

Being a Parishioner (Member) of the Greek Orthodox Church

Quite often, we hear a person identify themselves as a *parishioner or member* of the Greek Orthodox Church...or announce that they are a member of a particular parish. Sadly, for some people, this means little more than making an appearance at the annual Greek Festival. Others periodically attend Divine Services. Still others come to have their weddings, baptisms or other sacramental needs. So what does being a *parishioner* in the Greek Orthodox Church really mean? We will address three components of Church membership: Sacramental, Canonical and Stewardship.

(1) The Sacramental Component

The Holy Orthodox Church is not an organization, business or club. It is the Body of Christ on earth. The Church is the repository of faith and the arena in which we work out our salvation with fear and trembling (Phil 2:12). It is not a group that meets, which I can visit if and when I choose. My very membership in that Body of Christ is solely dependent on my regular participation in the basic gathering of that Body...the Divine Liturgy. One can hardly say that he/she is a parishioner if attendance at the Divine Liturgy is sporadic, at best. If we wish to be part of the Body of Christ, then our membership must be nourished and sustained by the sacramental life of that Body. Regular reception of Holy Communion, regular participation in confession and unction are the *sine quo non* of Church membership! This leads us into the second component...

(2) The Canonical Component

If we are to be “parishioners in good standing” in the Orthodox Church, our entire life must come under the Lordship of Jesus Christ. This includes our marriages, and when tragically necessary, our divorces. Someone who wishes to be a “parishioner in good standing” must have their marriage blessed by the Orthodox Church. Often, we meet individuals who were married outside the Church, were married by their non-Orthodox spouse’s Church, or were married in a civil service by a Justice of the Peace. These individuals come to our offices seeking a letter of good standing, enabling them to serve as a best man or godparent at an Orthodox wedding or baptism. No other aspect of pastoral ministry causes as much pain and misunderstanding as this one canonical issue. **Please read this section carefully:** If you have been married in any venue outside of the Orthodox Church, you are not in canonical standing. **The ramifications of this are important. One who is not in canonical standing may not receive Holy Communion, may not serve as a Godparent and may not serve as a Koumbaro/Koumbara at a wedding, may not run or serve on the Parish Council or vote in a General Election!**

You must have your marriage blessed by the Church. One final note on the “blessing”. There is a great deal of misinformation regarding

the wedding blessing. One group of people assumed they had to have a large wedding with hundreds of people invited. Another group assumed that the "blessing" involved them coming to Church of a brief (3 minute) prayer which would "bless" their union. Beloved, when we "bless" a wedding which has occurred outside the Church, we conduct the entire wedding service... as if no wedding exists. That being said, one need not invite hundreds of guests to their wedding "blessing". A bride, groom and Koumbaro/Koumbara are all that is required.

We must now address the painful reality of divorce. When one marries in the Orthodox Church, the Bishop(Hierarch) issues the ecclesiastical permission to marry. When that marriage ends through divorce, the Bishop must once again issue the divorce decree. This is the process known as "ecclesiastical divorce". Until that ecclesiastical divorce is granted, one cannot be considered a parishioner(member) in good standing. Once again, this means that participation in the sacramental life of the Church is not possible. One who was married in the Orthodox Church and is now divorced civilly, cannot receive Holy Communion, or serve as a Godparent or Koumbaro/Koumbara at an Orthodox wedding or baptism, until they have received their ecclesiastical divorce.

There is a great deal of misperception regarding the ecclesiastical divorce process. It is neither punitive nor invasive. The clergy are not there to ask intimate questions or serve as a modern day "inquisition". The purpose of the ecclesiastical divorce is to determine whether or not the marriage can be saved. Let me add here, the Orthodox Church does not grant "annulments"... which essentially says that a marriage never took place. The Orthodox Church recognizes that divorce is a painful reality that must be met with compassion, understanding and love. The process of ecclesiastical divorce seeks to reconcile the partners together...and if that is no longer possible, reconcile the Orthodox spouse back to the Church. After the pastor informs the Bishop of his own attempts to reconcile the couple, the formal petition is sent to the Bishop. The Diocesan Bishop then convenes a "spiritual court" where three clergymen will attempt to effect a reconciliation or offer pastoral guidance and comfort. If the three priests agree that the marriage is hopelessly dissolved, they will send a recommendation to the Bishop to grant the ecclesiastical divorce. The entire process requires between one and two months.

(3) The Stewardship Component

The easiest of the three components of Church membership is the stewardship component. We have discussed Christian stewardship at length...and will continue to do so each year during stewardship month. For our purposes here, I will be a bit blunt and direct. If you attend a Greek Orthodox parish and enjoy the benefits of the ministries of that parish, it is your duty and obligation to support that

parish with your financial resources. I am stunned by the numbers of people who have attended this parish for years...and have never once considered their own obligation to sustain the community. Does that person ever consider the financial needs of the parish? Just how does that individual think the Church sustains itself? If you wish to be a parishioner (member) of St. George, you need to fulfill your financial responsibility, as well as your sacramental and canonical obligations.

Beloved in Christ, we often wait to address our standing in the Church until it becomes a necessity. I ask you to take some time now and consider your standing in the Church. If you have not fulfilled your annual dues for 2005 or for other years for that matter, now is the time to fulfill your obligation to the Church. If you were married outside the Orthodox Church, now is the time to have that marriage blessed. If you were married in the Orthodox Church and are divorced civilly(not ecclesiastically), now is the time to file for your ecclesiastical divorce. Begin the process now so that you may be restored to full communion and standing in the Orthodox Church. If you have become indifferent in your Church attendance and participation, now is the time to re-commit yourself to weekly attendance at the Divine Liturgy. Make an appointment today for Holy Confession. Begin to drink deeply from the rich springs of the Orthodox Liturgical life. Beloved in Christ, now is the time for each of us to no longer merely call ourselves "parishioners" of the Church...but truly "become" parishioners of the Church and active members of the Body of Christ.

Adapted from an article by Fr. James Gavrilos of St Mark Greek Orthodox Church Boca Raton, FL.