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Growing Up: Adolescence – an opportunity for development



An Article Dedicated to young families of our Archdiocese in light of ‘Mental Health Awareness Week’

Firstly, dear friends, I must highlight that this short article, dedicated to you, following ‘Mental Health Awareness Week’ is in no way polemical or contrary to modern psychology.

The field of psychology is undoubtedly an essential field in the contribution to our understanding of the beauty, the magnificence and the complexity of the human psyche and our overall being. The Church in fact, promotes, is willing to cooperate with, and respects science and all who seek truth and honours the human person as a psychosomatic entity; body and soul. The Church encourages balance and cooperation between faith and knowledge, for both are gifts of God and are to be cultivated by His people. In fact, for the Fathers of the Church, ‘intelligence urges the soul to conform itself by its own free choice to the divine likeness.’ (St Maximus the Confessor, Philokalia II) ‘The noetic and intelligent creature, man – has been

made, alone among created beings, in God’s image and likeness.’ (St John of Damascus on Gen 1:26)

Clearly, the Fathers and theologians of the Church teach that the intellect is a characteristic of the highest value. In this case, intellect does not necessarily mean high intelligence, but rather the ability in each of us to reason, to create, to distinguish and to learn.

We can see many examples of contemporary bishops, nuns and monks, clergy and laity who harmonise faith with science, a Godly life with a medical profession. Let us be reminded of St Luke the Evangelist, a doctor by profession, the Unmercenaries St’s Cosmas and Damian, St Luke the Surgeon of Simferopol and others who provide relevant examples to us. Before we discuss the matter at hand let us conclude this thought; the Church is not opposed to, and in fact encourages, science and the use of intellect, all as God’s gifts to humanity. This of course applies to the field and practice of psychology.

The period of adolescence is identified with greater freedom. We are able to choose our company (without the same influences from our parents) our appearance, cultivate our hobbies and interests and choose our path in life, proceeding into adulthood with maturity and responsibility. Particularly in the current situation of further isolation and the inability to socialise and take part in activities, we find stumbling blocks and challenges during this stage of adolescence. We may be overwhelmed by uncertainty, insecurities, a fear of not being accepted, lack confidence at times, or can be affected by the stresses and problems existing within our family home. Such factors can affect our mental wellbeing.

The human being, according to the fathers of the Church, is in his or her natural (κατά φύσιν) state when in communion with God. We, as humans, need to eat, drink, rest, but simultaneously read, discuss, choose and create as we are invited to walk this beautiful path of life with the Risen Lord. According to Orthodox Christian patristic tradition there is no specific moral system or set of rules to be observed, but two states; natural and unnatural. Everyone who comes into this world is a special person and child of God. In Him, the source of life, of love and of healing, we see and identify our gifts and our talents; our fulfilment and value. Being a person, for the Christian, means having the ability to unite with God and our fellows, to know our selves, and to freely discern how we are able to sacrificially offer ourselves to society as we contemplate a career path.

Indeed this transitional period of adolescence brings about greater independence and freedom. However, as aforementioned, can also bring a mix of emotions and

feelings; some of which can be difficult to deal with. Psychologists have demonstrated that an adolescent's spiritual development (Donahue and Benson) a positive attitude and outlook on life, as well as a hope for the future (Smith and Farris) placing importance on physical health (Jessor) a formation of personal identity and a connection with God's creation (Montessori and Steiner) results in a balanced and healthy mental state. The formation of an 'authentic community,' as Dr Angeliki Leondari writes, is also required for our development and wellbeing. In particular, a space characterised by a climate of trust and acceptance. Dear friends, the Church truly offers this space. Within the life of the Church the human need for belonging and communal life is offered, as well as the ideal context for our own personal development and health of body and soul.

In today's society, where at least one fifth of children – and a higher percentage of adolescents – suffer from a mental health disorder, and where our fellow is considered a threat rather than a gift and joy, your local Church is here for you. It is there for you as a living community, offering examples and experiences of the eternal, transforming, joyful, reassuring and forgiving presence of the Risen Lord. Within the life of the Church, especially at a vital stage of life such as adolescence, whatever our struggles or situation, we are reminded of our value, our prayerful potential, and the personal love that the Lord Jesus Christ has for each and every one of us. Although the field of psychology stresses the determining factors of our parents' way of life, influence and example on our own mental wellness, the Church, as our Mother, is there to heal our wounds. Within in Her sacramental, prayerful and philanrthropic life we can fulfil our God-given desire to love and be loved and to realise our value and our salvation.

Adolescence creates the ideal conditions for one to think, question and contemplate existentially, to search for and find Christ in one's heart and one's fellow. This somewhat drastic change that takes place as you go from one stage of life into the next does not necessarily mean you lose the simplicity and the innocence of childhood. The well-known psychologist Sigmund Freud had the view that adolescence (and in fact all stages of life) is determined and controlled primarily by a self-centred desire for pleasure. However, human experience and a self-understanding will show that this is not the fulfilment of our human existence.

His All-Holiness, our Ecumenical Patriarch writes, ' A child's soul is altered by the influential consumption of electronic media, especially television and the internet, and by the radical transformation of communication. Unbridled economics transform them, from a young age, into consumers, while the pursuit of pleasure rapidly causes their innocence to vanish.' For Saint Basil the Great, this period,

beyond its challenges and obstacles of consumerism, and the temptations of comparing ourselves or competing with our peers constantly, is truly a wonderful chance to set out our priorities in life. He recommends we ‘turn the eyes of our soul towards the search for the inner self,’ finding our spiritual abilities, to engage with existential issues and to realise that being created in the image of God does not mean we are all the same. According to Saint Basil this image indicates the great variety of gifts that God gives each of us in His grace. If we open our eyes, like the Blind Man (Jn 9:1-41) to these gifts and the charismas (attributes) He has given each of us, while simultaneously admitting to our weaknesses, we will live in a state of appreciation and of praise. Adolescence, and in fact our entire life, is a calling from God to unite with Him, to be at peace and in harmony with ourselves and our fellows. The Church, through Her Scriptures and Tradition, Her pastoral care and philanthropy, Her Saints’ examples and primarily through Her services, offers us the healing and encouragement to live a balanced healthy life. When faced with any challenges, including struggles with mental health, Christ’s Church is here, like the father in the parable of the prodigal son. She Her arms and embraces us with compassion and love; the love of God that can heal all infirmities and struggles. ‘Come to me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest’ (Matt 11:28)

Christ is Risen dear friends. In light of Mental Health Awareness Week let us not forget that the main criterion for salvation, according to the Lord Himself, is the way in which we treat our neighbour; without judging. Especially in our context of the pandemic, let us be there for one another. Let our friends be aware that they can rely on us, as Christians, to open up about how they are feeling. Likewise, if we need assistance in any matter let us reach out to those who can help us. For this reason God created humanity; to learn from one another, to reach out to each other in time of need and fundamentally to live as one communion in Christ.

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