

Building the Domestic Church

by Presbytera Pearl Veronis
Lancaster, Pennsylvania

AGAIN spoke with Presbytera Pearl Veronis (Lancaster, Pennsylvania), mother of five, grandmother of six, and tireless teacher of younger women, regarding some ways she brings the traditions of the Orthodox Faith to life in her home and with her family. Following is a brief summary of some of her suggestions. For more ideas, see *A Guide for the Domestic Church*, published by the Diocese of Newton and available from Conciliar Press.

1. **Have your home blessed by your priest.** Ask the priest to come at a time when all family members will be present. The priest will pray and sprinkle holy water to bless each member of the family, the family altar, and each room of the house. Traditionally, homes are blessed annually at or near Theophany, or any time a family moves into a new home.
2. **Set up a family altar.** The one essential item for an altar is an icon, usually of Christ or the Theotokos. From there you can add additional icons, such as one of each family member's patron saint; a vigil lamp or candle, which burns continuously; an incense burner; a Bible and prayer book; a bottle of holy water and/or chrism (blessed oil); and other items you may collect, such as palms from church on Palm Sunday or objects from holy places your family has visited. In addition to the family altar, which is usually in the living room or dining room, you may wish to have icons in each of the bedrooms so each family member will have a private place to pray.
3. **Have daily family prayers at your altar.** These can be quite brief if the children are small. Many prayer books are available with various rules of prayer to choose from. Incense should be lit at prayer times. It is also good to light incense and cense the entire house each morning. Children love to help with this. When they are small you can give them an empty censer to hold while you hold the burning one. As they get older they can learn to light the charcoal and carry the burning censer. The smell of incense is one of the strongest sensory cues that one is in a holy place. This experience will stay with the children throughout their lives.
4. **4. Read the Bible with your family daily.** When you have family prayers, read the Scriptures appointed for the day (brochures are available which list the readings for every day of the year). While the children are small, find good illustrated Bible story books to read to them. Every child should be familiar with the great stories of the patriarchs, the events of the life of Christ, and the parables. Then, as they grow older, they will be able to understand the interpretations of these Scriptures given in the hymnography of the Church.
5. **Encourage your family to observe the fasts and feasts of the Church.** Many converts do not understand fasting or fully embrace it. Even many cradle

Orthodox have not grown up observing the fasts in a strict or consistent manner. If fasting is new to you, you can ease into it gradually. Each fasting season, try to fast a little more strictly than you did the season before. (Small children are not expected to fast as strictly as adults, but they should give up something.) But by all means make an effort to enter into this most important aspect of the life of the Church. Help your children to understand why we fast and to anticipate the coming feast. Then when the feast comes, celebrate it by going to church and by having a special meal, perhaps with extended family or friends. If possible, take the day off from normal activities.

6. **Have your children “churched.”** When a baby is born, bring the baby to church to be blessed and welcomed into God’s house. This brief ceremony, often called “churching,” is performed in some parishes on or near the fortieth day after birth; in other parishes it can be performed the first time the new mother brings her baby to church, whenever that might be. This is a wonderful way to begin your child’s life as a part of the Christian family.
7. **Use your children’s baptismal candles.** When your child is baptized, you will receive a baptismal candle that you will hold during the service and bring back to church for the next three Sundays. After that, the parents take the candle home. On your child’s birthdays, you can take this candle out and light it, to remind the child of his spiritual birth as you celebrate his natural birth.
8. **Celebrate namedays.** In addition to celebrating birthdays, celebrate your family’s namedays—the day dedicated to each person’s patron saint. This day can be celebrated with a cake and small gifts, like a birthday. In addition, it is good to read the life of the saint being celebrated and if possible to go to church and receive Holy Communion on that day. It is also traditional for the person celebrating his nameday to give small gifts to his family and friends.

These are just a few basics. There are many ethnically based traditions for celebrating the feasts of the Church and for other aspects of Church life. In fact, the variety can sometimes be rather bewildering for a convert. Feel free to pick and choose from what you see other Orthodox people doing, or even to adapt Western traditions for use in the Orthodox calendar (for example, making an Advent wreath with six candles instead of four). The important thing is to do something that your family will find comfortable and meaningful, and that will create a rich treasure-chest of memories to enrich your children’s lives in the years to come.

*From Again Magazine
Publication of the Antiochian Orthodox Christian Archdiocese of North America
September 1994
p. 30-31*