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Evolving Visions of the Orthodox Priesthood in America: an Executive Summary of the Study

To date, very little has been done to study systematically broad patterns and trends in the American Orthodox priesthood. The survey “Evolving Visions of the Orthodox Priesthood in America” was designed to answer the question: “What does it mean to be an Orthodox Christian priest in America in the beginning of the third millennium?” The study completed by the Patriarch Athenagoras Orthodox Institute in the spring-summer of 2006 is unique in several ways.

First, it is based on a national survey of the priests in two largest American Orthodox jurisdictions: the Greek Orthodox Archdiocese of North America (GOA) and the Orthodox Church in America (OCA). The questionnaires were sent to all parish clergy in the Greek Orthodox Metropolises of Chicago and San Francisco and in the OCA’ Dioceses of the West and Midwest. 226 priests (115 GOA and 111 OCA) participated in this study and completed questionnaires – a response rate of 88%.

	GOA -San Francisco	GOA - Chicago	OCA-West	OCA – Mid West	Total
Number of surveys sent to parish clergy	64	65	51	78	258
Number of surveys completed and returned	58	57	41	70	226
% of surveys returned	91%	88%	80%	90%	88%

GOA – Priests of the Greek Orthodox Archdiocese of America

OCA – Priests of the Orthodox Church in America

Second, this study focused on four aspects of priesthood:

- the sources of satisfaction in the work of an Orthodox priest in America;
- the challenges and problems that parish clergy face;
- the sources of support that the Orthodox priests can rely upon if necessary;
- the issues in the life of the Church that Orthodox priests believe should be urgently and openly discussed.

Third, our survey also examined clergy approaches to the four subjects that are frequently debated in the Orthodox community in America:

- Notion of Priesthood and Status of Priest;
- Democracy and Openness in the Church;
- Changes and Innovations in the Orthodox Church;
- Ecumenical Attitudes and Relations to the Outside Non-Orthodox Community.

Fourth, this study looked on the differences among the priests in various age groups, between the cradle Orthodox and the convert clergy, and between priests who identified their theological stance and approach to the Church life as either “liberal,” or “moderate,” or “traditional,” or “conservative.”

Fifth, the survey’s questionnaire was developed in co-operation with scholars studying American Roman Catholic priests. Therefore, the obtained data allow for discerning trends that are unique for the Orthodox community and those which are similar with the Roman Catholic Church in this country.

Numerous insightful and, sometimes, unexpected study results are helpful in explaining current patterns in American Orthodox church life and in making certain predictions about possible future developments and changes. Many findings are also challenging as they provoke further questions or raise issues which need to be addressed.

For example, we learned that:

- A “reform oriented” faction among American Orthodox clergy is much smaller than the group of the clergy who are keen to “keep the things the way they are.” Only 27% of the priests said that their theological stance and approach to Church life are either “liberal” or “moderate,” in comparison with 73% who identified themselves as “traditional” or “conservative.”
- The survey data and study results *do not support* a commonly shared stereotype that American converts to Orthodoxy - raised either Catholics or Protestants - tend to be in many ways more conservative and “Orthodox” than cradle Orthodox Christians. At least, in the case of the parish clergy there are no significant differences between these two categories.
- The greatest divisions among American Orthodox clergy are based not on distinctions between GOA and OCA, and not on variations between age-groups or between cradle-Orthodox and convert clergy, but on the theological stance of the clergy. Indeed, the clergy who defined themselves as either “liberal” or “moderate” or “traditional” or “conservative” approach

extremely differently the subjects of *Notion of Priesthood and Status of a Priest*, and *Democracy in the Church*, and *Innovations in the Church*, and *Ecumenism and Relation to the Outside not-Orthodox Community*.

- All categories of clergy – GOA and OCA, cradle Orthodox and convert, the younger and older priests - are similar in their top-choices of what has greatest importance for them as the source of satisfaction in the ministerial work. These four top-choices are: “Joy of celebrating liturgy and administering the sacraments,” “Satisfaction of preaching the Gospel,” “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.”
- The “issue of youth and young adults leaving the Orthodox Church” is seen as by far the most urgent and was chosen as “very important to be openly discussed in the Church” by the vast majority (74%) of all categories of clergy.
- Six major challenges of being an Orthodox parish priest in America are: “providing financially for my family,” “too much work,” “uncertainty about the future of the Church in America,” “apathy among parishioners,” “balancing time and priorities between parish life and my personal family life,” “the way authority is exercised in the Church.” At the same time, out of these six challenges, only one concerns equally all categories of clergy: “the way authority is exercised in the Church.” This issue was equally frequently chosen as “great problem to me” by GOA and OCA clergy, by the priests in various ages, and by the cradle Orthodox and convert clergy. The relative significance of five other problems in priestly work depends on the age of the clergyman, whether one is a cradle Orthodox or a “convert” priest, and on the size of the parishes. The greatest distinctions in clergy problems are between of two jurisdictions, that is GOA and OCA clergy struggle with quite different issues.
- Of all possible sources of support, the wives of priests (“presvyteras,” “matushkas”) are by far the most significant for all Orthodox clergy. Other sources of support that were chosen by more than 50% of clergy as “very important” are: “immediate family,” “parish council,” “parishioners,” and “bishop.”

- A very small proportion of all categories of Orthodox clergy – including those who identified themselves as “liberal” or “moderate” - supports an idea of intentional and thorough secularity of American public schools.
- All groups of clergy feel their priestly identity most strongly in performing sacramental ministry and leading worship. The majority of priests also view themselves as “men set apart:” they believe that ordination to the priesthood means an entirely new status which makes them different from the laity and they do not feel that this special distinct status is a hindrance in creating true Christian community;
- A vast majority of parish clergy – the GOA and OCA, and the younger and older priests, and the cradle Orthodox and convert clergy alike - *do not support* greater freedom for local parishes to experiment with forms of liturgical life and greater freedom for the individual believers to interpret Scripture and Orthodox tradition. Only less than one-third of the clergy are in favor of ordination of women to deaconate.
- 56% of priests declared their willingness to share in ministry with the laity by agreeing with the statement “The Orthodox Church needs to move faster in empowering lay persons in ministry” (20% disagreed and 24% were neutral or unsure). In fact, however, most American Orthodox priests remain quite authoritarian in their attitudes to the organization of parish life and do not support “democracy in the Church”: they do not favor ideas of electing parish clergy and bishops; they require voiceless obedience from the faithful to the established rules in Church in general and in their own parishes; they do not tolerate the presence of different opinions in their parishes and the right of laity to pick-and-choose the parish which would suit them the best;

The full study report is divided into six thematic parts. Each part is preceded by one page of the summarized most important findings and highlights. The full study report and questionnaire used in the survey with the distribution of clergy answers on each question is posted on the PAOI’s web-site:

http://www.orthodoxinstitute.org/parish_needs.html