

Soccer vs. Church

Dealing with One of the Society's Pervasive Trends

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Sunday morning soccer (or sports in general) and its ability to pull youth away from church is a concern of priests and parents. What should be done? How should this be handled?

Insights from Five Orthodox Priests: *How Do You Handle This?*

We contacted seasoned Orthodox priests at five reasonably vibrant and growing parishes to determine how they view and deal with this issue. Their responses offer some common ideas as well as differing approaches and insights. We've reproduced portions of their feedback below.

Priest 1: What are Your Priorities?

This priest poses a few tough, even confrontational, questions for parents and children:

- "What comes next (after giving in to sports) in terms of Christian retreat?"
- "Given that worship is Orthodoxy's primary mission, is the sacrifice worth it? How many Sunday's will have to pass until it is worth it? "
- "In the game of life, all life, how does soccer (or anything else secular) stack up?"

Priest 2: Here it is. You decide.

"I announce what is going on this Sunday (or any day), strongly encourage participation, and then let parishioners decide. I find some people to be immutable and most people will pick and choose the direction they prefer. Sometimes some follow my direction. I strive to make the fullness of Christ as present as possible in the community."

Priest 3: Involve Kids in Decision; the Church Cares About You

"We've had a few families in recent years who have had church attendance affected by sports. Coincidentally (I think) these were families who took their church life more seriously so it was easy to work with them. At the same time I have had several kids drop out of regular church attendance with no sports excuse, so sometimes I wonder if sport should really take all the rap for something that seems to be happening at that age to a degree anyway."

"What I found was that *by sitting down with the kids themselves, it was a window to establish a bit of a relationship with the kids...* to show that the church cared about their world, not just that they were expected to care only about the church. In two cases, *with supportive families*, we gave them a blessing to be absent Sundays (fortunately neither kid was involved in more than one sport so the season didn't go on forever), and on those weekends, to come to Vespers. It might sound like a low standard but it worked pretty well, I thought. Kids are invested heavily in these things, sometimes, socially and in other ways, and I sometimes think the church has a lot to gain with those kids by showing it takes their lives and aspirations seriously enough to work around it, and not just treat it as the enemy. So, perhaps too low of a standard, but it has worked well for us, in my opinion."



At age four this young man loves to go to church. How will he react at age 12?

Priest 4: Give a Little; Make a Few Exceptions, Make the Rule Clear

"When our kids had Sunday morning games my wife and I generally allowed them to participate, since they were *occasional*. We carefully explained that this was an exception, and that they should *never* expect that we would permit this weekly and they would attend Saturday vigil on those occasions. Twenty years later, both are active in the church with Orthodox spouses and Orthodox children. Allowing them to participate in a Sunday morning game a dozen or so times when they were kids obviously did not push them out of the Church, and by explaining clearly our feelings about it, they knew exactly where we stood."

"... In the wash, forcing a kid to go to church, only to have him or her fume throughout the entire Liturgy, walk in and out a dozen times, hang out in the rest room, and brandish his or her displeasure publicly, will do more to insure that they stop going to church when they get older than letting them attend a few -- operative here is "a few" -- Sunday morning events with the well-reasoned parenting line, "This is NOT the norm, so don't push it with us."

"...I wouldn't suggest this approach to everyone, especially the lukewarm who complain about Sunday sports but drive their kids to the field instead of the main aisle. A key point is that parents need to be parents. If you want your kids in church bring them to church --regularly."

Priest 5: Look First at Our Parishes

"People choosing not to attend (for whatever reason --soccer or other) *might* be an indicator of who we are and what we offer -- or fail to offer. *Maybe* the burden is on us as a parish and on the Orthodox Church to make Sunday Liturgy a blessing for which the people are thankful. The fault may be ours not theirs. Maybe we're too busy paying attention to the past to notice the people of God who are wanting to bless God and be blessed by Him in their lives in 21st century America -- rather than in 18th Century rural Russia or Greece."



So, some common themes --and an array of hopefully helpful perspectives. In the end of course -- follow the directives of your parish priest.