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Teaching Our Children to Pray: Reflections of a Young Mother

When the Road to Emmaus staff first decided to talk to an Orthodox mother about children and prayer we pictured an experienced woman with grown-up children and the leisure for a long interview. After some discussion, however, we decided on Inna Belov, a young mother with a three-year-old son, “in the midst of the fray.” At a time when her joys, fears and concerns about raising an Orthodox child occupy most of her waking hours, we found Inna’s spontaneous reflections both fresh and intriguing.



Inna and Nicholas

RtE: Inna, Can you tell us a little about your background?

Inna: Yes. I was raised in Moscow, and after secondary school I attended the Moscow Institute of Foreign Languages. I wasn’t baptized until I became very ill at the age of nineteen. After my baptism I recovered within a half a year, and began going to church regularly. I worked as a receptionist, and at Valaam Podvoriye in Moscow selling candles. I married my husband Victor when I was twenty-nine and had Nicholas when I was thirty-two. Nicholas is now three.

My husband Victor grew up in a non-believing family and became Orthodox at the age of twenty-three or twenty-four after his friends brought him to church. He is an artist and worked for many years frescoing churches. After we were married, however, he didn’t want to leave us for long periods to paint, so he got work in Moscow as a graphic designer and later went to school to become an accountant. We are hoping he may be ordained soon.

RtE: What about your family? Were they believers?

Inna: My two grandmothers were very simple. They believed in God, but in such a natural fashion that no one noticed. There is a story about my grandmother Maria, who once was very late coming home. When she finally arrived my parents asked her, “Why did you take so long?” She said, “I had to walk a long way.” “Why?” “Because I didn’t have any money to pay the fee on the trolley.” “But why? You can go without any fee, because they seldom check the tickets.” “Yes, but I thought it probably was a sin.” That was what she was like. Maria died when I was three.

My other grandmother, Alexandra—my mother’s mother—always brought us Easter eggs and kulich for Pascha. I remember it very well. She would sit in the kitchen and talk for a long time about her children and grandchildren. She couldn’t hear anything, but she was able to speak. I have a clear picture of her sitting in the kitchen, with the Paschal sun shining through the window and resting like a blessing on the eggs and kulich. It was like a moment out of Paradise.

When my grandmother Alexandra died, I knew she believed the soul lives on because she said to me, “Come and see me off.” One of her grandsons had bought her a burial shroud as a present, with Orthodox

words and crosses on it. It was very rare thing in those days and she often brought it out to show people, saying, “Look what I have.” She looked forward to her death with a peaceful heart. In 1992 her great-grandson was born weak and sickly, the doctors said he wouldn’t live. When Alexandra was told she replied, “I am so old...I want to die in his place, so he will live.” She was eighty-three and in extremely good health, but three weeks later she died with no warning. That same day, the baby began to recover. He was born on the seventeenth of December and she died on the eighth of January.

In spite of all this, I was not a believer. I was against religion because of all the atheist propaganda I had been told in school, in Pioneer camps, everywhere. When I was nine, my father said something one day about God. I was astonished and said, “How can you say this – it’s le-rigion.” I didn’t even know how to say the word “religion,” but I already knew how to fight against it. Then, when I was fourteen I had a teenage crisis. I saw a cross around my mother’s neck, a little Orthodox cross, and I asked her to let me see it. She did, and suddenly I became so angry with her for being ignorant and unmodern that I threw it out the window. She went downstairs and tried to find the cross in the snow, but she couldn’t. Afterwards she never said anything to me about it. I don’t know if she went to church then. I don’t think so, but she had the kind of natural faith that you just get from the air.

RtE: Why do you think your parents didn’t talk to you about God or religion when you were a child. Was it because they knew it would only lead to trouble for you in school, or were they still not sure of their own faith?

I don’t think they realized that they should speak to me about it, because they had a kind of faith without knowledge. They knew they believed in God, but they didn’t know any church dogma. They didn’t know anything. They were baptized as infants, and they believed in God and in the Church, but they didn’t know they should go there every Sunday. Atheist propaganda was so powerful that you didn’t hear a single word about God outside the church. Even in church the priests couldn’t say whatever they wanted. They could only serve. They sometimes gave short sermons, but they were not allowed to instruct. Those who preached with conviction were persecuted.

RtE: Before she died last year, I remember your mother as being rather devout.

Inna: Yes, during her last two months she received Holy Communion almost every week. Before that she had begun going to church, and by the time she died her prayer book was ragged from having been used so much. My parents were wedded in the church at age sixty, at my request, but my mother said, “If I am going to go through with this, please don’t have anyone else there.” My father is devout, but he is very slow in acquiring Orthodox knowledge. It’s still difficult for him to understand about the Trinity, about Christ being both God and man... He’s always asking me about these things and I try to explain. He is a very simple soul, like my mother and my grandmothers.

The priests now say that our generation is different from the previous ones. Before, parents and grandparents brought their children to the Church. Now it is the children who bring their parents. However, it was not that way for me. As little as they knew of religion, it was my parents who brought me to the Church. When I became very ill at nineteen, the doctors could do nothing for me. My parents took me to a priest and had me baptized, hoping it would help. It was only after I was baptized that I began to recover.

RtE: Before your child was born, had you thought of how you would begin to teach him about God, how to pray? Did you have the example of an older friend?

Inna: No, I had to think about all this myself. I wanted so much to be a mother that I prayed to God, “Please give me a baby and I will try to bring him up Orthodox.” I try hard not to forget this. I asked only that the baby would be healthy and have a good loving heart to love God.

As soon as I found out that I was going to have a child, and even before, when I was praying for one, I knew that I wanted to inspire in him my own love for Christ. I didn’t think much about teaching him to pray, or bringing him to church. The love of Christ was the main thing I wanted to give him. Now it is a little more difficult and different from what I thought, but that was my first idea.

In regards to this, I also think of Archbishop Anthony Bloom’s words to parents, who ask him about bringing up children, “I cannot give

advice relying on my own experience because I was not a believing child.” It is difficult for me for the same reason, and this is why I have to bring Nicholas up as a young adult, from an adult point of view. If he has any faith it will not be childish faith. Of course, from his side it will be a childish faith, but what comes from me will give him a sort of adult faith. I’m afraid there might even be something of a distortion here, because I cannot penetrate what he sees, never having had the experience myself.

Later it will be important for him to have friends who are older, and who have gone through all these early periods as Orthodox Christians. Particularly during his teen-age years I want him to have older friends who have been brought up Orthodox.

RtE: Many people feel that children are naturally devout—that is, until the world creeps in and clouds their souls. Did you see any indication of this in your child when he was small?

Inna: Yes, many indications. Soon after he was born we would put an icon of the Mother of God in front of him. He would smile and wave his hands, look at her and sort of speak to her. He wasn’t like this with toys or other pictures we put in front of him. Afterwards, when we began to take him to church and taught him to pray he was very zealous and even made prostrations to the floor. He was only two. If one of us skipped anything in the morning or evening prayers, he would protest and say, “You missed this prayer, please say it.” But, you know, when I heard this I thought I was on my way to having my own little church babushka—a two-year-old babushka. I felt sick. So, I decided to try something different. Not to make things so very strict and in order, but to accent things that are connected with prayer. For example, I try to connect the life that he leads as a Christian with the life that he leads in the world, with other children, with me at home...

RtE: And you did this because you felt that even at two years old, he was getting bound up in externals?

Inna: I think what he was doing was natural, but after I saw what was happening I began to pray more prayers that concerned our life. For example, I would say aloud to God, “Let us live this day without any quarrels, let Nicholas and I have peace between ourselves, that he might be kind to me and I might be kind to him.”

RtE: How early did you begin to teach him to pray?

Inna: The only thing I could do when he was a baby, of course, was to pray myself in his presence.

RtE: He watched you from the crib?

Inna: Yes, we only have one room and he was always here, so he heard me pray. As he got older, he joined me when he wanted to. I always make a point of him saying a prayer for his reposed grandmother whom he loved, and whose funeral he attended a few months ago, and for us, his parents, because this is what he understands.

RtE: Does he know any prayers by heart?

Inna: He can say the “Our Father” and the “Theotokos and Virgin Rejoice.” He has been doing it since he turned two. One day he recited a poem to me, and when I saw that he already remembered things by heart I asked him, “Please say the “Our Father,” and he did. “Please say “Theotokos and Virgin Rejoice,” and he did. He already knew them, but it hadn’t occurred to him to say them. (Unfortunately, his diction was so bad that only I could understand them.) Now he also knows “O Heavenly King...” and “Holy God, Holy Mighty, Holy Immortal...”

Although he has memorized these prayers, I think that he still pronounces them mechanically. He says them from his heart, certainly, but he doesn’t understand the meaning. Once I tried to explain to him, “Please forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive those who trespass against us.” I explained to him what sin is and then later, when I raised my voice and scolded him, he said, “Don’t shout at me, it is a sin.” I thought then that I probably wasn’t the person to teach him about sin. (*Laughs*) The only thing I could answer was, “Please don’t wrack my nerves because that is a sin too.”

Also, I ask him to pray for people if they have asked. Sometimes people say to me, “If you pray, it doesn’t mean much. Let the innocent baby pray for me.” And I say, “Please pray for Aunt Lena. She asked us to. Let us say, ‘God have mercy on Aunt Lena,’” and he says it. Or, “Please pray that Uncle Andrew’s work goes well.” Things like that. Or, “Please pray that you can forgive your friend Steve for taking away your pail.” (If he cannot, for example.) In this way, we have taught him to forgive joyfully. He likes to forgive people. When someone asks his forgiveness, he smiles with a great,

wide smile and says, “Certainly, I forgive you.” Before the person asks for forgiveness he will cry and be nasty and upset – but as soon as they ask, why yes, it is granted, everything’s OK—even if they’ve just hit him with a toy spade.

RtE: When do you think he began to understand about forgiveness?

Inna: I think he understood as soon as I began to ask his forgiveness. I am always asking his forgiveness. Sometimes, once, twice, three times a day I raise my voice at him. Sometimes I spank him. If I spank him too hard, I ask him to forgive me. Sometimes he comes to me and says, “Mama, please forgive me.” “For what?” “I don’t know, for something.” Or, he’ll come to me and say, “Mama, thank you.” “For what?” “For everything.” He is so funny.

RtE: Does he join you in your morning and evening prayers? Do you think this is important?

Inna: It is important for him to be present, and not to shout, not to run about. If he is drawing in the corner, and listening with one ear, I think that’s all right. If I want him to say a prayer, I call him and ask him to.

RtE: How do you get him to pay attention when he is at family prayers? What do you do if he becomes bored and restless?

Inna: If he becomes restless I understand that he is just a little child, and let him do whatever he wants, as long as it doesn’t interfere with my prayers. Sometimes when he doesn’t want to say his prayers, I ask him, “Please come help me because I am tired. Please help me to say this prayer.”

RtE: At what point will you start asking him to stand with you and be attentive?

Inna: I think that I will do it gradually. For example, if he says one or two prayers during our morning prayers now, in a month I will ask him to say three prayers... He is still so young that I have to draw his attention to every prayer we say, and it must be short. What is important is that there is a large icon of Christ before him, so that he knows to Whom he is praying. We have a big poster of Christ the Saviour with large eyes, and we have a poster of the Mother of God. Maybe this is not right, certainly it is not Christ Himself, but I think it helps him to understand.

RtE: Was there a time when you saw prayer start to become a habit, where Nicholas didn’t want to do without it? Does he ever pray by himself or does he always have to be reminded?

Inna: It differs. Sometimes he wants to pray. If he wants to pray he doesn’t ask me to pray, he just prays by himself. In the morning if I don’t remind him he won’t remember. During the day he will, but not in the morning or in the evening. But what he does remember is to bless his father and his grandfather when they leave the flat. He says, “In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit,” and makes a little cross over them.

He says a few regular prayers, like, “God have mercy on my reposed Granny.” He does this without my being there. Of course, we always bless the food together, and say the prayer of thanksgiving afterwards. When I leave him alone while I’m working in our small kitchen, he sometimes becomes lonely and will say a prayer. Also he will sometimes pray in difficult situations. For example, once I was speaking with a friend about a person that I couldn’t forgive from my heart. Nick, hearing me, began to say the “Our Father.” It was when he was two and a half. My friend connected it with the situation, but I don’t know if it was really so. Probably the baby just felt that there was something wrong, and decided to pray.

Sometimes, people speaking to Nicholas have an idea that as a child he is supposed to be more innocent and more devout than adults. A few times, when people came to visit us he felt that attitude, and began to pray to attract attention. I didn’t like it. It wasn’t natural, but we have tried to do something about it. Now, he understands that praying is a serious thing between us and God and not something to be demonstrated.

Something else is happening now. When Nicholas prays for our family he says, “God have mercy on Mama, on Papa, on grandpa, on my godmother, and on the mouse.” He calls himself, “mouse.” It has been a very long-lasting game. When people ask him his name he says, “My name is mouse.” When he prays, he prays for “the mouse.” I don’t know what to do about it. Nicholas calls me Mama Myshka, “the mouse’s mother,” and Victor, “the mouse’s father.” When his godmother comes, he says, “Here we are, all the mice together.” I hope it doesn’t offend his patron saint, because I don’t seem to be able to stop him.

There is something else I am thinking about here as well. This is not really about prayer, but it concerns young children. It is about drinking holy water and eating prosphora. Nick does it with joy. We try to do it every morning. One mother told me that she brought up her child on water from St. Sergius holy spring, and that during the day she often gives him holy things to kiss, etc. There was such a fantastic result in her child that I think this is the only thing I can do regularly for Nick at this age without an awful effort. I try to do it too, and I can say that I see some results.

RtE: What kind of results do you see?

Inna: I see very clear results in his disposition. He becomes more reasonable, happier, calmer. I try to do it as often as I can. Every morning I anoint him with holy oil. But I try not to make these things fixed so that he won't think they are tasks to be performed at certain times, and that they can only be done like this and no other way. I think this is important, and it is why I try to read different prayers aloud when he is standing beside me and listening. I choose different prayers from the Morning Prayers every day, so that he will not think that prayers are some logarithm to memorize by which you can pray without thinking. I try to anoint him, or give him holy water to drink or an icon to kiss whenever I remember. I do it when I have spare time during the day because I think it is the only way for a relaxed mother like myself to keep up his faith.

Sometimes, if I am busy in the kitchen and he is restless, I will sit him on the sofa with the prayer rope in his hand and he will say, "Lord have mercy" with each knot. It is repetitive and easily understood. I think small children like things like that. And he knows somehow that he is doing something real.

RtE: Can you recall any of Nicholas' prayers that particularly touched you?

Inna: He doesn't pray with his own words, but he repeats the prayers that he has heard me say. I expected him to pray, "Please make mother be kinder," but he doesn't. He says, "Please let us live this day in peace." He is already a diplomat.

When he was younger he would line his stuffed animals up with their faces before the icons. He wouldn't pray or say anything, but he would

stand with them quietly. I think he thought they were praying. He put his cars there also, but we explained to him that cars don't pray, and so he took them away.

RtE: Does he have a sense of the Saints yet?

Inna: He has a sense of saints because of the books we've been reading to him about saints, but mainly he prays to the Lord, the Mother of God, and to St. Nicholas, his patron saint.

RtE: Do you feel that a child's spiritual growth is something that happens naturally, as long as there aren't crude or worldly influences around him, or is it something that takes step by step guidance from you?

Inna: I think that my child's spiritual growth is closely connected with my behavior. If I myself am convinced that God listens to my prayers, if I myself really lead a spiritual life, it will naturally be imprinted on the child. But if I pray without conviction I don't think it will have any influence on him. The most important thing is that I am determined and sincere myself. Otherwise it is impossible. I believe that even if I never taught him anything, if I only prayed and he could feel that I was praying, it would be enough.

RtE: Yes, That is a good point, and during the Soviet period there were people who believed, but didn't feel they could teach about Christianity or even pray outwardly, for fear that their children would say something in school that would cause problems for the family. Yet many of those children, who are now adults, have told me that they had a kind of natural faith, that they imbibed quietly, sometimes from believing relatives, sometimes "from the air."

Inna: Yes, I have stories like that about my husband Victor. His grandfather's brother was a priest in the Ivanovo region in Kineshma. We think he must have prayed for Victor from heaven, because Victor's parents are not believers. He remembers, though, that before his Granny died, she showed him an icon and said, "Look, this is God." He was about seven, and he remembers that quite clearly.

Victor's mother is a convicted atheist. In spite of this, he didn't grow up as an atheist. When he was ten his mother began taking him to

Tretyakov Gallery. He would stand in front of the icons for hours until she dragged him away, saying, “What do you see in those things?”

Later he went to a Young Pioneer camp [a Communist youth summer camp]. There was a teacher there who taught them to draw pictures and make all sorts of images on metal and wood. He chose to do a relief of a monk in copper—he had seen a picture of one in an art book. (*Inna points to the metal relief above our heads in the kitchen, a rather sophisticated looking piece of art.*) I think that, taking into account he was only twelve, it is a rather pious work. I don’t think the Pioneer leader saw it though. Victor just took it home. He wasn’t baptized until he was in his twenties, when his friends brought him to church, but he says that on the day he was baptized, he felt that he was really changed.

There are many life problems bound up with disbelief in families. For example, I don’t know what I will do when Nicholas begins to play with unbelieving children—if he talks to them about God, or prays in their presence. But no such problem has arisen yet. People say that children understand that even if they believe in God, other people are not obliged to, and they take it naturally.

RtE: I think children are often aware of the subtlety of people’s responses. If someone doesn’t respond in the way you’re used to, you just realize that there are people you can’t talk to about these things.

Inna: Yes. I also foresee situations like the following. I know of a little girl who believes in God. One day her Granny took her to music school and they had to go by tram. The tram didn’t come for a long time and this unbelieving Granny looked at her and said, “Why don’t you pray that your God sends us this tram.”

RtE: Have you thought about how you would explain to Nicholas about praying for things like that and then not getting them?

Inna: I’m sure I can explain how he may not get something extra, something that he wants but doesn’t need. Probably I could say something like, “Are you sure that if your prayer is granted that this tram will not have an accident because it is going too fast?” Or, “Perhaps there is an old woman

who also needs to catch it, and if it comes more quickly she will not be in time.” Also, “We are not the only people who want the tram to come. There are hundreds waiting along this route.”

However, it will be much harder to explain if he prays for a friend to get well and the child doesn’t. Of course, I know the answers that are given in such cases. I know that God has His own ways, that He doesn’t see the situation as we do, and that He knows what is best for us, but I cannot say this to Nicholas with conviction. It is not that I don’t believe it, but I don’t have enough of what I would call the “energy of faith” to transfer it. Probably I should take him to a priest for this, to someone who has that faith. Until I have it myself, I will just have to honestly say, “I don’t know.” If I can’t transfer it with conviction, it will sound empty to him.

RtE: Do you foresee other things that atheists might do or say to influence him?

Inna: Many unbelieving parents repeat parrot-like from atheist propaganda. For example, they say that Christianity is the religion of weak people. I plan to tell Nicholas that that is true; we are all weak people. If we were strong people we could keep away disease, death and sorrow, but we cannot. Let’s not conceal it. Christianity is the religion of weak people because everyone is weak. It’s for all of us. Of course, there are strong people – but they are saints. Christianity is a religion for everyone, whether you are weak or strong.

As for other things atheists might say...atheists’ arguments used to be simpler, “Cosmonauts flew into space and they saw no angels, no God, nothing.” Now atheism has become very clever. I think this is a good thing because it is a challenge that one has to meet.

RtE: Does Nicholas’ prayer-life at home carry over to church?

Inna: I know I am not right, but I still only take him to church for Holy Communion. When I take him to church I don’t take him to long services—our Sunday service from beginning to end is about six hours. I take him at other times to stand for awhile when there aren’t many people there. Every day that we go out for a walk we stop at the church. We pray, or I say, “Let’s just stand and listen and watch,” for him to feel something if he can. Certainly he likes to light candles, to make the sign of the cross, to bow, to kiss the icons. Sometimes he spontaneously prays at the corner where they

place candles for the reposed. But he prays so loudly—he cries right out, “Lord have mercy on my grandmother.” (*Laughing*) I get embarrassed. He just doesn’t notice that there are other people there.

So far, I am glad that Nicholas prays and bows and crosses himself, that he places candles, and kisses icons with joy. I think that’s the main thing, to not make him feel disgust. I am still sorry though, that I can’t take him to the whole service.

RtE: Isn’t it common in Russia to wait until very young children are older? Particularly since you have such endlessly bitter winters and long distances to walk to church, or freezing waits for the tram. Not to mention the four floors in your block of flats—eight long flights of stairs—to get the baby up and down in the carriage. The churches being so over-crowded also make it difficult. From what I’ve seen it is rather usual for mothers not to take their young children to church except for Holy Communion, and then as they get older they attend more regularly.

Inna: Yes. Maybe it is wrong, but I am weak in this. It is a podvig for me to take a very young child to services and stand there with him for hours. Of course, it might be different if you have taken him to services every day since he was born, but I was simply not capable of this. I adore the people who have three, four or five children and who bring them to church all together. It looks fantastic. Having one child I know what it is like, but having three or four young ones.... The children from these families might move about a bit, venerate the icons or place a candle, but they don’t run about or gather into little groups and talk. Mothers sometimes even bring their babies in knapsacks and baby carriages.

RtE: It’s different for everyone.

Inna: I think that a mother who has a lot of children is like an angel in art, like a Michaelangelo. It’s really a gift. Of course, God helps too. I can’t imagine what really pious and strong mothers will think of me after reading what I’ve said, but I ask them to be condescending.

RtE: What have you learned from watching your son pray?

Inna: Frankly speaking, nothing particularly good. I see my mistakes in the spiritual life—I hear my tone of voice in him, and understand that in some ways I am too emotional, in other ways I am too formal...I see the

reflection of all of this in him. When I ask him to pray to Christ in front of this large icon, I do see a sort of awe in him. It is probably the only good thing. Mainly I see my mistakes.

...One thing I have learned is how responsive children’s hearts are and how quickly they turn to God. As adults, even when we know something is right, we often hesitate. We move slowly, first weighing the cost. Children are different. When I tell Nicholas, “Pray to God and tell Him that you love Him, and that you know He loves you,” he immediately makes a prostration and prays. There is only one second between my words and his action. When he stands carelessly in front of the icons, I say, “Stand up straight and quiet so that God will know you are seriously praying.” He immediately obeys. He responds from his heart without any hesitation.

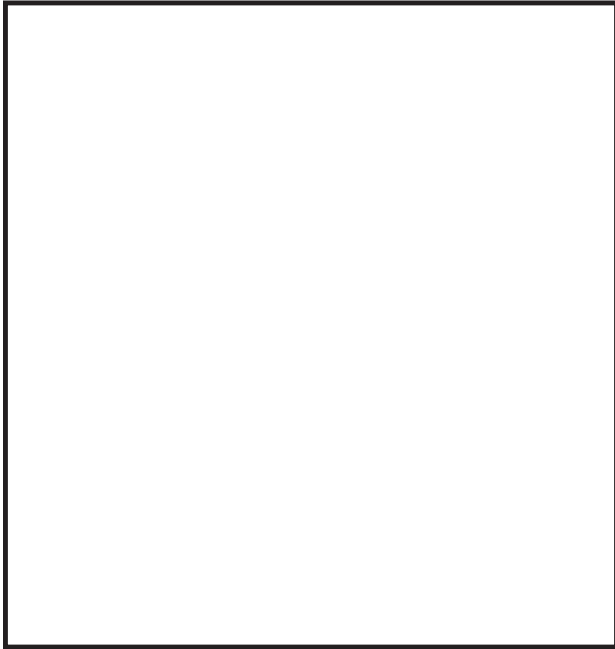
RtE: Is there anything else you wanted to say about children and prayer in general?

Inna: My problem is in connecting prayer with life. For example, I do not tell Nicholas to pray if he wants a new game or a toy. I can’t tell him to ask God, because I know that I am going to buy it. If there is something that I don’t think I can do for him, I also don’t want to tell him to pray, because I am afraid he will be disappointed. I don’t have enough faith myself. But I do want him to pray for his own state of mind. For example, “God, let me be peaceful, God help me to forgive this person,” and so on.

I know that God wills to give him forgiveness and peace of mind, but I am not sure about the toys. I don’t want him to become a devout young person because he thinks that he can get whatever he wants if he prays.

Again, about connecting prayer to life, there is a story I once read by a priest. He said, “When I was a young child and I disobeyed, my simple-hearted Mother knelt in front of the icons and prayed, sometimes with tears, ‘See, God, see how badly my child is treating me. Help me.’ This always made me stop what I was doing.”

But I think you can be too disciplined as well. One of our friends had his first child right after he was converted. When the child was very young and ran off in another direction in church, or stood in a place where he was not supposed to be, he took him by the ear and dragged him away. The boy grew up nervous. With the second child, he was less strict and the



Victor, Inna and Nicholas

child is more devout.

RtE: What do you think is the lesson from that?

Inna: I just thank God that I didn't have Nicholas when I first converted, when I was new and zealous. I think that a child should feel free with God. Maybe this just concerns Nicholas, my child, but because I believe that he needs to feel at ease with people, I also think he needs to feel at ease with God, to feel free to do what he wants as long as it doesn't contradict some moral guideline. For example, I don't spank him if he grabs an icon and carries it in his hand quite impiously. I just take it away, put it where it should be, and tell him not to do it again. I know that some people are very strict with their children in those situations, but I don't think it is right. I may be wrong, of course—different things work with different children.

My point is that I don't want Nicholas to feel that God and his mother are his enemies, that we are aligned against him. Also, I don't want him to have to flee to God from his family and friends. I want us all to be

united. I think that is the main purpose I have in the family. To make sure that none of us are in opposition to the others. I'm speaking of myself here because Nicholas' father is often absent working. He comes late and leaves early, so I am with the baby during most of his waking hours.

RtE: What do you see as your husband's part in Nicholas' spiritual life?

Inna: We think it is very important for the father to take part. There was an investigation conducted in atheist times so that they could better fight against religion, about children from believing homes. They found that where the father believes in God and goes to church, about ninety percent of the children become religious, but when it is just the mother, only ten percent do. I don't know if it is the same for a democratic society, but I believe there is something to think about here.

When Victor is here, he does pray with him of course. What is important is that Nicholas sees him praying.

RtE: If Victor is ordained, as you hope, then Nicholas will have time with him in church, and within a few years he will be his altar attendant.

Inna: Yes, but I'll tell you something that I'm afraid of for him, something that I've noticed among young altar attendants, even among some children of the clergy. They will often tell you where you can place a candle, or where you should stand, etc. I don't mean all priests' children—some of them are wonderful. Nevertheless, I do see a few imitating the behavior of their elders without the content or authority. They begin to look down on people. Not only other children, whom they try to boss around, but on older people as well. I never want my son to tell an older person what to do in church. I want him to stay in his place, to understand that he is just a little child. I do not allow him to make comments on older people's behavior. (I don't mean mine, I know mine is imperfect).

RtE: Can we go back to the idea of connecting prayer with life? Did you have anything more to say about this?

Inna: Yes. This also concerns very young children. To connect prayer with life, I think a baby should feel that the main thing in faith is mercy. We try to inspire this mercy in Nicholas all day long. We hope that later it will be connected with faith. So far we have not succeeded in connecting it. For example, when his friend cries, on the way home I ask, "Why do

you think he cried? What do you think his mood was? Do you think it was bad or good? Why?" I ask him to try to notice how a person feels. I think this is the only kind of mercy he is capable of so far, since he cannot physically help anyone. Helping me in the kitchen is really a game, and he feels it. But having psychological mercy on people is already not a game for him. For example, when his friend wants one of Nick's toys, and he doesn't give it to him, I don't say, "You are being greedy. Don't be greedy." I try to explain that this toy attracts his friend because it is new to him. I try to make him understand how the other person sees it.

By mercy I mean taking into account the other person, because children usually don't do this. This is not the core of mercy, but it is the mechanism—taking into account the other person's feelings, his situation. For adults, probably, the core of mercy is wishing another person's salvation and not interfering with the process. Helping it as you can. Helping a person with his physical needs is very simple for us, but for a child it is difficult. Handing over alms that his mother gives him for beggars, "helping" her carry a heavy bag, is all a sort of game. He cannot really help anyone except through her, but he can begin to take care of people psychologically. Just this week, I saw a result of this in Nicholas. He came into the kitchen and asked me what I was doing. I said, "I am making a special tea for our neighbor because she is ill." He said, "Then we must go pray for her." That, I think, is hopeful.

I have heard people say, "You must do this because God wants you to." We are going to say it in the future but I'm afraid to mention God in that way right now because I do not yet live a life closely connected with these things myself. For example, I don't pray every hour. When I speak to people, I do not always consider how God sees the situation. But as soon as I begin to connect more moments in my own life with this remembrance of God, I hope to be able to connect this mercy we are trying to plant in our son with faith in God. Then I will be able to convey to him that God indeed wants this. I hope that these two things will coincide.

RtE: Don't you also think, that as a soul learns human mercy and human kindness, it will naturally lead it to an understanding of God's mercy, which is much greater?

Inna: I think so. I think that from early childhood a young person should feel that above all, God is merciful. And to feel it he has to be merciful himself and to understand what mercy is. If not, then when he is ten and we tell

him that God is merciful, he won't understand. We want him to have this early childhood impression that God is not only Who you pray to, that God is not this or that, but that God is mercy. I think all the rest can be done afterwards. Mercy is like kindness, but kindness is a natural thing, while mercy can be instilled.

I have to say that I am only repeating what comes to mind. By no means do I think that I am doing these things. I only say them aloud be-



cause I cannot stop myself from thinking about what concerns me. When I read or hear such reflections or speculations – "this is like this, and that is like that," it always makes me wonder. I know that I am not at all authorized to speak about mercy. It is awful to speak about mercy and yet not really be merciful myself, but I do want my child to have this quality, so I have to think about it sometimes. I hope that the people reading this will forgive me.