

For the Sake of Those Who Don't Belong

Perhaps you serve on the parish council, and sometimes feel overwhelmed by the amount of work it takes to keep the parish functioning.

Or you might be a Sunday school teacher, help out with fundraising, property maintenance, or sing in the choir, but occasionally get frustrated by other parishioners' lack of commitment.

Maybe you're a priest, and are saddened by low attendance at services, educational presentations, or youth activities.

It's possible you're just a "regular guy/gal", who attends Liturgy on most Sundays, puts some money in the collection basket, and volunteers occasionally when asked.

Chances are that everyone who supports the Church in any way has at some point asked themselves "why do I do this?"

Ultimately there is only one valid Christian reason to dedicate our life and our work to the church. It is in fact the reason that the church exists in the first place. William Temple, the Archbishop of Canterbury from 1942 - 1944, stated the reason perfectly: "The Church is the only society that exists for the benefit of those who are not its members".

Jesus' last commandment to the Apostles before His ascension was "Go, therefore, and make disciples of all the nations . . ." (Mt. 28: 19-20). A parish, like a person, doesn't exist simply to exist. It exists so that Christ's Gospel might be preached to the ends of the universe, so that all those who aren't members of the Church might be evangelized. This means that every member of the Church ultimately dedicates their time, talents, money, worship, and charitable deeds for the benefit of those who don't belong to the Church.

It's a consequence of our fallen human nature that we often see things in a self-centred way. Self-centred sacrifice ("I'll work for the church because I like the church and I want to keep it open") might be OK as long as we're not chasing people away. But we should never forget that all our work on behalf of the parish, if it's true Christian work, is ultimately evangelical work. When this

evangelical imperative is missing – when we don't care for the salvation of our neighbour, aren't concerned with "non-members", or see the parish as a vehicle for the propagation of something other than the Gospel of Christ - we inevitably encounter ecclesial and parochial dysfunction. Such communities are characterized by an atmosphere of frustration, conflict, and distress.

Such dysfunction presents itself in many ways. Many parishes, for example, have "rate schedules". "Members" of the parish will have access to the Church for weddings, funerals, baptisms, etc. at no charge, whereas "non-members" are required to pay a fee to the parish for such "services".

An example of how such an approach can negatively affect our ability to evangelize might be as follows: a couple wishes to be married or baptize a child. Both husband and wife stopped attending church in any regular fashion during their teen years. Neither of them know much about Orthodoxy in particular or Christianity in general. They speak to a parish council member or a priest and the first thing they hear is not "welcome, we're glad to see you" but "it's going to cost you \$500"! You can't blame them if they get the impression that the parish is more concerned with money than with them! I know a man who left the Church because his "parish dues" weren't paid up at the time of his wife's death, and as he was entering the church for the funeral he was told by a parish council member that he had to pay his dues on the spot or he was going to get charged the "non-members fee" for the funeral!!!

Such abuses result from an improper feeling of entitlement. "I'm here every Sunday, I pay my dues, I volunteer and support the Church financially, and you come along, not having bothered to darken the door for decades or donate a cent for its upkeep and you expect us to treat you in as if everything is OK!?"

In such cases it might help, before saying anything, to prayerfully consider the parable of the Prodigal Son (*Lk. 15: 11-32*). When one of our children returns after years away which character am I - the father, or the older brother? We might also consider, after all is said and done, which of the two brothers in the parable is in worse shape spiritually.

We need to ask ourselves a simple question: "Do I belong to a Church, or to a club?" Clubs exist to exclude, that's why there's a "members only" sign on the door. Churches, on the other hand, exist to embrace.

And who do we embrace? Everyone. The stranger, the fallen-away, the rich, the poor, everyone. It is said that there are two types of bishops; for one, the diocese is his world, and for the other, the world is his diocese. Changing the changeables, the same can be said of every priest and parish. Does my parish consist only of the names on the “membership” list, or potentially of everyone who lives in my town or region?

God wishes that everyone be saved (I Tim. 2:3-4). God loves His Church, and wants her to grow. And she will - if we simply do our job and don't erect unnecessary obstacles. What opportunities has God given me, with my particular gifts and talents, in my particular community and parish, to joyfully work on behalf of His Church for the sake of the salvation of those who don't (yet) belong?

Fr. Bohdan Hladio, April, 2011