

TEO, ISSN 2247-4382  
67 (2), pp. 45-66, 2016

# Teachings of St. Paisios of Mount Athos about Children's Education

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## Abstract

*This study presents the most important teachings of St. Paisios of Mount Athos on the topic of children's education, trying to highlight the actuality, discernment and deep knowledge we can identify in the Holy Father's sayings and writings, on one hand and our belief the present pedagogy can find in these teachings the educational means, methods and principles of maximum efficiency, on the other hand.*

## Keywords

St. Paisios of Mount Athos, children, education.

“For a correct Christian education three things are necessary:  
One: a few words; two: a lot of examples and three: more prayers”<sup>1</sup>.  
(St. Paisios of Mount Athos)

Canonized at January 13<sup>th</sup> 2015 by the Ecumenical Patriarchate and celebrated every year at July 12<sup>th</sup> St. Paisios of Mount Athos (1924-1994) is a wonderful gift the Greek Orthodoxy and the Holy Mountain gave humanity and this world. Endowed with many over-natural gifts he was an example of endless love. During his life he was permanently visited by

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<sup>1</sup> Cuviosul Paisie Aghioritul, *Mica Filocalie*, translated by Fr. Victor Manolache, Editura Egumenița, Editura Cartea Ortodoxă, Galați, 2009, p. 142.

people for his advices full of balance and discernment and for his prayer, for his teachings orally transmitted or recorded in writing by his disciples and for the example of a holy life.

St. Paisios of Mount Athos proved to the world one more time that holiness is not just a superior goal or ideal, but a concrete reality that can be achieved regardless of this passing world unrest. Holy people will live until the end of the time and they will be “cardinal points in chaos” for the drifting society and the more and more secularized man alienated from God. They are sublime examples and marks of love and devotion to God and people. In our time of anxiety and confusion St. Paisios is a guiding light for the more and more tormented and divided soul of the contemporary man.

Although he did not manage to put together a work about examples of saints he knew them, who lived an ascetic life in their families, the Holy Father left profound reflections, through his advices and words inspired by God. They refer to the moral condition of the present world, to the provocations and threats for the Christian family, to the means of resisting these dangers, and - what concerns us in particular in our study - numerous and edifying exhortations to the principles of a moral high children education, capable of later bringing joy and spiritual gain for their parents and the Church.

In the following pages we shall mention his most important teachings trying to highlight the actuality, discernment and deep knowledge we can identify in the Holy Father’s sayings and writings, on one hand and our belief the present pedagogy can find in these teachings the educational means, methods and principles of maximum efficiency, on the other hand.

## **I. “With pain and love” about the contemporary world and man**

St. Paisios of Mount Athos had a profound knowledge on the contemporary world, on its more numerous and deep problems and worries and on the more and more tumultuous and troubled human soul.

He thought the cause of these “wounds” was the “worldly spirit” and the way it attracts and subjugates people, creating a distance between them and God and their essential vocation – to live a high spiritual life towards eternal happiness.

### *Teachings of St. Paisios of Mount Athos about Children's Education*

St. Paisios thought stress and restlessness are everywhere. Comfort and civilization or “facilities” as he called them physically lightened the living. But instead of bringing calmness and peace, they created a spiritual gap between man and God, his fellows and even himself. Machines and technique replaced the “sweat of one’s brow” but led to stereotypization and automatization of life and to scattering mind. The means of communication multiplied and became “performant”, as we can say from the height of heaven and from the depths of the earth, but often this communication does not produce communion too. Being exterior it does not touch the human soul and does not have the power to get inside the heart and much less to move and change it.

Having “top” technical means, the contemporary man can watch far away galaxies and the ultimate structure of a cell in his body, but as Father Paisios said “people see the whole world but not themselves”<sup>2</sup>.

Instead of morally improving man, technology dehumanized him and created a split within. Although much more educated and well-read, the contemporary man is interiorly dissipated, according to the pleasure he seeks and wants. He lost his initial “simplicity” and is incapable of really enjoy anything. As Father Paisios explained, this happened because his heart turned into an iron one. The machines multiplied and man himself became a machine that produces and consumes things, goods and pleasures.

It is easy to understand that a materialistic and hedonist society like this we live in provokes and asks man to get involved especially biologically. It arouses his senses and instincts leading him to ignore the spiritual element from his structure.

All the comfort and civilization the world created did not bring the moral progress of man. They address especially to the body and his urgent needs, but they do not fulfil his spiritual wishes, his thirst for superior things and do not “cultivate people’s conscience”<sup>3</sup>.

In such a mechanized, technical and automated world where machine replaces man and iron replaces feelings, there is a growing lack of life models. This general moral lack is present in the Church too. St. Paisios

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<sup>2</sup> Cuviosul Paisie Aghioritul, *Cuvinte duhovnicești. I. Cu durere și dragoste pentru omul contemporan*, translated from Greek by Ieroschim. Ștefan Nuțescu, Lacu Skete – The Holy Mountain, Editura Evanghelismos, București, 2003, p. 149.

<sup>3</sup> Cuviosul Paisie Aghioritul, *Cu durere și dragoste...*, p. 146.

shows that “nowadays the words and books multiplied and the deeds became increasingly rare. Now we only admire the Church saints but we do not understand their effort, because we did not make any effort to understand it and to love them and follow them with unselfishness. Of course God will take into account our period of time and the conditions we live in and will ask deeds according to these. But if we make a little effort we will be crowned more than those before us.”<sup>4</sup>

Sins which were avoided and criticized once have now become “fashionable” and are generalized. Our ancestors tried to avoid not only the mortal or grave sins, but also the light ones with all their moral strength. When someone committed a sin he was overwhelmed by a profound sense of sinfulness and repentance. Today any approach of a problem is not viewed through high moral but it must be adapted to the “world spirit” and has to comply it, no matter what it is: laws and general rules or individual and private behaviour.

In the past there were a lot of good and kindness in the world, as St. Paisios told, and these covered the small amount of sins committed like the sun with its bright rays rising from the dark clouds makes the world beautiful and kind. We notice that today sins and passions are generalized. They are cultivated and protected at the expense of virtues which seem to be taunted, humiliated and exiled in the clean souls of fewer people eager to find the high purpose of their passing through this world. Getting more and more evil and wickedness in the world, these seem to cover the beauty and kindness of the world, giving the false impression of a quasi-general wickedness and ugliness.

The sin is now seen as progress and moral is “backwardness”<sup>5</sup>. It is cultivated and praised and people who opposed it are considered “retrograde”<sup>6</sup> in a society that moves away more and more from God and from the ideals of a high moral life. This makes the world to be a hell and life to be a torment. Staying far from God who is the source of eternal life and happiness leads to losing God’s grace and receiving as consequence “the devil influence” and demonization. As Father Paisios said we “levelled” and “mixed” all: good and evil, sins and virtues<sup>7</sup>.

<sup>4</sup> Cuviosul Paisie Aghioritul, *Cu durere și dragoste...*, p. 29.

<sup>5</sup> Cuviosul Paisie Aghioritul, *Cu durere și dragoste...*, p. 40.

<sup>6</sup> Cuviosul Paisie Aghioritul, *Cu durere și dragoste...*, p. 40.

<sup>7</sup> Cuviosul Paisie Aghioritul, *Cu durere și dragoste...*, p. 40.

*Teachings of St. Paisios of Mount Athos about Children's Education*

Nowadays man's incapacity of receiving advices, his living in the slavery of sins and pleasures and not in obedience of a skilful spiritual father, the progressive renunciation to moral values and alienation from the heavenly Father bring him lack of meaning and grief instead of joy and fulfilment. St. Paisios said

“the more someone alienates from God the more things get complicated. If someone has nothing but God then he has no more wishes. This is the truth! And if he has everything but God he is tormented inside his soul. Therefore everyone should try to get near God. Only near God man finds true and eternal happiness. When we live far from Jesus is like drinking poison. When the old man becomes new and son of the Emperor, he feeds himself with God's delight and with the heavenly nectar and he feels the divine joy and a part of Heaven's happiness even from this life. From the heavenly small joy man gets to the great one step by step every day. He comes to ask himself if there is something higher in Heaven than the joy he already feels. The mood he lives in stops him from doing anything. His knees melt like candles because of the divine fire and sweetness. His heart overflows and is ready to break his chest to go as the earth and the worldly things seem vain”<sup>8</sup>.

The world seems to become a “madhouse”<sup>9</sup>, a “hospital for the insane”<sup>10</sup> where soul illness multiplies and gets worse instead of easing and getting healed. The reason is this wrong general view of life.

St. Paisios of Mount Athos recommended returning to faith and God in order to free from all these troubles and inner torments. Other means are fighting against sins till victory of good and virtues and re-gaining soul simplicity and unity. This is contemporary man's martyrdom and only this is able to restore rest and inner peace<sup>11</sup>.

In all this martyr deed the Christian is not alone but he is protected by God and helped by the divine grace. If in the past God guarded the world with one hand, today – as Father Paisios said – He protects it with both hands because the hardships and needs are bigger. “Today more than ever Christ, Theotokos and saints all help us but we do not understand it”<sup>12</sup>.

<sup>8</sup> Cuviosul Paisie Aghioritul, *Cu durere și dragoste...*, p. 43.

<sup>9</sup> Cuviosul Paisie Aghioritul, *Cu durere și dragoste...*, p. 138.

<sup>10</sup> Cuviosul Paisie Aghioritul, *Cu durere și dragoste...*, p. 164.

<sup>11</sup> Cuviosul Paisie Aghioritul, *Cu durere și dragoste...*, p. 81.

<sup>12</sup> Cuviosul Paisie Aghioritul, *Cu durere și dragoste...*, p. 33.

## II. The beauties of Christian family and living

The worldly spirit has effects not only globally but in family and man's soul too. Being influenced by many concessions and abdications from moral laws, by relativization and abandon of past time values it created a real crisis in contemporary family.

“Today for many who live worldly the family has no sense. Therefore young people do not get married or marry but do not have children or kill their babies by abortion and they make their ancestry get extinct. God do not destroy them but themselves do”<sup>13</sup>.

Among St. Paisios' apophthegms it is well-know the answer given to a young man who asked him about a girl he wanted to marry. Father told him he will realize she is the one or “soul mate” if he spiritually rests near that person<sup>14</sup>.

Even more, to show how important is peace and harmony in a family, St. Paisios told a young man on the verge of marriage: “Dmitry, I bless you to fight everybody but Mary. And blessing is valid for Mary too”<sup>15</sup>.

The Holy Father recommended as general advice of spiritual life: “Do what rests you spiritually, only to be with Christ”<sup>16</sup>. Regarding Christian spouses: “each one should try hard to take the hardships on him with gladness and to comfort the other. One should go shopping to rest the other or fulfil his wishes to please him. Comforting the other should be an occasion of joy for you”<sup>17</sup>.

<sup>13</sup> Cuviosul Paisie Aghioritul, *Cuvinte duhovnicești. IV. Viața de familie*, translated from Greek by Ieroschim. Ștefan Nuțescu, Schitul Lacu – Holy Mountain, Editura Evanghelismos, București, 2003, p. 70.

<sup>14</sup> Cuviosul Paisie Aghioritul, *Viața de familie*, p. 37. There is St. Paisios' advice: “From the beginning, he should seek to find a good girl who comforts him, as people are relaxed and find comfort differently with different people. He should not seek to find someone who is rich or beautiful, but above all simple and humble. In other words, he should give more attention to interior rather than exterior beauty. When a girl is a positive person and capable of dealing with men, without having more womanly character than is necessary, this greatly helps the man to find immediate understanding and not a lot of headaches. If she also has fear of God and humility then they are able to join hands and pass the evil current of the world.” Cf. *Ibidem*.

<sup>15</sup> Cuviosul Paisie Aghioritul, *Viața de familie*, p. 44.

<sup>16</sup> Cuviosul Paisie Aghioritul, *Viața de familie*, p. 23.

<sup>17</sup> Atanasie Rakovalis, *Părintele Paisie mi-a spus...*, translated from Greek by Ieroschim. Ștefan Nuțescu, Schitul Lacu – Holy Mountain, Editura Evanghelismos, București, 2006, p. 26.

*Teachings of St. Paisios of Mount Athos about Children's Education*

Interpreting St. Apostle Paul's words "women should fear their husbands" (Eph. 5, 33), St. Paisios asked the spouses to live in love and respect, helping and cherishing each other. Their relation must have Christ in the centre and "pure fear" and honest respect should clothe it.

"Inside fear there is respect, and inside respect there is love. I respect what I love and I love what I respect. Woman should respect man. Man should love woman. But now all is levelled and families are destroyed because they interpret the Gospel contrary. Man says «Woman must obey». But if you do not have love you cannot make even a cat to obey. If you do not love, the other is not convinced and you cannot ask him bring even a glass of water. When someone respects the other he respects himself. He disregards himself. Respect for others has magnanimity because that person does not take himself into account. If someone takes care of himself, than he is not munificent"<sup>18</sup>.

Based on these moral values the woman or wife is "the lady of the house, but also a great servant"<sup>19</sup> and the man or her husband is "the master of the house and also its porter"<sup>20</sup>.

As most recent researches of family psychology and contemporary education prove through a very fine spiritual intuition the love between the two spouses or parents' love is a high pedagogical principal, beyond being a matrimonial duty or a legitimate feeling. It has great relevance and impact on children<sup>21</sup>. Indeed the first and most beautiful prove of love given by a father to his children is to love and help their mother who gave them birth. Likewise the great prove of love given by a mother to her children is to honour and respect their father.

St. Paisios encouraged and appreciated the families with numerous children. He recommended the parents not to make personal and selfish calculations. As to the number of children and the moment they come to the world, he said

<sup>18</sup> Cuviosul Paisie Aghioritul, *Cu durere și dragoste...*, pp. 275-276.

<sup>19</sup> Cuviosul Paisie Aghioritul, *Viața de familie*, p. 44.

<sup>20</sup> Cuviosul Paisie Aghioritul, *Viața de familie*, p. 44.

<sup>21</sup> Cuviosul Paisie Aghioritul, *Viața de familie*, p. 145. St. Paisios thought that "maintaining family unity is very much helped by the fact that man loves his wife more than his mother and more than any other relative or dear person. His love for his parents should focus through his wife. Of course this is valid for woman too". Cf. Cuviosul Paisie Aghioritul, *Viața de familie*, p. 145.

“the parents must let God take care of this matter of babies’ birth. They should entrust their life to the divine Providence and not make their own program. They must believe that God who takes care of birds in the sky will take care of their children even more”<sup>22</sup>.

The families with many children are blessed because in such houses both parents and children learn the sacrificial love and humbleness and God “loves and takes care more of couples with many children”<sup>23</sup>.

Abortion is seriously condemned as a “frightening sin”<sup>24</sup>, as a “very serious killing because not Christened babies are killed”<sup>25</sup> and for this the parents and the other children pay by “illness and accidents”<sup>26</sup>, disrespectful attitude towards parents, criminality and wrongdoing. When the authorities help this crime by a permissive legislation against the Gospel the effect will be that God’s wrath covers the whole nation. If it does not change and does not turn back, it will be extinct<sup>27</sup>. Therefore the Church and the state, as well as the Christians should put pressure and do campaigns to annul abortion laws<sup>28</sup>.

### III. Pregnancy – a blessing time; the future mother - an example of sacrificial love

At the question “When the children’s education must begin?” the Orthodox theology answers – from their conception, from the intrauterine period. Or even earlier, when the future parents make friends because since then as friends and potential future spouses they propose their ideals, aspirations, expectations, wishes and hopes, most about their possible future family.

Nothing is more beautiful and elevating for parents than the quality of bringing new persons to the world, i.e. their children. Thus they become co-worker to the heavenly Father who out of infinite love brought all from nothingness to being for eternal life and happiness. The future mother en-

<sup>22</sup> Cuviosul Paisie Aghioritul, *Viața de familie*, p. 68.

<sup>23</sup> Cuviosul Paisie Aghioritul, *Viața de familie*, p. 76.

<sup>24</sup> Cuviosul Paisie Aghioritul, *Viața de familie*, p. 80.

<sup>25</sup> Cuviosul Paisie Aghioritul, *Viața de familie*, p. 80.

<sup>26</sup> Cuviosul Paisie Aghioritul, *Viața de familie*, p. 79.

<sup>27</sup> Cuviosul Paisie Aghioritul, *Viața de familie*, p. 82.

<sup>28</sup> Cuviosul Paisie Aghioritul, *Viața de familie*, pp. 81-82.

*Teachings of St. Paisios of Mount Athos about Children's Education*

joys this quality in a particular way. The pregnant woman is in a blessed period of grace. Beyond its difficulties and hardship the pregnancy time is a privileged period for her, a perfect time for deep meditation on the meaning of her own life strongly linked to the family and the gift of childbirth.

This is a proper time for reflecting on the past and especially on the future, on the accomplishments done and particularly on the future fulfillments, started at the childbirth. It is a time of inner dialogue with her but also with the other members of the family and especially with her husband and children's father on their home environment and most on the principles of raising and educating the future baby.

For these reasons and by understanding the special position of the future mother, the whole family and the other persons she interacts with have the responsibility to surround her with love making a harmonious and understanding environment where she could spiritually "rest" and get ready for the baby.

Any anxiety must be removed from her soul by prayer.

"If mother who bears a baby in her womb gets upset and grieves then the baby is troubled too. If mother prays and lives a spiritual life the baby from her womb is sanctified. Therefore when the woman is pregnant she must say Jesus Prayer, read a little from the Gospel and sing psalms. She must not create worries to herself and the others should behave as not to upset her. By doing this the baby to be born will be sanctified and the parents will have no problems with him both during childhood or when he is grown up"<sup>29</sup>.

Father Paisios says mother's responsibility brings up children not only during the present but also for the future.

During pregnancy the future mother should change her entire way of life to give birth a healthy baby that will be later joy and comfort for his family. The Holy Father's advices refer to general temperance and starting a program of persistent prayer for mother and baby health. He recommended stopping or reducing "as much as possible"<sup>30</sup> the bodily relations between husbands during pregnancy or "at least until the eighth month"<sup>31</sup>. He thought that by parents' indulgence the future child will get a predispo-

<sup>29</sup> Cuviosul Paisie Aghioritul, *Viața de familie*, p. 89.

<sup>30</sup> Atanasie Rakovalis, *Părintele Paisie mi-a spus...*, p. 27.

<sup>31</sup> Atanasie Rakovalis, *Părintele Paisie mi-a spus...*, p. 27.

sition to sensuality and carnal sins. Besides the danger of abortion, he said “the embryo participates too to the need of pleasure the mother feels and thus even from the womb he gets the passion. There are babies who while sucking the milk get sexually excited. At the same time there are teenagers of 18-20 who do not feel any passion and have no war in their body. What makes the difference? The parents’ spiritual state does. This is their spiritual legacy”<sup>32</sup>. Father Paisios had a lot of humour when gibing the smoking mothers by saying they give birth to “smoked herrings”<sup>33</sup>.

The main concern of the pregnant woman is to get ready for giving birth to her future child and then for his raising and bringing up. That is why she must have a program of Christian life, putting prayer in its centre.

“The pregnant woman should be calm, said father Paisios, and read the Gospel, pray and say Jesus prayer. Thus the baby is sanctified. The child’s education starts from now on. You must be careful not to upset the pregnant woman by any means”<sup>34</sup>.

If the parents respect such a high spiritual life program and pray, the baby will born sanctified<sup>35</sup> bringing a lot of joy to the family, to the nation and the Church.

After the birth the family life changes and all the members must show love and care, concern and responsibility to the new “offspring”’s education. St. Paisios recommended the parents to give a single name to their new-born baby because the parents often argued or even broke up on the account of different names they wanted for their baby<sup>36</sup>.

As to lactation, when he was asked by a young mother how long she should feed the baby from the breast, he answered her that during his childhood women breastfed the babies until they were five-six years old. Nowadays they should breastfeed them at least for a year or two because

“mother’s milk gives health to her children. By breastfeeding, the babies do not suck only milk, but also love, affection, comfort and safety, thus getting a strong character. Breastfeeding helps mother too. When mothers do not breastfeed their children anomalies appear in their bodies and may lead even to breast extirpation”<sup>37</sup>.

<sup>32</sup> Atanasie Rakovalis, *Părintele Paisie mi-a spus...*, pp. 28-29.

<sup>33</sup> Cuviosul Paisie Aghioritul, *Cu durere și dragoste...*, p. 291.

<sup>34</sup> Atanasie Rakovalis, *Părintele Paisie mi-a spus...*, p. 28.

<sup>35</sup> Cuviosul Paisie Aghioritul, *Viața de familie*, p. 100.

<sup>36</sup> Cuviosul Paisie Aghioritul, *Viața de familie*, p. 131.

<sup>37</sup> Cuviosul Paisie Aghioritul, *Viața de familie*, pp. 89-90.

### *Teachings of St. Paisios of Mount Athos about Children's Education*

St. Paisios said: “mother who gets lazy and does not breastfeed her baby transmits this laziness to her child”<sup>38</sup>. He also said that those children who suck cow milk from milk box instead of mother's milk, when they grow up they will look for comfort in the bottle from the pub<sup>39</sup> because when they were babies they did not receive mother's love and warm, but their parents' passions<sup>40</sup>.

St. Paisios gave a very practical advice that refers to the activity and the job of the young mother. We all know that because of a campaign that aimed woman's emancipation today most wives and mothers have jobs and sometimes the job is incompatible with their delicate nature. Many “successful women” are even busier than their husbands and have a bigger income. In recent years, due to their higher social and economic independence, the most applications for divorce are introduced by such women. That is because they want to fully live their life and to frequently enjoy its pleasures with other men than the father or even “fathers” of their children.

More and more the contemporary women and mothers find that the high price of this emancipation is betraying the conjugal home and denial of their own vocation – being wife and especially mother. The time spent at work is snatched from the time that was almost exclusively devoted to family in the past. It is known that unlike man who thinks he can be accomplished by working, outside or without a family, woman never really feels accomplished in her soul but in the bosom of her family, next to her husband and especially through her children.

The mother's job is needed, as St. Paisios said, because the family wishes are higher today, in an endless spiral of expectations and permanent social comparison to others from the desire to overcome them. In this case too he recommended simplifying life, setting rational and reasonable targets, material decency and cultivation of spiritual values. Among these values the fundamental priority is the nice education of children for life and redemption.

He advised the father should work and the mother should stay at home and take care of children's education. He said with great discernment that “if only the father works and they limit to bare necessities there will be no more problems. When both parents have jobs because

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<sup>38</sup> Cuviosul Paisie Aghioritul, *Viața de familie*, p. 90.

<sup>39</sup> Cuviosul Paisie Aghioritul, *Viața de familie*, p. 90.

<sup>40</sup> Cuviosul Paisie Aghioritul, *Viața de familie*, p. 90.

they seem they do not have enough money, then the family will scatter and lose its true meaning. Then what about the children? If they live a simpler life, their mothers will be more rested and the children will enjoy it. (...) Therefore I tell mothers to simplify their life in order to take more care of their children who need them so much. There is something else when they have a different occupation at home and work when they are too tired because of the children. When mother is present at home she can watch her children and properly take care of things and thus many troubles can be avoided<sup>41</sup>.

Children's education is a very important responsibility of both parents and it regards the salvation itself. For this reason all the other duties of the family must be subordinated to it. It is not enough the mother is a housewife. Even staying at home, her priority must be children's education and not the housework. She "has the greatest responsibility for children's education"<sup>42</sup>. This is why

"she should better be concern with children's bringing up instead of taking care of housework and the inanimate things. She should talk them about Christ, read them from *The Lives of Saints* and at the same time clean her own soul till spiritual shine. Mother's spiritual life will quietly help her children's souls too. Thus her children will live joyfully and she will be happy too because she has Christ inside her. If the mother does not have time even for a *Holy God*... then how will the children be sanctified?"<sup>43</sup>.

#### IV. Children's education – a noble art and holy occupation

St. Paisios thought education is a very important occupation because not only personal accomplishment or individual salvation of man depends on it, but also the future of the family and of mankind. The future of humanity relies on the values education inculcates but especially on its moral, formative and religious dimension. For Elder Paisios education has to be Theocentric, based on the revealed Christian teachings.

<sup>41</sup> Cuviosul Paisie Aghioritul, *Viața de familie*, p. 91.

<sup>42</sup> Cuviosul Paisie Aghioritul, *Viața de familie*, p. 99.

<sup>43</sup> Cuviosul Paisie Aghioritul, *Viața de familie*, p. 94.

*Teachings of St. Paisios of Mount Athos about Children's Education*

It must develop the wish for a high spiritual life and lead to perfection and holiness<sup>44</sup>.

St. Paisios has references to “early education” in terms of modern pedagogy, to its starting at early age when the child’s soul is easy to be modelled and his conscience easy to be persuaded. He saw the souls or children’s conscience in a very expressive manner, like “empty boxes”<sup>45</sup>. “If you fill them with Christ, he said, they will be near Him for good. If not it will be very easy for them to lose themselves when grown-ups. If they are helped when they are small, even if later they alienate a bit, finally they will recover”<sup>46</sup>.

In this process of human being’s education the parents have the fundamental part, but they have to be helped by the spiritual father and the teachers. They all must work together to find the child’s gifts and particular talents and to cultivate them in the liberty and responsibility spirit without compulsion or force. The Holy Father told young people: “Find what science you like so you will do in life according to your nature”<sup>47</sup>. This means everybody should discover and capitalize his particular vocation and this will bring accomplishment in job and in life.

Parents must particularly offer their children a high example because “children copy parents from the cradle. They imitate what grown-ups do and record everything in their empty «box»”<sup>48</sup>.

As to the responsibility parents have for bringing up their children, they must have congruent or convergent principles. That means no fight or dissensions between them related to the used meaning and the principles. However when this happens they should try to harmonize things not to affect or trouble children’s trust for their concern. More than words and advices children are open to what they see at their parents and to the example their parents give them, not only to what they hear.

The mother has the role of mediator in the family. Her conduct, respect and obedience to her husband have strong influence on children’s growth. If any divergence appears between parents, St. Paisios recommends mother

<sup>44</sup> Cuviosul Paisie Aghioritul, *Cuvinte. II. Trezire duhovnicească*, translated from Greek by Ieroschim. Ștefan Lacoschiotul, Lacu Skete – The Holy Mountain, 2000, p. 97.

<sup>45</sup> Cuviosul Paisie Aghioritul, *Cu durere și dragoste...*, p. 272.

<sup>46</sup> Cuviosul Paisie Aghioritul, *Cu durere și dragoste...*, p. 272..

<sup>47</sup> Cuviosul Paisie Aghioritul, *Viața de familie*, p. 180.

<sup>48</sup> Cuviosul Paisie Aghioritul, *Viața de familie*, p. 107.

“should never show this in front of children because otherwise the evil one will use it. She must never break the children’s confidence in their father and even when he is guilty she must find excuses for him”<sup>49</sup>.

St. Paisios had a very interesting opinion on differences between spouses’ characters. These are not reasons for arguing but ways of attraction and harmony. He said that

“when spouses have different natures this can help even more in children’s education. One slows down a little, the other says: «Let children freer! ». If both constrain children, they will lose them. Or if both give them freedom they will lose them too. Thus children find a balance”<sup>50</sup>.

Besides he told to such “different” spouses that

“God’s harmony hides in the difference of characters. Different natures create harmony. Woe to you who have the same characters! Only think what would have happened if both of you got angry at the same time. You would have destroyed the house. Or if both of you were soft. Nothing would have been built. If you were avaricious you would both have gone to hell. And if you were both generous how would you have supported the family? You would have wasted it and your children would have had nothing. (...) Small differences in spouse’s nature help create a harmonious family because each one completes the other. A car absolutely needs acceleration to go and break to stop. If the car has only break it would not go and if it has only acceleration it could not stop. Do you know what I told to certain spouses? «Because you match, you do not match each other»<sup>51</sup>.

Another essential principle recommended in children’s education is the spirit of freedom that must vest it. If the parents have similar principles and they apply them consistently in order to discover the children’s abilities and qualities and if they are good examples of vocation then they will manage to develop these high qualities in their souls too. In addition what is done with pleasure and no constraint produces solid and valuable works.

<sup>49</sup> Cuviosul Paisie Aghioritul, *Viața de familie*, p. 101.

<sup>50</sup> Cuviosul Paisie Aghioritul, *Viața de familie*, pp. 40-41.

<sup>51</sup> Cuviosul Paisie Aghioritul, *Viața de familie*, pp. 39-40.

*Teachings of St. Paisios of Mount Athos about Children's Education*

The controlled or directed freedom of children must be doubled by their respect for a clear and firm discipline. St. Paisios thought that in family and education “there is no military discipline”<sup>52</sup> but respect from all its members for the unanimously accepted principles. For an obedient child his parents’ advices are a necessity and not a duty or a constraint. They bring parents’ blessing and the divine Grace’s help. The “enclosing” the parents sometimes impose is due to the children lack of experience and the parents concern not to let them fall in errors, faults or sins.

Too much tolerance and laxity and freedom without limits given to children are not modern principles of education but parents’ weakness because they are too permissive or disinterested and irresponsible. Children’s disobedience to their parents and their lack of trust has the origin in the parents’ lack of trust in God, says Father Paisios<sup>53</sup>.

The secret of harmonizing kindness and firmness, love and justice is the proof of parents’ maturity and discernment.

“If you want your children go on the right way you need to pay very much attention, said Father Paisios. Let us not show them too much love because otherwise they become worthless and very rude. Also let us not show them too much rigour or they become rebel. The secret is to know when to tighten the rope”<sup>54</sup>.

Referring to the way of children’s correction and to the use or avoidance of punishments, especially physical ones, Father Paisios evoked his own family remembering the spirit of his home:

“We knew our parents love us when they spoiled us or kissed us or even slapped us. The hand and the caress and the kiss were given all with love. When parents beat their children their heart suffers. When children are slapped their cheek hurts. The pain of heart is bigger than the pain of cheek. No matter her children do, even if she quarrels them or beats them or caresses them, the mother does everything with love and all come from the same mother’s heart. But when children do not understand this and resist impudently or are stubborn, then they chase the divine

<sup>52</sup> Cuviosul Paisie Aghioritul, *Cu durere și dragoste...*, p. 274.

<sup>53</sup> Cuviosul Paisie Aghioritul, *Mica Filocalie*, p. 142.

<sup>54</sup> Ieromonahul Isaac, *Viața Cuviosului Paisie Aghioritul*, translated from Greek by Ieroschim. Ștefan Nuțescu, Lacu Skete – The Holy Mountain, Editura Evanghelistos, București, 2005, pp. 630-631.

Grace from their souls and they will certainly receive the devil influence”<sup>55</sup>.

St. Paisios thought that beating must be avoided and especially at older children because it will not correct them but alienate them from their parents and traumatize them.

“Parents should avoid it as much as possible, was his advice. They must try to make the child understand what he did is wrong but only using kindness and patience. Beating helps the child only when he is young and does not understand what he did is dangerous. He will remember the slap and will not do it again. Fear of not being slapped again will be like a break which protects the child”<sup>56</sup>.

Being a profound connoisseur of the human soul and its inner moves, St. Paisios recommended for the parents not to scold their children in the evening because

“during night they have no means of getting off the sorrow and the blackness of the night makes it even worse. They start thinking how to resist, they search for different solutions and the evil one gets involved too making them even despondent”<sup>57</sup>.

The most important principle is the total implication of parents and their support for children’s efforts, especially by giving them a personal example. Father Paisios said:

“Blessed are the parents who do not use the word *no* for their children, but restrain them from the evil through their own holy life. The children will imitate them and will gladly follow Christ with spiritual nobility”<sup>58</sup>.

In his writings St. Paisios made numerous and ample references to the religious education the parents have to give to their children. It should start from the first years of childhood. Its aim must be cultivating the Christian values, assimilating the examples given by the Holy Scripture and writings and especially going to Church and praying. All these must be acquired and practised in freedom and responsibility. If the spiritual reading

<sup>55</sup> Cuviosul Paisie Aghioritul, *Cu durere și dragoste...*, p. 287.

<sup>56</sup> Cuviosul Paisie Aghioritul, *Viața de familie*, p. 114.

<sup>57</sup> Cuviosul Paisie Aghioritul, *Viața de familie*, p. 114.

<sup>58</sup> Cuviosul Paisie Aghioritul, *Epistole*, translated from Greek by Ieroschim. Ștefan Nuțescu, Lacu Skete – The Holy Mountain, Editura Evanghelismos, București, 2005, p. 226.

*Teachings of St. Paisios of Mount Athos about Children's Education*

is called “energizing vitamins”<sup>59</sup>, about going to Church the Holy Father said: “the purpose is not to bring children to Church by force but make them love her. They should not do good deeds unwillingly by feel it like a necessity”<sup>60</sup>.

The Athonite saint thought prayer is “the oxygen of the soul”<sup>61</sup> and the essential part in initiating children in this “school” and “practice” is the mother’s prayer. She should not force them but teach them to pray since their early age<sup>62</sup>. The parents must not impose a certain prayer canon. “Every mother should try to find how much her child would resist”<sup>63</sup>. In order to help them discover the sweetness and the blessed and beneficial fruits of prayer

“the grown-ups should be gentle. They should do all the evening prayers and tell the children: «If you want you can stay a little too». When children are older the family can have a program of prayer. For example the parents pray for fifteen minutes and the children for two or five minutes and even more if they want to. If the parents force their children to assist all the evening prayers they will revolt. They should not force them because the children are not aware yet of the prayer power and value”<sup>64</sup>.

When they are ill or very tired the canon of prayer can be halved or reduced but not neglected.

Prayer has an essential role in Christian education of children and in the religious and moral formation of their personality. It is the most efficient way both parents and children can ask and receive help from God in the difficult work of moral formation and salvation. Therefore it has a great power within the family<sup>65</sup>. Especially mother’s prayer is quickly listen because it comes from the bottom of her soul, “from her heart and with pain”<sup>66</sup>. Besides it children’s prayer can make miracles because their prayer is pure<sup>67</sup>.

<sup>59</sup> Cuviosul Paisie Aghioritul, *Trezire duhovnicească*, p. 99.

<sup>60</sup> Cuviosul Paisie Aghioritul, *Viața de familie*, p. 171.

<sup>61</sup> Atanasie Rakovalis, *Părintele Paisie mi-a spus...*, p. 155.

<sup>62</sup> Cuviosul Paisie Aghioritul, *Viața de familie*, p. 172.

<sup>63</sup> Cuviosul Paisie Aghioritul, *Viața de familie*, p. 171.

<sup>64</sup> Cuviosul Paisie Aghioritul, *Viața de familie*, p. 167.

<sup>65</sup> Cuviosul Paisie Aghioritul, *Viața de familie*, p. 168.

<sup>66</sup> Cuviosul Paisie Aghioritul, *Viața de familie*, p. 113.

<sup>67</sup> Cuviosul Paisie Aghioritul, *Viața de familie*, p. 172.

## V. Youth – the age of challenges. Youth education through love

At his “hut” from the Holy Mountain Sf. Paisios of Mount Athos received a lot of young people eager to find their real meaning in life. He advised all with unequal love to find the measure of God’s love towards this fallen and alienated world from its endless Source. Once he gave a paradigmatic answer to a disciple to remember all his life:

**“- Father, tell us something. – What do you want me to tell you? – What your heart tells you... - What my heart tells me is to bring a knife, cut it into pieces, give it to the world and then die”<sup>68</sup>.**

Teenage and youth are an age of searches and discoveries, of temptations and challenges of world and environment, which become closer to the young man than his parents and family. The lack of experience and discernment may lead to serious fall and sins.

St. Paisios noticed that a gap was created between parents and children because of the different ways of education. To remove this gap it takes understanding, tolerance and empathy from both sides. To level this gap or conflict between generations

“parents should descend to children’s state and children should take their parents’ place. If children stop afflicting their parents, their children will not afflict them later. If now children do not obey parents and afflict them, their children will afflict them later because the spiritual laws come into operation”<sup>69</sup>.

The temptations that put the young man’s body and soul into danger are more and more numerous and therefore parents should not become authoritarian guardians to watch the agreed principles, but their closest friends, confidants and advisers.

Nowadays to keep your body and soul clean and to remain virgin before marriage means a real “war of conscience”<sup>70</sup> and a real “martyrdom” in a profoundly eroticized world that every minute tries to provoke the senses and inferior instincts. Chastity before marriage offers the young people a “double health”<sup>71</sup>: bodily and spiritual.

<sup>68</sup> Cuviosul Paisie Aghioritul, *Cu durere și dragoste...*, p. 19.

<sup>69</sup> Cuviosul Paisie Aghioritul, *Cu durere și dragoste...*, p. 288.

<sup>70</sup> Cuviosul Paisie Aghioritul, *Cu durere și dragoste...*, p. 227.

<sup>71</sup> Cuviosul Paisie Aghioritul, *Viața de familie*, p. 33.

### *Teachings of St. Paisios of Mount Athos about Children's Education*

From this reason he recommended the engagement to be short and the marriage should take place after graduation because otherwise the spouses' soul will be divided between family and professional duty, between responsibility as spouse and parent and the social one. He insisted on the fact that

“it is good that engagement does not last for much time. Until wedding the young man should try to see his fiancée as his sister and to respect her. If both fiancées fight heroically to keep their virginity, when the priest crowns them during Wedding service, they will receive abundant grace from God. This is because the crowns are the symbol of victory against pleasure, according to St. John Chrysostom”<sup>72</sup>.

Unfinished school and graduation during marriage are a “torment both for his woman and his children. He better focuses with all his spiritual and bodily power on study to finish the school without much fatigue. This problem will be solved too. If his power is dissipated, he will always be spiritually and bodily divided”<sup>73</sup>.

The young man should prefer to have a wife from a numerous family because it is a guarantee for her future sacrifice on the family altar. The wife should also be faithful and have a high moral life. He must not search for wealth or beauty, but simplicity and modesty<sup>74</sup>. Together with such a noble person the husband will gain “soul rest” and “they will put hand in hand to pass the dangerous river of the world”<sup>75</sup>. Their strong faith, Christ's presence in their family and their love will keep them united forever, together with Sweetest Jesus<sup>76</sup>.

Even if a person chooses the monastic life, the advice is the same: first the graduation and then embracing the angel way of living. Choosing family life or monastic life must be done in full knowledge and personal freedom. This is because not only the personal accomplishment in this life and world depends either on one or the other but the very salvation of the soul.

Regardless the children's errors and failures, the parents must not discourage them or lose hope. Through their good example and persevering

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<sup>72</sup> Cuviosul Paisie Aghioritul, *Viața de familie*, p. 38.

<sup>73</sup> Cuviosul Paisie Aghioritul, *Viața de familie*, p. 31.

<sup>74</sup> Cuviosul Paisie Aghioritul, *Viața de familie*, p. 37.

<sup>75</sup> Cuviosul Paisie Aghioritul, *Viața de familie*, p. 37.

<sup>76</sup> Cuviosul Paisie Aghioritul, *Viața de familie*, p. 38.

prayers they should ask for help and always hope for their turning back. They must think that God Himself give them “mitigating circumstances for the mistakes they make”<sup>77</sup> under the influence of the frivolous spirit of the contemporary world.

The spiritual father can be of great help for the youth because at that age young people think with enthusiasm they are the centre of the world and receive advices from other people, including their parents with great difficulty. By using his authority and spiritual fatherhood, but also his discernment, love and prayer, the spiritual father can get close and enter the youth soul. His advices and promptings inspired by God will be easier received.

Referring to the young people’s need of a spiritual father, Sf. Paisios said:

“The young man needs a spiritual guide to give him advices and to obey for a safe spiritual journey, without danger, fear or obstacles. With each passing year every man gains more and more experience from his life and from others’. A young man does not have this experience. An old man uses his experience and others’ to help the young un-experienced man not to make blunders. When the young man does not listen, he will make experiments on himself”<sup>78</sup>.

Unlike small children who can get punishments too, the success of young people’s education is exclusively given by the love they get. The golden rule or the real education that will make them receptive is education through love. In this respect too St. Paisios’ words are more than edifying. Being asked how the parents could get closer and correct the youth who turned the wrong way, he answered:

“With love. If there is true and noble love, the youth feel it instantly and are disarmed. All sort of youth with different problems come to my hut. I meet them, give them some refreshments, talk to them and shortly we become friends. They open their hearts and receive my love. Some of them, poor ones, are so destitute! They thirst for love. You can see immediately they did not feel love either from their mother or their father; they cannot get enough. If you sympathize and love them, they forget

<sup>77</sup> Cuviosul Paisie Aghioritul, *Viața de familie*, p. 112.

<sup>78</sup> Cuviosul Paisie Aghioritul, *Cu durere și dragoste...*, p. 262.

*Teachings of St. Paisios of Mount Athos about Children's Education*

even their problems and drugs; the illness goes away, they put some discipline in their life and come back to the Holy Mountain as pious worshippers. This is because in a certain way they feel God's love"<sup>79</sup>.

Besides parents, the spiritual father, family and Church, an important part in education is played by educators, teachers and professors.

"It is a rare thing to see a correct teacher, he said, especially nowadays! The children are unregistered cassettes that will be filled with dirty music or with Byzantine music. The teacher's work is saintly. He has a great responsibility. If he takes care, his wages from God will be consistent. He should care about teaching the children to fear God. The teachers must discover the way to transmit children certain messages about God and country. They only sow the seed, but do not have to wait for something to spring immediately. Nothing is lost; in the future the seed will take root"<sup>80</sup>.

In the act of education the teacher must show vocation and love, kindness and tolerance, soul warmth and high responsibility. In this way and compared to parents who give birth to children, "the right educators"<sup>81</sup> "re-born the children from the world"<sup>82</sup>, "give the society re-born people and thus it becomes better"<sup>83</sup>. At the same time God's reward will be great for these educators. In this life they will receive gratitude and joy and in the next life the forgiveness of sins and holiness.

As to the study programs Sf. Paisios noticed the young people are "bloated" with "a lot of useless things"<sup>84</sup>. Instead of morally forming and educating the youth they upset and confuse them spiritually. They should focus on getting practical knowledge which is formative for life, on profound knowledge of national history and religion and on the means the Christian can use to keep and develop them.

Regardless the age particularities the main purpose of education is the formation of human personality. As to the religious education, the purpose is the Christian character.

<sup>79</sup> Cuviosul Paisie Aghioritul, *Cu durere și dragoste...*, p. 270-271.

<sup>80</sup> Cuviosul Paisie Aghioritul, *Cu durere și dragoste...*, p. 320-321.

<sup>81</sup> Cuviosul Paisie Aghioritul, *Cu durere și dragoste...*, p. 321.

<sup>82</sup> Cuviosul Paisie Aghioritul, *Cu durere și dragoste...*, p. 321.

<sup>83</sup> Cuviosul Paisie Aghioritul, *Cu durere și dragoste...*, p. 321.

<sup>84</sup> Cuviosul Paisie Aghioritul, *Cu durere și dragoste...*, p. 315.

Being obedient to their parents, devoted to their nation, Church and Orthodox faith, such children will bring upon them their parents' blessing and God's grace. If insolence and sins drive the grace away and make children live wildly and in disorder, the respect for their parents, spiritual father, teachers and for the older and more experienced people pours the grace and heavenly blessing upon them. The grace covers such children giving them a super-natural shine<sup>85</sup>.

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<sup>85</sup> St. Paisios of Mount Athos said that "when children speak insolently to the older ones they drive God's grace away. When God's grace leaves, the small devils come and the children get wild and do naughty things. Whilst pious and respectful children obey their parents, teachers and older persons and thus they always receive God's grace and His Blessing. The grace covers them. Much piety to God and respect to the older ones bring plenty of heavenly grace in their souls and they are betrayed by the heavenly shine of grace. God's grace does not visit rebel children, but only good ones, with piety and kindness. These children have a shine in their eyes. The more they respect their parents and superiors, the more they receive the grace. The more rebel they are, the more abandoned are by God's grace". Cuviosul Paisie Aghioritul, *Cu durere și dragoste...*, pp. 285-286.