

Archpriest John Pierce

Developing a Sense of Mission in an Older Parish

I have been asked to speak about the Lord's work in revitalizing an old parish and imbuing it with a mission spirit. In preparing my comments, it seemed all I could really speak about with any knowledge were certain topics that have been important in the development of our particular parish, even though this parish merely stands as one among many.

As you will see, this one hundred eight year old parish has grown from about thirty five people all told to over a hundred fifty. It has poured off the mountainside of Washington's Mt. Rainier like glacial waters into the population centers of Southern Puget Sound. It has established a new parish center that hosted the latest Diocesan Assembly; and founded, out of its own membership, a mission in Olympia, the state capitol. The topics I would like to speak about include the purpose of a parish, the background of our particular parish, foundations for growth and renewal that include a "great cloud of witnesses," and the love of God. I would also like to touch on how aspects of stability, leadership and vision have affected the life of our parish.

Most of what I have to say seems more anecdotal than theoretical. I apologize for this, but I hope the story telling conveys something of what has transpired in our parish, and finds some sort of universal application, a fleshing out of theories which we all know and accept anyway.

1. Purpose

As you may realize, I come from that desperate land of the Seattle Mariners, last place in the A. L. West, bearing the indignity of having been swept last week by Tampa Bay. The only excitement generated by the club around our town is to see how quickly we can get to thirty out. Here, in the very shadows of Yankee Stadium, I feel like a barbarian standing before the gates of Byzantium. I'm mindful of the legendary Casey Stengel, who won eleven pennants in his thirteen years (1949-1961) as manager of the Yankees. When once asked the secret to his success as a manager, Stengel replied, "I couldn't have done it without my players."

I certainly don't want to pretend that I'm an expert in revitalizing a parish, but also, I might add, that when I look back over nearly twenty years of the witness of the faithful people of our parish, I realize that its neither been my managerial, pastoral skills nor the the result of any cleverness on the part of the players, the faithful people, that has produced a growing, mission oriented parish. For we all, as we pray at every Liturgy of St. Basil the Great, have done nothing good upon the earth.

If, in fact, there is anything worthy of praise, then the purpose of the whole endeavor must always be clear: and that is the prize. For Stengel and his players it was the pennant; and utilizing a sports analogy himself, the Holy Apostle Paul wrote about the purpose of every Christian, whether pastor or layman:

I press on toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus (RSV Phil. 3:14). Do you not know that in a race all the runners compete, but only one receives the prize? So run that you may obtain it

(RSV I Cor. 9:24). Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight, and sin which clings so closely, and let us run with perseverance the race that is set before us, looking to Jesus the pioneer and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross, despising the shame, and is seated at the right hand of the throne of God (RSV Heb. 12:1-2).

Programs, "how to" manuals, talks and even conferences may be useful, or they may not be useful. The most important thing is the purpose: that our parishes press on toward the upward call of God in Christ Jesus. Jesus Christ must always be Alpha and Omega in every parish endeavor, He must always be the first thing and the last thing or else there will be no-thing.

It goes without saying that placing Jesus Christ first in a parish means to recognize Orthodox worship, offered prayerfully and as beautifully as we can, to lie at the very heart of our heart of our endeavor. Clergy, Readers, servers and choir shoulder a tremendous responsibility that, history reminds us, has joined entire nations to Christ.

2. Background

I would like to introduce Holy Trinity Church to you. Imagine this: An old coal town, mines, coke ovens, a railroad at the turn of the last century. Miners arrive from the Austro-Hungarian Empire, in my town they simply call themselves Slavs, but lately some are identifying with the name Carpatho-Rusyn. Stepping out of a Byzantine Catholic background, they organized under the Orthodox Bishop in San Francisco in 1896. Here, families with Eastern European names that ended with "kos" and "aks" sacrificed out of their tiny and dangerously won paychecks and their one day off each week to purchase and build a monument to their faith in Jesus Christ. In 1900 they completed a small wood frame temple, an exotic mixture of the Victorian style that prevails in town, with the whimsy of a large blue "onion dome" cupola, it was consecrated in 1902 by St. Tikhon.

One might imagine that I'm describing a town somewhere in Pennsylvania: But no, the view here is from the flanks of Mt. Rainier overlooking beautiful Puget Sound in Washington State; the town of Wilkeson. The town was named in 1877 to honor the 60th birthday of Samuel Wilkeson Jr., who was corporate board secretary for the Northern Pacific railway, which financed the coal and coke mines.

Today the mines are closed. The town has no economic base: the sparse timber from further up country just passes through it, the sandstone quarries that provided some revenue after the coal shut down are themselves quiet now. The railroad is gone, the rail beds converted from rails to trails. Serving as a bedroom community for those willing to make the long commute into the dense population centers of Puget Sound, it is almost always referred to as a "sleepy little town" whenever it is mentioned in the local press.

Holy Trinity's last full time resident priest, Fr. Leporski, left in the late 1920's and the temple suffered disuse through the early 1930's. Andrew and Anna Michael, farmers who had settled in the area from the Carpathian Mountains, reorganized the Orthodox faithful in the 1930's and contacted the Orthodox Church in Seattle for a priest to visit on a monthly basis. The Michals and their children were an important part of parish life through that second half of the last century.

3. Foundations: A Great Cloud of Witnesses, the Love of God

Having already quoted Hebrews 12:1, we realize that as we press toward the upward call of God in Christ, we are not alone, but are surrounded by a "great cloud of witnesses." This would include for us the saints of the two covenants, both Old and New. It would also include the Church, not abstract, but manifest in the Eucharistic community in which we are planted, which for most of us is a parish. It is here, in the local Eucharistic gathering that the members of the Church have the opportunity to "encourage one another and build one another up" as St. Paul writes in II Thessalonians (RSV I Thess. 5:11). Unfortunately, here is where we may also encounter what Sergei Fudel describes as, "the Dark Double of the Church" in his book *Light in Darkness* (published by our host seminary). This amounts to discouraging one another and tearing one another down.

Encouraging or discouraging, building or tearing down is a response, ultimately to love, the love of God. It is a question about whether we love, or do not love. The Lord not only gives us a commandment to love one another in John 13, but he down right *commands* us to love one another in John 15.

It goes without saying that a priest should have love for the people.

When I first became aware of a possible priestly vocation, my home parish in the California Bay Area had undergone a rapid succession of priests, and was being supplied by a rotation of clergy at the time. I decided that the best thing to do would be to drive to Danville and visit the local Dean, Fr. Michael Prokurat, God rest his soul. There, I revealed what was in my heart, after which he asked me three questions. The first two were up-front precautionary measures: Had I been married only once, and, did I have a criminal record. The third one was the zinger, and revealed something of Fr. Michael and the priestly vocation. I'll never forget it. It is, along with the other two, now that I am a Dean, one that I ask all who speak of a priestly vocation to me: Fr. Michael asked, "Do you love people?"

The priest may love people, but do the people love people? Encouraging one another and building one another up was the foundation and the witness of Andrew and Anna Michael and their children. It is a foundation of loving one another.

In a local newspaper article published a decade before my arrival in 1985, we read the following:

The 35-member congregation are the children, grandchildren and relatives of Andrew and Anna Michal...1

Thirty five people, counting children, all related. This could be a parochial nightmare. Some priests may shiver at the prospect. But this family encouraged and built. They could have controlled the Parish Council, but through the last twenty years they opened their arms and shared this ministry with new people who joined the parish. They could have insisted on having their way with everything, but instead, they kept St. Paul's words about encouraging and loving in the context of what he writes after that:

Therefore encourage one another and build one another up, just as you are doing. But we beseech you, brethren, to respect those who labor among you and are over you in the Lord and admonish you, and to esteem them

very highly *in love* because of their work. Be at peace among yourselves (RSV I Thess. 5:11-13).

Andrew and Anna Michal died before I arrived at Holy Trinity. I've chanted their Panikhidas for twenty years, sometimes with tears in my eyes, thanking God for the love they passed on, the respect they taught, and the foundations they laid.

This loving witness has been built upon by many who have joined our parish: Slavs, Greeks, Arabs and of course the many converts who now make up the largest part of the congregation. Without this foundation of love for God in Christ, a parish cannot grow.

4. Stability

One of the most important aspects, I believe, in building up an older parish like Holy Trinity has been the stability of the clergy. I am very grateful to His Grace, Bishop TIKHON, for having a strong vision about the relationship and bond that should exist between a priest and his parish. A bond that should be broken only under the most irreparable circumstances, perhaps something as serious as the death of the priest! I have to confess that I did not always share this vision. Having been the sixth generation in my family to be born in California, I envisioned my time among the misty cedars of Washington to be a stepping stone back to a parish in the Golden State.

But Blessed Father Cosmas of Grigoriou, wrote this about his life's missionary work in Zaire:

"The missionary's beginning is significant, however it is not the sum of the matter... The outset might be blessed or might become blessed at the end. What's important is that the giving be true and total, without holding back, with a disposition to self-sacrifice and self-denial, and with the aim of leaving our bones among the natives."²

Now I sing a different song, it goes:

Washington my home;
Where ever I may roam;
This is my land, my native land,
Washington, my home.³

I've seen how a succession of priests demoralizes and taps out the love in a parish. Commitment and self-sacrifice are at the heart of missionary work, whether in Zaire or America. It may take years to really get to know the natives, learn their language (in Washington for example, we have twenty different words for rain). A pastor who comes into a parish and begins changing things right way, even for what appears to be the most Orthodox reasons, has trouble on his hands, especially in an older parish. Nothing happens overnight, and patience is revealed to be an important virtue. Yet, I've also found that no matter how hard one tries, no matter how much time it takes, not everybody is going to be satisfied with the results. I've often thought about a popular saying by Abraham Lincoln, with a different twist:

You can minister to some of the people all of the time, and all of the people some of the time, but you can not minister to all of the people all of the time.

5. Leadership

Holy Trinity began a new chapter in its history in 1985 when the members stepped out in faith to request their first full time resident priest in sixty-six years. His Grace, Bishop BORIS of Chicago, God rest his soul, was *Locum Tenens* of the Diocese of the West at that time. The parish, in its ninety years of existence, had never been incorporated! His Grace instructed the parish to incorporate, using the standard by-laws from the Diocese of the Midwest.

These bylaws reflect a truly eucharistic model for parish life: Not only does the Rector preside at the Divine Liturgy, but as the Father of the parish, he presides over "all meetings within the parish." The Rector's prerogative to lead the parish is an important tool in bringing about renewal. When this prerogative is sidelined, and the Rector is made to feel like a chaplain attached to a service organization, there is no hope for renewal.

At a baptism a few years ago that involved a number of people from a local Greek Orthodox parish, I was asked by an old timer from there, "Who's your president?" "I am," I said. "I'm the president of the Women's Auxiliary, as well," I added. "You must be busy," the gentleman's wife said, with some surprise in her voice. I thought to myself, "Probably not half as busy as I would be if I could not exercise genuine leadership within the parish."

There are, of course, many ways clergy and laity work together in leadership positions to encourage and to build, but among them, the presidency of the Rector both inside and outside the Altar is pivotal.

The Hierarchical support at the beginning by His Grace Bishop BORIS, and through the years by His Grace, Bishop TIKHON, has been key in building solid and orderly community. It is well known that Bishop TIKHON has great concern that "all things should be done decently and in order (RSV I Cor. 14:40). If there is anyone among the laity not satisfied with parish leadership, they and the leadership know they receive a fair hearing, provided they follow the good order of the Church: Rector, Dean, Chancellor and only then, Bishop.

6. Vision

Developing a common vision uniting the faithful with the clergy has been fundamental at Holy Resurrection. A willingness to truly employ the words used by St. Paul in the verse from II Thessalonians, quoted above, are at the heart of determining this vision. St. Paul uses words such as respect, esteem and love when he writes about encouraging and building each other up. These were important words to remember when we deliberated and sought a common vision.

After my first five years at Holy Trinity, we spent a number of Sundays brainstorming goals for various aspects of parish life. It was the typical giant tablet on an easel approach. I'm leery of this approach, having found a lot of these types of sessions to be a waste of time. But we pressed on, organizing the goals into specific categories, then submitting them back to the membership for a vote that would prioritize the top

three goals for each category. After this, the parish officially accepted these goals at a called meeting of the members. These goals included the first official statement about moving the parish from Wilkeson closer to the population centers of Southern Puget Sound. They called for ministries and projects that many parishes take for granted: A deacon, educational programs, a fellowship hall and Sunday school rooms, a library, a bookstore, a nursery, an office. Specific measures to preserve our sacred and historic temple were included. This set of goals provided a blueprint for what was to happen next. They were a tool to be utilized by the clergy and parish council, a guideline for future parish meetings. Having taken the effort to produce these goals (and, it *was* an effort), they allowed us to move from one to the other, sometimes several goals at once to establish what we as a parish felt we were called to be.

By the turn of this century, all goals had been accomplished, thanks be to God. A couple of years later, and we now have two deacons!

We have not produced a new set of goals. After our move to Tacoma, the goals have seemed to present themselves to us: building up specific ministries for women and men, acquisition of more property, site development and the construction of a new temple. I sense, however, that it may be good for us to go through this exercise once again to determine a new set of goals, perhaps to see things that we are currently missing, and setting a new blueprint for parish development.

I would like to take a moment to speak about seemingly derailed goals. The context for this is St. Paul's admonition to the Ephesians to "always and for everything giving thanks in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ to God the Father (RSV Eph. 5:20)."

Once a very dear Presbytera of a long retired priest told me a story. Years ago of ferocious and unfounded attacks were being leveled at her husband by a certain individual. This was turning their ministry into a nightmare, and having a profound effect on both of them and the parish. She told me that she has reached the breaking point one day while waiting alone in her car for a traffic signal. She remembered the words of the holy Apostle at that point, and began specifically giving thanks to God for this man and the painful and damaging words he had used against her husband. She broke down in tears as passengers from a car that had pulled up along side her gazed on helplessly. She told me that she had not only given thanks to God for this man, but even had the wherewithal to approach him and thank him personally, which she added, left him with just a dumbfounded look. What had been a source of pain became a source of joy. What had been destructive and dark became bright and illuminating. Through the Cross, joy had come into the world; and as the Patriarch Joseph said to his brothers when they cowered before him in Egypt, "As for you, you meant evil against me; but God meant it for good (RSV Gen. 50:20).

Derailed goals and setbacks are only such when they do not involve the Cross and Resurrection of our Lord. At one point in an attempt to move, Holy Trinity had purchased a piece of property. It couldn't afford the whole property, so it divided the land, leaving a small house on a lot for me to purchase. The parish invested in architectural plans, engineering reports and had even purchased the building and utility permits from the city. Then we found ourselves without financial backing and no money left to build. During the time of the agonizing resale of the permits back to the city, we realized that had we built, the property would not have been adequate for future development. There was going to be no Orthodox Church on that lot. Presbytera's witness

to the power of the Cross in light of St. Paul's admonition to give thanks to God always and for everything held our congregation together through what might otherwise have been considered a derailed goal. We ended up selling the property to another religious organization, and I have to admit to a thorn in my flesh kind of feeling every morning when I wake up and look out my kitchen window and have to summon everything inside me to give thanks for the Jehovah's Witness Kingdom Hall that now occupies that lot.

Derailed goals may be only the beginning of a sense of negativity that can grip a parish, it is sad to encounter or deal with a parish that thinks it has "problems". Christ is risen from the dead. A parish that has so called "problems" has not corporately recognized this most important aspect of faith. Death no longer has dominion over us, there are no problems in the new life offered to us in Jesus Christ. There is only joy! If the parish leadership perceives the new life in Christ to be fraught with problems rather than opportunities, with woe rather than joy, then what reason is there for the parish to exist in the first place? The leadership should always be the bearer of Good News, for there is no bad news for a Christian. "Christ is risen!" should echo from the front porch on Pascha night throughout all the services, meetings and deliberations of the entire year.

7. Conclusion

I realize that I have only touched upon those topics that have shaped the development of our parish as it has grown over the last twenty years. I suspect that you may have some questions for me, I'm never certain that I have the answers. Reviewing these topics: we have established the need for a sense of purpose grounded in Jesus Christ; we have explored a history and background that is by no means unique within our Orthodox Church in America; we have learned how good parish foundations are laid when there is a faithful witness to the love of God in Christ. I have spoken about certain aspects of parish stability and leadership that have been crucial in bringing about this growth and renewal. I have outlined the systematic way that our parish established a vision through the development of specific goals.

I want simply to just add one last thing. We spent many years up in Wilkeson determining whether we should move or not, and after we determined that we should, it became important for us to realize that this was not merely our decision, but Gods. If we moved, if we grew, it would be because the Holy Spirit had prepared the hearts of those whom we were to encounter, and the Lord would show us the way. It does not rest with us to be clever or progressive, but only to be faithful over the little God has given us.

Epilogue

Before I answer any questions, I feel that I would be remiss if I did not tell you about a certain phenomenon that I cannot place in any tidy way within the body of my talk.

A few years ago at a Deans meeting in San Francisco, I was telling Fr. Ian MacKinnon, who was at that time Dean of our Missions Deanery, about church growth and the parking lot. Twice in about a three year period we had enlarged our parking lot to accommodate more cars. Both times we experienced a spike in church growth. Like Fr. Ian, I prefer to think there is something more to Orthodox mission work than enlarging

parking lots, but in ways that I cannot understand, I'm placing it out there for you just so you know.

Notes

1. Churchill, Marlowe. "Keeping the Faith." Tacoma News Tribune. 29 Sept. 1974.
2. Aslanidis, Demetrios & Monk Damascene Grigoriatis. Apostle to Zaire. London, Ontario: Uncut Mountain Press, 2001.
3. Washington State Song, written by Helen Davis.