

**Talk delivered on  
Friday, June 4, 2004**  
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**The Orthodox Pastor  
in the 21st Century**

It has been good to be here! We are grateful to His Beatitude, Metropolitan HERMAN for blessing and guiding us, and for his hospitality. Being at St. Tikhon's Monastery is always an occasion for partaking of some spiritual rest and renewal. Thanks also to Fr. Robert Kondratich for his encouragement and for sharing his capable staff with us in planning for this Conference. Thanks to all who worked, sang, assisted and participated at this worthwhile and pleasant gathering.

Well, it is the last day, the last couple of hours, and we will not really resolve any great issues, although we perhaps will be thinking of future gatherings, perhaps the All American Council, where these pastoral issues may be resolved. Today we have an opportunity to think out loud about some issues that face us pastors today. Actually it is my privilege to share some thoughts about the priesthood and the pastoral issues and problems as they exist today, for us, in the OCA. By no means are they comprehensive or conclusive. Each one of you may have different observations and different thoughts. But with your indulgence I will use this opportunity to share these thoughts with you, motivated by nothing more than Love of God, love of people, love for our Orthodox Church and love for you, brothers in Christ.

I would like to offer reflections on some issues that seem to me to challenge us pastors, living here in North America at this time, the beginning of the 21st century, issues which, while not wholly new, nevertheless currently challenge us in our pastoral ministry. These are issues that are relatively new and were not a concern for pastors even a generation ago. We will look at four basic categories: 1. Liturgy, 2. Parish life, 3. Personal Life, 4. Institutional life.

**LITURGY**

St. John Chrysostom's words about the priesthood are sobering and inspiring. When one observes a priest during the Divine Liturgy, "you see not only marvelous things, but things that transcend all terror. The priest stands bringing down, not fire, but the Holy Spirit. And he offers prayers, not that some flame from above may consume the offerings, but that grace may fall on the sacrifice through that prayer, which enlightens the souls of all, ..." The majesty of Orthodoxy is the Liturgy; it is the glory of priests, the uplifting and awesome entry of earthly life into heaven, even if only for several moments. The Liturgy is the preview of the Kingdom of God and the bishops, priests and deacons whose task it is to solemnize the liturgical rituals are entrusted with royal privileges. The vestments and the rituals themselves emphasize the royal nature of

liturgical service. But our personal bearing and talents must be equal to the task. Dignity, art, piety, drama, diction, clarity, order, all of these qualities are important. But there are details, and more details, to be considered: words, music, singers, readers, bread, wine, candles, liturgical colors, charcoal, incense, etc. In the minds of many, and for most Orthodox Christians, Orthodoxy is contained in the liturgy. In fact, there is a sense in which that is true. We Orthodox priests know that pastoral life is much more than liturgy, but liturgy is the cornerstone of our life. As we pastors think about Orthodox liturgy today there are some very serious considerations. (Confession was discussed, and we will not address other specific aspects regarding particular rituals and sacraments.) The most obvious problem is this: with the exception of the Sunday morning Liturgy, people do not come to church! It is not just that, in terms of the whole traditional structure of Orthodox liturgy as expressed in the Typicon, only a small portion is actually done. The liturgical life that our grandparents regarded as a norm is now on the verge of extinction. Major holidays, vigil services, week day feast days, not to mention akathists, all of these are becoming rarities. The Orthodox Christians in North America have become a Sunday morning phenomenon. And this is a real problem. We are facing the fragmentation of our liturgical tradition and with that the loss of a significant and important part of our Christian heritage.

What are the causes of this problem? Yes there are cultural reasons, our materialism, our commercialism, our drive for success and financial gain; there are also practical liturgical problems, problems in finding and keeping a choir director, having good singers, good readers, someone to bake proskafara, someone to clean the church on time, to shovel the snow, etc. Some of these problems can be solved, some are more serious.

Most of us deal with this situation by living with the reality, which is to maximize whatever we can do on Sundays. And most of us also continue to do other services, feast days and evening services, even if they are sparsely attended. Some possible solutions are already being tested: e.g., evening Divine Liturgies and transferring feast days celebrations to Sunday. These may be solutions. But the real solution will be to find a way in which we can preserve the integrity of our liturgical tradition but also make liturgy meaningful and accessible to people in North America. Lay people will be more eager to participate in liturgical life when they have an understanding of what liturgy is. While many come to church out of habit or for sentimental reasons, the typical, educated North American person (both native Orthodox and convert) is more likely to want to be there when he or she can relate to what is happening and understand it. It is one of our collective pastoral tasks to be concerned that this indeed takes place. Liturgy is people! By definition liturgy is "public duty or public office". Our Lord's promise to be with us is contingent on a gathering of people: "Where two or three are gathered in my name there I am in their midst" (Mt. 18.22). The Great Commission to baptize all nations and the Descent of the Holy Spirit were the foundations of apostolic, pastoral and liturgical ministry. Liturgy was the means by which the apostles brought to people's understanding the reality of the incarnation. It is no less so for us today. Liturgy is people. Its interesting: going to visit one of the beautiful and historic churches in Europe or in Russia. There is the great art and architecture, but without people engaged in liturgy, these buildings are sterile and cold. On the other hand, a store-front mission, with a few laminated icons, but with a small group of sincere pious people praying together becomes the actualization of the Kingdom!

The liturgical problem (or problems) that face us are serious and complicated. While solutions will be a long time in coming and neither smooth nor easy, we pastors can do something about it now. We can re-affirm our love for liturgy. That means that we pastors become well-rooted in the tradition, that we study, respect and continually learn about our liturgical tradition. We need to love liturgy, even if we are able to only perform a small portion of it.

Loving liturgy means of course loving the services and loving to serve the services. But it also means loving to teach and to share the experience of liturgy. It means uncovering and elucidating the origins, the background, the Biblical framework and the spiritual significance of liturgical life. It means preaching and teaching at all services. And most of all, it means that we remember that liturgy is not for the priest, and his chosen remnant alone, but for all good people. There is a way in which we can use liturgy for "running away" from people, for ignoring our parishioners. And we can always use our knowledge of liturgy in a vain or pretentious way to distance ourselves from people. Liturgy was made for man, not man for the liturgy. But sometimes we prefer to have our liturgical life "pure" and unpolluted, we don't want singers who may be flat, people who are annoying, strangers who may be critical, parishioners who are irregular. When we are tempted with those feelings, and these temptations are very real indeed, we need to consider how Jesus Christ acted, when with patience and toleration He had mercy on the sick and lame, the orphans and widows, the outcasts and lepers. God mysteriously brings people to Church who we may not want to there, but they are there precisely for us to minister to!

What about liturgical reform? (That word makes some people cringe!) History has taught us that changes within the structure of Orthodox liturgy can have tragic consequences. In recent times, liturgical renovation has acquired the undesirable role of being associated with modernists, men of unrestrained ambition, lacking integrity and honesty (the "living churchmen" in Russia). But history also teaches us that liturgical change is ongoing, that it often takes place undramatically with little notice. The Orthodox Church in America, speaking in a collective and historical sense, has probably initiated and gone through more liturgical change than many other Orthodox churches (in the last 200 years). Some of these changes have been subtle, maybe unnoticed at first, but are striking to visitors from traditional Orthodox countries (pews, stained glass windows, women reading epistles, etc.). Other changes are more liturgical in the true sense (language, calendar, evening Presanctified liturgies, general confession, etc.). Recognizing that, in terms of church history we often have to speak of eras, or centuries, these changes in the OCA are rather recent. The process of liturgical change began in the lifetime of many of us present here and it is far from over. And we also know that it is a rocky process; sometimes it seems that that only thing that we can agree on is that we disagree. The fact is that we, as the OCA, and we as pastors in the OCA, are in the midst of liturgical change, we could even say that it is somehow our destiny. We need to be humble, prayerful and diligent in consideration of this. We have to realize that we really do want the same thing: to make liturgical life meaningful, beautiful, inspirational and accessible to all good people in North America.

In the meantime, we pray and support our seminaries where scholars will continue to research and study our complex liturgical history. And, of course we know that the final decisions and changes will be done by the Holy Synod of Bishops. But the Holy Synod does not operate in a vacuum, and it profits from gatherings with seminaries and presbyters, where thoughtful discussions will help in making informed decisions.

## **PARISH LIFE**

This is the area where we earn our bread and butter. Regardless of how often or how much time we spend in liturgical celebration, it is somehow strange to think that we are "paid to serve the liturgy." I think that for many of us, liturgical celebration is a joy and a honor, and to say that we are paid to serve at the altar is somehow ridiculous. Liturgical service is its own reward. But we pastors do need to be compensated, and we are, and the work that we are paid for is the work that goes on after the liturgy is over.

What are the aspects of Parish Life: All of those things that involve contact with parishioners: Pastoral visitations, educational work, Bible study, adult study, youth work, teen work, working with choirs and choir directors, marriage preparation, marital counseling, visiting shut-ins, grief counseling, office work, preparing and printing bulletins and schedules, parish mailing, paying bills, office work, preparing and printing bulletins and schedules, aspects of parish administration: parish council meetings, parish council nominations and elections, budgets, agendas, committees, finances, PR, building committees, renovation committees, sunshine committees, greeters committees, etc., yard work, mowing lawns, planting flowers, weeding, pruning trees, taking garbage out, etc.

I am sure that I have overlooked something .... (can you think of anything?).

All of the above, in various measures, affect the life of the typical OCA pastor. The fact is that pastoral life today involves a high degree of competent multi-tasking. The pastor in this 21st century has to be, in addition to an effective liturgist and preacher, a businessman (with knowledge some knowledge about finances, tax laws, fund-raising), administrator (with management skills involving nurturing community leaders, moderating discussions, and effecting compromises, etc.), jack-of-all trades, marketing specialist, hospitality, as well as an all-around nice guy. While none of us will be specialists in all of these fields, all of us are required to have some expertise in most of these areas.

We remember the type of traditional Orthodox pastor (a man of prayer, a liturgical man, a father confessor, a sacramental vendor, with starched shirts, and pressed black pants, a man who doesn't dirty his hands with money matters or maintenance). Yes this model had and has its value, but the fact is that effective ministry today must involve engagement in the contemporary aspects of parish life.

Our seminaries are not avoiding these issues, although perhaps they do not give them enough attention. On the other hand, a question could be raised: are seminaries the best places where these things can be learned. The typical three year course of study in the seminary barely touches on the essential elements of theology and history, which are all indispensable. We are talking here of certain practical things that, almost by definition, are "on the job training." To this end, the OCA's Department of Pastoral Life has, for the last seven years, been overseeing an Seminarian Internship Program. Although the program has had excellent results and received high marks from both participants and interns, it is still in stages of development. (We cannot go into particulars of this now, and funding is always an issue, but the design and the potential of

the program are unquestionably " of immense value to young pastors, and therefore to parishes and to the church-at-large.)

There is one area of pastoral life that, until quite recently occupied a fair amount of the priest's time, but rarely does today, and that is his role as preserver of ethnic culture. Not so long ago priests functioned as Russian teachers, music teachers, folk music instructors, balalaika orchestra conductors, etc. Many Orthodox clergy (and many in North America) still function in this way. There is nothing intrinsically wrong with this (and we may even lament the loss of some of these cultural aspects). But the OCA took a decidedly different pastoral course. Ethnically speaking, the OCA pastor is a universal man. There remains the issue of patriotism or political awareness. Historically the Orthodox consciousness is permeated not only with political patriotism but of explicit nationalism. Here too, there is a significant pastoral issue, with profound theological implications, which someday will have to be addressed.

On the other hand there is an area where OCA pastors should be involved in, which our predecessors could afford to avoid: Evangelization. We have heard at our conference about evangelization and outreach. This critical area is something that we all should frequently think about. Frankly, many of us do not, and while there may be various reasons, part of it I believe is the fact that we are not trained or encouraged to be more outgoing. I am not judging anyone, because I am one of those people: somewhat uncomfortable with outreach. .... We have various approaches and various visions, and we rejoice that God has blessed us with good missionaries and good people where active outreach has become successful and mission parishes have been established. The OCA has been involved in developing various programs and concepts, and we need to enthusiastically support this work. And we need to prayerfully work , to develop, reflect on, talk about, and articulate a real, meaningful and productive pastoral theology of evangelization.

In a sense there is only "one theology" in the Orthodox Church, contained in the Holy Bible, and in the teachings of the Holy Fathers, and summarized in the Creed. But the Church has always, from age to age and from place to place, articulated this theology to address the challenging situations that would arise. This is what we understand as "living tradition," the ever-evolving adaptability of the Church's permanent and eternal truths. Pastoral life is that arena where the Church's theology and the practical life of specific communities are compressed into the living tradition for a given place and time. For Orthodox pastors in 21st century North America one such development is the theology of evangelization that we referred to above.

Here too we could use a theology of church administration, as well as a theology of stewardship. Both of these areas are very much a part of our everyday lives. Stewardship is, of course, not just the art of extracting money from wallets, but it is also true that fund raising is how that Church is able to sustain itself and have meaningful programs. To speak about a "theology" of stewardship may seem strange, but it is something we do need to get used to, precisely so that in matters of fund raising we can do it in a way that is compatible with Orthodox tradition and not foreign to it. We have profited from OCA publications, workshops and speakers who have provided us with some valuable ideas. We should note the recent SVS publication, edited by Fr. Anthony Scott, "Good and Faithful Servant."

The theology of church administration is something that is at the heart of pastoral theology, yet still very much a fresh field, a theology in the making. Here too there have been some books ("Oriented Leadership" and a pamphlet about Parish Meetings). In the real world of our parish communities, wide-ranging differences are still the order of the day. Just what role does the pastor play in the administration of the parish? Should he actually chair all meetings, or only do so symbolically? Should he sign checks or not? Should he be in on budget meetings or not? Should he actively work with parish council nominations? What about involvement in parish organizations? How much a role should the priest's wife or immediate family play in administration? All of these questions are relevant and affect us in immediate ways. Some of these issues have been the cause of conflicts within parishes, sometimes very serious conflict. What is really at stake is that all of these points are related to the theological notion of what constitutes a parish.

The good news is that the OCA has been wrestling with these questions for some seventy years. There is even a consensus exists for many of these matters. But we still have a way to go. We would do well to work to overcome the natural tendency to remain parochial. Operating from a "survival" mentality, many of us have been forced to "do it alone," with each parish or each diocese somehow accepting that what is good for them is good enough. We can certainly get by with that approach. We Orthodox and especially Orthodox pastors are expert survivors, but there is a down side. The formulation of a bona fide theological vision of parish life, which is really Orthodox and not parochial, necessitates cooperation, mutual respect, sharing, patience and effort.

There is one area where pastoral life in the 21st century that is absolutely no different from pastoral life in any other era. We are speaking about the implicit sense of pastoral commitment to a parish assignment. At seminary we are taught to be gracious, to go to a parish community with eager openness, to accept the people that God has put in our charge, as the flock that we have to nurture and protect. But what we are taught and what actually occurs do not always coincide. The tragedy that happens often occurs with young pastors. We come to a parish (sometimes from the rarefied and ideal world of the seminary) with preconceived expectations: a perfect choir, and a good and friendly choir director, a workable and pleasant parish council, friendly, young, energetic parishioners, who are also good stewards, and yes, a nice rectory and a good neighborhood. But when we arrive, we are surprised to find something quite different. The frustration that ensues, sometimes immediately, produces tension and often ends with the priests eagerly leaving with a sense of relief, and with the parish feeling burned again, and its reputation as a bad-place becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy. Most of us, as young pastors, are cautioned to have a "steady as you go" approach, and not make any quick or rash changes. But our youth and zeal sometimes get the better of us, and we start making changes, and demands, which we in fact cannot implement.

Other feelings of frustration may arise when we go through somekind of mid-life crises or when, after being in a parish for some time, we develop indifference, irritation, or cynicism. Preaching and serving become a routine, parish administration becomes a burden, interaction with people becomes irritating. It is a dangerous scenario.

The parish is always the flock, and we are always the shepherd. The shepherd never violates that position of honor and respect that is his due, and he never shirks on the responsibility that he has accepted. His flock may be old and sickly, or young and temperamental, it may be large or small, it may a flock of malcontent sheep living in a pasture of industrial waste land. It is still the flock that we are to answer for. That little parish, those old people, that out-of-tune choir, that irascible starosta, that cantankerous sisterhood, THAT is the portion of the eucharistic lamb that was placed in our hand when we were ordained, for which we have to answer for, possibly to suffer for, and the consequences of our failure and frightening indeed.

## **PERSONAL LIFE**

Shifting now to the area of personal life, there is something that actually is also a part of parish life. These are the issues related to sex and sexuality. Our promiscuous, hedonistic, sexually provocative culture is also the culture that has raised sex-related issues to the very top of controversy and scandal; and no aspect of our society suffers more than the Christian Church. The fact that Orthodox Christians have been able to avoid the intense hot light of media scrutiny, may be a gift of God's grace, or it may be just plain luck, or it may be that false sense of security before the dam breaks. The proliferation of real and perceived episodes of sexual abuse have forced us to become vigilant and wary, as well as a little angry. The highly charged problem has increased our insurance premiums and have forced us to deal with letters, tapes, books and mailed instructions to read and to study all of the intricacies involved. It all has to get done, and it makes our jobs yet more complicated and even unpleasant.

The next time this Conference is held, we will probably be required to offer an entire presentation on this subject. For now, let us pray and thank God for our wives and also work on keeping our marriages, healthy, balanced, chaste and wholesome. As Orthodox clergy, unless we have been called to the monastic and celibate life, we have a great consolation in having a wife. This also makes possible for our ministry to have a valuable dimension which enables us to have a special sensitivity and sympathy for people in our parishes. Marriage also affords us with a family, which adds layer upon layer of experience and understanding.

The pastor's family life today, like all family's lives, have undergone radical change in the last thirty or forty years. Our wives, like most wives in America, usually have a career or job. They sometimes make more money than us and while there is nothing wrong with that, it may mean that we are forced to be involved in more parenting than we bargained for. These role changes are not that bad in and of themselves. I personally am grateful that I was able to be involved in my children's education and growth. But these changes do put strains on life, and hence on our ministry, which our predecessors did not have.

One result of this is that the pastor's family cannot enjoy the weekend, as other normal families do. Also, our working wives are forced to be "on deck" on the weekends when they would just as soon take a day off. Of course, the double-standard among parishioners remains: and the absence of the pastor's wife is always noted, especially by those people who do not tolerate any questions as to their participation.

Pastor's wives are a valuable asset: for comfort, friendship, family, support, and in many ministerial ways as well. We, as a church, and as male clergy, are not very eager to involve our

wives in our pastoral discussion, but we do need to start thinking about that in some organized way. They do have their newsletters and occasional gatherings, which is a good start. Just as we profit from this uplifting sense of being part of a brotherhood, I am sure that they will profit from mutual sharing and support from other wives.

Family. What can we say about the pastor's family? The pastor's family, the so-called PK's are a social phenomenon unto themselves. Are there patterns of behavior or trends that are noteworthy? As a PK and as a father, I think that our families are no better off nor worse off than any other typical North American families. Our children are subject to the same peer pressures, the same challenges, the same temptations. Yes, they are exposed to more church, and sometimes this produces good results. Other times, even in one family, the pastor's children develop an abiding distaste (sometimes an aversion) for the church. We are not just "Father" of the parish, we are also fathers of families, and neither of these two realms should be minimized at the expense of the other.

### **INSTITUTIONAL LIFE**

Just a few words here. We are not "lone rangers." We are part of an institution, the Church and part of the brotherhood of clergy. This gathering is a good example of how important and how productive it is for us to come together in the spirit of brotherhood, as ordained members of the Church. Of course, we are aware of weaknesses of the institution and the tensions inherent in the brotherhood. A recent Roman Catholic editorial, dealing with the recent sexual abuses cases, pointed out that the real problem was the "constraints on excellence in a envy-ridden and mediocre clerical culture that does a poor job in serving church members." Can this be said to apply to us? Let us pray and resolve that this may never be said about us. But we cannot afford to ignore our problems or ignore each other. If we do not help each other, we may very well be doomed. But failure here is not an option.

We would like to conclude with a short meditation from the Book of Acts. This is a great work, which describes how the apostles received the gift of the Holy Spirit at the first Pentecost (which we are celebrating this week), how the early Church spread from Jerusalem. About half of the book is the story of St. Paul. St. Paul never physically knew Jesus Christ, he was even an enemy of the Church. But he becomes the greatest Apostle. He is really a role model for all of us. And he is the one who best represents what it means to say that we are the One, Holy, Catholic and APOSTOLIC Church. The Apostolic vision, largely exemplified by St. Paul's writings, is THE standard by which we measure our spiritual, pastoral and moral life.

The passage that I would like to read is the description of St. Paul at Miletus. This is when, on his final trip to Jerusalem, he summons the elders (the priests) of Ephesus to join him at Miletus. It is a beautiful and moving passage and very appropriate for us: Acts 20. 17-38.

Remember, St. Paul says, the words of the Lord: "It is more blessed to give than to receive." Giving is what it is all about. Pastoral life is a ministry of giving. In this we are only following the example of Our Lord, who gives everything, even His life in the kenotic mystery of the Cross. We too are to be perpetual givers: giving glory to God, giving loyalty and obedience to the Church and the bishops, giving charity and assistance to family and parishioners, giving time, talent and money to those in need, giving compassion and guidance when asked to do so, giving

of our selves, at every service, in every sermon, at all times and in every place. And just as Jesus Christ's giving preceded the Resurrection, we give in order to receive "everything." In fact, we read in that beautiful priestly prayer during St. Basil's Divine Liturgy (after the Anaphora and the remembrances), that the Lord has "given everything to us." By giving we receive. We receive forgiveness, fulfillment, blessings, grace, consolation, patience, confidence, courage, dignity, honor, wisdom, love, etc. Failure is when we are sinful, when our fallen nature gets the better of us, and we begin to say or think, "I don't give a heck," when we turn from being givers to greedy men.

Yet even then, we can be restored ... We can give sacrifice, as we do at every Eucharistic Liturgy, and receive again, and again, the divine grace which enables us to overcome failure, to keep walking in the light of the Resurrection and in the joy of the Holy Spirit, and to be Our Lord's noble ministers who give proof to the fact that salvation has come to the world. Amen.