

I'm Bored!

One of the most common complaints I hear from the congregation is that “church is boring!” While I often hear this complaint from parents on behalf of their children, it would be naïve to assume that children are the only ones who express their dissatisfaction about going to church. Adults, often secretly, also share in the same sentiment. In the next series of articles, I hope to address some of the causes of boredom and provide remedies to help you stay engaged in Liturgy.

First, let's understand some of the psychological reasons, implications, and concerns of boredom. Boredom is the “unpleasant emotional state in which [an] individual feels a pervasive lack of interest in and difficulty concentrating on the current activity.”¹ It shouldn't come as a surprise then that psychologists have found that there is a positive correlation between boredom and low educational achievement.² What is even more concerning is that bored people are more likely to engage in high-risk activities such as sex, drugs, alcohol, and gambling.³ A Danish philosopher Soren Kierkegaard once remarked, “Boredom is the root of all evil,” and, similarly, our church has always taught us that “an idle mind is the devil's workshop.” Boredom, therefore, is a serious issue that deserves serious remediation.

There are a number of reasons why we might be bored during church services. First, routine activities may lead to boredom. Repetitive and predictable tasks often lack the thrill and excitement offered by novel or spontaneous tasks. Undoubtedly, parts of our Liturgy are repetitive; however, there are several aspects of the Liturgy that change day-to-day and others that change throughout the year. For example, there are unique readings from the Scripture and the *Synexar* for every day of the year, and there are hymns that vary according to the ecclesiastical calendar.

Although this might not be the type of novelty or spontaneity a thrill-seeking person is craving, I remind the reader that a repetitious, Liturgical-style of prayer is something that the God of the Old Testament commanded, the Lord continued, and the apostles practiced. In the Old Testament, God commanded Moses to follow very repetitive and detailed rites concerning the offering of sacrifices and incense. In that time, one, despite their good intentions, could not mosey into the Temple and offer a sacrifice that did not conform with the Mosaic Law and reasonably, the same concept is true today. For instance, in the New Testament, when the disciples asked the Lord how to pray, He did not respond by saying the things people say nowadays such as “Pray what is in your hearts” or “Pray whatever you want – just as long as you connect with God.” Rather, our Lord taught them to pray specifically using the Lord's Prayer, and the apostles, in turn, taught us in the *Didache* to repetitiously pray these words three times a day!⁴ Similarly, the church teaches us to pray unceasingly by the continual recitation of the Jesus Prayer: “Lord Jesus Christ, have mercy on me, a sinner.”

Since our style of worship was ordained by the Lord, boredom that is attributed to the problem of repetition in prayer should be, in my opinion, attributed to an unhealthy desire for thrill and entertainment. Unfortunately, the world has trained us to be adrenaline junkies who are always craving earthly pleasure. For example, youth these days can repetitively play Fortnite or watch NetFlix endlessly

¹ Heshmat, S. (2017, June 16). *Psychology Today*. <<https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/science-choice/201706/eight-reasons-why-we-get-bored>>

² Tze, V., Daniels, L. M., & Klassen, R. (2015). *Educational Psychology Review*, 28(1).

³ Biolcati, R., Mancini, G., & Trombini, E. (2017). *Psychological Reports*, 121(2), 303-323.

⁴ *The Didache*. Section 8.3. <<http://www.thedidache.com/>>

in multiple, hour-long stretches, yet if asked to pray or read the Bible for 10 min, this would be considered boring! The problem, therefore, is not in the form of the prayers; the problem lies in the way we are continually bombarded with stimuli. A recent study has shown that children diagnosed with attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) increased 43% from 2003 to 2011.⁵ While the causes of the increase were not specifically determined, my hypothesis is that the explanation lies in part with the fact that our society is building a tolerance to being continually stimulated. Activities such as church, which are undoubtedly less stimulating due to the lack of drama, violence, or humor, are thus labeled boring and uninteresting.

To further explain this point, I would like to share something I experienced almost 10 years ago. At the time, I was living in New Jersey and was about to visit New York City for the first time. I was coming up the escalators that exit Grand Central Station when I felt an immediate sensory overload. The number of people, the glaring lights, the flashy billboards, the loud street vendors, the poor homeless – it was overwhelming. After spending a while walking around the city, I desperately desired to go to a monastery for some peace and quiet. When the night was over, we headed back to our place of residence in the suburbs of New Jersey where I felt, in comparison to the rambunctious city, that I was in the middle of a desert. My mind was so overly stimulated from the city, that even a populated, developed city felt completely empty. Now, imagine someone who lives in New York permanently. Assuming they become accustomed to the fast-pace lifestyle, I would be willing to bet that they would think that living in any other city in the United States would be very boring. The problem is not that the other cities in America are inherently boring, but rather the individual's tolerance to stimulation is off the charts. I think this analogy adequately describes the problem of boredom we face in church. Many of us live "New York" style lives, and then are bored in the "suburbs" of church service.

In order for us to remedy this situation, we must set appropriate boundaries to limit ourselves from external stimuli. Possible remedies include limited screen time, daily periods of quiet time and reflection in prayer and Bible reading, and family retreats dedicated to prayer (i.e. trips to a monastery). Boredom is a state of mind or feeling that can be easily altered if we train ourselves to be okay with silence and meditation. For this reason, I strongly recommend that each family has dinner together and also that they pray and read the Bible together for at least 30 min per day! This will go a long way to tackle the problem of boredom. We must also realize that church is not a place for our entertainment – it is a sacred place of worship centered on Christ, not our self-satisfaction. Unlike some churches in the west, our church cannot and should not compete with the world in the domain of entertainment.

Now that we have covered the basics of boredom and the complaint of repetition, in the next article, we will discuss how to overcome other causes of boredom.

⁵ Collins, K. P., & Cleary, S. D. (2016). *The Journal of Clinical Psychiatry*, 77(1), 52-59.