



The Greek Star

The Voice of Chicago's Hellenic Community

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Letter to Parish Council Stirs Passionate Debate on Homosexuality and the Church

Note: The following article is a perspective by Jim Vail and therefore does not necessarily espouse the opinions of this newspaper's editorial board.



By Jim Vail

Greg Pappas is no stranger to stirring things up. He can be described as a mover and a shaker in the Greek American community with a touch of controversial flair.

The marketing specialist will either charm Greek Americans, or raise eyebrows from those who have donated thousands of dollars to his charities. The Greek Star published an expose on Pappas that questioned his integrity in his world of benefit galas and charitable actions.

But the Pappas limelight suddenly exploded this summer when the Greek promoter turned the cameras on himself. Pappas published a letter he wrote to the parish council at Holy Trinity Greek Orthodox Church in which he criticized his pastor's refusal to allow him to take communion at the church he grew up in.

"Last Sunday – at a time in my life when I needed the comfort, safety and support of my church the most, I was instead afforded one of the most humiliating experiences of my life when Fr. John Tou-

loumes warned me in a private conversation that should I ever approach the chalice at Holy Trinity, he would not impart Holy Communion to me because of a directive from his Metropolitan.

"In the eyes of Fr. John Touloumes, I was not worthy to receive the gift of the body and blood of Jesus Christ – a gift that is not even his to offer, because I am a homosexual."

Pappas said it was not right for Fr. John to judge him. The Greek priest did consult the Metropolitan Savas, who told Pappas that it was Fr. Touloumes' "canonical right" to refuse him communion.

Pappas then opened up the topic that has been spreading like wildfire in many churches throughout this country – the Greek Orthodox Church's position on homosexuality.

Pappas challenged his readers in his letter to go beyond the law that homosexuality is a sin. The tone of his letter was understandably defensive, and a bit sarcastic.

"My response to each and every one of you is to challenge yourselves to go deeper than the words of the law and dissect the spirit of the message," he wrote. "Don't just memorize verses, but try to understand their essence. It may take a bit of work, but do give it a try. Enlightenment comes with hard work and reflection."

He then laid out his argument that

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paying interest on loans, getting a divorce, holding public office, or seeing Jewish doctors were all once considered grave sins by the church.

The canons (church laws) changed, he wrote, because “character, judgment, compassion and love ultimately prevailed.”

Pappas wrote that while people choose to commit sins against the church every day, people do not choose to become gay. And everyone is created in the image and likeness of God.

“And I’m not sure what you believe, but I believe that God doesn’t make things he hates. There is a huge difference between being something and doing something.”

Pappas was especially upset that the priest would single out him to not receive communion, and not address all the other sinners before approaching the chalice.

“Fr. John Touloumes had an opportunity to be a leader, to show love, decency and compassion, and to truly attempt to imitate Christ,” Pappas wrote. “Instead, he became a self-righteous authoritarian, selectively imposing what he believed to be the letter of the law, but not applying the same letter of the law to others who might be in violation of church law.”

If it comes to openly defying the church and its teachings, then Fr. John’s refusal to give Pappas communion was correct, said Fr. John Baker, the priest at Christ the Savior Orthodox Church of America in Chicago.

Fr. Baker told the story about a parish-

ioner who openly told him she would not follow the fast on Holy Dormition Friday, and would eat steak rather than fish.

“I would deny communion to her,” Fr. Baker told The Greek Star. “She said I don’t care about the fast day.”

Fr. Baker said it is important to understand that the pastor has to take into consideration the whole parish when addressing individuals. Those who openly refuse to follow the canons of the church should not be given a free pass in front of the others.

“I read his letter as a sense of entitlement as a Greek American,” Fr. Baker said. “His family helped found the church. But Fr. John has to consider the whole parish.”

Pappas ends his letter with a burning question about how the Greek Orthodox Church treats the homosexual class.

“Do you want “witch-hunts” to have a place in a community that is supposed to be compassionate and welcoming? Is this the Holy Trinity you want to serve and build? Is it more important to have a shiny dome with a rusted, rotten core, or a welcoming place for all who seek Holy

Trinity’s comfort with as much beauty on the inside, as there is on the outside?”

Pappas anger is understandable. The church is adamantly opposed to homosexuality. In the Bible, Leviticus Chapter 20 Verse 13 states:

“If a man practices homosexuality, having sex with another man as with a woman, both men have committed a detestable act. They must both be put to death, for they are guilty of a capital offense.”

Certainly, Pappas has raised an important question about the church’s attitude toward homosexuals today. Homosexuality, considered once by many to be a choice, is a medical condition according to doctors. Research has even revealed that a certain percentage of insects such as flies are gay.

And many gay people have been heavily discriminated against, if not ridiculed and brutalized, in religious societies. Many African countries have outlawed homosexuality, while in some Muslim countries like Yemen, married men can be sentenced to death by stoning for homosexual intercourse, according to the Washington Post.



Alison Joy Ereksona

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The fight against gay people is no different here where religion also plays a big role.

While homosexuals have been gaining more rights, such as marriage or civil unions, many are also turning to the church.

The case of Alison Joy Erikson is a unique one. She is a homosexual woman, and is a catechumen, which means she is preparing for reception into the Orthodox Church. She attends Christ the Savior OCA Church.

"Homosexuality, gayness, lesbianism isn't an identity I chose," she wrote in an email. "This identity was and is placed on me. Even ex-gays who actively choose not to be identified as gay, are looked over, and people say, 'he has this mannerism' or 'look in his eyes' or 'way of dressing,' and on and on, and follow it with 'he's gay' whether he chooses it or not. And whether you choose to embrace this identity that is thrust upon you, or choose to hide it with constant vigilance, or choose to fight it, it's on you, and you pay for it."

Erikson said her parents tried to send her to an ex-gay organization with a suicide rate of 1 in 3 to make her straight. Statistics say gay teenagers are 4 times more likely to attempt suicide than their heterosexual peers.

"That means 1 in 3 gays and lesbians who participate in this program complete

suicide," Erikson wrote. "I was a teenage girl. I wasn't having sex, but I was still so awful, they would risk a 1-in-3 chance

of my suicide to 'fix me.' It's no accident that 60% of homeless youth are gay, lesbian, bisexual or transgender. That is what gay meant to me as a teenager, it meant fighting for my life, not engaging in sin."

Erikson said she has had to put herself through college, she is currently studying math at Northwestern University, and works full-time to support herself without parental sup-

port. This has made her stronger, she said. But, she added, families can use religion to demonize people like her.

"If your parents find out you are gay and they don't know how to react, in a loving, Christ-encouraging way, you are probably being told the reason you are being abandoned by your parents is 'Jesus.'"

Interestingly enough, Erikson said she came to the Orthodox Church through her gay friends.

"I'm here today because I went to a gay church, and older gays and lesbians embraced me and helped me fight those battles," she said. "They taught me the name of Jesus, and about mercy. This is exactly what St. Paul directed Christians

to do with sinners of every kind in the first century. He died for it."

What makes Erikson's case unusual is that she has denied her sexual nature and chooses to abstain from having any sexual relationship with a woman. She cultivates an intimacy with loved ones, just not a sexual one, she said, adding she had considered entering a convent to become a nun at one point in her life.

"I would fully expect my priest to tell me not to approach the chalice if I have a sexual relationship with a woman," she said.

Her parish priest had explained the teaching of the Orthodox Church to her from the beginning of her journey, which may have been something Pappas missed growing up in the Church, Fr. Baker told The Greek Star.

Fr. Baker said he has had several gay people attend his church on LaSalle Str., but they did not return.

A gay person must totally abstain from living a sexual life, and like a monk or nun, give up their passions to receive holy communion. Unlike the exception made for heterosexuals to engage in sex within marriage, homosexuals are denied this right and instead must bow to a life of "chastity."

The Christ the Savior pastor said also that heterosexuals may not receive holy communion if they are engaging in sex outside of marriage within the Church. A civil union marriage is not recognized by the Church and is a means for holy com-



Fr. John Baker



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munion to be withheld as well, Fr. Baker said.

“Because Mr. Pappas was married in a civil union, this in itself would prohibit him from communion within the church.”

The Pappas letter was published on the Monomakhos Orthodox Church news blog, and hundreds of comments followed, most holding the line that the church cannot make exceptions to this rule.

“Mr. Pappas also neglected to mention that the decision of Father John – as he declared at the time – was not based on matters of private behavior, but on Pappas’s quite public act of attempting an official union with someone of the same sex,” wrote Fr. Patrick Reardon of All Saints Antiochian Orthodox Church in Chicago. “Why in the world would Pappas expect Father John to follow the counsel of some other priest here in Chicago?”

The Greek Star published an earlier story about the pitfalls of gay marriage that, like heterosexual marriages, are succumbing to divorce. The article featured Pappas and his partner, who are seeking to dissolve their civil union.

On the other hand, there were also comments sympathetic to Pappas’s plight.

“Oh good grief,” wrote Daniel Fall on the blog. “If I had a scorecard for the sin you guys like to talk about the most – it would be homosexuality. From what I’ve understood about Orthodoxy most of my life – it is a religion where we focus on repenting from our own sins, but I digress. Not sure why homosexuality gets discussed so much here. There was one poster which suggested homosexuality was worse

than murder. The guy belongs in a Sharia law nation.”

One person addressed why the Orthodox have been able to hold the line on homosexuality compared to the other churches that have had to openly deal with issues such as allowing openly gay bishops to serve.

“Orthodoxy has seemingly avoided this because of the confusion regarding ethnicity,” Misha commented. “The Left does not want to attack non-Westerners. However, if a person of Greek heritage leads the charge, well, that’s different.”

One even accused Pappas of engaging in a “jihad against the moral tradition of the Orthodox Church” while another warned that many Orthodox churches are “gay friendly” which could result in a split in Orthodoxy.

Fr. John Baker’s church in Chicago attracts Orthodox faithful from different backgrounds. Beautiful icons and burning candles surround the faithful at Sunday morning liturgical services.

After a service in August, Fr. John and other parishioners, including Ereksen, sat down to discuss the topic of homosexuality in the church.

Fr. Baker said he was never prepared to address the topic of homosexuality after he graduated from the seminary.

“I did not feel prepared after seminary because of the position that these men held, ie, wanting to live receiving the sacraments of the Church and at the same time, wanting the Church to embrace or overlook their acting out homosexual sex,” he said. “Alison is the first who under-

stands what it takes.”

When I asked Fr. Baker the question about how can gay people like Ereksen deny who they are, and give up naturally acting out their sexual identity, both the priest and Ereksen objected to the question.

“Is that really who we are,” Fr. Baker said. “I lived a biker lifestyle (before), but that’s not who I am. We can all conjure up images and aspects of that lifestyle that would not be comparable with living within communion with the Church. So obviously I cannot subscribe to that lifestyle. And besides, that doesn’t define me as a person. What defines me is the image of Jesus Christ.”

We all live broken lives, Fr. Baker said, but what is important is the family of the church. Joy, I feel, would not be able to live a life as a practicing Orthodox Christian without the support of a parish family, he said.

Ereksen vigorously shook her head up and down in agreement to this statement. Without that support, she would not be in a church that is both holding the line on the church’s teachings about homosexuality, but is also understanding, loving and supportive to those who want to be an Orthodox Christian, no matter what their sexual orientation may be.

“I would be very surprised if (Ereksen) continued to live a celibate life without the support of our community,” Fr. Baker said. ““Christ the Savior parish offers a supportive community for anyone who is struggling to work towards restoring the likeness of Christ within their lives.”