

# STEPPING-STONES to Faith

By Elizabeth White

The following article is from Ms. White's book *Walking in Wonder: Nurturing Orthodox Christian Virtues in Your Children*, published in 2004 by Conciliar Press.

"Young people must be made to distinguish between helpful and injurious knowledge, keeping clearly in mind the Christian's purpose in life. So, like the athlete or the musician, they must bend every energy to one task, the winning of the heavenly crown."

—St. Basil the Great

"Let us draw from the fountain of the perennial garden and from the most pure waters springing unto life eternal. Here let us luxuriate."

—St. John Damascene

**F**RAGRANT OLD ROSES BLOOM EACH summer in my backyard. In one spot, stepping-stones lead to a gently bubbling fountain where birds gather for refreshing splashes and dips. Their delightful songs remind me of God's bountiful provisions for all His creations, even the smallest bird—even me. My patio is truly a place to luxuriate and ponder matters of life eternal. Even so, I am not deluded; the Christian life is not

always "luxuriating." Sometimes it is carrying a heavy cross—suffering and struggle with capital "S"s. It is in times like this that we are most likely to receive the power-filled, personal message from God, "I am with you," especially if we turn to the Bible and the Church. We are not meant to walk alone, either when luxuriating or when struggling.

The following story illustrates how God can speak through Scripture. Some time ago my family was about to go through some horrendous, unimaginable circumstances—not the first bad thing to happen to us, but perhaps the least understood, and, next to the deaths of a son and stepson, the most difficult to cope with. Little did we know that God, in His great mercy, could foresee what was to come and was already making provisions to hold us up with His sustaining strength and grace during the bad times.

I did not know what compelled me to type up certain Bible verses, mount and laminate them for use as book-marks. I did not know why, for weeks, I

was led to meditate almost daily on one of three passages (usually Isaiah 43:1–3)—until a rage-filled, mentally ill family member became increasingly irrational and violent after discontinuing his medication. As the devastating tentacles of schizophrenia wrapped around our lives, threatening to plunge us into hopelessness, God's Word became clear—there was no need to fear or despair, because the Lord God Himself was our help through the troubled waters. We would walk through the fire of tribulation but would not be burned. Who is so great a God as our God who does wonders?

In his book *Bread for Life*, Theodore Stylianopoulos says, "The essential purpose of reading the Bible is to discover the mystery of the living Christ, to receive Him in our hearts again and again, and to say with St. John the Evangelist, 'We have beheld his glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father . . . and from his fullness have we all received, grace upon grace' (John 1:14, 16)." My family has beheld His glory.

If there is one thing lacking, one thing needful more than anything else among otherwise devout Orthodox Christians today, it is personal intimacy with the written Word of God. This is not a Protestant attitude stemming from a dogmatic belief in *sola scriptura*. It has been said time and time again, by Orthodox saints and writers down through the centuries, we must "swim in the Scriptures."

In the fourth century, St. John Chrysostom claimed that ignorance of Scripture is the cause of all evil. And in the nineteenth century, St. John of Kronstadt counseled: "The Holy Scripture is the realm of Wisdom, Word and Spirit, of God in Trinity; in it he clearly manifests himself: 'The words that I speak unto you, they are spirit, and they are life.' In the Holy Scripture we see God face to face, and ourselves as we are. Man, know thyself through the

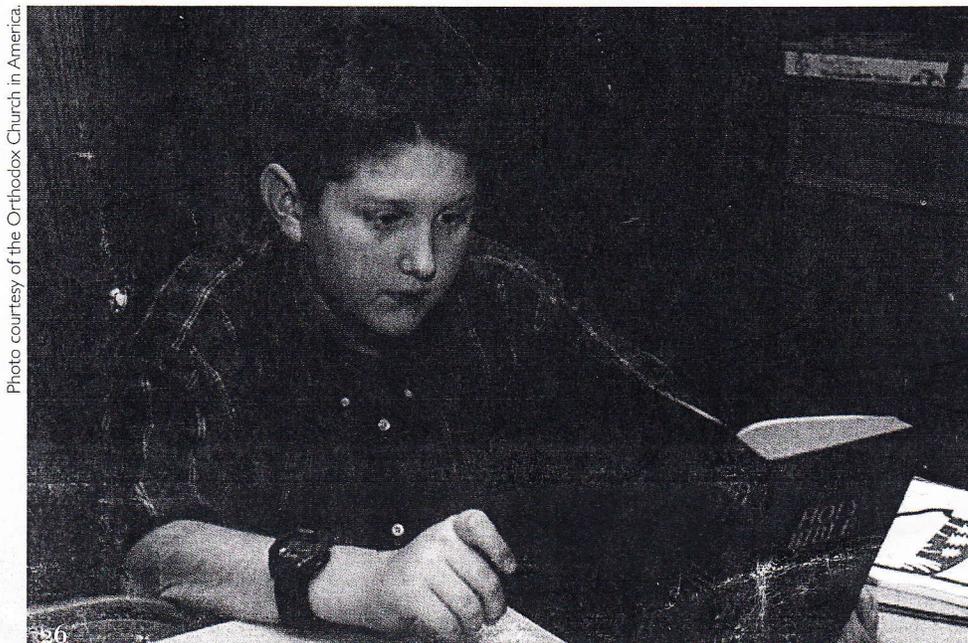


Photo courtesy of the Orthodox Church in America.

scriptures, and walk always in the presence of God." He also said, "Of those who do not read the gospel, I would ask: Are you pure, holy, and perfect, without reading the gospel? Is it not needful for you to look in this mirror? Or is it that your soul is so deformed that you fear to look upon your deformity?"

Several reasons are commonly given for neglecting regular Bible reading. First, our liturgical tradition is rooted in Scripture. The Liturgy and other services of the Church are so closely connected, they cannot be isolated into separate aspects of worship. When we pray in the Orthodox Church, we know we are praying Scripture. God's Word comes alive in Orthodox worship; the events of our salvation history are mystically made a real and present reality. Many people are satisfied with this amount of exposure. To this excuse I would answer by paraphrasing St. John Chrysostom: I advise that you obtain a Bible and begin engraving its words in your heart.

Secondly, some people have tried reading and have become discouraged when they do not understand what it all means. Instead of giving up, I would quote St. John Damascene: "If we read once or twice and do not understand what we read, let us not grow weary, but let us persist, let us talk much, let us inquire." It might also be helpful to read a simple introductory book such as *Bread for Life: Reading the Bible*, by Theodore Stylianopoulos. Keep in mind, too, that it is not necessary to understand every single word and passage—only whatever addresses your own personal, spiritual needs of the moment. Illumination normally comes only one tiny flicker at a time. It is most important to keep walking steadily and consistently, guided by the Unwaning Light.

To any Orthodox man or woman who tries the excuses, "I don't have time," or, "I've just never got into the

habit of reading the Bible," or, "We don't believe in private interpretation of Scripture, so we can't read it privately," or, "I read it once already," or, "It's boring," my retorts might seem tactless and unsympathetic. They are, however, all I can think of to say. Make time. Get into the habit. You're missing something. Once is not enough. Is there a possibility that you find all of the Christian discipline boring? Look to your heart. Realize that Holy Scripture is a necessary stepping-stone in our Christian walk.

And, as with every other aspect of spiritual life, the foundation for incorporating the Bible into our daily lives is most easily laid in early childhood. The attitudes that we want to impress upon children are reflected in these verses:

"Your word is a lamp to my feet and a light to my path" (Psalm 119:105).

"The gospel ... is the power of God to salvation for everyone who believes" (Romans 1:16).

"For the word of God is living and powerful, and sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing even to the division of soul and spirit, and of joints and marrow, and is a discerner of the thoughts and intents of the heart" (Hebrews 4:12).

Something we don't always perceive happens when we read the Bible. Our mind may wander, but unless we are in a totally vegetative state, it is catching a glimpse (however minute) of our Lord Jesus Christ. It is being illumined and made ready for renewal and transformation. Every person in the family, even nonreaders, should have his or her own Bible. Bible storybooks for children are great, as are picture books portraying individual Bible stories or themes. Look for quality text and illustrations. St. John Chrysostom wrote, "An important part of a child's education is story-telling, since good

stories excite the imagination and strengthen the bond between parent and child. Stories from the Bible are to be preferred, and the child should repeat them often, to underscore full comprehension." He also wrote, "Fathers and mothers: Go and lead your child by the hand into the Church."

Among Christians, Orthodox parents are in a unique position as far as religious education goes. We have immediately at hand ready-made tools for impressing God's truths upon the child's heart in the most natural ways. Our worship involves all the senses, our bodies as well as our minds. From the beginning of life, the infant smells the incense; tastes the communion bread and wine; sees the candles and icons; hears the chanting, singing, and beautiful recitation of prayers. At an early age she touches the holy things of God and knows intuitively that she is in a holy place.

I was reminded recently that my oldest son, Jeff, once thought that our priest was God. This recollection came to me at a parish function when a three-year-old girl called out to the current priest, "God, come here. I want to talk to you." "God," dressed in black, humbly pulled up a chair and listened with appropriate seriousness to what she had to say. Both young children were able to associate the priesthood with the divine, not because they had been given formal doctrinal lessons on the nature and function of the priesthood, but because they had experienced liturgical worship with their families. Even when it seemed as if they were not paying attention, were possibly even being disruptive, they were absorbing the knowledge quite subconsciously that something about this man was special. As infants absorb the verbal language of their culture, so too, the growing child absorbs the language and heart of our faith through

her surroundings and experiences.

While the church can surround the child with hints of a larger reality—God's Kingdom—through its architecture, liturgical rituals, education classes, and symbols, the parent must remain the primary religious educator. Brief Sunday school classes are not enough for such a great task. It is the

parents who co-create, with God, the stepping-stones to faith; who show by their words and actions, as best they can, the journey to *theosis*. It is their task, more than any other's, to teach the special kind of communication we call worship. Symbols need explaining; explanations need giving. Our religious language, or the way we commu-

nicate our faith by everything we do and say, needs careful thought. Above all, remember that religious education is not something that stops at age sixteen. Growing in faith is a family affair. As John Boojamra has said, education "belongs wherever it can take place, wherever people can be affected, changed or influenced meaningfully."

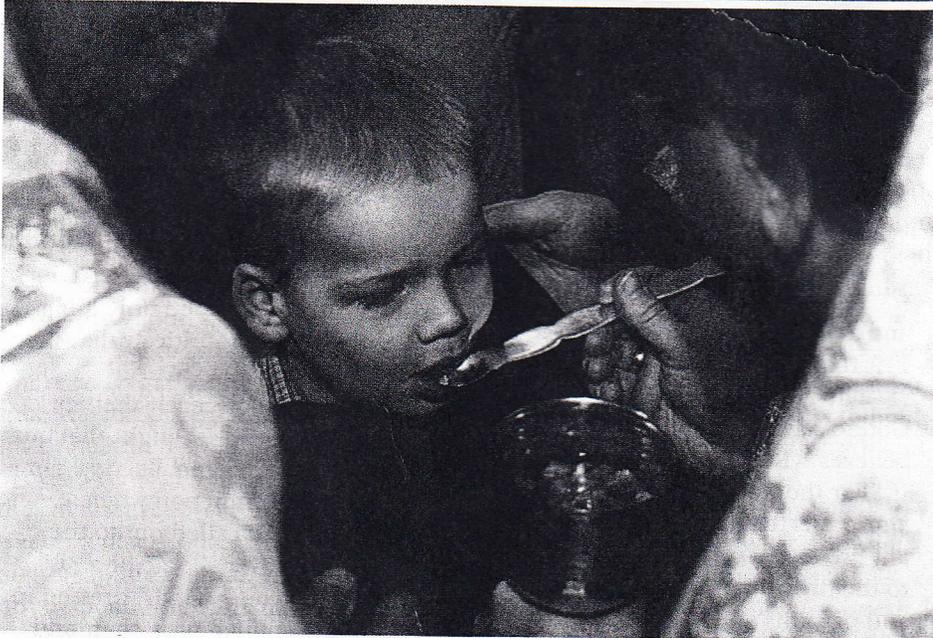
The Orthodox Church is a church of celebration; when our children are active participants in church life, when they can share in our celebrations, they learn the reality of God's active presence in their lives. Nor should our Orthodox rituals be restricted within the walls of the Orthodox temple. Our homes are considered "little churches," which means that Orthodoxy must be taken home.

Dr. John Boojamra made the following suggestions for carrying the church home: "Children can be encouraged to set up icon centers in their home as places of prayer, and to engage in daily Bible reading, and prayer at meals and on such other occasions as before a family trip. Family traditions, not uncommon among those of ethnic origins, should be adopted for holidays."

My experiences as a Montessori teacher have led me to realize that our goal as educators is not to impart facts to children as though they were empty vessels waiting to be filled, but to open their eyes so they can exclaim joyfully, "Wow, look at what I am becoming! I've got to know more!" If we can teach children how to learn, they will figure out somewhere along the way what it is they need to know for their particular calling in life. They will walk in wonder with God, whether they are eight or eighty. ←

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Photos of young boy communing and girls reverencing icons, courtesy of the Orthodox Church in America.