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INSIDE THIS ISSUE:

Renewal or Revitalization?
By Archpriest Eric G. Tosi 1

The Church in Today's Social
Climate
By Metropolitan Emilianos 2

Building an Orthodox Parish
By Archpriest Lawrence Farley 3

The Church
By St. Nektarios of Aegina 3

A Revitalization Matrix
By Archpriest Eric G. Tosi 4

RENEWAL OR REVITALIZATION?

by Archpriest Eric G. Tosi

“Then He said to me, ‘Son of man, these bones are the whole house of Israel. They indeed say, ‘Our bones are dry, our hope is lost, and we ourselves are cut off!’ Therefore prophesy and say to them, ‘Thus says the Lord God: “Behold, O My people, I will open your graves and cause you to come up from your graves, and bring you into the land of Israel. Then you shall know that I am the Lord, when I have opened your graves, O My people, and brought you up from your graves. I will put My Spirit in you, and you shall live, and I will place you in your own land. Then you shall know that I, the Lord, have spoken it and performed it,” says the Lord.’ ”

Ezekiel 37:11-14

“Father, there is just not anybody here anymore. There is no one left.” I was told this once while I was working with an urban parish in a depressed area. Here they were, perfectly positioned in one of the largest urban cities in the United States, where multi-lingual non-



denominational Protestant parishes are popping up everywhere, and the flow of people on streets are non-stop at all hours of the day. Yet, this person believed that there was “no one here anymore.” I am sure we have all heard that, but have we unpacked what that statement really means? Does it mean there is no one “like them” here anymore or that they are so separated from the surrounding community that they are now isolated? In any case, it is demoralizing and depressing.

When we think like this we are relying on some image of “past glory” which may not exist anymore. Changes in

demographics, changes in social morals, changes in the attitudes towards God have shifted (they always do), yet we are seeing a massive influx of new people into the Church nationwide.

The reality is that there are always people around; people who are seeking the truth of the Church which we uniquely possess. If we are truly honest with ourselves, we do not have a problem with people, we have a problem with attitudes. We don't want different people; we want the same type of people that we are used to. We don't want a renewed parish; we want the parish to be the way it was. We don't want a revitalized parish; we want the parish to carry on as before.

To renew something is to clean and reestablish something, to restore what is perceived as lost. But to revitalize is to bring new life, to recover the original purpose and vitality that was present from the beginning. To revitalize is a resurrection.

The Church in Today's Social Climate

By Metropolitan Emilianos of Silyvria

By stressing the deficiencies found in parishes, some see only a gloomy picture. Their attitude is pessimistic. They see problems but not solutions. They see insurmountable obstacles rather than opportunities. Overwhelmed by the unwanted obstacles, their vision of God's activity is blurred. Faith gives way to doubt. Dreams yield to despair. It is often possible to become so concerned over what is *not* happening, that one fails to see what is.



“Parish renewal implies a proper understanding of both the message of the Church and the flexible nature of the community.”

Obviously, we should keep the parish's human side in mind, i.e. its various temperaments, situations, needs and physiognomies. Problems such as approach, attitude, language and strategy depend on the wisdom and spiritual experience of the pastor, who has given thoughtful study to the history and background of a parish and the spiritual level of its members. Photios of Constantinople was once asked, which of the many icons of Christ painted in those days was the true one. He answered, “Knowing that the Romans have a different style and color, and the Indians another, and yet different ones among the Greeks and Egyptians, the same thing is presented in

many ways. The same Gospel is written with Roman letters and with other letters, that being those of Indians, Hebrews, and even the different letters of the Ethiopians. Divine words are written differently as to form and shape, and even uttered with different sounds. But what counts above all is not the language which contains them or the exterior form, but the content, the inner message and its deep meaning.”

Parish renewal implies a proper understanding of both the message of the Church and the flexible nature of the community. The first remains in its very essence immutable, while the latter changes because it is

composed of men and women of different moods, cultures, age levels and spiritual development, and is never uniform or constant. Therefore, we on the one hand encounter a changeless Gospel and on the other, the changing needs of a given parish. God is constant in all his relations with his creatures.

From Priest, Parish and Renewal by Metropolitan Emilianos (Brookline: Holy Cross, 1994) pp. 79-80.

Building an Orthodox Parish

By Archbishop Lawrence Farley

A large part of the problem with some Orthodox parishes (at least of my acquaintance) is not lack of money or lack of a nice building (nice as money and good buildings are), but the fact that they have not been built upon a proper foundation. The Scriptures have lots to say about the value of a good foundation, and the Lord teaches us that if the foundation has not been properly laid, the whole edifice built upon it is in danger of being swept away (*Matthew 7:24-27*), if not lit-

erally, then certainly spiritually. I know of a number of parishes which have been thus swept away—not that they no longer exist as parishes, but that they no longer exist as true temples of God. Some have become spiritually toxic, and are more accurately described as synagogues of Satan (compare *Revelation 2:9*). To be a truly Orthodox temple of God, the community must first have in place a solid foundation. And as St. Paul reminds us, “No other foundation can anyone lay than that

which is laid, which is Jesus Christ” (*1 Corinthians 3:11*). One can try to lay other foundations, setting in place the wood, hay, and straw foundations of ego and the cult of personality. But Jesus Christ is the only real and lasting foundation, either for a parish or an individual’s life. How can one build on this foundation to become a truly Orthodox community?

Excerpt from:

<https://www.pravmir.com/building-an-orthodox-parish/>

“To be a truly Orthodox temple of God, the community must first have in place a solid foundation.”

The Church

By Saint Nektarios of Aegina

The term CHURCH, according to the strict Orthodox view, has two meanings, one of them expressing its doctrinal and religious character, that is, its inner, peculiarly spiritual essence, and the other expressing its external character. Thus, according to the Orthodox confession, the Church is defined in a twofold manner: as a **religious institution**, and as a **religious community** (*koinonia*).

The definition of **the CHURCH as a religious institution** may be formulated thus: The Church is a divine religious institution of the New Testament, built by our Savior Jesus Christ

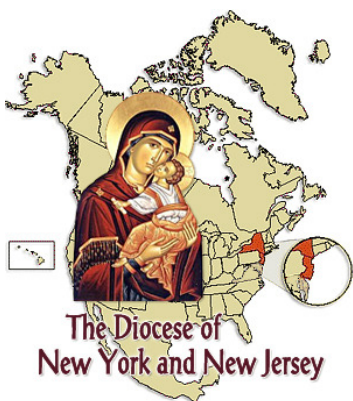
through His incarnate Dispensation, established upon faith on the day of holy Pentecost by the descent of the All-Holy Spirit upon the holy Disciples and Apostles of the Savior Christ, whom He rendered instruments of Divine grace for the perpetuation of His work of redemption.

In this institution is entrusted the totality of revealed truths; in it operates Divine grace through the Mysteries; in it are regenerated those, who with faith, approach Christ the Savior; in it has been preserved both the written and the unwritten Apostolic teaching and

tradition. The definition of **the CHURCH as a religious community** may be formulated thus: The CHURCH is a society of men united in the unity of the Spirit, in the bond of peace.

The right view of the CHURCH is that the CHURCH is distinguished into the Militant and the Triumphant; it is Militant so long as it struggles against wickedness for the prevalence of the good, the Triumphant in the heavens, where there dwells the choir of the Righteous, who struggled and were made perfect in the faith in God and in virtue.

“The right view of the CHURCH is that the CHURCH is distinguished into the Militant and the Triumphant.”



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A Revitalization Matrix

By Archpriest Eric G. Tosi

The following matrix was presented at the 2024 Diocesan Conference. It is to be used as a guideline to assist parishes in assessing the state of their community. It is to be prescriptive, but rather a snapshot of where the parish believes it is. Not all boxes will be aligned, but rather serve as an analysis of parish health.

Parish Status	# at Liturgy	Membership	10 Year Statistics	Committed Core	Facilities	Finances	Vision	Liturgical Life	Leadership
Healthy Parish	>150	>150	healthy growth	>150	facilities good/work completed	No debt/ full time clergy/met budget with vision/programs/assessments and appeals all	ongoing renewal	additional clergy/expanded liturgical life	clergy/council/subcommittees/programs
Turn-around parish	>100	>100	small growth	>100	planned work	refinanced debt/full time clergy/planned budget/reserve fund/some programs/assessment met/all appeals	vision/mission /goals defined	full time clergy/growing liturgical life	clergy/council/committees/subcommittees
Stagnant Parish	100	100	stagnant growth	50	needs examining/needs upgrade	some debt/full time clergy/budget is tight/reserve fund/no programs/assessments met/selected appeals	vision/mission defined	full time priest/stable liturgical life	clergy/council/some committee
Declining Parish	<50	<75	single digit decline	<25	minor repair	operating debt/full time priest/budget deficit/some reserves/planned programs/parish pays assessments/some appeals	vision defined	part time priest/minimal liturgical life	clergy and council
Crisis Parish	<20	<50	double digit decline	<10	major repair	operating debt/part time priest/shrinking budget/depleted reserves/no programs/no assessments/no appeals	none	no priest/minimal liturgical life	clergy or assigned clergy