

Dear Religious Educators,

“After three days they found him in the temple, sitting among the teachers, listening to them and asking them questions; and all who heard him were amazed at his understanding and his answers.” (Luke 2:46-47)

According to this statement Gospel of Luke, the twelve-year-old Jesus asked a lot of questions.

Lately, I’ve been asking clergy to list the questions that the young people they know ask them. The responses have been all over the map, from theology to ethics, to personal matters. “Is there a God?” “Why does the Church do this or that?” Lots of questions about sex and morality. As one priest said, “They ask about everything.”

Questions are normal. Adolescents are reaching new levels of intellectual and cognitive development. As a result they are able to wrestle with many topics. They also want to think for themselves. Of course, they have a long way to go, but they are trying to make their way in the world, thinking independently of their families, as they begin to take charge of their life and take their first steps into adulthood.

The critical task of the adults in their lives -- parents, priests, youth advisors, camp counselors, and Sunday Church school teachers -- is to walk with them as they ask their questions. Walking in a group, sometimes we will lead, sometimes we will push, sometimes we will be in the middle of the group.

How can we begin to deal with this?

First, rejoice. Be grateful that the young people you know are coming to you with their questions. That indicates that you have created a trustworthy environment for discussion about the weightier matters (see Matthew 23:23).

Second, listen attentively. Don’t listen only long enough to formulate your response, but listen to the entire thought. If need be, take notes.

Third, avoid “you need to know” statements. The religious educator John Westerhoff once wrote, “Few, if any, learn what someone else wants them to know, care about or do. It is somewhat like my reaction to those who come to me and say, ‘You need to know,...’ to which I have typically responded, ‘No, you are wrong. I do not need to know. You apparently need to tell me.’”

Fourth, when you do respond, respond with stories from your life, your own experience. We're hardwired to remember stories. Share the wisdom from your life, the lessons learned.

Fifth, open the sources of our Faith for them. Knowledge is important. The Bible, our Liturgy and Sacraments, the writings of the Fathers can offer insights and guidance. These sources should be studied, questioned, and brought into a conversation with our present understanding of an issue and the implications that the sources have on our lives. Let them share their questions with you. You can then create your lessons and conversations around their questions, using the many resources that are available.

Sixth, let them figure it out. The most frequent "teaching method" of Jesus was the parable. Those who heard the story were allowed to figure it out for themselves and once they did, they were probably more convinced than if they had merely been told. Of course, if there's danger involved, you need to step in. You are the adult. Sixth, accept the fact that they will fail and fall. Our natural temptation is to prevent failing and falling. But we learn from our mistakes. The important dimension is communicating that we care about this person no matter what mistakes he or she makes and we will accept him or her, faults and all.

"They ask about everything." They will ask about everything. Let them ask. Be ready!

Check out resources on www.OrthodoxMarketplace.com.

Rev. Anton C. Vrame, Ph.D., Director
Department of Religious Education
Greek Orthodox Archdiocese of [America](#)