

The Domestic Church as Foundation for Youth Formation in the Orthodox Faith

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As a brief preface to my remarks today, I would like to note that our starting point for a discussion on Orthodox youth formation is fundamentally and profoundly different from that of the prevailing culture. This has nothing to do with ethnicity or our own cultural heritage. Rather, it has everything to do with what we have received from Our Lord Jesus Christ, His apostles, and the holy fathers. While our western culture exalts the intellect as the sole arbiter in matters of life and death, including matters of faith, we are primarily concerned with the healing of the nous. This noetic energy functions in the heart of every spiritually healthy person, and according to the holy fathers, is to master and control the intellect, not the other way around. This is why our youth efforts are not concentrated on providing rational arguments for God's existence or His goodness. Following the example of Saint John Chrysostom, we experience the Church as a spiritual hospital where the sick come to be cured.

With that as our context, I would like to share the thoughts of a beloved pastor, Saint John of Kronstadt. When he was young, Saint John was not considered a good student but became an excellent teacher because he had acquired the Holy Spirit in ascetic struggle.

Saint John understood that the primary tool in the formation of youth is love. Interestingly, he didn't speak of education in terms of knowledge but rather of love and sharing that love of Christ he had acquired with the youth he taught. Saint John considered love for children to be the foundation of a teacher's work—a foundation that is very often denied by modern-day so-called technicians of secular educational sciences and activities.

There is a wonderful account of Saint John and a mother who was complaining about the education of her children in the schools. Permit me to recount it here briefly for you:

She told Fr. John *“Their teachers taught them everything they need to pass the exams and be clever.”*

The Saint responded, *“You should say that they pounded them and not taught them. When being pounded with spiritual knowledge, they have the same feeling as when they are learning arithmetic and so on. But how about you? Do you take care of their souls? Have you directed them so that besides human approval they would strive for God’s approval?”*

The woman answered, *“I suggest it to them according to my strength. After all, but I can’t find the door to my child’s heart.”*

Saint John noted, *“You didn’t find the door to the heart, so you’ll get beasts instead of humans. You have forgotten that the Lord has shown mankind an example in the bird species. A bird first gives birth to an egg, and until this egg has been kept for the proper time in maternal warmth, it remains an inanimate object. It is the same with people. The child born to you is that egg—with the beginnings of earthly life, but inanimate with respect to his blossoming in Christ. The child who has not been warmed by his parents and family to the root of his soul, to the root of all his feelings, will remain dead in spirit for God and good works. And it is precisely from these children not warmed by love and spiritual care that those generations come into the world, from which the prince of this world will recruit his armies against God and His holy Church.”*

As Saint John so beautifully illustrates for us, the beginnings of youth formation must begin in the Orthodox Christian home. As the domestic church, the home becomes the spiritual hearth by which the love of Christ is set aflame and stoked in the life of each child. The importance of this cannot be dismissed, especially if we consider the words of Saint John Chrysostom in his treatise on the education of children,

“Therefore I beg you to take care for the good upbringing of your children. First of all think of the salvation of their souls. God has placed you as the heads and teachers over your families. It is your duty to watch, and to watch continually after the behavior of your children. Listen to St. Paul. Educate your children in the teaching and instructions of the Lord (cf. I Cor. 14:35, Eph. 6:4). Imitate Job, who continually looked after his children and offered sacrifices for mercy towards any secret misdeeds they might have committed (Job 1:5). Imitate Abraham, who concerned himself less with the acquisition of riches than with the keeping of God’s law by every member of his house, and about whom the Lord witnessed: For I know that he will order his sons, and his house after him, and they will keep the ways of the Lord, to do justice and judgment (Gen. 18:19). David, when he was near death, wanted to leave Solomon the surest inheritance; he called him to himself in order to repeat the following wise instructions: that the Lord may confirm his word which he spoke, saying, if thy children shall take heed to their way to walk

before me in truth with all their heart, I promise thee, saying, there shall not fail thee a man on the throne of Israel (III Kings 2:4). These are the examples that we should follow during our lives and with our final breath!"

This urgent message must reach the hearts of Orthodox Christian parents who risk the loss of their child's salvation if it isn't heeded. If the home is not a domestic church, we have a responsibility to at least point it out to the parents. It means that we prepare to engage the parents and family members of our youth. A priestly home visitation, especially during the holy period of Theophany, may be a good place to start. If they are amenable to further discussions with the priest about prayer and the Orthodox life, we should do everything in our power to make it happen.

Additionally, we should have or at least know where to locate the resources for a prayer corner, prayer books, and a modest library of Orthodox books and literature. Since our primary goal as Orthodox Christians is the healing of the nous, we engage our senses by venerating icons, offering incense, making prostrations, and praying the Jesus Prayer with the guidance of our spiritual father. All of these help in the healing of the nous, purifying it of the passions that so often enter through these same senses. This should be a daily part of youth formation in the home.

We can begin with those newly married couples who are not yet parents. It is our job to form them and assist them in becoming godly Christian parents whose first concern is and always will be the salvation of their children. In discussing this issue, Father Geoffrey Korz, pastor of All Saints of North America Orthodox Church in Canada, has some excellent points that are worth mentioning. He notes, "If young adults (or not-so-young adults) do not love Christ's Church, the question must be asked, what exactly has been the highest priority of their home life? Academics? Getting a good job? Sports? Social life? Entertainment?" We can and should ask these questions of future parents, new parents, and older parents. Perhaps the most important point Father Geoffrey makes for those of us who are cradle Orthodox is this, "Orthodox kids in the western world are usually provided with two mutually exclusive

and spiritually poisonous options: retain a foreign culture (language, name, history, etc.) as your primary identity, in order to somehow “keep” the Orthodox faith as part of that culture, or become westernized and leave your faith and culture behind. The whole idea that Orthodoxy is ‘part’ of any culture is of course absurd, since two millennia ago, nearly every culture was thoroughly pagan. Even recently, many Orthodox cultures fell under the hypnotic effect of Communism, and today many are intoxicated with capitalist materialism.

Having a rich sense of inherited culture – whatever the culture is – is a formative seed in the soul of a child, since a rich appreciation and love for inherited tradition prepares a child’s heart for Orthodox living (since our faith is timeless, and requires inoculation against the passing winds of fashion). But a child’s first loyalty, the loyalty that must be cultivated and exemplified by each parent, is loyalty to the unchanging treasure of the Orthodox faith. If a young person thinks they have lots in common with other Orthodox people because they are Orthodox, there is a good chance they will remain faithful. On the other hand, if a child believes he has more in common with other peers who share their culture, whether those peers are faithful or not, it’s probably too late – the young person does not have an Orthodox Christian self-image, and tremendous work needs to be done. I would add something to this--the youth’s self-image must be rooted in Christ above and beyond a social support system of a like-minded Orthodox social network. If we only speak about Christ and His Church rather than speak to Christ while in Church we have only satisfied a passing intellectual curiosity. Christian parents require as much faith formation and support as do the youth. Whatever we do we should do with faith and love in order to awaken faith and love in others.

Obviously, these are just a few suggestions and your priest will know best how to approach the parents. The point is that this is the frontline where we have to concentrate our initial efforts in youth formation. If the Orthodox faith is not the primary influence in the daily life of the parents, it will likely not be any influence in the life of the children.

Now, I have experienced instances where the opposite is true and we have to be prepared for this as well. I am speaking about situations where the children come to church for Divine Services without their parents. In some of these cases, the parents are not only unsupportive of their child's faith, but openly hostile to it. These are particularly difficult situations that don't afford us easy solutions. Once again, we can learn from Saint John of Kronstadt and the saint who sought his canonization, Saint John Maximovitch. Both holy men dealt with similar situations. In the instance of Saint John Maximovitch, he ministered and cared for orphans who had no homes whatsoever and took in children after rescuing them from freezing to death on the streets of Shanghai in the 1930's. The saints employed similar approaches to these tragic circumstances. The saints would love them as Christ would love them, essentially parenting them and mentoring the children themselves. Saint John of Kronstadt never tired of telling his students, "You are my children, for I gave birth to you and continue to give birth in you to the good tidings of Jesus Christ. My spiritual blood—my instructions—flows in your veins. You are my children, because I have you always in my heart and I pray for you. You are my children, because you are my spiritual offspring. You are my children, because truly, as a priest I am a father." This is a tall order for all of us and it presupposes that we are continuously struggling to purify our own hearts of the passions so that the love of Christ can shine through and be recognized by others, especially the youth whom we hope to serve.

It is likely that the more common situation we encounter in the parish concerns the youth who express no interest in the faith, in attending Divine Services, or the spiritual life. If we are attentive, we can play an important role in these situations as well. In these instances, it's important to determine what influences in the lives of the youth are making them indifferent or hostile to the Christian faith. Often, this will mean a sincere conversation with the parents, presuming they are serious about the faith themselves. These influences may range from the youth's peer group, their school, their choice of entertainment, or extracurricular activities such as sports that keep them away from the church. Once

these negative factors have been identified it will be up to the parents to decide how to deal with these issues. However, it's important to recognize the important role we can play in these scenarios. We can help the parents identify the issues and propose solutions to them in helping them bring their children back to the Church.

This brings me to my next point. It's a cautionary note for all of us engaged in youth work and pastoral care. The solution is not to be found in more programs and more events. While programs and events are good things, they are not a panacea for the healing of the soul and eternal salvation which is our goal in this life. We shouldn't be tempted by other groups and organizations engaged in youth work who create more programs and events in order to distract the youth from other distractions. This won't bring anyone to Christ and His Church. I am referring to programs that offer basketball and soccer programs and the like as a way to keep kids off the streets or away from bad influences. Again, these are not bad things in and of themselves but they are not substitutes for faith in Christ which engages the heart and makes possible a true change in life. In our Archdiocese, we have many good programs that attract large numbers of youth, which is praiseworthy and should continue. Yet, if these programs aren't undergirded by an authentic spiritual life so that Christ would be formed in their hearts (cf. Gal. 4:19), these programs are built on quicksand.

If the primary goal of Orthodox parents is the eternal salvation of their children, we must also spend some time discussing a child's formal education. Before you examine a school's ability to teach academics, however, it is absolutely necessary that you determine whether the school is Christian-friendly, Christian-tolerant, or anti-Christian. If you find the school to be Christian-friendly and capable of teaching academics, you may want to utilize it as part of your responsibility to rear and educate your children. If, however, the school is merely Christian-tolerant or is anti-Christian, it behooves you to look for other choices. Let me stress that in raising your children, it is their eternal salvation which should be at the top of your priorities. This is your responsibility before God. Presently, there are two potential

options apart from the public school system--home schooling and enrollment in an Orthodox parochial school. Sadly, most areas of the country do not have an Orthodox school readily nearby. However, Orthodox communities who desire to start such an enterprise should have available to them the contact information for schools that have flourished in their respective communities. Our Archdiocese has several such schools, one of which is The Saint Constantine School located in the Houston area. Saint Constantine School is an independent Antiochian Orthodox Classical school and offers instruction from Pre-K through 12th grade as well as a College program that is accredited through The King's College in New York City. At the collegiate level, Eastern University, located just outside of Philadelphia, has established the Center for Orthodox Thought and Culture. It is an excellent school with a solid Christian identity and campus life, as well as a strong Orthodox Christian Fellowship program.

Homeschooling is another good but challenging option for parents. Homeschooling has grown in popularity as well as organization in the last twenty years and there are some good resources available in print and online for parents who wish to explore this path. For instance, the Greek Orthodox Archdiocese of America publishes *Praxis*, a homeschooling resource that is available online and in print editions. There is also a pan-Orthodox website available for parents who are thinking of homeschooling their children, "Orthodox Christian Education Resources". It is a comprehensive site with materials, curricula, and a network of like-minded Orthodox Christian parents for support. Within our communities we have the ability to pool our resources and pool our children together and expand a homeschool so that it becomes a mini-church within which is an Orthodox school. In many homeschools, people are involved aside from the parents. Whatever we do, the parish priest must be in the center of this, as the priest must be in the center of all our lives as Orthodox Christians. If we are doing things in our lives that are separate from the Church and also without the blessing of Christ's successors, then we are no better than that fallen system which we abandon. My brothers and sisters in Christ, we are called to live and learn together as a community that exists as a bridge from the heavenly to the earthly.

Beyond formal education, children require the friendship and social interaction with their Orthodox peers in order to grow and mature. These relationships should have as their starting point and foundation a vibrant faith in Christ Jesus as revealed in the teachings and services of the Orthodox Church. Such friendships can be formed during the many camping programs offered by the Orthodox jurisdictions as well as youth meetings and socials.

One final note on Orthodox Christian education--its goal must be the salvation of the child and not just a private, safer alternative to public schools. It also shouldn't be chosen because parents believe they will receive a superior intellectual education so they can succeed financially in life. That is not the purpose of an Orthodox education.

Whatever option is chosen for the education of children must be determined by the standard of the Gospel and that standard is a continual striving for holiness and union with God. Child-rearing is a lofty and holy task. The educational environment in which a child is placed will have a profound effect on the rest of his or her life.

Permit me to ask a rhetorical question. What keeps a married couple faithful to each other? Is it the vows they spoke? Is it the fear of a messy divorce? No. It is love. The mutual love between a husband and a wife is what maintains the relationship in good times and in bad. Unlike what the secular world tells us, love is not a feeling but a daily choice. The same is true about the spiritual life. To the extent that we are committed Orthodox Christians, we are such because at some point in our lives we recognized Christ's love for us and we desired union with Him so that nothing would separate us from the love of Christ. This isn't an intellectual achievement but a deep knowledge of the heart that nothing in life is preferable to the love of Christ. We know this because we've experienced it. This is what will attract youth and keep them faithful to Christ in the Ark of Salvation, the holy Orthodox Church.