

CHRISTIAN NURTURING OF CHILDREN BEGINS AT HOME WITH PARENTS

By Fr. Peter G. Rizos, Ph.D.

The idea of involving parents in the Christian nurture of their children naturally brings to mind the family unit. Interestingly enough, however, the Greek word for family, *oikogheneia*, does not appear at all in the New Testament, nor in other early Christian literature. The Greek words translated “house” and “household” are used many times, but not the word for family. In comprehensive dictionaries of the Greek language, no use of the word for family is indicated in ancient and medieval times.

Oikogheneia comes into common coinage only in modern Greek. My guess is that this is due to the appearance of the nuclear family in modern times, in contrast to the extended family which was the norm in earlier periods. The extended family often included grandparents and other blood relatives along with the domestic slaves. The relatively recent appearance of the word *oikogheneia* helps to impress upon us not only the change in the structure of the modern American family, but also the very different social conditions which surround family life today, as compared to earlier times. But first, let’s take a brief look at the role of the family in religious nurture, as we see this in our spiritual heritage.

Spiritual Nurture

Holy Scripture gives vivid testimony to the spiritual nurture of children required of parents. This is shown to us both by direct and indirect reference: It was unthinkable for early Christians to deny baptism to the children of parents who accepted Christ as their Lord and Savior. We see this is the case of the household of Lydia from Thyatira (Acts 16:14-15); and the household of Stephanas (I Corinthians 1:16, 16:15).

St. Paul enjoins children to obey and honor their parents, according to the Fifth Commandment. At the same time he tells fathers not to provoke their children to anger, “but to bring them up in the discipline *paideia*, and instruction *nouthesia*, of the Lord (Ephesians 6:1-4). St. Paul repeats the same admonition in Colossians 3:20-21.

According to the Old Testament, the love for God and the activity of teaching are inseparable. The failure of an Israelite to pass on to his descendants his true life in covenant with God meant that he did not love God with all his heart, soul, strength and mind. This responsibility was carried on by the entire adult community.

Persistence in Teaching

In Deuteronomy 6, we note that stress is laid on persistence in teaching the faith to children by their parents, and in using informal opportunities to do this. In the Book of Proverbs, 1:8-19, home-training is depicted as a moral safe-guard. Both the father and the mother are included in the teaching ministry which is discharged especially in the home. In Judaism today, a home is not considered Jewish unless the mother is a Jew either by birth or through conversion. This is because the mother’s role is considered crucial for the total religious nurture of the children.

Looking at the ancient Greeks and Romans, we find that when their family life was strong and vibrant, so too were their societies and civilizations. At the heart of the family bond was their evening sacrificial offering of food and wine or libation to Hestia or Vesta, the goddess of the hearth. It was the practice of pagan families to have an image of the goddess on the mantle of their fireplace, along with a statuary of the favorite gods and goddesses of the family members, called *sevasmata*. We have to admit that the family devotions practices by the pagans put to shame many present-day Christians! Turning to the contemporary scene in our parishes, let's think briefly about some reasons why it seems that parents do not participate in the Christian education of their children as much as they could. We are talking about parents who are themselves the third and fourth generation of our immigrant forebears.

Material Pursuits

These adult parishioners are completely Americanized in the sense that they are members of our technological society, consumers of all the material comforts and conveniences that we enjoy in this the wealthiest country in the world ever. They are also subject as we are to all the socio-economic pressures of 21st century America, including the need to be working parents of latch-key children. The current severe recession of the world economy has multiplied the pressures on our families by the factors of joblessness, financial hardship, exploitation, home foreclosures, and increased domestic violence. The woes facing American families today are compounded in the case of one-parent homes. The resultant sense of emotional insecurity and outright fear that has overcome many Americans is cause for alarm, and should be an occasion for grave concern on the part of Church leaders. It should also awaken a sense of urgency to lead and minister to God's people, reminiscent of the Lord's compassion toward the multitudes, as cited in Matthew 9:36-38.

At the same time Orthodox parents today are beset by a pervasive secular humanism and permissiveness that tries to break down everything sacred and all moral absolutes. The constant fear of having children fall victims to drug addiction, alcohol abuse, sexual immorality, child molesters, and kidnappers is another cause of real anxiety and inner unrest for many parents today. If we think that it is tough to be a child today, it is tougher to be a Christian parent!

The Orthodox consciousness which our immigrant forebears brought with them to these shores from their homelands can no longer be assumed to be present in parents today. Nor can we expect our Orthodox faith to be passed on by parents to their children by a kind of osmosis. Parents simply cannot communicate to their children what they themselves lack. It is no wonder that parents often feel uncomfortable in speaking to their children about religion. They are either embarrassed to betray their own ignorance of the faith, or feel emotionally alienated from spiritual matters. The Lord reminds us that the mouth speaks out of the abundance of the heart (Matthew 12:34).

Perhaps then the first step in promoting the participation of parents in the Christian education of their children is to start filling the hearts of the parents with the saving knowledge of Christ. There are some practical strategies to involve the parents in Christian education:

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Basic and foremost is the evangelization of the adult community as a normal, ongoing experience of parish life.

Reorient Priorities

This means the preaching and teaching of Christ Himself as the Crucified and Risen Lord—not merely dispensing information about religion. In some quarters this may call for a reorientation of the priorities of parish life. Our focus should be on the call to repentance and personal salvation as members of Christ's Body—the more abundant life in Christ. Our people badly need a basic catechesis as to what our Orthodox faith is all about. This must be done by developing programs of Christian education for adults and for all family members together.

Parents will make Christian education a priority for their children when they are led to believe that the Church is responsive to the concerns that they have as parents about their own life-situations in the real world. Perhaps we clergymen need to do less talking to our parishioners about what they should believe and practice, and do more listening to what they themselves have to tell us about how they are hurting spiritually.

Parents respond to opportunities for religious instruction more readily when they anticipate participating in certain sacraments of the Church. For example, the best time to teach adults about matrimony and marital life is when engaged couples are looking forward to their own marriage. The best time to teach parents and prospective sponsors about baptism is a few weeks before the sacrament takes place. This should be done not in the sense of merely conveying knowledge about the externals of the baptismal rite, but rather setting the basis for the Orthodox Christian education of the child. Perhaps this will help to make real the church within the Church, *ecclesiola in ecclesia*, in the homes of our parishioners. It may also help to create some much needed norms and standards of parish membership beyond the paying of stewardship offerings.

No Orthodox home should be without a worship center with an Orthodox Crucifix and icon of the Theotokos with the Christ Child, a vigil light, and any other Byzantine icons of saints. This should be set up in a corner of the home dedicated to family and personal prayer, where the family members are constantly renewed by the grace and power of the Lord. It is time also that we teach the fathers their proper priestly role within the home.

Most parents of our church school children have never observed a classroom during regular instruction. They have not been given the opportunity to meet and speak with their children's teachers. Our church schools should hold an open house at least twice during the school year: one at the beginning, and the other toward the end of the school year. Parents need to feel that the parish really wants and expects them to cooperate with the teachers in the religious instruction of their children. Christian education is primarily the province of the home. The Sunday School can only supplement, not replace, the witness of the parents as the primary teachers and role models of Orthodox Christian education.

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Parents are normally very proud of their children. They love to see their children take an active role in various religious celebrations, religious dramas, and public speaking events. Our church schools could do much more along these lines, in conjunction with various religious observances during the

year. Most parents would gladly cooperate with the teachers in helping to prepare the children for a particular part in such an activity.

In closing, we can say confidently that the challenge of getting parents involved in the Christian education of their children is not met by looking for gimmicks or easy solutions. The task rather requires us to open ourselves and one another to the saving grace of the Holy Spirit. It requires us to be willing to reach people where they really are in their spiritual lives. When we do this, divine grace is surely with us to fulfill our task.