

(Paper presented to the Society for the Scientific Study of Religion, Portland, Oregon,
October 20, 2006)

SATISFACTION AND MORALE AMONG PARISH CLERGY:
WHAT AMERICAN CATHOLIC AND ORTHODOX PRIESTS CAN LEARN
FROM EACH OTHER

Alexey D. Krindatch, Patriarch Athenagoras Orthodox Institute/Graduate Theological Union
(Akrindatch@aol.com)

Dean R. Hoge, Catholic University of America (Hoge@cua.edu)

The Roman Catholic and Eastern Orthodox churches occupy similar niches in the American ecclesiastical realm, and yet they are different in many ways. This paper investigates the life experiences of Catholic and Orthodox priests in the US, based on random sample surveys of both. To understand the approach of the Catholic and Orthodox clergy to various aspects of Church life we need to outline several similarities and differences in American Catholicism and Orthodox Christianity.

Similarities and Differences

The greatest similarities between Roman Catholicism and Eastern Orthodox Christianity are in theology and spirituality, as well as in Church administration. Both are sacramental religions, based on a high theology of Church as mediator of grace and salvation. Both were formed in the period of the Great Ecumenical Councils: from 325 to 787. Further, these two branches of Christianity were one Church until 1054 AD, when a combination of cultural, theological, and political causes resulted in their mutual excommunications and final schism between what are now known as the Orthodox and Roman Catholic churches.

Both Roman Catholic and Orthodox Churches have rich traditions of liturgy, spirituality, and arts. Both have hierarchical structures and three levels of clergy: deacons, priests/presbyters and bishops. Both have an exclusively male priesthood, and ordination in both means an ultimate obedience to the bishop: either explicitly, as a vow, in Catholicism or implicitly in Orthodoxy.

Both have two categories of clergy: the diocesan or “secular” priests (although the Orthodox do not use this terminology) and religious priests (in Orthodoxy, they are called “Priest Monks”).

The differences are equally important. Eastern Orthodoxy never developed a world-wide central authority equivalent to the Papacy in Roman Catholicism. Theologically, all Orthodox Christians consider themselves to be part of one church in the sense that they share the same faith and sacraments, as well as the Byzantine liturgical and canonical tradition. At the same time, at the level of church government, Orthodox Christianity is a loose communion of mutually independent national churches. These churches consider the Patriarch of Constantinople (residing in Istanbul) as first in honor and as symbolic center of all Orthodox churches, but he has no authority to intervene in the affairs of the national Orthodox churches. Accordingly, unlike Roman Catholicism, Orthodox Christianity never developed an institutional unity which could transcend national, ethnic and linguistic barriers. Rather, the idea of “one State – one Church” has always been characterized in Eastern Christianity.

In the history of Orthodoxy there was no struggle of church versus state as in Western Europe, since secular rulers always maintained control over the national Orthodox Churches. Also in Eastern Orthodox monasticism, no religious orders have been developed equivalent to the Dominicans, Franciscans, or Jesuits in the West. Eastern Orthodoxy was never confronted with modernization movements equivalent to the Lutheran and Calvinist reformation in the West. Historian John Meyendorff comments:

It is a historical fact which no one can deny that the Christian East has remained aloof from the great changes which have occurred in the West as a result of papal centralization and the great Scholastic movement during the Middle Ages, the Reformation, and the Counter-Reformation (1996, 207).

In the United States, the Orthodox arrived later than Catholic immigrants. Most Orthodox families came to America after 1900, and their integration into the wider American society has been slower than it has been for Catholics. Ethnic consciousness today is still much stronger for the Orthodox than for Catholics, and more Orthodox today feel like outsiders to mainstream American society.

Structurally, the Eastern Orthodox churches in the US are closer to Protestant denominations (especially Episcopalians) than to Roman Catholicism (Stokoe and Kishkovsky 1995; FitzGerald 1998). Indeed, Eastern Orthodox Christianity in US consists of more than twenty distinct Orthodox jurisdictions (Krindatch 2002). It should be noted that American Orthodox churches avoid referring to themselves as “denominations” and instead use the term “jurisdiction,” because of the theological notion that all are part of one universal Orthodox Church. The American Orthodox jurisdictions share the same theology and most of them recognize each other’s sacraments and seminary training. At the same time, the actual co-operation between them is limited to the few commonly sponsored agencies and programs coordinated through the *Standing Conference of Canonical Orthodox Bishops in Americas* (SCOBA). Direct communications between them are scant.

Most Orthodox jurisdictions in the United States are still formally subordinated to one of the “Mother” Orthodox Churches in the Old World, but *de-facto* they are quite autonomous from the Old World authority, though this varies from jurisdiction to jurisdiction.

The parishes in American Orthodox Churches have powerful parish councils of lay trustees elected by parishioners. Legally, each parish is incorporated separately, owns its property, and pays salaries and other obligations including support for the diocesan and national church administrations and programs. The American Orthodox Churches have periodic national meetings of clergy and laity to decide about jurisdictional affairs, both clergy and laity having voting power. Both locally and national, power is shared between clergy and laity.

For the priesthood, probably the most consequential difference is that in the Orthodox Church married men can enter the priesthood and serve as “secular” clergy. In fact the vast majority of American Orthodox priests are married. At the same time, only unmarried Orthodox priests - either priest-monks or celibate priests or widowed secular priests - are eligible to become bishops. The Orthodox clergy have two important rules regulating marriage. First, a man must marry prior to his ordination to the diaconate, if he plans to be married at all. Second, it has been traditional until now that a widowed priest cannot remarry, although this rule has been challenged and is now under debate (Allen 2001).

Surveys of Roman Catholic and Orthodox Priests

To get reliable data comparing the two, we carried out a survey of Orthodox priests in early 2006 which repeated a 2001 survey of Roman Catholic priests. We surveyed a random sample of non-retired parish priests in two American Orthodox jurisdictions: the *Greek Orthodox Archdiocese of America* (GOA) and the *Orthodox Church in America* (OCA). The latter is the former (until 1970) Metropolia of the Russian Orthodox Church. GOA and OCA are the two largest Orthodox jurisdictions in the nation. The GOA has an estimated 440,000 adherents, and the OCA has an estimated 115,000 (Krindatch 2002).

The two are different in that Greek Orthodox parishes are typically larger and more affluent and - on average - they also maintain stronger ethnic heritage than the OCA parishes.

We sent out 258 questionnaires to all non-retired Orthodox priests in four dioceses (two in GOA and two in OCA) and achieved 226 returns for an 88% response rate. The majority of the questions were taken from the 2001 survey of Catholic priests done by Hoge and Wenger (2003). The 2001 was a random sample of Catholics priests, both retired and non-retired, with a 71% response rate. In this paper, for the sake of accurate comparison with the Orthodox clergy, we looked only at non-retired diocesan Catholic priests (N=697). In American Roman Catholicism, diocesan (“secular”) priests make up 67% of the total, whereas in Eastern Orthodoxy it is 98%. It should be also noted that the Orthodox priest-monks (2% in our sample) do not belong to religious orders but live under the authority of diocesan bishops.

We will review the findings under six headings: (1) characteristics; (2) satisfactions in priesthood; (3) sources of support; (4) problems facing priests; (5) attitudes on priesthood and church issues; (6) topics that the clergy want to be openly discussed.

1. Characteristics

Orthodox priests are younger than Catholic priests. The average age of the non-retired Orthodox priests was 51, compared with 55 for Catholics. For the Orthodox, only 16% are 65 years and older, compared with 23% for Catholics.¹

About equal proportions of Orthodox and Catholic priests were born outside of the U.S.A. or Canada (Orthodox, 17%; Catholics, 16%). Many more Orthodox (35%) than Catholic (4%) priests are adult converts from other Christian churches. A dominant majority of the convert Orthodox clergy are either former Roman Catholics or Evangelical Protestants. Ninety-three percent of the Orthodox priests were married, 4% were celibates, 2% were priest monks and 1% was widowers. Of the married priests, 29% said their wives are working full-time, 23% said their wives are working part-time, and 48% said they stay at home.

2. Sources of Satisfaction in Priesthood

We examined two questions: Are American Orthodox and Catholic priests satisfied with their life choices, or do they regret their decision to become a priest? and What are major sources of satisfaction and in priestly work?

A vast majority of both Orthodox and Roman Catholic parish clergy would enter priesthood again if they had the choice anew. In answer to the question, “If you had your choice again, would you enter the priesthood?” 91% of Orthodox and 85% of Catholic priests responded either “definitely yes” or “probably yes.” Only 5% of Catholic and Orthodox clergy said “probably not” or “definitely not.” Among both Catholic and Orthodox clergy there was little difference between young and old clergy in response to this question.

There was also a striking similarity between Catholic and Orthodox priests in their major sources of satisfaction. The survey asked the question: “There are many sources of satisfaction and joy in the life and work of a priest. Please indicate how important each of the following is as a source of satisfaction to you.”

¹ We are not reporting significance tests in this paper, for sake of simplicity. With two samples the size of ours, approximately 8 percentage points difference between Orthodox and Catholics is significant at .05.

The clergy were given eleven choices, to which they could respond “great importance for me,” “some importance for me,” and “little or no importance for me.” See Table 1: the eleven sources of satisfaction are listed in descending order of importance.

Table 1: There are many sources of satisfaction and joy in the life and work of a priest. Please indicate how important each of the following is as a source of satisfaction to you: percent saying “great importance.”

| | Orthodox priests, % | Catholic priests, % |
|--|---------------------|---------------------|
| <u>For Orthodox:</u> Joy of celebrating liturgy and administering the sacraments <u>For Catholics:</u> Joy of administering the sacraments and presiding over the liturgy | 98 | 95 |
| <u>For Orthodox:</u> Satisfaction of preaching the Gospel <u>For Catholics:</u> Satisfaction of preaching the Word | 89 | 80 |
| Being part of a community of Christians who are working together to share the good news of the Gospel | 84 | 59 |
| Opportunity to work with many people and be a part of their lives | 78 | 68 |
| Spiritual security that results from responding to the divine call | 58 | 46 |
| Opportunity to exercise intellectual and creative abilities | 56 | 54 |
| Challenge of being the leader of a Christian community | 54 | 52 |
| Satisfaction in organizing and administering the work of the Church | 49 | 35 |
| Respect that comes to the priestly office | 33 | 23 |
| Engaging in efforts at social reform | 21 | 21 |
| “Business” aspects of parish life: fundraising, building projects, etc. | 17 | N/A |
| The well-being that comes from living the common life with like-minded priests | N/A | 24 |

N/A = not asked

Both the Roman Catholic and the Orthodox Churches are essentially liturgical and sacramental, and the two most important sources of satisfaction are the same for both Catholic and Orthodox clergy. Most important was “Joy of celebrating liturgy and administering the sacraments” (in the Orthodox questionnaire) / “Joy of administering the sacraments and presiding over the liturgy” (in the Catholic questionnaire). It was selected by 98% of Orthodox and by 95% of Catholic clergy as “very important.”

The second important source of satisfaction was “The satisfaction of preaching the Gospel” (in the Orthodox questionnaire) / “The satisfaction of preaching the Word” (in the Catholic questionnaire), chosen by 89% of Orthodox and 80% of Catholic clergy as “very important.” These priestly functions are similar because they both take place within the liturgy – the focal point in the lives of Catholic and Orthodox churches. Leading worship and providing sacraments are also the situations when the clergy are in their most unique priestly roles, clearly distinct from the people in the pews, and when they act as the shepherds of their flocks.

The Catholic and Orthodox clergy also made the same choices of the third and fourth most important sources of satisfaction: “Being part of a community of Christians who are working together to share the good news of the Gospel,” and “Opportunity to work with many people and be a part of their lives.” These two sources of satisfaction derive from the personal relationships and from the sense of community bonds in a local parish.

There is, however, a difference between Catholic and Orthodox clergy. Overall, Orthodox clergy find greater satisfaction in leadership of the Christian community than do the Catholics. They rate “Being part of a community of Christians who are working together to share the good news of the Gospel,” “Opportunity to work with many people and be a part of their lives,” and “Satisfaction in organizing and administering the work of the Church” higher than Catholic priests. This is possibly related to the sizes of Orthodox and Catholic parishes. The surveyed Orthodox parishes average about 650 members, while Catholic parishes average about 3,100 members.

Two strong generational differences are present among both Orthodox and the Catholic clergy. See Table 2. First, in both churches the most senior priests (65 and older) valued more highly “Spiritual security that results from responding to the divine call” and “Respect that comes to the priestly office” than the younger clergy. Second, in both churches, the younger clergy saw “Opportunity to exercise intellectual and creative abilities” as a more important source of satisfaction than the senior (65 and older) priests.

Table 2. Percent of clergy in three age groups who said that the following has “great importance” for them as a source of satisfaction in their ministry.

| | Younger than 45 | 45-64 | 65 and older |
|---|--------------------|-------|-----------------|
| ORTHODOX CLERGY, % | | | |
| Joy of celebrating liturgy and administering the sacraments | 95 | 98 | 100 |
| Satisfaction of preaching the Gospel | 88 | 88 | 94 |
| Being part of a community of Christians who are working together to share the good news of the Gospel | 79 | 84 | 91 |
| Opportunity to work with many people and be a part of their lives | 79 | 77 | 77 |
| Spiritual security that results from responding to the divine call | 47 | 62 | 69 |
| Opportunity to exercise intellectual and creative abilities | 59 | 56 | 48 |
| Challenge of being the leader of a Christian community | 44 | 54 | 71 |
| Satisfaction in organizing and administering the work of the Church | 45 | 47 | 62 |
| Respect that comes to the priestly office | 26 | 31 | 51 |
| Engaging in efforts at social reform | 21 | 21 | 20 |
| CATHOLIC CLERGY, % | | | |
| Joy of administering the sacraments and presiding over the liturgy | 96 | 93 | 96 |
| Satisfaction of preaching the Word | 81 | 79 | 83 |
| Being part of a community of Christians who are working together to share the good news of the Gospel | 61 | 59 | 58 |
| Opportunity to work with many people and be a part of their lives | 66 | 70 | 66 |
| Spiritual security that results from responding to the divine call | 42 | 40 | 66 |
| Opportunity to exercise intellectual and creative abilities | 60 | 55 | 48 |
| Challenge of being the leader of a Christian community | 52 | 53 | 53 |
| Satisfaction in organizing and administering the work of the Church | 36 | 34 | 37 |
| Respect that comes to the priestly office | 16 | 21 | 37 |
| Engaging in efforts at social reform | 17 | 22 | 20 |

As we have seen, sacramental and liturgical functions are the strongest source of satisfaction for both Catholic and Orthodox clergy. What if the priests’ ministry could be limited to sacramental and liturgical duties? Would they be happy?

As table 3 shows, almost half (48%) of the Catholic clergy would be satisfied, while clear majority (63%) of Orthodox priests would be dissatisfied. We conclude that a greater proportion of the Orthodox than the Catholic clergy feel that building human relationships with parishioners is as essential for fulfilling priesthood as sacramental ministry.

Table 3. In the future if you would be offered to restrict your parish work to only liturgical and sacramental duties, would you be satisfied or dissatisfied? (in percents)

| | Satisfied, % | Dissatisfied, % | Neutral or unsure, % |
|-----------------|-----------------|--------------------|-------------------------|
| Orthodox clergy | 25 | 63 | 12 |
| Catholic clergy | 48 | 42 | 10 |

3. Sources of Support

One way or other, all priests need help and assistance in their daily work. What are the major sources of support in the lives of the Catholic and Orthodox priests? What or whom do clergy feel they can rely upon if necessary? Table 4 shows responses to a question asking about various sources of support. The priests were asked to rate these sources as “strong support,” “some support,” “little or no support.”

**Table 4. In your priestly ministry, HOW MUCH SUPPORT do you experience from each of the following sources?
(percent who said they experience “strong support”)**

| | Orthodox clergy, % | Catholic clergy, % |
|--|--------------------|--------------------|
| <u>For Orthodox:</u> From your immediate family: children, siblings, parents <u>For Catholics:</u> From your family | 59 | 60 |
| <u>For Orthodox:</u> From your parish council <u>For Catholics:</u> From your staff members where you minister | 59 | 54 |
| From your parishioners | 53 | 50 |
| From your bishop | 50 | 29 |
| From fellow priests | 36 | 28 |
| From non-priest friends | 31 | 52 |
| <u>For Orthodox:</u> From the national headquarters of your Church <u>For Catholics:</u> From National Conference of Catholic Bishops | 11 | 3 |
| From your wife | 90 | N/A |
| From your extended family: in-laws, uncles, aunts, cousins, etc. | 29 | N/A |
| From your local community in general | 12 | N/A |
| From the non-Orthodox Christian clergy in your local community | 6 | N/A |
| From the Vatican | N/A | 11 |
| From the presbyteral council | N/A | 6 |
| From the National Federation of Priests' Councils | N/A | 2 |

N/A = not asked

Some items included in the Catholic questionnaire were not present in the Orthodox questionnaire and vice versa, but clearly both Catholic and Orthodox priests receive their *strongest support* either from the close relatives (“from your family”) or from the people who surround them in their daily work (“from parish council,” “from staff members where you minister,” and “from parishioners”). For both Catholic and Orthodox priests the *least support* comes from their national church organizations.

At the same time, two important differences should be noted. First, the Roman Catholic clergy are celibate and they live either alone or together with fellow priests, but not with families. By contrast, the vast majority of Orthodox clergy are married, living with their spouses. The survey indicated that by far the most significant source of support for the Orthodox clergy is their wives: 90% of the Orthodox priests say that they experience “strong support” from them. Further, the questionnaire for the Orthodox clergy asked them to agree or disagree with the statement, “I see my wife as a partner sharing in my ministry in the parish.” Seventy-nine percent of Orthodox priests agreed with this statement and only 13% disagreed; 8% were either neutral or unsure. Hence the data tell us that because of required celibacy, Roman Catholic clergy are left without the most significant source of support which Orthodox priests can rely upon – wives who share with them the daily routines, the burdens and the joys of parish life.

The second difference between Catholic and Orthodox clergy is the relative importance of support coming from “non-priests friends” (that is, somebody who does not belong to the clergy professional community or even to their church) in comparison with support from persons who belong to the institutional church structure (“your bishop,” “fellow priests”). Orthodox priests enjoy more support from their bishops and fellow priests - probably related to the much smaller sizes of Orthodox dioceses. Conversely, for Catholic clergy, the support from the non-priest friends has relatively greater importance than for the Orthodox priests. Does this mean that American Catholic clergy are socially more open to a wider range of contacts, while Orthodox priests tend to limit their personal relations to those who are also part of their professional and church community? Or does this indicate that Orthodox actually receive stronger support from their bishops and fellow priests, while Catholic clergy are in effect “forced” to find alternate sources of personal support outside of their professional community? More research is needed to clarify this issue.

The significance of “family” as a source of support for various age groups of clergy is different for the Orthodox and Catholic priests. See Table 5. A much higher proportion of the younger (under 45 years) than the middle-aged (45-64) or older (65 and older) Catholic clergy report “strong support” from their families. In the Orthodox case, all age groups report equally strong support from their families.

A possible explanation is that speaking of “families,” the Orthodox clergy more likely mean their own families - their wives and children, while Catholic clergy may refer to their parental homes. Accordingly, it is more likely that the parents of the younger Catholic priests are still alive and can provide their sons with the support they need.

The Catholic and Orthodox clergy are similar in that the older and more experienced priests benefit most from the support coming from professional interaction: from “parish council” (for Orthodox), from “staff members where you minister” (for Catholics) and from “your bishop.”

Table 5. Percent of clergy in three age groups who said that they experience “strong support” from the following:

| ORTHODOX CLERGY | Younger than 45 | 45-64 | 65 and older |
|---|-----------------|-------|--------------|
| From your immediate family | 62 | 58 | 59 |
| From your parish council | 59 | 57 | 65 |
| From your parishioners | 47 | 53 | 65 |
| From your bishop | 53 | 45 | 65 |
| From fellow priests | 39 | 33 | 41 |
| From non-priest friends | 29 | 29 | 38 |
| From the national headquarters of your church | 8 | 9 | 21 |
| | | | |
| CATHOLIC CLERGY | Younger than 45 | 45-64 | 65 and older |
| From your family | 72 | 57 | 59 |
| From your staff members where you minister | 49 | 53 | 59 |
| From your parishioners | 52 | 49 | 50 |
| From your bishop | 24 | 28 | 34 |
| From fellow priests | 29 | 25 | 32 |
| From non-priest friends | 54 | 53 | 45 |
| From National Conference of Catholic Bishops | 3 | 3 | 1 |

4. Problems Facing Priests

The priests were asked to rate the importance of problems they face. The list of possible problems was more extensive in the Orthodox questionnaire than in the Catholic version. The responses are listed in the table 6 in descending order.

The Catholic and Orthodox priests are similar in their concerns with “too much work” and “the way authority is exercised in the Church.”

At the same time, there were two notable differences between Orthodox and Catholic clergy. First, for the Orthodox, the most important problem was providing financially for their family. This was not included in the Catholic questionnaire, but certainly the issue of supporting their families is not a great concern for Catholic priests. Second, among the top problems for the Orthodox was “uncertainty about the future of the Church,” which is also felt less keenly by Catholics (22% for Orthodox, 10% for Catholics).

Table 6. How important are the following problems to you on a day-to-day basis? (percent saying “A great problem to me personally”)

| | Orthodox clergy | Catholic clergy |
|---|-----------------|-----------------|
| Too much work | 25 | 22 |
| Uncertainty about the future of the Church | 22 | 10 |
| The way authority is exercised in the Church | 21 | 25 |
| Lack of opportunity for personal fulfillment | 14 | 5 |
| Unrealistic demands and expectations of lay people | 13 | 18 |
| Difficulty of really reaching people today | 13 | 7 |
| Providing financially for my family | 37 | N/A |
| Apathy among parishioners | 21 | N/A |
| Balancing time and priorities between parish life and my personal family life | 21 | N/A |
| Inadequate administrative support: secretaries, Sunday school teachers, candidates for parish council, etc. | 20 | N/A |

N/A = not asked.

We looked at age differences in the rating of problems. Among the Orthodox, the younger and middle-age priests felt four problems more strongly than the old priests: “providing financially for my family,” “too much work,” “balancing time between parish life and family life,” and “lack of opportunity for personal fulfillment.” The Catholic priests had an age difference on only item: young and middle-age priests felt “too much work” more than old priests.

Another method we used to assess problems faced by the priests was to ask what kinds of improvements or changes would help them in their ministry. The Orthodox questionnaire had some topics not included in the Catholic questionnaire. See Table 7.

**Table 7. Would any of the following help you in your ministry?
(percent who said “would be very helpful”)**

| | Orthodox clergy | Catholic clergy |
|---|-----------------|-----------------|
| More opportunity for my personal spiritual development | 79 | 67 |
| Greater feeling of fraternity among priests | 67 | 56 |
| More opportunity to share concerns and to communicate regularly with priests in other parishes and dioceses | 52 | 14 |
| Opportunity for training in leadership: conflict management, communications, etc. | 46 | 28 |
| More opportunity to discuss theological and pastoral issues in a public forum | 42 | 23 |
| Greater opportunity for participation in decision making in my diocese | 27 | 32 |
| Opportunity for training in organizational and financial skills: budgeting, investing, insurance, etc. | 21 | 24 |
| More time available to spend with my family | 67 | N/A |
| “Trained” deacons sharing pastoral duties | 62 | N/A |
| Opportunity to be free from involvement in business affairs in a parish, so that I can concentrate on liturgical life of a parish and spiritual needs of parishioners | 36 | N/A |
| Greater freedom to run the parish as I see best | 28 | N/A |

N/A = not asked.

The most top-ranked and desirable change was the same for both Orthodox and Catholic priests: “More opportunity for my personal spiritual development,” clearly ahead of all others. Also equally important was “Greater feeling of fraternity among priests.”

Most noteworthy are the third, fourth, and fifth items in Table 7. The Orthodox priests feel greater need than the Catholic priests for more opportunity to share concerns with their fellow clergy (third item) and to discuss theological and pastoral issues in a public forum (fifth item). In other words, Orthodox clergy expressed stronger desire for more communications and more open discussion. The fourth item, about training in leadership skills, was also ranked more helpful by the Orthodox priests.

We checked age differences and found similar patterns among Orthodox and Catholics. Among both the Orthodox and the Catholic priests, the older men wanted more participation in decision making in the diocese than the younger men. Among both the Orthodox and the Catholics, the younger men were more interested in training in leadership and organizational skills and in more opportunity for personal spiritual development. These patterns are understandable. On the one hand, the younger clergy feel that they still have long way to go in shaping themselves as the leaders of the local Christian community: both in spirituality and in practical matters. The senior priests, on the other hand, are more confident in their abilities to lead their parishes spiritually and administratively, but then, they also wanted a greater deal of involvement in decision making on the higher - diocesan - level

5. Attitudes on Priesthood and Church Issues

Both in the “Old World” and in America, the Roman Catholic and the Orthodox Churches are struggling with the same dilemma: how to balance the established traditions and norms of church life with new social realities, and how to meet the changing expectations of the new generations of their faithful without compromising fundamental principles and rules. This dilemma is equally urgent for American Catholic and Orthodox communities, but the ecclesiastical contexts are somewhat different.

In the case of the Roman Catholic Church, the Second Vatican Council did groundbreaking work in giving canonical approval to many long-expected changes. It moved the Catholic Church toward greater lay involvement, greater respect for lay ministries, and more democratic structures at the parish, diocesan, and national levels. For the Orthodox Churches, there was no event similar to the Second Vatican Council which would officially legitimize such innovations. However, there is no actual need for an Orthodox “Vatican II” in order to initiate changes in American Orthodox church life. This is for three reasons. First, all national Orthodox Churches (Greek, Russian, Serbian, Romanian, etc.) are independent from each other, and decisions made by the hierarchy of one church do not require approval from the leadership of the other Orthodox churches. Second, while most of American Orthodox jurisdictions remain formally subordinated to their “Mother” Churches in the Old World, they are given *de facto* a high level of autonomy in decision making about church life in the US. Third, historically, the conciliar theology of the Orthodox Church provides Orthodox bishops with a significant degree of freedom to determine patterns of church life within their dioceses. That is, Orthodox bishops have much greater leeway than Catholic hierarchs to “experiment” with and to initiate some reforms in their dioceses.

In general, the kinds of changes instituted by Vatican II in the Catholic Church are still “pending” in American Orthodox Churches. Most of these changes are neither commonly accepted nor rejected, being debated by both parishioners and clergy.

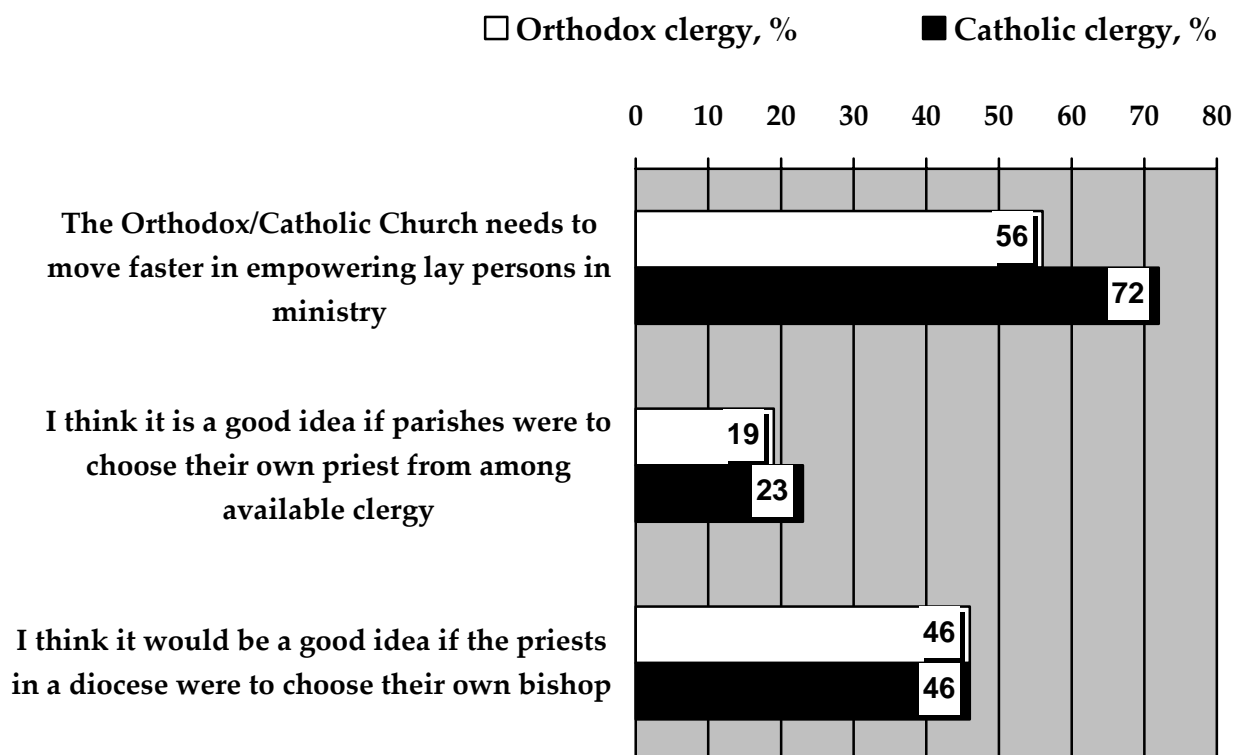
Our survey examined clergy attitudes on several issues regarding possible changes in the church life that American Orthodox and Catholic Churches share in common. The questionnaire asked priests if they agree or disagree with nine statements, which fall in two wide categories: “Democracy and Openness in the Church,” and “Notion of Priesthood and Status of the Priest.”

5a. Democracy and Openness in the Church

The questionnaire had three statements: “The Orthodox/Catholic Church needs to move faster in empowering lay persons in ministry,” “I think it is a good idea if parishes were to choose their own priest from among available ordained priests,” and “I think it would be a good idea if the priests in a diocese were to choose their own bishop.”

The percentages of clergy who agreed, either strongly or somewhat, with these statements are in Chart 1.

Chart 1. Three statements about democracy and openness in the Church (percent agreeing strongly or somewhat).



Clearly the idea of sharing in ministry with the laity is more accepted today among Catholic than among Orthodox clergy. Further, in American Orthodox churches today there is no established practice of *professional lay* ministers. Therefore to an Orthodox priest, the first statement would mean an increase in the activity of *lay volunteers* in the life of parish. Hence, the Orthodox priests responded to first statement thinking that it means providing laity with greater involvement in church life. By contrast, the Catholic priests responded to this statement from their experience with well-established paid professional lay ministry.

The Orthodox and Catholic clergy expressed strikingly similar opinions on the sensitive topics of who should choose priests for the parishes and who should choose bishops for the diocese.

Today, in the Orthodox Church, neither laity nor ordinary parish clergy have much influence on these processes. Parish priests are assigned and may be moved from parish to parish at the discretion of their diocesan bishops, just as in the Catholic Church. As for the election of bishops, this procedure varies somewhat from one Orthodox Church to the other, yet laity and parish priests have no influence on this process - as in the Catholic Church. However, in the Orthodox jurisdictions, bishops have a large amount of influence in the election of candidates, which takes place in the synodal meetings of bishops. By contrast, in the Catholic Church there is no election of candidates, but a few bishops have secret behind-the-scenes influence in nominating them, and Rome decides

The survey indicated that only about one fifth of both Orthodox (19%) and Catholic (23%) priests would let parishioners pick and choose their priests, but almost half of both Orthodox (46%) and Catholic (46%) clergy wish to have the possibility of choosing their diocesan bishop.

Not only are the overall attitudes of Orthodox and Catholic priests on issues of “Democracy and Openness in the Church” rather similar, but both also have a similar pattern of age differences. The Table 8 shows that among both Orthodox and Catholic clergy, the younger clergy are the most conservative and the most reluctant to agree with all three statements.

**Table 8. Three Statements about Democracy and Openness in the Church:
percent in three age groups who agree strongly or somewhat.**

| | Orthodox clergy, % Y / M / O | Catholic clergy, % Y / M / O |
|---|------------------------------------|------------------------------------|
| The Orthodox/Catholic Church needs to move faster in empowering lay persons in ministry | 47 / 59 / 69 | 59 / 79 / 68 |
| I think it is a good idea if parishes were to choose their own priest from among available ordained priests | 7 / 26 / 26 | 19 / 24 / 23 |
| I think it would be a good idea if the priests in a diocese were to choose their own bishop | 41 / 48 / 52 | 27 / 53 / 46 |

Y = priests younger than 45; M = priests in the age 45-64; O = priests 65 and older.

Why is this so? Possibly, the younger Catholic clergy who did not experience the excitement of the Second Vatican Council tend to romanticize the preconciliar stable Church life and its “cultic” model of priesthood (Hoge 2003). This theory, however, would not apply to the young Orthodox priests, since there was no Orthodox “Vatican II.”

Does the conservatism of the younger Orthodox clergy reflect a simple desire to be “on the safe side” in their approach to the Church life at least until the time when they would gain more experience and authority that will allow them to be more experimental? Or, are younger Orthodox clergy rejecting the numerous adaptations that the Orthodox churches made relatively recently in America (e.g., adapting musical traditions, changing architectural styles and outward appearance of clergy) (Vrame 2005). Or does the traditionalism of all - Catholic and Orthodox - younger priests indicate a general shift toward conservatism in the American religious realm? We are unsure of explanation. What is clear at this point is that both in the Orthodox and Catholic Churches the younger clergy are more likely to reject various democratic innovations in the church administration than their “fathers.”

5b. Notion of Priesthood and the Status of the Priest

Six statements examined opinions of the clergy on the status of a priest. Table 9 shows percentages of those who agreed, either strongly or somewhat, with these statements.

**Table 9. Six statements about status of a priest
(percent agreeing strongly or somewhat)**

| | Orthodox clergy, % | Catholic clergy, % |
|---|--------------------|--------------------|
| <u>For Orthodox clergy:</u> I feel that I am most a priest when I am celebrating liturgy and sacraments | 71 | 75 |
| <u>For Catholic clergy:</u> I feel that I am most a priest when I am “saying Mass” (presiding at Eucharist) and hearing confessions | | |
| <u>For Orthodox clergy:</u> Ordination to the priesthood means an entirely new status which makes priest “different” from the laity within Church | 61 | 82 |
| <u>For Catholic clergy:</u> Ordination confers on the priest a new status or a permanent character which makes him essentially different from the laity within the Church | | |
| The idea that the priest is a “man set apart” is a barrier to the full realization of true Christian community | 21 | 24 |
| Priests today need to be more involved with broad social and moral issues beyond their own parish’s level | 59 | 71 |
| It is urgent that priests achieve greater social status as competent professionals in the eyes of Catholic/Orthodox community | 45 | 64 |
| More effective organizations of priests are needed to protect their interests and to serve the needs of priesthood | 54 | 52 |

The first statement reflects the core identity of the priests. The high degree of agreement with this statement tells us that both Orthodox and Catholic priests feel their priestly identity most strongly when performing sacramental ministry and leading worship. These are the roles which are closed to laity and in which the uniqueness of the priesthood is clearly visible. These public sacramental-liturgical functions are also the main sources of satisfaction for both Orthodox and Catholic clergy, as we saw in Table 1. Responses to the first statement were roughly the same in all three age groups.

The second and third statements deal with the question of how distinct should be the status of a priest from laity and how clear should be the borders between clergy and people in the pews. These statements are useful to explore which model of priesthood the clergy favor more: the “cultic model” or the “servant-leadership model.” The responses to these two statements show that a clear majority of both Orthodox and Catholic priests view themselves as “men set apart.” Indeed, 61% of Orthodox and 82% of Catholic clergy believe that ordination to the priesthood means an entirely new status which makes them different from the laity. Less than one-fourth of the Orthodox (21%) and Catholic (24%) priests feel that this special distinct status is a hindrance in creating true Christian community. Clearly, the cultic model is dominant among both Catholic and Orthodox priests. Yet several nuances should be mentioned.

First, the Catholic clergy expressed significantly stronger agreement than the Orthodox priests on the statement that “Ordination confers on the priest a new status or a permanent character which makes him essentially different from the laity within the Church.” This is understandable. The “high theology of ordination” (even if criticized) is routinely and widely taught in the Catholic seminaries, and the candidates to the Catholic priesthood learn about the ontologically different character of the priest long before actually being ordained. Conversely, the Orthodox Church does not emphasize and does not focus on theology of ordination, and the curricula of the Orthodox seminaries do not pay such a great attention to the theology of ordination. Accordingly, in responding to this statement, the Catholic clergy said not only what they actually *think* but also what they have been consistently *taught* to think. In the Orthodox case, clergy more likely expressed their personal opinions uninfluenced by any official position of the Church.

Second, there are different generational patterns among the Catholic and Orthodox priests. Among Catholic priests, the younger clergy are the major proponents of the high theology of priesthood and they are the least likely to believe that being “man set apart” is an obstacle to realization true Christian community. The middle-aged Catholic clergy (45-64) form the group which is most reluctant to accept the statement about the special status of the priest which makes him essentially different from the laity. The Orthodox case is more complicated. The oldest (65 and older) priests adhere more likely to the high theology of priesthood (e.g. they agree with the statement about special distinct status of a priest), but they also agreed most strongly that “The idea that the priest is a “man set apart” is a barrier to the full realization of true Christian community.” Our guess is that this apparently contradictory position of the older Orthodox priests can be explained by the fact that they base their responses not on formal theology but on their personal convictions and experiences. The senior Orthodox clergy have a more traditional approach to the status of the priest and they support idea of clear distinction between clergy and laity, but yet their life experiences tell them that good communication lines are important for building a healthy and vibrant parish.

The fourth statement in Table 9 - “Priests today need to be more involved with broad social and moral issues beyond their own parish’s level” - indicates clergy opinions on significance of the social ministry to the priesthood. This statement does not undermine the importance of the sacramental liturgical functions of the priestly vocation, but suggests that clergy should also be socially involved. A majority of both Catholic (71%) and Orthodox (59%) clergy agreed, and the three age groups had similar responses. There was a higher degree of agreement among Catholic than among Orthodox priests and this is not surprising. The idea of social ministry as an integral part of priestly vocation is relatively new for the American Orthodox Churches. According to the national “Ministry in America” study published in 1980, the Orthodox clergy identified most completely with the “sacramental–liturgical model” of priesthood. In this model, clergy were called to have a *singular focus* on the transcendent and holy: on leading sacramental worship, providing communion, and teaching. Counseling, social outreach and the development of community services were subtly disregarded or even discouraged in many American Orthodox parishes (Harakas 1980).

The fifth statement - "It is urgent that priests achieve greater social status as competent professionals in the eyes of Catholic/Orthodox community" - is related to the image of the priesthood in the wider society. Almost two thirds (64%) of Catholic clergy agreed with this statement in comparison with less than a half (45%) in the case of Orthodox priests. In other words, the Orthodox are much less concerned with the professionalization of the priesthood than Catholic priests. In both churches, however, the oldest (65 and older) priests feel the strongest need for a greater social prestige of the priestly vocation. Why? Do life experiences of senior clergy tell them that it is important to keep up with the changing social realities? Or are older priests simply nostalgic for the good old times when clergy used to command more authority? More research is needed to respond to this question.

Clergy responses to the statements on democracy in the church and on the status of a priest lead to three conclusions. First, the Catholic and Orthodox clergy are similar in their strong beliefs that the sacramental liturgical functions are by far more important in their ministries than anything else. An overwhelming majority of both Catholic and Orthodox priests believe also in a distinct role of the priest in the Church and in the clear-cut separation of clergy and laity.

Second, in comparison with Catholic priests, the Orthodox clergy remain more traditional and conservative in their approaches to the norms of the daily church life. They are less open to sharing ministry with laity. The Orthodox clergy are also less concerned with social ministry as part of their vocations or with the need to become seen as competent professionals in the eyes of wider society.

Third, among Catholics, the younger clergy (under 45) are most conservative and traditional in their theological attitudes, in their approaches to the different aspects of church life, and in their vision of the role and status of a priest. Among the Orthodox clergy, there is no consistent age pattern. The younger Orthodox priests are more conservative than the older clergy on issues of democracy and openness in the Church, but not on the status and role of a priest.

6. Topics that the Clergy Want to be Openly Discussed

Part of our research was done to help priests to assess the urgency of an open discussion on the various Church related matters. See Table 10.

Table 10. Numerous issues relating to the priesthood are being discussed today and may have impact on your effectiveness as a priest. How important to you would open discussion be on following subjects: (percent who said “very important to me”)

| | Orthodox clergy, % | Catholic clergy, % |
|---|--------------------|--------------------|
| Clarification and standardization of salaries and benefits | 41 | 21 |
| The process of selecting bishops | 40 | 40 |
| Emotional and psychosexual maturity of priests | 38 | 46 |
| The issue of “ethnic” versus “American” parishes | 35 | 16 |
| Problems of sexual misconduct by priests | 34 | 36 |
| Problems of overwork | 33 | 46 |
| Sharing ministry with laity | 31 | 49 |
| Representation of the parish priests at decision making on the national church level | 30 | 25 |
| The image and esteem of the priesthood today | 29 | 64 |
| Representation of the parish priests at decision making on the diocesan level | 25 | 35 |
| The lack of clear professional standards for priests | 21 | 32 |
| Ordination of women | 7 | 22 |
| Issue of youth and young adults leaving the Orthodox Church | 74 | N/A |
| Relationship between mainstream American culture and traditions and requirements of the Orthodox Church | 44 | N/A |
| Family problems of the Orthodox priests | 40 | N/A |
| Clergy divorces and remarriage of divorced priests | 40 | N/A |
| Recruiting priests from the converts to Orthodoxy | 26 | N/A |
| Ordination prior to marriage | 14 | N/A |

N/A = not asked.

A number of subjects are equally urgent to be openly discussed in both Catholic and Orthodox communities and they reflect the similarities in the issues challenging both Catholic and Orthodox clergy. These subjects are: “process of selecting bishops,” “emotional and psychosexual maturity of priests,” “problems of sexual misconduct by priests,” and “representation of the parish priests at decision making at the national church level.”

At the same time, several clear distinctions should be noted. The most remarkable difference is the great interest of Catholic priests in the subject of “the image and esteem of the priesthood today,” contrasted with the low interest of Orthodox priests (64% versus 29% saying “very important” to be openly discussed). Put differently, the Catholic priests are more worried about priestly identity, possibly as a result of the innovations of Vatican II, the present-day priest shortage, and the recent sexual scandals. As of Orthodox clergy, they are – as we saw in previous chapter – more traditional and conservative in their approaches to the norms of the daily church life. Accordingly, the changing notion of priesthood does not challenge the identity of the Orthodox clergy to the same extent as in the case of American Catholic priests.

For a related reason, Catholics are more concerned about “the lack of clear professional standards for the priests” and also about “sharing ministry with laity.” In the latter case, the rapid growth of professional lay ministry in American Catholicism requires structural and attitudinal adjustments by the clergy, whereas in American Orthodoxy there is nothing equivalent to it. Catholics feel also stronger urgency to discuss problem of overwork, no doubt due to the large size of Catholic parishes and the current shortage of priests.

Compared to Catholic clergy, twice as many Orthodox priests said that an open discussion on “clarification and standartization of salaries and benefits” is very important to them (21% and 41% respectively). We believe, this fact reflects an actual difference between today’s situations in two churches. The practices and norms of clergy’ compensation in the Catholic Church have become more or less established and uniform, while in American Orthodox churches these practices may still vary from jurisdiction to jurisdiction and from diocese to diocese.

The Orthodox priests are also more eager than Catholics to ponder “the issue of ethnic versus American parishes.” It seems that the Orthodox continue to struggle with the old problem of the relationship between religious and ethnic identities, possibly aggravated by the most recent wave of immigration of Orthodox Christians to America in the 1990s.

Conclusions:

1. There are many similarities in the American Roman Catholic and Eastern Orthodox priesthoods. The Catholic and Orthodox clergy resemble each other in those aspects of ministry that have direct connection to theology and church administration which are similar for the Catholic and Orthodox Churches.

For both Catholic and Orthodox clergy, the sacramental liturgical functions (leading worship are providing sacraments) are by far more important than anything else in their ministries. These functions reflect their core identity and serve as the greatest sources of satisfaction in their work. In both churches, an overwhelming majority of clergy holds to a high theology and cultic model of priesthood: that is both Catholic and Orthodox clergy believe in a very distinct role of the priest in the Church and in the clear-cut separation of clergy and laity. The Catholic and Orthodox are also similar in the major problems that they face. The problem of overwork, the issue of “how authority is exercised in the Church,” the lack of opportunity for personal spiritual development and the longing for “the greater feeling of fraternity among the priests” are the major concerns among both Catholic and Orthodox priests. Finally, in both Churches, clergy feel an equally strong need for an open discussion on the subjects of “process of selecting bishops,” “emotional and psychosexual maturity of priests,” “problems of sexual misconduct by priests,” and “representation of the parish priests at decision making at the national church level.”

2. The Orthodox and Catholic clergy are distinct in those aspects of priesthood which are related either to their different marital status (e.g. celibate Catholic versus married Orthodox priests) or to the changes and innovations initiated by the Second Vatican Council, which had important consequences for the Catholic but not for the Orthodox clergy.

Almost all American Orthodox clergy are married, and this fact has both positive and negative outcomes. On the one hand, a vast majority of Orthodox priests see their wives as by far most important source of support in their daily lives and as “partners sharing in parish ministry.” On the other hand, the challenges of providing financially for and finding enough time to spend with their families are among most top-ranked problems for the Orthodox priests. Catholic clergy, because of required celibacy, are left without this strongest source of support (“wives”), but, at the same time, they don’t face family problems typical for the Orthodox priests.

The reforms in the Catholic Church initiated by the Second Vatican Council made Catholic clergy open to the ideas of expanding lay ministries and the broader involvement of clergy in society at large. In contrast, the Orthodox clergy are more reluctant to share ministry with laity, less concerned with the social ministry as part of their priestly vocation and with the need to become seen as competent professionals in the eyes of the wider society.

The Catholic priesthood has very small proportion of adult converts (4%), whereas more than one-third of the Orthodox clergy (35%) have been raised in another – not Eastern Orthodox – religious tradition.

Finally, we found several differences related to the distinct contexts in which Catholic and Orthodox Churches operate in the US (such as the priest shortage in American Catholicism, the much larger size of the Catholic parishes, the stronger ethnic identity of Orthodox communities, etc). The Catholic clergy feel much greater need for an open discussion on priestly overwork, on today’s image and esteem of priesthood, on sharing ministry with laity and on ordination of women. The Orthodox priests are more concerned than the Catholics with the “clarification and standartization of salaries and benefits,” and with the issue of “ethnic” versus “American” parishes. The Orthodox priests reported greater satisfactions from working with parishioners and being a part of people’s lives, while Catholic clergy said they would be relatively more happy if their future ministries would be limited to only sacramental and liturgical duties.

3) We found age differences among both Orthodox and Catholic clergy. Younger (under 45) priests in both churches would be less satisfied than the older priests if in the future they would need to restrict their ministry to liturgical and sacramental duties. Also younger Orthodox and Catholic priests are relatively conservative about possible new processes of selecting priests for parishes and electing bishops, and about greater lay involvement into church ministry. Yet, these “generational divides” are much stronger among Catholic than among Orthodox priests. The younger Catholic clergy are conservative not only in their approaches to the various issues on “democracy in the Church,” but also in their theological attitudes and in their vision of the role of a priest. There is no such consistent age pattern among American Orthodox clergy. We conclude that a general cultural shift is influencing younger priests in both churches toward ecclesiological conservatism, but that something additional in Catholicism is making this trend more pronounced.

References:

- Allen, Joseph J. (ed.). 2001. *Vested in Grace: Priesthood and Marriage in the Christian East*. Brookline, Mass.: Holy Cross Orthodox Press.
- Chang, Patricia. 2004. *Assessing the Clergy Supply in the 21st Century*. Durham, North Carolina: Duke Divinity School. Also available at <http://www.pulpitandpew.duke.edu/ClergySupply.pdf>
- FitzGerald, Thomas E. 1998. *The Orthodox Church*. Westport, Conn.: Praeger.
- Harakas, S. 1980. “Orthodox Church.” In *Ministry in America. A Report and Analysis, Based on an In-Depth Survey of 47 Denominations in the United States and Canada*. Ed. by D. Schuller and M. Strommen. San Francisco: Harper and Row.
- Hoge, Dean R., and Jacqueline E. Wenger. 2003. *Evolving Visions of the Priesthood: Changes from Vatican II to the Turn of the New Century*. Collegeville, Minn.: Liturgical Press.
- Krindatch, Alexei D. 2002. “Orthodox (Eastern Christian) Churches in the United States at the Beginning of a New Millennium: Questions of Nature, Identity, and New Mission.” *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 41:3 (September): 533-63.
- Meyendorff, John. 1996. *The Orthodox Church: Its Past and Its Role in the World Today*. 4th edition. Crestwood, New Jersey: St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press.

- Stokoe, Mark, and Leonid Kishkovsky. 1995. *Orthodox Christians in North America, 1794-1994*. Orthodox Christian Publications Center.
- Witham, Larry. 2006. *Who Shall Lead Them? The Future of Ministry in America*. Oxford University Press.
- Young Clergy Shortage, 2006. *Religion and Ethics News Weekly*, June 30. An online companion to the weekly television news program. Posted at: <http://www.pbs.org/wnet/religionandethics/week944/feature.html>
- Vrame, Anton (forthcoming). "Four Typologies of Orthopraxy in America." In *Thinking Through Faith: Perspectives from Orthodox Christian Scholars*. A.Papanikolau and E.Prodromou, editors. Crestwood, NY: St.Vladimir's Seminary Press.