

RELIGIOUS EDUCATION IN A VIRTUAL WORLD

Advice and Encouragement from Dr. Anton Vrame
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Dear Religious Educators:

There is a great deal of uncertainty about what parish life will look like this fall because of the pandemic. In particular, what might happen to traditionally in-person programs? Here are some ideas for your religious education program—basic strategies that you might consider implementing for a virtual religious education program.

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Relationships Are Central to Religious Education.

When Jesus called His disciples, He said, “Follow me.” He invited them into a relationship with Him. He was their teacher and they were His students. The relationship between a teacher and a student is the basis of learning, especially in matters of faith.

Teachers are role models for their students. Our students are watching us, learning from our actions if not more than our words and lessons. We may not remember a particular lesson, but we will usually remember the person who taught it. In a parish setting, everyone is a teacher, the clergy, the parish council member, the members of the ladies society, and the person near you during a worship service. Our students are learning from all of us. In a parish setting, those relationships and observations are happening in person, through the interactions of the members. Over time, we are steadily brought into the ways of life – the practices – of an Orthodox Christian community.

Learning best occurs through “talking and doing” more than only reading and listening. The classroom is a place where a teacher should be encouraging as much interaction as possible, hopefully, to a topic that is important to the learners and the community. This also facilitates the students learning from one another, building relationships among peers and with a teacher. As the educator Parker Palmer writes, “If we want a community of truth in the classroom, a community that keep us honest, we must put a third thing, a great thing at the center of the pedagogical circle.” I can think of nothing greater for study and discussion than our Orthodox Christian faith and way of life.

In an online world, the relationships are virtual, but no less important. In this case, we must make relationship building and maintaining intentional. In the virtual religious education programs that many parishes will have in the coming months, there are

some things you can do to assist build those relationships.

First, reduce the class size meeting. A video conference with one teacher and twenty students can't build a relationship well. Consider reducing the ratio of teacher to student to about 1 to 8. That might mean more teachers are needed in some places or changing the approach to attendance with students alternating when they come to an online class session. Many video conference programs have tools for breaking out into smaller groups. So, even two teachers can meet at the same time, then break out into smaller groups, and then come back to a larger group.

Second, keep students with the same teachers as last year. Students already know the teacher and already have a relationship. It will be much easier to build on that existing relationship than start anew.

Third, use the first sessions to do the relationship building work. Use icebreakers like those you would use in a youth group meeting or at camp (an online search can locate plenty of ideas). Play some games so that students can be comfortable with one another in the online world. Use part of the on-line time for keeping the relationships strong. Celebrate name days and birthdays. Allow time for sharing, “checking in”.

Fourth, consider holding online “office hours.” You, or even the priest, could let the students know that a certain teacher is on-line at a certain time every day. Or, add a link to the parish website that a student can use to reach a teacher or the priest easily, and not have to wait for a class session to ask a question or reach out.

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A Good Question Will Start the Conversation. In the New Testament, one of the central elements of the encounters that led to increased faith was a question. In the Gospel of Luke (10:25) a lawyer asked Jesus,

“Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?” Also in the Gospel of Luke (24:17), Jesus asked Cleopas and his traveling companion, “What are you discussing with each other...?” In Acts of the Apostles (8:30), Philip asked the Ethiopian eunuch, “Do you understand what you are reading?” In each case, the question led to a conversation that revealed the Good News.

A good question opens up the possibility for dialogue and importantly investigation. In each of the examples above the conversations required a closer look at events, scripture, and teachings.

In a virtual religious education classroom, students of any age should be involved and not just be listening to or watching a teacher. If you don't like attending lectures in person, a virtual lecture – especially a long one – isn't much better.

So, what kinds of questions?

Ask the students for their questions. What are the big things on their minds today when it comes to matters of faith? You don't have to look too far to find them, especially these days. But when the students get to ask them, they begin to take charge of their learning. Our task then becomes one of helping them find the information that helps them answer their questions, through the conversation. (See also the Icebreakers PDF, “Agree or Disagree”.)

Ask the students to get involved with planning their learning, their classes. Helping students to dig deeper into the questions, discuss their findings, with the teacher guiding the process is how learning can occur. A class session becomes a time for presenting resources and ways to use them. A resource can also pose questions to a student for investigation. This is the basic strategy in most of the resources from our Department. They strive to question the student, and the student can question as well. And a student who is given the opportunity to pursue the questions is far more likely to stay involved and participate.

Ask the parents of the students. On this front, ask the parents how they can assist their children and the class in learning. Of course, there are also the practical aspects of asking parents for the virtual classroom. When is the best time for the class? What can be accomplished at home? What resources do you have and what do you need?

One of my teachers liked to say, “Think more about the questions you will ask than the lectures you will deliver.”

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There is still a great deal of uncertainty about what parish life will look like this fall because of the pandemic. In particular, what might happen to traditionally in-person programs? While virtual meetings will still be the safest, or the only option available, in some places occasional in-person gatherings may be possible. Here's a third installment with some ideas.

If Possible, Gather Wisely and Safely. We know that “place matters.” Classrooms and meeting spaces provide stability for groups. They help create order and ways to interact. Desks in a row say one thing; desks in a circle say another. Classrooms can be very inviting spaces, decorated with student work and inspirational photos. In a religious education classroom, icons and vigil lights can create the class's prayer corner. Crosses and other religious items create the “sacred space” for learning and can be utilized for lessons themselves.

While virtual class meetings will still be the safest, or the only option available, in some parts of the country occasional in-person gatherings *may* be possible. So, *if it's possible -- and that's a big if --* to hold an in-person gathering for religious education and youth ministry, here are some things to consider.

Observe Local Guidelines. Before you arrange any in-person event, check the local guidelines about what is and isn't possible. The variations across the country are huge. We can see this dramatically in what's possible or not for church attendance. There are rules about masks, physical and social distancing, and sanitization protocols. Importantly, there are rules about the numbers of people that can gather in a place at one time. Can people bring snacks and drinks? Can certain snacks be available, grab-n-go style?

Is an Indoor Gathering Possible? Every space in a church facility should be reconsidered as a potential meeting space, where the health rules can be observed. The church itself, the fellowship hall, and the gym all become possibilities where safe physical and social distancing can be observed.

Is an Outdoor Gathering Possible? Weather permitting, lawns and parking lots could become

meeting spaces. Picnic tables, pop-up tents (like the ones we cart to soccer games), and chairs can be used to designate classes. Maybe a parish could treat it like a picnic, with everyone bringing lawn furniture or blankets. This website has good ideas for working outdoors, <https://www.greenschoolyards.org/covid-learn-outside?fbclid=IwAR2gqN2yTi2eaZmSqmvtE-kgPetzxYqvRIAWF53NpO7EN9daVqVzgp13JKc>

Then, determine how best to mark (tape, paint) the safe spaces and distances. Bookcases and plastic (shower curtains?) hung from simple frames (saw this in a barber shop) may create the right kind of barriers indoors. Sanitizer can be available everywhere; masks and other protective measures can be observed based on local guidelines.

The Meetings. Make the in-person gatherings somewhat different from what takes place virtually. Is an art or craft project possible? Is there a game that can be played? Completing worksheets, discussions, reading and sharing are still possible. If you are using the church itself, this is the time for doing activities that you couldn't do during services.

If you plan multiple activities and groups meeting at the same time, limit the moving around. Keep the group in one place, move the teachers and others from group to group. Consider scheduling when groups arrive and depart so that you can avoid having children and adults congregating and not maintaining safe distancing. You may have to encourage additional volunteers to assist, for organizing, working with groups, cleaning up after, etc.

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There is still a great deal of uncertainty about what parish life will look like this fall because of the pandemic. As you plan your on-line religious education sessions, you will have to review and rethink your usual lesson plans. Here's a fourth installment with some ideas.

Focus the Time and Content. When I was a Sunday school student, our class sessions were close to one hour long. After the prayer (no snacks back then), we read the Gospel lesson and did a short review of its contents. Sometimes we heard about the saint or feast day closest to that class session. Then we would open our books and do the lesson of the day. Maybe we would learn a hymn or complete an art or craft project. If there were extra time, maybe there'd be a game. We'd close in prayer.

We still like to accomplish a lot in a Sunday school class, even when there is just thirty minutes. In the virtual religious education classroom that we will have this fall, we will have to use our time well and keep it focused.

Keep it Short and Sweet (or Simple). We all have heard this phrase and its variations. In the virtual religious education class, the principle of short and simple or short and sweet becomes important. Students may not be able to stay focused for too long, especially younger students.

As you begin to prepare for your online classes, you will have to review the materials that you typically have used for in-person class time. An on-line class session cannot replicate an in-person class session.

What's essential for this session and the future sessions? What are essential elements? (a helpful document from our office is <https://www.goarch.org/-/what-your-child-should-know?inheritRedirect=true>). Much of educational planning is discerning our priorities and values and then balancing that with how much time and energy can we devote to the topic. For example, what events in the history of the Orthodox Church are essential for a young person to know something about? Educators debate this kind of question all the time, but ultimately they have to select something. So, in this unusual time that we find ourselves, focusing on essentials is critical. Work through those questions with other teachers and the parish priest. If appropriate, ask the students.

How do you sequence topics? While this is always an important factor in lesson planning, online it becomes even more important. A Sunday school textbook has done most of that work for you, so you may only need to adjust that content to fit your time limitations.

Nice idea but it can wait. There are plenty of these in our class sessions. They enrich the time, giving it variety and adding richness to a curriculum. We want our students to know hymns and prayers. We want them to paint an icon or make *prosporo*. Perhaps these activities can wait for other youth group gatherings, even on-line events. Work with the youth group leaders on that. Some ideas may be best handled in the occasional in-person gatherings, if you are holding them.

Using Time Wisely. When the class is together on-line, make the time as interactive as possible. Ask the students to read the material just before going on-line and be prepared with a question or two for them to answer as they join the call. With younger students, you may have to read to them. But, the on-line time should be dedicated to the question and answers, the discussions based on what was read. Your questions could point to elements of the reading material.

When there's a handout or worksheet, let the students complete them off-line, then return to share them on-line. You could even break the class up into smaller online groups to work together. This gives them a break from the large group screen time.

A suggestion I heard recently was about how to keep everyone engaged. Turn a question and answer into a "game," with students holding a red card for No, a green card for Yes, and a Yellow for "I'm not sure." They can use blank cards to write answers and hold them for all to see on screen.

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There is still a great deal of uncertainty about what parish life will look like this fall because of the pandemic. As you plan your on-line religious education sessions, more support will be needed. Here's a fifth installment with some ideas.

Expand the Staff. Invite the Digital Natives. If you are like me, virtual classes and on-line almost anything are a fairly new thing. I'd arranged and spoken at conference calls and videoconferences. But, last March, that went into overdrive. We are all learning how to function in this new format.

Our students are "digital natives," meaning, they have grown up with technology as part of their life; they don't know a time before cell phones, social media, etc. So, as we begin our virtual religious education and youth ministry programs, enlist those digital natives in your work.

High school students, in particular, might really enjoy teaching and guiding teaching, and working with a favorite Sunday school teacher. They can certainly assist set up the needed technical side of a class, like delivering scanned materials or developing clever ways to engage learners. They can also lead small group break out discussions.

Locate Specialists. Like any in-person program, not everyone teaches everything. Enlist "specialists" from the community. Of course, the parents of students will be the first to be asked but search widely. Every parish has members with special skills that could be shared and utilized in the online meetings, even as a "guest speaker." Arts and crafts, music, cooking demonstrations (make koliva, prosphoro, artos, etc.) can all be shared online. For younger learners, perhaps there can be a "story time," led by a beloved member of the parish. In this scenario, a forty-five-minute class session can be divided up into a lesson and an activity, with two teachers, the specialist or guest speaker and the "regular" teacher.

Resource Experts. Locating resources and determining ways to adapt them for an online session can become very time consuming. While many working professional teachers may not have a great deal of time these days, a young person studying to be a teacher or a retired teacher in a parish could be invited to help out. That volunteer could search online, review printed materials, and then share them with the teachers with ideas for using them in a virtual session, such as preparing a materials list that a student would need to find at home, or ways to encourage on-line discussion that would accompany both books and videos.

If you think about it, many of these roles work just as well for an in-person program as they can for a virtual program. They need not stop once we return to in-person religious education.

Don't be overwhelmed by these additions. Most likely, you only need to find a few people for any of these tasks. In these coming virtual days, expanding and sharing the roles and tasks that are needed to hand forward our Faith can help the program thrive.

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There is still a great deal of uncertainty about what parish life will look like this fall because of the pandemic. Most likely you will offer an on-line religious education program, perhaps with some in-person gatherings, depending on the local situation. As you plan your on-line religious education sessions, you will need resources for students. Here are some ideas.

Learning Requires Engaging with a Text. Most of us carried a set of books to school, used them in our classes, with a teacher guiding us through their contents. We'd take them home to read another section, answer questions, complete worksheets, and more, all with the goal of mastering the contents. Eventually there would be a quiz or test.

Learning and study require engagement with a "text." Texts, of course, are books and documents – the written word, but we can also study a piece of art, music, a film, and the like. Good "texts" (to be very inclusive) are often the "third thing" in the classroom (after teachers and students) that can foster learning. For example, reading Lincoln's Gettysburg Address can spark a great discussion of the words themselves, their historical context, and the ideas that they convey about American democracy and society at the time of the Civil War. While we might ask a student to memorize the Gettysburg Address (and I'll bet many of us did), we wouldn't expect them to study the Address without a copy and the necessary texts to understand it.

In the on-line school settings that many of our children are attending these days, they still use books and other resources. Schools are finding ways to distribute resources to students (based on local guidelines). When they are online together in class, they work through the material in those books with their teachers.

We can do the same in our religious education classes. Engaging our students with the topics of our Faith requires the use of many resources. Books, Bibles, handouts, icons, hymns, liturgical objects are the "texts" that should be available for a class session. We wouldn't imagine holding a Bible study without each participant having a Bible to read from and to focus the discussion. "Show and tell" lessons that involve icons and liturgical items can work virtually. There are many companion books that a student can read as well about those items. Questions – whether posted

on a screen or in a handout – to answer questions about a Bible passage or story can still be done as it would in person. The key question when using any of these in a virtual setting is how to get every student active with the material, not just let them be passive observers.

Here's a list of some of the many producers of Orthodox Christian religious education materials:

The Greek Orthodox Archdiocese Department of Religious Education <https://www.orthodoxmarketplace.com/ess/default.aspx>

The Orthodox Christian Education Commission, an agency of the Assembly of Canonical Orthodox Bishops in the United States <http://orthodoxchristianed.com/>

The Orthodox Church in America Department of Christian Education <https://www.oca.org/about/departments/christian-education>

The Antiochian Orthodox Christian Archdiocese <http://www.antiochian.org/christianeducation>

The Serbian Orthodox Church in North, Central and South America <https://serborth.org/christianeducation>

Once you obtain your resources, you will have to determine how best and safest to distribute them: Can people pick up packages from the parish either when they attend services or at another time? Can you mail the packages to each student? Some handouts in Teachers Guides can easily be scanned and e-mailed.

But, in the end, religious education is about learning the content of our faith. Textbooks and other resources contain that content and should be utilized in your on-line classes.