

The Apostolic Mission of Bishops: A Short Reflection - Bradley Nassif [1],

The purpose of this brief, and incomplete, reflection is to focus on the centrality of the gospel in the ministry of a bishop. It is not intended to promote a partisan perspective on any issue facing the contemporary Orthodox Church – Antiochian, Greek or O.C.A. It simply spotlights what the calling of a bishop is to be.

I want to be clear that this article is not a response to the recent discussions of the Antiochian bishops or the Holy Synod. It is a timeless reflection -- a positive statement -- of what the primary work of a bishop should be, regardless of his geographical location or the time of history in which he lives. It is vitally important that we understand the bishop's calling because the gospel of Jesus Christ lies at the very center of his ministry among us.

The Bishop's Apostolic Mission

The apostolic mission of a bishop in the Eastern Orthodox Church can be summarized in five points.

1. Preach the Gospel. All bishops are to proclaim and interpret the gospel of Christ to the church and to the world.

Bishops should be elected largely on the basis of their knowledge and ability to skillfully communicate the Holy Scriptures. St. John Chrysostom is the prime example of such a bishop.

All bishops are to faithfully keep the gospel *clear and central* to their ministries.

What is the gospel? The gospel is the “good news” that God became human in Jesus Christ, took upon himself our fallen humanity in order to restore it into communion with God, conquer sin and vanquish death. This he did pre-eminently through Christ's life, death, resurrection and ascension into heaven. This “good news” must be at the very core of every life-giving action in the church – the sacraments and throughout every liturgical season of fasting and prayer.

Bishops need to preach and teach this message to all their priests and parishioners. They need to boldly call people to repentance and faith and not make the fatal assumption that everyone is a Christian just because they happen to be inside the walls of an Orthodox Church.

I have said this for the past four decades, and I will continue to say it until I die: *The most urgent need in the Orthodox world today is the need for an aggressive internal mission of converting our nominal Orthodox people to personal faith in Jesus Christ.* Bishops should be teachers, preachers and evangelists of the gospel first and foremost. That is their main apostolic function (see point 2 below).

This requires that we lay people give them a large degree of freedom from administrative and managerial functions. Managerial duties must be done by them, but whenever those duties occupy more attention than

the preaching of the gospel, we the people have committed a great sin against our bishops. It is our duty to support our bishops in their apostolic calling by freeing them to focus on preaching, teaching and evangelizing others with the Word of God.

2. Administer the Sacraments of the Gospel.

Bishops are to oversee the celebration of the Eucharist and ensure the sacramental integrity of its parishes. This is a heavy subject so I will forego an extensive theological commentary on it. Suffice it to say that all Orthodox sacraments are sacraments *of the gospel*.

We speak much about the Eucharist (and rightly so) but we sometimes forget that the Eucharist is rooted in the gospel. "For as often as you eat this bread and drink this cup *you proclaim the Lord's death until He comes*" (1 Cor. 11.26). The death, resurrection and Second Coming of Jesus Christ lies at the very heart of this sacrament, and that is what the bishop is called to preach and to celebrate. He is to be a herald of the good news of God's love given supremely through his Son, Jesus Christ. Every life-giving sacrament of the Church communicates this good news in one way or another, and it is the duty of the bishop to faithfully make that gospel *clear and central* to his flock.

The failure to intentionally keep the gospel *clear and central* is the main reason why so many of our young people are "religious but lost". They know about God but have seldom been *asked* to make the Church's faith their own, even though they have attended Church all their lives. Bishops (as well as priests and lay people) are to do the work of an evangelist.

3. Guard the Faith, Unity, and Discipline of the Church.

Maintaining the unity of the church today requires acts of courage and risk taking. Guardianship of the gospel does not mean simply "holding the traditional line." It also means *preventing spiritual decay and ignorance*.

Just the other day an Orthodox Christian out of state asked me if the book of Ephesians was in the Bible. I was saddened to have even been asked such a question. All this person needed to do was to open the Bible and look inside the table of contents. But that is the level so many of our people are at in the Orthodox world today. No wonder St. John Chrysostom declared, "The lack of Scriptural knowledge is the source of all evils in the church."

4. Be a Moral Example of Holiness and Wholesomeness.

This implies the usual exemplary personal conduct and spirituality that is the vocation of every baptized Christian -- bishops, priests and laity alike.

Another aspect of episcopal modeling would be for bishops to renounce work-a-holism. Compulsive work habits destroy one's spiritual and mental health and that is simply not a Christian thing to do.

5. Diminish the Distance between Bishops and their Flock.

The worldly values of the Byzantine Empire crept into the episcopal ministry after the Fall of Constantinople (1453). Under the Ottoman Turks, bishops began wearing the literal crown of the fallen Byzantine Emperors as political and spiritual leaders of their millet (Christian sub-cultures). Honorific titles such as “Despot” and “Master” began to be used. The ordination of a cathedral bishop came to be described as an “enthronement”. All this is tied to the legacy of Byzantine politics.

Today we find ourselves in a quandary. We have a strong desire to honor and respect our bishops; yet we do not want to unwittingly perpetuate a worldly and politicized gospel. What would Jesus say about such practices if he were alive today? He once said, “For he that is greatest among you shall be the servant of all” (not an enthroned Despot or Master). Is there a more Christian way to express our desire to hold bishops in high regard?

The True calling of an Episcopal Ministry requires that the gospel be kept *clear and central* in the life of the Church. Perhaps we should examine historical accretions that have attached themselves to the office of bishop and which mislead the flock about the servant nature of Christian leadership.

The five points I have outlined above, admittedly incomplete, are shared in order that we might keep our eyes on the ball. That ball is nothing less than the Good News of the gospel of Jesus Christ in the life of the Church. If the goal is the gospel, then a vital means to that end is to keep the gospel clear and central to the apostolic mission of an Orthodox bishop.

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