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St Elisabeth
Convent

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Suffer the little children to come unto Me (Mark 10:14)

Ye fathers, provoke not your children to wrath: but bring them up in the nurture and admonition of the Lord (Eph. 6:4)

I and my youngest son, aged twenty, have been in uncompromising spiritual 'warfare'. He doesn't like anything I do: whether it's the way I cook or the spiritual books I read. He says bluntly that I annoy him and he simply can't bear me. I don't speak with him about God and the Church. He has never wanted to hear anything about them. As a result now I'm afraid of my own son. What should I do in this situation?

You should believe that your prayers will nevertheless lead him to repentance and to improving his behaviour. We know from the Life of Blessed Augustine of Hippo¹, for example, that his mother prayed for him for as much as twenty years before he converted to Christ – and it was a long period of persistent efforts.

You just need to understand your son, accept him, and be patient when he's annoyed with you. Maybe you're not attentive and sensitive enough to your son.

If you persevere in your life with God and are inwardly strengthened in God, then your son will sooner or later get over the temptations of this world and want to be like you. To do so, you need to die to sin.

¹Blessed Augustine (354-430) served as a bishop of the city of Hippo in North Africa and was an outstanding Christian theologian and writer.

How can I struggle with the impatience and irritation I experience as I bring my children up? Should I insist on the child doing something and obeying me immediately, at the moment I feel I'm getting irritated? Or maybe I should step back, wait a little and try to do it later?

You should try and do it later. If you store up anger and annoyance, it's a sin. With sin you'll never get any results – all you'll have is your face, distorted and twisted with anger, and your biting words.

So you ought to calm down, pray and wait for a while, if only for a day, and then speak to your child strictly and explain his fault to him. You may even punish him; the main thing is that he should see that you're not out of sorts and that it's not a sinful or emotional outburst.

The purpose of punishment is not to show that you're the head of the family and that you're stronger. Reformation is the aim of punishment: you help your child overcome his vices and prevent his flaws becoming his personality traits and part of his life. If parents don't want to be responsible for their children, it's nothing but cowardice and faint-heartedness.

You need to have a sober outlook on life. Now your child's small, but what will happen when he grows up? You must think about it and be careful with whatever you say or do to your child. Children are very sensitive to injustice. They're capable of harbouring resentment against anybody. They may reach the age of thirty or forty, but still bear a grudge against their parents for unjustly beating or scolding them in their childhood, for some dispute that hurt their souls.

What is your opinion on the book by Priest Anatoly Garmaev, *Stages in the Moral Development of Children*?

To my mind, this is the priest's personal experience, his own vision which cannot be regarded as universal... There are Divine love and grace in the Church which are superior to all other things. Christ's love must triumph over sin – this is our benchmark. It is above any psychological laws. God acts contrary to any earthly logic. He can act in such a way that everything may seem totally wrong to us – but it will be according to His providence.

So the essence of our Christian education is in loving, taking responsibility on ourselves, working and bringing up our children by personal example. 'Acquire the spirit of peace,' here are the edifying words of the Venerable Seraphim of Sarov. 'Show me Christ as He is; don't speak but show – I want to see Him' - this is what's required of a teacher.

My son is seventeen. He can't fight his laziness and he's being excluded from college for poor progress. How can I help him?

Yes, you should have punished him earlier, now this won't help. Parents must blame themselves for this. You should repent instead of moaning, lamenting, and scolding your son for the umpteenth time (he must have heard these words lots of times). Just try to understand why his life's like this and why it's difficult for him to study. True, it would be easier to say, 'You bring disgrace on us! We work hard and keep you well provided for, while you, you rascal, don't respect us!' Making reproaches like these will lead you nowhere. It will result in child-parent alienation.

A different approach is needed: what about taking him to church so he may come to understand that something must be changed in his life and may want to do something himself? What if he didn't want to study in the first place? Maybe he wanted to become a firefighter or somebody else instead of enrolling at college? Some finish two universities. Well, what then? Many of

them never use their knowledge and their lives become meaningless, whereas creativity should be present everywhere. And parents should guide their children in this respect. Otherwise the street will do it for them – and the ‘creativity’ of the street is very different and ‘sad’.

I’m very short-tempered and often scold my children, for example, for not tidying their room, not combing their hair, not cleaning their shoes and writing in their exercise books with mistakes. I’ve often repented of this sin at Confession. I want to be a loving, affectionate mother, but I still behave like a supervisor. Please can you tell me how I can change for the better?

Read the prayer of the Optina Elders attentively every morning, ‘Grant unto me, O Lord, that with peace of mind I may face all that this new day is to bring. Grant unto me to dedicate myself completely to Thy Holy Will...’

Always repeat the Lord's Prayer in your mind before you say anything with annoyance or anger. It would be very good not to open our mouths when we have no peace of mind. If we vent our sins on the children, it is neither giving education nor upbringing. When you have peace in your soul, you can both punish your child and speak to him strictly, and the child will take in the mother's words because in them he will hear pain and the desire to help him correct a mistake.

I can't get on with my daughter and establish a warm, family relationship with her. I want us to be more open, tolerant and kinder to each other. I do my best but see that she finds my attention a burden. She wants to become a doctor, but I

think she's still not prepared for this spiritually. Should she really study medicine?

Firstly, if she wants to become a doctor, then don't stand in her way. No doctor will tell you that he's ready to show compassion to every single patient. In fact, the doctor's inner state may vary, and love and compassion for people do not always live in him. I'm positive that this labour, the desire to alleviate somebody else's pain, heal their wound and restore them to health is the most Christian work imaginable. It's no coincidence that the cross is the symbol of medicine. So you shouldn't decide that your daughter is not prepared spiritually. She'll mature once she's encountered pain. I think it's good that she's going to be a doctor.

Secondly, you've probably been trying to overprotect her and want her to be like you. It looks like she is clearly guided by other qualities and values at this stage. Your daughter has already grown up, and it is something you should take into account and respect. When we are tactless, when we mock others, disregard their opinions and get our way, saying, 'This is my child! I can do whatever I want with them!' we build walls in our relationship that are based on distrust. These walls should be destroyed as far as possible. This problem above all concerns the mother rather than the daughter. You really need to change your life. You have to do that.

If a teacher grossly violates the code of ethics for educators in the presence of the students, what should we do with him?

If a teacher is rude to students and violates elementary standards of conduct, this, undoubtedly, affects the students. Parents must protect their children.

There must be people who share your opinion. I suggest you all speak to this teacher together. He may not listen to you. Then his misconduct should be reported to the school authorities – you should struggle to prevent children being traumatised by their own teachers. Don't be afraid of any misunderstanding or difficulties in relationships. If you see that harm could be done to young souls, you must act.

My oldest child was born out of wedlock. He grew up a good boy and when he was nine, I got married. My husband and I had two wonderful children, a boy and a girl, who are now eight and five respectively. We have lived together for ten years. Unfortunately, my husband and my elder son couldn't get on from the outset. That affected the son badly. He has no purpose in life. He doesn't want to finish his college, doesn't attend practical training classes and refuses to work. All this makes my husband angry and he tells me not to give my son food and help him. He demands I choose between my son and him. He says either the elder son moves out to rent a separate room or he (the husband) leaves the family. What should I do? I would appreciate your prayers. I'm asking you to speak with my son.

Problems like this are widespread among those living in a second marriage. What can I say? You need to try and struggle for everybody: for your son, your husband, and the other children. To do so, your love must suffice for everybody. You need prayer. It is clear your husband is driven by selfishness and most likely by jealousy. You too have failed your elder son because you didn't manage to keep the integrity of the family

and the son grew up without a father. Why?

You need to reconcile the whole family. This is why you must forget yourself and pray continually so Divine love can unite your beloved ones somehow. You need to repent of your sins and take Communion.

You mustn't believe the devil who is trying to suggest to all of you – yourself, your son and your husband – that this conflict is insurmountable, that it will result in the loss of your son or husband or even you losing your aim in life. It is certainly a very difficult task.

Hopefully, this very task will turn you into a true Christian and give you an opportunity to pray for four people simultaneously.

Take care not to agree with sin. It is sin that persuades you to make a choice: 'either I or your son'. He who loves God more than others thinks he himself is more to blame. You are most likely responsible for this situation to some extent and you should atone for your fault by living a life that is pleasing to God. Your son is to blame too, since children tend to take advantage of certain situations. All is interrelated here. Your son should have studied instead of fooling about. He should take pity on his mother. Everyone involved is selfish. No matter from what perspective you look at this situation, sin is everywhere.

God wants you to learn to love everybody so your love can suffice for the reconciliation and the beginning of a new life with God. How can it be achieved? That is unattainable with human efforts. There's Christ, there's the Holy Church, and the Holy Chalice. Find love in it, and it will transform you.

My son's quarrelled with his wife (they just married two months ago) and isn't going to make up with her. Should I try and convince him? I'm sympathetic to my daughter-in-law and sorry for my son; I like this girl, but my son's not that

flexible. I have no idea what to do. I want them to live a happy life so much...

The parents' mission is to help, support, and guide their children. So you need to try and convince your son, saying that there may be different phases in life: some of them are easy, others are hard to deal with. Life situations do change. Continue to educate your son. In addition to Church prayers, some living words are needed. Perhaps you should speak not only to your son but to your daughter-in-law as well. You should become a mediator, reconciling, supporting, helping this young family to build a relationship. One month, two months, a year for a married couple is a very short period. You must learn to live with God and teach your children the same. Of course, we feel ashamed when we see our sins in our children. We grow like our children. We continue to instruct our children to our last breath. We depend on each other.

My daughter's sixteen years old. She believes in God but goes to church with the sole aim of asking God for good health, a safe journey, success and lighting a candle on the feast. She has no patience to stand through the service and can only stand from fifteen to twenty minutes. She hardly ever takes Communion and goes to Confession, and she doesn't see or understand the meaning of the Divine Liturgy. Earlier, when my daughter was between six and ten, I forced her to go to church, but now I can't do it. Can you give me some advice how I can persuade her to attend the Liturgy on Sundays?

Try not to force her to go to church. Let your desire be expressed in prayer. In case of compulsion she may begin to

protest and won't come to church even for twenty minutes.

You need to understand she's a very young woman with her own character. Maybe she wants to go out for a walk and have a break from school. At this stage it's probably hard for her to understand the meaning of the Church services – for this the Lord should touch her with His grace.

The period when you took her to church will certainly have its effect. If you trust her, if you grow spiritually, then your daughter will tell you sooner or later, 'Mummy, I want to be like you because I see your beauty.'

That is when you will be able to tell her that we receive everything from God. You will explain to her we do not always have to understand everything, sometimes we just need to accept certain things and believe that everything that takes place in church is very important. Then the Lord will reveal its meaning to us.

How can we contain the Liturgy? Are we really able to understand its essence? Do we really grasp the nature of Holy Communion? We can only receive it 'with the fear of God and faith'.

If you love your daughter and accept her for what she is now, if you see beauty in her, if all she hears from you is not rebukes and reproaches, if you become friends and trust each other, then one day she'll come to understand everything and wish to attend the Liturgy at church. It won't be according to your own will - it will be arranged by God.

My son's joined an anarchist organisation. Now he attends their meetings and brings their literature home. Though I keep praying, it's still going on. What should I do?

You should try to find out what kind of an organisation it is, what anarchism is like and what effects it can have. You need to study the things that are promoted there so your son can see

that you're interested in his life. It's very important not to say words that may repel him and estrange you and him. It's really important because children often hear the following words from their parents: 'Listen, stop fooling away your time! Go away!' Naturally, children start looking for other advisers, people who will understand them.

Perhaps you think the same, 'What nonsense! I go to church, I'm a religious person. I've never thought of anarchists...' Meanwhile, it may be important to him. He has found some meaning in this and he certainly had a reason for joining this organisation. He needs your help – he must be convinced that the lifestyle promoted by these people and the ideas they're instilling in his mind are wrong. You must make efforts in this.

How do we inculcate obedience and respect for parents in a child, if the parents themselves, unfortunately, fail to set an example?

In my view, parental example in bringing up children is vital. As parents live in the family, so their children will largely live their lives because children imitate their parents in everything. Therefore, your personal example is crucial. You can coerce, reproach, and rail at your child all the time, but he will clearly understand that his parents themselves don't live by what they teach. That is why children take their parents' words as mere lectures, nuisances that they just need to get through and then forget.

Parents need to gain their children's trust so they begin to feel ashamed and realise their parents really love them and say these words not because it is normal and they are older and in charge, but because the parents are their best friends and wish them well. We should talk with our children and devote our time to them.

It is very bad that we lack time for the most important thing, namely, bringing up our children. We are in a hurry to earn money,

but we don't benefit from this money.

We want our children to learn music, foreign languages, take them to numerous clubs until we are exhausted. Above all else, the main thing we must learn is to love our children. We love our kids when we devote our time and energy to them, when we search and take a creative approach to our children's personalities instead of regarding them as our 'possessions' that follow us everywhere as if they were our tails.

This is why the question of our children and their lives is above all the question of our own lives. How do we live? What is our inner state? Do we really have what we need to share our children with? Do we have at least a tiny bit of humility, faith, and love in our hearts or do we just say words, which are seemingly correct but absolutely fruitless?

What to do if a child from the first marriage fails to accept his mother's second husband? They live in a state of permanent conflict.

I am of the opinion that this conflict is to do with jealousy. Children, the fatherless in particular, tend to become very jealous when their mums fall in love with another man and give him a lot of attention. Such children think their mum loves this man more than them, hence some very serious conflicts.

It is important for your husband to understand what is going on in case he comes into conflict with the child; rather, he should convince him with humility and patience and do his best to ensure the child feels that not only his mother but also his stepfather needs him.

The struggle for the family is the aim of your life. When you got married, you must have striven to build a close-knit family. Unfortunately, this is difficult because indeed there is jealousy. Your husband may also be jealous and say, 'You never give me any attention! You only care for the child!' Here you should show

the maximum of love, be continually on the alert, keep humility in your heart permanently to endure, to keep silence and refrain from saying something unwise which can hurt. It was you who took this cross on yourself.

How do we bring up a child, a boy, in the spirit of Orthodoxy, if his father doesn't set an example of piety and purity, smokes, seeks entertainment, refuses to pray and keep the fasts instead? The boy may begin to imitate him after this. How do we keep the child safe from a ruinous path from infancy?

Thank God you've asked this question. First and foremost, you shouldn't oppose his father so the child can see that you love your husband, though at present he is far from following a proper lifestyle. It is important not to have outward marital discord and keep your family united. To do so, you ought to be very flexible, very wise and continually ask God to enlighten you as to how to act and what to say in one or another situation. That is because when a child hears his parents argue and quarrel, it has a detrimental effect on him. It is vital that he sees beauty in your humility.

How can you receive help? Only God can do this. You won't help the situation by your own strength. God can do it through your prayer, through your heart, through your love that must cover everything and bring your husband, this grown-up sick child, to repentance.

You decided to have a family, you took this responsibility on yourself. Of course, you might say, 'He does not go to church, he does not fast, he drinks and smokes, so I don't want to know him any more!' This path would be the easiest one. That is why everything depends on the degree of your love for and trust in God.

If you want to keep the peace in your family and build relations which could be called beautiful, then you should die for your 'ego' in order to 'rise from the dead' later. The enemy may try to trick you at once by showing you some seemingly pious, 'very spiritual' man who 'makes so many bows', and you'll begin to indulge in fantasies, 'This one would make a good husband for me! My current husband is good for nothing.' The enemy will instantly inspire dreams and resentment in you. In the end you will be bound by sin hand and foot. Instead, you must be thankful, 'This is my husband, and I love him! Perhaps he doesn't love me right now, but I haven't deserved love. I'll try and change for the better. How? Maybe I should be more considerate, cook nicer food, start a conversation, and see my fault in what's been happening in our family...'

No one wants to see their own fault. We usually say, 'I'm so unlucky! How is it that I was mistaken in my other half?' Thus, bad luck may accompany us throughout our lives. We can also justify ourselves, 'If I'm misunderstood, I can't help this.' But what about children? They soak up everything like sponges: every single word, every single shout and instance of rudeness. A child can even come to hate the Church: while he loves his dad, his mum's always complaining: 'You must go to church, you must keep the fast!' And the child will say: 'What should I fast for? What is this personal violence for?'

You have to be a very skilful strategist and politician, and show great tact to live with God. You need to have so much attention and inward discipline not to commit sin!

I'm twenty-four years old, and my son's one year old. We live with my parents. Please can you tell me what should I do if my mother discourages me from taking my baby to Communion, going to Confession and Communion, reading

spiritual literature, lighting an icon lamp in our flat? She is annoyed by all this. We argue and quarrel because of this. How can we preserve peace in the family without affecting my child's and my own spiritual development?

That is a delicate question. Some excesses and extremes are always unavoidable here. You must do all you can to live in peace with your mother. Nobody will take God away from you. As for lighting a vigil lamp at home, perhaps it's not time to do so at this point. You're most likely trying to convert your mother in this way so she can go to church together with you; I presume you also preach at her and argue with her. You should do nothing of this either.

However, it's essential both you and your little one partake of Holy Communion. It'll be wrong if you stop going to church. But you need to try and minimize your losses and temptations. You need to have discernment and you need to entreat God to grant your mother faith.

I'm twenty-three and I live with my parents and my younger brother. My mother has taken to heavy drinking lately. She was fired because of heavy drinking sessions. My father works. I work as well, but my mother constantly gets cross with me and calls me names unless I give her money. On the one hand, I'm aware that this is my cross too; but, on the other hand, I often lose heart because I have been grown fed up with these problems and I am still single to boot. My mother says I'll never marry. It hurts me to hear these words. If I leave and start living on my own, won't it mean I am running away from my problems?

I'd advise you to try. Keep your mother in your heart and pray for her always, but in your case it would be better to try and live independently for a while. It would be another matter if she were bedridden; but since she drinks, that makes all the difference.

If you get annoyed easily, lose your temper, have no strength to live in this way any more and blame your mother for everything in your mind, then why not live separately for a while, calm down and look at the situation from outside?

You need to gain strength without forgetting your mother or judging her. Perhaps later, when you stand on your own feet and your life changes, you'll be able to help your mother more seriously than now. What if you ended up with a nervous breakdown, if you do nothing and keep your patience?

I've been married for six years. I've got two daughters (the elder one, aged sixteen, is from my previous relationship – I had never married her father). The younger daughter, aged five, was born after I had married my current husband. While my husband is infatuated with the younger girl, it seems as if he's coming to hate the elder one, though she hasn't done anything wrong to him. My husband drinks. It used to be worse a few years ago: he used his fists, verbally abused us and tried to throw me out of the house with the children (we lived at my mother's). We survived with God's help – I went to church, read prayers and really wanted to save the family. Now I'm at a loss: their relations with the elder daughter are getting ever worse – he wants to throw her out of the house, saying, 'Let her live with her grandmother.' I answer, 'If she leaves, then we'll leave you too.' Of course, this is all because of his drinking bouts.

He isn't a church-goer; maybe he'd go to church, but something's stopping him. My elder daughter is growing into a very kind girl, but now she trades insults for her stepfather's insults.

A struggle for your family is under way so you can all live together. You have already done a lot: you didn't divorce, didn't run away, you prayed and sought God's help. You can see your husband is already changed a bit.

Of course, a person can't control himself when he's drunk; he becomes jealous, and currently the source of his jealousy is, alas, your elder daughter – he pours out his anger on her. However, in reality he's most likely jealous of the man who's your elder daughter's father. You must pray so the Lord will help your husband give up drinking, overcome the 'demon of drink' and take a sober look at the whole situation.

I think you should get both of your daughters to join you so you can pray all three together. Explain to your elder daughter your husband's a good man, but he gets 'sick' after getting drunk; dissuade her from bearing grudges against him. Tell your daughter you are not going to betray or renounce her to please your husband. Tell her that you love her and believe that there will be good, Christian relations in your family.

This struggle is under way so you can be united and he can be like a father to her. In the moments of harmony you should tell your husband that you love him, that you don't want your family to be destroyed and that it should be full.

I believe the Lord will help you. When somebody's drunk, it is useless to spell things out to him. You should talk things out only when he is sober. Try and take him to church. Give him holy water, prosphora, oil from the icon of the Mother of God the Inexhaustible Cup – he needs to be touched by the grace of holy objects. Take care to read the akathist hymn every day and ask God to help you – I really believe He won't reject you.

How can I pray for my daughter? This year she started as a student in Minsk. At home she didn't go out anywhere, but here she has found freedom that has caused a lot of trouble and problems both for herself and for us her parents. Were we right to forbid her to 'go on the town', since now she is 'making up for lost time'?

Now you need to pray for your daughter as hard as you can. Prayer depends on our relationship with God and the pain we have in our hearts. How can we restore our contact with God so the mother's prayer can protect her daughter? I think the mother should grow and struggle spiritually. Of course, the mother's heart is always anxious: *In the world ye shall have tribulation* (John 16:33).

True, the girl has faced a lot of temptations in Minsk which can do a lot of harm. What do you imply by 'going on the town'? If you brought her up in piety and chastity, then you shouldn't feel regret. If she saw beauty in your family relations, then this considerate attitude toward each other, the spirit of love and understanding in the family, will be enough to protect her. When she recalls the good she saw and compares this to what she sees at discos and various parties, she'll be able to turn away from the bad and not let sin enter her heart.

You need to pray for your daughter, go to church, ask God to help you, speak with your daughter and be frank with her as far as possible. You shouldn't talk down to your daughter in a moralizing and peremptory tone; instead, you should do it with love, the desire to understand your daughter and help her realise her mistakes. I think if she sees this candour and uprightness in you, then you'll be able to help her avoid temptations and traps that can hurt her and cause her wrong in the future.

How can I explain to my child Who God is? My little one keeps asking me why God and the angels are invisible to us. The child will be five soon. He prays, we go to church with him and he takes Communion. How do I explain all these things? I know from my experience that you need to feel God with your heart.

Take him to church, take him to an icon and say, 'Here is God. This is how He was depicted, He appeared to holy people in this way. He looks at us all the time and sees everything we do. But we can't see Him because of our sins: we are disobedient and even wayward, we fail to do what we are supposed to do.'

Take your child to Communion and say, 'God Himself came into this world. Here and now, God is giving you His love through the priest. What you are eating now is Divine love, the most precious thing that God has.'

You need a dialogue with your child. He will surely respond and come to understand everything. You need to say some living words. I believe that they will be born in your motherly heart; but you shouldn't get embarrassed and choose words artificially.

Children are closer to God than adults. Sometimes a child may see a priest, point at him and say, 'There's God!' That is, he sees God in the priest. Generally speaking, we can see God in every human being because we were made in His image and likeness. You should try and make these ideas clear to your child by finding the words he will understand.

My daughter, aged fourteen, doesn't want to go to church services. She even refuses to stand with me for ten minutes. Earlier she used to go to Sunday school and keep an eye on candles during services. But now she can't be persuaded.

Once, after I had tried to talk her into going to church for the umpteenth time, my husband took her side and said that I mustn't force her and that she is free to do whatever she likes (he is not a church-goer). After that incident there has been no way of persuading her even to go to Communion. We also have a nine-year-old son, and we more or less get along with him. I am myself to blame for these changes in my children – it began when I started attending church seldom. Now I try not to skip Sunday services and ask my children to come to church if only ten minutes before the end of the service. My daughter agrees very rarely. Please, can you tell me what I should do?

Now you ought to be very cautious so you don't stir up aversion to the Church and God in your nearest and dearest. Take my advice: propose but don't impose; persuade and explain unobtrusively. When a child is fourteen, it is a difficult age. When your son reaches the same age, he may turn out to be obstinate as well because he will be influenced by the world and his environment, adult feelings will begin to awake in the adolescent – and he will need to control himself. Don't say, 'Why do you refuse to go to church?' Never reproach them for this and don't raise your voice; instead, tell them about the feast or the saint celebrated on that day, or the sermon delivered during the service gently and peacefully (I am sure you meet at the dinner table). You can offer them prosphora to eat or anoint them with holy oil.

You should continually ask God in your mind to give you wisdom and help so your children can stand firm in the faith and not lose trust in Holy Church. Today this is your labour. It is vital that you and your husband keep peace and avoid discord. Otherwise your children will conclude that 'dad is good because he allows

us not to go to church, while mum drags us there by force.'

This may cause chaos in your family. Therefore, now you should be focused on inner prayer and petitions to God. Look out for some words, moments, and times when they are able to hear you. I believe that God will inspire you to say the necessary words and you will support them. The main thing is that they must see that you don't judge them, that you love them and wish them well, that they mean a lot to you and you don't think they are 'impious'.

My elder son (aged fourteen) is only busy with one thing: sitting by his computer and playing online games. If I express my indignation, my husband takes his side immediately, 'He is not hanging around in the back streets! He is at home under our supervision.' In fact, the husband is keen on computer games himself. It hurts me to see them wasting their precious time. Please tell me how I can help them.

I would suggest you start keeping a dog to care for and walk. Of course, if your son has a warm corner in his heart for this and wants a four-legged friend.

I recall how a dog appeared in our house – the children became better and kinder immediately. You should spend more time with your son and maybe go to the country more often. Let him go fishing, or go to the forest to pick mushrooms and berries with his father. The mother should suggest him some alternatives. She knows her son's inclinations and interests. It should be done in addition to the mother's prayer and the prayer of the Church. What is the cause of this game addiction? Boredom, a dull life, and despair. A person turns on the screen - and there he can speak, live, and travel virtually... He can do whatever he wants in this virtual reality effortlessly. He has not yet found anything

that would interest him in this life. There isn't anything he would devote his life to and strive for. Certainly, it would be great if your son finds God and begins to pray at church. Regrettably, not all children are up to it. That is why some interests, likes and desires should be used. For instance, he could develop a hobby of horse riding. You need to make some effort and exploration.

How should I live if neither my father nor my mother understands me, if there is no kindred spirit near me? Mother shouts at me, and father keeps silent... How can I live when there is no direction and no support?

You should not wait and feel hurt because nobody understands you; neither should you think no one needs you. Learning to understand others is important. Why does your mum raise her voice and why is she so nervous? Why is your father silent? Perhaps you should sympathize with them? In my view, this is precisely our spiritual path to God. If we come out of our shell, into which we retreat and wait till others begin to pity, praise and treat us kindly, if we manage to see people with their problems, weaknesses and characters (and people may be difficult to deal with), this will truly be our spiritual growth and development. Thus we'll be able to overcome despondency, murmuring and the darkness that comes when someone withdraws into his shell, obsessed with his petty problems without seeing anything else, when he expects something from others while ignoring everybody around him.

My son grew up disobedient. I argued with him and prayed for him – but all in vain. He has no job, no family of his own – he has been living at my place although he is already over thirty. What can I do?

You should love your son, cook nice meals for him, pray for him. You should tell him all the time he is a very good son and you believe in him, that he will begin to work and succeed and will do many good things in his life...

As for reproaching, exhorting him and making him listen to reason, it seems this was done for many years, since he is in his thirties. Now you ought to change your attitude toward your son. I have reason to think that if he has lived with you for many years and he is still not married, then a very close bond must have been established between the mother and the child. Therefore, you need to help him start to do something, have faith in himself, so he tears himself away from the sofa and overcomes his inferiority complex and laziness (something we all have). You must encourage and support him. What you mustn't do is succumb to panic and give way to despair. A miracle must happen through your prayers, through your love, through your patience and kind words – and your son will make his mother happy. May God grant you strength, trust and faith that the Lord will perform this miracle. Needless to say, you have to make efforts to achieve this.

Recently I began to go to church, to Confession and Communion, and read the Gospel. My twenty-five-year-old daughter began to reproach me because all my conversations are about God and the Church now. Can you give me advice about how I am supposed to behave in this situation and how I can speak with my daughter and avoid the sin of irritation?

The initial period of our life with God is marked by enthusiasm, joy, and a festive mood. You want to speak about this joy alone and share it with our loved ones. Sometimes they won't understand you. They haven't yet experienced what we have expe-

rienced. Therefore, you need to be reserved, restrain your emotions, and be considerate to your people. Don't tell them they understand nothing in spiritual life, don't drag them to church and don't preach to them. Hear them out and be concerned with their problems instead of being in a hurry to bring everybody to the Holy Chalice. God Himself will lead them to it. If your daughter has such questions, if she reproaches you for talking about Church alone, then you should be thoughtful, understand her interests, and try to sympathize with her. It is important for you not to distance yourself from your nearest and dearest ones who are still not inclined to go to church but help them find their path to God.

My baby is about fourteen months old. I feed it a little before taking it to Communion. Can you tell me if I am allowed to do so, and if yes, then till what age?

I think you may do it till the baby turns seven. However, the older the child the more he should understand that he needs to prepare for Communion by denying and depriving himself of something in order to be with God.

Now the atmosphere in your family matters. If someone in the family tries to observe a strict fast, it doesn't mean he should impose this rule on all the others. Each has his special needs. If a child hears prayers since his infancy, if he is taken to church, if the family observes the fasts, then the parents will naturally try and take their little one to Communion on an empty stomach. All the more so since there is an early Liturgy.

If a child who is about five or six years old takes Communion after eating, that is acceptable. There is no direct link between the Sacrament of Communion and human meals. In the first centuries of Christianity people took Communion after

a meal. Christians would gather for a joint meal, agape ('love-feast'), and then they would take Communion. Nowadays we are intemperate, it is hard for us to come to our senses and take a sober look at things, so we need restrictions, an appropriate preparation for the sacrament – we need fasting.

The child should gradually get used to behaving in church, to being restrained and attentive. Of course, a baby doesn't understand many things: it makes noise, fidgets, and expresses its discontent by crying.

The task of a child's parents is to train him to behave properly, introduce him to church, and teach him to pray. Thus, it is not a matter of eating or not eating before Communion; what really matters is that taking Communion should become a special, joyful event for a little Christian.

Perhaps after Communion you should reward him so as to stimulate his interest so he can feel it is not just a trivial episode in life. Or maybe the opposite will be good for the child – to receive Communion after waiting and fasting a little; and then he will be taken to a café and given treats there, and the whole family will rejoice. It will be a true festive occasion for the little one. I know it by the example of my granddaughter. She waits for the grown-ups to take her to the café after Communion because she finds it interesting. In order to do that, she needs to be patient a little. The more effort we put into preparation for the sacrament the more meaningful is our participation in the Eucharist – and the more we will value it.

My twenty-two-year-old son has got into trouble: now he plays gambling games at a casino. I pray for him every day, but it seems I do it wrongly or my prayers are not sufficient. Please, can you tell me how I should pray for him?

As our life is, so is our prayer. You need to change your life in order to help your son. Prayer should become the breath of your soul. How do you change? By drawing nearer to God. Perhaps it would be good to see that it is also your fault that your son has this gambling 'disease' because you are his mother. We need to improve our relations with God and with each other alike. This is the inner man's spiritual growth. This is the path to the Heavenly Kingdom.

This sorrow, this trial is your opportunity to become closer to God. The peasant does not cross himself so long as the thunder does not sound, as the saying goes. Miseries that befall our beloved ones prompt us to reconsider our lives, begin to make efforts and rectify our mistakes, and we surely make many of them. As the Holy Fathers used to write, 'Praying means shedding blood.' It was their experience of prayer. We don't have this experience, but perhaps it's time to begin to pray attentively, try to stay with God 'in private' and knock at the heavenly door of Divine mercy. Here the contents and the form of our prayers don't really matter. What matters is how much faith and trust we put in these prayers – they should be a cry of your soul, which is always answered by God.

My daughter, aged sixteen, has fallen head over heels in love with a young man. She dropped her studies (the tenth form) and now she skips school, goes to that guy for the night, lies to me, and doesn't listen to me or her friends. Please tell me what to do.

What does a mother who has problems with her daughter do? She knocks at the doors of Divine mercy, prays to God, goes to church, and seeks God's help. Your repentance is probably needed: in some sense you are to blame for this too – may-

be you didn't take sufficient care of your offspring or didn't have enough time and strength.

At any rate, the process of upbringing is going on, and you need to pray for your daughter, you need to speak with her, not to judge her and not to argue with her at this point. She is no longer a child – she is a young woman. You should tell her how beautiful life with God is, that if she loves this man then their relationship should be blessed by God, be open and beautiful, that true love doesn't hurt our family and friends.

You should ensure that she begins to think seriously about her future. But this won't be possible until you begin to talk with her as with a friend and not instruct her from the position of a teacher or a mother who reproaches, renounces, shames her daughter and fails to accept her for what she is now. If your daughter sees, hears your love and friendly disposition, your desire to understand and help her, then I am sure she will open up to you and you'll have a candid, detailed conversation with her. But for this you should first exert yourself and improve yourself, if you want your relations with your daughter to improve. This labour is above all necessary for you. As St Seraphim of Sarov said, 'Acquire the spirit of peace, and thousands of souls around you will be saved.'

So try to control yourself, suppress your feelings, and give your daughter maximum affection and attention; take care not to denounce, tell her off or call her names. It will only aggravate your breach and mutual misunderstanding, which you obviously already have.

I often hear from believers that they live for their children's sake. What degree of absorption in the lives of our children and grandchildren is permissible?

The main goal of human life is victory over death, entering eternal life where there will be no more death. This is the life in

God which we once lost. This is the preparation of the soul for the examination at which the Lord will ask us, 'Do you love Me, My soul?' As for serving our children, grandchildren and other family members, this is, of course, part of our life on earth. We are expected to help our kin and support them because there are various circumstances when people need this help. But that is not the purpose of our life, it is not our main aim.

Sometimes young parents shift the burden of caring for their children onto the grandparents, while enjoying themselves and not feeling their responsibility and the burden of motherhood and family life. This often leads to deplorable results as it is an exploitative approach toward life: 'you must help and serve me, while I will have fun and live as I please'. Children must be brought up by their parents. As for grandparents, of course they can help spiritually, physically, and financially.

As far as I understand your question, you asked if it is the sole purpose of our life. The criterion is the following: we shouldn't forget God and must first and foremost think about our souls so as not to lose inner peace. For when something is wrong, when there are excesses, then the soul suffers, we get confused – and this is not for our good.

Let your soul be like a barometer. You see the need to help or support someone – that is right and good. If you are upset in your mind, feel murmuring and unfairness that you have been loaded with all the domestic work, then I think your help can be limited. If your heart is confused, you need to reconsider something in your relations and the tangle of circumstances.

I believe God will help you and suggest the solution to you through Confession, through Communion, through prayer, and you will find the yardstick which will be pleasing to God and salvific both for you and your loved ones.

There has been a misunderstanding between my son and me for about fourteen years. He has a grudge against me, but I have no idea what I did wrong. I continually ask him, 'Tell me, what have I done to you?' The answer is the same every time, 'We won't be on speaking terms until you understand it for yourself.' I've asked for his forgiveness many times, saying, 'Forgive me, if I am guilty of something.' But he always turns a deaf ear to my entreaties. It hurts me we haven't been on speaking terms, and my son doesn't even allow me to see my grandson. My son is baptised but he doesn't go to church; he has a wife, they married in Church, and his spouse treats me in exactly the same way. For my part I did everything that all normal parents are expected to do: I set him up in life, I helped him obtain his education (facilitated in his studies at school and then at the Institute), and after he graduated from the university and got married I supported the young family in every possible way and at their instance I never bothered them with frequent phone calls and visits. Before every visit I would ring them up and enquire about the possibility of calling on them. I have no idea what happened. As a mother I have been grieved by the fact that my son rejected me. He added me to a 'black list' both on his mobile and on social media. He lives in Russia, and I have recently moved to Minsk after marrying. I want to hear my son say the word 'mum' so much. Please help me!

Misunderstandings between people happen. Unfortunately, sin lives in each of us, and at some point it may lead to a breakup, estrangement and even severance of the most intimate kinship relationships. We don't necessarily find visible, serious reasons for that because people sometimes fail to control their feelings, thoughts and moods; not least when someone is not integrated into Church life, only trusts himself and often takes sin for the truth of this life. For the time being, your task is not to get offended, to continually pray for your son and struggle to enter into dialogue with him – without resentment, without reproaches – to knock, knock, and knock at the door of Divine mercy. I believe the Lord will open this door and your son will open his eyes and see that his mum loves him and he needs her.

For this to happen your life must be in the hands of God. It is impossible to overcome this without God. The devil has been doing his best to separate you so you may be alienated from each other. A struggle is going on. As long as your son is in this state (he has struck his mother out of his life for an unknown reason), his life will surely remain unsettled and he won't succeed in building good relations with those he holds dear. This state is a disease. He is obviously having a hard time... There may also be his wife's influence on him. It would be good if your son pours out his soul and opens up to you. Perhaps he is jealous of your husband too. You probably need to look for appropriate words and wait, be patient and believe. May the Lord help you!

I would appreciate your prayers for my daughter Nadezhda. She is fifteen; she has fallen for a boy whom she met online, whom she has been in correspondence with and whom she has never seen (he lives far away). Now she is totally under his influence. She constantly waits for his mes-

sages, doesn't go outside and has stopped communicating with her peers in real life. My heart aches for her. Father, please tell me what prayer I should read for her?

Read the prayer that is closest to your heart, to which your soul responds. I also think you should try and understand your daughter – you need to maintain personal contact with her. She is now fifteen – it is an awkward age. Some young man has totally blown her away and she has become infatuated with him. Of course, now it has blinded her and she is in an abnormal state because she is excited and youthful fantasies probably affect her psyche which is still not strong enough. You need to talk with her as often as possible, tell her about your youth, about relations between men and women, about the beauty of love. Help her out of this state somehow and revive her interest in life during the dialogue. Tell her that love – provided it is a true feeling – must breathe life into us, give us energy to live and struggle with sin instead of isolating us from everybody else and making us crazy and avoiding reality. You need to reach out to your daughter, find appropriate words to help her out of this stupor, from this state of disease. It really is a state of disease!

Perhaps it would be wise to contact the guy your daughter has fallen in love with and as a mother ask him to help her get over this unhealthy state.

You must pray, order a service of intercession for your daughter and, if you have a chance, take her to church so she can say something at Confession. It is not certain whether she is able to do it at this point or not, but you must make an attempt. Of course, you mustn't judge her; rather, you should try and drag her away from the internet, from this virtual communication, gently, kindly, and with patience. Online communication may become an addiction, and fantasy may lead someone far from reality. May the Lord help you!

I have the following question. When I had serious psychosis, I hurt my child a lot – I hit my daughter and offended my husband as I couldn't control myself.

Now that seven years have passed, my daughter says she can't forgive me. She is twenty-three, it is painful for her to speak with me and come round mine; she says many children reject their parents. What should I do? Whom should I pray to?

I suppose you've asked for your loved ones' forgiveness? If not, then be sure to do it. True, you had a nervous breakdown and psychosis, and you need to explain it to your daughter. This was impermissible and cannot be justified, but she must understand you.

You should knock at the door of your daughter's heart, you should pray to the Mother of God, confess, take Communion and beg the Lord to reconcile you so her heart can be softened. You can read the akathist hymn in front of the Icon of the Mother of God, Softener of Evil Hearts. There are many prayers, but the question is how to pray. In no case should you judge your daughter. I believe God will help her overcome resentment, but it should necessarily be done with your involvement.

I am thirty-three and I am married. My husband and I have three children and all of them were born by Caesarean section. Doctors of official medicine discourage us from having more children because every new pregnancy after a Caesarean section is associated with increased risk to both the mother's and the fetus's health and even lives. My husband and I were ready for a big family from the very beginning. I have the following question: do you think

we should take a risk and have a fourth child or we should see the will of God in the doctors' warning and stop having children?

It is a question of your faith. You should talk things over with your husband, pray and make a decision together. I know families where there were more than three operations during delivery and babies arrived absolutely healthy quite contrary to the doctors' prognoses. Once again, I want to stress that it is a question of your faith. If you doubt and have fear, then I daresay you shouldn't try. If you believe, if you want to have more children and ask for them in prayer, then God speed you!

My husband and I have a son aged five. We want a second child very much. Four years have passed, and the Lord has not granted us another baby yet. In December I started reading the akathist hymn before the icon of the Mother of God the Unexpected Joy, and became pregnant at once. Sadly, I had a miscarriage. Please tell me, may and should I pray to have another child if I already have one child? How can we figure out the will of God with regard to our family? Should we try and adopt a baby? Thank you for your answer.

I think you may and should pray and ask the Lord to grant you another baby, and maybe even more than one. Women lose their unborn children sometimes. It is definitely a tragedy and a very painful thing. It is life, however; and everybody has to suffer a lot in this world. There's no need to perplex yourself guessing why and what for. What you should do is trust God and implore Him, it is necessary for you and your husband to pray for another child together. When you are pregnant again,

try to come up to the Holy Chalice as often as possible and take Communion. I believe all will be well with you.

The following question has arisen in our family: our son doesn't want to serve in the army. I have no idea what I should do, I am ashamed of myself that I have given my son such a bad upbringing and it would stick in my throat to ask God to 'protect' him from the army. Please can you give me advice what to do in this situation?

Pray for your son and speak with him. You need to find out why he is wary of serving in the army and what are the reasons for his unwillingness. Understand him and accept him for what he is now and find some points of contact with him. Then, I believe, you will come to understand him and he will listen to your words. You should neither be ashamed nor be afraid – you need a frank conversation, and I think it is possible for you to draw nearer to each other and hear one another on this path.

I can say about myself that at some point, when I was unbaptised and didn't believe in God, and was carried away by Leo Tolstoy's books, I didn't want to serve in the army and didn't go there. Those around me thought it was madness, none of my elders tried to understand and listen to me. This incited my protest. I have been a believer for some years, and my view of the world and attitudes toward military service and my obligations in general, my responsibility for what is going on in my native country and around me, have changed.

Your son is still young, and your task is to help his personality to be formed so the right foundation for life can be laid – the foundation of faith without which there will be a lot of destruction in life. And since we are Christians, we ask God to enlighten and guide our children so their lives can be pleasing to Him.





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