

July 2009

Pastoral Word

### **What is a pastor?**

As the Orthodox Catholic and Apostolic Church, we enter the month of July with the celebration of the Holy Apostles, Ss Peter and Paul (June 29) and the Synaxis of the Holy Twelve Great Apostles (June 30) fresh on our mind. This is a wonderful opportunity to dwell upon the pastoral service of our Mother the Church, in the Name of the Lord Jesus Christ.

What is a pastor? As Jesus said thrice to Peter in the act of reconciling him to his apostolate, "Do you love me? Feed my sheep," so even today our Lord Jesus says the same to all who serve in apostolic succession in His Name. To serve as pastor means nothing other than to feed the flock of Christ, the humanity restored by holy faith and baptism.

#### **A pastor...**

...**speaks the Word of God** to illumine his hearers with faith, hope, and love. This means that he uses every opportunity to proclaim the Gospel by sermons, by teaching, by catechesis (instruction of potential new converts), and by pastoral instruction to the erring and confused. The Word of God is the primary therapy for restoring human beings to true PERSONS! Preaching, unfortunately, has been badly caricaturized. We priests are to blame for that. When we are unfaithful to the ministry of proclamation, our whole pastorate is undermined. It has been said recently that our greatest need, pastorally, these days is to be made HUMAN again. This is most certainly correct. Well, "faith cometh by hearing and hearing from the Word of God." And, we are saved by FAITH. So, where faith fails, nothing else can be done. I take preaching seriously and therefore spend a goodly amount of time studying the sacred Scriptures which "make one wise unto salvation." Then, filling my own reservoir, I am set to fill yours, God helping me!

...**serves under obedience** to his spiritual authority, not aggrandizing anything to himself. Jesus said, "He who seeks the glory of another, I will glorify." So a pastor always is called to turn attention away from himself toward Christ, the only One worthy of glory. In practice, this means that there is no pastor who does not draw his authority from another: a priest from his bishop, for example. Every pastor is under obedience, thus freeing himself from ego and allowing him to be fully present for the needy. There is a certain expression of divine authority present in the pastor who serves under obedience. This authority is self-emptying, however. This means that it operates only where it is actively sought out. The pastor has no authority in anyone's life for good, unless that person actively invites such authority. The pastor respects the freedom of each and all. This means that if I sense a certain area of correction or adjustment needed in one's life, I do not have any right to interfere unless that person actively engages me toward that end. Remember the story of the wise desert elder of old: he was revered for his evangelical wisdom and great discretion. Due to his fame, a group of pilgrims from the city came out to the desert to see him, after they had completed a long arduous journey. After they arrived, they inquired of the elder for a "word." "Geronda, give us a word for our salvation!" The elder was silent. After repeated requests, he finally said, "in these days there is no word." The pilgrims left, confirming within themselves that this was no real father; it was all myths. Meanwhile, the elder's disciples inquired of him, "How come you did not teach them, Geronda?" He then explained that real spiritual therapy could not be given to those who do not desire it. They had been mere spiritual tourists, not serious about obedience. Jesus said, "Do not cast your

pearls before swine.” So, a pastor must exercise discretion, so that what he shares truly helps. The secular healing motto of Hippocrates serves us well here: First, do no harm!

...**seeks the lost**. Jesus said that the shepherd leaves the 99 and goes out to find the one lost sheep. I admit this is difficult. How do I weigh the demands of time? Always a challenge... one priest friend of mine, in response to my question about this said, “I call upon such a person through three occasions, spaced apart in time to allow the sense that I am really serious to be felt. If there is no response after the third occasion of calling upon him, then I offer him to the Lord and turn to others.” This seems to be wisdom, and so I have followed that to the best of my ability. A pastor is called to seek out and to save the lost, not to pester the unwilling!

In any case, seeking the lost can mean many things. I have found that a regular rotation of calling upon the members of my parish serves to remind each and every one that I am available for them in Christ’s name. Perhaps when I call, there is no felt need of any kind. Then the call lets the faithful know that I carry him in my heart. Thus, pastoral care of souls (*cura animarum*) is a spiritual therapy: holy treatment of the soul’s ills takes place through pastoral care.

When I email you or phone you, I am coming in the Name of the Lord! My mission is simple: to be the presence of Christ to you, based upon the holy apostolic orders I received when I was ordained to the presbyterate. A pastor is a friend, but this does not mean that he can be casual and overly familiar with everyone. Frequently, being too casual leads to a decline of respect; as the old saying goes, Familiarity breeds contempt.

Seeking the lost also means going out to the market-place with the Word of Life. As we as a parish seek our new location, this outward-orientation will become crucial in defining our life as a holy community. Let’s see what good we can be to our neighbors!

---**saves his own soul**, in the course of saving others. How can any pastor serve, if he is given to the passions and rotting in his own carcass? He becomes a purveyor of pain rather than an agent of grace. This means that a pastor keeps a rule of prayer, and “buffets his body” so that in justifying others, he himself will not be condemned. There is an adage in the Church: speak only of those things authoritatively which stem from your actual experience. So, a pastor, in the end, must be a spiritual man. If I do not receive, I have nothing to give. This is why the faithful are encouraged always to pray for their bishop and parish priest.

Conclusion:

This summer, especially July, requires me to be out of the parish a great deal. This is due to several demands: family, Archdiocese, and my own salvation (retreat at monastery for confession and counsel). But, when I am present in the parish and call upon you, I invite you always to receive my call for what it is: an invitation to grow spiritually!

May the Lord bless and keep you all, as we look to an adventurous summer and fall!  
Fr Patrick