

# YOUTH AND THE CHURCH

By Fr. Rodion Laskowski

The question of how to attract and keep our young people close to the Church is one of major concern in our troubled age. To remain indifferent to this problem can only be regarded as a grave sin and is an indication of soul-destroying self-love. The proposed solutions to this problem are many and varied, but unfortunately most succumb to the easy allure of gimmicks, i.e. the attempt to use methods popular in our fallen society, but sadly distant from the true aim of our salvation. Among these we find an exaggerated call to social action, distraction through social activities, appeals to the intellect, and outright distortions of the Gospel message to accommodate each individual appetite.

Let us briefly examine each of these methods, beginning with the call to social action. This approach plays upon what are basically positive and as surely Christian virtues such as mercy, loving-kindness and brotherly concern. Apostles of social action exaggerate the human aspect of Christ's message, stressing it over and above all other considerations. Thus, the primary functions of our Lord's Incarnation are understood to be feeding the hungry, clothing the naked, healing the sick, etc. Far different is the Orthodox concept, which recognizes as above, all these things "the freedom from the slavery of sin" wrought by the Passion, Death, and Resurrection of our Saviour. Therein lies the fullness and the perfection of love. However, to belittle the previously mentioned works of mercy would be to belittle the very command of our dear Saviour Himself. The ideal we must aspire to is to place all this good in a sound perspective, in accordance with that hierarchy of values revealed to us by the divinely-wise Father of the Church. For a false perspective destroys the delicate balance in which our Creator has placed these things. The distortion of this perspective has caused many purposely to direct the high values of youth towards exaggerated social action, to the lamentable exclusion of any spiritual struggle. Our Saviour and Judge may have relegated those who failed to relieve the sufferings of their brethren to perdition, but he also distinctly stated that Mary, the sister of

Lazarus, had chosen the best part by sitting at His feet and hearing His words. To those critical of the woman who anointed Him with costly ointment at the house of Simon the leper He said: "For ye have the poor with you always and whensoever ye will ye may do them good: but Me ye have not always" (Mk. 14:7). We should beware lest our sense of social justice lead us to the excesses of organizations such as the World Council of Churches, which give monetary support to guerillas waging war against their governments. I believe we can find the key to the correct path in these words of our Saviour: ..... "and whensoever ye will ye may do them good." Certainly the love we have for our Saviour for freeing us from the bondage of sin will naturally move us to perform those works of mercy which are so important a part of our spiritual struggle.

The question of social activity as the responsibility of the Church and as a means of attracting young people is even more clear-cut. The Church has always adequately provided for the social needs of her children by the very nature of her spiritual activity. Christians, drawn together for the worship of God, have always naturally accompanied this sacred duty with the opportunity to share not only their bread, but their struggles and spiritual joys as well. There is no precedent in Scripture or ecclesiastical history for the Church being responsible for sponsoring purely secular entertainments. Parties, dances, raffles, sports activities are simply gimmicks which give the illusion of uniting the flock. More often, they are destructive of that sober and soul-saving spirit which should be cultivated among Christians. Those who need such outlets can find a wide range of choices in secular society. However, among serious Christians we see much less dependence upon these activities. How sad it is to see the church so often empty during services because later there is to be a social event and people must prepare themselves for it!

Another popular gimmick is the appeal to intellectualism. Since most young people today receive an education and considerable stress is placed upon becoming a diversified and cultured individual, it is a temptation for many churches and spiritual leaders to entice young people by appealing to their intellect and certainly the Church is not devoid of things to study.

Thus, we find groups of Christians studying the Sacred Scriptures, the holy Fathers, art, iconography, music, etc. The pitfall here is simply that most of this is education devoid of experience. We can become Scripture scholars, but we are not taught or encouraged to believe sincerely the words about which we know so much. We plunge headlong into the lofty exegesis of the Fathers without first mastering the ABC's of the spiritual life: the lives of the saints. We read about Prayer of the Heart over coffee and doughnuts, and upon rising from our chairs expect the gift to be already upon us. The intellectual pursuit of spiritual things not accompanied by struggles can easily lead us into the delusions of the sectarians and their theories of instant salvation. Again, we see how some thing basically good and holy can be distorted and can lead to the ruination of souls.

Lastly, we are confronted with the outright and deliberate distortion of the Gospel. For this distortion we can blame not only youth, but parents and spiritual leaders as well. Now, this blatant distortion goes hand in glove with the "theology of convenience," i.e. "what is convenient for me is good;" and the good assumes many faces when Divine Revelation is interpreted by the theologians of convenience. For instance, the self-same Scriptures which condemn homosexuality as a grievous and soul-destroying sin can simultaneously be regarded as a "holy book" by those who go far as to "marry" two individuals of the same sex! To serious Christians this blasphemy is, of course, obvious, but what of other and more subtle distortions? Do we perceive their deceptions as easily? We shall attempt to unmask some of them as we continue.

Now that we have examined some fallacies, what are the truths which can realistically solve our problems? If these methods are imperfect or even patently destructive, what can we substitute for them? Are there any valid and soul-saving ways by which we can keep our precious youth close to God and His Church? With great conviction we must state that we believe there are. Our Saviour in His mercy has given them to us, the Holy Church has preserved them for us in the face of impossible odds, and they are available to us even now for our comfort and consolation. These ways are simply bound up in the attitudes and actions of those Orthodox

Christians who are our youth, their parents and families, and their spiritual guides. In examining these attitudes and actions we hope to reveal the only sure way to ensure the future of the Church, i.e. the dedication of her children to Truth and spiritual struggle.

## **Youth**

The youth of today have very high ideals, and to deny this would be grossly unfair. But we must admit that very often these ideals can sour, can be perverted, can be exploited. Often young people ultimately relinquish their ideals if they suspect that the situation is hopeless; if they conclude that nowhere can these ideals be fulfilled. Unfortunately, this is the usual progression of events today. Disappointments lead to abysmal falls, often to depths lower than those they condemned when their idealism was fresh. Where this does not happen, ideals are exploited by false prophets of good. Why is it that sectarians far from the fullness of truth are able to inspire youth to make such amazing sacrifices? Young Mormons sacrifice years of their lives in active missionary work. The disciples of Sun Myung Moon live amazingly austere lives centered around work and self-sacrifice. What of the tremendous sacrifices made by the members of the Guyana community before the ultimate horror which stamped out its existence? Yet at the same time, the Orthodox Church, possessing the fullness of Truth, has a real difficulty in keeping her youth. Could part of the answer be that in ignoring the high ideals and potential moral heroism of our youth we have failed to familiarize them with our examples of such heroism, displayed by our own young, even the very young, who loved Christ and His Church in past ages?

Do our youth know of St. Bogolep, the righteous child schema-monk, who as an infant refused milk from his mother's breast on Wednesdays and Fridays, thereby going hungry on the days of fasting appointed by the Holy Church? What of St. Sergius of Radonezh, whose fasting was so severe at the age of twelve that his mother had to entreat him to abandon it? His wise reply was: "Should I not strive toward God with all the strength I have so that He might deliver me from my sins?"<sup>1</sup> What of that great

athlete of Christ, St. John the Faster, who was hung from the rafters, had straw burned beneath him, and was beaten with swords by the Moslems because he would not eat meat during the Fast of the Dormition of the Mother of God? Against the wicked perverters of our age we offer the struggles of the Virgin-Martyr Basil of Mangazeya, who endured martyrdom for his refusal to participate in the wicked sin of homosexuality. Can we even count the choirs of virgins of tender years who gave themselves over to martyrdom rather than defile their bodies, those temples of the Holy Spirit, by fornication? The litany would be endless if we continued. Therefore, dear youth, do not be afraid of struggles. Here are your examples and defenders. For the sake of passing honors and earthly beauty you often give yourselves over to amazing deprivations. Do not look to heroes who worship the body and mind, but to Christ Who can reward you in eternity for your struggles.

The reason we are not well-disposed to spiritual struggle is because we live in a slothful, self-indulgent age, and the enobling ideas that do exist can, unfortunately, lend themselves to self-glorification. To deny oneself for Christ has ceased to be attractive. To fast is difficult, even useless (so we think), yet dieting to make our bodies comely and training for athletics and sports are profitable because the glory returns to us. But how long does this glory last in comparison to the glory our Savior promises us? Our own Metropolitan Philaret in his *Essays on Moral Theology for Young Students* has said: "The Kingdom of Heaven is acquired by effort and only those exerting themselves achieve it." We cannot expect to lie back; we cannot expect God to do it all for us; yet how often do we hear youth asking what the Church can do for them, without the least thought of exerting any effort on their own part. In the above-mentioned essay, our Metropolitan proceeds to explain "synergism," as taught by the fifth century father, St. John Cassian:

*According to this teaching, we are saved only in Christ, and God's grace is the main force in salvation. However, salvation requires the individual efforts of man himself, not only God's grace. Individual effort alone is insufficient for our own salvation. It is*

*necessary since not even God's grace will save us without our own effort. In this way, our salvation occurs simultaneously through God's saving grace and through our individual effort. According to the bold expression of several Church fathers, God created man without his participation, but he cannot save man without his agreement and desire. He himself created man with absolute power over himself. Man is free to choose good or evil, salvation or destruction, and God does not limit this freedom, even though He continuously summons man towards salvation.<sup>2</sup>*

To understand this ideal more fully we can turn to our great Abba and First Hierarch Metropolitan Anthony (Khrapovitsky), who explains the process thus:

*Christianity is a podvig of virtue; Christianity is the pearl, for the acquisition of which the wise merchant of the Gospel should sell all his possessions. . . . 'This is the will of God: your sanctification,' says the Apostle, and it is possible to attain it only by making it the chief and only aim of life, if one lives in order to attain holiness. . . Moral perfection is attained by the way of independent, intricate work on oneself, by inner warfare, deprivations, and especially by self-humiliation. . . In short, the Orthodox faith is an ascetic faith.<sup>3</sup>*

Of course, the implementation of these ideals is difficult. We can become intimidated by the pressures of society and succumb to peer pressure. But we must remember, 'Orthodox Christians have moral codes by which we must and should live. If it happens that the code runs contrary to the (sinful) 'way of life' of the given society in which we live, we should and must adhere to the higher way of life which is our Orthodox Christian way of life. Our Orthodoxy cannot be determined or influenced by outside criteria, but the outside criteria must either be transformed or rejected by us.<sup>4</sup>

"We set ourselves apart from the rest of the world by our non-participation in those things which the world considers 'cultural,' 'progressive,' 'amoral,' and 'contemporary. Christ's Church provides for us our light and vision. And our light and vision sees and detects evil and sin which the outside world views as harmless. <sup>5</sup>

It may seem that God is asking a great deal of us, but we must never forget to what lengths our heavenly Father went in sacrificing His Only-Begotten Son and what pains and humiliations our Savior endured to show us the way towards salvation.

### **Parents and Family**

In addition to the role of our youth, and their own relationship to the Church, we must of necessity examine the role of parents and family as partners and helpers in the formulation of that relationship. Unfortunately, this can be a rather distressing subject. Obviously our Lord foresaw difficulties when He gave these words to us, "He that loveth father or mother more than Me is not worthy of Me" (Matt. 10:37). He foresaw the struggles sincere Christians would encounter, even with their own parents, in striving to live the Gospel message. Examine the lives of the saints and marvel at the countless examples of parents imploring their children not to go to martyrdom, forbidding them to enter the monastic life, even to the extent of chaining them up and mercilessly beating them. The mother of the Blessed Feofil of the Kiev Caves actually attempted to murder her infant son rather than to recognize the grace of God in him. The mother of the holy martyr St. John the Faster knelt at his feet during the entire time of his contest, and besought him with tears to break the fast and escape martyrdom. Our own age is certainly no different. How many parents are horrified at the thought of their own child entering the monastic life or the priesthood! One mother took her son to a psychiatrist. A father told his son, who had taken the monastic tonsure, that while at work, when other men spoke of their sons' accomplishments as lawyers, doctors and business men, he told them that his son was dead, so ashamed was he of his monasticism. One wonders if that father knew how accurate he was in

a certain sense. Monastic struggles aside, how many parents are disturbed if their children so much as wish to lead a fuller Christian life. Some of my own spiritual children have related to me that their parents are disturbed over their attendance at the vigils on Saturday nights. They were told that normal young people go out on Saturday nights to have a good time, not to church. I know a priest who told me about some young men who came to him in desperation because their own fathers had given them money to go out and defile their virginity with prostitutes because they had "come of age" and had to prove their manhood! When these young men resisted, their fathers accused them of perversion!! It would certainly be unfair to convict all parents of these destructive attitudes, but even pious parents are often terribly weak and permissive, fearing to lose the love of their children. I had a neighbor in my childhood who took the phone off the hook every Sunday morning on her way to church so that her children, who were sleeping in, would not be disturbed. One author, writing about what it means to be an Orthodox parent, has adequately described this weakness: □

*Where once there were grace-filled societies, in old Holy Russia and in Greece, today the spirit of the world has almost completely triumphed and now constantly conspires against the raising of godly children. We know this in our hearts, but do we really act as if we believe it? Or have we succumbed in large measure to the spirit of the world? Have we accommodated ourselves to it, so that our compromise takes a terrible toll on the sanctity of Orthodox homes?<sup>6</sup>*

Of course the entire situation is a reflection of the abandonment of zeal as the standard for life in Christ and its replacement with mediocrity. "If the Church of Christ finds herself in difficult times today; if she is faced with challenges which seem impossible; if many of her leaders are tempted to compromise with secularism totally; if the Church is considered 'too monastic, too rigid, too confining, too strict, too "otherworldly" 'and, to sum it up, 'too way out', then is it not because we have accepted mediocrity as

the standard norm in our lives?"<sup>7</sup>

Young people are often presented with some terrible standards by their elders. Some examples can be offered. Drug abuse is a terrible sin, but alcoholism is an acceptable vice. A brother priest of mine was told he could not possibly be a good batiushka because he does not like to drink vodka. Such an attitude contributes to the fallen idea that clergy must participate in various vices in order to appear more human to their people. In American jargon this is known as the "good Joe" concept. Often priests, whether they are tempted to follow this "good Joe" mentality or are true pastors of souls, are exposed to the bitterest of criticism. Protopresbyter George Grabbe, in his article "Orthodox Christian Education of Children in our Days", well states:

*Let the most important center of interests for them be the local church, and let the parents hold the spiritual authority of the church pastor high in the eyes of their children. Children must be protected from all criticism of their priest. It is difficult to ascertain to what degree such criticism can poison their hearts for many years to come, and sometimes for their whole lives.<sup>8</sup>*

Other poor or double standards are revealed in attitudes toward fasting and fornication. Of partners in fornication, the young man is held to be experiencing a normal part of growing into manhood, while the unfortunate girl is considered a harlot. As for fasting, we can bring forth an all-too-well-known example. How many of our people, both parents and youth go out and wildly celebrate the civil New Year in total disregard of the fast? Young people are often exposed to destructive prejudices by their elders (e.g.: Blacks and Puerto Ricans lack intelligence, ambition and morals! Or, how superior Russians are to Greeks, Greeks to Russians, both to Americans, Americans to foreigners! We can go even further: Great Russians are better than Little Russians, city people to peasants, those of the first emigration to those of the second or vice versa.) We can almost become convinced that our Savior might have been somewhat confused when He came to save "all men."

But, glory to God Who does not deprive us of merciful hope! We can still find examples of God-fearing and God-loving parenthood even in our times. To comfort our souls after the above-cited examples, we have the Righteous Abraham who trusted God to such an extent that he was willing to plunge the sacrificial knife into the son of his old age, until his hand was stayed by the angel of the Lord. What of the brave Sophia, who witnessed the brutal martyrdoms of her three young daughters, encouraging them all the while? Or what of the martyr whose mother came to witness his contest in her wedding garment because of her joy? Or of the mother of the martyr Meliton of the Forty, who bore his half-dead body on her shoulders, following the cart which contained the bodies of his fellow athletes, that he might be with them as he drew his last breath?

Where such wondrous Orthodox parents still exist, there still breathes the Spirit of God. Yes, glory to God, we still see mothers holding their babies through the long vigils. We see parents who endure the criticisms of those who chastise them for imposing "cruel and unnecessary" fasts on their children. Yes, we have even heard of an Orthodox father who, in this very country, suffered imprisonment because he desired the Orthodox enlightenment of his children! Yes, there are still homes where true Orthodox parents preside as abbots of monastic communities. It is interesting to note that one of the most destructive influences on contemporary Church life has been the exaggerated and false distinction made between monastics and lay people, between monastery and parish rules of prayer. The Church has never made such distinctions.

St. John Chrysostom used to say constantly that the life of the monks does not differ from the life of married people. God's commandments are common to all, and the call to heavenly blessings and the glory of God in the Kingdom of Heaven is directed to all people, monastics and married. When the Lord spoke to the multitudes, those who were listening to Him were not monks. Purity of heart, humility, spiritual mourning, almsgiving, fortitude during times of persecution and grief in order to acquire the Kingdom of Heaven are the features of the way our Lord indicated to the

Israel of grace and were directed to farmers, fishermen, simple folk, and heads of households who brought with them wherever they went their children and their problems, which were just like ours today. St. Chrysostom says that the Apostle Paul, in writing his epistles to city dwellers, such as the Corinthians, the Thessalonians, etc. people, in other words, with wives and children - "demands of them all the spiritual precision which the monastics keep."<sup>9</sup>

### **Spiritual Guides**

In order to direct the high aspirations of youth and to bring to fruition the good seed planted by devout Orthodox parents, it is essential to have access to wise and prudent spiritual guides. Our Savior did not leave His fold unattended when He departed from this earthly life, but appointed the holy apostles, and through them their successors, as shepherds of His rational sheep. These shepherds have led Christ's flock through many spiritual dangers and, by God's mercy, a few such guides remain even in our terrible times to lead us as well. But, alas, many souls have been lost to the wolves of the passions because of false shepherds, and of these our own age has its full share. The youth of our times must use the rational and spiritual gifts which God has given them to seek out wise guides in the spiritual life. Those who have not the comfort of truly Orthodox parents will have only the comfort of these discerning spiritual guides to cling to. In order for them to be able to help us, 'we must be willing to submit ourselves to them in obedience, to the very exclusion of our own will. For spiritual directors to be able to help the youth know Christ, they must, for their part, guard the purity of the faith. and cultivate holiness in themselves.

One might ask where one can find a spiritual father. In the life of St. Arsenios of Paros, we read:

*St. John the Baptist dwelt in the wilderness, fasting and praying in secret. No one saw him but God, Who, seeing the Forerunner*

*fasting and praying in secret for Him, for His glory, revealed his virtues to all. As the wise Nibs says, men left the cities and ran to the wilderness; wealthy persons who had houses decorated with gold and wore silken clothes, and those who had beds studded with precious stones and rested on soft mattresses, lay down outdoors on the sand by the banks of the Jordan. Why? Because of the virtues of the man. Virtue, like a magnet, attracts men.*<sup>10</sup>

Those who truly thirst for spiritual perfection will find, by God's mercy, true fathers. Those who wish to be mediocre will likewise find mediocre guides and be satisfied with them. The advantages of good spiritual relationships are spoken of by that great father St. Ambrose of Milan in his work *Duties of the Clergy*:

*It is a very good thing to unite oneself to a good man. It is also very useful for the young to follow the guidance of great and wise men. For he who lives in company with wise men is wise himself; but he who clings to the foolish is looked on as a fool, too. This friendship with the wise is a great help in teaching us, and also as giving a sure proof of our uprightness. Young men show very soon that they imitate those to whom they attach themselves.*<sup>11</sup>

The saint proceeds further to prove his point by citing the beneficial relationships between Joshua and Moses, Lot and Abraham, Elisseus and Elias, and Timothy and Paul. The exalted character of a true spiritual relationship is illustrated in our times by the warm sentiments of love and esteem directed towards our Metropolitan Anthony, of blessed memory, by our present First Hierarch on the eve of his consecration as bishop of Brisbane in 1963:

*But today I would like to mention, mention with gratitude, the extraordinary attention and fatherly love which was shown to me as a young monk by the 'abba of abbats' and spiritual father of the*

*Russian Emigration, His Beatitude Metropolitan Anthony. 'An infirm and overburdened elder,' weighed down by care and 'looking after all the churches,' he found time to write letters to me, and with the shaky, already weak hand of an old man, he wrote letters full of wisdom, edification and enormous spiritual experience. I preserved these letters as sacred objects, as precious treasures, but they were destroyed by the merciless fire which broke out in the house where I was living in Harbin, in which I myself all but perished.<sup>12</sup>*

Recognizing the necessity of seeking out these spiritual relationships, we might further ask what are the responsibilities of the Church and her spiritual guides in our times.

**1. Holiness of life.** This is something very difficult to evaluate, both because true spiritual guides often conceal their holiness, and because charlatans feign it. Suffice it to say to the dear youth of our Church: Give glory and thanks to God that it is not difficult to perceive in our hierarchs true monks, men of prayer, defenders of the faith. We have, by God's mercy, true monasteries and convents where true monks and nuns wage warfare against the passions and pray for us sinners night and day. We even have venerable fathers and spiritual guides among the parish clergy who bring forth much fruit, despite the most incredible obstacles to spiritual development caused by ignorance and indifference. Not long ago, during the radiant glorification of our Righteous Xenia the Blessed of St. Petersburg, I discovered, to my amazement, that among the priests was one who had labored for over 60 years in the vineyard of Christ. I must confess I was rather awed by that realization. It was something which I could barely comprehend. It was both chastisement and uplifting to my sinful soul which already thought that almost eight years in the priesthood was a great cross and deserving of praise. So, we see in just a half century how considerably enfeebled we have become in comparison to our elder fathers! I recall with equal amazement hearing at the Youth Conference in Toronto about a father in Palestine who by his prayers brought down the whole side of a mountain in order to conceal the impious exposition by marauders of the relics of

some fathers who had labored in the nearby caves. And this in my own lifetime!

**2.** We need not speak much of the attempts of our beloved archpastors in these times to defend the purity of the faith. This they have consistently done in spite of much bitter animosity on the part of lukewarm hierarchs intent on keeping "in step with the times." Dear young people, you will do well and profit your souls if you speak out and read the epistles of our Synod of Bishops, and especially the "Sorrowful Epistles" of our First Hierarch.

**3.** Finally, an important lesson we must learn from our spiritual guide. both of the heavenly choir and of those struggling in our times is how to recognize Orthodoxy as our Fatherland and to speak its language. We would be naive if we did not admit that even today we often contend with the lamentable sin of placing ethnicity above our precious faith. In this regard we have failed to take example from our own wise hierarchs who, in their epistle of this past September, have stated:

*By God's mercy, the Russian Orthodox Church Abroad has outgrown its name and has come to occupy a special, unusual place in the conscience of all Orthodox Christians. Despite our weakness, we have been vouchsafed so great an honor, and on this account they may but love us or despise us. Without separating ourselves from the Mother Russian Church, our Church is truly the free, multinational, multilingual Church of the diaspora.<sup>13</sup>*

To illustrate how these words are sadly ignored or misunderstood, I recall a disturbing passage from the report of Archimandrite Panteleimon, Abbot of Holy Transfiguration Monastery, to the 1974 Council of our Russian Orthodox Church Abroad:

*And sometimes we hear it said that one of our people, or perhaps even one of the priests, has said that our Church uses Russian and, therefore, it would be better if they went to the Metropolia where English is used. Or perhaps again, that our Church does not have the youth facilities, etc. of the Greek Archdiocese and,*

*perhaps it were better that they went there. When we hear such things we are greatly saddened. We have said on many occasions that the Russian Synod Abroad is the sole guardian of piety in the diaspora. She alone among the 'Orthodox' unashamedly proclaims the Orthodox Faith. How can we then surrender the lambs that come to us to wolves in sheep's clothing?*<sup>14</sup>

Yet in 1929, our Metropolitan Anthony had a much brighter vision than many of our contemporaries. Upon presenting the staff of office to Bishop Nicholas of Great Britain he said, "The Lord has decreed that you commence your episcopal ministry in a country which has many enlightened sons who genuinely love our people and our Faith... You should turn your pastoral attention to those English people, especially the youth, who wish to acquaint themselves better with the Orthodox religion and Church. Welcome them with pastoral affection and pray to the Lord for the salvation of both Russian and English souls."<sup>15</sup>

I do not think that we live in a time or under circumstances where we can afford to identify the Church too closely with cultures. That may be a luxury reserved for more openly prosperous times for the Church. Possibly, a return to the concept of theocracy will be God's blessing on our times. When the people of Israel were tempted by the way of life of their pagan neighbors, they besought God to give them also an earthly king. It seems that from the time that God granted their request their woes began in earnest. I can state my concern no better than our respected theologian Father Michael Azkoul in his article "Orthodoxy: My Country":

*The Ark of the Church must not escape the rocks Of ecumenism only to founder on the shoals of nationalism. Let us remember that nothing is more precious than Orthodoxy. No matter how beautiful, how brilliant, how formidable our ethnic heritage, the Church on earth is our country, our home. She is the Way to our everlasting and celestial home in the Kingdom of God above. No wonder the Church has always placed the monk before our eyes as an ideal: he is *aoikos*, 'homeless' on earth save in the greater 'nationality'*

*or 'fellowship' of the Church universal. He tells us that we are 'pilgrims,' always emigres, especially in these 'last days.' We have one 'home' now, the Church, the icon of the heavenly Church, in which she mysteriously shares already. Indeed, bring in your earthly treasures if you must; let God bless and sanctify them. Beware, however, lest you seek to bring too much and cannot enter the door of the temple.<sup>16</sup>*

I hope that it has become apparent from all that I have said that my contention is simply that the most perfect way for us to inspire a love for the Church in our youth is for the Church to be precisely "herself." By simply clinging to her traditional piety, by encouraging the fullest possible liturgical life in our circumstances, by nurturing the concept of the "Church in the home," and by attaching ourselves to sound spiritual guides, we will provide the means for keeping youth close to the Church. Of course, the results will be qualitative and not quantitative. It is vain to expect that the Church will be preserved by numbers. If the numbers are plagued by mediocrity, we will only become disastrously enfeebled. Let us heed this call to Orthodox zeal!

"Why be mediocre, when you can be your best, with the grace of God, through your efforts and the prayers of His saints? Why be a spiritual loser, when the Heavenly Kingdom is to be gained? Why seek earthly prizes and goals, when Heaven is to be stormed? 'The Kingdom of Heaven suffereth violence, and the violent take it by force' (Mt. 11 :12), said our Lord. Let us use Christ's spiritual power to overcome our sinfulness and temptations. Let us seek perfection from ourselves and, in so doing, discover that our Lord's yoke is indeed light. Let us not live with mediocrity, but let us seek after perfection."<sup>17</sup>

In parting, allow me to share with you these precious and divinely inspired words of our God-bearing father St. John Climacus, taken from his Ladder of Divine Ascent:

*Offer to Christ the labors of your youth, and in your old age you*

*will rejoice in the wealth of dispassion. What is gathered in youth nourishes and comforts those who are tired out in old age. In our youth let us labor ardently and let us run vigilantly, for the hour of death is unknown. We have very evil and dangerous, cunning, unscrupulous foes, who hold fire in their hands and try to burn the temple of God with the flame that is in it. These foes are strong; they never sleep; they are incorporeal and invisible. Let no one when he is young listen to his enemies, the demons, when they say to him: 'Do not wear out your flesh, lest you make it sick and weak.' For you will scarcely find anyone, especially in the present generation, who is determined to mortify his flesh, although he might deprive himself of many pleasant dishes. The aim of this demon is to make the very outset of our spiritual life lax and negligent, and then make the end correspond to the beginning.<sup>18</sup>*

□ **FOOTNOTES:**

<sup>1</sup> "The Early Life of St. Sergius of Radonezh," The Orthodox Word, x (July-August, 1974), 130. □

<sup>2</sup> Abbot (now Metropolitan) Philaret, Essays in Moral Theology for Young Students (N.Y., Department of Foreign Relations of the Synod of Bishops [of the Russian Orthodox Church Abroad], 1975), 16. □

<sup>3</sup> Metropolitan Anthony (Khrapovitsky), "How Does Orthodoxy Differ from the Western Denominations?" (St. Nectarios Educational Series, No.59; Seattle, Wash.: St. Nectarios Press, n.d.), 24-26. □

<sup>4</sup> "Popular Songs, Heresy and Our Way of Life," Orthodox Christian Witness, V (Sept. 27/Oct. 10, 1971), 3. □

<sup>5</sup> "The Playboy Philosophy", Orthodox Christian Witness, V (Aug. 14/27, 1972). □

<sup>6</sup> "On Being an Orthodox Parent," Orthodox Christian Witness, XII (Nov. 27 /Dec. 10, 1978), 1-2. □

<sup>7</sup> "The Age of Mediocrity, & quote; Orthodox Christian Witness, V (Oct. 11/24, 1971), 1, 4. □

<sup>8</sup> Protopresbyter George Grabbe, *Orthodox Christian Education of Children in Our Days* (Jordanville, N.Y.: St. Job of Pochaev Press, 1960), 29. □

<sup>9</sup> "St. John Chrysostom", *Orthodox Presence* (Nov., 1978), 11-12. □

<sup>10</sup> Constantine Cavarnos, "St. Arsenios of Paros" (*Modern Orthodox Saint* Vdl. VI; Belmont, Mass.: Institute for Byzantine and Modern Greek Studies, 1978), 59. □

<sup>11</sup> St Ambrose of Milan, "On the Duties of the Clergy" (*A Select Library of Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church 2nd Series, Vol. X*; Grand Rapids, Mich.: Wm. B. Eerdmans Pub. Co., 1969), 58. □

<sup>12</sup> Archimandrite (now Metropolitan) Philaret, "Address of Archimandrite Philaret," *Orthodox Christian Witness*, VII (Aug. 5/18, 1974), 3. □

<sup>13</sup> "Epistle to the Flock of the Russian Orthodox Church Abroad, Beloved of God", *Orthodox Life*, XXVIII (Nov.-Dec., 1978), 20. □

<sup>14</sup> Archimandrite Panteleimon, "The Mission of the Russian Orthodox Church Outside Russia," *Orthodox Christian Witness*, VIII (Sept. 23/Oct. 6, 1974), 5.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 9. □<sup>16</sup> Rev. Michael Azkoul, "Orthodoxy: My Country," *Orthodox Christian Witness*, X (Oct. 18/31, 1976), 2. □

<sup>17</sup> "The Age of Mediocrity," *op. cit.*, 3. □

<sup>18</sup> St John Climacus, *The Ladder of Divine Ascent*, trans. Archimandrite Lazarus (Moore) (Willits, Calif.: Eastern Orthodox Books, 1973), 55.

*"Youth and the Church" is the text of an address delivered at the annual St. Herman Youth Conference, held on 12/25 December, 1978, at the Russian Orthodox Church of Our Lady of Kazan, Newark, New Jersey, sponsored by its pastor, the V. Rev. Archpriest Vladimir Shishkoif. Reprinted from Orthodox Life Vol. 29, No. 3 May-June, 1979*