

Toward an Orthodox Pedagogy: Teaching as the Church Teaches

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In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen. Thank you all for coming. We will do our best to make your time and attention worthwhile.

About four years ago, at the St. Kosmas Orthodox Education Conference, there was a panel discussion on the topic, “What is Orthodox Classical education?” The panelists discussed the question for over two hours without coming to any satisfactory answer. Finally one member of the panel suggested that the word “classical” be removed from the question, and that the discussion be, “What is Orthodox education?” When this suggestion was made, there was a wave of relief in parts of the audience. However, by this time it was too late in the evening to continue. The result would have been the same if the question had been, “What is Orthodox Montessori education?” or “What is Orthodox Charlotte Mason education?” or “What is Orthodox (fill in the blank) education?”

The problem with these questions is that while there seems to be one starting point, there are actually two. Therefore, the discussion is starting at two places at once. So where do we start? One of the starting points is Orthodoxy and the other is a particular secular pedagogy. I do not mean to be pejorative with the word “secular,” but simply want to point out that Orthodox pedagogy and (fill in the blank) pedagogy are not the same. That is why no satisfactory answer was found.

The above mentioned secular pedagogies have expressed in writing, at least to some extent, the principles upon which they are based. We have prepared what we consider to be a beginning of an answer to the question, “Upon what principles is Orthodox education based?”, or more simply, “What is Orthodox education?”

To give you a sense of the talk, I will tell you that it will be in four sections.

I. Introduction, and a description of the current situation concerning various pedagogies used by Orthodox educators

II. Powers of the Soul, according to St. Theophan the Recluse

III. How these powers are educated in Orthodox liturgical life

IV. How these powers can be educated in the classroom

Introduction

I will be using the word, “pedagogy” many times in this talk, so I had better define what is meant by the word.

The word pedagogy comes from Greek, originally meaning “leader of children”, in terms of their education. Now it refers to teaching methods. Pedagogy refers to both the content of education, namely, what is taught, and to the ways in a which a teacher delivers that content to the students, namely, how that content is taught.

Orthodox teachers, either in their homes or in an Orthodox school, use one or more of a variety of educational approaches, or pedagogies. Among the most popular are those promoted by Charlotte Mason, Maria Montessori, and some form of Classical Education. There are Orthodox Facebook groups for home-schooling parents who use these pedagogies. There are Orthodox Charlotte Mason schools, Orthodox Montessori schools, and Orthodox Classical schools. In addition, there are also Roman Catholic and Protestant schools, as well as non-Christian schools, which are founded on these same three pedagogies. Without doubt, there are some valuable insights in each of these pedagogies. Yet, despite their good qualities, none of these pedagogies are founded on Orthodox Christianity.

Have you ever considered that the Orthodox Church has a pedagogy, a set of principles concerning teaching, which can be applied to our efforts in teaching our children, either in a home-schooling environment or in a multi-family Orthodox school? Once we discern these Orthodox teaching principles, we will have the right perspective from which to evaluate, and to accept or reject, the methods of the various secular pedagogies.

An analogy of the current situation would be a cake. The pedagogy being used - Charlotte Mason, Montessori, Classical, whatever - becomes the core, or the heart, of the school, the cake itself; and then the Orthodox, Catholic, or Protestants running the school add their religious “frosting.” What if the core, the heart of the school, as well as the “frosting” could be founded on Orthodox principles? This is the subject of our presentation.

Archimandrite Sergius (Bowyer), the abbot of St. Tikhon Monastery in Pennsylvania, has written a short book called *Acquiring the Mind of Christ*. In this book, he makes a simple, yet profound, point. He writes,

The Church’s mind is the mind of Christ. The way the Church thinks is the way we need to learn to think about God, each other and the world. (Bowyer, xiii)

We need to learn to think as the Church thinks. This goal is one that no Orthodox Christian could easily contradict. Yet, this simple principle has a corollary which Orthodox teachers should consider. Would not thinking as the Church thinks include teaching as the Church teaches?

We should make an effort to learn how the Church teaches, because if we teach the way the Orthodox Church teaches, then our teaching will be founded on an Orthodox pedagogy rather than the pedagogy of the ancient Greeks, Charlotte Mason, Maria Montessori, or any other popular educator. By starting with the mind and pedagogy of the Church, our schools could be more faithful extensions of the Church, in that they would be based on the same understanding of human nature that is taught by the Church.

Background

A little background information would be helpful to illustrate this point. My wife and I each have taught in schools for over thirty years. Before our conversion to Orthodoxy, we had been teaching in our own school and using methods gleaned from all the pedagogies mentioned above.

However, after being baptized in the Church, we began to realize that beneath each of these pedagogies there was, as a foundation, a particular understanding of

the nature of a human being, and a particular view of the goal of education. The pedagogies were different because each was founded on a different understanding of a human being, and each had a different view of the goal of education.

While we appreciated aspects of each of these approaches, we wanted to be grounded in the Orthodox understanding of a human being and discover how that understanding should influence what we did in the classroom.

There is, as you know, a striving in Orthodoxy that the home should be “a little Church.” It is also important that the school become “a little Church.” This is because the goal of an Orthodox education should be to participate in the Church’s goal to produce saints.

Probably everyone here knows the saying of St. Theophan the Recluse, **“Of all the holy works, the education of children is the most holy”** (St. Theophan, *Path to Salvation*, pg 84). His words should be encouraging to all of us, but his words should also be a challenge. What does St. Theophan mean by this?

Is simply teaching history, language arts, mathematics, science, etc. the most holy of holy works? Teaching these things to children is a good work, but if this was all it took to be a “holy” work, then all schools, Orthodox and non-Orthodox, even non-Christian and public schools would be examples of this “holy work.” In making this claim, St. Theophan must have had something deeper in mind.

If St. Theophan’s view of education is that it is the most holy of works, he must mean by the word “education” something far beyond simply providing children with the information they will need to be successful in their life. St. Theophan’s claim about education only makes sense if he were considering the education and development of the souls of the children, not just their minds. St. Theophan’s view of education must be that it is primarily concerned about the right-formation of the soul, not just about providing information for the brain.

The well-known quote of St. Theophan about education being a holy work appears in his book, *The Path to Salvation*. There is, however, another passage in the same book which is not so well-known. This unknown passage is actually the foundation of the more well-known passage, because it gives us the conditions which must be met if education is to be considered a “holy work.” He writes that,

It should be placed as an unfailing law that every kind of learning which is taught to a Christian should be penetrated with Christian principles, more precisely, Orthodox ones. (St. Theophan, *The Path to Salvation*, pg. 64)

What we teach our children should obviously be in line with what the Church teaches; we should not teach that which the Church does not hold as true. Yet, St. Theophan is directing us to take a further step, that is, to align our teaching with the Church, not only in *what* we teach, but also in *how* we teach.

So, how does one learn to teach the way the Church teaches? We propose that the Church reveals not only Her thinking, but also Her way of teaching, that is, Her pedagogy, in Her liturgical life. By examining the liturgical life of the Church, we can discern the principles of Orthodox pedagogy, that is, how the Church teaches.

St. John of Kronstadt, in his book, *My Life in Christ*, describes the educational aspect of Orthodox services in this way:

The Church, through the temple Divine services, acts upon the entire man, educates him wholly; acts upon his sight, hearing, smelling, feeling, taste, imagination, mind, and will, by the splendor of the icons and of the whole temple, by the ringing of the bells, by the singing of the choir, by the fragrance of the incense, the kissing of the Gospel, the cross and the holy icons...

(St. John of Kronstadt, *My Life in Christ*, pg. 401)

It is interesting that St. John uses the phrases, “the entire man” and “educates him wholly” because this same terminology is used in the web sites and brochures of many schools, Orthodox and non-Orthodox, which claim that their school “educates the whole child.”

This goal of educating the whole child is a noble aspiration, but who knows the whole child, who holds the correct view of human nature? The answer is the Orthodox Church. Therefore, if we desire to educate the whole child, we must know something about the human soul, which leads us to the next part of this talk.

The Human Soul, according to St. Theophan

Several Church Fathers write about the soul, but for us it was St. Theophan who was most helpful. In two of his books, *The Path to Salvation* and *The Spiritual Life*, St. Theophan writes about the soul in a way which can be successfully applied to education.

While it is obvious that a person's body and mental capacities develop over time, we do not often consider the soul as something that "develops." St. Theophan writes,

the soul appears in the world naked; it grows, becomes rich with inner content, and undertakes various forms of activity only later. The first material, the first food for its formation, it receives from outside, from the senses, through imagination." (St. Theophan, *The Path to Salvation*, pg. 53)

The teaching that the soul develops over time can also be seen in the writings of Metropolitan Hierotheos. In his book, *Orthodox Psychotherapy*, the Metropolitan quotes St. John of the Ladder on this subject. St. John writes,

The embryo is endowed with a soul at conception... and the soul at that time is just as active as the flesh. As the body grows, so the soul increasingly manifests its energies [or powers].
(Metropolitan Hierotheos, *Orthodox Psychotherapy*, pg 108, quoting St. John, from *The Ladder*, Step 26)

Our soul actually goes through a process of formation or development; it is influenced, positively or negatively, by what it experiences. Like our body, our soul requires healthy experiences for its "nutrition" and right development.

The Church Fathers teach that the soul has three primary "powers." Different terms are used to name these powers; we will refer to them as the power of will, the power of feeling, and the power of thought. As we give a brief description of each power, you will notice that the way St. Theophan describes them is different than how the earlier Church Fathers, like St. Gregory Palamas, describe them.

Perhaps this difference is because the earlier Fathers wrote about the soul from the perspective of ascetic struggle, whereas St. Theophan (at least in *The Path to Salvation* and *The Spiritual Life*) writes about the soul from the perspective of what it needs for its healthy development. It is like looking at a diamond from different angles. Although the diamond does not change, different colors are revealed from different perspectives. Also, since St. Theophan lived much closer to our own time, the way he expresses himself is more familiar to us.

This simple understanding of the soul is essential if one is to appreciate the connection between Orthodox liturgical life and an Orthodox pedagogy. Initially, these descriptions may not seem related to education, but we will show the relationships.

The Will

The power of will in the soul is sometimes called the active part and sometimes the desirous, or appetitive (as in appetite) part. How often have we thought, “I desire something and will do this to get it.” In order to fulfill our desires, we engage in a particular activity. Therefore this power is called the desirous or active part. St. Theophan shows the relationship between this power of the soul and the body when he writes,

The second function of the body is movement. Its organ is the muscles, in which lie the power and strength of the body, the means of labor. With relation to the soul this [the muscles] is the seat of the will, and it very easily develops self-will. (St. Theophan, *Path to Salvation*, pg. 49)

Our soul expresses this power of will mainly through the movements of the body, or movements of the mind. One expression of this power is imitation. We have all seen children imitate what they see and hear, and perhaps we saw it as “cute.” Yet, the imitation we see in children is far more than “cute”; it is an expression of the power of will in the soul. The desire to imitate what they see and hear is a great force within a child. It is the soul, wanting to learn, and doing so by acting out what it has observed through the senses. Children imitate not only their parents’ words and actions but also their attitudes. St. John Damascene teaches that this learning is an activity of the soul, saying that **“The pleasures of the soul are**

those which are the exclusive possession of the soul, such as the pleasures of learning and contemplation.” (*Exposition of the Orthodox Faith*).

Young children imitate with uncanny accuracy and yet seem to be unaware that they are doing so. Perhaps this is because, at this stage of a child’s life, the power of will has developed more than the power of thinking. For example, at one time we had two deacons serving in our church. The rhythm with which they swung the censer was slightly different. One little boy in our parish, fully into the imitation stage, knew exactly when the deacon was about to come out to cense. At vespers one evening, the young boy had already started his censuring for “Lord, I have Cried” (with his prayer rope) in the rhythm of the deacon he expected to come out of the altar. When the other deacon came out, he changed his rhythm in accordance with that deacon without missing a beat. It was as if there were no thought involved, but simply the power of will.

Another expression of the power of will is the ability to give attention to one thing rather than to another. This activity of the will is also an action, although not so obvious, since it is an internal action, rather than an external one. In this case, the action of the will shows itself as a decision concerning where the mind is to be focused. Many thoughts call for our attention; it is our will which decides which ones receive that attention.

St. Theophan notes that,

Properly, the work of the soul in this part (the will) is the establishment of temporal living conditions for man, so that he will be well-off... At the same time, it is not satisfied with this, but goes out of this domain and carries out deeds and undertakings not at all because they are necessary, beneficial or pleasant, but because they are good, virtuous and just. (St. Theophan, *Spiritual Life*, pg. 68)

Both St. Theophan and Irenaeus, Bishop of Ekaterinburg and Sibirsk in Russia, make mention that the power of will is actually the “mistress” of the other powers of the soul. After describing the will, St. Theophan writes,

From what you have been told, it will not be difficult for you to draw conclusions concerning the natural and correct activity of the will, which, as you see, is the mistress of all our powers and our life. (St. Theophan, *Spiritual Life*, pg. 55)

In the third chapter of his work, *On the Upbringing of Children*, Bishop Irenaeus, writing about the importance of teaching obedience, echoes the same observation,

We can even say that he who has succeeded in teaching his children obedience has solved the problem of their upbringing. This is because the will is the strongest power of the soul, governing all the other powers. That which we will, we also think, say and do. (Bishop Irenaeus, *On the Upbringing of Children*, pg. 19)

What we want for our children is a will which is not “self-willed”, that is, only seeking personal good, but a will which desires the good of others, and ultimately desires God. However, in our fallen state, our will does not readily yield to these higher aspirations and therefore *the right development of the will always requires a struggle.*

Rightly forming or educating the will, leading to the formation of virtue, is done primarily through disciplined physical activity, training the mind to observe and attend, depriving the body of unnecessary comforts, and participating in virtuous actions. Virtue is not developed by an intellectual knowing how to act, but rather by the performing the actions themselves.

The Heart

The second power of the soul is the power of feeling, which is sometimes called the heart, the incensive, or the sensual power. The word “sensual” often carries negative connotations in Orthodox writing because we often sin through our senses. In this context, however, the word is used simply to relate the fact that it is this power of our soul which gives us the ability to be aware, through the bodily senses, of that which is outside of ourselves.

For a young child, the first perceptions are very basic. We see this power express itself in the infant who wants to touch everything, then put it into the mouth for a

detailed examination. As the child grows, the perceptions become more refined. Soon the child will be experimenting with sounds he can make by himself, such as babbling, as well as sounds he can make with the objects around him.

Children's ability to see in more detail comes during this time and, as a result, they are fascinated by all around them. Reaching for objects, like mommy's glasses or daddy's beard, hitting objects together to hear the sounds made, and experimenting with their own sounds are all signs of the emergence of the sensual power of the soul.

This power of feeling involves not only perceptions from the outside, but also the perception of one's inner state. Whenever we ask someone the simple question, "How are you?", we are actually asking the person to use this power of the soul to discern their inner state.

In *The Spiritual Life*, St. Theophan describes the power of feeling, or heart, in this way,

In the sensual [or feeling] part of the soul, there appears a yearning and love for the beautiful. The proper work of this part is to perceive in the soul, through the senses, either its own pleasant or unpleasant condition...But we see in the realm of the senses along with these mercenary senses - we will call them such - a number of selfless feelings, which arise completely apart from the gratification or non-gratification of requirements; they are feelings from delight in the beautiful.

The eye does not want to tear itself away from the flower and the ear does not want to tear itself away from the song, only because the one and the other are beautiful. We go for a walk and select a place for the single reason that it is beautiful. Above this is the enjoyment received from paintings, works of sculpture, music and singing, and even higher than this, the enjoyment received from poetry. (St. Theophan, *Spiritual Life*, pg. 69)

Notice a similarity between the description of the power of will and the power of feeling. Both powers have a very personal aspect, namely, what *I* want, (the will), or what *I* feel, (the heart). Yet both powers have the possibility to go beyond the

personal to something higher, namely, to virtue for the will, and to true beauty for the feeling.

St. Theophan also tells us that, **“The soul seeks not only what is beautiful... but also the expression of the beautiful.”**(St. Theophan, *Spiritual Life*, pg. 70) We have all seen this selfless aspect in children. How many of you parents and teachers have been given pictures from your children or students who drew them especially for you? This is their enjoyment of what is beautiful and their longing to share this beauty with those they love.

St. Theophan notes that it is the feeling, or heart, aspect of the soul which is involved as children acquire tastes for various experiences. As children grow, they develop tastes for various things: foods, types of music, literature, art, and quality of relationships, and most importantly, the place of God in their life. This is why we must provide quality in all these areas. He writes,

The most effective means for the education of true taste in the heart is a church-centered life, in which all children in their upbringing must be unfailingly kept. (St. Theophan, *Path to Salvation*, pgs.59-60)

Note St. Theophan’s use of the word “education.” It clear from this quote that his use of the word “education” refers to the process of the formation of the soul. As one of our mentors said, “We teach souls, not subjects.” In other words, true Orthodox education is aimed at the soul, not the brain. If we keep this in mind, all the powers of our children’s souls will get plenty of opportunities to develop correctly.

The Mind

The third faculty of the soul is the power of thought, also called the intellectual or rational power. St. Theophan notes that,

In children the power of thinking is quickly manifested. It comes at the same time as speech and grows together with the development of [speech]. (St. Theophan, *Path to Salvation*, pg. 56).

Generally, children are able to say at least one word - maybe “mama” or “dada” - when they are about one year old. They say the word very deliberately - it is no longer babbling - they know what they are saying. The word has a very particular meaning. This is also about the time that children, on average, are serious about experimenting with walking.

In his book, *The Spiritual Life*, which is based on a collection of his letters to one of his spiritual daughters, St. Theophan explains why her younger brother is asking questions such as, “What is it? Who made it? What is it made of?” He tells her that,

The faculty of the soul, from which arise such questions and thoughts...is called the intellect, whose business it is to reason, think over things, and reach the necessary conclusions. (St. Theophan, *Spiritual Life*, pg. 50)

In his description of the intellect, St. Theophan also speaks of the imagination and memory, which he refers to as the “lower powers of the soul.” He describes these “lower powers” as capabilities that stand at the transition point between the activity of the body and that of the soul. (St. Theophan, *Path to Salvation*, pg. 53)

In another place, St. Theophan notes that,

... nothing can enter the soul without the imagination and memory. Thus, subsequent mental activity rests upon the imagination and the memory... [The] entire intellectual aspect of the soul is imaginative... (St. Theophan, *Spiritual Life*, pg. 49)

This connection between imagination and intellect may come as a surprise to some, but St. John of Kronstadt also notes the importance of images in his work, *My Life in Christ*. He writes, “**imagery or symbols are a necessity of human nature in our present spiritually sensual condition.**” (St. John, *My Life in Christ*, pg. 395)

St. John also writes about the relationship between the heart and the intellect. He says that it is the rightly formed heart which first understands what is true; the intellect then utilizes words to express this understanding. He writes,

Do you not notice that our heart acts first in our life and in nearly all our knowledge? The heart sees certain truths (ideas) before the mind knows them. When knowledge is acquired, it happens thus: the heart sees at once, indivisibly, instantaneously; afterwards this single action ...of the heart is transmitted to the intellect and subdivided, in the intellect, into parts or sections, preceding and subsequent; the sight of the heart is analyzed in the intellect. The idea belongs to the heart and not to the intellect; that is, to the inner man, and not to the outer one. (St. John, *My Life in Christ*, pgs. 47-48)

It is interesting that St. John refers to the heart as the “inner man” and the intellect as the “outer man.” Indeed, there are many well-educated, scholarly saints, such as St. John Chrysostom, St. Basil the Great and St. Gregory the Theologian, St. John Damascene, and many others. Yet, it was not their scholarliness that made them saints, it was their saintliness that allowed them to be true scholars.

St. John also gives us a warnings concerning the heart and intellect. He says,

In educating, it is extremely dangerous to only develop the understanding and intellect, and not pay attention to the heart. We must, above all pay attention to the heart, for the heart is life, but life corrupted by sin... Society is corrupted precisely through the want of [Orthodox] Christian education. (St. John, *My Life in Christ*, pg. 208)

From the writings of St. Theophan and St. John of Kronstadt, it is clear that in order for the power of thought to be properly developed, one must first attend to the correct development of the power of will and the power of feeling, the heart.

This conclusion is supported by one of the earlier Church Fathers, St. Gregory of Nyssa, (335 - 395), who gives us an image which beautifully illustrates the relationship between the right development of the intellectual faculty and the right development of the faculties of will and feeling. In his book, *The Life of Moses*, St. Gregory writes about the spiritual meaning of some Old Testament events.

As we all know, when it was time for the Israelites to be released from slavery in Egypt, God sent ten plagues on the Egyptians to convince Pharaoh to free the Israelites. The last plague was the killing of every first-born in Egypt, both of man and of beast. As protection from the angel of death, whom God was about to send to accomplish this last plague, the Israelites were instructed to put the blood of a slaughtered lamb on the side posts and on the lintel of their doors.

In Moses' time, doorways were formed by heavy beams of wood placed upright a door-width apart. Another heavy beam was placed on top of the two upright beams. These beams were the original side posts and lintel. In modern house building the "side posts" and "lintel" are usually hidden behind drywall. We are, however, left with decorative trim which represents the original side posts and lintel. Each door in our homes probably has trim - a vertical piece on each side of the door, representing the side posts, and a horizontal piece, resting on the side posts, representing the lintel. This trim is simply decorative; it bears no weight and can be removed without any structural damage.

In *The Life of Moses*, St. Gregory of Nyssa gives us a spiritual understanding of the side posts and lintel. He writes,

Safety and security consist in marking the upper doorpost (lintel) and the side posts of the entrance with the blood of the lamb. [In] this way, Scripture gives us, through figures, a scientific understanding of the nature of the soul...dividing it into the rational, the appetitive, and the spirited. Of these parts we are told that the spirit (heart) and the appetitive (will) are placed below, supporting on each side the intellectual part of the soul, while the rational aspect is joined to both so as to keep them together and to be held up by them, being trained for Courage by the spirit and elevated to the participation in the Good by the appetite. (St. Gregory of Nyssa, *Life of Moses*, pg. 76-77)

This image has great value have for those of us who are teaching children. Notice how St. Gregory says that the spirit and the appetite, that is, heart and will in our terminology, hold up and support the rational aspect of the soul. The thinking aspect of the soul rests on the heart and the will, just as the lintel rests on the side posts. St. Gregory notes that the intellectual aspect is actually "trained for

Courage” by the spirit (heart) aspect and “elevated to the participation in the Good” by the appetitive aspect (will).

A child whose education provides plenty of experiences to rightly form the will and heart will be able to think clearly enough to recognize truth. Without a right formation of the will and heart, a child may have plenty of mental “knowledge,” but still not have the foundation to develop virtue and an appreciation of true beauty, wisdom, and courage. Parts of the soul may be underdeveloped. This may remind readers of C. S. Lewis’ book, *The Abolition of Man*, and his image of “men without chests.”

How These Powers are Engaged in Divine Liturgy

Now that we have briefly described each of the powers of the soul, let us consider how these powers are engaged, (or educated, as St. John of Kronstadt would say) in the services of the Church. The Divine Services are designed to educate the soul, giving all the powers of the soul some work to do, something to awaken and develop them.

The Will

Recall that St. Theophan teaches that the seat of the will is in the muscles of the body. This means that every time we cross ourselves, every time we bow, every time we kiss the icons, the cross, the Gospel book and the other holy objects, we are engaging our will by using the muscles of the body. These activities call upon the will to participate in holy actions, that is, actions which tend toward the salvation of the soul.

One of the meanings of the word *liturgy* is “the work of the people,” and what the Church gives us for the education of the will can often be real work. For example, the traditional posture we take during all the liturgical services is standing, a position which requires far more muscle engagement, and therefore struggle, than sitting. While some Orthodox churches now provide seating for everyone, even in these situations, there are parts of the services in which all are expected to stand, and therefore the will, through the muscles, is asked to struggle.

When the will is called upon during the Divine Services, the purpose is often not only to exercise the will, but also to use the will to reach the heart. The design is to use a movement of the body to help elicit a movement of the heart. For example, during each of the services of Vespers, Matins, and Divine Liturgy, there is a time at which the priest, or deacon, exclaims, "Let us bow our heads unto the Lord." The purpose of bowing the head is to elicit a sense of humility in the heart.

The silent prayer said near the end of Matins shows this will/heart relationship very clearly. After the same words, "Let us bow our heads unto the Lord," the priest quietly prays, "...unto Thee have we bowed the *neck of our heart and body*, and we pray Thee...pardon us..." The neck of our heart should be bowed, as well as the neck of our body.

In each of these moments, the Church is using a movement of our body to help us soften our heart and develop a sense of dependence on God, contrition, and worship. This same pattern of moving the body to encourage a movement of the heart can be seen in the veneration of the icons and the kissing of the cross and Gospel book.

Without doubt, the most dramatic use of the body in our Orthodox services is seen during of Great Lent. How many bows and prostrations do make during Great Lent, the season of repentance! The goal of such full-body movements is the development of a spirit of humility and repentance in our hearts.

Another aspect of the power of will is the ability to observe and to pay attention. As with all actions of the will, a choice is involved. When we attend to something, we are choosing to move our mental powers toward a particular object, sound, or thought.

The Church knows that we are easily distracted. Therefore, the Divine Services are designed to keep our attention on what is important. Consider how many times during the services the priest, or deacon, calls us to pay attention to what is to follow, by exclaiming "Wisdom!" or "Let us attend!" This is done before every prokimenon, and before every reading of the Scriptures, and shortly before receiving the Body and Blood of Christ. These are not empty exclamations; they are deliberate reminders to pay attention.

Of all the movements we make in our Orthodox liturgical life, making the sign of the cross is the most frequent. Yet, perhaps because we make this movement so often, we tend to do so without much attention, and thus do not fully partake of the power and protection of the sign of the cross. Let us make this holy movement with attention.

If we look at our Orthodox services through a child's eyes, we can appreciate the multitude of actions to do, or imitate: lighting candles, seeing the movements of the clergy in the entrances, and the deacon with the censer. How many of your children imitate parts of the Divine Liturgy when they are at home? This is not simply "cute"; this is their soul learning and being formed by the design of Orthodox Divine Liturgy.

The Heart

Orthodox churches and services are also designed to touch the heart, or the sensory power of the soul. Anyone walking into an Orthodox church, especially for the first time, is struck by the amount of sensory input. The beauty of the icons, the beauty of the singing, and the majesty of the service itself, is often overwhelming. This is good; we should be overwhelmed by God.

We have cited this quote before, but it is worth a second reading. In *The Spiritual Life*, St. Theophan describes the power of feeling, the heart, in this way,

The proper work of this part is to perceive in the soul, through the senses, either its own pleasant or unpleasant condition...But we [also] see... a number of selfless feelings, which arise completely apart from the gratification or non-gratification of requirements; they are feelings from delight in the beautiful. (St. Theophan, *Spiritual Life*, pg. 69)

We have all heard of what happened when Prince Vladimir of Kiev sent groups of men to various places to learn about the religious beliefs and practices of others in the world. Those who had been sent to Constantinople returned with glowing reports of their experience. According to an account related in *Tales of Begone Years*, the Russian delegates attended a Divine Liturgy and were extremely impressed. When giving their report to Prince Vladimir, they said,

And then we came to the Greek lands, and were taken to the place where they serve their God, and we didn't know if we were in heaven or on earth, for there is no such sight or beauty on this earth, and we do not know how to describe it to you. We only know that God is there with His people, and that their services are better than in all the other lands; we cannot forget the beauty. And just as no person will accept bitterness after having tasted sweetness, so can we no longer remain pagans. (as quoted in *Orthodox Christianity*, vol. I pgs. 98-99, by Metropolitan Hilarion Alfeyev, from *Tales of Bygone Years, year 6495 (987)*, pg. 273-74)

Beauty is an integral part of Orthodoxy because it is an integral part of human nature. St. Theophan writes about the human soul longing for beauty. **“In the sensual [or feeling] part of the soul, there appears a yearning and love for the beautiful.”** (St. Theophan, *Spiritual Life*, pg. 69) St. Basil the Great also teaches the same thing when he writes, **“By nature men desire the beautiful.”** The beauty of the Church and of her Divine Services serves the same purpose as the movements, that is, to touch the human heart and soften it.

A prayer said by the clergy, as they wash after vesting, includes the phrase, “O Lord, I have loved the beauty of Thy house.” (*Psalms 25:7, LXX*) The priest's prayer, said during the second antiphon reads, “O Lord our God, save Thy people and bless Thine inheritance, preserve the fullness of Thy Church, sanctify them that love the beauty of Thy house...” Finally, the same phrase, “sanctify them that love the beauty of Thy house” is part of the Prayer Behind the Ambo, which the priest says at the end of the Divine Liturgy.

To love the beauty of the Lord's house takes work because we can, because of our lack of attention, so easily take this beauty for granted. Yet the struggle (using our will) to see this beauty anew at each Divine Service educates our soul, and teaches it to recognize and accept the beauty of truth and to reject the ugliness of evil.

The Mind

Unlike the services of some other Christian faiths, Orthodox services are not primarily aimed at the intellectual, or mental, aspect of the soul. Yet, there is plenty in the services to engage this part of the soul. The sermon is obviously one place in which the mind could be engaged, but there are many other places as well.

Consider all the troparia, kontakia, and stichera that are chanted, or sung, during the services. These short poetic verses teach us about our faith and about the lives of the saints. Consider also the beautiful icons, which not only assist in our prayers, but also instruct us about the faith, events in the life of Christ, or in the life of a particular saint.

From an educational perspective, it is very important to recognize the principle, that in the Divine Services, we are never given cold, hard facts. Whenever the Church wants to engage the intellectual power of the soul, she clothes the “information” with beauty, with the beauty of the icons, or the beauty of song, or of poetic images.

How These Powers Can be Engaged in the Classroom

Now that we have seen how the powers of the soul are engaged and educated in Divine Liturgy, we would like to present some of our attempts to use the same principles in a classroom setting. The activities in the classroom will look very different from those in our liturgical life, and may initially seem to be unrelated.

Yet if we consider these activities from the perspective of how they engage the various powers of the soul, we will see that they are based on the same principles that are used in our Orthodox services. While the outward forms are quite different, the underlying principles are the same. We are not claiming that what we have done is the only way to fulfill these principles. We simply did our best to fulfill these principles in the school setting.

As part of the beginning of our school day, we prayed *The Orthodox Prayer Before Instruction*, which reads,

Most Gracious Lord! Send down upon us the grace of Thy Holy Spirit to grant us intelligence and *strengthen the powers of our soul*, that we may attend to the instruction given us, and grow up to glorify Thee, our Creator, to gladden our parents, and to serve the Church and our people. Amen.

Note the reference to the powers of the soul, indicating that the Church actually expects the engagement of all the powers of the soul in the school setting. The Church considers the school setting to be a place for the strengthening of all the powers of the soul, not just the intellectual aspect.

To fulfill this expectation of the Church, there needs to be a relationship between what is done in Orthodox services and what is done in school. One of our guiding principles has been, “What is important in the Church should be important in the school.”

Activities for The Will

After our morning prayers, we began the first period of the day, which we called The Opening, in which all the students participated. This period had many components, including activities which require both large muscle movement and attention. All these activities are based on St. Theophan’s observation that **“the seat of the will is in the muscles of the body.”**(St. Theophan, *Path to Salvation*, pg. 49)

This was not a PE class - running around the field or doing sit-ups and push-ups - but rather various games with balls, bean bags, wooden rods, etc. In these games, the students were required not only to throw and catch accurately, but also to be very attentive to what was happening around them. The activities were designed so that the actions of any one player affected all the players, so if one of the players was inattentive, it became very obvious because it affected all.

There were also times during the week in which the students were engaged in some sort of outdoor physical labor. This may have been raking leaves, pulling weeds, gardening, or simple, but meaningful, construction projects.

Most children enjoyed these activities, but there were some who wanted someone else do the work. Our experience was that the children who did not want to work physically were the ones who needed it most. The children who did not want to struggle physically were most often the same ones who did not want to struggle mentally. How could we expect them to struggle spiritually? An essential part of the development of the will is doing what you would rather not do, or to struggle to come up to a standard.

Children worked indoors as well; they cleaned the school by dusting, vacuuming, taking out the trash, etc. Parents often thanked us for teaching their children “life-skills.” Initially, we were not sure what the parents meant, because teaching “life-skills” was not our intention. Rightly forming the will was our goal. We had several students whose academic abilities blossomed once they learn how to work physically.

We used artwork in as many subject areas as possible, but art was never used as a form of “self-expression.” It was used as a discipline, requiring attention. Whether the artwork was of a seasonal theme, a portrayal of an Old Testament event, or a lesson in grammar, the students were expected to replicate what the teacher had painted, or drawn, as closely as possible.

In this way, the artwork called upon the will of the child to be attentive. If the children were attentive and followed the teacher’s directions, (obedience is a matter of the will) what they produced was beautiful. The lesson they learned was that the right use of the will leads to beauty.

We provided opportunities for the older children to help the younger ones. This gave them exercises in virtue, especially patience and compassion. We taught, and required, basic courtesies and manners, as concrete activities of putting others before yourself. Unfortunately, many modern children grow up without this instruction. We also provided opportunities for the children to serve our parish and local community.

Virtue is a fruit of a right-developed will. It is a matter of doing; it is not a matter of thinking or feeling. St. Nikolai Velimirovic, in his *Prologue from Ochrid*, tells a story of the Athenian and Spartans. He writes,

At a certain gathering of Athenians, at which envoys from Sparta were present, one old man was going from bench to bench, trying to find somewhere to sit down. The Athenians mocked him, and no one gave him his seat. When the old man drew near to the Spartans, they all leapt to their feet and offered him their places. Seeing this, the Athenians expressed their gratitude in well-rounded phrases. To this the Spartans replied, “The Athenians know what is good, but do not do it.” (St. Nikolai, *Prologue from Ochrid*, For Consideration for January 5.)

Children acquire virtue not by knowing what is virtuous, but by doing what is virtuous. That is why virtuous activities should be part of the curriculum.

Activities for The Heart

Most of the Divine Liturgy is sung, so we sang every day during The Opening. The songs included the Lord’s Prayer, “Rejoice, O Virgin Theotokos”, the troparion of the day, or of the feast, as well as simple songs of a religious nature,

and folk songs. Over the years, the children learned many songs and often did not want to stop singing. What joy singing brought to the school environment!

The Psalms of David are songs of the heart and are in integral part of Divine Services. Therefore, we always recited a Psalm during this time, with the goal of learning it by heart. We printed the Psalm in a large font and taped it to the wall for all to see and read. When we learned one Psalm, we would start another. The children loved the Psalms. We told the children that once there were bishops who would not ordain a man to the priesthood unless he knew the Psalms by heart. One boy spoke up and said, “Well then, let’s start with Psalm I.”

In St. Theophan’s description of the power of feeling, he says,

Above this is the enjoyment received from paintings, works of sculpture, music and singing, and even higher than this, the enjoyment received from poetry. (St. Theophan, *Spiritual Life*, pg. 69)

Therefore, learning poetry was also part of The Opening. Except in seventh and eighth grades, learning poetry was not a matter of analysis of the form or symbolism of the poem. It was simply an exposure to the wonderful beauty of words. We wanted to give the heart plenty of time to appreciate the beauty before we gave the mind some work to do.

Music has a very powerful influence on the hearts of children, especially as they approach the teen years. Therefore, in school, we exposed the children to the music of the Church, and to Classical music, hoping to develop in them a taste for music far more noble than what the modern world offers.

Orthodox services are filled with beauty, and an invitation to respond to it. In the classroom that response included the struggle to create something beautiful. When a person is attempting to produce something beautiful, all the powers are engaged. The effort and attention required engages the will, the beautiful result is a delight to the heart, and, if used as part of an academic lesson, it enlightens the mind. In this way we tried to follow the lead of the Church in Her pedagogy of clothing knowledge with beauty.

Nearly every day, we read to the children, introducing them to well-written, inspiring literature. We wanted them to acquire a taste for beautiful writing and beautiful story which reflected wholesome relationships and moral activity. We

would read a book to the students as they ate their lunch, often above their normal reading level. They loved it, and were always fully engaged in the story. All the books assigned to the students to read were wholesome, well-written, and of high moral quality. Exposure to good literature and music, learning and reciting poetry, singing, and art were some of the ways we tried to feed the feeling, or heart, part of the soul.

Activities for The Mind

St. John of Kronstadt's observation that **"images are a necessity of our human nature."** (St. John, *My Life in Christ*, pg. 395) and St. Theophan's teaching that **"the entire intellectual aspect of the soul is imaginative."** (St. Theophan, *Spiritual Life*, pg. 49) greatly influenced how we presented academic material.

Students were required to paint, or draw, as part of their early math lessons, grammar lessons, science, Old Testament history classes, and other history classes. The use of images, in the form of three-dimensional manipulatives, were the foundation of teaching mathematics.

The students were even expected to draw simple illustrations of story problems in math classes. If they could not draw it, they did not yet understand it. If they could draw it, they understood and could easily solve the problem. This was one of the many ways we experienced the truth of St. Theophan's and St. John's teaching about the connection between images and the intellect.

As you read about the time and effort we spent on art, song, and activity, do not get the idea that we were soft on the academics. We challenged the students academically, and they loved the challenge. What is crucial to understand is that they were eager to meet these challenges because their intellectual powers had been strengthened by the many experiences they had been given which rightly-developed their powers of will and heart. Recall St. Gregory's interpretation of the side posts and lintels, that the intellectual power is trained and upheld by the powers of the will and feeling.

Before reading St. Gregory's interpretation of the side posts and lintels, we had experienced the truth of it in the classroom. Although we knew the importance of feeding the will and heart, there were times when we succumbed to the pressure (temptation) to not spend so much time with these non-academic activities, thinking that this would give more time for the academics. This pressure came not

from the parents, nor from the students, but from the mind of this world. Every time we yielded to this temptation, our efforts back-fired. The children gradually became bored with the constant intellectual work and their learning and comprehension decreased. The joy that had filled their hearts faded.

When we finally realized what was happening, we would say something like, “Let’s go outside and rake leaves” or, “Let’s get out the water-color paints.” The result was immediate. Joy returned to the classroom, and after feeding the other parts of their souls, the children’s intellectual abilities flourished once again. In this way, our experience made us appreciate the truth of St. Gregory’s interpretation of the relationship of the powers of the will and heart to the power of the intellect. They do, indeed, train and support it.

We often had to re-write the tests that came with the curricula we were using because they were too easy. Our students would have been disappointed, even insulted, with the original version of the tests. We know this we because we showed them the original version and saw their response.

Although we never advertised the school as “academically advanced,” we had more than our share of valedictorians in the high schools our graduates attended. One year, a local private high school had two valedictorians because two students tied for the highest GPA. Both students were graduates of St. Michael’s. Several times our graduates expressed displeasure about their first year in high school, saying that it was simply a repeat of their last years at St. Michael’s. We are not telling you this from pride but from our many experiences which confirm that the Church’s pedagogy works.

The Church teaches by engaging all of our senses, and all the powers of the human soul. We can see this pedagogy in Church architecture, in iconography, and in the majesty of all the liturgical services. If the Orthodox Church uses activity and beauty to teach us, then it follows that our teaching will be most effective for our children’s souls - will, heart, and mind - if we use the same approach.

Thank you for listening. God bless you all.

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