivas: “Holiness can be found in the Parish, as well as in the Monastery.” Some Priests have unfortunately told their parishioners to go to the Monastery for Confession, instead of their local pastor. That is an abdication of their role and responsibility. The Hierarchs are silent on this as well.
- e. Financial transparency and the appearance of hypocrisy. Hierarchs are supposed to live a life as tonsured monks, and yet one wonders at how tonsured monks have villas in Greece and drive luxury cars? Some Priests insisting that they be paid an honorarium for various services they perform. Materialism is more rampant than they let on.
- f. Many of our Hierarchs state that they do not want to hear anything “negative”. This is a fundamental breakdown in the efficacy (if not concern) of an executive leader who will inevitably surround himself with numerous sycophants who will remain un-objective if not deluded. The fact is that not wanting to hear anything negative means that you are allowing the negativity to grow (by not dealing with it) and consequently contributing to the growth of the problem. This is a clear avoidance, if not abdication, of the role of a Shepherd. Imagine a Shepherd that does not want to hear about the wolves? The sheep are doomed.
- g. A vivid perception of our Hierarchs of having a lack of understanding about the issues of the modern world – technologically, scientifically, socially, and otherwise. The situation is so dreadful that a Hierarch who *merely* spends too much time on Facebook is considered relevant.

Throughout all the above, our Hierarchs appear aloof and unconcerned with matters of substance. In fact, a couple of Hierarchs have been quoted as saying that “we should not worry about the people that have left the Church because they’ll be back”. To be fair, not all Hierarchs are like this. However even one is too much. The sad fact is, *it is more than just one*.

As time passes and we become 6th, and 7th generations of Greek-Americans (and beyond) the cultural bonds that have held us together will dissipate. Without the notion of genuine and substantive Hierarchical concern, coupled with a lack of pro-active leadership to help enable and inspire parishioners to live and deal with issues of the modern world, the notion of irrelevance within our ministries will grow. The obvious result is that people will vote with their feet as to the confidence they have in their leaders. We are not even sure our leaders know what “voting with their feet” actually means. So, to put it bluntly, it means parishioners will simply walk out the door. We have tangibly seen this is already happening. There are many former Greek Orthodox parishioners in other Christian denominations right now. A few Hierarchs proclaim “they’ll be back”.

Being Open Means Being Honest and Accountable for our State of Affairs

Talking about the issues will help lead people toward resolving the issues, or discovering that there are no issues at all. Either way, being open about it and having a conversation is a vital first step. But this means that the Hierarchs may have to change their arbitrary style of authoritarian leadership which gives the appearance of malfeasance and lowers the morale and enthusiasm of their spiritual charges. We are not hopeful that things will get better anytime soon. If this conversation amongst clergy and laity were to actually happen in a sincere and substantive manner, **accountability** would be one of the top-priority items for discussion. This will then lead to a honing and refining of our leadership which will lead to a more effective ministry.

There are already established, proven and effective techniques and methodologies that improve leadership and effectiveness. One of these is called the “360 Review”. It is used to honestly assess and establish groundwork for improvement amongst secular and Church leadership performance. It is being used amongst various Christian denominations, including the Catholic Church, with great success.

Secular Origins <https://www.thebalance.com/what-is-a-360-review-1917541>

Catholic Parish Implementation Example: <https://www.faithandleadership.com/features/articles/leadership-360>

Other Christian Denomination use: <http://sacredstructures.org/manpower/why-conduct-a-church-staff-360-degree-feedback-survey/>

Recent GOA Actions Do Not Give Hope

While some other non-profit organizations are doing their very best to become more transparent and effective, recent goings on within the GOA indicate we have no immediate plans to do so. For example, aside from the exodus of revenue and people from the GOA, there has been zero communication about other publicized investigations regarding alleged improprieties from the monasteries of Elder Ephraim. The Monastery Task Force was formed at the Archdiocesan level. The name was changed to the Monastery Review Committee (MRC). Since that has been formed several years ago, certain Metropolises have formed their own MRC and have effectively seemed to have thwarted the Archdiocesan MRC. There have been no reports as to the Archdiocesan MRC. Accountability has become a taboo word for our Hierarchs, when in fact it is something that will make them even better. Why aren't we talking about it?

Priests that are stand-up men who have reported improprieties and have been "punished" for speaking up are suffering from punitive actions. Fr. Angelo Artemas is one such example. Why aren't we talking about it? The list goes on and on.

Suffice it to say, if things are not addressed, it will only get worse. Add to the list the actions of Metropolitans who have been reported to be working to dismantle the Archdiocese and keep the revenues themselves. Instead of creating a culture of building one another, they appear to be creating a culture that is toxic and self-aggrandizing.

We are sure it will only get worse. Our only hope is that our Lord's Grace will inspire a few leaders to actually address things and make a positive difference. "A little leaven makes the whole loaf rise". Right now, we are flat and getting moldy.

Why aren't we talking about it?

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