



"THE PARISH COMMUNITY": Counting the Sheep

by Fr Dan Kovalak

Father Thomas Hopko's "keynote" for the All-American Council -- "The Orthodox Parish in North America" -- is a thoughtful, inspired and insightful document worthy of honest reflection in our parishes. Immediately after receiving it, I put the yellow highlighter to it and began preparing copies for our parish study group. In the process of doing so, I left my office to attend an ecumenical committee meeting at a local Protestant church. When the meeting concluded, as I was leaving, I picked up a denominational newspaper from the church where the meeting was held.

Returning to my office, with Father Hopko's article still open on my desk, I glanced through the newspaper I had just picked up. It included the following report (edited for space) by a woman pastor to the denomination's district board.

"25 years ago, our church had 1,000 members, 300 in church school, and about 750 people for Sunday services in a beautiful, well-maintained building. Today, we have the same building in very shabby shape, 76 members, more than half over age 75, 11 kids in church school, and debts in excess of \$150,000. How did we get to this place?

There were three core problems: an unwillingness to engage with our neighborhood, an inability to disagree without fighting, and unrealistic long-term financial planning.

It started many years ago. We ignored the cultural and demographic changes in our neighborhood. We fought, between ourselves and with our leaders. With every fight, good

people left and our will to serve was diminished. Our financial-planning was short-sighted. We used our nest egg to hire an education person then were unable to address disastrous problems with heating and roofing that left us with a mortgage far beyond our means.

We were warmly welcoming people, had good worship, inspiring sermons, excellent music, well-presented bulletins, friendly people at the door -- everything consultants told us to do. But our mission commitment was abysmal. Very few people were involved in hands-on ministry. We will be closing this Summer."

As I read this, I considered some obvious comparisons to many Orthodox parishes with which I am familiar. What really struck me, however, was the matter-of-factness of the final sentence: "We will be closing this Summer." Here was a community that allowed relevant empirical data to provoke a corresponding action; a parish willing to "face the music" in an honest fashion. It had done its homework, realized its situation, acknowledged its poor stewardship and arrived at a painful conclusion. Though the prospect of closing its doors undoubtedly ruffled some feathers, the crucial decision was inevitable.

With this in mind, I returned to Fr Hopko's article in a slightly different frame of mind. Rather than study it as simply a "paper", I felt it would better serve as a tangible measure; a template against which the realities of Orthodox parish life in contemporary North America may be set to gauge the health and vitality, or lack of same, in our communities. (over)



"A priest who is a living witness to the Divine truth unconsciously accustoms his parishioners to think of God and of their souls every time they meet him. The very sight of him will cheer and comfort them. In his person people will find their memory of God and of their highest spiritual values. Such a love is bound to be a blessing both for the flock and for the shepherd."

— Archbishop John (Shahovskoy)

PASTORS TO PASTORS
pays loving tribute, with profound thanks and
gratitude for his 25 years as Primate of the
Orthodox Church in America, to
Metropolitan THEODOSIUS.

"An Orthodox Christian parish is first and foremost a worshipping community," declares Fr Hopko. This seems a good place to begin and focus a thoughtful and sorely-needed self-analysis. On a national level, rather than settling for a head-count for assessment purposes, wouldn't the Church and her mission be better served by simply counting worshippers? "Supporting membership", as reported from Council to Council, has been in steady decline for decades (except for when it has been frozen to assure adequate cash-flow). Further, we can continue to adopt statute amendments defining "parishioners" until the cows come home yet experience similar effects. Yet some suggest that the Church is in fact growing! "Show me the numbers!" If the parish is indeed "first and foremost a worshipping community," let's allow the number of worshippers to be our "census"; a more reliable measure of parish life. Gaining such information should be relatively painless and cost nothing more than a stamp. It need only fill in two blanks: "On x Sunday, Liturgy attendance was ___ adults and ___ children." Is this too simplistic?

The follow-up on such information would be significantly more difficult.

For if the "worshipping community", based on pertinent data of various "averages", is not sufficient to meet a realistic operating budget for an existing physical plant, adequate clergy compensation, etc, some tough decisions must be made. This, naturally, falls to leadership. Is the OCA up to this task or do we fear ruffling feathers? Such action is crucial.

Earlier in the document, Fr Hopko offers the following statement:

"If a parish has no awareness and consciousness of being 'sent' by God to speak His words, to do His work, and to accomplish His will in this world, then it is not an Orthodox Christian parish. At best it is a bunch of decent people carrying on a bundle of benign activities for their own benefit. At worst, to use apocalyptic words, it is a 'synagogue of Satan'."

These are stinging words that provoke two questions: (1) Who is to judge whether a parish is or isn't doing these things? and (2) If a parish determines, or has been determined, to be "not an Orthodox Christian parish" according to these criteria, what is to be done with it? What recourse does it have; what mechanism is engaged to correct its path or disband it?

I commend the report and subsequent action by the above-cited denominational parish. That community was no longer fulfilling its mission, confessed its lack of resources to do so, and thus shutdown. This required difficult decisions from

bold leadership. But it was a necessary instance of pruning a dead branch from a tree. Otherwise, that particular denomination, on a national and even international basis, would seem to substantially conform to the criteria for "an Orthodox Christian parish."

For years, at times with good reason, the OCA has refused to engage in a serious process of strategic planning. Perhaps the main obstacle lies in the corporate implications of the word "strategic". This should by no means, however, deter us from collecting relevant data to realistically measure at the least where we're at. If the health of the constituent parishes summarily reflects the health of the national church, we should be eager to empirically measure the vitality of our parishes beyond vague notions of whether or not they have "an awareness and consciousness of being 'sent' by God." Ask me how many worshippers we have on a Sunday morning. In a year, ask me again. Then we'll have something to measure. Whether that measure will incite action or not depends on the boldness and vision of our leadership. But let's start somewhere!

If the per-capita assessment data remains the only solicited information from parishes for the national church, we know the trend all too well. Let's try instead to paint a more accurate picture of "The Orthodox Parish in North America" and, consequently, to ambitiously address the most dire situations before history matter-of-factly records, "x parish closed last Summer." □

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Department of
Pastoral Life and Ministry
Orthodox Church in America
PO Box 675, Syosset NY 11791

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"A man conscious of himself as a soldier of Christ will not involve himself in 'buying and selling'; he will strive to be as unencumbered as possible both with regard to his needs and to his requirements. Love will do the rest: love for a pastor who is not self-seeking and who is of spiritual value to his parishioners will supply him with all that is necessary, and the pastor's love for his flock will be a secure foundation of its love for him.

In truth, and in accordance with "inward" justice, a parish which is not prepared to share *its last* with its pastor, so that undistracted by material cares he may devote himself entirely to his work, is not worthy to have a pastor at all. "If we have sown unto you spiritual things, is it a great thing if we shall reap your carnal things?" (I Corinthians 9:11)."

- Archbishop John (Shahovskoy) in "*The Orthodox Pastor*"



"Thoughts and Recollections"

"Pastors to Pastors" looks to another of the "elders" of the Church for guidance and inspiration. We are pleased herein to share our interview with

Fr Laurence Lazar

Dean, St George Archdiocesan Cathedral, Detroit and
Dean of the Michigan Deanery (OCA-Romanian)

Q. Fr Laurence, what were the factors that led you to your vocation as a priest?

A. The greatest influence came from my father, the priest Eugene "of Blessed Memory". He was born and raised here, but before beginning his life-long ministry in America he studied theology in Romania in the early 1930's, since theological schools hadn't as yet been established in North America. Of course, even if there was a seminary here, it still most likely would have been felt that the training of priests to serve Romanian people should be done in a Romanian seminary.

Especially in those years, the needs of the faithful were changing and, fortunately, my father was one of our first priests to be able to speak and serve in both Romanian and English. He was known for encouraging the liturgical use of English and for sharing the Faith with "non-Romanians". In addition, he was the executive Secretary of the Archdiocese throughout his priesthood, so I was able to see a wider picture of Church life. He and my mother were also leaders in our archdiocese in the field of parish religious education, and spending over 25 years directing and teaching at Camp Vatra, our summer religious education programs.

I was also influenced and blessed by the pastoral example of other priests and faithful people, and during my seminary years, +Fathers Schmemmann and Meyendorff. And then there was Archbishop Valerian 'of Thrice-blessed Memory', who was like a second father to me. He touched me with the simplicity of his

preaching that always conveyed the love of Christ and the need for us to lovingly respond to Him and others.

Like others, then, I grew up in a priest's family and our life was that of the Church and parish. There was nothing joyous or painful, spiritual or social from which the priest was excluded. From childhood, I *saw* (my parents) sharing themselves with their flock. Oh, there were internal politics and personal struggles, and I could see and feel my father's pain on many occasions, but for me and countless others, he was a rather amazing example of service, patience and long-suffering, and a beautiful example of pastoral concern and love.

All this had an impact on me, and even though I considered studying for a profession in architecture or even medicine, I realized from childhood that the vocation of the Priesthood was "*in*" me. I saw a sometimes harsh picture of the life of a priest, but I was also always *shown* the joy of the Ministry of the Priesthood. I graduated from St Vladimir's, having entered in 1965 as a "pre-The". Then, thirty years ago I was ordained as a deacon and, in 1973, as a priest.

Q. In your opinion, what are the characteristics of Orthodox pastoral work that are unique to North America?

A. I'm not sure how much is unique to North America. If I use Romania as an example, I know that for almost 2,000 years it has had one "national" spiritual heritage, Orthodox Christianity, and a single cultural, ethnic and linguistic identity, all of which passed naturally from generation to generation. Such a

reality does not apply to us in North America with our multiple ethnic heritages, plethora of religious expressions, secularized mindset, etc.

Albeit the Church was planted here 200 years ago, we are challenged on numerous fronts and confronted by somewhat different forces that (insidiously) vie for the time and hearts of our people. We are a minority with virtually no political clout especially due to the continuing sin of jurisdictional, administrative disunity; amorality; sports on Sunday mornings; long drives to church, due to urban sprawl, etc.; society's ever-growing, paranoiac refusal to acknowledge God's existence, in our schools; etc. You know what I mean!

As "the Way" of life, our Faith has always called for free acceptance, but here in North America, with all our blessed freedom, our people are increasingly challenged by innumerable other "choices". The clergy/hierarchy must face these realities and be on the forefront of this battle.

Q. As a pastor in the Romanian Orthodox Episcopate, is Orthodoxy in North America transcending its ethnic identities or still dependent on them?

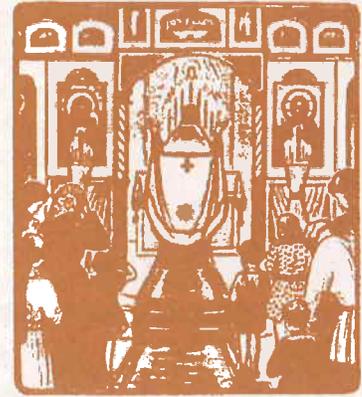
A. Both. We have 100 year old communities in our Archdiocese that were founded by Orthodox Romanians but which, over time, developed their own "American" or "Canadian" personality, without forgetting their founding heritage. This is true about any other (OCA) community in the United States and

(Fr Lazar, to page 4)



"If the pastor is inspired by the process of saving his own soul during the course of his parish ministry, he will indeed become the leader and father of his flock. His life will be undivided from the life of his flock. The flock, in turn, will become closely attached to him as their preacher of God's grace, who enlightens, enlivens and brings all into the unity of one ecclesiastical body. Under these conditions the pastor is able to offer from his inspired personal life the 'breath of life' into the dry bones of a given parish. Slowly, but with confidence, parishes can arise out of dormancy. The invigoration of genuine Orthodox Christianity has the power to overcome the darkness of prevailing spiritual impoverishment. It can raise the morale of our families and inspire other Christians, and positively affect our society. Without question, the wholesome renewal of parish life can profoundly benefit the surrounding human community."

-- from the "Preface" to the Parish Statutes adopted by the Russian Orthodox Church at the Council of 1917-18



"The Grace of the Holy Spirit, today has assembled us. Taking up Thy Cross we sing; "Blessed is He that comes in the Name of the Lord. Hosanna in the Highest!"

(Fr Lazar, continued)

Canada, founded by Orthodox Russians, Carpatho-Russians, Bulgarians, Albanians, Serb's, etc.

We also have an increasing number of communities of newly arrived immigrants. For them, the Church necessarily has an ethnic character and identity. In this "new" world, their parishioners find a certain security in it but with patience and loving guidance, they too will most likely experience a similar "metamorphosis" as did their older

sisters. They too will seek out, welcome, and integrate all people within the Faith.

The Church always transcends and unites *all* in Christ, in His way and time. However, we must never *create artificial barriers* to the transcending mission of the church.

Q. How do you balance your personal-family life with your pastoral life?

A. It would probably be better to ask our three children, but honestly,

Proeteasa Anita, my wife, has been a true blessing to our family, and its interaction with our parish family. Giving the parish its due attention, dealing with meeting schedules, services, pastoral concerns, my work in the Archdiocese, etc., etc. isn't always easy, but however successfully, I've tried to be a normal husband and father; and I've tried not to unnecessarily bring home those matters better left at church. I think the children have understood the need for this sort of "balancing act!"

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