

Toward an Orthodox Pedagogy: Teaching as the Church Teaches

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Part II

The Human Soul, according to St. Theophan

The understanding that most people, even Orthodox, have about their own soul is often rather vague. All would acknowledge that doing good is good for the soul and doing bad is bad for the soul. Beyond that, what is there to know? We usually know more about our bodies, and what is needed for its growth and health, than we know about the growth and health of our soul.

Although we clearly see that a person's body develops over time, we do not often consider the soul as something that "develops". Yet St. Theophan teaches that it does. From him we learn that the soul is not static, but vibrant and active. He writes that,

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." (*The Path to Salvation, pg. 53*)

The soul actually goes through a process of formation or development; it is influenced, positively or negatively, by what it experiences.

The Fathers of the Church teach that the soul has three primary "powers" or "aspects", namely, the power of will, the power of feeling, and the power of thought. In the Patristic writings, different terms are used to name these faculties, for example, the will is sometimes called the desirous or appetitive aspect.

We will give a brief description of each power, based on St. Theophan. Basic as it is, this simple understanding of the soul is essential if one is to appreciate the connection between Orthodox liturgical life and an Orthodox approach to education.

The Will

The power of will in the soul is sometimes called the active part and sometimes the desirous part or appetitive (as in appetite) part. How often have we said, "I want to do such and such?" If we were to rephrase that statement and say, "I desire this certain

activity”, it becomes clear why this power is called the desirous or active part. In order to fulfill our desires, we engage in a particular activity. 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. (*Path to Salvation*, pg. 49)

In other words, our soul expresses this power of will mainly through the movements of the body.

The will shows itself in a few ways. One expression of the power of will is imitation. We have all seen children imitate what they see and hear. Perhaps we saw it as “cute”, but we may not have realized that this imitation is an expression of the power of will in the soul. The natural imitation of 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. St. John Damascene teaches that 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*).

Children can 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 capability of the soul is also an action, although it is not so obvious since it does not show itself as an external action of the body. In this case, the action of the will shows itself as an internal action involving a decision as to where the mind is to be focused. Many thoughts call for our attention; it is our will which decides which ones receive that attention. We generally put our attention on what we desire.

Given that the power of will goes through a process of development, what would be indications of a correctly developed will?

St. Theophan notes that while the basic function of this part of the soul is to labor, to work and thereby establish suitable conditions in this life, he says,

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. (*Spiritual Life, pg. 68*)

The goal is a will which is not “self-willed”, always wanting personal good, but a will which desires the good of others, and ultimately desires God. The body, however, in our fallen state, does not readily yield to these higher aspirations of the soul and therefore *the right development of the will always requires a struggle.*

Forming or educating the will, and therefore the formation of virtue, is done primarily through physical activity, disciplining our minds to observe and attend, as well as through delaying or depriving the body of unnecessary comforts. 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 also called the heart, the sensual power, or the incensive 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 through this aspect of the soul that we are able to be aware, through the bodily senses, of that which is outside of ourselves. This power also gives us the ability to perceive our own inner condition. While the power of the will is seen in desire and movement, the power of the heart is seen in the ability to perceive.

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 more detail comes during this time and, as a result, they are fascinated by all around them. Reaching for objects, hitting objects together to hear the various sounds made, and experimenting

with their own sounds are all signs of the emergence of the sensual power of the soul.

The power of feeling involves not only perceptions from the outside, through the senses, but also the perception of one's inner state. How often have we asked someone the simple question, "How are you?" When asking this simple question, we are actually asking someone to use this power of the soul to discern their inner state.

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)

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.

Our soul not only longs to experience the beautiful, but also desires, in whatever capacity it can, to express, or create, this beauty. We often see this unselfish aspect in children. How many parents and teachers have received pictures that their children or students drew, especially for them! Perhaps the pictures were not destined for an art gallery, but they are still expressions of the soul of the child. This is their enjoyment of what is beautiful and their longing to share beauty with those they love.

Again, St. Theophan writes,

The soul seeks not only what is beautiful... but also the expression of the beautiful. (*Spiritual Life*, pg. 70)

and notes that

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. (*Path to Salvation*, pg. 60)

This teaching of St. Theophan makes it clear that his use of the word “education” refers to the process of the formation of the soul rather than to the acquisition of information for the brain. 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. A rightly formed, or educated, heart will be able to discern between that which will lead us toward God and that which will lead us away from Him.

The Mind

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].**” (*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.

St. Theophan’s book, *The Spiritual Life*, is based on a collection of his letters to one of his spiritual daughters. In one letter he explains the origin of her younger brother’s questions, “What is it? Who made it? What is it made of?” He notes that her brother would not calm down until his questions were answered to his satisfaction. St. Theophan explains to 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. (*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 (*Path to Salvation*, pg. 53). He writes,

... nothing can enter the soul without the imagination and memory. Thus, subsequent mental activity rests upon the imagination and the memory... [T]he entire intellectual aspect of the soul is imaginative... The imagination and the memory do not think. They are the unskilled labor force, the backbone. (*Spiritual Life*, pg. 49)

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.”** (*My Life in Christ*, pg. 395)

St. John also has a thought-provoking perspective on the relationship between the heart and the intellect. He says that it is the rightly formed heart which first understands what is true and then the intellect puts thought and words to this understanding.

This quote is longer, but there was no way to edit it and still keep the meaning.

Do you 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. (*My Life in Christ*, pgs. 47-48)

From the writings of St. Theophan and St. John, it becomes clear that in order for the power of thought to be rightly formed, one must first attend to the correct formation of the power of will and the power of feeling, the heart.

St. John writes,

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. It is necessary to purify this source of life, to kindle in it the pure flame of life, so that it should burn and not be extinguished; and should direct all the thoughts, desires, and tendencies of the man through all his life. Society is corrupted precisely through the want of [Orthodox] Christian education. (*My Life in Christ*, pg. 208)

We inserted the word *Orthodox* into this quote, since that is surely what Fr. John had in mind.