Godparents/Godchildren Sunday & Grandparent /Grandchildren Sunday

Reflection by Fr. Luke Veronis

How many of us know of someone who says, "I believe that you have to give children the freedom to learn on their own. You shouldn't force your own beliefs upon them. Let them discover truth for themselves gradually, as they grow up." This is a common mantra I have heard from people not committed to any religious faith. How do we respond to that?

Well, when one priest heard this comment, he invited the person to come and see the beautiful garden he had behind the church. This skeptic was a fond lover of flowers and gardens, so they followed the priest enthusiastically. As they looked behind the church, though, they saw a field covered with weeds. Every few feet, one could see a beautiful flower trying to pop up its head, yet everywhere dominated the thorns and thistle.

As the skeptic looked with a perplexed glance, the priest highlighted, "There is a beautiful garden here, but it is hidden under the many weeds and thorns fighting for space. To bring forth the beauty of the garden, a gardener must weed it continuously, water it, nourish and care for the flowers, so that they increase and grow, while the weeds decrease and diminish. IF one lets the field on its own, it will naturally be full of weeds."

Aren't our children and youth like this garden? Full of great potential, but in need of much care and cultivation. There are many influences battling for their attention in our world today. Only when we protect them, nourish them, prune them, and care for them, can they grow into the beautiful flowers they were meant to be!"

St. Theofan the Recluse, one of the most famous Russian saints, said, **"Of all holy works, the education of children is the most holy."**

We see the special love that Christ had for children in the story where people were bringing little children to Jesus for him to bless them. His disciples rebuked the parents, thinking that Jesus was too busy to be bothered with insignificant children. Christ, however surprised his disciples by saying, **"Let the children come to me, do not hinder them, for to such as these belongs the Kingdom of God. Truly I tell you, anyone who will not receive the kingdom of God like a little child will never enter it."** Mk 10:14

Children hold such an essential part in the lives of many. Whether we are parents, grandparents, godparents, uncles, aunts, or teachers, most of us hold certain children dear to our lives. They bring us joy, as well as heartache. They lift our spirits, as well as challenge our patience and endurance. They are a blessing to us, just as we are called to be a blessing to them.

Caring for our children and raising them by the grace of God, is a sacred, yet sobering, blessed yet challenging responsibility. That is why parents often need the assistance of others, like grandparents, godparents, uncles, aunts, and friends of the family. The Church has always understood the central role the family plays in the formation and education of children. It is in the home that we discover and develop our identity, cultivate our virtues, create our visions, and prepare ourselves for the world outside. It is in the home where we are first educated and taught about the divine. It is in the home that we say our first prayers, and discover the importance, or unimportance, of God and faith. It is our family that creates a foundation that often stays with us until the end of our lives.

Indeed, the Book of Proverbs wisely teaches, **"Train a child in the way he should go, and when he is old, he will not depart from the path."** (Prov 22:6)

On Godparents/Godchildren Sunday, together with Grandparents/Grandchildren Sunday - We lift up these two important roles and relationships that many of us have in our lives, but we could just as readily lift up the parents themselves, along with the uncles, aunts, teachers, and any Christian adult who has a relationship with children.

As Christian adults, we have a sacred task to instill in our children a Christ-centered foundation, an immoveable base that does not chase after every modern fad and ideology, but which remains firm upon our 4000 year Judeo-Christian heritage.

A central teaching in the Old Testament tells us: *"These commandments that I give you today are to be upon your hearts. Impress them on your children. Talk about them when you sit at home and when you walk along the road, when you lie down and when you get up. Tie them as symbols on your hands and bind them on your foreheads. Write them on the door frames of your houses and on your gates." (Deuteronomy 6:6-9)* The word of God is supposed to be

a close companion in our lives. It is something we talk about continuously to our children, guiding them into a dynamic relationship with our loving Father in heaven and teaching them to love Him above all else in life.

St. Clement emphasized, **"The primary lesson for life must be implanted in the soul from the earliest age, and the primary lesson for children is to know the eternal God, the One who gives everlasting life."**

As godparents, and grandparents, how can you fulfill this sacred task you have in assisting parents to raise their children in a godly fashion in the midst of a secular world. I have a few suggestions:

1. **Become a strong support for the parents by taking an active interest in the overall life of the child, including his/her spiritual development.** As a godparent, these parents chose you to be a spiritual influence in the life of their child. Fulfill your role, not solely by giving material gifts on birthdays and Christmas, but moreso fulfill your role by setting a good Christian example with your life. Be a constant reminder to the child of his Christian identity and Christian responsibility. And both godparents and grandparents, remember that parents can often use another perspective and willing hand as they guide their children in adulthood.

2. **Pray through the ups and downs of life with your godchild and grandchild, and let the godchild and grandchild know that you are praying for them every day. Teach them how to pray! Pray with them.** One of the greatest gifts you can give a child is to buy them a simple Orthodox Prayer Book, and then teach them how to use it! Our new "Agape" Bookstore, which will be open after Liturgy, is selling some great prayer books for children! Buy one today and give it to your godchild and grandchild.

3. **Celebrate your godchild/grandchild's special days, reminding them that their life is a gift from God. What they do in life will be their gift back to God.** Along with birthdays, celebrate your godchild and grandchild's nameday in a special manner. Buy them an icon of their patron saint. Find the life of the saint and share it with them. Do something special, and spiritual, with them on this personal feastday.

4. **On other holidays, like Christmas and Easter, emphasize the spiritual aspects of the feasts, creating memorable Christ-centered traditions.** Don't simply follow the commercial and material temptations of these holidays. Be creative as you try to be a constant reminder of that which is holy.

5. **As a godparent, this child received his/her first Holy Communion in your arms. Remind the child how you were there for his/her first Holy Communion, and invite them to come to Church with you, and receive Holy Communion together once again.** If you live close by, make this a regular tradition. If your godchild lives farther away, go out of your way to do this as often as possible! And grandparents can follow the same advice!

6. **Call your godchild or grandchild every Sunday** and ask them what they learned in Sunday School. Even ask them if they remember the Gospel lesson, and discuss what lessons they learned from it. **Don't be embarrassed, or afraid, to discuss such spiritual issues with the child. If you won't do it, who will?**

On the same line of thought, buy the child an age appropriate Bible, and tell them that you're going to ask them questions about the different stories. As the child grows up, buy other Bibles that will speak to his/her age.

7. **Encourage your godchild/grandchild to serve God through volunteering in community service projects. Connect your life lessons with today's Gospel Reading of the Last Judgement – "Whatever you do to the least of my brothers or sisters, you do to me."** A great way to bond with the child is to make a special visit together to an old age home or hospital. As the child grows, challenge them to participate in a cross-cultural mission trip. As they think about colleges and their future, encourage them to consider a vocation in serving God – plant a seed for one to possibly become a priest, or a Church worker.

8. Finally, keep frequent contact with the children. Send them love notes often. Drop them texts, emails, and phone calls, Let this child know that no matter how much distance separates you, your love will always be close by. The greatest gift a child can have is the love of those close to him/her.

Remember, "Of all holy works, the education of children is the most holy" St. Theophan said. Let all of us godparents and grandparents, as well as every Christian adult, heed these words, and fulfill our sacred responsibility to our children.