

Reclaiming Formation for Religious Education and Youth Ministry
Anton C. Vrame, Ph.D.
Greek Orthodox Archdiocese of America
Holy Cross Greek Orthodox School of Theology

As we think about youth ministry and youth religious education, there are three issues that I believe are important for our conversation. I believe these have made it far more difficult to hand forward the Orthodox Christian Faith and Way of Life (as I call them) to this next generation. First, the issue of loss of connection between young people with the “flesh and blood” community of faith. Second, that education and youth ministry has largely been reduced to a ministry of entertainment. Third, the continuing narrowing of Orthodox Christian self-understanding and expression into forms of monastic piety. Perhaps in a mode of wishful thinking, I would like to suggest a reclamation of formation in youth ministry and education as a possible long term remedy.

Fraying Connections

Professor Nancy Ammerman often speaks of the “fraying connections” between people and communities. She points to a number of factors, including economic and social. For example, around 50% of people under 35 years of age will move in five years across county lines; 42% of 30-somethings have been in a job two years or less. Following the work of Jeffrey Arnett on emerging adulthood, she notes that it takes longer to become an adult today than it did a generation ago, specifically marriage and beginning a family, when someone is most likely to return to parish life. She points to how parishes orient their programs around families with children at home, a demographic that is only around 21% of the American population today (leaving more than 70% of the population not fitting parish model). Because of technology, a community can be built independent of geography. The internet may have led to us being the most connected people in history but it also may have led us to being the most disconnected from one another.

As a powerful example of the fraying connections among people, and thus negatively affecting parish life, Sherry Turkle in *Reclaiming Conversation* talks about how so many people today “would rather text than talk,” leading to conversation being endangered. She writes, “Most endangered: the kind (of conversation) in which you listen intently to another person and expect that he or she is listening to you; where a discussion can go off on a tangent and circle back; where something unexpected can be discovered about a person or an idea. And there are other losses: In person, we have access to the messages carried in the face, the voice, and the body. Online, we settle for simpler fare: We get our efficiency and our chance to edit, but we learn to ask questions that a return email can answer.” (*Reclaiming Conversation*, 2015, p. 22-3)

Individualism

Christian Smith in his landmark work *Soul Searching* (2009) has argued quite persuasively that American teenagers have accepted the basic principle of

individualism. This too has led to the frayed connections among people. Smith writes, "Each individual is uniquely distinct from all others and deserves a faith that fits his or her singular self; that individuals must freely choose their own religion; that the individual is the authority over religion and not vice versa; that religion need not be practiced in and by a community; that no person may exercise judgments about or attempt to change the faith of other people; and that religious beliefs are ultimately interchangeable insofar as what matters is not the integrity of a belief system but the comfortability of the individual holding specific religious beliefs." (p. 147)

We can see the fraying in our parishes and in our religious education programs. While I cannot quantify it, the single biggest challenge in parish religious education programs is the intermittent attendance of students. As I often hear, a class might have ten or twelve students enrolled, but after the first or second week, only three or four students attend, and it's seldom the same three or four students. Parish involvement has become an optional activity for many Orthodox Christians. According to Krindatch, 60% of Orthodox respondents stated that one *can* be a good Orthodox Christian **without** going to church every Sunday. (Orthodox Church Today, 2008). The Pew Forum studies indicate that "regular" church attendance now means once a month.

Again, there is nothing systematic in my study of this, but what are the likely causes? First, for parish life, sports on Sunday. Sunday morning was once a privileged space of the Christian church. It is no longer. Now a parish must compete with the local sports league for a family's Sunday morning schedule. Smith's research would confirm this observation when he writes, "In the ecology of American adolescents' lives, religion clearly operates in a social-structurally weak position, competing for time, energy, and attention and often losing against other, more dominant demands and commitments, particularly school sports, television, and other electronic media. (*Soul Searching*, p 161) Religion simply occupies a largely losing structural position when it comes to most adolescents' obligations, schedules, routines, and habits. (p. 161)

Second, interChristian marriage. It is not uncommon to hear of family's splitting their Sundays between two Christian communities. This week we are Orthodox; next week we are Catholic. I spoke at a parish with a high number of intermarried members on our second Sunday of Lent, "Western Easter." Everyone noticed that attendance was down. In fact one of the Readers came to me to apologize for leaving before Liturgy began because he had to go to another Christian community for Easter services with the "other side" of his family.

In effect, within Orthodox Christianity, we have ecumenical families, practicing ecumenical Christians, probably participating in the sacraments of the other communion. Quite possibly, they are finding these other communities more engaging and inspiring.

Finally, when there is a free Sunday morning for a family, it has become the time to just stay at home, sleep in, or go out to breakfast. Church attendance is an optional activity.

Education as Entertainment

In this challenging intermittent environment, each education session must stand alone as an independent session, with no connection to what happened previously or will happen subsequently. This is hardly good educational practice. As a result, educational time has become entertainment time for young people. While we've always had "coloring book" Sunday schools, we can now add "watching video" Sunday school to the mix.

In an age of information overload, this entertainment approach, rather than the systematic study of a topic, to education is problematic. While one can argue that Sunday school was hardly a good educational model, at least it had consistency of presentation.

Digital Disruption of Education

Digital resources, especially online, that can be used for teaching the faith have proliferated at a dizzying speed. Because of the ability of anyone to create a blog, or anyone with a digital video camera to present theology, the teacher now is a curator or a projectionist, cueing up the latest videos for students. As a result, there is no need to actually teach and engage in conversation about religious topics. Education has been reduced to information transmission, "banking education," as Freire named it, and entertainment sessions. And since a young person may never need to say very much about his or her faith (we Orthodox tend to be private about these matters), there's no need for outlets of faith, other than sacramental participation.

As Smith writes, "The new world of knowledge, and perhaps human consciousness that flows from it, is for better or worse, increasingly visual, decentralized, unclassified, disjointed, unregulated, fragmented, and unevaluated. Alien to it, therefore, are many of the continuities and organizing principles of historical tradition, canon, authority, rules of order, systematic doctrine, and many other features that have historically defined American religions. Youth socialized into the new digital order may therefore find the substance of historical religious traditions difficult to assimilate." (*Soul Searching*, p. 180) "On the other hand, American youth now have easy access to masses of information about an endless array of religious systems and spiritual practices that might broaden their religious horizons and kindle new spiritual interests." (pp. 180-181)

As a possible result, even this too has led to a disengagement from the traditional sources of education and ministry: the life of the Orthodox parish. As Setran and Kiesling have written about the matter (albeit from an Evangelical perspective): "In our 'downloadable' world, many ask whether or not the local church is really all that necessary. Emerging adults have access to Christian teaching on television, through online sermons, and through Web-based Bible studies and blogs. They can

worship along with downloaded praise music. They have opportunities for fellowship with friends and through social networks. They can engage in evangelism and social welfare work through numerous secular and parachurch organizations devoted to missions and social justice. Such options may be perceived as superior because of their flexibility, allowing for listening, learning, worshipping, and service at any time and in any location. Waking up early and dressing for church can appear quite unnecessary in such a world.” (*Spiritual Formation in Emerging Adulthood*, 2013, p. 90).

Narrowing of the Orthodox Tradition

The late Antiochian Orthodox educator, John Boojamra, once wrote, the church is liturgy, but it is more than that (*Foundations of Orthodox Christian Education*, 1989, p. 30). Sadly, John’s observation has been forgotten. Increasingly, it appears that the Orthodox Tradition is narrowing its forms of expression in a retro-Orthodox revival of past liturgical forms, whether Byzantine, Arabic, or Slavic. All one has to notice in the Greek Orthodox Archdiocese is the revival of Byzantine music and liturgical styles and formalism that are more “old world” than new world. From watching attendance patterns in parishes, it would appear that this revival is appealing to only a particular audience and might not be appealing very well to assimilated Greek American Orthodox Christians. Not helping matters is the increasing monastic piety and the ultra-conservatism/fundamentalism and all that comes with it. As a result, the local parish and wider Church could be appealing to a smaller segment of the Orthodox population.

In the book *Googling God*, Mike Hayes names seven categories of young people. *Eclipsed*, no interest in spiritual or religious matters; *Private*, little use for outward displays of religiosity; *Ecumenical*, those with an openness to other Christians; *Evangelical*, those who flock to worship services and tend to have an emotional attraction to the Church, these are often fundamentalists; *Sacramental*, those in tune with the liturgy and sacraments, prayerful and enjoy the rituals; *Prophetic*, active in service projects; *Communal*, those with a great regard for social ministry groups, faith sharing and retreats. (*Googling God*, 2007, pp. 14-23).

Hayes argues that the Church needs to minister to all of these types. He suggests that to date our ministry to young people has been a one size fits all approach that is no longer effective. His approach is helpful and suggests that for Orthodox youth ministry and education to be successful we should be broadening our appeal, not narrowing it. For example, in Orthodox settings, I would argue that we too have a group of people who are Sacramentally minded and a group who are Prophetically minded. We also have a culturally minded group, people who participate in Church life for the connection to their ethnicity. So, we offer plenty of programs that engage young people with liturgical life, social and charitable service work, and cultural programs. But what about those young people who are more Ecumenically minded? Can they find a place in an Orthodox parish ministry? And in our case, the narrowing becomes more problematic when we define programs based on ethnic roots or jurisdictional family? What is the place for a well-assimilated fifth or sixth

generation American Orthodox teenager, child of a religiously mixed home, who attends an excellent Roman Catholic high school that already emphasizes service to others, where youth ministry means learning Byzantine chant, all night vigils, or folk dancing?

The challenge with this narrowing is that it marginalizes other forms of expression and self-understanding, from the more assimilated to the more moderate practitioner of Orthodoxy. As jurisdictional expressions continue their revival, the post-jurisdictional programs like CrossRoad or OCF will become challenging. In effect, quite possibly OCF and CrossRoad in the short run are returning young people to a church that does not exist in their parish.

Part of the narrowing is the growing social conservatism of Orthodox communities. This could be quite at odds with the “Whateverism” of the typical American teenager and young adult, and quite possibly the growing “liberalism” in the next generation. Coupled with Smith’s observation in the young that the overly religious are to be avoided because of their apparent intolerance, this creates the possibility that the Church becomes irrelevant to the lives of the next generation, making it increasingly likely that they will walk away from the Church, if they haven’t already left, because they find themselves at odds with the Church’s position on issues. Christian Smith writes, “For most teens, nobody *has* to do anything in life, including anything to do with religion. ‘Whatever’ is just fine, if that’s what a person wants.” (*Soul Searching*, p. 143) “Most teens embrace a very strong ethos that forswears judging any ideas or people that may be different. When each individual has his or her own unique and self-authenticating experiences and felt needs and desires, it is impossible for any other (alien) individual to properly evaluate or judge those chosen beliefs, commitments, desires, or lifestyle. The typical bywords rather are, ‘Who am I to judge?’ ‘If that’s what they choose, whatever,’ ‘Each person decides for himself,’ and ‘If it works for them, fine.’” (*Soul Searching*, p. 144)

Reclaiming Formation

Returning to Nancy Ammerman, she suggests that parishes become places of conversation. She says, “spiritual lives need spiritual communities.” A statement from Sherry Turkle’s *Reclaiming Conversation* about family could easily be applied to a church community: “We need family conversations because of the work they do – beginning with what they teach children about themselves and how to get along with other people. To join in conversation is to imagine another mind, to empathize, and to enjoy gesture, humor and irony in the medium of talk. As with language, the capacity to learn these human subtleties is innate. But their development depends on the environment in which a child is placed.” (*Reclaiming Conversation*, p. 165)

To build on this I would describe that spiritual community as a gathering place for people with multiple interests, a community with role models, that strives to excel in its practices of the Christian faith (The work of Dorothy Butler Bass is particularly interesting in this area.). I believe that the ministerial task of the Church is to create

a conversation space that is open to the critical exploration and questioning that is needed for a mature adult faith to emerge, an act of formation.

Elsewhere I have written, “Formation is the hands of a community -- the Church – that touches the life of the person in a lifelong process leading to that person becoming God-like (theosis) or complete and becoming a contributor to that community. It occurs through instruction, interaction, experiences, role models, conversations and dialogue, and questions and responses, all of which lead that person to become a well-informed member of that community. Formation occurs through ritual, familial, communal, and societal, ecclesial, and liturgical activities. Formation happens through relationship: the learner with God, the learner with a community—family, Church, and the world.” (Vrame, OCREA paper, p. 19)

Hayes writes, “When the truths of religious faith butt up against the ambiguities of life itself, especially life within American culture, young adults need to set critical reasoning skills alongside their strong adherence to a faith tradition in order to navigate through that ambiguity and through the dark nights of the soul that we all experience.” (*Googling God*, p 13).

Dn. Nicholas Denysenko has said that we can no longer expect people “to blindly accept the information we offer, even the received Tradition of the Church.” In our post-modern, post Christian environment, any information we provide is subject to question and challenge. Thus the need for conversation, question, challenge, is more important in the educational ministry than ever before, allowing for the individual construction of knowledge that is occurring in the learner, but through the formative potential of a community that finds the sources of a faith tradition meaningful, life-giving, and applicable and practices in our to contemporary situation.