

Reflections on Spiritual Formation in Youth Ministry

At the Midwinter Meetings last year, the Diocesan spiritual advisors and youth directors from throughout the Archdiocese met together, along with Fr. Joseph Purpura and Bishop JOHN, to discuss spiritual formation in the context of Teen SOYO. To help structure our discussion, we read four papers on the topic of spiritual formation in teen ministry, and then spent time reflecting on each of these papers during our discussion. The authors of these papers are His Grace, Bishop THOMAS, with Peter Schweitzer as co-author, Fr. Joseph Purpura, Fr. Anton Vrame, and Fr. Ian Shipley.¹ The following is a reflection inspired by that discussion, with a view to synthesizing and expanding on the several themes that emerged.

Much has been said or written about the disturbing trend of young people leaving the Church as they enter adulthood. While we've seen significant efforts to reach the hearts of our youth during their teen years, as well as during college, the question remains, "what distinguishes those who remain involved in the Church from those who reject the Church, either outright or simply by drifting away?" While there may be any number of contributing factors, at the most basic level, for teens as for all of us, the question turns on whether or not we have a living, experiential relationship with Christ.

To remain steadfast, every Christian, and particularly the young Christian on the threshold of adulthood, must have actually come to know Christ somewhere along the way. It is not enough to be Orthodox by heritage; nor is it enough to know basic teachings of the Faith, or even to have extensive knowledge of the teachings and practices of the Church, if that knowledge is not lived and experienced as the essential reality. Somewhere along the line, we have to have been captivated by the beauty of the Church if we are to make the choice to apply her precious teachings to our whole life. This counter-cultural choice can only come through a recognition of Christ as the source of our life, and our one true source of joy.

Without this recognition, there is no foundation on which to build. How are young people to make their parents' faith their own, unless they *experience* it as their own? How are they to blossom into full, mature participation in the life of the Church unless already in their childhood their faith is participatory and central in their life? The surrounding society will offer no support. It is no longer the cultural norm for people to be in church on Sunday morning, let alone for them to apply Christian principles to the challenges encountered the rest of the week. Our young people will not remain Orthodox Christians by accident. Only through a deliberate, daily decision to follow Christ in spite of everything will they stand fast in the battles they'll face.

Indeed our young people are fighting great battles already. We who bear spiritual responsibility for them — parents, teachers, youth advisors, clergy and others — must fight for them, and alongside them. Here, however, we who care so deeply face a particular temptation. Considering the sheer magnitude of the forces arrayed against us and our young people, we might give in to a spirit of anxiety, defensiveness, and reactivity. Our hope, though, lies not in our scrambling to put out fires and our vain attempt to calm storms, but rather in the way suggested by the 20th-Century elder, St. Porphyrios: "As soon as you

¹ His Grace, Bp. THOMAS Joseph and Peter Schweitzer, "The Domestic Church as Foundation for Youth Formation in the Orthodox Faith"; Purpura, V. Rev. Dr. Joseph F., "Youth Ministry: Connecting Learning with Living the Kingdom"; Shipley, Fr. Ian, Paper for CE 510 Youth Ministry; Vrame, Anton C., Ph.D, "Reclaiming Formation for Religious Education and Youth Ministry" (*All papers referenced hereafter by author's name alone*).

see evil coming to get you, ignore it and run to God's embrace... Turn to Christ, run to Christ, open your arms to Christ, try to get to know Christ, to love Christ and to feel Christ."² Our hope — for our children as well as for ourselves — is Christ. We must embrace this way ever more deeply ourselves as we help our youth to discover Christ as their only hope — not in some vague way, but clearly, definitely, and concretely.

The chief criterion for good youth ministry is that it helps young people precisely to embrace Christ. "Spiritual formation" is not a topic separate from youth ministry in general, but is simply a description of what youth ministry has as its true aim. Our youth are either "conformed to this world," or they are "transformed by the renewing" of their minds, which can only happen as Christ is formed in them.³ We fall short of the mark when we reduce our efforts with our youth to a "ministry of entertainment."⁴ Certainly, we need "well-trained and well-equipped youth workers."⁵ The necessary training and equipping must be guided, though, by an accurate job description that corresponds to the work Christ has set before us: to help our young people to become authentic disciples of our Lord, mature Christian men and women, "partakers of the divine nature."⁶

Addressing the danger of becoming sidetracked from this true purpose, His Grace, Bishop THOMAS writes, "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."⁷ Acknowledging the many programs and events in the life of our Archdiocese that are "praiseworthy" and should continue, His Grace nevertheless warns that if they "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."⁸ Our goal is not to train our young people to serve this world's purposes, but to form them as disciples of Christ who will be strugglers for His Kingdom. As Fr. Joseph Purpura writes, "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."⁹

To become true disciples and full participants in the life of the Kingdom requires the "healing of the nous."¹⁰ This is impossible for us to accomplish on our own, and in that sense, our task of forming disciples is an impossible one. Only God's grace can refashion us so that authentic Christian life becomes possible. Nevertheless, God Himself calls us to the awesome responsibility of participating as "co-workers" with Him in our own re-creation, and in that of our young people.

As with all spiritual endeavors, fruitful youth ministry involves being stretched beyond what we find comfortable, and, at the same time, being renewed continually by God's grace. The many insights people have expressed regarding Orthodox youth ministry indicate both the points at which we are commonly stretched in this ministry, and ways in which we are supported and led by God's grace and revelation. As one possible way to organize and

² *Wounded by Love*, 2005, p. 151

³ Rom. 12:2, Gal. 4:19

⁴ Vrame

⁵ Purpura

⁶ 2 Pet. 1:4

⁷ Bp. THOMAS

⁸ *Ibid.*

⁹ Purpura

¹⁰ Bp. THOMAS

connect these observations, we might consider spiritual formation in youth ministry in terms of: 1) a human being, 2) a family, 3) a conversation, 4) a story and 5) a journey. While each of these elements might be understood very differently in a different context, from an Orthodox perspective, each principle has Christ and His Body as its focus and foundation.

A Human Being

If there is a single crisis facing our youth that overshadows, or encompasses, all other crises, it is the search for identity. Questions like, “Who am I,” or “what am I,” or “how do I fit into the world around me,” are natural within the transition from childhood to adulthood. However, added to the natural process are unnatural pressures in contemporary society, as young people are encouraged to reject traditional ways of thinking about identity. In the face of the legion of voices clamoring for our young people’s attention as they consider where they fit into the world, we need to provide them with a solid grounding in Orthodox Christian anthropology. That is, we’re called to teach, by word and by example, what it means to be a human being: a man or a woman made in the image and according to the likeness of God.¹¹

Along with an Orthodox *anthropology*, we need to be able to express a coherent *cosmology* (account of the purpose of the created world) and *ecclesiology* (understanding of the Church). Our identity exists against the backdrop of the whole creation, “visible and invisible,” in which God’s fingerprints can be clearly discerned if we have eyes to see. As Christians, our identity is also revealed and clarified as we discover our place within the Church.

Most critically, the quest for identity must be seen for what it ultimately is: a quest for true personhood which is only to be found in and through Christ. Discovering what it is to abide in Christ and Him in us, we discover who we are.¹² Every aspect of youth ministry should have that discovery in the hearts of our young people as its aim.

A Family

Closely related to the question of personal identity is the question of belonging. As we seek to identify ourselves, we ask “Which group is my group? Where do I fit in?” The yearning to belong is natural. When misguided, this longing can find tragic fulfillment in social bonds that lead our youth into dark places. When rightly directed, this same deep longing can find its true fulfillment in the communion of the Saints. We find tensions between parents and teenagers especially as the latter grapple with the question of belonging, and determine whether their allegiance lies more with peers or with parents. Simultaneously, young people raised in the Church face the question whether they identify more with the Church or with one of the many other perspectives around them. In the face of such a chaos of competing voices, it is crucial that the Church family *be* one family in the eyes of young people. Youth ministry should always connect young people with the Liturgical life of the parish and the whole life of the Church. It should also support the life of the home (the “domestic church”).

Spiritual formation begins, of course, in the home. Parents are their children’s first spiritual leaders, and the true meaning and purpose of parental *discipline* is the formation of *disciples*. The more stability, consistency and loving discipline can be provided in children’s lives, the better equipped they will be for the spiritual journey that lies ahead of them. Thus,

¹¹ Gen. 1:26

¹² John 15:4

fruitful youth ministry involves parents. It should also have in view the need to help form the next generation of fathers and mothers (both married and monastic).

At the same time, a vision of the larger family of the Church as a whole is essential. As Orthodox Christians, our lives are not compartmentalized. Christ unites the powers of our soul and the aspects of our life into a single, harmonious whole. Likewise, we belong not only to particular families, but to the vast, universal, family of the Body of Christ extending throughout space and time. We belong to the Saints, and they belong to us. The Theotokos is our Mother. So are the *sittees*, *yia-yias* and *babushkas* of our parishes — they are all like mothers to us. The Holy Fathers that we speak of at the end of every Liturgy are *our* fathers, and so are our hierarchs, clergy, and the faithful men of our parishes. This reality of the Church family should be reflected in youth ministry, both through cross-generational mentoring, and through connecting our young people with the Saints.

A Conversation

In the Church we learn to converse with God liturgically, just as in our homes we learn to converse with our families. Even in silent prayer, the “mystery of the age to come,” there is a conversation between God and man.¹³ We are relational beings, and it is through conversation of one form or another that we maintain relationship. Unfortunately, there’s much in our broken world, and especially in our contemporary world, that sabotages real conversation, both between us and God and with one another. Here we might consider the spate of recent articles highlighting the pathetic wish of many children that their parents would give them as much attention as they give their smartphones.¹⁴

Spiritual formation in youth ministry means cultivating the art of prayerful communication. Our parishes should be “places of conversation.”¹⁵ This requires, first of all, that we as leaders cultivate prayer in our own lives, and then that we teach young people to regard conversation with Christ as the “one thing needful.”¹⁶ With prayer as the foundation, we must also engage our young people in frank discussions about how to live as Orthodox Christians in our world. Speaking to them respectfully and listening to them prayerfully, we can mentor them in the Orthodox way of life and also model for them what healthy conversation is. This requires that we practice and model attentiveness in our time together. It also requires us to listen and pray more than we speak, using “lots of prayer and few words” when we do speak.¹⁷

To foster authentic conversation, we need to make opportunities for our young people to speak openly, with the assurance of our love, knowing that they will be heard. They should be encouraged to be candid with us, and we, for our part, need to listen soberly and courageously. There is nothing to be afraid of; the Church is certainly strong enough to withstand the doubts and questions of our youth. However, they need to be shown that. If

¹³ *Ascetical Homilies of St. Isaac the Syrian*, 2011, Homily 65

¹⁴ E.g. <http://kdvr.com/2014/03/10/parents-busy-with-smart-phones-not-paying-enough-attention-to-kids/>

¹⁵ Vrame

¹⁶ Luke 10:42

¹⁷ “Pray, and when you have to, speak to your children with love. Lots of prayer and few words. Lots of prayer and few words for everyone.” Elder Porphyrios, *Wounded By Love*, 2005, p. 203

we can listen and respond gently with the love of Christ, we will be “filtering the atmosphere”¹⁸ for our young people, and by so doing, helping them to breathe.

A Story

Every conversation is part of a larger whole, and that larger whole forms a story. As Christians, we view life in terms of the story of God’s love for man. “True theology...is a narrative, the story of an encounter, of a meeting with God,” says Archimandrite Zacharias Zacharou.¹⁹ The holy Scriptures tell us a story, and every conversation between God and man that is recorded in the pages of Scripture is part of that story. Identity and family relationships are formed and forged within the story’s context.

On the one hand, there is really only one story — the story of a Bridegroom and a Bride, and the unconditional, crucified, and ultimately victorious love of the Bridegroom for the Bride. On the other hand, there is a great multitude of stories, each of which fits somehow into the one story, just as there is a multitude of human beings, but one humanity, one Body of Christ. The question for each of us is how our own story fits into the one universal story of the Church (not, to be clear, how “God fits into my narrative”).²⁰ We find our inspiration and guidance for this in the Divine Liturgy, in which the narrative of the human race becomes our own narrative. As we glorify God with “one mouth and one heart,” we discover the great Story as our own, and we see our own stories as interwoven with the whole.

All this is a given from the perspective of the Liturgy, but it is probably not yet a given for most of our young people. Partly, this is due to the need for most of us to learn slowly, and painfully, to identify with the pain of others, and to know ourselves truly. Partly it is the result of the individualism preached incessantly in our culture. However, we have good medicine for these ailments in the form of countless God-inspired stories that nourish the soul. By being steeped in the stories of Scripture, the lives of the Saints, and the whole wealth of Church’s treasure trove of history and experience, our young people can be formed according to the “mind of Christ.” What we don’t grasp in the abstract we may yet perceive through stories. Therefore, we should make every effort to help our young people to connect their stories with the stories (and the one great story) of the Church.

A Journey

The idea of a journey, with the adventure that a journey entails, is what drives a story, and every good story has its journey, even if it is only metaphorical. At the heart of the Gospel is the journey Christ makes to Golgotha and beyond: the grave, Hades, the Resurrection, the Ascension. Our life as a whole is a journey to the Kingdom of Heaven. The journey is fraught with peril, the protagonist has to have the courage to face the peril, and that is what makes the story so compelling.

¹⁸ Elder Thaddeus, *Our Thoughts Determine Our Lives*

¹⁹ Archimandrite Zacharias Zacharou, *The Enlargement of the Heart*

²⁰ There is a danger of viewing the situation as the reverse of reality: I’m looking for something to complete my narrative, and for a time Orthodox Christianity does that; however, that can easily change. Christ and His Body then may no longer seem relevant to my story. Our goal should be to avoid this trap of egotism for ourselves, and to steer young people away from it.

Every young man, and every young woman, has a heart that longs to make a perilous journey and to arrive at the “homeland of the heart’s desire.”²¹ We have a natural longing to give ourselves to something greater than ourselves, and this translates into a desire for a challenge. With challenge, there also comes responsibility, one of the most crucial qualities of the journey to maturity in Christ.

While Christ accepts responsibility for each of us on the Cross, He also calls each of us to accept responsibility for one another — to “bear one another’s burdens.”²² Without responsibility, not only is there no personal growth, there’s also no adventure in life. A hero without a quest that the world somehow depends on is no hero. A human being, to be fully alive, must embark on a journey that will involve the facing of real dangers, the bearing of real responsibilities, and the acceptance of real burdens, all connected with love for others. This is the source of both maturity and authentic freedom.

Our young people are on a journey to full Christian manhood and womanhood, which is at once the journey to the Kingdom. That journey requires that they be given real responsibility, taught what the responsibility means, and encouraged to exercise it wisely. This means we must teach our young people to be spiritually resourceful and ascetical, and to love the virtues of delayed gratification and persistent effort. Thus they will discover that “life itself is a classroom in which we learn the gospel of the kingdom.”²³

The journey also requires that young people be inspired with a sense of holy adventure. Just as the Lord did with His disciples, we are to call our young people to leave the shallows behind and “launch out into the deep.”²⁴ The potential is for their hearts to come alive as they discover what a glorious adventure the spiritual life is. Then, finding that the Lord is their companion in that journey, they will take delight in Him, and He will give them the desire of their hearts.²⁵

Conclusion

The journey that lies ahead for our young people is one that must lead them out of childishness, through the turbulence of adolescence, and to the spiritual maturity to which we are all called — “the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ.”²⁶ It is one that should tie their stories to that of the universal Church, and enable them to find their voice in the conversation of eternity. It is one through which they will find that they are “related to the family of the Kingdom on high,”²⁷ and in making that discovery they will at once find their own irreplaceable, God-given identity. It is one that will require doing battle with the enemy.

It is also a journey of unspeakable joy for those who accept it. Elder Aemilianos of Simonopetra Monastery speaks of the spiritual journey, saying that “the one who undertakes such a journey rises up to heaven, even though he still walks upon the earth.

²¹ Orthodox Funeral Service

²² Gal. 6:2

²³ Shipley

²⁴ Luke 5:4

²⁵ Cf. Psalm 36:4 (Septuagint)

²⁶ Eph. 4:13

²⁷ St. Isaac, Homily 65

Going about his ordinary tasks, he celebrates a feast in heaven. He travels on the wings of the Holy Spirit, and his aim, his desire, his vibrancy and daily concern, is heaven.”²⁸

How are we who care for the souls of our young people to communicate this vision of a vibrant, daily experience of heaven — of the Kingdom as a present and compelling reality? There is so much working in their lives, and in ours, against that. Clearly we must first make our own desire and “daily concern” the Kingdom of Heaven. Then, artfully, with the wisdom of a serpent and the innocence of a dove, by our example more than our words, and with great love, patience, and persistence, we do all that we can to inspire our youth with the same burning desire for the “pearl of great price.”²⁹

²⁸ Elder Aemilianos, *The Church At Prayer*, 2005, p. 53

²⁹ Matt. 13:46