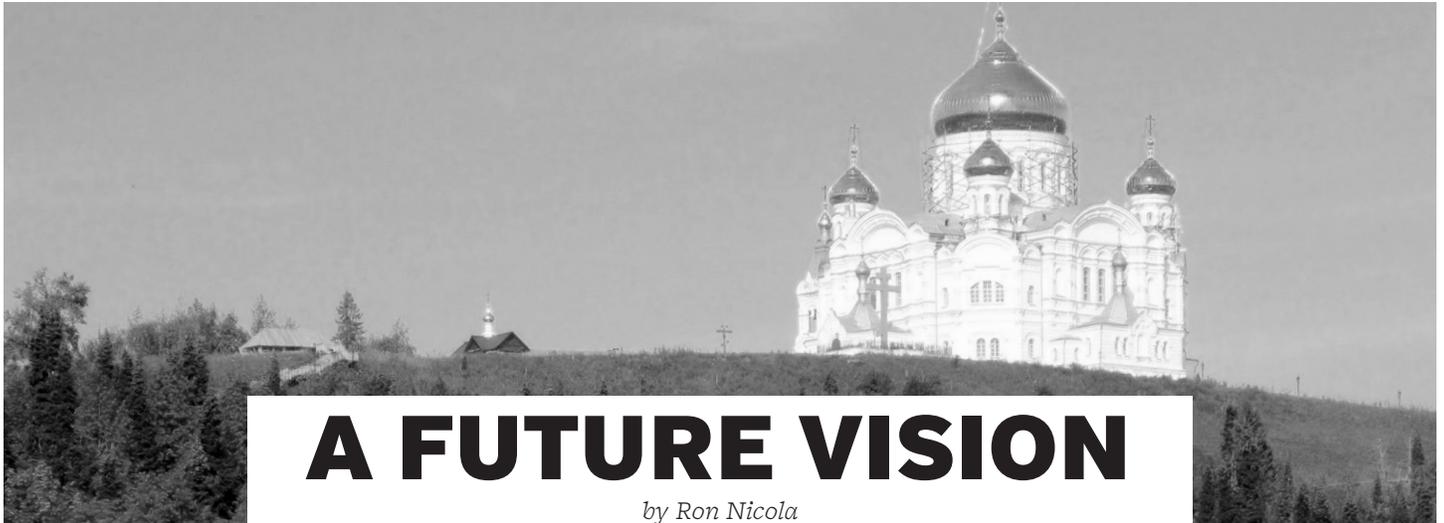

First Fruits

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A FUTURE VISION

by Ron Nicola

“THANK YOU, FATHER, FOR THE BEAUTIFUL SERMON YOU DELIVERED in church today.” This common compliment is often received with a certain amount of skepticism by priests. They appreciate the kind words from their parishioners, but they wonder what lasting impact their message will have on those who heard it during Divine Liturgy.

Sermons are often framed around the day’s gospel lesson, and these stories reflect the wisdom and teachings of Our Lord. A sermon which effectively communicates this message should be perceived by the faithful as being more than “beautiful words.” When a priest observes behavior which is contradictory to a gospel teaching, he often wonders why his sermon did not have more impact. Perhaps he would be reassured if more parishioners commented on his sermon by saying, “Father, your message this morning made me stop and think about my life. There might be some changes in store as a result of your sermon.”

“What people say as they learn about Christian Stewardship is important, but it is completely overshadowed by what people do with this new awareness.”

This same line of thinking can apply to the discussion of stewardship. What people say as they learn about Christian Stewardship is important, but it is completely overshadowed by what people do with this heightened awareness. Dedicated Orthodox Christians who attend workshops, read articles, or hear sermons about stewardship are frequently heard to comment positively about these experiences. Again, presenters, authors, and speakers appreciate these expressions of support, but stewardship demands action and behavior, as well as belief and acknowledgment.

What does it take for belief and acknowledgment of stewardship’s validity to be translated into action and behavior? Probably there are many factors involved, but the evolution of a vision within the mind of every Orthodox Christian is certainly a key element. Vision can be thought of as the wisdom to foresee something that is going to happen or the ability to use a special sense or sight to know what lies ahead. A true Christian has faith in God and believes in His holy word. When these characteristics begin to produce clear pictures of what lies ahead for ourselves, our family, and our church, vision is being defined. Since stewardship involves the use of our God-given time, talents, and resources to take care of the earthly world He created, we must have a sense of purpose and commitment in our lives. The goals we set and the dreams we have become the focus of our lives. Stewardship is practiced as these are fulfilled, and visions are realized in the process.

An individual’s faith and belief in God produces visions which relate to self and to family. Actions such as observing Great Lent, receiving Holy Communion, allowing Christian teachings to guide behavior in the work place, and observing family discussion nights are simple examples of visions being realized in the personal lives of Orthodox Christians. Application of this vision principle broadens when applied to a person’s role in a parish community. Using time, talents, and resources for the greater glory of the Church becomes possible when the parish is seen as the vehicle through which our stewardship of God’s creation is manifested. Involvement in church organizations, support of parish activities, volunteering services to fulfill church needs, and contributing to the church’s financial well-being are a few of the ways visions or goals for the parish are fulfilled. ■

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Financial and Material Wealth in the Church

IT IS AN ONGOING TEMPTATION TO SEE THE ACQUISITION OF WEALTH OR facilities of the Church as an end in itself. Stewardship implies that the Church building and resources must serve the greater plan of the Master. Jesus repeatedly reminded His followers that His Kingdom was not of this world and that even the Temple would be destroyed. If a desire for temporal goods infiltrates the mindset of the parish (or its leadership), the parish may be tempted to seek money as an end in itself. A second temptation is to seek financial gain and pay parish bills in ways that are inappropriate for Christian communities, regardless of how effective they might be. Fundraising schemes that impoverish others or weigh on their personal weaknesses or passions would, in most cases, fall into this category. Similarly, the desire for material goods can also lead to unwise indebtedness, the burden of which can rob a parish of its spiritual vitality. This consideration becomes particularly important as a church purchases property (invariably with a substantial mortgage) or does major facility upgrades or renovations.

The contemporary American Orthodox Church ethos is not egalitarian, nor has it ever been. Some persons are entrusted with more wealth by God and shall be called to account for it at the Final Judgment. The Church has a responsibility to teach and minister to all persons about financial stewardship – the poor and the wealthy as well. A successful, broad-based stewardship initiative of teaching and formation throughout the parish might tend to elicit a higher donation level from more people, tending to shift the dependency of the parish financially away from a wealthy individual or individuals. However, this shift will never eliminate the trend where the majority of the wealth in the parish tends to come from those who are wealthy. This is both a spiritual and a mathematical reality which must be acknowledged. In fact, when cognizant of the dangers mentioned above, it is a good thing when the wealthy respond through giving; if the numbers are skewed, so be it.

The First and Finest, Rev. Fr. Robert Holet, Authorhouse, 2013.



INTENTIONAL GIVING

“THROUGHOUT THE OLD TESTAMENT, THE SIGN OF MAN’S OFFERING of himself was his offering from what he produced. Such offering, regularly the tithe or the tenth (Leviticus 27:30–32), was holy and in turn sanctified the rest of his possessions. So when Man produced things, the works of his hands, the produce of the land, cattle or other animals, it was the tenth part of those things that he offered. In modern society, the only thing that Man produces is money. He usually works for a salary or he invests money and increases his holding through interests and dividends. To this pursuit of making money he dedicates most of his time and energy; that is, he devotes himself. Unless a certain part of his modern product is consciously and premeditatedly dedicated to God, to His work, and to the extension of His kingdom among men, then donations, gifts and (Church) dues are merely token amounts. The amount of one’s gift and the spirit in which it is made indicate the relative importance that God and His Church hold in the heart of the giver.” – Archbishop Dmitri

Scripture and Stewardship

Malachi “Bring all the tithes into the storehouse, that there may be food in My house, and try Me now in this,” says the Lord of Hosts, “if I will not open for you the windows of heaven and pour out for you such blessing that there will not be room enough to receive it.” (3:10)

Proverbs “The preparations of the heart belong to man, but the answer of the tongue is from the Lord. All the ways of a man are pure in his own eyes, but the Lord weighs the spirits. Commit your works to the Lord, and your thoughts will be established.” (16:1-3)

Colossians “And whatever you do, do it heartily, as to the Lord and not to men, knowing that from the Lord you will receive the reward of the inheritance; for you serve the Lord Christ.” (3:23–24)

Luke “He who is faithful in what is least is faithful also in much; and he who is unjust in what is least is unjust also in much. Therefore if you have not been faithful in the unrighteous mammon, who will commit to your trust the true riches?” (16:10-11)

DDB Report

The DDB program has played an essential role in continuing the work of the Church in our Diocese. Without the voluntary donations made to this program, it would be difficult to nourish Diocesan missions, help young men attend seminary, and assist in parish renewal. In 2015, disbursements from the fund included:

MISSIONS: LANSING, ONEONTA, POTSDAM
\$52,930

THEOLOGICAL EDUCATION
\$40,820

ASSISTANCE TO EXISTING PARISHES
\$12,500