

## **The Holiness of the Christian Family**

In this article, Fr. Andrew discusses the way in which the Christian family is understood as holy and how our future campaign ought to reflect such a reality.

The modern family today consists of everything and anything according to the hit comedy television series. Modern Family has aired for five seasons and averages twelve million viewers per episode. The notion of what constitutes an “American family” is undergoing drastic changes today. The changes present a challenge for Christians to understand the uniqueness of the gift of the family and its relationship with God. “It seems that in many cases any two people who share an address are to be considered a family, whether or not they are married or have children together. So, the family is under heavy pressure, because its very sense of identity and uniqueness is being eroded by this huge change in public sentiment. If everybody and everything is a family, then nobody is truly a family in any meaningful sense.” (Archbishop Demetrios, Keynote Address Clergy-Laity Congress 2014)

Archbishop Demetrios in his keynote address at the Clergy-Congress last summer drew our attention to a passage in Ephesians which declares the uniqueness of the Christian family. “For this reason, I bow my knees to the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, from Whom every family in the heavens and on earth is named, that He would grant you, according to the wealth of His glory, to be strengthened with might through His Spirit in the inner man, that the Christ might dwell in your hearts through faith, having been rooted and founded in love, in order that you might be able to apprehend with all the saints what is the breadth and length and depth and height, and to know the love of the Christ which surpasses knowledge, that you might be filled to all the fullness of God.” (The Orthodox New Testament Translation, Eph. 3:14-19) The Archbishop explains: “The family is an institution of divine origin and character, not merely a social arrangement that arises from the exigencies of earthly affairs. From God every family in heaven and on earth is named. The family is a powerful microcosmic expression of God’s fatherly care for the whole universe. Therefore, if the concept and the very name of ‘family’ derives directly from God the Father, it is truly a holy thing. Such a sublime word the word ‘family’ is not to be used lightly, not to be redefined according to every whim of moral or social convenience!” (Archbishop Demetrios, Keynote Address Clergy-Laity Congress 2014)



If the family is a unique and “holy gift” from God then it needs to be safeguarded and nurtured in accordance with God’s plan. Archbishop Demetrios challenges parents today to take a careful look at how our children spend their time outside the home. As our community begins to consider the purpose of building a new Community Center there is the real possibility that our families may find themselves too busy with activities outside

the Church to be interested in or even value the place of a Community Center and its positive role on the formation of the Christian family.

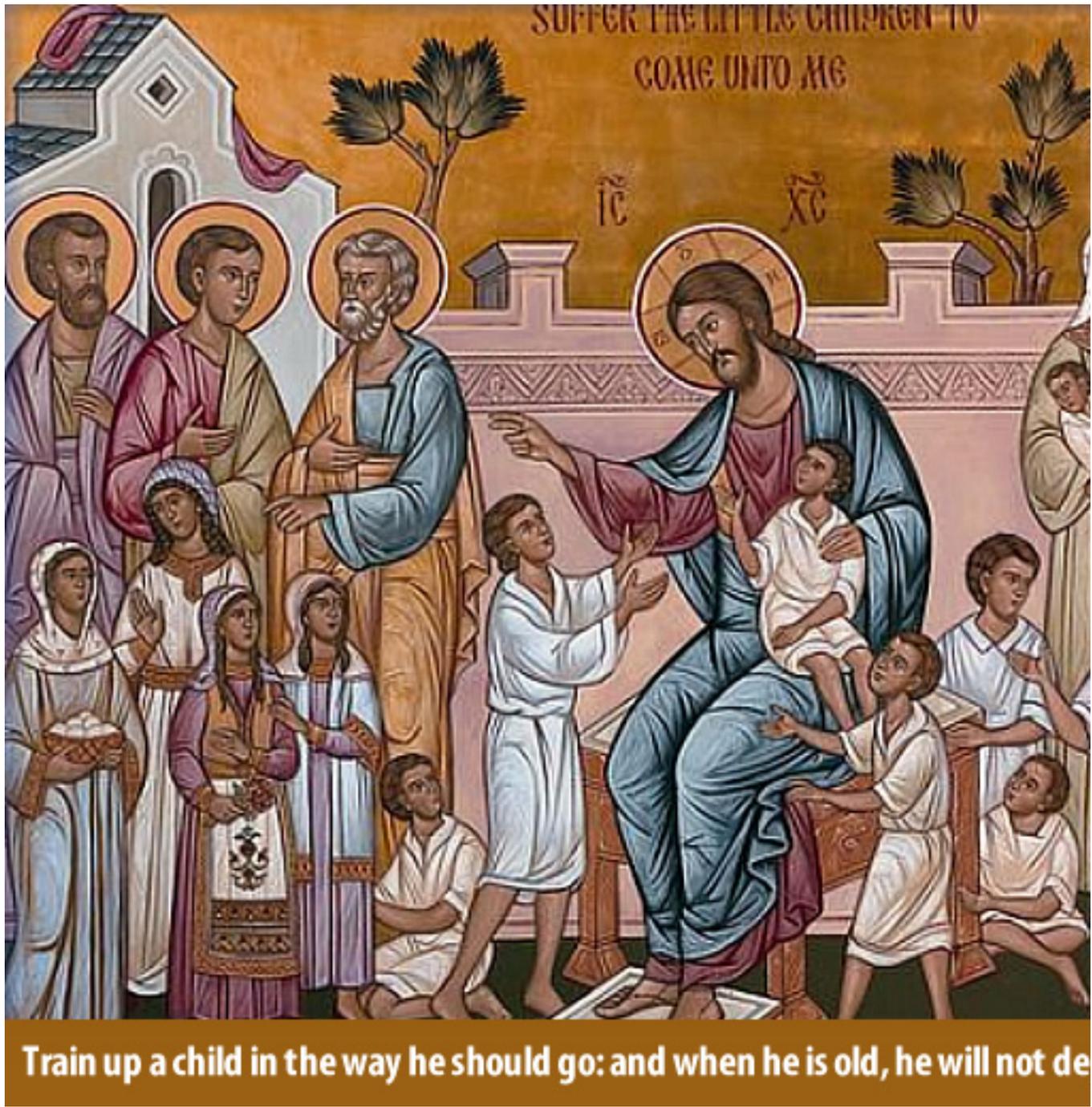
“The demands of the modern life weaken the bonds between family members, between parents and children, between siblings, between grandparents and grandchildren. Economic concerns take both parents out of the home and into the workplace for more and more hours each day, each week. Falling birthrates mean that children no longer find playmates easily in their own family and neighborhoods, so that organized sports and activities away from home are becoming the norm. Children’s athletics are becoming a focal point, taking children out of their homes for more and more hours each week. How many of our families find their Sunday mornings dominated by activities other than worship in the Church and Sunday School! The real work of parenting – which is to say, of developing character, religious convictions and life-skills in children – falls to coaches and teachers. Add to that, the dominion of all screens in the contemporary lives of people: television screens, computer screens, iPads and iPods, tablets and smartphones. The modern culture seems to be a culture of the “face in a box” at all times of day and night. People no longer look into the faces of one another; they stare at the various screens, mesmerized and transfixed. And how about the replacement of face to face dialog and communication with texting!” (Archbishop Demetrios, Keynote Address Clergy-Laity Congress 2014).

The purpose of Assumption’s Youth Groups (Moms ‘N’ Tots, JOY, Jr. GOYA and Sr. GOYA) are to provide children and their families with an experience which allows them to share their faith, develop relationships and share their struggles in living a Christian life in a non-Christian world. The “coaches and teachers” are the Youth Advisors and Clergy who are all very concerned with the importance of spiritual development and formation. Assumption has always relied upon young couples and parents to serve as Youth Advisors. Youth programs cease to exist when parents no longer care enough to serve as advisors. The Orthodox Church understands that spiritual formation involves all four pillars of Christian Life and each is equally important. The pillars of spiritual development involve worship, fellowship, service and witness and are meant for every Orthodox Christian and not just the youth.

#### 1.) Through Worship & Prayer we Know Who we Are

Attending Sunday worship together as a family affirms the uniqueness of the gift of the family as something that comes from God. Furthermore it is only in worship that the “laity” the unique people of God become the Church and offer prayers for the world as part of their function as members of the Royal Priesthood. In worship we “taste and see” the goodness of God and are changed, lifted above the earth and given the Kingdom of God as the ultimate reference point for our earthly lives. In the Liturgy we ask for mutual forgiveness and receive forgiveness and everlasting life. Each week becomes a call to live out in the world the life in Christ which we have just received – becoming witnesses to this new reality! The early Christians in the 4<sup>th</sup> C. met daily in the morning and evening for common daily prayers. The liturgical historian Robert Taft remarks that there was as much evidence for Christians to attend daily Matins and

Vespers as there was the obligation as well to attend Sunday liturgy. (Robert Taft, *Oriental Lumen XVI Conference*, 8/8/2012, "On the role of the Laity"). Since today daily Matins and Vespers are no longer part of most Orthodox community life, this must be done in the home by offering daily prayers. The reason Matins and Vespers are offered at Assumption seasonally is not to completely abandon this aspect of being the unique family of God that worships together.



2.) Through Fellowship & Community We Become Who We Are

The Church that worships together becomes a unique creation, a community and family in Christ. Our Lord gave a radical new understanding of what constitutes a Christian family. "And a crowd was sitting about Him; and they said to Him, 'Behold, Your Mother and Your brothers outside are seeking for You.' And He answered them, saying, 'Who is My mother or My brother?' And He looked round about on those who sat about Him in a circle, and said, 'Behold, My mother and My brothers!' For whosoever shall do the will of God, the same is My brother and My sister and My mother." (The Orthodox New Testament Translation, Mk. 3:32-35) A family in Christ is constituted not from common interest in a particular sport but is the product of the presence of the Holy Spirit. There are many valuable lessons from participating in sports, music or any extracurricular activity that create well-rounded individuals. At the same time however participating in these activities should not be done at the expense of developing relationships with those whom we share a life in the Spirit. The relationships that form in a Church community have the unique quality of an extended family which considers everyone as members of one another. This is a reflection on earth of the reality of the Kingdom of Heaven.

### 3.) Having the Servant's Heart of Christ We Act Who We Are

Serving Christ in the poorest of the poor is the fruit of authentic worship. If in worship we come to "know the love of Christ" this leads to seeing Him in everyone especially those whom society has forgotten...the lonely, the isolated, the hungry, the imprisoned, the naked, the thirsty and the ill. Finding ministries through which our faith can be put into action fulfills the membership requirements of the Royal Priesthood. As we call upon the Holy Spirit in the liturgy to come upon "us and these gifts here offered" in order to change them into the "body and blood of Christ" we indeed are also changed by receiving the Holy Spirit and participating in His Body and Blood. We become the bread of life which must be broken in order for us to become distributed as food to others. The love of Christ fills our hearts so that overflowing with His love we truly die to ourselves, denying our self-interests and begin to become fellow co-servants of Christ. Wherever our Lord is, there we must also be! "Verily, verily, I say to you, unless the grain of the wheat that falls into the earth should die, it abides alone; but if it should die, it bears much fruit. The one who loves his life shall lose it; and the one who hates his life in this world shall keep it to life eternal. If anyone serves Me, let him keep on following Me; and where I am, there My servant shall be also. And if anyone serves Me, the Father shall honor him." (The Orthodox New Testament Translation, Jn. 12:24-26)

### 4.) Witnessing faith in the world.

The Disciples were ultimately sent out into the world in order to make other Disciples of Christ. Here, we as Orthodox have the most to offer the world and yet have been the least successful at doing it. The reason is because the first three pillars of spiritual formation have been neglected, forgotten and silenced by our over indulgence in worldly things.

The building of our Community Center can either become a place of witnessing faith to the world or a social club gathering place no different from any other such place. The difference will be found in the spiritual maturity of the people who find themselves

blessed for having such a place and inspired to use the space for the glory of God, for the sharing of love, for the preservation of the unique gift from God and the holiness of the Christian family.

In Christ's love,

Fr. Andrew