

“The Orthodox Parish in North America”

by: VRev. Thomas Hopko

An Orthodox parish has only one God-given reason for being. It exists to be the One, Holy, Catholic and Apostolic Church of Christ. Whatever the original reasons and conditions for its founding, whatever other services and activities it may provide, whatever other desires and needs it may fulfill for its members, a community of Orthodox Christians must be Christ's one holy Church. If it is not, then it is neither Christian nor Orthodox, whatever else it may be and do. A parish must be the Church of Christ, and not simply a church, because, according to the Orthodox faith, every local community of Orthodox Christians with a priest must be, and theologically understood actually is the one Church of Christ. Theologically speaking, there are not many Orthodox Churches; there is only one. An Orthodox parish is this one Church or it is not an Orthodox church at all. Each parish, therefore, must be the one and only Church of Christ. The parish must be holy because Christ's Church is holy. Everything in the parish, and everything about it, must be holy because God and Christ are holy. There can be no part of a parish that is not sanctified by the holiness of God and His Son Jesus Christ, “the holy One of God.” There can be no aspect of a parish not inspired and empowered by God's Holy Spirit, who is the Spirit of God and of Christ. Everything in and about a parish—its organization, structure, administration, finances and properties, as well as its theological and moral teachings and practices, and its liturgical and sacramental rites and services – must be of God. They must be determined by God, inspired by God and submitted to God for His glory and the good of His people. The Christian parish must also be catholic. For the parish to be “catholic” means that it is full, complete and whole, lacking nothing in its mystical and sacramental being and life as Christ's holy Church. In an Orthodox Christian parish the whole fullness of God must dwell, as in Christ's body, with all the fullness of life and grace and truth, by the indwelling of the Holy Spirit. PART 1

In an Orthodox Christian parish the whole fullness of God must dwell, as in Christ's body, with all the fullness of life and grace and truth, by the indwelling of the Holy Spirit. The word catholic literally means full or whole or complete. It does not, in the first instance, mean universal or worldwide. Thus every local Christian community, every “parish” in the contemporary meaning of the word, theologically, mystically and sacramentally is, in apostolic words, “Christ's body, the fullness of Him who fills all in all.” (Eph. 1:23) It is the “household of God, which is the church of the living God, the pillar and bulwark of the truth.” (1Tim. 3:15) Everything expresses this. Everything testifies to this. This obviously does not mean that a parish will not be particular and limited in its human empirical, cultural and sociological forms. It has to be, since it is made up of human beings. But all of a parish's particular aspects, with all of its teachings, services and activities, if they are Orthodox and Christian, will be open to the boundless fullness of God and will thereby be inclusive to everyone and everything that is good and holy and true. And, according to the understanding of Christ's Church in the Nicene creed, the Orthodox parish that is truly Christian will not only be the same Church of Christ with every other parish - one with God's unity, holy with God's holiness, and catholic with God's fullness. It will also be apostolic with God's own apostolicity which is found in the Church of Christ in all times and places. An Orthodox parish, if it is Christ's one holy Church, will be apostolic in at least two meanings of the term. It will be apostolic because it is founded upon Christ's apostles and firmly rooted in apostolic doctrine and tradition. It will keep and live “the faith which was once and for all delivered to the saints.” (Jude 3) It will preserve and pass on the apostolic “deposit” (*paratheke*) which has been guarded and developed by Orthodox Christians, particularly through their bishops, in all times and places, from apostolic times to the present. (cf. 1 Tim. 6:20 ; 2 Tim. 1:12,14) PART2

An Orthodox Christian parish is catholic in the fullest sense of the word and it is apostolic. It is postolic because it exists with God's mission, which is the mission of Jesus Christ, the Holy Spirit, and the apostles of all ages, beginning with Christ's own. The Greek word *apostolo*, from which the words *apostle* and *apostolic* are derived, means, “to send.” So does the Latin word *mitto*, from which are derived the words *mission* and *missionary*. According to the scriptures, Jesus the Messiah is himself “the apostle.” (Hebrews 3:1) According to his scriptural testimony, especially the Gospel according to St. John, Jesus speaks the words, does the work, and accomplishes the will “of the Father, the One, who sent Him.” (cf. John 6:29,44; 7:28,33; 17:3,18) In the same scriptures, the apostles, being filled with the Holy Spirit who proceeds from the Father and is sent by the Son, are themselves sent into the world by Jesus to proclaim the gospel of God's Kingdom. “As the Father has sent me, even so I send you...Receive the Holy Spirit.” (John 20:21) An Orthodox Christian parish, however it was founded and for whatever purpose it was organized, must understand itself to be an apostolic community with a missionary purpose. Its members, especially its leaders, must be conscious of themselves as people sent by Christ from God and empowered by the Holy Spirit to bring God's unity, holiness and fullness to all human beings in this divided, sinful and fragmented world. 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” perverting God’s gospel by its “blasphemy against the Holy Spirit (which) will not be forgiven, either in this age or in the age to come.” (Revelation 2:9, 3:9; Matt. 12:31- 32; Mark 3:28) The members of an Orthodox parish must be motivated to keep God’s commandments as their essential and ultimately exclusive reason for being. The life and activity of an Orthodox parish should be perfectly described by Jesus’ answer to the question concerning the first and great commandment of the law of God. And one of the scribes...asked him, “Which commandment is first of all?” Jesus answered, “The first is, ‘Hear, O Israel, The Lord our God, the Lord is one; and you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your strength.’ The second is this, ‘You shall love your Neighbor as yourself.’ There is no other commandment greater than these.” (Mark 12:28-31) PART 3

An Orthodox Christian Parish Part 4: In the Gospel according to St. Matthew, Jesus teaches, “on these two commandments (Deut. 6:5 and Lev. 19:18) depend all the law and the prophets.” (Matt. 22:40) For our present purposes we can also say that on these two commandments depend the whole being and life of an Orthodox Christian parish. Jesus says that God must be loved first of all with all one’s heart. In biblical usage, the heart is the center of a person’s being. It is the ground of a person’s life, the seat of a person’s will, and the source of a person’s activity, beginning with one’s words. It is the “place where God bears witness to himself,” according to St. Isaac of Syria; the place in a person, according to St. Macarius, which contains God himself, and Christ and the Holy Spirit, and the whole of creation, visible and invisible, spiritual and material, good and evil. A person’s heart reveals what he or she really is, and really thinks, and really wants and really does. “For where your treasure is,” Jesus tells us, “there will your heart be also.” (Matt. 6:21) The heart of a parish, if it is Christ’s one holy Church, will be totally given to God. In this sense, the heart of an Orthodox Christian parish will be its liturgical and sacramental worship. Worship will constitute the parish’s core. It will be the parish’s essential mode of self-realization. It will be its basic reason for being, the foundational purpose for its existence and life. An Orthodox Christian parish is first and foremost a worshipping community. It exists to praise, bless and glorify God, to ceaselessly sing the thrice-holy hymn to the life-creating Trinity. Its essential purpose is to baptize people in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit; to enable them to die in Christ and to be raised with Him to newness of life; to be sealed with the gift of the Holy Spirit; to hear God’s word, to respond to God’s gospel, to confess and repent of our sins, to participate in the Eucharistic sacrifice of Christ’s Body and Blood; and to actualize God’s Kingdom on earth, in spirit and truth, by faith and grace, until Christ comes in glory at the close of the age.

An Orthodox Christian Parish Part 5: An Orthodox Christian parish must also be a community of people loving God with all their souls, as God’s law commands and Jesus confirms. The word soul literally means life and is often rendered as such in contemporary translations of the Bible in English. Loving God with all one’s soul means loving Him with all of one’s thoughts, words and deeds in all of the routine thinking, talking and acting involved in everyday living. For an Orthodox Christian parish, if it is Christ’s holy church, this means that the community as a whole, and each individual member of it, is personally committed to living a Christian spiritual life by struggling to keep God’s commandments. “If you love me,” Jesus says in St. John’s Gospel, “you will keep my commandments. And I will pray the Father, and He will give you another Comforter to be with you forever, even the Spirit of truth, whom the world cannot receive, because it neither sees him nor knows him; you know him, for he dwells with you, and will be in you.” (John 14:15-17) Christian spiritual life relates to every aspect of a person’s being and to every area of a person’s life and work. It has to do with his or her body and behavior, as well as to his or her thoughts and feelings. It has to do with sexuality as well as spirituality, with public and political action as well as with private and personal activity. People need help in living a Christian spiritual life in its fullness and depth. People do not mechanically become “members of Christ” and “temples of the Holy Spirit.” (1Corinthians 6:15-19) and do not magically possess the “mind of Christ” (1Corinthians 2:16) and become “one spirit” with the Lord. (1Corinthians 6:17) Members of Christ’s Church must have spiritual guidance and direction. They require pastoral attention and care. They need instruction in “fighting the good fight” by learning how to resist temptation, to reject evil thoughts, and to overcome spiritual passions by partaking, through faith and grace, in Christ’s victory through the Holy Spirit. Such spiritual and pastoral services must be present in an Orthodox Christian parish if it is truly Christ’s holy Church. They need not, and indeed cannot be provided by the clergy alone. It is the duty of bishops and priests, however, to see that these services are provided by people capable of doing so, for the benefit of those willing to receive them. The Orthodox Christian parish is the proper place for this to happen. If it is not happening, then, once again, the parish community is not Christ’s Church. *By Fr. Thomas Hopko*

An Orthodox Christian Parish Part 6: Essential also to an Orthodox parish, if it is Christ's holy Church, is total mobilization of efforts to love God with all of one's mind through enlightenment and education. Jesus' first title in the scripture is rabbi, which means teacher or master. As messianic pastor and priest, Christ is also "the prophet" who brings ultimate and lasting judgment upon those who hear and reject him. (John 1:21, 6:14; Acts 3:22-26) The Lord's first followers are called disciples or students. And the first thing that is said about those who believed in God's gospel of Christ crucified and glorified is that they "continued steadfastly in the apostles' doctrine (teaching)." (Acts 2:42) An Orthodox Christian parish, therefore, is essentially a teaching and learning community for all its members. It is a school of disciples whose master is Christ as He speaks within the community of believers, especially through the pastors and those with the charism (gift) and training for teaching and preaching. An Orthodox parish without well-prepared evangelical and exegetical sermons at its liturgical services, and well-prepared doctrinal and catechetical sessions as part of its educational ministry, whatever else it might do, including having lots of liturgical services and loads of social events, can hardly be an Orthodox Christian Church. This is especially true now in North America when Christianity generally, not to speak of Orthodoxy, is not a respected, accepted and supported part of public life and education, but is rather warred against, scorned and ridiculed by powerful forces in society.

An Orthodox Christian Parish Part 7: An Orthodox Christian parish must also be marked by a people who love. Loving God with all one's strength, particularly according to the Hebrew text of holy scripture, means that we are to love God with all that we possess, primarily our money and property. Strength, in this context, does not merely mean mental, emotional or physical might, though these, of course, are not to be excluded from our love for the Lord. An Orthodox Christian parish, when it is Christ's holy Church, is obliged to use all of its powers for God's glory and the people's good. Christians as individual persons, as well as families, parishes and dioceses, will have to give account to Christ for how they used their God-given strength. We will have to answer for our use of money and resources, property and possessions, positions and profits. We will be asked how we loved "in deed and in truth," and not merely "in word or speech," through concrete acts of charity for the hungry and thirsty, the sick and suffering, the homeless and naked, the persecuted and imprisoned. (cf. 1John 3:18; Matt. 25:31-46) On judgment day, the Lord will not ask us about our parish size and facilities. Nor will He be interested in our liturgical schedule or style. He will not ask us how we dressed or what we ate. He will be indifferent to how large our church temples were, or where they were located, or how they were decorated and appointed. Nor will He ask us to recite the Nicene Creed, or to explain the doctrine of the Holy Trinity. All of these things are important, but their significance has only one end: the love of God with all one's heart, soul, mind, and strength, expressed as it can only be expressed in this present age, in concrete acts of love for our neighbors, first of all the members of our own families and parishes, and most of all for those who hate and oppose us. Love of God with all our strength through acts of love for our neighbors and enemies is enacted primarily in acts of evangelism and philanthropy. While sacramental participation in an Orthodox parish is strictly reserved for committed Orthodox Christians who take full responsibility for the Church's faith and life, and completely identify with the Church's path through history, the philanthropic and evangelical activities of an Orthodox Christian parish as well as its services of teaching, counseling, and prayerful intercession, have no bounds or limitations of any kind. They are to be exercised freely and without discrimination for all people regardless of their religion, nationality, race, sexual behavior, or relation to Christ's church. The first Christians, as witnessed in the New Testament, and such saints as John Chrysostom and Olympia, and St. John of Kronstadt and St. Maria Skobtsova, taught and practiced this Christian truth without the slightest hesitation, equivocation or compromise. A parish without carefully planned and implemented evangelical and philanthropic activity directed both within and outside its parochial bounds, is, once again, simply not Orthodox or Christian.

An Orthodox Christian Parish Part 8: In order for the aspects of parish life we have been discussing to be actualized, a parish community must have the proper Christian structure and administration. The head of the parish in its total life is the presbyter, who is ordained and assigned by the diocesan bishop. He is also embraced and accepted by the parish as the community's spiritual and sacramental leader, father and pastor. The parish priest, properly understood in Christian Orthodoxy, is neither domineering nor servile. He is neither an authoritarian "stand-in" for an absent hierarch, nor a hired underling at the beck and call of a secularized board of trustees. He is rather a called, trained, tested and ordained teacher, pastor and priest who guarantees the presence and action of Christ in the community. His God-given task, confirmed and supported by the faithful, is to empower every parishioner to find and fulfill his or her calling as a member of Christ's Body. He is the servant of servants, for God's glory and the good of all people. When functioning properly in love, this structure maintains its identity and integrity as Christ's Body, the household of God. Until God's Kingdom comes with power at the

end of the age, Orthodox Christian parishes around the world will be struggling to be Christ's holy Church. These parishes, certainly in the United States and Canada, will be of a great variety of sizes, shapes and styles, though each one, theologically and mystically, will be the very same Church of Christ. The parishes will be composed of different kinds of people. They will be of different cultures and traditions. They will have different emphases and possibilities in worship, education, pastoral care, and philanthropic and evangelical activity. None of them will claim that they can do everything by themselves. They will acknowledge that they need each other, that they are constrained by truth and love to cooperate with each other, that they must complete each other, but must complete each other in Christian service and ministry. They will know that the only way in which they should strive to outdo each other is in expressing godly zeal, brotherly affection, due honor and mutual respect. (cf. Romans 12:9-13) Whatever confusions and difficulties confront Orthodox Christianity in North America today, whatever their origins and causes, and whatever temptations and trials they bring to believers, there is no good reason why an Orthodox Christian parish in the Canada or United States cannot be Christ's holy Church. All that is required is that its members, beginning with its leaders, be firmly resolved to have it so. Their afflictions will be great, as Christ has promised, but their successes are assured by His victory. "In the world you have tribulation," Jesus says to his apostles, " but take courage, I have overcome the world." (John 16:33) "For what is impossible with men is possible with God." (Luke 18:27) *By Fr. Thomas Hopko*