Forming Christians, Sunday-Morning Style

> Peter's Second Epistle closes with instructions for Christians about how to lead righteous lives as they await Christ's second coming: "Beware that you are not carried away with the error of the lawless and lose your own stability. Grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ" (2 Peter 3:18). The verb is active and imperative: grow. Do not passively get "carried away." Christian formation is an active, intentional process, toward a specific destination.

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Sunday Church school has an image problem. Literally. Photos from our children's youth groups, camps, family activities, service projects and mission trips all show vibrant faith and the active formation of young Orthodox Christians. Sacraments and services in our beautiful churches also make great photos, as do pictures of loving families in their homes. But chairs crowded around a table with a laminate top, kids with winter-pale faces under the fluorescent lighting? Even when they're up and moving, playing a game, or involved in a hands-on activity—no matter how smiling, energized and engaged the students might be—that picture's not going to be a social media scorcher.

Much of what goes on in our classrooms is more subtle and behind the scenes, in a way. Yet in the few minutes that we have on a Sunday morning, formation is in progress. Here are several topics that don't spend much time in the spotlight.

LEVERAGE THE "HIDDEN" CURRICULUM

A relatively safe and straightforward aspect of our ministry is the "transfer of information." In our "Religious Education Basics" series in *PRAXIS* several years ago, we offered a variety of articles and reflections about conveying the content of the Faith, with topics such as curriculum, learning objectives and lesson planning. What is being taught, and how, is the *explicit,* formal part of our endeavor (as described in the works of Elliot Eisner and others). It's the answer we give when our students' parents ask, "What are you doing in Sunday school this year?"

We are usually quite clear, at least in discussions amongst ourselves, about many parts of the *implicit* curriculum, which is sometimes called the "hidden curriculum": the values, expectations and experiences that we are imparting to our students even though we do not explicitly communicate them. For example, classroom culture is part of the implicit curriculum:

- **How is your classroom arranged?** If you have the space, you might arrange orderly rows, cooperative tables, or a single collaborative circle, depending on the specific lesson and your students' needs.
- **A teacher's location and posture also communicate:** do you stand at the front, sit in the middle, or circulate among the tables? If students have a question, do you go to them, or do they come to you?
- **Class routines**—from greetings to dismissal—can also be very telling about our priorities. Do you get right to work and socialize at the end of class, or do you spend a few minutes catching up and then turn to the explicit lesson?
- **Your approach to classroom management and discipline teaches students what is valued.** How long do you allow disruptions to last? What happens after your final warning—is the student removed from the group, removed from the classroom, or brought to sit next to the teacher?
- Even with a tiny budget, **the physical setting and materials can send a positive message** about how you value your students and your mission. Crooked photocopies, peeled crayons, or general disorganization?

The structure and timing of a Sunday school is also an aspect of the "hidden curriculum." Parishes large and small are always balancing various constraints. How you acknowledge and work through them demonstrates your values:

- **Limited space:** Do you have enough classrooms of a large enough size? If not, the remedy could mean anything from a building campaign to buying portable dividers to reducing the number of grades offered.
- **Low enrollment or spotty attendance:** Where are all of the kids? Do parents bring their children regularly and on time? To allow families to worship together and for children to experience the full Divine Liturgy, would parents be willing to hold Sunday school entirely before or after the service?
- **Teacher availability and experience:** How do you honor your teachers? If you have willing but undeveloped volunteers, do you sponsor their attendance at conferences or host training workshops?

FOSTER ETHICAL DEVELOPMENT

We often speak of spiritual development and formation, but what does it mean to develop spiritually? What does a spiritually mature Christian look like?

Just as human beings develop physically, cognitively, socially and emotionally, we also develop spiritually and morally. Many psychiatrists and educators have explored questions of "ages and stages" from a variety of angles. A classic example is Maria Montessori, who had great respect for children's individual pace of development and "sensitive periods." Other theorists were more specific in describing milestones that are reached in certain age ranges: Erik Erikson for social development, Jean Piaget for cognitive development, and Lawrence Kohlberg for moral reasoning. Kohlberg described three levels and six stages of moral reasoning and the resulting ethical behavior.

Drawing heavily from Kohlberg, James Fowler developed a theory of faith and spiritual development. His 1981 book, *Stages of Faith,* is a foundational and generally accepted work in the still-developing field of theory and research into faith development. After conducting and analyzing about 400 interviews with people of all ages, Fowler and his associates found a pattern of progression in faith from birth through adulthood.

Faith Development Theory can help Sunday school teachers and other youth workers understand how the children in their classrooms view the world and their relationship to God and others. The theory isn't a guide for training people of any particular Christian creed or form of spirituality, but more generally describes how individuals can grow into their capacities for faith and spirituality:

> As children mature, good religious nurture invites and stimulates the growing person to claim a shared sense of identity in relation to the Source of Life's being and meaning. This happens by participation in the community's shared symbols, practices, and teachings. They come to know and trust *God's love* and *cherishing* for themselves, as it is expressed in sacramental action, in teaching and proclamation, and in the warm and faithful sponsorship and affirmation of their presence and worth, by a community of faith. (James Fowler, "Faith Development at 30: Naming the challenges of faith in a new millennium," *Religious Education* 99, no. 4 [Fall 2004], page 30)

Fowler summarizes each stage as follows:

Stage 1 Intuitive-Projective faith [generally, ages 3–7] is the fantasy-filled, imitative phase in which the child can be powerfully and permanently influenced by examples, moods, actions and stories of the visible faith of primally related adults... (*Stages of Faith,* page 133)

Stage 2 Mythic-Literal faith [mostly in school children] is the stage in which the person begins to take on for him- or herself the stories, beliefs and observances that symbolize belonging to his or her community. Beliefs are appropriated with literal interpretations, as are moral rules and attitudes. Symbols are taken as one-dimensional and literal in meaning... (page 149)

In **Stage 3 Synthetic-Conventional faith** [arising in adolescence; age 12 to adulthood], a person's experience of the world now extends beyond the family. A number of spheres demand attention: family, school or work, peers, street society and media, and perhaps religion. Faith must provide a coherent orientation in the midst of that more complex and diverse range of involvements. Faith must synthesize values and information; it must provide a basis for identity and outlook... (page 172)

The movement from Stage 3 to **Stage 4 Individuative-Reflective faith** [early to middle adulthood; not all persons reach stage 4 or beyond] is particularly critical for it is in this transition that the late adolescent or adult must...face certain unavoidable *tensions:* individuality versus being defined by a group or group membership; subjectivity and the power of one's strongly felt but unexamined feelings versus objectivity and the requirement of critical reflection; self-fulfillment or self-actualization as a primary concern versus service to and being for others; the question of being committed to the relative versus struggle with the possibility of an absolute... (page 182)

Stage 5 Conjunctive faith [unusual before mid-life] involves...a new reclaiming and reworking of one's past. There must be an opening to the voices of one's "deeper self." Importantly, this involves a critical recognition of one's social unconscious—the myths, ideal images and prejudices built deeply into the self-system by virtue of one's nurture within a particular social class, religious tradition, ethnic group or the like... (pages 197–198)

Stage 6 Universalizing faith is exceedingly rare. The persons best described by it...have become incarnators and actualizers of the spirit of an inclusive and fulfilled human community...The rare persons who may be described by this stage have a special grace that makes them seem more lucid, more simple, and yet somehow more fully human than the rest of us." (pages 200–201)

The stages of Faith Development can provide helpful insights for teachers who might not yet know their students as individuals; however:

> It should never be the primary goal of religious education simply to precipitate and encourage stage advancement. Rather, paying attention to stage and stage advancement is important in helping us shape our teaching...Movement in stage development, properly understood, is a byproduct of teaching the substance and the practices of faith. (Fowler 2004, page 417)

By actively presenting the examples of Christ and the saints, and by focusing on the Gospel, we can help our children progress through these normal developmental phases. A balanced approach considers both a child's age and how to help him or her blossom in our Orthodox Christian Faith and ethos.

SHOW YOUR IMPERFECTIONS

Which do you think we at the Department of Religious Education hear more often at our workshops and conferences? "I don't remember a thing that I learned in Sunday school," or "I had a great teacher who listened to me and helped me love the Church and understand the faith"? Unfortunately, it's the former—even though both might actually be true!

As teachers and youth workers, we have been entrusted with being role models for Orthodox Christian living. *The* role model is Christ—who *we* are comes from Him. He teaches us the way to "Be perfect, therefore, as [our] heavenly Father is perfect" (Matthew 5:48). Day by day, we follow the path of theosis, often in fits and starts. Discerning and then doing God's will is hard work for all ages, from sneaking a cookie to dropping that nice office pen in your bag, from insisting that you weren't the one who carved your sister's name in the pew to figuring out how often you should "prosocially" tell your mother-in-law that you love her gifts.

For older students especially, the sense of a shared journey and struggle is invaluable. We begin our lessons by having students explore their own knowledge about and attitudes toward a topic—start from their life experience, then introduce the Church's teachings and wisdom, and then integrate the new knowledge into their life moving forward. Offering your own personal examples and reflections, perhaps with a dash of self-effacing humor, goes a long way with older children and teens.

Push that principle a bit further: share your own ongoing struggles and questions with students. Rather than making students think you're faltering or don't practice what you preach, you'll leave a lasting impression. In a recent study of young Jewish women who had attended Saturday morning religious schools as children, researcher Zehavit Gross showed that:

> In general, teachers who maintain a tentative and open-ended worldview are perceived as more conducive to the shaping of a stable and coherent religious world for students than are those who declare themselves to be "perfect" and adhere to a more rigid outlook on life. ("Reflective Teaching as a Path to Religious Meaning-Making and Growth," *Religious Education* 105, no. 3 [Summer 2010], page 277)

Although this study was conducted with Israeli youth, not young Orthodox Christians in the United States, I believe the principle applies: reflective, open and respectful teachers are more successful than teachers who rely solely on technical transfer of information. If you are working toward understanding or accepting the Church's position on an issue you're teaching, admit that you're still learning instead of pragmatically plowing through the lesson. You might say (honestly, of course), "I actually asked Fr. Mark about that the other day..." or "I'm reading a book about it and praying that God will help me understand..."

Questioning, curiosity and doubt are all part of human nature, part of how we live as Orthodox Christians and develop our relationship with God. When our youth see how a mature, reflective Christian operates, i.e., within the Church, they will understand that they too can weather the inescapable struggles and skepticism of modern adolescence. Christians are made, not born.

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