



From Expectations to Mutual Love: The Relationship of the Clergy and Parish Family

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When a man and woman begin a relationship, they have some expectations. If each person fulfills the expectations most desired by the other, they continue to get to know one another better. If not, they go their separate ways or develop an unhealthy relationship, one marred by unmet expectations that create regular conflict.

If, on the other hand, the couple continues to grow a healthy relationship, they begin to move away from expectations, build trust and move toward genuine mutual love and shared hopes, trusting that basic and appropriate expectations of love, honor, fidelity, safety and respect are met.

Similarly, when a priest is first assigned to a community, both the parish *and* the priest (plus his wife and family) have expectations of one another. The parish rightly expects the priest to be a man of faith, good character, sound mind, a good manager of his household and blameless (principles found in the pastoral epistles of Timothy and Titus). Further, he is expected to administer the sacraments of the Church, live sacrificially, offer pastoral care and counseling, visit the sick, preach, teach and oversee the administration and ministries of the parish family. These are realistic and appropriate expectations for any parish priest.

The expectations for the presvytera and children are a bit more blurred. Certainly, she is to be a loving, faithful and supportive member of the parish family (similar to the other women in the parish family). Other expectations, however, vary greatly from parish to parish. Some expect the wife to jump

into roles of leadership in various ministries to fill in the gaps, while other parishes expect little of the presvytera. Children often experience the unrealistic expectation of being perfect, as they are in the spotlight and looked upon as role models for the other children. If they slip, they may become a subject of gossip in the parish family.

On the other hand, the priest and his family may enter the parish family with expectations of their own. They may presume the parish family will love and embrace them, accept and honor priestly authority, positively respond to ministry initiatives, attend worship regularly (and on time) and live lives with piety and faith.

Additionally, clergy families *and* parish families often have expectations of themselves, some of which are congruent with one another and others not. For instance, some clergy assume the responsibility of attending all events and meetings in the parish. If that is what the faithful are used to and want, all is fine. Sometimes, however, ministry teams and committees prefer to work more independently and see the priest's constant presence as one of micromanagement and control. Or some presvyteras may take on a responsibility in the parish, such as Church school director, out of obligation, since no one else will step forward. This decision may work well in some situations; in others, the presvytera may become resentful and/or the Church school staff may not accept her leadership, especially if difficulties arise.

Sometimes parish families get stuck in the "expectation game" and do not move beyond it, creating power plays and difficulties between the priest and his family and the parish family, thus limiting clergy and laity alike from uniting to become a whole and healthy family of faith. When these difficulties arise, gossip often ensues, and the parish family may

become divided. However, if those involved come together and respectfully and honestly dialogue with one another, the door opens for the growth of trust and understanding.

AN ALTERNATIVE PATH

As articulated above, we see that both clergy and laity have expectations of one another. Some are holy and right; others are unrealistic and misguided. Unfortunately, many remain unspoken until conflict arises, sapping energy and life from the parish family. Rather than reacting to conflict arising from unmet expectations clergy and their families and parish families have of one another, let us consider an alternative path, one of open and honest dialogue about expectations that will bear the fruit of mutual understanding and trust. Thus, when difficulties arise between the clergy and parish family—and they inevitably will—those involved will work toward resolution from a foundation of trust.

This alternative path is one of ongoing and respectful dialogue grounded in faith and obedience to God. It begins with the priest, parish council and ministry leaders discussing spoken and unspoken expectations of clergy (and their families) and laity for one another. Ultimately, it bears the fruits of mutual trust, understanding, and love. In the words of Fr. Alexander Schmemmann:

... there must exist within the Church the distinction of functions, of ministries that complete one another... They equally can fulfill their function only in complete obedience to God. It is the same obedience: to God and to the Church that establishes the harmony between clergy and laity, make them one body, growing into the fullness of Christ. ("Clergy and Laity in the Orthodox Church," 1959)

This "distinction of functions" in a life of obedience to God cuts to the core of the expectations. Unless we examine these together, misunderstandings and mistrust will continue. Below you will find some questions that promote respectful dialogue among clergy (and presvytera/children) and laity.

DISCUSSION STARTERS FOR CLERGY AND LAITY ON EXPECTATIONS

Clergy can pose the following questions to ministry leaders, ministry groups and parish council members to begin honest and open dialogue and hopefully lead to greater understanding and growth in mutual love. When possible, the presvytera may want to be part of these discussions.

1. How do you understand the role and responsibilities of the priest in the parish family?
2. How do you understand the relationship of the clergy family and the parish family?
3. What does the relationship of the priest and parish leadership look like?
4. What boundaries are appropriate for the priest and his family?
5. What are some unrealistic and misguided expectations priests (and their families) and parish families have of one another?
6. What does mutual respect look like, particularly in times of conflict?
7. What does a model parish family look like? What does a model clergy family look like?

PERSONAL REFLECTION

As a presvytera of thirty-five years, I have learned much from the people God has brought into my life and the many opportunities for building relationships. Some parishioners remain acquaintances in relationship defined by my place in the parish as presvytera; with others, I have developed mutual friendships with varying levels of closeness.

No matter what the relationship, when my heart is open to seeing the face of Christ in my brother or sister, I experience the love of Christ as I both give and receive His love in encountering the other.

As humans, God has created us to love and to be loved. For the clergy and parish family, this exchange of the love of Christ has some distinct blessings and challenges, given the leadership role of the priest in the parish and the many layers of relationships the priest (and by extension his family) has with individuals and families and with the parish family as a whole.

By the grace of God and our personal and communal life in Him, may clergy and laity alike grow together in communion with Christ and one another for the building up of His Body.

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