

The Family as the Extension of the Church

by Fr. George Aswad

May I begin this morning by sharing with you an experience of mine. Because of personal reasons, it was necessary for my wife Grace and I to have a new home built. When the contractor was preparing to pour the foundation, I placed a cross in the forms as the concrete was poured. It engulfed the cross. In my mind I symbolically dedicated this home to be built on the cross of Christ.

This newly constructed house of concrete, wood and metal will become a home when my family and I move in. This home is eight miles from the St. George Church of Niagara Falls. So here is the church and here is the home.

We ask the question, "How do we extend the church into the home?" We discuss, "The Family As the Extension of The Church".

First explore with me the word "extension" used often with the word cord. An extension cord is plugged in and the electrical power is transmitted from the outlet to an object where something happens. A light goes on, a radio, a drill. You plug in and something happens at the end of the extension that is in complete harmony with its source. An extension ladder is successful only if the original ladder enables you to climb to the extension thereby achieving your goal.

So now we ask, if you plug into the church, thereby transmitting to the family the power of the church, what is it that is passed on to the family from the church?

Electricity, could not be transmitted until its power and potential were understood. The church can only be extended to the extent that it is understood.

Secondly, let's briefly discuss the church. We can define it as:

A divinely instituted community of people, united by the true faith the laws of God, the hierarchy and the holy sacraments. St. Paul explains it throughout his Epistles: Ex. Ephesians 2, "Now therefore ye are no more strangers and foreigners but fellow citizens with the saints and of the household of God, and are built upon the foundation of the Apostles and prophets, Jesus Christ himself being the chief cornerstone.

Most of you can define and explain the church. That is, quote the Holy Fathers. By definition there are no boundaries between the church and the family, for we are all citizens of God's Household. But what does the church really mean to you and your family? We are Christians, plugged into a particular church. Ex. Saint Nicholas. But what do we take home with us and does something happen in the household? Do many of us have a child's concept of the church — the building, the Icons, the priest? How many adults commit themselves to the physical, the external form of the church and not the content, the spirituality of the church?

So many individuals are more concerned about their physical bodies and not their spiritual soul. Even at a convention so many involve themselves with the form, procedures, rules, long and repetitious reports and not the true worth of the convention. How many sleep the days and worship the social

events at night? For me, the highlight of the Convention is the Archbishop's message which is based on the scriptures. He gives us the spirit, the true content of the Convention. What do you take home with you and extend to your parish from these Conventions?

In today's Liturgy were you spiritually carried away by the content or impressed with the form? The form is not an end in itself, but carries the content. Therefore, in all situations we need both form and content. But where do you put the emphasis? Let me share with you a true story:

A Greek father was a real family man and above all a Greek Orthodox. He went to church every Sunday and in his home there were Icons in every room and vigil lights burning. All the members in his family made the sign of the cross at the proper times. One day his daughter came home and informed her father that she was going to be married. He was thrilled as any father would naturally be at such joyous news until she told him that the boy was not Greek and not Orthodox. He was stunned. He said if she married this boy, he would have nothing to do with her. This was not an idle threat for after she married the boy, he disowned her.

On the surface, in the eyes of society he was a Christian. You could visually see it in his home and in his actions. However, he confused and over-emphasized the form of the church. He neglected to extend the spirit of the church into his home — possible he just never understood the church. He was plugged into the church but nothing happened. And when he was faced with a family crisis, his shallow concept of the church failed him and the family unit was shattered. The spirit of Christ should have held this family together — it did the opposite. May we add, "Spiritually crippled parents give birth to spiritually crippled children."

The form of the church is easily seen by all but what is the spirit of the church, what is this content we refer to? It has been explained in many ways. Millions of sermons and books have and will be written explaining the spirituality of the church as a commitment to Christ, a commitment to His teachings, reading and understanding the Scriptures. It's accepting the responsibilities of a Christian, it's loving Christ and one another, it's the Holy Spirit living within us and uniting us as a family of God growing in spirit.

We need to extend the spirit of the church, to live in Christian harmony with our immediate family as well as with the whole family of God. We seek not our own secular gain, but rather act and live as the children of God.

We have briefly discussed extension meaning we plug into the church, transmitting the power of the church into the family and then something happens — a light goes on. And then spoke of the church as having form and content. And that the content, the spirituality of the church, is that which we extend into the boundaries of our families.

This leads us to the family. When we hear the word family we think of father, mother and children. The family can have members with a variety of relationships and not necessarily living under one roof. In the family circle we see clearly an economic life, a social life and we now speak of a religious life, the family as truly an extension of the church. It must function as a religious and spiritual community; not to be going through the various external signs of the church, but to live in the spirit and love of Christ and to pass "on" this spirit one to another. A father and mother by example, teaching, and conduct extend the church to their children as Christ extended the church to us. The church grows through this

extension. The family grows in spirit, becoming a spiritual fortress which can withstand attack from outside movements and forces that would destroy the family unit.

If the family does not truly extend the church in a living and active way, then the church will cease to exist as a vital force in the world. Today, we can see a great need for the church, politically, socially, and morally for our world is in a state of decay. What are the consequences? St. John Chrysostom said this hundreds of years ago in a sermon to a congregation like this:

“Yet now I behold the whole of the church prostrate, as though it were a corpse and as one may see eyes, and hands and feet and neck and head in a newly dead body and yet find not one limb performing its proper function, so it is the same here also. Truly all who are here are of the faithful, but their faith is not living and active and so we have made the Body of Christ a corpse, we have quenched its life.”

If we neglect to extend the living Christ into our homes, to live by His will, to be witnesses to Christ, then as in the words of St. John, we make the body of Christ a corpse and quench its life. For a living Christ, for a church that is alive, we as families must be living extensions of the church. We must extend Christ into our homes, the community, and into the world. In the spirit of the Convention theme let us say, “But as for me and my family, we will serve the Lord.”

From Word Magazine, Publication of the Antiochian Orthodox Christian Archdiocese of North America September 1973, pp. 3-4