

Let the Children Come to Me: Leading Children in the Way of Prayer

By Melissa R. Olt

What parent among us would not want his children to develop a close relationship with our Lord? We are very adept at scheduling play dates and taking our children to birthday parties and other social functions so that they can spend quality time with their friends, but are we equally as attentive to helping our children nurture the most important relationship of all? As Saint Theophan the Recluse explained in *The Path of Salvation*, “arousing and strengthening the child’s orientation towards God” should be the main focus of those who have charge over him.

Our pastor beautifully explains baptism to children as “becoming a friend of Jesus,” but that friendship, like all friendships, must be nurtured. What kinds of things do we do to cultivate our earthly friendships? We visit our friends, we share a meal with them, we talk to them, and we simply spend time with them. As we read in Psalms 37:23, our Lord “delights in every detail of [our] lives,” and wants us to visit Him, partake of the Mystical Supper, talk to him, and simply be with Him. As parents, we must help our children to develop a deep, loving friendship with our Lord.

In the Psalms we read, “Out of the mouths of babes Thou hast perfected praise.” Our Lord referred to this verse in Matthew 21:16 when the children were exclaiming “Hosanna to the Son of David!” Perfect praise does not originate from ourselves, however, “for we do not know what we should pray for as we ought, but the Spirit Himself makes intercession for us with groaning which cannot be uttered” (Romans 8:26). Such prayer is simple and flows naturally from young children, who are guileless and have not yet learned to hide from God, as Adam and Eve did in the garden.

There is much that we parents can do to help our children grow in their relationship with God. Here are some suggestions:

1. Teach our children to memorize basic prayers. “Learning prayers by heart,” as Saint Theophan

pointed out, “ensures that at all times and in every circumstance the prayers are with [them], and this means a great deal.” When the Apostles asked our Lord how to pray, He replied, “When you pray, say Our Father...” Certainly, the Lord’s Prayer should be among the first prayers that a child learns.



2. Set a prayer date and don’t cancel. Saint Teresa of Avila describes “[mental] prayer as nothing else than a close sharing between friends.” Make a firm commitment as a family to spend time with our friend Jesus by attending the Divine Liturgy every Sunday and on feast days, as well as setting aside time each day, as a family, to pray together.
3. Establish and follow a family and personal prayer rule. With the guidance of a spiritual father or mother, establish a family and personal prayer rule for yourself and for your child. In *The Spiritual Life and How to Be Attuned to It*, Saint Theophan advised that “it is better to perform a small number of prayers properly than to hurry

through a large number of prayers.” The saint’s advice seems especially fitting for a child. Of course, the prayer rule should mature as the child matures. Another prayer that children can learn easily and has the tradition of the church behind it is the Prayer of the Publican, also known as the Jesus Prayer – “Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me, the sinner.”

4. Turn off the TV and other distractions. Psalm 46:10 tells us to “Be still and know that I am God.” Good friends are good listeners. We need to help our children carve out some time each day – say five to ten minutes – just to sit quietly with their friend Jesus in a place removed from the everyday hustle-and-bustle activity of the home and listen to Him. Saint John of the Ladder described such silence as the “mother of prayer” and is the means by which authentic Orthodox spirituality is firmly planted.
5. Set the example. Saint John Chrysostom wrote that “the example of the parents is everything in Christian parenting.” Be bold. As parents, let us show our children how important our friendship with God is by following our own prayer rule, bringing them to Sunday school, and going to church on Sundays and feast days. Be socially incorrect by making the Sign of the Cross and saying prayers before meals, even when in public. Dare to pray with your child for healing when he falls on the sidewalk and skins his knee. How can we expect our children to turn to God in prayer if they do not see us do it?

Our Lord has told us, “Let the children come to me, and do not forbid them, for the Kingdom of God belongs to such as these” (Matthew 19:14). As parents, let us do all within our power to help our children foster a deep, loving friendship with our Lord that will endure for time and eternity. †

Melissa Olt is a parishioner of Holy Transfiguration Parish in McLean, Virginia.