

## Introducing Children to Lenten Worship

For many parents and teachers, the very image of eternal suffering is a fidgeting child at one's feet or in a pew squirming throughout a two or three hour Lenten service. The question arises, and often with painful persistence, as to whether or not these services are within the grasp of younger children (or most adults, for that matter). How much can younger children be expected to understand and how much can adults be expected to endure?

First of all, we must realize that children assimilate and understand the life of the church at their own level. Just as one cannot expect a middle aged mother of four to have the same perspective and understanding of the liturgy as a seasoned professor of theology, one cannot expect the child to understand the life in Christ as an adult. The mother of four brings her own unique life and visions of the church and offers to God a perspective that is entirely different from that of the theologian. It is neither higher nor lower, better or worse, \. It is simply different, and uniquely her own. The same is true of the child. We must be careful that we do not dismiss the child's piety as inconsequential and guard that we do not push him into a posture, which is false and foreign. The child understands the liturgy as a child. Young children learn about the word around them by imitation and react to the liturgy in the same manner; waving a prayer book in the air like the book of the Gospels or swinging a pacifier like a censer. This is their way of entering into the community of the church, our common life in Christ. And let us not forget that they are full members of that Body.

As the child grows older, imitative play becomes less and less a part of his method of learning. Children begin to reason and to think about the world in which they live. Both the parent and the church school teacher must be prepared to engage their own minds and experience to help the child discover the world of the liturgy, to help the child offer himself and his life up to God. Children also need to feel at home in God's house and at the Divine services. We should not be surprised if children wiggle and scream in church if we do not bring them regularly.

We have several tools at our disposal that can be of great help in acquainting the child with the services of Lent and Holy Week such as the recordings made that are available with hymns from the Liturgy of the Presanctified Gifts and Holy Saturday and Pascha.

Take the time to sit down with your child or your church school class and explain to them what they will see in church, e.g. how the church is dark at the Presanctified Liturgy and how it is bright and white at the Paschal Vigil. There is no substitution for time! Discuss the idea of Lent; preparation and return to God. Use images from their world; perhaps a friend they may have offended or a dog they may have hurt. Explain that we want to be with God and so we take time after our busy day at work or at school to come to church and to receive Holy Communion. Then play several hymns from the service you are discussing. You might also choose to make use of the wonderful pamphlets and books not available through the Archdiocese Department of Religious Education.

Almost every child can and should be encouraged to learn the troparion of Pascha by heart (Christ is risen from the dead...Christos Anesti ek nekron). This will not only be an advantage for the day of Pascha itself, but as this is the "theme song" of the season, it will play a prominent role in the course of almost every service in the church. One might also add that this troparion should enter into the life of the family at the table during the paschal meal.