

SERMON given on Sunday, July, 2020, Opening of the Relics of St. Sergius of Radonezh

The Apostolic tradition of the Church has always been to baptize infants. Concerning infant baptism St. John Chrysostom says: "We baptize even infants, though they are not defiled by [personal] sins, so that there may be given to them holiness, righteousness, adoption, inheritance, brotherhood with Christ, and that they may be his [Christ's] members." Normally, adult baptism takes place only when someone converts to the Christian faith later in life. At one time for a brief period in the early history of the church, some parents decided that they didn't want to have their children baptized as infants. They became confused about baptism and felt that it would be better to wait until the child grew up and could then rationally and intellectually better understand the Holy Mystery before they would receive it. This was especially sad and tragic because the parents were often pious people who unwittingly were doing their children a grave injustice and even harm by omission. Severely condemned and censured by the Holy Fathers, this practice very rarely takes place in the Orthodox Church today except by parents who either do not understand or who choose not to follow the teaching and practice of the Church.

In the life of St. Sergius of Radonezh we read the following: "One day during the Divine Liturgy, before the reading of the Gospel, the child began to cry so loud in his mother's womb that other people in the church heard his voice, and the same thing happened again at the chanting of the Cherubic Hymn, so that his mother was afraid. At the exclamation: *The holy things are for the holy!* the child uttered a cry for the third time and his mother began to weep. When the people wanted to see the child, she had to confess that it was not in her arms that he was crying in her womb. After this unwonted event, Maria ate neither meat nor fish nor milk but took bread and water alone for the remainder of her pregnancy, and gave herself up to prayer." In the life of St. Nicholas the Wonderworker, Archbishop of Myra, it says: "From infancy, he showed his love of virtue, and his zeal for observing the ordinances of the Church by abstaining from his mother's breast on Wednesdays and Fridays until the evening." In Luke 1:41 we read: "And it happened, when Elizabeth heard the greeting of Mary, that the babe leaped in her womb; and Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit." Are infants less human beings than we are? In fact, in some ways they are more human than we are. It is not a dogma of the Church, but I believe that they are so innocent, they can see the spirit world around us which is invisible to you and me but only visible to the saints and those who are pure of heart. Does Jesus say, "No, you are too young for my grace" to anyone? Does the Holy Spirit say, "No, you are too young for me." Is it like when we reach a certain age we can get a driver's license or be able to vote? Does Jesus look at the calendar and say, "OK, it is your 18th birthday, now you are old enough for my grace." A baby needs physical nourishment from birth. Do you think that this little human being does not need spiritual nourishment or that giving spiritual nourishment to an infant is in vain and has no effect? Do you take the baby to the doctor and when it is time for vaccination, do you say, "No, he will grow up and make up his own mind?" How many other decisions do parents make for their children and do not say, "No, I will wait until he or she can decide for themselves?" In John 6:53 Jesus says "Most assuredly I say to you, unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink His blood, you have no

life in you. Whoever eats My flesh and drinks My blood has eternal life, and I will raise him up at the last day.” Don’t infants also need and benefit from receiving Holy Communion? They most assuredly do. In Matthew 19:14 Jesus says “Let the little children come to Me, and do not forbid them; for of such is the kingdom of heaven.” In Acts 10:34-48 it is recorded that a man named Cornelius and his *entire* household was baptized. It says nothing about excluding children. If an infant died, do you think that St. Peter will stop the infant at the pearly gates and say, “Sorry, come back when you’re 18 and you can make a conscious decision. You’re too young to decide right now whether or not you want to enter the kingdom of heaven and anyway, you’re too young to enter the kingdom of heaven.” Aren’t all the holy innocents (baby boys 2 years old and younger) murdered by Herod at the time of the birth of our Savior celebrated as saints and martyrs by the Church? Parents want to do what’s best for their child and not deprive them of any good thing. What greater thing to give our children than the gift of Christ Himself and His Holy Church?

Some parents today put off baptism for their child because they are afraid to have their children baptized as infants and wait until the child is maybe six months, a year or older. This is what St. Gregory of Nazianzus says about this: “Do you have an infant child? Allow sin no opportunity; rather, let the infant be sanctified from childhood. From his most tender age let him be consecrated by the Spirit. Do you fear the seal [of baptism] because of the weakness of nature? Oh, what a pusillanimous mother and of how little faith!” (*Oration on Holy Baptism* 40:7 [A.D. 388]).

With baptism the parents and godparents have responsibility. Just as it is an injustice to have our children wait until adulthood to be baptized, it is equally tragic when after our children are baptized we fail to bring our children to church and raise and teach them according to Christ and the Orthodox way of life. The child must become accustomed to being in the Lord’s house and receive the Holy Mysteries frequently. By the same token, our homes should be like a little church, filled with prayer, fasting, love, the Word of God and the name of Jesus on our lips and in our hearts. Every room in our home should have icons and the presence of Christ. May we all strive to be good parents and good stewards of these little souls and hearts which have been gifted and entrusted to our care, to the glory of the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit, now and ever, and unto ages of ages. Amen.