

Alexei Krindatch ([akrindatch@aol.com](mailto:akrindatch@aol.com)), Coordinator

National Census of Orthodox Christian Churches & US Religion Census  
[www.orthodoxreality.org](http://www.orthodoxreality.org)

## What Orthodox Christians in the USA Want From Their Bishops

### Overview: What Is This Article About?

Are you curious what changes ordinary parishioners in U.S. Orthodox Christian Churches desire from their Bishops? If so, keep reading this article. It presents the analysis of answers to the survey question, **“If you could request JUST ONE THING from the Bishops to improve the life of your parish or the Orthodox Church in the United States in general, what would that be?”** About 1,100 Orthodox Church members responded to this question in the spring of 2022.

With fewer than half of parishioners (47%) fully approving of their Bishops and expressing positive sentiments, this article offers many insights into what Bishops “should” or “should not” do from the perspective of Orthodox laity.

Survey participants represented four U.S. Orthodox Christian Churches which – combined – account for 80% of the total Eastern Orthodox Church membership in America: Antiochian Orthodox Christian Archdiocese (AOCA, 228 respondents), Greek Orthodox Archdiocese (GOA, 380), Orthodox Church in America (OCA, 340), Russian Orthodox Church Outside of Russia (ROCOR, 188). For all topics, we will discuss both the overall picture and key differences among these four Churches.

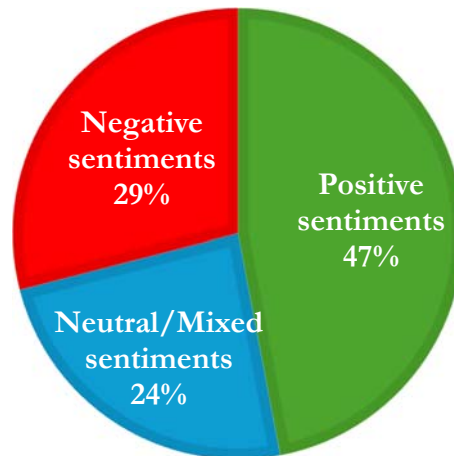
The article is divided into four short chapters which answer four challenging questions:

- What are the overall feelings and sentiments (positive, negative, neutral) of American Orthodox Church members toward their Bishops?
- What are the main reasons for having either positive or negative sentiments?
- From the perspective of parishioners, what changes in Church life should Bishops initiate and uphold?
- What are the greatest concerns of parishioners regarding the life of the Church?

## 1. Are U.S. Orthodox Church Members Happy with Their Bishops?

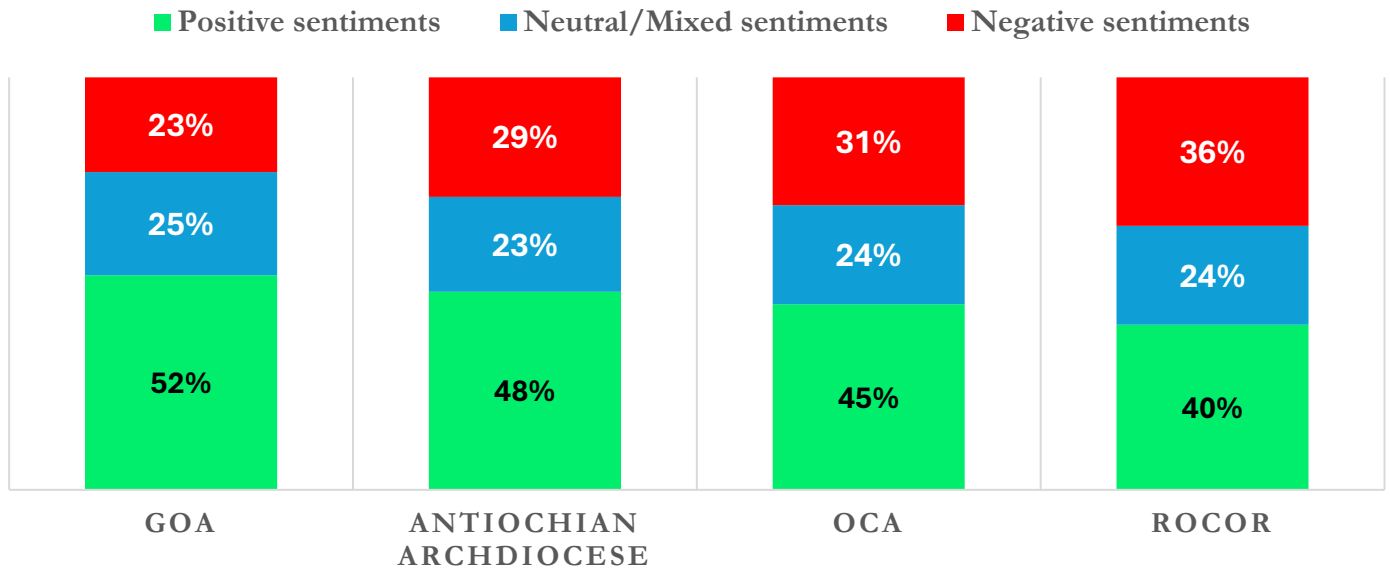
Answering this question, there is both good and bad news. The good news is that overall parishioners' feelings about their Bishops are more positive (47% of respondents) than negative (29%). The bad news is that fewer than half of the church members express clearly positive sentiments regarding their hierarchs, whereas almost a quarter of parishioners (24%) are "on the fence" with neutral or mixed sentiments, and 29% bluntly disapprove of their Bishops.

**Percentage (%) of U.S. Orthodox Church Members Expressing Positive, Neutral, or Negative sentiments toward their Bishops**



Looking separately at the Antiochian Archdiocese, GOA, OCA and ROCOR, there are notable variations in the intensity of positive and negative sentiments expressed by the members of each jurisdiction towards their Church leaders. See the chart.

## Percentage (%) of Church Members Expressing Positive, Neutral/Mixed, or Negative Sentiments Toward Their Bishops



In summary, among these four Orthodox jurisdictions:

- Members of the Greek Orthodox Archdiocese (GOA) have a more favorable view of their Bishops compared to other jurisdictions.** Indeed, GOA has the highest percentage of parishioners expressing positive sentiments (52%) and the lowest percentage of those with negative sentiments (23%).
- On the opposite side are members of Russian Orthodox Church Outside of Russia (ROCOR), who are clearly divided in their feelings about the Bishops.** Nearly the same percentage of ROCOR parishioners expressed positive (40%) and negative (36%) sentiments regarding their hierarchs. This suggests not only a more critical view of ROCOR Bishops' performance, but also significant internal disagreement among Church members.

## 2. What Makes a “Good” and a “Bad” Bishop?

**Titus 1:5-9 (NKJV)** *“For a Bishop must be blameless, as the steward of God; not self-willed, not quick-tempered, not given to wine, not violent, not greedy for money, but hospitable, a lover of what is good, sober-minded, just, holy, self-controlled, holding fast the faithful word as he has been taught, that he may be able, by sound doctrine, both to exhort and convict those who contradict.”*

In the New Testament Epistle quoted above, Apostle Paul teaches Titus about appointing elders and outlines the qualifications for overseers of the Church. Does this “job description for Bishops” align with opinions of American Orthodox Church members about what it means to be either a “good” or “bad” Bishop?

Looking at the survey responses, we identified the three most common reasons for having either positive or negative feelings about their Bishops.

- **The most common reasons for positive sentiments toward Bishops (in descending order of importance):**
  1. **Pastoral Care and Accessibility:** Bishops who are perceived as caring, approachable, and actively involved in the lives of their parishes.
    - Example: "He is a true shepherd who cares for his flock." (OCA)
  2. **Upholding Orthodox Faith and Tradition:** Bishops who are seen as faithfully safeguarding Orthodox traditions and canonical practices.
    - Example: "He is a staunch defender of true faith." (ROCOR)
  3. **Spiritual Guidance:** Bishops who are talented at providing spiritual direction and care.
    - Example: "He offers profound spiritual insights and guidance." (Antiochian Archdiocese)
- **The most common reasons for negative sentiments toward Bishops (in descending order of importance):**
  1. **Lack of Presence and Engagement:** Bishops who are perceived as distant, uninvolved, or inaccessible to their flock.

- Example: "I feel that our Bishops are more concerned with their egos than with what is going on with the average Orthodox Christian. They should spend time talking to regular people instead of expecting people to cater to them" (GOA)
2. **Perceived Deviation from Tradition or Canons:** Bishops who are seen as not strictly adhering to traditional Orthodox values or canonical practices.
    - Example: "He is not following the canons of the Church." (ROCOR)
  3. **Lack of Transparency and Accountability:** Bishops who are blamed by parishioners for financial mismanagement, lack of transparency in decision-making, and failure to address issues within the Church.
    - Example: "There's a lack of transparency in how decisions are made, and it's concerning." (OCA)

However, these main reasons for either positive or negative sentiments towards Bishops vary significantly when looking individually at parishioners of Antiochian Archdiocese, GOA, OCA, and ROCOR. That is, the members of these four jurisdictions have fairly different ideas about what Bishops “should” or “shouldn’t” do, and they value different qualities in their hierarchs.

For each jurisdiction, Table 1 shows the top three qualities of a Bishop which – from the perspective of ordinary Church members - make him a truly good shepherd.

**Table 1. Top Three Qualities of a Bishop Resulting in Positive Sentiments Among Parishioners**  
(each column shows qualities in descending order of importance)

GOA	Antiochian Archdiocese	OCA	ROCOR
Engagement and Visibility	Shepherding and Guidance	Spiritual Fatherhood	Upholding True Faith and Tradition
Focus on Youth and Education	Spiritual Depth	Adherence to Canons	Spiritual Leadership
Focus on Community Building	Focus on Orthodox Unity	Accessibility	Defense of Orthodoxy

Looking at data in Table 1, it is clear that a “good” GOA Bishop should first of all be personally engaged in the lives and building of the local parish communities and, especially, in such areas as youth and religious education.

In contrast, the members of the Antiochian Archdiocese place highest value on their Bishops’ spirituality and ability to exercise strong spiritual leadership. Also, of all these jurisdictions, Antiochian parishioners are the only ones who place great emphasis on Bishops’ dedication to achieving Orthodox Church unity in the U.S.

In turn, OCA parishioners feel that a good Bishop should be like an intimate spiritual father, who is close and accessible for individual members. And they also want to have Bishops who demonstrate their adherence to the canons of the Church.

Finally, among all jurisdictions, ROCOR parishioners are most appreciative of the Bishops who are not simply strong spiritual leaders, but also strongly focused on safeguarding Orthodox traditions and canons of the Orthodox Faith.

The next table reveals those qualities of Bishops that are disliked by the members of each of the four Orthodox jurisdictions: Antiochian Archdiocese, GOA, OCA, and ROCOR.

**Table 2. Top Three Qualities of a Bishop Resulting in Negative Sentiments Among Parishioners**  
**(each column shows items in descending order of importance)**

<b>GOA</b>	<b>Antiochian Archdiocese</b>	<b>OCA</b>	<b>ROCOR</b>
Lack of Pastoral Presence	Distance from the Flock	Perceived Infighting	Perceived Focus on Church Politics
Perceived Focus on Church Politics	Lack of Accessibility	Lack of Pastoral Presence	Lack of Accountability
Lack of Transparency	Lack of Responsiveness	Lack of Transparency	Lack of Pastoral Presence

Table 2 shows that the members of all jurisdictions are uniform in their antipathy for the Bishops who are seen as distant from the “people in the pews:” not engaged in the lives of the local parishes and inaccessible to ordinary church members.

But then, a few other reasons for negative sentiments towards Bishops are more unique for each jurisdiction.

A considerable number of GOA and ROCOR members blame their hierarchs for the excessive meddling into Church politics.

A good portion of OCA parishioners feel that their respective Bishops provoke and engage in various internal Church conflicts and discords.

And, except for the Antiochian Archdiocese, a substantial number of “people in the pews” in other three jurisdictions accuse their Bishops in the lack of transparency and accountability (which is essentially the same).

### **3. What Do the Members of U.S. Orthodox Christian Churches Want from their Bishops?**

Five main themes emerged from the analysis of responses to the question **“If you could request JUST ONE THING from the Bishops to improve the life of your parish or the Orthodox Church in the United States in general, what would that be?”** They are summarized in Table 3.

**Table 3. Five Main Desires Expressed by Parishioners Regarding Their Bishops**

<b>What do U.S. Orthodox Church members want from their Bishops</b>	<b>Percentage of respondents</b>
Greater Pastoral Presence & Engagement	37%
Better Spiritual Guidance & Teaching	25%
More Emphasis on Orthodox Canons & Traditional Values	19%
Greater Transparency & Accountability	10%
More Emphasis on Unity & Collaboration among Orthodox Churches	9%

One can see that by far most common desire expressed by Orthodox parishioners is greater presence and participation of their Bishops in the lives of the local parishes: more than one third of the respondents (37%) brought up this subject. Less frequent, yet indicated by a good quarter of church members, was the feeling that their Bishops should offer a better spiritual guidance. And nearly one-fifth (19%) of members felt that their Bishops should pay more attention to upholding the traditional values and the canons of the Orthodox Church.

**Here are quotes illustrating these five main desires expressed by parishioners:**

❖ **Greater Pastoral Presence and Engagement (37%):**

- "Visit parishes more frequently and socialize." (OCA)
- "Don't just preach: engage with your parishioners and community." (GOA)
- "Simply listen to your parishes!" (ROCOR)

❖ **Better Spiritual Guidance and Teaching (25%):**

- "Provide more spiritual guidance to the flock." (Antiochian Archdiocese)
- "A bigger emphasis on catechism & development of Orthodox mindset - too many Orthodox don't know or can't articulate response to challenges to Orthodox teaching from society." (GOA)
- "Teach us how to live as Orthodox Christians in the modern world." (OCA)

❖ **More Emphasis on Orthodox Canons and Traditional Values (19%):**

- "Preserve the Orthodox Faith, traditions and way of life at all costs." (ROCOR)
- "Never compromise the Orthodox Church's beliefs in the face of modern cultural pressure and political correctness." (OCA)
- "Stick to our Orthodox faith and traditions and do not comply with the mainstream noise." (Antiochian)

❖ **Greater Transparency and Accountability (10%):**

- "More transparency in how decisions are made." (GOA)
- "Greater accountability for Bishops' actions." (ROCOR)
- "Open communication about the challenges facing the Church." (OCA)



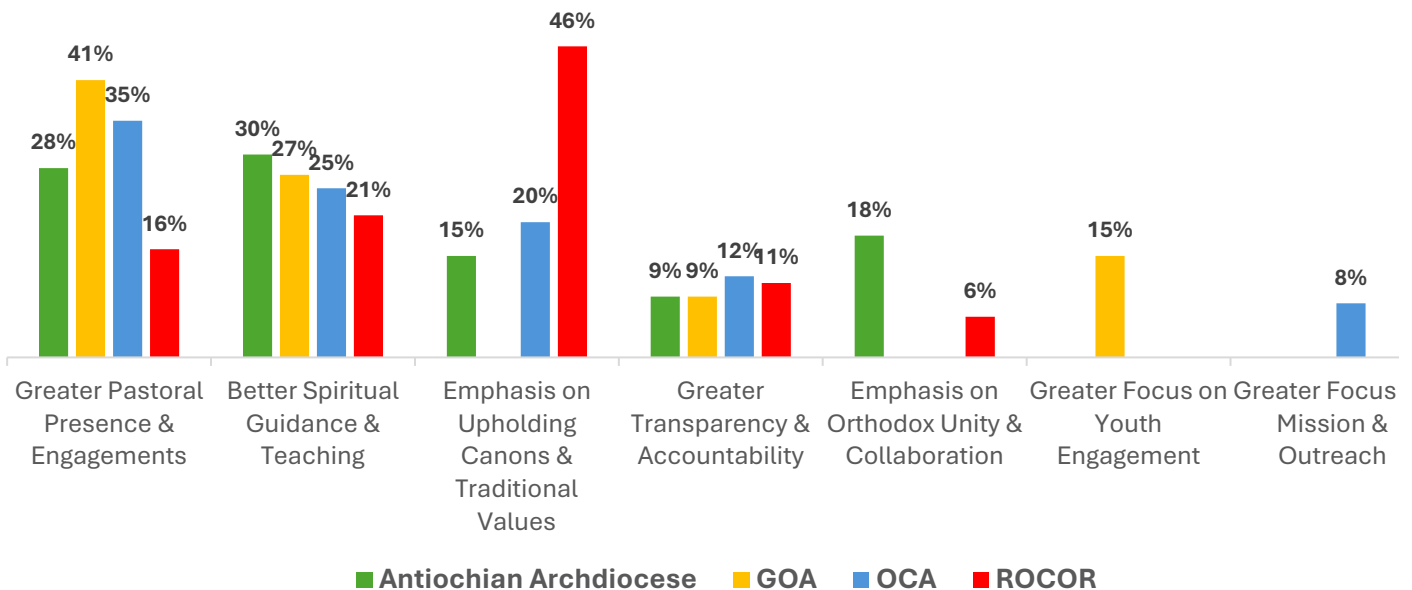
❖ **More Emphasis on Unity and Collaboration among Orthodox Churches (9%):**

- "Work towards greater unity among Orthodox Christians." (Antiochian)
- "Merge into one American Orthodox Church and move away from old world ethnic identity and being subjects to foreign synods." (GOA)
- "Promote a spirit of cooperation and understanding among all Orthodox." (OCA)

In summary, when looking at the entire group of survey participants (all jurisdictions combined), the primary narratives revolve around the desire for Bishops to be more present and engaged with their flock, while providing stronger spiritual guidance and upholding traditional Orthodox Christian values. There are also desires concerning greater accountability of the Bishops and their dedication to Orthodox Church unity.

However, while these common themes emerged across all four jurisdictions, there were also notable differences in emphasis and priorities. Further, certain issues were raised uniquely in responses coming from members of a particular jurisdiction. The chart below offers a more nuanced picture – jurisdiction by jurisdiction – as to “what do Orthodox Church members want from their Bishops.”

**Percentage (%) of Church Members Desiring that Their Bishops Would Pay More Attention to the Following Issues**



The **need for greater pastoral presence of Bishops and their engagement in the local parishes** is especially strongly felt by the members of the Greek Orthodox Archdiocese and the Orthodox Church in America. In both jurisdictions, well over one-third of parishioners brought up this subject.

The need for Bishops to **provide stronger spiritual guidance and be better teachers of the Orthodox Faith** is relatively equally present in all four jurisdictions, with the members of Antiochian Archdiocese expressing this desire somewhat more often than other jurisdictions.

The same could be said about members' desire for Bishops **to be more accountable and offer more transparency in the life of the Church**, with parishioners of the Orthodox Church in America mentioning this issue slightly more often than other groups.

The desire for Bishops to **place greater emphasis on upholding Orthodox Christian canons and traditional values** is uniquely strongly pronounced among parishioners of the Russian Orthodox Church Outside of Russia. Nearly half of them (46%) expressed this desire.

The need for Bishops **to better work towards unity and collaboration among American Orthodox Churches** is especially strongly felt by the members of Antiochian Archdiocese.

In turn, the need for Bishops to care about **greater youth engagement** is uniquely strongly expressed among GOA parishioners.

Finally, it was only among members of the Orthodox Church in America that a noticeable number felt that their Bishops should place **greater emphasis on mission and outreach**.

An additional issue (not on the chart) was brought up by a fair number of respondents: the subject of Bishops' involvement in various church conflicts and tensions. However, this subject was raised in different contexts for each of four jurisdictions:

- **OCA members** expressed more concern about perceived internal Church conflicts and infighting.

- **ROCORA parishioners** expressed concerns about various scandals within the Church and the need for some administrative reforms.
- **Members of the Antiochian Archdiocese** expressed concerns related to corruption and mismanagement in the Church.
- **GOA members** expressed fewer concerns in this area compared to the other jurisdictions.

**To conclude this chapter**, the main differences among the members of these four Orthodox jurisdictions in their responses to the question, “If you could request JUST ONE THING from the Bishops to improve the life of your parish or the Orthodox Church in the United States in general, what would that be?” could be summarized as follows:

- **The members of Antiochian Archdiocese** emphasize the need for the Bishops to provide better spiritual guidance, offer greater pastoral presence, and to foster unity among Orthodox jurisdictions.
- **GOA members** feel that their Bishops should pay more attention to pastoral presence and engagement in the life of the parishes and promote much better youth engagement.
- **OCA members** long for greater pastoral presence of their hierarchs and feel that they should give more attention to preserving the traditions and teaching of the Orthodox Church. In addition, OCA parishioners desire from their Bishops a greater emphasis on mission and outreach.
- **ROCORA members** primarily focus on the need for the Bishops to uphold traditional Orthodox values and canons, while addressing perceived deviations from the true Faith.

#### **4. What Are the Greatest Concerns of Parishioners Regarding the Life of the Church?**

The analysis of responses to the survey’s primary question also allowed us to identify what parishioners perceive as undermining the lives of their parishes and the Church in general.

Some of these concerns essentially mirrored the desires expressed by Church members regarding their Bishops, while others brought to light new subjects and themes.

When looking at the entire sample of respondents (members of all jurisdictions combined), four issues appear to be most troubling to American Orthodox Church members:

- Lack of accessibility and approachability of Bishops.
- Concerns about transparency and accountability in church governance.
- Insufficient focus on the needs of youth and young adults.
- Inadequate communication and opportunities for dialogue between Bishops and parishioners.

However, when looking jurisdiction-by-jurisdiction, the picture of members’ greatest concerns is more diverse and nuanced. Table 4 summarizes the top three concerns in each jurisdiction.

**Table 4. Main Concerns of Members Regarding Lives of their Parishes and Church in General**

<b>GOA</b>	<b>Antiochian Archdiocese</b>	<b>OCA</b>	<b>ROCOR</b>
Lack of accessibility and connection with Bishops	Concerns about transparency and open communication in decision making	Challenge to balance adaptation to modern times while preserving Orthodox tradition	Concerns about transparency and accountability in Church governance
Concerns about financial transparency and accountability	Need for more youth-oriented programs in the parishes	Concerns about Church relevance to young generation	Lack of Church’s responses to contemporary issues and the needs of younger generations
Strong need for broad Church initiatives to engage youth and young adults	Lack of outreach and engagement with the wider (non-Orthodox) community	Lack of Church’s engagement with social issues	Insufficient pastoral care and support from the Bishops

Clearly, the overview of Church members' main concerns presented in Table 4 is far from comprehensive, as it was obtained via the secondary analysis of the survey's main question regarding most common "requests" of Church members to their Bishops. Yet we hope that the information offered in Table 4 will be helpful and informative for those engaged in Church decision making, both in the local parishes and nationally.