

***The Desires of the Heart:
Inspiring a Vision for Sexual Purity among our Youth***

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Note: Andrew Kern is a seasoned educator and researcher in the field of education, and founder of the CiRCE Institute (<https://circeinstitute.org>), based in Concord, North Carolina. From its webpage:

The CiRCE Institute is a leading provider of inspiration, information, and insight to classical educators throughout the U.S. and Canada via an annual conference, an online classical academy, in-house teacher training, *Lost Tools of Writing*TM Workshops and materials, consulting on board development, school leadership, and school start-up, as well as a content-laden website and blog.

“The plurality into which each human being has descended, given over to a multiplicity of desires, reverberates in the plurality of multiple conflicting voices, each asserting itself.” -- John Behr¹

It is the nature and role and the very name of the devil to be the great divider. His most powerful tool is the lie, which is itself a fragment and distortion of truth. Discord is his wedge, and the soul is his object.

The soul is the seat of our deepest desires. By driving a wedge between those desires, fragmenting them, and putting them in conflict with one another, he murdered our first parents; and he continues to attempt to destroy us today.

When I was asked to present a talk at St. Tikhon’s Orthodox Seminary on the topic of *inspiring a vision for sexual purity among our youth, at school and at home*, I knew immediately that I would need to

conduct a great deal of research. So I did. I went straight to the young men and women in my church community and asked the question: “What inspired you to remain sexually pure?”

I have some good news: people still do.

Their answers were not all that surprising. Most of the women expressed a reluctance to engage in sexual activity out of fear, particularly “Fear of Dad.” Others felt a confusing sense of shame. One wondered, “Why does the act change after a one-hour ceremony?”

However, my appointed theme was “inspiring a vision.” Wisely or foolishly, I take that as a call to find an alternative to fear: a reason to pursue purity beyond the fear of dad or the consequences of sin. More than that, I believe that there are beautiful and positive reasons to cherish sexual purity. I also believe there are things we can teach our children, even in the pre-school years, to incline them to sexual purity.

This paper focuses on the nourishing, ordering, and orienting of desires. It will not address the important protective side of what children should not do, but will focus on what we as parents and teachers ought to do.

As Alexander Schmemmann reminded us, “A strong desire overcomes the natural limitations of man; when he passionately desires something... he overcomes and transcends himself. The only question therefore, is whether we desire the right things.”²

I have a simple thesis: If we hope to inspire our children with a vision for sexual purity, we must honor and cultivate their multifaceted but simple desire to know God.

Let me restate that in a little more detail and then contemplate it with you.

The Holy Trinity has breathed into our souls a desire for *theosis*. This is a desire that can be refracted like a rainbow into at least six subordinate, but interrelated, desires, each of which ought to draw us to Him. When those six desires are corrupted, either by excess or defect, our hungry souls go unsatisfied, and our union with God dissolves. The perfect rainbow of our desires has been diabolically fractured, and as a result, our souls, and the souls of our children, are disoriented and confused.

One of the effects of that disorientation is the sexual confusion that permeates our age. Yet we have the guidance of the Divine Wisdom that enables us to guide our children to *theosis*. This enables us and them to overcome sexual confusion.

Mary Ford summarizes that Divine and Holy Wisdom in her guide to reading the Bible:

The clear goal of traditional Christianity is in fact to deepen and transform our desires through *reorienting them towards Christ, in order to help us fulfill our deepest desires* which lead to the great pleasure... to be, or to become, our authentically “true selves”, something possible only in Christ, in Whose image we are made.³

However, it’s hard for adults, and perhaps especially parents, not to try to deal directly with the sexual question, though it is in fact a secondary or even tertiary matter. First, we can, should, and must tend to each of the six desires. Then, in the fullness of time, we can wisely and confidently attend directly to sexual matters after having laid strong foundations in the Word of our Lord.

This paper concisely, almost as caricatures, introduces six essential God-given desires. I will risk giving each a name, none of which is without potential for confusion. Therefore, I will attempt to define each desire to the best of my understanding. Next, I will offer brief comments

on each of the six desires.

Throughout what follows, we must never forget that in the end, each desire is only a refracted ray of our desire for *theosis*: that is, to *know* God, to be *one* with Him, *ruling* as a kingdom of priests and free children, entering into His *rest*, *shining* like the stars in the heavens, where all the blessed repose *in life eternal*.

Perhaps you noted the hints of the six desires in the previous paragraph. Allow me now to separate what ought not to be separated in order to list them by name and put them back together.

The Creator has breathed into our souls the desires

- To know
- To dance
- To rule
- To rest
- To shine
- To live forever.

The desire to know

First among our desires is the desire to know.

It was Aristotle who famously asserted that “all men by nature desire to know.” Though he could not reach the fulness of knowledge or even the object of his desire, his claim remains axiomatic.

If we wish to wisely nurture this desire, we must ask, what does it mean for us as Orthodox Christians *to know*? Here I offer you my first troublesome caricature: knowledge is the soul’s perception of the essence, or what St. Maximos the Confessor identified as *the logos*, of the object of our knowledge, and with that perception, a right relationship. Knowledge is more than either the recollection of

information or the acquisition of power; it is true perception and right relationship.

If the object of our knowledge is a living soul, we desire union with it. If it is something inanimate, we desire to fit it to ourselves and ourselves to it in an appropriate way. In every case, the union or the harmony depends on a right perception, not only of the objective facts ABOUT the thing or person, but of the very essence of it, a knowledge that carries and protects the meaning of the object.

Biblical knowledge is always *relationship*; it's never purely abstract. Other forms of knowledge offer partial satisfactions, but they fall short of this essential and personal enlightening. For example, if I know the way to my friend's house, there is practical value in that knowledge, so I am happy. Or if I know that $7+2=9$, the world makes better sense to me, so I relax a bit more. If I know the meaning of a word or the structure of an argument, those will help me score well on a test or even give me a path to actual knowledge, and these make me feel proud or hopeful. But these are shadows of knowledge; they fail to give the light from the True Light referred to by the Holy Apostle in John 1:9.

Perhaps Paul includes this concept in the extraordinary promise of I Corinthians 13 (not accidentally, St. Paul's famous encomium to love): "For now we know in part.... Then shall we know as we also are known."

Modern approaches to knowledge waver between, on the one hand, fragmented collections of information gathered into various subject areas, and on the other, means of indoctrination. These approaches don't have the Christian or classical conception of knowledge as perception of an essence, a knowing that sounds philosophical when stated that way, but which is in fact intimate, and personal, and whole.

True sexual knowledge involves a deep and essential knowing of another person; but such a knowledge is available only to people who

have cultivated this Biblical manner of knowing.

Therefore, we must first believe in this kind of personal, intimate, meaningful, and essential knowledge, in which the inner life of one person can interact with the inner life of another through the outward life of the body.

Since God has infused a desire to know rightly, we must nurture this appetite. We must train it and direct it to its right object. To that end, we must cultivate the disciplines required for that kind of knowledge, which are enumerated for us repeatedly at the beginning of each chapter in the book of Proverbs, where you see these verbs and variations on them repeated over and over again: “My son, attend to, remember, think about, understand, and love wisdom.

If we neglect the proper cultivation of the desire to know, it will not go away. It will search hopelessly and desperately for simulacra to assuage the hunger pangs. For many, especially in our age, those simulacra (a Latin word sometimes translated “idol”) will take sexual forms.

The desire for knowledge is satisfied only in *theosis*, one of the qualities of which is the perception of the harmony of all things in Christ.

The desire to dance

To be clear, I am using the word “dance” allegorically for the soul’s desire for all things to be one and to move in harmony. The great Apostle Paul revealed in Ephesians that it pleased the Father to make all things one in Christ. The experience of that harmony is our second inescapable God-given desire.

From very infancy, we are troubled by discord at every level of our being and experience. We assess each experience, tune, song, sentence,

or painting *for its internal harmony*, and externally *for its accord with the world with which it moves*. The desire for harmony is the soul's created yearning to be fittingly one with each thing according to its nature, and for all things together to be one in Christ.

The desire for sexual union is a specific expression of this yearning for union, a desire in which the physical seems most dominant. But sexuality is also a means to a psychological and spiritual union, and the inability to explore those deeper unions frustrates young people. They do not like to believe that it is merely an animal appetite pointing to nothing beyond its own physical satisfaction.

But our age, having rejected the possibility of harmony, has constructed its educational practices to reflect that discord. Anti-logocentric, anti-foundational, and post-human, ours is a fragmented age with a curriculum as shattered as the minds that constructed it. The consequences of this discord are endless, from suicide to social breakdown, with sexual perversion shading the way to both deaths.

The trouble is that a curriculum always serves students as a model of reality. No matter the intention of the adults, it has a deep and profound effect on how our children know the world and their place in it. How they come to know, and the perceptions that arise from that mode of knowing, lay foundations for how they think about their sexuality.

Fragmentation and specialization leave our children unequipped for attacks that come from outside the expected specialized knowledge. They cultivate fragmented habits of thinking, which disables children from perceiving the relationships between created realities.

The unsatisfied yearning for harmony expresses itself in the multitude of our desires for union and communion, at the most intimate level, and at the most public. We need to be able to modulate the private and public for our mental health, but we don't have tools to figure it out

or explain the relations to us.

Above all, our yearning expresses itself in the remarkably persistent, though increasingly hopeless, desire to be whole and pure. Our souls know and our minds prove that harmony requires a transcendent principle. Humans are never content with a mere physical union. We know that sexual activity offers a form of harmony; but without soul and spirit the experience is so deeply disappointing that we exaggerate and contort its pleasures.

How fascinating that the so-called liberation of the sexual appetite, a liberation from what makes it meaningful and human, has led to new modes of oppression and fear, deep personal injustices that shatter souls, relationships, and communities. For injustice is a form of discord that arises from our failure to rightly discipline and order our third great and God-given desire: the desire to rule.

The desire to rule

It may surprise and even trouble you that I speak favorably of your child's (and your) desire to rule. After all, it was St. John Chrysostom who said, "The desire to rule is the father of all heresies."

We are rightly cautious about the desire to rule, but I do not think St. John Chrysostom meant his words to be understood in absolute terms, as though rule can only be tyrannical or dominating. We learn from the words spoken at our creation that we were created precisely to have dominion, as St. John also says!

Like the centurion of great faith in the gospels, in our hearts we want to rule where we have authority, and to rest contentedly in the power of those who rule us where they do. We want to be like the nursing infant resting on her mother's breast, or the laughing son wrestling under, and exulting in, the gentle and trusted power of a playful father. Just as deeply, we want to be like the loving mother and

the gentle father.

It's by learning how to rule justly in their little dominions that our children discover both the meanings of their lives and the love for which they long. They learn that they can and ought to make a contribution to the well-being of others, both objects and living things.

By ruling their toys (that is, playing with them and putting them away), they ensure the well-being and availability of their toys the next time they want to use them; and, by habit, they prepare for the day when their toys become tools. By ruling their beds (that is, sleeping in and making them), they assume an apt authority, and exercise it to bring peace and order into their little kingdoms. By ruling a plant (that is, by watering and trimming it), they discover that they are capable of sustaining the life of a living creature, one that cannot thrive without their care.

As a result, they feel that they matter. By ruling an animal (that is, by feeding, tending, training, and enjoying it), they find that they contribute to the flourishing of something under their care. Perhaps this is why a boy and his dog together serve as something like an icon, the very *type* of a world of love and happiness to which nothing in a child's life can compare except friendship itself.

Most of all, and through all, by ruling their beds, their toys, their plants, and their pets, they learn how to rule themselves. Surely we can see the truth of this in the regular fasts established by our Mother the Church.

It takes time and practice to learn how to rule. If a boy can't rule himself with an empty bed or with a dog, how confident can we be that he can rule himself with a girl near his bed. If our children don't learn to rule their appetites for food, how will they rule their sexual appetites, which are so much more confusing. If the first thing they encounter that requires self-discipline is sexual pleasure, it's going to be hollow.

As parents, we've been delegated the authority to teach our children to rule. To shirk this duty to rule is to fail our children and our Lord. We must cultivate our children's desire to rule things in fitting ways. We must inspire habits of just rule. We must model for them the aspiration to rule themselves.

When we do not cultivate the desire to rule, we breed the despair that permeates our youth and their parents. The joy of aptly ruling a given dominion will be replaced by a restless lust for power and domination, a passion both underlain and undermined by hopelessness.

Weak, undisciplined people (that is, people who have not learned to rule themselves) feel the need to rule something weaker and even more undisciplined. They fall into rudeness and impatience, and from there they slide easily into addictive behavior patterns that often involve drugs and pornography.

Each step of the way, they feel ever more defeated, ever more hopeless. Learning to rule must precede the temptation. The coaching has to start with easier things, like toys, rooms, plants, and dogs, and then harder things like food and money.

It's by learning to rule the body by the soul, and the soul by the spirit, that we learn to harmonize spirit, soul, and body, and thereby to attain integrity, wholeness, and purity of heart, by which alone we are able to see the one desire that most ravishes us, spirit, soul, and body: God Himself.

To rule requires knowledge; and its goal is harmony, justice, and peace. But our rule is threatened both by disordered appetites in our souls, and by forces that attack from the outside.

Consequently, we yearn endlessly for a fourth thing: rest.

The desire for rest

We are more willing to acknowledge out loud that we want rest. In fact, we remind those around us of this desire quite often. Therefore, our danger here is not so much that we will deny this desire, but rather a misapplication of it. We think that what we want is to stop working, but what we really want is to stop *striving*. And we can always do that.

Two images come to mind, which I suggested above in relation to the centurion. Think of a baby resting on her mother's breast after nursing. Or think of a laughing boy wrestling with his father. During liturgy my grandson Jeremiah often comes and stands directly in front of me. I'll rest my hands on his chest to show him how very welcome he is. Sometimes he'll take my hands and lift them up to his neck and arrange them in a strangling posture.

Why does he do that? Why do children delight at being thrown in the air or wrestling with their fathers? It is because, like a head on its shoulders, they are at rest, not passively and slothfully, but actively and eagerly, resting in the strength of the one who could instantly crush them if he wanted to. But they know he doesn't.

This is the rest we want, a rest like the sabbath enjoyed by God on the seventh day. Having conquered chaos, dividing, filling, and blessing the cosmos and then delegating its priestly stewardship to His Image, God looked on His work and declared it very good. Then He both rested and blessed as holy this day of rest. Our souls yearn to reach the end of their week and to rest in the rule we have established.

This is not the rest of sloth, but the rest of dominion. This is a desire that we have been commanded to enter into.

Each week, the Israelites were told to remember the Sabbath day, which we can profitably understand as that first Sabbath that God blessed on the seventh day. They were to keep it holy. But they didn't.

They failed to wrestle with God; instead they strove with Him and tested Him, and He was compelled to drive them out of their land for 70 years.

Why is that so important? And what does it have to do with sexuality? We are a restless and anxious people, and we need to enter into His rest. That is the only rest that will ever satisfy our soul's desire. We want to come under His power and laugh as He tosses us in the air, pins us to the ground, rests us on His Holy Breast; because if we do, then His power and His rest enter into us. Only then can we contribute our witness to a world around us that desperately needs His peace. Only then can we form words and actions and artifacts that embody the rest He has breathed into us.

The Holy Prophet Isaiah testified to Israel: "In returning and rest shall ye be saved; in quietness and in confidence shall be your strength: and ye would not" (Is. 30:15). Rest is confidence. First, confidence in the love of the Father. Second, confidence that He will fit us for the tasks and martyrdom to which He has called us.

Your children yearn to rest in Him, to be seated securely in their domains, to cease striving for glory before men, to stop testing God, to learn confidence from you, and then from Him directly; and finally, to enter into a place of brightness, a place of refreshment, where all the saints repose.

Like us, if they are restless, they will fall back on ruling; but they will not rule from or for peace, but restlessly, from fear and insecurity, unable to deny themselves because they have yet to conquer themselves and therefore to rightly value themselves. If they have not been shown by example and by experience how to rest in our Lord Jesus, the anointed and seated Son of God, if they cannot perceive at least an image or shadow of a son resting in the love of a father, then they will search restlessly and anxiously for anything that gives them confidence, welcomes them, and promises them peace. In our age, that promise often takes the form of sexual seduction.

If our desire to rule is the desire to fulfill our vocation before God, then the desire to rest is the desire to offer our dominion and crown as a thank-offering to the One Who called us and made us for His own joy and glory. Then, when all our labors are over, we may stand before our Lord and hear Him say, “Enter into your rest” (cf. Heb. 4:10).

How can we cultivate rest in our children? I offer five rather obvious suggestions and leave it to you to identify modes that fit your circumstances. First, by ruling them with peace, mercy, selflessness, and justice. Second, by believing that our Lord keeps His promises even in our darkest times. Third, through the practice of gratitude and its corollary, repentance. Fourth, through contemplative participation in the Divine Liturgy. Fifth, by attending with care and diligence to the one thing needful, instead of the many things we become anxious about.

In short, to inspire our children with a vision for sexual purity, we must enter into that rest by faith, and then establish that rest in our habits and practices until it becomes our settled disposition. When it’s ours, we can distribute it to our children with peace of soul and firm conviction that His loving will governs all.

After all, what is that will for us if not what we read in the Epistle to the Hebrews: “Bringing many sons to glory” (Heb. 2:10). This is why He gave Himself for us, that we may shine with glory. This is the fifth God-given desire that fills the souls of our children.

The desire to shine

I have named this desire the desire to shine, and I will explain why below. Nevertheless, it’s here that I anticipate the most resistance. Surely I am not saying that we should desire our own glory!

I can only appeal to you to read the epistles of St. Paul and note what he has to say about *glory*, a constant theme in his epistles. In

Romans 2 he tells us to seek for glory, honor, and immortality. In Romans 8 he assures us that “whom He justified, these He also *glorified*.” In 2 Corinthians 3 he insists that we can be transformed “from glory to glory”; and in 2 Corinthians 4 he contends that “this momentary light affliction” cannot be compared with the “eternal weight of glory” that our troubles are achieving for us.

I could go on, but let me simply make the assertion: It is God’s intention to glorify you. It is God’s intention to glorify your children. Therefore, we should not be so humble that we resist or work against the intention of our Lord.

Now let me put it more dramatically and controversially: You want glory because you ought to want glory. Your children want glory because they ought to want glory.

The problem is not that we want glory. It’s that we want *vainglory*, the simulacra of glory. Because of this we have created a second problem, which is that we have forgotten what real glory is.

Jesus told the Pharisees that the reason they didn’t believe had nothing to do with arguments. It was, He said, “Because you seek the honor that comes from men and not the honor that comes from God.” This is why it matters that, rather than feeling ashamed of this God-given desire, we should come to understand it, order it rightly, and nourish it honorably. For there is a horrible substitute for glory, which is called variously vainglory, or pride, or any number of other damnable vanities.

There are at least two honorable senses in which we ought to seek glory. One is ontological, and one is relational. Ontological glory is the perfection of our being. This is what I mean when I say we want to shine; and this is what the Holy Scriptures promise, going so far as to compare those who are wise with the very stars in the heavens.

Relational glory is when that perfection is recognized by someone else. It's when somebody recognizes that we are radiant and says to us, "Well done."

Your child wants to become authentically what he is made to be. If I may repeat the words of Dr. Mary Ford: "The clear goal of traditional Christianity is in fact to deepen and transform our desires through reorienting them towards Christ, in order to help us fulfill our deepest desires which lead to the great pleasure... *to be, or to become, our authentically 'true selves,' something possible only in Christ, in Whose image we are made.*"

Does your child have any idea what that means? Does she know what she is made to be? Does she have the means to attain it?

Without hope and confidence that he can attain it, your child will despair, fall into anxiety, lose his power to rule rightly, disorder his soul and mind, and close his mind to the knowledge that could have delivered him.

There's no shame in wanting our glory to be recognized and even acknowledged by somebody else. The issue is, *by whom?* It's easy for advertisers and peers to manipulate us and our children when we are vulnerable to flattery. If our children never hear a just "well done," if we fail to give them a fitting honor, the hunger for honor will not go away.

We can fortify our children against this flattery by giving them a taste for true honor, and clinging to our Hope of Glory, our Lord Jesus Himself (cf. Col. 1:27).

We need to know that somebody knows that we are worth their love, and that we please them. We want to be remembered. We want the light of His countenance to shine upon us. This is the desire for true glory that God has placed within us. We must nourish and cultivate and discipline and direct it, because it will not go away; but it can most

easily go astray at the slightest provocation.

If we look at our children's desire for glory as essentially evil, instead of misdirected or too easily "satisfied," something that only Christ can satisfy, something that Christ intends to satisfy, we rob them of a primary motive as images, children, and servants of the Holy Trinity and the Lord of Glory. We want to shine, and we want our dear Father to see that we shine and so please Him who delights in the radiance of His only-begotten Son and all His children.

The desire to live forever

But it's no good to be remembered if you're not conscious of it!

I will mention only briefly that our children want to live forever if only so they can stay in the "well done" of their Lord. When our children are young, they should be shown the power of His resurrection that's given to us when we are baptized into Christ.

Death confronts us with the challenge that perhaps, after all, our lives have been without meaning and what we did mattered to nobody. Yet, when we conclude the Creed, we say, "I look for the resurrection of the dead and the life of the age to come."

I am rather fond of the Latin term for "look for": *expecto*, from *ex* and *specto*. You could say that it means, I am looking out for it. But *specto* is a more concentrated looking than, say, *video*, as you can perhaps see from derivatives like "spectate." Ironically, this brings to mind the father in the parable of the Prodigal Son, *looking out* for his son and running to meet him when he sees him.

As our Lord looks out for us, let us teach our children, primarily by active example, to look for that resurrection and the life of the age that will be fully realized when our Lord returns in His glory. For even now, we have the Holy Spirit Who is the earnest of that life and the promise

of its coming fulness.

May our children cherish the welcoming words of their Lord that await those who are faithful, pure in heart, governing themselves even to martyrdom, “for the joy set before them.”

Perhaps it’s worth ending with the reminder that it’s only those who hunger and thirst for righteousness whose desire will be filled, only the meek who will inherit the earth, and only the pure in heart who will fulfill the one undivided desire that we all share: to attain that perfect union when “we shall be like Him, for we shall see Him as He is (1 John 3:2).

We who have nothing to offer have been made joint heirs with the Son of God. He has washed away our impurities in the laver of regeneration and we are radiant, spotless, and without wrinkle before Him. His “well done” is our lamp, His will is our life-giving bread, and it is in the key of His glory that we offer the songs of our prayers as incense. He has torn the wall of discord and brought us into the bridal chamber to know Him in covenanted love. He has fed us on the heavenly manna, and seated us on the twelve thrones of the eternal kingdom; and we have entered into His rest beneath the wings of the cherubim.

All this He has achieved for us through the Cross, the Tomb, the Resurrection, the Ascension into Heaven, and the Second and Glorious Coming. He has raised us from the multiplicity of desires reverberating in the plurality of multiple conflicting voices to the perfect Harmony of all our desires in that one thing needful.

May we learn to say, from our hearts, the words of our honored Mother more glorious than the Seraphim, “Let it be to me according to Your Word.”

May the Lord remember you, and your children and students, in

His Kingdom!

¹ “Introduction,” *Saint Athanasius: On the Incarnation* (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 2011), 29.

² Alexander Schmemmann, *Great Lent: Journey to Pascha* (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 1974), 18.

³ Mary Ford, *The Soul’s Longing: An Orthodox Christian Perspective on Biblical Interpretation* (Waymart, PA: St. Tikhon’s Monastery Press, 2015), 294; italics added.