

# PRAXIS

πραξις



## Teaching Strategies

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St. Macrina the Younger was born at Caesarea, Cappadocia, around the year 330. She was named for her grandmother, St. Macrina the Elder. Many other members of the family are also known as saints: her parents, Basil the Elder and Emmelia; and three of her nine younger siblings, Basil the Great (whose icon is on the next page), Gregory of Nyssa and Peter of Sebaste.

Her father planned for Macrina to marry an intelligent and good-hearted lawyer. The young man died before they could be married, and Macrina considered herself a widow even though her parents introduced the virgin to other suitors. She devoted herself to religion and lived at home, helping her mother run the household after her father's death. After her mother's death, Peter helped Macrina convert the family's estate in Pontus into a monastery and convent. She died there on July 19, 379.

Macrina had a profound influence on her brothers Gregory, Basil and Peter. Gregory wrote a work entitled *Life of Macrina* in which he described her as the "Teacher." He also told how Macrina helped Basil rein in his pride at his own oratorical skills after he returned from university. By her deep dedication to prayer and humble ascetic life, she demonstrated to her brothers that knowledge of God was more important than the classical education they had obtained.

And Moses was learned in all the wisdom of the Egyptians, and was mighty in words and in deeds.

– Acts 7:22

The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom;  
A good understanding have all those who do His commandments;  
His praise endures forever.

– Psalm 111:10

You should not unqualifiedly give over your minds to these [pagan authors]...but that, while receiving whatever of value they have to offer, you yet recognize what it is wise to ignore...Into the life eternal the Holy Scriptures lead us, which teach us through divine words...Heathen learning is not unprofitable for the soul...When they recount the words and deeds of good men, you should both love and imitate them, earnestly emulating such conduct. But when they portray base conduct, you must flee from them and stop up your ears.

– St. Basil the Great, *On the Right Use of Greek Literature*

A monk complained to St. Arsenius that while reading Holy Scripture he does not feel, neither the power of the words read nor gentleness in his heart. To that the great saint will reply to him: “My child, just read... When we continually hold in our mouths the words of Holy Scripture, but even though we do not feel the power of the words, evil spirits tremble and flee for they are unable to endure the words of the Holy Spirit...” My child, just read! The Holy Spirit who, through inspired men, wrote these divine words, will hear, will understand and will hasten to your assistance; and the demons will understand, will sense and will flee from you. That is: He whom you invoke for assistance will understand, and those whom you wish to drive away from yourself will understand. And both goals will be achieved.

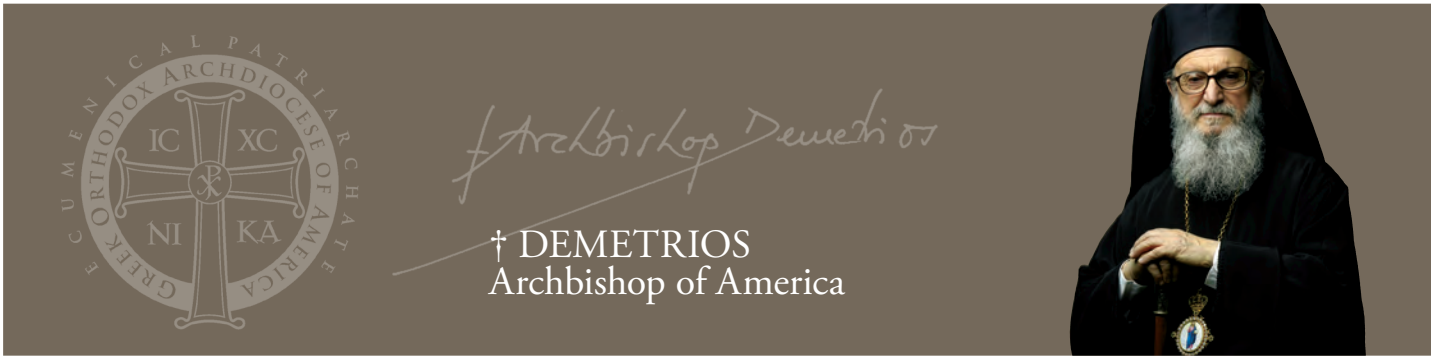
– St. Nikolai Velimirovich, *Prologue of Ochrid (May 21)*

The Church, through the temple and Divine service, acts upon the entire man, educates him wholly; acts upon his sight, hearing, smelling, feeling, taste, imagination, mind, and will, by the splendor of the icons and of the whole temple, by the ringing of bells, by the singing of the choir, by the fragrance of the incense, the kissing of the Gospel, of the cross and the holy icons, by the proskynias, the singing, and sweet sound of the readings of the Scriptures.

– St. John of Kronstadt, *My Life in Christ*

# WISDOM, ANCIENT AND MODERN





Beloved Brothers and Sisters in Christ,

The quality of religious education programs and teaching in the local parish is essential to our mission of nurturing the people of God in the Orthodox Christian Faith. Just as we strive to bring honor and glory to God through our worship, we should also labor to do so and fulfill our calling to the teaching ministry of the Church by evaluating and enhancing our teaching skills and methods. The focus of this issue of *PRAXIS* on “Teaching Strategies” assists with this by directing your attention to the importance of faith, effectiveness and quality in this sacred work.


First, if you are to teach effectively, you have to live faithfully. Your teaching methods and strategies must be supported by and guided by your trust in God, your belief in His divine promises, and your transformative journey through life in His saving grace. As religious educators and committed teachers who are called to guide the faithful, you will be most effective when your teaching reflects your relationship with God. In addition, your teaching strategies will be effective not only because of the engaging methods you use, but also because they are a reflection of Christ who dwells within you.

Second, evaluating your work as teachers also means that you must have a proper understanding of the goals of education in the local parish. Effectiveness in religious education is focused on the spiritual growth of those you teach. Thus, your teaching strategies are not about the recognition you may receive for using the latest techniques or technology. It is not about how your teaching style or methods are better than those of others. As members of the Body of Christ, united by Him and in Him, your focus must be on helping each other, sharing and learning together, and providing the most effective program and means to ensure the spiritual growth and maturity of those you teach.

Finally, this understanding of the goals of your mission and strategies, built upon a foundation of faith and your relationship with God, will ensure the quality of your teaching. This requires tremendous commitment and effort. You must strive to bring honor and glory to God by offering your gifts as an educator, by enhancing your skills and seeking training and guidance, and by dedicating the time that is necessary to be prepared and equipped to guide others in the Faith. The quality of your teaching is dependent on good and effective teaching strategies, on excellent resources, on study and preparation, and most importantly on prayer and communion with God.

As you read this issue of *PRAXIS*, I ask you to evaluate your teaching strategies and the ways in which you seek to enhance your teaching ministry. I also ask you to participate in conversations in your parish about how your religious education program can provide teacher training and resources to strengthen the quality and effectiveness of this ministry. As you do this, may you receive abundant guidance and wisdom from our Lord and know that every good and perfect gift that you need to serve others comes from above.

With paternal love in Christ,

  
† DEMETRIOS  
Archbishop of America



Beloved in the Lord,

During His earthly ministry, our Lord Jesus Christ was most often addressed by others as *Rabbi* (“Teacher”)—although He wasn’t a teacher in any ordinary sense. He was a carpenter (*tektôn*, Mark 6:3), and a sharp distinction was drawn at that time between the formally trained teachers and scribes who required the “opportunity of leisure” to master the skills of their profession, and laborers like the farmer and craftsman (*tektôn*), who had no leisure to learn the skills of a teacher (Sirach 38:24–39:1). When Jesus’s neighbors heard Him teaching in the synagogue, therefore, they were shocked and asked, “Where did this man get all this? What is the wisdom given to him?...Is not this the carpenter (*tektôn*), the son of Mary?” (Mark 6:2–3). Others responded more positively, and so we read, “They were astonished at His teaching: For He taught them as having authority, and not as the scribes” (Mark 1:22). Although Jesus lacked the training of a typical teacher, He exceeded the wisdom and authority of a typical teacher. He was a teacher in a revolutionary and unexpected way.

Today, nearly two millennia from the time He roamed the cities, towns and countryside of what we now call the Holy Land, teaching in synagogues, in private homes, on hillsides and by the seaside, the content of His teaching remains alive in the hearts and minds of believers throughout the world, and it is familiar, even attractive, to countless others beyond the discernible boundaries of the community of believers. Why? In large part because of the manner in which He taught—because of His teaching strategies.

The teaching method most especially associated with Jesus the Rabbi is the use of the parable. “The Lord said, ‘With what can we compare the kingdom of God, or what parable will we use for it?’” (Mark 4:30). Jesus knew His audience intimately and drew from their world of experience—observable nature, common occurrences, familial relations, business dealings—examples that communicated eternal truths about God and man. If we wish to understand the love of God, for instance, we need look no further than to the lilies of the field (Matthew 6:28), or to the way that any father would give his son a piece of bread and not a stone (Matthew 7:9). Although the parable made accessible the truth of God and His plan for man, effort is required. “The reason I speak to them in parables is that ‘seeing they do not perceive, and hearing they do not listen, nor do they understand’” (Matthew 13:13). Jesus’s most powerful parables get under our skin because they require of us an effort, a response. “Who proved neighbor to the man in need?...Go and do likewise.” How did the elder brother respond to the father’s plea to join in the celebration of the return of the prodigal? What about the brothers of the rich man in Hades?

In the Great Commission, Jesus instructed His disciples to go and teach all that He commanded (Matthew 28:20) to all the nations. In His earthly ministry, He not only taught them Good News, but He also provided them with the tools or methods to continue His teaching ministry. The Apostles, Fathers of the Church and many saints also taught the Good News of Christ. They too used many of the Lord’s strategies, in addition to using the teaching strategies of *their* day, such as the tools of rhetoric, as was expected of a teachers in the classical world. Today’s religious educators have thus inherited a great legacy of lessons from the great teachers of history. Of course, the Greatest Teacher of all is our Lord Jesus. And today’s religious educators can also add their own strategies, using the great variety of tools available to them, so that the Gospel can fill the head and the hearts of their students, so that they may “be transformed by the renewing of (their) minds, so that (they) may discern what is the will of God” (Romans 12:2).

With love in Christ,

† SAVAS  
Metropolitan of Pittsburgh

## SUBMISSION GUIDELINES

Submissions should be 1,000–2,000 words in length and directly discuss education in the theology and tradition of the Orthodox Christian churches. Lesson aids or graphic enhancements may accompany the articles submitted. We also encourage the submission of photographs relevant to parish life (praxis). Please also provide a biographical sketch of the author not exceeding fifty words.

PRAXIS Magazine is seeking submissions of lesson plans based on articles from previous or current issues of PRAXIS. Submissions should use the article as the text/background of the lesson plan. Lesson plans are welcome for any or several age groups. Please send submissions in a Word document with a length of 1,000–2,000 words to [tvrame@goarch.org](mailto:tvrame@goarch.org).

Material previously published or under consideration for publication elsewhere will not be considered without prior consent of the editor. We reserve the right to edit for usage and style; all accepted manuscripts are subject to editorial modification. Articles sent by mail should be accompanied by an electronic version on CD-ROM in Microsoft Word for Windows or for Macintosh. Articles in Microsoft Word may also be e-mailed as an attachment to [tvrame@goarch.org](mailto:tvrame@goarch.org).

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**New Times Need New Methods**  
*Anton C. Vrame*





# TEACHING ORTHODOX CHRISTIANITY TODAY

A NEW ERA DEMANDS NEW STRATEGIES

ANTON C. VRAME

Since the 1970s, we've thought of our society as being in the "information age." For most of us this new era became part of our daily experience about twenty years ago with the arrival of the Internet. Since then the explosion of digital information and our immediate access to it has transformed all that we do, in education generally and specifically for us in religious education. For nearly as long, religious educators, myself included, have argued for an approach that does more than inform, but also forms and transforms.



Orthodox Christian religious education is not just about handing over information. Knowledge of any topic, especially in our age, abounds and is easily obtained. Our methods of instruction must go beyond the rote transmission and banking of information in learners. This is especially critical today when facts and figures can easily be obtained and held in the palm of our hands on our phones. With so much information surrounding us—even on topics of faith and religion—why is there so much religious illiteracy and ignorance? This alone should persuade us that information transmission is not enough to bring about an educated person. What is needed is a community—a Church—of formation and transformation, where the Faith is embodied, practiced and reflected upon, thus leading the individual into increasingly greater “levels” of Christian life. Information that is disconnected from experience cannot be formative. Information without formation and transformation is merely trivia retention, as John Boojamra liked to call it. What students need is critical thinking skills so that they can separate the wheat from the chaff of the abundance of information returned by Googling any question about the Orthodox Faith. On the other hand, formation without information (and the freedom to think and question) can become a form of oppression.

Thus, I believe Orthodox Christian religious education should renew its consideration of formation as central to the teaching of Orthodoxy today. So, then, what is formation?

Two verses from Scripture provide us a place to begin to answer the question. One section of the Orthodox Christian funeral service opens with a Psalm verse that tells of a formative process in human life, providing an educational insight for us: “Your hands have made and fashioned me; give me understanding that I may learn your commandments” (Psalm 119:73, NRSV). Later in the funeral (and in the Memorial Service), we hear, “Lead me back again to Your likeness, and renew my original beauty.” This too is an artistic metaphor for our vision of formation: a beautiful person.

The Prophet Jeremiah also provides us with a formative metaphor to consider:

The word that came to Jeremiah from the Lord: “Arise, and go down to the potter’s house, and there I will let you hear my words.” So I went down to the potter’s house, and there he was working at his wheel. And the vessel he was making of clay was spoiled in the potter’s hand, and he reworked it into another vessel, as it seemed good to the potter to do. Then the word of the Lord came to me: “O house of Israel,

can I not do with you as this potter has done?” says the Lord. “Behold, like the clay in the potter’s hand, so are you in my hand, O house of Israel.” (Jeremiah 18:1–6)

In short, for the scriptural mind, God is an artist. In antiquity, the educational process was also seen in this artistic manner. Within the ancient Christian ideal of education, we hear about formation as *morphosis* and *paideia*. In this perspective, education is a plastic art, like sculpture, shaping the life of the person. To educate is to form another person, to shape his or her character, his or her being and way of being, to make a better person, to create the beautiful person—there is an understood sense of the ideal in the term. This ideal involves more than the mind, but the whole person.

“BEHOLD, LIKE THE CLAY IN  
THE POTTER’S HAND, SO ARE YOU IN MY  
HAND, O HOUSE OF ISRAEL.”

*Jeremiah 18:6*

So then, can we begin to create a definition of formation for Orthodox Christian religious education? I propose the following: Formation is the hands of a community—the Church—touching the life of a person, in a lifelong process leading to that person becoming God-like (*theosis*) or complete and becoming a contributor to that community. It occurs through instruction, interaction, experiences, role models, conversations and dialogue, questions and responses, leading persons to become well-informed members of that community. Formation occurs through ritual, familial, communal and societal activities, and, in our case, ecclesial and liturgical activities as well. Formation happens through the relationship of the learner with God and his or her community: family, Church and the world.

## TODAY’S LEARNERS

There isn’t enough time to discuss the challenges presented by today’s learners to religious educators. Suffice it to say that in too many of our parishes, religious education has not kept pace with today’s learners. Students still read to one another and color nice pictures. Teachers are always looking for new activities, better ways to use glitter and glue. Class content, especially with older students, still focuses too heavily on relatively unimportant topics, like names of vestments or finding the deep symbolism of a color and focuses less on the important questions of life and meaning or religious practice that seeks repair and reconciliation in our world.

Over the last few years, researchers have paid particular attention to the question of today's learners. Standing out is the work of Jean Twenge. She has gained a lot of attention with her work on "Generation Me," those thirty-five-years-old and younger in our society. She wrote:

Generation Me students like doing things themselves better than sitting and listening to a lecture...Few young people today, even the high achievers, enjoy sitting quietly with a book and reading. Instead, they attempt to multitask, doing homework while surfing the web and exchanging instant messages with friends. (Jean M. Twenge, "Generational changes and their impact in the classroom: teaching Generation Me," *Medical Education* 43, no. 5 [May 2009]: pages 398–405)

What is so striking about this article is that she is describing the challenges of educating medical doctors! This can be a distressing situation, but Twenge is optimistic when she points out that when the connection between the classroom and the world is made students will usually respond:

Most young people no longer respond to appeals to duty; instead, they want to know exactly why they are doing something and want to feel they are having a personal impact. This is an opportunity: if young people understand the deeper meaning behind a task, they can bring their energy and passion to bear on it. (Twenge 2009, page 404)

If we are to take seriously the issues of formation, then Orthodox Christian religious educators might begin to modify their methodologies, with resources to match. The newest materials from the Department of Religious Education are attempting to use the following principles.

### **OFFER INFORMATION IN SHORT BURSTS AND "CHUNKS."**

Information provides the "external check points" because it is objective. As the saying goes, each of us can have our own opinions, but not our own facts. In religious education, this is the scriptural and theological tradition of the Church. In religious education practice, this will mean providing direct access to the sources of the Orthodox Christian Faith and Way of Life: Scripture, liturgy, patology, theology, etc., to the best of our ability, depending on the students and the teachers involved. Short bursts of activity and chunks of information, likely leading to many of them over time, seem to capture the attention of our learners better. Connecting the information to various experiences is also important, as is recognizing the construc-



tion of knowledge that is taking place in the learners through the interactions of information and experience.

### **A CRITICAL APPROACH, QUESTIONING THE SOURCES MUST BE ALLOWED.**

In a recent presentation, Dn. Nicholas Denysenko stated that we should no longer expect people to blindly accept the information we offer, even the received Tradition of the Church. The Church in its educational processes can and should create the space for questions and questioning the sources, recognizing the individual cognitive and spiritual development taking place in the learner. This means creating, in the classroom, the safe space and freedom for students to question the received wisdom of our Tradition. As Parker Palmer writes, "Learning does not happen when students are unable to express their ideas, emotions, confusions, ignorance and prejudices. In fact, only when people can speak their minds does education have a chance to happen" (*The Courage to Teach*, Jossey-Bass, 1998, page 75).

### **DISCUSS MEANINGFUL TOPICS AND CREATE MEANINGFUL EXPERIENCES IN A LIFE TO FAITH TO LIFE APPROACH.**

The dynamic of moving from life to faith to life can be tremendously effective. A seminary student of mine approached me to say that after he began using this approach, attendance at his class and in his youth group increased. When we ask our students what they want to know and we ask about their lives, we will often learn that it is far more meaningful and challenging to us as teachers, thus creating a better learning environment for all.

While the content of the Orthodox Tradition has not changed over the centuries, our approaches to teaching our Faith can be updated to meet the unique needs of today's learners.

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Anton C. Vrame, PhD, is Director of the Department of Religious Education and author of *The Educating Icon: Teaching wisdom and holiness in the Orthodox way* (Holy Cross Orthodox Press, 1999).



# ORTHO-PAIDEIA

## A Strategy for Orthodox Religious Education

GEORGET PHOTOS

When I was called upon by the Archdiocesan Department of Religious Education to write an article on “Teaching Strategies for Religious Education,” I found myself in a quandary. I considered several approaches—some theoretical, some practical and some religious. After much prayer and meditation, and mounds of ripped up paper, I found myself looking for the basic definition of the term “strategy.”

Webster’s defines *strategy* as “the science of military command, or the science of directing great military movements. It is derived from the Greek terms *strategia* and *strategos*.” According to Lidell & Scott’s Greek–English Lexicon, the primary meaning of *strategia* is defined as the “office or period of command; with an emphasis on generalship.” The term *strategos* is defined as the “leader or commander of an army, the general himself.”

Applying these definitions of strategy to Orthodox religious education, the Church school teacher is, within a distinct period of time, directing a great “military movement” in which he or she demonstrates the qualities or skills of a “general.” He is the leader or commander of an “army.” His “soldiers” or warriors are his students. This imagery is reflected in many prayers of our Church. For example, the Prayer of Ablution, which is read by the priest in the Sacrament of Baptism, proclaims, “He who has

put on You, O Christ our God, also bows his head with us unto You. Keep him forever as an invincible warrior against every attack of those who assail him and us; and make us all victors, even unto the end...”

Our Orthodox students battle against sin and evil daily in the society. As a “commander” of our youth, exactly which strategies should the religious educator use to ensure that his “warriors” are invincible against every attack our contemporary society musters? How can we help students become victorious over evil and sin? Simply stated, we must provide the students with the genuine Christian teachings to protect them from the assaults of the devil, and equip them with the weapons of the Faith for spiritual warfare, that lead to victory: salvation! I posit that the only genuine strategy for victory is Ortho-Paideia.

Ortho-Paideia is a combination of the terms *Orthodoxy* and *paideia*. Orthodoxy is the correct and true teaching of the Christian Church. According to Fr. Anthony Coniaris in his book *Introducing the Orthodox Church*, “A church is the true Church of Christ if it can show historically that it was founded by Christ and has maintained a living connection over the centuries with that early Church. We need this historical connection in order to be assured that the deposit of the faith has not been tampered with but has been handed down to us in entirety.” Fr. Theodore Stylianopoulos, in his book *Christ in Our Midst*, writes that “the Orthodox Church is the true Church of God on earth and maintains the fullness of Christ’s truth in continuity with the Church of the Apostles...If a person carefully examines the history of Christianity he or she will soon discover that the Orthodox Church alone is in complete sacramental, doctrinal and canonical continuity with the ancient undivided Church as it authoritatively expressed itself through the great Ecumenical Councils.” *Paideia* is a Greek term and is defined as training, teaching, or education and its result.

Ortho-Paideia utilized as a strategy by the teacher has as its goal the training and teaching of the student in the Orthodox Faith. Its result is to bring about the development of an Orthodox Christian identity, which is vital for the “invincible and victorious” lifestyle of the student.

### THE STRATEGY

According to its definitions, strategy involves “directing great military movements” employing “the qualities or skills of a general.” Ortho-Paideia is a strategy from the perspective of Orthodox Christianity. It provides the objectives for spiritual warfare and the skills for the religious educator, who is the general, to lead his student “warriors” to victory.



Sophie Koulomzin, the Orthodox Christian religious educator and author of *Our Church and Our Children* (St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 1975), greatly expounded and advanced the concept of Ortho-Paideia. This landmark book, even though it is forty years old, provides advice and guidance that is relevant today:

The Orthodox Church today faces a challenge. It needs to discover an approach to religious education that is rooted in the total church tradition. This tradition includes knowledge of God, the life of grace within the Church and relationships with others. At the same time Christian education has as its object the education of a person. Whether it deals with an infant, a young child, an adolescent, or an adult, it must deal in a personal way with the individual at whatever level he exists: speaking his language, understanding and sharing his needs and concerns, loving him as he is. Religious experience is valid at whatever level it takes place, at any stage of intellectual maturity; and the process of Christian education must be a process of growth that is each person’s own experience, a gradual change involving his total person. The task and the challenge are tremendous and can only be met if we live fully the life of the Church.

The following details of the strategy of Ortho-Paideia have been derived from Koulomzin.

## OBJECTIVES OF ORTHO-PAIDEIA

Directing a great military movement involves objectives. This is some advice in the preparation of classroom objectives.

### Approach to Religious Education

An Orthodox approach to religious education must include these five objectives:

1. Help students acquire a sense of the reality of God in their lives.
2. Make them realize that none of them stand alone under God, that they are all a part of the Body, the Church.
3. Cultivate genuine individual growth of intellect and spirit.
4. Bring students as they mature to recognize with awe the Holy Mystery of God, beyond the limits of human wisdom.
5. Help them comprehend that Orthodox Christianity involves the whole person and all of life.

### Objectives of Church School Teaching

The knowledge that children should gain in the Church School has three objectives:

- “God is” – Development in the knowledge about God
- “The Church is” – Development in the knowledge of the Church
- “I am – Development in the knowledge of self

### Skills of Ortho-Paideia

The religious educator as the leader of “warriors” needs to acquire the qualities and skills of a general. This is some practical advice for leadership in the classroom lesson.

### The Lesson

In addition to the curriculum, which determines the subject to be taught, and the liturgical calendar, which determines some of the themes, the teacher must have a personal plan that emphasizes the following:

- Carefully reflect on and consider the lesson. Enhance your lesson by finding what is important to stress about God, the Church, the day, season, human experience, or personal experience. Make the lesson relevant and alive. Only then will the students be interested and see its importance.
- Consider the age of your students. Take into account their individuality. Students grasp information differently at various ages. Home in on what they find interesting and what difficulties you might expect with the group. Be prepared for anything!
- Captivate them with your presentation. Supplement the information with a craft, game, discussion or interactive activi-

ty that will give you results. Encourage discussions and questions that will lead to achieving the goal. Be sure to obtain the approval of your parish’s religious education director.

### Evaluate the Lesson

Review your lesson according to three criteria:

- Reflect on what you are teaching. How will your material impact and assist the student in gaining knowledge about God, His working in the world, and the student’s relationship to Him?
- Lead the students to understand that they are part of the Church through your lesson, and encourage enthusiastic participation in the services during the liturgical calendar. Active participation of the student is key in bringing them to the life of the Church, for example, through youth choir or altar boys. Emphasize the fact that Orthodoxy is the genuine, original and authentic Christian Faith.
- Assist the students, by your lesson and methodology, in developing of an awareness of themselves as unique persons made in the image and likeness of God, focusing on their relationship with God and their neighbors. Emphasize the importance of developing an Orthodox Christian identity.

## THE VICTORY

Having reviewed and expounded upon Ortho-Paideia as a teaching strategy, we can turn to St. Paul, who in his Letter to the Ephesians, best expresses our own preparation and motivation:

Finally, be strong in the Lord and in the strength of his power. Put on the whole armor of God, so that you may be able to stand against the wiles of the devil. For our struggle is not against enemies of blood and flesh, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers of this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places. Therefore take up the whole armor of God, so that you may be able to withstand on that evil day, and having done everything, to stand firm. (Ephesians 6:10–13)

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Presvytera Georget Photos and her husband, Fr. Dean Photos, minister to the community of St. Sophia Greek Orthodox Church in Winter Haven, FL. Among many other interests and accomplishments, she is the author of the *Let Us Live Orthodoxy* series being published by the Department of Religious Education.



# 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.**

AIMEE COX EHRS

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 primarily 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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## INTENTIONAL ORTHODOX PARENTING

CINDY KAROS

In our world there are endless opportunities to help our children excel. If they are musicians, there are voice lessons, state honor programs and special bands to help them make the best musical groups. If they are athletes, just pick a sport. There are private lessons, clinics, specialized equipment—all designed to get them from the worst team to the varsity team in no time. If it is academics, there are tutors, enrichment groups and advanced placement classes ready-made to get our kids into the perfect colleges someday. We even work hard making sure our kids are in the right groups of friends! Is this intentional parenting? Absolutely! And, for the record, there is no judgment here; my checkbook's ledger includes the flute teacher's name, the batting coach, and many more.

And, not to beat ourselves up, we also do the right things to get our children into the Church. We bring them to church, to Sunday school, and youth groups. But I would ask, are we *as intentional* about our children's spiritual lives as we are about the secular world? Which really gets the priority? Are we going for their spiritual well-being in the same way that we are going after their worldly ambitions? I would argue that, more often than not, the answer is no. I believe that this is *unintentional* and most likely *unrecognized*. What if we felt as strongly about missing a feast-day liturgy as we do about missing an important hockey practice? What if we worked with our kids to memorize the prayers after Holy Communion as diligently as we do with their Spanish vocabulary?

This parenting challenge is not new. In the fourth century, St. John Chrysostom was teaching parents about this same trap:

We spare neither labors nor means in order to teach our children secular sciences, so that they can serve well the earthly authorities. Only the knowledge of the holy Faith, the service of the Heavenly

King are a matter of indifference to us. We allow them to attend spectacles, but we care little whether they go to Church and stand within it reverently. We demand an account from them of what they learned in their secular institutes—why do we not demand an account from them of what they heard in the Lord's house? (*Homily 21 on the Epistle to the Ephesians*)

My husband and I believe that one of the best ways to learn great parenting tips is to be open to the experiences of others. We married later in life, and, being involved in Church youth ministry, we had watched many families raising children in the Church. Why did some children remain connected to the Church later in life? We decided to ask—not exactly a formal research study but we learned many things. In doing so, we found an interesting common denominator: Families spending their free time with other Orthodox families, *and* trying to live the life of the Church, were more likely to have their children more connected to the Church later in life. We were



not surprised at the living-the-life-of-the-Church portion, and we were working on that, but we were curious about the fellowship part. We had a strong extended family, which provided Orthodox fellowship. But as we looked around with our young children, we realized that much of our free time was spent with the hockey team, the baseball team and school friends. Wonderful, and many times Christian, people, but we were not enjoying fellowship with our Orthodox friends in places outside of the coffee hour and a few events during the year.

We decided we needed to become more intentional Orthodox parents—ones that lived in the world, but were willing to struggle to keep God and His Church in our forefront. What a project! What did it mean to us to become more *intentional Orthodox parents*?

We began by looking at our own lives. *We needed to be intentional in our own Orthodox lifestyle.* Were we trying to develop a relationship with Christ in prayer? Were we going regularly to confession with a spiritual father as we might go a personal trainer to improve our physical conditioning? Were we attending liturgy on a regular basis and arriving on time? Were we working on the virtues in our lives—kindness, patience, peace, self-control? If we answered no to these questions, how would our children learn from our example? In my life, my parent modeled this for me and my siblings. Were we modeling this for our children?

It is more than being a church-going family—we need to also have a Christ-centered home. What does that mean? The liturgical, sacramental and ascetical practices that are given to us by the Church to help us stay on the road to salvation need to be evident in our daily lives. Our children not only need to watch us model the faith, but they also need to understand why we do it. For example, we need to remember to say prayers with our daughter when she feels hurt by friends. In doing this, we hope that when she is an adult—and experiencing the inevitable hurts life has to offer—she will have learned to turn to God first for comforting. When my son and I have a knockdown, drag-out argument, he not only needs to understand that he should go to confession, but he also needs to see me go. When he becomes an adult and does something he is not proud of, hopefully he will know that confession is what brings us closer to God. If we are on time to everything *but* church services—movies, doctor appointments, practices—what message are we sending to our kids about the importance of church? This is a lifestyle that takes daily thought and effort.

Once we examine our own spiritual lives, we need to frequently connect with other Orthodox Christians—to live in community. We had many wonderful friends in the parish but hardly spent any time together outside of church activities.

We asked ourselves, “Why not meet them for coffee or do a couples’ date night?” We made a commitment to develop more of these friendships.

As for our children, did they have close friends in the Church? Not always. When they did, we began to suggest and plan more activities with those kids and their families. For one of our sons, there were not many boys his age active in the parish. We asked the Church school teacher for the list of kids not attending class regularly. We tried to find some of them in our area and began to make connections. We offered to pick up kids for the youth group, and we offered our home for events. We encouraged other families to send their children to camp with our kids. In time, we began to have close friends that we were spending time with other than just Sundays!

We took it one step further. Our parish decided to start fellowship groups in neighborhoods around town. Once a month, seven or eight families would gather for dinner, fellowship and a short, real-life spiritual discussion. We hosted and found families with children our kids’ ages. For ten years, we have been having dinner and fellowship with this same group on an almost-monthly basis. All of this has made our Orthodox connections stronger. Why is this important?

- We need each other’s help on the path to salvation. Being a Christian is not easy in today’s world; being with others gives us strength.
- When it is time to go to church, our children look forward to seeing their friends; it is not a battle to attend special services or activities at church.
- Our children realize they are not the only Orthodox kids in the world. When our group gathers at our house, they see others fasting, praying and talking about God in times of joy and pain.
- Our children have friends in the Church with whom they can mature into adulthood.

It is okay for us to be bold! Our children are growing up in a non-Christian world. We need to be willing to work harder to keep Christ in the forefront of their lives—no one is going to do that for us! We need to be intentional now and pray that something God inspired us to do today will make a difference later.



*continued on page 18*

# St. George and the Dragon

Michael Lotti

Illustrations by Jennifer Soriano

Many of the lives of Christian saints from the official biographies contained in the Synaxarion can be formulaic, that is, they relate basic information in a straightforward manner, with few embellishments and details. One reason is that the Synaxarion is read liturgically, thus a “bare-bones” approach to reminding the worshipper about who is being commemorated on a particular day is adequate. Another reason is that the Church does not have a great deal of information about many saints, especially the early ones. Usually all that is known are the events that led to sainthood, which are frequently the events that led to martyrdom.

Michael Lotti, an Orthodox Christian writer from Minneapolis, has taken the life of St. George the Trophy-bearer and dramatized the life for young readers, ages ten and up. As the author states in his introductory note to the novel, the story about St. George is unclear and inconsistent. What Lotti says he has done is taken “what is known and what is guessed at and added many of my own guesses to create a story about a great Christian man.”

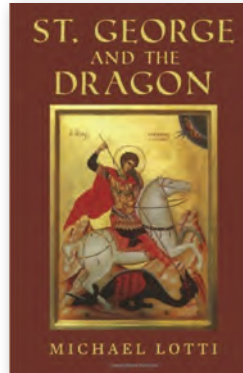
As the story opens, we meet Marcellus, who will later be renamed George, and his Roman patrician family. He begins his military training as a teenager, and his family has grand plans for his future. We then see him challenged by

the noble lives and faith of the Christians around him. A particularly moving moment is at the funeral of a slave, when Marcellus encounters how the Christians view humanity. This challenges him to reconsider his attitudes toward others. Spoiler alert: Marcellus becomes a Christian and fights a dragon.

The story reads like a great adventure, but, as Lotti warns, it should not be read as the official biography of the saint. The story is extremely well written, and the reader will be taken on a great journey of the life of the saint. The tone is not “preachy,” rather the reader will encounter an instructive and engaging story of Christian faith.

There are not enough books written for young people, ages ten and up, that engage them with Orthodox Christian topics. We tend to jump from picture books directly to scholarly texts, with little in between. Lotti and illustrator Jennifer Soriano have created a chapter book that fills this gap exceptionally well.

✠ Michael Lotti, *St. George and the Dragon* (2014), 147 pages. Illustrated by Jennifer Soriano.



*continued from page 17*

There is no perfect roadmap for leading our children to salvation. There are too many variables. We can do this only with God’s help and guidance. We only have so much time with our precious children, and God expects us to bring them to Him. We are again reminded of wise advice from St. John Chrysostom:

Your children will always be sufficiently wealthy if they receive from you a good upbringing that is able to order their moral life and behavior. Thus, strive not to make them rich, but rather to make them pious masters of their passions, rich in virtues. Teach them not to reckon their worth according to worldly standards. Attentively watch their deeds, their acquaintances and their attachments—and do not expect any mercy from God if you do not fulfill this duty.

I humbly offer these reflections for you to consider as you raise your children in the faith. Since God is the only judge of whether we have successfully parented our children toward the kingdom, it is a useful reminder that none of us have all the answers. So these are reflections from a parent who isn’t even finished yet—we are still a family in progress! May God bless us all in our parenting endeavors.

Cindy and Paul Karos have been married for seventeen years. They have three children between the ages of twelve and sixteen and are active in both the Greek and Antiochian Archdioceses. Prior to being a full-time mother, Cindy’s career was in domestic and international sales management. She was also the youth director for the Midwest region of the Antiochian Archdiocese for ten years. She has led the St. Mary’s Pan-Orthodox Family Camp in the Minneapolis–St. Paul area, and has held other church leadership positions.

# Simon Says "Save the Climate!" Video, Handbook & Extras

Denis Thomopoulos

With the Day of the Protection of the Environment (September 1) just passed and His All-Holiness Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew exhorting us to become instruments for healing our environment, "Simon Says 'Save the Climate!'" can become a very useful tool for parishes and children's groups to learn more about environmental issues facing our planet.

Good science and creative entertainment join together to make a very memorable opportunity for students in grades kindergarten and up to study of climate change. Denis Thomopoulos channels his inner Greek-immigrant grandmother, doing the voice of Suzanne, the wise and wise-cracking character in "Simon Says 'Save the

Climate!'" The 29-minute cartoon movie is addicting—it's that clever and cute. Follow the adventure of Suzanne, Bob the Rodent, Peep the singing and guitar-playing bird, and Simon the Hippo as they explore the effects of global warming around the world, from fires in California to floods in England. The information is easy to grasp as well as scientifically current, explaining the points in a catchy and entertaining way. The cartoons will keep you watching, they are just that amusing. As a result, kids can learn a great deal.

The website includes are bonus cartoons, eBooks, mp3s and ringtones from the songs, screensavers, desktop wallpapers and more. The pdf Handbook contains lesson plans, quiz-



zes, worksheets, vocabulary cards, and information about how the content is connected to national and California curriculum science standards. The songs are easy to master; the Handbook includes the chords and lyrics so that a guitar-playing teacher or parent can lead the singing.

Check out [www.hippoworks.com](http://www.hippoworks.com) to download (or stream) the video, handbook and extras, and to make contribution to support educational programs like this.

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Anton C. Vrame, PhD, is Director of the Department of Religious Education.

✉ Denis Thomopoulos, "Simon Says 'Save the Climate!'" (Hippo Works, 2014), 29 mins.



# Getting My First Hug

## A Father's Story of His Son's Triumph Over Autism

Steven E. Yates

Autism has become one of the most widely discussed and diagnosed disorders of childhood. According to the Centers for Disease Control, about 1 in 68 children is identified with the disorder. Autism is five times more common in boys than in girls. This means that all of us are much more likely to come into contact with a child with autism than we might have guessed. We are more likely to meet these children—and because it is a spectrum disorder, their difficulties range from quite moderate to severe—in our churches and parish programs. We need to sensitize ourselves and prepare to support and welcome the children and their families.

We don't often know what's going on in the family of a child with autism. Steven Yates has opened up his heart to readers to tell us the story of his son and their life with autism. The story begins simply enough when the parents notice that their son seemed slower in developing language than his older sister had been. From that moment on, the readers follow a twenty-year journey through doctors, various specialists, teachers and school staff, camp counselors, coaches and more as their son's autism is diagnosed and "treated." I place "treated" in quotation marks because there are no cures or medicines for autism, only various therapies that

promise to help the person in some way. But most of them are unproven, and, as Steven often wonders, whether it was the treatment or something else that made a difference for his son.

The story is powerful because Yates is so open about the struggle and how every step in the journey presents a new struggle. As one challenge is at least temporarily dealt with a new one appears. As I read the story, I sensed the tension of frustration and persistence, with school systems that mean well but are overwhelmed and overtaxed, and with medical systems and alternative therapy systems, some useful and some useless. Like all parents, Steven and his wife want the best for their son. And so apparently does the system. But the central challenge is learning to navigate through the deep thicket called the school and medical system. Throughout their twenty-year journey, the love and concern for their son never wanes. As they come to understand the system better, their advocacy for him becomes more powerful.

I'm sure you will be moved by the story, sensing the inner strength of Steven and his wife throughout. You will cheer for their son when he learns and performs new tasks. You will cry for them all as they encounter bullies and neglectful adults, like when the son somehow never seems to be

invited to the post-game dinners of his sports team. You will sense their grace of acceptance and forgiveness for those who did not understand.

I do have some quibbles with the book. Occasionally the timeline of events threw me off. Admittedly, Yates says this is a collection of stories, but it does read biographically, so in one event the son is a toddler, but shortly thereafter he's a teenager. There are few names of people, most likely to protect them, but names also provide guideposts in the story and would have helped me as a reader keep events together. But these are indeed minor.

Steven Yates has also described his journey and talked about the book with Orthodox Christian Network. You can find the story online at [www.myocn.net/parenting-child-autism](http://www.myocn.net/parenting-child-autism)

✪ Steven Yates, *Getting My First Hug: A Father's Story of His Son's Triumph over Autism* (Kingston House Publishing, 2013), 120 pages.



# 2014 National St. John Chrysostom Oratorical Festival

Cleveland, OH



Overlooking Lake Erie, the beautiful city of Cleveland was bustling with excitement as the sun set on this particular Friday evening. It was June 13 and eighteen young Orthodox teens were arriving, one by one, with their families from all over the country. Some were flying in and some were braving the family road trip, all to attend the Thirty-First Annual Archdiocese St. John Chrysostom Oratorical Festival.

Hosted by the Annunciation Church in Cleveland, along with the Metropolis of Pittsburgh, the weekend kicked off with a Doxology service at the church and then a “taste of Cleveland” in the church social

hall. The event showed off the diversity of Cleveland with food stations representing its many different cultures. Upon the arrival of His Eminence Metropolitan Savas, everyone was ready to enjoy the many types of food. From Polish food, Greek food, and to an all-American hot dog cart, there was something for everyone! Combined with icebreakers, the evening was a perfect night of fun, fellowship and bonding.

On Saturday, June 14, eighteen sleepy and nervous teens and their families climbed onto a bus, bright and early, to start the long awaited day. After a quick breakfast and orientations for the speakers and judges, it was time to start. The

speakers took their seats, the church filled up, and the cameras started rolling. Hold on, cameras? The Annunciation Church broadcasted the Oratorical Festival live on the Internet, making it the very first National SJCOF to be streamed live for all to see! Even His Eminence Archbishop Demetrios was watching online because bad weather had delayed his arrival.

The audience listened attentively as each speech was delivered. The speakers wonderfully elaborated on a multitude of themes, such as being “an Orthodox Christian living in the 21st century”, learning about the difference between “earthly goods” and “heavenly goods,” discussing how some celebrities can ac-





tually help influence us to be more open about our Orthodox Faith, and hearing how we are commanded to be vocal about equality and justice for all of mankind using the examples of the great Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., and Archbishop Iakovos as guides.

After the speeches, it was a whirlwind of a day. Archbishop Demetrios arrived and we set out on a tour of the city of Cleveland. Our first stop was the Greek Cultural Garden in Rockefeller Park, which had been dedicated by Archbishop Athenagoras in 1940! Then on to the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame for a special presentation to Metropolitan Savas of a brick in his honor that will be placed in the plaza in front of the museum. The evening ended at Quicken Arena for dinner and a Cleveland Gladiators professional indoor football game, where the top Junior and Senior Division speakers did the beginning of the game coin toss!

After celebrating a Hierarchical Liturgy on Sunday morning, there was a farewell luncheon with the whole parish. In addition to the eighteen participants and their families, sharing in this beautiful weekend were His Eminence Archbishop Demetrios, His Eminence Metropolitan Savas, Rev. Fr. Dean Dimon, Dr. Anton Vrame, Angeliki Constantine, the Cleveland host committee, chaired by Evie Boulas and Ellie Skoutas, and the entire parish of the Annunciation Greek Orthodox Church. This weekend was not just about sharing the faith through speeches; it was a weekend of making new friends from all over the country, learning from them, and making new memories for the participants and their families through our Orthodox Faith.

Whether they advanced to the National Oratorical Festival or not, we commend every young person within the 220 parishes who participated in the pro-

gram this year for taking the time to learn more about their faith, and then taking the time to share it with their church community! The parish participants are the heart and soul of the Oratorical Festival, and we look forward to even more participants in the future!

– Angeliki Constantine, Project Coordinator



## JUNIOR DIVISION

# ALEXANDRA NICHOLS

Metropolis of Boston, Annunciation Church, Cranston, RI

**Topic #2: The Artoklasia service concludes with the hymn *Plousioi eptohefsan*, “Rich men turned poor and went hungry; but those who seek the Lord shall not lack any good thing” (Psalm 33/34, verse 11, from the Orthodox Study Bible, SAAS). Discuss the meaning of this hymn for our contemporary world.**

Our Artoklasia hymn says, “Rich men have turned poor and hungry; but those who seek the Lord shall not lack any good thing.” We live in a prosperous world where we often have way too much stuff. Our riches begin to choke us like the thorns in the Parable of the Sower and the Seeds. We, as Orthodox Christians, must follow the example of St. Paul, who tells the Philippians: “I know what it is to be in need, and I know what it is to have plenty. I have learned to be content whatever the circumstances” (Philippians 4:12, 11).

The riches of this world may seem nice while they last. But soon they don't mean anything as we move on to new riches. For example, if you get the coolest new version of an iPhone it won't stay cool for very long. It'll go out and a new one will be in fashion. Then everybody will start updating their old versions to the cool new one. They'll keep updating all the time as each new version comes out. This is an *unstable* way to live. There is no sense of being *satisfied*; no sense of having *enough*. Spiritually, this hunger for wealth is selfish and greedy. It destroys our souls. It's a gnawing sensation that never goes away. St. Paul says to Timothy that “The love of money is the root of all evil: which while some coveted after, they have erred from the faith, and pierced themselves through with many sorrows” (1 Timothy 6:10). Our country went through an eco-

nomie crisis a few years ago, and we're still experiencing the consequences today. Many rich people became poor and hungry. But if we turn to the Lord in times of need, He will always help us and bless us, even if it's not always in the way we expect.

As I thought about the hymn previously, where it says, “those who seek the Lord shall not lack any good thing,” I didn't understand it because I thought “good things” meant “earthly goods.” But many people in this world, who seek the Lord, *do* lack earthly goods. When the hymn says that we shall not lack anything good, it means that God will bless us with everything *He* thinks is truly good for each individual person. For example, many Christians are tortured and even martyred for their faith. We may not think of that as a good thing at the time. But afterward, it turns out to be a *very* good thing. If the Christian remains steadfast, it sets a good example for other Christians to follow, and usually draws other people to the faith.

Another truly good thing with which the Lord blesses us is

the feeling of peace and *contentment* that comes only when we are not always spending our time going after earthly things, but instead spend our time in prayer, study and service to the Lord, distributing our wealth to those who have less than we do. St. John Chrysostom tells us, “The rich exist for the sake of the poor. The poor exist for the *salvation* of the rich.” Those who have earthly wealth need to recognize it as a gift from God and use their money to help their church and other organizations.

Recently, I thought of a parable that illustrates this hymn. My little sister and I were outside in the snow and she wanted to go back into the house. She asked me to come with her because the snow was too deep and heavy for her to get through on her own. As I watched her struggling through the deep snow, I thought, “This must be what it's like when God watches us.” The snow, like our earthly riches and sins, kept causing her to fall down. But when she asked for help, I happily helped her up and helped her get safely to the house. If we seek the Lord, He will be even happier to help us safely and *peacefully* and *contentedly* get to His heavenly house, our ultimate goal.



# CHRISTINA HANOS

Direct Archdiocesan District, Sts. Constantine & Helen Church, West Nyack, NY

**Topic #5: Some people support, others criticize the public declarations of faith of celebrities, athletes, and actors, such as Tim Tebow, Jonathan Jackson and Troy Polamalu. How do their acts affect your attitude toward being open about your faith?**

I'd like to ask you all a question. Are you ever at a restaurant and think about saying a prayer of thanks, but feel too self-conscious and don't want people looking? Do you ever want to cross yourself before playing in a big game at school, but reject the idea because no one else is doing that and you're embarrassed? We have all been in these situations, but we need to decide for ourselves what's *really* important. People might judge you in public, but what matters most is what the Ultimate Judge thinks.

The openness of a few celebrities about their Christianity inspires me to profess my faith proudly. As Jesus said, "Let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father who is in heaven" (Matthew 5:16). Football player Tim Tebow risks subjecting himself to ridicule and, yet, isn't afraid to express his faith. He kneels down in prayer after a good play and hasn't let society intimidate him. I was proud to learn that I share more than hair length and texture with Pittsburgh Steeler Troy Polamalu when he professed his Orthodox faith before the cameras. In the present age, it's hard to be open about Christianity, since our secular society is always putting it down. While researching this topic, I viewed actor Jonathon Jackson's ac-

ceptance speech at the Daytime Emmys and was amazed to hear him praise the monks on Mt. Athos to an audience that had likely never heard of them. What a positive role model compared to others who proudly display shameful behavior, which only seems to enhance their status. Miley Cyrus and her vulgar display at the MTV Video Music Awards immediately come to mind. Her actions did anything but bring her down, increasing her popularity and encouraging others to behave in a similar manner. Kim Kardashian is another example as she became famous only after her intimate tape became public. As an Orthodox Christian, I am disappointed to see that so many of my peers actually consider individuals like these role models. Why don't girls my age renounce behavior that is so degrading to women instead of emulating it? What has happened to our society if it's bigger news to kneel down in prayer than to take your clothes off on camera? I admire celebrities that go against the tide and don't bury their faith but live it, regardless of how it may affect their future.

News station 1010 WINS uses the slogan "All news all the time." This slogan can be modified to apply to how we should live our lives as Orthodox Christians *all the time*. Our faith is the essence of who we are and we should

incorporate it into every action we take. I know first-hand about the challenges we face. I went to a friend's sweet sixteen party recently. As she started to light her sixteen candles, she explained that her first candle was lit for God. Some of the other girls rolled their eyes but I was moved by this act of faith and impressed that my friend didn't care what her guests would think. She didn't bury her faith—she lived it.

There's no question that celebrities have a unique opportunity to influence the public, especially in this age of social media networking. They can use this influence in a positive or negative way. At this year's Academy Awards, best actor Matthew McConaughey revealed his faith during his acceptance speech. He said that first off, he wanted to thank God, because that's who he looks up to. Not his agent, manager, or even family, but God, first. That part of his speech was met with only a smattering of applause from his peers. Somehow, I don't think it mattered to Mr. McConaughey. In Matthew 10:33, Jesus says "But whosoever shall deny me before men, him will I also deny before my Father which is in heaven." This is one Hollywood actor that doesn't deny Christ or bury his faith, but lives it.

Yes, there are celebrities, although few in number, who use their status to show Christ's presence in their lives and can inspire all of us to do the same. If Tim Tebow can reverently kneel down in prayer on a football field in front of a national audience, then I can certainly cross myself before enjoying a meal at a restaurant. Orthodox Christianity is part of our identity and we need to live and breathe it, not keep it hidden away. In other words, let us be all Orthodox, all the time.

## ALEXANDRA PATZAKIS

San Francisco Metropolis, St. Anthony Church, Pasadena, CA

*Topic #3: "I am an Orthodox Christian living in the 21st century." What does this phrase mean to you?*

### *Of Which World?*

On Good Friday, candles blink sporadically inside plastic red cases, leaving traces of hardened wax

Our fingers tap the screen in flat rhythms as the light imprisons our weakening eyes, muting reality from us

Byzantine hymns and chants ring through the church dome and sunlight streams through colored glass

Turbulent rap music pounds our cars, washing away all that is pure

Iconography and church architecture connect us to the saints whose lives endure and teachings flourish

Graffiti lines the meandering freeway walls, its unreadable markings blending into gray

The opening of a door, the touch of a hand, the sprouting of a smile, invite all that is warm and beautiful

The separation of a glass screen adorned with pixelated pictures

The path divides in two and for a while we linger at the meeting point, uncertainty swallowing us

Which way?

"Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind, that you may prove what is that good and acceptable and perfect will of God..."

– Romans 12:2, 9

## STEPHEN DAMIANOS

Boston Metropolis, St. Nicholas Church, Portsmouth, NH

*Topic #2: Discuss a time when you experienced the presence of God, whether in church, in nature, or in other circumstances.*

### *Everywhere Present*

When I am bleeding and alone,  
with no Samaritan to bind my wounds,  
no spit-laden clay to wipe sight into my broken eyes,  
I stumble into His house and wait to be saved.

My voice moves in rhythm with the others as raindrops slide down stained glass windows, but I mouth empty words. I fill my lungs with sacred air as the priest elevates our prayers with incense that smells like smoke.

I'm told that God loves me as He loved His own Son. But sometimes it's hard to know for sure.

Because when communion just tastes like wine, and when I raise my clouded eyes but see only a dome ringed by prophets, it's hard to know for sure.

And so I bow my head on the hard wooden pew, surrounded by people who sing a song I struggle to hear, and I ask the Lord to show me a sign.

My eyes find Jesus on a cross, painted in reds and browns and gold, and in his eyes I see my pain. And I can hear His voice call out my own cry of doubt, the ageless words of the ancient Psalm:

"My God, my God, why have You forsaken me?"

And suddenly I understand that He is not absent in me, but rather I to Him, and that perhaps He doesn't always respond, because He knows I am not ready for the answer.

And incense that smells like roses and rises like a dove. The communion on my lips tastes like life. My eyes lift up and see salvation. On the warm wooden pew, I am surrounded by people who sing a hymn, and with tears welling, my voice joins in.

And it feels like coming home.

## GABRIELA AWAD

Boston Metropolis, St. Athanasius Church, Arlington, MA

**Topic #2: The Artoklasia service concludes with the hymn Plousioi eptohefsan, “Rich men turned poor and went hungry; but those who seek the Lord shall not lack any good thing” (Psalm 33/34, verse 11, from the Orthodox Study Bible, SAAS). Discuss the meaning of this hymn for our contemporary world.**

Our church has many great hymns sung in the services. One is the *Plousioi eptohefsan*, a hymn sung at the end of the Artoklasia service. It goes: “Rich men turned poor and went hungry; but those who seek the Lord shall not lack any good thing.” Although this hymn is many years old, it can still be applied to our world today, just like it was applied to the world thousands of years ago.

People tend to get caught up in material objects. They want the latest electronics, the newest clothes. They become obsessed with the idea of wealth and an easy, superficial life. People who are rich are generally viewed higher in society. People are ranked on their amount of money earned rather than who they are as person. And children are taught to believe that wealth is the most important thing to have.

I think this hymn is trying to say that riches are so easily lost, and once you lose them you are left with almost nothing. But the people who put their faith in God will never be left with nothing because they will always have their faith as a guide. You could have no home, no money, no food, and still have your faith. It is the one thing you can count on to stay consistent because eventually everything leaves us. People die, wealth is lost, and the world changes.

Faith in God is not controlled by how much money you have, or what you possess. It’s a relationship that anybody can have, even the most poor person on Earth. Strengthening faith doesn’t require money or a job or a social rank. Strengthening your faith can be as simple as saying a prayer before you eat your din-

ner. A strong relationship with God cannot compare to any riches in the world because really no riches matter in the end. God is not going to forgive your sins just because you had a lot of money or you bought fancy cars. But God will forgive your sins if you stay faithful and ask for forgiveness. God loves us equally, and the rich are not more likely to be redeemed because of their wealth.

I think this is one of the most important hymns sung in our Church because it tells us what we need to remember: riches can be gone very quickly but the one thing that always remains is our faith.

Faith should guide our lives, not earthly materials.

## ALEXANDRA MAMALAKIS

Boston Metropolis, St. Nicholas, Lexington, MA

**Topic #1: When you participate in a sacrament, you are called “the servant of God” (doulos tou Theou). What does it mean to be a servant of God today?**

What does it mean to be a servant of God today? St. Paul uses the word δούλος, meaning “slave,” even stronger than the word “servant.” We are called to be slaves to Christ; to do exactly what He wants and tells us to do, as He is the master of us and our hearts. I think about what it means to be a servant of God in three different ways; in my inner life, in my relationships with others, and in my service to those in need.

In my inner life, being a servant of God means to follow what Christ tells us to do, and to give our hearts to Him. Christ even tells us how we can do this. In 1 Thessalonians 5, St. Paul says, “Rejoice always, pray without ceasing, give thanks in all circumstances; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you.” Through rejoicing and through prayer, we are becoming His servants and giving our hearts to Him. Christ also gives us a choice. We can be slaves to Christ, or “slaves to sin” (Romans 6:20). Each evening, we can choose to go right to sleep, or to say prayers. Christ also gives us a chance to repent. Through confession, and turn-

ing back toward Christ after sinning, we become more of His servants. The first words of Christ’s ministry were, “Repent: for the kingdom of heaven is at hand” (Matthew 4:17). Being a servant of God today is living our what Christ calls us to do, being His slave, instead of giving in to our own desires.

In relationships with others, being a servant of God is following God’s commandments of how we should treat each other. We are made in the image and likeness of God, and if Christ intended us to become like Him, then being a servant of Christ is to grow in that likeness and become like Christ. “God is Love,” and through showing the love of Christ in our relationships with others, we become more Christ-like (1 John 4:8). Paul says in 1 Corinthians, “Love is patient, love is kind, it does not envy, it does not boast,” and Christ calls us to love like this. Being a servant of God and following Christ’s commandments in relationships today is not simple. Through being patient, kind, not easily angered, and keeping no record of wrongs in interactions with others, we are following what Christ tells us to do,

and in being his “slave,” we are serving God through serving others.

Being a servant of God is also reaching out to those in need. This past summer I participated in Project Mexico and the CrossRoad program, where we learned about vocation in the face of our neighbor. Early one morning we went into downtown Boston and had breakfast with a homeless person, and in Mexico we built a home for a homeless family. In both experiences we talked about having a servant mentality, not coming to help or give, but to serve. Christ calls us to be servants to Him through serving other people. Being a servant of God is not only serving in one part of our lives, but also is daily choosing to turn toward Christ and show the love of Christ in every situation we are in. As St. Paul says, “In all things we commend ourselves as the servants of God in much patience, in troubles, hardships and distresses” and doing this “by pureness, by knowledge, by long-suffering, by kindness, by the Holy Spirit, and in sincere love...as having nothing, and yet possessing all things” (2 Corinthians 6:4–6).

# NEW TIMES NEED NEW METHODS

## DEAR READERS,

The goal of this issue of *PRAXIS* was to focus your attention on our methods as religious educators. More and more research is showing that today's learners learn differently than previous generations. More and more research has proven that not all students learn in the same way. Multiple intelligence theory has demonstrated this conclusively. Considering what we know about learning today, our methods for religious education should also adapt.

Simply put, today's young people learn more when they "talk and do" instead of "read and listen." Children sitting quietly in a row of desks reading from a book has become children sitting in circles working on a common project, solving problems, or investigating issues, all the while teaching one another about what they are learning, all under the supervision of a teacher who prods and questions, suggests approaches to the issues being raised, and orchestrates activities.

In our religious education work, we would also add a strong focus on the significance of what's being learned for the lives of the learners. It's what I like to call the "So what?" For example, after we read the Parable of the Good Samaritan, the question becomes, "So what?" Now what am I supposed to do with this information? How should it influence my life and the lives of those around me at home, in my family, in my community, in my church? As the Lord told the young lawyer who posed the question after hearing the parable: "Go and do likewise" (Luke 10:37).

Religious education work is more than filling the minds of our learners with facts, dates, and things to memorize. Religious education also strives to influence the lives of the learners, changing their way of life, helping them grow as followers of Christ, doing the things that Christ has taught us to do. The best outcome of our religious education ministry is to see our students become active members of the Church, participating in its liturgical and sacramental life, being in-

involved with the congregation's activities and ministries, being devoted stewards of their parish, and becoming themselves role models for another generation.

Our methods of religious education will teach students about what it means to be Orthodox Christians, just as much, if not more, than from what they read. If our methods of instruction are passive, most likely they will become passive Christians. When we teach them actively, they will learn to become active Christians.

Raising these issues for ourselves, as teachers, means we should be reflecting on our work regularly. When was the last time someone observed you teaching? Have you ever recorded one of your lessons on video and then watched yourself afterward? Have you ever observed another teacher, someone who has the skills you would like to develop in yourself? When was the last time you shared your lesson ideas with another teacher, looking for feedback? When you meet as teachers, do you discuss various techniques that improve class activity? Do you read a good book on instruction and share the insights and skills? All of these activities can be first steps in improving our methods as religious educators. The best way to improve is to keep teaching and gathering feedback from your fellow teachers.



*Anton C. Vrame, PhD*  
Director

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