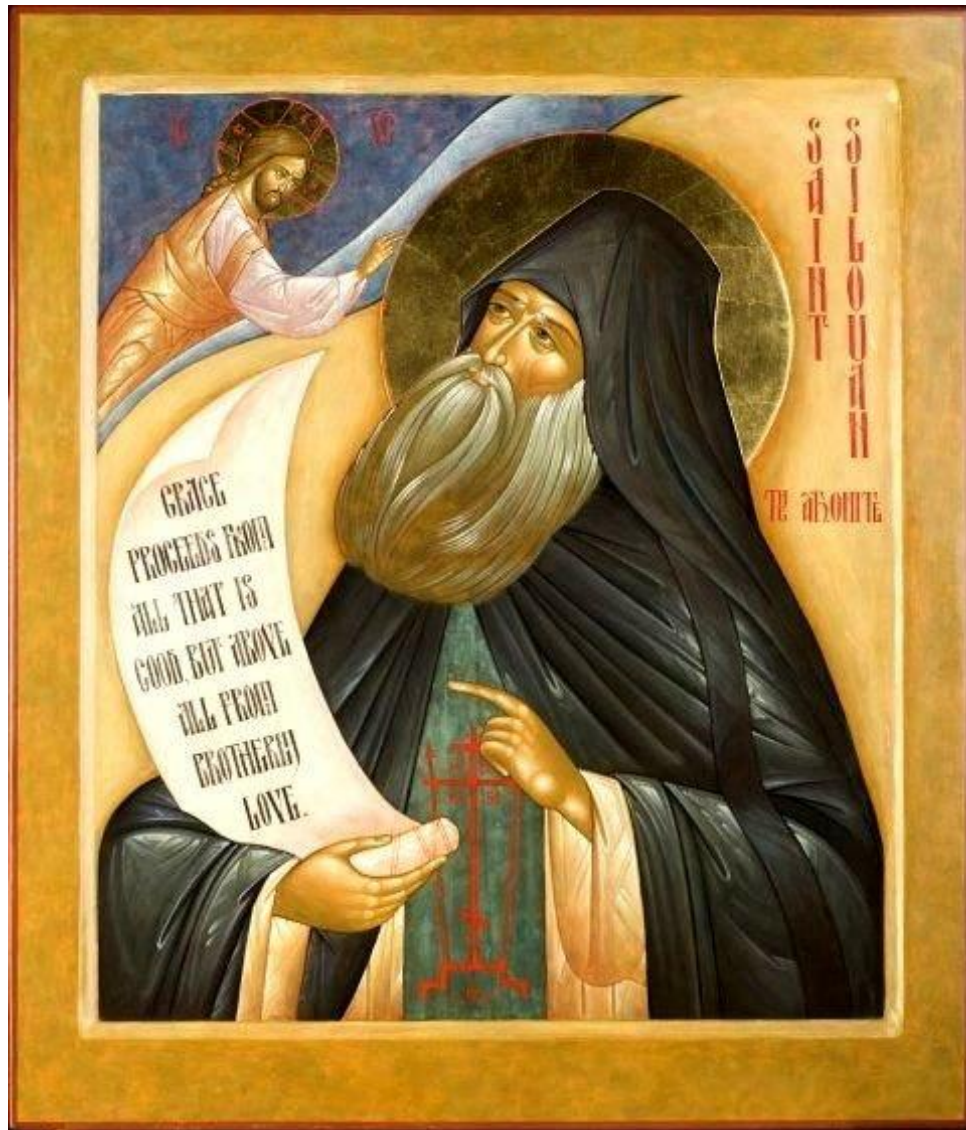


# St. Silouan the Athonite



## Youth Group Guiding Principles

## **Why does St. Silouan parish need a youth group?**

-The church needs to consider the special time of life that the youth are in so that we can better integrate them into the community. To not, would be to risk losing them. So while the youth grow up and learn to appreciate the beauty of the church, the church must in turn recognize the unique qualities of the youth.

-The youth need to have their own social dynamic within the church. This will help link them to the greater church community. Youth need to socialize and find themselves within the community. If they cannot link to the community, even if what we say to them is very good, all words will be completely meaningless. They will join other communities that help them feel like they belong (such as friends at school), and be less inclined to spend time being invested at church.

-A church without a youth group is basically saying goodbye to the youth. Having a youth group is a practical expression of the "liturgy after the liturgy". Having a youth group is how youth liturgize, and shouldn't be seen as optional as it is an extension of the liturgy. Churches without youth groups will eventually go extinct. Such deprived youth will dwindle away as they cease to appreciate what it is that they were baptized into.

-The church itself nourishes and gives identity and personality to young people. The friendships that they will make within the embrace of the church with other young people as well as the adults who love and care for them, is perhaps the only way for a young person to fully mature in their spiritual as well as their personal life.

-Youth group is a different forum than most others our youth are exposed to - in that the youth are in presence and care of adults who care for them, and are encouraged to socialize with their peers. In other situations, there are possibly no adults guiding and loving them, so though they might have socialization of peers, it's without guidelines. Though these other avenues can be healthy in some ways, they could also potentially be a damaging thing.

## **Isn't it enough that they go to church?**

-It might have been for you, but there are a lot of former-Orthodox who've left the church. That way of thinking fails to recognize who the youth are. Youth are not like adults. This is the way into becoming a part of the church. This is the agape meal for the youth. They are not interested in the uncreated light just yet. They are still in a formational period. They need to be educated on the faith at a level they can understand. Youth group is quality catechism for young people, even when there is no discussion at all. Young people who attend youth group are ingesting the doctrines of the Church through catechesis of love: the church, their peers, and leaders love them and this becomes the first and primary teacher toward understanding their faith. In time, lofty words like "apophatic theology" will mean something to them, but only after years and years of being ministered to in a way that makes sense to them. Youth group is a channel where they can learn to join and appreciate the 'dance of the church.' It serves as a bridge that they will eventually cross into full acceptance of the faith.

## **Why should the parents run it?**

-From multiple years of youth group experience as participants and as leaders, we have seen how a youth group cannot be simply an addendum item. It has to be run by people from within the parish, not someone hired from outside. The youth are able to connect better with a person they see on a regular basis. Someone who believes they need this. The adults in the church can show this to them. It shows that they care.

-This demonstrated effort should not be underestimated. When Paul was helping with youth group in previous years, it wasn't on his own - there were still parent leaders. He was fresh out of youth group himself. The youth group cultivates leaders. We must endeavour to bridge any gaps that might allow for youth to fall away from the church. The hope is that they will eventually turn around and help out with the next youth.

-It does not need to be ONLY parents to lead a youth group, but it should be PRIMARILY parents. There's a type of life experience that parents bring that is a little more mature. The lessons a young person would give versus what an older adult would give are very different.

-By having a group of adults with a common interest, churches is more able to bind themselves together. If someone were paid, our church would be no different afterward. Even though possibly our children will get

closer, the adult relationships in parish they would model themselves on would not appear as fully forged together as they are. The kids will take from the example we give to them. If the adults are distant from each other, the youth will be too.

-Having the parents around us as we grew up really enriched our lives. They were a part of our experience. To this day we have a lot of respect for those people that gave themselves and blazed the trail for us. I don't know if we would've have had the same respect for a person that was hired and left us. The parents are part of the village that is necessary to raise us. To this day, those adults who mentored us in youth group are still known to us as, "uncle" and "auntie". We see them as the brothers and sisters of our parents. This is very healthy for youth to see. These adults weren't professional or always dynamic, but we appreciated them and continue to now in our older years, all the effort they put forward in our own youth group years. They became intimately connected to us, so much so that it would be entirely normal that they might attend our weddings now, or our children's baptisms -- they are rooted in our hearts because we knew they were not simply hired to fill a role and then leave.

## **Yearly Calendar**

### **Weekly or biweekly events**

**For lent**, youth group could be Akathist and some post Akathist treat,

### **Two annual trips at least**

-March break trip

-in the past we've done overnight trips to the Refuge as well as to New York City. Both were well received. There's some thought about also possibly doing a trip to Ottawa to visit Christ the Saviour church and tour the city.

**Summer:** OWL camps. No planning involved. Just encourage the youth to go.

### **Weekly or Biweekly Event Scheduling**

Events could be every Friday (or whatever day of the week is most convenient for most people), and begin at 7:30, and end between 9:30 and 10:00pm.

Minute by minute youth event:

-before 7:30 youth arrive

-7:30-7:45 prayers at

-7:45-8:30 catechism or main activity

-8:30 – 9:30 socializing and food

On nights where the activity is richer, the time could be extended (e.g. movie nights)

Socializing for the first while might have to be guided because the youth don't know each other that well yet (e.g. get to know each other games, opinion games, icebreakers) in time these will morph into normal socializing.

### **Overnight Trips**

-these require some scheduling

-balance between church related activities and opportunities for youth to bond and explore. Can be done very cheaply (find thrifty options). There's no precedence for them spending lots on these activities.

-a ball park figure per kid is ~\$100 with some subsidy from Parish youth budget

Outline of overnight trips at Refuge:

-mornings and evenings, we have prayer, and a prayer before every meal.

- three meals a day
- plan activities and catechesis around meals and prayers
- having a theme for the trip which a lot of the activities/catechesis revolve around
- make sure to have some fun time.
- have one of the nights be a movie night. (Parish has a projector screen)

A similar outline could be set up for out of town/province/country trips, with maybe shorter meditations after breakfast or supper with more attempt to try to see attractions in the area for cheap (e.g. going to Times Square, the Met, Ground Zero, all of which were free)

-Christ the Saviour Orthodox Church in Ottawa is a possible idea for an overnight trip. Contact Fr. Maxim through Fr. Roberto. Two night, three day trip. Ideas: tour Parliament Hill, Byward Market, downtown Ottawa, the river, skating on the Rideau and check out whatever else is there. Attend vespers and liturgy at Christ the Saviour. Possibly have Fr. Maxim speak to them. Arrangements for meals and accommodations are the only serious arrangements needing to be made.

- Emmaus House, NYC
- St. Herman's House, Cleveland
- Other Orthodox mission centers

### **Locations to hold youth group**

We should have a hub location (St. John's Mission). Regular youth groups which begin with prayer, have a lesson, and then have socializing time, works well at the Mission. Also movie nights could happen there, and guest speakers could speak from there as well.

### **Food at regular events**

A light snack is a good idea. Maybe special occasions could have a lot of food. (small snacks are fine e.g. popcorn and juice)

### **Outreach to the youth**

Every two weeks a few days ahead of the event, give a personal call/gentle reminder to encourage the youth to come. In time, if there's a routine, the outreach efforts could become less frequent.

There should also be an attempt to not only "put on events" with the youth, but also to engage with the youth (e.g. at church at agape meal, to be ever mindful that you are wearing your youth leader hat, ask "how's it going?" being purposeful and attentive to the situation to seize opportunities to show care for the kids at all/appropriate times.)

### **Catechesis and resources**

-Not every meeting requires a lesson, but it would be good for there to be a short meditation for the youth to chew on.

-It ought not to zero in on the personal issues of any of the youth (e.g. one person is known for doing drugs, don't talk about doing drugs).

-Speak on whatever seems pertinent to the speaker if it's on the level of the youth. That'll be far more effective than trying to understand their issues. However, youth group is a good time to expound on issues that the church can speak on, e.g. lessons related to relationships and love, general interest issues to young people. Young people are very attuned to injustices, and how the church responds to them. Use topics that are tantalizing for their age, but not targeting one person's issue. Interweaving issues with what's seasonal (seasons of the church, saints feast days, etc. Anecdotal stories of lives of saints can be very impactful while they are young).

-The internet has a lot of resources. If you're not sure of your topic, you can bounce your ideas off the clergy, the other parent leaders, or Paul/Naomi. Disclaimer: not everything that claims to be Orthodox on the internet is. There's lots of bad theologizing on the internet, so you can check with someone.

### **Parish's involvement with the Youth**

- e.g. getting choir director to do akathist workshop with the youth
- e.g. parish council to see youth as a body that could be called upon.
- we have now empowered a group of people and they should be called upon.

### **Youth involvement in the Parish**

-This is an ongoing effort to try to get youth to see themselves as part of the parish. It would not be good if the youth begin to see themselves as an entity and their events as a thing that happens away from/outside of the parish.

-Parents are liaisons between the youth and parish.

-Has some need or event in the parish arisen? The youth as an entity could address it together. E.g. youth organize a parish picnic, put on a bake sale to raise money for a benevolent charitable need in the parish, or even simply washing up agape meal dishes.

-Inviting youth to be involved in liturgy in some way such as singing in choir, helping in the altar, or leading a Lenten service.

### **Youth involvement in the Mission**

-Youth at St. Silouan have the unique opportunity above other youth to easily access St. John's Mission. Some youth events could be held on Saturdays to help run the meal program instead of Fridays. They could serve meals, wash dishes, and get to know people from St. John's community.

-Another creative way to help kids understand and appreciate St. John's Mission is by having an annual "40 Hour Challenge". Maybe 20 of the hours could be in the form of a series of youth events. Then invite youth to come to do 20 other hours at the Mission. There could be rewards for those who do well.

-At the end of the calendar year, a youth group night could be a debriefing with Fr. Roberto or another clergy about their experiences, what they've seen, and the complexities of Life beyond their own lives.

### **Where to get ideas from?**

#### **Be aware of:**

- what is happening in Toronto
- the time of year and what events might be good for that season
- what is going on at school at that time of year
- what future jobs are looking for
- what interests the youth

-Use the seasons to your advantage. Be in the know about different things going on around Toronto (e.g. summer is a great time to run BBQs; there are many parks around the mission area). In the winter when Nathan Phillips square opens, skating capped off by hot chocolate at Tim Horton's across the street.

-In colder months, more indoor ideas such as movie nights, rent Queen Alexandra gym for dodgeball championship

-Guest speakers. Find out what the strengths of the guest speaker is and use them.

-Making sure they engage with the clergy from St. Silouan (having Fr. Roberto and others talk to the kids, even about in-house things such as the history of the Mission, etc).

-Get into the habit of having youth groups start with a prayer rule (nothing laborious) and having the kids run it, along with the Book of the Hours distributed. The leaders could select different kids each time to lead them in prayer (if meeting in public spaces, this is maybe not necessary, but other times make it seem not optional).

-Though not every meeting needs to have a “lesson” of sorts, when you do provide a lesson, it should not exceed 30 minutes. A good lesson will always prompt for a guided discussion. But lessons need to be engaging. There should be a rotation so that different adults are benefitting them with different thoughts. No lesson needed for days when they go to out e.g. Nathan Philips square.

-Always have socializing time.

### **Past youth group activities:**

- scavenger hunt downtown in September while the weather is still warm
- barbeque at park at the beaches (end of school year)
- beginning of summer, pick-up soccer at the beach
- movie nights
- sleepover at one youth leaders home
- documentary discussion youth group
- pool party at one family’s house
- games night at LTS
- invited any visiting youth groups to join
- Akathist workshop at Drobac home
- Akathist led by youth group, followed by falafels down the street from mission
- Etc

### **Logistics**

-some youth might not be able to easily come to the site. Carpooling might be necessary.

### **How each parent can help?**

- driving kids to events and home
- organize/provide snacks
- plan the weekly plans
- do the outreaching/calling
- group effort for trip organizing
- book guest speakers
- host events
- group effort to come up with ideas for events
- parents might need to be emailing regularly
- biannually or quarterly, have a meeting to assess progress and create a plan for the upcoming months

### **Money**

Depending on this becomes costly, on some weeks, we can ask each child to bring \$2 to help with costs. Usually we tell the parents ahead of time of what money will be required.

The Parish has a budget for youth events which the parents should feel free to access as needed.