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SOULS IN MOTION: THE SPIRITUAL LIFE OF TEENAGERS

Fr. Artemy Vladimirov, Moscow Patriarchal priest of All Saints Church in Moscow, Russia, shares his pastoral experience of helping hundreds of Orthodox teenagers find their way to faith in the contemporary world.

RTE: Father Artemy, you once said that to raise a child properly, you should be attentive to his upbringing from the first day you discovered you would give birth. How do parents go about this?

FR. ARTEMY: St. John of Kronstadt says that raising children is best illustrated by a bird that sits on its eggs, protecting them with its own warmth. The moment the mother abandons the eggs, if the break is too long – some five or ten minutes – the chicks will never hatch. They will perish. This is quite a good analogy for raising children. When children appear from the womb, they may be quite normal physically, but in their moral and spiritual aspects they are like embryos; they are incapable of self-growth, they do not have the power to develop independently. If children are not warmed by personal, parental love from the top of their head to the bottom of their feet, they risk remaining morally dead to eternal truth, to the laws of God, and to His service. According to St. John this is the “axiom of love,” and he adds that, “these very generations, abandoned by their parents and deprived of personal love, will be organized by Satan for the struggle against Jesus Christ and His Church.” He said this in 1908, only a decade before the Bolshevik Revolution.

Psychologists and doctors know that a future mother begins to form the

inner character of her child before birth, and it is common knowledge that during the first three years of earthly life, you are to be enveloped in grown-up love, so that your personality can manifest and your heart and mind flower. It is just as clear that, from the earliest months of pregnancy, we must avoid any expression of irritation or hatred in the presence of the child and particularly towards him. We should protect our child from any hint of moral corruption, particularly in the realm of lust, including sexual conversation (even on television), and the cursing and rude words that vilify the ears and hearts of innocent children.

The most important thing is to try to create a moral environment, a realm of love, that will act like morning rain on small plants.

RTE: In speaking of this encompassing love from conception, there are many people in the West adopting children from second- and third-world countries who have often had a very difficult start in life, with moral or physical hardships and years in institutions. What can be done for them?

FR. ARTEMY: We know that it's very difficult to erase the dark spots from a damaged young soul that has been wounded by the world. These children often differ very much from their happier contemporaries, as if they bear an imprint that can hardly be erased even in the most pleasing circumstances. I've seen many of these children who look like young grandfathers; childish in their physical development, but with souls that are old and tired. Particularly if they are older, they can hardly escape from previously acquired vices of cunning, hypocrisy, a cold pursuance of their own aims, and they often have a knack of accommodating themselves to different people for their own purposes.

RTE: But we still have to care for these children.

FR. ARTEMY: Certainly. We are to understand their grief; to be tolerant, patient, and more importantly, we are to wait on God and not ascribe success to our own efforts. These souls are often above human effort. It is only God's grace that can visit the heart and make someone a real child in Christ. If we are brave enough to take up this cross, we are to be wise and far-seeing. We are to expect unpleasant things and not become upset, lost, or furious because, after taking a child like this, we do not have a moral right to change the decision. As Saint-Exupery says, "We are responsible for those we have tamed."

RTE: Is it better to try to talk to teenagers in a language close to their own (as a friend who is interested in the things they are interested in) or in an adult language of life-experience?

FR. ARTEMY: As for me, in communicating with teenagers, I believe that a teacher or parent should have a notion of teenage life: their psychology, the subjects of their youthful interest, the laws of their thinking, their sympathies and tastes; but when speaking with them, you shouldn't distort your own language, artificially accommodating your words to their way of expression. For myself, the best method is to use a literary language. Certainly, I can insert this or that contemporary word to let them understand that I know everything about their world – but my own speech is to be clean, classical, high, satiated with rich content, so that it can enrich their mind and heart, awaken some unknown feelings and thoughts, and raise their perception.

My words are to change their mind, but not to violate it, not to influence their subconscious. This is not to be a sophisticated invasion, but a visitation of holy grace via kind, loving, sincere language. If some of my expressions are unknown to them, if they can't be grasped by their minds, this doesn't matter. The main thing is my heart, which embraces the child and leaves him free, giving him the spiritual warmth that helps the soul to open and spread its wings. This is the best way of communicating, because the moment you begin imitating jargon or slang, you become too familiar and too sweet. This is a great mistake because children are very perceptive and they catch every hint of pretence or deceit.

RTE: How do you begin talking to a teenager who is already hostile, who thinks that adults don't understand, or don't have anything of value to say to him?

FR. ARTEMY: When I hear confessions, it isn't rare for parents to bring a subject that looks like a young porcupine with his needles spread, ready to reject anything you say to him. As a pastor or friend, you are to be clever and experienced enough not to read him moral sermons, but you are to be radiant



Fr. Artemy Vladimirov

with sympathy. You are to feel his soul. Perhaps it is not completely crushed, but merely hidden or depressed; nevertheless, it is a childish soul, beautiful in its inner freshness. It is like a flower that has been bent to the earth by a strong wind and cannot stand unaided, or like parched grass battered by the beams of the sun. You are not to pull at this soul with your fingers, with your moral injunctions, but simply to pour cool water – your cheerful approach, your skillful and delicate care, your intelligent way of communicating when you guess what he thinks and feels, helping him to smile at shortcomings. You are not to insult him, not to hurt him, but help him to get rid of this or that lack. You should be like an icon-restorer – an artist who doesn't dare to hack away at the damaged part, or to daub fresh paint over it, but gently and attentively cleans all the spots and disfigurement with small, delicate brushes and sponges until the original image is restored.

Certainly, the hearts of our teenagers are often like icicles and it would be naïve to suppose that in a single hour, or at one meeting, you will achieve any result. No, you are to become interesting for them so that your communication is pleasant, so that they are not wearied by your “lessons,” but realize that you are opening new horizons, that you understand and love them, that you don't despise them.

RTE: You said that we are to “feel the soul.” Can you explain how?

FR. ARTEMY: The main tool for this is your prayer and your love. We should be like those underwater plants that, although fixed to the ocean floor, have the God-given ability to explore the space around them for a great distance with subtle radar-like signals. With us, this spiritual sixth sense is implanted into our hearts. When your heart is calm and filled with prayer, you may be able to feel the soul and understand it, not outwardly, but from within, and then you might guess how this soul thinks and perceives the world. You are to embrace the experience of another human being. It is your love that helps you to understand your neighbor, and it is love that will help you choose the words that can be adopted by his heart. This isn't the practice of a cold psychiatrist who observes his patient and makes some mental calculations, but it is your love, which has the spiritual aim of helping him save his soul, of ridding himself of anything that hinders him on his path to the kingdom of heaven. It is very similar to a parent's love, when we don't judge our child but hold all of his joys and sorrows close to our heart.



Photo Courtesy Elena Yermelova

RTE: Thank you. Now, what would you say is the essence of the “teenage crisis”? What happens psychologically and spiritually in adolescence? Obviously, much is due to the physical changes.

FR. ARTEMY: Our soul is tied to our body, and therefore these two parts of our human nature influence one another. An experienced parent or teacher cannot ignore these characteristics of adolescence. Certainly, we are to know how hormones manifest both physically and in reactions, moods, and attitudes. This needs to be understood by every adult so that we are not caught off-guard.

Concerning the religious-moral aspect, we know that in this period teenagers are prone to hesitate, to doubt. They become judgmental, critical, and biased against the most important moral axioms of life. They are ready to doubt everything. They proclaim that the most important thing for them is their rational mind, and at the same time they quite easily adopt the most ridiculous opinions, particularly those suggested by the mass media and popular culture. These opinions can all be combined into one notion: Protest!

The more wildly this protest can be expressed, it will. It is an intentional pose against society, its fundamental truths and conventions, and as Orthodox physicians and psychologists say, all this mad mass media allures our teenagers and even makes them ill. Its goal is to ruin their psychology. If you want to hurl protests at society, you are to invent something that goes against rational sense: dye your hair strange colors, insert a metal ring into your tongue or eyebrow, or tattoo your body (which is forbidden by the Old Testament). These acts are not only provocative, they are a violation of one’s personal integrity.

So, when we come across a group or an individual poisoned by this rebellion, you are first of all to feel, to sense the atmosphere, and then to understand that this will not be a struggle of notions. It is not on the logical level that you will communicate with them. It won’t be possible to conquer their minds by “proving” some rational points, but you are to *touch their hearts*, to melt their hearts with your wise love, to *attract* them to the realm of purity, beauty, and truth, not by dragging them there or violating their freedom.

You are to be a person who lives not only by his own forces, but is strengthened by the breath of the Holy Spirit. You are to be taught by our loving saints, our own contemporaries like St. John Maximovich of Shanghai and St. John of Kronstadt who never despaired, but had the inner

force to penetrate into the heart of the person they were talking to with their love and prayer.

RTE: That is obviously the ideal to strive for, but practically speaking, what does a parent or guardian do in the situation of a moment if your child comes home and announces that he is going to dye his hair purple? Or if a teacher has a child in his class who is causing problems. At some point, you may have to violate that free will.

FR. ARTEMY: When you have love in your heart, you have the moral right to impose something on a child. You certainly limit their freedom when it transcends borders that are ruinous. We teachers give direction to help our students pursue their aim, even if they don’t want to do so at the outset of our mutual labor. It is impossible to effect the process of education and upbringing without a good and sensible influence. To give unlimited freedom, and to let them become chiefs and bosses over grown-ups is equal to awakening demonic instincts in our children. It makes a halloween of school and home. But the most important element in discipline is to have God’s love in your own heart.

RTE: One of the problems in the West, and I imagine increasingly here in Russia, is that they are under so much pressure from the unChristian values of society and school.

FR. ARTEMY: We don’t have much strength. As St. Paul says, we preach to everyone, hoping to save a few. We are to work in the most difficult circumstances, knowing for sure that if thirty teenagers listen to us, perhaps only three will be influenced by our zealous words and allow the spiritual seed to penetrate into their souls.

It is interesting that in the Russian language, the Slavonic word *nakazaniye*, “punishment,” is translated into modern Russian as “instruction.” To punish is to instruct, it is not to execute. Therefore, even some stern and hard methods of making a child obey have a sensible and good aim, to make him meek, mild, full of respect, to implant some virtues in his heart. Discipline is certainly necessary, and we have an unheard-of problem in West Germany now, where there is a special police force that searches for parents who spank their children, not with any violence, but with their hands.

RTE: We have that in parts of America as well.

FR. ARTEMY: This is unbelievable nonsense, and it is a serious proof of the crazy way of things in this world, when everything is being turned upside down. This is not humanization, but damnation; the appearance of a seeming good whose real goal is to establish chaos in society. Discipline is the foundation of all success in bringing up children.

RTE: Can you give some examples of discipline that wouldn't push the child into resentment, that instruct rather than cause a reaction?

FR. ARTEMY: It is difficult for me to construct a palace of theory, but I remember some cases in my own experience as a classroom teacher. In one instance, one of my twelve-year-old students not only behaved badly, but like a monkey who tried to make everyone laugh, attracting the attention of the entire class to himself, and was bold enough to make some comments on my teaching. What was worse, the class was not indifferent but was poisoned by this destructive influence.

I thought, "What am I to do?" Should I beat him with the pointer over his knuckles, as in Dickens' England? Am I to shout at him as if he were a fallen spirit? Shall I take him by the collar and throw him through the window? No, no, and no. But what could I do?

So, I approached him, I made some ante-commentaries on his remarks, perhaps even praised him for his cleverness, and proposed that he occupy the first seat in the first row so that I could more easily communicate with him in order to ask for his advice... I tried to make him my supporter, to assist me in giving out new material, and approving my methods of discipline. And so my teaching was mostly addressed to him, with the spellbound attention of the entire class. Certainly, I tried to remain loving, smiling, noble, open-hearted, but I immersed him, enfolded him, in my personality, so that he couldn't find a single word to answer. He was permeated with my knowledge and my level of thought, and he couldn't go on functioning as the class clown. It was an interesting approach to this type of hooligan, who soon became my ally.

RTE: Yes. Isn't there a time, though, in these teenage struggles when some of their protest may reflect the growth of rational thought and the discovery of themselves as individuals, distinct from the adults around them?

FR. ARTEMY: Certainly, but to have this growing consciousness of one's



Young Georgian Pilgrim.

personality become a conflict between parents and children is an artificial problem created by literature and the mass media. The most important thing is to make children understand that they are to serve their parents, their family, and society. They are not the center of attention, they must be grateful for their birth and for their parents' labors. We should reject the cup of pleasure for our children. We are not to satisfy all their caprices and self-will.

RTE: And how do we curb rude and opinionated behaviors without dampening them?

FR. ARTEMY: In our talks with youth, we should explain things not as theories, or with some psychological terminology, but by using examples drawn from life. We should try to talk about the difference between being an individual and a person, about what makes you a personality and what deprives you of this gift. We are made in the image and likeness of God; this is the mystery of personality. When, for example, you are rude and aggressive and try to gain respect and compliance by means of your fists or your venomous tongue, does this make you a person? A tiger, yes, a poisonous snake or a python, yes, but a person, no.

Or, when your lips open only for the purpose of loosing some insulting, sarcastic words, throwing them like mud that defiles everything it touches, is this the quality of an interesting person? No. It is just a demonic feature that makes all sinners look alike. All lustful people are quite similar, as are all drunkards, all murderers. They don't have their own face, but their features are hard and dark, like voracious beasts or vultures. It is only virtue – mildness, patience, real humility, especially purity, wisdom, courage, discernment – that makes you a real person and makes your spirit unique and unrepeatable, different from everyone else.

To be a person is not to manifest your ill "individuality," your pride, arrogance, and provocation, but to radiate God's grace, which brightens your eyes, your face, your words. In talking with our children, each of us is to be very attentive to himself, accumulating these Christian qualities in our own heart, that we ourselves may become a real personality. It is important not to read moral lectures – "this is bad," "this is good," "this is polite," "this is impolite" – but you should try to be open to the mystery of life, to show the divine beauty of Jesus Christ, and the courage of His disciples who conquered the demons of lust, arrogance, and pride.

RTE: How can parents overcome their own negative emotions of worry, fear, anger, etc. when their child refuses to obey or exposes himself to dangers common to this age?

FR. ARTEMY: Certainly, we should know that demons don't sleep and that they wait for us in our own homes. Here in Russia we call them "house demons" – and by this I mean that that passion which most often seduces you in your own surroundings and is often connected with a certain relative, particularly your own child. I know very mild people, noble and refined, who cannot abstain from irritation when talking with their own mothers. Also, we know good parents – educated, very pious, who pray from their hearts – but who also carry many negative emotions about their child. They lose the habit of smiling, and tend to only criticize, to express negativity. They poke their fingers into all these sore places, and although loving their children, they do everything to push them away. Certainly, this is demonic wisdom, it is the demons' own network. If we insist on being like the silly fly that invariably settles on the spider's web, we shouldn't blame the spider. Blame doesn't help when we are caught in the web.

RTE: So how do we disentangle ourselves?

FR. ARTEMY: We are to be very, very attentive, to exercise self-control through deep, inner observation of the heart and spiritual readiness to oppose any movement of this negativity. We are to explore our own heart, and the moment something appears in your conscience, the instant that you detect the slightest hint of such a heinous vice, you are to smash this Babylon baby against the rock of prayer.

We should try to be quiet, sympathetic, loving and smiling when we communicate with teenagers. Priests know this fact: if you want to attain some moral goal, if you want to produce a change in a human heart, you are not to be dry and harsh and dark, but, as the Holy Fathers advise, we are to say unpleasant things in pleasant words, and these must be words from the heart.

RTE: Thank you. We've been talking about the problems of adolescents, but what good things are happening at this time that we can help develop?

FR. ARTEMY: We know that a teenager differs from a younger child, first of all in his mind, which is capable of analysis, of developing moral standards for himself, of seeking the meaning of life, searching for ideals, and yearning to



dedicate himself to some noble cause. At the same time, the passions become very intense and pull him the opposite way, particularly in everything connected with sexual matters. A battle begins in his heart.

It is very important for this adolescent to find himself in appropriate surroundings, to have good examples, some grown-up friends who can share their worthy experience of life with him, who will inspire him to set his feet firmly on the path of sacrificial love. If he is left to himself, in most cases he will attach himself to a crowd with low taste and wild passions, corrupted by the world.

A universal advantage of these early years is innocence, which is the integrity of soul and body, a gift given to us from birth. But often, like prodigal sons we waste this treasure, partially or fully, slowly or suddenly. If we call this period dangerous, it is only because of a lack of wisdom, of light-mindedness, stubbornness, and of being influenced by bold and brazen people who too often mislead and rob our youth.

Certainly, we should know that teenagers differ from grown-ups in that their hearts are still integral, that in the space of a moment they can follow the summons of heavenly grace. In an instant, a teenager can cast off all the obstacles that hinder him from moving forward on the field of good.

RTE: And this is why we sometimes see teenagers change very quickly when they are introduced to church life, and they find someone or something to inspire them?

FR. ARTEMY: Yes. Their hearts are not so burdened by sin, and these sins are not yet habits or rules of life. Many teenage sins are made by mistake. Teenagers are often misled, they are not clever and wise, they are silly, and their sins are a result of ignorance, not decades of hardened consent. It is not difficult for them to become good Christians, once they believe in Christ with all their hearts.

RTE: How do we make chastity something tangible and desirable? Can you give some concrete ways?

FR. ARTEMY: First of all, when we speak to teenagers about chastity, which nowadays is warred against most of all by both demons and fallen men (particularly in the mass media), the most important thing is your own personal life, your own piety, your own incessant war against unclean thoughts and desires, your personal chastity. If you are not successful in this

respect, if you don't repent of your thoughts, how can you help someone else remove the splinter from their eye when you have a log in your own?

The second thing is the glorification and veneration by the Orthodox Church of the Most Holy Mother of God. She is a visible ideal of embodied love, beauty, and inner chastity. Her holy face pushes away hosts of lust-filled demons. This is a fact. Therefore, the most important thing is to teach our children to reverence the Holy Virgin: to speak with her as their mother; to reveal all their grief, sorrows and joys, so that they feel the presence of the Heavenly Queen in their everyday life; to look to her icon before they decide to do anything wrong or unclean. If they have this reverence, you may hope for success, because the kingdom of vice and lust reigns in those countries where you see only portraits of politicians, actors, and rock stars, not icons of the Mother of God.

The third thing is to teach our children to wage spiritual war, to discern thoughts and feelings and to qualify them as holy or sinful. If they learn to oppose lust in their hearts and to keep their minds clear of unclean thoughts, they will strengthen their will in turning away from the muck of the present life. They should know that if you tell lewd jokes or stories, if you dress provocatively, this means that you are collaborating with demons and have become their obedient instrument. Is this a role that you want to fulfill? We are to be angels, we are to help other people come to the kingdom of chastity, of love and truth, not to be like a bomb placed under a skyscraper by Bin Laden.

RTE: A Russian reader asks, *"Teenagers see that in Russia today life contradicts all that you find in the Gospel. If you forgive your enemies they take advantage of you, if you don't spend immense energy making sure you earn enough to eat and drink, soon you find yourself overwhelmed with problems connected with lack of money. How do we bring up a teenager to be both devout and yet fit into the world in a useful, normal way? Many parents are afraid to let their children grow up too mild, too kind, too honest, and psychologically unprepared for the hard life that awaits them here."*

FR. ARTEMY: Nowadays in Russia, many Orthodox parents and teachers understand that we are to bring up our children like warriors, as defenders of their motherland. They are not only to be pious, but strong protectors of themselves and their friends. Turning to our past we find our national

heroes, our warriors, our *Bogatiri* – St. Ilia of Myrom, Alyosha Popovitch, and Dobrynya Nikitich. They were like lions and tigers in the struggle, but noble and generous to their conquered foes. They rode to victory as if on wings. So we have the ideal of the Russian warrior-saint, who is ready to fulfill the command of Jesus Christ to give his life for his friends. It is quite a popular idea now in Russia to teach our children some skill in fighting, not in the spirit of oriental warfare, but as Russian Orthodox patriots who respect force not for itself, but as virtue submitted to a moral ideal.

Nevertheless, we are not to use physical force, wickedness, and treachery as a path to earthly success. No, here in Russia, Christians know that every lie proceeds from the devil and that honesty, being true to your word, a sense of duty and self-sacrifice, are the most precious and necessary qualities of a real human heart.

In our days, television programs and computer games are designed to ruin this way of thinking and to implant other ideals that are quite opposite to the Orthodox faith. Therefore, we should remember the words of Jesus Christ, "Be wise as serpents and gentle as doves." This is the best answer to this question; not only to be "gentle as doves," but to be "as wise as serpents." We are not to be deceived by the ideology of our enemies. We are not to submit to bold and godless aliens, we are not to be enslaved by rude and merciless invaders, but we are to be ready to oppose and to counter them. This is a manifestation of Christian love. As St. Philaret of Moscow says, "Love your own enemies, vanquish the enemies of your motherland, and despise the enemies of God."

RTE: Sometimes teenagers ask difficult questions like Ivan Karamazov in Dostoyevsky's *Brothers Karamazov*. If they are not satisfied with the answers given by the Church and keep asking these questions, what should parents tell them?

FR. ARTEMY: We believe that our spiritual mother, the Orthodox Church, has all the answers, and it is our fault that we don't have these answers at our command. But we must also remember that a good answer is not necessarily a precisely formulated rational syllogism. A good answer is a word permeated with sense, truth, and love. A good answer comes from turning your thought into the depth of your own mind and heart. A good answer helps you to humble yourself before God, to feel His incomprehensibility – that our life



is a mystery and that you cannot overwhelm this mystery with the coconut of your mind. It is only a prayerful person, who, at the very moment a question is asked, can give an answer that will satisfy a proud mind.

Certainly, we should read more of the Holy Fathers, so as to have a golden treasury of their enlightenment and wisdom in our hearts. We are not to be stupid, narrow-minded, worldly, dull and boring in our meditations concerning God and human life. Many great spiritual fathers, like St. Ambrose of Optina, also had unique ways of speaking. They were not prolific in their sermons, they were not philosophers who gave long speeches, but their words were to the point, sometimes in the form of proverbs, with some rhyme or idiomatic expression, often filled with good humor. Their words often made a person laugh, but their essence contained a mustard seed. Every adult Christian should aspire to this height of wisdom, so that his words are like a precious jewel. Our Lord Jesus Christ is to be our teacher in this respect because people listened to Him with delight and sweetness. They followed Him for three days and nights, even forgetting about food. They said, "No one has ever spoken like this man."

Of course, it is difficult to master this skill of spiritual speech, but if you don't fear to study when you are 35 or 40 years old, certainly God will help you learn these mysteries of better communication with your children.

RTE: This Russian mother also asks, *"Is it necessary to gradually overcome teenage worldly habits, such as a liking for rock music, clothes, language, etc., and to try to make them look humble and chaste and silent, or is it enough if they have faith in their hearts and remain normal teenagers?"*

FR. ARTEMY: Faith is not an artificial collection of moral principles, but to have faith in your heart means to simultaneously have appropriate deeds in your hands, light thoughts in your mind, clean words in your mouth. It is a Protestant approach, I am afraid, to talk about only having faith in your heart. If you have a fresh rose, it cannot but blossom, and you feel its presence in the room even without seeing the flower. You cannot support a burning fire without feeding it with the ever-living root of our Lord Jesus Christ.

But it is one thing is to understand all these things, and another to have small successes in your attempts to bring up children. Certainly, I think the most important thing is to choose a good school, a more or less normal school which will keep your child clear of sexual perversion, drugs, corruption, aggressiveness. Here in Russia we still have many such schools. Otherwise

you will be like a builder who constructs with his right hand and tears down with his left, or you will be like the ancient Sisyphus of Greek mythology, whose eternal doom in the underworld was to roll a heavy boulder to the top of a hill, only to watch it roll back to the bottom, from where he would have to begin again. It is enough to have a television set on constantly to ruin and obliterate all the moral principles you are trying to write in the purity of a child's heart.

What is most important are not only these attempts to choose a correct school and environment, but whether your own parental, guardian, or teacher's heart works or does not work. If you are a person of good taste, with a real Christian heart, who prays for those in sorrow and trouble, if your word is clean and devoid of any hint of uncleanness, if your soul is rejoicing, and even radiant with God and His grace, this is what your child is waiting for. In this case, you don't need to read sermons, you are only to talk, to spend time with him. You don't have to press upon his personality, but if you arouse his interest you will enliven his desire to be with you, to be your friend. Pascal demonstrates a law of physics, that we have an equal level of water in neighboring vessels, and this law is quite applicable in the domain of ethics.

RTE: Yes. I believe that this mother's point was also that even good children, if they go outside the home, are going to run into teenage music, clothes, and books. How far do we insist that they abide by our standards?

FR. ARTEMY: Certainly, we are to be very attentive to them, to reproach and reprimand if necessary, as a sculptor carefully chips away the unwanted portions until the ideal form appears. We are not to let our children do as they please. If you want to have a meek child, capable of listening to you, who can apply himself to study something deeply, he first needs discipline and obedience. These are fundamental.

We are to be very attentive to all that they listen to, and know who they are spending time with, because St. Paul doesn't say incidentally, "*Be not deceived: evil communications corrupt good manners.*" Bad music or an unclean book is an invasion of this world into the heart of our child, and we are to be like skillful physicians, to foresee these phenomena and to give some antidotes, take some preventative measures. We are to guess the new interests of our children and take care that they have good taste so that they can determine for themselves what is nasty and what is high and beautiful.

The effort of modern culture is to overturn all these aesthetic criteria with spiked green hair and rings in the tongue.

To teach these high ideals of beauty and ethics, and more simply, good taste, parents must begin from the child's first years. It is the parents' choice to dress their five-year-old daughter in pants, to allow senseless television programs, and low music. We prepare them for the seductions of the teenage years by injecting good music, good reading, clean language, so that they won't easily be poisoned by their contemporaries. If a child has loving parents who are very firm in their Christianity, if they abide by the teachings of Christian culture, with appropriate clothing and keep the fasts, even if these children are attracted by the world and its tastes, sooner or later if we haven't oppressed them, they will return.

We in Russia are very fortunate because we have a great layer of Orthodox people in society, and many Christian families consist of not just one or two children, but four or five or eight. This family is a small world, a tiny city, where there are all levels of growth.

RTE: How would you respond to a teenager who asks, "*I love the Church, but I like to listen to heavy-metal music too. What's wrong with that?*"

FR. ARTEMY: Let us listen to St. Paul who says that everything was permissible to him, but not everything was useful. If you are sincere, my dear kid, you are to feel how this heavy metal music affects your mind and your heart. If, after the concert you have an inner desire to pray, if you want to take care of old men and women, if you see some unhappy people and feel inner compassion for them, I will agree that heavy metal music is a good remedy, and valuable for moral progress. But if you feel yourself as stupid as a pig, aggressive as a tiger, poisonous as a snake, or lusty as a crocodile, don't ask me such questions again.

RTE: Here is another question from a Russian mother: "*Young people who can be outwardly recognized as Orthodox with modest clothes and facial expressions, downcast eyes and usually silent, often seem unnatural, as if they are acting a part. In fact, they often look down on their "worldly" friends. I'd rather see them in brighter clothes, talking freely and laughing aloud, which seems healthier for their age. Some are quiet by temperament, but on the whole isn't it better for young people to behave in a manner more natural for their age?*"

In saying that some external behaviors are good and others bad – I’m not talking about mortal sin here, but about a child being molded into something that may not be him – aren’t some Orthodox Christians and priests trying to level everyone? This doesn’t seem to be what Christ did to the people around Him.”

FR. ARTEMY: Let us remember our holy Father Lev of Optina, who named all that you have depicted here with one word: *chimera*, that is, an illusion. Being a saintly person with the Holy Spirit breathing through him, he was very natural, without a hint of hypocrisy or heterodox sweetness. He could even be harsh and rude when it was necessary to help a sinner return to the path of repentance. This is a great problem for new monasteries in both Russia and the West, where many young people are taught some external monastic behaviour, but abandoned totally in what concerns the inner *podvig* of cleansing hearts. This is a tragic thing when new Pharisees and hypocrites grow up and are filled with envy, jealousy, wickedness, like black angels in their robes.

But, if we are so bold as to try to help others, we must not only be unimpeachable ourselves, but we must also remember the sovereignty and nobility of the human soul, which like a precious jewel, must be treated with great care and respect. Orthodox Christians are to be far from psychological manipulation and the secular techniques of dealing with subordinates. Heads of monasteries and spiritual leaders are not to exploit those under them, turning them into robots under the guise of “obedience.” The people who come to your monastery are God’s sheep, not your own, and you should not use any human being as a medium to fulfill your own interests. You are only a gardener whose duty is to soften the soil, to pour fresh water, and to allow the rose its own *natural* growth, in integrity and freedom.

On mundane topics, such as appearance, as a protopriest of a city parish, I only say basic things about appearance in church – your appearance is not to be seductive, you are to stand in awe before God, with all the consequences of that reverence in your outward manner. But in my experience of young people, I completely agree – let children remain children, with everything intrinsic to them. For me as a teacher, it is a precious thing for my students to come to love God and each other without losing all the sympathetic features of their age. The most important thing is to create a warm atmosphere of communication, where their hearts can open to the eternal truths of God and His Love. They themselves won’t notice this because they are



Photo Courtesy Elena Yermelova

interested in the lesson, they are eager to listen to you, and your real instruction is even hidden. You don't need to pay so much attention to all these outward things, except for some basics, such as class discipline.

RTE: At what point do we let them go their own way?

FR. ARTEMY: Certainly, if it concerns drugs or sex, there is a need to explain, to caution, and to prepare them for these temptations. There are no pious interviews in the world that will free us from the tension of life and the necessary *podvig* of personal prayer, day and night, particularly in regard to our children. It is only a mother's tears poured out in abundance that guarantees the salvation of her children.

RTE: In early teenage years, children feel a need to fit in, while later they want to be unique. How do you help them balance this so that they don't go too far either way?

FR. ARTEMY: It is only our Orthodox belief and life that gives a real consciousness of God's presence, when each cell of your being is fed by God's grace and you feel the significance of every moment of your life in eternity. It is impossible to find a golden mean between this fitting in and individual uniqueness except in Orthodox piety. In the life of the Church every limb has its own mission, its own service, its own destiny, and at the same time, all these limbs are necessary for each other. As St. Paul says, a hand does not substitute for a leg. An eye cannot say to an ear, "I don't need you." They are tied together with love and form one body. This problem of uniqueness and fitting in cannot be solved satisfactorily except inside the Church, where a child finds his own place, his own service in society, and his own peace in being required by the other limbs.

RTE: We have two interesting comments here from American teenagers about fitting in: *"I'm Orthodox, but none of my friends at church are, and I don't want to talk about Orthodoxy to my friends."*

"We are pressured at school to not let it be known that we are Christian, and I don't know if I should speak up in class or not. For example, one of my teachers lets everyone know that she is pro-choice on abortion. Do I say anything to my friends or in class about what I believe? Teachers often make political or moral comments that are common in the U.S., but are not Christian."

FR. ARTEMY: First of all, it is not your duty to preach Our Lord Jesus Christ and to tell everybody about the church you attend. Let *batiushkas* and missionaries do that, but your place in the world is to be an angel of assiduity, to be clever and smart and frank and mild and radiant with energy to help your friends in their studies, to support them, not to steal with them, not to smoke with them, not to fight with them, not to spit with them, not to kiss with them, but you should be like a little sun in your class.

In some cases, though, a young Christian is to be a confessor and even a martyr, and when you hear about things like abortion in class, you are to be both wise and clever. You might say something like: "My little sister said to me, 'When I grow-up I will never kill a baby in my womb.' I couldn't say anything against this, because I know that I too will never kill any child in my family."

RTE: How do we keep teenagers interested in Church? Until what age is it right to insist that they come with you, and at what age do you let them make their own decisions? If they are very reluctant should you insist?

FR. ARTEMY: When this age inevitably comes, this period of doubt, or cold relations to piety, you are to prepare for it by finding a work for him or her within the Church, which may help when the crisis comes. Church choirs, bell-ringing, classes of needlework and vestment-making, being altar attendants, or catechists for young children. But all these things have a secondary role, certainly, because it is your own choice to be with Christ or not, to be in church or not, and as we in Russia say, your belief and piety are to be suffered over. Your faith is to be tempered. If you want a living faith you are to suffer in seeking it.

Certainly, for younger children it is not a bad approach to simply require church attendance, particularly within a family when all the children are obliged to fulfill this parental rule with no discussion. It is quite right to insist and to oblige your children to share this time in church on Sunday. It is the life of the whole family.

Also, it is quite natural for a child to obey his parents in his mild years, and up to a certain period a child never invents revolution in his head. He may be disobedient of course, but this is impulsive, not planned. He is not a theoretical protestant. But if your teenager comes across modern youth trends and is poisoned with the spirit of this world, he will certainly contest

parental power over his personality. In Russia we say, “You are waging war against the womb that gave you birth.”

However, it is a question as to what age, and how hard we should force. Should I tear off his ear and shed his blood in the street while dragging him to church? We have a Russian proverb: “Heavenly grace doesn’t commit violence.” An oppressed soul cannot pray to God. Therefore, we parents are to be ready for the moment when our children may say, “No, this is not the time for me. When I am ready I will come to church again. Don’t force me now.” The only remedy in this instance is the mode of life of the whole family, when the grandmother, parents, and brothers and sisters are all permeated with the Church spirit and cannot imagine Sunday without liturgy.

Certainly, our new apostate will not be quite at ease with his reforms. He will feel himself a culprit, as someone who tramples on and violates the commandments of God. He won’t admit it aloud, but in his heart, remembering the calm and peace of his childhood, he will feel regret.

RTE: Teenagers are spontaneous, and often find it hard and tiresome to pray with prayer-books. What can you do if they find prayer boring?

FR. ARTEMY: We have books from former centuries depicting the deep prayer of teenagers, even the Jesus Prayer. For example, in a famous story retold by a pilgrim to his spiritual father, in the *Way of a Pilgrim* we glimpse the atmosphere of old Russian society and some interesting references to youth. But these are exceptions, because they come about owing to the pleasing atmosphere of a nearby monastery or an extremely pious family, when a teenager is surrounded not only by icons, but sees holy people with his own eyes. He is imbued with piety, and prayer becomes an inner life for him.

St. Basil the Great writes that children have a unique nature, that they are mostly physical beings. This means that they manifest themselves in outward movement, and it wouldn’t be wise to call them to strict inner concentration, telling them to keep their minds free of thoughts and images and everything that hinders us from meditating on God.

Inevitably, children lose their early angelic state during these teenage years, and we are to be ready for this, and not to become upset, because this is the period when we to help them develop their minds and widen their intellectual horizon. They are to master the huge heritage of culture, of the physical sciences and humanities, and it would be a naïve and strange thing to encourage them in mystical life only. We find in the Holy Fathers the axiom that faith is

*Oleg, young monastery worker,
Optina Pustyn, Russia.*

born by knowledge, and at this period we adults need to give our children a world-view devoid of inner contradictions: for instance, the problem of the origin of man, the creation of the world, human history, philosophy.

RTE: And as for prayers?

FR. ARTEMY: If you have prayers together as a family, you should sing with them, you should vary prayers, insert new prayers so that this new material is of interest to them. Pray for real needs, both their own and others. Mostly singing, but only a little reading. Murmuring prayers hastily, without feeling and awe is hardly useful. Make it interesting and try to include a variety of things, because the most important skill is the ability to stand in the presence of God.

RTE: How would we teach that?

FR. ARTEMY: Mostly by your own example and your inner conversation with our Lord. Certainly our services are to be mystical invocations of God, but we shouldn't tire young children with expanded prayers. After talking with them about the omnipotence of God and His all-seeing presence, we should try to have them stand in front of God for only three minutes, but in those three minutes they should stand like candles, then allow them to relax, they can sit and maybe even laugh. In our prayer, however short, we should approach God like peasants being introduced to the emperor. As they become older they can participate more fully in family prayers.

RTE: How would you answer this question, asked by an American high school student of her priest: *"Why do I have to be Orthodox? I'd rather be Protestant. I didn't choose this, my parents did."*

FR. ARTEMY: We should describe our Church as a loving mother, whose warmth and light spread and carry life, and we can tell our young protestor that a tiny baby, a little Huckleberry Finn, wouldn't ever change his loving mother for some alien woman with big teeth and tiny eyes. We in Russia say, "Not all that glitters is gold; not everything sweet is sugar." Therefore, my dear kid, don't be hasty in calling this or that group of praying people, "the Church." The best answer is go on pilgrimage. Let us visit Russia and see.

RTE: Could we close by speaking of the advantages teenagers have in their spiritual life, as compared to other ages?

FR. ARTEMY: If you are fortunate enough to have kept your innocence safe, it is a great advantage. If you have not been corrupted, if you have a clean heart, unmenaced by demons to the awful degree that is often seen with teenagers, you will be able to fully experience the freshness of the world, to embrace an ideal, to fulfill a spiritual aim. In Russia we say that a bad example is poisonous, but I would say that a good example is three times stronger. It is the attracting force of the Holy Spirit, the unimpeachable moral life of a true Christian demonstrating humility and love. It is mostly young people who feel this beauty, the inner truth of a righteous man, and who will follow it, overcoming all obstacles, as Our Lord Jesus Christ and His disciples teach us.

In our youth, when we are healthy in body, we are able to exercise a small *podvig*, a spiritual labor. We are not old people whose *podvig* is to be patient and endure their infirmities. Youth is one of the most brilliant periods of human life because you are in your full strength, you can fight for truth, you can struggle against vice, you can manifest your fidelity to God, and you are ready to suffer in the struggle against vice in your own heart.

In our youth we are destined to gain heavenly crowns. It is a time of spiritual warfare. Isn't it interesting, important, unique, to be a soldier of Our Lord Jesus Christ, to gain skill and spiritual wisdom, to be victorious against your own fallen nature? If we work hard for the sake of Christ in our youth, we will know the savor of the Holy Spirit for the rest of our lives. ✚