

## Rector's Reflection – 2013

Dear Brothers and Sisters,

Allow me to begin with an edited quote from my reflection given last year:

*“There is no life for us as Christians without the Liturgy. All life is brought into the Liturgy and all life flows from the Liturgy. We cannot be members of the Church unless we participate in its liturgical and Eucharistic life which stems from our love and desire to be with God and each other. Our liturgical life beckons us to God’s kingdom. Our liturgical life places us, here and now, within God’s kingdom not as an escape from the world around us and not to smugly condemn those around us. Standing in God’s kingdom as persons gathered together as Church we are given an epiphany of the new creation drawn and held together by Christ: ‘The earth is the Lord’s and the fullness thereof; the world and all that dwell in it.’ (Psalm 24:1)*

*Given this epiphany we, as a parish gathered around the Lord’s Table, walk the journey of life as humble pilgrims who by the grace of the Holy Spirit strive to continue the ministry of Christ for the life of the world and its salvation. Our neighborhood dinners, our Church School and Adult education programs, our website, our SOS fund and our never ceasing efforts to keep our doors open for all seeking Christ so they may, with us, enter and experience the new creation make up our communal offering.”*

Our parish is blessed to be located in one of America’s great cities. With this blessing comes the challenge to be an authentic Christian witness to our immediate surroundings. As an Orthodox parish in Boston, we are aware that we live in a multi-cultural and therefore multi-religious context. What makes this challenging is our living out the Christian life vis-à-vis a socially and religiously heterogeneous culture. As Orthodox Christians in Boston we are aware – we must be aware – that there is no corresponding monolithic Orthodox culture in North America. There is no supporting government that bolsters our place and prominence in the public square. Given our demographics as a parish of the Orthodox Church in America we are sociologically a non-entity.

In conjunction with social pluralism are the corresponding voices, movements and legislations which, for some Orthodox Christians, threaten the inner peace and, most importantly, the very identity of Orthodox Christianity. Issues relative to economics, political governance, human sexuality including the place of women in the Church and the configuration of the family, Christian and non-Christian fundamentalism and relativism are threads of the many colored tapestry that is our culture.

Given all of this, we are obliged to ask ourselves how we as a parish should respond to social and religious pluralism. Hierarchs, priests and laity across the continent and throughout the world have offered varying and, at times, conflicting solutions. They include closing off Orthodox Christianity from the wider society, condemning anything that can be construed as coming from the Renaissance and Enlightenment periods of Western society including human rights, forging a path for the Church to actively engage in the culture wars of the day and, last but not least, the need to create an alliance with Christian political and religious factions - whether on the right or the left - which equate the Gospel and therefore theology with ideology.

Because of the very nature of pluralism we, as a parish sojourning in Boston, are also confronted with the issue of secularism. Broadly speaking secularism is associated with the *absence of God* or the *absence of the transcendent*. This multi-faceted worldview with its corresponding mores, while prevalent, is not, I would suggest, our greatest challenge. Secularism is but another strand of pluralism's tapestry. The greatest challenge and blessing to accompany social and religious pluralism is that of *choice*.

Yet, choice is an abhorrent and antithetical concept within any expression of orthodoxy. In Greek the word for heresy, *αρεσις*, means *choice*. Like it or not, we are part of a culture and therefore contributors to a culture that offers an almost endless range of choices including what faith and god one wishes to follow. We are, as the renowned sociologist Peter Berger cleverly and accurately described, confronted with the *heretical imperative*.

Those who follow current events are aware that Orthodox Churches, particularly in Eastern Europe, are rabidly opposed to the heretical imperative. Consequently, there are some autocephalous Orthodox Churches in collaboration with their respective governments that seek to create, under the guise of maintaining and promoting Orthodox values, a monolithic culture devoid of choice that opposes anything that could be construed as being influenced by the *liberal and secular* West. We should keep in mind that within this anti-Western perspective there is also a geo-political agenda fostered by the State/Church alliance and driven more by the engine of politics than by the Gospel. Let us bear in mind that since the fall of communism in Eastern Europe we have witnessed the Orthodox Church aiding and abetting governments in the creation of polarized cultures maintained by fear, repression, intolerance and hatred.

Unlike other parts of the world we as a parish of the Orthodox Church in America have the opportunity, should we desire, to dialog with our culture. How this is to be carried out depends on the path we *choose*. For some the Church is to dialog only from a position of worldly and political power since this will enable the promotion and implementation of the evangelical enterprise. For others vulnerability, associated with political and worldly weakness, places the Church beneath the cross of our Lord from which the faithful are given strength and power that supersedes that of the world and politics. Given this heretical imperative, it seems to me that for our parish in Boston the choice is clear. The weakness of the cross is our strength in as much as we are free from anyone and anything that would close us off from the other. Here we can appreciate dialog as a way *to listen* to what the other has to say. But this is possible only when those in dialog recognize that each participant possesses equal dignity and value. The need to listen, the need to recognize that every human being is created in God's image and likeness are among the most important Gospel precepts we can impart to our children and grandchildren. It is up to us to ensure that these and all the Gospel imperatives remain firmly established in our parish. Without these imperatives the beautiful face of Christ will remain invisible while the Gospel will be used as a weapon to inflict pain and suffering among human beings.

The weakness of the cross frees us from a formalized Christianity bound only to the past. Through the Holy Spirit, the weakness of the cross allows for a creativity that is not afraid to glean from our culture ways to clarify the Gospel and even correct what was wrongly presumed to be the immutable living Tradition of the Church.

The heretical imperative cannot be avoided. Neither should it be the business of the Church to replace it. As an Orthodox Christian parish in Boston it is our cross – our challenge - to change the minds and

hearts of others by first changing our own minds and hearts. Our liturgical con-celebration, our entrance into the inaugurated Kingdom of God, our common work/ministry in making real the new creation depends on us acquiring the mind of Christ that solidifies and fortifies his body, the Church. But as the Chrysostom and Basil liturgies make clear, to acquire the mind of Christ requires taking the risk – so as to receive the joy – of loving one another. “Let us love one another that *with one mind* (lit. εν ομοια) we may confess Father, Son and Holy Spirit the Trinity one in essence and undivided.

© 2013 Father Robert M. Arida