

VITALITIES OF THE VIBRANT ORTHODOX PARISH (Part 1)

by Father Frank Marangos

“Earth proudly wears the Parthenon as the best gem upon her zone.”
Ralph Waldo Emerson

Eight vitalities characterize vibrant Orthodox Christian parishes. Like the eight grand pillars that have supported the weight of the ancient Athenian Parthenon for two and half millennia, resilient Greek Orthodox communities are reinforced by solid scripturally-based foundations.

During my respective tenures as Director of Religious Education and Executive Director of Communications for the Greek Orthodox Archdiocese of America, I had the privilege of conducting leadership/educational workshops for numerous parishes throughout the United States. Aside from local distinctives, my visits disclosed that healthy communities exhibited similar liturgical, pastoral, and administrative competencies. During the next eight Sundays, my Sunday homilies will discuss eight of these vitalities.

The first characteristic exhibited by vibrant Orthodox Christian parishes is a climate of genuine *philoxenia*. A Greek word that literally means “friend of the stranger,” *philoxenia* entails much more than mere hospitality. A distinctive cultural pillar of the ancient Greek world, *philoxenia* encompasses the welcome, generosity, and care shown to visitors, strangers, and guests.

In his role as the protector of guests, the Greek god Zeus was often referred to as *Xenios*. He thus embodied the religious obligation to be hospitable to travelers. In time, “Theo-xenia” developed as a theme in Greek mythology in which human beings demonstrate the virtue of extending hospitality to strangers (*xenos*) who might actually be a disguised deity (*theos*) with the capacity to bestow rewards.

In His Parable of the Good Samaritan (Luke 10: 30-37), Jesus compares and contrasts the self-centered attitudes of the religious and lay leaders of His day (priests and Sadducees) with an individual who was willing to tend to the needs of a nameless stranger who had been beaten, robbed, and left for dead along a public road. In addition to presenting the victim to an innkeeper with instructions to “take care of him,” this “Good Samaritan” vowed to repay “upon his return” (Luke 10:35), all future debts that the man’s rehabilitation may entail.

Orthodox Christian parishes would do well to honestly assess the degree to which their community exemplifies the scriptural pillar of *philoxenia*. Apart from warmly welcoming visitors, strangers, and guests, vibrant parishes are noted for attending to the needs of all its affiliates regardless of membership status. In so doing, they faithfully adhere to the Good Samaritan’s admonition outlined by Jesus in last week’s gospel lesson.

Unfortunately, according to the recent PEW and the Hartford FACT (Faith Communities Today) Studies, only one in four (27%) Orthodox parishes in American report NOT experiencing conflict in their community during last 5 years (43% Protestant and 61% Roman Catholic). If Orthodox Christian parishes in America honestly desire to authentically honor their ancient Hellenic heritage – attention must be given to honest self-examination, repentance, and adjustment to this unhealthy reality.

Originally dedicated to Athena, the Greek Goddess of Wisdom, the Parthenon was built on the Acropolis, one thousand years after the site of highest point in the city of Athens was established. Although the Acropolis had many uses throughout history (armory, pagan temple, and citadel), the Parthenon’s longest tenure was that of a Christian cathedral dedicated to the Theotokos, the Holy Mother of Jesus.

Having withstood fire, earthquakes, arterial bombardments, and foreign invasions, the Parthenon’s pillars finally succumbed to the deteriorating effects of air pollution. As such, the nation of Greece commissioned several renovation projects. While well-intended, initial strategies that inserted a metal reinforcement bar through the center

of the columns, unfortunately, did more harm than good. As a result of the metal's need to expand and contract, the stability of the pillars was severely imperiled.

Vibrant Orthodox Christian parishes are distinctively characterized by a faithful adherence to the Good Samaritan admonition for peace, kindness, and *philoxenia*. In addition to having structures for authentically welcoming visitors and guests, these communities strive to identify and tend to the immediate and long-term needs of both its parishioners as well as local non-member communities. Irrespective of race, creed, financial status, or ethnic association, such parishes do not “walk on the other side” but genuinely strive to adhere to the Good Samaritan's injunction to minister to those in need.