

From the Office of Eastern Christian Formation

“Start children off on the way they should go, and even when they are old they will not turn from it”
(*Proverbs 22:6*).

Glory to Jesus Christ!

Dear Friends, as we are nearing the beginning of the new school year for the ECF Program I extend my best wishes to the Pastors/ Parish Administrators, ECF Directors/ Coordinators, Instructors, ECF students and their families and all our parishioners on this joyous occasion. Jesus sent His apostles saying: “Go ye therefore, and teach all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost” (*cf. Mt., 28:19*). Today He sends each one of us to teach others about God’s Love and to share the message of hope, faith and love. I thank all of you for your efforts and sacrifices you make to teach our children about God and our faith and for being faithful to this mission of sharing God’s Word. Please remember, your daily work and dedication brings people closer to God and brings God closer to people – the most important thing one can do. We all know how rewarding it is to be good instruments in the hands of God, who works through us, who today needs our hands to do the acts of mercy and to bless others, needs our feet to go to those who are in most need, needs our heart to love everybody, and needs our lips to preach the Good News of the Gospel. Let each one of us be that Good Sower who plants the seed and let us trust that God will take care of the rest.

Dear Pastors/Administrators

All of us have been through a lot in the past several months. It is uncertain how the pandemic will continue to evolve and no one is able to guarantee a completely COVID-19-free environment. In light of this current uncertain situation, if your parish has the ECF program for children – use your pastoral discretion as to whether to re-open in-person ECF classes. If you plan to start the program in September (provided the parents are willing to send their children to participate in these classes), I recommend that you take the most conservative approach and proceed with great caution, ensuring that all safety precautions and guidelines as issued by the CDC and your local civil and health authorities are followed. Listed below are some of the safety measures/guidelines that should be taken:

- make sure all children and instructors who come to classes are healthy and have not been exposed to the virus;
- ensure proper social distancing;
- wear a face mask/covering or face shield by anyone who is 2 years of age and older;
- do not share any books and materials during the classes;
- cleaning/sanitizing and ventilating the class space;
- finally, please consider any other personal precautionary measures which you find appropriate.

These guidelines should remain in effect until the situation with the coronavirus subsides. As a general rule for re-opening the ECF Program for in-person learning, I further encourage you to follow the guidelines for re-opening of your local school district in which your parish is located, if applicable to your situation. Safety and well-being of all involved in the ECF program should be our top priority. If in your pastoral judgment resuming the in-person ECF classes need to be delayed until the situation improves or not all parents feel comfortable sending their children for classes – please invite your ECF instructors to consider having classes online, so that everyone has an opportunity to attend virtually and learn during these unprecedented times.

Dear Parish ECF Coordinators and Instructors

The ECF program focuses on spiritual formation of our children and we aim to share with them the riches of our Byzantine Tradition and faith. Nevertheless, as with any other educational program, we also aim to develop their gifts and talents, to encourage them, to build character, and to ensure their personal growth. I encourage you to be creative and to do everything you can in relation to the catechetical formation of those involved in your parish ECF program - encouraging them to use Zoom and/or other online platforms for conducting online religious instruction (i.e. if possible/when necessary). If you need a list of online resources or in case of any questions or need for assistance – please email me and I will be happy to help you. Please make known to ECF participants and their families, as well as to anyone who wants to learn more about God and our faith they can refer to our online resource which provides excellent weekly educational updates and resources related to our liturgical calendar <https://godwithusonline.org/catechetical-resources/>. Also visit our Facebook page Teach me, O Lord: <https://www.facebook.com/Teach-me-O-Lord-ECF-Office-of-Byzantine-Catholic-Eparchy-of-Passaic-178288089491219/> and the ECF section of the Eparchial web-site for new updates, available online programs, courses and summer camps and other helpful resources.

In addition, if you are organizing any online event at your parish or are aware of any other creative solutions, please share that information with me so that perhaps we could collaborate Eparchy-wide and invite all the interested individuals to participate. Finally, if your parish has the ECF classes set up online, I encourage you to share this with me with the hope that other parishes would be able to join you.

Dear Parents

Education begins at home, and continues in school and Church. Each of those aspects is very important. I encourage your families to continue to be a good example to your children by living your faith so that it is passed to generations to come, just as it was passed to you by your parents. How successful in many different ways the life of your child will be depends on you! We can help, we can teach, we can pray, but we cannot do what only you as parents can do. I encourage all of you to pray with your children daily before and after meals and before going to bed, to read the Holy Bible with them and reflect upon/discuss the reading together, make use of Eparchial Inquiry Program “Come and See” that was recently published and distributed at our parishes.

Parents, **you** are the primary educators of your children (cf. *Gravissimum Educationis*, #3, #6, *Lay Catholics in Schools: Witnesses to Faith*, #12, *The Catholic School on the Threshold of the Third Millennium*, #20) “[Parents] bear witness to this responsibility first by *creating a home* where tenderness, forgiveness, respect, fidelity, and disinterested service are the rule... This requires an apprenticeship in self-denial, sound judgment, and self-mastery – the preconditions of all true freedom. Parents should teach their children to subordinate the “material and instinctual dimensions to interior and spiritual ones.” Parents have a grave responsibility to give good example to their children” (cf. *CCC*, 2223). “Close cooperation with the family is especially important when treating sensitive issues such as religious, moral, or sexual education, orientation toward a profession, or a choice of one’s vocation in life. It is not a question of convenience, but a partnership based on faith. Catholic tradition teaches that God has bestowed on the family its own specific and unique educational mission” (*The Religious Dimension of Education in a Catholic School: Guidelines for Reflection and Renewal*, #42).

“Tell me and I forget, teach me and I may remember, involve me and I learn,” – this quote attributed to Benjamin Franklin is so true when it comes to educating our children in faith.

As parents, you have the greatest influence possible on your child. What they see happening at home, what they hear during the meal times at the family table, what they are taught about God and faith by you, the prayers you say together, the atmosphere of trust and love that you create in your home – your Domestic Church – these are the things that will stay with them for the rest of their lives. If this home foundation is strong, nothing and no one will have a greater influence on them than you and no one will be able to shake it or take it away from them. A recent major survey concluded that Catholic school education alone does not keep the children in church later on. In fact, there is no difference between the number of Catholics who were in a Catholic or public school who later were leaving the church, according to the survey. When it comes to religious education, you are the primary educators of your children, from you they learn about the image of God, which they will carry with them always, from you they learn how to trust God and other people, how to love, how to grow closer to God, from you they can learn how to put God at the center of their lives. You cannot make a decision for them, but you can teach them to make right choices, and you do not just bring them to the destination, but take a journey with them. You teach them about commitment, responsibility, trust and faith. I invite all of you to find new ways how to touch your children with God's love, and to allow Him to guide you all in this difficult and rewarding journey. It is a very challenging task but please remember, "The only way to stay above the water is to trust the One who walked on the waves."

Dear Children

There is an old proverb: "Teacher only opens the door (to knowledge), but you must enter by yourself." I invite and encourage all of you to enter that door, to take a step further in your learning about God.

During the blessing of school children on the occasion of the beginning of a new school year we pray: "that the Lord send down upon the children the spirit of wisdom and understanding, and open their minds and their lips, and enlighten their hearts, for the receiving of precepts of good instruction... and understand the knowledge which shall be taught them, to the glory of His all-holy name, to the profit and building up of His Holy Church, and that they may comprehend His good and perfect will... and preserve them in the true faith, and in holiness all the days of their lives, that they may increase in wisdom, and in fulfilling of God's commandments..." (cf. *Euchologion*, pp., 325-327).

Dear Parishioners

You belong to the Church because your parents did a good job, your priests did a good job and school did a good job. You use what they have shared with you and this helps you to live your lives and we know it is the right thing to do. I encourage each one of you to take a step further in your learning about our faith and God. Make use of your parish library, ask your priest questions if you have any, and look for new ways and opportunities to live as followers of Christ, as His disciples in today's world. We are one community. The children at your parish today can see your faith and dedication to the parish: it affects them, it builds them. So, continue to be a good example to them by always doing what is right, by encouraging them, by helping them, by praying for them. That's how we build community, that's how we help one to discern a vocation, that's how we all journey together to the Heavenly Kingdom!

Let us all continue to build vibrant community of faith, where everybody is using his/her talents and shares in the life of the parish, and grows deeper in his/her faith and relationships with God.

Religious education helps us to understand our identity as God's children and how to live out this identity. In the future our Office plans to continue using programs we currently have and to find new and effective ways and resources to teach all about our faith.

Finally, please let me know if the ECF Office can be of any assistance in your catechetical efforts. It is my mission and privilege to serve your educational and spiritual needs. Should you have any suggestions or recommendations related to our religious education programs or in case of questions or if you are looking for ways to deepen your knowledge about faith and God, please do not hesitate to contact me at: directf@eparchyofpassaic.com I want to hear from you!

In closing, it is a blessing for me to serve you and in this wonderful way, be part of your lives by assisting all of you in your efforts to learn about God and our faith and to share this knowledge with others, to bring the light of the Gospel to our parishes and to all people of good will. Please pray that our mission is blessed by God, is fruitful and successful, and all of us are good instruments in God's Hands. May the Holy Spirit guide you through this wonderful adventure and exciting journey of learning about God and our faith! Let us walk together in the footsteps of the Lord, learning from Him and serving Him the best we can. Wishing all of you God's blessings, I will continue to pray for a fruitful, blessed and safe year for all of us.

Fr. Vasyl Chepelskyy

Director of the Office of Eastern Christian Formation