Ways to Share Great Lent and Pascha with Your Child



Children are never too young to be brought to Church for services. The sooner we introduce them to the Church, her services, and her wisdom, the sooner we begin the process of "becoming" an Orthodox Christian. In order for Orthodoxy to make sense, our children need to experience all that the Church offers.

Make it part of this year's Lenten commitment to attend more services, or attend more often. When Holy Week comes, block out all other activities. Make it a point to attend every service you can with your children. Be creative so that you can keep little ones directed and occupied. Locate service books for children who can read. Explain what's going to happen. Talk about what Holy Week and Pascha were like when you were growing up.

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by Ann Marie Gidus-Mercera

Take your child to Church!

Whenever a service is scheduled, plan to attend. Services like The Canon of St. Andrew of Crete may be physically tiring with the many prostrations, but don't think your child can't be a part of them. In my own parish, which is filled with pre-schoolers, the children do a great job of making prostrations right along with the adults. Many of the children will join in as "Have mercy on me, O God, have mercy on me" is sung. This experience is good for our children! If they see their parents attending services, they get the message that attending Church is important. If we bring our children to Church with us (both young and old), they get the message that their presence in Church is important. The Canon of St. Andrew of Crete is especially good for teaching our children that we worship with our entire bodies.

Explain the service that your family will be attending.

Notice that the word "family" is used in the first sentence. Now is a good time to stress that the *entire* family should be attending services. My husband can't make it home from work in time for all of us to get to services together, but he always meets us at Church. This tells our children that Church is important enough for Daddy to meet us there. As children get older, homework and after-school activities may tempt them (and us!) to skip Church services. Don't let it! First of all, if we give in, then what we're really telling them is that worldly affairs are more important than spiritual affairs.

By allowing our children to miss Church, we make it extremely easy for them to fall away as teenagers or young adults.

Last of all, if we allow our older children to miss Church, we are telling our younger children that Church is not important when they get to be big sister or big brother's age. Enforcing Church attendance by the entire family is no easy task. In fact, enforcing it may be one of the hardest jobs you encounter. Sticking to your rule will be even tougher. It's a choice we must make as Orthodox parents. Maybe, it makes our task easier if we ask ourselves, "What would God want us to do?" The answer is obvious.

Prepare your child for Lent.

[Editor's Note: great sources for readings and color sheets are **A Way of Life** (see below), or use the gospel readings listed in your parish calendar or bulletin]. The weeks prior to Lent help us take on the right frame of mind for entering Lent. Let them do the same for your child. Read the stories and let your child color [or draw] the pictures prior to attending the Sunday services. You may want to read the story again on Saturday evening, or let your child take the color sheet to Church. A simple reminder Sunday morning concerning what the service and gospel reading will contain can be enough. Pre-schoolers have the ability to remember even the briefest of comments (even when it's something we DON'T want them to remember!) Keep your explanation simple and BRIEF in order to hold his/her attention. [Editor's Note: As your children get older, your explanations can get more involved.] Don't try to go into a long and draw-out explanation or s/he will lose interest. If s/he has questions or comments, answer them briefly.

Don't feel mountains have to be moved the day Lent begins, or even during Lent.

It might be a quiet, even uneventful day. That's okay! Nothing magical needs to happen. We must only be ready to give our hearts to Christ, and we should gladly hand them over in an effort to be a good example to our children. This is our greatest task as Orthodox Christian parents.

A Brief Explanation of Lenten and Holy Week Services

Use this section to help familiarize your child with the services s/he will be attending. A few minutes spent talking about them during the day, or in the car on the way to Church, is sufficient for the young child. Help get him/her interested in the services by asking questions about what s/he will see, hear or do.

1. **The Liturgy of the Pre-Sanctified Gifts.** Tell your child that this service is part Vespers (like the services we attend on Saturday evenings) and part Liturgy (like the service we attend Sunday mornings.)
2. **The Canon of St. Andrew of Crete.** This service is celebrated several times during Great Lent, and gets it title from St. Andrew, a Jerusalem monk who lived during the seventh and eighth centuries, and became archbishop of Crete. The service is a poem that tells the story of the Old and New Testaments, and become our "spiritual lament" that our sins have separated us from God. Between each verse of the poem, we sing the following refrain as we prostrate: "Have mercy on me, O God, have mercy on me." Your child will identify this service with the numerous prostrations made during the service. Tell your child everyone will bow down to God "many, many times." Ask him/her to try to listen to the hymns sung and see if s/he recognizes any stories from the Bible.

   [Editor's Note: A section of the poem is chanted within the context of compline during the first four days of the first week of Lent, and the entire poem within the context of Matins on the fifth Thursday of Lent. It is more commonly done in the Slavic parishes. If your parish does not offer the Canon of St. Andrew, consider attending the service at a sister Orthodox parish that offers it.]

3. **The Bridegroom Service.** "Behold the Bridegroom comes in the middle of the night. Blessed is the servant He shall find awake. But he who is found negligent shall be judged unworthy. Be careful, my soul, and fall not into a deep sleep..." is the hymn we sing at this service celebrated on [Palm Sunday evening, in the Greek tradition], Holy Monday and Holy Tuesday. In this hymn from Scripture, in which Christ is the Bridegroom and we are the servant, we are warned to be ready for Christ's coming by preparing our souls.
4. **Vesperal Liturgy of Holy Thursday.** This service is most significant because we remember the first Holy Communion which took place at the Last Supper. Tell your children that the first Holy Communion occurred at this Passover feast when Jesus Christ gave bread and wine to His Apostles and told them to "do this in remembrance of me."
5. **Reading of the Passion Gospels.** During this service of Holy Thursday, we hear the entire account of Christ's Passion. The reading is taken from all four gospels in order to include every detail, and is divided into twelve parts. Prepare your child for the lengthy service by explaining two significant events attributed to Holy Thursday your child can relate to: The Last Supper and Judas' betrayal. At the service, ask your child to watch as each candle is lit before each reading. If old enough, s/he can try to count the candles after each lighting.
6. **Entombment.** Great and Holy Friday is the most somber day of Holy Week; thus, the Entombment service helps us express our sorrow over Christ's death on the cross. We see a "tomb" where an oversized icon (the "winding sheet") of Christ lays, beautifully adorned with flowers. We prostrate before the winding sheet and venerate it. The service contains hymns of lamentation and sorrow for both Christ's death and our own sins.
7. **Matins and Paschal Liturgy.** When we come to Church late Saturday evening, the Church is very quiet and dark. The only light comes from the flickering candles. We leave the Church and walk around it three times (the procession) singing a beautiful hymn that tells us Christ has risen from the dead. Each person carries a small, lighted candle. The Gospel is read at the Church entrance; then [in some traditions] the priest pounds on the door three times. It is opened, and when we return inside, the Church is full of light! Candles are glowing everywhere. The priest's white vestments seem to glow! The tomb of Jesus is gone. The Church seems bigger and brighter. We sing loudly and with great excitement many times: "Christ is Risen from the dead, trampling down death by death, and upon those in the tombs bestowing life." This is the happiest service of the year and we are glad to be part of it! [Editor's Note: I would like to add the following to the list of services offered during Lent and Holy Week:
8. **Akathist to the Theotokos** is made up of twenty-four stanzas in the form of an alphabetic acrostic, alpha through omega, offered within a compline service. In the Greek tradition, the stanzas are divided into four parts, with each being read on the first four Fridays of Great Lent. On the fifth Friday the entire twenty-four stanzas are recited. The stanzas tell us of the Annunciation, Mary's visit to Elizabeth, Joseph's doubt and his dream, the Nativity of our Lord, the flight into Egypt, the blessing of St. Simeon, the new life centering on Heaven, God's presence on earth and in heaven, the angels' amazement, and more about the Virgin Mary's role. We are reminded that the Theotokos intercedes for us.
9. **Holy Unction.** Many of our Orthodox parishes offer the sacrament of Unction on Holy Wednesday evening. Unction is offered for the healing of both physical and spiritual illness, including the forgiveness of sins. The service consists of seven prayers, seven epistle and seven gospel readings. The priest will also call on the "healing" saints to join us in our prayers. Tell your children that Jesus continues to heal people just as He did in the Gospels. Suggest they listen for the names of the "healing" saints.]

*Reprinted from **A Way of Life: Introducing Your Child to the Orthodox Faith**, a Religious Education Pre-School Program for Parents, by Ann Marie Gidus-Mercera. Copies available from Light & Life Publishing $15.95 + $4.50 SH, 612-925-3888.] **A Way of Life** contains many, many other ways to help parents teach the Orthodox faith to their preschooler at home. We thank Ann-Marie for granting permission to reprint this section.*

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