

“‘C’ and ‘E’ Christians”

On Easter Sunday (Christ’s Resurrection), there is the highest church attendance on a single day in the United States. Closely behind is Christmas (Nativity of Christ). The third-greatest is Mother’s Day. Why is it that there are people who go to church only on Christmas and Easter? Possibly, this allows them for the rest of the year to identify themselves as “Christians”. It is comparable to sports fans who only watch the playoffs and then say for the rest of the year they are fans of one of the teams.

This identification allows them to tell family and friends that they attend this particular Church and are members of this particular denomination. This will keep people, especially family, from asking, “why don’t you go to church?” According to Pew Research there are three common reasons that people don’t “go to church”: 1. They practice their faith in other ways; 2. They don’t believe; 3. They have not found a church they like.

A probable reason they attend on Easter and Christmas can be “to participate with the family”. Or it may be a vestige of their Faith. They may be open to another way or place to practice their faith. It is for this reason that the Church should welcome these Christians on these holy days. There is still something that drew them, and brought them on these important feasts. Hopefully, it is a statement that their faith has not been lost but is just lying under the surface.

It may be just the spirit of the season. Joy, hope, and love are in the air, (ask Hallmark). They are seasons of awe. So, it may have something to do with the grandeur, the awe-inspiring services that are offered. Flowers and trees, bright candles, the smells, and bells are all in greater abundance. These sensual experiences can bring back memories of past celebrations. The joy expressed by the community can make them feel more at home. Some are there only because they come home for the holidays and then help them believe this Church is their own spiritual home. The Holy Spirit may move some to find it another attempt to get closer to God. It is for this reason that these holy days should be considered as an important opportunity for evangelization.

There is no need to be embarrassed by evangelization. It was—and is—the command of our Lord to go, teach, and baptize. Following Christ’s Ascension, forty days after Pasha, we have a period of ten days before the greatest day of conversion recorded in Scripture. On Pentecost 30,00 people were called and baptized to be Christians. According to the Acts of the Apostles, people were attracted by the sound of the wind. The words preached by Peter changed their hearts. The people who were converted came from many different nations. Today the people who attend Divine Liturgy may also come from many different communities. The wind of the Spirit brought them in. The service can be the words of Peter, and the community can be the apostles surrounding them in faith. Each church community can be like that first Pentecost, especially at Christmas and Easter.

Each church may not be able to provide a strong wind the whole neighborhood can hear. They can, perhaps, provide the movement of the Holy Spirit within the members, inspiring heartfelt prayers and angelic singing. People can feel when they have left earth and entered into heaven.

So, once we get them into the church, how do we inspire them to stay? The best example in the history of the Ukrainian Church is found in the *Chronicles of Nestor*. Representatives of the Prince of Kyiv, Volodymyr, went to Constantinople to see if Byzantine Christianity was suitable for Ukraine. There can be no doubt that the local Church pulled out all the stops for this delegation. So, if a church today is expecting to have visitors from far and wide, they too should pull out all the stops. That means that the young children who are visiting their grandparents should not see an old dusty church. It should be clean and shiny. Strangers in town should be welcomed as family, and the locals should reserve no pew. The congregation should be attired as if it were welcoming a king.

On Christmas we celebrate the birth of the King of kings. Just as the shepherds in Bethlehem were awed by the singing of the angels, visitors and locals should be awed by the beauty of the service. But even more, awe-inspiring than the beauty of the service, the sacred environment should exude the Presence of Christ, our King, and our God, in the Eucharist. It is essential to reaffirm that the “communion” one receives is the Real Presence of Christ, our God. It is not just a piece of bread dipped in wine. It is divinity Itself. The bow before receiving communion is the humble bow before the King. It is not the bow to see if our shoes are shined. It should be done with the fear of the Lord. The making of the sign of the cross should be felt as our profession of faith in the Presence of Christ whom we receive. As we open our mouths, we are opening our hearts. The arms crossed in front of us are our loving embrace of the God who loves us. It should be such a moving event in our lives that we would never want to be without it.

Sadly it seems in our church, people have come not to miss the Body and Blood of Christ when they are away. How can people stop going to communion when they believe it is a moment in time that they share with God Almighty? It is God calling out to them as He called out to Moses at the Burning Bush, and he approaches with fear of God and with faith. A renewed devotion within our churches can lead to greater participation of members and call back those who have fallen away. It should be the hope of our hierarchs that all of our churches inspire the love of Christ in the Eucharist. That our members, whenever they may be in the world, will search out our Church to partake of these Holy Mysteries. And when we are away and when it is not possible for us to attend the Divine Liturgy our hearts ache and yearn to receive.