

# FAMILY CONNECTIONS

## Raising Paracletes: Teaching Our Children to be Compassionate

by Kathryn Saclarides Bocanegra

Orthodox Christians are called to live compassionately through committing daily to acts of mercy, however the thought of 'almsgiving' has become a seasonal consideration (Christmas, Lent) rather than a lifestyle. How can a family make acts of compassion a part of their spiritual life?

Several years ago I sat in on a parish meeting discussing the possibility of opening a soup kitchen. A concerned mother voiced her anxiety over having "those kind of people" becoming familiar with the Church, and in turn showing up at times when children were at the parish school. There was marked discomfort over the idea of "those kinds of people" coming into contact with parish children. As parents who want the best for our children and to protect them from harm and the dangers of the world, in truth how many of us share the sentiments of this concerned mother?

When I was in elementary school I have vivid memories of my mother preparing a Nativity meal for the janitorial staff of my public school. She would come in with trays of rich food for the janitors, who would stare in disbelief at the delicious spread before them, and that somebody acknowledged them as human beings who also celebrate the Nativity of Christ.

When I asked my mother "Why didn't you prepare a meal for my teachers?" she replied, "Because nobody remembers the janitors who make this a safe and clean place for you". By the time I was in fourth grade my mother started getting me and my siblings involved in volunteer activities. To this day she still volunteers at a foster home with mostly African-American youth who grew up in broken homes.

What did my mother instill in me and my siblings starting at an early age: That "those kind of people" are also made in the image of Christ and worthy of our hearts.

My mother's example echoes the words of St. John Chrysostom who wrote, "It is not a small thing for even one sheep to be saved, since the shepherd left the ninety-nine sheep and ran after the one which had strayed. I do not despise anyone; even if he is only one, he is a human being, the living creature for which God cares." My mother embodied the Gospel reading shared on the Sunday of the Last Judgment when Christ tells us "Inasmuch as you did it to one of the least of these My brethren, you did it to Me." (Matthew 25:40)

Often out of the desire to protect our children and instill morals in them (the difference between "right" and "wrong"),



we end up making them more punitive than Christian. We encourage them to capitalize on differences rather than seek out similarities. When they tell us about a friend who got in trouble or a concerning behavior, we tell them "He is a bad boy, you should stay away from him" rather than processing the roots of this individual's behaviors and teaching our children compassion. We should form our children to be Paracletes, a word that is used for the Holy Spirit in the Gospels (John 14:16, John 14:26, John 15:26, John 16:7). A Paraclete is a comforter, an advocate, and a helper. "Sympathy corrects the difference, and love makes all even." (St. John Chrysostom, on Wealth and Poverty)

Although my mother probably never wanted me to work in violence prevention in one of the cities with the highest homicide rates and prison populations, I attribute my work to her compassionate heart. Children desire a sense of purpose in life, the feeling that they are 'making a difference'. My parents were stewards of my gifts and talents, charged with the sacred responsibility of nurturing them so that in turn I could be an offering of thanksgiving, "Thine own of Thine own we offer unto Thee." (Liturgy of St. John Chrysostom). Parents are given the opportunity to be the greatest influence in drawing forth God's gifts in their children, but they can also be the biggest obstacle in their life towards self-actualization and the realization of God's Will for them. Unfortunately some parents find it more important to see the realization of their own dreams rather than what is in their child's best interest.

Raising compassionate children will in turn lead them closer to God. The desert father Abba Dorotheos was once approached by a monk who was disgruntled by the behavior of a fellow monk. Abba Dorotheos drew a wheel with many spokes. He explained that the wheel represented their monastic community with the center of the wheel being Christ. Each spoke represented a member of a community. Observing this wheel, Abba Dorotheos

pointed out that at the periphery of the wheel (further away from the Christ center); the spokes were widely spaced out. The closer you move to the Christ center, the closer the spokes grow together. If we raise children to "live generously," in the words of my spiritual father, we in turn lead them closer to Christ.

There are many ways families can incorporate almsgiving into their daily life.

First and foremost, be an example of a generous and compassionate person. Watch your comments about minority/ethnic groups, how you express your anger, and how you process misfortune or tragedy. Your disposition towards people who are different from you will lay a blueprint on your children. A good exercise is to watch the 5 o'clock news with age-appropriate children (10 years and older) and help them process the crisis that is reported. Do this in a compassionate way, not a punitive way.

Second, incorporate prayers for those who are not remembered into your family prayer life. Discuss with your children "Who are people who are normally forgotten?" Examples include the mentally ill, prisoners, soldiers, and the institutionalized. When your children enter a Church you can encourage them to light a candle for those who are not remembered as well, explaining that God knows who these people are.

Read the lives of the saints like St. Moses the Ethiopian, St. Photini (the Samaritan woman), St. Mary of Egypt, St. Thais, St. Mary Magdalene, Dismas (the thief on the cross), St. Paul (once the persecutor of Christians), and King David the psalmist to your children. Their lives are powerful testimonies of authentic repentance and redemption. Share stories like these with your children, like the one about St. Pachomios the Great, a desert father, who once learned of a famine ravaging the city of Alexandria. He wept for several days and refused to eat any food. When begged to eat, St. Pachomios replied, "How can I eat when my brethren do not have bread?"

Participating in regular volunteer work is a spiritually beneficial activity for children. It is not harmful to expose them to poverty; rather, it will make them more thankful for what they have.

Before a priest communes at the Liturgy he prays that the Lord will, with His own hand, grant a share in His Holy Body and Blood to those in the altar and "through us, to all the people". May God encourage parents to teach their children the benefit of putting a higher value on others than they do on themselves, so that Christ can give Himself to ALL people through your children. May they become Paracletes for the weak and disenfranchised they encounter, and as a result, develop a warm and compassionate heart. "Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit, but in humility consider others better than yourselves. Each of you should look not only to your own interests, but also to the interest of others." (Philippians 2:3-4)

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### Quotes for Families

Then the King will say to those on His right hand, Come, you blessed of My Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world: for I was hungry and you gave Me food; I was thirsty and you gave Me drink; I was a stranger and you took Me in; I was naked and you clothed Me; I was sick and you visited Me; I was in prison and you came to Me.

(Matthew 25:34-36)

Owe no one anything, except to love one another; for he who loves his neighbor has fulfilled the law. The commandments, You shall not commit adultery, You shall not kill, You shall not steal, You shall not covet, and any other commandment, are summed up in this sentence, You shall love your neighbor as yourself. Love does no wrong to a neighbor; therefore love is the fulfilling of the law.

(Romans 13:8-10)

The bread you do not use is the bread of the hungry. The garment hanging in your wardrobe is the garment of the person who is naked. The shoes you do not wear are the shoes of the one who is barefoot. The money you keep locked away is the money of the poor. The acts of charity you do not perform are the injustices you commit.

(St. Basil the Great, 4th century)

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