

The Family Altar: Establishing a Place of Prayer

by: Michael Hyatt

As a young junior high school student, I wasn't fast enough to run most track and field events. But one event I could participate in was the relay race.

A large part of our training was concerned with handing off the baton. The idea was to sprint as fast as you could to the next runner on your team. His job was to meet you about fifteen yards before the hand-off and run with you, being careful to match your pace exactly. In this way, you didn't have to stop to hand him the baton; you could continue the race without losing momentum. If everything went smoothly, the baton was passed from one hand to the next and the race progressed.

The hand-off was the single most important part of the race. Not that it was that difficult, mind you; it just led to the worst of consequences if it wasn't managed properly. The running part was easy. You simply did your best and that was that. But the hand-off had to be conducted with care lest - horror of horrors - you dropped the baton and thereby cost your team precious time and probably the race as well.

Running too slowly was excusable; all you could do was your best. But dropping the baton was totally unforgivable. Such a tragedy would lead to the immediate scorn of your teammates and the derision of your opponents. It was something that most all of us dreaded and worked to avoid.

Recently, I asked a group of young parents in our parish what their chief priority was with their children. Not surprisingly, each of them spoke of passing on their faith to their children. Like a runner in a relay race, no one wanted to stumble. The consequences of doing so were more than any of us wanted to consider.

But as a practical matter, how do we pass on our faith to our children? How do we successfully hand off our faith to the next generation so that they can continue the race and do their part to advance the Christian mission? No doubt, there are a variety of ways. But I would suggest that one of the main ones is the practice of family prayer.

The Home: Icon of the Church

As an Orthodox Christian I've come to believe that the Kingdom of God is the central reality of life. It takes precedence over every other allegiance, over every other priority. But that Kingdom is not some ethereal, far away place. No, it is concretely manifested in the life of the Church, especially in the Divine Liturgy. In other words, if you want to experience the reality of the Kingdom, look at the Church which is the principal icon of that Kingdom. But if this is true, of what significance is the Christian home? Does it have a role in Christ's Kingdom?

As a Protestant, I believed (though I would have never said it in quite this way) that the Church was an icon of the home. I was convinced that the Christian home was the central institution of society and everything else - even the Church - was secondary. But now, as an Orthodox Christian, I've come to believe that I had it all backwards: the home is an icon of the Church.

This is far more than some esoteric, theological point. It has important ramifications for our family life and especially for how we raise our children. Amazingly, this idea actually makes the home more important, not less. Let me elaborate. In the Church, Christ has established a government made up of bishops, priests, and deacons. And in like manner, He has also established a government in the home: the parents who are, in a very real sense, domestic priests. Consider the fact that the hymns sung at an Orthodox wedding as the bride and groom are led around the table are the very same ones sung at an ordination of a priest when he is led around the altar.

Parents, like priests in the Church, have a responsibility to shepherd the flock allotted to their charge (see I Peter 5:1-4). And as parents, we must rediscover our roles as domestic priests and our corresponding responsibility to pass on our faith to our children.

There are, of course, many more parallels between the Church and the home, but space permits me to mention just one: the centrality of the altar. The primary responsibility of a priest is to officiate at the altar. It is there that, representing the people, he brings their gifts of bread and wine before God's throne as an offering of praise and thanksgiving. And, it is also there that, representing the Lord Himself, the priest returns to the people the holy food of Christ's flesh and blood. Similarly, the family altar should be the central features of every Christian home and prayer its most important activity. The family altar is the primary place where we pass on to our children the "baton" of our faith.

But if this is true, what are some practical ways in which we can focus our family's activities on prayer?

The Family Altar: A Place of Prayer

If you are to take your role as priest seriously, you must first of all construct an altar for your family. In order to do something well, you need a place to do it. Dad needs a place where he can fix broken bikes and build bird feeders. Mom needs a place where she can sew and mend clothing. The children need a place where they can play and make crafts. The family also needs a place to pray - the family altar.

This special place of prayer does not have to be fancy, but it does have to be special. Remember, it is a place where the family carries out its most vital activities: prayer, the

reading of the sacred Scriptures, and the announcing of important events in the life of the family.

While each family's altar will be uniquely theirs, most altars share certain common characteristics. Usually the altar faces the East. From ancient times Christians have seen in the rising of the sun a symbolic representation of the coming of Christ, the Sun of Justice (see Malachi 4:2). The altar can be a simple shelf mounted on a wall, a small table covered with a tablecloth or, as in my family's case, a special dresser with a glass top. Regardless of the form it takes, most family altars include certain basic components: a few icons on the wall or on the altar itself, candles, a Bible, and prayer books. Optional items include a small incense burner, candle snuffer, and a bottle of Holy Water.

When is the right time to gather at the family altar? Anytime, of course. But through the centuries, Christians have especially gathered twice a day for corporate prayer: morning and evening. Morning prayer gives us an opportunity to bring our needs and concerns to God before we embark on the day's activities. It also helps each person "set his mind on the things above" (Colossians 3:1) where he can address the bustle and demands of the day from a spiritual frame of reference.

Evening prayer, on the other hand, is an opportunity for use to review the day, to confess where we have failed, and to give thanks where we have succeeded.

Prayer during these two times doesn't have to be long; ten to fifteen minutes is generally sufficient. The important thing is to be consistent. It's far better to spend five minutes a day every day praying together than to spend fifteen or twenty minutes praying a couple of times of week. The general principle is to become faithful in little before we stretch ourselves - and our family! - to become faithful in much (see Luke 16:10).

There are, of course, other times to pray. Whenever there is a special need in the family it's a good practice to stop what we're doing and gather for a few moments at the family altar. In like manner, whenever something especially good happens, it's a good idea to stop and give thanks. These times of spontaneous prayer are wonderful tools for communicating to our children the reality of God's presence and His involvement in our lives.

Once you've selected the appropriate time and place, you still have one important decision left to make: what to pray at the family altar. For many people this is the most difficult. Fortunately, there are a variety of resources available to help us. Good prayer books can be obtained from a variety of Orthodox publishing houses. Regardless of which one you use, try to get a copy for each member of your family. This will encourage everyone's participation and give you, as the leader, the option of calling on various members of the family to lead in certain prayers (something my children love to do).

When using a prayer book, it is not necessary to say every prayer nor is it necessary to "stick to the script." If you're just starting out or if your children are small (and their attention spans short), you might want to pray only the Trisagion Prayers, have a short time for extemporaneous personal petitions, and then go immediately to the dismissal. In my home, we often use the prayers as a springboard for our own prayers. This is especially true when we're praying what is referred to as the General Intercessions. For example, if we're praying for the whole Church, we might pause after the written prayer and pray spontaneously for the specific needs of our local parish. Similarly, if we're praying for the civil authorities, we might pause and pray for specific needs in our own community. In this way, prayer becomes a living, dynamic activity rather than a dull, repetitive one. To me, this is liturgical prayer at its best.

One final note: prayer was never intended to be a monologue. In genuine prayer God speaks to us, and we speak to Him. Both are necessary for dialogue. But how does God speak to us? Are we to expect an audible voice? Generally, God speaks to us through the reading of the Holy Scriptures. Thus, Bible reading should be an integral part of our family worship. God specifically charges parents to have His Word upon their hearts and then to pass it on to their children (see Deuteronomy 6:4-9). What better context for Bible reading than as we are gathered together as a family for the purpose of prayer.

A Few Miscellaneous Tips

In conclusion, let me give you three brief tips, items that will go a long way toward making your family's experience at the family altar a meaningful one.

Start small. You can't run a marathon without training and neither can you engage in long prayers without training yourself in the short ones.

Be sensitive to your children's attention spans. Yes, it's good to stretch them, but don't break them! The last thing you want is for prayer to be something your children dread. Again, it's far better to keep it brief and meaningful than to frustrate your children - and ultimately yourself - by reading long drawn-out prayers. Remember, the Publican was justified with a very short prayer: "God be merciful to me a sinner." And the thief on the cross entered Paradise with one sentence: "Remember me, O Lord, when You come into Your Kingdom."

Let everyone participate. Although you will be tempted, don't insist on doing everything yourself. Make sure everyone has a book (even the little ones that can't read), and let your children lead some of the prayers. If they can read, let them read the Scripture lessons. If you follow this principle, you'll find that they look forward to prayer and, little by little, begin to own it as their prayer.

Reprinted from ...Again, Vol. 12, No. 1, pages 7-9.

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