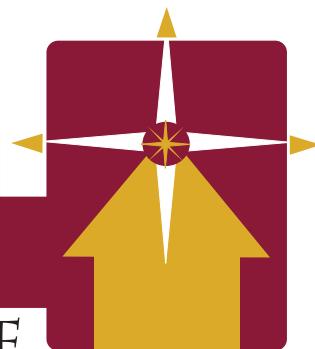


Family Connections



CENTER *for* FAMILY CARE

Planting Seeds of Stillness

by Christiana Dorrance

The priest raises the gifts, asking the Holy Spirit to descend and consecrate the bread and wine into Christ's own Body and Blood; the melodic voice of the chanter sings. The importance and sacredness of this moment in the Divine Liturgy fills the church. Suddenly, a little voice shrieks, "Mommy, when is this going to be OVER? How much LONGER until Communion?"

The child's mother is mortified as heads turn and disapproving eyes direct their gaze on the little girl. The mother's face turns crimson, and she swiftly grabs her child's hand, her infant, and the diaper bag, and, muttering excuses, she squeezes her way out of the pew, into the aisle, and dashes for the narthex.

My poor mother! This scene was repeated again and again, Sunday after Sunday, child after child, but she never gave up on bringing her children to church. People often asked her, "Presbytera, why bring the children to church? It's so long, and they're so little. They don't even understand what's going on." Yet my mom continued to bring us—not just on Sundays, but also for Vespers and other weekday services.

To many outside of the Church, Orthodox worship is foreign. It does not compliment popular culture, but rather endeavors to participate in the unchanging heavenly worship. In fact, the Orthodox Church cannot fundamentally change its worship without fundamentally changing what it believes. We live in a society that devalues quiet and discipline, and goes against the path of salvation; however, Orthodox Christian worship can become for us a safe haven of stability and sanity in a turbulent and confused world. When children are brought to church, they learn to cultivate inner stillness and self-control, and are given the tools necessary for salvation.

We live in an age of sensory overload. Children in today's society are frequently bombarded by noises and images. As more technology becomes available to children at a continually younger age, their minds and hearts become less filled with innocence and purity, and more filled with worldly distractions. It is in church that we are challenged to practice stillness, prayer, and attentiveness to the things of God. Even the pace and rhythm of Orthodox worship require us to slow down; such worship stands in stark contrast to the hurried pace of our everyday lives. This quietness must be acquired and cultivated, taught and experienced. In church, I was taught that only by being still could I hear the voice of God; I learned that I was not going to be entertained just because I was bored. In a world where we are afraid to be without some measure of stimulus, and where boredom is avoided at all costs, attending Orthodox worship helps children and adults alike to empty their hearts and minds of all unnecessary noise by being present in the moment and accepting the Church's invitation to participate in the good news of salvation.

Self-control is often frowned upon in today's society. Exercising the ability to be or do whatever a person wants is seen as the way to live. It is in church that children are taught not only how to exercise discipline, but also why it is important. In the first few years of life, children are testing how far they can push not only their parents, but also the society in which they live.

Therefore, children will push to the left to see where the boundary is on that side, and also to the right, the top, and the bottom, until they have come to an understanding of what their limits are. As children, pre-teens, and teenagers, they will continue pushing those boundaries, seeing if they can push just a little farther. These boundaries need to be maintained through the guidance of parents.

The world tells us that self-control stifles a person, and yet the Church tells us that it is only in the implementation of self-control that a person can truly be free. In church, children are taught to make the sign of the cross in a certain way, to sit, stand, kneel, and bow at the appropriate times, and to use their bodies and voices in a way that pleases Christ. It is the parents' role to put Christ first and to model Christ-pleasing behavior in all that they do,



including consistently taking their children to attend worship. If a parent models this, a child will, in almost all cases, grow to take ownership of his or her own faith, and to use the Church as a means of salvation.

Satan tries, with all his might, to keep us distracted and overly busy, but Christ teaches that the only way to have communion with Him is to practice stillness, watchfulness over our thoughts, and self-control. It is in the Church, through participation in the sacraments and through worship, that we fully experience Christ.

The world will not lead us to salvation, but to separation from God. It is in the Church that everything necessary for salvation is found.

Through heavenly worship we partake of Christ's own Body and Blood, and therefore most tangibly receive God's grace. We do not give children the option to go to school, because it is in school that they learn valuable lessons in order to be members of this temporal society. It is imperative, therefore, for them to attend divine services, which instruct them in the ways of salvation, so that they can become members of the eternal kingdom of heaven.

Imagine someone who has poor health but for years and years resists getting help from a doctor. One day, the person's health gets so bad that he or she finally realizes his or her need to see a doctor.

The doctor, in turn, prescribes painful therapy, a strict diet, and bitter-tasting medicine, while telling the patient that it is going to take a great deal of perseverance before he or she is healed. What a difficult road for the person who put off going to the physician! But children raised in the Church are like persons who check in with the doctor regularly. Their road is not so difficult, and if a problem arises, the doctor catches it early, and the patient is restored to health.

There is no doubt that my mom struggled greatly in bringing her children to church. There were tears and frustrations, and probably moments when she questioned the importance of her effort. Yet all four of her children are thankful for her perseverance. I cannot imagine my life outside of the Church. I have many struggles and temptations, and my greatest sense of comfort and reality is found within the Church. I am convinced that it is only through my mom's strength in bringing us to Church, and through the prayers of both of my parents, that my siblings and I are able to more easily navigate our way in a society that has seemingly forgotten God. Through my mom's insistence that we attend liturgical services, little seeds of

stillness, self-control, and knowledge of the path to salvation have been planted in our hearts, and as we grow and mature more fully with the guidance of the Church, I pray that those seeds begin to bear fruit.

Christiana Dorrance is a resident of Portland, Oregon, where she lives with her parents, Fr. Theodore and Presbytera Stacy Dorrance, and three younger siblings. She attends St. John the Baptist Church where her father serves as the head priest. She is a senior at Portland State University, studying communication and history and also teaches Latin at Agia Sophia Academy – an Orthodox school for pre-school and elementary students.

A PRAYER FOR FAMILIES

O God, our heavenly Father, Who loves mankind and is merciful and compassionate, have mercy upon us Your servants [names] and our family for whom we humbly pray and who we commend to Your gracious care and protection. O Lord, be our guide and guardian in all our endeavors. Lead us in the path of Your truth, and draw us nearer to You, that we may lead godly and righteous lives in Your love and fear, doing Your will in all things. Give us grace that we may be temperate, industrious, diligent, devout, and charitable. Defend us against the assaults of the enemy, and grant us wisdom and strength to resist all temptations and corruption of this life. Direct us in the way of salvation, through the mercy of Your Son, our Savior Jesus Christ, and the intercessions of His holy Mother and Your blessed saints. AMEN.

This prayer has been adapted from the Table Top Prayer Guide: Volume I published by the Center for Family Care. The guide provides a collection of Orthodox prayers and meditations for daily use, for both personal and family prayer time. It can be ordered at www.OrthodoxMarketplace.com

RESOURCES FOR FAMILIES

"Mission Possible: Orthodox Parenting Today" – An Orthodox Christian Network (OCN) podcast by Ginny Nieuwsma. Her prayer is that this podcast will bring hope, spiritual wisdom, and practical help, to moms and dads dealing with the same pressures and concerns she too faces, every day. Visit www.myocn.net

Close to Home: One Orthodox Mother's Quest for Patience, Peace, and Perseverance – by Molly Sabourin. This is a book for every young mother who's ever wished children came with an instruction manual, and wondered why "happily ever after" takes so much work. With courage, humor, and unflinching honesty, Molly Sabourin offers not answers or solutions, but a new perspective, a pat on the shoulder, a reassuring "I've been there too, and there is hope." Published by Conciliar Press.

The Bible for Young People – by Zoe Kanavas. This beautifully illustrated volume contains 162 pages of stories for young readers from both the Old and the New Testaments. The stories, theologically Orthodox, are written in a unique style that will capture your child's interest. For grades Kindergarten and up. Available from the Department of Religious Education.

Family Connections is a ministry of the Center for Family Care of the Greek Orthodox Archdiocese of America.

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