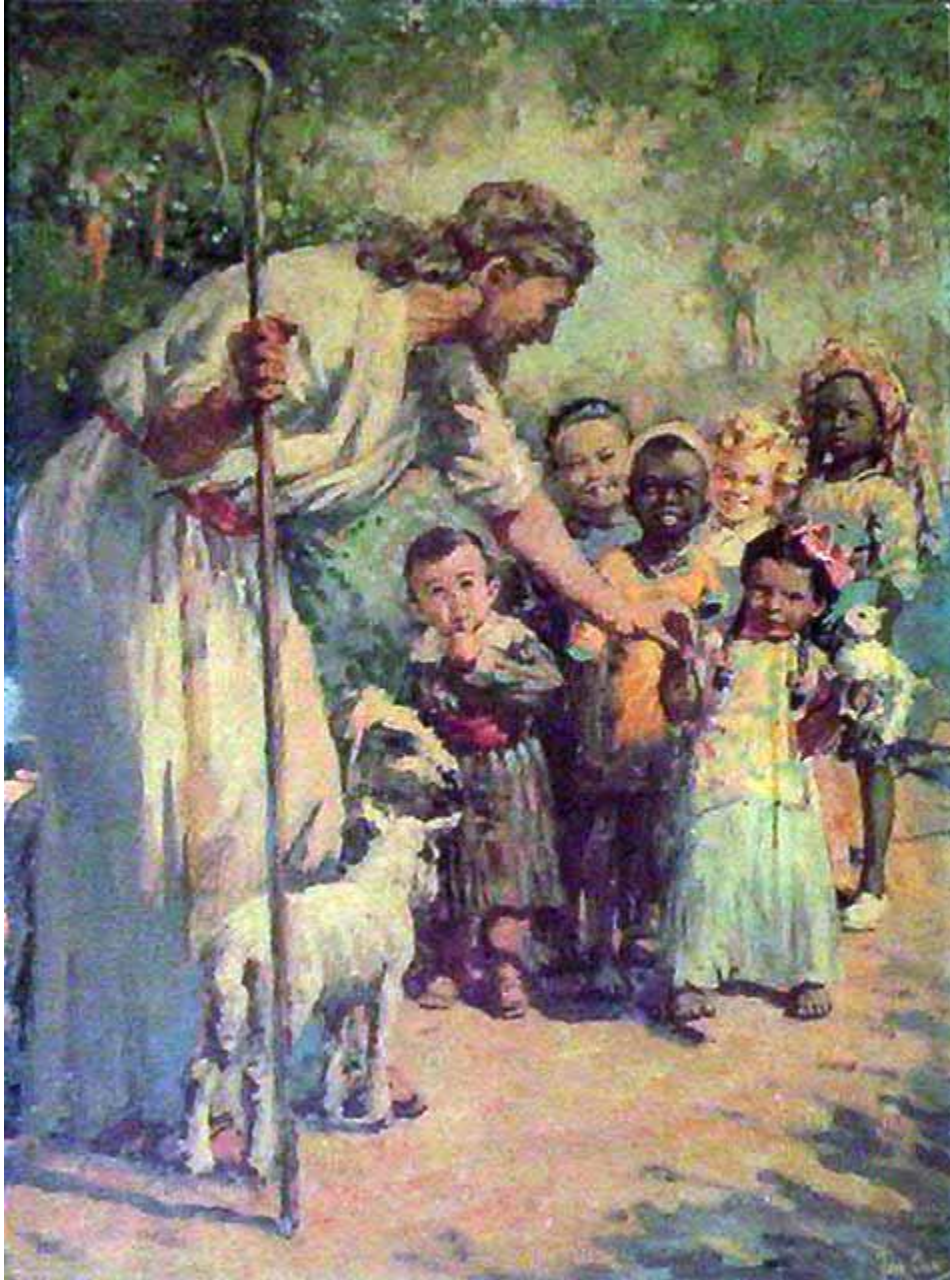


Should children attend church services?



by Deborah Wegh

Why do we want our children to participate in the Divine Liturgy? Other churches have nurseries, separate Sunday School classes for young children, children's liturgies why not the Orthodox? Orthodox parents bring their children to church so that they can experience God, not only intellectually as in their church school classes, but from the heart. We bring our children to the Liturgy because they are part of our family and thus part of our church community; the liturgy is the "common work" of the people of God.

If the liturgy is a "common work," then the parents attend for the same reason their children do to experience God. Indeed, Fr. Alexander Schmemmann felt that the "church is not a place where we fulfill our religious obligations, but the place where we find our real home, where joy and light are given to us." (p. 83, *Liturgy and Life*).

The parents are then responsible for modeling the proper attitudes and behaviors that will help them truly experience this goal. They are also the ones responsible for teaching their children about the liturgy, during the liturgy. Parents need to talk quietly to their children in church, focusing their attention on what they see, hear, touch, taste, and smell. Infants and toddlers appreciate this time of close physical contact with their parents, and can be taught very early to make the sign of the cross, say "Amen," and fold their hands for prayer and for communion. Older children can follow along in a prayer book and can begin to sing "Lord have mercy," "Holy God," "Alleluia" and the Lord's Prayer. They can also watch for the entrances and stand attentively for the Gospel. When they are tall enough, they should be encouraged to sing in the choir or serve in the altar, and in all cases be an active participant in the service.

What then, are barriers to children's participation in the liturgy? Many parents themselves do not know what the parts of the liturgy mean. Two books that can help are Fr. Hopko's *Worship* and Fr. Schmemmann's *Liturgy and Life*. From these parents can get the intellectual understanding they need to explain the parts of the liturgy to their children, at their level of interest and understanding.

Other parents assume that the liturgy is boring for children. St. John of Kronstadt writes in his diary (as quoted by Bishop Alexander in *The Life of Fr. John of Kronstadt*, p.25) "Is not the indifference toward the divine service to be explained by the fact that some do not understand it, and others, who have learned about it, have been instructed in a dry, intellectual way without any examples? The teaching has been directed to the reason of the pupils whereas the divine service is not only a lofty contemplation of the mind, but, in the first place, sweetness and bliss for the heart."

Children naturally come to the liturgy with joy; it is the adults who can lose that childlike sense of wonder and awe in the presence of God. Adults often get so accustomed to the liturgy that they "tune it out." Most do not realize that the liturgy is constant because they are not; all of us come to the liturgy with one more week of temptation and experience in this fallen world behind us.

Indeed, I have found that the best way to rekindle a wavering sense of God in one's life is to be with a young child who has been taught about the liturgy in church. One of the most memorable Paschas in my life was when one of my daughters, at age 5, stood before the cross with Christ crucified on Good Friday and began to cry. She realized for the first time that Jesus was a real person who really died, and she was sad. She and I truly participated in those services that weekend, and my explanations to her added to my own understanding of the Feast.

As we teach, we learn; as we search for ways to interpret the liturgical experience for our children, we find new understandings ourselves. It is true that such attention to the child during the liturgy may distract us from our own prayers, but such is parenthood! (Don't our children distract us in our lives outside of church?)

Another question is one of attention span. Parents assume that the child cannot remain focused and still for such a long time. Indeed, that is much to ask of a child under the age of five. There are, however, periods for movement in the liturgy, especially if the children are part of the entrances as they are here. Children can be taken out of church for short periods

of time (preferably before they misbehave!) if they are very active, for a drink of water or a run around the church. This will help the service to be a positive experience and not one from which to "escape."

If the children are busy participating in the liturgy, with prayer books as noted above, the service takes on a form and familiarity to them that becomes a reassuring and important part of their lives. (Remember that children find comfort in repetition as they try to make sense of their rapidly changing world!) We deprive them of this possibility if we allow them to bring and play with toys during the liturgy. The message then becomes "You must stay occupied during this time and leave us alone" instead of "You should experience the liturgy with us." If only books, preferably religious ones, are allowed (and perhaps some familiar item to hold), the children can be refocused on the important parts of the liturgy instead of feeling resentful when their fantasy play has been interrupted. This also makes church "different" from home we play at home but pray in church.

Father Schmemmann also notes in *Liturgy and Life* that the parents must extend the experience of our communion with God in the liturgy to their home during the week, by creating a "home atmosphere which precedes and prolongs the mood of the church" (p.16). Sunday morning is always rushed with young children, but an attitude of anticipation should prevail. We need to talk about God and His role in our lives at home, and establish family rules of prayer, even if only grace before meals.

We need to refocus the message of the "me" generation so prevalent today to a "we" outlook. This is most effectively accomplished by establishing family rules and consequences that focus on the common good of the family, and then manage behavior problems from that perspective. Children exposed to such a philosophy will learn to "behave" in church as well as at home. (Children who do not follow directions in church usually do not follow them at home either!)

We think nothing of the time that even our youngest children spend in front of the television. They are attentive, focused, motivated, and curious as they watch. Educational specialists urge us to watch with our child, so that we can be available to answer their questions or interpret what is on the screen in terms of our own family values and experiences.

The Divine Liturgy offers more to see and do (with Communion as its most notable event) than even the most interactive Barney video or National Geographic special. It is important for parents to accept their responsibility as models and teachers during the service. Parents can learn more about the liturgy, focus their child's attention during the service, and carry the experience of "being with God" into their daily lives. They can learn from and with their child, so that both can receive the Kingdom of God like a child with joy in the Resurrection.

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