

Church Membership

Virtually every Orthodox parish or Church in North America sets “membership fees” for their parishioners. These are generally in the form of a minimum donation which the individual or family must make in order to be entered officially onto the rolls of the given parish or Church. In some parishes the yearly budget is set, the dollar total is divided up according to a specific formula, and the result is the yearly membership fee for the individual members (often in the range of \$500 - \$1,000). In other cases a parish will have a very minimal membership fee, and depend on collections and donations to cover the operating costs. In the case of our Ukrainian Orthodox Church of Canada, this membership donation is usually paid to the parish, with a specific portion being paid to the Consistory (the “levy”), another portion to the Eparchy, another portion to cover the cost of the Herald/Visnyk, with the remainder staying in the parish coffers.

Generally speaking, in order to be a member of a secular organization we must (at the minimum) pay our dues (or taxes) - a fee which entitles us to the privileges of membership.

We occasionally hear people in our parishes raise the question “what do I get in exchange for paying my Church membership?” Many people think that being the member of a Church is like being the member of a secular organization - pay your dues, help out here and there, attend meetings (or services) insofar as you feel like it, and in general be as active or inactive as you wish. Likewise, they expect some “privileges of membership”, a quid-pro-quo relationship with the parish - “I’ve paid my dues, so I’m entitled to be married/buried/visited/looked after, etc. by the Church”.

Not long ago on a late-night talk show the host asked his guests “What, in your opinion, is more important - believing in Christ, or living a Christian life?”. This question, as was intended, began a discussion. From the standpoint of Orthodox Christianity there is only one possible reply to this query - “you’re asking the wrong question”. This question presumes that faith and life are to some degree mutually exclusive, a presumption that is not just un-Christian, but anti-Christian. They’re both important. It’s not “either-or” but “both-and”. A real, Christian question might be “What is the relationship between Christian faith and life?” Trying to answer the question as phrased might be interesting, but it won’t lead to anything more meaningful than some personal reflections. Simply put, if we want to get the right answer, we have to ask the right question.

Looked at in this light, the question “what do I get for paying my Church membership?” is the wrong question to ask. We might ask the question “What is the purpose of having Church membership dues?”, or “what is the benefit of paying my Church membership?”. Before addressing these questions, however, it’s important to precisely define what Church membership is, and what relationship Church membership has to the paying of a membership fee, or vice versa.

In the “old country” Churches were often state supported, with the faithful shouldering only a portion of the financial responsibility. Here in the new world the faithful must shoulder 100% of the load. While in “diasporal” Orthodox communities (a misleading

description, as it indicates that our homeland is somewhere other than where we are right now) the custom of having membership fees to belong to a parish is for good or for bad an accepted and established practice, we should never lose sight of the fact that our real “membership fee” to the Church is our participation in the Holy Mysteries. Baptism and Chrismation are our initiation; Confession, Holy Communion, Marriage, etc. are (among other things) the constant and necessary renewal of our membership.

Church membership, then, is essentially and primarily our right to take part in the Holy Mysteries of the Church, no more, no less. It is not to be equated with membership in a political party, a social or service club, a sports team, or the Loyal Order of Water Buffaloes. Church membership is first and foremost a spiritual reality. St. Paul states very clearly that those who are members of the Church are members of Christ’s body (*Rm. 12:5, Eph. 1:22-23*). Church membership is predicated upon a real and true and strong faith (which is why we read the creed at baptisms and the Liturgy), ordering our life according to the principles of Christian morality, and on a constant struggle to manifest the Gospel in our everyday lives.

Parish membership is obviously predicated upon already being a member of the Church. Our parishes consist of members who pay their dues religiously (sorry, couldn’t resist), others who for various reasons do not pay dues but participate in the sacramental life of the Church and support the Church materially, and still others who regard themselves as being Church or parish members, who come through the doors to get baptized, married or buried, but who, if you moved the building between one Pascha and the next would probably not know where to go to get their Easter basket blessed. We might categorize them as “dues-paying members” of the Church, “non-dues-paying members”, and “non-members” (as opposed to non-Orthodox). In considering these three general categories of people who regard themselves as being members of our parishes, we see that the main difference among them is the degree to which they take responsibility for their parish, their Church, and their Faith.

We all know of dues-paying members who are very active and take part in the services and activities, as well as those others who we rarely if ever see in Church (the “I’ve paid my Church membership, so don’t bother me with religion” crowd). We have devoted and generous parishioners and adherents who physically cannot attend services or functions because of their age or health, but who never fail in their financial as well as their spiritual support. Likewise there are those of the non-dues-paying members who are in Church every Sunday and Holy Day and donate very generously to the material needs of the Church, so much so that they are in reality much better and much more responsible “members” than many who officially pay their membership.

As for those who do not partake of the sacramental life of the Church nor make donations for the material support of the Church (whether dues-paying members or not), it is obvious that something is not right. Why would a person go to the Church to be buried, to have their children baptized, to have Easter eggs blessed, etc. if they truly don’t believe (it’s the same question the talk-show host should have asked - “what relationship exists between Christian Faith and a Christian life”)? Simple common sense dictates that if we don’t have

the money to pay for the heating, cooling, electricity, maintenance, staff, etc. we'll have to close up shop. Expecting the Church to meet my spiritual needs while myself ignoring the material needs of the Church is self-centred, apathetic and un-Christian.

If Church membership really does mean my right to participate in the Holy Mysteries and not simply my name being entered on a list in the office, then why should I bother to make my membership donation? Does it matter to God whether I pay my parish membership? The answer has to do not with rights, but with responsibilities. When I pay my Church membership I first of all declare myself a Christian, a member of the Church.

This is something so obvious we often overlook it, but it must be remembered that Jesus did found a Church, we believe in the Church (see the fourth "I believe" in the creed), we're not free to do the "me and my bible" thing - living my life the way I want to and only showing up at Church when I have a specific need or want. The Church is necessary to our salvation.

Secondly, when I make my membership donation I unite myself to the Church - I give my money (let us remember that there is probably no greater symbol of love and dedication in our culture than money) so that I can be publicly acknowledged as a member of Christ's body. Thirdly, I show my willingness to take responsibility for God's Church here on earth.

Whether I help out physically, financially, materially, administratively, spiritually, in whatever way, officially becoming a member of the Church indicates my willingness to assist in the preaching of Christ's Gospel.

In addition to all the above, official parish membership does entitle me to certain benefits - use of the Church hall perhaps, free use of the Church for services, etc. Conversely, it is not uncommon that parishes set "user fees" for baptisms, funerals, weddings, etc., which apply to those who are not registered members. There are people who regard such a practice as "un-Christian". The fact of the matter is that it is un-Christian, as well as nonsensical, for me to expect others to look after the day-to-day needs of the Church, so that I can come waltzing in whenever I feel like it with no strings attached. We don't approach business this way, we don't expect others to buy our groceries or pay our mortgages, and God forbid we should have such a cavalier attitude regarding our jobs! Parishes are, of course, free to approach such matters however they feel will most suitably reflect the Gospel, but it must be said that anyone who might suggest that these "user fees" are unnecessary, let alone un-Christian, should reconsider their words in light of common sense and the teaching of Christ.

What happens when we have devoted parishioners who truly cannot afford to make the requisite donation because they are on a fixed income, out of work, etc.? Generally speaking there are two ways to approach this in the light of the Gospel. First of all, if we were to accept a biblical paradigm such as tithing this problem would immediately cease to exist. In other words, if the faithful would pledge to donate a certain percentage of their income to the upkeep of the Church instead of simply making a "membership donation" the poor would immediately be put on the same level as the rich, and we would probably see our parish and Church income soar. Even a 3% "stewardship donation" by the faithful would probably double our Church income. Where the "membership donation" is the norm we must make sure that no one is kept off the parish lists because of real poverty. Either as

individuals or parishes we should cover these shortfalls, remembering the words of St. Paul: *"bear one another's burdens, and so fulfill the law of Christ"* (Gal. 6:2).

What happens when devoted parishioners end up in nursing homes, and those looking after them either willfully or through neglect stop paying their parish membership? Are they ipso facto excluded from the list of the faithful? When they die will they be forbidden a Church funeral, or charged a "non-members" fee? This is a very difficult situation, for if those responsible for the care of our aged and infirm are not paying their parish membership they may not be looking after their spiritual welfare at all. One of the real pastoral benefits of being on the "parish list" is that there is a concrete address and phone number, a contact for the priest. Everyone needs pastoral care, whether they are healthy, sick, aged, or even self-aware. As far as dealing practically with the questions raised at the beginning of this paragraph, they will probably be different depending on the particular parish involved, but should always be approached from the standpoint of love and concern for both the parishioner and their family. Resolving these situations begins not with the question "what do the parish by-laws say", but with the question "how will God most greatly be glorified?"

Love for God, respect for the Church, and responsibility for the Faith are necessary for anyone who wishes to be saved. The "right question" for an Orthodox Christian is not "what do I get for paying my Church membership?" but rather "what kind of things do responsible Orthodox Christians do?" Looked at in the light of what has been stated above, one of the right answers may just be "pay their parish membership".

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