



Fr. David R. Smith

I'm the pastor of St. Sophia's Greek Orthodox Church in Syracuse, New York. Presbyteria Donna and I have four children, all married, and one grandchild. I'm the author of three books of non-fiction, and my first novel will be released by St. Innocent press this year.

### "Addressing Boredom"

I'll start with some pictures.

Picture a clergy meeting at a national event. The clergy wait at tables, chatting with one another. The bishop approaches the lectern and begins to talk. After he speaks for two or three minutes, I look around and notice that everyone at my table, every single priest sitting near me, has his phone in his hand, and his eyes on it. Every one.

Here's a similar picture. I'm celebrating the Divine Liturgy, and I turn around to bless the people. There is a man seated in the balcony who I know well, and all I can see is the top of his head. At the end of the liturgy and I say something to him, forgive me, but I get a little angry with him. As he takes the antidoron, I describe to him what I will do with his phone if I see him looking at it during the liturgy again. I feel bad about it later, but the upside is he hasn't looked at his phone during the liturgy since that day, at least that I've seen.

And one more picture: for many years I did children's sermons after the gospel reading in the Divine Liturgy. I preach the regular sermon at the end, because it gives more time for Sunday school. I would speak to the kids for, at the most, 5 minutes after the gospel. But I don't do the children's sermon anymore - can you imagine what happened? Two things. First, parents keep bringing their children to church late. In fact, in my thirty years as a priest, I've noticed that families come to church later and later. I even have a name for it - tardy creep. After I had done the children's sermons for a few years, it got to the point that I had no children in the church at the time of the gospel. None. For communion, perhaps thirty or forty. But at the gospel? Crickets. And second, my parish did a survey some years back, and many of the people who wrote in the comment section of the survey said they didn't like the children's sermons because they made the liturgy too long.

Now, my task today is to speak to the issue of boredom. I'm here because I've written a book called "Help, I'm Bored in Church." The structure of the book has a numerical theme, the chapters are: six reasons you may find church boring, five ways of looking at your priest, four ways of serving the church, three kinds of waiting, two kinds of prayer, and the one thing you need. I started with

the fact that everyone gets bored in church. Everyone. But the wise among us address the problem, and find ways that make our time in church pleasurable. What do the unwise do? They sit there in misery. They wonder what else they could be doing. Their minds wander. They come to church later and later, because a half hour of misery is better than an hour of misery.

Who am I talking about? Not children! It's the adults that do these things! They don't want to come to church, so they come as late as they dare. They don't want to pay attention, so they take out their phones. I have never seen a young person looking at his phone in church, but I've seen more than one adult doing that.

The question today is: how do we as parents keep our children from getting bored in church? The first answer is to look to ourselves. Are you bored in church? Do you go late because, well, I don't know why? The fact that children are brought to church late conveys something to them about how important church is to the family. It says the church is not important. It says the church needs me more than I need the church. It says that church is boring. And whereas we may feel compelled to go to church, something in our family history compels us to endure what we've come to accept as misery, those feelings will not be conveyed to our children, or grandchildren. Boredom will be the only feeling that rises to the surface. Why would they continue to go to church after they come to an age where they can refuse?

We must look to ourselves. In my book, I say if you're cold you put on a coat and if you're bored you should look for a solution to that as well. For some people, it means finding something to do in church: sing in the choir, serve in the altar, sell candles, whatever. But as we grow in our faith, it means that we find our need for silence and stillness. We learn to enter into the liturgy, to be fed by the liturgy. When we find this oasis of stillness in the church, we also find that to be away from that, even for a few minutes, is a kind of starvation.

Let me share some words from Metropolitan Hierotheos Vlachos: Something happens that seems strange to most people, but is natural for those who consciously brace hesychia. Although they are present at the Divine Eucharist and are aware through their senses and their reason of everything that is going on, they are listening at the same time to the noetic faculty in their heart, where the Holy Spirit prays without ceasing: "Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me." In other words, there are two liturgies. One is the external liturgy of the Divine Eucharist, where the bread and wine are changed into the Body and Blood of Christ in the Holy Spirit. The other is the inner liturgy or eucharist, where they experience uncreated worship and the spiritual priest of divine grace celebrates. There is no break between the two liturgies; both are accomplished with full awareness. The Holy Spirit changes the bread and wine into Christ's Body and Blood, and the same Holy Spirit activates noetic prayer in the altar of the heart."

The first answer to boredom is for adults to address the problem of boredom that they themselves have. We do this when we learn to search for stillness, and then convey the search for stillness to our children. This is not easy, it's never been easy. Ask any teacher. Children's lives are naturally chaotic, because they haven't learned the patterns of life, of interaction, of satisfaction. Consequently, to sit quietly during a liturgy, and to do it every week, takes practice and discipline. But that's the key, practice. My goodness, children get bored sitting through a three hour sporting event, but when the family conveys that it's important, the kids learn to accept the burden of loyalty.

Let me give you another picture, a picture that is repeated often in the church. Someone who doesn't come to church at all brings a child to take communion. The child probably hasn't been to church since he was baptized, and so what happens? He's terrified. Someone has taken him to a place he doesn't recognize, it smells funny and he's being told to be quiet, then he's taken up to the front where a grim looking man tries to give him something on a spoon. It's no wonder this picture might be mistaken for a boxing match.

Children learn loyalty to the institutions that the family deems important. If church is one of those places, then boredom will be a problem with a solution. If church is not important, and unyielding boredom is the character of the church that parents convey, children respond accordingly.

Brothers and sisters, we do not address the subject of boredom with the phrase "kids these days." A more appropriate phrase might be "adults these days." So I leave you with this question: how will each of us address the problem of being bored in church in our own lives?

My publications:

Mary, Worthy of all Praise (2004, Conciliar Press/Ancient Faith Publishing)

Christianity and Pleasure (2008, Regina Orthodox Press)

Help, I'm Bored in Church (2013, Ancient Faith Publishing)

The Saint Outside the Gate, a novel (2020, St. Innocent Press)

Suggested Reading:

Hesychia and Theology by Metropolitan of Nafpaktos Hierotheos (especially the last chapter, "Hesychastic Elements in the Divine Eucharist")