

HELPING OUR CHILDREN ACCEPT THEMSELVES AS WORTHY PERSONS

By Fr. Anthony Coniaris

*This article is condensed from a chapter in **Making God Real in the Orthodox Christian Home** by Anthony Coniaris.*



What do you think of yourself? Psychologists tell us that this is one of the most important questions in life. Almost everything we do starts from the kind of concept we have of ourselves. The man who sees himself as a "failure type person" will find some way to fail no matter how many good opportunities he has. The man who considers himself a "success type" will succeed no matter how many obstacles he has to face.

Dr. Carl Rogers, an eminent psychologist, writes, "I have dealt with maladjusted and troubled individuals... And if I were to search for the central core of difficulty in people as I have come to know them, it is that in the great majority of cases they despise themselves, regard themselves as worthless and unlovable."

This is true of delinquents: it is true of the emotionally ill; it is true of many criminals. They consider themselves worthless and they act it out in the type of life they live. In many cases, a change in their self-image has changed their whole way of life. How does one acquire a healthy self-image? How can we help our children accept themselves as worthy, capable persons?

1) Sin - One of the greatest destroyers of a healthy self-image is sin. After one sins, the self-image suffers terribly. One begins to be tortured with feelings of unworthiness. One begins to hate oneself. This is why it is so important to come to Christ with our sins every day, to repent and seek His forgiveness in prayer and through the Sacrament of Confession. Only the forgiveness of Christ can give us a self we can live with.

2) Success and Failure - Part of our self-image is formed from our experiences of success and failure in the past. We have a tendency, however, to forget our experiences of success, saying, for example, "I failed that test," we say, "I am a failure." Instead of saying, "I flunked that subject" we say, "I am a flunk-out." This, of course is self-defeating. No one is free from failures. However, we learn from them; we grow. To have a healthy self-image we need to remember not only our failures but also our successes. Parents need to keep pointing this out to their children.

3) Parents - Our belief about ourselves was formed also from the way other people have treated us, especially in our early childhood. A child, for example, acquires an attitude toward himself as wanted or unwanted, worthy or unworthy, capable or incapable, loved or unloved from the attitude his parents have toward him. The parents' attitude is the mirror in which the child sees himself. If parents respect a child, he learns to respect himself. If they love him, he learns to love himself. If they balance criticism with praise, the child's self-

image is enhanced. In other words, whether we consider ourselves as worthy or unworthy persons is a reflected appraisal. We get it from others; how they look at us, mostly our parents.

4) God - If what others think of us affects our self-image, much more so does God's attitude toward us. When Christ died for us, He drove the final nail into the coffin of human worthlessness. ... If God gave His only Son for us, it shows how much we count in the eyes of God. It shows that each one of us is someone whom God loves dearly, someone for whom God cares greatly, someone whom God forgives mercifully, someone for whom God created the world, and someone for whom He has prepared heaven. Man is superior even to the angels, for no angel was ever created in the image and likeness of God as man was. And God, Who is so great that the entire universe cannot contain Him, comes to dwell mystically in the heart of man. So great is His love for man! One of the great contemporary saints of the Greek Orthodox Church, St. Cosmas Aitolos, used to say in preaching to Greek villagers: "Each one of you is more precious to God than the whole world."

The apostle John said, "Behold what love the Father has given us that we should be called children of God." What do you think of yourself? The Christian will answer, "I think of myself as a child of God, loved by Him, redeemed with His precious blood, destined to live with Him to all eternity. Because of this I will love myself. I will not act like a worthless nobody, but like a precious somebody, the child of a King. I will not allow sin to make me feel worthless because there is no sin that our Lord will not forgive. I will not allow failure to make me feel inferior, for with God's help, failure can be a stepping-stone to something higher and better. Witness His Cross as an example. Even if people look down on me, I shall remember that God does not; He loves me. This is what counts. I shall endeavor to love myself always as an important person, deeply loved by God, and I will try to love others that they may come to love themselves as children of God and live up to the image of God in them." We suggest that Orthodox parents repeat the above statement often with their children and, above all, that they reflect this attitude of personal worth to their children. One of the greatest gifts we can give our children is to help them raise their self-esteem.

Teachers: *Among the many things we need to keep in mind when preparing our Church School lessons, is ways to reinforce our students' self-confidence. It is somewhat assumed, along with reinforcing respect for one another. I have learned to assume nothing, so please choose activities that will reinforce your students' self-confidence. PMO*

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