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CE 510 Youth Ministry

Formation is at the heart of what the Church is all about. Just as we are formed in our mother's womb, we are formed in the Church. The Church is a womb in which are formed until we are delivered into eternal life. This begs the question, why can we not be formed by whatever happens to be going on in the wider culture? There are many reasons, but for our purposes it will suffice to say that the wider culture has neither the desire, nor the resources, nor the oneness of mind to accomplish such a task, and furthermore the umbilical cord of the secular culture is severed from the divine nutrition offered in the "new birth."¹ Nevertheless, it is important to keep in mind that this severance is never total, and there are in all cultures, even the most impoverished, beautiful threads of connection, which can echo depths of meaning in the most diverse and unlikely of places. Returning the analogy of the womb, the womb is a place of protection and safety where formation takes place, not in total opposition to the surrounding world, but indeed taking in the helpful nutrients that are necessary, while excluding the harmful elements that would prove deadly to the child within.

But what exactly is formation? In her landmark work, *Children in the Church Today*, Sr. Magdalen² says that "Christian education means helping our children to **acquire** what St. Paul calls "**the form of God.**"³ She goes on to remind us that in Greek this word is *morphosis*. This is a term that one hears today in the realm of biology but not often in the realm of youth-related

¹ *Who were born, not of blood nor of the will of the flesh nor of the will of man, but of God.* (John 1:13)

² Sr. Magdalen, of St. John the Baptist Monastery in Essex, England. Author of *Children in the Church Today*

³ Sr. Magdalen, *Children in the Church Today*, (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1991), pg. 9.

ministry. When St. Paul refers to the form of God, what is he talking about? What is the form, and how are we, or, our youth today to acquire such a thing?

The Theological Context of Formation

At the heart of Orthodox teaching about salvation is the understanding that what was lost by all of humanity in the fall, was *not* the image of God, but *likeness* to God. *Let us make man in our image, and after our likeness*, (Gen. 1:26) recounts the first chapter of Genesis. After the primordial transgression Adam responds to the voice of God, saying, *I heard thy voice in the garden, and I was afraid, because I was naked; and I hid myself*. (Gen. 3:10) Why naked? Can it be that this foundational narrative was concerned with cloth? No indeed, salvation is not about textiles. The tradition is clear that what was lost was the *likeness* to God, this likeness, as it were, was what clothed the first humans. They had lived in a state of communion with the *uncreated divine energies* of God, which mystically clothed them. The best possible way to describe this loss of divine radiance was *nakedness*, for so they felt, after such a change in their mode of being.

Though the loss was devastating and had cosmic implications, it did not involve a complete loss of connection with God, for human beings continued to exist in the image of the Holy Trinity. As we sing in the memorial service of the Church sung for the departed: “I am the image of the ineffable glory, though I bear the marks of transgressions.”⁴ It is this dual reality in which we live: on the one hand, we are earthly, and live darkly in a land of shadows cast by our sinful condition of spiritual blindness and slavery, and on the other hand we are related to the

⁴ Rev. Igor Soroka, *Panikhida* Book, St. Tikhon’s Monastery Press.

Divine Being of God. It is this precious and most-beloved image of God that Christ came to restore to its original *likeness* through His incarnation.

God beheld His image distorted by the lack of light and divine likeness and therefore took upon Himself human nature that He might restore it, but not only restore, but also continue the original aim to become godlike, derailed by a premature taking of the forbidden fruit. We hear the most loving voice of Christ once more speak out to man:

God did not despise the one who, in Paradise, was tricked by guile; and despoiled of the robe which God had woven for him. Again, He has come to him---calling, with holy voice, the one who was misled: ‘where are you, Adam? This time do not hide from Me; I wish to see you. Even if you are naked and poor, do not be ashamed; for I am fashioned like you. Even though you desired it, you did not become God; but now I have willed it and become flesh. Draw near to Me and recognize Me, so that you may say: “Thou hast come, Thou hast appeared, O light unapproachable.”⁵

It is for this reason that God become incarnate in human flesh, to restore the image of God, to call us out, to beckon us to embrace once more the original calling, to invite us into the life of the Holy Trinity. In Christ’s high priestly prayer, He says to His Father: *That they all may be one; as thou, Father, art in me, and I in thee, that they also may be one in us.* (John 17:20) Through the incarnation, all the barriers have been broken down, and we once again can be restored to the *form* of God. This is the divine *morphosis*, or metamorphosis⁶ that God offers to us in Christ. Indeed, God has already accomplished this salvific act in Christ, it is now up to us to participate in the *restoration of all things* (Acts 3:21) or not.⁷ We are given the opportunity in this life to incline our will towards holiness or not. It is implied in the Apocalypse, that we will continue in the path we have chosen: *The one doing wrong, let him do wrong still; and the filthy*

⁵ Kontakia of St. Romanus the Melodist, for the Feast of Theophany

⁶ The name for the Feast of the Transfiguration in Greek

⁷ The full verse reads: *For he must remain in heaven until the time for the final restoration of all things, as God promised long ago through his holy prophets.* (Acts 3:21)

one, let him be filthy still; and the righteous one, let him do righteousness still; and the holy one, let him be made holy still. (Rev. 22:11)

Connecting Youth to Christ: beginning at home

God may be the *Ancient of Days* (Daniel 7:22) but He is also always new and young, He does not age, for He exists outside of time. He calls us to *newness of life* (Rom 6:4) and St. Paul says that as Christians *we have put on the new self, which is being renewed in knowledge in the image of its Creator.*⁸ (Col 3:10) Our new life in Christ begins in the waters of baptism in our parish churches, but it is nurtured in the Christian home. The first arena where formation will take place is in the womb of the home environment, which is called, a little church.

Fr. Anthony Coniaris says that first level of formation at home is called experiential. It is through the daily living out of the faith in the family setting, that the experiential level is solidified and God is seen not just as a word thrown around from time to time, but rather as a living being with Whom we can communicate. Here rituals, symbols, and traditions play an important role.⁹ It is "...the simplest of evening blessings, or a spontaneous prayer around the table, (that) is more basic to life-long faith than most of us realize."¹⁰ These are the daily faith experiences ritualized in the family system. These experiences are trans-rational, and speak to us at the level at which music and art speaks to us. This almost pre-cognitive state, is an exceedingly important phase in developmental learning of a child, proven to be very consequential in promoting both the good and the bad.

⁸ Berean Bible

⁹ Anthony Coniaris, *Making God Real in the Orthodox Christian Home*, (Minneapolis, MN: Light and Life Publishing, 2004), pg. 12

¹⁰ Ibid.

Connecting Youth to Christ: thoughts on Christian education

The parish and the home form a symbiotic relationship, each strengthening the other. The education of the child is the task of parents as well as the priest and church school teachers. It is important that education is never reduced to mere *information*, just as we do not wish children to see a butterfly as merely a collection of cells and DNA, but rather as a beautiful creature, composed of both biological, and mysterious elements that awaken a sense of wonder, contemplation, and doxology.

God is not simply a thing to be dissected and analyzed any more than a child is. God is to be known and experienced, as indeed the world itself is. Facts *about* God, if one can say such a thing, is not the same thing as knowing God. As Sophie Koulomzin says, we should "...help the child to *know* God, as distinct from conveying to the child knowledge *about* God."¹¹ Children need to be surrounded most of all by prayer and love, these two elements being so important that without them it becomes doubtful that any other methods of formation will be successful.

In the education of children there is a fourfold schematic of goals that I would suggest, based on four patristic quotes: *A pattern of life* (St. John), *need of scriptural knowledge* (St. John), *to know the eternal God* (St. Clement), *conveying that life itself is a schoolroom to learn the gospel of the kingdom* (St. Theodore). These are the central means and goals of formation at the home, parish, and classroom levels.

As Fr. Joseph Purpura points out: "We want our young people to understand the need to struggle, to discern, to seek God's help, healing and restoration and ultimately to overcome their

¹¹ , Sophie Koulomzin, *Our Children and Our Church*, (Crestwood NY: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, Crestwood NY, 2004), Pg. 20

own failing, through Jesus Christ.”¹² This means that they must see *us* as parents and Christian educators, struggling, discerning, and seeking God’s help, hearkening back to the concept of *a pattern of life*.

In Canon 102 of the Quinisext council we read “.... the whole purpose of God and of him who has been entrusted with pastoral authority is to lead back the wandering sheep and to cure him if he has been wounded by the serpent; and neither to cast him down to the precipice of despair, nor to loosen the reins so much that he begins to live in dissolution and contempt...”¹³with this in mind we must do our pastoral work.

Four main principles from Patristic Writings

In looking at the fathers I discovered four main principles that we can use to achieve our desired goal. Number one is *a pattern of life*. “A pattern of life is what is needed, not empty speeches; character, not cleverness; deeds, not words.”¹⁴ As teachers of youth, our teaching will be ineffective if we do not exhibit “a pattern of life.” It’s not about having all the latest clever trends in hand, it’s not the most entertaining speeches, it’s about character, deeds, and a visible pattern of life than can clearly be seen. This foundation is what must be laid in our own lives before our other work with youth will have the impact we desire.

The second principle that we should apply to our youth work, is that of *scriptural knowledge*. Again, Saint John Chrysostom has these important words to share with us: “Do not think that only monks need to learn the bible; children about to go out into the world stand in ***greater need of Scriptural knowledge***.” Here we have some golden advice from the golden

¹² Joseph F Purpura, *Moral and Ethical Issues*, 2002, pg. 19

¹³ Heirotheos Vlachos, *The Science of Spiritual Medicine*, (Levedia, Greece: Birth of the Theotokos Monastery, 2010), pg.27

¹⁴ <http://orthodoxinfo.com/praxis/parenting.aspx>

mouth of St. John. It is indeed strange that we should think that the scriptures are supposed to be well known by Monastics or Clergy but somehow the average Orthodox young person will be fine living in ignorance of the scriptures.

One of the striking findings of the Orthodox Teen Survey conducted by the Antiochian Archdiocese is that regular reading of the scriptures has a real influence on the choices that teens make. The word of God stirs up the heart to right actions and repentance where we fall short. What we take in, comes out in our life. If youth are only watching and reading worldly materials then should we be surprised at the outcome, when their life-choices reflect the world rather than the Kingdom of God. We need to instill in our youth a burning love for the scriptures, and this is a love that we ourselves must possess.

The scriptural story is not something dead from the past, it is a living thing. By reading the bible daily we can weave it into our life, connecting these divine words with our own experience of life. This helps us to accomplish and live out the next principle, which is for children *to know the eternal God*. According to St. Clement, “The primary lesson for children is to know the eternal God, the One Who gives everlasting life.”¹⁵ The three rules of the Christian life: prayer, fasting, and almsgiving, foster this knowledge.

The fourth main principle is to convey that life itself is a classroom in which we learn the gospel of the kingdom. According to St. Theodore the Studite, “God, Who, fashioned us out of non-existence into being, has placed us in this life as in a schoolroom to learn the gospel of his kingdom.”¹⁶ This is a beautiful way of seeing life. It’s not just in official parish functions that

¹⁵ <<http://www.orthodoxchurchquotes.com/tag/raising-orthodox-children/page/4/>>

¹⁶ <<http://www.orthodoxchurchquotes.com/category/sayings-from-saints-elders-and-fathers/st-theodore-the-studite/>>

we learn the gospel, but in the whole of life, because God is the author of our whole life, not just part of it. We need to promote this way of seeing all of life, and speak out against a compartmentalization of life into categories of “religious,” and “secular.”

Implementing a Youth Program

Taking into consideration the above principles and goals of formation, what would a successful youth ministry look like at the parish level? First we should address the overall environment of the parish. The parish environment and its attitude to the youth is a critical component. It was important to the youth that I interviewed that they see the parish as a safe place, a place that has “a family environment where there are people you can trust.”¹⁷ Also, important is for the Priest to stay engaged with the youth and take an active interest in them. There needs to be a situation where youth can speak about the various challenges they are facing and where it is okay to ask difficult questions.

The parish should value the young people as full members of the community and allow them to share in tasks that advance the mission of the parish. The parish should be a place where the youth are acknowledged and supported in their quest to advance spiritually and in other endeavors. The parish should offer regular opportunities and times where the youth can get together for fellowship, and spiritual enrichment.

A youth group ought to be organized in each parish to create a more intentional youth formation experience. This would also give due emphasis to the uniqueness of being young and the vast potential for spiritual growth during this pivotal time of change and ferment within the young person. A monthly meeting with the youth seems to be a very achievable balance. Both

¹⁷ Teen interview conducted at Sts. Cyril & Methodius Orthodox Mission in Chico, CA.

quality and quantity are needed when it comes to interactions with youth. During youth group meetings, the priest or youth leader should address the teaching towards the things teens are dealing with.

One of the goals of working in the youth group context is to find out, “Who they are, what they believe, what they like, what they fear and what they do.”¹⁸ Establishing a rapport with the youth will help in achieving the goals of formation. A youth worker must be willing to talk about any number of topics in an appropriate manner, including movies, celebrities, music, politics, gender, race issues etc.

According to Fr. Joseph Purpura:

One of the most frightening things to teens is that they feel at times that they are the only ones going through these issues, or that they are not normal because they have these feelings and concerns. We need to assure them that they are not alone, that many of the feelings they have are normal, and that they can successfully work through these issues.¹⁹

It would be my suggestion that any youth group should strive to embody and empower the youth to live the values outlined in the SOYO Statement of Purpose: Worship, Witness, Service, and Fellowship. The SOYO model is the best and most well thought-out structure for youth ministry that currently exists in North America.²⁰

Key Characteristic of Youth Formation

Based on my research, I would say that making *connections* is essential to formation. The connection-making ought to begin with the parent and the child, and through the parent the

¹⁸ Purpura, *Moral and Ethical*, 2002, pg. 8

¹⁹ Ibid, pg. 58.

²⁰ I would like to see the OCA adopt this model on a national and diocesan level.

connection is made with the parish, and through the parish the connection is made with the Universal Church. Another aspect of this is that we as pastors and youth workers should seek to make connections on multiple levels, between what is happening in the services and the scriptures (worship) in the world (witness & service) and what is happening in the Church on the local, universal (fellowship) and eschatological level (fellowship with the Saints). As connections are made, it becomes more evident that the way of Christ is the way of life. *In Him we live and move and have our being.* (Acts 17:28)

Towards establishing a Teen Youth Program

The teen program should ideally take the form of a youth group rather than a class format. Why? Because the youth group setting will hopefully enable frank and honest discussion of Christian teachings and the ways those teachings conflict or are potentially in harmony with (less likely) the world around them. Meetings could be held once a month and be inspired by the fourfold themes of: Worship, Witness, Service, and Fellowship. Each youth group should consider adopting a constitution similar to that adopted by SOYO at the national, diocesan and parish levels.²¹

Difficult moral and ethical issues should be discussed, especially since there is a direct correlation between the moral choices teens make and their relationship to the Church. The “Orthodox Teen Study demonstrated a clear connection between what teens thought and what they did.”²² Since thinking and action are so closely related there is a need to teach clearly,

²¹ SOYO Constitution: <http://www.antiochian.org/soyo_chapter_constitution>

²² Purpura, *Moral and Ethical*, pg. 83

directly, and compassionately, on difficult moral and ethical issues such as: abortion, birth control, pre-marital sex, homosexuality/transgenderism, alcohol and drug abuse, and euthanasia.

Along with regular meetings of at least once a month, there should also be outings and activities throughout the year such as: visiting a monastery, serving at a local soup kitchen, project Mexico trips, community service projects, visiting shut-ins etc. There should also be sponsorship for youth to participate in Orthodox conventions, gatherings and other educational opportunities. Lecturers should be brought in at least annually to speak to real-life concerns from an Orthodox perspective. This also helps them to see someone besides their local pastor or youth leader speaking about the faith, understanding more deeply its universal dimension.

Conclusion

Any program for Orthodox youth ministry should be grounded in the clearly defined goals of enabling our youth to grow in their relationship with Christ and His Church. Using the means of “a pattern of life, “scriptural knowledge,” “knowing the eternal God,” and “seeing life as a schoolroom for the gospel of the kingdom.” The goal is further identified as seeing our youth live out a life of Worship, Witness, Service, and Fellowship, as a natural outcome of all that has been suggested above.

Once a youth group is established, and a few initial meetings have been held, a constitution based on youth input and already established examples should be defined and adopted. Goals for the youth group should be discussed by the youth and their director. Together they should examine similar youth work and identify what is desirable to imitate and what new ideas and emphasis might be possible and appropriate. Over the course of the years, youth can be asked to write short reflections on their involvement in the youth group and how it may have

affected their lives. It is my firm belief that being more intentional with the youth we have, can in fact accomplish much more than we ever thought possible. *You have been faithful with a few things; I will put you in charge of many things.* (Matt. 25:21)

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