



# PASTORS TO PASTORS

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## The Changing Face of Church Communities

by Father Daniel Kovalak



Many of us who grew up in the Church and serve today as her pastors tend to minimize her powerful influence upon our lives. Without our even realizing it, we were nurtured by a holy fellowship that equipped us to cope with the rapidly changing society around us -- and still remain faithful. The Church was the center of activity; spiritual, social and otherwise. And it was good.

It was good as many of our neighbors shared our faith. We would walk together to the Church, not only on Sundays but for weekday services and a myriad of other activities. We knew that when the church bell rang very early in the morning that one of our fellowship had fallen-asleep in the Lord. As we got out of bed, mom was already preparing a dish to take to the family. Funerals were numerous. Facing death, together, was a normal part of community life.

It was also good for the entire parish community to celebrate weddings and baptisms together. They weren't private affairs. In fact, newlyweds regreted leaving their own wedding reception for their honeymoon because everyone was having such a good time.

In January, as the priest accomplished the customary Theophany home-blessings, he could go almost door-to-door in some neighborhoods. And the last house on the block would host a get-together for the neighbors. More fellowship and celebration for the community!

During Lent, it would not be unusual to see and be with the same people in church nearly every single day. There was always some 'extra-curricular' activity going on besides all the services. And the children would make extra trips to the church to prepare to make their confessions. (They would be told that they would have to ask forgiveness from their parents and siblings before coming to confession. They humbly obeyed.)

(CHANGING FACE to page 2)

## A Sabbatical

No. \_\_\_\_\_ by Father Thaddeus Wojcik



*"And after he had dismissed the crowds, he went up on the mountain by himself to pray. When evening came, he was there alone," -- Matthew 14:23*

Ten years ago my mental cobwebs would go away after a good day off, but slowly the day-off turned into two, and eventually it got to the point that I would still see the fog even after a week to myself. I began to hate coming home to find the light flashing on my answering machine and knowing full well that there would be fifteen to thirty calls to respond to every day. During various church group meetings I would think of anything other than the issues at hand, fantasize about finding excuses to leave, or purposefully try to doze off in order to bring order to the never-ending stress (I was having a difficult time sleeping all night and it was impossible to nap during a meeting ...maybe if I could throw-up it would be easy to excuse myself!).

To be sure, I found Vespers and Liturgy to be the peaceful oasis of Church life. Hospital visits were a joy because I could do God's work while having a one on one pastoral experience with someone who desired my unworthy prayers. Weekly instruction classes to converts was an incredibly positive adrenaline rush. But, I was tired and getting to the point of needing a healing rest. Our parish is large and busy enough to need three full-time priests. Thirty years of priesthood, and thirteen years of fifty-to-seventy-hour weeks at the Minneapolis Cathedral had taken their toll, and something had to change.

Since marriage is just as sacramental as the priesthood, I made a date with my wonderful wife, Karen, and discussed my experiences and problems. Obviously, this was not news to her and she suggested including others in helping me find some relief. My first outreach was to a neighboring priest who has his act together and knows my life almost as well as I do, my son, Father Christopher. Over lunch, he helped me whittle down the numerous possibilities for relief until it became clear to me that a sabbatical was the best course. Back to Karen who seconded the motion. Then the two hour drive to my father-confessor's hermitage. Father Jerome came right to the point, "I'm surprised you haven't done this years ago! You need to do this."

It was time to seek the permission and blessing of Bishop JOB. His Grace must have read the same books as Fr. Jerome. "What took you so long! You have my full support." I promised to send the bishop details as soon as I had them sorted out. So off I went to the local county library where I found some books about how business people should plan out sabbaticals.

I put together a multi-point plan for a three month sabbatical, October thru December, which I then shared with our two assistant priests who gave me their support. Next it was time to give the plan to the parish council president. Point number one was that the sabbatical was going to take place and that I was going to fund it myself. When the council president shared this with the entire council, they made one change - the parish would continue to pay my entire salary and benefit package because they felt the parish would reap the benefits, and the parish had contributed to the stress which triggered the need for the rest.

Things were beginning to roll, and my next step was to phone Fathers Vadim Pogrebniak and Nicholas Boldireff, who had recently taken sabbaticals. They helpfully shared suggestions of do's and don'ts; Fr. Vadim strongly suggested that I read St. Gregory's book on pastoral care while on sabbatical. Both said just do what I haven't done for a long time - go to movies, work around the house, sleep, whatever.

(SABBATICAL to page 4)



Such was parish life in the Orthodox communities of our youth. This was all normal. And the priest, as the leader of this community, by his service and presence at everything, was seen as the respected father figure, calling his children together to suffer with those who suffer and rejoice with those who rejoice.

Because of this tightly-knit community, people inherently cared for one another. It was expected that they conduct themselves accordingly in these intimate relationships they had with their priest and each other. There was a structure and familiarity among members that epitomized the meaning of church as *community*. And it was good.

As society has changed, so has the idea of the parish 'community'. Unfortunately, we have largely failed to acknowledge let alone adequately deal with the intense effects of such change. Increased mobility has resulted in isolation from, rather than incorporation into, church communities. People relocating, mostly for jobs, often seek first to satisfy personal interests and achieve temporal goals rather than the Kingdom of God. If there happens to be a church nearby, all the better. If not, the 'greener pastures' are a sufficient draw.

Separated, therefore, not only from extended families but from a parish community, the primary influence upon especially young lives has shifted dramatically. School and sports programs

have supplanted family and church activities. And adults, caught up in the 'quest for success', vigorously pursue *business* relationships while serving as little more than chauffeurs to their children. It is not unusual for youngsters these days to *never* attend a funeral; never face death as a part of life. Except in cases of a close relative, 'the folks' leave them playing videogames or surfing the net while they 'make an appearance' at a wake, if time allows. Weddings and baptisms have evolved into private affairs.

The enormous costs now associated with "putting out a nice spread" for such occasions prohibit extensive guest lists. Though the priest still offers and encourages the traditional home-blessings, most can't seem to fit us into their hectic schedules. (And God forbid if we show up unannounced!)

When Lent rolls around, the appearance of fish replacing meat seems the only remnant of church 'community life' experienced in the households of our parishioners. Even the holiest of weeks is compromised with a host of utterly secular Spring activities. And confession -- *blah!* There's simply no desire for our busy communicants to have to deal with this. It has been rationalized right off the list of Sacraments. Many are hard-pressed to make time for an occasional Liturgy let alone 'jump through ecclesiastical hoops' to prepare for confession. There is no time to share a cup of coffee in a fellowship hour, or be involved in church committee meetings. And parents wait impatiently in their cars in the church parking lot as their children endure another boring Sunday school class when they'd much rather already be on the soccer field.

Given this scenario, what has become of the once-respected and honored service and presence of *the priest*? He leads a *community* that many have rejected. He celebrates once-joyful corporate worship with only a handful of the faithful remnant. He conducts sacraments -- Mysteries of the Heavenly Kingdom! -- in the presence of a few family members. His once-esteemed position has become debased. His 'presence' is now a politically-incorrect sign of personal weakness. His once highly-regarded influence for our children has been subverted by scout masters, sports coaches, and school guidance counselors.

Yet there remains in this a strange irony. When life takes a tragic turn, when

striving for success meets with miserable failure, or when young Jeanie gets "in trouble", to whom does one turn? Often, *to the very community (and its leader) which has been rejected!* All else having failed, a 'miracle-worker' is summoned to 'make it better'. But it's too late. And it's not good.

The present clergy shortage in our Church is well-documented. The greater crisis involves pastors who are simply burning-out because of their inability to cope with their radically-new roles as herein expressed.

*"... the very things the Church and her pastors have always been respected and admired for remain intact; indeed, they are among the things which continue to draw people to embrace the faith."*

The seasoned pastor, like the good shepherd who knows his sheep, looks helplessly upon his membership list and sees, like a prophet, the fate that awaits many of those entrusted to his care. He notices the strivings of some that will assuredly result in their

self-destruction, the relationships that will end in personal disaster, and the leanings that will mean downfall. He fervently prays that they will find the strength and comfort in God to withstand the coming storms; that the support systems of the Church *community*, that were once so vital to survival, will kick-in. The erosion of his personal influence, however, makes him like a politician in his final term -- *a lame duck!* Ultimately, his final recourse will be *'to bury the dead'* -- in more ways than one.

The changing face of the American religious landscape has deeply impacted upon our Orthodox church communities and we whom God has mystically called to lead them. Yet the very things the Church and her pastors have always been respected and admired for remain intact; indeed, they are among the things which continue to draw people to embrace the faith. The representation of the Church as *the Ark of Noah* continues to be just as relevant today as it has always been. In the *community* of the ark, there was *safety, hope, security and salvation*. Outside it was only chaos and turmoil, with the floodwaters carrying sinners every which way to their doom.

As contemporary pastors confronted by intense change, it behooves us to rediscover and effectuate the treasure and wisdom of *community* within the Church. Though we know that 'the children are the future of the Church', even more importantly, *the Church is the future of our children!* We must not lose heart but consciously strive to provide all of our spiritual children with what we once had and can have again; a *community* life! □

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## "Thoughts and Recollections"

"Pastors to Pastors" looks to another of the "elders" of the Church for guidance and inspiration. We are pleased herein to share our interview with

### Fr Paul Shafran

Pastor of St Vladimirs Church, Trenton NJ,  
recently celebrating his 50th Anniversary in the Holy Priesthood

**Q. Fr. Paul, you have been an Orthodox priest for over fifty years! What general feelings do you have after working in the Church for such a length of time?**

A. From my early childhood years I have had the desire to become a priest. I was raised in Olyphant, PA in a religious home and spent a good deal of time in church, attending daily church school classes, serving as a altar boy and singing in the choir. After graduating from high school, my parish priest at that time, Fr Joseph Pishtey, helped me apply for admission to St. Vladimir's Seminary. After completing my studies at the Seminary and at Columbia University, I was ordained and sent to a rural area in southern Ohio where I served three small parishes. The salary was \$100 a month and living conditions were not easy. Nevertheless the spiritual experience was rewarding.

For the past many years I have been at St. Vladimir's Church in Trenton, NJ. Fifty years have passed by rather quickly because I was involved in many activities. At first my pastoral work at St. Vladimir's parish was not easy, but as the years passed, the flock grew and spiritually blossomed. A lot of pastoral work needed to be done and there were also many projects. Among the most notable were the enlargement of the church building, having the church interior renewed with iconography by Pimen Sofronoff, building a parish social-education center, and enlarging the rectory. In addition to parish work, I taught at St. Vladimir's Seminary, served as an Orthodox Chaplain at Pennsylvania University in Philadelphia and at Rider College in Trenton, and served on various boards and commissions of the Orthodox Church in America.

I am happy and thankful that the Lord has given me the opportunity and strength to serve the Holy Orthodox Church for over fifty years. I shall strive to continue to serve in the priesthood, if the Lord

wills, to the end of my earthly life. I would not care to do anything else.

**Q. You were at St. Vladimir's Seminary at the very beginning and you were fortunate to have studied with Fr. Georges Florovsky. What are some of your memories of seminary life?**

A. I entered St. Vladimir's Seminary two years after it was established. The student body was quite small. All instructors were Russian and taught in Russian. The schedule was very heavy. In the morning we studied at Columbia University and in the afternoon at the Seminary. At that time we lived on the campus of General Theological Seminary in downtown New York City. We had our own building and excellent meals were provided in the General Seminary dining hall. Later, while already a priest in Trenton, I returned to do graduate work at St. Vladimir's, now relocated near Columbia University with many new faculty from St. Sergius in Paris.

The teachings of Fr. Florovsky, as well as the other faculty, had a profound impact on me and the other priests. Fr. Florovsky made us aware of our Orthodox faith in a dynamic way. He also taught us about the serious responsibilities involved in being a priest and pastor in a parish. A new and richer life in the Orthodox Church was manifested, and I strove to live in that spirit.

**Q. Your ministry coincided with many dramatic changes in the history of the Orthodox Church in North America. In your opinion, what were some of the high points and what is the future for the Orthodox Church in America?**

A. For many years the Orthodox Church in North America had to struggle with the attacks and propaganda that came from the Soviet Communist government. The canonical position of our Church was

always challenged. After World War II, the arrival of bishops, priests and laity from Europe created new problems. Most of these immigrants had ties to the Church Outside of Russia and their hierarchs demanded that we submit to their authority. Struggles and problems persisted until we received the Tomos of Autocephaly from the Mother Church in Russia. We took on a new name, the Orthodox Church in America, and embarked on a new course of seeking a united Orthodox Church in North America. There was a new incentive to propagate the Orthodox faith in our country through evangelization. A new generation of American-born priests became active and converts entered the Church. In all this was a time of enrichment in the life of the Church in America and today we have many talented people laboring in the Lord's vineyard.

We do not know what the future holds for us, but priests must remain faithful to the tradition of the Church. As Fr. Florovsky taught us, we must not compromise the Orthodox faith; it must not be contaminated with modern trends. *"Always preach Orthodoxy,"* were his words.

**Q. What advice do you have for younger priests?**

A. Younger priests, especially those starting their pastoral life, must realize that being a priest is not an easy life. You are a servant and disciple of the Lord. Following the teachings and examples of the apostles and their successors we have to make sacrifices and we also have to accept the challenges in the world. Obedience to the discipline of the Church, the virtue of humility and love for your spiritual children entrusted to your care are essential. There must be a commitment to love and to serve Christ's holy Church. We must not rely on ourselves, but trust and call upon the Lord Who says, *"With God, all things are possible"* (Matt. 19:26). □



**(SABBATICAL, continued)**

Everything was ready - the bishop sent me a letter blessing my three month leave of absence. The few rumbles from unsettled parishioners who said, "we never did this before!" were soon hushed by a steamroller of support from the church community. I took some time to personally assure a few people that I was not going to travel the nation seeking a better assignment, but I could now smell the excitement of the next ninety days.

Karen and I started out by flying to Pennsylvania to attend the wedding of our godson, Basil Vansuch. I was honored to concelebrate the wedding with Archbishop HERMAN and Father Eugene Vansuch. Seeing old friends and participating in the joy of the sacrament was a wonderful way to start my sabbatical. We drove south to Arlington National Cemetery and between tears blessed the grave of my father who had been buried there ten months earlier. Our next stop was a visit with our Kum and Kuma, Father Nick and Vivian Bacalis in Richmond, again seeing old friends was a great way to help the brain.

Finally, we arrived at our destination -- Bogue Banks off the North Carolina coast. We have rented a condo at Salter Path a number of times in the past and find the area to be very relaxing and peaceful. Walking the beach several times a day, collecting shells, reading a mystery novel, attending the Orthodox chapel at Camp Lejune Marine Base, and eating fresh seafood started to bring some clean air to my head. Still, even after ten days of sun and sand I was still "stiff." In fact, ***it was over a month before I felt the fatigue begin to melt, and it was two months before the feeling of having to do something disappeared.***

In 1991 I was in a serious accident and during my months of recuperation I

learned that it is necessary to have something to do with my time. Before the sabbatical I planned to do a number of chores around the house, but more importantly I planned to work at Trinity Mission foodshelf in St. Paul. Trinity Mission is run by one of our Cathedral families who feed several thousand people a month. Since I serve on the Mission's board of directors it was easy to jump right in and bag food and hand out the groceries, clothing, and Christmas toys to needy families. It was a humbling experience to talk with people who have little, but who appreciate everything. ***My days at the food shelf were the highlight of the sabbatical.***

It was very enlightening to attend other Orthodox churches every Saturday and Sunday. Once, I arrived for Vespers to find that the priest was sick and the assembled congregation was going to sing an Akathist sans clergy. I was able to celebrate Vespers and with the priest's permission I stepped in the next morning and celebrated the Liturgy for him and the parish. I also served at two Missions -- St. Croix Falls and Brainerd. For the entire period my wife and I continued to observe a regular liturgical life which I believe is vital to life itself.

Twice we drove to the parish of Fr. Christopher and stayed over the weekend to see the grandchildren and our daughter-in-law. We were also able to be with them for the Feast of the Nativity. One weekend we flew to Chicago and spent the weekend with another son, Fr. Bartholomew and his wife, at their new parish. One of our parishioners flew Karen and me to Phoenix for Thanksgiving. We had a wonderful time sightseeing and visiting with former parishioners. On the way home from Arizona we were fogged out of Minneapolis and wound up in Omaha, where we rented a car and took a

leisurely ride through the Midwest since it would be eighteen hours until we could fly home.

There were a few occasions when I just wanted to be at the Cathedral. Bishop JOB came on the feast of the Entry of the Theotokos to ordain one of our late-vocation deacons. Two of our former parish council presidents died and I felt a need to concelebrate at their funerals. Yet, for the most part, I was totally absent. For seven dollars USWest gave me a temporary phone number so I couldn't be called by anyone including people selling credit cards or vinyl windows.

***Since I have returned to regular pastoral life, I have increased energy, and clergy and laity tell me my preaching has improved*** (and I haven't thought about throwing up). I try to keep my hours under sixty a week, although with blessing homes, there have been few evenings at home. I try to spend more time reading during the day or visiting my mother or aunts, and periodically I come home early to cook dinner for my wife.

Five weeks after I returned from the absence, the parish annual meeting moved to include a sabbatical as a part of the items available to the priests after they have spent ten years of full-time service at St. Mary's Cathedral in Minneapolis. Clearly, some parishes cannot afford the costs of a paid sabbatical, while others would have difficulties obtaining the services of a supply priest for an extended period of time. However, ***for the parishes that have the resources, the investment has great rewards, and can be a healing opportunity for the priest, his family, and his parishioners.*** □



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