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CHILDREN, THE CHURCH, AND FREE WILL:

Notes from Moscow Priests

Fr. Constantine Ostrovsky:

Our children's inner world is very often closed to us. Often children feel ashamed to let us see something good and holy in their souls, hiding it from our importunate attention. Here is an example. I had a distant relative, an old woman who died not long ago at the age of 110. Her very grown-up son did not believe in God. When we came to serve holy unction for Aunt Sonia he stood in the corner secretly crossing himself over and over. Although he had told everyone that he didn't believe, something had actually happened in his soul, but he did not want his mother to see it, although it was her dearest dream. She must have talked to him so much about it that, in the end, he just couldn't reveal it to her.

Fr. Vladislav Sveshnikov:

When I served in the Tver region, there were only two young people in my church, a boy and a girl. The boy had just come back from the army and I asked his mother, "How is it that he believes? He is the only Christian boy here."

She told me, "Since he was born I worked at the central telephone switchboard in the nearby town. Imagine, I am working, doing things automatically, but my soul is all at home. How is my little Serozha? What is happening to him? What can I do for him? In my mind I am running home. And when I actually come home from work, I feed him and myself, I start praying with him, telling him stories, reading to him."

This attention is the norm of the attitude of real parents, but it is still only one component. It is not yet real upbringing, but it is the psychological ground upon which real upbringing can occur.

Even though Serozha's mother took care of him so seriously, his faith eventually cooled and she did not know if he would remain a believer. But when he went into the army he was the only non-Komsomol* member there, and when an officer tried to tear off his cross, he quickly put it into his mouth, clenched his teeth and would not let it go, although he was punished for this. Now he is a priest serving in his home village in the Tver diocese.

Fr. Valerion Krechetov (father of 8):

Besides everything else we can and should explain to children that they need to work on their own souls. I remember when my children were small (can you imagine, I had four sons in four years!) and when I came home late in the evening from work, my mother-in-law always told me that our children were a band of hooligans, because they shouted and howled from morning until night. They fought all day long, and only right before they went to sleep could they be talked to. I told them, "Look here, what have you fought over today? Yes, certainly, one has to be strong to take something away from another person, but one needs will-power and humility, not just mere strength." They understood, and afterwards I saw the fruit.

A few days later two of them came to blows tearing a toy out of each other's hands and the third one came up to them and said, "Give it to him because he doesn't really want the toy, he just wants to take it away from you." At once they both lost interest in the toy. When one boy let go, the other just let it fall out of his hands onto the floor.

Also, once we had a fight between our son and a neighbor girl. They each cried, "Give it to me," but the girl held it tight and did not let our son take it. We had to use a trick. "Well, which of you has humility?" She cried, "It's Vasia, it's he who has humility." Vasia, flattened by the fact that he had humility, let go. Nevertheless, the child felt how good humility was, and it was a great moment for the boy. There was some real life in that moment.

Once I came home and from outside heard a wild commotion. I flew into the room and saw the boys fighting fiercely — I thought they would kill one another right there. Natalia, my wife sat there calmly reading, and I said, "Natasha, why are you reading, don't you see what's going on?" She said, "They'll make up in a minute." And they did. Another time my mother-in-law

*Komsomol: The Communist Youth League — During the Soviet years, this was a group for young people from age fifteen to twenty-seven. Komsomol's focus was on preparing them for full Communist party membership.

met me at the door saying, "They have been fighting so long it is a disaster, please go in there." When I came in I found out that they had forgotten what they were fighting over, and sometimes you needn't remind them or make them learn to drag all this behind themselves. Such analysis is not always correct, as sometimes we cannot analyze properly. If somebody has forgotten, let him forget.

Certainly, if you have sinned, the Lord will remind you and you will reap what you have sown, but if both the childish suffering side and the offending side have forgotten, if they have reconciled, let it be forgotten because we need to keep the atmosphere of love.

However, what we say about bringing up children can turn out to be quite different in practice. Life in an Orthodox family is ideal for self-perfection. Your spirit has to work all the time every day. If you fail, start anew. If you fail again, start again, and someday you will succeed. Sometimes I see how ridiculous it is, my making the same mistakes without end. St. Ambrose of Optina used to say, "Theory is a dame in a king's court, and practice is a bear in the woods."

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Fr. Dimitri Smirnov:

Even if we cannot achieve the desired ideal in bringing up our children, still we should know what the ideal is in order to improve the situation a little bit. I have heard many people say, "Well, I used to take my son to church all the time, but now he is such and such and doesn't even go to church." I ask them, "But he is not in prison, is he?" "No, he isn't." "He isn't a drug addict? An alcoholic?" "No." "Does he swear?" "Well, not at home, not that I know of." "Well," I say to them, "for our times he is almost a saint." That is, although we have not achieved the ideal, the boy is not at the bottom where he could well be without our efforts, and this in itself is very good. Our prisons are very crowded, mostly with young people. The fact that he has escaped all the traps means that we have somehow succeeded. If he had not gone to church, prayed, and fasted before he was fourteen, he could now be absolutely out of control and wild. By and by, we will see. It is quite possible that in fifteen or twenty years he will get his mind back. At least he knows the way to church.

Fr. Artemy Vladimirov:

...Many times I have seen newly converted mothers give themselves up to the pursuit of virtue, and after shaking the dust of godlessness, unfaithfulness, and sin from their feet begin to zealously raise their poor innocent children with ferocious piety. And how often it happens that a pious young mother, not having acquired proper discernment or a peaceful spiritual disposition and being ill with “spiritual bolshevism,” so to speak, lies her child down on the Procrustean bed of pseudo-pious intentions which she has hurriedly picked up but not yet tested in life.

Some Orthodox parents make a great mistake when they wish to make future St. Sergius’s or Ambrosy’s of Optina, Cherubims and Seraphims of Sarov out of their children, forgetting that each child is created in the image

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and likeness of God, and that this precious facet of God’s image is revealed in a person through the God-given gift of freedom of choice. God Himself never forces our good will; He only offers the pathway of love and faith. Parents must pray hard to find this path, this “golden mean,” in raising their children. On the one hand they

must not yield to their child’s caprices, raising him on the false principle of over-permissiveness, and on the other, not fall into super-correctness, administrating the child’s immortal soul — an action which guarantees his falling away from God when he reaches the age of creativity and self-expression and asserts his own free will.

Truly, one must have a spiritual heart in order to direct a child who for some obscure reason refuses to go to church on Sunday. He has other business more important and necessary, such as a making a dinosaur den or chasing his playmates around the yard. And when we snatch the toy from him by force or tear him away from his friends, dragging him to church like a slave-owner dragged his slave to the market, we are undermining the pious foundation of the childish soul; aiding and abetting this soul to become a revolutionary when at some future hour he will stamp his foot and turn his back on the Church.

What should we do? First of all, as parents we should master the Socratic method of relating to our children. What method is this? This is a skillful and



Photo Courtesy of Fr. Sergei Novozhilov/Foma Journal

expedient way of offering him something if you wish to make him obey. We act in such a way that he does not notice our strong educative hand, but is sure that he is doing this of his own will. For example: “My child doesn’t want to go to vespers on Saturday evening; he sits glued to this ill-fated TV.” You know that he loves the church, loves his batiushka and is used to being with him, he has his friends at church, he is like a fish in water there.... This precise moment is a temptation, but it would be wrong to switch off the TV with

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an imperious movement, especially when it is accompanied by irritation, or to knock out the chair on which your child has arranged himself so comfortably. It is much more important, leaving everything as it is, to influence his heart.

Here words are most important, spiritual words which have the power to melt the vanity and darkness in the heart of your child. “Well,” you would say. “I am going to church... and who am I going to see there? ...I’m going to see a...a... (your child is not paying attention yet) batiushka, our batiushka, and first he

will give us his blessing (you are speaking to the air, your child is totally engrossed in the television) ... and then Batiushka will bring the oil, not any common oil, but holy oil, and then he will take the brush with a tiny cross on the end of it and he will anoint the forehead of ... Serozhenka (now you may mention your child’s name) in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. And what joy will fill Serozhenka’s heart! And then, you know, on Sunday the Lord Himself through the priest will carry out the golden chalice and we will...we will...” (if you say this with parental love from your heart, he will finish the sentence for you)...“receive Holy Communion!”

“But I’m not going...I don’t want to...” “Well, Serozha will deprive himself of heavenly grace. When the rest of us return peaceful and full of joy, our guardian angels will be with us, and when we go to bed after prayers the angel will stretch his wings above us and will be with us in prayer, but poor Serozha will go to bed without prayers, unenlightened, having looked all evening at those st-u-u-u-pid animal cartoons, and you know who will come up to him then?”

Now, some people mention the word “devil” too easily. They say, “The devil is in you, you are a dwelling of the devil...” and so on. Avoid saying this! It is no good to engrave a darkened spirituality on the tender and vulnerable heart of your child. It is better to say, “Well and so... who will come up to Serozha? The guardian angel?” (Now you are saying more interesting things than the animal cartoons and your child is listening to you attentively.) “So if it is not the guardian angel who comes to you, who will it be?” Let the child himself give the name of this nasty goat-footed being who will destroy the calm dreams of our Serozha because he didn’t go to vespers... It is a great spiritual art to keep your heart prayerful and at peace when you must give necessary rebukes and reprimands. Our Holy Fathers teach us to say unpleasant things in a pleasing manner so as not to hurt, but to conquer everyone with the weapon of love.

Fr. Vyacheslav Poloz:

With children we should do our best and trust God as to the result. The golden mean is always preferable to either strictness or indulgence. A child’s free will is restricted by the will of his parents, but children should not see this. Our wisdom as adults is to show them the attractive aspects of church life, and then, very gradually, step by step, we introduce the elements of responsibility. It is ideal if our child asks to be taken to church, to Holy Communion. When he is small, let us try to bring this about. Loving parents know that it is not difficult.

Also, we must give them knowledge about the Church and Christian faith in general. It is our common humanity to love what we know best. For very young children the faith must be connected only with joy; and this is right and fair, theologically speaking, for they have no sin, the source of all problems. The very notion of sin must be introduced to them very mildly. There is a joke about a priest who is talking to a little boy who doesn’t know what to say at his confession. The priest is trying to help and asks, “Have you taken any coins from your father’s pockets?” “No, I haven’t,” says the boy in surprise, “but I like your idea very much.”

I know two men who cannot live normal church lives. They always felt somewhat depressed as children because their parents talked a lot about sin, hell, and God’s punishments. Their parents had loaded them with ideas that were too heavy for a child’s soul and they grew up without the freedom that is so attractive in Orthodoxy.

But I also know a man who wishes that his parents had not been so indulgent with him. He does not have the habits of normal church life and has to work hard and spend his spiritual strength on just making himself come to church on Sunday. He thinks he is too undisciplined and that his faith is shallower than it could be.

So, God gives parents their faith and it is our children's inheritance. We lay the foundation and they continue building on it. The children of this decade are in a situation quite different from their parents, who weren't born Christian but converted. Yes, they won't have the experience of inspiration that we had in turning to God, but I believe that this experience is still given to them indirectly as a result of our conversion. Let us not deprive them of this fruit for it also belongs to them. Let us not leave them to themselves, thinking that they are free to choose too early; we should lay the foundation and then they will decide if they want to continue building on it when they are old enough to see things distinctly. We must take them to church regularly, take care that they say their prayers and acquire the knowledge we have, but how we do this depends on who we are and who our children are. God will help with this. †