

## Against the Current

*A column for high school and university students*

### *Introduction*

Over the past several years the idea of a column for high school and university students has occasionally been proposed. You - the “young adult demographic” - are important to the Church. Not only that, but whether you realize it or not the Christian Faith is important to you - probably more important than you realize. I’ve often asked myself: “If I was a teenager or university student, and I came upon a church newspaper or website, would there be anything in it to interest me?”

Hopefully this column will.

I’ve been directly involved with youth ministry and education during most of my adult life. One of the high points of my summer is going to All Saints’ Ukrainian Orthodox camp in Emlenton, Pennsylvania to spend time with the teenagers there. Every day, after breakfast and again after dinner, we have an hour to talk about spiritual matters. The campers put questions in a box, and we pull them out and answer them as well as we can. I’d like to work this column the same way, as a conversation, not a lecture.

The contemporary world can be a complicated and intimidating place. Besides the technological complexity of our society there is a social and moral complexity which is even more overwhelming. It’s no exaggeration to say that the current state of affairs regarding many moral, ethical, religious and spiritual issues would have been unthinkable even 50 years ago.

Growing up in such a world it’s easy to lose one’s way, and it’s always easy just to “go with the flow”. But just like it was for Christians in the Roman Empire, under the Moslems, or in the Soviet Union, it’s necessary for true Christians today to be knowledgeable about their faith and dedicated to the Church.

I recently heard a talk given by Metropolitan Kallistos (Ware). During question period a woman asked him what we could do to keep our youth in the Church. He replied by saying that whenever he speaks with the youth of his parish in Oxford he reminds them that in our contemporary world, if they want to remain Orthodox Christians, they need to be prepared to be like a salmon, swimming constantly against the current. It’s not impossible for people, even young people, even university students, to remain committed believing Orthodox Christians, but it is definitely a countercultural act, and those who wish to remain with the Church will have to be prepared to deal in a sound intellectual, spiritual and loving manner with the questions, derision, and outright aggression which they will certainly face.

Due to the emphasis “the world” puts on career success and “personal fulfillment” most of our teens and young adults, even those who are close to the Church, find themselves in a constant tug of war among many activities - sports, music lessons, dance classes, school work, part-time jobs, social activities, etc. Notice we haven’t even mentioned worship services, parish youth group activities, or prayer! Based on my observation, Christ and the Church usually seem to find themselves at the bottom of the priority list. This is both sad and unfortunate, because it’s precisely at the beginning of the teen years and continuing through the early twenties that as human beings we are able to start philosophically engaging the deeper realities of life, the world, and the Christian faith.

While we’re blessed to live in an age of rapid technological advancement, we’re at the same time witnessing a frightening drop in the level of spiritual knowledge. This is dangerous for society, as economic or scientific progress which is not tempered by wisdom and love for the people and things this progress affects is often catastrophic. It is dangerous for all of us individually as well, since if we aren’t spiritually and intellectually engaged with our faith we’re sitting ducks when the next cultist, secular humanist, or “evangelist” wants to have fun with us.

Speaking of “evangelists”, we must admit that part of the reason “Christians” are often made fun of is because of the way certain “Christians” act and speak. Watching some of the questionable characters that claim to preach the Gospel on television or listening to what most of them preach would make any normally intelligent person with an even minimal understanding of the Gospel of Christ be suspicious. These “evangelists” often prey on the general public’s ignorance of authentic Christian teaching and practice, as well as their base human instincts (greed, jealousy, fear, the need for affirmation, etc.) to line their own pockets. Which is all the more reason to know our faith well, so that we don’t get sucked in by these charlatans or lumped together with them as “crackpot Christians”.

In addition to the above, it takes people longer to grow up nowadays. Fifty or a hundred years ago people often got married in their late teens or early twenties. The spiritual, psychological and practical lessons that were learned by our grandparents simply by virtue of going to Church every Sunday, having a spouse and children to look after, and taking an active part in the ongoing life of the community are not being learned, or learned late in life, by a large segment of our population today, to the detriment of society, the Church, and us, individual people.

Hopefully this column will help you contextualize a lot of the information you may have been fed through the mass media, school, or even in Church. Based on my pastoral experience I’ve got a list of things I’d like to write about, issues like honour and honesty; relationship issues (friendship, dating, courting, marriage); sexual morality (sexual activity, homosexuality, pornography, the Church’s vision of human sexual activity); addiction issues (alcohol, internet, drugs, gambling); family issues

(relationship with parents, siblings, etc.); relationship to Church (do I feel uncomfortable or unwelcome in Church? Why should I even belong to a Church?); theological issues (Who is Jesus Christ? The bodily resurrection and the resurrection of Christ. What about non-Christians or non-Orthodox?); personal spirituality (prayer, fasting, worship, service), etc.

But as I said, I don't want this column to be a one-way street. I welcome all of you who might have a question or an issue you'd like addressed to e-mail it to me at [bhradio@sympatico.ca](mailto:bhradio@sympatico.ca). All correspondence will be kept in the strictest confidence. I will prioritize these questions and address them in upcoming columns.

I'm excited about this column, and look forward to exploring the world of Orthodox Christianity with you.