

## **Blessed Are The Children**

### *Return To Innocence*

It has been a real blessing to me as a priest to speak and listen to our children in Church on Sundays. If you haven't figured it out yet, they write the sermons, and I am just along for the ride. It's a precious miracle that takes place because of their openness and innocence. I have always thought that God is particularly interested in planting seeds in their souls at this stage of life so He tends to assist and speak in profound and inspiring ways through the hearts of these children.

Our heavenly Father intentionally created humanity to begin life as a child dependant upon parents for survival. I suppose He could have altered the laws of biology so that a human would be born fully developed but He didn't. The reason is obvious, just as a child's body needs "another" to live, so also our souls need God for survival, growth and development. God also created us with the freedom of choice. Fr. Hopko has remarked that often sin is defined as making bad choices, but for the Christian there is only one choice - to follow Christ and obey the will of God. The scriptures warn us, "For narrow is the gate and straitened is the way that leads away to life, and few are they who find it (Mt. 7:14)." Most make the wrong choice and live independent of God.

The consequence of making the wrong choice is also clearly taught in scripture - it leads to death. St. John the theologian wrote in his gospel: "Then Jesus said to them, "Truly, truly, I say to you, unless you should eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink His blood, you are not having life in yourselves. "The one who partakes of My flesh and drinks My blood has eternal life; and I will raise him up in the last day. "For My flesh is true food and My blood is true drink. "The one who eats My flesh and drinks My blood abides in Me, and I in him. "Even as the living Father sent Me forth, and I live because of the Father, also the one who eats Me, even he shall live because of Me (Jn. 6:53-57)." The teaching is that Christ is life and this "life" is gifted to us through the reception of Holy Communion. Each Sunday we make the choice to be fed with the life of Christ but what happens to this gift once we leave church? If nothing is done after the seeds of faith are planted, no cultivation or growth is possible.

### Stop Being "Sunday-Only" Christians

Every created thing starts as a seed, develops over time, has a season of bearing fruit and then dies. We also know that the environment in which life develops has a direct effect upon how something turns out. Too much sun, not enough water, surely leads to death. If our spiritual life is only watered once a week with an hour-and-a-half of "church" the possibility of growth, development or change, becomes very minimal. It is equivalent to planting a seed each week, not watering it and it fails to sprout. So we go back to nursery, buy more seeds and the cycle repeats itself. Nothing will change in one's spiritual life until the decision is made to stop this cycle.

## Water Comes in Many Forms

The most accessible, easy-to-do method which leaves absolutely no one with an excuse is prayer. You cannot say Bible Study is on the wrong day; or I cannot come to the adult catechism class because it conflicts with my must-see TV show; or I am too busy doing homework with the kids. Everyone can pray if we make the time. Excuses vanish when priorities change. If we do not pray, whatever blessings received on Sunday, whatever great inspiration was received will most likely be lost. When something dies, something undesired inevitably starts to grow in its place. Spiritually speaking that would be the various signs of vice such as: a bad attitude, gossip, criticism, envy, hatred (especially of the good), jealousy, malicious talk, despair and depression. Prayer sustains the life of Christ in us and allows for growth. How do you know if you are growing? The next stage is, fertilizing.

## Fertilize with Spiritual Nutrients

I love reading the homilies of St. John the "golden mouth," in preparation for the weekly Bible Study. In one homily he speaks on how we have become "strangers" to heaven. "And what righteous men were to the world, 'strangers' and 'dead,' we are to Heaven. And what they were to Heaven, alive and acting as citizens, that we are to the world. Wherefore we are dead, because we have refused that which is truly life, and have chosen this which is but for a time." Prayer produces the desire to cultivate virtue in one's life. As a human soul begins to be fed by its relationship with God, the desire for more grows. It is only natural to want to do everything possible to create the greatest growth possible. This leads to many forms of spiritual nutrients that increase godliness in all of its various forms of virtue.

The bible is the first (no excuse for not indulging) nutrient readily available, perhaps covered with dust, that no one can say - I have no time to read the bible. Just think for a moment of all the time in a day spent reading for various worldly things. Once we start reading the bible, while maintaining a life of prayer, the words of Christ come alive to us and then the dialogue begins. Speaking, questioning, seeking understanding and wisdom, become an active dialogue between God and us. This leads to attending an adult catechism, a bible study, a retreat or an appointment with the priest. It may also lead to speaking about God with someone who seems connected and plugged into a dialogue with God.

## Growth - "from Glory to Glory"

Unfortunately, unless we have genetically engineered seeds, every person inherits some "junk." There are hidden factors, genetic codes that carry inherited traits from the parents that show up in children. Recent research has shown for example that there is some evidence that alcoholism is linked to an inherited gene. Alcoholism seems to run in families. The wise Fr. Schmemmann once said, "The whole of the spiritual life is to deal

with what we have been dealt." Cultivating virtue is impossible without help from someone who is a cultivator. Yes, all growth is the result of God's grace but all the grace in heaven cannot penetrate a soul that is unwilling to yield to grace. Sin, guilt, shame, work to demoralize and stop any change from ever occurring, what is needed is a return to being an innocent "child" again.

#### A Return to Innocence

"Truly, I say to you, unless you be turned about and become as the little children, in no wise shall you enter into the kingdom of the heavens. "Whosoever therefore shall humble himself as this little child, this one is the greater in the kingdom of the heavens (Mt. 18:3-5)." Innocence allows for mistakes and gives a person the admirable ability to learn from them without having a bruised ego. Innocence sees every moment as an opportunity for discovery. The flame of innocence is a very precious part of spiritual growth without which nothing happens.

Saints know exactly who they are - sinners. They are ready for spiritual warfare, sacrifice and to willfully submit to the corrections by God (Hebrews 12)." Children are like that in a way-- aware of the consequences about obtaining a wrong goal, be it the conquest of the cookie jar or the antagonizing of a sibling. Once corrected, they learn. It may take repeated attempts, but in time they get it. Each new lesson raises them higher and higher. A humble soul is fertile soil.

#### Growth is Enhanced with Someone to Prune

Pruning removes that which hinders growth. Pruning all that is dead or in the process of dying stimulates new growth. Being honest, not hiding behind pride or what others think of us allows for constructive pruning. A good marriage, for example, has to have this quality so that the relationship does not stagnate but progresses and grows in love. Our Lord walked on this earth with innocence, honesty, and identity. He was blatantly frank with the hypocrites and lovingly compassionate with His disciples. He cleared out the Temple with a vengeance and welcomed the children to come unto Him. To humble oneself before Christ is to pray for insight that God may reveal to us that which we cannot see. We try to obey the commands of the Gospel and follow Christ, yet, how do we know if we are doing the right thing and are not in a state of delusion? Someone else is needed to prune away all that is dead in us. Seeking spiritual direction and guidance is a form of pruning. There is only one pruner - Christ. Seek out someone who is being pruned and shows forth the fruit thereof.

Everyone is created in the image of God and blessed with dignity. Our Lord was found to be in the company of harlots and thieves, the very outcasts of society. He was openly judged for his associations, but that never stopped him, he was pruning. He came to cultivate the seeds of faith and repentance. Christ is an ever bright light that reveals all that is hidden within us. With this Light we can re-discover our innocence in Christ and

become as children. We can begin to learn joy again. Whatever comes our way is a God-sent lesson. His correction and chastisements remind us we are loved and not forgotten by God. He is just working in us so that the seeds planted in us every Sunday may sprout, come forth, and bear fruit abundantly.

+Fr. Andrew