

Encouraging
Christ-Likeness
in Our Diocesan Youth
(& others)

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Our Diocesan youth (and everyone else) stand in crying need for greater experience in spirituality – in fact, that is the primary goal of Orthodox youth ministry: the nurturance of Christ-likeness, the acquisition of the Holy Spirit ... in a word, *theosis*.

However, the effort toward spirituality should never be accompanied by *judgmentalism* – which is odious in any group, but is especially noxious when it seeps out of the lips of those who should seem to be innocent. The spirituality, the very cultural manifestation of our youth, should be holy and winsome, bright and free, devoted, vibrant, other-worldly and joyful. It should not be cynical, world-weary, despondent, cynical, sullen, or condescending.

Following are a number of goals for Encouraging Christ-Likeness in our Diocesan Youth:

1. Nurture Orthodox spirituality

The nurturance of Orthodox spirituality is the highest priority of our youth ministry. If such nurturance does not exist, then ministry is not occurring – neither, for that matter, is Orthodoxy. The aim of the Church's ministry to youth is to help them pray, so that they are able, as the Pilgrim sought himself, to pray without ceasing. Prayer is revolutionary. It seeks nothing less than to turn out the present regime of darkness, and to realize the already-existing marks of the Kingdom, looking forward to the ultimate and final act of Divine transformation, which we know of as the "Last Day." After all, is this

not what is meant in the phrase, “Thy Kingdom come, Thy will be done”? Thus, Orthodox youth ministry must be mystically eschatological.

It is in this goal of nurturance that catechesis takes on its fullest meaning. Catechesis must involve the content of religious education, as enumerated in the “Curriculum Guidelines for Religious Education: Preschool to High School.”¹ These guidelines are a valuable integration of Biblical and Traditional content.

Nurturance also requires leading youth in the experience of Orthodox spirituality. The ascetical practices of fasting, morning and evening prayers, Lenten disciplines, Confession, visits to monasteries and pilgrimages should not only be discussed, but should be practiced as a group, and as part of the parish.

2. Build commitment to family

The commitment to and involvement in family and home life should be a goal for any Orthodox youth ministry. At the same time, families should be encouraged and assisted in their care of youth, whether adolescents or elementary-ages.

The rebellion of adolescents against parental authority is a truism in psychology, sociology, and – tragically – even church administration. It is a truism, and it is trite, because the rebellious posture of the adolescent has never been proven as a necessary developmental task. Too much uncritical acceptance has been given to the doctrine of the developmental need for establishing “one’s own identity” ... too little attention has been given to more important psychological need for extending one’s identity as a family member ... this trite doctrine about “necessary” rebellion is not only a cliché, it is also a pillar of the very sort of radical individualism we fight against.

The affirmation of cooperation, obedience and honor should be re-embraced as priorities in youth ministry.²

“Future ministry” means not only ministering to youth, but also ministering to families, especially parents and guardians, in rearing their youth. The tragic fact behind much, if not most, of adolescent mental illness is the presence of adult problems (in behavior and emotions) in the home.

Habits of peace

As society becomes more unstable, it will become even MORE IMPORTANT that the home becomes a peaceful refuge. Tragically, as the need for a “peaceful home” increases, many parents have become more “emotionally chaotic” and undisciplined themselves. As a result, children and adolescents continue to “run away” in various ways, including:

- outright running, or “elopement”
- “running away” without leaving home, by avoiding contact with family as much as possible (e.g., excessive mall-wandering, chat-room lounging and web-surfing, room-nesting)
- leaving home prematurely – i.e., “escaping” the family by entering a foolish co-habitation or marriage
- “fogging out” from home life by drug use

We will help parents combat cultural chaos, and to adopt HABITS OF PEACE by encouraging these truths:

- discipline is corroded, not helped, by yelling
- leadership is enhanced, not hindered, by humility
- no one loses when the father properly functions as the head: everyone loses when the head is the kid
- gentleness and firmness are not opposites

- respect is received after respect is given
- *organization* grows, *control* never lasts
- when things are bad, repent and pray until things are good
- an Orthodox family will be miserable to the degree that it is not Christ-like, joyful to the degree that it is

In the near future, the care of the elderly will become an increasingly vital need. The frequent habit of consigning infirm family members to the care of over-priced “nursing” facilities may become, for economic reasons, not so frequent. It is probable, not just possible, that families will once again need to become the primary caregivers for the elderly. Our youth must be prepared for this very real eventuality. It goes without saying that presently, they are not ready.

3. Encourage religious vocation

The identification and encouragement of religious vocation should also be a goal. Religious vocation here means the entry into major holy orders for males, and the tonsure into the monastic profession for both males and females. The early preparation for clergy wives would also be dealt with in this area of concern.

We need to help families overcome the temptation to discourage the vocations of their sons and daughters. Parents are understandably concerned about serious practical concerns about their child entering major holy orders or the monastic profession.

Children and youth should hear, in church and at home, the high value of the church vocation, or “the calling.” This must be done as a high priority in any circumstance, but especially now, as society openly de-values the priesthood and the monastic life.

4. Train for family life

The preparation of youth – especially adolescents – for marriage and family life must be of almost paramount importance.

We have understood this goal already in our concern that our youth meet and marry each other. Here is where our interest in nurturing our particular ethnicity – the Rusin culture – is not only profitable, but finds meaning. Rusin ethnicity (along with other ethnic traditions in other jurisdictions) in an ecclesial context actually contributes to the development of family/home life in succeeding generations. It is counterproductive to assume that an eradication or absence of ethnicity is required for contemporary ministry. In fact, the converse is almost certainly true. Our ethnicity is what we possess ... it is what God has given specially to us as a people ... and it is what we can offer to the American non-ethnic and culturally-deprived youth that no one else can. The American adolescent has been described, trenchantly, as “a lost aborigine looking for a tribe.” The adolescent is afflicted with an intense need for cultural identification. This is what our ethnicity has the potential to provide. It should be noted that ethnicity is transmitted only through enjoyment and the social experience of a successful and creative lifestyle – it is not transmitted solely through membership in a dance troupe.

In this particular goal of preparation for marital and family life does the discussion of sexuality find real meaning. Here we must be willing to speak frankly of the cultural problems of pornography, extra-marital sexual activity, and gender-blurring identifications. We will discuss the Orthodox affirmation of children as the miraculous fruit of the nuptial union, but also of the inherent joy of marital sexuality.

Fight against negative sexual messages

We will work to overcome, in this indoctrination,³ the modern corrosion of family life which involves these constant advertisements from the surrounding culture:

- “late childless marriages are the best”
in fact, such marriages are likely to be short-lived and unstable – after all, the longer one is single, the harder it is to learn to live with someone else
- “co-habitation can ‘test’ to ‘make sure’ marriage ‘will work’”
in fact, nothing is further from the truth – co-habitation before marriage actually REDUCES the likelihood that the marriage will succeed
- “you have sex with ‘sexual partners’ of various numbers and genders – ‘spouse’ is too old-fashioned”
in fact, not only does the Church oppose this, but so also do psychological surveys show that sexual activity outside a monogamous relationship almost always leads to anxiety and depression ... the “sexual partner” idea has led to uncountable psychological, social, and medical miseries (e.g., STD’s, AIDS, abortion, child abuse and child abandonment)
- “you should experiment with novel practices (e.g., oral and anal postures, along with various masturbatory forms, as well as homosexual and fetish acts)”
in fact, such practices are one of the chief reasons for the current spread of STD’s, and the expansion of homosexual behavior
- “the classic Christian forms of marriage and sex (e.g., monogamy, church wedding) are only for the very few people who are weird and ‘fundamentalist’”
in fact, a growing number of young people are practicing abstinence, which is the ONLY reliable method of adolescent birth control and prevention of STD’s

Of course, very important in the fight against negative sexual

messages is the problem of pornography. Pornography needs to undergo a “PR spin change” in our population: instead of being something snickered at and dismissed as “boys will be boys” (and now, even “girls will be girls”), we need to help our youth recognize that pornography is the chief developmental and training tool for the production of sex offenders. It should be known, outright, as the insidious toxin it really is:

- It is a violation and corruption of the natural beauty of the human body — a beauty that is sacred in its nakedness.
- It is a blasphemy against the holy mystery of the nuptial union (i.e., marital sex).
- It is a willful — and idiotic — invocation of lust-inducing demons, especially the pernicious Asmodeus (see the Book of Tobit).

Encourage Orthodox teaching about sex

We will encourage – against the above cultural advertisements – the more classic, Christian affirmations about sexuality, marriage and family:

- early marriage, rather than late marriage – after education, career and (detrimentally) bachelor habits have become entrenched⁴
- *abstinence*, along with a critique of the practice of multiple successive dating (which leads, inexorably, to multiple sexual liaisons)
 - **abstinence means refraining from sexual intercourse and all genital contact until marriage**
 - **abstinence also means confining sexual activity to a marriage that is blessed by the Church, monogamous and heterosexual**

- the priority of retaining the wedding and subsequent marriage in the Orthodox Church: we have gone past the point where removal from the Orthodox Church into protestant affiliations might have been passively condoned
- the affirmation of the Christian insistence on commitment and stability, even in the face of disappointment and challenge ... St. Paul insisted that Christians remain in the station they occupied “when they were called,” and he condemned divorce, even when circumstances were difficult (as did the Lord Himself) ... the Ascetical Fathers also condemned the practice of monks leaving their habitation, depicting for us the ecclesial ethic of remaining on station (cf. 1 Corinthians 7.20 – Everyone should remain in the state in which he was called)
- the training – even during youth years – of young men as Orthodox husbands and fathers, and of young women as Orthodox wives and mothers ... the current family disarray is due in large part to the absence of such training in the catechesis of our youth in previous generations

The necessity of the family as comprised of one breadwinner, and one primary nurturer ... usually, this would entail the father gaining income, and the mother providing nurturance and care for the home and children ... while this might strike contemporary readers as hopelessly outré and obsolete, it should be noted that in the West and Russia, where the classic family pattern has been ransacked throughout the 20th century by communism, capitalism, feminism and secular individualism, consequences include – aside from the obvious skyrocketing increase in the abortion rate – a negative birth rate, an increasing rise in mental illness, an increasing crime rate, an increase in suicide and other self-destructive behaviors.⁵

5. Educate youth about ethical and cultural issues

The education of youth in responding to ethical and cultural issues is an increasingly prominent goal in Orthodox youth ministry. One of the significant factors behind the evacuation of young adults from the Church, in the last 25-50 years, is the lack of effective preparation in responding to contemporary social and moral issues. Holy Tradition contains real, concrete responses to questions posed by modern society.

Here is a partial list of issues that Orthodox Youth must be educated in:

- the denigration of human life from the Orthodox view of man as soul and body in the image of God, to a technologically modifiable animal which possesses no divine value, but is instead a utilitarian variable (symbolized quintessentially by the Social Security number)
 - thus, we will lead our youth into pro-life activities, and there will be no politically correct (and morally negligent) permissiveness of the pro-abortion position
 - thus, we will affirm the protection of the weak and the voiceless, including the poor and marginalized, but also those who fail “quality of life” assessments
- the continued industrialization/commercialization of human life, in which materialistic utilitarianism has truly become the god (or antichrist) of this age
- Orthodoxy has been identified, customarily, with conservatism ... but in America, this conservative outlook should be clarified to include a sharp critique of this industrial materialism, as well as a distrust in all materialistic models – communism as well as capitalism
- in this interest, as well as that of the environmental ethic

below, some of the modern agrarians may be helpful ... Wendell Berry, especially, comes to mind: "Rats and roaches," he wrote recently, "live by competition under the laws of supply and demand; it is the privilege of human beings to live under the laws of justice and mercy"⁶

- the vocation of priestly stewardship over creation, in opposition to the twin perils of deification of nature, and the objectification and rape of the environment
- the increasing antagonism of modern society against the Apostolic Christianity of the Orthodox Church, in contrast to the acceptance of diminished Christian forms such as mainline liberal Protestantism and mega-church commercial enterprises
- the increasingly militant forms of secularism and anti-Christian bias in the education system ... it is appalling that Joseph Campbell can be taught authoritatively in high school, the teacher openly equivocating the Incarnation of Christ with other myths of the avatar, while the bland, non-religious theory of "Intelligent Design" cannot even be mentioned for fear of arousing "funda-phobic" frenzy

6. Develop a strong commitment to Orthodoxy

The development of a strong, lifelong commitment to Orthodox parish life, should be espoused unabashedly as a primary goal, with particular regard to retaining our youth over the long-term within their home parish, and within the American Carpatho-Russian Orthodox Diocese. To develop this retention of membership requires two things – one is negative, the other is positive.

- the **negative objective** is to overcome the single, most significant reason why people leave the church ... in a recent poll, Spring Harvest and Care for the Family, two Christian organizations in England, found that of all the

reasons that people give for leaving a church, the most significant reason is the occurrence of “petty squabbles”⁷ ... clergy and parishioners must be brought to the realization, for the sake of the salvation of our youth, that the culture of complaint, criticism and conflict vanquishes the immature faith of our children: fights at annual meetings, and the weekly dissections of priest and faithful over Sunday dinner, all combine to form a dynamic of apostasy

- the **positive objective** is to fledge our young with an “ecclesial personality” ... this is, admittedly, a neologism that may sound strange, but its meaning is already known well: an “ecclesial personality” is one that is legislated by the Sermon on the Mount – in particular, by the Beatitudes

The Beatitudes will be our practical goal for Diocesan youth ministry: they are what we want our children to become ... we want to bless our youth (this intention to bless is the root and requisite intent of all ministry), and we want even more our youth to experience the Blessings of God ... thus, we want to lead them into a life of Orthodox prayer, and a life that is characterized by the Beatitudes.⁸

The Beatitudes describe the iconic and revolutionary virtues by which the Orthodox person, family and Church may become the means by whom Christ calls the world into His Kingdom ... thus, the Orthodox youth ministry must produce “evangelist-saints” – if it fails to do this, it is neither “ministry,” nor is it “Orthodox.”

7. Be Shock-Proof in future ministry

The planning and execution of youth ministry should be shock-proof. Our ministry to Diocesan youth should begin now, not later ... here, not somewhere else ... with us, and

the youth God has put in our charge, not someone else: The harvest is plentiful, but the laborers are few; pray therefore the Lord of the harvest to send out laborers into His harvest field. Go your way; behold, I send you out as lambs in the midst of wolves. Carry no purse, no bag, no sandals (Luke 10.2-4). We do not need to wait for more money, more people, bigger churches, more training or fancier, imported programs. We have already everything we need to do what needs to be done. After all, we are the Orthodox Church, and this modern age is, in the final analysis, only the world, and only that.

I fully expect that patterns of cultural decline into techno-barbarism will continue, and may perhaps even accelerate. I also expect that the hopes for the establishment of a new public morality, espoused by some conservative Protestants and Roman Catholics (like Fr. Richard John Neuhaus) are ill-placed, and are doomed to be disappointed.⁹ To use some modern sociological terms, we must work so that the ethics and worldview of our children and youth will be drawn from church and family – we cannot expect other institutions like school and corporations to be of any assistance. Orthodox ministry to youth should be “shock-proof” – that is, it should be able to continue despite the changes of society ... even if some of these changes may be revolutionary, perhaps even catastrophic.

It should come as no surprise that the “Orthodox experience” is becoming more at odds with the American psyche: people will enter our Orthodox churches and youth ministries more as “refugees” than as citizens seeking mere religious affiliation. It is useless to think of ministry in terms of the church as a tsarist beneficiary, a state-mandated institution, or even a community parish. The American Orthodox Church understands itself best by looking further back in history into the first centuries of Christianity: the catacomb Christians have more to instruct us than do the Christians of more recent cen-

turies. Why is this discussion crucial here, in a “youth ministry” document? It is important simply because our youth are always the first to experience cultural tides and social change: they have known, profoundly, for the last twenty years, that society has moved from a nominal and passive acknowledgment of “Judeo-Christian morality” to a quite active adoption of deconstructionism – a stance that is much more anti-Orthodox than it is post-Christian. If this is true, then we are really in the business of preparing martyrs¹⁰ – but then again, I would suggest, when has this not been true?

About Youth Ministry Assumptions

There are certain practices which have been associated with “youth ministry” – practices which are assumed to be de rigeur, but may not possess any real doctrinal or missional support. Following is a list of “goals of youth ministry” which need to be critically re-considered. All of these activities may be utilized, but I strongly suggest that we discourage their adoption as goals:

- fund-raising
- business sessions, elections – all under the dubious rubric of “leadership development”
- recreational activities that serve no other function
- conventions, and convention-planning
- career and “future” planning

It is important to be clear here. I am not dismissing any of these activities outright. I suggest, instead, that not one of these items ought to be positioned as a “goal.” And who would argue against this notion? Yet, if one looks at the possibility of “implicit goals,” as opposed to the “explicit” ones, then the analysis becomes disturbing. To identify the “implicit goals” of a youth ministry, one should simply tally up the time

and effort given to various activities. The activities which have the highest totals are the ones that reflect the implicit goals, which are always more significant than the ones written explicitly on paper.

I suspect that the results of such an analysis will show that too much of our ministry is devoted to fund-raising, business meetings, convention planning and recreation. It goes without saying that such implicit goals carry very little existential value or spiritual meaning. And where there is no value or meaning, young people will absent themselves in droves: Where there is no vision, the people perish (Proverbs 29.18).

About careers and vocation

The concern about “career and future planning” has nothing to do with the very correct and very real need for the inducement of religious vocations. Instead, it has to do with the pernicious contemporary myth of “destiny.” Young people are cultivated early into a career, which is insidiously framed as a “secular vocation.” The young person is led to believe that personal meaning, identity and significance will be found in the rubric of his career. Perhaps this is acceptable to protestant cultural formulations, which are often too uncritical of sociological structures. But such a myth of “career as vocation” is anathema to the Orthodox ethos. Such a myth is articulated in common statements regarding one’s future in the “American Dream”: “I need to find myself” ... “I have to find a career/job that I can believe in” ... “I want to be a success.” Occasionally, these secular vocations are even dressed up in religious language: “I know that God has something special for me” ... “I need to find God’s mission for me.”

Orthodox youth ministry must rebut beliefs that tend toward this myth. It is not true, in Orthodoxy, that God has a special mission or plan for anyone in the debased sense of career or

one's position in the material economy. The Orthodox Church, in following after the Apostolic tradition, holds an ambivalent attitude towards employment: one should work hard (2 Thessalonians 3.10; Proverbs 31); one should perform tasks on the job to please God (Ephesians 6.5-8); one should not cheat or steal from people, and one should be content with his wages (Luke 3.12-14). There is, from Scripture and the Fathers, that secular employment is a blessing, but it is not something to be believed in, and it is definitely not something upon which one should base his identity and philosophy. God does have a special mission for every youth, and it goes much higher than being a doctor, lawyer, or Peace Corps volunteer. That special mission is nothing less than *theosis*.

I find here the words of St. Theophan the Recluse, written in response to a young person with career questions, most meaningful:

You ask, "Must one do something?" Of course one must! And do whatever comes along – in your circle of friends and in your surroundings – and believe that this is and will be your real work. More will not be demanded of you. It is a great misconception to think, whether for the sake of heaven or, as the modernists put it, to "make one's mark on humanity," that one must undertake great, reverberating tasks. Not at all. It is necessary only to do everything according to the commandments of God. Just what exactly? Nothing in particular – only those things which present themselves to everyone in the circumstances of life, those things which are required by the very day happenings we all encounter. This is how God is. God arranges the fate of each man, and the whole course of one's life is also the work of His most gracious foreknowledge, as is, therefore, every minute and every encounter.

St. Theophan, obviously, harbors some assumptions about adolescence that are quite at odds with modern ones. He seems to think that adolescents are better than entertainment-junkies, that they are able to pursue higher aims than those pertaining to immediate self-gratification. And most radically,

perhaps most scandalously, he presumes that youth people, and all people, are able to be Orthodox ...

... so scandalously did our Lord presume this, along with the Apostles, the Fathers and Martyrs, and – hopefully – so do we in the Diocese: Let your light so shine before men, that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father Who is in heaven (Matthew 5.16).

A New Ethos vs Societal Values

COMPETITION is exchanged for COOPERATION

CONQUEST is exchanged for COMPASSION

CELEBRITY is exchanged for HUMILITY

RULERSHIP is exchanged for SERVANTHOOD

DEMAND is exchanged for GENEROSITY

ANGER is exchanged for RECONCILIATION

ISOLATION is exchanged for SOLITUDE

CONFORMITY is exchanged for FELLOWSHIP

ACQUISITION is exchanged for SIMPLICITY

SELF-PITY is exchanged for REPENTANCE

LUST is exchanged for FRIENDSHIP

SELF-ORIENTATION is exchanged for WORSHIP

VIOLENCE & POWER are exchanged for PEACE

Notes

¹Available from Protopresbyter Kenneth Bachofsky, Diocesan Supervisor of Schools. This is a superb text: every Church School should plan their program around it.

²To test the degree of how far individualism has advanced, simply imagine yourself, in a homily to adolescents, saying something like “You should obey and venerate your parents, and even contribute the income from your part-time job to the family treasury.” The outcry aroused in your imagination will attest to the profound differences between contemporary youth culture and the general practice of only a hundred years ago.

³there is nothing wrong with this word: we should embrace the term, as “indoctrination” is precisely what we are doing

⁴while one might be surprised, even offended, that early marriage should be considered as a value, is it not even more unsettling that such an old value should be so surprising?

⁵Allan Carlson, “Standing for Liberty and Marriage, Virtue and the Political State,” in *The Chesterton Review*, vol. xxxi, nos. 1 & 2 (*Spring and Summer, 2005*).

⁶Wendell Berry is a superior essayist and poet whose environmental writings veer quite close to the Orthodox environmental ethic ... two of his books that are especially helpful are *What are People For?* (1990); and *The Art of the Commonplace* (2003).

⁷cited in Ruth Gledhill, “Petty squabbles cause empty pews,” in *The Times Online* (8/25/05): www.timesonline.co.uk

⁸the Beatitudes form the “ethical code” of the Church and her youth, as distinct from the Protestant individual pietism that usually frames most Christian ethical thinking ... cf. Christos Yannaras, “Pietism as an Ecclesiological Heresy,” in *The Freedom of Morality* (SVS, 1996).

⁹of course, I hasten to add that I think it was always this way, that the hope of the “public square” was always illusory ... one should consult Vigen Guroian’s *Ethics After Christendom* (Eerdmans, 1994), for an illuminating discussion of this issue.

¹⁰I assume that this word will be taken in its best and Christian sense, not in its wretched distortion as advanced by that infamous 7th century Jewish-Gnostic heretic



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