

WHAT A PRIEST EXPECTS FROM HIS PARISH COUNCIL

*(Reprinted from the WORD Magazine, January 1960)
By Father David F. Abramtsov*

The parochial councils of our churches are usually quite explicit about what they expect in a priest: He must be not only a spiritual leader, a teacher, preacher and steward of the Mysteries of God, but also an all-American sportsman and an all-around 'jolly good fellow!' Rarely does the ordinary council member consider the qualities a priest expects of him. This then will be our subject.

What does a priest expect of members of the parish council? Many things. Most of all the priest expects that only the most pious and dedicated men in the parish will be elected or appointed to the council. If a man feels that Christ's Faith is not foremost in his life, then the priest expects that man to decline the nomination to the high office of council member. Frequently a man is elected to assist the priest, by serving on the council, for whom Christ's religion is the most distant aspect of his life — it comes after his business, after his lodge, after his golf, after his wife's demands on his time. The most irritating thing for a priest is to have a parish council made up of lukewarm Christians who put their church in last place instead of in first place; who look upon their church duties as sort of extra-curricular activities or hobbies to which attention is given last. This sort of council members is easily spotted because he is the one too busy elsewhere to show up at meetings; he is too attentive to civic, political and lodge affairs to further and advance the parish program.

The priest desires religious men on his council. He expects his church council members to be pious and to be an example to the rest of the parish in speech, and conduct, in love, in faith and in purity (I Tim. 4:11). It goes without saying that there ought to be no room on a parish council for foul-mouthed and profane people who conduct themselves as unbecoming followers and disciples of Christ, who frequent places of ill-repute, who lead lives of sin, who have married outside the pale of Holy Church (or allowed their children to do so); who have no understanding of the most basic doctrines of the Orthodox Church. There is nothing more scandalous in a parish than to have council members who do not receive the Sacraments frequently. The priest expects his assistants in the parish to receive Holy Communion at least four times each year and even monthly if possible. Those who cannot receive this often because of their lack of faith ought not to have been elected in the first place.

It is often that a priest has council members who are wise as concerns earthly vanities, who are experienced in the business world, but who are completely ignorant of the things of God. He sees council members who make the precious Sign of the Cross as if brushing specks of dust from their neckties; who do not know how to make a good Confession, who do not even know the Creed halfway through from memory — but yet know how to make a shrewd business deal and can recite baseball averages for hours on end. The priest expects his assistants in Christ's vineyard to be exemplary Christians, to take a meaningful part in the ritual of the Church, to know the important prayers of the Church from memory, to have some comprehension of what

the Church stands for, its doctrine and dogmas, its mission in the world, and to have some concept of the Orthodox Church's world-outlook.

If a priest is expected to exhort older men as he would a father and treat younger men like brothers (I Tim. 5:1), so does a priest expect to be treated by his council members as a spiritual Father; to be looked up to and not down upon. The priest is truly the father of his parish (and his council) because through Baptism, and the other Sacraments and means of Grace, he has begotten and nourished them in the spiritual life; they are his spiritual children (I Cor. 4:14-16). The parish is a spiritual family: the priest being the father, the parishioners — the children, and no family will prosper where there is no mutual understanding, loyalty and respect. The priest dedicates the whole of his life to Christ's work, the council members devote only some spare time and a few dollars. The priest is truly a minister and servant of his people but he chose to be this minister and servant voluntarily. Sometimes the council acts as if it imposed the position of servant upon the priest. In other words it tries to make a hireling of the priest. The council who sees the priest not as a builder and steward of church life, with special Grace of God for his godly work, but only as a hireling or "hired-man" — should recall the words of Christ who said that a hireling is not a shepherd and cares nothing for the sheep (John 10:12-13). In other words, if the priest is forced to be a hireling, he is lost as a shepherd and his flock will be scattered and devoured by spiritual wolves.

The members of the parish council also are called to be servants of the people and to assist the priest in every practical way. Too many of the council members think of their position as one of honor alone. They think they were elected as a reward for worldly success. The idea of service is far from their minds. Unfortunately, there are still some parishes which elect men to the council because of wealth or for some other equally unspiritual reason. According to the words of Christ, a wealthy man will have more than enough work cut out for him simply to save his own soul without burdening him with parochial work! When such men of worldly wealth are placed on the parish council they sometimes assume almost dictatorial powers and run the parish like a business corporation — threatening to withdraw often much-needed financial support if their dictates are not followed. Rich men often have a wrong idea of their wealth thinking that the Lord has rewarded them personally. It sometimes does not occur to them that they are merely stewards of the things of the Lord — that what the Lord gave He can also take away. The Lord entrusted them with wealth to be used for doing good and in order to be liberal and generous with those not so fortunate. The riches were not given them in order to abuse the trust placed in them by the priest and people. There is nothing more despicable than the wealthy parishioner who uses his wealth to run a parish. The priest is directed by St. Paul to charge the wealthy not to be haughty but rather to be rich in good deeds and in the spiritual life (I Tim 6:17-19). The priest expects Christian humility from all his council members not an overbearing superiority complex which destroys mutual love and respect.

A priest was once respected because he was an ambassador for Christ, who preached the Kingdom of God and the salvation of souls, but there is now a tendency to honor him because of his business acumen and his ability to put on successful extravaganzas. It is not infrequently that a church council wants a worldly priest and is nervous with a pious and deeply religious pastor. A certain priest once said that if Christ came to earth in these days, the parish council would hasten Him off to some smart men's shop, outfit Him with stylish clothes, take Him to a barber

shop for a shave and haircut, buy Him some expensive cigars, and have Him join a prominent lodge! Some parochial council members are engaged in a never-ceasing struggle to pull the priest down to their level of worldliness and to resist the priest's efforts to elevate them from the love of the world to the love of God. Holy Writ directs the priests of God to avoid men who are lovers of self, lovers of money, proud, arrogant, abusive, unholy, implacable, swollen with conceit, lovers of pleasure rather than lovers of God, who hold the outward form of religion but inwardly deny its power (2 Tim. 3:1-5). St. John Chrysostom thunders against priests who are man-pleasers and willing to give the Holy Mysteries into sinful hands to those who give Christ a kiss as did Judas. Yet what is a priest to do with those who resist the power of God, who prohibit the Holy Spirit from abiding in their souls — and yet with whom he must work because they were placed on the parish council?

As Metropolitan Antony frequently says, such men are spiritually sick and the priest must try to heal them with all the power of Christ's love at his command. As things stand in congregational America the priest has little left of even moral and spiritual authority but he can exert the influence of his own personal way of life, his own holiness which like the leaven of Christ's parable can and should leaven the whole parish including the parish council. The priest expects his council to have an open mind and an open heart so that into their "itching ears" he can preach, strive to convince, have the right to rebuke and exhort with all the unfailing patience he ought to possess (2 Tim. 4:1-3), and thus lead them along the narrow way. The priest certainly has the right to expect his parish council from debauching his piety and to cooperate with him in his attempts to elevate them from the mire of worldly vanity.

The priest expects his council members to be well-informed about Archdiocesan affairs as well as general Orthodox matters; to purchase and read literature to that end, to subscribe to the Archdiocesan magazine *The Word*; to attend Archdiocesan conventions; to assist the work of national and international Orthodoxy as well as Orthodoxy's efforts on the local level.

The priest expects cooperation from the parochial council in all things which build the spiritual life of a parish; he expects full attendance at all meetings and active participation in all parochial activities; interest in the progress and welfare of the church school, the choir, the altar boys society, and other such youth groups such as the SOYO. The priest expects the council members to show a zealous willingness to underwrite the expenses of these groups: to see to it that the church is lacking in nothing that is needed for the worship of God. It is unbelievable but true that some church councils oppose the buying of necessary vestments, church vessels and appurtenances of the Holy Altar such as a Tabernacle, etc. These same councils who will spend countless dollars on improving kitchen and toilet facilities, bingo supplies and brooms for the janitor, hesitate to purchase those things necessary for carrying out Orthodox Divine Service in all its fullness and beauty. If it may be put so crudely, a parish is in the church business and not in the kitchen or diner business. In every parish the Holy Sanctuary must come first, and the priest has the right to expect his parish council to understand this and underwrite the expenses entailed.

The priest expects his council members to be exemplary workers and contributors of time and energy as well as money. He expects them to receive Holy Communion frequently as a body; to attend all church services, and what is more important to arrive on time and stay until the end. He

expects the council members to attend evening devotions during Lent and Passion Week. He expects the council members to put the church in first place in their lives.

The priest expects the members of the council to consult him before scheduling any parochial affairs lest unseemly activities be held during Lenten periods, which could ruin the good name of the parish and undermine the spiritual influence of the parish within the community. There is nothing more reprehensible than the council member who refuses to abide by the priest's wishes in such matters and such a member stands self-condemned by his own actions.

On Sunday morning the priest expects the president of the parish council, or someone appointed by him, to be in church at least fifteen to thirty minutes before the beginning of the Divine Liturgy to see that everything is in order, to see whether the priest needs some last-minute assistance; to see that the candles are prepared, that there is enough wine, and generally to see that the sexton has done his job. The priest expects his council members to stay to the very end of the Liturgy, to usher out the people and keep order. There is probably nothing that upsets a priest more than the council member who walks out of church during the sermon to count the Sunday offering or to take a smoke. The money-counting can wait until after the Liturgy. Anyone willing to serve on the council ought to be willing to stay fifteen minutes after services to count the offerings! If the council member is anxious to eat lunch, let him remember that the priest has not even eaten breakfast!

Sometimes at the end of the Liturgy, by the time the priest consumes the Holy Gifts, makes his thanksgiving, unvests, and emerges from the Holy Sanctuary, he finds the whole church deserted. It is as if everyone had fled the presence of God. The priest is confronted with the job of blowing out the candles, closing the windows, turning off the lights, turning down the thermostat, locking the doors and generally doing what he expects the church council members to take care of. After all, it is their church building, and it is not unreasonable for the priest to expect them to care for it. In modern times the faithful hastily leave the Eucharistic Christ behind for the swimming pool, the lunch table and the golf links and, frequently, the church council leads the procession. How insulting to Christ such a hasty departure is, not to mention its boorish, undignified and plain bad-mannered aspects. The priest expects the council members to approach the Altar of God at the conclusion of the Liturgy with everyone else; he expects them to venerate the Holy Cross with piety and devotion, and to receive the Antidoron from his hands and then, with everything in order, to go out and count the offerings in a leisurely manner.

From the above it is obvious that the priest expects his council members to be all-around, "all-American" Orthodox Christians who realize that their position is of grave importance since they are in a position to influence all the other parishioners for better or for worse. In his high place as assistant to the pastor a council member is bound to be temperate, serious, sensible, sound in faith, in love, and in steadfastness (Titus 2:2), to be in control of himself (Titus 2:6), to be submissive to spiritual authorities, to be obedient, to be ready for any honest work on behalf of the parish, to speak evil of none, to avoid quarreling, to be gentle, and to show perfect courtesy toward all men (Titus 3:1-2). If a church council member does these things he will be well-pleasing to God, an inspiration to his fellow-layman, and a true and fruitful servant of Christ the Lord.