

Fr. Theophan Whitfield  
Youth Ministry  
Final Paper

This paper develops the ideas presented in my second Youth Ministry presentation during the St. Vladimir's Seminary D.Min. onsite intensive in January 2015. Our task in the second presentation was to develop a youth ministry program that could be implemented on the parish, diocesan, or archdiocesan level. What follows is a brief description of a program that would be useful in a parish setting. Much of the biblical and patristic background that lies behind this proposal can be found in the first, more comprehensive presentation given during the onsite intensive.<sup>1</sup>

### **I. For starters, some insights from Koulomzin**

In *Our Children, Our Church*, Koulomzin instructs parents and educators to convey a sense of the reality of God as the first and foremost task.<sup>2</sup> We must seek to help children know God, not just acquire knowledge about God, otherwise a child will naturally accept the absence of God (21).

To acquire the sense of the reality of God is the goal of our whole life. Obviously no text book, no lesson, no activity per se can give it. But I do believe that this basic purpose should always be kept in mind by the teacher, and should serve as a criterion for all our teaching methods, our lessons and activities (23).

In addition, Christian education must emphasize the importance of community -- of belonging to the messianic body. It must also produce growth by stretching our children, much in the

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<sup>1</sup> These Power Point version of these presentations can be provided upon request.

<sup>2</sup> Koulomzin, Sophie. *Our Children and Our Church*. (Crestwood, NY: St Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1975), p. 19. (Future page references are made parenthetically in the text of the essay.)

same way that Christ stretches us by teaching so often in parables (25)! And critical to raising our children in the faith is growing their sense of awe and mystery, and to do so in a way that makes sense to them, given their age and abilities.

Our task in developing the children's sense of awe is to help them to recognize God's action within the realm of their experience of life, of their knowledge of natural events and of their reasoning capacity. At their own rate and in their own way, with God's help, they will acquire a sense of the holy, a sense of awe before the mystery of God (27).

To this end, Koulomzin urges educators to know their students from the inside, so to speak.

Educators should be familiar with the developmental psychology of children, and she helpfully adapts Piaget's theory of cognitive development for use in outlining an effective way to accomplish the tasks of knowing God, emphasizing community, stretching abilities, and growing the sense of awe and mystery. In particular, when she discusses the education of adolescents she points out two urgent needs. "First they need the opportunity to make religion part of their own experience of life ... through informal free discussions, through participation in church work, through friendships" (74). And second, they "need to acquire information that will allow them to think intelligently" (74). This is the basis of any "helpful and creative" youth group: to "combine freedom and spontaneity of expression with an exposure to information about the Christian faith that will enrich their thinking" (74).

## **II. The needs of Orthodox youth**

In our coursework this semester, we have explored the large range of problems and challenges now faced by Orthodox youth. And it is beyond the scope of this paper to address

even a small collection of these in any detail. But in a previous presentation<sup>3</sup>, I summarized these needs in the following way.

- (1) *Orthodox youth need to understand God's love for them.* They need to understand that that they are created in the image and likeness of God, and are called to become "little Christs." They should learn to experience prayer as a call to divine fellowship, and the call to holiness as a call to honoring one's dignity. And most importantly, they need to acquire an appreciation of God's unbounded and never-changing love.
- (2) *Orthodox youth need to understand God's love for others.* They need to understand that others are also created in the image and likeness of God, and are also called to become little Christs. They need to know that God is just as much at work in the lives of others as in our own lives, and that compassion is not just something "good to do," but that it is sacramental -- that when we meet the needs of others, the Christ in us meets the Christ in them.
- (3) *Orthodox youth need to understand God's love for the whole world.* John 3:16-17 is not just about human beings! "For God so loved the world (*ton kosmon*)," Scripture says. And it goes to say that Christ came so that "the world (*o kosmos*) might be saved through him." There is divine dignity in who we are, in where we live, and in the labor we accomplish. There is no part of life that God does not touch and sanctify. If having an "incarnational faith" means anything, surely it means this. As St Maximos wrote long ago, our vocation as human beings is to work with God and to steer all of creation into communion with the one Holy Trinity. And as Fr Alexander Schmemmann wrote, "the whole world is a sacrament of Christ's presence."<sup>4</sup>

### **III. Meeting these needs: The "Three Ps" & a platform for parish youth ministry.**

To meet the needs described above, youth ministry should focus on three types of formation:

- (1) Personal Formation. Orthodox youth are called to take care of themselves, in Christ.
- (2) Pastoral Formation. Orthodox youth are called to take care of others, in Christ.
- (3) Priestly Formation. Orthodox youth are called to take care of all creation.

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<sup>3</sup> See my *Onsite Presentation 1*. In particular, my reflection on Ephesians 4, Philippians 2, the story of the rich young ruler, and Matthew 25, and the parable of the Sower and the Seed.

<sup>4</sup> Schmemmann, Alexander. *For the Life of the World* (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1963).

These are the *Three P's of Youth Ministry*, and each is described more fully in the following proposed platform, or mission statement, for Orthodox Youth Ministry at the parish, diocesan, and archdiocesan level.

### **Youth Ministry Platform**

Youth Ministry within the Orthodox Church in America exists so that our young people will nurture their relationship with Jesus Christ and will work out their salvation using the rich treasures of the Orthodox spiritual and liturgical tradition. Doing so, we encourage our youth to “grow up in every way into him who is head, into Christ” (Ephesians 4:15-16).

The ministries and programs we sponsor aim to guide our young people through three stages of formation:

**(1) Personal Formation.** Orthodox youth are called to take care of themselves. We encourage our youth to nurture their relationship with Jesus Christ through mature participation in the Church’s tradition of prayer, worship, and spiritual guidance. Christ often went away to a quiet place to pray. We likewise encourage our young people to give time to God each day through prayer, adoration, and purity of heart.

**(2) Pastoral Formation.** Orthodox youth are called to take care of all God’s children. We encourage our youth to nurture their relationship with Jesus Christ through compassionate ministry to those who suffer around them. Christ did not come to be a physician to the healthy, but to the sick. We likewise encourage our young people to develop the Christian virtues of mercy, community-mindedness, reconciliation, and love.

**(3) Priestly Formation.** Orthodox youth are called to take care of all creation. We encourage our youth to nurture their relationship with Jesus Christ through righteous engagement with the world around them. Jesus Christ was the fulfillment of the Law and the Prophets, and his death and resurrection inaugurate a new age in which all of life is transfigured by His divine love and life. We likewise encourage our young people to seek justice, to engage culture, and to lift up this entire world as a holy sacrifice so that God might bring it into his kingdom.

#### **IV. The structure of youth ministry at the parish<sup>5</sup> level: The Anaphora Fellowship.**

To make this mission statement a reality, I propose a youth ministry program in which the “three Ps” are separately addressed by three distinct groups or ministries in the parish.

Here is a brief description:

Each parish will maintain a youth ministry program for young people who attend middle school and high school. To give it a name, the parish youth group will be called the *Anaphora Fellowship*, as a reminder that each young person is called to offer herself, her family and friends, and her whole world to God, through Christ, as a sacrifice of praise in the Holy Spirit.

Within the Anaphora Fellowship, three different groups will be maintained:

##### **(1) The Spiritual Council.**

Here, the focus is personal formation. At the Spiritual Council, youth are invited to gather informally in a spirit of fellowship with each other and with their advisors. The purpose of the Spiritual Council is to give the youth a safe and supportive place to talk about the many challenges they face. The goal of the advisors is to listen and to help the youth explore these challenges. At the Spiritual Council, the advisors meet the youth where they are, and they begin to help our young people cope with their struggles and, most importantly, with their failures. The hope is to achieve Koulomzin’s goal of making the loving presence of God a

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<sup>5</sup> Although the focus of the present paper is youth ministry at the parish level, two members of my ERC (including my diocesan chancellor) enthusiastically pointed out that this structure could be useful on a multi-parish level, especially in cases where individual parishes have only a small handful of young people. I agreed and mentioned that in my onsite presentation I described the possibility of creating youth ministries at the deanery and diocesan level as well.

reality in the lives of our children. To do this, the adult advisors listen, love, and provide counsel. Also, the youth will be encouraged to seek additional personal spiritual guidance from their father confessor as needed.

In addition, the Spiritual Council will have an at-home component. The Spiritual Council will sponsor an “Orthodox Parent Boot Camp” in which families will receive training in the basics of Orthodox life and practice, so that the home becomes a place of prayer, open communication, and common growth. Families will be invited back for occasional “Booster Camps” as well! Youth ministry will fail if the home is not the primary place of learning about and living out the Orthodox faith.<sup>6</sup>

## **(2) Young Orthodox DiakoniA (YODA).**

Here, the focus is pastoral formation. When young people share their personal challenges and struggles at meetings of the Spiritual Council, we can be certain that these are challenges faced by their friends as well. We want our youth to take care of themselves in Christ, but we also must train them to be a healing presence to those around them. The goal of YODA is to help our youth acquire the tools they need to be a source of encouragement and good guidance for their friends. For example, if our youth speak up at the Spiritual Council

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<sup>6</sup> Members of my External Review Committee offered several helpful suggestions and useful questions for further review. Suggestions included: inviting in outside speakers (in person or through an internet connection) who can share their own stories, finding ways to allow for youth to express conflict with one another (especially if the group is a larger one), keeping the number of youth workers small and keeping them well-trained, promoting a family atmosphere that is non-judgmental.

Some questions for further review include: How can we create a ‘hook’ in the Spiritual Council to get them to pray and not just share? Many outsiders will feel reluctant to share at the outset, how do we bring the whole group along? Many of those raised in the church might be reluctant to bring up topics that they “hear” are off limits according to church teaching, how do we help them talk about these concerns?

about the prevalence of drugs at school, then in the meetings of YODA, our youth should be given then knowledge and tools they need to help themselves and their friends to make good choices, and what steps can be taken if bad choices and mistakes have already been made.

YODA aims to help our youth to, in turn, help their friends to cope and to rebound.

In addition, YODA should emphasize ongoing but feasible outreach. The YODA could have one signature, annual outreach effort. (For example, the YODA group could work with the local Special Olympics Committee, or some other local non-profit group that organizes a major annual event.) YODA is also a place in which we can emphasize missions, by establishing a relationship with a missionary in the field and by showing our young people what the church is doing in the wider world.

In addition to outreach, "in reach" should be emphasized. Through YODA, youth should develop meaningful relationships with other groups in the church, especially the elderly and homebound. With their families, youth should be encouraged to visit and to communicate with our elderly on a regular basis. And if possible, these relationships should be deepened to allow for mentoring possibilities. Our elderly are often an untapped resource. They can provide our youth with so much in the way of wisdom, experience, encouragement, and practical knowledge.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Members of my External Review Committee suggested several wonderful skills that might be emphasized in YODA: active listening, the art of referral, knowing how to apologize and to ask for forgiveness in helpful ways, conflict resolution, how to relate to people that are in "other groups," forming prayer groups and prayer partners so that requests can be made and shared.

An important question was raised concerning mixed families -- those in which one parent is not Orthodox. Are there special ways we might reach out to them, especially in connection with an effort like the Orthodox Parent Boot Camp? What are their special needs? What unique challenges do they face?

### (3) Life and Liturgy Laboratory.

Here, the focus is priestly formation. As Koulomzin points out, after our children make the experience of God a reality through free and informal discussions (Spiritual Council) and through friendships and community (YODA), the adults then need to help them “think intelligently” about the life to which Christ calls them. Youth ministry must “combine freedom and spontaneity of expression with an exposure to information about the Christian faith that will enrich their thinking” (74). To meet this latter need, the Anaphora Fellowship at each parish will maintain a third group, the *Life and Liturgy Laboratory*.

At meetings of “the Lab,” our young people are given *context*. They are taught to appreciate the meaning behind the vision of an Orthodox life. We do not want our youth to mindlessly follow rules for the sake of conformity. We want them to achieve holiness with understanding, and at the meetings of the Life and Liturgy Lab we have the chance to “enrich their thinking,” as Koulomzin writes.

Questions addressed at the Life and Liturgy Lab could include:

- *What does the Orthodox Church teach about ... ? And why?*
- *How does the worship life of the Church make contact with real life?*
- *What is the relevance of these ancient texts in the age of the internet?*
- *What should I do with my life?*

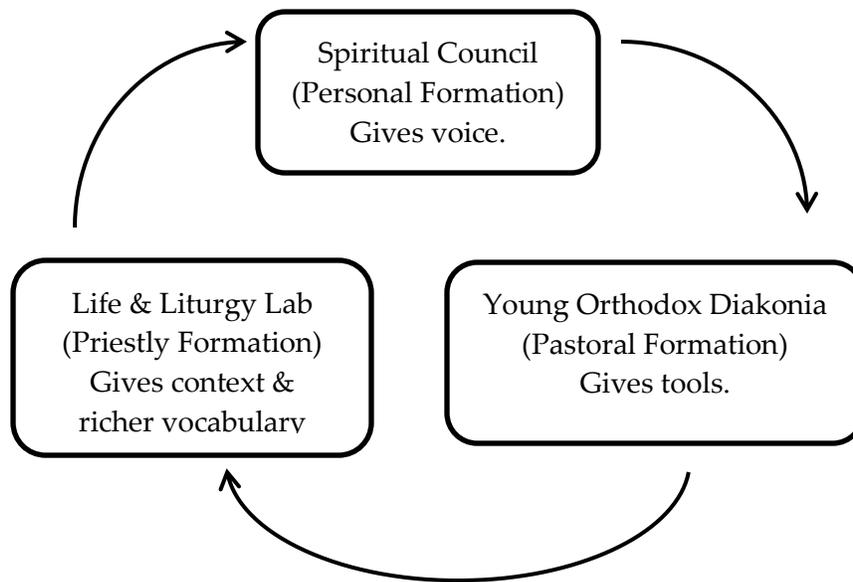
The content of the Lab is student-driven, but is adult-led. The focus is educational -- our youth will be asked to “learn stuff” and to evaluate it from their point of view. This is the place where we can help our youth make important and life-giving connections between Church and life.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> One member of my ERC made the comment that when he was a teen, he would have been reluctant to open up and share in a group setting unless he knew that a strong sense of community was in place. He

To review, the three groups within a parish Anaphora Fellowship are interconnected, and we start by meeting our youth where they are.

- At the Spiritual Council, we listen to how our young people suffer. We give them a voice.
- At YODA, we invite them to confront this same suffering in others. We give them tools.
- At Life and Liturgy Laboratory, we share with them what the Church teaches and offers. We give them context/meaning. And in turn this helps them to understand and express their challenges in meetings of the Spiritual Council with greater maturity and understanding.



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mentioned that for him, the more classroom-like setting was more effective at growing such a sense of community because it is a more directed and intentional effort, and more likely to bring the whole group along at once.

I certainly agree with him. In response, I wrote *“Your comment about the interrelationship of the groups is a helpful one. For some, the classroom type teaching-and-learning scenario can be a more comforting and community building one. The nice thing about the set-up of the three groups is that, really, they form a circle. In practice, they should build on each other. Perhaps at a given moment in time they are dealing with a common theme (substance abuse, e.g.), but in the Spiritual Council the emphasis is on exploring how this presents a challenge to them, in the YODA the emphasis is on picking up skills to help navigate the choices faced by them and their peers, and in the Life and Lit Lab the emphasis is on learning why the church has the outlook it does. With this approach, hopefully each young person can find the hook that will help them to give the church a chance.”*

## V. A word about scheduling.

A parish Anaphora Fellowship has three interlocking groups, and the vision is that concerns from one group will help to determine the work and focus of the other groups. As students are emboldened to discuss their challenges in the informal Spiritual Council, they are given tools in YODA to help both themselves and their friends to cope and respond. And in the Life and Liturgy Laboratory, our youth are given the chance to learn and to explore the reasons behind the Church's views on contemporary issues and challenges.

However, the three groups do not meet weekly. To do so would be an unrealistic.<sup>9</sup>

Instead, a possible routine could be this:

- (1) Weekly or biweekly meetings of the Spiritual Council -- over a meal, or a movie.
- (2) The YODA would meet monthly, with enough time to explore the relevant topic in an unhurried way.
- (3) The Life and Liturgy Laboratory would meet once per month, in a seminar format. And as follow-up, one church school session each month could be set aside to review the content of the Life and Liturgy seminar.

## VI. Measuring Success

To measure the success of an Anaphora Fellowship, the following questions are useful to consider.

- **Measuring success after one year.** Do the youth feel that the priest and youth workers understand the challenges that they face? Meeting our youth where they are -- hearing them describe their struggles first-hand -- is the starting point of youth ministry according to the proposed model. If, after one year, the youth are comfortable "being

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<sup>9</sup> Two members of my ERC also expressed concern about the delicacy of scheduling. How do we invite our young people into significant youth ministry opportunities without adding to the overburdened schedules that so many of them already have?

themselves” in church settings, then the Anaphora Fellowship model has achieved initial success.

- **Measuring success after five years.** Do the three Anaphora groups (Spiritual Council, YODA, and the Life and Liturgy Lab) interlock in the hoped-for way, as described at the end of section IV above? Are there specific examples of how an identified issue cycled through the three groups, helping our youth as they work through the stages of personal, pastoral, and priestly formation? If so, then the proposed model is “working” in the hoped for way, moving our youth from suffering, to responding, to understanding.
- **Measuring success after ten years.** I suggest that longer term success might be measured in terms of continued connection to the Church. Do college students who come from parishes with an active Anaphora Fellowship make involvement in Orthodox College Fellowship a priority? Do these students seek out local churches at which they will worship while in college? Do they continue seeking counsel from their father confessor? Do young adults remain involved in the life of the Orthodox Church? Also, do college students and young adults feel confident in their ability to give a response when they are asked to give “the Orthodox perspective” on some question relating to faith and life? Are young adults finding ways to be pastors and priests in ways that make sense given their personal circumstances?

## VII. Portrait of a graduate

One way to evaluate the goodness of a youth ministry effort is to imagine what life will be like at age 40 for the alums of the program. The vision behind the Anaphora Fellowship model is that Christ is relevant to the lives of our young people, and that the Church exists to help our youth (and all of us) “to grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ” (Ephesians 4:15). And more than this, the hope behind the Anaphora Fellowship and its platform is that young people will grow in Christ, not just so that they will enjoy more spiritual and moral successes in life, *but so that they will be able to live through and cope with their failures*, knowing that in the Church they are loved and supported as they face the many challenges around them as young people. Too often people leave the Church because they believe that

their spiritual and moral failures make them feel ashamed or somehow unworthy of being with Christ in his Church. We know that the opposite is true. It is precisely when we are suffering that Christ desires to draw most closely to us. This is the source of our hope. This is the heart of our faith in Christ and his cross.

With this in mind, if our youth ministry is a success, then our 40 year olds will be able to say to their children, or to the youth they work with: "You know, it was really hard being a teenager. But I was surrounded by adults in the church who helped me to experience the love of Christ in ways that kept me full of hope and courage, despite all the many challenges and occasional failures." The Anaphora Fellowship seeks to communicate the boundless and changeless hope we have in Christ. And if the alums of an Anaphora Fellowship, in turn, seek to communicate to others the same hope that they received as young people, then our youth ministry has been a success.