

FAMILY CONNECTIONS

The Church In the House

by Fr. Alexander Veronis

"Father, my teenager is losing interest in Sunday School and in the Church," a parent comments with obvious frustration. "What can I do?"

Her concern is prompted following a sermon on John 3:16: "For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have everlasting life."

Sunday school, the Divine Liturgy, youth ministries, summer camps, Bible studies, pilgrimages, monasteries, and mission trips - all represent ways the Church attempts to make John 3:16 a reality in peoples' Christian experience. From birth to death, we use these avenues to bring others to love and follow Jesus Christ, especially during the formative years of their youth. We want everyone to experience God's love and to know that He "desires all people to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth" (1 Timothy 2:3-4).

Where can young people experience this better than in a Christ-centered home? We need the home environment that includes parents, grandparents, and relatives to manifest this love of God. St. Paul speaks of the "church in the home." The Church depends on the 'church in the home' to fortify its teaching of the gospel.

What does a Church in the Home look like? Here are some ingredients:

- It is a home where there are plenty of icons. At least one icon of Christ should be displayed in a prominent place in our homes. This immediately tells every guest that Jesus Christ is Lord of this home and family. Icons of the Theotokos and patron saints of our family members should also be present.

By displaying icons, we let others know that our home is a sacred and holy place - a place of faith, love, rest, and renewal - just like the Church.

- It is a home where the family prays. Some families create a prayer corner or area where everyone can gather to pray. An easy-to-read Bible in a modern translation, a children's Bible, a book of Orthodox saints, and an Orthodox prayer book make it possible for children to share in the readings during family devotions. Children will remember for the rest of their lives that they once prayed together in their home with their parents and siblings.

- It is a home where the family speaks positively of the Church. They discuss the good things that take place in Church, in the atmosphere of grace. This includes talking about the Liturgy and Holy Communion or a particular sermon that taught



or inspired the parish. Children can learn to be positive and optimistic about Church or they can turn negative and critical depending upon what they hear. It is often written of the saints that they grew up in a pious home with parents who loved the faith and taught their children to also respect and honor it.

- It is a home that is hospitable. The Bible says, "Be hospitable to one another" (1 Peter 4:9). A family enriches its members by inviting people into their home and offering them Christian hospitality. Over the years, we've received many blessings by having in our home neighborhood children, schoolmates of our children, foreign students, college students, monks, nuns, missionaries, retreat speakers, priests, bishops, Sunday School teachers, choir members, parish council members, visitors, and friends! They left a positive influence on our family. More importantly, our children realized that their home was open to everyone. There is no limit to showing Christian love to others. Our Lord said, "Inasmuch as you do it for the least of my brethren, you do it for me." (Matthew 25:40).

- It is a home where the family relates their faith to the surrounding world. "The poor you shall always have with you," Jesus says (John 12:8). Our cities and neighborhoods have needy adults and children who beg to be loved and accepted. They bless us when we reach out to them in the name of Christ. A parishioner once shared this story:

I was passing by a street person, an elderly man clinging to his knapsack. Suddenly I had the urge to pull out a \$20 bill and gave it to him. "Thank you! Thank you! Thank you!" he repeated over and over. "I'll pray for you! Do you believe in prayer? Prayer really helps! We all need prayer! Do you believe in prayer?" he asked. "Yes, yes, I certainly do!" I said.

As the parishioner told this story in a Bible study group, she related it with tears in her eyes because of the blessings she had received from the street person. "I think it was Christ himself blessing me with such enthusiasm at that moment!" she said. And it probably was. "Blessed is the one who considers the poor," the Psalmist writes (41:1).

St. John Chrysostom says, "A rich man is not one who has much, but one who gives much. For what he gives remains his forever." There are so many ways to serve the poor, the refugees, the hungry, the homeless, and the foreigner—especially in times of high unemployment. Some parishes do it through CROP/CWS Hunger

Walks, building homes through Habitat for Humanity, serving in a local Soup Kitchen, becoming Big Brothers or Big Sisters, or tutoring those who need guidance.

- It is a home where children learn to be givers. Jesus said, "It is more blessed to give than to receive." (Acts 20:35) When parents teach their children at an early age to fill their Sunday school offering envelopes, to give a generous portion of their money to charity, and to offer some of their time in service for others, those children will grow up as givers. On the other hand, it is sad when parents fail to teach their children to give to charity and the work of the Church. Those children are more likely to grow up self-centered

and indifferent to charitable requests. Later on as young adults, they resent the Church for asking for a stewardship contribution. Yet they will think nothing of spending \$50,000 for their wedding.

Recently, a lovely mother of five children died unexpectedly of a heart attack at the relatively young age of 47. She and her husband were active in their parish. Over 1,000 people came to her funeral. She and her family had touched so many people through their strong faith and example as Orthodox Christians. In the eulogy her priest said:

"Elisabeth and her husband John and their five beloved children have made their home a 'church in the home.' One feels the presence of Christ as much in their home as in the Church."

What a tribute it will be for each of us, when we appear before the Lord one day, to present a record of living the faith and walking the walk as this devout woman did.

Remember the 'church in the home.' Help make it alive and vibrant in Christ. The children raised in such homes will reflect a Christian life.

Fr. Alexander Veronis, pastor emeritus, has served Annunciation Church in Lancaster, Pennsylvania for 50 years. He and Presbytera Pearl have five children and 15 grandchildren. Their son, Fr. Luke, served as a long-term missionary in Kenya and Albania for 12 years and now teaches courses related to missions at Hellenic College-Holy Cross School of Theology and heads the Missions Institute based there.

Resources for Families

Raising Saints (www.ancientfaith.com)

Raising Saints with Elissa Bjeletich offers tools to bring the Orthodox Christian faith to life for our children. Providing specific ways to express complex ideas to children so that they can understand and make them their own, and offering concrete and practical suggestions to reinforce those ideas, this podcast hopes to equip adults to share the faith with children, shaping the way in which our youth understand their lives.

The Sounding Orthodox Blog (www.soundingblog.com)

At the Sounding Orthodox Blog, you'll find practical and thoughtful posts on a number of topics—including marriage and family—presented from a variety of perspectives, all of them rooted in the tradition of the ancient Christian faith.

Upcoming Orthodox Lectures, Retreats & Events

This is an e-mail that goes out about once a month and provides a comprehensive list of all the upcoming nationwide Orthodox lectures, retreats and events. To subscribe to this list, e-mail Mary Photini at iphnh3@earthlink.net

HomeWord Center for Youth and Family (www.homeword.com)

HomeWord seeks to advance the work of God in the world by educating, equipping, and encouraging parents and churches to build God-honoring families from generation to generation.

Vibrant Faith Ministries (www.vibrantfaith.org)

Vibrant Faith Ministries supports families who are intentional about their faith and religious practice as they raise the next generation of committed Christians.

Doing Good Together (www.doinggoodtogether.org)

The idea behind Doing Good Together (DGT) is to inspire, encourage and equip families to volunteer together, to spend time with loved ones while also helping the larger world. In the process, we raise children who are compassionate, aware of social issues, and are instilled with the lifelong habit of giving. DGT provides hands-on tools specifically for parents, and also teaches organizations how to more effectively engage families in service.

Family-to-Family (www.family-to-family.org)

Family-to-Family, through its family sponsorship program, is dedicated to connecting, one-to-one, families with enough to share, to impoverished American families with profoundly less. In addition to the family sponsorship program, we've created a constellation of other giving opportunities, all designed to provide kids, families and adults with meaningful, hands-on giving experiences.

Family Connections is a ministry of the Center for Family Care of the Greek Orthodox Archdiocese of America.

For more information about the center's ministries please contact the center at:
79 Saint Basil Road
Garrison, NY 10524
Phone: (845) 424-8175
Fax: (845) 424-4172
Email: familycare@goarch.org
Website: www.family.goarch.org

Leadership 100

The Center for Family Care was established with a major grant from the Archbishop Iakovos Leadership 100 Endowment Fund, Inc.

We are grateful for its support.