

The Orthodox Seminary Curriculum in North America Today: Growing the Seeds of Classical Christian Education

Commencement speech at Holy Trinity Seminary, 5 June 2022

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Your Grace, Reverend Fathers, Faculty, Graduates and their families, Brothers and Sisters in the Lord. *Christ is in our midst!*

It is a blessing and honor to be with you today. I want to begin by mentioning His Eminence, Metropolitan Hilarion, who was buried here only one week ago. May his memory be eternal!

I am humbled to have the chance to reflect on a topic of great importance for this institution and the formation it imparts upon its graduates, like those of you whom we recognize today. That topic, which Dean Schidlovsky asked if I would address, is reflected in my title: “The Orthodox Seminary Curriculum in North America Today: Growing the Seeds of Classical Christian Education.”

The phrase ‘classical education’ may conjure up a number of things in our minds. The term ‘classical’, on the one hand, evokes our ancient cultural inheritance, from the Hebrews, Greeks, and Romans to the civilization of Christendom that united elements from all three in response to the cosmos-shaking event of the Incarnation. As we know, the Church inherited and adapted Hellenic classical culture.¹ From St Basil’s “Address on the Use of Greek Literature,” in which he defended the benefit of reading pagan literature, to the entire patristic, Byzantine, and western European legacy of the liberal arts, the *trivium* and *quadrivium*, classical education was *the* form of schooling within Christendom until the modern era.

But for us today, the term ‘education’ is more amorphous, abstract. The reality is that now there are as many types of education as there are images of what a mature human person should look like. As David Hicks notes, “education at every level reflects our primary assumptions about the nature of man, and for this reason, no education is innocent of an attitude toward man and his purposes.”² Despite many contemporary educators’ declaring their neutrality, in actual fact every moment of teaching in every classroom, whether sacred or secular, assumes a particular vision of the human person into which its pupils are meant to be changed.

But we knew this already, didn’t we? Orthodox Christians have never forgotten the fundamental link between the formative practices of our faith - catechesis, study, prayer, worship, *ascesis*, and good works – and our life in Christ. As early fathers like Clement of Alexandria and Justin Martyr insisted, Christian life is itself an education, leading us to the ‘true philosophy’ of the knowledge and love of God. Even the patristic vision of eternal life is dynamic, in which we grow increasingly more capable of receiving God’s grace. Our formation never ends.

Keeping in mind this basic sense of Christian life as an educational process, what defines a classical approach? And how does it relate to the curriculum, pedagogy, and purpose of an

¹ For more on this subject, see W. Jaeger, *Early Christianity and Greek Paideia*; C. Cochrane, *Christianity and Classical Culture: A Study of Thought and Action from Augustus to Augustine*; J. Pelikan, *Christianity and Classical Culture: The Metamorphosis of Natural Theology in the Encounter with Hellenism*.

² Hicks, *Norms and Nobility*, 3.

Orthodox seminary in 21st-century North America? The word ‘seminary’ derives from the Latin, *seminarium*, meaning ‘seed bed’ or sprouting place. How have the seeds of classical Christian education been planted here at Holy Trinity, and what has begun to take root?

These are eminently valid questions. An Orthodox seminary constitutes one of the few places where a classical education, in all of its multifaceted richness, is still possible today. And not only possible. The formation you received here at Holy Trinity *was* classical in a number of ways: in its logocentric curriculum, its integrated pedagogy, and in its normative vision and transcendent horizon for the human person. These are all fundamentally classical, even if what we as Christians mean by them has been exponentially deepened with reference to Christ. We’ll explore each of them in what follows. Let’s look first at curriculum.

Logocentric Curriculum

A succinct enumeration of the subjects taught in the BTh and MDiv programs at Holy Trinity Seminary will indicate at a glance the curricular heart of a classical education. As students here, you have studied:

- Grammar in studying Writing and various genres of Literature;*
- Logical reasoning in studying apologetics and elements of argumentation in your own scholarly essays;*
- Rhetoric in studying Homiletics and examples of patristic oratory;*
- Language in studying Greek, Church Slavonic, and Russian;*
- History, both secular and ecclesiastical;*
- Liturgics and Music, specifically vocal and choral, in theory and performance;*
- Philosophy, ancient, Byzantine, and modern, including moral philosophy;*
- and Theology, the Queen of the Sciences, in its Dogmatics and Pastoral aspects*

This garden of subjects is founded on the ancient *trivium* of grammar, logic, and rhetoric, which has as much importance today as ever, as is increasingly recognized. Aristotle’s emphasis on the place of literature and poetry alongside history also receives its due; while the latter recounts what *has* happened, the former describe what *may* or could have happened – both are vital for cultivating the moral imagination. The scriptural-liturgical languages of Greek and Church Slavonic give deeper access to the sources in which our tradition is rooted. Classically, the study of music evinces the harmony inside and outside the soul; the highest calling of music, yesterday and today, is in songs of divine praise. Philosophy – the love of wisdom - caps these subjects, with theology crowning them all as their benevolent sovereign.

Together, this curriculum is both *logocentric*, it centers upon words and *the Word*, the *Logos*, and it is *mythopoetic*, a more complex term implying the place of both narrative and the arts. Pre-Christian classical education was split between two rival paths toward virtue: the philosophers contending for *logos* and the beauty of truth, and rhetoricians arguing for *mythos* and the truth of beauty. For the philosophers, dialectical conversation leading to unchanging *logos* was the proper path for moving beyond the material world into the ideal realm. For the rhetoricians, on the other hand, *mythos*, or story, was the proper vehicle for forming souls, inspiring them to desire the good by portraying historical and literary figures of virtue and wisdom alongside those of vice and foolishness. Which was to be the governing concept of classical education – *logos* or *mythos*? Christ overcame this impasse, uniting the two concepts. He is both the eternal *Logos*, and, in taking on flesh, is also, in C.S. Lewis’ words, ‘myth become

fact.’³ Truth, as St Sophrony said, is a Person. The narrative form of the Gospels, and the Lord’s use of parables, confirms the place of story and beauty in Christian life; at the same time, Christ tasked philosophy with the higher calling of exploring the paradoxes of two natures in one person and three persons with one essence. Christ thus united rhetoric with philosophy, concrete with abstract, particular with universal.

For educational purposes, Christ also manifests Himself throughout the created order and therefore within all areas of knowledge dedicated to studying creation. The Church Fathers knew this. Against Tertullian’s quip, ‘what has Athens to do with Jerusalem?’ (*Quid Athenae Hierosolymis?*), the fathers maintained an openness to seeking divine truth in all places, confident that God ‘enlightens every man that comes into the world.’ Blessed Augustine contended that Christians were the rightful possessors of the “gold of Egypt,” by which he meant secular learning. In line with Paul’s teaching in Romans, St Maximos the Confessor spoke of the ‘two books of God, Nature and Scripture,’ thus endorsing natural philosophy, which we know as the sciences.⁴

Elsewhere, Paul had instructed the Philippians in the panoply of the Good: “whatever things are true, whatever things are noble, whatever things are just, whatever things are pure, whatever things are lovely, whatever things are of good report, if there is any virtue and if there is anything praiseworthy—meditate on these things” (Phil 4:8). An Orthodox seminary curriculum, when possible, can indeed expand to include a broader array of disciplines. As long as it remains logocentric, centered on the trivium and the incarnate Logos, it is classical at heart.

Integrated Pedagogy

In the next verse in his letter to the Philippians, Paul says: “the lessons I have taught you, the tradition I have passed on, all that you heard me say or saw me do, put into practice; and the God of peace will be with you” (Phil 4:9). Here, in moving from curriculum to pedagogy, we see the integrated methodology of classical teaching & learning: the student, in a trusting, deferential relationship with and in imitation of their teacher (*mimesis*), receives and engages with a tradition (*paradosis*) of thought and practice (*praxis*) through personal struggle (*ascesis*).

The Person of the Teacher - Mimesis

Rejecting the modern dominance in education of analysis and description, classical education takes a prescriptive, normative approach, pursues an Ideal, and calls forth the student’s desire to realize their character and potential in reference to that ideal. The teacher, as the imperfect yet concrete witness to this Ideal, must reflect the intellectual, moral, and spiritual virtues which he hopes to cultivate in his students. In seeing knowledge come alive in personal existence, students are moved to humble themselves and strive to imitate their living model.

³ “God is more than a god, not less; Christ is more than Balder, not less. We must not be ashamed of the mystical radiance resting on our theology. We must not be nervous about ‘parallels’ and ‘pagan Christs’: they ought to be there—it would be a stumbling block if they weren’t. We must not, in false spirituality, withhold our imaginative welcome.” —C. S. Lewis, “Myth Became Fact.”

⁴ “Creation is a bible whose letters and syllables are the particular aspects of all creatures and whose inner words are the more universal aspects of creation. Conversely, Scripture is like a cosmos constituted of heaven and earth and things in between; that is, the ethical, the historical, and the theological dimensions.” (*Ambiguum* 10; PG 91.1128-1129a). St Paul in his Epistle to the Christians in Rome articulates this more directly: “For since the creation of the world, God’s invisible qualities – his eternal power and divine nature – have been clearly seen, being understood from what has been made, so that men are without excuse” (Romans 1:20).

There have been a variety of ideal types throughout history, of course. But in an Orthodox seminary, heroes like Aeneas or philosophers like Socrates are but prefigurations of the true God-man, the ultimate Ideal. After Christ, as David Hicks notes, “there would be no more myths of heroes adding their idiosyncrasies to the evolving shape of the Ideal Type. The myths of heroes would give way to the lives of saints, men and women who partook of the Ideal Type but did not presume to enlarge upon it” (Hicks 103). In the diverse lives of the saints, and the related tradition of holy elders, we can notice a startling unity of form, the form of Christ, in a diversity of lives. *They* manifest *Him*. We read the lives of saints, and seek counsel from our spiritual mentors, learning to act and think like them, in order to draw close to *Him*. This normative-personal approach is the first principle of classical pedagogy.

So I would encourage you graduates to reflect: what teachers have you had, in whom you encountered the living Word?

Tradition, Received and Internalized - Paradosis

St Paul goes on to speak of ‘that which you received.’ The second principle of classical pedagogy is tradition. Quite classically, the Orthodox seminary is rightly enamored with the wisdom of the past, and cries, *Ad fontes!* To the sources! Just as in the Church we speak of the canon of faith, the canon of Scripture, and ‘canonized’ saints, so in classical education we speak of a ‘canon’ of texts and artifacts which best represent our civilizational inheritance. In general, this includes the best of what has been written, painted, composed, sung, sculpted, thought, and taught. Through direct engagement with these sources, we are changed, and become responsible for the tradition that they comprise.

The perspective resulting from the continual return to the sources of the tradition is what the ancients would call a *paideia*. An Orthodox *paideia*, which includes a *phronema* of mind and an *ethos* of manner, has certain characteristics. With Christ as its hermeneutic key, it prioritizes certain sources over others, and puts them in a discerning relationship of ‘checks and balances.’ It strikes a balance between dogma and experience, mysticism and hierarchy, charisma and institution. It insists on divine mystery, man’s free will, the goodness of material creation, and the derivative nature of evil. It brings to the transparency of dialectical reasoning an emphasis on mental watchfulness, or *nepsis*, against the passions of fallen rationality. And so forth.

Embodying Paideia - Praxis/Ascesis & Liturgical Worship

In order for a tradition to become *paideia*, it must be appropriated and authentically internalized. Paganism understood this dynamic, but without reference to Christ, it could not sustain its own *paideia*, succumbing either to narcissistic egoism in self-worship or tragic fatalism in self-destruction. For an Orthodox seminary, however, Christ has shown Himself to be the Way: we participate in Him through humble, ascetical *praxis*, including the effort of study, as well as through communal liturgical worship. These are not tangential aspects to the classical Christian approach – they are crucial, and constitute the third dimension of pedagogy.

On practical *ascesis* first. The priority of lived experience and personal effort – of purification *before* illumination - is a maxim of both Orthodox spirituality *and* classical education. *Ascesis* and *curriculum* are both terms from ancient athletics, suggesting that we must train to be worthy of what we learn, lest we not finish the race. I’m afraid this is not so much ‘student-centered’ in the sense of letting the student decide what and how to learn. Humility and patience are key. The desert fathers spoke of the ‘university of the desert.’ And as T.S. Eliot has said, “the desert is squeezed into the tube train next to you. The desert is in the heart of your

brother.” The affinity of the monastic life with the classical approach to education validates the work of learning and study as a form of *podvig*.

In tandem with this is the liturgical life. Scholars have noted how Plato modified his *Republic* in a more liturgical direction in his later work, *The Laws*. Orthodox liturgy manifests the unity of knowledge in the liberal arts by concretely bringing together human arts, culture, and resources for the purpose of doxology. The Liturgy is an experiential synthesis of divine truth, goodness, and beauty that forms us both tacitly and mystically, leading us out away from earthly cares to taste the *eschaton*, where God is all in all.

Again, we find ourselves on familiar ground. I urge you, graduates, to reflect, as you conclude your time here: how has the proximity of monasticism, the practice of self-denial, and the centrality of liturgy shaped your seminary education?

To sum up so far: from the trivium of logocentric disciplines and the imperative to seek divine truth in all fields of study, from the person of the teacher to the active reception of an inherited tradition and its sources, from ascetic struggle to its fulfillment in liturgical doxology, classical and Orthodox seminary education are deeply akin.

Purpose and Telos

In moving from curriculum and pedagogy to the purpose, or *telos*, of classical Christian education we can note that in contrast to the original pagan context, in which classical education was designed only for the leisure class of male aristocrats, the Orthodox Christian emphasis on freedom and salvation in Christ opens up the infinite vista of *theosis* as the true calling of each and every human person. This is a quantum leap that endows our life and learning with an eternal weight, the weight of glory. The *telos* of a classical Christian education is thus nothing less than the full living human being, as understood by Orthodox anthropology. Our purpose and end the final stage of the threefold path: deification. With God’s help, classical education can assist in the prior stages of purification and illumination in a number of ways:

- It can steel our minds against false assumptions, invalid arguments, & wrong-headed questions;
- It can equip us for both rational thought and watchfulness over our thoughts; for articulate communication and patient listening; for self-sacrifice and practical ingenuity;
- It can populate our memories with emulable figures, heroes and saints, to help us to live righteously;
- It can help us acknowledge and explore the depth and complexity of God’s wisdom at work in all things;
- It can form in us an enduring desire for whatever is good, beautiful, and true;
- It can remind us that virtue is its own reward, the only thing to fear is sin, & the only sadness is that of not being a saint.
- It can instill in us a thirst to continue learning, to become like little children who are eager to meet Christ face to face, and thus seek Him everywhere, until our last breath.

Conclusion

And up until our last breaths...there is much that can be done. We live in a culture that is crumbling before our eyes. Families in our parishes are already searching for better schooling options for their children. At the same time, we have to be honest: Orthodox Christians, despite being on average the wealthiest and most educated demographic of Christians in North America, are quite behind in establishing educational institutions. Holy Trinity and a handful of other seminaries and colleges are the exceptions that prove the rule. In these changing times, clergy and lay leaders will increasingly need to lead the way in helping their parishes explore educational alternatives. Maybe this will mean leading a steering group to establish a

homeschool co-op, a cottage school, or a parochial academy. Such educational efforts and initiatives will be increasingly vital for keeping our children in the Church.

Thankfully, we have many allies. In addition to a growing number of bricks-and-mortar Orthodox schools, some of the leading thinkers in classical Christian education in North America, authors of seminal texts and founders of institutes and publishing houses, are Orthodox: David Hicks and his book *Norms and Nobility*; Andrew Kern and the Circe Institute; John Mark Reynolds and the St Constantine School; Christopher Perrin with Classical Academic Press and the Schole Academy; the Van Fossens with the Classical Learning Resource Center; and the reposed Fr Porphyrios (Taylor) and his book *Poetic Knowledge* and the St Raphael School - these are just a few of the figures and organizations which, like this one, are striving for a marriage of Orthodox Christianity and classical education.

In receiving your diploma today, which signifies your successful completion of the curriculum here, you have become an heir to a venerable legacy, that of Holy Trinity Seminary, which this Fall will be entering into its 75th year. Through your seminary education, God is preparing you for greater service. Depending on your degree program, the formation you underwent has readied you to pursue further studies, or move toward parish ministry. In whatever God has next for you, your contribution will, either directly or indirectly, be a part of growing the seeds of classical Christian education, as someone who has had a taste of it. If you're not sure how this could be so, that's OK; this feeling may be humility, which, in fact, is rather important – even a prerequisite, for the Lord's strength is made perfect in our weakness.

At the same time, as we await the Spirit of truth, whom we shall welcome in one week on Pentecost, let us ask that He may instill in us and especially in these graduates, a boldness alongside humility. A boldness to follow the Lord in a hostile world and to lead others toward Him; a boldness to proclaim the Gospel and keep the commandments; a boldness, as well, to learn and to teach, to the glory of God, and for the salvation of those whom you meet. This is, after all, what you have been trained to do here. But take heart - there's always more to learn! May God give you strength.