

**Your Spiritual Family: Spiritual Fathers and Spiritual Children**  
**ReCatechism 5**  
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From September, Re-Catechism has dealt with the different components – the different parts – of *The Orthodox Family*: married couples, children, singles, divorcees and widows; the problems of communication and secularism (and their solutions) in the Orthodox household. The family as we know it today is far different than how things were even a decade ago. The blessing of the Orthodox family is that it is not alone on this journey. Every Orthodox family that has a relationship with Christ is part of a greater family, the *spiritual family* – also known as the Orthodox Church.

Throughout Scripture, we hear of many holy figures not being alone, but being together with their family: Adam had Eve, Abraham had Sarah, Isaac had Rebecca, Jacob had Rachel (spouses); Moses had Aaron (brothers), Lazarus had Mary and Martha (siblings); Jesus Christ and His Mother, the All-Holy Theotokos and Ever-Virgin Mary (mother and Son).

However, relationships in the Bible (and in the Church in general) are not restricted to blood relationships: Elijah had Elisha (friends), St. Paul and Timothy & Titus (friends); Jesus Christ had His disciples (both the 12 and others, including the myrrh-bearing women, St. Paul...even you and I). *The spiritual family* should not only serve as a support during difficult times; rather, they should be true brothers and sisters, on the road to the Kingdom.

Now, this might sound like “great theory but no practical application”; however, we can find so many spiritual relationships in our Church. Just like any relationship, we just need to work at it in order to make it grow. The “AGAPE” model is split into five categories:

**A** spiritual Father and spiritual children  
**G**odparents and Godchildren  
**A**ltar Servers and Girls Groups  
**P**hiloptochos  
**E**ntire Parish

### A spiritual Father and spiritual children

Just as every person has a biological father, Orthodox Christians are called to have *spiritual fathers* in their journey to the Kingdom of God.

In the ancient Church, the spiritual father was a clergyman who would catechize (or, teach) the Faith to the person seeking baptism, baptize them at the appropriate time and then lead the newly-baptized in their spiritual life. This was done at a time when many people were baptized at a later age (and not as infants). As an example, we find St. Paul the Apostle being the spiritual father of the Churches he wrote to – the Corinthians, the Ephesians, the Thessalonians, etc. In *1 Corinthians 4:14*, he tells them: “I do not write these things to reprimand you, but to advise you as my beloved children. For even if you have ten thousand teachers in Christ, you do not have many fathers; for I have begotten you in Jesus Christ, through the Gospel.” Paul is not merely their guide, their friend, their spiritual counsellor – he is their *father*.

Today, as the majority of the people baptized are infants, the spiritual father is there to guide the baptized Orthodox Christian in their spiritual life. The Orthodox Christian finds a priest or a bishop and asks them to become their spiritual father. The spiritual father must have the blessing of the bishop to hear confessions (as there are some priests, usually those who have just been ordained, that do not have the blessing to hear confessions until about 3 years into their priesthood, or as the bishop sees fit).

After the spiritual father agrees (and some might not, for a variety of reasons), the relationship is to be ongoing; that is, the spiritual child can't go to another priest or bishop to be their spiritual father, then another and another. No one would go to a doctor to diagnose a problem, and then go to another and another for the same problem.

This is a reason that “travelling confessors”, although they might be wonderful priests and filled with the Holy Spirit, pose a problem for Orthodox Christians who wish to have a stable spiritual father. Will they always be around and able to talk about spiritual problems? Will they be able to relate to life in Canada? The clergy of our Metropolis have the same Holy Spirit guiding them as other Orthodox clergy.

One aspect of this relationship is that the spiritual father is the *confessor* of the spiritual child. Confessions can be scheduled at any time (usually Christmas and Great Lent for most people, although there is no rule that it must be then – and the spiritual father must be there at any time to listen to the spiritual problems of the faithful at any time, just like a biological father would).

For those that do not have a spiritual father, they should go to a priest who they feel comfortable with: Fr. Konstantinos is here for the spiritual needs of the parish, which include these, or any other priest. If there is a relationship of mutual respect and Christian love, there is only opportunity to grow in Christ – for both the spiritual father and child. This doesn't mean we seek the spiritual father who will be “lenient” with us and that we “like as a person”, but one that will bring us closer to Christ.

### Godparents and Godchildren

Another spiritual relationship that many of us tend to remember only a few times a year is that of Godparents and Godchildren. We remember this relationship at Christmas (especially for Greek families – *nouno* and *nouna* always bring new shoes) and at Pascha (with the Paschal *lambada*, chocolates and other gifts in hand). The Godparent-Godchild relationship, though, is more than just gifts.

In the ancient Church, “godparents” were the ‘guarantors’ of the worthiness of the people getting baptized – that the person getting baptized was a good person who knew the faith and would be a worthy Christian. In the “Apostolic Canons” (3, 16), godparents were to be the same gender as that of the child. In 15<sup>th</sup>-century Russia, we find more than one godparent attending to the child at baptism – usually a couple. In the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century, we have heard of children in Greece having over 10 people as godparents – a pietistic practice with no historical backing. Today, the Greek Orthodox Metropolis requires just one godparent (although they can be two or three) who is in good standing with the Church.

Today, godparents are usually family members (except the parent or brother/sister of the child) or good friends of the family. It is important to note that godparents should have an understanding of the Faith: if they don’t know what the Creed is, let alone can’t recite it, that is a problem. As we said before, it’s not about the gifts: godparents are there to be the first “Sunday School” for the child/children they baptise, thus bringing them closer to Christ and His Church. If the proposed godparent has married outside the Church, does not have a divorce that is given by the spiritual court or has apostasized (i.e. has left the Orthodox Church to attend/be part of another church or other faith community, e.g. Jewish, Muslim, Buddhist, etc.), they cannot serve as a godparent. All godparents must be part of the Orthodox Church, part of the “mystical Body of Christ”, and can thus teach the child the Faith. How can you teach the Faith to the child without living it?

The godchild no longer has their parents that gave birth to them, but has the godparents who brought them into the Church and gave them renewed life in Christ. Subdeacon Thomas Wilson quotes Fr. Timothy Sawchak of Sts. Peter and Paul Church in Lakewood Ohio, who writes about some practical ideas for godparents and godchildren to build their relationship in Christ (The Orthopraxis of Godparents in the Orthodox Church):

1. Celebrate the anniversary of the baptism with a card or a telephone call. Along with learning about the child's patron saint, learn about the saint whose feast day is celebrated on the date of his or her baptism and share the story of that saint's life with your Godchild.
2. Model your faith through your actions. Understand the sacraments as well as the teachings of the church so that you will be able to answer questions that your Godchild may have.
3. Encourage the faith life through the types of gifts that you give your Godchild. Some examples of gifts are a bible, prayer book, books on the lives of saints, [prayer rope](#), etc.

By doing this you are giving tools to help your Godchild grow in the faith, and are helping him/her to start a personal library of Orthodox teachings.

4. If you live in close proximity to your Godchild make yourself available to spend time with him or her. Find out when school activities and sports events are scheduled and try to go to a few. Plan a special time, whether for lunch or a trip to the zoo, to be with your Godchild. These times together will only help to make your relationship closer.
5. If you live far away, call, write, or e-mail your Godchild. Send a letter at the beginning of a church season (Advent, Lent, etc.) to let him or her know that you will be praying for him. If possible, plan visits to see your Godchild.
6. From the moment of Baptism, your Godchild deserves a very special place in your prayers, for on the day of judgment you will be asked about your Godchild's soul.<sup>2</sup>
7. A faithful Godparent will be a friend in Christ and maintain close contact with his Godchild. The focus at all times is to progress the child in the knowledge and practice of the Orthodox Faith. He should at all times model a Christ-like example. The relationship between the Godparent and the baptized is so important and so close that the Church forbids marriage between the Godparent and Godchild.
8. Pray through the ups and downs of life with your Godchild. Find out what's troubling or challenging your Godchild, what he or she is excited about or eagerly anticipating, then do your best to talk about God in that context. Encourage your Godchild to pray, pray together, and let your godchild know that you are praying for him or her every day.
9. Make a big deal of your godchild's [names day](#). Celebrate with a special visit and dinner if you're nearby, and give a "spiritually oriented" gift to celebrate, like an age-appropriate book of his patron saint's life, a new icon, etc.
10. Emphasize the spiritual aspects of holidays. Make it a tradition to read the stories of the [Nativity](#) and [Pascha](#) morning with your godchild, and help his or her parents downplay the material and commercial aspects (Santa, the Easter Bunny, loads of loot in pretty wrapping). Play up the feasts of the Church instead - by bringing candles to be blessed at the [Feast of the Presentation](#) and flowers at the [Dormition of the Theotokos](#) and sharing them with your godchild, or by baking a birthday cake for the nativities of the [Theotokos](#), Jesus, and St. John the Baptist.
11. Invite your godchild to go with you to [Great Vespers](#), [Matins](#), or weekday services for the feasts if you live close by. Encourage your whole "god-family" to come to Church for services other than the Sunday/resurrectional Divine Liturgy, if they don't do so regularly.
12. Ask what your godchild is learning in Church school... Discuss the lesson of the week, and offer to help with Church school homework, prepare for oratorical competition or catechism bowl, etc. Buy your godchild's first Bible, and update it regularly as his or her reading level increases. Encourage him or her to study the gospel!
13. Help your godchild serve God. Choose a service project to work at regularly together, such as working at a hot-meal program or visiting parishioners in the hospital. Help him or her discover new ways to use God-given talents to help others - the artistic might design posters or programs for retreats, the musical might record Church music for shut-ins, etc. Encourage your godsons to serve in the altar, too, and "cheer them on" each week.
14. Encourage both boys and girls to attend seminary, and explore the monastic lifestyle, if they show interest. Mention the priesthood as a "career choice" to your godsons, and

help them learn more about what our Orthodox clergy do - and how important their calling to guide others in the Faith is to all of us!

15. Make your godchild "one of the family". Include your godchild, and his or her parents and siblings, in your own family's "social" events: reunions, picnics, camping trips, and zoo and museum outings.
16. Spend time together. Keep in touch by phone, e-mail, or postcard if your godchildren are out of state or across the globe. Prayer and love in Christ know no distance!

A great practice is when we see godparents and parents going up to Holy Communion with their godchildren. Make sure this isn't done simply for the first three Sundays after the baptism; rather, make sure this is done on an ongoing basis (once a month, maybe?), reinforcing this relationship rooted in the love of Christ.

A final word on this topic from Subdeacon Thomas:

Although great care and many prayers are put forth by the parents in choosing the Godparent for their child, sometimes after the baptism the relationship does not grow. It's sad to have your child want to disown their "missing-in-action" godparent, but it can happen. If after repeated efforts the godparent does not respond and since it is so important for our children to have the influence of a "godparent," ask yourself, "Who among my closest Orthodox friends could relate to my child and serve as a spiritual mentor?" Discuss the situation with your spiritual father/parish priest. Ask God to guide your efforts. Ask that person to consider the task and to pray about it. If that person agrees, let your child know that this individual is there for him/her. If the person does not consent, keep on praying and asking. Have faith that God will provide for your child's spiritual needs. (The Orthopraxis of Godparents in the Orthodox Church)

#### Altar Servers & Girls Groups

When children want to participate in worship, boys usually have no problem finding something to do. *Altar Servers* are not something from the early Church, as their duties were done by the deacons present at Liturgy. With very few deacons in our Church today (only 3 deacons in our Metropolis in Canada), Altar Servers have become an irreplaceable part of the Church today. Their mission is to assist the Clergy during the various divine services (although they most attend the Sunday Divine Liturgy, as they are in school the rest of the week).

The duties of an altar server can vary. A "lead" or "head" Altar Server is usually the oldest of the group and is responsible for the rest. When Altar Servers reach a certain age, some of them begin saying the readings (Epistle, Prophecies, Psalms, etc.). At this point, the Parish Priest asks the Metropolitan or Bishop to read them the *Prayer of a Reader*. When this is done, the Altar Servers join the lowest order of the clergy, "Readers". In our Church, we have six (6) readers: Dr. Nick Vozoris, Nick Zourbanos, Jordan Fiuza, Phillip Giontis, Dimitre Pavlidis...and yours truly.

Altar Servers are not there to merely "help" the Clergy, though; they are there to pray and offer their praise to God through their work. The moment being an Altar Server is to

get away from parents, not go to Sunday School or any other reason than the pursuit of holiness, the Altar Server has the temptation (πειρασμός) to become proud and not prayerful. Being an Altar Server is a type of “calling”, because not everyone can do it. The boys that can are called to “multiply their talents” and grow in the Faith. As one Priest put it, “today’s Altar boy might be tomorrow’s Bishop!”

That having been said, girls are **not** “second-class citizens” in the Church! The greatest Saint of the Church is the Theotokos – the Virgin Mary. Women were the first to find out about the Resurrection. Women Saints adorn the walls of our Churches and are examples for our families. So, just as boys are called to be Altar Servers and offer their services to the Church, girls have that opportunity with a new ministry we are beginning at our Church: *The St. Paraskevi Girls Group*. We are still at the phase of finding a person to head the group, but we will be hopefully starting this group sometime in the January 2012. At the end of this presentation, I’d like to ask you what *you* think this group should do – only together do I think we can help this spiritual relationship between the Church and our young girl parishioners *thrive*. Just to get the ball rolling, I think we should have them as greeters at the front, to welcome people to the Church. But more about that later....

### Philoptochos

The first Philoptochos Society was established by the late Ecumenical Patriarch Athenagoras I in November 1931, when he was Archbishop of North and South America. Since then, it became a hallmark of every Church and Community. The President of Philoptochos in Canada is Mrs. Efthymia Koutsougeras. At St. Demetrios Church, the President of Philoptochos is Mrs. Theodora Koutsoubou.

From its name, the main emphasis of Philoptochos is to be the “Friend of the Poor” – both here in Canada and internationally. From its official bylaws, the Philoptochos is called:

“To preserve the sacredness of the Orthodox family through family concern, service, unity of action; to perpetuate the Christian concept of marriage and upbringing of the children and through it perpetuate and promote the Orthodox Faith and Greek Orthodox traditions in conformity with its doctrines, canons, discipline, divine worship, usages and customs;

To promote [ελεημοσύνη,] the charitable, benevolent and philanthropic... purposes of the Greek Orthodox Metropolis of Toronto (Canada) by instructional programming, presentations, lectures, seminars and educational resources;

To formulate plans and methods to voluntarily aid the poor, the destitute, the hungry, the aged, the sick, the unemployed, the orphaned, the imprisoned, the widowed, the handicapped, the victims of disasters, to undertake the burial of impoverished persons and to offer assistance to anyone who may need the help of the Church through special funds or solicitations on the local level;

and to promote participation in the activities of the Greek Orthodox community with the cooperation of the Community Priest and the Community Council.” (Greek Orthodox Ladies Philoptochos Society, 1997)

When Philoptochos becomes merely about “serving coffee” and “memorial lunches” (μακαρίες), and not about the above, it has lost its meaning and purpose for the Orthodox Family. It has no spiritual relationship to the people they should be ministering to (‘the poor, the destitute, the hungry’, etc.).

According to their constitution, Philoptochos can only have female members. When I first heard it, I thought that was odd that men were not allowed to be philanthropists. Yet, I quickly reminded myself that men do not need to be part of “Philoptochos” to have a philanthropic heart! Through this ministry, they can help the Ladies of “Philoptochos” during their events and fundraising activities so that people can be fed, clothed, saved from addictions and accept Christ.

#### Entire Parish

Finally, the entire parish is called to have spiritual relationships with Christ and their neighbour. During **Re-Catechism**, we are called to learn and ask questions in order for us to grow in Faith and learn that we are all brothers and sisters in Christ. The **Church Council** is called to be good spiritual family members, as they should be seeking the betterment of the entire parish. The **Bookstore and Sunday School** should focus on educating the children, youth, young adults and adults of this parish, so that the level of spirituality grows with every passing year. There are other relationships, but we can discuss them later on.

Finally, during **the Divine Liturgy and the services**, we are called to express that spiritual relationship of “brothers and sisters in Christ” by “loving one another, so that with one heart we may confess Father, Son and Holy Spirit” (from the Divine Liturgy of St. John Chrysostom). If we are not united in the Eucharist – but are caught up in bickering, fighting and judging one another – then we are condemned by our actions. In his epistle, St. James cautions us: *“Speak not one against another, brethren. He who speaks against a brother, or judges his brother, speaks against the law, and judges the law: but if you judge the law, you are not a doer of the law, but a judge. One only is the lawgiver and judge, even he who is able to save and to destroy: but who are you to judge your neighbor?”* (James 4:11-12)

Our spiritual family is our family in the flesh, our friends, our fellow parishioners, the Orthodox Church across the globe. By nurturing all the relationships above – not merely keeping them at the same level, but making them *grow* – we will all become closer to Christ and become a *true family*, and not merely on paper.