

Toward an Orthodox Pedagogy: Teaching as the Church Teaches

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Several months ago, we posted an article called, “Why We Need an Orthodox Pedagogy.” The article ended by suggesting that the principles of an Orthodox pedagogy are right in front of us. In the next series of articles we would like to propose that these principles can be discerned within the Orthodox liturgical life, particularly within the structure of the Divine Liturgy.

These articles are from a lecture is called “Toward an Orthodox Pedagogy: Teaching as the Church Teaches,” which was scheduled to be given at a St. Kosmas Homeschooling Conference in November, 2020. However, because of the COVID 19 situation, the conference had to be cancelled. Perhaps the talk will be given in some future conference, but in the meantime, we wanted to make the ideas available for consideration.

We will begin by defining what we mean by the word “pedagogy.”

**Pedagogy is the study of teaching methods, and considers both the aims of education and the ways in which such goals may be achieved.
Pedagogy refers to both the content of education and to the ways in a which a teacher delivers that content to the students.**

Pedagogy includes both the content of education, or *what* is taught, and methodology, or *how* that content is taught, that is, how that information is presented to the children. Orthodox educators, either in schools or at home, use a variety of different pedagogies. These articles will attempt to answer the question, “Is there an Orthodox pedagogy, that is, a way of teaching that starts with the tenets and world-view of the Orthodox faith?”

We start with an observation of Archimandrite Sergius (Bowyer), who is currently the Abbot of St. Tikhon Monastery in Pennsylvania. He has written a book called, *Acquiring the Mind of Christ*, and in the foreword of the book, he writes the following,

Our task is great: to acquire Christ, to put on Christ, and to acquire

the Mind of Christ. How are we to begin? 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, ourselves, each other, and the world.

This vision and goal of “thinking the way the Church thinks” is something that is basic to our Orthodox mentality; it is a striving that no Orthodox Christian would deny. For Orthodox educators, this directive to think as the Church thinks has a crucial corollary or application. Would not learning to “think the way Church thinks” include learning to “teach the way the Church teaches?” As Orthodox educators, we need to know not only *what* the Church teaches, but also *how* the Church teaches.

What we plan to explore is how the Church, through its liturgical life, and especially through the design of Divine Liturgy, can reveal to us the principles of an Orthodox pedagogy, that is, an Orthodox method of teaching. We hope to clearly show a relationship between how the Church teaches us in Divine Liturgy and how our children could, (or should) be taught. Some seek to find Orthodox pedagogy by looking into what was done in the past. Yet our beloved Orthodoxy is forever present, ever new. Therefore the example of Orthodox pedagogy is immediately before us, in the present.

Now that you have a sense of the destination of this talk, we need to give you some background material so that the conclusions offered will have a context. We need to briefly relate our journey to those conclusions because they did not appear suddenly, but rather took about thirty years to take form.

Background and Introduction

In the late 1970's and early 1980's, we were part of a group of people who wanted to start a school. We were not yet Orthodox, but were looking for true Christianity. We wanted a school that would have an approach to education that was different from what we saw in the public school system. However, while it was easy for us to articulate what we did not want, it was far more difficult to state clearly what we did want.

We started to explore various schools of thought on education. We read about the approach taken by Charlotte Mason, an English educator who was very active at the turn of the 20th century. We explored the ideas of Marie Montessori, an Italian physician and educator who was active a little later, during the first half of the 20th century. We considered the Classical Approach, which is based on the thinking of the ancient Greeks. We also read about the Waldorf approach, started by a German philosopher, Rudolph Steiner. We picked what we liked from each of these sources and started a school.

Several years later, we were received into the Church. Now we were home; we had arrived at the very pillar and ground of truth, (I Timothy 3:15). This was wonderfully comforting, yet it also presented us with a question. While in general we were pleased with the approach we were taking in the school, we were experiencing an uneasiness just below the surface of our thinking. The children were responding very well; they loved school and were learning a lot. The parents saw the joy and growth of their children and were very happy. Yet we teachers were asking, “What are the unifying principles behind our approach?”

Once we were in the Church, it was no longer satisfying to teach in a certain way because “it worked”, or because “the children liked it”, or because “this is how Charlotte Mason, or Maria Montessori, or the ancient Greeks taught.” We had realized that beneath each of the pedagogies we had studied, there was, as a foundation, a particular understanding of the nature of a human being and a particular view of the goal of education. These pedagogies were different because each was founded on a different understanding of a human being.

Charlotte Mason’s view of a human being was different than Maria Montessori’s view. Therefore the teaching approach is different. The goal of a Classical education is different from the goal of a Waldorf education. Therefore these two approaches emphasize different subject areas and have different teaching methods. The methods of teaching, the subjects emphasized, and the overall goals of these various schools of education reflect their different world-views, specifically their particular view of the nature of a human being.

While we appreciated aspects of each of these pedagogies, 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 school. There is, as you know, a striving in Orthodoxy that the home should be “a little Church.” We wanted to learn how the school, also, could be “a little Church.”

Hearing the well-known saying of St. Theophan the Recluse, “**Of all the holy works, the education of children is the most holy.**” (*The Path to Salvation, pg. 208*), was very encouraging, but it didn’t answer our question. What does St. Theophan mean by this? Is simply teaching the facts of history, grammar, mathematics, science, and all the rest the most holy of holy works?

Teaching these things to children is indeed a noble and worthy work, but it is difficult to imagine a man of St. Theophan’s caliber, a saint, considering this level of teaching as “the most holy.” If this was all it took to be a “holy work”, then all schools,

Orthodox and non-Orthodox, even non-Christian schools would be examples of this “holy work.” He must have had something more than this, 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. For him, education must be far more than a part of a child’s preparation for adulthood. 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.

In other words, the education of a child is “most holy” if it is designed to contribute to the salvation of the child’s soul. Therefore, if a school’s pedagogy is designed to provide an education for the child’s soul, not just the child’s mind, then the school can become “a little Church.” The school can fulfil its “most holy” role only if it is aligned with the thinking of the Church.

The well-known quote of St. Theophan about education referenced above appears in his book, *The Path to Salvation*. There is, however, another passage in the same book which is not so well-known, yet crucial to understand if we are to provide this holy education. This second passage is actually the foundation of the first passage, because it gives us direction concerning how we develop a pedagogy which provides an education for the child’s soul, as well as for the child’s mind, thereby making our educational efforts a holy work. St. Theophan 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. (*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 what the Church does not believe. 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.

Where do we learn about these Orthodox principles and about how Church teaches? We may not have books which explain these principles, but we do have the liturgical life of the Church, particularly the Divine Liturgy, which demonstrates these principles.

St. John of Kronstadt, in his book, *My Life in Christ*, describes the educational aspect of Orthodox liturgical life 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, by the prosphoras, the singing, and the sweet sound of the reading of the Scriptures. (*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 many school brochures, Orthodox and non-Orthodox, which claim that their school “educates the whole child.” Striving to educate “the whole child” is a noble endeavor, yet we can only do this when we think and teach the way the Church thinks and teaches. Only the Orthodox Church, the “pillar and ground of truth”, knows what the whole child is.

The Church’s pedagogy, that is, the way she teaches, is rooted in her understanding of the human soul. Unless our pedagogy is rooted in the same understanding, our teaching and methodology will be incomplete. It will not be the “holy work” it should be.

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 we can successfully apply to education.

Some of the ways he describes the soul seem to be different than what the earlier Church Fathers, like St. Gregory Palamas, write. Perhaps this is because the earlier Fathers wrote about the soul from the perspective of ascetic struggle, whereas St. Theophan 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. He is easier to understand.

The next part will be about St. Theophan’s description of the powers of the human soul.