Family Connections

by Melissa K. Tsogranis

Who is Our Family?

"And his mother and his brothers came; and standing outside they sent to him and called him. And a crowd was sitting about him; and they said to him, 'Your mother and your brothers are outside, asking for you.' And he replied, 'Who are my mother and my brothers?' And looking around on those who sat about him, he said, *'Here are my mother and my brothers! Whoever does the will of God is my brother, and sister, and mother.'"* – Mark 3:31-35

Growing up, my brother and I didn't have the benefit of living near our relatives. Although our entire extended family lived on the East Coast for most of my childhood, we were at least a day's drive before we could reach any of them. It always made me sad that my grandparents, uncles, aunts, and cousins were frequently able to see each other, and we were relegated to the occasional visit. Shortly before I entered high school, our family packed up and moved to California which made the distance from our relatives even greater. When the time came to purchase a home, I very clearly remember the conscious effort my parents made in finding a house that was close to the local parish–it ended up being only 2.1 miles away. They told us that the Church was our family, as well. That is how my brother and I were raised–within the arms of the parish family of the Annunciation Church in Modesto, Calif.

In a world that increasingly rejects the need for family and values individualism over community, family is more important than ever. But who, then, is our family?

In the traditional sense, family is comprised of the parents and children of a household brought together by divine grace. In addition, our family tree can include grandparents, uncles, aunts, and cousins from whom dynamic, vital relationships may or may not develop. For some people, their 'family' may consist of people who are constant and loving supports in their life but have no official place on their tree.

We know that our Orthodox Christian faith builds upon our family tree by adding spiritual relatives—godparents, godchildren, and other sacramental relations.

But it doesn't stop there. As baptized Orthodox Christians, we are truly related to one another by the body and blood of Christ offered to us in the sacrament of Holy Communion. *The cup of blessing which we bless, is it not a participation in the blood of Christ? The bread which we break, is it not a participation in the body of Christ?*

Because there is one bread, we who are many are one body, for we all partake of the one bread (1 Corinthians 10:16-17).

We are all one family in Christ—regardless of one's age or stage in life.

God fashioned humanity so that it would exist through relationship. After creating Adam, He declared, *"It is not good that the man should be alone; I will make him a helper fit for him"* (Genesis 2:18). We were made by God to live in communion with one another.

We need connections with others to survive. When we enter the world as newborns, connection is necessary for our survival. Studies have shown infants who do not have someone to bond with fail to thrive.

As a result, their development can be delayed, they may detach from the world, and, in some extreme instances, they can die–essentially from this lack of connection. Current studies on neuroscience show that it isn't just infants who need real connections to thrive; we all do.

We all need to belong. When people are less connected with others, there is a higher occurrence of depression and isolation, impacting overall day-to-day functioning.

As Christians, a healthy relationship with Christ forms the basis for every one of our other relationships.

In her book, "Persons in Communion," Kyriaki Karidoyanes FitzGerald writes, "Human persons are meant to be in communion with other persons. Authentic human life requires relationships with others. A relationship with God cannot be separated from relationships with other persons. As human persons, we share a common origin in God's creative love and we share a common goal in God's transfiguring love. We are bound together in God and are by nature social persons. We are not meant to live our lives in isolation from others. Rather, we are meant to be in relationship with others."

As my husband and I reflect on what is most important in raising our son, one of the words that inevitably recurs is family.

We want him to know his family and, to us, this goes beyond the blessing of grandparents, aunts, uncles, cousins, godparents and god-siblings.

It is critical to us that he recognizes the parish as a family that will help to nurture and support him as he grows in the faith.

But most importantly, we want him to know that he is infinitely loved by His heavenly Father and, through Him, intimately connected to the household of faith within the Church. This is the exalted family position that we all share - we are children of God.

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FOR PRAYER:

PRAYER OF ST. PAUL FOR THE CHURCH AT EPHESUS

For this reason I bow my knees before the Father, from whom every family in heaven and on earth is named, that according to the riches of His glory He may grant you to be strengthened with might through His Spirit in the inner man, and that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith; that you, being rooted and grounded in love, may have power to comprehend with all the saints what is the width and length and height and depth, and to know the love of Christ which surpasses knowledge, that you may be filled with all the fullness of God. Now to Him who by the power at work within us is able to do far more abundantly than all that we ask or think, to Him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus to all generations, for ever and ever. Amen.

(Ephesians 3:14-21)

Center for Family Care: Webinar on Children's Mental Wellness

The Center for Family Care will offer an online workshop Aug. 23, "Fostering Mental Wellness in our Children and Teens A Parent's Guide to Promoting Resiliency," with Georgette M. Constantinou, Ph.D.

Dr. Constantinou will give parents the tools to promoting resiliency in their children, including the ability to bounce back and meet life's challenges. The 7 C's model of Dr. Kenneth Ginsburg will be presented to assist parents in developing the skills necessary to encourage the development of resiliency. These include competence, confidence, connection, character, contribution, coping, and control. To register visit www.family.goarch.org. Dr. Constantinou is the administrative director for the division of pediatric psychiatry and psychology, child neurology, and developmental- behavioral pediatrics at Akron Children's Hospital. An associate professor of psychology at Northeastern Ohio Medical University, she has served as faculty since 1978. She is an active speaker and trainer on the local, regional, national, and international levels.

Dr. Constantinou advocates for the mental health needs of children and their families in the areas of traumatized children and children coping with the demands of chronic medical illnesses and injuries.

TABLE TALK: QUESTIONS FOR AROUND THE DINNER TABLE

- Who are our extended family members? What do we know about our family history and life? What role did the Church have in the lives of our family members?
- Who are our spiritual family members? What impact do they have in our life? How do we include them in our life and prayers?
- How can we accept the Church as part of our family? Why is this important? How do we do this?
- Pray St. Paul's Prayer for the church at Ephesus (Ephesians 3:14-21) and discuss what it means to your immediate family as well as your family in Christ.

FOR PARISHES:

FAMILY HEIRLOOM ACTIVITY

Participants will gather to learn more about their fellow parish family members while exploring our heritage as Orthodox Christians. Invite your parishioners to gather for a potluck dinner or meal. Then, encourage everyone to bring an heirloom (or a picture of or a story of the heirloom) that holds special meaning for their family. This item could be something that has been passed down through generations or could be something that is cherished even as a newer keepsake. After dinner, families will share their heirloom. For more details on this activity and other family night activities, visit *www.family.goarch.org.*

FOR FAMILIES:

MAKE A FAMILY ICON TREE

You don't need to be an amazing artist to do this–anyone can assemble it. To begin, get a precut piece of wood on and stain or paint it the desired color. Once it has dried, sketch a tree with enough branches for each member of your family and paint it.

Find small paper icons of Christ and the patron saint of each of your family members (Holy Transfiguration Monastery is a good source for these. www.thehtm.org). Use Mod Podge to affix the icon of Christ to the trunk and the patron saints to the branches. Decorate the tree by painting fruit, flowers, and leaves. Put a final coat of protective sealant; this can be found at an art supply store. Finally, give the icon to your priest to be blessed.

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

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