



Theological Education

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Fr. Robert Knight's Commemorative Address at St. Herman Theological Seminary, Kodiak, Alaska

The theme of my address is theological education. It comes in no sector that for many outside of the seminary community, theological education is nothing more than a costly luxury, which the Church—particularly the Church in Alaska—can do without. For some, in and outside of Alaska, St. Herman's Seminary has deviated from its intended path by striving to provide a quality theological education to its students, who will return to homes and villages to serve the faithful and to counsel those seeking to enter the new life in Christ.

Theological education is not a luxury, nor is it something the Seminary should abandon for some other candidate that would deprive this diocese of educating and training leaders who will, in time, give their lives to the building up of the local Church in Alaska.



Theological education is a necessity that originates in the parish and is further developed and broad through the seminary. My desire today is to speak about these aspects of theology: Theology and Life, Theology and Mission and Theology and Culture.

Theology and Life

Theological education is based on life. It is necessary for life. It provides the means by which the relationship between God and humanity can be best articulated. Theological education, because it is nurtured and sustained by the Holy Spirit in His giving and His forming. For this reason, it cannot be confined solely to the classroom. Here we can benefit from the wisdom of the venerable Father George Florovsky who in an article on ecumenism, almost over fifty years ago that any discussion about the Church needed to move from the classroom and street back to the temple. We can use the advice as we discuss theological education and its spiritual and intellectual components. For it is in the temple — more specifically it is in the context of our liturgical worship that theology is best expressed and manifested in the celebration of word and sacred life. When theological education becomes separated from the temple and Quaker, from the life of the local Church, it becomes an artifact that has the ultimate just as its only point of relevance.

Theology in life and in our architecture. For us, the study of theology is not a starting point for discussing the interaction between God and humanity that leads to the very essence and continues into the future. It is my experience as an instructor at the seminary and as a parish priest, one of the most dangerous reductions of a theological education that I have encountered has been its divorce from life. How easy it is to turn Orthodox theology into an academic discipline as an academic career without spiritual coverage. While our academics and seminarians have historical academic excellence, the curriculum each may offer must be based on the spiritual life. There is the need to build in the professors and students the fundamental idea that the study of scripture, history, liturgy, practices and dogmatics cannot be separated from seeking after the "wisdom of heaven and the gifts of heaven." Academic excellence cannot be achieved if one does not acquire the Holy Spirit. Understanding theology or theological education as something parallel to the life of a Christian is fully consistent in one dimension that, in any respect, the words proper to God are becoming a life change. The life theology resulting from an alien spirituality, alienates its essential nature by neglecting human culture and participation with the history of social and political change.

The spiritual and intellectual formation of the Orthodox theologian is provided by the spiritual discipline of the Church. Academic needs to connect with spiritual life with one that seeks to love and serve Christ and neighbor. The academic related needs to experience, prayer, fasting and the involvement of the passions have contained in by Elder John the Baptist. Christ "never deceives, but never deceives" (St. John). These words capture as well the life of the academic theologian. They express a way of life that ultimately allows the mind and heart to participate in the central activity of the Holy Spirit. The success of this capability is a living and true theology that reflects and responds to the new questions and challenges of the 21st century. Science, technology, globalization, local, national and world politics, the suffering and treatment of the oppressed and the innocent, human sexuality and the abuse of the environment are backdrops for the Orthodox Church and, therefore, Orthodox theology to meet the cry of academia.

Theology and Mission

Theology is evangelial. Unfortunately, the missionary responsibility of our Church continues to be understood by ethnic, chauvinistic. Used to become closer to the Orthodox themselves that every local parish is, by definition, a missionary community and responsible for offering the Gospel to all people, theology will remain separated from life. Every parish must strive to be a center of spiritual and intellectual formation.

Because theology seeks to proclaim the Gospel in time and space, it has to be very human and evangelial quality. This means that Orthodox theology cannot be the possession of a particular people. It is universal in scope, offering the saving and transforming power of Christ's gospel to all nations. Our history teaches us that in the Church engaged in time and space, it used the culture of empire and nation to articulate a living theology. This is certainly the method employed by the Church Fathers. Knowing the language, art, philosophy, literature, science and politics of their time, they were able to convey the gospel to people of varying intellectual and social backgrounds. They were able to proclaim Christ who is the "true presence, being and essence" (St. John), using the culture with the word as their digital.

Today Orthodox schools of higher learning, especially our academies and seminaries, need to preserve and develop the patristic method of using culture for the proclamation of the Gospel. Because they know their culture well, the Fathers were able to interact with its prevailing ideas. They were able to draw the knowledge of their surroundings into a broad ecumenical spirituality that enabled them to communicate the Gospel freely and openly.

A theology separated from the culture is ultimately a theology separated from the people. To respond to the culture, especially the challenges posed by the rapid development of science and technology, theology is compelled to creatively interact with its environment so as not to fall into a cultural vacuum. The voice of the Gospel and, therefore, the voice of Orthodox theology will be heard only when the theologian truly knows his audience.

While the missionary thrust of theology is directed toward the world, there is the ongoing need to educate the faithful. Seminars, Bible studies, church school curricula and publications are to raise the level of awareness—need to open the mind and hearts of all the faithful. Theological education has the task of instilling in those who would preach and teach the ability to challenge and obtain the wisdom and hearts of the faithful, regardless of social and educational backgrounds. Too often theology among the Orthodox is relegated to the ivory tower where what is offered the faithful is of the lowest common denominator. Here we need to remember that Holy Scripture and the subsequent writings of the Fathers were written for the education of the faithful. The high theological culture of St. Basil's Gospel, St. Paul's Letter to the Romans, and the treatise On the Incarnation by St. Athanasius were not only for the building up of the local Church and not only for the scientific analysis of academia.



St. Philaret Dushakov of Moscow reminded his flock that every Christian had the duty to learn. Those who preach, teach and write theology are challenged to consider all the baptized to know their faith well. St. Innocent Yudinovich, first ruling bishop in North America and later Metropolitan of Moscow explained that "it is the binding duty of every Christian, when he teaches another, to know his faith thoroughly, because anyone who does not have a solid knowledge of his faith is cold and indifferent to it and frequently falls either into superstition or nihilism" (Indication of the Way into the Holy Kingdom). This great missionary bishop helps us to see that theology belongs to everyone who is a Christian. Therefore, it is up to those who have the gift of a formal theological education to cultivate interest and enthusiasm among those seeking Christ. For God "desires all to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth" (1 Tim. 2:4).

Just as theology must not be confined to the ivory tower, it also must not become a prisoner of occasion. It must not be entangled by an attitude or stated not that understands and articulates the vision and life of the Church as it is seen through the cloudy lens of ignorance, fear and open antagonism to anything new, different or challenging to the status quo. We as Orthodox Christians living in the West in the 21st century and have no right to pretend that we live in Byzantium or pre-Revolutionary Russia. Both of these worlds are gone. And let us forget, each of these worlds was fraught with its own inherent problems, tensions and hopes.

Theology and Pastoral Care

Throughout this address I have assumed that theology belongs to all the faithful. Yet, because it is the parish priest who potentially has the most influence when it comes to teaching in a local church, I will finish my remarks to his vocation.

Theology and pastoral care cannot be separated. The theologian is pastor and the pastor is theologian. By virtue of his place within the Eucharistic community, the pastor is compelled to share the theology of the Church with his flock. Because the pastor lives and works within a specific community he cannot escape one-faith theology to his own flock or to his flock. The pastor theologian is no stranger to the community of the faithful that theology books use to God's kingdom. The pastor theologian is to be perceived as a servant who like the Lord himself, takes on the struggles and burdens of those to be cared. In his Great Commission, St. Theodore the Studite notes to the heavy responsibility he carries due to those in his care: "For your spiritual I have to deliver my flock soul, even shed my blood. According to the words of the Lord, this is the special function of the good and true shepherd: bring forth from him, and culture and animate, procreate, discipline and discipline."

These difficult words of the Studite remind us that the pastor is to love and care the other as he seeks to lead and care the other. In the nature of pastoral care, theology often comfort and hope. Theology brings the dead to life and prepares the living for death. Theology shows the wounded back to the center of the Church's worship when, in the context of the Divine Liturgy, everyone and everything begins in proper identity in relationship to the Triune God. In the context of the Eucharistic celebration we are "baptized" here and now "into the Kingdom which is to come" (St. Symeon the Great).

So long as theology is experienced and taught in that which brings us into the Church—the saving and sanctifying life in Christ—the missionary endeavor will not be spent or compromised. So long as theology is treated as a gift that shines on from the spiritual realm, it will continue to build up and unify the body of Christ.

Finally, so long as theology is accepted with faith and in a spirit of humility, the divine uncreated light of the Godhead will continue to transform and defy the human person and his surroundings.

Thank you.

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