

## **Defending the Souls of Our Children: The Place of Orthodox Schools in Their Spiritual Formation**

### **A. General Thanks and Introduction**

Your Eminence, Reverend Fathers, thank you for this opportunity to say a few words on a subject which is very dear to my heart, that is, the education of young children. As some of you know, my wife, Dcnsa Katherine, and I started an Orthodox elementary school in Santa Rosa, CA in 1992. We taught in the school, with a dear friend, for 22 years, until the spring of 2014. At that time, for health and age reasons, and the fact that we had no one to continue the work, we had to close the school. It was an extremely sad time for the children, for the parents, and for the teachers. Our greatest sorrow was that the children, who loved the school, had to continue their education in non-Orthodox environments. There was not then, nor is there now, another Orthodox school in the area for them to attend. This is the subject of my talk.

### **B. Study Sponsored by Assembly of Canonical Bishops of the USA**

There are, at this time, two powerful, but opposite, movements occurring in Orthodoxy in the United States. According to a 2015 study<sup>1</sup> sponsored by Assembly of Canonical Bishops of the USA, there are now close to one million Eastern Orthodox Christians in the United States. Nearly half of this number are converts. In addition, this same study revealed that Orthodox parishes have grown 16% in the past decade, which is “a fairly high ratio for religious groups in the United States.” Converts include those who were previously affiliated with various religious denominations, as well as those who had no previous religious affiliation. This is, of course, excellent news for the Church, which has received the commission from our Lord to “make disciples of all nations.”

However, there is another movement in the opposite direction. Other studies are revealing that up to 60% of Orthodox young adults leave the church either during their college years or shortly afterwards, and do not return. This departure has sparked the formation of an organization called Pan Orthodox United, whose mission is to reach out to these young adults and encourage them to

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<sup>1</sup> “Orthodox Christian Churches in 21<sup>st</sup> Century America”, sponsored by the Assembly of Canonical Bishops of the United States of America

return to the Church. Their program is called Solve 60. While the ideals of this type of effort are noble, the timing of the efforts is at least 12 years too late.

### **C. Why These Efforts Are Too Late?**

In order to understand why these efforts are too late, we must consider the various elements, or influences, which are crucial in a child's development in their early years. I would like to quote, at some length, from an article called *Three Pillars*, by Fr. Patrick Tishel, headmaster of St. Herman of Alaska Christian School near Boston, MA.

Fr. Patrick writes,

Years ago I lived in a house that was undergoing renovations. The brunt of the work focused on creating more space, and by the end of the project the workers had enlarged many of the rooms, giving the house a seemingly new and improved flare. Yet, to their horror, as one of the workers bounded up the stairs to the second floor, the house began to sway back and forth. It so happened that they had taken down certain walls that bore the weight of the structure. Without these walls in place, the house lost its strong foundation and was affected by the slightest movement... The same must be true in a child's formation...

For this reason it is important to be mindful of the three weight-bearing pillars of a child's education, which are primarily the Church, the home and the school. Imagine the results, when these three spheres of influence are all working towards the same goal.

The first sphere of influence is the Church, which St. Paul calls "the pillar and ground of Truth." ( 1 Timothy 3:15) The Church is the true, solid ground and pillar, and serves as the role model for other two pillars. The second pillar is the home, in which Orthodox parents strive to create an environment which reflects the values and piety of the Church, making the home "a little Church."

But what about the third pillar - the school? What about the place where our children spend six hours or more a day, five days a week, for nine to ten months of the year? Does that environment reflect the values and piety of the Church? Is the school environment modeled after the environment of the Church?

Do the schools which our children attend support the values we try to instill in them at home and in the Church, or do they work against these values?

It is well known that experiences in the early years of a child's life are very influential in forming the rest of his or her life. The Scriptures teach us that, "Train up a child in the way he should go: and when he is old, he will not depart from it." (Proverbs 22:6). St. John Chrysostom writes in his *Address on Vainglory and the Right Way for Parents to Bring up their Children*, "If good precepts are impressed on the soul while it is yet tender, no man will be able to destroy them when they have set firm."

Even the secular world recognizes this principle. In every language and culture, one can find proverbs such as "as the twig is bent, so grows the tree," "well begun is half done," "a good beginning makes a good ending."

Given this universal experience, should we not fill our children's formative years with as much Orthodoxy as possible - in all three spheres of their lives? If the influence of one pillar is not promoting, or is even contrary to, the values of the Church, we can expect trouble in the future of our children.

In the same *Address on Vainglory*, St. John Chrysostom writes that, "Having children is a matter of nature, but raising them and educating them in the virtues is a matter of mind and will." He then compares the raising of children with the building of a city. The child's senses - the eyes, the tongue, the hearing, the sense of smell, and the sense of touch are all gates into the city. He writes that "it is through these gates that [the] thoughts [of our children] are either corrupted or rightly guided."

St. John also warns us about the dangers of exposing the young child to harmful influences. He asks, "Would it not then be absurd, when we are establishing a city and citizens for the heavenly King, to entrust the task indiscriminately to all? Let [only] those who are well fitted...have a full share in the undertaking."

#### **D. Some Reasons to Remove our Children from the Public Schools.**

I would now like to present some reasons for removing our children from the public schools. We want our children to be taught in a spirit of virtue and piety, but often we allow those who are "unfitted" to this task to teach our children. Without doubt, there are, within the public school system, teachers who

are dedicated to their students and are, to their best ability, Christians. The problem with the public schools may not always be with individual teachers, but there is plenty of evidence to suggest that there is a problem with the modern mentality of the public school system.

Further, we must realize that this mentality is not of human origin. This is the work and mentality of the devil. The fight for the souls of our children is a fight is against “principalities and powers.” (Eph. 6:12)

Before 1962, prayer was part of the daily routine in most public schools. Then, efforts by some atheists culminated in a ruling by the Supreme Court of the United States which stated that prayer in public schools was “unconstitutional.” Since then, official prayer in school is banned. The result of this action is that the quality of public schools has declined in terms of academics, discipline, and morality. Studies (in 2014) have shown that since 1963, there have been five negative developments in the nation’s public schools:<sup>2</sup>

- 1) Academic achievement has plummeted, including SAT scores.
- 2) There has been an increase of out-of-wedlock births.
- 3) There has been an increase in illegal drug use.
- 4) There has been an increase in juvenile crime.
- 5) There has been a deterioration of school behavior.

Since that study was done, we can add four more,

- 6) Early sexualization of children,
- 7) Endorsement of promiscuity,

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<sup>2</sup>Education Expert: Removing Bible, Prayer from Public Schools Has Caused Decline  
<https://www.cnsnews.com/news/article/penny-starr/education-expert-removing-bible-prayer-public-schools-has-caused-decline>

- 8) Promotion of sexual deviations, i.e. LGBTQ, etc.
- 9) Teaching world-views which are destructive of brotherly love, such as Black Lives Matter curriculum, Social Justice curriculum, Critical Race Theory curriculum.

While there is not time to give even a small sampling of this type of anti-Christian, anti Orthodox teaching in public education, I will give one example that happened in our parish. One of our parishioners has a grandson, about 10-11 years old, who attends a public school. On the first day of school, he and the other students were asked about their gender preference and pronouns. He returned home very upset and confused, not understanding why it was not obvious that he was a boy, a male. Without doubt, thousands of other children, many younger than 10, including those baptized in the Orthodox faith, have had the same experience.

I have a handout with links to 20 short videos available on Youtube which expose these abuses. These are only a small sampling of videos available. They show examples of public schools by-passing the rights and responsibilities of parents and presenting to our children material, that in former times, would be considered crimes of “contributing to the delinquency of a minor.” These abuses are not in one or two localities. They are happening all across our country.

Many parents, who previously had no idea of what was happening in the schools their children attended, have now become alarmingly aware. How did they come to know? COVID 19 opened the door which had been deliberately shut.

### **E. Silver Lining of the COVID 19 Pandemic**

Without doubt, the COVID 19 pandemic was extremely disruptive to our daily life. Yet, this disruption had an interesting “silver lining.” With their children at home, receiving their lessons online, parents had the opportunity to become aware of what was being taught. One school district in Tennessee realized that parents could be watching their children’s classes and demanded that parents sign a waiver stating that they (the parents) would not “eavesdrop” on their children’s lessons.<sup>3</sup> Many parents strongly objected, so the district said that the parents could watch the lessons, **with the district’s approval**, but they must not

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<sup>3</sup>A Tennessee school district tried to ban parents from observing their kids' virtual classes  
<https://www.theblaze.com/news/tennessee-schools-ban-parents-observing-virtual-classes>

record the lessons. Other school districts also wanted the parents to avoid “eavesdropping.” The obvious questions for Christian parents to ask is, “Who is responsible before God for the child’s education, the parents or the state? Why should the parents not be fully informed concerning what their children are being taught in school? ”

There has been a strong, nation-wide response from parents about this situation. The concern is not just about the curriculum but also about the type of books which are available in the school libraries. For the most part, the mainstream-media is siding with the public school system rather than with the parents.

Even what used to be a non-political, family-friendly magazine, *Reader’s Digest*, featured an article titled, “Librarians Under Attack.”<sup>4</sup> The article recounts that parents objected to certain books in school libraries such as *Lawn Boy*, *Gender Queer*, *This Book is Gay*, *Fun Home*, *All Boys Aren’t Blue*. These books contain LGBTQ characters and frank depictions of sexual activity. Although there are several ways to approach the situation, *Reader’s Digest* choose to focus only on the few instances in which school librarians were being aggressively challenged by parents who objected to the material their children were being offered. There was no mention of the parents’ responsibility and right to oversee their children’s education. There was no mention of the moral quality of these books. The mainstream media has generally taken the same approach, that is, to accuse the parents of over-reacting, or being extremist and judgmental.

As a final comment in this section of the talk, I would submit an insight of St. Nikolai Velimirovic who reminds us that, “The world has lent us a body, but understand that it wants our soul also.”<sup>5</sup> The state schools want the souls of our children. We must not let it have them. This is the ugly truth we must recognize when we make a decision concerning where we send our children for their education.

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<sup>4</sup>Librarians Under Attack, *Reader’s Digest*, December 2022/January 2023, pg. 62. The original article is from the *New York Times*.

<sup>5</sup> Prologue from Ochrid, Volume 1, Homily for January 19, page 78.

## **F. Sending Orthodox Children to Private, but Non-Orthodox Schools**

Perhaps some would suggest that, if putting our children into public schools is not good for them, let us enroll them in private schools. That may seem to be a partial solution, but it simply creates other problems.

The mind of this world has penetrated many private schools as well, including those which are considered “faith-based.” There is no guarantee that private schools, even “faith-based” ones, have not been infected. Many years ago, as two of our Catholic students started their last year at St. Michael’s, we had to inform their parents that we could not continue their sons’ education into high school. They literally begged us to try because they were determined **not** to send their boys to the local Catholic high school. Although the high school was touted to be academically sound, the moral atmosphere of the school had deteriorated over the years. We taught the boys for their freshman year of high school, giving the parents time to make other arrangements. By the way, both these young men are now Orthodox.

Attendance at Christian, but not Orthodox, schools can easily cause conflict for young children. As much as they may disobey, children look to their parents as the source of what is true. Children assume that their parents accept what they (the children) are being taught. Yet the faith taught in non-Orthodox schools is different from what the children hear in Church. It is very difficult for young children to reconcile the fact that their parents send them to a school which teaches what they (the parents) do not believe.

The child, perhaps most often, does not have words to express this inner conflict, but the conflict itself may easily pull him from the truth of Orthodoxy. Are Catholic, Protestant, or non-Christian teachers “well-fitted” for the task of building that third pillar of an Orthodox child’s life? I believe that St. John Chrysostom would say, “No.”

## **G. Benefits of Our Children Attending Orthodox Schools**

I would now like to speak of some of the benefits of an Orthodox school. Although Orthodox home-schools provide many of these benefits, I think that, on the parish level, an Orthodox school, involving several families, provides some additional advantages.

By far, the greatest and primary benefit of providing an Orthodox school is the spiritual health of the children. The evil influences, now so prevalent in public education, are eliminated. The children are given a school in which the atmosphere and teaching are in accord with what they experience in the Church and in their homes. Rather than sensing an opposition to what the Church teaches, the children sense a support. They hear from their teachers the same Christianity which they hear from their parents and their priests. They are taught the Orthodox faith in the Church, in the family and in the school. All three pillars agree, giving the child a firm foundation for their lives.

As part of this primary benefit, teaching the Orthodox faith on a daily basis is very easy in an Orthodox school. It is easily integrated into the curriculum and becomes part of the whole ethos of school.

For example, our practice in school was to read Sixth Hour in the Church every day before lunch. The children loved to read Sixth Hour and would literally run to Church. Before long, they knew the whole service by heart. When we were on field trips and it was time for lunch, they would insist on reading Sixth Hour before eating. Although we had no books, we took turns reciting the Psalms and prayers of the service by heart. Only then could we have lunch. Our students learned many Psalms, the daily troparia, the lives of many saints, as well as the basic teachings of the Orthodox faith in a simple, organic manner.

Often, we saw the faces of our students light up when a Psalm, or some event from the Old or New Testament we had learned in school was read as part of the Church service. They were so delighted because they knew the reference and therefore felt more part of the service. Participating in Divine Liturgy and other Church services was no longer something their parents “made them do.” The children had been taught about the services in school and therefore could be part of them and not just passive observers. This type of experience is extremely important in the spiritual life of a child because it unites two pillars of their life - Church and school.

A child’s soul yearns for the Truth, a child’s soul yearns for Jesus Christ. Only an Orthodox school can keep this yearning alive. Many Orthodox parishes have some sort of Sunday School program to teach the children, but how many of our pastors and Sunday school teachers are satisfied with what they are able to teach the children in the short time available?



## **H. Benefit of Orthodox Friends**

Another benefit of an Orthodox school is Orthodox friends. Relationships are very important to young people. They want friends; they need friends; friends are part of the school pillar. They want to be part of a group. It is these relationships with other Orthodox children that can strengthen them in the faith. We can encourage them to resist peer pressure, but it is very difficult to resist peer pressure when you feel alone. What about providing a group of peers in an Orthodox school?

I have heard from some that this effort would be creating a “hot-house,” in which our children are artificially sheltered from the world. This is not true. We are simply acknowledging some basic truths of child development. Just as no gardener plants small seedlings outside in the middle of winter, it is of great benefit for children to have the opportunity to develop a firm foundation, and a firm sense of who they are, by having all three pillars of their early life direct them to the Living God.

They will undoubtedly face the harshness of this ungodly world. Yet, if we give them an opportunity to develop firm Orthodox roots while they are young, they have a far better chance of surviving the inevitable onslaughts from the world.

## **I. An Orthodox School Gives a Wonderful Life and Vitality to a Parish.**

An Orthodox school adds a wonderful life and vitality to a parish. We all have experienced how the innocence and enthusiasm of children bring life and joy to any situation. This added life is especially felt if the parish as a whole accepts a school as part of its mission and supports the school as much as possible. In our situation, the presence of the school was very much appreciated whenever the parish celebrated Church feasts as well as when we celebrated simple cultural festivals, like our Harvest Fair and Celtic Festival.

An Orthodox school is an excellent form of missionary work. I can guarantee you that there are many parents in your locality who are longing for a wholesome school for their children. These parents may not be Orthodox, perhaps not even Christian, but they see the decline of morality in the public schools and want something better for their children. An Orthodox school provides a wonderful way for non-Orthodox to “come and see” (John 1:39) the Church that

will lead them to Jesus Christ. We had both adults and children see the truth and beauty of Orthodoxy through their experience in the school and convert to the true faith. One of the converts is now a deacon in our Church.

## **J. What do we do?**

Finally, “What do we do?”

We may all agree that we have a pastoral situation concerning our children that needs to be addressed. Let us not pull back from addressing it because we see so many problems to be solved, so many questions to be answered. How do we start? Where do we find the teachers? Where do we find the facilities? How do we finance a school?

The evil one wants us to be overwhelmed by such questions in an effort to dissuade us, to discourage us, and finally, to lead us to inaction. Yet, if we have the “mind and will,” as St. John Chrysostom exhorts us to have, these questions will be answered with the help of God.

The Catholics have their schools; the Protestants have their schools. Now, with a million of us in the United States, it is time for the Orthodox, who have found the true faith, to have more schools for our children. We must defend the souls of our children rather than unwittingly co-operate in causing them to stumble.

I submit unto you, Fathers, our Lord’s word to His disciples, “The harvest truly is plentiful, but the laborers are few. Therefore pray to the Lord of the harvest to send out laborers into His harvest.” (Matt 9:37-38) I have no doubt that He will answer our prayers.

Thank you very much.

**Handout for Govenie Talk**  
**Defending the Souls of our Children: The Importance of Orthodox Schools**  
**March, 2023**

PUBLIC SCHOOL ACADEMIC PERFORMANCE

<https://www.schoolchoices.org/roo/academic.htm>

- 1) Grandmother tells school board, I'm not fighting you, I'm fighting the evil  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pzRyOAr98Wk>
- 2) Parents accuse school board of trying to indoctrinate students with controversial 'Critical Race Theory'  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=v-fKU4ZEZL4>
- 3) Watch Black Father Blast Critical Race Theory At Board Meeting In Viral Video  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=m66rcHzWaPU>
- 4) Student CALLS OUT school board for rewarding attendance to Drag Queen show  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Oc3u2wQ49-4>
- 5) Ohio Mayor Demands Board of Ed Resign After Assignment Controversy  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vgODQFi-R30>
- 6) Writing prompt book sparks controversy among parents in Hudson  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OGafQC2A5pY>
- 7) Mom Gives GUT-WRENCHING Testimony To A School Board Regarding Her Trans Son  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-OGn8giyj0o>
- 8) Tennessee parents forced to sign waiver stating they will not eavesdrop on their children's online lessons  
<https://www.foxnews.com/us/tennessee-parents-waiver-eavesdropping-online-lessons>
- 9) Mom HAMMERS This School Board With FACTS  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9PbeBSXj4qQ>
- 10) New LGBT curriculum rolls out, parents protest in Trenton  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=g2L-N5Q1AXM>
- 11) Gardner-Edgerton school board meeting gets heated over proposed pronoun policy  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9SsWJMsx89E>
- 12) Critical Race Theory in American Schools  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PUZ8cPNPjpo>

- 13) Thomas Sowell - The Origins of Woke  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CxEeYSusehc>
- 14) 11-Year-Old SILENCES School Board As He Reads From DISTURBING Book Found In School Library  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CkgU0ZtKUxg>
- 15) Rocklin Parents Grill School Board Over Transgender Discussions In Kindergarten  
[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6kDtFCwU\\_go](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6kDtFCwU_go)
- 16) Why Most Kids in California Can't Read and Do Math | Frank Xu  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OIfPomLLBt8>
- 17) Wake County parent wants 'Lawn Boy' removed from school library  
[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Dz1\\_Ju8yD3A](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Dz1_Ju8yD3A)
- 18) Heated debate on book banning resumes at Dearborn schools during 2nd board meeting  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ImBvAosqPC4>
- 19) Chaos at Virginia school meeting over history and race  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5AMFgm5FP5E>
- 20) Dad Standing Up to School Board for the school distributing pornographic books  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VrhJafkayt8>