

The Story of Our Church

Introduction

In the experience of most Americans today, Church is perceived primarily as an institution or organization dispensing services. While not a business per se, it is seen as being in competition for 'customers' with other, similar organizations. The success of a church depends on the degree to which it meets the needs of its patrons.

Little wonder, then, that the Church in the experience of teenagers is similar. Since the main business of teens is making friends, a church is judged successful if one's friends are part of it. If they are not, if the teens' social community is elsewhere, they will perceive their church – or the Church – as part of their parents' world, but not theirs: "You like brand X, I like brand Y."

The approach of the Tradition is very different. The New Testament, the Fathers and other sources of faith see the Church in organic terms. It is the Body of Christ: irrevocably connected with Him and therefore filled with His Spirit. It is primarily an organic communion, not a voluntary organization. We are a part of it as we are one with Christ, from baptism unto all eternity. Its story is of necessity our story.

The chief aim of this course, then, is to bring the students to see themselves as connected to their Church and to identify it as their own. Stress is laid on its direct continuity with the Old Testament and with the apostles, with its identity as Eastern and Byzantine, and with its mission as ecumenical and countercultural. By the end of this course your students should be aware of the Church's self-understanding and appreciate their connectedness, not only with the Head of the Body, but also with this particular incarnation of that Body, realized in their own local Church.

Chapter One - Session One

THE STORY OF OUR CHURCH

How one approaches religion indicates something of one's idea of the core of its being. Is it chiefly an unfolding of philosophy, of doctrine, of mission or morality? For the Eastern Christian, worship is the heart of religion, the center of the Church's life. Religion is not oriented to the intellectual acceptance of propositions about God, but the active relating to Him which is worship.

Perception that God exists and the actualizing of that perception in worship is basic to humanity. Later awareness and worship of God was experienced in a revealed, if provisional, way in the Old Testament, fulfilled on earth in the worship of the New Testament and now foreshadows the perfect worship of the age to come.

- Aim:** To help the students see religion/worship as a natural drive of mankind.
- Materials. Needed:** Index cards, pens and copies of "*Come Let Us Worship*" and Handouts A and B for each.
- Preliminaries** Take the time for any introductions. Spend some moments updating one another on new developments in one another's lives or engaging in an icebreaker, such as the following:
- in the upper left hand corner, their favorite room in the house
 - in the lower left hand corner, the best thing that happened to them this summer
 - In the lower right hand corner, something they think others in the group don't know about them
 - In the upper right hand corner, what they hope to be doing five years from now
- Then indicate the topic and general overview of the course as you will be presenting it: the story of the development of the Church from Old Testament times to the story of your own parish church. Present the text for this course, "*Come Let Us Worship*," and indicate the chapters you will be using, referring to the table of contents.

Encourage the students to read the text interactively, by making their comments in the margins. There can be comments in their own words, of course, but the following standardized signs can effectively be used for gauging comprehension:

- + I agree
- I disagree
- ! I didn't know that!
- ? What does this mean?

Point out that the course will also include an Action Project, incorporating the theme of Church History in a practical way. Note that you will discuss this in more detail later in the session.

Upon completing the preliminaries, begin the following lesson, or spend the remaining time reading the first chapter in "*Come Let US Worship*," noting their observations with the signs indicated above.

Opening Discussion: Conduct a discussion on the students' experience of worship, based on the following questions:

What do you think about worship?

What have been your best/worst experiences in worship?

Why do you worship God?

Do you worship God only when or because you feel like it?

Do you ever worship except in church?

Where do you think your ideas about worship came from?

Why do you think people worship God?

Transition: In our society many people ignore religion. We have so many material advantages and possibilities that life can be so busy that people are satisfied. Others are restless and know that material things are not enough. Which view is the most common one in this country: in the world? In history?

Presentation: Develop a presentation including the following points:

- 1 *Young People Hunger for the Spiritual* - In the fifties and sixties young people began looking for spiritual fulfillment in drugs, Far Eastern religions, psychic phenomena, etc. They were dissatisfied with what they knew, but there was also something within them which wasn't satisfied with a life which was only concerned with material things. They wanted to reach out to something "spiritual". Many times they were fooled into thinking that simply sensual experiences were spiritual, but it still shows that they were looking for more.
- 2 *All Mankind Is Religious* Most people today – as they have done all through history – worship in some way. In the world today there are approximately:
 - 1 billion + Christians
 - 800+ million Muslims
 - 600 + million Hindus
 - 200 + million Buddhists
 - 17 + million Jews
- 3 An Example of 'Natural Religion' - Have the students read the first four paragraphs on page five "*Come Let Us Worship*" and annotate the margin with the codes previously indicated..

Distribute Handout A and compare the following letter of the nineteenth century Russian Saint, Theophan the Recluse with the above textbook selection.

"You ask, . . . 'Aren't there people who don't know God?— These people do not know the true God, but know that He exists – everyone confesses this. Believing that there is a God, and wishing to define more precisely that He exists, they have gone astray and called God that which is not God: some call the sun God, others the moon or stars, others say something else. Not everyone, however, has strayed so grossly . . ."

“Of the Eastern peoples the Persians and Indians, both Asian and American, have the most elevated concept of God. (The Greeks and Romans belittled God, so to speak.) The American Indians, for example, call God the Universal Spirit – invisible, all-embracing. This is a very lofty notion, and in and of itself, it cannot be carried further than this.”

From a letter of St. Theophan the Recluse

St. Theophan explains the rise of pagan religions as people using their imagination to describe God (“wishing to define more precisely that He exists”). Why could they not but make mistakes in this attempt?

St. Theophan sees the American Indians as having the loftiest natural religion. What does he mean by saying, “in and of itself, it cannot be carried further than this”?

- 4 *Atheism or Agnosticism and the Scientific Mind* - Many Europeans and Americans in the last two centuries have said that science – particularly the theory of evolution – ‘proves’ that there is no God. You may wish to discuss the way creation is presented in your students’ schools; is evolution a theory or a dogma” Are scientifically minded people prone to accept the possibility of life on other planets, for which there is no evidence, while denying the existence of God because it is scientifically unproven? You may wish to discuss the article Making Room for God (Handout B) on this theme.

- Response:
- a Discuss with the students where they fit into the human story of religion: If you believe there is a God, what do you do about it? How do you show your belief?
 - b Discuss this statement: “The one who knows that God exists, cannot but worship Him.”
 - c Contrast with the feelings on worship expressed at the beginning. How can we grow in an appreciation of and an ability to worship?

(Note that there are a variety of ways to participate more actively in liturgical worship (reading, singing, serving, etc.). In some parishes teenagers are regularly involved in these activities. In others they may take up these responsibilities on a periodic "Youth Sunday". It may be opportune to discuss your parish practice and begin including time for preparation of these roles.)

Summary: Religion is a basic human inclination. We are naturally worshipping people. You cannot be a fully developed and mature person unless you worship God in some way.

This is why people all through history have tried to understand God. Of all these human attempts, the American Indians, were the most successful because they saw God as a universal and spiritual being.

Fortunately, we do not have to rely on natural, human efforts to discover God. More of that next time.

Action: Indicate the specific project you will undertake or describe the several listed below and have the group discuss and then vote on which one interests them:

Project A – The students will compile a history of the parish from written records, (dedication books, bulletins, etc.) as well as interviews with older parishioners.

Project B - The students will participate in making a presentation about the Eastern Churches to a group of students from another church. This will involve arranging a visit and determining what topics would be new or interesting for the group in question as well as planning and conducting the presentation.

Conclusion: St. Paul described how God had called Him to be a Christian long before he could have imagined it: *"He who had set me apart before I was born, and had called me through His grace, was pleased to reveal His son to me. . ."*

Gal 1:15-16) Has he called us in the same way?

In the Icon Corner pray spontaneously expressing the following ideas:

Faith in God,

Adoration of God, and

Thanksgiving for His gifts