

Chaplain's Reflection — September 19, 2011 — © Very Rev Steven Belonick

"The glory to which man is called is that he should grow more godlike by growing ever more human." —Archpriest Dumitru Staniloae, from *The Experience of God*

When we consider the characteristics the Apostle Paul employs to describe those aspiring to clerical office (bishop, elder, or deacon), we are struck by how "ordinary" his "job requirements" are. We might expect his list to include extraordinary spiritual gifts and achievements: "demonstrates prophetic ability and gift of tongues"; "knows Psalms by heart"; "strives for theosis"; "proven capacity in clairvoyance"; "maintains strict asceticism." But, St. Paul does not include any such requirements in his comparatively unremarkable description of the skills and talents required of community leaders and pastors.

In his First Letter to Timothy, the Apostle writes: "A bishop (overseer) must be blameless, the husband of one wife, temperate, sober-minded, of good behavior, hospitable, able to teach, not given to wine, not violent, not greedy for money, but gentle, not quarrelsome, not covetous, one who rules his own house well, having his children in submission with all reverence...Moreover he must have a good testimony among those who are outsiders, lest he fall into reproach and the snare of the devil" (3:1–4, 7).

We find a similar list in St. Paul's letter to Titus: "...and appoint elders in every city as I commanded you—if a man is blameless, the husband of one wife, having faithful children not accused of dissipation or insubordination. For a bishop (overseer) must be blameless, as a steward of God, not self-willed, not quick-tempered, not given to wine, not violent, not greedy for money, but hospitable, a lover of what is good, sober-minded, just, holy, self-controlled, holding fast the faithful word as he has been taught, that he may be able by sound doctrine, both to exhort and to convict those who contradict." (1:3–9)

These qualities focus on a sober, disciplined, and gracious life-style, which influences the pastor's family and faith community. Not overly exciting, these basic human qualities, according to Scripture, fundamentally allow effective ministry. Though appearing simplistic, they point to a living, dynamic relationship with God. Rather than recommending aspirations to sensational spiritual gifts (which can cause a person to focus morbidly on his ego and spiritual progress), the Apostle Paul suggests first and foremost that pastors simply behave as decent and engaged human beings, by following basic precepts of Scripture.

Regrettably, in the process of pastoral formation, such human qualities are assumed, minimized, or disregarded; some candidates for ordination may even fend against discussing them, for they strike at the heart and are deeply personal. (How much easier—and safer—it is, to discuss *theosis* than a

candidate's penchant to drink too much, or, his frequent flares of anger?)

However, neglecting to address formation of character—expressed as basic human goodness—opens wide the door to pastoral failure, for the fact remains: leaders fail in ministry not because they haven't achieved the extraordinary gifts of the Spirit, but because they have failed in demonstrating basic human qualities necessary for ministry: kindness, courtesy, gentleness, hospitality, self-control, fair-mindedness, sobriety, and so on.

Some candidates for church leadership seem to possess certain of these qualities innately, but candidates can also foster each quality. In fact, God uniquely awakens them in His chosen leaders, to make them effective in His hands. He sends potential leaders (and those who already are pastors), particular people, events, and situations, which help build these essential human qualities into their psyches. The question is, when such God-given opportunities arise, do potential leaders and pastors recognize them as divine intervention? Do they demonstrate their willingness to “launch out into the deep,” into heretofore unfamiliar and uncomfortable territory, where God can teach them and cultivate them as human beings (Luke 5:4)?

Let me provide a simple example. In one of the parishes to which we send our seniors seminarians, the host pastor regularly expects his students to move from table to table at coffee fellowship after Divine Liturgy, to meet and chat with parishioners. For some seminarians, this exercise has seemed mundane and simplistic, perhaps even a waste of time, given the “talents” of the seminarians involved. For other seminarians, this exercise has created great anxiety, even panic.

Yet, this simple exercise can speak volumes about a future church leader's ability to engage as a human being: listening and focusing; demonstrating courtesy, politeness, patience, interest, and care. This basic encounter requires not the giving of talents—which is far easier—but the giving of *self*. Within this “human” encounter, pastoral work begins, for it lays the groundwork, the relationship, in which teaching, admonishing, and preaching can then take place.

When our Lord Jesus met the woman at Jacob's Well, in the familiar Gospel story (Jn 4:1–42), He refused at first to speak to her about “theological” matters, even when she pressed Him. Instead He spoke initially of well water, the muddle of her personal life, and her burden. They met and sat at an ancient well, in the heat of the day, and He approached her not as the Son of the Most High God, but as a wearied, thirsty traveler. Can we be “human” in the way this perfect “Human Being” was?

In future reflections I will take some time to discuss “spiritual formation” and

“pastoral formation.” For now, however, I want to stress the importance of “human formation” as fundamental to churchly ministry.

Clearly, the human qualities mentioned by the Apostle Paul in his letters are connected to spiritual and pastoral qualities. Each of these three aspects of formation hinges upon and informs the other two. But, just as clearly, spiritual and pastoral formation will produce lasting results only when the groundwork is laid. Are we willing to cultivate our human goodness, in accordance with simple scriptural precepts, and engage others in our humanity? Jesus was the *Son of Man* as well as the Son of God.

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