

## **Addressing the Needs of Parishes in Declining Demographic Regions**

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The purpose of this talk is to explore the varied life of parishes in declining regions and the challenges and opportunities in ministering in and to them. Certainly, since this is an evangelism conference, I am assuming that a particular undercurrent of this presentation should be precisely *\*how\** to evangelize within such an atmosphere. We must address this. Therefore we will discuss what comprises a declining region, what characteristics are sometimes exhibited in parishes in declining regions, what issues need to be addressed in such areas, and finally, possible actions that might be considered to attend to the ongoing needs of these parishes.

I am a native of the Pittsburgh area of Western Pennsylvania. I was born in Charleroi, where my father was the pastor of Holy Trinity Church, having succeeded his father before him. His brother, Fr. Igor, is still, today, a priest in Donora, PA, not far from Charleroi, while my father has since retired. I was raised in an era when the churches of the Mon Valley were always full. I can remember the stirring Lenten “Mission” services, the beautiful singing, the full churches, seeing friends who I would only see during the Lenten season. It made you proud to be an Orthodox Christian. It was an idyllic time for Orthodox Churches in Western PA. At least, it was to me. And most of us remember the nickname for the area. We called it, “The Holy Land.” It wasn’t far from the truth. My own parish of St. Nicholas in McKees Rocks, only a few miles from downtown Pittsburgh, tells an almost identical story.

And I am certainly conscious of the temptation to idealize the era of the 1970’s and earlier times in Western PA. There were indeed problems, problems that were shared

by many parishes throughout America: Parochialism, trusteeism, fights over the calendar issue, formalism, and so forth. But the general feeling was that things were good. The parishes were thriving, from the largest to the smallest. *The future was really not an issue.*

Around the time of the mid 70's however, things began to change, not within the parishes so much, but within the region. Economically, the steel industry began to feel the sting of cheaper foreign imported steel which was starting to flood the market, while the unions were still holding out for higher wages for their workers. Soon after, the economic collapse of the steel industry had had left an indelible wound on the region. Steel mills which were once buzzing with 24 hours-a-day operations laid-off their workers and closed. Men and women who had worked all their lives and had hoped for a retirement with full benefits soon had their hopes dashed and found themselves fortunate if they received even half of their promised retirement.

Now, I do not want to belabor the point, but it does bear stating at least one time, simply to put this presentation into context. Proportionally, at that time, a high percentage of the Orthodox Christians in the OCA in Western PA, and the previously so-called "Metropolia," were directly affected by the economic collapse of the steel industry in that region. And this story can be repeated with minor reference changes to the industry and the region, all across the Northeastern US. Their children left for a brighter future, to, well, somewhere else. But they left in droves.

So, in answer to the question, how did Western PA get itself into the predicament it is in today, we can offer only a few answers. First and foremost, the economic downturn in that region did have a major impact. Most of our Slavic people were manual

laborers, and they knew no other trade than the steel industry and no other area than Western PA. Most simply rode it out as best they could. Second, I believe that intermarriage, especially with Roman Catholics, contributed to the loss of a great many Orthodox Christians. At that time, it was required by the Roman Catholic Church to sign a pledge to raise the children in the Roman Catholic faith. Essentially, that means you would never again see those children or their children's children as Orthodox Christians. They're gone, and the Orthodox Church is now simply "grandma's Church." I'm sure that many of the priests here have served funerals for venerable life-long members of the community surrounded by dozens of family members who would have still been Orthodox, if just one spouse had made a commitment to remain in the Orthodox faith. Another trend, which was common across the US, was a wholesale migration from Orthodoxy, maybe due to language, ethnicity, or simply a desire to be more "American" within a Western religious context. Ultimately, however, we must also acknowledge that although the parishes, slowly but surely, began to feel the effects of the regional woes, whatever their cause, *few parishes, if any, did anything to respond*. It may even be said that the slow decline in membership happened in a rather subtle manner, but even the decline was not recognized as a problem until it became a fiscal problem. That is to say, until the parish realized that they were having difficulty meeting their financial obligations, and that no amount of bake sales or raffles could cover the increasing debt, they may not have even realized what was ultimately happening around them in their parish. Today, both rectors and concerned parishioners are the inheritors of these very real issues. Many of us have aging congregations with similarly aging buildings, parishes which are unable to pay a reasonable wage to a priest with a family or to have the money

to fix the leaky domes. And certainly not to do both. There are many of these parishes, some of them within a few miles of each other. In my own deanery we have four parishes within five miles of each other and each of them has similar issues.

That is not to say, however, that all hope is lost. In Christ, we never lose our ultimate hope. I want to avoid the temptation to paint an overly bleak picture, but it is important that we look at the trend that my diocese and areas similar to it, are experiencing. We must have the courage to face the reality of the situation head on and realize that the time for critical action has arrived. The current issues must be plainly stated, and the response should be equally decisive.

So what indicates a declining region? Although we could use various data sources and determine a certain baseline population, for our purpose, we will simply state that if the general trend of church membership for a significant number of years has indicated a steady decrease, we could consider this to be a “region in decline.” We will leave it to various department members and administrative staff to determine the exact numbers. For our purposes, the overall numbers for the Diocese of Western PA indicate such a decline. Other regions may also show similar trends. (*Show slide.*)

Again, we want to reiterate that there is no value in pointing fingers, assigning blame, or condemning an entire region or diocese. Our task is only to be honest about a serious situation, and use our collective wisdom and experience to move forward in faith and love.

Before we examine what characteristics may be experienced or exhibited in a parish which is experiencing serious decline, it is important to be reminded that the ministry which is given to priests and parish leaders is not simply to be spiritual

physicians to souls in need of healing, but also, and just as importantly, to diagnose and treat the spiritual maladies of the corporate body of Christ in the local community. As Orthodox Christians, we believe in the Church, we are members of one another, in Christ. Is it not then logical that we should be as adept at healing the local church? It is imperative that we look honestly at our communities and ask ourselves difficult questions, far beyond whether “liturgy is good,” “there are no major complaints” or “the bills are being paid.” We must ask ourselves if our parishes are simply in a maintenance mode, simply existing, and drifting toward an uncertain future.

One characteristic which is typical of parishes in declining regions is the lack of knowledge of purpose or direction among the parishioners. Here we confront some fundamental questions of our existence as Orthodox Christians. Why am I here in this parish? What does it mean to be a Christian? What does it mean to be Orthodox? What is the purpose of the Church?

There is no doubt that many of the parishes in declining regions are predominantly made up of so-called cradle Orthodox. There is certainly nothing wrong with this at all, but what is important is that life-long Orthodox Christians are reminded of their high calling and purpose as members of the body of Christ. To be “born” as an Orthodox Christian means that we can so easily take for granted our rich inheritance. And as a body of cradle Orthodox, we can simply exist in a vacuum, performing “our” rituals, doing things “our” way, while forgetting, if we ever really knew, the reason why we are together in the first place.

Here, I believe preaching takes on crucial importance. Basic themes of belief in Christ as Lord and Savior, the sacramental life, the mission of the church, living life as a

member of the Kingdom of God, anything which brings every person in the parish to reconsider (or maybe consider for the very first time) their identity as Orthodox Christians, should be considered. Why has God placed me here in this church? What is the purpose of this parish? Where are we going as a body?

Our parish will soon be celebrating their 90<sup>th</sup> anniversary. It will undoubtedly be a joyful celebration, especially for those who have been life-long members of our St. Nicholas parish. They can rightfully feel a tremendous sense of accomplishment and satisfaction that their parish has “existed” for 90 years. But indeed, this will precisely be the attitude among a few. We have “survived,” despite being in a declining region, despite the fact that the majority of the families of life-long members have long since left the faith or are nominally so. Unfortunately then, the purpose of the church is reduced to “survival,” to be able to balance the books at the end of the fiscal year, and to keep the doors open, no matter the liturgical life or attendance! I am determined, however, to remind everyone in my parish that as we look back and give thanks to God for the fearless and selfless efforts of all those who gave so much to establish our parish and build our unique and beautiful temple, all of that is for nothing if we only gather together in homage to our ancestors. Our parish was indeed originally established so that people of Carpatho-Russian ancestry in the McKees Rocks area of Pittsburgh could worship together using their language and their rituals. They sacrificed so much to have a place of their own in which to worship and to give a church building to their children, to pass on their culture, their language, their heritage, and their religion. However, we know that the mission of the church has always transcended such purposes, no matter how sincere and noble. And today, that original mission simply no longer exists, at least in such a

singular and exclusive manner. It is important to note that the parishioners must be told this with all humility and gentleness and deference to their heritage. We cannot dismiss anyone's culture. We cannot simply say, "well, you're thinking is wrong and you're here for the wrong reason." God will use everyone for his purposes, whether they know it or not. However, the purpose and direction of the parish must embrace the entire Christian mission, to proclaim the gospel to the world, to equip the saints for ministry, and to witness to the glory of God's grace which is at work in every believer. There must be a conscientious effort to proclaim and live the understanding of "this is why our parish is here and this is where we are going."

Another way in which we can bring this issue to light is to provide opportunities for real charitable service. God will certainly provide the opportunities both within and outside of the community. Those of us whose parishes reside in urban areas are surrounded by multiple opportunities for charitable work. And do not neglect appropriate chances to help those who are within the community, both old and young.

One of my first funerals at St. Nicholas was for a five year old Russian girl who died of brain cancer. The family was not entirely well known in the parish, but her illness and subsequent death provided a wonderful opportunity to experience a small victory of purpose. When she died, I wanted to make sure that the family was not burdened with the expense of the funeral, having lost a daughter at so young an age. I approached the funeral director and asked if he would give a discount on his services and he generously gave everything at cost. I then called the parish council president and asked if he would call 14 people of some means who could donate \$100 each which would cover the expenses of the funeral, about \$1500. He called me back only a few

hours later to tell me that people were now calling him, and the donations were totaling over \$4200! I think this was a pivotal event in our community, because it allowed us to experience God's rich grace and mercy as the body of Christ, but it also was a dramatic demonstration of the power of the purpose and direction of the church. From then on, charitable endeavors of many forms have been enthusiastically embraced by the parish.

And so, reminding a parish of their true purpose for existence is a powerful way to being the process of transformation from being an insular community which survives, to a parish which will begin to look at themselves as a community which serves God's greater purposes.

Parishes that find themselves in decline most likely have experienced it through difficult circumstances. Maybe it was a large loss of parishioners, a parish split over some contentious or divisive issue, a high turnover of priests, or whatever. In these cases they often become a breeding ground for frustration which turns into cynicism. A new priest or new family can enter the parish with great hopes and fresh ideas only to be answered with, "it will never work." In this case it is important that great patience is exercised so that ideas and hopes not be quashed. New priests and young priests experience tremendous frustration here. "Why are they not listening to my ideas?" As a new priest, I was given great advice by my father. "Treat everyone in the same manner and with respect," he said. And a good friend told me, "don't make any big changes in the first year." I think both ideas were very timely, and very much appreciated.

We must also be concerned about those who are frustrated, who have given up any hope for the future of the parish, or even for the peaceful life of the parish in the short-term. It can often happen that a new family joins the church, or a young family,

with bright ideas and a hopeful attitude, but will soon meet with cynicism and be instantly quieted. Both with those who are cynics and with those who are met with cynicism, a patient and respectful attitude by the priest can be very effective.

At the beginning of my ministry I met with many people of the parish, either one on one or with their families. While some of them were checking me out, I was checking them out too. Who can help to lead or administer this parish? Who in the congregation has a heart to see the church move beyond survival and towards growth? It is very important to identify people that support positive change and not just change for change's sake. It is also important to listen to the cynics, hear their frustrations and not meet their concerns with judgment.

So then, providing opportunities for small victories is very important. They can take so many different forms. A new class on the Orthodox faith. A vespers service done properly and prayerfully. One successful charitable project. The crucial thing is to start small. A series of small victories is more effective in the long run than one large change which may be too much for long term members to handle. We've all heard the stories of priests who, upon arrival during their first week at a new parish, went in and removed all the pews from the church. While removing some or all pews, or some similar drastic change, may be an commendable long term goal after years of education, expose to the larger experience of Orthodox Christianity, and a build up of trust between the priest and parishioners, it is a sure fire way to cause more bitterness and strife in the parish in the short term if approached in a heavy handed manner. More importantly, pews are about as far down on the priority list for a parish in decline as you can get. There are simply more important and bigger issues to tackle.

Ultimately, cynicism must be met with patience, and a relationship of trust must be established between priest and parishioner. Giving opportunities for small victories can show at least some cynics that things can work in the parish, things can change, and not all change is bad. Cynics cannot be ignored, but they must be loved.

I had mentioned previously that it is important that a priest not only be spiritual physicians to individual souls but that they are able to diagnose ailments of the corporate body. Another major issue in the life of a parish in a declining region that must be addressed is the disunity of the body. Frequently, a parish is at odds with itself. The cynicism which we previously discussed can lead to disunity, even a blatant lack of love for each other, a lack of respect for other people and an unwillingness to properly receive any visitors or inquirers.

One teacher of education wisely taught me, “assume nothing.” That is, do not assume that because we are in a church, having the Divine Liturgy, surrounded by people who have been in the church all their lives, that they’re actually treating one another in a manner worthy of the people of God. If the reception of the grace of God is “unto judgment or condemnation” then it is logical as some Orthodox teachers have noted that sometimes within the Church people can become more hateful, more bitter, more angry and more contentious. If our heart is not pure, if we are not striving to grow in the likeness of God, if our entire concept of Church and Christianity is distorted, then it is no wonder that such attitudes exist within the body of Christ.

The scriptural witness to this unity within the body is clear. Christ taught us to “love one another, as I have loved you” (Jn 13:34). St. Paul spent considerable time in his writings healing divisions within the Corinthian church and admonishing them to

exercise the greatest gift of the Holy Spirit, love. Our Divine Liturgy continues this witness. “Let us love one another, that with one mind, we may confess Father, Son, and Holy Spirit...” We are also called to glorify God with “one mouth and one heart.”

Again, if we assume that people have been in the church for their entire life, or have been a Christian all their life and that they actually know how to treat one another, I believe we make an assumptive mistake. Leadership within the parish community must both call the body to the highest ideal of love as well as embody and model that love. Everyone is loved by God and we must grow in love as we grow in the likeness of God.

Now it seems rather naïve to simply say, “we need to love one another.” But of course, it is true. Not only must we give the call, we must also facilitate opportunities for loving relationships within the body of Christ. I know examples in my own parish community of people who have been going to the same small church for 30 years and barely know each other. They may have never even said “Hello” to one another. We must, therefore, provide opportunities for relationships to be established and for people to get to know one another.

In our parish, we have a considerable number of Russian immigrants. Most of them are educated, professional people, but they also enjoy being together with one another, to speak in Russian, and to establish friendships within their Russian immigrant community. This is commendable. However, especially when dealing with disparate groups within the community, such as life-long members, new members, immigrants, converts, visitors, etc., opportunity for them to come together must be given. I’ve heard it said that if it’s not liturgical worship, it’s not Orthodox and it’s a waste of time. I think that’s a mistake. I believe that some of the most important ministry goes on during

coffee hour. Coffee hour may be a break, a relaxing time, for people, but the priest should consider it just another important aspect of his ministry. I really believe this. Visitors should be made to feel especially welcomed and introductions should be made to other parishioners, especially those who are most welcoming and supportive of parish growth. I know of priests who never go to coffee hour. This is a mistake, it sends the wrong message, and people notice. Even social activities outside of liturgical worship can play an important role in establishing unity within the body.

We must do everything possible to establish unity within the church, both mind and heart, so that a parish can embrace each and every parishioner truly as brothers and sisters in the Faith.

Many times, when such attitudes are prevalent and the decline of membership is steady and consistent, planning for the future becomes an unaffordable luxury. It is ironic that while most churches which were established in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century had a strong sense of passing on a temple and the faith to future generations, that same commitment to the future fades into the background when parishes are in decline. Many of the adult children of life long members have since left the church, either for other parishes, other areas, or other faiths. The future no longer seems an important issue when your children will not be a part of it.

There are so many opportunities to plan for the future in any parish. Some are given to us and some must be planned. Older parishes often must spend a large part of their budget on buildings and maintenance. Planning repairs and upgrades to a building can take a parish far into the future, so the opportunity to plan five or ten years ahead can actually be an opportunity to ask larger questions. Will we be here in five or ten years?

What can we do to help ensure our continued life as a parish beyond building maintenance?

One of the most difficult choices a parish can make is whether to stay in a declining area, where virtually all the businesses and other churches have left and the area is in physical decline. Will a move to the suburbs give the parish a chance for growth? Is there enough financial support to make a move to an area of more expensive real estate and new mortgage? Will all the parishioners stay in the parish if the move is accomplished? Or is it better to stay in the area and attempt to revitalize the surrounding area by purchasing properties? Both options are very long-term solutions, each with its advantages and disadvantages. Historically speaking, both options have experienced both successes and failures.

Ultimately, thoughts of the future are usually low on the priority list of a parish in decline. The reason is obvious. It is painful to think of a future where the congregation has withered to a few people, the building is aging, and young children were part of a bygone era. However, sometimes facing the future honestly can actually spur growth minded individuals to rise to the occasion and begin to ask (and maybe even answer) difficult questions and face harsh realities. Further, through education, more positive answers of church growth and evangelization may come to mind. Only then can the future truly be faced with courage.

One way to begin planning for the future is simply to create a committee made up of individuals either from the parish council or forward thinking individuals who have the best interest of the church in mind. Hold an informal discussion about the church's plans for the future. Use it as an opportunity to discuss the mission and purpose of the church

in a positive manner. Most of all, make the plans flexible enough to embrace change and to leave options open. Only those who have a positive and realistic attitude need apply.

Besides diagnosing issues and treating them within the local community, it should be emphasized that all of this requires leadership. It goes without saying that we are a hierarchical church - our leadership models are clear. The first priest of the community is a representative of the bishop who gives the community their unity with one another and with other Orthodox communities. Therefore, it is imperative that leadership, both bishop, priest, and local lay leaders, work together for the common good. Leadership must provide the vision and sometimes ask difficult questions or point out with all gentleness, difficult realities. If an entire diocese is sliding into decline, it is imperative that the leadership recognize the trend, be honest about the situation, and facilitate the treatment of causes as best they can.

Every issue must be available for discussion. Within a diocese, unless we are talking about planting missions in highly populated or growth areas, geographical location must be an important issue that can be discussed honestly. Many of our older parishes were established in neighborhoods that were inhabited by parishioners. Rarely is this the case today. In the Pittsburgh area, our parishes have a two-fold geographical challenge. First, many of the older churches are located in areas which have experienced severe economic decline. It is difficult, but not impossible, to attract new parishioners in an area where they would not normally travel. Additionally, sometimes the buildings do not offer basic facilities that would be considered essential, such as accessible washrooms, or adequate space for Christian education. This problem is compounded by the fact that many of these parishes are within a few miles of each other.

Here, depending on the direction of the parish, the wish of the parishioners, the severity of the decline and the economic situation of the parish, we need to think of alternatives to parishes existing with only a few people who are unable to give even a modicum of support to a priest, the diocese and the central administration, as well as repair ailing structures. Difficult choices must be made, together, by the entire community. Would it not be better to have some of these existing facilities possibly converted to monasteries, retreat centers, youth facilities, Christian Education resource centers, reading rooms, church history displays, bookstores, diocesan administrative centers, or start them over as a regional mission station or satellite facility for another existing parish? This would not only allow existing structures to be used to the benefit of a larger group of people, this would give other parishes the opportunity to have a better chance for visitors and newcomers who would not be overwhelmed by a plethora of choices within the OCA, all within a few miles of each other.

Other choices that could be considered include combining parishes. This is a very delicate issue, especially for parishioners who have supported a parish all of their lives only to abandon that property because a parish is combining with another. Nevertheless, if the options are very limited, it can be a more attractive option than the difficulties experienced in supporting a priest, assessments, and property expenses. Although there are issues of property ownership involved in this issue, since most properties are owned by the local parish corporation, diocesan or deanery leadership can explore possibilities with local congregations that are facing such difficulties. Needless to say, this is the most difficult and undesirable choice of all. We do not want to encourage the closing or combining of parishes, but one larger parish could make a more effective witness than

two very small parishes which are both financially struggling, it is an option which should be explored.

It is imperative that we consider the idea that leadership makes all the difference in these situations, both clerical and lay. To minister in a declining region is not a task for everyone, just as every parish has its own challenges, large and small, resource abundant and humble, mission and established. Each parish requires a unique vision, with a leader at the head who is willing to provide direction, vision, guidance, patience and love. It is very helpful if the priest in the declining region is from the area or is very familiar with the people, the background and the geographical area, not only of that parish, but of all the parishes in the area. While a parish is struggling, he must also take into account the parishes around him. Are they in a similar situation? Can they work together for the common good of a brighter future? Are there simply too many parishes for this region at this time? What is the relationship between parishes in the deanery or in the immediate vicinity. What about parishes outside of the OCA but in the vicinity – are they experiencing similar difficulties?

I believe the priest must love this area, must want to see it grow, not just the parish, although, of course, this is fundamental, but also the larger area, the deanery, the diocese, he must know and love these people. He must have a passionate heart to know that all hope is not lost, that tremendous opportunities lie ahead, and that God's will is that His Church be firmly reestablished in the area. If he is not from the region, he must come to know the people as his own. He must be a good listener, with patience and understanding. The people look to him for leadership and direction, not condemnation and criticism.

The priest must be able to provide opportunities for the parishioners to experience the greater realm of Orthodoxy, by visiting other parishes, inviting speakers, visiting monasteries, etc., anything that will give the parishioners of sense of being part of the larger church, be it the diocese, the Orthodox Church in America, or the Orthodox world at large. This is an important component in attempting to break out of the mindset of parochialism, where Orthodoxy is measured by one's narrow experience, knowledge and understanding.

It is ultimately strong and patient leadership that will lead a parish out of decline, even within a region of demographic decline. The priest must want it, the people must want it, and all must be willing to make the sacrifices that are required to create an atmosphere of growth. A priest must have the God given gifts to accomplish such a ministry. The people must be willing to trust, with all sincerity, his leadership out of decline.

Finally, a word about evangelization. We have focused closely on the possibilities of addressing the needs of the parish in a declining region, and have not spoken at all about the larger community surrounding the church, reaching out to the unchurched, and evangelizing those who do not know Christ. However, we must first ensure that as we bring people to a saving knowledge of the Truth, that we actually have a loving church to bring them to. That is, we must first evangelize, or rather re-evangelize, those who are living within the church, and need to hear again the wonderful words of salvation that Our Lord gives to us. While it is commendable and even essential to begin to reach out to those who are not of the Church, it is important that the parish, as

a community, be living the life which we are all called to live. In short, we must look for opportunities to evangelize within the parish before we go outside of it.

And so, we must work to give purpose and direction again to our parishes, to answer frustration and cynicism with patience and hope, to unite everyone in the parish as the one body of Christ, and make plans for the future which glorify God and fulfill His mission and high calling for every Christian community. All of this can only be done when both priest and people work together for the common good and the building up of Christ's holy Church.