

MOTHERS AND THE UPBRINGING OF CHILDREN

by our father among the Saints

NECTARIOS

Bishop of Pentapolis,
the Miracle-Worker

Translated from the Greek original
by Thomas Carroll

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St. Nectarios, Bishop of Pentapolis, the Miracle-Worker
Mothers and the Upbringing of Children
(Translation of: Ἡ ἀγωγή τῶν παίδων καὶ αἱ Μητέρες)

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TO MY DEAR MOTHER, NANCY,
WHOSE "HEART SHOWED ME GOD."

Mothers and the Upbringing of Children

The education of children must begin from infancy, so that the child's mental faculties may, from their very first appearance, be directed right from the beginning toward the good, the gentle, the true, and may be removed from the evil, the obscene, and the false. This age can be regarded as a most immovable foundation upon which the child's moral and intellectual formation will be built. This is why Phocylides says,

You must while he is yet a child instruct him in good works,

for it is from childhood, as from a starting line, that a man sets off on the race he is to run in life. And Basil the Great declares, "The soul, while it is still easily molded and soft, while it is still like wax that is easily melted and that easily receives the impression of the shapes that are pressed upon it, must straightway and from the beginning be urged on to every exercise of virtues; so that, when the faculty of reason has come and the habit of discrimination has appeared, the soul's course may proceed from first principles and from the impressions of piety that have been handed down to it, with the faculty of reason suggesting that which is useful and the moral character producing an ease of accomplishing it." And who, indeed, does not acknowledge that those first impressions that have come during childhood prove indelible? Who doubts that in early childhood influences are so powerfully impressed on the child's tender soul, that they remain vivid throughout his whole life?

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As educators for this age nature has ordained the parents and, especially, the mothers. It is necessary, then, because of this lofty duty of theirs, this duty of the educator, that we instruct these mothers suitably and raise them carefully, for they will serve their own children as images and models – images and models of which the children will become casts. To such an extent does the child imitate the virtues or the faults of his mother, and likewise her voice and manners and moral character and deportment, that one can quite appropriately compare children to the brass disks of the phonograph, which first receive the foot-prints of the voice and then send the voice out again with the same pitch, the same expression, and the same color with which it was originally articulated. Every gesture, every word, every movement, and every action of the mother becomes the gesture and word and expression and movement and action of the child. This is why Asterios (*Homily 5 on Matthew*) says, “For one of the children preserves the likeness of his mother’s voice, another assumes the greater part of her temperament, another with respect to the state of his moral character has been given the shape of her who bore him.” By constant togetherness with the child and by the continuous display of the same dispositions, the mother influences the child’s soul and moral character, and she is the first to give the first push toward the good.

The mother by a single glance, by a single kiss, by her sweet voice and her delicate caresses, can immediately arouse in the child’s heart the leaning and inclination toward the good. Likewise, by a single disapproving glance, by a single tear falling on her cheeks, by a single expression suggestive of her heart’s sorrow, she can remove the child from

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the most destructive danger of the heart. The child, nurtured in his mother's bosom and warmed in his mother's embrace, begins to love before he learns the concept of love, and he begins to subordinate his will to the moral law before he learns the concept of the moral law, and it is the mother alone who is most suited to arousing in the child's heart his first conception of God. Because of this, Basil the Great says (Letter 223), "The conception of God which I received in childhood from my blessed mother – it was this conception, brought to maturity, that I had within myself. For I did not change from one set of opinions to another in the maturation of my reason, but rather I brought to completion the beginnings handed down to me by her." And the greatest of modern educators, Pestalozzi, assigning all the child's religious upbringing to the mothers, exclaims, "I believed in my mother. Her heart showed me God. My God is my mother's God. The God of my heart is the God of my mother's heart. Mother, mother! You showed me God in your instructions, and I found Him in my obedience. Mother, mother! If I should forget God, I must even forget you."

But just as every good action, every good word, and every good disposition of the mother constitute the cornerstone of the subsequent good actions, words, and dispositions of the child, so too do every bad action, word, and disposition of the mother contain the corruptive seeds of the subsequent bad actions, words, and deeds of the child, wherefore the child turns out to be such as his mother is. If, then, the mother's soul is ugly and malignant, or dark, or corrupt, or hard and harsh, and her inclinations evil, and her conduct scandalous and indecent, or if she tends toward irreverence, or toward anger, or toward frenzied passions and

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hatreds, there will quickly sprout up from the child as well the buds of these malignant vices. But if, on the contrary, the mother's soul is godlike, pure, cheerful, innocent, and full of the fear of God, and her inclinations generous and holy, and her dispositions peaceful, God-loving and mankind-loving, then the child's soul too, mirrored in such a mirror and imitating her unawares, turns out like her and, as time goes on, exhibits the sprouting of the good seeds. This is why, when the great Napoleon asked an eminent educator, Henriette Campan, "What does France need in order to acquire good and honorable men?" this most thoughtful woman replied to the monarch, "Mothers." "Then," said the great man, "appoint enough such women for this great national purpose."

Because of the great influence they possess over their children, mothers can fashion them according to their own character, just as the potter fashions the clay in accordance with his own design. Concerning the easy moldability of childhood, Diogenes used to say the following, that "the upbringing of children is like the moldings of potters; for just as potters, while the clay is soft, shape it and proportion it as they wish, but are no longer able to mold it after it has been fired, so too the young, having been educated without toil, when they have become full-grown, become incapable of being remolded." And Plutarch (in *On the Education of Children*) declares, "Youth is a thing easily molded and pliant, and lessons are readily absorbed by their still-soft souls." During the child's tender years, then, mothers can more effectively and more profoundly influence the child's soul and thought and emotion and mind and imagination and moral character, since in the subsequent years, as the child's heart hardens, education becomes, if not impossible, exceedingly

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difficult, as the divine Chrysostom rightly declares: “You should have anticipated these faults from the beginning and, when he was docile and still very young, you should have bridled him with strictness, accustomed him to the performance of duties, brought him to order, arrested the diseases of his soul. You should have cut the thorns down then, when the work was easier, when, being of a tenderer age, they would have been uprooted more easily, and the passions would not, neglected and growing, have become hard to work. This is why the Scripture says *bow down their neck from their youth* (Ecclesiasticus 7:23), for thus may the upbringing of children proceed more easily” (Chrysostom, Homily on 1st Timothy 5:9 – *Hom. in illud: Vidua eligatur*).

Accordingly, mothers, both on account of their lofty vocation and on account of their subjective value independent of this office, must receive from infancy the upbringing that befits them. And the upbringing that befits them is that which has as the object of its formation the mind and the heart, for these two things are the two poles around which both the intellectual and the moral formation of the human person revolve. If one of the two is neglected, the person’s formation turns out defective and impaired. The mind and the heart, although they are organs of a single soul, nevertheless require different means and manners of formation, for the heart, because of its intuition, belongs to the supernatural world, but the mind, because of its reason, belongs to the natural world. Because of this, each of the two must be instructed thoroughly in its proper truths. And their proper truths are these: of the mind, learning, but of the heart, religion. We must, then, give our girls both learning and religion, so that they too may pass these things on to their own

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children. Learning and religion are two bright lighthouses guiding seafaring man on the billowy course of his life and protecting him from every shipwreck and removing him from every dangerous reef. They are the two eyes of the soul, through which she looks out around her and without stumbling advances into happiness and salvation. They are the two spiritual organs that perfect a man and present him worthy of his lofty origin and of his lofty position in the world. Only thus formed can mothers present virtuous children, good citizens, and brave men. We have before us as radiant examples the mothers of all great and virtuous men. We have before us as radiant examples the mothers of the Holy Three Hierarchs Basil the Great, Gregory the Theologian, and John Chrysostom.

These mothers, desiring to educate their children as perfectly as possible and to polish their minds through Greek learning and knowledge, did not at all hesitate to entrust them to pagan teachers, so that they might be suitably developed intellectually. They considered the teachers' heterodoxy of no importance, because they had confidence in themselves, confidence that by their own example they had wholly channeled their own love for true learning and their fervent zeal for religion into their children's hearts. They recognized that nothing would be strong enough to shake their sons' religious principles and convictions, because these principles and convictions had been carefully built upon a rock! Consistent, then, with their convictions, Nonna and Emmelia, the good and noble mothers of Basil and Gregory, sent them off to Athens, to the hearth of learning and enlightenment, but the center also of idolatry, where the pagan religion was enthroned with all its magnificence. But their

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confidence was not disappointed, for the two young students, having alive in the hearth of their heart the fire of faith in Christ, remained uninfluenced during the whole period of their studies. For being neither shaken by the teaching of professors systematically waging war against Christianity, nor seduced by the magnificent ceremonies of the pagan religion, but remaining vigorous and lively in their religious convictions, they returned to their mothers, presenting themselves to them as a reward for their labor of child-rearing, for their motherly care, and for their virtue. And the reward was rich indeed, for they were receiving their sons back as members of Christ, as members, that is, of themselves. For he that is not a member of Christ is not a member of a Christian mother either, for a Christian mother, being a member of Christ, cannot have a foreign member, a rotten member, a corrupt member. Had the sons wandered away, then, it would have meant their perdition! We can, therefore, fittingly call their sons' keeping of the faith in Christ a reward for them, a reward which would never have come about had the mothers not been formed in a Christian manner.

John's mother, too, the good and noble Anthusa, widowed at the age of twenty and having only one son, devoted herself entirely to his upbringing, valuing the attention paid to her son's upbringing above a second marriage. But likewise, when he who was most dear to her, her only-begotten son, had come of age and was in need of further education, this same woman did not hesitate to entrust him into the hands of a pagan teacher for the development of his intellectual powers. Her confidence in her faith was confidence in her child, for she knew that she had poured it all out into her

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beloved son. And she was not disappointed, for immediately after the completion of his studies, having briefly pursued the work of a teacher of rhetoric, John gave himself up to the service of the Church. Libanius, John's teacher, was greatly pained at his failure to convert John to his own religion, and, "Alas!" he exclaimed, "What manner of women there are among the Christians!" indicating by these words the cause of this failure. How truly beautiful! What radiant examples we have before us in these pious mothers! What wondrous images! What wondrous models! Who can deny that it is the mothers who produce great and virtuous men? This is why Rousseau says in his *Emile*, "Men wish always to be such as the women would wish them to be; if you wish the men to be great and virtuous, teach the women what greatness and virtue are." We must, then, form the mothers in accordance with these examples that lie before us, and we must begin this care from their childhood, so that we may be sure of the future fruitfulness and results.

It is necessary, then, that we form our daughters religiously and intellectually, so that we may present them worthy of their vocation. It is necessary, then, that reverent education and educated religion exist side by side, for these two things are the only sure provisions for travelling in this life, provisions that are able to help a man in manifold ways.

A one-sided upbringing is reprehensible and leads to the following two unseemly things: either to superstition or to contempt for the things of God. A plight such as these is the natural consequence and direct result of the kind of education that has been given.

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Intellectual formation and religious formation are two trees of different kinds planted on the same ground, which need to receive equal attention and care for their parallel growth. For an unequal cultivation will bring about disproportionate growth, which will have as its result the increase of the one and its dominance and the withering of the other and its diminution. For if attention revolves around the mind only, sickliness of the man's religious perception is unavoidable. But if our care revolves around religion only (and that not the educated kind), the intellectual faculties will wither and become dull. The result of the first situation will be irreligion and atheism, upon which follow boundless horrors; the result of the second, however, will be superstition, that curse of humanity, which, holding in its hands fire and the sword, threatens death to everyone who has a differing opinion. Such are the results of a one-sided education and the incomplete upbringing of mothers.

† NECTARIOS of Pentapolis

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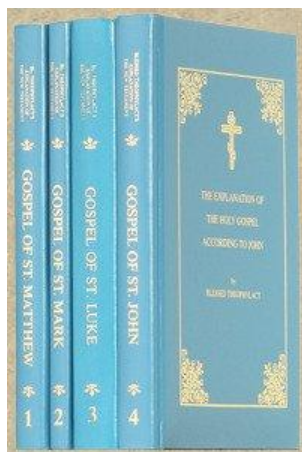
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Orthodox Christians have long held the New Testament commentaries of Blessed Theophylact, Archbishop of Bulgaria (born ca. 1050, died after 1126), in the highest esteem. St. Nicodemos of the Holy Mountain so valued these commentaries that he translated them into modern Greek for the Christians of his day.



St. Ignatius Brianchaninov in his book *The Arena*, writes,

While reading the Evangelists, the novice should also read *The Herald*; that is, the explanation of the Gospel by Blessed Theophylact, Archbishop of Bulgaria. The reading of *The Herald* is indispensable. It is an aid to the right understanding of the Gospel and consequently to the most exact practice of it. Moreover, the rules of the Church require that Scripture should be understood as the holy Fathers explain it, and not at all arbitrarily. By being guided in our understanding of the Gospel by the explanation of the holy Father, by the explanation re-

ceived and used by the Church, we keep the tradition of holy Church.¹

In his *Prologue* entry for December 31st St. Nikolai Velimirovich writes, “[Blessed Theophylact] wrote commentaries on the Four Gospels and on other books of the New Testament. These are the finest works of their sort after St. John Chrysostom, and are read to this day with great benefit.”²

Blessed Theophylact’s exegetical work holds a very important place in the traditions of Western Christendom as well. Thomas Aquinas, who had the commentaries translated into Latin, cites Blessed Theophylact 1,033 times in the *Catena Aurea*.³

Erasmus of Rotterdam, who cites the commentaries frequently in his *Annotationes in Novum Testamentum*, “made considerable use of Theophylact manuscripts at Basle, whereby the work of Theophylact became a major ingredient of the *Textus Receptus*.”⁴ Theophylact’s influence on Erasmus “is especially evident in Erasmus’ most popular work *The Praise of Folly*. The notion of ‘divine folly’ (μοῦσία)

¹ Bishop Ignatius Brianchaninov, *The Arena: An Offering to Contemporary Monasticism*, trans. from the Russian by Archimandrite Lazarus (Jordanville: Holy Trinity Monastery, 1983), p. 21.

² Bishop Nikolai Velimirovich, *The Prologue from Ochrid: Lives of the Saints and Homilies for Every Day in the Year*, trans. from the Serbian by Mother Maria (Birmingham: Lazarica Press, 1986), p.393.

³ Marcus Plested, *Orthodox Readings of Aquinas* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), p. 18.

⁴ Andrew J. Brown, “The Gospel Commentary of Theophylact, and a Neglected Manuscript in Oxford.” *Novum Testamentum* 49 (2007): 185.

which we find in its theological passages was, on Erasmus' own showing, directly taken over from Theophylact's Pauline commentaries."⁵

Martin Luther asserted that, of the Fathers, "Theophylact is the best expounder and interpreter of St. Paul."⁶

Blessed Theophylact's commentaries were consulted by the translators of the King James Version as well (in fact, they cite him by name at Mark 7:3).

Philip Schaff writes of Blessed Theophylact's exegetical work that "it is drawn from the older writers, especially from Chrysostom, but Theophylact shows true exegetical insight, explaining the text clearly and making many original remarks of great value."⁷

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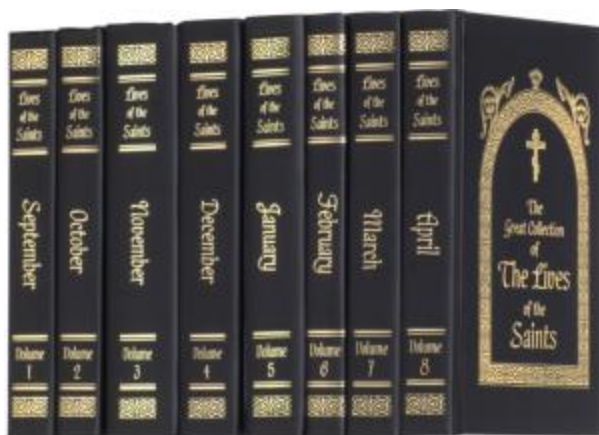
⁵ Dimitri Obolensky, *Six Byzantine Portraits* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1988), p. 35.

⁶ Henry Bell, *Luther's Table Talk; or, Some Choice Fragments from the Familiar Discourse of that Godly, Learned Man, and Famous Champion of God's Truth, Dr. Martin Luther* (London: Longman, 1832) p. 280.

⁷ Philip Schaff, *History of the Christian Church, Volume IV: Medieval Christianity from Gregory I to Gregory VII A.D 590-1073* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1890), p. 644.

“The lives and praises of the saints are like the stars in brilliance. *Because of their*

number, we do not know the names of all the saints; still, they amaze us by their radiant majesty, as do the stars, which while fixed in their position in the heavens, illumine all that is below, being seen by the Indians, yet not concealed from the Scythians, shining upon the land and guid-



ing by their light those at sea. Similarly, the radiance of the saints, though their relics be entombed in sepulchers, is not bounded by

the ends of this earth here below. Therefore, we marvel at their lives and are amazed at how God has glorified them that please Him.”

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