

The Methodology Of Theology

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Father Jeftic has provided us with a sound Orthodox approach to the methodology of theology, a methodology rich in "theoria". A common criticism of modern Orthodox theology is its imitation of Western prototypes. A result of this trend has been the compartmentalization of theology: systematic theology, historical theology, practical theology, and hermeneutical theology. Those of us who are entrusted by the Church to teach theology in the Western world are familiar with the critique of our Roman Catholic and Protestant colleagues that we both are rich in "theoria" but poor in "praxis". It is, in fact, this integration of "theoria"/ "praxis" which I see as our most important challenge in theological education today.

I see my task here today as one of affirming an Orthodox approach to the methodology of theology. This I shall attempt to do by identifying what I perceive to be an Eastern prototype in what in Western parlance is referred to as theological field education. Yet, the field dimension to learning has been stressed in the medical, legal, and teaching professions for years. Theological field education seeks to provide seminarians with significant experiences of "diakonia" under supervision. Such experiences serve as a focus for reflection upon the theological implications of one's actions. The purpose of such reflection is to confirm that all "diakonia" to God's people is informed and sound theologically. This model of theological education corresponds ideally to the Orthodox holistic approach to the study of theology. Orthodoxy has consistently avoided the artificial distinction between "pure" and "practical" theology. All theology in the Orthodox Church is rooted in the experience of the Incarnation, not simply as a past historic event, but as a continuing reality which is believed, celebrated, taught, and lived by God's people. Therefore, to do theology involves not simply the intellect but the entire person as he/ she relates to the Risen Christ through daily "askesis" in prayer, in the celebration of the Eucharist, and in service to others.

The foundation upon which the field dimension to theology lies is the conviction that, for the Orthodox, theological studies cannot be isolated or unrelated to Church life. Theological thinking cannot be separated from spirituality. There is an intimate and necessary relationship between theological study, worship, and loving service to others. From an Orthodox perspective, theological study cannot be detached from the life of God's people. The various aspects of theological study are not academic disciplines which can be pursued in and of themselves. On the contrary, theology seeks to reflect and to interpret God's revelation in Christ. This is a revelation

which is not closed, but one which is constantly unfolding in the lives of persons by the power of the Holy Spirit. It is a revelation which is especially evident in the lives of the saints, and of the fathers and teachers of the Church.

We rejoice in the fact that the greatest fathers and teachers of the Orthodox Church have been pastors. They have been individuals who were not simply skilful thinkers, but- more importantly- they have been persons of prayer and participants in the joys and sorrows of human life. Because of the sanctity of their lives, they were especially sought out as guides and teachers by those aspiring to the clerical state. Indeed, it was the monastery, where many of these saintly persons were to be found, which for centuries provided much of the theological training available for the clergy. There is much in the early practice of the Church which points to supervision as an important component of ministerial training. Thus, it is not to something entirely foreign to our tradition that we turn when we speak of field education and supervised "diakonia".

As an integral part of preparation for service to the Church in today's world, field education- as practised in an Orthodox theological curriculum- manifests the intimate and necessary relationship between worship, theological study, and service to God's people. Our tradition teaches us that it is through the integration and exercise of these that one acquires the fruits of the Holy Spirit and is divinised. It is the aim of theological field education to accomplish this integration.

GOALS

Supervised field education experiences have one fundamental concern: to assist individuals in deepening their relationship to God and to nurture their vocation to serve God through the Church. This central concern expresses itself in the following goals of the program.

1. The first objective of the supervised field education program is the exploration, fostering, and nourishment of an individual's zeal and vocation to enter ordained or non-ordained ministry through active engagement in the life and work of the Church. The various experiences are opportunities where an individual can develop an identity as a person called to be part of the Church's ministry. In addition to this, those men who are seeking ordination should have the opportunity to develop a priestly consciousness. In short, the programs of supervised field education are concerned not simply with acquiring skills and knowledge, but with nurturing the very essence of the individual.

2. The experiences of field education are designed to provide the individual with the opportunity to grow in the life of the spirit within the context of service. As we have already noted, there is an intimate relationship between worship, theological study, and service to others. All the experiences of field education should provide the student with opportunities to perceive this relationship.

3. The programs provide opportunities in which professional understanding and competence can be developed. Ministerial skills are best learned in actual situations. In addition to the acquisition of fundamental pastoral skills, the students have the clear opportunity to test their vocations, and to sense their gifts, talents and weaknesses.

4. The programs provide an opportunity for the student to offer responsible and meaningful service to the Church during the period of study and preparation.

5. Through involvement in the programs, students have the opportunity to develop interpersonal skills. Students are encouraged to work in cooperation with other students, the supervisor, members of the parish, and the parish priest.

6. The programs offer a framework in which theological issues are raised and faced. In this, the student is challenged to reflect theologically on the many contexts and situations of ministry today.

7. The programs provide a comprehensive and realistic view of the Church and its role in the lives of persons.

8. Lastly, the students should be able to recognize in the programs the opportunity for guided self-evaluation and development of spiritual and personal skills so that limitations are recognized and strengths developed.

PRINCIPLES

The following principles are considered to be of importance for the development and implementation of a program of supervised field education.

1. The experiences offered by a field education program should be clearly distinguished from occasional and un-supervised church work in which an individual may become involved. During the student's first year of theological studies, he/ she would be expected to participate in Church activities such as religious education, chanting or choir, and parish youth work. This features of a field education program which distinguish it from occasional parish service are: First, an appropriate setting in which students are responsible and accountable for meaningful ministerial service. Second, the student's involvement is supervised by a competent individual who is actively concerned with the student's personal and ministerial growth.

2. Supervised field education cannot be viewed as an appendix to theological education but as an essential and integral part of it. Therefore, all students enrolled in a Master of Divinity degree program are expected to participate in the field education programs throughout the normal three years of residency at a school of theology.

3. The Director of a field education program has the ultimate responsibility for placing students in field education programs, and of determining satisfactory completion of requirements. He works closely with supervisors and with a Faculty Committee on field education.

4. In addition to the actual field education experience, all students are required to participate in weekly seminars. These seminars, which are led by members of the faculty and

supervisors, afford the students with the opportunity to study various aspects of the ministry in which they are involved, and to share with their fellow students their experiences and concerns.

5. The parish is of special importance in the field education programs. This is especially true for students who are preparing for ordination. A seminarian should have the opportunity to learn and to serve in the various dimensions of parish life: worship, education, administration, and mission.

6. The program of field education is structured for each student so that he/ she is involved in a variety of experiences during the three years of participation in the programs.

SUPERVISION

A critical key to the success of the field education programs is adequate and regular supervision. It is the task of the supervisor to oversee, encourage, and direct the students in his/ her charge as they fulfil their field education responsibilities. Indeed, the significant feature which distinguishes accredited field education from occasional “parish service” is the presence of competent supervision. It is the supervision which encourages accountability and responsibility from the student.

In the parish setting, the supervisor is normally the parish priest. It is the task of the priest to “tutor” his students in the responsibilities of parish life. The priest is called upon to acquaint his students with pastoral duties and to oversee their progress in developing a spirit of Christ-like service. At the end of each semester, each supervising priest is required to submit a report on the progress of his students.

From what I have said and observed in the past, it would appear that Orthodox theological education needs to uphold a more fully integrated theology, one which unites “theoria” with “praxis”. Such a theology, in fact, reflects the authentic tradition of the Orthodox Church. Progress has been made in this direction through the incorporation of field education with supervision into an exclusively Orthodox theological curriculum. It is important, however, that this educational model be modified where necessary and adapted to the realities of the Orthodox Church.