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Ecclesiastical Nostalgia (Fr. Lawrence R. Farley)

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Bishop Pankraty of Troitsa with Metropolitan Jonah

If one is the type that is easily discouraged, one can find today much that is discouraging—secularism is making inroads, even in the Orthodox Church, men of power scorn and minimize the insights proffered by Christians, the Church makes up a small fraction of society, and our bishops are sometimes not up to meeting the multitude of challenges faced by the Church. The temptation for those easily discouraged is to look back fondly and nostalgically to an imagined Golden Age for the Church. There are a number of contenders for this Golden Age. One of the most enticing contenders is the fourth century. After all, this century saw two ecumenical councils (Nicea in 325 and Constantinople in 381), as well as the ministries of Basil the Great, Gregory of Nyssa, Gregory the Theologian, and John Chrysostom. Surely if any period of church history could lay claim to being a golden age, especially as far as bishops were concerned, it would be the fourth century. That was the time to be an Orthodox Christian! If only we could have lived then! If only our bishops now could be more like bishops then!

One of the salutary effects of scholarship and of reading church history is to disabuse one of such facile notions. Books such as *Renouncing the World Yet Leading the Church*, by Andrea Sterk, examine the episcopate of the fourth century, and paint a different and more nuanced picture. Gregory of Nyssa, for example, wrote much of what the ideal bishop looked like, largely because such an ideal bishop was hard to find. The revolution begun by Constantine, with all the tremendous advantages and opportunities it opened for the Church, also brought with it a flood of candidates for the episcopate who were less than ideal. Gregory of Nyssa, for example, in his *Life of Moses*, wrote of men with selfish ambition and arrogance, men who “thrust themselves into the honour of the priesthood and contentiously thrust out those who had obtained this ministry from God”, men who “fatten themselves at rich tables, and who drink pure wine, and anoint themselves with the best myrrh, and who make use of whatever seems pleasant to those who have a taste for a life of luxury”. Sterk wrote that “political manoeuvring was not unusual for the attainment of positions in both the civil and ecclesiastical hierarchies of the fourth century” (op. cit., p.113). The office of bishop was a plum, a way for social and financial advancement, and many men sought the office for precisely this reason. And their flocks did not object, or see anything wrong with this. Most of the people wanted and demanded for their bishops men who were rich, aristocratic, and esteemed in the eyes of the world, preferring them to men who were holy, yet poor. As Gregory the Theologian said in his *Oration 42*, the people “seek not for priests, but for orators, not for stewards of souls, but for treasurers of money, not for pure offerers of the sacrifice, but for powerful patrons.” The supposed golden age was not that golden.

Compare this with our current situation. The bishops I know (admittedly, mostly from afar) are men of faith, men who accepted the episcopal office not because they hungered for social prestige and riches. They did not sidle up to the Emperor (or President or Prime Minister) and jockey for episcopal preferment. There are things to criticize in the bishops, of course—just as there are things to criticize in the presbyters, the deacons, the readers, and the rest of the laity. But over all, our North American bishops have their eyes on the Lord, not on the Emperor or their bank accounts. This is a welcome change from the fourth century.

Indeed, the marginalization of the Church which some find discouraging is actually a reason to be encouraged. There is no social advantage any more to becoming a Christian. Rather, professing faith in Christ is more likely to garner criticism and social disadvantage. This is all to the good. The Church does not need multitudes to do its job, only dedicated souls willing to serve Christ and die for Him. Better a small and dedicated church, than multitudes of merely nominal believers. Better

bishops who serve the Church despite the fact that it brings no smile from the Emperor, than episcopal time-servers and men-pleasers. Better twelve men filled with the Pentecostal Spirit, than a thousand without zeal for God. Of the thousands that flocked around Christ when He did miracles and healed their sick, only a few stayed faithful to Him after the Cross. Of those thousands, only a hundred and twenty were found in Jerusalem's upper room at the end. But these one hundred and twenty had hearts that burned with love for Jesus. And that was enough.

The golden dedication which we seek is not the possession of any single age, century, or epoch. The gold is found in the hearts of all who love Jesus with all their might, in whatever age they live.

Fr. Lawrence Farley

For more from Fr. Lawrence go to [Straight from the Heart](#), where many more of his articles and thoughts can be found. This article was unpublished upon submission and is posted here with permission.