



The Numbers Game

Numbers. They tell us many things: the weather, our grades, scores; not to mention prices, stocks, calories, our speed, the time, the date.... Just about everything.

We use them in church as well. How many times have we been asked: How big is your church? How many stewards do you have? What's your weekly average attendance? In responding I sometimes wonder what these numbers truly reveal. Can the success of a parish – the state of a parish – be measured by the amount of people who attend liturgy Sunday mornings? In a way, I suppose, one of the guidelines given to us by Christ when He established His Church is number based: “where two or three are gathered in my name” (Matt. 18:20). Admittedly, there is no hint of a divine commission here that we obsess over any specific number of people. No, it is more definitive than anything else, revealing the nature of the Church as community. At another place, however, Christ takes it a step further when He actually gives His commission to “go and make disciples of all nations” (Matt. 28:19). Yet, even here, where everyone is called, it is still not a matter of quantity. After all, it's easy to fill the pews with people, bodies, numbers. A disciple is a different matter for it suggests one who is disciplined.

So then, are numbers important? In a way, yes. They're important because we're all important to God. And they're important to the church just as well but not in the way we might think. The church's numbering system doesn't fit in the mindset of our consumer society where the customer is always right and must therefore be pleased so they keep coming back. Or, to put it more bluntly: the church doesn't need us, we need the church.

It was on this very topic of numbers and church attendance that I pondered during Lent as I commiserated with a fellow priest over the poor attendance we had that morning for Presanctified. The same could be said for weekday liturgies or even the Sundays of summer. Is it really important how many people come? Does it say anything about our faith? If that were the case what would the stadium-sized churches of TV evangelists say about their faith? No, if anything it reveals something about us. Pascha was a beautiful day. Churches everywhere were filled. So was ours. And as parishioners filed out of church one by one into the sunny day, to the sound of children laughing and the chatter of friends and family coming together, church numbers came to mind again. Truth be told, the church filled with people didn't stir in me any feelings of success, an accomplishment to pride myself in. But there was a joy, one felt not only by me but by everyone there. It is not in the numbers themselves but in the fact we're all there. We've all been invited and the church calls us each week to that sacred gathering. Why we don't see those numbers every Sunday is because it takes more than just a warm feeling to bring us to church – it takes discipline.

To that very discipline, dear readers, have we all been called. And in all of life's calculations and numberings it is that very calling which is the only one that counts!