

# Should I Send My Child to Summer Church Camp?

by Phyllis Meshel Onest, M.Div.

## One Family's Experience

If you were to ask my 18-year-old daughter Maria this question, the answer would be a definite "YES!" Let me tell you about her plans this summer. We leave for Greece on June 26. She was asked to serve as a counselor for JOY Camp (8-12 year-olds) from June 20-26. Maria plans to go to JOY Camp, launder her clothes there and return a day early on June 25 so we can leave June 26! GOYA Camp (13-18 year-olds) runs from July 11-17. We return from Greece on July 13, time unknown. She plans to quickly do laundry and go to Camp on July 14. (I'm thinking that she should have a set of clothes just for camp, but I have not told her yet.) Needless to say, she does not want to miss out on her last year of camp. My mistake was not considering Camp when I scheduled this trip. (JOY and GOYA Camps take place at Camp Nazareth, PA and are sponsored the Greek Orthodox Diocese of Pittsburgh.) Thank God for "instant messages" and "chat rooms" on the Internet. Otherwise we would go broke paying for the phone bills Maria would rack up calling all her friends from Camp. They live not only in Ohio, Pennsylvania and West Virginia, the boundaries of the Pittsburgh Diocese, but also in Tennessee, Arizona, and who knows where else. The time between camp sessions and retreats and basketball tournaments goes quicker when we factor in the Internet.

## From the Perspective of the Professional Psychologist

According to psychologist Dr. John Dalack, camp affords our children "the opportunity to confront and gradually attempt to accomplish, at his or her own pace, many of the significant development tasks of childhood and adolescence. Included among these developmental tasks, on the one hand, are the general challenges inherent in dealing with new people, establishing new relationships, confronting the demands of new situations, and coping with the separation from family and familiar surroundings, to mention only a few; while, on the other hand, there are the more specific challenges inherent in tasting, testing, trying out, and experimenting with many different kinds of wholesome activities. If we consider the matter carefully, we'll recognize that it's only through this fundamental process that the growing child and the maturing adolescent will be able to get in touch with, and begin to appreciate the full range of his or her own potential talents, interests, skills, and special abilities." They do this at home, without their peers around, and at school, without their parents around. Camp offers a third alternative, a safe and supervised environment without parents, and with peers - old, new and soon-to-be friends - from Church. At home children are the center of attention, and lessons are direct. At school the lessons are less personalized and very structured. Camp offers wholesome activities, supervision, and guidance without grades and curriculum.

## From the Perspective of the Religious Educator

This is only part of the learning that takes place at Summer Camp! At Summer Camp, young people learn about their Faith in a very different way than is possible during Church School sessions because of the intensity of the program and the time frame. (Although summer camp

programs vary from camp to camp, generally speaking they offer similar activities.) While young people attending Church School receive less than 30 hours of instruction over a nine-month period each year, campers are given 20-30 minutes of religious instruction each day, plus the opportunity to discuss the subject for another 30-40 minutes. That's about 6 hours in 5 days! In addition, they participate daily in two Church services - Camp Orthros/Matins and Camp Vespers - after which a short 3-5 minute sermonette is delivered by one of the Camp Staff. Campers pray together before and after every meal. At night, within each cabin, campers and staff have a "Cabin Talk" to review the day's teachings and events. Then they pray together before going to sleep.

## **Living as an Orthodox Christian**

Young people learn how to live an Orthodox Christian lifestyle on a day-to-day basis as they strive to love those who are hard to love: the camper who misbehaves, the camper who is loud and boisterous, the camper who always wants to borrow clothes, the camper who gets angry. They can also reach out to the camper that is lonely, or perhaps an outsider. In a very real sense, the lessons taught in Church School and in our homes are put to the test at Summer Camp. Campers are encouraged to receive the Sacraments of Holy Confession and Holy Communion while at Summer Camp, and frequently once they return to their parishes. A number of priests are usually available for Confession. For some campers, this may be the only time during the year they receive this sacrament. There is a lot of growth needed in this area depending on one's jurisdiction. On the playing fields, campers learn Christian sportsmanship. In the swimming pool, they learn Christian modesty (Summer Camp information flyers include a dress code). In their cabins, campers learn how to keep their possessions neat and their living space clean against almost insurmountable odds. In short, they learn what it means to function as "Community," and in particular, as an "Orthodox Christian Community"! Summer Camp becomes "the model" for living as an Orthodox young person in a society that does not have Christian values and ethics.

## **Dovetailing Our Resources**

Our weekly Church School programs coupled with a Summer Camp program, and with Diocesan, Deanery and local retreats, reinforce that which is taught in our homes. Parents today need the support from all areas within our society in the ongoing education of children: family, friends, schools, and especially the Church. Make a point to get your children to both Church School classes and Summer Camp. You won't regret it!

The quotation from Dr. Dalack is taken from "Summer Camp? The Decision Is Easy" published in *The Word*, May 1998, pp. 21-22. Dr. Dalack attends St. Mary Antiochian Orthodox Church in Bay Ridge, NY. He writes a bi-weekly column, "Straight Talk on Parenting" for his local newspaper.

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