

Toward an Orthodox Pedagogy: Teaching as the Church Teaches

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Part Four How These Powers are Engaged in Divine Liturgy

Now that we have briefly described each of the powers of the soul, and hopefully given the reader some understanding of each power, let us consider how these powers are engaged, and therefore educated, as St. John of Kronstadt would say, in Divine Liturgy and the other Divine Services of the Church.

There are many ways to consider the Divine Services. The analogy of a diamond is again useful, for our Divine Services are like diamonds which reveals different colors and qualities when viewed from different angles. One could consider the historical development, or symbolism of the various parts of the Services, and probably in many other ways. In this part of our consideration of Orthodox pedagogy, we want to look at our Orthodox liturgical life from the angle of how it is designed to engage, and therefore educate, the powers of our soul.

We have probably all traveled in an airplane and know that once everyone has boarded, someone announces the flight number and destination of the plane. Then the flight attendant shows us the exits, how to use the oxygen masks, and how to buckle our seatbelt. Finally, when all the safety features are presented, there is an announcement which invites the travelers to, “Sit back, relax, and enjoy the flight.”

Divine Liturgy also begins with an announcement of the destination, that is, with “Blessed is the Kingdom of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.” Divine Liturgy is, indeed, designed to transport us to the Kingdom of Heaven. However, this announcement is not followed by, “Sit back and relax.” It is followed by a call for all present to get to work, the work of prayer. Immediately after the destination is announced, we hear, “In peace let us pray to the Lord.”

The Divine Liturgy is designed so that all the powers of the soul have some work to do, something to awaken them, something for them to experience. Let us consider what our Orthodox liturgical life offers to each power of our soul and see how each is invited to participate in the journey to the Kingdom of Heaven.

The Will

Recall that St. Theophan teaches that the seat of the will is in the muscles of the body. Every time we cross ourselves, every time we bow, when we kiss the icons, the cross, the Gospel book and the other holy objects, we are engaging our muscles, and therefore our will. These activities call upon the will, via the muscles, 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.” 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 struggle, than sitting. Indeed, many Orthodox churches have pews, or chairs, not just for those who physically need them, but for everyone. Yet, from the perspective of engaging the will, this arrangement is not helpful. A case could be made that such an adaptation actually interferes with what the Divine Liturgy has to offer our will by reducing the struggle and encouraging a spectator frame of mind.

Fr. George Calciu, who, for his faith, spent many years in prisons during Romania’s communist period, tells a story from his youth concerning standing in Church.

We children were very little and it was very difficult for us to stand for two to three hours in church, so we tried to move around. After church, when we came home, Mother used to say to us, “Don’t you know that this is your prayers to God, just standing there until your feet hurt? This is a child’s prayer to God.” (*Father George Calciu, Interviews, Homilies and Talks, pg. 63*)

Whenever the will (using the muscles) is called upon during the Divine Services, the purpose is 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.”

During Vespers, while the people stand with bowed heads, the priest says a prayer which contains the words, “Thy servants [have] bowed their heads, and submitted their necks, not expecting help from man, but awaiting Thy mercy and looking for Thy salvation.” The purpose of bowing of 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 even more clearly. After the priest, or deacon, says 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.

During Divine Liturgy, after the priest’s, or deacon’s, directive to “Bow your heads unto the Lord”, the priest prays, “...look down from heaven upon them that have bowed their heads unto Thee, for they have not bowed to flesh and blood, but unto Thee the awesome God...”

In each of these moments, the Church is using a movement of our body to help our heart soften and develop a sense of dependence on God, contrition, and worship. This same pattern of moving the body to help move 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 Orthodox liturgical life is seen during the services of Great Lent. How many bows and prostrations do we make during the services of Great Lent, the season of repentance! The objective of such full-body movements is not physical exercise, but the movement our hearts to a spirit of humility and repentance.

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, a choice involving a movement. When we pay attention to something there may not be much outward movement, but there is a definite, concentrated, inward movement. When we attend to something, we are moving our mental faculties 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. These are not empty exclamations. They are deliberate reminders to pay attention.

At the beginning of the Anaphora, the priest, or deacon, proclaims, “Let us stand well, let us stand with fear, let us attend, that we may offer the holy oblation in peace.” This particular command includes two aspects of the will - use of the muscles in standing, and paying attention. We are also called to attention immediately before the priest exclaims, “Holy Things are for the holy.”

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 the movement so often, we have a strong tendency to do so without much attention. How often do we make this precious movement in a sloppy way, and thus lose the power and protection of the sign of the cross by our inattention!

Seeing our Orthodox liturgical life through a child's eyes, we can appreciate the multitude of actions to do, or imitate, in Orthodox services - lighting candles, seeing the movements of the clergy, the entrances, 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.

The Heart

Orthodox services are also designed to touch the heart, often called the sensory power of the soul. Anyone walking into an Orthodox Church, and especially attending an Orthodox service 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 striking.

This power of the soul is also called the power of feeling, but to understand this power, we must distinguish the idea of feeling from the idea of emotion. We previously noted the 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.

The personal aspect of the power of feeling in the soul could be called *emotion*, and be defined as the experience this power affords which is confined to our own personal comfort or discomfort. This experience is often centered on ourselves, is short-lived, and is not particularly soul-profitting. We have all had this experience. Perhaps it is not sinful, but it is not the goal.

The goal is to rightly educate this power of feeling so that self-centered emotion is not the primary experience. This level will, perhaps, be always with us, but the goal is what St. Theophan calls "true feeling", an experience which is not self-centered, often rather humbling, and therefore brings us closer to 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.

In the sensual [or feeling] part of the soul, there appears a yearning and love for 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. (*Spiritual Life*, pg. 69)

You may have heard of what happened, over a thousand years ago, 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. They had 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. (*Tales of Bygone Years, year 6495 (987)*, pg. 273-74, as quoted in *Orthodox Christianity*, vol I pg. 98-99, by Metropolitan Hilarion Alfeyev.)

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.”** (*The Spiritual Life*, pg 69) St. Basil the Great teaches the same thing, **“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.

Just as standing, rather than sitting, during the Divine Services encourages us to be participants rather than spectators, our heart-felt response to this beauty is actually a

necessary part of our work in the liturgy. Prayers said in preparation for the Liturgy, and in the Liturgy itself, refer to the necessity of a response by both those ministering and those attending the service.

For example, after the clergy vest for Divine Liturgy, they wash their hands. (This happens in the altar, so the congregation generally does not see it.) As they wash, they recite a portion of Psalm 25, which includes, “O Lord, I have loved the beauty of Thy house, and the place where Thy glory dwelleth.”

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 liturgical life is 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 during Divine Liturgy, or after other services, 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 songs either teach us about our faith, or about the lives of the saints. Consider also the beautiful icons, which not only assist in our prayers, but also teach us the faith, and events in the life of Christ.

What is most important when considering how the intellectual power of the soul is engaged in the Divine Services is that, in the liturgical life of the Church, we are never given cold, hard facts. Whenever the Church wants to engage the intellectual power of the soul, she clothes the “information” with the beauty of song, or the beauty of images.