
A CALL TO SERVE

By Fr. Kevin Scherer +++

Today, most of us in the Church are familiar with the old adage that ten percent of the people do ninety percent of the work. The real statistics may be even grimmer. The Church is full of burned-out priests and stressed-out parishioners who regularly make real sacrifices for the good of the local parish, only to find that their personal offerings are met with indifference and criticism.

Discouragement and even despair run rampant in the Church. Year after year, the Church loses more and more good workers because they simply refuse to put up with the stress anymore. Despite the best strategies and creative ideas of these few, most of the members of the average parish seem comfortable with a passive role and unwilling to change. Who can blame the workers who have given up? Many of them have suffered personal health problems and family strife due to the stress of their commitment. In many cases, priests even feel guilty asking for help, because they know what eventually awaits the eager response of the innocent and naive.

The Workers Are Few

Jesus reminds us, when He laments to His disciples that “the harvest truly is plentiful, but the laborers are few” (Matthew 9:37), that this is not just a contemporary problem. In fact, we find the very same problem from the beginning of time. In Genesis 3, God Himself has difficulty finding laborers for His new creation. Instead of gratefully and obediently accepting their life and identity as workers in the Garden (Genesis 2:5, 15, 18, 20), Adam and Eve are duped into believing they have been shortchanged of their divine right to be like God. With their newfound attitude of entitlement, they begin to seriously doubt if they can find real life in working for God; so they rebel.

Most of us are more than content to sit back when others step up. Our tendency toward laziness is a very common and real distortion of our true identity and vocation. We are called to work because we are made in the image of the One who works. God the Father creates, begets, heals, raises—He works. And in His Son Jesus Christ, we witness the perfect incarnation of this work on the cross. Jesus comes to do the work of His Father (John 5:36) and calls us to partner in this work, before the night comes and no one can work (John 9:4).

I’ve always been amazed at Jesus’ response to His disciples in Matthew 14, when they urged Him to send the crowds away because of their deserted location and lack of food. Instead of taking personal charge of the situation, Jesus looked at His disciples and said, “You give them something to eat.” Jesus wasn’t passing the buck or skirting responsibility; He was simply challenging His disciples to exercise the ministry, the work, to which He had called them.

This scenario was commonplace in Jesus’ ministry. Time and time again, we find Him entrusting His disciples with the work of the Kingdom. From the very beginning, He told them He was going to train them to “catch men” (Luke 5:10). He modeled for them what it meant to preach and heal, and then He sent them out two by two to do the same (Luke 10). When He taught, He warned His disciples of laziness and the judgment that awaits those who fail to use the talents God has given them (Matthew 25). And in the end, before His Ascension, He commissioned His followers to finish the work of making disciples of all nations.

Jesus was always looking for workers and always seeking to give His ministry away. Sadly, however, both the Scriptures and church history bear witness to the fact that the Kingdom of God has always wrestled with the burden of rebellious indifference and laziness. It is the reality of broken humanity.

A Scriptural Model of Ministry

How should those of us who do work react to this reality? Do we give up and wallow in self-pity, or try harder, hoping to beat the odds? Most of us, if we’re honest, can attest to having tried each. Neither option works, however, and both leave us feeling even more empty and lost than before.

I know countless priests who have given in to the passive culture of their parishes. In a noble effort to exercise their ministry and further the Kingdom of God, they simply take over and do it all. In their minds, it has to be done; and so, if no one else will do it, they must. It seems like the reasonable thing to do.

In reality, it’s the absolute worst thing a pastor can do. St. Peter reminds us that all Christians share in the priesthood of Christ (1 Peter 2:9)—we are a “royal priesthood.” When a pastor assumes the responsibility of all the priests in his parish, he not only assumes an impossible load, but he also trains his parishioners not to exercise their priesthood. In this way, priests unknowingly cripple their own parishes and the Church as a whole. When a father does for his children what they can and should do for themselves and the family, we call it dysfunctional and enabling. Fathers are to nurture healthy independence and maturity in their children.

Much of the Church’s problem is systemic. We have raised immature and lazy spiritual children because we have fallen prey to an overly clericalized model, which praises priests who work themselves to death and unintentionally micromanage their parishes. To my knowledge, the Scriptures never condone any pastoral model that does not emphasize and respect the individual spiritual gifts and priesthood of every believer (Romans 12; 1 Corinthians 12). An outsider might conclude of the Orthodox Church that holiness, evangelism, service, teaching, and all other aspects of pastoral ministry have only been entrusted to the ordained clergy.

Instead, what we find when we read the Scriptures is something completely different. Note carefully in the following quotations from Ephesians 4 what the Scriptural responsibility of a pastor is: “And [Christ’s] gifts were that some should be apostles, some prophets, some evangelists, some pastors and teachers, to equip the saints for the work of ministry” (vv. 11–12, RSV—emphasis mine).

A pastor’s job is to equip. He’s a trainer, a coach. His work is to train others to do the work. That training will certainly

include modeling what it means to work, but it does not include taking personal responsibility for someone else's work! St. Paul outlines the whole goal of this model in verses 12 and 13: "for building up the body of Christ, until we all attain to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to mature manhood, to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ."

The goal is maturity—the fullness of Christ in every Christian. Only when a pastor calls his parishioners to their true identity as priests and equips them to use the different spiritual gifts God has given each of them can the Church realize her true identity and calling in this world. St. Paul attests to this in verse 16, when he writes that the body only grows and matures in love when "each part is working properly" (emphasis mine).

As the Church begins to actualize this model, she will also begin to realize its fruits: "we [will] no longer be children, tossed to and fro and carried about with every wind of doctrine, by the cunning of men, by their craftiness in deceitful wiles. Rather, speaking the truth in love, we are to grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ" (vv. 14–15). It's clear that though we profess to be a scriptural Church, we struggle to live it. Most of the pastoral ministry of the Orthodox Church in North America is conducted from the top—the episcopacy—down. Our bishops are seen and experienced as the final word and authority on all things ministerial. We expect our bishops to create, design, and initiate all forms of ministry within our dioceses and jurisdictions.

Once these ministries have been identified, they are passed down to the clergy, who seek to raise the necessary funds and carry them out. Because of the number of duties and responsibilities these ministries demand, the clergy often seek the help of various boards and parish councils. These boards and councils are often charged with the material or financial demands of the ministry, leaving the more spiritual requirements to the clergy.

Finally, the great mass of the people, the parishioners, simply watch the entire ministry take place. In fact, most of the time, they view themselves as the recipients of these ministries. They grow up believing that they come to church primarily to get, and not to give. We train them to be a passive audience who watch the bishop, his clergy, and their respective boards and councils do the work. In this model, it's no wonder that ten percent of the people do ninety percent of the work.

The model we found in Ephesians 4, however, is the reverse of this. Instead of the bishop being an authoritative dictator, he is, in imitation of Christ, the chief servant. He is the one who gives his life on behalf of all and for all. He selflessly and tirelessly guards the deposit of apostolic truth (2 Timothy 1:14) and then rightly interprets it (2 Timothy 2:15) so that his priests can preach it and use it (2 Timothy 3:16) to equip their parishioners to do the work of Christ (Matthew 5:13–14). In this scriptural model, the various boards and councils are responsible for creatively assisting the clergy in any way they possibly can to implement the full equipping of every parishioner. In this model, unlike the previous one, everyone is active. There is no passivity because everyone shares in the same priesthood and ministry of Christ.

Putting the Model into Practice

At the beginning of the twenty-first century, the Orthodox Church in North America has enumerated many noble goals: administrative unity, education, missions and evangelism, charitable works, and more. But in each of these areas, the Church is barely limping along—and in comparison with some of the other Christian traditions in North America, embarrassingly so. None of our goals will be fully realized unless we become serious about implementing St. Paul's ministerial model. I believe that any serious attempt at putting this model into practice will include, at the very least, the following resolves:

First, the Church must free its episcopacy to return to its primary function of "handling" (KJV) the apostolic truth. Unfortunately we have tied down our bishops with every burden under the sun except for that which is necessary. Have we forgotten why the Twelve appointed deacons in the first place? In Acts 6:2, the Twelve admitted that "it would not be right for [them] to neglect the ministry of the word of God in order to wait on tables."

The world desperately needs the apostolic truth to be interpreted and applied to its ailing life. The faithful need to hear the collective voice of the episcopacy as it relates to the modern issues of their generation. And the ordained clergy need to hear a cohesive episcopal vision of this life-giving truth that inspires them to action and courage.

As is evidenced in Acts 6, the Church has struggled from the very beginning not to reduce the functionality of its episcopacy to arbitration and social service. The mission and health of the entire Church hinge upon the scriptural ministry of the bishop. If the history of the episcopacy has, at times, been riddled with control, greed, and territorialism, perhaps a great deal of that blame belongs to the faithful, who, like the Grecian and Hebraic Jews in Acts 6, have unknowingly shaped the ministry of the episcopacy by their own petty and sinful desires.

Second, the Church must give more attention and credence to the discovery, development, and exercise of the spiritual gifts outlined by Ss. Peter and Paul in Romans 12, 1 Corinthians 12, Ephesians 4, and 1 Peter 4. These are the very tools Christ has entrusted us with to exercise our priesthood. Despite what appears to be a clear scriptural truth, these gifts are almost never mentioned in normal church life. When was the last time you heard a sermon or teaching devoted to the explanation and application of these spiritual gifts? It's clear, at least from St. Paul's perspective, that without them the Church cannot realize her mission or maturation.

Most Orthodox Christians who have been raised inside the Church understand very little about these gifts and even less about their connection to the Sacraments of Baptism and Chrismation. Each Orthodox Christian must be taught that he or she has a unique impression or thumbprint to leave upon this life—one that no other person, past, present, or future, can leave. The unique combination of each person's spiritual gifts, abilities, knowledge, experience, and personality cannot be duplicated.

It should be the resolve of every priest to light the fire of these gifts within each of their parishioners. This is how priests

equip the faithful. They inspire, educate, and coach their parishioners in how to use these gifts for the edification of the Church and the glory of God.

Third, as these spiritual gifts are being realized by the faithful, the Church must open its ministerial doors to the laity. For too long, ministry has belonged only to those who wear black. Even the very few departmental or organizational ministries that belong to SCOBA or the individual archdioceses, more often than not, are run by the clergy. In some cases, a theological degree is important and even appropriate. However, so many times the Church is simply too fearful to let go of ministerial control. When we fail to let go of our children, they fail to thrive.

Sometimes I wonder whether this fear stems from the need to protect a kind of good-ol'-boys' club—a secret society of insiders. Maybe some clergy are threatened by the thought that their gifts might be somehow trumped by the remarkable gifts of others within their parish. This kind of insecurity and jealousy, if it exists, will certainly strangle parish ministry. Instead, the Church must rediscover the spirit of Hagia Sophia in Byzantine Constantinople, where the various spiritual gifts of the faithful were recognized and a variety of major and minor orders existed. I'm not advocating the tonsuring of doorkeepers, exorcists, catechists, and choir members in our present context, but I am suggesting that we begin by not minimizing the various ministries of the Church and by looking for every way possible to open new ministerial opportunities for the laity, especially young people and women.

A couple of years ago, I was incensed when I heard a priest describe the role of a subdeacon as nothing more than a glorified altar boy. That comment and attitude is an absolute travesty of both ministries. How dare anyone minimize the grace and gifts that God has given to an individual. "The eye cannot say to the hand, 'I have no need of you,' nor again the head to the feet, 'I have no need of you.' On the contrary, the parts of the body which seem to be weaker are indispensable" (1 Corinthians 12:21–22, RSV).

The clergy must always be looking for ways to give their ministry away and to affirm the priesthood of Christ in others. If priests monopolize parish ministry, the faithful will never develop spiritually or realize their true calling. It should be a priest's greatest joy to share his ministry with others in the parish. Perhaps this is the reason St. Paul urged Timothy to entrust his ministry to other faithful individuals who could exercise that same ministry (2 Timothy 2:2).

The time has come for the Church to return to a biblical paradigm of ministry wherein the one priesthood of Christ is shared by every baptized Christian. In order to realize this, the clergy must seek to give away their ministries with humility and generosity, and the faithful must obediently embrace the spiritual gifts God has given them through their baptism. When this happens, the Church in North America will finally discover its true identity and become a light to the nations.

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