



## *For the Orthodox Family...*

### **Helping Our Children Grow in Faith**

What They Can Do, When They Can Do It,  
and What Parents Can Do to Help!

**by Phyllis Meshel Onest, M.Div.**

When our daughters were toddlers, it was important for their father and I to do all that we could to help Michelle and Maria learn how to worship and how to behave in Church. There was also certain behavior we would not tolerate. To guide us in our parenting, I had read Burton White's *The First Three Years*, as well as *Parents* magazine and articles in Orthodox newspapers and books that were available. [I wish John Rosemond – a syndicated family psychologist - had been writing then!]

We wanted the girls to know how an Orthodox Christian enters the Church (e.g. lighting candles, Crossing themselves, venerating icons), to be able to sit quietly in Church for blocks of time, to sing various hymns, and to behave in a manner that would not distract those praying around us. We would bring a "church bag" filled with paper and colored pencils, Bible Storybooks, the *Guardian Angel* prayer book, and quiet toys. They were directed to draw pictures related to Church, some of which I cherish yet today. We sat in the second row so that the girls could see what was going on. I would point out different things such as the change in the liturgical colors, the icons, processions, and remind them to make the Sign of the Cross. When Maria was too young to do so, I would make the Sign of the Cross on her and then on me.

Three rules guided us. Our friend Nick Gerassimakis, who was working on a Ph.D. in psychology, advised us to "pick our battles and win them." Dr. James Dobson of *Focus on the Family* advised parents not to allow church, restaurants and the like to become "sanctuaries for misbehavior." In other words, if they misbehaved in such locales, they would indeed suffer the consequences. We mutually agreed not be embarrassed. Third, spanking was to be reserved for situations that could result in harm, such as walking into the street after being told repeatedly not to do so.

There were Sundays when we came home shaking our heads, wondering why we even attended Liturgy that day. Nevertheless, we kept on going. Surely, God would help us if we were persistent! A few occasions required extreme measures that the girls still remember. On one occasion, when they repeatedly misbehaved after several reminders, they were not permitted to receive the Eucharist. I did not receive that day either!

On another occasion when Michelle [age 4 or 5] was misbehaving, her father came from the choir [in this parish the choir sang in the front of the church], whisked her out of church as she cried out, "Daddy, don't spank me!" Since she was spanked only once before (when she had turned the thermostat to 90 degrees), Michelle realized that she had gone too far! Dad did not spank her. Just removing her from church and talking sternly to her was enough to get Michelle in line. After that, all her father had to do was give her a stern look. Maria, who is three years younger, learned from her sister's mistakes.

By the time Michelle was six and Maria three, parishioners would comment on how well behaved they were. Each Sunday Maria would go down the center aisle kissing the crosses engraved on the end of the pews. When Lent came and it was time to make prostrations, the girls quickly learned to move to the aisle and drop to the floor.

Sometimes parents look back on their parenting and regret some aspect of what they had done. This area seems to have worked out well; the jury is out on others. When the girls were teens and they observed a child misbehaving in church, they would turn to me and say, "If we had done that when we were young, we would have been toast!" and "Why do the parents let that child get away with that?" They know what to do and have even told me that they plan to do the same with their children.

During my years as a parish Church School Director, I tried to encourage the parents of young children. When I would see them exasperated after Liturgy, I would encourage them to continue bringing them, relating that I had felt the same way at times. I also took note of those parents who seemed to be "succeeding" in their parenting and would compliment them, and pass on the techniques I observed to those asking for suggestions. I finally compiled these and distributed them at parent-teacher meetings with the hope of equipping parents in their task. I continue to do so at Parent Workshops that I lead.

An important point to remember is that each section builds on the previous one, so behavior that began in the early years needs continually reinforced as our children get older.

## Preschoolers

### About Making the Sign of the Cross

By age three the preschooler's little hands can be guided to the correct position for making the Sign of the Cross: thumb & first two fingers together [signifying the three persons of the Trinity], remaining fingers touching palm [signifying the two natures of



Christ: human and divine]. If you have puzzles that have pegs on each piece, practice grabbing the pegs. The thumb and first two fingers are needed to grasp the peg.

When showing children how to make the Sign of the Cross, consider looking in a mirror and doing it together. Touch the forehead, the chest, the right shoulder, then the left shoulder while you say, "In the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit." If you do not have access to a mirror, have the child face you, then you cross from left to right while your child follows crossing from right to left.



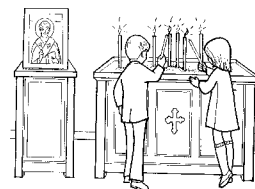
### About Icons

It doesn't take much for our children to be able to identify their favorite *Sesame Street* or Disney character, so there is no reason why they cannot learn to point out Jesus, Mary and various Saints, and especially the Patron of the parish. Review this each time the family enters the Church. Make sure there

are icons in your children's rooms and in your home to which you can refer.

### About Entering Church

Lighting candles (Jesus is the "Light of the World") and venerating icons (kissing Jesus, His mother and His friends) and the Cross come easily to little ones. Each time you enter



the Narthex, remind the children that the Church is God's House, a very special place. We behave in a certain way in God's House: we sit & stand quietly; we walk rather than run; we speak softly using what I call our "Church voice."

### About Prayers

Pray "*Holy God, ...*" and begin saying the "*Lord's Prayer*" together daily. Work on the prayer at meals. Getting children to fold their hands and bow their heads while you recite a prayer is a start. "*O Christ our God, bless the food and drink of Your servants, for You are holy, now and ever and unto ages of ages. Amen.*" Pray before the icons. Pray at bedtime.

### Reading Books

I suspect that most families have a children's library of secular books. My daughters kept their favorite childhood books and read them to children who visited our home. [Now that the "nest is empty," the books are stored in clear plastic bins waiting to be read to future grandchildren.] We also need to add Bible storybooks and Orthodox children's books. Today there are many Christian and Orthodox books available. There are even Preschooler and Toddler Bibles! These make great bedtime reading on Saturday evenings as we prepare for Sunday Liturgy. In addition, they are great for our Church bags.

### Kindergartners

Continue to work on the "*Lord's Prayer*" and other prayers that the Church School class is learning. The Kindergartner can begin cutting back on breakfast. [Ex. juice & toast or a bowl of cereal]. In our own home, since the adults planned to receive each week, no breakfast was prepared. By the time the girls were three or four, juice and toast was all that was offered. I do not mean to imply that this is for all children, but please, no pancakes, bacon and eggs before Liturgy.

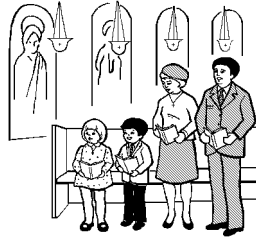
Keep it simple. I do not remember bringing food for the girls to eat during Liturgy. Any food we brought they consumed after Communion.

## Preschoolers During Liturgy

Sitting close to the front offers the children fewer distractions. Our children should be standing at least for "*Blessed is the Kingdom*," during the Small and Great Entrances, the Gospel reading, the Lord's Prayer, the Creed, and whenever the priest/deacon censens the icons and the congregation.

Add Standing [or Kneeling, if it is the practice of your parish] for the Consecration, from the Epiclesis ["Thine own of Thine own..."] until the Hymn to the Theotokos. Remind

children to make the Sign of the Cross whenever the Holy Trinity is named. Some people also make the Sign of the Cross when they hear Theotokos or a Saint or when praying for a particular person during one of the Petitions.



During the Sermon is a good time to allow children to stretch their legs. Depending on the layout of your church, use the Narthex or the back of the Nave. If seated in the Nave, allow children to look at religious books or icon 'photo albums,' or draw quietly. Please bring only "quiet" toys to church. It is unrealistic, but not impossible, to expect Preschoolers and Kindergartners to be in the Nave of the Church throughout the Liturgy. Besides going to the bathroom, they need a change of scenery or to stretch their legs. I have found that the Petitions and Sermon give built-in break times.

Teach the children from now that we do not enter or exit the Nave during an Entrance, the Epistle and Gospel readings, the Sermon, the Creed, the Consecration of the Gifts, or the Lord's Prayer. It is best to enter or exit during the Petitions.

## Primary Grade Students

Primary Grade Students should be able to make the Sign of the Cross easily, but need to be reminded when to do it during Liturgy. Besides identifying the icons of Jesus, the Virgin Mary/Theotokos, and their

patron saints, primary students can begin identifying some of the Apostles, Saints and Feast Day Icons.

Correctly entering the Church should be routine for them if you have kept at it. They will still need to be reminded that the Church is God's House and that we behave in a certain way as listed above.

Continue to add age appropriate books of the Saints, storybooks and videos/CD's to your home library. There are many fine videos, such as the *Veggie Tales* (Hanna-Barbara *Greatest Adventure* and *McGee and Me* were popular in the late 20<sup>th</sup> century) series, available for rental and purchase from Christian bookstores. Check with your church school director or parish priest for suggestions.

The Church School program should be encouraging the children to work on the "*Lord's Prayer*" and other prayers for the primary grades. Third and Fourth Graders can work on learning the *Creed*.

In some Orthodox traditions, students have their First Confession in second grade. They should also be using their Prayer Books to prepare for both confession and communion and abstaining from food and drink before Communion. If there are problems with abstaining before communion, consult with your parish priest.

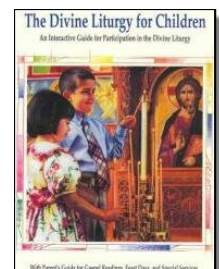
Although second graders are not routinely prepared for confession, it is a good time to do so. Children (about age eight) know the difference between right and wrong, and have not developed a major fear or embarrassment of talking to their priest. A first confession is a rite of passage and can be promoted as such. If the priest is actively involved, the children can have a pleasant experience.



Continue to build on the prayers before icons, at bedtime and at meals, and to work on fasting before Communion.

## The Primary Grade Child During Liturgy

Continue sitting close to the front so the children can see what is happening and be less distracted. The older a



child gets, the more s/he should be standing. Since primary children are reading, provide them with age-appropriate liturgy books. If your parish does not provide them in the pews for the children, several are available through the Orthodox Christian Education Commission and the Department of Religious Education of the Greek Orthodox Archdiocese. Check with your parish priest or church school director.

Some younger Primary grade children still cannot be in the Nave of the Church throughout the entire Liturgy without a break. Encourage them to go to the bathroom before Liturgy. If they need a change of scenery or to stretch their legs, use the Petitions and Sermon as built-in break times.

Students should be introduced to Vespers, Presanctified Liturgy, Salutations, the Canon of St. Andrew, Holy Week services, as well as attending the weekly Liturgy. I encourage parents to bring their children to as many services of Great Lent and Holy Week as possible. Palm Sunday evening, Unction, Holy Thursday evening through the procession of the Cross (the service is long, but the children should at least be there for part of it), Holy Friday afternoon, Holy Saturday morning, and the Agape Service on Pascha morning are key services. Keep in mind that this special week occurs but once a year.

The rhythm of the Orthodox Church services continues throughout our lives. It appears to me that the more we participate in this rhythm from an early age; the more it becomes an integral part of our lives. We begin to see what it means to be Orthodox Christians. For their lessons on worship to make sense, it is important for our children to participate in the services as often as possible. This also serves to reinforce our understanding that Orthodox Christianity is a life-style, not just a Sunday religion.

## Grades 5 & 6

Identify additional icons of different Apostles, Saints, and Feast Days. Focus on memorizing the "**Creed**" during these years. Fifth and Sixth graders can use Prayer Books to prepare for both confession and communion.

**During Liturgy** - This age group should be able to listen to the Sermon and talk about it on the way home from church.

By now this age child can have **private confession** at least four times a year, but it presupposes that parents not only bring their children to confession, but also receive confession themselves. Fr. Peter Gillquist, one of the many former Evangelical Christians to embrace Orthodox Christianity has said that if we want our children to stay in the church, then we should bring them to confession before they need it and they need to see us go to confession, too!

## Jr. & Sr. High Schoolers

Having taught this level student for over twenty years, and having been the mother of teenagers, I know they are capable of participating in the liturgical life of the Church. Sometimes peer pressure and our children's struggle to separate themselves from us gets in the way! When they question why they must attend church, consider responding with, "This is what our family does" and expect them to attend. In addition, do not forget to keep praying.

It is vital to encourage them to have Church friends and to be part of the parish youth group and church school classes. These situations need to be safe places for our teens, where "it's okay to be an Orthodox Christian," and they can talk more freely about their concerns.

We can also encourage them to serve in the altar and sing in the choir. Without these ties and friends, they are much more easily pulled away from the Church. Given all the distractions of the secular world, parents need to keep them attached to the Church in as many ways as possible.



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