

VITALITIES OF THE VIBRANT ORTHODOX PARISH (Part 5):
AN ELEVATED VISION

by Father Frank Marangos

“Where there is no vision, the people perish, but those that keep the law are blessed.”
Proverbs 29:18

When he was 88 years old, the Supreme Court Justice Oliver Wendell Holmes found himself on a train. When the conductor requested his ticket, Holmes was unable to find it. Terribly upset, the elderly Justice searched his pockets and fumbled through his wallet without success. The conductor was sympathetic. “Don’t worry, Mr. Holmes,” he said. “The Pennsylvania Railroad trusts you. When you reach your destination mail your ticket to us.” The conductor’s kindness did not put Holmes at ease. “My dear man,” Holmes confessed, “my problem is not that I do not remember where I put my ticket . . . but where exactly I am going!”

Vision is the 5th vitality of the vibrant Orthodox parish. Vision is one of the most important supporting pillars of a Christian community that is committed to living according to God’s Will. Healthy parishes refrain from focusing their talents and resources on worldly aspirations, but strive to carry out the purposes of God by living productively and harmoniously.

When the Bible talks about vision, it means something higher than we can reach by ourselves. Vision begins with the identification of a community’s particular “charism(s)” and its utilization for the glory of God. The role of the Old Testament prophets was to help the nation of Israel “see” the Will of God. The Prophet Habakkuk exhorted leaders to “keep watch” to see what God would disclose. The Lord will “write His vision, and make it plain” (Habakkuk 2:1-3). Vision that comes from God sets direction and focus. It helps the local Orthodox Christian parish to discern where to concentrate its energy, so it can fulfill God’s purposes.

Last Sunday’s Gospel lesson (Luke 13:10-17) described how Jesus freed a woman who had an infirmity for 18 years. Her ailment was her inability to “fully straighten herself” (Luke 13:11). Although the religious leaders of the day were openly opposed to Jesus’ vision of how the Sabbath should be observed, the Lord healed the unfortunate woman by placing His hands on her. As a result of His “work” the woman was immediately straightened and praised God.

An important component of the leadership training seminars that I provided parishes during my tenure as Director of Religious Education for the Greek Orthodox Archdiocese, was the PowerPoint projection of various sanctuary icons. Asked to match the liturgical artwork to their geographic locations, most leaders were surprised to learn that that the image of the Pantocrator – the icon in the dome that portrays Christ as the Righteous Judge and the Lover of Mankind – actually belonged to their own church!

The point of the exercise was obvious. Unlike the deformed woman described by Saint Luke, the spiritual, physical, and financial attentions of vibrant parishes are not earthbound. Having experienced the touch of the Eternal Healer’s hand, their focus is not overly secular-minded but “upright.” Leaders of such communities continually strive to advance an elevated vision, identified by “looking up” and empowered by God’s Will. Unlike Justice Holmes, they have a clear understanding of their purpose and destination and are characterized by heaven-ward visions that include humility, generosity, servanthood, and liturgical praise.