

A Caring Church is a Thriving Church

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Picture in your minds, if you can. Two churches situated within 200 feet of each other, separated only by a modern funeral home. One is thriving while the other church is one disaster away from foreclosure and disbandment. The first church is hospitable and accepting of strangers, warm and inviting, praying for one another and daring to take chances. The second parish, needless to say, is despondent, uninviting and unaccommodating. The first parish is progressively moving away from self-interest, while the latter can dwell only upon itself and maintaining the ways of the “old country.”

Truly, between the two churches, there are various issues at play, both social and psychological. But there is also a common thread that binds them together, if only as opposites. Having recently celebrated the Feast of Pentecost, do you recall the Kontakion of the Feast? “When the Most High descended and confused the tongues, he divided the nations: But when He distributed the tongues of fire, He called all men into unity. Therefore, with one voice, we glorify the All-Holy Trinity.”¹ What is the significance about this hymn? The retraction of the curse at Babel. No longer do men have excuse for segregation, discrimination, or prejudice. All men, and all nations are one and the same. A call goes forward to every nation and tongue. “Come and join the family of God!” The blessings are not specific to one race. The primary interest should not be in the maintenance of ethnic differences. Rather it is to the servicing of nations under the orders of the Great Commission.

And Jesus came and spoke to them, saying, ‘All authority has been given to Me in heaven and on earth. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all things that I have commanded you....’²

One of the characteristics that distinguish the two churches is their outreach. The thriving church has within its walls numerous nationalities, a desire to accommodate, and a general interest in the good of others. Within the governing body of the “healthy” parish is a desire (consciously or subconsciously) to fulfill the calling from the Holy Prophets of loving your neighbours. This includes the mandate to care for disenfranchised groups.³ Let us use the Book of the Holy Prophet Isaiah as an example.

Viewing the Holy Book of Isaiah,⁴ God is concerned with the interaction of people toward one another. For instance, the mistreatment of Israel by the hands of other

¹ The Good Shepherd Prayer Book (Winnipeg, MB: Ecclesia Publishing Corporation [2007]), 509.

² Holy Gospel of Saint Matthew, 28:18-20.

³ Webster’s Dictionary, 4th edition, clarifies disenfranchise, “to deprive of a right or privilege, especially the right to vote.” This paper further identifies a disenfranchised group as any people group who have certain common needs arising from the mistreatment by others through deliberate acts, acts of omission, or unintended negligence. Such people groups would be the poor, widowed, children, the destitute etc.

⁴ The Holy Book of Isaiah is multi-faceted. There are so many issues at play and interacting with one another that an exhaustive topographical study would take hours. For example, there are themes of hope and despair; faith and faithlessness; doubt and trust; reward and punishment; holiness and sin; the redemption of man and creation; the message of the coming messiah; honor and love.

nations is cause for punishment.⁵ Not only are the acts of other nations questioned, but individual acts themselves, including acts committed by the very people of God. Acts that include, murder,⁶ greed,⁷ and the failure to defend orphans and widows.⁸ The very act of oppression towards another, is a very important aspect within the scope of Isaiah's overall message.⁹

Not only is there a concern for oppressed people groups by their very mention of ill treatment, the Holy Prophet Isaiah clearly identifies the expectation of proper treatment. The Holy Prophet Isaiah is not just concerned about the avoidance of physically oppressing people, but he also warns that oppression can occur even by the lack of doing charitable acts. Yes, an act of omission was as indictable as an act of commission. One may recall that Jesus clearly identified this kind of oppression by His Sermon on the Mount.¹⁰ It is also similarly themed, in attitude, to the prayer before Holy Communion, "Therefore, I pray to you: have mercy on me and forgive all my transgressions- both voluntary and involuntary, of word and deed, committed in knowledge or in ignorance...." The similarity exists in the identification that sin can occur not only from the very best of intentions, but also through accidental ignorance or lapses of knowledge.

One cannot escape the message that as God is holy, God expects all peoples to be holy.¹¹ There are certainly two aspects of holiness. Isaiah reports of a holiness that is outside the reach of mankind, in that only God can cleanse of sin.¹² The second aspect is by particular acts of an individual or group.¹³ The call to be holy can be viewed in the calling to fear God.¹⁴ As God is a refuge to the poor and needy,¹⁵ there is an expectation for all people to be a refuge for the poor and needy.¹⁶ God expects justice,¹⁷ and that also

⁵ For example, Isaiah chapter 13, which is a pronouncement of the coming destruction on Babylon because of its inhumane dealings with Judah. In fact there are a minimum of nine pronouncements against nations of the earth (Moab, Syria, Ethiopia, Assyria, Philistia, Egypt, Tyre, Ephriam).

⁶ Holy Isaiah 1:15; 57:7,9,28-31. The deplorable practice of child sacrifice is very possibly being referred to within this category.

⁷ Holy Isaiah 5:8

⁸ Holy Isaiah 1:23; 10:1-2

⁹ General oppression is mentioned in Holy Isaiah 3:5,10,15; 5:8; 10:1; 30:21; 32:7; 43:24; 51:13-14,19; 52:4-5; 57:1; 58:3; 59:3-8,13. Further mention of oppression towards specific groups such as widows and orphans can be identified in footnote 8.

¹⁰ Compare the Sermon as indicated by the Holy Gospel according to Matthew, chapters 5-7. It is not enough just to avoid physical acts of aggression or violence, for example murder, but even the very thought of murder is sin. Even clearer is Jesus' call to the rich man about perfection. The rich man's lack of perfection would be remedied by giving to the poor (19:21). Also look at 26:31-46 of the same Holy Gospel.

¹¹ The specific calling to be holy (or to be good) can be found in Holy Isaiah 1:16; 52:11; 55:6-7; 56:1; 61:8. Further reference can be found in God's expectation of righteousness in Holy Isaiah 42:6; 45:24; 58:6-7,9-10,13.

¹² This is a righteousness in position to God. Compare Holy Isaiah 6:6-7.

¹³ This is a righteousness in relation to the context a person finds themselves in the space-time continuum. For instance, Holy Isaiah states (51:1), "...you who pursue righteousness and seek the Lord."

¹⁴ Holy Isaiah 50:10; 66:2

¹⁵ Investigate Holy Isaiah 12:1; 14:32; 25:4; 40:1-2,29-31; 41:17; 49:9,10,13; 51:3,12; 52:9; 61:1,2

¹⁶ Compare Holy Isaiah 1:17; 16:3,4; 33:15; 58:6-7,10. Attention should also be brought to the expectation that servicing the destitute and disenfranchised is not just a corporate expectation, or the act from institutional entities. Individual expectation, and personal responsibility is clearly in play.

includes acts of goodness to the stricken.¹⁸ Jesus told a parable which emphasizes this very point, in that a Samaritan¹⁹ was the only one to aid the man in distress after an unfortunate entanglement with robbers.²⁰ Among the possibilities for Jesus' parable, was the deliberate involvement of ethnicities, of Jew and Samaritan, clarifying that good acts are expected of us even to our enemies and to those who are foreigners.

The Holy Prophet Isaiah did not declare a message in isolation. Every book of the Holy Bible carries a similar message. It was too great of a message for the Church to miss. For instance at the First Council of Nice,²¹ the first of the ecumenical councils, Canon LXX²² states, "Of the hospital to be established in every city. . . ." The Bishops were concerned about the sick, and so appointed the local church to provide resources and attention to those in need. Later in the fifth century, at the Council of Chalcedon, Canon VIII mentions specific behavioral expectations of "the clergy of the poor-houses."²³ Again, the point of discussion is that at some point in time, the "poor-house" was established to aid the less fortunate, with it being overseen by the Church.²⁴

The Holy Prophet Isaiah revealed the necessity of loving others. Jesus identified the expectation God demands of each one of us in serving. Two illustrations revealed the early Church's attempts to assist the distressed.²⁵ But what about today? Clearly, many churches are not in a position to establish or maintain hospitals and "poor-houses," nor should it be expected of them. Every locality has different issues, so it requires an ear to the ground to identify needs, and to match them to the resources of both individuals and parishes. For churches so far removed from the calling of loving your neighbour, a first step could be donations to a local food bank or to the sponsoring of a child through an agency like Children international. Another small step in the transformation begins by becoming acquainted with everyone who steps through the doors of your church. The initiatives are numerous: community work, participation at drop in centers, food kitchens, and privately donating to those around us who are financially struggling. The very nature

¹⁷ Holy Isaiah 5:7; 33:15; 35:8. God will also be the one to meet out justice: 11:1-5; 16:5; 28:16-17; 30:18; 32:1,16-17; 42:1,3,6-7; 45:8; 49:26.

¹⁸ Holy Isaiah 19:19; 30:19; 35:5-6; 40:1,29; 42:7,16; 44:22; 49:9; 51:14; 53:11; 54; 60:17-18; 63:9. It is interesting to note that God's doing good and correcting the evils committed, requires the use of other people to carry out the restoration. Even Christ, Himself, came to bring us restoration, and in so doing, brought us blessing not seen since the very creation of the world.

¹⁹ To the Jew, a Samaritan was considered unclean, despised, a traitor to both his people and to the Jewish God. In the Jewish understanding, one would be hard pressed to find a lower social class than a Samaritan.

²⁰ According to the Holy Gospel of Saint Luke, 10:25-37. So it is that a despised foreigner of lowly class stature acts in kindness and mercy towards one not his own and heaping coals of fire upon all those Jews who ignored the plight of the beaten man.

²¹ 318 Bishops gathered in the year, 325AD.

²² This Canon is of the group of Arabic Canons attributed to the Council of Nice, pg 46, Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers, 2nd series, vol. 14, *The Seven Ecumenical Councils*, 1994, reprint; Hendrickson Publishers, Peabody, MA, USA.

²³ *Ibid.*, 273.

²⁴ The Acts of the Holy Apostles, 6:1-7, identifies the first official committee with intent on aiding the needy, in particular specific widowed groups.

²⁵ A further example can be found in the second epistle of Saint Paul to the Corinthians, chapters 7-9. Saint Paul was very concerned about the financial hardship that was ongoing for the Jerusalem Christians. Saint Paul was moved enough to establish a collection and strongly encouraged the Corinthian Christians to give generously.

of giving becomes an attitude that is very infectious, both to the individual and the community.²⁶

Let us become like the first parish, with small initiatives that act like a catalyst for greater acts. God blesses those whose interests are towards the cares of others.²⁷

²⁶ Orthodoxy should be at the forefront of servicing. It is a witness and a survivor of oppression, including the most atrocious acts of violence. Let us take our history, and the legacy of our fore-fathers, and transform the present. Two outstanding issues in Canada come to mind. The first is the unrestricted use of abortion as a birth control. The second is the gross mistreatment of North American Natives and the violations of treaty rights that are currently occurring.

²⁷ This is also a commandment Christ revealed while giving His Sermon on the Mount, as expressed in the Holy Gospel according to Saint Matthew. First, "Treasure up for yourself treasure in Heaven!" (6:20) Secondly, "Seek first the kingdom of God and His righteousness! And all these things will be added to you." (6:33) What are the other things? The Holy Gospel identifies them as clothes, food, money: both needs and wants (6:19-34). This is an important concept because self-interest leads to destruction of both the self and of others. People are also not attracted to churches where self-interest is clearly prevalent. People want to be loved, and served. Yet there is also a factor in wanting to participate in something beyond, above, and outside of themselves. There is a very interesting correlation found within the Holy Gospel of Matthew and the Holy Prophet of Isaiah. Selflessness leads to the blessings of the individual as well as the corporate society. This is one possible reason why the first church is growing, while the second church, in our story, is stagnant and dying. Selfishness will lead to the degradation of the entire society.