

13. Our Children & Youth Activities at St. Nicholas

His Eminence, Metropolitan PHILIP, of blessed memory, used to say that “the youth are not just the future of the Church, they *are* the Church.” Our children, from the moment of their baptism, are full members of the Body of Christ. As such, they ought to participate as fully as possible in the sacramental, liturgical, and practical aspects of the life the church community. So we encourage our families to attend services with their children. If young children are crying loudly during a service, they should simply be taken out of the nave until they are calm enough to return. Normal “baby sounds” are to be expected, though!

Orthodox children receive communion from the time of their baptism, which is typically done as early as 40 days after birth. This is their means of participating in and receiving the gift of God’s uncreated grace from long before they can understand or articulate what that means. To be honest, we adults can hardly articulate what it means to receive the Lord’s life-giving Body and Blood. However, just as children are nourished by earthly food long before they know anything about the metabolic process, so they are nourished by the Bread of Life and the Cup of Salvation long before they even begin to understand what that means. For more on children and communion, please see the section on “Communion” above. Also, you may find the section on children in the “Baptism” section below useful.

We try to provide opportunities for our children to learn their faith, to interact with their parish family, and generally to grow as Orthodox Christians with the support and encouragement of the Church. One caveat must be made here. As important as church youth activities are, they cannot possibly replace the duty of parents to teach the Orthodox Faith to their children at home. Ideally with the additional support of godparents and other family members, parents have the task of constantly exemplifying and reinforcing Christian teaching at home. Important examples of this include saying prayers together as a family at meals and before bed, reading stories from the Bible and the lives of Saints and fasting together. For more ideas, please see the section “On the Home as a Little Church.”

That said, we do consider Sunday School, church camps, encouraging our children and teens to participate in church life as Altar Servers or Handmaidens, and providing activities for the youth throughout the year to be important supports for our families. To lead all of these activities we need adults willing to voluntarily dedicate time and energy to this crucial ministry. Sunday school for the children is generally offered September through May. Vacation church school is typically done in cooperation with the other local Orthodox parishes in June. Summer camps, such as Camp St. Raphael in Oklahoma, are held in June and July, and limited scholarships are available. Other youth activities take place throughout the year and are generally publicized in the monthly calendar and weekly bulletins. Please see separate sections on Altar Servers and Handmaidens below.

An important note here is that we as a community are responsible for the safety of our children and teens. To that end, we have certain child-safety procedures in place that we must maintain. Adults who wish to help with youth activities in any capacity must fill out a *Child/Youth Worker Application Form* which includes a waiver authorizing a criminal background check. In addition, we have a written *Child Protection Policy* that lists requirements for youth workers (including volunteers), rules of conduct, and procedures to follow. That document is attached as an appendix at the end of this handbook.