

Philoxenia: Integrating the Priest and his family into Community

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The world only if shared exists
--Tassos Leivathitis

Philoxenia, the life-giving act of hospitality to strangers in our midst, (which includes the new priest and his family) is at the core of sustaining a vital worshipping community. That “Christ is in our midst” is evidenced as much or more by the quality of relationships among the community than in the beauty of the voices in the Divine Liturgy.

Yet church and family are not primarily social entities. They ‘share the world’ as God does in Christ. What honors the church honors marriage and family and what honors marriage and family honors the church. This is a deep and costly love, an ascetical sacrifice for fidelity.

Metropolitan Gerasimos of San Francisco reminded his Priests and Presvyteras at on a retreat that “marriage is a sacrament which renews husband and wife with Grace on a daily basis.” Just as we strive not to enter marriage unworthily any more than to receive Eucharist unworthily, the parish strives to offer hospitality to the priest and his family because as St. Paul reminds, “In offering hospitality to strangers some have entertained angels unawares.” Just as the Divine Liturgy (which literally means *work in behalf of the people*) is an on-going dialogue of prayer chanted between priest and laity in the presence of God, Philoxenia is an on-going dialogue of love lived between the priest, his family and the parish members in the presence of God and the larger community of witnesses outside the church. It is in this sense also a kind of evangel testifying to whether the church is a disincarnate word relegated to Sunday Liturgy, or a Word lived in daily life.

Love is a Divine Energy that we participate in when we truly encounter one another as on the “Emmaus road.” Our hearts burn in the dialogue toward the eventual gift of offering hospitality in breaking of bread with the stranger who is revealed as Christ in our midst. This is an essential action for the life of the church. Integrating Priest and Presvytera into the community is a continuation of the dialogue begun in the Divine Liturgy which moves out into daily life. “When I leave the altar I go to the altar of my brother” observes St. John Chrysostom. Or as James, the brother of the Lord and first Bishop of Jerusalem observed, “What is pure religion undefiled? – visiting orphans and widows in their affliction.” There must not be worship without koinania, except to the diminishment of both.

Yet the struggles of the Priest and his family often go unnoticed. Living in a fishbowl, clergy families often feel ‘on display’ and constantly judged against a higher standard. The priest’s home is expected to be a model ‘microchurch’ where members live exemplary Christian lives. But as in the Liturgy when the priest turns to the parish and asks forgiveness, are laity actually welcoming and forgiving of the clergy and his family in daily life? Are they forgiven for being *human*.

A 1993 survey reported 94% clergy felt the need to have an ‘ideal’ family, while 80% said their ministries actually had a negative impact on their families. Studies reveal that the two most important factors in clergy well-being and longevity in the parish are

the quality of the clergy's spiritual resources and the well-being of the clergy's marriage and family life. Neither body nor soul can be ignored. They dwell together.

How can laity become more welcoming? Recognize that the priesthood can be very lonely and unhealthy if the Priest and Presvytera are not allowed friendships. One reason priest and family keep a distance in the parish is because if they are seen to be closer to one or two families there is a fear that others may begin to cry 'favoritism.' But let's remember love is not a *feeling*. Jesus was closer emotionally to some people than he was to others, though he *loved* all. Feelings are different among people. Love is something much greater even to include one's enemies. Yet even Jesus himself had to contend with friction arising among his own disciples when they argued who was the greatest, who was closest, to him. Not all are described as Apostle John, the "one Jesus loved" who "leaned on his breast" at supper. Jesus often chose James, Peter and John to accompany him and do things the others did not participate in. He frequented Mary, Martha and Lazarus's house in ways that he did not at others. It is clear he had friends and he had feelings that he allowed his friends to know.

Another isolating factor results from treating the Priest as "an employee" who will be 'moving on' sooner or later and 'may not work out' therefore why bother developing a relationship with him which is a common attitude. This lends itself to a 'professional' priesthood rather than a personal one. Jesus was not a 'professional' clergy, but an authentic human being whose ministry was revealed in and through his daily life and relationships. His character as priest, as friend and ordinary person were as seamless as the robe he wore.

Laity can ask ourselves if we are willing to really know our priest or if we prefer to keep a distance of disingenuous piety that bows to the priest in church while relegating him to the periphery in daily affairs, suggesting a hypocrisy and compartmentalization in our own lives. One Presvytera lamented "Our experience has been that people are cordial and usually friendly, but don't feel any kind of obligation to bring the priest into the "inner circle" of the parish, amongst those who've been together for years. Instead he and his family are often kept at a comfortable distance-more as in an employer/employee relationship"

It is good to remind ourselves that the priest cannot celebrate the Divine Liturgy by himself. It is dialogical. Christ is present when the people are gathered with the priest and participating. Neither can the people celebrate the Divine Liturgy without the priest. When the priest says, "Christ is in our midst." and the laity respond "He is now and ever shall be" this points beyond the stylized ritual of a Divine Liturgy as an end in itself, toward an event that permeates the stuff of our daily lives. Christ incarnated to redeem the world and infuse it with life, not to separate us from it.

Remember "Corban" – how the religiously zealous Pharisees used their religious sacrifices to avoid family responsibilities? Jesus condemned this as he condemned using our work or our marriage or even burying our dead, as a means of holding ourselves aloof from the Divine wedding feast. Daily life and worship are meant to interpenetrate one another. Ignoring the suffering of the stranger left in the ditch in order to get to the Divine Liturgy is a misplaced religious zeal, just as dishonoring the Liturgy by reducing it to a mere ritual to dress up for on Sundays prior to some socializing and glad-handing afterward that doesn't really create authentic community.

The priest is frequently separated from his family at church events by putting him at the head table with the Presvytera and children off in a corner. Is this always necessary? Is your parish sensitive to your clergy family's needs? "Let the little children come to me" said the Lord when the disciples tried to separate him from the family, "for to such belongs the Kingdom of Heaven."

Finally, there is the priest's very real need for personal renewal. Do we support our priest having a day off on a regular basis? Do we expect him to take his full vacation annually and to have time for retreat and continuing education annually? Does false piety or fear block us from being human with our priest and his family? Too often this creates an artificial split between a certain religious piety reserved for church situations while we live totally secular lives apart, in effect shielding ourselves from the leaven of the Gospel which is aimed at affecting our life in the world. Most importantly, Jesus did not come to destroy the world but to redeem it. He came so that all "might have life and have it abundantly." This is our task as well.

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