

Healing Divisions in the Parish Community

Greetings

With the blessing of His Beatitude we gather for this Evangelization Conference. We are building on the foundation laid by St. Herman of Alaska and his monastic brothers, the hierarchs Metropolitan Innocent and Patriarch Tikhon, and so many archpastors, pastors, and faithful. Now we face the challenge of developing an organized approach to evangelization and mission with the formation of a department, which is chaired by Father Eric Tosi. He has established for us an impressive agenda and list of speakers.

It is appropriate that this theological school, under the patronage Saint Vladimir, the Enlightener of Rus, is the place of this conference. Its founders came to America in the early 1950's in the last half of the 20th century, and labored with pen and service book and renewed the spirit of Orthodoxy. They were wonderful people. May the Holy Spirit teach us during this conference and the years to come to contribute to evangelism in 21st century.

Introduction

I want to begin by sharing with you two incidents the essence of which is typical and not exceptional. The names, locations, and situations are not important. The first incident is as follows.

It is 11 p.m. A wife and children are asleep, and a priest is staring at the T.V. trying to divert his pain following an ugly council meeting. The meeting got out of control again; people were nasty with each other. Some wanted to call the bishop and others were talking about a petition.

Something has been going on and the priest was the last to find out. He thinks and he feels intensely, "How could this happen? When did this start?" He's drained emotionally. His thinking fluctuates. "What did I do? Maybe I should tell them all off on Sunday? Maybe I should leave? This shouldn't be happening especially in the church." If he is a little older and experienced and he knows enough about himself, he knows that tomorrow, or the day after he'll be over this.

The second occurrence is about woman who was deeply hurt because some parish council members were giving the sisterhood a difficult time. She painfully said "I thought the church was different. Especially the church."

Conflicts, strife, and divisions do not seem to fit in with the subject of this conference. These seem out of sink with the theme and the subjects. Evangelism is about the good news, the God-Man, and correct belief and worship. It is about utilizing your personal skills and knowledge. It is about giving talks and sermons. It's about bible

study, pamphlet racks, parish web sites, house visitations, adult and teen education, sharing and listening. There is something so positive about beginning a mission and giving it birth, but the presence of divisions and strife and

Saint Gregory the Great, bishop of Rome, wrote his book *Pastoral Care*; Saint John Chrysostom wrote his work *On the Priesthood*. They, as well as Saint Gregory of Nazianzus, had this in common; they wanted to escape the office of bishop/priest; so their writings are their apologies for desiring to flee the burden of the office. Yet their holy lives and writings remain the most fundamental and substantive witness to the character of the priesthood and totality of their labors. No one should take these as interesting pastime reading, but as serious and challenging guide for service.

Whether you are seasoned veteran priest returning to gain more insight on this subject, or if you are facing this for the first time and reaching out for help, or if you are one of those who is shocked that the church can have divisions and conflicts, I hope this presentation and our discussions will be helpful.

Some of you are children of priests or you have family member as priest, and/or remember the service of a priest. You remember his life, teaching, and always some very concrete situations. You remember his successes, stumblings, and struggles; maybe more so, his struggles. Sometimes these appeared as losses and defeats.

As children we all valued the healing, which our mothers and fathers gave us everyday with sibling, family, and other struggles. Their love and acceptance meant so much. It was so natural: flavored with tolerance, tears, and embraces. These were assurances and rewards in themselves: the medicine and the prize. Their love, care, fortitude, and wisdom were not analyzed by our intellect, but felt with the heart.

This presentation focuses on two areas: the interpersonal conflict and the conflicts of the parish and groups. It will not focus directly on sacramental offices.

Source of Conflict

How, when and where do conflicts begin?

A conflict can occur over some issue or someone's behavior. If it is over an issue, it can have its objectivity as well as relatedness to other objectives and individual subjectivity. When a conflict is because of someone's behavior, its conditioning is usually extremely personal.

Put it simply, something happens or doesn't happen. In the inner man some hurt is felt. Inwardly the victim cuts himself off from the offender. The victim's imagination takes over. Negative feelings become rigid. An inner conversation begins within the mind of the offended about the good or bad of the offender, and about personal hurt. It could

go on for a day or days. Then something happens. The conflict begins to unravel explosively or less. The victim is able to bring this into the open. The victim and the offender reason and feel their way to resolution, and healing is taking place within a context which is so interpersonal, or alienation continues.

This goes on all the time. The resolution is not complicated, but we complicate it. Some parishioners are carrying a lot hurt. Metropolitan Hierotheos calls, “consequences of evil,” so that much care is required.

You read prior about the priest and the distraught parishioner? Their cries had something in common. They both summarized what was happening to them, saying, “especially” it shouldn’t be happening in a church.

All parishes have this in common: How unprepared the church is to deal with conflict. The one place people expect conflict to be handled differently is where it is not. Few parishes have a clear procedure for handling complaints. Because it so contrary to what people expect to find. It is unrealistic to think churches are conflict free. This in fact only exacerbates the problem. Clergy/bishops don’t report that they are having much conflict. Why? Because they are not supposed to have trouble. This is where an adjustment has to be made.

Without introducing panic and negativity, we, clergy and laity, need to look at ourselves differently. When conflicts arise and after searching for it’s cause, there is a tendency for rectors to feel responsible as if the rector did not do his work. We blame ourselves, and rectors need to free themselves of this self blame. A second self awareness which needs to be addressed is the image the rector. He needs to project an aggressiveness and forthrightness. This can be by setting guidelines for council persons: the rules by which an issue will be discussed. The rector will not only appear to be in control, but will actually be in control in best sense of this word. It will give the impression that the rector is strong enough to deal with conflict, and this order will help others to deal more objectively with themselves and others.

Let’s listen to the words of one of our missionaries and one of our missions. These are not coming from a convert-priest in Happy Valley, Tennessee, nor new immigrant priest in Steelton, Pennsylvania, but a convert previously a Jew. You’ll know who he is and his parish.

“Now all who believed were together,
and had all things in common,
and sold their possessions and goods,
and divided them among all, as anyone had need.
So continuing daily with one accord in the temple,
and breaking bread from house to house,

they ate their food with gladness and simplicity of heart, praising God and having favor with all the people. And the Lord added to the church daily those who were being saved.”

Our initial response to this is that this is such a wonderful parish. A loving fellowship. This is expected in our congregations today. In fact, such love and care can regularly be found. An Inspiring picture, isn't it?

What's wrong with it? It's momentary. It's a snapshot: one of many. When this happens in our parish, we get euphoric. Let's hear the rest of the story.

“Those very early days gave way to many false pretenses and lying... (Acts 5), to serious conflict between Jews and Gentiles...(Acts 6) to theological contention... (Galatians 2, Acts 15:1) and to interpersonal disagreement.” (Acts 15:36).

The first century churches had their share of disputes. They are spoken of in every epistle. Paul spoke about quarreling, jealousy, outbursts of anger, factions, slander, gossip, arrogance, and disorder. Are the words of Christ diminished? No. If the portrait of the early church. diminished? No. There will be strife. Conflict is a reality of human experience. Churches are tax exempt, but not conflict exempt. They never were.

I see many of crosses today among our clergy and laity: decorated, gold and silver. Why don't I see purple hearts? Every single one of you has been wounded in action, and many times. What am I getting at?

Priests and laity are human. We sense we fail, because there is a conflict. Why do we blame ourselves, because there is strife? There's only one reason to blame yourself, and that is if you deny there are conflicts and strife.

I recall sharing my struggles with another priest many years ago. I felt I was responsible for the strife in my parish. I wanted to do something which was absolutely wonderful in my eyes and as well as quite a few others. It caused so much trouble. He said, “You have trouble, because you're doing what you are supposed to be doing.” It was my cross.

Paint a rosy picture, and you are in denial. Put denial in a pot and it's going to slowly simmer until it explodes. The longer the congregation hides, the more political and power oriented the struggle becomes, and the more destructive its impact.

What can pastors do? What can parishes do?

Resolution

The first thing is a change of minds. We teach music, history, and the lives of saints. Why not teach a new subject: conflict 101? Conflict is a natural outgrowth of the

human proclivity to be self-centered.

Metropolitan Hierotheos gives us a refined description of what a parish is: “a hospital for healing of soul and body.” He goes on saying, everyone is a different person having different levels of faith and commitment, and subject to their own sins: pride, envy, jealousy, and sickness of the heart, consequences of evil, ignorance, forgetfulness of God, hardness, uncleanness, foolishness, rudeness, and inward self-indulgence.”

Today we live in an era of unprecedented egoism and hypocrisy. Many would find the medicinal vocabulary used above as offensive though it reflects theological and ascetical wisdom and truth. The new acceptable vocabulary would have us say, “I’m not sick; I just think differently, or I have my views.” The Book of Ecclesiastes says, “There is not a righteous man on earth who continually does good and who never sins” (7:20).

When a dispute occurs, don’t be surprised. Anticipate it. Teach that it will happen. This will be a major first step in modifying the shock when conflict becomes evident.

Composition of Conflict

This is what accompanies conflict. This is a sequential, predictable pattern of behavior.

We begin to undermine. The original issue is no longer the real issue. The problem is now identified as a person. He is / she is / they are the problem. Now people start talking less constructively about each other and more negatively about each other with those in their own circle. Suspicion grows. We become more judgmental and condemning. We question the other’s character, competency, credibility, or spirituality. Our emotions now effect our reasoning. Exaggeration, false accusations, and other distortions increase. Our church setting may resemble more the setting of a fighting street gang. Question a parishioner’s integrity, they are going to be more emotionally violent. This must not be allowed to happen.

When people are battling, my group is more human than yours. My tribe is better than yours. Russians are better than Greeks. The committee for the renovation of the church with Byzantine frescoes is better than the 18th century art loving committee. Labeling does nothing to manage conflict. It only creates a more entrenched enemy. She’s an animal. He is nothing but a cheat. The other always becomes second-rate. This may be typical, but must not be allowed. Alexander Solzhenitsyn wrote about his experiences in the gulag. He says if only all the evil people were somewhere else and all we had to do is separate from them and destroy them. He says, however, “The line dividing good and evil cuts through the heart of every human being.”

Let's stereotype our adversary by characterizing him with his worse behavior. We see one negative point and build a whole picture of that person. Let's make him totally depraved. It will justify our feelings about him and discredit his opinion. We need to be reminded; "hate the sin but not the sinner."

Friction, problems, conflicts or strife among Christians are normal and should be expected. Let's not be perplexed by it and spare ourselves and others degradation. Let's find a way to address differences in a manner that strengthens parish fellowship instead of tearing it apart. Its like a net under a trapeze artist, it will provide a sense of security.

Now worship, fellowship, and the work of the parish are adversely affected, often for years. Some will deny the depth or severity of their actions, and others will be embarrassed and blame those who led them.

Healing in parish can take place between persons as already stated, but it does become more complicated when it takes place within larger body, the parish.

A word of caution. Not everyone is called to be a healer, or capable of being a healer, and not all of us has allowed ourselves to be totally healed; some still carry some unresolved struggle. In a parish some just don't want to be bothered with this; even when they are on parish council. A pastor's knowledge of his flock is tantamount.

Statutes

In addition to considering the above, we should not avoid the Statutes of the Orthodox Church in America. Besides reflecting the good order of the church, they do have practical application. I have heard of conflicts which could be healed, if these were considered.

The Statutes of the Orthodox Church in America provide a procedure for dealing with conflicts for a rector, parish council, parish meeting, a dean, a diocesan bishop, and the Holy Synod. There is a method of investigation though it is not detailed, but certainly subject to the dean, diocesan bishop, and/or the Holy Synod. The most extreme punitive measure is stated as suspension or defrocking. Provision for church courts and even a Supreme Court of Appeals is called for; these are utilized based on the nature of the issue.

The parish priest is the head of the parish. He is the intermediary between the parish and diocesan bishop. If he is in disagreement with a decision of the parish council or the parish meeting it is to be recorded and the matter submitted first to the dean, and if necessary to the bishop. If the parish council or the parish meeting is in disagreement with the parish priest, it is to be recorded and the matter submitted first to the dean, and if necessary the bishop.

The Parish Council is the body which provides the parish with administration. The Annual and Special Parish Meeting is the highest legislative body in the parish. The Diocesan Council provides the diocese with administration. The Diocesan Assembly is the highest legislative body of the diocese. The All American Council is the highest legislative body of the Orthodox Church in America. All decisions of parishes, assemblies, and councils are subject to the approval of the diocesan bishop and/or Holy Synod.

A Check List

The following check list can be helpful for implementing change in a parish and minimizing the possibility of conflicts. It is certainly not exhaustive nor the grace of God. The personal skills of clergy and laity are necessary.

1. Depending on the gravity of the consideration consult your bishop.
2. Think through what you want to do and how you will do it.
3. Put this on agenda of the parish council. Discuss it, giving permission for dissenting comments. Affirm their privilege to dissent, encourage objections, listen to all at this meeting, and put it on the agenda for the next meeting.
4. Record only official motions and courses of actions. Stay from he said/she said and opinions, because you risk misquoting.
5. Speak with anyone following the meeting.
6. Speak with others during your coffee hour.
7. Watch faces, body language and note language
8. If this is a liturgical, pastoral issue that has limitations to council approval.
9. Watch so the issue remains the issue and not a persons.
10. Whatever happens, retain your composure. Keep your dignity.
11. Don't get out of control. You may loose the battle, but in the long run win the war.
12. Keep your bishop updated.
13. If you see you can't obtain your goal now, place on a future agenda.
14. Be cautious of a split occurring.
15. Keep a chronology and a paper trail.

The efforts for healing will require more than those items referred above. Prayer and the reading of scriptures and contributions of saints' writings will be fundamental.

I am grateful for being able to add my contribution along with all the other presenters and those who participated in discussions at this conference. We know our efforts will be helpful.

Archpriest Joseph Lickwar

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Saint Paul tells his disciple Timothy “preach the word,...in and out of season...” (2 Timothy 4:2)

and we need to add,

if you have to

use words.

I am not saying that teaching by example is an alternative after everything else has been tried.

Teaching by example is fundamental.

But every kind of effort has been made do not despair.