

"Historians and Spies"*

Moving from one location to another is a chore. Matushka Deborah and I know that well, having made a move over this past summer from 605 to 545 Scarsdale Road. Of the four moves we have made during our married life, this move, although the shortest in distance, was the most difficult. I can only explain it by two factors—we are older, and we have accumulated a lot of "stuff" over the years.

As our emptying of boxes slowed to just a few per week, one box held a wonderful surprise—a wide-angle photo of my parish community in Binghamton, NY, from 1990. The photo had been used in the parish's 75th anniversary book that same year. At first glance, the photo showed a mass of people. But as I gazed more closely, the face of each parishioner became clear, and, the story of each person began to surface in my mind.

A pastor who stays in a parish for any length of time can't help but remember the members of his flock. He can just look at a face, and a story returns.

That photo made me recollect the backgrounds of dozens of people, and the backdrops to lives. As their pastor, I had witnessed their joys, sorrows, struggles, triumphs, anxieties, fears, strengths, talents, and biases; even their sins came flooding back to me. Likewise, I remembered my own "successes" and my own "failures" as their pastor.

My pastorate continued for another ten years in that parish after the photo was taken. As I held the photo in my hands, I realized that I also had buried a good number of those "faces" that the photograph had captured in time.

Then, another memory surfaced. Long ago, a fellow priest had once asked me if I had any "funeral sermons" that he could borrow. His question struck me as odd, and at the time I didn't know how to answer him.

Now—gazing at my former flock in this photo—I would know how to respond: "There are no general 'funeral sermons.' Each person is a sermon. Each person is a word of God to us, if we take the time to know him or her."

That wide-angle photo further impressed upon me that pastors are like historians and spies. There are many temptations that can beset a pastor, but two, in particular, can render him ineffective and obstructive: being moralistic and being condescending.

A moralistic pastor focuses on "what's wrong" with people. Judgmental pastors categorize people as "misfits," giving them a good excuse to alienate themselves

from certain members of their flock. Good pastors, rather, are historians. They listen before they judge. They meet people where they are, discover what makes them tick, and do not allow their biases to blind them to the pastoral work that needs to be done. Unearthing a person's history can be both a powerful pastoral tool and also a powerful antidote for pastoral sin.

A condescending pastor gets bored with his flock. Proud pastors tire of "dull people"; they get irritated with "difficult people" and frustrated with "obstinate people." However, good pastors are like the spies sent by Joshua search out the city of Jericho (Joshua 2). They search out ways and pursue openings in which the grace of God might act in a person's life. St. John Chrysostom writes, "So the shepherd needs great wisdom and a thousand eyes, to examine the soul's condition from every angle" (*On the Priesthood*).

An effective pastor is a historian and a spy. He discovers the unique condition of each person of the parish flock. He acts as "gently as a dove" and as "wisely as a serpent" in tending his sheep, for one purpose only: to help them grow to the fullness of the measure of the stature of Christ." (Ephesians 4:13). Amazingly, and over time, he begins to know each sheep by name, and the sheep begin to recognize him as their shepherd.

I've hung the anniversary photograph in my new office on campus. I expect it will continue to remind me of people, their stories, and the privilege I had to be called their "Father" for 17 years.

*The idea of a pastor being a historian and spy comes from Eugene Peterson's *Five Smooth Stones for Pastoral Work*. I realize that many might be skeptical of Peterson's works, because of his biblical translation. However, I do recommend this particular title of his. Of course, St. John Chrysostom's work *Six Books on the Priesthood*, should be required reading for every Orthodox seminarian.

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