

Thriving, Dying, or In Transition?

Fr. Bohdan Hladio

On a recent visit to a monastery I happened to meet the caretaker. After asking my blessing he inquired where I came from. Upon hearing that I was pastor of a Ukrainian Orthodox parish in Canada, he asked “what kind of a parish is it - thriving, dying, or in transition?” I was a bit taken aback. “In transition - I hope!”, I replied.

I didn't quite know how to answer. I know our parish isn't thriving, I hope it isn't dying, so “in transition” seemed the only reasonable choice. He went on to explain that he and his family belonged to a small Romanian Orthodox parish not far from the monastery. As we compared notes about our experiences, it became clear that the same issues and problems face most “ethnic” Orthodox parishes, wherever they are.

He spoke about how certain people in the parish couldn't understand why an American from Texas would want to belong to their Church. About how some people wanted things to remain as they “used to be” - services in a strange language, an old cantor doing things “his way”, etc. He spoke about how many people didn't seem to realize, or didn't want to admit, that unless they actually made an effort to bring new members into the Church the parish would die.

Most “ethnic” parishes on this continent are probably in the same boat. I began to consider how many parishes I know which are truly thriving. Though several came to mind, it didn't relieve the sadness I felt upon realizing that most parishes I'm familiar with seem to be dying. It's sad, because it doesn't have to be this way.

Most of the thriving Orthodox parishes I know of are doing well because of a combination of two facts – they are located in cities which offer ample opportunity for employment, and neither the priest, nor the parish council, nor the parishioners actively chase people away.

In addition to the above, though, there are Orthodox parishes which are thriving simply because of their attitude. A dying parish is usually either denominational or sectarian in its outlook. A thriving parish is evangelical.

Jesus Christ founded a Church, not a denomination. Not long ago I read an article by a priest where he stated that there are “three major branches of the Christian Church”. This “branch theory” is totally incompatible with Orthodox Christian ecclesiology.

We believe in “one, holy, catholic and apostolic Church”, the Orthodox Church. We do not believe that Orthodox, Catholics and Protestants are three perfectly acceptable, culturally conditioned “branches” of the one, true Church. We do not believe that denominations are of God, but rather a product of human sinfulness and pride. When individual human beings, whether they be Popes, Protestant reformers, or self-styled prophets begin to preach a gospel different from that which has been accepted “everywhere, at all times, by everyone” (St. Vincent of Lerins), when they begin to promulgate teachings which are clearly not in accordance with apostolic preaching and practice, we say that their teachings are either heterodox, or heretical.

We do not judge those who are outside the Church. We must be prepared - when appropriate, and always with love and respect - to sit down with people outside the Orthodox Church and point out where we disagree on matters of faith, and why. Denominationalism would teach that “it’s OK for them to be what they are, and we shouldn’t force our beliefs on others, because everyone’s got their own religion”. While we as Orthodox must always have love and respect for everyone, we categorically deny the validity of “denominationalism”.

Then we have the sectarians. A sect is a group of people, usually within a particular denomination, which claims a specific teaching, or tradition, or language, etc. For example, within the Church of England there are the so-called “high church” and “low church” traditions. The former would be more Roman Catholic in their liturgical life, the latter closer to Protestantism. Within the Roman Catholic Church there are groups which believe that only the Latin, Tridentine Mass is “authentic”. Within Judaism there are groups like the Lubavitchers. Almost every religious group has their various sects, and we do, too.

Generally speaking, within the Orthodox Church we are sectarian along ethnic lines. The denominationalist would say “it’s OK for you to be Orthodox - just don’t try to convert anyone else.” The Orthodox sectarian would say “we’re Orthodox Ukrainians (or Greeks, or Serbs, etc.), and our mission is to minister only to “our own.”

A sectarian denominationalist would have nothing whatsoever to say to anyone who was outside of their own group! This, as we know, isn't a Christian attitude in any way, shape or form. If it was you wouldn't be reading this, because St. Andrew would never have gone to Kyiv, and our ancestors would never have heard about Christ!

Why are parishes dying? Because they either don't have anything to say, or are afraid to say anything to those who are "outside the denomination". People with a very rigid "sectarian denominationalist" mentality, especially if the group is defined by national origin and/or language, are often more afraid of converts coming in and "changing things" than they are of their parish closing its doors forever!

But there's an option. It's called the Gospel. When I mentioned an "evangelical" attitude earlier I wasn't talking about "Bible thumpers". The Greek word for "Gospel" is *Evangelion*, from which we get the English "evangelical". An evangelical is simply someone who preaches the Gospel. And this isn't an optional activity.

"Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you. . . " (*Mt. 28:19-20*). Bringing the Gospel to the entire world, to all peoples, was the final command Jesus gave to His apostles.

The Lord's commandment to be pastoral (to make disciples), priestly (to baptize), and prophetic (to preach and teach) was the basis of the apostles' activity, just like the Resurrection was the foundation of their teaching. If we are not doing this fundamental work how can we honestly claim to be part of a Church which calls itself "apostolic"?

There are Orthodox parishes which are thriving on this continent – with many children, outreach activities, adult conversions, etc., etc., etc. This is due to evangelical zeal. But many of our Orthodox parishes here in the western hemisphere are, sadly, dying. Unlike a human body, though, a dying parish can be reinvigorated. It's this process that the young man referred to as being "in transition".

This renewal or "transition" from what might have been an "immigrant", or "old immigration", or "ethnic" parish to a thriving, young, growing community requires three ingredients: faith, courage, and persistence.

Faith that God has put us here for a reason, and it's not to engage in religious "self-centredness". Faith in God and the Gospel. Without true Christian faith we will have nothing to give to those who seek the "water of life". We must be believers in the full meaning of the word.

Renewal requires courage as well. Yes, things will change. Music, language, and (God willing!) parish demographics might all change greatly, but if the essence of the faith is maintained everything will be not only OK, it will be better than it was.

As the saying goes, "Rome wasn't built in a day". Being "in transition" means being within a process, a process which will take time. During the process there will be people who will question the possibility of success, or the desirability of continuing, who will say "we've been doing this for a year (or three) and what has it gotten us?" But persistence, when coupled with a reasonable action plan and achievable goals will always win the day.

Years ago the motto of one of our Church Sobor's was "For the Glory of God, and the Salvation of all people". I'm sure we can all agree that this motto should be a reality in our parishes, not just letters on a banner. What can better contribute to this goal than parishioners who are truly concerned with evangelizing their youth, friends, and neighbours? Of parishes which have turned from the death of being concerned with their own needs to the "transition" of being concerned with the needs of their community?

Thriving, dying, or in transition? Apostolic Christianity, or sectarian denominationalism? Life or death? The choice is ours.