

Orthodox theological education and contemporary life

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

Vth International Consultation of Orthodox Theological Schools,

Halki Theological School, Turkey, August 14-20, 1994

Fr. G. KOCHETKOV

Your Eminences, dear Fathers, brothers and sisters!

No one doubts that the Orthodox Church is experiencing a variety of crises. This can be seen clearly in many aspects of the Church's life. For example with regard to Liturgies, Biblical study, culture, creativity, ethics and aesthetics, family life and sexuality, asceticism, dogmatics, mysticism, canon law, pedagogics, national and social life, hierarchical and parish structures, philosophy, history, ecumenism, mission and catechetics. In my opinion the most painful of these is the *crisis in Orthodox theological education* where there is a need for an integrated and consistent system which can produce an adequate response to the challenges and needs of the world today.

The crisis in education means that many people have lost interest in it. They are convinced that theological education is something at best useless and at worst harmful for a Christian because it tends to develop the intellect alone, even to the point of depravation, while giving nothing to the soul and heart of the believer. I imagine that the sentiment "just pray, and that is sufficient as far as theology is concerned", is a familiar one to many of us Russians. Unfortunately, it is not only the gloomy obscurantists, the ignorant or the plainly materialistic who see no need for a theological education. Those who are by no means the worst of Orthodox Christians may conclude that it is only the narrow-minded, the dogmatic, the careerists, or perhaps those who are simply not in touch with contemporary life who need a theological education.

What may be seen as the main problem here? We can try to give some kind of answer based on our experience, and particularly on our experience of the new theological school which I have been running for the last six years. The Moscow Higher Orthodox Christian School began its activities in 1988 - illegally. Thus it was forced by circumstances to start from nearly nothing. Almost any adult (that is, over 21 years) was then welcomed into the school irrespective of sex, profession, gifts, age, cultural or ethnic background.

Our experience is of teaching any member of the Church, and in this it differs from that of seminaries and academies which deal primarily with clergy. The only precondition for entry is to complete the full catechism program, which in our case lasts just under a year. This is understood as a progressive introduction into a personal and full involvement in the life of the Church. We are convinced that theology should take into account the life of *all the members of the Church* - this goes for both catechism and the reading of Holy Scripture. This is particularly important in the cities, the spiritual wildernesses such as Moscow, where many people despite having had a good secular education are still spiritually hungry.

In this respect our first task was to avoid two dangers in our educational work. On the one hand secularism - ie. coldness, an extremely objective and utilitarian approach which is the norm for secular universities; on the other hand, a low educational level, an unnatural split between the internal and external, alienation from life and practice and the dead scholasticism which is unfortunately often met in Church educational institutions, especially those which have taken up the role of so-called '*defensive Orthodoxy*'.

Our second task was to encourage all students and teaching staff to be responsible members of the Church and to be *fully* involved in some kind of service within the Church. This meant that the educational process had to be comprehensive, vital, progressive and possessing an inner integrity. I will explain what I mean by this.

In my opinion, for a spiritual education to be comprehensive, teaching needs to cover the following three areas:

1. Firstly, teaching must cover all that is required by Orthodox *Liturgical practice*. This means covering the Old and New Testaments, Liturgics, Sacramentology, Homiletics and Catechetics. Other auxiliary subjects may be added onto this list, such as biblical languages (Ancient Hebrew, New Testament Greek) and liturgical languages (Old Church Slavonic for us up until now) as well as church singing, biblical archeology, relevant parts of canon law etc.
2. The second area to be covered is teaching about the theology of man - *Christian anthropology*, so to speak. This can be broken down into the following areas: ethics, aesthetics, ascetical and mystical teaching. Additional subjects might be stylistics, the history of art and literature, history of religion, patristics (the ascetic fathers), anthropodicy, etc.

3. The final area is *theology* and *church history* in the more narrow sense: dogmatics, patristics apologetics (theodicy), and philosophy including logic and Russian religious philosophy of the 19th and 20th centuries. Ecclesiology also comes into this with the corresponding parts of canon law, Russian and general Church history from 1st to 20th century. All this should be completed by studying modern languages, and English in particular, so as to gain access to specialized literature, but more importantly to facilitate communication with people outside Russia.

The level of work in the above-mentioned areas may be different. Our methodology combines a traditional *academic* style for the first three courses with lectures and seminars, a more *personal* and fluid approach for the senior courses, and finally on the sixth course, students write a thesis in which they demonstrate their *creativity*.

The difference in the levels and corresponding approaches makes it necessary to have different emphases during each period of education. Thus in the early stages we try to acquaint students with those parts of Church doctrine and practice which are *beyond discussion*. Therefore, the original texts are studied, something which is not done in our traditional Church educational institutions. On the higher levels we go beyond this, dealing with those subjects which can provoke *disagreement* and which demand the ability to make independent judgements. This level may not be accessible to everyone, thus the majority will finish their education after three years.

At the third and highest level, ie. the sixth year of education, while working on a Masters thesis, the student acquires a specialization and works on deciphering and even producing a solution for a real problem in the chosen area. This ability could of course be further developed during work on a doctoral thesis - something which in normal circumstances would involve a further three years' work for the more gifted students.

Each student ought to be aware that he can complete his studies at the end of the third or fifth year and receive a bachelors degree. Everything must be orientated towards internal and external capabilities which depend directly on the quality of personal spiritual life. In this way the fullness of the spiritual education has a direct link with its *vitality*. This in turn means that an Orthodox theological education should be built on a strong and effective foundation in life. It should be aimed at the active members of the Church only, no matter that they are often frail sinners. Although this may have different applications in different

situations, in any normal situation it presupposes regular (ie. at least once a fortnight), communion of the teachers and students, preferably from one Cup. And there would be other demands normally associated with the idea of being a practicing Christian.

Teachers and students should work together in a united community, though this does not of course mean breaking away from their permanent communities. It is very important that together they gain experience of living Orthodoxy through practice and involvement in various areas: mission, catechization, community life, diakonia and charity. As has already been mentioned, a full adult *catechization* lasting for at least a year is of fundamental importance as far as the vitality and effectiveness of theological education is concerned.

According to our experience, a *pause* should be made between these two stages of the spiritual life. This may be a year or six months, depending on the individual. This pause allows the neophyte to grow more certain of his faith and find his place both internally and externally in the life of the Church and his own personal life. During this time he will have the opportunity to put into practice everything he was taught during his time in the catechumenate. This includes the services, looking for a confessor and/or a personal spiritual authority, developing a Christian personal and family life, finding a circle within and beyond the parish for fellowship.

A modern Orthodox theological education should be characterized by an *openness* towards people, society and the problems of both. It means that not only should any closedness with regard to the spiritual life be opposed as being an expression of life without a real faith, but chaos, irresponsibility and a lack of boundaries should also be opposed. It is well known that a lack of understood boundaries leads to a lack of responsibility. As for Christianity that is closed, it can support only a defensive stance.

An important element here is the attitude taken to those not yet in the Church. The principle of openness towards any kind of sectarian mentality allows a comprehensive reception of the full value of the Holy Scriptures and Holy Tradition of the Church; it makes all their marvels, including the historical ones, transparent and sets their proper hierarchy. It also allows the discovery of sectarian mentality in Orthodoxy and Orthodoxy in sects, as archbishop John (Shakhovskiy) said. It makes decisive action in a proper Christian manner possible, avoiding fanaticism - that is, belief devoid of love - when dealing with non-Orthodox and non-Christians. It means that in practice we use the principle of complementarity, that is, we try to share with them our belief and knowledge, but not as a

stick to beat them with. 'Do not resist a dissenter' may be understood as a version of the evangelical principle, 'do not resist an evil-doer', but it is rarely recognized in contemporary systems of Orthodox education. As far as this is concerned, it is necessary to learn how to 'silence the ignorant talk of foolish men' in accordance with the spirit of the Gospel, but not in a secular way which leads immediately to a sectarian spirit.

The latter is extremely dangerous within theological education and moreover directly contradicts it, initiating a heavy, inert, primitive and gloomy spirit of *formal dogmatism* lacking in grace and common sense. We do not have to look too far for examples. It is enough to remember the systems and level of education of our semi-sectarian Church in Exile or Old Believers of various kinds.

A formalism in the field of spiritual education may easily be found in systems that are extremely secular, where the main method of education is just reading literature. This way is quite usual in many West European and American Orthodox Theological Schools.

We should learn to *differentiate* more clearly between the *spiritual* and the *secular* in theological education, although in Church life in general we need more fully to overcome the gap between them. What is secular may not necessarily contradict the spiritual, but rather support and enhance it, as long as we do not make this an equivalent of state, national, cultural or ethical principles in personal life or society. Secular powers are able to guard one's personal rights. Then it stands guard over the spiritual law of society, people, state and culture, as well as the morality of the individual.

A modern theological education should observe some other principles in the Christian life besides openness and complementarity. For example, recognizing the possibility of a *shared spirit having a variety of forms* at any level, even the dogmatic, sacramental and mystical levels, as well as at the level of community and parish. Or, for instance, that the *spirit comes first, before it is applied in any form*, and that forms are created by it, thus making it possible for different forms to contain the same spirit, although the opposite is also true when a single form can contain different spirits.

These principles allow us to overcome our fear of any kind of form in the spiritual life. This fear can beget a magical and impersonal approach which needs to be rejected in all cases, especially in asceticism and mysticism, liturgics and sacramentology and also in ecclesiology where it produces all forms of false ecclesiastical authoritarianism. It is only as

the Church strives for *fullness of life in love and freedom* that this difficult task can be resolved.

The principle of primacy of spirit over form and the importance of a personal approach for both teachers and students allows a freedom from phobias within theological education - that is freedom from *fears* which are not from God - be they psychological, spiritual, dark, irrational demonic fears or even simply the fear of physical punishment. It is no secret that many teachers and students, having put their hand to the plough, then turn back. It means that decisions are made with the main considerations being those of avoiding punishment. Discipline and appropriate punishment are certainly of relevance everywhere, and that includes theological education, but only when they strictly correspond to Christian principles and are devoid of any cruelty and vengeance.

For an Orthodox theological education to be really contemporary it should clearly recognize the specific features of our time in history, our culture and civilization, and should be able to overcome the way it lags behind contemporary life. It is impossible to discuss in full the *specifics* of our time within this paper. We shall therefore dwell on the most important and most striking things.

In the first place, it would be stupid not to mention or to forget that this present stage of history is becoming more and more contradictory in itself. In my opinion its culture and civilization are growing more and more to contradict the principles of Christian civilization, culture and spirituality. But all that should not make us despair. As one Russian poet said, 'the darker the night, the brighter shine the stars' (Maikov).

This may for example be related to the brilliant time of the *Russian religious-philosophical renaissance* which is over now, particularly after the deaths of Fr Alexander Schmemmann and Fr John Meyendorff. Metropolitan Anthony of Sourozh and Olivier Clement seem to belong to some other stage of Church history and spiritual culture. We must make our conclusions about that time and start new work in our new conditions. This seems to me to be one of the most important tasks for contemporary Orthodox theological education.

The Communist era through which the Church entered a new stage of its history is over, thanks to God. But along with the passing of criminal and aggressive regimes such as the Communist regime, the 1500 year long Constantinian era of 'symphony' between Church

and state has also passed, although the reverberations will certainly be felt for centuries in the future.

It is fair to say that with regard to this aspect of contemporary life there is no need to *discern spirits and to make judgements*. There is a need for making new efforts to be both *humble* and *bold*. The beginning of this post-Constantinian and post-Communist stage requires the ability to hold on to those good, glorious and eternal things which are present in that recent spiritual heritage and a determination not to keep alive those ideas which belong entirely to the past, no matter if they once had a positive meaning for the Church. An example of this is the idea of the divine right of the Tsar and that of a Christian state.

In this respect the Church will need a new theological understanding of the relationship between things *temporal* and things *eternal* in the services and in the canons, the great majority of which belong to the Constantinian period. All this can be said with fairness about other things also.

The Church will, in its turn, have to work at *raising up again* those things which it has lost during its tortuous history. Now is the proper time and place for remembering the need to bring back a *lay* apostolate, catechization of all *adult* members of the Church enabling them to be full members of the Church. It is also appropriate here to mention regular participation of the eucharistic community in the Eucharist, and the *organic linking* of all the other sacraments with the Eucharist and Baptism, and finally a gradual development of Church life and structure on community lines.

Florovsky's well known motto 'forward to the Fathers' may be supplemented in this context by the *fullness* of Divine Revelation - ie. the Sacred Writings of the Church and the *entire* Church experience of the knowledge of God ie. Holy Tradition. When this supplement is denied, we often come across a kind of misunderstanding of Florovsky's words - when the way taken is backwards and not forwards. We do not have to go far to find examples.

The end of the Communist era and the end of the 20th century in general puts before Orthodox theology the task of being responsible with the gifts God has granted to His world in this century, as well as dealing with the main dangers and temptations from Satan that are characteristic for our time. What are these *gifts and dangers*?

They can be seen most clearly in the fact that on one hand both Church and society try to relate to each *individual as a person* taking into consideration the person's requirements. The same is true for the way the Church relates to *society* and the *world* as a structured whole. Thus it is easy to see the importance of Christian cosmology, sociology, anthropology and mysticism for a successful dialogue with corresponding non-Orthodox and non-Christian doctrines including those of the modern sects and New Age movements.

But on the other hand what is more characteristic of our time than ever before is a growing *alienation* between people, and their *indifference* to one another not only in a crowd, but even in church, where the words 'brothers and sisters' are growing more and more formal. We see a mass desecration of the living icon of God - that is, man, as well as the living and non-living parts of creation. All these things together have initiated an *ecological* crisis, despite the growing importance in the modern world of *art and culture* in general including the more refined arts such as music or icon-painting as rediscovered in Russia at the beginning of the 20th century.

Unfortunately, even these branches have fallen into decay by now and have become devoid of any real creativity of style and are now strongly infected with *stylization* and pure mimicry.

To go one step further it must be stated that on the one hand a characteristic of the Church in our century is that it is striving towards a *full* realization of the totality of Tradition and Scriptures (including traditions and writings of a local or temporal significance) beginning with the apostolic times. This is being done to ensure that more than just the experience of the 18th and 19th centuries is remembered. And from this has come a desire to have open hearts, having recognized the fact and significance of the *common catholic* tradition and experience in its wide variety. This tendency has led to some positive results and to a certain progress as far as relationships go between churches who share this tradition and are not sectarian in outlook.

On the other hand, an obvious fact of today is that the spirit of dead *totalitarianism* and mechanical unification of all parts of life including the spiritual, the spirit of *fanaticism* and *xenophobia*, narrow confessionalism, and phyletism is attacking mankind. The so-called 'red-brown' threat exists not only in the fields of politics and sociology but is a real force within the Orthodox Church also, and it is preparing to take its revenge if not today then tomorrow. The above-mentioned processes have produced a situation in theological

education where, on the one hand, we face a new *synthesis of subjects* coming together at the meeting point of our former knowledge with the new historical knowledge of their dynamic, as a result of which biblical and liturgical theology, church archeology, catechetics, eucharistic ecclesiology etc., came about. But on the other hand the split between the *levels* of theological education, where what is taught from a defensive position or to the masses seriously contradicts what is taught in academies, theological schools and institutions, is very clear. This is especially the case where a handful of fanatics are concerned. The consequence of this is that Orthodox theological education *falls behind* its own world level and the souls and thoughts of people are being torn apart by the *contradictions* between their education and real life. Well-educated people find it impossible to use their education when they are striving to perform a ministry within Church life as they find it today. This presents us with the danger of new schisms in the Church.

When we speak about God's gift to his Church. we must not forget the recent experience of the martyrs and confessors of this century as well as the new works of theologians, teachers and historians. And in this respect we must not forget the particular importance of the great gift of the Russian Church to world Orthodoxy in the great list of *Russian new martyrs and confessors* as well as the prominent figures of the *Russian religious philosophical renaissance*. Both should be directly included in a contemporary theological education.

This unique experience has its own consequences. The evil aggression against the Church in the 20th century has severely torn apart a number of important Church traditions. Thus the questions of internal and external mission and the adequate teaching of children and especially of adults have become very acute. In reaction, a completely new missionary and catechetical movement has come about and is developing in our Church. This fact claims our attention and deserves proper inclusion within the system of Orthodox theological schools because this movement can bring people of today into the Church tradition beginning from absolutely nothing. The specific characteristics of this movement are to a great extent due to the above mentioned gaps and also to the fact that the Church is condemned to live almost everywhere in conditions of the post-Constantinian era of its history when it had only itself to rely on.

There has also been a growth in new liturgical experience, not only through the influence of new forms of liturgical practices emerging from the changes both within and outside of the Church, but also clearly because of the achievements of liturgical studies,

church archeology and liturgical theology. In this connection we cannot forget the leading lights of recent times who have done so much work for Orthodox mission and theological education. For example, Fr Alexander Schmemmann and Fr John Meyendorff as well as Patriarch Ignatius of Antioch, Patriarch Ilia II of Georgia, Archbishop Paul of Finland. The fruits of the liturgical movement in the Orthodox Church show such a breadth of the ways of *renewal* in the Church that one can say with conviction, 'God has not abandoned His people!'

Everyone would witness to the fact that this way is possible only when there is real *participation of the whole people of God* in God's service and in the sacramental life, with every person in his assigned place serving with the gift personally received from the Holy Spirit. All this allows us to broaden our view on the boundaries of Church life, on ministries and service within the Church, as well as on the role of any power, hierarchy or seniority in the Church.

It also allows us to overcome the serious danger of further *objectivisation* and *secularization*, the alienation of Church services and clergymen from the eucharistic community. It makes it possible to eliminate the gaps between *spiritual knowledge* and the *real life* of the Church and the individual, between *spiritual gift* and *ordained ministry*, or between word and deed in the moral sphere.

All this takes for granted that the Church and all her members are striving for a *fullness of life, community, wholeness and unity*.

To achieve all this there is still a great deal to be done in order to review and revalue our Church heritage without superficiality, undue haste or tendentiousness. In other words, this heritage needs to be translated into the language of contemporary life. The Church has to learn to speak in an accessible contemporary language, while at the same time not forgetting the richness of its old languages - the languages of the Scriptures, of the fathers, ascetics and teachers, the languages of preaching, prayer and liturgy. This should not sound like a declaration of unconditional devotion to what is ancient and immovable. It does not even mean that it is not possible to translate the language of the liturgy, or that liturgical creativity is to be rejected. It means that of whatever century, of whatever area of Church life, those things which are true and relevant to the present time must be preserved in all their *clarity*.

Since we have been enriched with new gifts and new experience, we need to start an energetic move towards 'the community of the Spirit in the bond of peace'. We must think

over the problem of the integration of Christian theological education with the whole of contemporary life: the life of the Church, the life of teachers and students, liturgical life, family and community life, etc.

To reach this the system of Orthodox theological education must become an *integrated whole*. For example, alongside the Moscow Higher Orthodox Christian School, a school of catechization for adults and a two year course of lectures for neophytes (ie. those who have just completed the catechization) are operating. This school and the courses have a correspondence department. There are also six educational establishments for children: a kindergarten, Sunday school, youth group, scout groups, a Lycee and a gymnasium. Regular charitable work is carried out. In addition we have a library, an audio studio, an information bulletin, a journal, an icon-workshop and two brotherhoods.

All this work is closely linked with the life of the parish and *parish church* where there is the normal round of services. As a *missionary* and *community* church it has some specific features which both restore some elements lost to the Church today and stress some new elements within the existing tradition. In this context the desire for full congregational participation in the services and for full understanding of all that is sung or read is perfectly natural. Parishioners feel the need to know the liturgical language so as to understand the priest's prayers, especially during the Eucharist, and to hear the sermon that always follows a reading from the Scriptures. In the same way they require that the reader faces the people, that the Royal Doors are kept open; the iconostasis is not to grow too high, and the practice of the unsystematic and senseless filling of the church with icons is to stop. For the majority of parishioners it is quite clear that it would be a good thing to bring back together the sacraments to some experienced unity, to see catecumens leaving the church after the call to do so, to encourage congregational singing, to have a special place for the children and adequate seating in the church. All this demands further theological, liturgical and canonical interpretation.

One fact, however, I think can be accepted without any discussion. Catechization should at least partially be brought *back into the Church* in accordance with the present circumstances of Church life. Our cathedrals and churches must become centres for the teaching and enlightenment of the people: heart and mind and life. In addition, I think that theological education and missionary and catechetical work must come back into the personal ministry of the *bishops*. Each diocese should have its own small theological school, any large parish should run a Sunday school and a catechism school. There should also be theological

courses which are more flexible, including those aimed at improving the theological and general spiritual levels of clergy and church workers. The courses in the New Valaam monastery in Finland are an example of this. In general many monasteries with their daughter houses may be regarded as good bases for educational and charitable work.

Of course no system of theological education can replace the Church. No matter how good an educational institution is, it should not be solving theological and other problems in place of the Church. But institutions can make *recommendations* and *suggestions* for correcting various parts of church practice including the liturgical life and liturgical language.

False hopes connected with the role of 'specialists' and 'objective scholarship' need to be overcome.

It would be good if the voice of these establishments was heard more clearly, giving appropriate worthy and competent comments on all the problems of today. For example: abortion, contraception, homosexuality, suicide, the marriage of priests and laymen, women priests, relations with non-Orthodox and non-Christians, Church services and who we can pray for in church, the calendar and lectionary, pedagogics and psychology, computers and their application to Biblical study, audio-visuals and their use in teaching, church education and training, including long distance learning, professional life, etc.

But it must not be forgotten that the voice of Christian educational establishments must be united with a large number of voices in the Church for the true voice of the Church to sound - the united voice of the Church that is still demonstrating within the sinful world the will and truth of God, giving peace and love in the Holy Spirit to everyone seeking for the Kingdom of God, that is, His Truth, His Love and His Freedom.

The Church is called by Our Lord to be the light of the world and the salt of the earth. In order to do this the Church needs to learn to be consistent, not to conform to the pattern of the world, but to follow behind the Lamb of God wherever He goes. The Church needs to mark out and keep to that path - and that is also the task for Orthodox theological education today.