

*The Lord has sworn,
and will not change his mind.
You are a priest forever,
according to the order of Melchizedek.*
Psalm 110:4

Practical Guidelines for the Retirement of Priests

While Orthodox tradition does not teach an ontological difference between the priest and laity, it is clear that the life of an ordained clergyman is imbued by the holy priesthood – in a sense, we cannot separate the man from the office, nor should we.

Therefore, the concept of a priest's "retirement" is at once foreign and familiar. How can one ever retire from the Holy Priesthood?

However, there comes a tipping point in the life of a priest when the daily rigors and intense workload of a pastor demand an evaluation of the role that the priesthood plays in his life. As the Psalmist says, "Our days may come to seventy years, or eighty, if our strength endures, yet the best of them are but trouble and sorrow, for they quickly pass, and we fly away." (90:10).

For this reason, it is clear, that a transition from active ministry into so-called retirement is required of a priest when:

- 1) His ability to minister to his flock is impacted by his age and/or health,
- 2) The work of the pastor takes a such a toll on the aging priest that it is detrimental to his health (mental and physical), regardless of his ability to "keep up" with the demands placed on him by his parish.

This is not to say that the priest should forsake his liturgical and ministerial position in the Holy Church – God forbid! The life of a retired priest should, instead, reflect the natural transition from active ministry and full-time work into a period of rest and rejuvenation in the final years that he is granted by our Lord.

The retiring priest should look to these years of retirement as an opportunity to cultivate life-giving hobbies for which there was little time before. He should seek to take full advantage of added opportunities for contemplation and prayer, and he should seek, as we pray in our divine services, "A Christian ending." If one embraces retirement as a gift, and in a spirit of meekness, we can join with Saint Paul in proclaiming, "I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith." (2 Timothy 4:7)

With this in mind, I offer the following guidelines for the retirement of priests in the Diocese of the South. These guidelines are not a strict rule, but I would ask that any deviation from them be blessed by me, according to the individual circumstance of each clergyman.

Archbishop Alexander

GUIDELINES FOR THE RETIREMENT OF PRIESTS IN THE DIOCESE OF THE SOUTH

- 1) A priest should plan to retire by the age of 70. Exceptions to this rule may be approved at the discretion of the diocesan bishop as long as there is a solid plan in place.
- 2) The priest's retirement income should be financially funded by participation in the OCA Pension fund, an adequately funded investment vehicle (e.g. IRA) and perhaps a spouse's retirement income in addition to the aforementioned.¹
- 3) When a priest anticipates retirement, he should submit official notification of such intent to the Diocesan bishop no fewer than three years in advance of the anticipated date of retirement. In accordance with the normal retirement age of 70, noted above, clergy in the diocese should expect a letter from the diocese at age 67, inquiring about the details and planning for retirement.
- 4) Since the parish with a long-serving pastor often assumes the ethos of the pastor himself, it is advisable, though perhaps not necessary, that the priest explore options for association with another parish during the first 12 months of formal retirement, if not permanently.
- 5) Before the 1 year mark prior to retirement, the priest should submit a formal plan for retirement to the diocesan bishop to include a) the financial viability of retirement to include any plans to work in a non-clerical or "supply priest" role, b) plans for association with a parish in retirement c) geographical considerations and d) a narrative that details the clergyman's expectation of what day-to-day life will look like during retirement.
- 6) While the input of the priest in finding his replacement in the parish might be valuable in some cases, it is not a given, and clergy assignments are the sole discretion of the diocesan bishop.
- 7) When the retiring priest has 12 months of active ministry remaining, he should craft and submit to the diocese a succession plan to include a) a list of daily, weekly, monthly tasks that he performed, b) any practical and pastoral considerations that will be important to the new priest, c) the last 12 months of financials for the parish to include the detail of operational expenses, salaries etc., d) the "regular" schedule of services at the parish and e) the names and contact information for all people in positions of leadership in the parish, clergy and lay.
- 8) With three months until retirement, the priest should submit a letter to the diocesan bishop detailing the current state of affairs in regard to his retirement to include any concerns, finalized housing arrangements and other information that might be critical to a smooth transition. Additionally, Diocesan Administration, working with the appropriate Dean, will help to coordinate a meeting with the parish council and members in order to assure a smooth transition.
- 9) Upon retirement, the retiring priest should plan to return all parish owned property to the warden of the parish council. This includes laptops, keys to the church property and any other physical assets that properly belong to the parish. Additionally, all account credentials to parish resources or generic email addresses should be provided to the new priest.

¹ It should be noted that the failure of a clergyman to prepare for retirement can, in many cases, negatively impact the parish in which he ministers by prolonging his ministry beyond the capacity of the priest. There should be no expectation of employment as a parish priest, "because I simply cannot afford to retire."

- 10) Any generic clergy email addresses (e.g. priest@xyzparish.com) should be transferred to the new priest.
- 11) If the retiring priest has a personal email address under the parish domain name (e.g. fatherjohn@holyspiritoca.org) it is advisable that a new primary email address be created for his use, and this email address be retired with a permanent “auto responder” with a) a note about the change in leadership b) the new priest’s contact information and c) a request to direct all personal correspondence to the priest’s new email address.
- 12) The retired priest should be attached to a parish in retirement, and his years of ministry and ability to contribute in a meaningful way should be honored and recognized by the rector and priest in charge, however, there are expectation regarding how and when these skills should be employed as outlined below.
- 13) The retired priest should, as long as his health permits, remain a servant at the altar. His concelebration at the Divine Liturgy and festal vigils is expected. His service at the altar during other divine services should not be assumed and should take place only at the invitation of the rector or priest-in-charge.
- 14) The newly appointed rector or priest-in-charge will assume responsibility for all aspects of parish life to include liturgical practice, parish administration, scheduling and any other area of parish governance required to assure good order in the parish.²
- 15) If the retiring priest remains attached to the parish from which he retires, he remains as a guest of the new priest. Therefore, the retired priest should undertake no effort in the life of the parish without the express permission of his replacement to include conducting of divine services, leading scriptural or other studies and preaching.
- 16) As noted, it is advisable that the retiring priest associate himself with a different parish during the first year of retirement (at least), but if this is not practical or possible, and in order to assure a smooth transition for the new priest, the retired priest should not expect to preach or teach in the parish for the first six months of retirement (unless invited to do so out of necessity when filling-in during the new priest’s absence).
- 17) The retired priest should not participate on any committees of the parish during retirement but may (and should) be consulted in an advisory role in any situation where his institutional knowledge is invaluable to process and function. Such participation in decision making should only happen at the invitation and with the blessing of the new parish priest.
- 18) The retired priest should hear confessions in the parish only at the invitation of the rector or priest in charge.
- 19) The retired priest should recognize that his position of authority invites the opportunity for triangulation and dissent in parish life if clear lines are not established and boundaries observed. If for any reason there is a political matter in the parish that demands his involvement, the situation should be detailed and brought to the dean for consideration.

² The role of the new priest is that of servant, and it is therefore advisable that significant changes that might disrupt the good order of the parish, or invite undue scrutiny by parishioners, should be avoided during the first year of the new priest’s tenure in the parish (though an expectation that no change will occur is impractical).