

# Raising Children Who Believe

**Fr. Peter Gillquist**

## *Five Steps We Took as Christian Parents*

One of the great struggles we have today in the Church is preserving our children in the Orthodox Faith. Too often they seem not to be interested. Can we somehow motivate our kids to be excited about following Christ and being Orthodox Christians? I believe there is a way. It takes commitment and hard work, but it's worth it.

When I was eight, my mom passed away, and my dad remarried when I was ten. One summer evening when I was about fourteen, I was sitting on the front steps of our home in Minneapolis, thinking about how much I missed my mom. That night I decided that if I were to have nothing else in life, I wanted a great marriage and family. I put it above education, above a successful career, above my standing in the community.

My wife Marilyn and I both committed our lives to Christ while we were students at the University of Minnesota. One evening Dr. Bob Smith, a professor at Bethel College in St. Paul, talked on marriage and the family. Somewhere during his talk he created a picture that was indelibly etched in my mind. He said, "One day I'm going to stand before the judgment seat of Christ as a father, and my goal is to have my wife and children by my side, saying, 'Lord, we're all present and accounted for. Here's Mary, here's Steve, here's Johnny, we're all here.'" That night, I prayed, "Lord, that's what I want when I get married and have children - that we might all enter Your eternal Kingdom intact."

Through college, seminary, and forty-five years of marriage, my commitment to have a great family and to bring them into the Kingdom with me has never wavered. My wife and I have kept our marriage healthy and have striven to be godly parents and grandparents. I want to outline for you five specific things Marilyn and I tried to do and, by the grace of God, mostly succeeded in doing, to build up our family in Christ and His Church.

### **1. Make Your Family Your Priority**

More important than anything other than the Kingdom of God is our family. I believe if we're going to raise Orthodox Christian families, our spouses and children have to be our highest priority, next to Christ and His Church.

For the believer, our journey with Christ and His Church always comes first. On that matter, the Scriptures are clear, the Fathers are clear, and the Liturgy is clear. At least four times each Sunday morning we call to mind our holy and blessed God-bearer and all the saints, saying, "Let us commit ourselves and each other and all our life to Christ our God." Our relationship with God comes first, our commitment to our family comes next, and our dedication to our work is third.

As parents, we need to make a vice-grip-firm commitment that above job, above our social life, above all the things that vie for our time, we will prioritize our families.

During the early years of our marriage, I worked with Campus Crusade for Christ. After that, I spent three years working at the University of Memphis, and then eleven years at Thomas Nelson Publishers in Nashville. At each juncture the battle for balance - work vs. family - raged. I would like to report that winning it is easy, but it's not. I cannot tell you the number of friends and acquaintances I have had - Christian people - who lost their families because, by their own admission, their career came first. They were absentee dads and moms, and their jobs ate them up.

In most of my work over the years, I've traveled. It was true in Campus Crusade in the 60s, it was true at Thomas Nelson in the 70s and 80s, and it's true today in my work for the Antiochian Orthodox Archdiocese. I'm gone about half the time. When the airlines some years back started offering frequent-flyer miles, I thought, "Wait a minute, there's a way I can beat this problem. I'll take my kids along."

So in those years at Thomas Nelson, I began to take one child at a time with me on some of my trips. On a trip out East with one of my daughters, we rented a car in New York City and drove to Harrisburg, Pennsylvania. I think we had the best talk we ever had together during that drive. Another time I had to drive all night from Chicago to Atlanta, and I had my son Greg with me. When we got out into the country where there were no city lights, he remarked he could see the stars more clearly than he had ever seen them before. That night we talked about God's creation. As adults, most all our six children have said, "Dad, some of my favourite times were those trips I got to take with you."

If you're busy, find a way to compensate. I made appointments with my children. If your time is in heavy demand and you don't block out time for the kids, you'll never see them. If someone calls and has to see you, you say, "You know, Joe, I've got an appointment. I can see you tomorrow." You decide to prioritize your family.

## **2. Tell Your Children of God's Faithfulness**

In Deuteronomy 4, Moses is talking to the children of Israel about the importance of keeping God's commandments. And then he speaks directly to parents and grandparents: "Only take heed to yourself, and diligently keep yourself, lest you forget the things your eyes have seen, and lest they depart from your heart all the days of your life. And teach them to your children and your grandchildren" (Deuteronomy 4:9).

Maybe you are a parent who came to Christ later in life and feel you didn't do a good job spiritually with your kids, and now they have families of their own. Well, now you've got a crack at your grandkids! This opportunity does not mean that you become your grandchildren's parent. But what you can do is tell those grandchildren what God has done for you, just like Moses says. Talk to them. If you've become more dedicated to Christ later in life, tell your grandkids about that. Tell them lessons that you've learned. Tell them real-life stories about God's faithfulness and His mercy to you.

Moses goes on to explain the importance of such conversations by recalling what the Lord had said to him: "that they may learn to fear Me all the days they live on the earth,

and that they may teach their children" (Deuteronomy 4:10). Children who are rightly taught the Word of God will teach their own children.

How did we teach our kids? Before I answer, let me say I think it's possible to overdo it. You can't ram Christianity down your family's throats. If you are a zealot, you may be tempted to force-feed them until they become rebels. I met a few men in seminary who were there not because they wanted to be, or even because God had called them; rather, they came to please their parents. And that's scary.

Central to everything we tried to do as a family was going to church Sunday morning. Even through the struggles of the teenage years, there was never a question as to what we did Sunday morning. I was not a priest during the teenage years of our older children, but regardless of that, as a family we were in church on Sunday morning. And if we traveled, we went to church wherever we were.

I knew that if I cut corners with our kids, they would cut corners with theirs. If you compromise, they will compromise more. So this point was never open for discussion. Thank God, all six of our kids are Orthodox, their spouses are Orthodox, and our seventeen grandchildren are Orthodox. And they're all in church on Sunday morning.

Now, Orthodox churches have more services than Protestants do. So what did we do? We always went to Saturday night Vespers, Sunday morning Liturgy, and major feast days. Was there mercy in that? Absolutely. Would I keep them away from the prom or a big football game on Saturday night? Of course not. But we didn't want them to be out so late that it interfered with their participation on Sunday morning. On feast days, if they had a midterm the next day, did I force them to go? I did not. The line I tried to walk was to put Christ and the Church first, but not to do it with a hammerlock. There was discipline, and there was also mercy.

And that is the same spirit we tried to keep in family prayer. When the kids were little, we read Bible stories to them every night. We would pray together. We did that all the way through, and as they got older we encouraged them to say their own prayers at night.

In becoming Orthodox, we graduated into the church calendar. During Advent and Lent, in the Lexicon there are scriptural readings from the Old and New Testaments. At the dinner table during Advent and Lent we would do those readings together every night. If I was on the road, I would ask someone else to do it. That way the family was on the spiritual diet that the Church prescribes during those two seasons. When I was home, I would read and comment on the passage. We would talk about how the passage related to our lives and how it related to Lent or Advent.

Then the rest of the year, I would give the blessing for the food, and often the conversation at the dinner table would focus on Christ. If the kids had questions, I would open the Scriptures with them. So we found the rhythm of the church year brought a good balance.

### **3. Love Your Spouse**

Thirdly - and I can't stress this enough - we do our kids a favour when we love our spouses. Psychologists tell us that even more important than a child feeling love from parents is for that child to know mom and dad love each other. Kids know instinctively that if love in marriage breaks down, there's not much left over for them.

The beautiful passage that describes this love is in Ephesians 5. It's the passage that we read as the epistle at our Orthodox weddings. "Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ also loved the church" (v. 25). That means, gentlemen, that we love her enough to die for her. We martyr ourselves to each other; that's what the wedding crowns are about. I love my wife more than life itself. The crowns also speak of royalty. In my homily at the marriage of our younger son, I said, "Peter, treat her like a queen! Kristina, treat him like a king!" That arrangement works out really well.

And I don't think we ever get over courting. Marilyn and I still go out on dates, and we've been married forty-five years! Sometimes you just need to take a break, go out together, talk and listen and stay in love. Before I got married, I had a friend who had a great relationship with his wife. I asked, "What's your secret?" His advice: "Find out what she likes to do and do it." Marilyn likes to shop. In our early years we couldn't afford anything, so we'd go out window shopping after the stores closed.

Now, if I've got a day free, I ask her, "What do you want to do, honey?" She usually answers, "Let's go shopping."

So I'll put on a sport shirt, drive downtown, hold her hand as we look in the windows, and buy the grandkids a gift. Grow in your love and keep up the courtship.

### **4. Never Discipline out of Anger**

There are times when things go wrong, even badly wrong. I would love to tell you that none of our six kids ever missed a beat. Or that mom and dad were infallible. I don't know of a family where that happens. I will say that on a sliding scale, three of our children were relatively easy to raise, three were more challenging. When some of them got stubborn in their teenage years, I would say to Marilyn, "Remember what we were like at that age? They're no different than we were." I was difficult as a teenager, and some of that showed up in our kids.

St. John said, "I have no greater joy than to hear that my children walk in truth" (3 John 4). The opposite of that is also true. There is no greater heartache than when our children do not walk in truth. We've had a few big bumps in our family. There were nights my wife and I were both in tears as we tried to sleep. We would say, "Lord, is there light at the end of this tunnel?"

One of the verses I memorized out of the Old Testament early in my own parenthood was Proverbs 22:6: "Train up a child in the way he should go, / And when he is old he will not depart from it." Let me assure you, that promise from God is true. There were days I wondered whether our family would stand before the Lord fully intact. Thank God for repentance, forgiveness, restoration, and grace.

Immediately after St. Paul's exhortation on marriage in Ephesians 5, he continues with parent-child relationships. "Children, obey your parents in the Lord, for this is right. ... Honour your father and your mother, ... which is the first commandment with promise: 'that it may be well with you and you may live long on the earth'" (Ephesians 6:1-3). This is another dependable promise. If a child obeys his parents, he'll live a longer life. So we train them up to be obedient.

It is helpful now and then to sit down with our children and remind them why it's so important to obey mom and dad. Because if children do not learn to obey their parents, they will not learn to obey God. And the consequences of that are dire, both in this life and the next. So one reason we obey mom and dad is that in turn we learn to follow the Lord.

The next verse gives the other side of the coin: "Fathers, do not provoke your children to wrath, but bring them up in the training and admonition of the Lord" (Ephesians 6:4). I don't know where I got this idea (few things I do are original), but when I had to correct our girls, I would hold their hand. In my early days as a dad, I would sit them in a chair and then sit across from them. But one day I said to myself, "This doesn't say what I want to say." So I would sit with them on the couch, hold their hand, look them in the eye, and tell them what I wanted them to do.

Two of my daughters have come to me independently as adults and thanked me for holding their hands when I corrected them. They both had friends whose dads embarrassed their daughters, disciplining in a way that was probably too strong. I encourage fathers to guard against a discipline or correction that engenders wrath in your children. After the correction, give them a hug and let them know you love them.

There are times when a father may need to refrain from discipline on the spot because he is angry. Remember that line from *The Incredible Hulk*? "You won't like me when I'm angry." If that's true for a cartoon character, how much more is it true for a real-life dad?

### **5. Help Your Children Discern God's Will**

Let's look again at Proverbs 22:6: "Train up a child in the way he should go, and when he is old he will not depart from it." The phrase, "in the way he should go," is not speaking of the way you want him to go. Rather, it's the way God wants him to go. In other words, taking into account that child's gifts, his emotional makeup, his personality, his intellect, his calling, you help him discern the path God has for him.

I'm really pleased that Peter Jon is a seminarian and that Wendy's husband is an Orthodox deacon. But I'm no more pleased with them than I am with Greg, who is a marketing guy, or with Terri, who is a mom of five, or with Ginger and Heidi, who both work outside the home to help their husbands provide for their sons.

To repeat, our job as parents is to try to discern with our children what God wants them to do, and then train them in that way. Whether their calling is in business or law or

retailing or service to the Church, I want them to be the best they can be, for the glory of God. And by the way, all of us are in the ministry of Christ by virtue of our baptism. We are ordained as His servants - lay or clergy. Therefore, whatever we do, our goal is to do it for the glory of God.

These, then, are the steps we have tried to take with our children. Thank God, these measures have produced good fruit. At our stage in life, it is wonderful with just the two of us at home to think back over the years and to thank the Lord for children, spouses, and grandchildren who are faithful. There is nothing like it.

That doesn't mean there will never be any more problems. I'm naive, but not naive enough to believe that. There may be bumps yet to come in our lives. But as we confess at our weddings, "The prayers of parents establish the foundations of houses." These years are not kickback time, but they are a time of thanksgiving.

May God grant you the joy in raising your family in Christ that we have known in raising ours.

*Fr. Peter E. Gillquist is the director of the Department of Missions and Evangelism for the Antiochian Orthodox Christian Archdiocese of North America, and the publisher of Conciliar Press. He and his wife, Marilyn, live in Santa Barbara, California.*

*This article originally appeared in AGAIN Vol. 26 No. 4, Summer 2004*