

In the Name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit.
Amen.

Concerns for Orthodox Women's Theological Education

Kyriaki Karidoyanes FitzGerald, Ph.D.

Introduction:

It is a great honor for me to be with you today. This is, indeed, one of the most meaningful invitations I have ever received--in my life. Enjoying this opportunity of being with sisters and brothers from central and eastern Europe, discussing Orthodox women's theological education, is still, hardly believable to me. This is because the present state of Orthodox women's theological education in North America is at best, confused. There are many reasons for this. Some of these reasons will be touched upon within the contents of this presentation. Most assuredly, we will be discussing this situation in greater detail, during our work together through the week.

Still, because of our differences and distances I have been rather intimidated in speaking to you. You all come from cultures very different than mine. Many of you, despite former Socialist administrations, come from largely intact Orthodox Christian environments. Others of you, also coming out from behind the so-called "Iron Curtain", have apparently fared less well. You may be experiencing deep spiritual, administrative, financial and/or material resource crises.

We are all only now, in our own ways, beginning to appreciate just how profound a change in events this "taking down of the wall" is. These changes are profound for the world, and for Orthodox Christians in particular. To state this more simply and perhaps more humorously, many of you, also, may have good reasons to be just a little bit confused! So I may be in good company, after all. We will see.

At the same time, however, not everything for us is confused. There are numerous things, about which Orthodox Christians are essentially not confused. Among these, includes considerable foundational clarity regarding our approach to theology and theological education. Allow me to review a few of these assumptions with you now.

Orthodox Christian Theology:

The Orthodox approach theology in an essentially unique way. This is because we traditionally do not view theology as primarily an academic exercise, as many others do. To be sure, academic honesty and scrupulous research are absolutely necessary in their proper context. This cannot be emphasized enough! Still, the Orthodox traditionally understand theology to be much more than this.

The Orthodox understand theology to be an activity of the Church, enlivened by the Holy Spirit, which is to be experienced and lived by every believer. This basic assumption cannot be taken lightly and it bears repeating: theology is an activity of the Church, enlivened by the Holy Spirit, which is to be experienced and lived by every believer. Perhaps the most popular quote the Orthodox enjoy citing which illustrates this, is that of Evagrius of Pontus which states: "A person who truly prays is a theologian, a theologian is a person who truly prays."

Those of us who have grown up in predominantly Orthodox contexts have most likely heard stories, and perhaps have even met people, who were engaged in these very depths of theology. It is, indeed, a gift to meet such persons, as they are often considered to be living saints. It is these persons who are viewed to be the "real" theologians of our day. Many function as spiritual fathers and mothers to seekers striving to know the will of God in their lives. These spiritual fathers and mothers may or may not be ordained, are male or female and may have much or little obvious formal theological training. These persons in a concrete human way, make present the life of the Holy Spirit given to the Church, on a personal level. They are considered to be Spirit-bearers (pneumatophoroi).

Historically, the Church quite forcefully has affirmed that these Spirit-bearers, as much as human beings can, -- truly know God! Authentic theology, from this understanding, demands what the Fathers of the Church called: theognosis. Theognosis is not a mere intellectual or academic kind of knowledge. It is rather, a knowledge, gnosis, based upon a living, growing, even intimate form of relationship. And it is from this perspective, we state that theology is ultimately experienced and lived.

St. Maximos the Confessor writes that this experience is "knowledge itself in action which comes from beyond all concept...participation in the object which is revealed beyond all thought" (P.G. 90, 624 A) St. Maximos's description of this "Knowledge...which comes from beyond all concept..." which is at the core of how the Orthodox approach the manner by which theology is expressed.

Our approach in expressing theology, in other words, is usually "apophatic". Apophatic theology is a way to describe the life in God in negative terms. By saying what God is not, and by avoiding the over-use of positive statements, theologians engage in a unique form of spiritual discipline. This apophatic orientation in conveying theology, strives to actively respect the reality of the inadequacies of human speech when referring to the triune God.

For many understandable reasons, many of us have not met "real" theologians. The privilege of our even meeting such theologians, persons of prayer, is often a rare gift. The encounter is typically both a life-changing and life-giving event! Still, those of us who strive to live within the Orthodox Christian tradition, must keep this fundamental assumption regarding theology at the fore-front of awareness and our work.

...Could perhaps we ourselves, also, be on our way to genuine theology, with just the subtlest, yet authentic, change of heart? I think the answer here is "yes".

Orthodox Theological Education

In reflecting upon Orthodox theological education, we must seriously consider what theology and theological education is not. Theology and theological education is not a dry science which one "does" solely as a philosophical, or worse yet, academic exercise! It is not an activity or body of knowledge which one can "use" or "manipulate" for reasons of self promotion and personal gain. Tragically, there appears to be too many people in the "business" of theology today, who do precisely this. For these persons, theology, is "just a business"!

While a number of us may now be thinking of theologians from the West who do theology "as a business", we Orthodox are hardly immune! To believe we are personally immune to this, simply because "we are Orthodox", is a delusion! It is a delusion, because we put our own personal arrogance before our life in God.

And to my knowledge, no human person, not even an Orthodox one, has yet found a way around the temptation of pride! And the Fathers of the Church teach us that it is our human propensity to sin which keeps us from becoming theologians! Every heart, first of all, must be set upon a growing relationship with the living God. This is the first task of theology. This is not an easy task, rather, it is a life-long calling.

Sadly, there are those who are engaged in theology who do not know, nor even care to know, God. How can they maturely love the triune God, if they do not know Him? What kind of

"theology" do they live and teach? These, I think, are dangerous people. Worse yet, they often do not know just how very dangerous they are!

The current western educational fixation of the "scientific" approach to theology, undermines the "theology" of many scholars. This is because these academics often fall into the trap of passing off their personal ignorance of God as knowledge. This is also a temptation, to which many Orthodox may succumb, as well.

Whenever any of us do not know God, we risk falling into the trap of having our intellectual and academic training turn into idols! In another popular quote within Orthodox circles, this time from St. Gregory of Nazianzus, we remind ourselves that we are called "to do theology in the manner of the fishermen - Apostles- and not in the manner of Aristotle." If we are truly engaging theology, then it will eventually change us to our very souls.

Practical Concerns for Orthodox Theological Education:

When we consider how we prioritize Orthodox theological education, we must be careful, very careful! Thoughtlessly copying western scientific or academic models of "doing" theology, cannot be the basis from upon which we begin. I would like to offer to our discussion three concerns. I am sure in our work together, we will be able to improve upon this. These three concerns are that of 1) spiritual development, 2) a life of intentional and active Christian community and 3) accountability to a specific Orthodox theological understanding and body of knowledge.

1) Spiritual development: The first concern of any Orthodox institution which strives to promote Christian theology, must be a spiritually oriented one. The ongoing growth and continued salvation of a theological institution's students, professors, administration and staff cannot be ignored. They are all called to be theologians!

The "good news" of the Gospel must be applied as fully, as humanly, possible to every member of the theological community. This is because "if one member suffers, all suffer together. If one member rejoices, all rejoice together." Whenever attention to spiritual development is blindly lop-sided, the immediate result is a painful one to those persons who were not given appropriate, perhaps even similar consideration. Unfortunately, in the end, and often despite rabid protestations to the contrary, the life of the entire theological institution may suffer. As one's life in Christ is at the foundation of all living theology, spiritual development must be the first concern in the formation of all theologians.

2) Intentional and active Christian community: As the spiritual needs of the institution are primary, then it must follow that the community actively connects its life with the liturgical life of the Church. The liturgical life of the Church must be readily accessible and part of the theological institution's daily life. The theological institution, in other words, must also be a functioning worshipping community. When the theological community comes together for various reasons to worship the triune God, orthodoxy and orthopraxis meet. Here, we can perhaps learn tremendous lessons from our spiritual and monastic tradition.

Committing an Orthodox theological institution to the life of worshipping community, is absolutely essential. The reason for this is related to the Christian understanding that the Gospel is typically expressed within the context of living relationships. It is in practicing and living what is experienced in the worship life of the community, where we live "the liturgy after the liturgy." It is within the ongoing development of these inter-personal relationships, established and nurtured by the liturgical life of the Church, where hearts, thinking and behaviors are challenged. Here, the "liturgy after the liturgy" challenges us to grow closer to the Lord, better applying His "good news". Even in the smallest practical details, such as the scheduling of classes and study periods, recreation, community stewardship, vacations, examinations, etc. must somehow be expressive of the life of the Church.

3) Accountability to a specific Orthodox theological understanding and body of knowledge: The first two concerns addressed the "formation" of the theologian. This third concern relates to the "information" of theology, which depends directly upon the previous points. Orthodox Christians studying theology are accountable to a specific body of knowledge which is identifiably Orthodox Christian. We are each accountable to a rich and living heritage. While one can study, perhaps, "too much" of this body of knowledge, without enough concern for the lived community experience of the faith; one can also study "too little".

When Orthodox sometimes attempt to learn about the specifics of Orthodox theology, outside of a lived community experience, they may fall prey to many temptations. For example, we might ask ourselves, "How much study is enough?" Some may believe, especially today, that a few correspondence courses or independent study projects makes them an "expert" in the faith. They have had precious little on-going, day-to-day, mundane contact with fellow believers and students. In other words, they have had little living connection with the depth of Christian community experience..

As expressive of the above, we are also accountable to engage other Christians and persons of various faiths in society. If the good news is real within the known limits of the theological community, then is it equally real outside its walls. The "good news" of our Lord's Gospel impells us to love others.

In reflecting upon his understanding of Orthodox theological education, the beloved, late Fr. John Meyendorff wrote the following: "Those who teach, as well as the students of theology, can only be worthy of their calling if they (sic) seek that ultimate personal experience of God of which the Fathers spoke. But in the process of their studies and their seeking, they also gradually acquire a vision of what their ministry is (or shall be), of what the mission of the Church truly is, of what forms this mission should take in the world of today- a world which "God loved so much, that he sent His Only-begotten Son" to save it."(The Orthodox Church, 28:8/9 Aug.-Sept. 1992 p.4)

Orthodox Christian Women:

In this last section I will briefly share a few concerns with you. A good introduction to the ministries of women was published under the auspices of the Ecumenical Patriarchate of Constantinople in the book titled: The Place of Woman in the Orthodox Church and the Question of the Ordination of Women (ed. Gennadios Limouris, Tertios Publications, Katerini, Greece 1992). It reflected the findings of a Pan-Orthodox conference held in 1988 on the ministries of women was held in Rhodes, Greece. This conference concluded that there are many ways women are called to serve our Lord in His Church. These ministries will reflect, largely, the various ministries bestowed upon the laity. The conference also identified the reality of the sin of sexism, to which both men and women may succumb.

Women's participation in Orthodox theological life has been varied. In many places it is vibrant, in other places it is minimal. I know we will learn more about this as we share our experiences and understanding about this in our work together.

I believe, however, that our answers will lie in our encouraging women, as well as men, to respond to their particular vocations as "theologians".

We all come from different cultures and contexts. Still, it is only with people who know God, or who are at least in a growing relationship with Him, who will ultimately acquire the gift of discernment (diakrisis). The Orthodox value discernment as the most prized gift of the Holy Spirit. It is these persons of discernment, I believe, who will have a beneficial impact on the various aspects of the society in

1
which they live. It is these persons who will be able to both "hear the Word of God and keep it" (emphasis mine).

The world today is starving for these friends of God, who help share His love and mercy with it. While we cannot predict how this process will unfold, we cannot hesitate...nor lose courage...to do as our Lord instructed us: which is to "First seek the Kingdom of God and all else will follow."

Thank-you.

Amen.