

# FAMILY CONNECTIONS

## Prayer as a Means of Educating Children

by John Sanidopoulos

The infamous “generation gap” to some extent has always existed, because “the differences between people based on age, spiritual gifts, experience, and spiritual state are natural”, as noted by Metropolitan Hierotheos of Nafpaktos in his remarkable early study (1989) titled “The Relationship Between Parents and Children.” Today, however, in an age of general crisis in values, institutions, leadership and people, a multidisciplinary crisis of the relationship between parents and children also exists.

To overcome these difficulties and differences we need to be serious, composed and especially loving. There is also needed a stable criteria in life, something very rare today, in an era of such great confusion that we live in. What can parents impart to their children and how can they come to an agreement with them when they themselves are confused and first need help?

### What is prayer?

St. John of Sinai wrote in his classic text *The Ladder*: “Prayer... is the converse and union of man with God, and by reason of its action upholds the world and brings about reconciliation with God,... it is... a bridge over temptations, a wall against afflictions, a crushing of conflicts [with the devil],... a source of virtues, a means of obtaining spiritual gifts,... illumination of the nous, an axe against despair, a demonstration of hope, a cure for sorrow,... the reduction of anger,... an indication of one’s [spiritual] condition...” (Step 28).

Heartfelt prayer implies love and concern for whom it is addressed (in this case, our children), and trust in the One whom we are addressing (God), that He has the love and strength to help us.

When we talk about prayer as a way of life for parents, we mean parents who live prayer, who are people of prayer, people of God, people of the Church, with a spiritual father, who participate regularly in the Sacraments, and who live their lives with spiritual care.

### The most effective method

The most effective method in the parental education of children is to use as few words as possible, and educate through example. Elder Paisios the Athonite, in his Epistles, writes: “Blessed are the parents who do not use the word ‘don’t’ with their children, but they put a brake on evil with their holy lives, which children mimic, and they follow Christ with spiritual chivalry joyfully.” Many



saints spoke of this relationship between the holiness of the parent and the positive role this plays in the life of the child. Thus, when parents are people of prayer, they live prayer, they live in Christ and Christ lives in them, and then they could convey Christ to their children.

Real parents are not those who merely give birth biologically to a child, but those who raise them up correctly. These parents are established upon Orthodox principles and criteria. They know that the reason we exist on earth is to become inheritors of God’s kingdom, which is only achieved by the therapeutic method prescribed in our Orthodox patristic tradition: purification, illumination and glorification. By purifying our hearts of sinful passions, we are illumined by the Holy Spirit and in turn united with God by His grace. When a parent raises their child with this purpose in mind, that they are invited to become a “god by grace,” then, as St. Basil the Great says, all will enter into its proper place and acquire its true meaning.

### First things first

A person of prayer, fighting the good fight for virtue, is in a position, with the help of God, to provide a real education for their children.

Such a person sees the other as a unique person, and respects their freedom. As Metropolitan Hierotheos writes: “Our relationship with our children should be distinguished by love and freedom, and indeed these should go together and be spoken of together: love should be expressed as freedom and freedom should be expressed as love. A love without respect for freedom is a dictatorship, and a freedom without any real love is anarchy.” He further writes: “Usually parents justify their every action in how they love their children. Of course, the issue of love is great and, as the Holy Fathers say, actual love is the fruit of dispassion, that is, it requires the purification of the heart.” Later again he says: “Also, usually children justify their actions by saying they are free to do whatever they want, that they are free people. In this way they cannot accept guidance from their parents. But freedom does not mean I do what I want. It is not simply a free choice. True freedom is expressed as love.”

The humble person considers themselves worse than everyone. They do not easily judge the errors of others, but if they do need to discipline, they do it in order to build up the child, and not to hurt them and justify their own ego. As Scripture says: “The righteous shall chasten me and

reprove me with mercy.” (Psalm 141:5)

A person of love and humility knows how to forgive, to be patient and how to listen to others. Instead of these virtues, we more often find their corresponding vices within us. Today we tend to egotistically hold resentments and bear grudges, we are overly focused on our own stress which we pile on ourselves with a lack of simplicity and right perspective in our lives, and we love to talk about ourselves and our opinions and refuse to change and admit our wrongs.

A person of prayer does not anger easily, but is meek and peaceful. They know how to suffer and they know true joy, because all suffering refines the soul and gives us the opportunity to glorify God when we are least expected to do so. If a parent comes home grumpy, sad, or stressed out of control, then this virus will spread through the home like a contagious disease. A person of God has faith, trusting in God and not their own thoughts and abilities. A person of faith does not fall into despair and hopelessness, which is a fruit of pride, but out of humility will acknowledge their failure and turn to God for help. As Elder Paisios would say: “When we assign everything to Him, God is obligated to help us.”

These are characteristics of a mature spiritual parent who is not self-centered, compulsive, or overprotective. They understand that their children are not their property, they do not belong to us; we did not create them on our own, but we were co-creators with God. We help to give the

body, but He gives the soul. They do not put themselves first, make false promises, smother and control, and constantly make negative comments and criticize.

Finally, a mature spiritual parent does not only speak to the children about God, but they especially speak to God about their children. Prayer for them is a comfort, not a burden. They understand that the brunt of the struggle must be given over to prayer, and not limited by words.

### There is hope

We must also understand that young people “do not simply seek a world where there is an abundance of economic goods, but rather a world without boredom” (Metropolitan Hierotheos). Boredom is created by not finding the meaning of life. As the American psychiatrist Victor Frankl, the founder of logotherapy, wrote: “The Pan American Education Council did research (surveys) to 171,500 students; 68.1 percent answered that the highest purpose of life is to find a philosophy of life that makes sense.”

Young people with spiritual concerns are seeking answers to their so-called existential questions: Who am I? Where did I come from? Where am I going? What is the meaning of life? Is there life after death? What is the purpose for my existence? Contemporary society is not in a position to provide answers to these valid questions and help the youth.

The sound and proven answers of the Church are usually despised out of ignorance and prejudice, and necessarily so because the enemy of our salvation, the devil, pushes people to engage in false knowledge, methods and beliefs to satisfy these questions and obstruct their salvation.

Fed up with consumerism, secularism and materialism, children are bored and easy victims of many surrounding dangers. As parents we are called to lead them according to the example of Christ. This is not easy, but the power of God can transform and fulfill people, when everything else seems impossible. Through this method, the “generation gap” can be bridged.

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## A PRAYER FOR PARENTS

*O Lord, Heavenly Father, You have blessed us with the gift of family and have entrusted us with their spiritual upbringing. You commanded that we should teach our children about You in our lives: when we sit in our house, when we walk by the way, when we lie down and when we rise. Guide us O Lord every moment of the day as we work toward this awesome task.*

*Let the words of Christ dwell in us, so that we may teach and guide our family, through our words and deeds, to the saving knowledge of Your everlasting kingdom. Help us, O Lord, be compassionate, kind, and patient throughout our days. If one of us has a complaint against another, help us to forgive each other; as You have forgiven us. Let the peace of Christ rule in our hearts. Above all, help us remember to put on love which binds everything together in perfect harmony.*

*We thank You, Lord for the many blessings and mercies You continually bestow on us. In everything we do, in word or deed, may we always do so in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through His Holy Spirit. Amen.*

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