

The Parish Council and the Church

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The most difficult transitions for people serving on Parish Councils are reaching understandings about their place in the parish and the place of the Parish in the Church. Orthodox Christians who have the honor and privilege of serving the Church of Christ through service on Parish Councils hold a special trust that involves both understandings. These matters are the foundations for the Council's support of the Priest in his role as the Bishop's representative to the Parish and for the continuation of the Faith.

In the first instance, the place of the Council and the Council members in the Parish is to preserve the Apostolic Tradition that is represented by the Holy Orders transmitted to the Priest through ordination and to exemplify Christian service through humility and patience, honoring faith above politics. We are both receivers and conservators of this awesome treasure. This responsibility should produce a strong sense of humility. If it does not, then we do not comprehend our Holy Inheritance. Membership on the Parish Council is first and foremost a lay *ministry* of the Church under the guidance of the Clergy.

In the second instance, the place of the Parish in the Church, the Council's role is to educate themselves and the community that the Parish exists as one branch of a tree with heavenly roots; that the Parish can not live without getting sustenance from and giving support to the tree that is the Church on earth nor without the roots that are the Holy Trinity. Seminaries, missions, bishops are all earthly instruments for the Faith, giving context to the ongoing life of the Parish. The Parish can not thrive without them and vice-versa.

These foundations are very different from where we usually start, thinking about the administration of the Parish in business terms and in the pressures of the short-term. But we do need to meet payrolls, pay utility bills, mortgages and other expenses. How, then, can we connect the temporal with the spiritual and with the conservation of the Faith? Here are some ways:

First, understand and promote the office of the Priest as the Parish's tie to the Apostles and, thereby, to Christ;

If a Council sees the Priest as an employee and not as the Parish's spiritual leader, then the temptation is to forget who the Priest is and what he represents. Taking the long view of the Parish as a community of faith and the Priest as its shepherd can create a different context for relationships with the Priest.

Second, take to heart the duty to preserve the Church and her sacramental life as the principal responsibility of the Council;

Parish council members who do not prepare and present themselves regularly for the sacraments, who appear only at Sunday liturgy and not for special services, who do not visit parishioners in need reinforce the “business” perception of the council;

Parish Council agendas must include issues of the spirit and the sacraments through the leadership of the Priest.

Third, make a sincere attempt to see the parish in the context of the Diocese, the Archdiocese and the Ecumenical Patriarchate;

Attend Diocesan and Archdiocesan conferences, visit the Seminary, the St. Fotios shrine and other institutions of the Church, translate your parish’s financial Archdiocesan fair share support to support for the continuity of the Church.

The local Parish may see itself as an island, but that is an incorrect view. We take for granted the continuity that is delivered to the Parish by the institutions of the Church. We also take for granted the availability of Parishes when we or our loved ones move or attend college away from home. The network of Parishes that exists in America is testimony to the faith of the people, but it is also a consequence of the work of the international, national and diocesan structures of the Church.

Fourth, if only in a small way, put support for local, national and international missions into the ongoing budget of the Parish;

Yes, the Archdiocesan budget supports missions, but if fair share support to the Parish goes only for regular expenses, then the Parish loses sight of one of its principal Christian obligations. Especially during Lenten seasons, Parish focus should include service to the needy. The Council can help the Priest create this focus.

Fifth, remember that it is our obligation to present our best to the Church.

As parish council members, we have the duty to act as Orthodox Christians in our dealing with fellow Council members and with the Parish at large. We become larger than ourselves when we take the oath of office, and expectations for the character of our service are high.

Service on the Parish Council is indeed a lay ministry. If we accept that premise, then we must see that service in a larger context than administration. When we look only at administrative service, we are tempted to see the spiritual base of the Church in administrative terms and seek to preserve the wrong inheritance. We are admonished to take the long view of the continuation of the Faith and see our service in the context of the spiritual life of the people.