

**Earth and Sea**  
**Images of the Church for Every Age**  
Fr. John Shimchick

*The earth is the LORD's, and everything in it,  
the world, and all who live in it;  
for he founded it upon the seas  
and established it upon the waters. (Psalm 24:1-2)*

*Today earth and sea share the joy of the world, and the world has been filled with  
gladness.*

(Prayer of Patriarch Sophronios of Jerusalem from the Great Blessing of Water on  
Epiphany)

Walking along the shore in southern New Jersey this summer, I was moved by how it was that the ocean and the beach can bring pleasure to almost everyone. There were the youngest children up to the oldest adults, families, couples, teens, and those alone. Some like the children enjoyed running around, bounding into the waves, riding on boards, digging, and building castles. Two young ones – probably brother and sister – enjoyed sitting by the edge of the water and throwing handfuls of wet sand at each other: “Take that,” said the brother. “Oh, yeah. Then you take that,” replied his sister. Others like an older adult couple in front of me just sat for hours, saying few words to each other, moving their chairs only as the tide crept closer to them. Some simply preferred the compulsive yet comforting and cleansing release of the rhythm of the waves. Then there are those who are drawn by the overwhelming expression of power and awe that the ocean manifests, particularly in storms. There may be no other place where so many different ages and – in theory – races and backgrounds can all come together, each finding something of value and enjoyment, a place where they all can be renewed, transformed, and refreshed at every point of their lives. The shore exists as this place, both old and ever new.

While the analogy might not line up perfectly, I wondered why could not the Church – especially as the local parish – be able to offer all that is essential to those of every age as well? Why can't the parish be a vehicle of renewal, transformation, and refreshment for everyone? Why can't one experience here the mystery and awe of God's presence? St. Peter Damascene reminds us that, “If a man sees his sins as sands of the sea, this is a sign of a healthy soul.” Why can't the Church be the place where one realizes both the depths of one's sinfulness and finds healing waters which, like waves running up the beach, restore the original form and beauty? Why can't one learn within the Church, the reality found at the shore, that only those things built on a solid foundation can survive the relentless destruction of life's waves?

Of course, the Church can and often does reveal itself as all of these things. It knows what the shore and ocean teach, that the reality of life is not simply intellectual, but capable of being learned through the senses and experience – touching, speaking,

listening, watching, and even tasting. As the means by which we are prepared for and already experience God's Kingdom, the Church is like a "householder who brings out of his treasure things new and old" (Matthew 13:52). The Church is not just about rules and bylaws, power and decisions; God provides it to us for our renewal, our cleansing, and our salvation. Being such a place, the Church can also offer the experience of these things to everyone both young and old, at every stage of a person's life.

There are many intergenerational activities that can go on in the life of a parish to bring people together and allow them to feel welcome. The youth can be encouraged to participate in worship with others through serving, singing, taking collections, and cleaning the facility. There can be festivals and opportunities for working with one another. The young can create cards and meals, visiting seniors and the ill with carols, and other expressions to remind them, especially the homebound, that they are not forgotten. But there are other things, less easy to schedule and organize and less programmable, which the older members particularly can help the younger understand.

Often church life can sound like that brother and sister at the shore, throwing back and forth to each other a kind of verbal wet sand. "You take that. Oh, yeah, then you take that." But the older members can also demonstrate to the younger how one should act in church – not just how one should stand or make the sign of the cross, but how one should consider and talk about life in the community, other members, and community leaders including the pastor. Adults can model to the younger ones answers to questions found in every family, in church and at home: How can people who care about each other overcome conflict and disagreements? How can they get over disturbing and embarrassing moments and words said in anger? How can they learn to forgive each other?

In a world and culture where expressions of passion and love can be presented in reckless and fleeting ways through the media, the elderly can manifest to the young how profound and deeply satisfying real and long-lasting love can be. Here, where all signs of beauty and passion seem faded and nearly extinguished, the love one spouse shows in daily caring at home or visiting and feeding the other who is ill can teach an unforgettable lesson of how "two can become one." When loss occurs, especially when their love has been united to Jesus Christ, the lesson is taught more powerfully than in any sermon that "love is stronger than death."

In one sense, the intergenerational dynamics within the parish are rooted in this perspective of "the end," but not necessarily of death as the end. Here, Metropolitan Anthony Bloom reminds us of the need to dispel "the feeling that death is the worst that occur to a person." If death is not the worst thing, then what is?

Thirty years ago on a seminary choir trip an Orthodox priest told me that his work consisted primarily in trying to prepare his parishioners for the Kingdom of God, and having them in various ways respond – that they were not interested. It's not that they were necessarily not interested in "the Church," its culture, or programs. They would never stop being Orthodox Christians, coming to liturgical services, or helping at various

affairs and festivals. But they were just willing to go only so far; there were questions about themselves and God they were just not willing to ask, things they just didn't want to know. There were doors they were not willing to go through. It may well be that not wanting to know about God's Kingdom is that which is worse than death.

Yet, in every parish there are other examples and I have met them. There are those who know that the Gospel compels them to remember the poor and the lonely. They struggle themselves, yet seek to fulfill the message to forgive, knowing that it is the condition for their own forgiveness and healing. There are those among the homebound who know what is going on during the liturgy, even when they are not there, and alone before God, they remember and uphold the parish in prayer. In fact, it is often to these "prayer warriors" that the needy and wise will turn when they seek intercessory prayers for themselves. There are people who memorize and chew on the saving words of the Scriptures, the liturgical texts, and other prayers knowing that they are not only enriching but that they bind them to God and to the community in ways sickness and separation can never diminish.

Among all the objects of success and accomplishment, there is one thing that is needed which death itself cannot even take away (Luke 10:42). This life-lesson is one of the greatest gifts that a parish's older members can relay to its younger ones. Through three concentric stories, we are always trying to identify that needful thing: the Bible's essential vision of creation as good, fallen, and redeemed is proclaimed — particularly in the Gospels — in the context of God's Kingdom; the story of each person as seen from the perspective of another; and our own story. So within the parish, one hears the Story within the Scriptures and proclaimed in the Sacraments, and looks for its intersection in the lives of those within the community, learning from them, applying what one has learned: If this is what is needful and important, what has it meant to you, and what can it mean to me?

But the saving remembrance is also of how one is brought back in the End to the essential things made possible in the Beginning. Saints Kallistos and Ignatios put it this way: "The aim of the Christian life is to return to that perfect grace of the Holy and Life-giving Spirit, which was given to us from the beginning in divine baptism." Among the most important things in parish life is the proclamation that it is a life-giving place, where — from the moment of our baptism until our final breath — we continue to grow in wondering and understanding what that means for us. Within the parish, continually throughout our life, we refer back to the new life given to us in Baptism, and renewed in each reception of the Eucharist. When we gather, work, and meet, let this affirmation guide our efforts and decisions.

Finally, there is the hope that all of us in parish life, no matter what our age, might in some way, as St. Paul wrote to the Romans, "be mutually encouraged by each other's faith" (1:12). We will not all do this in quite the same way. The youngest children, by providing what Fr. Alexander Schmemmann used to call "holy noise," might remind us of what a silent parish, absent of children, would represent. The angst and uncertainty experienced and the provocative questions raised by our teens need gentle responses and

abiding love and patience. But the young can also be encouraged to channel their energy and passion in ways that can be helpful and revitalizing to the community. The angry and discontented need a chance to be heard; their listeners (particularly clergy) need to receive their pain not defensively, but lovingly and with humility. The older and mature members, having heard and seen it all, need to provide hope, stability, and the confidence that “we can get through this and everything.”

Victor Hugo once wrote, “there is fire in the eyes of the young, but there should be light in the eyes of the old.” For the parish to be a place that is receptive and life-giving to all, both things are necessary: fire and light, energy and wholeness. In this way, the parish can indeed be that place where all can come together, each finding something of value and enjoyment, a place where they all can be renewed, refreshed, and transformed throughout every point of their lives, ultimately each finding their place in God’s Kingdom.

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