

CHILDREN AND THE CHURCH. Sermon given on Sunday, May 6, 2018

In Matthew 19:14 Jesus blesses the children. Jesus said, "Let the children come to me, and do not hinder them; for to such belongs the kingdom of heaven." Children come to church even while still in his or her mother's womb. The child is nourished by the grace of God every time the mother receives Holy Communion and is present at the Divine services. As soon as a child is baptized the newly illumined Christian child receives Holy Communion and enters fully into the mystical and sacramental life of grace as a full member of the Holy Church. Children are full participating members of the church and are expected to attend the services of the church no less or differently than adults. There is nothing more beautiful and joyous than the sound of a child. Fr. Alexander Schmemmann called it "holy noise." I salute and praise the mothers who, from the earliest possible age bring their children to church on a regular basis. That is the way it should be. I know very well the struggle of mothers with infants and young children in church. Children in church is part of church life. How sad it is when children are kept home and not brought to church. How sad it is when fellow parishioners make it even more difficult for struggling young mothers with children. Children are an example to us, because we must imitate their innocence and purity if we hope to enter the Kingdom of Heaven. In Matthew 18:2-4 our Savior says, "Truly, I say to you, unless you turn and become like children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven. Whoever humbles himself like this child, he is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven." Our Savior further says in Mark 9:42 that whoever hurts or disdains any of these little ones, "it would be better for him if a great millstone were hung round his neck and he were thrown into the sea." Hurting or disdaining the little children is the same as betraying our Lord Himself. In Mark 14:21 Jesus uses similar language when he says, "It would have been better for that man if he had not been born." Whenever I hear the "holy noise" of babies and young children while I am praying in church, my heart rejoices. I rejoice because they are here where they belong, in the house of their Heavenly Father. I rejoice because I know how hard it is for parents to bring the little ones to church, yet they did it anyway. How much harder is it for the single parent who brings the child to church? How many parents do not have the luxury of a spouse or grandparents or relatives to help them in church? When my children were babies and young my wife did not have the luxury of a husband or relative to help her. I had to be in the altar, and she struggled alone with the children. Sometimes parishioners helped her, sometimes not. I remember my son Christopher who thought the middle aisle of the church was a slip and slide. He liked to slide down the center of the church on his knees. Bill Waters, Rich Luby's father, acted as a surrogate grandfather to my son Chris, and Chris liked to stand with Bill and hold his hand. I remember seeing Matushka Rebekkah bringing her two children to church every day in their baby carriage to the daily services at St. Tikhon's Monastery. Little Katherine Markewich grew up from babyhood going to church every day. I remember Bob Palmer holding her as a baby in the back of our church. Today at 7 years old she can sing Vespers by heart, and knows many of the hymns of the church by heart. Not only the young mothers and fathers, but all of our babies and children need to feel welcome in church. They need to feel that their presence here matters, and that they are an integral part of our church. Their prayers, their songs, and even their "holy noise" of whines and cries are a joyful noise because it means that they are present. A baby is the greatest gift that God can give to a young couple. The greatest gift that a young couple can give to a baby is to bring the baby to church where the child belongs, where that little baby is blessed by God, just as Jesus laid His holy hands on the heads of the children and blessed them in Matthew 19:14. When I was a seminarian, I visited a large Greek parish in Toronto. There are no pews in this church. It is a huge church with perhaps two thousand parishioners. On Pascha, the floor of the church was covered by a sea of sleeping babies. The deacon and the priest had to gingerly step over the babies in order to cense the church. Sadly, I heard of one church where on Pascha a young girl singing in the choir looked over the balcony and asked, "Where are all the children?" Remember the words of Fr. Alexander Schmemmann given in his final sermon on Thanksgiving Day: "Thank You, O Lord, for our

families: husbands, wives and especially children, who teach us how to celebrate Your holy Name in joy, movement and holy noise.” Amen!