

“Onboarding” New Orthodox Families

— Fr. Matthew Thurman

A same general approach can be taken to welcoming visitors to a parish and “onboarding” them into the life of the parish. The general approach is specifically adjusted, depending upon whether someone is a non-Orthodox inquirer or a current Orthodox Christian. What is described below is this process specifically tailored to Orthodox Christians who are new to the area and your parish:

At Initial Visit/Sunday Divine Liturgy

- Especially in smaller parishes and missions, it is easy to notice visitors on a given Sunday.
- When there are visitors at Sunday Divine Liturgy, **generally** acknowledge them during announcements, extend an invitation to stay for coffee hour, and express that you would like to personally, individually greet them at that time.
- After finishing Liturgy (blessing cross, consuming the chalice, removing vestments, etc.), your first priority is to greet visitors. Introduce yourself by name. Ask if they are new to the area, etc. In such conversations, you will quickly glean if they are simply traveling through the area, an inquirer, or an Orthodox family that is new to the area and looking for a parish home.
- Tell them that your practice is to meet with all visiting families over coffee at a local coffee shop during the week. This provides a neutral context to have a one-on-one meeting with them. Most visitors are open to this possibility. Get their basic contact information (phone number and/or email address) to follow up.
- Introduce them to current parishioners who have similar circumstances/interests and let the visitors enjoy coffee hour.

After the Initial Visit

- Within the first few days after their visit (ideally Monday morning), contact visitors to schedule time to meet for coffee.

Over Coffee

Most of the following are discussion points to have with new visitors while having coffee with them:

- Ask about their background. What brought them to the area? What do they do professionally? What parish are they coming from? What has been their past involvement in church? What grades are their children in in school?
- Give a **brief** introduction of who you are as the priest (your family background, your theological education, how many years you have served the parish, etc.)
- Give a **brief** profile of your parish, its programs, and the overall feel/direction of the parish.
- Offer to answer any questions they may have about the parish, yourself, or concerns about future participation in the parish.

- Offer to add them to the parish announcements email list. Indicate that you send a few emails a week focused on upcoming services and activities.
- Offer to schedule a house blessing for them to help them settle into their new home.

After Meeting Over Coffee

- Send the visitor a quick email, thanking them for meeting over coffee. If there are things that you discussed over coffee (like scheduling their house blessing or adding them to the parish email list), include that as follow-up in your email.
- Follow up with the visitor weekly, especially if they miss a Sunday with a low key form of communication like a text, a quick phone call, or (if necessary) an email. Ideally, your check-in should be something that they can quickly respond to and acknowledge.

Becoming Members of the Parish & “Onboarding”

In my experience, conversations with Orthodox families about becoming members of the parish play out in different ways. I’ve experienced families who have shown up after one visit and tell me they have decided they want to join the parish. I’ve had other families tell me they want to visit other area parishes before deciding which parish they want to make home. I’ve had other families tell me that they appreciated visiting our parish, but (for whatever reason) that they aren’t interested in being a part of our parish.

Usually, if a family has had some conversations with you and regularly return to Sunday Liturgy, they decide to join the parish and express that desire on their own. Once a family has done that, the following steps are the approach I take to “onboarding” an Orthodox family into the life of the parish:

“Onboarding” Steps

- When they have indicated they want to be members of the parish, reach out to the priest at their previous parish and confirm the "transfer." While there is no uniform practice of “membership” and “transfers” among Orthodox jurisdictions, most priests appreciate being contacted and know that a family that has moved away from their parish has joined a new parish.
- Get all demographic information for the family: family members names, home address, phone numbers, email addresses. Add this information to your contacts list and the parish directory.
- Get all birthdays, anniversaries, and name days. Add all family dates to the parish calendar so that they can be acknowledged/celebrated in the bulletin and at Sunday announcements when they come up.
- Add them to the parish census.
- If they haven't been to church in several months/years, encourage them to come to confession (mileage may vary on this point, depending upon their past formation and experience of confession).

- Have a follow-up discussion with them about their past parish involvement and how they see fitting into the life of your parish. Connect them with the appropriate ministry leaders in the parish.
- Provide them with stewardship information, including a pledge form for the remainder of the year. Discuss briefly what the parish's overall approach to stewardship/pledging is. The family may bring up stewardship early on in the process, but I typically don't bring it up until after they have said they want to be a part of the parish. Give their completed pledge form to the parish treasurer.
- Schedule with the family a Sunday in the near future to formally receive them at the beginning of Divine Liturgy. Once you have scheduled a date, announce to the parish in the weekly announcements that the family will be formally received into the parish.
- Use the "Reception of Orthodox Faithful Transferring From Another Parish" service to formally receive the family at the beginning of Sunday Divine Liturgy. This brief service publicly acknowledges (1) the commitment the family has made to being a part of the parish and (2) the parish's responsibility to support the new family as a part of the parish.
- Follow up, follow up, follow up. Show the family that they haven't been forgotten once they join the parish. Demonstrate that they are now part of the family.