

Serving Christ in Our Neighbor

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St Vladimir's exists to prepare servants for God and the Church. In addition to academic studies and liturgical worship, our seminarians have obligatory community work, parish assignments and field work requirements. These mandatory activities are not "practical additions" to a seminarian's theological education. They are integral elements in the educational process itself without which a student's theological and spiritual formation would be incomplete and distorted.

In St Matthew's Gospel Jesus said that he did not come to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many. He also said that those who have fed the hungry, given drink to the thirsty, clothed the naked, sheltered the homeless, or visited the sick and imprisoned, have done these things to him; and that those who fail to perform these acts of mercy with love, have failed to show love for him and for God his Father.

Church fathers, like SS Augustine, John Chrysostom, Basil the Great, and Simeon the New Theologian, point out that Jesus gave this teaching, upon which our final judgment will be based, not simply because the Lord wants us to consider our actions toward others as if they were actions toward himself. Christ gave this teaching because he has himself literally become hungry, thirsty, naked, homeless, wounded, imprisoned, and even crucified and dead, identifying fully with every human being, so that in him all people might be saved.

Christ was hungry in order to feed us with his own broken body. He was thirsty, hanging on the cross, in order to have us drink of his own blood, together with the "living water" which flows from his side. He was naked -- in the cave at his birth, on the table at his circumcision, in the river at his baptism, on the cross at his crucifixion, and in the grave at his burial -- in order to clothe us with himself. He was homeless in this world to take us home to the house of his Father in heaven. He was wounded for our transgressions in order to heal us by his wounds. He was imprisoned and executed in order to liberate us from the power of the devil and death, and so to give us freedom and life forever in God's coming kingdom.

The Letter of James in the New Testament, teaching about faith, affirms this essential aspect of Christ's gospel.

Religion that is pure and undefiled before God and the Father is this: to visit orphans and widows in their affliction, and to keep oneself unstained from the world. (Jm 1:27)

If a brother or sister is ill-clad and in lack of daily food, and one of you says to them, "Go in peace, be warmed and filled," without giving them the things needed for the body, what does it profit? So faith by itself, if it has no works, is dead. (Jm 2:16-17)

The First Letter of John, teaching about love, says the same thing.

But if any one has the world's goods and sees his brother in need, yet closes his heart against him, how does God's love abide in Him? Little children, let us not love in word and speech, but in deed and in truth. (1 Jn 3:11-12)

We love, because he first loved us. If any one says, "I love God," and hates his brother, he is a liar; for he who does not love his brother whom he has seen, cannot love God whom he has not seen. And this commandment we have from him, that he who loves God should love his brother also. (1 Jn 4:19-21)

The apostle Paul makes the further point that acts of mercy performed without love profit nothing.

If I give away all that I have, and give my body to be burned, but have not love, I gain nothing. (1 Cor 13:3)

At the seminary we teach and study the Bible and church history, dogmatics and ethics, patristics and canon law, liturgy and hagiology for the purpose of applying this knowledge in our daily life, and helping others to do so as well. Serving God and Christ in our neighbor, and assisting others to do so, is ultimately what St Vladimir's Seminary is about.