

Commentary on Youth in the Orthodox Faith

Most Rev. Archbishop David, of Sitka and Alaska, OCA

Having read the excellent work of His Grace, Bishop Thomas and the Reflections paper, there is nothing I could contribute that would enhance what has already been said. I urge all of our Brethren of the Assembly of Bishops to do the same.

What I would like to add is a brief commentary on what might be considered an addendum to what has been said. What is perhaps an overlooked segment of our youth, the children of clergy. Having raised four children myself, and I know there are others who have been chosen as hierarchs in a similar situation that should be a witness to this work, as well. Then, I would like to add a few words about the Alaskan situation that differs slightly from the cultural setting found in the continuous United States.

I have been friends with many priests over the years who, like me, were serving the needs of their parish and attempting to be a good father to their children. We recall the words of St. Paul to Timothy, that “if someone does not know how to manage his own household, how will he care for God’s church?” [I Tim. 3:5] This is a difficult struggle for any priest, and those that do it well are to be commended.

I do not think we have had a study on what percentage of clergy children remain in the Faith, advance in the Faith, or leave or cease to practice the Orthodox Faith? I am sure it would be an interesting statistic. A study of the Barna Group found that among protestant Pastors,

40% went through a period where they significantly doubted their faith.

33% are no longer actively involved in church.

7% are no longer Christian.

While we cannot say with any degree of certainty that this statistic would remain consonant with our own youth, it like represents a similar challenge among our own PK’s. What Pastors have said they have done well in raising their children:

37% Introduced them to Christ and maintained a Bible-focused home.

21% Spent time with and supported them.

12% Loved them.

10% Taught them good values.

9% Allowed them to make their own choices and be themselves.

What we find interesting in this segment is that common denominator that all parents should have with their children love, teaching them properly, and supporting them is not particular to Pastors, but to all parents. What we might find more significant is what Pastors said they wish they'd done differently in raising their children:

42% wish they had spent more time with their children.

8% wish they had been more understanding.

5% which they had given their children more Bible teaching.

19% have no regrets and wouldn't change anything.

Pastors were also asked about their children 15 years or older and said the following is accurate about their child:

40% went through a period where they significantly doubted their faith.

33% Said they are no longer actively in church.

7% said they no longer consider themselves to be a Christian.

Looking at these numbers, we, as the Chief Fathers of our Flock of Clergy, should be mindful about the struggles a Pastor goes through with his children. Like other parents' children, they have the same types of temptations, the same questioning, the same struggle to be a Christian, with the addition of the intense scrutiny that comes with having a father as a priest. Their pressure is one of a higher intensity and they come to realize that either they are destined to work harder than others at being Christian, or they give up, and accept that they will always be criticized for any behavior that is unwelcome in their social environment. As a parent, the most difficult aspect of raising children that I felt was being a fair disciplinarian and at the same time realizing they had free will.

Push too hard, and risk the loss of trust in your child, too lax, and they end up somewhere far away from God and their Church.

I am happy to report that all four of my children are married in the Church, have an Orthodox spouse, and have a strong relationship with their local Parish, and I have baptized all 5 (soon to be 6) of my grandchildren. I do not say this with any pride or boasting, for I spent many long hours away from them, far too many. I do try to make up for that now in any way I can, but I cannot get back the time I lost. It is to my Matushka's credit that they have remained in the church. They may not be exactly the way I would want them to be, but thanks to God's love and my wife's work, they remain in the Church.

His Grace wrote well about the influence of culture and nationality among our Orthodox in America. While some parishes in the "Lower 48" as we call it, have a tension between their homeland and their American sense of belonging, in Alaska it is almost the opposite. When the Russian Missionaries came to Alaska in 1794 (225th Anniversary this year of their arrival), their intent was not to make them "Russian", but to bring them the Holy Orthodox Christian Faith. Very early on, the texts of services, catechisms, and Holy Scripture were translated into the local languages. Clergy were taught in schools and seminaries established in Alaska as soon as was possible. Native priests were sought out and ordained, trained by St. Innocent in Sitka, Unalaska, and elsewhere. Even when Alaska was sold to the United States in 1867, St Innocent wrote to the Emperor saying, "This must truly be an act of God, for now we can spread our Orthodox Faith to those on the mainland of the continent. He urged the translation of the necessary texts in English, and as soon as possible, train native-born priest to serve the people of the United States. Yes, to St Innocent, as to St Tikhon who followed him, for Orthodoxy to spread in this land, it needed to be assimilated to this land for instruction and conversion of others.

Can we make the same claim in our own Assembly? I think not. When we gather, perhaps we need to listen more to these early hierarchs and their wisdom. We will not become a truly American Orthodox Church until our Youth seek it to be so. They are looking to us, so let us lead, in the Spirit of St Innocent, St Peter the Aleut, St Yakov Netsvetov, St Sebastian Dabovich, St Raphael and St Innocent, Apostle to the Aleuts and All America. Amen.