

Orthodox Theological Education and Parish Life in Russia

“Let your light shine forth : Orthodox Theological Education in the modern world”

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Your All Holiness!
Your Eminences!
Distinguished fathers, brothers and sisters!

All over the world Christianity is undergoing a serious crisis. Perhaps to be more exact this crisis continues and develops from the problems and moods which we have inherited from previous generations. I think that in its essence the nature of this crisis is universal, though in a given country or Church it has features and peculiarities of its own and very often it is characterized by tragic circumstances.

Russia and the Russian Orthodox Church in the 20th century are marked by the unprecedented dimension, acuteness and depth of man's militant atheism and its consequences. The enormous catastrophes which have befallen Russia have changed everything both in man's inner and outer life, and the very nature of man seems to have suffered new damages which are unlikely to be repaired.

At the end of the 20th century the Church can clearly see the spiritual nature of the events which have happened and which are taking place now. Without trying to offer you a theological analysis of the historical collisions of our times, I would like to concentrate on the agreed theme, namely, 'Orthodox Theological Education and Parish Life in Russia'. But in so doing, I must consider these issues and speak about them within the context of the destiny and life of the peoples of Russia and those of the Russian Orthodox Church.

The task of theological education in Russia has specific features which are determined by a long-term genocide, on a scale unprecedented in history, which Russians were put through together with other peoples of Russia and the Russian Orthodox Church.

Besides the physical liquidation of tens of millions of people, the very sources of our spiritual life, our spiritual continuity and culture were threatened with destruction. Attempts to create a 'new man of the communist era' led to the situation where our people began to think using different notions from those of their ancestors and they lost the common language which united them with previous generations. Russian culture and its unique Russian spiritual heritage, centuries-long, became inconceivable and alien to them.

It is only natural that while discovering the spiritual treasures of Russian history, modern man is unable from the outset to conceive their nature organically or to assess them in the right way. For a long time he remains out of touch with those spiritual treasures, as though he were alien to them by nature, but gradually he overcomes this alienation and tries to penetrate into that spiritual realm which until recently seemed to him strange and unreal. This requires a great spiritual struggle and if a man is not ready for it he renounces the spiritual life again, separating from it even more, which is followed by a tragic degradation of the personality of the man who prefers lentil soup to spirituality.

Another negative version of conceiving recently found spiritual possibilities reminds me of a colonizer who, when he discovers treasures, does his best to use them as quickly as possible without taking into consideration the culture and experience of the indigenous population. Such psychology becomes a favorable soil for all kinds of sectarianism, fundamentalist theories, occultism and sorcery.

At present everybody understands that the Church is the only body in Russia which survived the tragedy of the 20th century. And although the Church also lost a great deal of wealth, not only in material but also in spiritual terms, it still attracts Russian people who look on it with hope. It is the Church that as far as possible should help the cut tree of Russian national life to get back to its natural roots.

The educational task which faces Russia today is enormous and daunting. It can only be accomplished with God's help and thanks to the fact that the genotype of the Russian man has not yet lost its historical features completely. The Russian man, even he who has utterly lost the possibility of consciously choosing Orthodoxy, still intuitively feels his genetic relationship with Russian Orthodox sanctity and spirituality, and in the final analysis, in a critical situation his heart is drawn not to Protestants or Catholics but to the Orthodox Church.

On this is based our hope that the new generation will conceive and accept the Orthodox testimony more easily and effectively than the propaganda of some other spirituality.

The general educational system in Russia today is deprived of its ideological content and since 1917 has never had a real spiritual basis. Communist ideology, which used to play the role of an artificial element implanted in place of the denied Orthodox spirituality, was never taken seriously by Russian people but they accepted a life free of spirituality. The tragic consequences of this for the majority were concealed for a long time by ideological propaganda. The educational system, like our people's life in general, needs a sound spiritual foundation rooted in the Orthodox faith and in God-given Christian catechism. This means the necessity of Christian reflection on educational problems, pedagogy, the psychology of age, the spiritual basis of family life and the Christian teaching of the humanities above all.

On a large state scale such activity would take a lifetime of several generations, even if the state supported it. But in today's Russia, Orthodoxy has no real privileges and the system of state education, just like before, does not officially allow any Church influence.

Nevertheless, more and more frequently, it is precisely the Church that gains favor amongst our people .

How can the Church respond to this? Sunday schools, Orthodox kindergartens and gymnasia, diocese schools and, at last, Orthodox institutes which offer higher education: these are the areas of our educational activities in Russia. This process of response is streamed into two channels. The first springs from administrative initiative, from the attempts of the episcopate to open diocese theological schools and, if possible, theological colleges. Diocese schools and colleges are inspected by their bishops and by the Teaching Committee at the Holy Synod; they have certain financial support from the Church and train the clergy, choir-singers, and readers. Two theological academies in Moscow and St Petersburg and three theological schools in St Petersburg and Odessa, having survived the times of Church persecutions under Khrushchev (the General Secretary of the CPSU) are now the leading teaching centers which guide newly born theological schools. Amongst these I would like to mention Tobolsk Theological School, Stavropol Theological School, Smolensk Theological High School, Kostroma Theological Secondary School, Kiev and Minsk Theological Schools.

The second channel springs from local initiative, in Church communities, brotherhoods and sisterhoods. They run Orthodox kindergartens, gymnasia, Sunday Schools, courses and even colleges. They are mainly registered and inspected by the Department of Catechism and Theological Education at the Holy Synod, but have no other financial support from the church than that which they receive in the form of parish donations. Among the Orthodox colleges of the second type, I should mention the St Tikhon Orthodox Theological Institute, the Orthodox University of Father John Ekonomtsev, the Volgograd (Tsaritsyn) Orthodox University, the Moscow Orthodox Christian Higher School headed by Father George Kochetkov, the Theological Faculty in Minsk and a number of other initiatives.

While the first channel tends towards traditional forms and curriculum, the second is more open and free for experimentation.

It goes without saying that such a subdivision into two directions could be considered rather vague. For if when the schools and colleges of the second type were initially being set up, they were mistrusted and raised suspicion among the Church hierarchs, time tests these initiatives fairly quickly and they are gradually accepted or rejected by the Church. Bishops look for support in the enthusiasm of Church communities, yet initiatives of laymen need the blessing and approval of the hierarchs. The process of exchanging curricula and teaching materials is in progress.

More and more frequently the initiatives of church communities are implemented through fruitful contacts with bishops. The devoted activity of the Holy Patriarch Alexey II gives an inspiring example of church unity of the pastor with his flock.

Common to all theological schools and colleges are problems of staffing, problems of teaching material, considerable financial difficulties and the lack of necessary premises. In a far away province it may be easier to find premises and financial support but the task of finding teachers is considerably more acute and sometimes hopeless.

As for the curriculum plans and materials, they are under intensive investigation and working out. Traditional teaching literature has for the most part become obsolete and is little suited to today's teaching. Thus it is of utmost importance for us to provide such a theological education as will give Orthodox institutions, and at a later stage those of the state, the necessary Orthodox teachers and specialists and relevant teaching materials.

Since it is not possible to describe in any more detail how the system of theological education in the Russian Orthodox Church originated and developed in its entirety, I shall concentrate on the history and life of the St Tikhon Orthodox Theological Institute and Brotherhood in the name of the All-Merciful Saviour (the Saviour Brotherhood) which I represent. As the experience of the St. Tikhon Orthodox Theological Institute shows, the most important foundation for developing the educational activity of the Church today is our parish life.

It is true that the term 'parish life' can be understood in a number of different ways. We usually mean by it the life of our parishes, which are now organized not on a territorial principle, but under the guidance of those pastors whom believers and church-goers really respect.

Until recently such priests were often transferred from one church to another. When such situations arose, parishioners followed their pastor. Due to the fact that not all priests can carry the burden of such pastoral activities, accordingly not all churches have very active communities.

There are few strong parishes at present, but their number is growing as young priests, properly prepared, come to serve the Church. A strong parish can count a thousand or more members. They are not organized in an administrative way, but are united by Christian love and spiritual kinship having one and the same guiding confessor whom we call a spiritual father.

Even under the communist regime such parishes used to set up underground circles, libraries and choirs, and organize summer camps and excursions for children and young people, as well as printing spiritual literature, even though all such activities at that time were prohibited by law. Parish life turned out to be capable of attracting and involving young people and so within the communities large, strong Orthodox families were founded. One of the major tasks of the parishes became the Orthodox upbringing of children.

When the process of the liberation of our church life started, the parishes, ahead of church centers, with the blessing of His All Holiness Patriarch Alexey II, began to unite into charitable brotherhoods and sisterhoods which turned out to be a convenient form of legalizing and expanding parish life. It is these parishes that are the main source of church personnel, and are a leading and active force in the creation of new forms of church life which we need.

Church life which we find in church communities naturally includes Orthodox education as one of its most important spheres of activity. The process of training Orthodox pedagogical personnel started with the setting up of courses for catechists on the initiative

of several brotherhood-communities. Very soon these courses were transformed into a Theological Institute which on the blessing of His All Holiness Patriarch Alexey II was named after the Holy Patriarch Tikhon. The importance of the Institute soon grew beyond the limits of individual brotherhoods and gained all-Church renown.

The Theological Institute is governed by the Scientific Council and the rector elected by the Council, approved by the Holy Patriarch. At present there are five departments at the Institute, namely the Theological—Pastoral which trains the clergy, the Catechetical, the Pedagogical, the department of Church Singing and that of Church Art (icon-painting, mosaic, fresco, sewing and restoration skills). All departments, with the exception of the first one, enroll both men and women. We organize day, evening and correspondence courses and we also have a preparatory department. At present we have about one thousand students and their number is likely to increase in future. Today we already have around 500 applications to take entrance exams, which will be starting soon.

It is a five year course and classes mainly take place at the Moscow State University which provides the St Tikhon Institute with premises free of charge. A particular feature of our institute is its attempt to combine a solid humanitarian education on an Orthodox basis, with theological and specialist education. This probably explains why we have an excessively overloaded teaching curriculum and such an intensive learning process.

It goes without saying that the Church is in need of a high level of education and theological science, so the Institute is doing its best to reach that level although for the time being it has neither a building nor finances of its own. It should be stressed that the Institute exists thanks to the enthusiasm of our students and teachers who work hard for only a token salary. The Institute receives only small donations and thus any possible support of the Saviour Brotherhood can hardly be overestimated.

Amongst the teaching staff of 150 members are a large number from the Moscow Theological Academy and from Moscow State University, whose support is particularly valuable for us. Our Institute greatly appreciates broad contacts with other theological schools. Quite a number of church leaders from abroad have already visited the Institute and have given us the honor of delivering most interesting lectures. We are closely connected with the Institute of St Sergius in Paris with which we have an exchange agreement for teachers and students and for the joint publishing of the valuable theological inheritance of Russian professors in Paris. We are open to cooperation in the teaching process and in scientific theological activity in all Orthodox establishments. The Institute has its own printing facilities and has started to issue a periodical - 'Messenger of the St Tikhon Theological Institute'. We hold an annual theological conference in Moscow at the end of January after the feast of Epiphany according to the old calendar, and we invite Orthodox theologians to participate in it. The Institute has published and prepared for printing a number of books, the most recent of which 'Words of St Tikhon and the latest documents on the continuity of church administration from 1917 to 1943', may be of certain use for those interested in the history of the Russian Church this century.

The Institute meets an ever—growing number of requests from diocese hierarchs and representatives of various dioceses to assist them in organizing Orthodox higher education in the provinces. Perhaps we will be able to set up our branches or groups to

study by correspondence there. Time will tell what form should be used but it is absolutely evident to the Church that educational activity should be given the highest priority.

Equally evident is the demand of our Church and of our people for a great missionary effort. In the past the Russian Orthodox Church gave special training to missionaries and was rich in such devoted holy men who were counted amongst those equal to the apostles. Our Institute and perhaps other establishments of Church education should start training missionaries, especially as missionary activities in our times are characterized by new difficulties and require a high level of culture, theological knowledge and real pastoral devotion.

Missionary activity has two aspects. Firstly it means as always to preach Christianity in non-Christian countries. Alas! As such we can again consider vast territories of Russia where for a long time already, hardly any Orthodox churches have remained. There we should again preach Christianity. Secondly, there is, so to speak, an inner mission. For example, in Moscow there are about 200 churches operating but a considerable part of its population is isolated from them in their inner life due to their Soviet up-bringing. Here an enthusiastic missionary activity is likewise needed. To some extent this task can be accomplished by educational institutions which train Orthodox specialists. Perhaps we can consider the Orthodox School of nurses to be the first among such institutions. This school was founded under the first Municipal Hospital in Moscow and the Sisterhood named after St. Dimitry the Prince, which is integrated into our Brotherhood of the Saviour. It is wonderful that the state agreed to finance this school at which they offer, besides the purely medical discipline, a good program of basic theological knowledge.

The problems of our Church life, up-bringing and education are explained above all by a break in the continuity of the spiritual tradition which took place due to the persecutions that befell our Church. Even the majority of our ordained priests are neophytes brought up in families of non-believers. This leads to the situation where priests often differ in opinion and it becomes difficult to unit them all in accordance with one and the same spiritual guidance. Consequently various groups appear which can be a threat to the unity of the Church.

The lack of spiritual culture, good education, outlook, and real spiritual continuity provoke many contradictions. On the one hand we see attempts to modernize church life, yet on the other, as a dialectical opposition, there is a strong tendency towards conservative protectionism. However supporters of these conflicting views do not understand clearly their actions, nor their final objectives. They do not properly understand what the spiritual and church life is. They have only recently come into the Church, and seeing the quantity of historical archaisms and irregularities, have begun to change and reform everything using ungrounded and superficial interpolations taken from the church life of the first centuries. They try to model the church life of the 20th century in accordance with their rationalist assumptions, ignoring the spiritual experience accumulated by the Church in previous historical eras.

Others, who have already spent several years in the Church think everything should remain unchanged and nothing should be touched. The most important thing in their opinion is to follow meticulously the living tradition which a newcomer observes in the 'country of Orthodoxy' - an outdated neophyte or a provincial utterly devoid of any spiritual vision. He, of course, does not realize his own obscurantism and narrow mindedness and with jealousy worthy of Russian Old Believers of the 17th century, tries to dramatize his own local occasionalistic so-called 'order' on a unichurch scale. Any other perception of Orthodoxy and church life together with its problems is quickly denounced as heresy, suspiciously considered to be non-Orthodox and even to be in secret collaboration with freemasons and Zionists. Any change is considered by such defenders as an evil or subversive action. These two conflicting tendencies quite often collide and it is up to us to look for the golden mean.

This of course can only be shown to us by people who have spiritual discernment; such people today are greatly lacking. Those who support either of these two extreme views think that everything depends on the modification or preservation of one or other outward form of church life or outward ceremony. They fail to understand that Church life is based on a spiritual struggle, on faith, love, humility, meekness, peace, and unity. In their view, everything is determined by this or that form. The deep spiritual life of individuals and of the people as a whole, the Christian way of life of church-goers - these are the main objectives that exist always and everywhere more especially in modern Russia. This is the most difficult thing to achieve. Nevertheless I firmly believe that anyone who sincerely seeks to serve the Church, sooner or later finds the right way. And Church life will only improve when people seek God with all their heart, when they can say sincerely and informally, 'Let us commend ourselves, each other and our whole lives unto Christ our God'. When a person thinks in such a way all outer problems are easily solved and everything falls into place. Real spiritual life without too much effort gives rise to necessary forms and completely naturally takes them on board without provoking doubt or argument.

The time of persecutions convincingly demonstrated this truth. A large number of catacomb churches sprung up and the liturgy was celebrated on the antymins without any iconostasis; the order of service was adjusted, and liturgy creativity flourished. But all this was due to the situation and the spiritual life of the people. One should suffer for it: such things do not happen without a spiritual struggle. Reforms will never bring good fruit if they are carried out in a rationalist manner or out of pride. The second Vatican council should serve as an example to warn Orthodoxy as a whole.

Both modernism and rigid protectionism are essentially substitutes for church activity, a replacement for the spiritual struggle and real spiritual endeavor.

The temptation of a spiritual replacement is probably the main temptation of our times. It is the spirit of the Antichrist, because the Antichrist is he who will come in the place of Christ. Every Christian faces the danger of leading an unreal life. Moreover the priest has the added temptation of calling people to himself and not to Christ. This is a very sophisticated temptation as any priest bears upon himself the image of Christ and should manifest this image to people; but the people having loved Christ's image should belong to Christ and should not become followers of the priest. Replacing Christ with himself, a priest can easily become a small antichrist, and in such a situation his parish becomes a sort

of sect. In our times it is particularly difficult to remain spiritually sober and to bear true spirituality within oneself. All around us are too many lies, too much spiritual ignorance, and replacements occur as a matter of course.

So as to preserve the true spirit of Christ we must be faithful to the tradition of the Fathers, to the spirit of inner struggle of our ancient and new holy martyrs: they had this spirit of Christ in themselves and it triumphed.

We do our best to study thoroughly the inheritance of our Holy Fathers. On the other hand, we strive towards quickening the approach of the day when our new martyrs and Russian confessors are glorified.

In today's Russia, at least, the churches in the centers, monasteries, and cities are full of people despite the fact that the number of churches has considerably increased. Our church of St Nicholas in Kuznetsy is full of people on feast days. Every Sunday and every feast day we serve three liturgies. On a regular Sunday about 400 people receive Holy Communion, on big feast days around 600, and at Christmas and Easter about 1000-1200. At the late third liturgy around 600-700 people receive Holy Communion out of which 300 or more are children. This can be a difficult service but one full of joy. In Moscow nowadays people take Holy Communion often. The thirst for a Eucharistic life, thanks to God, is spreading all over Russia. Until recently the conservative mood of the clergy did not allow people to approach the Communion cup too often and they forbade people to receive Holy Communion at Easter and on important feast days. Now it seems impossible to stop the process: more and more often believers receive Holy Communion and at Easter one may do so everywhere.

This is a very positive phenomenon though there is some danger of profanity. If we now cancelled obligatory confession, people would flood in right from the streets, and would begin to receive Holy Communion without any kind of preparation and even without any Orthodox belief. This would be an inadmissible blasphemy. Therefore both our hierarchs and spiritual fathers whom, thanks to God, we still have in Russia, categorically forbid such experiments.

After the vigil service we stay to hear confessions until midnight and on the following morning again as many people come for confession. Very often it is impossible to take detailed confessions from all those who would like to do so. But in the evening the opportunity for confession is open to those who have not done so for a long time, or who have committed grave sins. There are many such people as today a large number of baptized Christians come to church who have not been brought up in the faith. The rest we have to limit with a prayer of absolution if they have confessed recently, if they take communion often and if they have no grave sins on their conscience.

It seems to me that in the West the problems are sometimes just the opposite. There, not everybody wants to have confession and many have grown accustomed to receiving Holy Communion without doing so. In our country it is hard not to allow people to confess. I should also add that we have particular problems with the order of the sacraments of confession, baptism and marriage because during the time of Soviet power these sacraments became routinely profaned. It is understandable why this happened. As very few priests

remained it was an impossible task to baptize all those willing. While I was serving at various parishes in the suburbs of Moscow, in one day I had to baptize one hundred or more people. When baptisms happen every day, and on feast days in such large quantities as for example 70 children and 30 adults, as well as 200 godparents, it is of course quite unimaginable.

Under such conditions, it is impossible to read out the prayers so that they can be heard because there is so much noise and excitement. Such a method of baptizing inevitably leads to profanation. Yet some people get used to it and come to think that this is the way it should be. As a result a new tradition of baptizing has come about: just baptizing and nothing more.

Now we have the opportunity to challenge this somehow. Already four years ago now, next to our church we built a parish building with a home-baptism church in which we have a special place to baptize adults. We have recently received the blessing of our Patriarch to celebrate baptismal liturgies there. Thus in our brotherhood, the problem of the profanation of baptism has been solved. We are now in a position to be able to instruct those wishing to be baptized. We prepare them for baptism and then we baptize them with reverence, yet in a festive way. The majority of adults whom we baptize in our church become our parishioners.

It is also interesting how we deal with marriage. For a long time I have been trying to wed my spiritual children in a festive way. Everybody liked it so much that a tradition of our own soon emerged. Parish weddings are wonderful feasts! In our parish on such occasions many priests often participate. Last year we wedded two choir singers: a girl from my choir and a young man from another church of our brotherhood, and ten priests attended their wedding. The church was full, and two choirs sang. After such festive wedding ceremonies comes the reception party which is likewise a wonderful occasion: choirs sing songs and there is much joyful, pure and sincere merry-making. In fact weddings have become such feast days that sins of fornication in our parish have almost completely disappeared. At first I did not notice this trend, but then I realized that it is to a considerable degree thanks to such weddings and reception parties. People begin to feel what a real marriage is like, and to see the beauty and purity of this great sacrament. And they are keen to approach it in due purity, so that they too may have such a wedding, and that their family life may also begin in such a solemn, joyful, pure and beautiful manner.

Here I should say some words about family life in our parishes. Of course it faces many problems related to the extremely low standard of living, lack of living space and medical service, together with the difficulties in upbringing and educating children. But in the light of the sexual revolution which storms all around in all its diabolical dimensions, with widespread pornography, divorce and abortions, in families rooted in church life, many questions are not even asked, as they have come to seem normal in the contemporary dechristianized world. In such families no forms of artificial contraceptives are used, under no circumstances of course do abortions take place, divorce is not accepted, and fornication disappears. In our parishes there are many large families - many with seven or eight children, and some with twelve. Intensive birth-giving, regular church-going, a eucharistic life, faith in the church tradition, obedience to the spiritual father, all make Orthodox

families islands of a true Christian spirit, witnessing by their very existence to the undying grace and power of the teaching of Christ.

A very important part of the life of the Brotherhood of our Saviour, and of our parishes and schools is the summer holiday for young people and children. We organize Orthodox summer camps where the life of the children and young people is centred on the church. This year for one of the new camps, a portable church-tent dedicated to All Saints of Glorified Russia was set up and blessed by His All Holiness Patriarch Alexey II. Camp life attracts large numbers of children and young people, and has a great influence on their upbringing. It is here where the best possibilities are offered for training new church staff. In this respect we use the rich experience of the Russian emigration in the West, but our camps do have specific features of their own. These are first and foremost the very strict conditions of camp life, which includes restoration work, since there may be a church under repair on the camp territory.

In the life of a church community, spiritual guidance plays a decisive role. Of course even the most devoted priest and industrious pastor cannot claim to tell God's will to his parishioners and to lead them on their life path without any mistakes. But we are not ashamed by the belief that if the wholeness of the church appears in an Orthodox community, the Lord reveals his divine will, and will not allow it to go astray. Many children from our parishes study at our Orthodox gymnasia, and then enter the Theological Institute, and strive to devote their lives to the service of the Church.

However, we should never forget our historical experience which proves that very often spiritual education leads to a result contrary to the intended aim. It was precisely from seminaries that many revolutionaries and atheists emerged. Now, not having any spiritual understanding, we do not yet know what will be the result of our endeavors. But we hope that theological education, as an integral part of real church life which we strive to bring about in our parish, may help us not to go astray but to be true children of God.

A short-term experience of the life and activities of the Orthodox Brotherhood of our Saviour, the Holy Tikhon Theological Institute, evidently proves how much can be done in the fullness of Christian love and unity. The covenant of God, 'Where two or three are gathered together in My name, I am there in the midst of them', is implemented in the assistance of God to those who love unity in Christ. And if one of the most fearful temptations of our times is division and rift, for all sorts of reasons - political, national, traditional, calendar, jurisdictional and so on, then the most valuable input into the life of the Orthodox Church will be our desire to be united in Christ.

Today's Theological Consultation serves such unity and witness to the wholeness of the Orthodox Church and gives us a sense of heartfelt gratitude, and as St Sergius of Radonezh once said, helps us under the protection of the Holy Trinity Monastery, 'to overcome the hateful disunity of this world'.

In conclusion, I would like to thank all those who made our participation in this conference possible. Thank you for your attention.