

VITALITIES OF THE VIBRANT ORTHODOX PARISH (Part 3): CULTIVATING A CATECHETICAL CULTURE

by Father Frank Marangos

“Train up a child in the way he should go, and when he is old he will not depart from it.”
Proverbs 22:6

A couple once invited guests over for dinner. At the table, the mother turned to her six-year-old daughter and said, “Would you like to say the blessing?” The girl replied, “I would – but I do not know what to say.” “Just say what you heard Mommy say,” her mother answered. The daughter bowed her head and said, “Lord, why on earth did I invite all these people here tonight for dinner?”

For the past few Sundays, the Annunciation Church of North Miami has been reflecting on what constitutes the vitalities of the vibrant Orthodox Christian parish. Like the eight grand pillars that have supported the weight of the ancient Athenian Parthenon for two and half millennia, resilient Orthodox communities are reinforced by eight well-formed liturgical, pastoral, and administrative foundations.

Apart from the supportive stalwarts of: (1) *philoxenia* (love of neighbor), and (2) love and faithfulness to Holy Scripture, the vibrant Orthodox parish is characterized by (3) a culture of ongoing catechesis for both adults and youth. As illustrated by the humorous anecdote provided above, such communities realize that, without careful and intentional educational programs, the next generation of Orthodox Christians may develop detrimental understandings, habits, and values.

Numerous surveys indicate that Orthodox parishioners thirst for local communities that paradigmatically inspire young as well as old to continue to cultivate and refine their cognitive, somatic, esthetic, and spiritual capacities. Such parishes are led by dedicated leaders who understand the value of assigning adequate budgetary resources that will transfer the rich catechetical dowry of Orthodoxy to the next generation. Only in this fashion can they provide them valuable safeguards against the dangers of Biblical revisionism, moral relativism, and postmodern secularism.

In his compilation of wise proverbs, King Solomon recommended parents should “train up children in the way he should go, and when they grow old they will not depart from it” (Proverbs 22:6). The Word of God alternatively warns that if we fail to teach our children to carefully observe and obey the commandments of God “we shall have sons and daughters but they shall not be ours; for they shall go into captivity” (Deuteronomy 28:43). By cultivating a culture of catechesis, Orthodox parish leaders join hands with families in safeguarding the young from the captivities of alcohol, drugs, sexual immorality, the occult and various types of cults.

The basis for all catechetical initiatives is outlined in the Great Commission of Jesus to His disciples. “Make disciples,” He commanded, “baptizing, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you” (Matthew 28:19-20). A noteworthy feature of this exhortation is that it directs Church leaders throughout the ages to teach, inspire, and cultivate faith in Christ. The task that remains for each local parish is to honestly assess the degree to which their community nurtures a culture that teaches, renews minds, and leads parishioners to praise, glorify, and serve our Lord and Savior.

An intentional, coordinated teaching and educational ministry is really important for the health of a church. As a primary source of joy and renewal, catechetical education is a vital ministry that deserves a parish’s best efforts. Without effective education, we run the risk of not passing on our Orthodox Christian faith

to the next generations. As such, the goal of catechetical education is not only the recital of Biblical verses, catechisms, and creeds. Students of all ages may churn out verses they have memorized, but with little change taking place in their personal lifestyles. In the final analysis, a culture of catechesis is a vital column of the vibrant Orthodox parish because it's ultimate goal is to help each member develop their own particular gifts and abilities and obediently engage in good works for the glory of God out of love for Christ and others (orthopraxis). As each member matures, the whole community grows by the grace of God into the image of Christ.