

Finding One's Calling in Life

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Theological Education at St Vladimir's Seminary: Yesterday and Today
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The founders of St. Vladimir's Seminary had clear ideas and strong convictions about theological education in the Orthodox Church. Though many changes and developments have occurred over the past sixty years, the seminary's faculty with its administrative staff and board of trustees, holds essentially the same ideas and convictions today as those of the seminary's founders in 1938.

The seminary's vision of theological education which has been consistently maintained throughout the school's sixty-year history may be summarized simply in seven points.

1. Theological education is an essential part of Orthodox Christian faith and life. All Christians, like the first disciples, must sit at Jesus' feet to learn from Him as their sole Teacher and Master. They must learn God's word from Christ in order "to be saved, and to come to the knowledge of the truth" (1 Tim 2:4). They must hunger and thirst for divine understanding and wisdom in order to "know the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom (He) has sent," which, according to Jesus himself, "is eternal life" (Jn 17:3). No Christian believer is, in this sense, exempt from being theologically educated.
2. There are various levels of theological education which, in one form or another, is for all believers. Illiterate people, beginning with young children, learn by seeing, hearing, listening, and observing. They do this especially in liturgical worship and in sharing the life of learned and experienced elders. Believers who can read, however, are obliged to study the Bible, the church's canonical scriptures, and the church's sacramental and liturgical services, the lives and teaching of her canonized saints, and the decrees and canons of her universally-accepted councils. Such study necessarily accompanies, informs, and illumines the prayers, pieties, and practices of the faithful. It protects them from error and insures that their "zeal for God" is truly "according to knowledge" (kat' epignosin) so that in their ignorance they do not replace God's righteousness with a righteousness of their own (see Rom 10:1), thereby "making void the Word of God" by "teaching as doctrine the precepts of men" (see Mt 15:6-9).
3. While all Christians must study God's Word to the measure of their capabilities, the Church's leaders, particularly her hierarchs, abbots, archpriests, professors, and teachers, must have the highest and fullest theological education possible. St Vladimir's Seminary, like the old Russian Orthodox academies after which it was patterned, was established to provide this level and quality of study and learning, and it continues to do so until today. Higher theological education is not for all members of the Church and it certainly is not a prerequisite for sanctity, wisdom, and virtue. But it is a normal and normative necessity for those who are called to serve as the Church's pastors and teachers.
4. The highest level of theological education required for the Church's leaders now includes the following areas of study: the Bible in its original languages, early Christian writings (including those of apocryphal and legendary character), liturgical rites and services, church history, patristics, dogmatic theology, ethics, canon law, spirituality, hagiology (the lives and legends of the saints), iconography, music, practical theology, pastoral counseling, and various languages. If all graduate students of theology cannot master Hebrew and Greek, they are at least expected to know something of these languages so that they can have at least some basic access to God's Word in its original scriptural form. (I personally remember Metropolitan Leonty of blessed memory, one of the founders, deans and protectors of St Vladimir's Seminary, telling us young seminarians of his desire to teach us Hebrew. At the time we hardly knew English -' not to speak of Slavonic, Russian, or Greek! The Metropolitan, who knew all these, as well as Latin, had written his academic dissertation on the prophecy of Habakkuk.)
5. The highest level of theological education in the Church must also engage the highest level of secular learning, thought, and culture of its particular time. This truth is exemplified in the great fathers and teachers of the Church from the Holy Apostle Paul and St Basil the Great (with his many colleagues and co-workers), to St Theophan the Recluse and St. Tikhon the Confessor of Moscow who as archbishop in North America opened the theological school in Minneapolis at the beginning of this century and brought Fr Leonid Turkevich, later Metropolitan Leonty, to be its dean. St Basil, like St Gregory the Theologian, St John Chrysostom, Metropolitan Leonty and the Holy Bishop Nikolai (Velimirovich) of Ochrid -' to name but a few -' wrote specific treatises on this subject. The holy fathers and teachers are clear and strong about the fact that a sound knowledge of contemporary culture, thought, and learning is essential for an effective defense of the Christian faith against its detractors, an effective preaching of the Gospel to potential believers, and an effective pastoral care for all members of the "reasonable flock" of Christ's Holy Church, learned and unlearned alike. It is for this reason that St Vladimir's Seminary has insisted from its beginning that its students be university graduates who are well acquainted with all the riches and glories of Egypt and Athens, as the Church fathers would say, as well as their temptations and dangers.
6. The highest level of theological education required for the Church's pastors and teachers must be accomplished,

again according to the Church's biblical and patristic tradition, together with liturgical worship, sacramental participation, ascetical struggle, ethical behavior, spiritual guidance, and pastoral care. Apart from the liturgical, sacramental, ascetical, moral, spiritual and pastoral elements of Christian faith and life, "theology" (theologia) becomes, in St. Gregory the Theologian's expression, mere "technology" (tekhnologia). It is not "theology" at all, but a barren, dry and sterile package of information and data devoid of divine life, grace, truth and power. Such "learning" is not only useless, it is pernicious and perverse. It lacks reality, warmth, discernment and practical application in the everyday lives of real people. It leads to every sort of difficulty, division and darkness in the spiritual life: pride, arrogance, judgment, animal zeal, nominalism, formalism, legalism, relativism, sentimentality -- and to every sort of intellectual and emotional deviation which allows Christian faith and life to become just about anything but what it is as given by God. For this reason St. Vladimir's Seminary, again following the Russian Orthodox model, has always insisted in its sixty-year history on the integration of its academic programs with a full cycle of liturgical services conducted and participated by its faculty and students, with regular participation in the sacraments of confession and communion, with spiritual guidance, pastoral care, and community service.

7. And finally, St. Vladimir's Seminary has always held that higher theological education, like everything else in human life, exists solely for the glory of God and the salvation of human lives, first of all one's own. Graduate theological study is therefore a sacrificial service. It is an act of love for God and one's neighbors including, perhaps even first of all, one's enemies and adversaries. It is a ministry in and for the Church. It exists for the illumination, edification, exhortation and consolation of the faithful. And it exists also for a witness to the world of God's Truth, being a testimony to the glory of the human mind and heart when they seek and discover "all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge" which God has hidden and revealed in Christ (see Col 2:3). When properly done, theological education is not merely a matter of ink on a printed page or a computer printout. It is a matter of blood? a painful "podvig," as the Slavs would say, a "spiritual feat" whose agonies and ecstasies are known only to those willing to pay the price, and whose fruits are gratefully shared by those for whom the price is being paid.

May God grant that the ideas and convictions of St. Vladimir's Seminary be always of His own inspiration, and that every aspect of the seminary's life and work be always pleasing in His sight.