

The Real Thing

“How do we increase the number of parishioners?” “How can we engage our inactive parishioners?” “How can we bring our youth back to the Church?” Such questions are heard in Orthodox parishes all over North America.

The Christian faith in our contemporary world is under attack from within and from without. The doctrines, moral teachings, and polity of the Church are regularly assailed in society, academia, and the media. Our young people are generally very uninformed about their faith, and virtually defenseless when antagonistically confronted about Christian beliefs and practices.

Add to this the “cult of the individual” as well as the atomization of society and we shouldn’t be surprised that it’s sometimes difficult to find people willing to become members, let alone active members, of our parishes.

Is there anything we might do to actually strengthen and increase the numbers of our parishioners? Is there anything we might do to not only defend ourselves, but answer the criticisms leveled at us by the secular world, as well as those who, having disavowed much of the belief and practice of traditional Christianity, still call themselves “Christians”?

“Ours must be an Orthodoxy not only of doctrine, but of deed”. These words point to an important truth. Perhaps the reason our parishes are not bursting with faithful has to do with the relationship between our doctrines and our deeds, or, as St. Paul puts it, between our truth and our love.

In his Epistle to the Ephesians, St. Paul writes: “. . .speaking the truth in love, we are to grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ, from whom the whole body, joined and knit together by every joint with which it is supplied, when each part is working properly, makes bodily growth and upholds itself in love.” (Eph. 4:15-16). In other words, it’s not enough to have the truth, to understand the truth, or to speak the truth - it’s our calling first and foremost to live the truth.

The “growth of the body” which St. Paul mentions is the building up of the Church, which he claims is “upheld in love”. So perhaps the reason we have problems within parishes, trouble evangelizing the heterodox, and fail to keep our children as members is a due to a defect in the quality of our love.

Parishioners often speak of how they wish new members would join the parish. When asked “why?”, the response is often something like “so we can pay the bills”, or “so we can continue to have services” or “so we don’t have to close the doors”. Such an attitude isn’t primarily concerned with what good the parish might do for the new

member, but rather with what the newcomer can do for the parish. The love of such people is turned inward - to the parish, or community, or self - not outward, to the newcomer or stranger. It's about "we", not about "them". Most people, when approached in such a manner, instinctively feel a sense of discomfort and turn away.

When younger people are asked why they don't come to Church a common response is "because I don't get anything out of the services". When older people are faced with change in parish life (e.g., the introduction of a liturgical language understandable to their grandchildren, a change in singing style, or even the participation of youth in the Liturgy) they often react negatively. "When we die, father, then you can do what you want!", or "This is the way we've done it for 50 years - why should we change now?" are common responses.

The attitudes of both the young and the old in the previous paragraph have one thing in common - they both assume that the Church exists to fulfil their own personal "spiritual needs" as they themselves define them.

Why does the Church really exist? To witness to the life, the ministry and the Gospel of Jesus Christ. To proclaim Christ's death and resurrection. To teach the world what Life really is. To show the world what Love is.

It's been said that our contemporary world is experiencing a crisis of love. Everyone, Christian and non-Christian, religious and atheistic, is in favour of love. Love is universally regarded as a virtue to be cultivated. But what is love? How do we define love? How does Christian love differ from the love of the Buddhist, the Atheist, or the Animist?

"You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind. This is the first and greatest commandment. And the second is like it: you shall love your neighbour as yourself." (Mt. 22: 37-38)

Lesson number one: Christian love is not self-centred, but centred upon God and the neighbour.

"Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you and pray for those who spitefully use you." (Lk. 6:27:28)

Lesson number two: Christian love is unconditional, it's not confined to any particular group, but extended to everyone, always, and at all times - even those we don't "like", even those who hate us.

“By this we know love, because He laid down His life for us. And we also ought to lay down our lives for the brethren. But whoever has this world’s goods, and sees his brother in need, and shuts up his heart from him, how does the love of God abide in him? My little children, let us not love in word or in tongue, but in deed and in truth.” (I Jn. 3: 16 - 18)

Lesson three: Christian love must be active and sacrificial, love in “deed and truth”, “laying down our lives” for others.

The Church exists so that her members might not only know God and worship Him, but that they might actually serve God by serving their fellow man. And this is precisely where our attempts at parish renewal tend to break down. We offer worship services, seminars, retreats and educational programs for personal spiritual growth, as well as cultural and social activities. But our parishes often lack a means whereby the parishioners might, in the name of Christ, serve the physical needs of the greater community.

The majority of our active parishioners are also active in their community. They work for charitable and service organizations, support acts of benevolence with monetary donations, and engage in personal acts of mercy towards the poor, the marginalized, the sick and the aged. They do this, no doubt, because of their faith.

But most of this work is done outside the context of the parish. We should never do anything for show (*see Mt. 6: 2-4*), yet it is important that both parishioners as well as guests see that the parish community is openly engaged in following Jesus’ teachings regarding acts of mercy. Our Lord tells us that we will be judged on the basis of how we treat “the least of our brethren” (*Mt. 25: 31-46*), and if such work isn’t obvious to a visitor they might come to the conclusion that while we preach about love, we don’t actually, on an “organizational” level, engage in charitable activity. What percentage of the parish budget is actually used to perform deeds of mercy?

Offering food to the hungry, inviting people from the neighbourhood in for coffee once a week, supporting or hosting a soup kitchen, visiting the sick or elderly and other charitable activities give an opportunity to those who might have a calling and desire to do such work to offer their time and energy to the parish, rather than some other religious or secular organization, as well as giving the poor, the marginalized, and the lonely contact with the Church.

The only thing necessary for parish renewal is true Christian love - unconditional, focused upon God and the neighbour, sacrificial and unselfish. A healthy parish serves the needs of the community - a dying parish expects the community to serve its needs. If we try to get new parishioners or keep our youth so that everything can remain the way we want it to be everything will inevitably fall

apart. If, on the other hand, we concentrate on trying to fulfill God's commandments, trying to do His will, "parish renewal" will happen in and of itself.

Do we truly love and care for the people around us - the poor, those who live in the neighbourhood of our church, and our non-religious friends and family members of whatever ethnic derivation - or are we concerned primarily with bricks and mortar, with "services", cultural events, and personal relationships? Is our love only *"in word or in tongue"*, or is it the real thing?

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