

**A PASTORAL ENCYCLICAL
OF BISHOP EPHRAIM**

Protocol Number 313

Holiness becometh Thy house, O Lord,
unto length of days
(Psalm 92:7)

My beloved brethren and children in the Lord.

Some time ago, a young mother belonging to one of our parishes was speaking with a member of a new calendar church. The latter expressed his concern over the fact that most of the youth of his parish stopped attending church after they finished high school.

To this, the young mother replied, “Well, we also have some losses, but I am not surprised at what you tell me about most of your young people. You hold your Sunday School classes during the Liturgy, so the children are hardly in church at all. When they are in church, they are so unfamiliar with the services they don’t understand what’s going on. Since they are so unfamiliar with everything and are not really in church that much during their formative years, they are not really encouraged to partake of the holy Mysteries with any regularity. So, since so much is foreign and irrelevant to them, they drop out.”

In many ways, this conversation highlights the spiritual crisis that exists in parishes that have adopted various innovations in their beliefs and practices. The church, for them, has become primarily a social or ethnic center rather than a spiritual assembly.

One other incident illustrates this from a slightly different perspective.

A while ago, during one of my visits to our parishes. I was asked to speak to a group of young people about issues that concerned them. Among the various subjects that arose was the following question: what role do social and athletic activities have in the Church? Some felt that perhaps such activities might attract other young people to the Church: others had their doubts whether these undertakings were effective or appropriate.

On my part, I reiterated what has always been my constant theme, not only in this matter, but in all that pertains to our Church life, that it is important that we seek out what the *Church’s* view has always been from the beginning. “It doesn’t make any difference what opinion I have in these matters, nor does it make any difference what anyone else’s personal opinion is. What we need to find out is what our Saviour, the Apostles, the Saints, teach us. What do we learn from the Lives of the Saints? That is the only measure we, as Christians, can use. This is the only way we can be sure we are walking truly in their footsteps, and not merely on some path of our own making.”

However, to be quite frank, the most satisfactory answer that was made to this question was expressed not by myself, nor by any of the other clergy present, but rather by a young woman in her early twenties. In more or less these words, she said:

If I’m looking for “good times,” I’ve got plenty of places to go and things to do. But I don’t think that the Church is the right place for that sort of thing. There is only one purpose for the existence of the Church: to help me prepare to partake of the Body and Blood of Christ worthily. Everything in the Church

is aimed toward that one goal: the services, the feasts, the fasting, the prostrations, the holy icons, everything. A few days ago, an older relative of mine who belongs to the local new calendar Greek parish told me, "I just don't understand how you keep any of your young people over there at your church, what with your long services and those wild fasts of yours!" I told her, "The answer is simple. By nature, young people are idealistic. They want to leave the world a little better than they found it, and they are inspired in this especially by the heroic example of people they admire. For Orthodox Christians, there can be nothing more inspiring than our Saviour, the Mother of God, and the Saints. If you take this heroic element out of Christianity, and if you eliminate the spiritual struggles and the example of the Saints, then you've cut the spiritual heart out of Christianity, and there is nothing left to inspire anyone to strive for something better. If I want to have my good times, with dancing, and sports, and such, then I can join a social organization or a basketball team, or go out with my friends. No one prevents me from doing that. But judging from what we hear in the services and the Lives of the Saints, it's pretty clear to me that the only reason for the existence of a Christian parish is to help me prepare to receive the Holy Mysteries and to be united to Christ. Isn't that the purpose of all the prayers, the fasting, holy confession, and everything else? Since your parish seems to have an emphasis on ethnic things, maybe this is why it has cut back on these other matters, and so, since there is nothing there to really inspire your young people, they look elsewhere when they are looking for something more serious."

My beloved Christians. I cannot overemphasize how deeply the young woman's account impressed me. The point could not have been made more eloquently: *the primary reason for the existence of an Orthodox Christian church is to help us to prepare to receive the Body and Blood of Christ worthily.*

This is precisely why we chant, "O taste and see that the Lord is good." As the Holy Church teaches us, this prophetic and Psalmic verse is to be understood in its literal sense, because of the Incarnation of our Lord and God. If our children grow up in the midst of the holy services, and the holy chants, taking part in the cycle of the Church's feasts and the holy fasts, if they grow up tasting and seeing that the Lord is good, then they will begin to understand and appreciate the purpose for their being in the Church.

This is why the Fathers and Saints strove for the purity of our Holy Orthodox Faith. To this end have countless multitudes of monastics and laypeople struggled in "fasting, vigil, and prayer."

The Orthodox Christian parish cannot be a social center for dancing and parties, nor can it be an athletic, or cultural, or ethnic, or political center. All these activities have their place — in the world. In his book, *The Ladder of Divine Ascent*, Saint John of the Ladder writes that attachment to the things of this world will only dilute and distract our spiritual efforts: "Little by little," this attachment to social and earthly concerns "can entice us" away from our spiritual aspirations "and completely quench the fire of our compunction." Is it possible to gaze at heaven with one eye, while gazing at the earth with the other? asks the Saint. Just so, it is impossible for the Church to accomplish its unique task if it is

involved in pursuits and activities that distract it from “the one thing that is needful” — to help us prepare to receive the Body and Blood of Christ worthily.

It is for this reason that we look with grief on the activities that occupy so much time and effort in many nominally Orthodox parishes. One will encounter such phenomena as Lenten Lotto, Saturday night dances, Bingo, Grand Haflis, Mediterranean Festivals with exotic female dancers, and popular cabaret singers — all sponsored by the Church.

The excuse often given is that this is done “for the Church.” But this is a very great delusion; it is, in reality, only another method of bringing the spirit of the world into the Church. Metropolitan Philaret of blessed memory addressed this very issue in one of his encyclicals, in which he decried the practice of using dances and other such activities supposedly for the purpose of helping the Church, or for charity. This is what he wrote:

Another equally crying violation of piety is represented by the now beloved of Russian society so-called charity balls and soirees, especially those organized during hours of the divine services on the eves of Sunday and holy days. Saint John of Kronstadt, himself a performer of charity, taught that charity in the form of soirees and balls was not Christian charity, but merely inane entertainment and pandering to passions. We must all unswervingly explain to our flocks the necessity of the fasts and about the above-mentioned balls and soirees, so destructive to the salvation of souls.

(Orthodox Life, Nov.-Dec. 1965, pp. 4-5)

On his arrival in the United States in 1948. Archbishop Michael of the new calendar Greek Archdiocese was shocked to find that the parishes in this country sponsored dances on Saturday evenings, that alcoholic drinks were being sold and served in church halls, that the Liturgy of the Presanctified Gifts was celebrated only rarely in the parishes, and that the Mystery of Holy Confession was virtually unknown and considered by many to be strictly a Roman Catholic practice! It was only with great efforts during his ten years as archbishop that he strove to correct these abuses that he had inherited from his predecessor. And after his repose, some of his reforms — such as the abolition of Saturday night dances sponsored by church organizations, and the serving of alcoholic beverages in church halls — were again overturned by his successor. Archbishop Michael often commented wryly that, since many of the early churches in this country were constructed above the church halls, the fumes of the cigarette smoke and alcoholic drinks from the previous night’s “social” had had enough time to infiltrate the church itself, just in time for the Divine Liturgy; and he would comment, “What a remarkable and incongruous confluence of aromas: incense, cigarette smoke, and the stale smell of beer and wine!”

When a parish strives to intermingle its spiritual work with social (or cultural, or ethnic, or athletic, or political) activities, then the Church’s message becomes ambiguous. Then our energies and efforts become divided. We are trying to look at Heaven with one eye and at earth with the other — and failing in both endeavors. This is especially evident when the spiritual and social aspects clash. When is the best time to have the parish dance or basketball tournament — Friday night or Saturday night? The first is a day of spiritual recollection and fasting, the second is the time of vigil and prayer in preparation for the celebration of the Resurrection. Which has priority? The dance or the fast? The tournament or the vigil? Alas, as we know and see, in the various innovating jurisdictions, the social activities slowly begin to take precedence. When we fill our weeknights with various social activities and programs, then what

happens to the Vespers services that celebrate the feast days of our Saviour, the Theotokos, and the Saints? Eventually, imperceptibly, they are set aside one by one, and both the services and the Saints begin to seem unfamiliar to us. What is worse, they eventually become irrelevant and meaningless, which inevitably leads to greater evils, even in matters of the Faith.

Certainly, there is no lack of secular activities for those who are inclined to pursue them. But this is not the Church's work. As our Saviour said, "No man can serve two masters: for either he will hate the one, and love the other; or else he will hold to the one, and despise the other" (Matt. 6:24). Those who seek to serve both the secular and the spiritual within the framework of the Church will succeed in becoming proficient in neither, for the one effectively cancels out the other. Either we dedicate our time to social and athletic "church" activities or we consecrate time with the holy services, with prayer, and with fasting. How painful it is to see in newspapers or religious periodicals such announcements as: **Gala Dance**, sponsored by Saint Demetrius Church; **Greek Taverna Night**, sponsored by Saint George the Great Martyr Church; **Lenten Lotto**, sponsored by Holy Trinity Church; **Las Vegas Night**, sponsored by Dormition of the Theotokos Church; **Pre-Lenten Mardi Gras Dance**, sponsored by Saint Nicholas Church; **Grand Hafli**, sponsored by Saint Elias Church. etc. The Saints and Prophets did not strive and contest unto blood in order to sponsor such worldly, unseemly, and sinful affairs.

We know that we are in a fallen state and that, as the People of God, we are striving to become a "new creation," as the holy Apostle Paul teaches us: "Therefore, if any man be in Christ, he is a new creation" (II Cor. 5:17). Certainly, one does not become a new creation in Christ by occupying himself with dances and other secular activities — at least, not according to what we have been taught by the Saints. One should read, for example, what Saint John Chrysostom has to say about dancing in his homily on the beheading of Saint John the Baptist; or what St. Hypatius of Rufinae (celebrated on June 17) says of the Olympic Games. Saint James the Brother of the Lord writes, "Is any among you afflicted? let him pray. Is any merry? let him chant" (James 5:13). He does not say, "Let him dance, or drink, or gamble."

This is not a puritanical approach, as some may suppose, for we realize very well that the spiritual life cannot be imposed on anyone, nor can spiritual growth be forced. The Church forces no one to follow in her way. All are free to walk in the footsteps of God's holy ones to follow their own way. Furthermore, we know that each person will proceed on this spiritual path at his own pace and level of understanding. But the Church's purpose is one: to lend a helping and guiding hand to the person striving for that one thing that is needful — to be united to Christ through a worthy communion of the Body and Blood of Christ. By its teaching and by the example of its faithful, the Church is there to encourage and to help us attain this aim. The Church was not founded for frivolous and unbecoming conduct, so that we might "walk . . . in rioting and drunkenness," (Rom. 13:13), but rather that we should "walk circumspectly, not as fools, but as wise," (Eph. 5:15), so that Christ might be formed in us, and we might attain "unto a perfect man, unto the measure of the stature of the fulness of Christ" (Eph. 4:13).

When we lose sight of the unique mission of the Church, then many unseemly elements begin to enter, and the House of God becomes a "house of merchandise," if not a "den of thieves." When the parish starts to become a social center, then other elements immediately enter. Given an inch, the spirit of the world takes a mile, and all this comes to pass, of course, with the excuse that it is being done "for the young people," or "for the church."

Thus, step by step, the apostolic words "Ye are a chosen generation, a priestly kingdom, a holy nation, a people for His own possession" called to "show forth the praises of Him Who hath called you

out of darkness into His marvellous light” (I Peter 2:9) become meaningless, if not incomprehensible to the flock, and, eventually, the Church’s precepts and its true purpose are rejected and even derided.

There are, in fact, many activities in which the entire parish may take part, without their clashing in any way with the Church’s sacred purpose. Such activities and organizations may include:

- 1) A “Friends of the Poor” society, having an appropriate Saint as its patron. This organization would assist and visit the poor, the handicapped, the sick, the aged. It would also assist the local parish clergy, in arranging fund-raising projects for the parish and the diocese. Some of our parishes already have such an organization.
- 2) A youth choir that would learn the hymns of the Divine Liturgy, the special troparia of the feasts, the special melodies of Vespers and Matins in the eight tones.
- 3) Various fund-raising projects for the whole parish, such as church dinners, bake sales, car washes, cookie sales.
- 4) Parish maintenance crews for landscaping of the church grounds, painting and clean-up, polishing candlestands, lighting and cleaning the icon lamps.
- 5) Picnics, outings, pilgrimages to our monastic communities and sister parishes.
- 6) Sessions for teaching our young people how to prepare kollyva, prosphora, fasting foods, and special festal dishes.
- 7) Lecture series and “mini-conferences” on the Holy Scriptures, Church doctrine and history, contemporary moral and social issues.
- 8) Publication of a parish bulletin.
- 9) Subscription drives for the periodicals and publications of the diocese.
- 10) Printing missionary materials.
- 11) Translating and printing lives of Saints and other edifying texts from Orthodox Christian sources.
- 12) Formation and maintenance of a parish book, video tape, and audio tape library.
- 13) Formation and maintenance of a parish bookstore.
- 14) Formation of a team of church bell ringers.
- 15) Projects to help small parishes or missionary parishes.
- 16) Volunteer work in hospitals, city parks, public projects.

Every November, our Cathedral in Boston offers various home-made pastries for sale. These items are prepared by the parish faithful and are sold in order to help the Cathedral financially. This is an example of parishioners working and enjoying themselves together, while helping the Church in an appropriate and seemly manner that does not detract from the Church’s sacred character, and without

its having to resort to dances, lotteries, bingo, and other such activities that are not only unbecoming, but also forbidden by the holy canons and the holy Fathers.

My beloved Orthodox Christians, the Apostle Paul teaches that we should redeem the time with psalms, and hymns, and spiritual songs. How beautiful it would be to perpetuate the age-old Orthodox practices of the Orthodox Christian homelands, which had many “spiritual songs” that were used outside of the liturgical services. The Carpatho-Russian people are an example of Orthodox faithful who have a multitude of such spiritual songs that are sung whenever they would get together for recreation, or during work. One of the more popular songs of this type is “Tomorrow, Tomorrow in the House of Zacchaeus.”

The Greek people of central and eastern Asia Minor, who had forgotten the Greek language and spoke only Turkish, had composed many spiritual songs based on the Lives of the Saints, such as the Life of Saint Alexis the Man of God, sung according to the special melody of *That Which Came to Pass in Thee* (from the Megalynarion of the Ninth Ode of the Canon of the Feast of the Meeting in the Temple. February 2). The Greek-speaking peoples also have special carols for many of the major feasts, such as the Nativity of Our Saviour, Theophany, Lazarus Saturday, and Holy and Great Friday. There are also a multitude of such compunctionate songs composed by simple, believing people. For example, there are a whole series of spiritual songs composed by the blind nun Xenia, the first abbess of the convent founded by Saint Nectarios on the Island of Aegina.

Already, this pious tradition of spiritual songs has taken root among some of our parishes with the translation of “O Queen of All Creation.” It became so popular in the parish of St. Nectarios in Seattle that they asked that a similar anthem be composed for their patron saint. This was done by a pious layman, and the parish is now using it. The same layman, a pilgrim to the Holy Land, has also composed a similar anthem to SS. Joachim and Anna. and this hymn too is being used by our parish in Roslindale, Massachusetts. Another anthem has been composed in honor of the Transfiguration of our Saviour, and yet another in honor of Saint Justin the Martyr and Philosopher. And, of course, there are the 150 Psalms, which can be chanted antiphonally. Of these, the more well-known and beloved by our people are the Psalms of the Typica, the Polyeleos (especially Psalm 135), Psalm 33, the Psalms of the Praises (Psalms 148-150), and “By the Waters of Babylon” (Psalm 136). How salutary and edifying it would be on church outings and gatherings if the faithful formed two choirs and chanted these psalms, or the above-mentioned spiritual songs, antiphonally. Truly, we would then be fulfilling the holy Apostle’s counsel to ‘redeem the time.., in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing and making melody in our hearts to the Lord’ (cf. Eph. 5:16, 19) in a manner befitting Christians, instead of “killing time” in a secular manner, which, in turn, kills our souls unto eternity.

As one theologian notes, we must never forget that the Church is primarily a missionary body, having as its aim to bring people — through faith and repentance — to Christ, that they might be born anew in Him and into Him by water and the Spirit, and be no longer children of the world and of the enemy of our salvation. The uniqueness that every local Orthodox Christian parish possesses proceeds from its unity and consecration in the Holy Eucharist. Nothing must be allowed to compromise or adulterate this sacred union. “I am jealous over you with a godly jealousy; for I have espoused you to one Husband, that I may present you as a chaste virgin to Christ,” writes the holy Apostle Paul (II Cor. 11:2). Our goal as Christians is that Christ God be formed in us, that we may attain “unto the fulness of the measure of the stature of Christ” (Eph. 4:13).

Therefore, my beloved, let us ever strive to preserve the Church's voice clear and unambiguous. We are engaged in a spiritual battle with the passions, the devil, and the spirit of the world, which lieth in error and in evil. This spiritual warfare is being waged both within us and all around us. If the spiritual trumpet — I mean the voice of the Church — “gives an uncertain sound, then who shall prepare himself for this battle’?” (cf. I Cor. 14:8). If the Church's voice is intermingled with the voices of this world, then its sound will become “uncertain” and no one will prepare himself for spiritual battle. Like the early Christians, we are called to be Saints, that is, consecrated, set apart for a sacred purpose. “Let this mind.” my brethren and children, “be in you, which was also in Christ Jesus” (Phil. 2:5) that we may be counted worthy of the Heavenly Kingdom prepared for us by our Saviour and Lord, unto Whom is due all glory, honour, and worship, now and ever, and unto the ages of ages. Amen.

Your fervent suppliant unto God.

✠ Ephraim, Bishop of Boston

Dormition of the Theotokos

August 15, 1991