

A vision of Youth Ministry,

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In April of 1990, the revival of charitable work, religious education, and youth ministry became possible for the Orthodox Church in Russia. Due to perestroika and glasnost, the Church has entered a new era.

Youth ministry had not been highly developed prior to the 1917 Revolution. In fact, apart from the work of the theological seminaries and academies, there was no youth ministry.

Hence, in reference to youth ministry, we cannot properly speak of a "revival". Youth ministry must be "created", not revived.

Some dioceses have questioned the need and purpose for youth ministry. "Why the youth," they ask, "when the congregations have been primarily supported by grandmothers?"

The grandmothers carried the Church to the end of the 20th century --but the future belongs to our youth. It is time for the grandmothers to step aside, with our deepest gratitude and thanks.

The challenge is this: How might our youth organize for the future while handing on the best of the past?

Youth is not a matter of age. Some, though physically young, lack enthusiasm. A youthful attitude must be preserved. Youth must be encouraged so as not to become old before their time.

Youth must be encouraged to work independently to solve their own problems. Ministry can be accomplished only when it is genuine, not artificial. Forming a youth movement must be authentic, from the ground up, not imposed from above.

A few years ago, my wife was told by her doctor that what he had thought to be a cyst on her thyroid was, in fact, a malignant tumor. There was no question in the doctor's mind that the tumor would have to be removed.

As a priest, I know very little about thyroids. I have heard of "over-active" thyroids and "under-active" thyroids, but I do not know exactly what a thyroid does. My knowledge is limited to

the fact that the thyroid affects many other parts of the body and, for this reason, it is essential that it functions properly.

Saint Paul compares the Church to the human body. Like the body, the Church is made up of many "parts" or "members" -the People of God. Each member has a specific and important function, as does each part of the body. The thyroid, the heart, and the brain have different functions, yet each shares a common goal-to work in harmony with the other parts of the body to ensure physical health and growth. In the same way, the clergy and the laity, the young and the old, the active and the contemplative have different functions within the Body of Christ, yet they too share a common goal-to work together to ensure the spiritual health and growth of God's People, the Church. According to Saint Paul, it is only when each member of the Church fulfills his or her function that the Church "upbuilds itself in love" and "matures to the stature of Christ."

God's People have been blessed with unique talents and gifts by which they might fulfill their specific functions within the Church. Saint Paul reminds us that, while there are many gifts, there is but a single, common purpose for using these gifts: to build up the Body of Christ by proclaiming the Good News of salvation in Christ Jesus to all who would receive it. This was the very heart of Christ's ministry. And it remains at the very heart of our ministry, regardless of our particular gifts and functions, as God's People. Everyone-from the Patriarch to the most elderly believer in the remotest area of Siberia shares in this ministry in different, yet equally important, ways.

Holding a special place within the Body of Christ are our children and youth. On the one hand, they are the "future" of our Church. They are the ones destined to carry on the ministry of Jesus Christ well into the 21st century, long after most of us are gone. The babies we baptize today are tomorrow's priests, bishops, Sunday School teachers, monastics, parish council members, and faithful, Christian parents.

Yet we cannot be content with relegating our youth to a place in the "future". Our youth, especially our teenagers and college-age young adults, have an essential and critical role and function in the present life of the Church. And this is a fact that we must recognize and accept if we are to take the task of youth ministry seriously.

Before delving further into this area, however, it is important for us to reflect on the needs and characteristics of teenagers and young adults.

All of us were, at one point, 15 years old. I'd like to ask you to think back to the time when you were 15. What were you like? With what were you concerned? What were your aspirations and dreams, your fears and needs?

At the age of 15, most, if not all of us, were faced with many confusing challenges and decisions. Our bodies were changing, growing, maturing. We worried about how we looked. We wondered about life, friendships, what we wanted to be when we became adults. We were filled with insecurities, questions, hopes, dreams, and ideals. Some of us rebelled against our parents, our teachers, and the other "authority figures" whom we encountered. Often we felt alone and

abandoned, convinced that no one cared, that no one was concerned about us. And yet, at other times, we felt that we were the very center of the universe, that we were invincible, omnipotent, and self sufficient.

When I was 13, I decided to run away from home. I packed a suitcase, left a note for my parents, and walked to the train station, where I sat. And sat. I had no money, no plans, no idea of what I was going to do. The longer I sat, the more I realized how much I depended on my parents, how much I desperately wanted them to listen to me, to understand me. As the hours past, I became hungry. I grew lonely. And I was the happiest boy in the world when I saw my father enter the station. I felt wanted and loved because he had taken the time to look for me. Without saying a word, he hugged me, took my bag, and drove me home. I never ran away again. In fact, I never really *wanted* to run away in the first place. What I *really* wanted was an expression of love, a sign of assurance, a sympathetic ear to *listen* to my fears and to *reassure* me that everything was going to be all right.

So the first thing we must be, as youth ministers, are *good listeners*. In the Church we often talk too much. We want everyone to listen to us, but we sometimes fail to listen to others. We remind others that the Church has the answers, but we need to be reminded that we are not always answering the questions youth are asking.

The world in which we live is growing more and more complex. We face war in the Middle East, civil unrest at home, political and ethnic conflicts, and countless uncertainties. Many adults are asking, "What is going on? Where are we going? What will become of us?" Imagine how teenagers react! They confront the same global crises *in addition* to the countless insecurities and cravings for acceptance, clarity, reassurance, affirmation, direction, and guidance. Add to these the potent draw of rock music, drugs, alcohol, sex, peer pressure, and fashion, and the reason our youth are swimming in a sea of confusion, desperately seeking an answer to "the meaning of life", becomes obvious. Yes, the Church has the answers, but the sensitivity needed to listen to the questions is all-too-often lacking. If we are to effectively address youthful fears, hopes, and needs, we must accept our youth as they are, "where *they* are at", rather than "where *we* are at" or "where *we want* them to be".

Jesus listened. He accepted people as they were. When Jesus spoke with farmers, He used language they could readily understand. He spoke of God's Kingdom in terms of sowing and harvesting. He spoke in simple terms with the simple, yet He provided sophisticated answers to the well educated. He knew how to speak because He listened first to those with whom He was speaking. He was the perfect example of someone who became "all things to all men".

Listen to our youth -and listen without prejudice or arrogance. Can you hear their intense need for self-acceptance? Youth, above all, need to *love themselves*, to discover their strengths, to discern their unique gifts, talents, and abilities, and to feel loved, wanted, and accepted. If these essentials are not experienced at home or in the Church, they *will* be experienced *elsewhere*. Where the family and the Church fail to provide youth with a positive self-image, a sense of community, or a caring, loving environment, the vacuum is filled by gangs, drugs, rock idols, and other elements which promise a definite-if disastrous and sometimes fatal-identity and sense of community.

Jesus teaches us that *everything* is based on a single commandment: Loving God, and loving others the way we love ourselves. But before we can love God or others, He says, we must love ourselves. I cannot respect you if I am unable to respect myself; I cannot trust a God whom I *cannot* see if I refuse to trust those whom I *can* see.

Love *heals*. And there are many, many young people who need and want healing. Jesus encountered many who needed healing -spiritual as well as physical. He once encountered an adulterous woman who was about to be stoned by an angry mob. The *Law* dictated her death; *Love*, however, dictated her transformation. After dismissing the crowd ("If any one of you is without sin, you may cast the first stone"), Jesus approached the woman. He listened to her heart. He did not lecture her on the evils of adultery, nor did He condemn her less-than-honorable behavior. Rather, He told her, simply and lovingly: "Go in peace. Sin no more." Jesus' willingness to accept the woman transformed her. He showed her that, while *what* she had done was *bad*, she was, in essence, *good*. He enabled her to discover this essential goodness and, in the process, she changed, repented, and accepted God.

While we, as God's People, are first and foremost a *worshipping* people who are nourished by liturgy, by *common worship*, it is not enough to say that the only thing we need is liturgy. The Divine Liturgy is, historically and by its very nature, a public expression of faith by those who *already* have "seen the true light, received the heavenly spirit, and found the true faith worshipping the undivided Trinity, who has saved us". In the early Church, only those who had already accepted Jesus Christ into their lives through Baptism were permitted to participate. There are those who would say, "All we need is the Liturgy", as if public worship is sufficient to fill the needs of our youth. I have heard those who say, "If teenagers have problems, they should attend All-Night Vigil."

Before liturgy can become a genuine expression of a young person's faith, he or she must *have* faith. And this becomes especially challenging when dealing with youth who were raised in a non-religious or atheistic environment. In many cases the Church becomes the only vehicle by which the seeds of faith can be planted and nurtured and the invitation to a life of loving unity with God and others can be imparted.

How might all of this be accomplished? Based on my experience in ministering to youth for twenty years. I would like to offer the following suggestions:

1. The Church must provide the setting by which youth will share and discuss their needs and fears, and, as we say in America, "open up". This might take the form of a *conference* or a *retreat* –a gathering of one to three days at which youth can discuss and share their problems, hopes, fears, and joys, listen to talks by clergy, lay ministers, and peers, and react without fear to what they hear and feel. Such gatherings build a sense of community and become a very model or microcosm of the Church as the *Body of Christ*. The atmosphere must be one of trust, mutual acceptance, and love, focused on *ministry* rather than *activity*, as the time spent together is a *Kairos*:

- time spent in conscious awareness that the Lord is presence in all that is happening. In this way, youth are given the opportunity to be heard as well as to hear, to share their feelings, and to identify with the feelings of others. When youth see that others feel the same way they do, and that the problems and fears they face are not theirs alone, they begin to open up. Trust builds. A "bond" is established. The things that unite, rather than separate, are discovered, as are the ways God reveals Himself through others. When I ran away from home, my father came and rescued me. His action still reminds me of how God seeks us when we are lost, and the joy we share when we are found.

The program at a youth camp should also be based on this vision and should include talks, discussions, reactions, sharing, fellowship, and worship. Even athletic activities enable youth to discover their unique roles within a team or community. A lively football game provides enjoyment while teaching the very principle upon which the Church is based: many individuals working together for a common goal and purpose.

2. In order to accomplish these things, there must be a nucleus of well-trained youth ministers-clergy, lay adults, and youth who *already* possess a *genuine* experience of God's presence in their own lives and in the lives of others. Whether we like it or not, we must admit that not everyone has been blessed with the gift of working with youth, and we need to seek out and set apart those individuals who are able to

- a.) accept youth as they are.
- b.) be good listeners.
- c.) know when to speak and when to be silent.
- d.) make youth feel comfortable and not feel threatened.
- e.) empathize with the fears, problems, pressures, and uncertainties youth face, as well as with their joys, hopes, and successes.
- f.) be genuine in their own faith and experience of the Church.
- g.) be honest and trustworthy.
- h.) be sympathetic, open, and willing to share their personal experiences.
- i.) serve as role models.
- j.) admit their own faults, or the fact that they do not know everything, without feeling threatened.
- k.) sense the pressures youth face in their daily lives.
- l.) discover and develop the talents and gifts of youth.
- m.) accept each youth as a unique, special person, and as a genuine gift from God.
- n.) see God's presence in the youth with whom they work.
- o.) see that their ministry is an extension of Christ's ministry, designed to lead youth to salvation.
- p.) put aside their own self-interests, ego, pride, and arrogance.
- q.) possess a sense of humor and a playful spirit.
- r.) accept a certain amount of freedom by the Church to experiment and to try new methods of youth ministry.
- s.) display confidence without being boastful.
- t.) possess a genuine rapport with youth and an understanding of contemporary youth culture and interests.

Above all, youth ministers must *love* youth and *accept* them as equals. Nothing is more deadly than youth ministers who see youth as "beneath" themselves. Jesus ministered to prostitutes,

tax collectors, lepers, and many whom others had rejected. He accepted them for who and what they were. *Never* did He reject them as inferior.

Finally, youth ministers must, to a certain degree, be youth themselves, at least in spirit. There are those who have told me that I relate well with teenagers because, despite the fact that I am 41 years old, a part of me is still a teenager!

We cannot *teach* these gifts to those who do not possess them by nature. We can, however, develop the God-given abilities of those whom we know to possess youth ministry skills. As we say in America, "either you *have* it, or you *don't*." A person who does not possess a natural love for youth cannot be taught such love.

3. Youth must not only be ministered to, but they must also be encouraged and allowed to minister to *others* as a living expression of their faith and belief in Jesus Christ. Having served the Lord in the Liturgy, it is necessary to serve one another once the Liturgy has ended, thereby transforming day-to-day encounters and relationships into expressions of God's presence and love. This is especially important at this time in history when the Church in Russia has new and exciting possibilities for becoming involved in and affecting society as a whole. Non-believers need to see our youth serving others, if for no other reason than to reverse the impression that the Church is relevant only to *babushki*. Our youth must be given the support necessary to

- a.) volunteer to rebuild and restore our venerable churches and monasteries, which are, in and of themselves, reminders of God's presence in our midst. As Alexander Solzynitzin writes, the countless cupolas, bell towers, and churches which dot the Russian landscape stand in silent testimony to God's Kingdom.
- b.) offer assistance in hospitals, homes for pensioners, and other endeavors where charitable service is necessary.
- c.) teach and assist in Sunday Schools.
- d.) offer assistance in caring for children, in nurseries, and in schools.
- e.) organize activities for younger children and their peers on the premises of our churches or in other available public locations.
- f.) participate in the liturgical services as readers, choir singers, altar servers, etc.
- g.) speak of their faith to others openly and without fear-and speak of it with a genuine joy and warmth.
- h.) recognize God's presence in others and treat them as they would treat Christ.
- i.) live and share their faith at school, at work, and in their neighborhoods, thereby offering an experience of God's presence with non-believers and others who might otherwise never come into contact with the Christian community.
- j.) develop their talents-writing, speaking, singing, etc.-for the glory of God and the building up and growth of the Church.
- k.) use their experience to minister to other youth who are lost, searching, or troubled.
- l.) invite others, especially non-believers, to camps, retreats, and youth group gatherings.

There are countless other areas in which our youth can bring a vibrant, living sound to those silent cupolas and bell towers of which Solzynitsin writes. We, on our part, must encourage and affirm them in all they attempt, thank them for all they accomplish, and assure them of our support in every way.

4. Finally, we must form local, parish youth groups and clubs which meet on a weekly or monthly basis to plan and accomplish that of which we have spoken. We need dedicated leaders to guide these groups and to ensure that the groups do not become exclusive, cliquish, or self-serving.

I would like to conclude by saying that what has been impossible for too many years is now possible, and we must take great care in keeping our vision clearly focused on ministry *to* and *by* youth, rather than on merely organizing another self-serving bureaucracy. Our vision must be on the needs of our youth rather than on the needs of an organizational structure, important as it is to be organized. I have witnessed the death of too many American Orthodox youth groups which lost their vision and direction through preoccupation with organizational rather than human needs. Many youth were lost in the process.

So let us begin our work, recognizing that our youth are the *present* as well as the *future* of our Church, and that their function within the Body of Christ is no less important simply because of their age or lack of experience. A finger is not a thyroid, as we've stated, but both are essential in making the human body whole and complete. Our youth are not the only ones to whom the Church must minister, but without them, something *most* essential-*the future*-will be lost.