

Orthodox Parishes and Neighborhood Identity

What Do We Convey to Our Neighbors?

Curiously Colorful? Or Open, Hospitable and Inviting?

The Philadelphia Inquirer recently offered an article (no longer available on line) about the insular state of Philadelphia's many inner city Orthodox Churches. One important quote in the article came from a local person who said he would "Love to have a conversation with the Orthodox, but I'm not sure how to start it. That's the missing piece, the engaging piece . . . reaching out to the community, saying what you're about, and the community reaching back." The man wanted to talk to us -and nobody was listening.

Recently an article with a similar theme appeared in the **New York Times**. It described a procession marking the Great Feast of the Dormition at a Malankara [Indian] Orthodox parish in suburban Long Island. [Malankaran Christians trace their origins to the missionary efforts of Saint Thomas. They are a part of the Oriental Christian Tradition.]

The Neighbors: Fascination & Nonchalance

The article quotes neighbors observing the procession. The comments offer interesting insight into how they perceive the parish, its faithful, and ultimately its mission.

"...neighborhood residents say they look forward to the procession because it is practically the only time when the people of the congregation venture outside, not counting getting in and out of their cars."

"If you didn't actually see this with your own eyes, and some people around here haven't, you might think I was making it up.... I mean it is so rococo, wonderful, Hindu-esque, with the flower petals, the girls holding the decorative parasols - everything but the elephants."

"...the congregation and its parade have assumed a mysterious, almost mythical status..."

"Usually they're very quiet people.... This is the only day we hear anything from them at all."

"people watched with a mixture of fascination and neighborly nonchalance as the procession made its way around the block."



No disrespect is intended toward the people of this parish. Malankara Indian Christians are consistently pious, knowledgeable, and zealous. The customs described in the article are not many generations removed from those of Eastern Orthodox or Roman Catholic communities. [Paschal processions in most Orthodox parishes consistently give rise to neighborhood curiosity.] The neighbors' reactions and descriptions, however, speak volumes with regard to how "open" they perceive the parish and its involvement in the immediate, broader community.

A Good Question

When, in our own parish life, someone asks the good question, "How do the neighbors perceive our parish and its involvement in and outreach/ministry to the neighborhood", the answer we DO NOT want is, as noted by the Times, "across the street, some people sat on their porches, glancing occasionally over the tops of their newspapers at the passing parade."

If we are interested in sharing "what we are about" as the fellow from Philadelphia mentioned, the line between "curiously colorful" and "hospitable, open and inviting" - as perceived by the neighbors-- is important to understand.