

Summer Vacation

As we approach the end of the school year and the beginning of the “vacation season”, we approach one of the most difficult and dangerous periods of our church year. In parishes all over the continent thousands and thousands of parishioners will be “taking vacations” from the Divine services. Some will do so because they are out of town, visiting relatives, sightseeing, etc.; some will do so because they are away at camp or summer courses; but many will not be in church simply because it’s summertime. Why is this a great problem, and what can we do to address it?

As faithful Orthodox Christians, we all understand very well the fact that we are called upon to live lives of responsibility and commitment. We also understand that our primary responsibility and commitment is to God and the Church. This Christian responsibility and commitment often exists in tension with our secular culture. Perhaps one of the greatest examples of this tension is the attitude which has grown up around Church attendance in the summer months. Because children have a vacation from school, and parents from work; because many go to the cottage or on vacation, we apply this same attitude to our religious obligations and “take a vacation” from Church. As all of us know, there is nothing in our Holy Scripture or Holy Tradition to support such a practice. It’s a practice unique to our modern, western culture. It exists basically because of laziness, and a poor understanding of our faith. The point must be made, though, that this is a very dangerous habit to have, both for our salvation, and for the growth of our Church.

Many of the faithful go on vacation for weeks or months during the summer. Is this bad? Obviously not. But how does an Orthodox Christian “go on vacation”?

In most areas of North America an Orthodox Church of some jurisdiction is within a reasonable driving distance. Finding a church is no more difficult than looking in the yellow pages. If I can’t attend at my own parish it’s important to attend at the nearest parish - whether it be

Ukrainian Orthodox, or an Orthodox church of another jurisdiction. This is in fact a very good habit to have, for we always notice differences from parish to parish - things which would be good to do in my home parish, things which we do at home which perhaps we shouldn't, and things which really make me appreciate my home parish. If I can spend the time and money to travel hundreds or thousands of miles to vacation, traveling 30 or 60 minutes on a Sunday morning to give glory to the God who gave me the means to do so should not be a big deal.

Many of our young people go away to camp. Thank God that our Orthodox camps are in general well looked after by our clergy, and the youth are not neglected on Sundays. At camps where religious services are not offered (computer camps, sports camps, etc.) parents should make every effort to see to it that their children have some type of religious support - driving to the camp and taking their children to Church on Sunday morning, for example. And in any circumstances where Church attendance is simply not possible, we should then do what our forebears and pioneers here in Canada did - gather together as well as we can on Sunday morning and pray together from our prayerbooks.

But in general, we see that our parishes are even emptier during the summer than the numbers of vacationers and campers indicate they should be. As was mentioned above, this is due to a poor understanding of what our Divine services are, and it's a very dangerous habit to have. The idea of "taking a vacation from church" puts our attendance at Divine services in the same category as work, school, and other "unpleasant" realities, which we "need to get away from" in order to "relax, and enjoy life". We must never forget that our Divine Services - **Especially the Sunday Divine Liturgy** - are our God-given opportunity to learn from, praise, and commune with God. The idea of "taking a vacation" from such an opportunity, whether one is a Bishop, priest, or layman, is simply nonexistent in our Orthodox tradition, and nonsensical from the standpoint of our Faith.

But I've also mentioned that it is dangerous. Why? First of all, because it puts Church attendance in the same category as all our other "worldly" concerns, and one thing that the Church has always taught is

that the Church, and especially the Divine Services, should be anything but worldly. We are enjoined to be “in the world, but not of the world.” During the Liturgy we are told to “lay aside all our earthly cares”. When anyone, whether clergy or laity, consciously decides that they need not attend - or worse yet, that they will receive a real benefit by not attending Divine Services (“I’ll come back refreshed and renewed in a month”), they weaken the Church as well as their own spiritual constitution. The only one who benefits by this behaviour is the Devil.

The second danger is one which relates especially to the future of our Church - specifically, that our young people who are on vacation from school and have the opportunity to more fully enter into the life of the Church, who have the opportunity to take part in some of the most beautiful feast days of our Church, either stay away or are kept away from services, and thereby do not learn about their faith where they should - in Church. We celebrate the feast days of Pentecost (“the Green Holidays”), Ss. Peter and Paul, the Transfiguration (with the blessing of fruit), and the Dormition (with the blessing of flowers and herbs); we have the important feast days of Ss. Ol’ha (24 July), St. Vladimir (July 28th), and the baptism of Ukraine on August 14th (with the blessing of water) - and since school is out, there is no excuse for those students who are not away at camp to not be in Church. These great feast days, which brought great spiritual consolation and strength to our forebears, will not bring us God’s blessings if we ignore them. How many of our young people have never seen the Church bedecked in greenery for Pentecost, or the blessing of the first-fruits at the Transfiguration?

And lastly, it must be said that this lack of attendance is always a negative factor in parish life. Those who count the money know that donations are generally down in the summer (just because I’m on vacation it doesn’t mean that the parish bills don’t need to be paid); those who attend every Sunday ask themselves “if they’re not attending, why should I?”; and clergy become demoralized and say “who am I serving this Liturgy for, the walls?”

As we enjoy this beautiful spring weather, having celebrated Pascha, the Feast of Feasts, we consider the fact that a great opportunity is set

before us. How will we respond? What is the example will we give to our children?

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