

HOMILY, V. REV. DAVID R. FOX – SEPTEMBER 23, 2018

CONCEPTION OF ST. JOHN THE FORERUNNER

FIRST DAY OF CHURCH SCHOOL 2018

Today, as we think about the Feast of the Conception of St. John the Baptist, we are reminded of the great gift of the Forerunner, the beginning of our salvation in preparing the way of the Lord. But I'd also like to invite us all to reflect on the gift that is a child, even from the time of conception, how this one child can be formed to know God.

And I'd like to spend some time talking about how we, in this faith community, help our children to be formed in an understanding and experience of God. Ultimately, this is "the one thing needful," as Our Lord said, and the one thing that we can offer that's most important – to know God and to glorify Him.

First, in talking about how we form our children as Orthodox Christians I'd like to begin at the Divine Liturgy. Our faith is, first of all, an experience. The Divine Liturgy is the experience of the Kingdom of God here on earth. There's nothing greater that we can offer, to ourselves and to those that we love, than this experience of God through the Divine Liturgy. I had the great blessing to be able to study at one of America's fine educational institutions, Princeton Theological Seminary. This is the place where I first encountered the texts that led me to Orthodoxy. This is also the place where Fr. Georges Florovsky, one of our finest Russian theologians, taught when he left St. Vladimir's Seminary. But despite all the great things at this institution -- fine teaching, resources -- this place did not have the most important thing, and that was the Divine Liturgy. Simply by bringing our children and ourselves to the Divine Liturgy we are giving them an experience of God that far transcends anything that is offered in the finest institutions in this world. What we offer is an experience of God.

I need to emphasize this understanding of experience because, so many times in our culture, people water down the notion of God to something that can simply be understood rationally by concepts and words. We Orthodox are, first of all, not a "Pharisee factory." Our task is not simply to feed ourselves and our kids a bunch of facts about religion, which can then be debated and turned around and bandied about. No, our Faith can and must be experienced. We see this when our infants receive the sacraments of Holy Baptism, Chrismation, and Holy Communion: we give the child those sacraments all at one time because we believe that this

faith that we have, can be experienced. It takes the rest of our lives to begin to understand this experience.

The Fathers of the Church make a distinction between this kind of understanding that we gain by experience – they call this the *nous*, this part of ourselves that can know God experientially, directly, and intuitively. The other part of ourselves they called the *dianoia* or the rational mind, which understands things by concepts. And so, unlike so much of what we see in Western culture, our Orthodox faith has always preserved the primacy of knowing God first of all by experience.

One of the children in our parish attended a religious school, and she was given classes in theology and church history and those kinds of things, and she attended other worship experiences at this other private school. And she said to her Mom, when she wanted to go back to our church, “I want to go and experience a real service, real church.” What she meant was that she already knew experientially, intuitively, that what she experienced at our church was something deep and profound, and for her it was the real thing.

So the point is that by giving our children the experience of the Church, by bringing them to the Divine Liturgy; by bringing them to the Holy Feasts; by giving them the experiences of fasting, of standing and praying, of coming to church in the middle of the night, and of being here for “Christ Is Risen,” of making processions around the church, and of breaking the fast together – when our children have those experiences, they know that what they’ve experienced is something deep. And that deep experience can be a great antidote for what they are exposed to in the world, down the road.

As parents we can’t insulate our children forever. This weekend, Matushka Kerri and I are going to visit [our daughter] Paris at college. As parents it’s tough to see your kids go. You worry and you want to protect them and you want to say, “This is the safe place.” But it’s inevitable that they grow up. They have to make this life and this faith their own. You hope and pray that you’ve done your best to plant good seeds and given them the tools that they need. But the reality of it is, as my confessor used to say, “We inoculate them; we don’t insulate them.” The Divine Liturgy, the experience of the Church, the fasts, the feasts, the prayers – that’s the greatest inoculation that we can offer. If someone comes knocking at the door and offers another kind of experience, or another kind of way of thinking or being, at least our children will have been given something to inoculate them to say, “No, no, this isn’t right. This isn’t the full thing. This isn’t real. This isn’t who I am.”

And so I want to thank everybody here for bringing your children to experience the Divine Liturgy. We say to our children, “You’re coming to church with us. This is what we do.” And yes, it might be tough. They might not want to. But really, anything in life that’s worthwhile is work.

By the way, "liturgy" means "the work of the people." And so one of the best things we can do to educate our kids is simply to put them to work, to let them work in the Divine Liturgy, to be part of it, to own and experience it. We can have them sing in the choir, we can have them serve in the altar, we can have them take collection and ring the bells. Put them to work! In fact, work is one of the great ways that we can inoculate ourselves from getting bored, not being able to understand, and not being able to handle simply standing there the whole time. We get put to work. It's work for me. Keeping myself busy is one way to experience it. So we put them to work and they become part of the Divine Liturgy by their own experience.

As a little child we bring them to the church...as little babies we have them experience lighting a candle or simply coming in and kissing an icon, or smelling the incense, or bowing as the priest censes us, or simply standing and being still. And as the children grow, they can color quietly as they sit and be with us during the Divine Liturgy, and if they begin to cause some commotion, we try to help them along, and if they get really antsy, we take them out for a little while so they're not a distraction to others. But then we bring them back and we help them be able to make this experience of the Liturgy their own.

Second, the way in which we can educate our children and give them an understanding and knowledge of God is by what we do for ourselves. There's a wonderful saying, "The mother's heart is the child's classroom," and this simply means is that whether you're a mother or a father, kids intuitively know what's important for you, and they'll follow that. You can see in the lives of children that they follow the trajectories that lie in their parents' hearts. And that might not be obvious in the very beginning, but somehow children know, no matter what's said or given to them, what really matters to their parents. So, if we're going to offer anything to our children, we first of all have to think that it's important for us. If we try to seek to know God ourselves, to learn for ourselves, our children have a great path to follow.

I think maybe I've had too much education, really, about these matters, and it only takes about 5 minutes for a child to reduce me to saying, "You know, I don't know." And that's ok. One of the things that we as parents have to get over is the discomfort that we don't know everything, especially when it comes to knowledge of God. How can we know everything?! In this life or the next? We're entering the Mystery of Mysteries, so it's ok not to know. In fact, the children can help teach us. I had a priest friend who intentionally used to make mistakes when he offered sermons. He'd say things like, "You know when Noah brought down the 10 Commandments," and the people would stop him: "No, that was Moses!!" And he would say, "Oh, yeah, yeah, yeah!" So the people would learn by having to wrestle with things and offer their own reflections and learn for themselves. And the same too with children. If they come to you with questions about our faith and say, "I don't understand this...Why...?" it's ok to say, "You know, I really don't know. Let's go and try to find out together." This can be a wonderful thing. So, for

Church School teachers, a wonderful thing is to be able to learn for ourselves, and then impart what we've learned to the children. And the same with parents, try to learn for ourselves and the children will come along. There are opportunities for adult study that I offer all the time, and I'm certainly here to help you if you have questions about the Faith, to direct you to books, or to offer some questions myself that might be a direction for you, "one beggar to another beggar – how to find bread."

We've talked about the role of experience, and I want to add another aspect of children and experience. Speaking for myself – I'm a priest, a presbyter, who spends, as a father, 99% of my time not talking about religion or the faith to my children. Most of what I do is to try to serve them: going to work to provide for them, supporting them, listening to them, having fun with them, going to school meetings, being a coach, attending their events, encouraging them, simply being their greatest advocates. These things are a great classroom for our children because in doing those things we are giving them an Icon of Christ. Our children are experiencing someone's love and sacrifice in their life. No matter what anyone else teaches them about the meaning of love or sacrifice, they'll at least be able to look at a good parent's life and say, "No, I've experienced something better." So we need to know that all our effort, good intention, sacrifice, every little thing that we do on behalf of our loved ones, is a witness of God, of Christ, they are acts of martyrdom.

I've been at the funerals and gravesides of many people, and I can say this: at the end of the day, what the children and the loved ones take away as the greatest legacy of anyone's life is – his or her sacrifice. Their eyes fill up and they say, "I remember how much he or she sacrificed for me." Rich or poor, smart, accomplished, this is the thing that we leave. And really, this is the witness of the Cross: that love is found through sacrifice and that there is something that transcends this world in sacrificing for another. If we do that as parents, this is a great classroom and will not block children's understanding of God because they've experienced an Icon of God already in their parents' lives.

Finally, I want to move on to what we think of as learning: facts, principles, ideas... using this part of ourselves known as the *dianoia*, the rational mind – it's important. Just because experience comes first doesn't mean that the intellectual part of it, the learning part of it, isn't important. In fact, you know, the danger can be that we have the experience, and but it becomes bent, distorted, through the way we see through the prism of the way the world sees religion and life. In other words, we can have a wrong understanding of a proper experience. Fr. Alexander Schmemmann discusses this in his writings, observing that often, our own people, who have had the experience of the Divine Liturgy and other aspects of the truth and beauty of our Faith, and the sacrifice of parents and so forth, by absorbing the way the outside world sees things, they interpret their experiences of God incorrectly. We don't live in an Orthodox culture

(and this is no guarantee!) and so it's easy to interpret our experience in a wrong way. I've had many people come to me and talk about the Liturgy, Confession, Baptism, and other parts of our faith, and they have many misconceptions. And so part of the job of Christian education for our children – and for ourselves -- is just to learn the “right way” – the Orthodox Way.

Think about how much time our children spend learning in other places. Think about how many hours a day they're learning at the local public school or private schools. Think about how many resources we pour into all the other aspects of their lives: how much we pour into college education; how much we pay in taxes for public school; how much of the time they're reading other sources of information; how many times they're listening to what other people say – children, adults, others – who have no conception of the Orthodox Faith and are sometimes talking about something antithetical to the faith.

Today we mark the first anniversary of the death of Gertrude Mullaney, a beloved pillar of our church, a real model of piety, from whom I learned a lot. She once sadly said to me, “You know, Father David, there's something that happens to the kids [she was talking about the kids in her own family] when they go to college. They used to go to church, and they come home from college and they don't go anymore.” She had insight into the reality of our world. When we go to visit Paris a little later, I'm going to give her a little red prayer book that we have in the bookstore downstairs. First, we're going to buy her lunch of course, but then we're going to give her a little something else that can be a help to her -- that little red prayer book. It was originally created for soldiers, for Orthodox Christians who were in the armed forces, on the run, under fire, out in the field. It contains the basics to get them through the days of conflict. And really, that's the way Orthodoxy is today. We really have to think of ourselves as being in a battle. Think of the Second World War, the troops landing at Normandy. They lost a lot of people landing in boats. They had to establish a beachhead. Many perished. They had to go inch by inch, foot by foot, through the sand, under fire from everywhere around them, until finally they had enough resources to move past the beach. Now think of Orthodoxy in America. Our recent ancestors came to America and established this Faith on the shores at great expense and sacrifice. They lost people in many different ways. But slowly they made their way. They built the churches, and they gradually were able to provide for clergy and for educating children, and inch by inch they established the faith in a new world.

Today at Holy Trinity the reality is that we have the children in Church School for about fifteen to twenty minutes each week. This is how much time we have for education in our faith, compared with all the other hours of the week when they are learning in other places. Fifteen to twenty minutes after they receive Communion, before the rest of us go down for coffee hour. This is the time we have to offer the basics of our faith and to inoculate them and give them the tools for understanding everything else they'll learn for so much of the other time. I'd

like us to think about how in the next generation we can invest more and provide more for our children.

I knew a couple at the parish where I served before here, in New York. On the surface they were very faithful Christians. They came to a lot of services, considered “good members of the church.” But really when you looked at their life, they also were very intent on proving that they could ‘make it in America.’ They chased the American Dream. They spent a lot of money sending their kids to an Ivy League school, and they themselves acquired a lot of things, and they spent a lot of time on other activities. And they came to me with tears in their eyes when their children were older and didn’t go to church anymore. Of course, I tried to help, to reach out to their kids, and to offer what I could. But in my heart I realized that it wasn’t terribly surprising, because as Our Master says, “Where your treasure is, there is your heart.” We need reflect on that and think about how we use our time, treasures, and talent to offer the faith to our children. This isn’t a guilt thing; it’s just a matter of taking an inventory.

Finally, in the fifteen to twenty minutes that is our Church School, I’m ask the teachers to give it their all! I’m ask them to prepare something that they themselves can learn and appreciate. And if the kids show up, great! If they don’t show up, at least they, the teachers, will have learned. And if we just simply do it, and do it with integrity, whoever comes will be blessed. I ask the parents to commit at least not to block the children’s desire to learn about the faith; and commit to trying to get them in time, to begin to experience the Sunday School. It’s always helpful to understand what they’re learning about, and if you can follow up at home, that’s great.

I’ve asked the teachers to make sure that the children spend a little time simply reading from the Bible. And I would say that every person in this parish, especially, those on the Parish Council, every teacher, every child accept as a goal to read one of the Gospels, all the way through. It doesn’t take much time at all. We hear a parts of the Gospels at church services, but reading about the life of Jesus from one of the Gospels, from cover to cover, 25-30 chapters, is a wonderful benefit. How will our children even understand and respond to others who talk about other faiths if they don’t even know the life of Jesus? It such a basic part of learning about God, as we learn about the life of Christ, and the first place we do that is by simply reading the Bible. I can offer some tools: the Family Study Bible is a simple beginning; for those that are a little farther along, the Orthodox Study Bible has helpful footnotes that us the way the Church interprets the life of Christ.

My brothers and sisters, may God bless every good act, every experience of the Divine Liturgy. May God bless our children and us as we attempt to grow in our knowledge and understanding of God and especially through our Lord, and God, and Savior, Jesus Christ, as revealed in the Church through the Holy Spirit. Glory to Jesus Christ! Glory forever!