

20. On Leadership in the Church

The Orthodox Church is hierarchical. As Christ has appointed, we have bishops, priests and deacons. There are also minor clerical orders: subdeacons, readers, taper-bearers. The Church has monastics, who are specialized members of the laity. Finally, the majority of people in the Church make up what we call the laity. Though there is a distinction between the roles of these different orders, all the Church's faithful are expected to take responsibility for their faith and their parish home. The lay people are "ordained" by their *chrismation* to serve in the Church.

From New Testament times until now, the Church has had bishops. The term "bishop" comes from the Greek word, *episkopos*, which means "overseer." This is not meant to carry any implication of tyranny. Rather, the bishop "oversees" in the sense of watching over the people as a faithful shepherd protecting the flock from spiritual wolves. The bishop has the particular authority to ordain other clergy, to wisely administer all the Holy Mysteries (sacraments), and to "rightly divide the word of the truth" — that is, to decide concerning doctrinal and disciplinary matters in the Church.

While the Church is hierarchical, at the same time she is also conciliar. Any changes affecting the Church on a large scale require the meeting of multiple bishops, sometimes even those from throughout the whole Church. We see this in Acts 15, in which a decision was required concerning the reception of Gentile converts to Christianity. The Apostle James presided at that council as the local bishop in Jerusalem. Nevertheless, the decision of the council represented the consensus of all the Apostles and bishops gathered, as inspired by the Holy Spirit. Such councils become authoritative when their decisions are received by the whole universal Church.

St. Ignatius of Antioch speaks about the necessity of the bishop's presence — with the other clergy and people gathered around him — for the Eucharist to be celebrated. Eventually, the reality of bishops overseeing more than one local parish meant that the bishop deputized his priests to serve the Divine Liturgy in his place. A "priest" is both a *presbyter* (elder) and an *ierevs*. The term *ierevs* in Greek refers to the liturgical function of the priest as the one leading the worship. Along with bishops and priests, the Church has deacons. Originally the *deacons* (meaning "servers") were ordained for the practical role of collecting funds and distributing them to the widows and needy. Eventually, the diaconate developed into a specialized liturgical role as well.

While women are not ordained as clergy in the Church, there is no lack of appropriate leadership roles for women in the Church. The role of ordained clergy is a fatherly one; women naturally serve in motherly roles within the life of the community. Women frequently lead choirs, teach the children, beautify the temple and prepare the things necessary for the services, and run many of the practical aspects of parish life. At St. Nicholas there is a Ladies group (known as "Antiochian Women" elsewhere in our Archdiocese) that takes the lead in many of these areas. Please see the separate section about the St. Nicholas Ladies for more information about their ministry.

In honoring the clergy of the Church we are blessed, and we receive grace to the degree that we humble ourselves and honor God by honoring His servants. That does not, of course, give them the right to act as tyrants. The clergy are servants and ought to follow Christ who said, “even the Son of Man did not come to be served but to serve.” (Mark 10:45) When we greet a bishop, we say “Master, bless,” making a metania (bow) and holding our hands for a blessing. When greeting a priest, we do the same, saying “Father, Bless.” When greeting clergy in writing we begin the same way. It is good to address a bishop with the appropriate formal title salutation: “Your Grace” for a bishop, “Your Eminence” for a metropolitan, and so on.

A deacon is greeted with respect and honored for the dignity of his office, though we do not ask his blessing or kiss his hand. In some places, deacons are referred to as “Father,” or “Father Deacon.” Otherwise, they are simply addressed as “Deacon,” followed by their Christian name. Some deacons are elevated to be “Archdeacons,” in which case they would be referred to as “Archdeacon,” followed by their name.

Monastics, unless they are ordained clergy, do not give priestly blessings. However, the abbot or abbess in a monastery has a unique authority within the monastic context. Although an abbess is not ordained as a member of the clergy, she is invested with charismatic authority, which is why we kiss her hand and get her blessing.

Clergy wives have particular titles, and it is right to use those titles to show respect for them. The Greek term for a priest’s wife is “Presvytera.” The Russian term is “Matushka,” (also used for the wife of the Deacon in some practices), and the Arabic term is “Khouriye.” The term for the wife of a Deacon is “Diakonissa” in Greek or “Shamassy” in Arabic. At St. Nicholas we use “Presvytera” and “Shamassy.” The wives of clergy ought to be highly honored for their sacrificial and motherly role within the Church.

In American practice, parishes typically have a parish council. The use of the parish council is a recognition that the priest cannot carry out every function in the life of a parish, but needs the assistance of the laity. At St. Nicholas, as at many parishes, we have a council comprised of both members who are elected by the parish’s members, and those that are appointed by the priest. The members of the council elect from among themselves four officers: the Chairman, the Vice-chairman, the Treasurer and the Secretary. Besides these, heads of recognized organizations within the parish (e.g. the Ladies’ president, the choir director, and the Sunday School director) are ex officio members. All members of the parish are welcome to attend regular Parish Council meetings, or to request that the council address particular matters.

While the Church is not a democracy, she is not a tyranny either. She is not a merely human organization at all, but is rather a “Divine-Human organism.” That is, in the Church we find the Body of Christ, of which Christ is the head, and a life made possible by the Holy Spirit. We find an order reflecting the life of Heaven, with the Angels and Saints, even as it must take many practical things into account. In this order, all the faithful are responsible with the clergy to uphold the Faith — to be faithful to Christ — and to do all they can to glorify Father, Son and Holy Spirit in thought, word, and deed.