

Children in the Church

A Short Message from Fr. Gabriel

“Suffer little children, and forbid them not to come unto me; for such is the Kingdom of Heaven” (Matthew 19)



One of the greatest compliments that I receive from visitors and outsiders who follow our parish family is how wonderfully blessed our parish is to have so many children in Church. As one parishioner recently told me: “Even if we never had another outside soul step foot into this Church, I look around on Sundays and can see a future for the parish.”

As Orthodox Christians, there is **no greater gift** that we can give to our children than the experience of the Faith and of Christ. Regular participation in the Divine Services, whether we think that they are paying attention or not, is an absolute necessity! I cringe when I think of the world that our children are growing up into, which seems to become more backwards as the weeks go by!

With all of that being said, from the bottom of my heart, **and from the bottom of our future children’s heart**, I want to thank each and every parent who brings their children faithfully to the Divine Services. I know there are days that are difficult and you feel that you are ready to pull your hair out, but the gift you are giving them goes beyond anything that can come from this world.

There is a beautiful quote from the book *Parenting Towards the Kingdom* which says: “Just as the only way to strengthen our muscles is by stressing them, the only way for children to become strong is through struggling”. Having a difficult time in Church is apart of all children’s growth, so do not despair! May God continue to strengthen you in your efforts!

To help to aid you in your parental ministry, I thought I would offer our parish community five important reminders about children in the Church.

O-U-R Responsibility

Of course, raising children in the Church is not the sole responsibility of the parent! This is a ministry that we all share as the One Body of Christ. It is up to each and every one of us to help out, especially with those parents who are physically outnumbered! If you see a parent struggling on a particular Sunday, never hesitate to offer a helping hand! Holding a baby for a struggling mom or dad will almost always be welcome!

Noise

Our Church Sanctuary is very small, with a lot of sound reflecting hard surfaces! There are some Sundays, where 1/3 of our attending population is made up of children under the age of 12! This can typically lead to even the smallest noises becoming deafening and distracting!



For those in the congregation who have a difficult time concentrating on the Divine Services, always keep in mind that the little noises that you hear are the ones that will be singing at our funeral services **For the parents**, please remember that while a little occasional noise is ok, if one of the children is having a difficult morning, you should not hesitate to take them out behind the glass doors until they are able to settle down. Use this time to gently correct and remind them of what the behavioral expectations are in a Holy Place like the Church.

While in the Church, it is important to have the children stand at certain points in the Liturgy like the Gospel, the Anaphora, and during Communion. Have them cross themselves when they hear the words “Father, Son, and Holy Spirit”. Instead of talking out loud, encourage them to sing the responses with the choir! Remember what we hear in Scripture: *“Train up a child in the way he should go, and when he is old, he will not depart from it!”*

Toys in the Church

Try as we might to keep their focus on the Liturgy and the Icons, there are sometimes when the situation calls for younger children to need a distraction. Some toys and books are ok to have in the Church for the little ones, but they should be limited to books and toys that are “quiet toys”. There are a number of great Orthodox children’s books available in our bookstore, as well as on places like the Ancient Faith Online Bookstore (store.ancientfaith.com)

Food and Fasting

Even though we have a lot of “little hungry tummies”, food and drink should generally not be in the sanctuary of the Church. The exception of course is for babies and toddlers! If one of our little ones needs a small snack during Church, it is ok to take them down into the hall or outside in the vestibule. Generally, as children are preparing for their first confession (around 8 years old) they should also be learning to fast before communion like their mom and dad!

Home as a Little Church!

While all of these reminders are important, I saved the **MOST important one** for last. Our children are not going to learn how to pray and worship the Living God by just doing so for two hours on a Sunday morning. It is **imperative** that they receive this instruction at home as well!

Every night before bed, light a candle in front of an icon, turn out the lights, and say the Trisagion Prayers and the Our Father together as a family. If the children are a bit antsy because this is a new routine, pick them up and try to focus their attention on the icon. The more consistent you are with these practices, the easier it will get at home, and the better your children will be at experiencing the Divine Liturgy on Sundays!

A Prayer for Children

May our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, Who loves mankind and art a most merciful and compassionate God, have mercy upon all of the children of St. Mary Magdalene parish for whom we humbly pray to You. Protect and care for them. Be their guide and guardian in all their endeavors. Lead them in the path of Thy truth, and draw them nearer to you, so that they may lead a godly and righteous life in Thy love, as they do Thy will in all things. Give them Thy Grace and mercy so that they may be patient, hard working, tireless, devout, and charitable. Defend them against the assaults of the enemy, and grant them wisdom and strength to resist all temptation and corruption, directing them in the way of Salvation. For Thou art a merciful God Who loves mankind, and unto Thee do we offer Glory, to the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit, now and ever and unto ages of ages, Amen.

