

Parenting in the Spirit: Helping Children Stay on the King’s Highway

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Abstract

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In this groundbreaking article, the author, an Eastern Christian and practicing child and family psychologist, both calls for much more work to analyze and integrate secular psychology and Eastern Christian spirituality and psychology, and deepens that very process by briefly analyzing developmental theories of such as Sigmund and Anna Freud, Jean Piaget, Lawrence Kohlberg, Erik Erikson, John Watson, Walter Bandura, William Kessen, Harry Stack Sullivan, and John Bowlby. These are set alongside prominent psychological theories in Greek patristic and monastic literature from the *Philokalia* as well as such ancient figures as Sts. Basil the Great, Isaiah the Solitary, Philotheos of Sinai, Hesychios the Priest, Symeon Metaphrasis, Diadochos of Photiki, Anthony the Great; and, in the modern period, Archbishop Chrysostomos of Etna, John Boojamra, Anthony Coniaris, and others. The author focuses in particular on patristic-monastic notions of *psyche*, *nous*, *dianoia*, *logos*, and *theosis*, which are analyzed to find where there are possible semantic overlaps with analogous terms in the psychological literature of today. Eastern Christian parents, in seeking to fulfill their role as *pneumatophors*, must practice *theosis* and strive to help their children grow into that practice by means of de-deification of the ego, rejection of the *logismoi*, and acquisition of self-control and a spirit of repentance.



Introduction

We have not received the spirit of the world but the Spirit that is from God, so that we may understand the things freely given us by God. And we speak about them not with words taught by human wisdom, but with words taught by the Spirit, describing spiritual realities in spiritual terms.¹

God sent humanity the Holy Spirit and, through the Spirit, a new mode of perception and appropriate language by which to live, so all may speak to each other as spiritual people in spiritual terms.² With the indwelling of the Holy Spirit, people are enabled to understand and make judgments or discernments about the world that they otherwise would be able only to reason about using created senses and reason.³ For parents, caught up in the day-to-day interactions of family life and work, the challenge is to discern the wisdom and will of God as they make their way through the world with their children. Parents struggle with the challenges of their mortal existence and separation from God, yet God did not move away from people: humanity moved away from God, severely damaging the simplicity and integrity of God's likeness within each person.⁴

Parents can best help their children if they are mindful of being image-bearers who, as they move through life with their children, are striving to move towards God in order to develop His likeness within. Parenting of children is among life's most complex tasks, and many sources of advice on how to raise children are available in contemporary society. While the discipline of psychology has contributed to discourses on parenting, psychology is not unified in its focus of study; rather, one

¹ 1 Cor 2:12–13.

² Cf. *Ibid.*

³ 1 Cor 2:14–16.

⁴ St. Basil the Great, *Homily 15, On Psalm 32*, in *The Fathers of the Church, a new translation: St. Basil the Great Exegetic Homilies*, trans. Agnes Way (Washington, DC: The Catholic University of America Press, 1963), pp. 227–246. All further references to *Homily 15* are taken from this translation.

must look more specifically within psychology to the field of child development. This distinction is important because not all theories and findings in psychology are applicable to children or families, as many pursuits in psychology focus on adults quite exclusively. Findings about adults are not always transferable to children, and studies of individuals do not necessarily shed light on our understanding of families, groups, or communities.

The field of child development broadly considers changes over the course of a child's life and tends to be interdisciplinary in nature. Study of child development includes the biological, social, and psychological domains, including cognition, the intellect, emotions, and morality. Textbooks in child development rarely include matters of children's faith development, which is somehow seen as separate from what psychology "normally" studies.

Although most parents are aware of the vulnerability and dependency of their children and are attentive to that, remaining attentive to soul-care in the midst of daily tasks and responsibilities can be daunting, and parents, like psychologists, might be tempted to leave matters of the soul to the Church on Sunday, while care for the biological, social, and psychological needs of their children become the focus for most of the week. However, in the Eastern Christian tradition, parents are the first educators of the child,⁵ and the early Church fathers and mothers of Eastern Christian monasticism have much to say about soul-care that is applicable to the contemporary lives of families. Appreciation for the spirit and practices of Eastern Christian monasticism can strengthen parents in their own spiritual development, while they also guide their children through the practicalities and challenges of their daily lives. At the same time, integration of principles

⁵ Patriarchal Catechetical Commission, *Life in Christ: A Moral Catechism*, ed. Sviatoslav Shevchuk, trans. Oleh Bych (Lviv: Ukrainian Catholic University Press, 2009), 50; Catechetical Commission of the Ukrainian Catholic Church, *Catechetical Directory of the Ukrainian Catholic Church* (Lviv: Monastery of the Studite Monks Svichado Publishers, 2000), Paragraph 86, 51; John L. Boojamra, *Foundations for Christian Education* (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1989), 64.