

Prophets, Priests, Pastors and Professors

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Orthodox Christians believe that God creates human beings to be His prophets, priests and pastors in creation. We fail in our divine calling because of our sins. And God saves us by sending His Son Jesus Christ to fulfill our calling for us. With, in and through Jesus Christ, God's unique prophet, priest and pastor, Christian believers become "a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's own people" (see 1 Pet 2:4-5, 9). We constitute "a kingdom, priests to his [i.e. Christ's] God and Father" (Revelation 1:6). Some members of the Church, we Orthodox also believe, are ordained bishops and priests to sacramentally actualize the presence and power of Christ Himself within the believing community.

How and where, we want now to ask, do seminary professors fit into this picture?

To Study and Teach

Seminary professors are first of all members of God's royal, prophetic and priestly people in Christ. Some professors may also be members of the ordained priesthood with the specific prophetic, priestly and pastoral service belonging to this sacramental office. And some may, from time to time, even receive the special charism to prophecy in God's Name.

Whatever a seminary professor's particular ordained or charismatic calling in the Church, however, all professors have as their fundamental duty to study and teach God's Word in holy scripture, and to study and teach the proper interpretation and application of God's biblical Word as it is witnessed in the Church's liturgical worship, conciliar decrees, canonical rules, canonized icons, and writings and lives of saints.

Professors in Orthodox theological seminaries today do their work for the enlightenment and guidance of God's people. They work first of all for the bishops and priests who preach, teach and pastor the flock of Christ. If this is so, and I believe that it is, it seems to me that the Church's archpastors and pastors have at least three essential duties to perform with and for the professors of our theological schools.

Pastors and Professors

The first duty of the Church's bishops and priests who daily pastor and govern Christ's flock is to be responsible for those who become professors in our theological seminaries. They are to foster, guard and defend this critical calling in the Church, and to see that its candidates are properly trained, appointed, protected and retained in their duties.

A second duty of the bishops and priests who care for Christ's Church is to work in closest communion with the seminary professors in order to learn from them by carefully, respectfully and responsibly monitoring and questioning their study and teaching.

A third duty of the Church's archpastors and pastors is to mediate between the seminary professors and the general membership of the Church. They do this by defending the propriety of Christian study and teaching on the highest scholarly level for those engaged in this work before and on behalf of the faithful. They also mediate between the seminary professors and the people by bringing the professor's teachings about God's Word, the Gospel and Christian doctrine to the faithful on a level and in a form appropriate to their ability to receive instruction, to understand, and to live out what they are taught. In a word, the bishops, with the priests, "rightly divide the word of truth" (see 2 Tim 2:15).

Strictly speaking, it is the duty of bishops and priests to teach the people; it is not the duty of seminary professors. Although some seminary professors may have the gift of popular, pastoral teaching, and some may be obliged to this service by virtue of their being ordained, this is not their primary duty as seminary professors. We may even say that, in a certain sense, this is not their duty as seminary professors at all.

The seminary professor's unique duty is to study and teach on the highest, most difficult, delicate, disputed and

dangerous -i;½ scholarly level, and thereby to educate and assist those who serve, and will serve, as the Churchi;½s bishops, priests, pastors and teachers. This, at least in theory, is what Orthodox Christians ask their seminary professors to do in todayi;½s church and world. And they may rightfully expect the highest scholarly competence and the most responsible dedication to truth from those in this service. There is no question here of "academic freedom" as conventionally understood today for seminary professors. There certainly must be, however, the unqualified guarantee of the glorious liberty of the children of God in pursuit of the truth which makes us free.

Variety of Gifts

Apostolic scripture bears witness to this vision when it says that Godi;½s "gifts were that some should be apostles, some prophets, some evangelists, some pastors and teachers, to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ. ..." (Eph 4:11-12).

For God has appointed in the church first apostles, second prophets, third teachers, then workers of miracles, then healers, helpers, administrators.... Are all apostles? Are all prophets? Are all teachers? Do all work miracles? Do all possess gifts of healing? (1 Cor 12:27-30).

Some clever folks may point out that apostolic scripture mentions neither seminaries nor professors. But those who study the Bible and church history know that there were always theological and catechetical "schools" in one form or another for studying sacred scripture and engaging the difficult questions and issues of the day. That some schools were not always successful in their service is hardly cause for considering them dispensable or dangerous.

As for the prophets i;½ whether they be bishops, priests, professors, monastics, or lay people i;½ our only prayer can be that they are inspired by God and not themselves (not to mention other possible spirits), and that we be ready to hear and obey their voice when they are sent to proclaim Godi;½s Word to us.

May the Lord help us to be worthy of our calling, each in his or her own way, and all of us together in God. We especially ask your prayers and support for the professors of our seminaries.