Nurturing the Seed of God-life

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Introduction

"A child becomes a learner from the first day of its life. Parents should be reminded to include basic religious learning among the things they communicate to their children, for they are the first and primary teachers."

Diocese of Newton Pastoral Handbook

We are made in the image and likeness of God. The image of God in us is our spiritual abilities. The likeness of God is our participation in the Divine nature given at Baptism, sealed by the gift of the Holy Spirit in Chrismation and nourished by the holy Body and Blood of our Lord and God, Jesus Christ. This likeness must increase and grow, nurtured through our liturgical participation, self-discipline and prayer. As parents, we also are called to help our children learn to nurture this seed of God-life in them from the first days of their life in Christ.

The period between birth and age three is a time of intense development during which the child absorbs knowledge from the environment. Our Church recognizes the very great importance of infancy through its rites at birth and through the bestowal of the sacraments of initiation even on infants. Its prayers on the first day of a child's life contemplate and reveal the contrasts between this world and the life redeemed by Christ. The naming of the child on the eighth day before the icon corner in the home marks the time when the Church claims the child for Jesus Christ. The first time the child is brought to church the community prays for its eventual entry into its life through baptism. Then, at last, the day of its second birth comes as the child receives divine life in the sacraments of initiation: Baptism, Chrismation and the Eucharist.

Just as the Church proclaimed the Lord to your child in these rites, you too, are called to share God with him every day. It is to assist you in this daily task of sharing the fulness of life with your child that this packet has been developed. It is not designed as a short course in child development, but as an aid on
helping to nurture the seed of God-life within your child: that likeness to God which must increase and grow as your child begins and progresses in theosis, the process of divinization.

In addition to this introductory leaflet the packet contains a series of five cards, printed on heavier paper, designed for frequent use. Each card lists some characteristics of the child at that stage of his growth. Each card also notes suggestions for sharing elements of the Christian life with your child. We suggest that you attach the appropriate card to your refrigerator door for easy reference as your child reaches the stage described.

As Eastern Christians, we teach by sanctifying all that we do, bringing the recognition of God and the worship of our Church into our daily experience. Several of the suggestions of this sort which are proper to the Byzantine tradition may not be familiar to you. While brief explanations are offered below, consult your priest or parish religious education personnel for specific help in implementing these suggestions. Further explanations of these and other ways of relating our Church's faith to your home life may be found in A Guide for the Domestic Church (Educational Services, Newton, Ma., 1986).

Most of all, enjoy the great role that is now yours: revealing the God of love to your child, who is His gift of love to you.
Preparing the Environment

As Christian parents of a newborn, our objective should be to enrich the child's environment with the sights and sounds, the smells and tastes and touches of God's love, remembering that it is through you, his parents, that he now experiences God's love.

The first condition for building a godly environment is that children should be raised in an atmosphere of order. There should be a routine established and generally adhered to. Naturally, flexibility is necessary but routine and order are important. There should be a place for everything and normally everything should be in its place. Better to set the standards early and train young children than to constantly nag pre-teens and teen-agers later. This applies to all things in the child's life, including the activities suggested here. They should be used daily with your child, making prayer or a religious story a daily experience from the start. In this way religious expression will become as natural to your child as eating or playing.

Another important rule of thumb in establishing a Christian family environment is that we do not teach anything that must be untaught or exposed as incorrect later, e.g. myths of Santa or the Easter bunny. We do teach legends and stories of our faith, i.e., Saint Nicholas, Saint Mary Magdalene and the red eggs, the basil growing at the site of the holy cross, etc. We take the baby to services, all that are possible for us. We sing to the baby and talk to the baby, using songs and hymns from the services. We instill a love of good music early in the child's life by playing classical music and songs with acceptable lyrics so that a firm basis of good taste may counteract the influence of rock and roll and whatever else may appear later.

An essential aspect for a Christian family environment in every Eastern Christian home should be an Icon Corner, the tangible sign of the family prayer life. The Icon Corner is that
special place in your home where icons of Christ and His saints are enshrined. The icon is an artistic representation of Christ, His saints or events in His life which are made present to us through the medium of paints and wood. Simply put, an icon is not just a religious picture: it is a "window to heaven." Thus the Icon Corner is the outward sign of your "domestic church", your family's citizenship in the heavenly kingdom. In the Icon Corner we keep a burning candle or oil lamp, the censer, the Holy Bible, holy water and holy oil.

The family Icon Corner, in a principal room in your home, is the special place where you gather as a family before God to pray and share His presence. There should also be an Icon Corner in your child's room where the Lord and His saints may be greeted in the morning and at bedtimes.

_Come Bless the Lord,_ an inexpensive packet containing prints of 39 large icons of all the major feast days and saints of the Byzantine calendar, may be purchased from God With Us Publications, Mc Kees Rocks, Pa (see page 12).

Individually mounted icon prints can be obtained from a number of sources. Hanging oil lamps, votive lights, seals for preparing Holy Bread, charcoal and incense as well as a censer and icons may often be obtained at a Middle Eastern or Greek specialty shop. Consult your priest or the religious education personnel in your parish for the address of one near you. They probably also have catalogues in their files listing icons, books and many of the aforementioned items which can be purchased by mail.
Suggested Activities

Blessings - Make the Sign of the Cross over food whenever you eat or feed your child, and trace the Sign of the Cross in the bath water before bathing your baby. The Sign of the Cross symbolizes our belief in the Trinity in whose name it is made (*In the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit...*). As we sign ourselves with the Sign of the Cross, our thumb and first two fingers are joined to symbolize the Father, Son and Holy Spirit; the other two fingers are held together to symbolize Jesus Christ, God and Man Who came to the world to save us.

As the baby sees you blessing your food and drink, the bath, the dough you will bake, and other things, he will begin to imitate you. In time you can teach him that by blessing all things we offer them to God.

In addition help the baby make the sign of the cross every time the words *Father, Son and Holy Spirit* are heard as you read or sing to him, preparing him for the day when he will begin to take an active part in your prayers and the services of the church.

Religious Stories - Many excellent religious books for children exist today, including Bible stories and stories with Christian life themes. In addition, there are a number of books on Eastern Church practices, the lives of Eastern Christian saints or folk tales from Eastern countries which can help the child grow in his own tradition as he grows in age.

Younger children enjoy *Arch Books*, an extensive series of Bible stories in verse, which can usually be obtained from local religious bookstores or from the publisher, Concordia Publishing House (see page 12). A number of their titles are also available on inexpensive video cassettes.
I Go to Church by Ann Marie Gidus-Mecera is the first of a projected series of illustrated booklets for pre-schoolers from St. Ignatius of Antioch Press, Columbus, Ohio (see page 12). Promised titles include I Thank Jesus and I Pray to Jesus.

A comparable work published in Australia, The World, My Church by Fr. John and Sophie Chyssavgis, is available from the Department of Religious Education of the Greek Orthodox Archdiocese of North and South America (see page 12).

The Guardian Angel Children’s Prayer Book, from the Toronto Eparchy Office of Religious Education is a lavishly illustrated and sturdily bound introduction to the Divine Liturgy and Church feasts for children. It is available from several U.S. sources, including the Eparchy of Newton Office of Educational Services.

Another Canadian publisher, Synaxis Press, publishes a series, Lives of the Saints for Children, which may also be of interest (see page 12).

Religious Songs - There are a number of religious fun songs that many of us heard from our parents and would do well to pass on to our children. We teach body parts and what to do with them by using something like Aunty Adele’s little verse:

"Two little eyes to look at God;
Two little ears to hear His word;
Two little feet to walk His Way;
Hands to serve Him day by day;
One little heart to love Him too;
Take them, O Jesus, and let them be
Always faithful and true to Thee."

Father Konstantine Mendrinos has written a number of similar songs from an Orthodox Christian perspective. The Me and My World song book and accompanying cassette are available from the Greek Archdiocese Religious Education Department (see page 12).
Going to Church - Despite the occasional distraction the presence of an infant invariably brings, it is important to bring your child into the worshipping community early and regularly, and to teach them reverence for the Eucharist, which they should receive whenever they are brought to the Liturgy. The General Policy for Administration of the Sacraments of Christian Initiation for the Eparchy of Newton sets forth a vision for children’s participation in the Liturgy:

"Parents should be encouraged to continue bringing their infants and young children to the sacred banquet as often as possible and are not to be discouraged from doing so in any way. They are, however, to be reminded of their obligation to stress appropriate reverence for this sacrament to even the youngest child and to communicate an understanding of this mystery as truly the Body and Blood of Christ to their child as soon as he is able to appreciate it.

"Parents should be encouraged to bring their child to church on a regular basis from the time of their Baptism so that the divine life he has received may be continually strengthened ... that by a constant and directed exposure to the sacred rites, [their] children will acquire a sense of reverence for God and, by continued reception of the sacred mysteries, their union with Him will be strengthened. The idea of many parents that they can get closer to God by leaving their infant at home is to be discouraged strongly."

Metanies and Prostrations - A metany is a profound bow. Bending from the waist, we touch the fingertips of the right hand to the floor and, raising up, make the Sign of the Cross. This is done as a sign of reverence before kissing an icon, receiving the Eucharist, kissing the cross, etc. A prostration is "falling on one’s face" before the Lord. Get on your knees and bend down until your face touches the floor. Prostrations are often made during prayers and church services during the Great Fast.

Teaching the young child how to perform these actions enables him to participate more actively in worship. Since the child is so physical and energetic, he is especially comfortable with such ritual gestures: perhaps more so than we adults!
Holy Bread and Wheat - Allow your children to help you prepare Holy Bread to be offered for the Divine Liturgy and to help prepare the boiled wheat which is used for memorial services in church. Use these opportunities to explain to the child the meaning of the Eucharist or the truth of death and the life of the world to come.

Children at this age can be taught that the Eucharist is for us the Body and Blood of Jesus who wants to feed us and keep us strong in this way. They can also understand that life with God is sweet and good like the wheat dish we prepare to remember someone who has died.

Two recipes for these foods are:

Holy Bread

1 pkg. compressed or dry yeast
2 1/2 cups very warm water
1 tsp. salt
6-7 cups (or more) flour

Dissolve yeast in water. Add salt, then half the flour and stir. Mix remainder of flour into the dough and knead at least ten (10) minutes until smooth and elastic. Divide dough in half and smooth into round cake pans that have been floured only. Do not grease pans. Smooth out dough until it covers the bottom of the pans. Take Religious Seal, dip into flour, shake off any excess flour and press into the center of the dough. As you press the seal into the dough, you and the children helping you should pray for those for whom the bread is being offered. Remove the seal and allow the dough to almost double in bulk. Then take a skewer and prick in each corner of the cross; with a sharp knife, cut a line around the outer edge of the risen loaf and bake in a pre-heated 350 degree oven for approximately 45-60 minutes until golden brown and done. Wipe the loaf with a wet cloth and wrap in a clean cloth until it cools. Seal in a plastic bag to take to church.
Wheat for Memorial Service

2 lbs. wheat (with "skin" on -- it's the golden or brown color, not white)
ground anise seed
water
dash of salt
powdered sugar
walnuts
golden raisins

Soak wheat overnight. Drain, then cover again with water. Add salt and anise seed (ground) and boil until tender. Drain, and spread out on clean cloth to dry. Add powdered sugar, raisins and nuts; then toss together. Mound on a silver tray or in a nice large bowl. Use white Jordan almonds to make the Sign of the Cross on the wheat and take to church.
Sources of Religious Books and Music

Concordia Publishing House
3558 South Jefferson Avenue
Saint Louis, MO 63118

Educational Services
19 Dartmouth Street
West Newton, MA 02165

Greek Orthodox Archdiocese
Department of Religious Education
50 Goddard Avenue
Brookline, MA 02146

St. Ignatius of Antioch Press
6665 Huntley Road, Suite K
Columbus, OH 43229.

Synaxis Press
Box 404
Chilliwack, B.C., Canada V2P 6J7

Sources of Icons

Icon packet:
God With Us Publications
PO Box 505
McKees Rocks, PA 15136

Mounted prints:
Monastery Icons
Route 1, Box 75
Geneva, NB 68361
Birth - 6 Months

Some Characteristics:
- becomes increasingly aware of and reacts to sights and sounds;
- recognizes familiar persons and objects;
- coos or hums in response to music;
- may begin to creep;
- grasps objects.

Suggestions:
- hang mobile in crib and/or playpen (include cross, icons);
- set up icon corner in baby’s room;
- greet the Lord and His Saints in the morning and at bedtimes;
- bless food and bath water;
- take baby to Church services and to receive the Eucharist regularly;
- thank and praise God audibly and frequently;
- sing, talk to baby.
Suggestions:

- Keep up with the previous suggestions.
- Read short stories, poems (e.g., "The Arch (Very Simply)")
- Talk about things, behavior, give reasons.

Church
- Sing to baby: all kinds of "good songs"
- Frequently
- Help baby make the sign of the Cross.
- Give small icons to hold and compare.
- Hang icons within baby’s sight.

and behavior from memory.
- Enjoys playing with people,imitates people.
- Creeps or crawls, may begin to walk.
- Listens to conversation and singing tunes.
- Utters more consonant sounds, babbling.
- Pincher grip.
- Grasps and manipulates objects, develops.
- Seeks hidden objects.
- Regards objects at length: may compare.

Some Characteristics:

Months

6 - 12
12 - 18 Months

*Some Characteristics:*

- searches for hidden objects;
- can group a few objects by shape and color;
- identify animals in pictures;
- experiments with spatial relationships (height, distance, etc.)
- remembers events for longer periods;
- responds to directions and understands much of what is said to him;
- babbles in short sentences;
- shows greater interest in what adults do;
- gives affection to human beings and favored objects;
- begins to develop conscience.

*Suggestions:*

- read stories (*Bible, Arch Books, lives of the Saints*);
- help to group like icons together;
- identify Saints and events in icons and books;
- sing, as suggested before, and little "Bible School" songs;
- talk about Christ and His Saints, and about prayer;
- discipline, saying sorry to God, parents and friends when necessary;
- kiss icons and holy things;
- say prayers out loud.
Some Characteristics:
- climbs;
- turns pages, scribbles and scrawls;
- finds hidden objects;
- imitates actions (eg helps with household tasks);
- knows and names body parts;
- listens to stories; repeats words; points in answer to, "Where is..."
- follows two commands;
- says "no," uses words together properly;
- develops sense of property, has favorite objects;
- dresses self;
- puts away toys;
- gaining independence.

Suggestions:
- read Bible and other stories regularly (develop habit of turning to Scripture and lives of the saints);
- reinforce the sign of the cross, teach metanies, prostrations;
- use "Auntie's poem" to teach body parts;
- use "three period lesson form," eg.:
  "this is a cross"
  "give me the cross"
  "what is this?"
- allow child to dust icons, help trim oil lamp or change vigil lights, change the icons with the seasons (eg Pascha, Nativity);
- continue to teach prayers, only now with more drill and memory.