

COMMON STUMBLING BLOCKS

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The United States allocates billions of dollars to the space program, but the separation of church and state compels churches to be self-supporting. If citizens feel the need to worship God, they must raise the costs – to buy a building, maintain it, hire clergy, purchase books and vestments, bring water to the premises, electricity, telephone, etc.

Some Orthodox Christians come from countries in which the government provides for churches, and they imagine that this holds true for the United States. In their mind, it is sufficient to be sacramentally Orthodox; if they have been baptized, they consider that the requirements have been met. So, they attend, but provide no financial support for their church. If a question arises, their preference is to go elsewhere.

Money is also at the root of the second stumbling block. There are people that look around, in church, and wonder whether a cheaper icon would not do equally well. Then they do the same with everything else, and argue that the church could easily cut costs and save the members' money.

The mistakes, in the second stumbling block are many. First, when money is put in the collection plate, that money represents a thanksgiving offering to God. The dollars or checks no longer belong to the donors; they belong to God; they are not “members' money.” Second, each congregation relies on a small number of dedicated people that form a parish council. These are laymen who, with their deacon and priest, are entrusted with the care of all things, so that things are done in order. Once this system is in place, all the needs of the church are provided in an orderly fashion, and nothing is left to each member's judgment.

If there are individuals who feel that they should have a voice on how the parish council deliberates, they are free to express it. Beyond that, to break with the parish is misguided and pointless. Likewise, the person that does not wish to contribute is still welcome to attend, as a guest of the parish. Then no questions arise.

A third source of conflict is the tendency to import values from society and imagine that they are Orthodox. What is legal, in the United States, is not automatically Orthodox. For example, the use of marijuana for recreational purposes, the resort to abortion (legal in some states), the use of dishonesty in business transactions (by people who think that “business is business” – allowing such practices. None of these can be imported into the Orthodox church as acceptable conduct. Likewise, many churches invite “all believers” to participate in Holy Communion, irrespective of denominational differences, as though such differences have been abolished.

One way of finding out what the Orthodox belief and practice is, on any given topic, is to attend the local Orthodox study. However, this is easier to say than to do. A favorite reply is: My parents and grandparents were Orthodox, yet they did not have to attend a study. Another response is: I attend church, light a candle, say my prayers, listen to the gospel and the sermon, and make an offering. Why is that not enough? So, they continue to hold the values of their society and expect them to be honored in church or they shop for a church that agrees with them – or one that treats such matters as personal choices.

The only way one can overcome these obstacles is through study and careful examination of each article of faith. Otherwise one accepts and perpetuates mistakes in his/her life and family, and the longer it goes on the more entrenched one becomes in self-deception.

There are many more common stumbling blocks. Concerned parents often find a church that has more young people than their parish, and imagine that the prospects of marriage for a son or daughter are better in the larger church. So, they make a change. The truth is that God can provide a spouse even in the smallest of congregations.

Personal conflicts also introduce stumbling blocks. It is easy to think that a new church will at least help one avoid this or that person with whom there is conflict. In such a situation, what will happen, if the other person is not at fault? Then the person that leaves carries all personal problems with him/her. Many have tested Christ's admonition (Matthew 18:15-17) and discovered a new friend for life. Others sought wise counsel. There is much value in continuing to serve the church one knows.

Last, not a few are swayed by a mere show of interest. They move to churches that openly welcome them, thinking that at last they have found a place where true values are cherished. It is to be granted that some other area can easily be more welcoming than another, and there is much to be said for maintaining a friendly and welcoming climate.

In an Orthodox study, one can submit the following fundamental question: Is personal friendliness merely the icing on the cake? Let us say that it is an essential feature of Christianity. Then the person who notices its lack, should go to church earlier and volunteer to greet people as they come in, perhaps handing out a hymnal or service manual. In that way he/she does not sit around expecting others to do what he/she does not want to do. On the other hand, if it is only the icing on the cake, the question must be asked: What counts as an essential feature of Christianity? Is it the reverence, the faith, or qualities that are not always visible?

A common thread runs through these stumbling blocks. That thread is the failure to recognize what is of essence. It is of essence to have a church, even in a country that separates church and state. It is of the essence to be a supportive member, to have an orderly way of doing things, to know the Orthodox values, to trust God for spouses and all needs, to iron out conflicts the way Christ had taught, and not to do what seems right to us or to society.

There was a time when many disciples left Christ. They did this when they heard his say that one must eat his body (John 6:52). This was their stumbling block. They could have stayed and asked him to go over this idea in detail, but they decided to leave (John 6:60-66). Then Christ posed a question to the rest of his disciples: "Do you also want to leave me?" Peter answered and said, "Lord, to whom shall we go?" (John 6:68).