

Where have all the children gone?

by Fr. Bohdan Hladio

An oft-heard lament in most churches has to do with the real or perceived lack of younger congregants. Parishes which twenty or thirty years ago had lively church schools and sizable youth groups might have only a half-dozen or a dozen youngsters attending a normal Sunday liturgy today. Why? What went wrong? Is it something we said? Something we did?

One reason we see less children in our congregations is that people nowadays simply have less children. It has nothing to do with the Church itself, and everything to do with basic demographics. Western society in general is plagued by a “me first” mentality, which often results in children being seen as a burden, or worse yet, as competition for resources.

I’m sure we’ve all heard someone say “I’d like to get married and have children, but first I want to travel, I want to advance my career, I want to enjoy myself”. Sadly, family life and parenthood are often juxtaposed in a false dichotomy against personal freedom, economic security, and “fun”. Consequently many who do end up getting married and having children usually get married later in life, and have fewer children.

My experience as a husband, father, and priest shows me that it’s our marital and familial relationships which bring us our greatest joy and deepest happiness. A year long first-class trip around the world is nothing compared to the feeling you get watching your child grow into a spiritually, mentally and physically mature human being. The pride one gets in rising to the top of one’s profession is nothing compared to the feeling of peace and love one has just being near a spouse who loves you in spite of your faults, one who you know will be there by your side no matter what.

When our young people do get married, the vast majority marry non-Ukrainians and non-Orthodox. Our Church is beautiful and true, but it can for these very reasons be very intimidating to those who grow up outside of her. I don’t think it would be an exaggeration to say that in most parishes we do a poor job of integrating the non-Ukrainian Orthodox spouses of our children into parish life. When we don’t integrate the non-Ukrainian Orthodox spouse into the parish, we put the burden for the Christian upbringing of the children entirely on one parent which increases the chances that children from this union will not get a well-rounded spiritual formation and sooner or later leave the Church.

Language obviously plays a part in this process as well. I know of no Canadian born person who by the age of nine does not understand English much better than they understand Ukrainian (I don’t even know a young person born in Ukraine who doesn’t know English better than Ukrainian after four years here!). Both for the non-Ukrainian spouses of our children, as well as our children and grandchildren themselves, a judicious use of English (and French in Quebec) is absolutely essential.

There are those who would say “We have a Ukrainian Church. If they want to join they

can learn Ukrainian!” Leaving aside the lack of respect, evangelical sensitivity and common sense evident in such a statement, experience has shown that in those places where young people have had the opportunity to go to Ukrainian school and strove diligently to learn Ukrainian well they with rare exceptions still do not become regular congregants as adults.

When asking younger, middle-aged, and even elderly people why they are no longer members of our Church no one ever says “the theology is wrong”, or “the singing is bad” or “the services aren’t beautiful”. The almost universal response is “I couldn’t understand anything”. Language is important. If we wish to have any hope of our younger people remaining in our churches we’ve got to communicate with them - both intellectually and liturgically - in a language they can understand.

Growing up today is difficult. Growing up as a Christian is well-nigh impossible. Our faith and morals are so totally countercultural that an Orthodox student on a normal university campus who practices their faith would be regarded as totally daft by most of the students and professors they encounter. The influence of secular humanism and materialistic scientism is virtually universal in schools today. The influence of the immorality, sexual license, violence and simple nonsensical noise present in movies, TV, popular music, computer games, etc. upon our young people cannot be overestimated. A child raised without a solid Christian foundation will have no defenses against these influences - none of which is telling them to value God, His Church, responsibility, honesty, humility, community, commitment, faithfulness, or Christ-like sacrificial love.

This brings us to the issue of Christian education. It’s natural to feel uncomfortable when we don’t know what’s going on. If you say to a child “we’re going to the ball-game”, and they ask “what do they do there?”, and you reply “Oh, there’s a lot of people, and they do different things, and we’ll just sit there for 3 hours and watch”, what child would want to go?

“What is the priest doing?” “Be quiet!” “What does that song mean?” “Sit still!”. “How much longer will we be here?” “I don’t know!” Sadly, for some children this is about as good as it gets as far as religious education is concerned!

Ideally, every child will have a Christian formation consisting of five elements. Christian formation at home consists of prayer, reading the bible, and other spiritual reading (lives of saints, etc.). Attendance at the divine services (at least every Sunday and on the great feast days as a minimum) is the next step. Attending church school is the third step. Belonging to a parish youth group where faith and culture can be integrated with service and socialization is next. And finally, attendance at church camps, conferences and retreats where the young people can interact with youth from across the country is the icing on the cake.

Needless to say, the same program, with the necessary modifications in material and approach, should be a paradigm for young adult and adult programs - for converts, those who marry into our Church, and ongoing Christian education.

Parents nowadays often feel very weary. They feel pressured by their jobs, their responsibilities, and by the need to give their children opportunities to experience everything - dance lessons, and Ukrainian School, dance and music lessons, sports, travel, cottage life, etc., etc., and etc. It's usually Church attendance which gets sacrificed first in such circumstances. But I've seen examples of grandparents who faithfully bring their grandchildren to Church, thereby giving them an opportunity to stay connected to their parish community, to learn about God, to become a responsible member of the Church and society.

This is more important than most of us realize. When that child is fifty years old chances are they're not going to be doing ballet, or the Hopak, or playing soccer, etc. But we certainly hope they'll be happily married, have raised good children, be a responsible and contributing member of society, etc. These things are most likely to happen when built upon a solid Christian foundation.

If we are serious about seeing more children in our churches we must, in addition, seriously consider how we might serve the needs of single adults who are looking for an Orthodox spouse. Our young, single adults need to find mates if they're going to have children. The chances of those children becoming solid, contributing members of the church increases drastically when they have pious and committed Orthodox parents. We desperately need to organize dances, socials, and other get-togethers to give our unattached young people, from university age to "thirty-somethings", regular opportunities to meet potential spouses. I may be wrong, but it seems to me that this is one of the greatest failings in our parish and church life. If this need isn't addressed we have very little chance of church growth from within.

None of this matters, of course, unless we truly love our Church and care for her continued welfare and well-being. But I guess we could say the same thing about our children as well, couldn't we?