

If the Second Coming of Our Lord Should Be Soon (Bishop Isaiah of Denver)

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For approximately 2,000 years, the Church of our Lord Jesus Christ has continued uninterruptedly in the world according to His promise. If He should return today, would He recognize His Bride, the Church? If the faith and the traditions of His Church have remained constant, He would certainly be able to recognize the Church which He established.

Have those traditions and the faith remained strong in America? A number of holy people of our Church, including Ecumenical Patriarch Dimitrios of Constantinople and Patriarch Elias of the Patriarchate of Antioch, both of blessed memory, did not think so when they visited the United States a few years ago. They immediately perceived that the spirit of materialism and secularism had infiltrated the lives of our people and consequently, the Church.

Looking at how our parishes are administered in our holy Archdiocese and throughout the dioceses, we would have to admit that the most common criterion

for a successful parish life is never recognized by the increase in membership, but by the increase of parish revenues.

There are some parishes which are so involved with the investment of parish funds in certificates of deposit, in stocks and bonds and in other special and restricted funds that it is not at all surprising for parish council members to make the statement that the Church is a business. Of course, the question arises, since we know that the Church of Jesus Christ is not a business, who made it a business?

The concern for the funds of those parishes has been so great on the part of some, that they have not realized the erosion of the parish membership. An ironic result of this reality is that the parish, with its decreased membership, cannot compensate a full-time priest adequately because of its decreased annual income and also its refusal to touch the invested funds.

There are also large parishes within the Archdiocese which do not bother to measure increasing or decreasing membership because the parish services seem to be well attended. Furthermore, they, too, have vast sums of money put away. For what?

If the Second Coming of our Lord Jesus Christ were to take place today and the Lord had come to lay claim to His Church, what would the guardians of all those millions of dollars say to Him? Would they say to the Lord, «Here is your money, Lord.»? And in offering the funds to the Lord, what in the world would our Lord do with those funds? Or would they say to themselves, «This is the heir. Come, let us kill him and seize his inheritance (Matt. 21:38).»

Obviously, when the Lord returns in glory, neither will He be killed nor will He have any use for all those buried funds.

In reflecting upon parishes with excessive amounts of funds, it is a sad testimony when we hear of the evil that has befallen some of those parishes. Aside from the fact that those funds are being used only by the investment and lending institutions rather than by the Church for the benefit of the people, a number of our parishes have suffered embarrassment and heavy losses. Although, shamefully, some custodians of the funds have received personal favors from financial institutions, the greater sin is that a few custodians have removed large sums and used them for their personal intentions. These sins rarely come into public focus for fear that our people will stop giving to the Church.

Where in this ugly reality can anyone see that our Church is truly the Church of Jesus Christ Who suffered and died for Her? Where can one find the spirituality for which Orthodoxy is known and admired? Where is the light of Orthodox Christianity which is found on the stand and not under it?

This bold materialism which has permeated the lives of many of our people may be traced back to a good number of the first immigrants. They themselves were the highest example of what it means for one to sacrifice. However, because they did

not want their children to undergo the same hardships and sufferings they endured, they taught their children how to gather, but not how to give. Most of our Greek Orthodox people today have never had to sacrifice because of the abnormal protection of their parents and grandparents. Even now there are grown adults with substantial incomes who prefer to have their parish memberships listed under their parents' names, so as not to give out of their personal earnings.

With the resources our people have in this country, we could perform miracles as a Church. However, we are poverty-stricken as we desperately look around to see Orthodox hospitals, Orthodox nursing homes, Orthodox cemeteries which are not part of city-owned cemeteries, Orthodox camps and retreat centers owned by the Church, and not rented or leased as most of the ones found in the Archdiocesan yearbook.

Our Church has been in this country for at least one hundred years. Where are our tangible assets for the benefit of our people of all ages? What can we really show for who we are, besides our own homes which one day will be gone? In the absence of all these Church institutions, including schools and monasteries, how do we have the audacity to say that we are a mature Church? On what do we base our maturity and our spiritual growth?

Really, if our Lord were to return tomorrow, would He recognize us as His own? And all those certificates of deposit and stocks and bonds, what will happen to them?

As the history of the Church witnesses, it was not due to the coins of Caesar which preserved Her for 2,000 years. It was something higher and better. It was something indestructible. It was and is the Holy Spirit Who continues to preside over the Church and assures Her preservation in spite of us and our lack of vision.

The sad reality is that many of our secular-minded parishioners, who see success only in the financial strength of our parishes and not in the people of the Church, are the ones who many times control the parish funds. Some of them do not find time to attend the Divine Liturgy because they are busy counting the money, like the money changers outside the temple in Jerusalem in the days of Christ. If one were to tell them to seek first the Kingdom of God, they possibly would be totally confused or resentful.

Can it be that our Church in America is identical or closely resembles the Church to which our Lord speaks when He says:

I know your works: you are neither cold nor hot. Would that you were cold or hot. So because you are lukewarm, and neither cold nor hot, I will spew you out of My mouth. For you say, I am rich, I have become wealthy, and have need of nothing—and you do not know that you are wretched, miserable, poor, blind and naked (Revelation 3:15-17).

Already an increasing number of our smaller parishes are identical to a large number of Protestant churches which have closed down. The physical facilities

have been left with an endowment, but the people have gone. Look to the prairie and mountain states and you will witness the tragedy with some of our parishes. When our Lord does return, He certainly will find much material wealth owned by the parishes. But «when the Son of Man comes, will He find faith on the earth (Luke 18:8).» And when He finds that faith, will He see it in us and in our children?

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