

Why Doesn't Our Church Take a Stand on Contemporary Issues?

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We want the Church to make explicit statements about our involvement in a world that is immersed in sin and death – hoping to justify our every action. But actually, the Church cannot provide a panacea for all the ills of society! What is the responsibility of the Church? Knowledge of God – the presence of God in the World, to put every individual in communion with the living reality of Christ and His Kingdom.

Christ was in the world but not of it. So, too, the Church is in the world but not of it. The Church is above existence. We enter into it to have more communion with this Being Who is responsible for everything that is. And then we go out into the world and testify in our own individual ways.

Action in the world depends upon our individual commitment. We are individually responsible for our actions in the world. How do we make our decisions? We have to make our decisions on the basis of our experiences in the Faith. It is up to every generation to acquire the Holy Spirit, assimilate the Faith, and express it in contemporary terms. How can we do this? By being an active communicant and living the Faith.

All of us act in the world. No one of us lives in a vacuum. We eat, we shop, we vote, and we have contacts with other people. All of this makes us, in a real sense, political, economic and social beings. Yet, though we are this, we are as Orthodox baptized, and it is this reality that must underlie and determine the other aspects of our lives in the world.

Our baptism is in a real sense an ordination. We are ordained by God to do His work in the world. Christianity has a great deal to do with the world, precisely because Christians have to do with the world. The Church's baptism is God's gift of power to fight evil and to accomplish good – imagine, God promises us the strength even to love those who hate us; and he expects us to do just that. We are called upon to fight the devil in all his manifestation, not only in our own personal existence, but in the world and, more specifically for us, our American society.

Traditionally monks and nuns “left” the world, not because they didn't like it or were afraid of it, but to fight evil directly in their personal lives. We must sometimes fight evil on a different plane. Surely the devil is as much at work in our black ghettos, in the hunger suffered by many living in the midst of plenty, and in the insanity and hate of war, as He is in the monasteries of Christendom.

Orthodoxy means “right belief” and if this is so then Orthodox must imply *Orthopraxy* – right action. We Orthodox have always been great on action. Let's think for a moment about the way we express our faith in the liturgy – kissing icons, bowing, prostrating, censuring, processing, singing, etc. This necessity for social action to flow from the faith is made abundantly clear by two Epistles 1 John and James. (Before we go any further let's

read them.) A faith that does not change the way a person acts in the world is effectively no faith at all.

What, then, does this Orthodox action mean? Does it mean asking ourselves what Christ would do if He were in a given situation? I think not. I think that this approach misses the point. More and more, especially in the last five years, American young people have assumed a political, social and economic activism which goes beyond individual action and involves working through organizations. I am not here suggesting that we all must suddenly go out and become “political.” What I am suggesting is that, whether we like it or not, we are political, social, and economic. What we must realize is the failure to take action on an action itself. There are people who are opposed to American’s involvement in Vietnam, yet refuse to demonstrate against their government because they don’t want to get involved! That very attitude is a position; a political decision has been made to lend oneself to something which they consider evil. The refusal to act to foster justice for all men in our society is a stand for racism.

We Orthodox have always believed in a certain personalism. Each of us is responsible for the Faith; the Holy Spirit works through the entire community, not just through one bishop or the Bible. The action of the Holy Spirit presupposes that we will be open to Him. The Church does not give us all the answers; God expects us to act on the basis of the life and teachings we have within the Church. We must study the history of Christian action in the Church. We must involve ourselves in prayer. Hopefully, we will acquire a certain understanding of what Christianity is all about in the world. In a real sense, the Gospel must become incarnate in the world in a given historical situation through us. Such is the nature of Orthodox personalism.

So the question is asked, “Why doesn’t the Church take stands on current issues?” Well, the fact is that the Church does stake such stands, but very rarely officially. More often the Church takes these stands through her people, the faithful. This is why the teaching responsibility of the Church is so important. The quality of the stand taken by Christians and the faithfulness of this stand to the teaching of the Gospel is dependent upon how well the Church has preached Our Lord’s message. Occasionally, the hierarchy of the Church must take a stand on a certain issue, but this issue must very clearly be a moral issue, for example, on Hitlerism or racism.

How then can we bring ourselves to the point where we can act on issues? We must know the Gospel and actively participate in the Sacraments. The Gospel offers us ethical criterion. How should we act? We must feed the hungry, clothe the naked and visit the sick. We must act and live as if all men were our brothers and worthy of all the good things which we want for ourselves. Our Lord is clear. We must, however, keep in mind that to accomplish these things we might have to involve ourselves in social, political or economic actions. We might have to judge our government, system, or the status quo. Whose interests it is serving? Does it serve a small clique of people with money, or does it serve the just need of all people? We shall admit that no government is perfect; but demand that ours be as perfect as possible in a world that has seemingly given itself to much evil.

Let us be clear before going further. We are not speaking of a paradise; young people are always accused of being utopian. We are assured by Our Lord that no perfect society will be established, short of the Kingdom of God. Yet we are called to live as if it were possible to establish such a society. We know that the poor and sick will always be with us, yet this does not exempt us from trying to do away or lessen the suffering produced by poverty and sickness.

A man, let us say, has been attacked by a gang and is lying in the street bleeding and perhaps dying. What do we do? Do we stand over the man and say “get up, you’re all dirty?” But he lies there; he can’t get up! Do we then walk away lamenting how disgusting it is to see that dirty man “tolerating” his condition in the gutter? Do you know there are many people who believe that black Americans live in ghettos because they like living that way! No, the answer is to get down and pick the man up and do all that is needed to restore him; such was the response of that Samaritan man in the Gospel. There is nothing utopian about this!

We should allow no one to tell us that as Christians who are longing for the Kingdom of God we are exempt from political or social action. It is precisely this action that in many cases will determine whether we are worthy of our Lord’s Kingdom. We are in virtue of our baptism responsible for good and evil in our society; we are responsible to try to build not just society, but a more just society. We can never allow the excuse that because the world will never be perfect, we should do nothing. We must attempt to make our society more Christian than it is. This is precisely our responsibility as Christians in the world – to act in terms of the Gospel message and the new life that our Lord continually offers to us in the Holy Eucharist.

We are ordained to be fighters for God in a world that, to a large extent, has given itself to evil and injustice. There is a struggle going on and all of us are part of it. It is a spiritual struggle which manifests itself in concrete human situations – poverty, exploitation, war, hunger, loneliness. In this struggle, no one is an observer because no one observes life; everyone is involved. The decision to be made is on which side we will take our stand.