

The Orthodox Home: The Little Church

V. Rev. Fr. Philip Tolbert

Director, Bulgarian Orthodox Youth Apostolate
Bulgarian Eastern Orthodox Diocese of the USA, Canada & Australia
Bulgarian Patriarchate
sttheophan@sbcglobal.net

Orthodox Christianity is a way of life. That means how we live our lives should be noticeably different from those around us who are not Orthodox Christians. Our Orthodox Faith should be showing, even if no one else is looking! This is doubly true when we are at home, where our children are always looking.

Parents are the first and most powerful teachers of their children, whether or not they are consciously attempting to teach anything. From the very earliest days of life, even as an infant, children are constantly learning from their parents the most fundamental and longest lasting lessons of their lives. Other educators, adults and peers may later come to exert strong influences also, but those things learned by the children in their own homes within the circle of the family life are the foundation of all education outside the home.

St. John Chrysostom explains:

Parents, teach your children the fear of God. All good things will flow from this as from a fountain, and your house will be full of ten thousand blessings. If we seek to acquire spiritual benefits first, the necessary material goods for earthly life will follow. *“For,”* the Lord Jesus says, *“seek first the kingdom of God and His righteousness, and all these things shall be added to you.”* (Matthew 6:33) What sort of persons, do you think, the children of such parents will be? For generally the children acquire the character of their parents, they are formed in the mold of their parents’ temperament, they love the same things their parents love, they talk in the same way, and they engage in the same activities.

(Homily 20 on Ephesians)

Prayer is the Foundation of the Orthodox Home

In every Orthodox wedding ceremony, the bishop or priest performing the service prays that the Lord our God would bless and remember the bride and groom, “and the parents who have nurtured them, for the prayers of parents make firm the foundations of houses.”

Orthodox prayer is rooted in the remembrance of God. Prayer is not something that we do only when we are in church. We strive to pray at all times and in all places as the Holy Apostle St. Paul tells us. We pray at home because we believe in God and know that He is a ready helper of all who are in need. We tell Him our troubles and ask for His blessing in all things. We thank Him for His many mercies and for His tender care for every member of our families.

We also pray at home at certain times of day. We pray in the morning before we eat breakfast and before we go to school or work. We pray at mealtimes, both before we eat to ask God's blessing on the food, and after we eat to thank Him for this gift of bodily nourishment. We pray in the evening before we go to bed, thanking God for the day that is now ended, asking for His forgiveness for things we may have done that were wrong, and for His watchful blessing upon us while we rest in sleep.

Blessing for a New Home and Annual Blessing at Theophany

When we move into a new home, we ask the priest to visit us and to bless the house or apartment with Holy Water, incense and special prayers. It is not enough for us that the priest do this that one time only. We invite him to return each year to bless our homes in the period after the Feast of Theophany in January, with Holy Water blessed during that Feast, and before the start of the Great Lenten Fast.

Preparing for the Blessing

Having made an appointment with the parish priest to bless your home, here is how to prepare:

All who reside in the household should make every effort to be present for the Blessing and to gather around the dining room table or family icon corner to join in the prayer and singing.

Set out the Theophany icon or another icon of Christ and a lighted candle or oil lamp. Have a list of the baptismal names of all the family members to be prayed for during the blessing, both living and departed so the priest can pray for each by name.

Unlock and open the doors to all your rooms, remembering to turn off any televisions, radios or other electronic devices.

If children are present, they may carry the icon or a candle to lead the priest from room to room. If not, the head of the household or another family member will lead the priest.

After the blessing, we all gather around the icon for the concluding prayers, in which a short litany is said for the welfare of the family, and then the service is ended.

The Heart of the Home is the Icon or Prayer Corner

Where are we to pray when we are at home? Of course, we can pray in any part of our home, but if we wish to get the most from our prayer it is best to create a special place where we can pray with concentration. For this reason, the first thing we do when we move into a new home is to select a place, ideally a wall or corner facing the East, in which we can place our family icons, especially those given to us by our priest and parents. In the days and year ahead, this special place will help us greatly to concentrate in prayer.

In addition to icons, we also place in the Icon Corner a lamp or candle which we will light during times of prayer, and of course, in this special place we will also keep a Bible and a prayer book for daily use in family and personal prayers.

The Grace of the Day

Some recent Holy Fathers have referred to this daily spiritual activity as “capturing the grace of the day”. What do we mean by this? While any day may be compared to another, and we all may feel one is much like another, every day in the life of an Orthodox Christian is unique; we will see it only once.

Understanding this, our Holy Orthodox Church has given us a special calendar that contains Scripture readings for each day of the year together with the names of the Saints that are to be remembered on each day.

In the same way that our God causes the rain to fall “on the just and on the unjust” (Matt. 5:45), our Lord sends His Grace upon all people each and every day of the year, but not all benefit from it equally. Those who are wise will strive to capture this Grace, just as those who live in dry climates strive to capture the rain when it falls and store it for use during those times when there is little rain. For this reason, we strive each day to remember God in prayer both morning and evening every day. In keeping with the times, in addition to printed calendars and books, we now have many good websites where we can find these prayers and readings, in many different languages, and several very useful calendar and prayer apps for use on cell phones and tablets.

To more fully capture the Grace of the Day we add to our daily times of prayer at home the reading of daily passages of Scripture listed in the Orthodox Calendar and the remembrance of the Saints of the day named there, asking them to pray for us. Wanting to become better acquainted with these Saints, we can readily find and read brief accounts of their lives, whether in print or online, in many languages. Some Orthodox Calendar apps even include such readings.

At the end of our morning prayer it is good for us to take a little Holy Water or Blessed Bread that we have brought home from the Church where we regularly attend the Divine Services.

Prayers for Namedays and Other Special Days

Each Orthodox Christian bears the name of a saint, given to him or her at their baptism. Following the Orthodox Calendar, we will easily remember the special day or days on which our patron saint is commemorated. On that day, when possible, pious Christians may attend the Divine Services in their local parish church, but will certainly pray in their home Icon Corner, perhaps adding an akathist or canon to the saint. Others may request that their priest serve a molieban (special prayer service) of supplication or of thanksgiving on namesdays or birthdays of family members.

Below is a prayer from the Priests Service Book that you can pray in your own home, also.



A Prayer for Birthdays or Namedays

All Holy Lord, how can I worthily thank You for the life which You have given me? You have brought me up from the abyss of non-existence, and my life is a gift which came from Your goodness. You have kept me until this day, supporting me in times of trouble and need. You watch over me, directing my steps along the right path and preserving me from temptation. When I stray, You lead me back to the way of Your commandments; when I slip, You support me; when I fall, You lift me up; when I wander, You turn me back and open Your fatherly arms to me. My debt to You is immeasurable, for You have given me life and daily show me the proof of Your fatherly goodness and care. In full acknowledgment of this, I offer You my entire life, and, especially, this particular day. I pray to You in humility, asking that You not take Your goodness from me, and that Your wisdom may guide me throughout my entire life along the right path of blessedness; through the prayers and intercessions of Saint [insert name of patron saint] and of Your all-pure Mother. Amen.

“As Orthodox parents, our most basic task is to bring our children to a sense of the truth, of the real-ness, of God. This is not the same thing as head-knowledge about God; it is a personal experience, through prayer, of the reality of God in our lives.” ~ Mary Mansur, *Children and Prayer*



Birth of St. John the Baptist, 2019