



Since I travel a lot around the USA and Canada, I'm often asked what I think about our churches. When that happens, I always mention my three wishes.

My first wish is that our church buildings would be neater, and that holy things would be treated with greater respect. Our churches, and the offices, rooms and halls in and around them, are often quite messy. Icons, crosses, winding sheets, vestments, service books, calendars and educational materials are often scattered around. They are piled on tables and chairs, left on the floor, or stuffed carelessly in closets and cabinets. Empty wine and oil bottles, dried up flowers, palms and branches, candle stubs and boxes, and all kinds of ecclesiastical paraphernalia, are often strewn around the altar area, and in adjoining rooms and offices. Church halls and rooms also often abound with the depressing remnants of classes, meetings, sales, parties and projects.

A special part of my "first wish" is that churches in temporary quarters, and even some churches in permanent buildings, would not use cast-off or poorly made altar tables, liturgical stands, candle stands, icon screens, icons, holy pictures, altar covers, vestments and server's robes that often don't fit, and should have been discarded long ago, or never used in the first place. It is spiritually more effective, in my opinion to have a few good, simple and beautiful things in church, rather than lots of old, expensive and worn out stuff. I also wish that when church things need to be packed and unpacked, greater care would be taken that they be neat and presentable.

My second wish is that greater care would be exercised in assigning people to do things in church. Some priests, deacons, servers, singers and church officers are incapable of performing their duties. Sometimes they just can't do them. Sometimes they could do them if they were better trained. And sometimes they try to do things beyond

## My Three Wishes

by *Father Thomas Hopko*

their competence, including things that they don't really have to do, like, for example, singing too difficult liturgical music at church services, or following rubrics too legalistically.

When people read, sing or serve in church only because they "have always done it, and we can't replace them," or they "have to be included or need to have a turn," or because "they need something to do," or because "it's cute," as in the case of children, or because "we have to get through this somehow," the result is that the people who come to church dismiss what is done as trivial and unimportant. The same is true when people who can't make icons, sew vestments, build furniture, or even design buildings, are allowed, and even encouraged, to do so, with their poor products being used, sometimes for many years. More than one person has remarked to me that our churches seem to be the only places where people who can't do things are permitted, and even encouraged and assigned, to do them.

My third wish has to do with words. I feel so sorry for words, and for those who have to hear them, in most of our churches.

Words in church, like words everywhere, are to be used and pronounced properly. Our clergy,

***"I hope to come to you soon, but I am writing these instructions to you so that, if I am delayed, you may know how one ought to behave in the household of God, which is the church of the living God, the pillar and bulwark of the truth."***

— 1 Timothy 3:14

singers and readers often pronounce and accent words wrongly, not only in foreign languages, but even in English, sometimes even when they know what is correct. They do this because of the way the reading, chanting and singing are done in their traditional non-English languages and cultural styles. This, in my view, again causes people not to take what is said and sung in church as serious, important and meaningful for their "real lives." Experiencing the way reading, singing and serving are done in some of our churches almost makes one feel as if the church were some sort of game or hobby for those who like to do such things.

Because I'm mostly invited to preach when I visit churches, I don't get to hear many sermons. But when I do, I have the impression that the preachers don't spend much time and energy in preparing their words. In most instances the scripture readings, verses and hymns at the service are not the main inspiration for the sermons. And it seems that the lack of care in this area has nothing to do with education or charisma. In fact, sometimes those who are less trained and less gifted actually speak more effectively than those who know a lot and speak easily because they prepare themselves better and work harder at their task.

Though I don't get to hear many sermons in our churches, I do get to hear many greetings, announcements, appeals for contributions and requests for participation in events and projects. I shudder over how many powerful and beautiful services and sacraments in our churches are spoiled by the careless, lengthy and sometimes even frivolous ways in which this necessary duty is often done. I believe that greetings, announcements and appeals have to be prepared as carefully as sermons, with a brevity, dignity and sobriety that befit words that are spoken in church. I also believe that these necessary words should be said at the end of church services, and

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Three Wishes, continued

sermons should be delivered at some point within them, normally after the scripture readings.

So my third wish is that those who preach, read, chant, sing and speak in our churches would be more respectful of words.

My "three wishes" for our Orthodox churches in the USA and Canada, therefore, are these. I wish for clean, neat and orderly church buildings, sanctuaries, offices and halls; with proper appointments and equipment, and greater love and respect for "holy things." I wish for capable clergy, readers, singers, servers, musicians, iconographers, architects and church workers who demonstrate the importance and seriousness of what is said, done and shown in church. And I wish for the careful and respectful use of words in church, with proper pronunciation and accenting.

Having revealed my "three wishes," I'm delighted to say that I have seen committed, careful and capable clergy and people in our churches who perform their duties admirably. Their ministries are truly inspiring, enlightening, encouraging and edifying for those whom they serve.

May God guide us all, as we work for His glory and the good of His people. □

## Seminarian Internship Program

For the fifth consecutive year, the OCA's Department of Pastoral Life and Ministry has overseen the Seminarian Internship Program (SIP). This past summer (2004) six seminarians were assigned pastor-mentors in active parishes, to spend three months in intensive work, study, reading and reflection. The Internship program was launched as a Church-wide initiative at the 12th All-American Council and has proved to be of tremendous value to young priests and seminarians who are planning to become pastors in OCA parishes. The six participants of the program this past year echoed the sentiments of the participants of the past; both pastor-mentors and seminarian-interns have given high marks to the concept and form of the SIP. Parish pastors who have not yet participated in the SIP are encouraged to do so. If you have any questions please feel free to contact or call **Fr. Steven Voytovich**, SIP Coordinator (203-789-3248) or **Fr. Alexander Garklavs**, Department Chairman (516-483-3649).



## Pastoral Ministries Conference

The OCA's third Pastoral Ministries Conference took place during Pentecost week, June 2 - 4, 2004. This conference was coordinated by the Department of Pastoral Life and Ministry and held at St. Tikhon's Monastery, South Canaan, PA. His Beatitude, Metropolitan HERMAN, officiated at the opening Molieben service and gave the keynote presentation. Other highlights included presentations by His Grace, Bishop TIKHON of South Canaan, Fr. Leonid Kishkovsky, Fr. Andrew Morbey, Fr. Stephen Freeman, Fr. Alexander Garklavs, and Fr. Vladimir Berzonsky. Smaller discussion groups met several times during the conference. These groups allowed for lively exchange of ideas and honest dialogue. Liturgical services, conducted at the Monastery church, were inspired celebrations of faith and unity of mission. Just like the previous two Conferences, this occasion provided pastors with an opportunity to affirm their spiritual brotherhood and mutual respect. There is no doubt that the Pastoral Conference has become a much needed and appreciated event in the life of the OCA.

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## PASTORS TO PASTORS

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# "Thoughts and Recollections"

"Pastors to Pastors" looks to another of our "elders" for guidance and inspiration.

We are pleased herein to share our interview with...

## Fr Vladimir Berzonsky

Rector, Holy Trinity Orthodox Church  
Parma, Ohio

**Q. Fr Vladimir, what people influenced your vocation to the holy priesthood?**

**A.** My greatest influences to the holy priesthood were my grandfather, Peter Bankovsky, my spiritual mentor with whom I read the Holy Bible with difficulty, his native language not being my own, my father Michael, my moral example and inspiration of truth and love, and my uncle Michael who treated me with the dignity of an adult, albeit I was but five years old. Overriding them was my beloved mother Anna who carried me and led me to the Lord, taught me to pray and why I should pray. I carry them in my heart constantly. The three men above all died before I was in the middle teens, Uncle Mike killed in the D Day invasion in Normandy, and I was left with the great unanswered question, why? I sought answers in philosophy, psychology and ultimately in seminary. I took my inner struggles together with my abiding faith to my loving Lord Jesus Christ, "working out my own salvation with fear and trembling," as St Paul stated so poignantly.

**Q. Of the many things that one learns in seminary, what has affected you most?**

**A.** What stays with me since my seminary days is the deep faith of the faculty. I see them even now before me in my mind's eye. They comfort and encourage me. I believe they pray for me even now. They include Nicholas Arseniev, possessing more knowledge than any professor I've known in having something to do with more than a dozen universities in my lifetime. He would read the New Testament in Greek and translate it into English, pausing in rapture on some phrase. I recall with devotion Fr. John Meyendorff, with Arseniev one of the trio of brilliant scholars that would include Fr. Georges Florovsky, and the way Fr. John in his erudite

manner would point out hidden insights of the church fathers. Fr. John with his marvelous wife, Marie, pulled down the European style academic wall separating faculty and students by their gracious hospitality, inviting all to take coffee with them and sharing in their family life. He more than any I consider my mentor and inspiration. I recall Fr. Alexander Schmemmann explaining liturgical prayers I'd known from infancy, yet uplifted with refreshing new insights. My notes from his classes even now are sketchy, because I sat entranced by his theatrics in the classroom. I still hear Sergei S. Verhovskoy leading us to discernment into the great mysteries of the Holy Trinity and theandric nature of the Son of God, and the German accents of Alexander Bogolepov insisting that we memorize poetry by T'uch'ev, Pushkin and other poets.

**Q. The parish pastor is by definition an authority figure, yet he is also called to be a servant. How do you understand the balance between these two concepts?**

**A.** Even though it's Western, I like the Jesuit motto: "Ego sum servus servorum Dei." — "I am the servant of God's servants." Our loving Lord took pains to get across the role of the disciple priest. Recall His way of dealing with the brothers James and

John who wanted to be captains in the army they thought Christ was assembling. Reflect on His words about humility, the striking image of His washing their feet, His reaching out to Judas Iscariot with a special piece of food at the Last Supper -- only the insecure or the fop has to strut about in cassock and want to be treated in the way that Our Lord forbade in describing scribes and Pharisees in Matthew 23:3-6. One leads by example. If you have to announce who you are, then you aren't. My role model was Metropolitan Leonty, whom I'll never match in leadership nor humility. I also take literally the role of pastor as shepherd. My goal is to lead others to the Kingdom, not to myself. I like the Russian phelonion that hides the man at the altar so that the Cross on his back is visible. A priest handicapped by egocentricity is crippled in his ability to lead, inspire and serve the Lord. Humility is not just a good idea, it's *sine qua non* for a priest.

**Q. The recent presidential election in the United States has forced all of us to think about politics. Although pastors can never explicitly endorse a candidate or party from the ambo, do you think that certain "political" issues can be addressed in the sermon?**

**A.** May we never emulate the churches in our nation that welcome candidates to office to preach from their pulpits, and to endorse a person for office. However, we cannot be complacent and not be involved in some ways in the democratic system. Our views on issues such as morality and ethics are clear and unambiguous. The world can witness our Church and its hierarchs leading groups to march each January in the Right to Life assembly in our nation's capitol. In a so-called post-Christian era when Satan has achieved great victories in

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Fr Berzonsky, continued

challenging, confusing, and obfuscating our society, in a time of neo-paganism, decadence and rampant immorality how can we not speak out with conviction those in support of those principles of morality that Christ wants to address through us, His vessels? Of course we ought not point out one or another candidate for office or party, but we ought to appeal to the wisdom and good sense of the people of God who bear Christ in their hearts to evaluate those running for office and vote with the Orthodox Christian principles of ethics, charity and welfare for the poor and needy, concern for the peace of the world and the care for planet earth including all flora and fauna. A capable preacher should be able to utilize the Word of God in the sacred scriptures in order to make the above points in ways that do not involve himself directly in choice of candidates for office. □



"It is better to be silent and be real, than to talk and be unreal. Preaching is good, if the preacher does what he says. What Christ preached came to pass, and what He has done in silence is also worthy of the Father. He who has the work of Jesus for a true possession can also hear Jesus' silence so that he may be perfect, and may act through his speech and be understood through his silence."

— St Ignatius of Antioch (+115)

## Wisdom from the Fathers

"If you are put in charge of the brethren, in your care of them be strict in thought and merciful in action; teach them the way to live both by word and by deed but especially by your deeds because the example is more stimulating than words. If you are strong in body, mold them by bodily works; if you are weak in body, by the fruits of the spirit which emanate from a noble state of soul; in love, patience, joy, peace, constancy, goodness, faith, meekness and control of



all the passions. If a fault occurs, do not be too anxious, but explain the disorder and the harm that comes from these faults. And if there is need to rebuke, take into account the person to whom the rebuke is due, and choose a suitable time. Do not be exacting about small faults or anxious about your own rights, do not correct too severely, for this is burdensome and piling up corrections leads to insensitivity and contempt and not to orderly government. Rather, with humility take counsel with the brother. Speaking like this is more effective and more persuasive and keeps your neighbor calm. At a time of disturbance, when the brother is resisting you, control your tongue lest you say anything simply to vent your anger and do not allow yourself to curse him in your heart but remember that he is your brother, a member of Christ and made to God's likeness... And so be compassionate towards him... have sympathy with your brother and give thanks that you have found a starting place for forgiveness, that you may be forgiven by God for your many and greater faults."

-- Dorotheos of Gaza (6th cent), "How the Abbot Should Conduct Himself Towards the Brethren," *Discourses and Sayings*

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