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### **Youth Ministry: Connecting Learning with Living the Kingdom**

This paper will briefly look at what we are trying to accomplish in youth ministry, especially as we make the connection between what youth learn in the classroom and how they live out their lives as members of the Kingdom of God here and now on earth. We will look at youth ministry in terms of Spiritual formation and development of identity in our youth as Children of God. In doing so, we will reflect upon the Holy Scriptures and the Divine Services of the Church, examine the wisdom of the Fathers, and just as importantly, reach into layers of experience and practical expression to generate dialogue of what spiritual formation looks like in the classroom and beyond.

Today, the Church needs well-trained and well-equipped youth workers for the long term. Too often we see youth ministry as a stepping stone to “real ministry” as a time in waiting for ordination or a secular job. We must be serious about raising-up and forming young people by training youth workers that commit their life to youth ministry. America needs educators and youth workers who know the faith, know Orthodox theology, have diverse talents, range in age, and are models of committed servants of Christ from each stage of life. In addition, it is with years of experience working with young people that we as clergy and youth workers begin to fully understand the immense task before us. With many years of ministering with and to young people in Christ, clergy and youth workers develop the eyes, the ears, and the heart that are so essential to participating with God in youth formation.

Let me dive into spiritual formation of our youth by stating that good youth work makes the connection between what the student learns in the classroom and how they live out their daily life. For the purpose of this paper, Youth Ministry often takes place outside of the classroom, while not dismissing the classroom, but rather taking what has already been taught and learned by our Christian Education Teachers, and helping the young person incorporate that information into their daily life in words and deeds. Our young people are inundated with information – some of it very good and some of it not beneficial for their formation and salvation. Every person with whom our young people come in contact, the bishop, the priest, the deacon, the youth worker, the church school teacher, the parent, relatives, and everyone else in the community, have the task of helping youth form their identity.

The real question for the Church, parents, and those involved in youth ministry, is who is teaching and forming the identity of our young people? Who will have the hearts and minds of our youth – the world or the Church? Will they be children of this world or children of the Light<sup>1</sup>? Will they be members of the Body of Christ<sup>2</sup> living in this world or merely members of this world lost to the Kingdom of God<sup>3</sup>? The world is continuously teaching our children through the schools and through media in its various forms of television, radio, movies, social media, and whatever new forms of media will arrive later today. As the Body of Christ, we are called to pass the faith down to our peers and to the next generation. What are we as the Church doing to excel beyond what the world is doing in teaching our youth? Some think this is a lost cause, while others think we can form young people with just forty-five minutes in the classroom each week. The reality is that the world is consuming our young people while some sit back and

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<sup>1</sup> Eph 5:8, 1 Thessalonians 5:5-11

<sup>2</sup> Colossians 1:18

<sup>3</sup> Matt. 6:10, 19:24

debate if our Church school curriculum needs updating, should we use this social media or the like for our youth group, should we hire a youth director or get by on volunteers. Yes, while all of that is very much needed, we must do so much more. The Church should not be afraid, nor stand by idly with the advances in communications. The apostles and the fathers of the Church were well trained and successful in communicating to the crowds and society of their time.<sup>4</sup> As we served at the Holy Altar together, Father Alexander Schmemmann would often say, “Maranatha – Lord Come.”<sup>5</sup> In many ways these words form my image of Youth Ministry or what stands at the heart of forming young people as children of God in His (God's) image and likeness.

Youth Ministry is about developing in our youth the yearning for the very presence of the Lord – the yearning for the full establishment of the Kingdom of Heaven here and now – the yearning for the end of the nonsense of this fallen world and the restoration of the Kingdom in all places. Not in the sense of avoiding the world, but fully engaging the world as a citizen of the Kingdom. It is the yearning for the fulfillment of the story of salvation and the end of our wandering in the desert of this world. It is not a hopelessness and a desire to end one's life, but rather a great desire to really live as full human beings with an understanding that all that happens now is more than just preparation for our place in the Kingdom and the story of salvation. In fact, it is an understanding that this life is our very working on our own salvation, our place in the story and it is our finding our permanent place now in the story of salvation as citizens of the Kingdom of God. Without this “Maranatha – this desire for “Lord Come” there is

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<sup>4</sup> Acts 2:41

<sup>5</sup> Cf. 1 Cor. 16:22. Father Alexander Schmemmann was dean of Saint Vladimir's Seminary during my five and a half years at the school September 1973 - December 1978.

no “Memory Eternal.”<sup>6</sup> We can say that Youth Ministry is about guiding and helping our youth so that their names may be written in the Book of Life.<sup>7</sup> It is in this reality that Christians can bring hope and life to our American Communities.

Youth Ministry is where theology for young people begins to come alive. It is where the theory of the classroom is opened before their eyes and their hearts and they see God in each person and in each moment of their life. Youth Ministry is about opening the hearts and minds of young people to constant prayer and a constant desire to belong – to belong as citizens of the Kingdom. Youth Ministry is where partaking of the Body and Blood of Christ opens the noetic heart and mind to see that Christ Himself dwells within each of us. It opens the way for young people to understand “that God desires mercy and not burnt offering.”<sup>8</sup> It opens the heart and mind to see that real love for one another and for God is far more powerful than all of the kingdoms of this world. That true riches lie in relationship with God and His people and not in possessions which become obsolete in short time and rot and decay. It is understanding and living our Lord’s words, “A new Commandment I give to you, that you love one another; as I have loved you, that you also love one another. By this all will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another”(John 13:34-35). To convey, teach, and inspire this message of hope and love, we need well trained, educated, inspired youth workers who are actively working on their own salvation.

When I was a young, twenty-three -year -old priest, a ninety-six -year -old parishioner once told me that life begins at around age seventy, as it takes that long to figure

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<sup>6</sup> Memory Eternal is a short hymn said and sung at the Orthodox Christian funeral and memorial services for the dead. Asking God to remember the person who has died, is asking God to keep the person alive in His mind and hence alive in reality. If we are remembered by the Lord we are alive with Him in the Kingdom, just as Christ promised the thief on the cross. “Then he (the thief on the cross next to Christ) said to Jesus, “Lord, remember me when You come into Your kingdom.” And Jesus said to him, “Assuredly, I say to you, today you will be with Me in Paradise” (Luke 23:42).

<sup>7</sup> Psalm 69:28, Revelation 3:5, Rev. 21:27, Luke 10:20.

<sup>8</sup> Hosea 6:6; Matthew 9:13.

out what is really important and what really matters in life. As a young priest, I wondered if this was correct. Now, over thirty-seven years later, I am convinced this saintly woman was right. We need the elders to be present in the lives of our youth and we need youth workers of all ages in order to present to our youth, people at various stages of their journey in life. Many elders have ministered in forming young people and guiding youth to Christ and their knowledge and experience can help lead our efforts to mentor new youth workers. Our elders of the Church, who have really begun to live life in full contemplation of the Kingdom of God, are essential models to our youth and young adults. St. Basil speaks to us about forming young people and the importance of our extended families. St. Basil recognizes the time of childhood and youth as the time for change and learning saying,

What clearer proof of our faith could there be than that we were brought up by our grandmother, a blessed woman, who came from among you? I have reference to the illustrious Macrina, by whom we were taught the words of the most blessed Gregory, which, having been preserved until her time by uninterrupted tradition, she also guarded, and she formed and molded me, still a child, to the doctrines of piety. But, after we received the power of understanding, and reason had been perfected in us through age, having traversed much of the earth and sea, whenever we found any who were walking according to the traditional rule of piety, we claimed them as our fathers and made them the guides of our soul on the journey to God.<sup>9</sup>

Just like in Saint Basil's time, our youth need to be placed in front of those that walk in piety and righteousness, so that they too will know what Godly people look like and how they act, so that they may do the same.

In many ways American Society has lost the role of the Elder. The tradition of respect for our Elder, of the one who has lived life and has the wisdom of life experience, has been lost as though their days of giving are over. We know in this regard what our Lord warns of this

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<sup>9</sup> Basil, "Letter CCIV," *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church*, Second Series, Vol. VIII (Grand Rapids, MI: WM. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1975), 245.

mentality as recorded in Luke 12:16-20. The Church needs just the opposite. She needs the Elder, (men and women) who love Christ, who love His Church, who love the people of the community, to continue working and standing as witness of the presence of God in the community. This is something only the Elder can do, as the Elder is now free in personhood and in understanding of their ultimate journey, and has a fuller understanding of the necessity to “lay aside every care of life” that stands in their way to the Kingdom.<sup>10</sup> Many of our young people have been separated from the Elders and hence miss out on this vital gift given by God for the formation of young people. Saint Theophan the Recluse writes,

But suppose someone has turned toward God, suppose he has come to love His law. Is the very going toward God, the very walking on the path of Christ’s law, already necessary and will it be successful merely because we desire it to be? No. Besides the desire, one must also have the strength and knowledge to act; one must have active wisdom...It is necessary for someone who already has the desire to walk on the indicated path to the Lord to be shown (*by someone who has already journeyed that way*) in addition all the deviations that are possible on this path, so that the traveler may be warned in advance about this, may see the dangers that are to be encountered, and may know how to avoid them.<sup>11</sup>

Our methods of teaching need to become cutting edge and at the same time bring with them the wisdom of the Elders of the Church. We need to do better than the world in this regard, because we have so much more to offer and the stakes are a matter of spiritual life and death. The Good News of God is an exciting and continuously relevant message and way of life that cries out to be shared and lived by all, precisely because it is life-giving and filled with great joy. To some the Church appears to be a century or so behind the world in capturing the imagination and eyes and hearts of our young people. Yet at the same time, the Good News of Christ is needed more than any other time throughout all of human history. The message of Christ needs to be made

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<sup>10</sup> From the Divine Liturgy of St. John Chrysostom from the priestly prayers as the priest prepares for the Great Entrance with the discos and chalice.

<sup>11</sup> Theophan the Recluse, *Raising Them Right: A Saint’s Advice on Raising Children* (Mount Herman, California: Conciliar Press, 1989), 7-8.

alive today, as the Church has the most to offer young people, so that they may live and have great joy and purpose in life.

To truly care about the salvation of our youth, and really seek to form them as children of God – as disciples and leaders of the Church, we must take seriously that we are raising up a generation of disciples and leaders for Christ and His Holy Orthodox Church. There is no greater task than raising up a generation of young people to serve and love God. No greater task exists in this world for educators and parents, and no greater reward awaits each of us in this world than to know that we have passed the faith down to the next generation intact and even greater and more alive than what we received.

In 1999, I wrote the following in my doctoral project concerning youth,

Young people today are confronted with moral and ethical choices at a younger age than in past decades. They are tempted to partake of illicit drugs, alcohol, and tobacco. They are confronted with choices of whether or not to participate in pre-marital sexual relations – heterosexual or homosexual, whether or not to view pornography in secret or on their family television or over the Internet connection from their own bedroom, [and today I would add the iPad or personal phone].

More often than not through these influences and choices, the youth are encouraged to reject and abandon their faith in God. These are among the many choices confronting young people today. Often they are encountering these issues as early as their pre-teen years. The numerous moral and ethical choices confronting pre-teens and teens leave these young people ill-prepared to make responsible and educated choices. In addition, they are confronted with these choices without the extended family surrounding them and with parents who are absent or often ill-equipped to understand the conflicting issues. Ideally, children ought to be protected from such issues until they are old enough to deal with them maturely. The reality of our time, however, is that our society is so permeated with immoral and unethical behaviors that we as the Church, and as parents, must act to equip our children to respond in a meaningful and responsible way to all

of these issues.<sup>12</sup> In many ways, these challenges are forming the identity of our young people. Perhaps we need to be more mindful of the words of our Lord, that “Whoever receives one such child in my name receives me; but whoever causes one of these little ones who believe in me to sin, it would be better for him to have a great millstone fastened round his neck and to be drowned in the depth of the sea” (Matthew 18:5-7).

The biblical texts of Paul’s letter to Timothy and of Jeremiah’s first chapter stand out as reminders to us of the significant impact and place that young people can and do have in the life of the Church. They also stand as examples of what we must teach and equip of young people to likewise do. St. Paul says,

Command and teach these things. Let no one despise your youth, but set the believers an example in speech and conduct, in love, in faith, in purity. Till I come, attend to the public reading of scripture, to preaching, to teaching. Do not neglect the gift you have, which was given you by prophetic utterance when the council of elders laid their hands upon you. Practice these duties, devote yourself to them, so that all may see your progress. Take heed to yourself and to your teaching; hold to that, for by so doing you will save both yourself and your hearers (1 Timothy 4:11-16).

A similar reference is made of Jeremiah saying, “But the LORD said to me, “Do not say, ‘I am only a youth’; for to all to whom I send you, you shall go, and whatever I command you, you shall speak. Be not afraid of them, for I am with you to deliver you, says the LORD” (Jeremiah 1:7-8).

Youth Ministry is helping young people understand where they fit into the story of salvation and just how important their part is in the story. It is helping young people know that they belong to the story of salvation and most importantly they are members of the Kingdom of God, members and partakers as children of the Light.<sup>13</sup> They are seeking to be clothed with the

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<sup>12</sup> Joseph F. Purpura, “Moral and Ethical Issues: Confronting Orthodox Christian Teens Across North America” (D.Min. doctoral project, Pittsburgh Theological Seminary, 1999) 1.

<sup>13</sup> Eph 5:8, John 8:12, Matt 5:14, John 3:19-21, 1 Thessalonians 5:5-11.

garment of light given in the formation of Adam by God in paradise and tragically lost by Adam and Eve<sup>14</sup>. As Saint Gregory Palamas reminds us that what we lost in the garden is shown again in the Transfiguration of Christ on Mount Tabor and in Christ's Resurrection as a promise to come for each of us who seek and choose to truly be Children of God, as children of the Light.<sup>15</sup> Therefore, our young people must know the story of salvation, both in and out of the classroom. They must come to know what was lost in paradise and what has been gained in the Resurrection and that they belong to that story and must be equipped to participate in that story in a positive, life-giving, Christ centered way, in everyday life, in each situation, and in each person they encounter.

To know the story of salvation means we must also be good theologians – as good theology leads to good youth ministry. Youth Ministry without a solid foundation in *right* theology will set our youth adrift and ultimately lead to spiritual death. Youth Ministry is about the eschaton – it is eschatological – it is about salvation. Orthodox Youth Ministry is not accidental. It is a deliberate effort to transform lives and save souls.

As a young youth worker over thirty-five years ago, I was told my job was “to keep the kids busy and out of trouble.” I quickly came to understand that youth ministry was so much more. I came to know that youth ministry was about life and death. The late night talks in the hotel lobby with groups of teens quickly led from small talk to the deep issues in life facing our young people. The questions our youth asked were often about physical life and death matters, but more important they were ultimately about spiritual life and death. I have often said that I

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<sup>14</sup> Gen 3:8-24 The nakedness of Adam is that he lost the Clothing of Light given when God breathed life into him. After disobeying God and losing the clothing of Light God then clothed Adam and Eve with skin according to Genesis (Orthodox Study Bible).

<sup>15</sup> Gregory Palamas, "Homily Thirty-Five Delivered on the Feast of the Transfiguration," ed. and trans. Christopher Veniamin in *St Gregory Palamas: The Homilies* (Dalton, PA: Mount Tabor Publishing, 2014), 275-276; Matt. 17:1-2; Matt. 28:1-7.

fear not physical death – but I greatly fear spiritual death. Physical death comes with the hope of passage from this world to the Kingdom of Heaven, but spiritual death leads to darkness and oblivion.

From my early days at St. Vladimir’s Seminary, I remember the gentle, insightful woman, Sophie Koulomzin as she wrote her book *Our Church and our Children*. Koulomzin reminds us that teaching youth is so much more than simply conveying information, or simply filling time with them. Koulomzin reminds us that, “As our children reach adolescence, they have to come to terms with the concept of the Church as the Body, the incarnation of God in our life: (They need to ask the questions) What is the Church? What is my place in it? What does it mean for us? What is its place in the world?”<sup>16</sup> In short youth work, teaching our children, is much more than keeping our youth busy and out of trouble, it is about helping young people form their identity.

In a document being prepared on Spiritual Formation of Youth, for the Antiochian Archdiocese, our committee struggled with the question of what does working with young people look like in terms of forming the youth of the Orthodox Church.

In general terms, our job as youth workers within the Orthodox Church is to foster spiritual formation, or growth in spiritual maturity, among our young people. In some circles, this process is referred to as “discipleship,” which is an accurate and Biblical description of the process of spiritual growth. From our perspective as we consider both the wonderful potential that our young people have in Christ, and the spiritual dangers that confront them, we are interested in producing the next generation of disciples... And of course, what we don’t want to do is to create disciples of ourselves; rather, we want true disciples of Jesus Christ, or in other words, spiritually mature men and women.

This document later goes on to discuss, as part of the formation of our young people, we are helping them form their identity:

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<sup>16</sup> Sophie Koulomzin, *Our Church and Our Children* (Crestwood, NY: St Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 1975), 102.

A major part of having an identity is having a narrative. To a large degree, we think of who we are in terms of the narrative of our lives. Our lives are stories, and we are shaped by those stories, but we also try to shape the stories, and to a certain degree, we may succeed. We have a natural tendency to try to make sense of life by understanding it as a narrative. This is clearly something recognized by the Church; narrative characterizes the Holy Scriptures in general, and we might think in particular of the parables used by Christ. Narrative is present in every aspect of Church tradition, from Saints' lives and Church history to hymnography and iconography. Therefore, a major factor in helping teens to discover their identity in Christ, is helping them to see themselves as part of the Church's narrative, and to see Christ and His Body at work in their personal narratives.<sup>17</sup>

In forming the identity of our young people we would do well to remember the fruits of the Holy Spirit, "But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, longsuffering, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control."<sup>18</sup> Saint John Chrysostom similarly reflects on the spiritual person, as he speaks on inner beauty.

Let us turn I say to the soul. Look upon that beauty, or rather listen to it: for thou cannot see it since it is invisible - Listen to that beauty. What then is beauty of soul? Temperance, mildness, almsgiving, love, brotherly kindness, tender affection, obedience to God, the fulfillment of the law, righteousness, contrition of heart. These things are the beauty of the soul. These things then are not the results of nature, but of moral disposition. And he who does not possess these things is able to receive them, and he who has them, if he becomes careless, loses them.

For as in the case of the body I was saying that she who is ungraceful cannot become graceful; so in the case of the soul I say the contrary that the graceless soul can become full of grace... You cannot alter grace of body, for it is the result not of moral disposition, but of nature. But grace of soul is supplied out of our own moral choice.<sup>19</sup>

Formation of our youth, as Saint John Chrysostom reflects, is about choosing to be formed as a beautiful person from within. The gifts of the Spirit are essential in forming the identity of Children of God. Our task is no less than to help form children who are beautiful in their identity and personhood before God and His people.

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<sup>17</sup> "Working Document of Spiritual Formation," Antiochian Orthodox Christian Archdiocese Department of Youth Ministry, Daniel Bethancourt, 2016.

<sup>18</sup> Gal. 5:22

<sup>19</sup> John Chrysostom, "Homily II: Eutropius having been found outside the Church had been taken Captive," *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church*, Vol. IV (Grand Rapids, MI: WM. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1975), 264.

Ultimately, the Church in America needs to gather her Bishops, Priests, and Lay Leaders on the Archdiocesan and Diocesan levels, and the Parents, Educators, Youth Workers, and Young People to dive into the depths of Orthodoxy and articulate anew—based on the Scriptures, the Fathers of the Church, the Divine Services, the Holy Fathers and Mothers throughout history as well as this present day—a deliberate path forward in genuinely developing a current, effective, Orthodox approach to Youth Formation, that will address the unique needs and circumstances of Orthodoxy in America. This dialogue and direction should generate educated youth workers and present concrete material on how to deeply and broadly form the identity of our young people as Children of the Light working on their salvation here in North America in the twenty-first century. If we do this, and if we are successful, then we will be raising up strong and fervent disciples and leaders for the Holy Orthodox Church and for this great nation. Filling the Church with Children of the Light who sing in their hearts and minds “Lord Come” will show the Church as She really is—the Body of Christ—and a great beacon of light and hope to this very troubled world.