

# **Toward an Orthodox Pedagogy: Teaching as the Church Teaches**

*Protodeacon James Hughes*  
*stmichaelschool.us*

## **Part Five** **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 liturgical life. While the outward forms are different, the underlying principles are the same - to rightly form, or educate, the powers of the soul by engaging them in spiritually profitable experiences. We are not claiming that what we have done is the only way to fulfill these principles. While we have done our best to fulfill these principle in the school setting, what we have done is not necessarily what other teachers would do. Others will certainly find different ways of fulfilling these same principles.

As part of the beginning of our school day, we prayed together *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 and prays for the engagement of all the powers of the soul in the school setting. This prayer shows that the Church considers the school setting as a rightful 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 direct relationship between what is done in Orthodox liturgical life 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 each day, we began the first period of the day, which we called The Opening. 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."** This is 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 are required not only to throw and catch accurately, but also to be very attentive to what is happening around them. The activities are designed so that the actions of any one player affects all the players, so if one of the players is inattentive, it becomes very obvious. Instructions for some of these activities are available in the **Curriculum Ideas** section of the website.

There were also times during the week in which the students were engaged in some sort of outdoor physical labor. This could be raking leaves, repairing some of the fencing around the Church/school property, pulling weeds, gardening, and various other simple, but meaningful, construction projects.

Most children enjoyed these activities, but there were some who would rather be lazy and let someone else do the work. Our experience has revealed that the children who did not want to work were the ones who needed this physical work the most. An essential part of the development of the will is doing what you would rather not do. We found that children who do not want to struggle physically are often the same ones who do not want to struggle mentally. How, then, can we expect them to struggle spiritually?

Children worked indoors as well; they cleaned the school, dusting, vacuuming, taking out the trash, etc. Parents often thanked us for teaching their children "life-skills." Initially we were not sure what they meant, because teaching "life-skills" was not our intention. Rightly forming the will was our goal.

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. They learned that the right use of the will leads to beauty.

We provided opportunities for the older children to help the younger ones as exercises in virtue, i.e. patience and compassion. We taught basic courtesies and manners, as ways of putting others before yourself, practices often not taught to many modern children. We also provided opportunities for the children to serve our parish and local community.

Virtue is an activity of the will, 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.” He who does good is like a tree that bears good fruit for its owner. And the well-spring of goodness in man is a good, God-loving heart.**  
(*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, 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.

The Psalms are in integral part of Divine Services, so we always recited a Psalm during this time, with the goal of learning it by heart. We printed out 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. Once we told the children that, in the past, 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 1.”

The **Learning the Psalms** section of the website offers several Psalms in large format, ready to be downloaded.

We also learned and recited poetry each morning, in accordance with St. Theophan's description of the power of feeling,

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

St. Barsanuphrius of Optina also writes of the importance of poetry.

Except in seventh or eighth grade, 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 the heart to have a chance to appreciate the beauty before we gave the mind some work to do. We will soon start a **Poetry** section of the website, similar to the **Learning the Psalms** section, which will offer many poems, in large format, for memory and recitation.

The Opening was always a disciplined, but very enjoyable, time for the children, who thought that it was "fun." What they may not have known is that the teachers considered it a very serious class.

In Divine Liturgy, we are invited to respond to the beauty of the service as it offers an education to the power of feeling in the soul. (Remember the prayers of the priest which ask our Lord to, "Sanctify them that love the beauty of Thy House"). In the classroom that response included the struggle to create something beautiful. When a person is attempting to produce beauty, 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.

Music has a very powerful influence on the hearts of children, especially as they approach the teen years. The music of Orthodox services is truly beautiful, with none of the negative elements we hear in much of modern music. Orthodox music sets a standard of beauty, with the goal that those participating develop a taste of that quality of music, and shun music of lesser quality. Therefore, in school, we expose the children to the music of the Church, but also to Classical music, hoping that such an exposure would develop in them a taste for something more noble than the music the modern world generally offers.

We often 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 slightly 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 are wholesome, well written, and high quality.

### **Activities for The Mind**

Most people would consider education as primarily a matter of enriching the mind. However, from an Orthodox liturgical perspective, and a Orthodox Patristic perspective that is not the case. Without doubt, the mind, or the intellectual aspect of the soul, is very important. We are not questioning that truth, but would offer a perspective from St. Gregory of Nyssa.

We all recall that when it was time for the Israelites to be released from slavery in Egypt, God had to send ten plagues on the Egyptians in order to finally 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 plague, the Israelites were instructed to put the blood of a slaughtered lamb on each of the side posts and on the lintel of their doors.

Each door in our homes probably has trim - an upright piece on each side of the door, called the side posts, and one piece on top, called the lintel. In modern architecture, this trim is simply decorative. It bears no weight and can be removed without any structural damage. Yet, this trim is actually symbolic of ancient architecture. Before the era of modern framing, 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 not trim; they were structurally essential. These beams were the original side posts and lintels.

In his book, *The Life of Moses*, St. Gregory of Nyssa presents a fascinating interpretation 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 appetite (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.**  
(*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” by the spirit (heart) aspect and 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 understand of the truth. Without this right formation of the will and heart, a child may have plenty of mental “knowledge”, but still not have the foundation to appreciate the truth.

Remember, St. John of Kronstadt tells us that truth is first perceived by the heart, and only secondly by the mind. Also, recall his warning that, **“In educating, it is extremely dangerous to only develop the understanding and intellect, and not pay attention to the heart.”**

If the heart is not formed rightly, how can it perceive the truth? Unfortunately, we see plenty examples in the world today of people whose intellectual faculties are strong but they have not come to the Truth because their wills and hearts are ill-formed.

Please, do not get the idea, with all this talk about art, song, and activity, that we were soft on the academics. We challenged the students academically. They loved the intellectual challenges because they were also receiving nourishment for the other parts of their soul. They were eager to meet the challenges because their intellectual faculties were founded on experiences designed to rightly form their powers of will and heart. We were amazed when we first read St. Gregory’s interpretation of the side posts and lintels because what he said is exactly what we had experienced in the classroom. We found that if children are given enough experiences which feed and rightly-form the will and the heart, teaching them the academics becomes far easier.

We must confess that it took us several times to learn this lesson. Even though we knew the importance of feeding the will and heart, there were times when we succumbed to the pressure (not from the parents, but from the “mind of this world”) to not spend so much time with these activities, thinking that this would give more time for the academics. 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 colors.” 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 support it.

Whenever we had the right balance of will, heart, and intellect, we had to re-write the tests that came with the curricula we were using because they were too easy. Our students would have actually 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 presented the school as “academically advanced”, several times our graduates expressed displeasure that their first year in high school was simply a repeat of their last years at St. Michael’s.

The school was small, yet we had more than our share of valedictorians in the high schools our graduates attended. One year, a local private high school was forced to have two valedictorians because two students shared the highest GPA. Both were graduates of St. Michael’s.

We do not relate these experiences as a matter of pride, because this success was not because of some extraordinary skill of the teachers, but because we did our best to align the pedagogy of the school with the pedagogy of the Church.

There is one more thing we would like to say about the intellectual aspect of our soul. This power of the soul is dependent upon images. Using the visual arts (painting, drawing) in teaching not only provides a way to engage all the powers of the soul, but also provides images which help the children learn. This follows St. John of Kronstadt’s observation that “**images are a necessity of our human nature.**” (*My Life in Christ*, pg. 395) as well as St. Theophan’s teaching that “**the entire intellectual aspect of the soul is imaginative.**” (*Spiritual Life*, pg 49)

As mentioned above, we incorporated art in as many areas of study as possible. Art was used in the early math lessons, in grammar lessons, in science, and in history class, and in the Old Testament history classes. Images in the form of three-dimensional manipulatives were the foundation of teaching mathematics.

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