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The Phenomenon of the Higher School of Orthodox Theology in Moscow: Reintegrating Ancient Patristic Catechesis as a Starting Point for a New Type of Education

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This article is about the experience of a new and unique type of educational institution which was born as a collective effort, during the late Soviet era, among Soviet intelligentsia, given their interest in religion and the Orthodox Church. The team did not try to recreate either the structure or the forms currently employed for seminary or university education. The author demonstrates the use of relevant early church catechetical systems, which open out into the necessity for further system-driven educational development which nevertheless presumes both the rejection of scholasticism and the assumption that there is no insurmountable rift between the attainment of knowledge in an intellectual sense and experienced knowledge in terms of spiritual, ecclesial practice. The principles of the new educational system, which occurs in three stages, are forged within the context of the search for commonality and unity in community, without which spiritual schools are doomed to formalization and degeneration. Maximal resources are dedicated to the active engagement of students with the educational process itself; the form and content of their independent work is proscribed, and then described, in specific, written detail. The necessity and opportunity to orient students directly toward the achievement of serious Christian theological thought are underscored, given the fact that the educational process is not primary, but an addition to the existential aspect of students' lives. We consider this new type of spiritual education within the context of our understanding of the Christian tradition as a unity of theology, culture and education within the context of the church. We at the Moscow higher school of Or-

thodox Theology have come to the conclusion that spontaneous revelation of principles, methods and patterns on the basis of reintegrated patristic-style catechesis is an answer to the contemporary crisis in higher education, in many ways similar to what we see in the appearance of various forms of “open university” education.

KEYWORDS: catechesis, church community, brotherhood, Christian education, stage-by-stage process, spiritual literature, Orthodox Christian tradition, educational programmes.

Introduction: 30 years of Independent Education

This year St. Philaret’s Orthodox Christian Institute (SFI) celebrated its 33rd anniversary and entered into its 34 year of existence. In 1998, Deacon Georgy Kochetkov pulled together an extremely informal (and illegal, by the measure of those times) group of 12 people, whose common study was the foundation of the future St. Philaret’s Institute. It can be said definitively, that none of them — even by their boldest estimates — could have predicted that the group would turn into a modern academic institution, that it would be one of only 8 institutions in our nation to teach Orthodox Theology [*Perechen’*], and that eventually the Institute would employ more than 50 teachers (including 6 DPhils and 33 Doctoral Candidates), teaching more than 500 students, the majority of whom are active members of Christian communities and groups from within the now enormous Transfiguration Brotherhood.

In this article we try to analyze the sources and principles of the Institute’s activity, in order to see what made such tremendous growth possible.

The Context of SFI within both Church and Society

In the USSR during the period from 1970 to 1980, there came about a noticeable difference in people’s attitudes toward religions and especially toward Christianity. As researcher D.I. Sazonov writes: “Soviet society was entirely surprised by the religious awakening that occurred at the end of the 1960s and beginning of the 1970s” [*Sazonov, 179*]. Even Soviet scholars of religion noted “a stream of youth from among the intelligentsia coming into the Church” [*Sazonov, 179*]. Interest in religion was expressed not only in a renewed interest in medieval church art and the study of the Russian religious philosophers, but in people’s conscious and consistent efforts to enter the Church [*Zelinsky*].

Fr. Georgy Kochetkov — at that time only a layman — also looked, in a detailed fashion, at the subject of coming into the Church. In 1978, he wrote an article entitled “Entry into the Church and confessing the Church within the church”, which was published in 1979 [*Kochetkov 1979*]. In this article, he accentuates the innovative nature of the task before the church, given that many people without any living link to the Orthodox tradition were joining church parishes. This was a very difficult task to cope with, insofar as “coming into the Church means crossing a mystical boundary and finding yourself on the other side — in a different world, a different age and a different aeon” [*Kochetkov 1979, 43*].

It might seem that entry into the church is a fairly simple affair involving coming into the church building, getting baptised, and then more or less participating in the mysteries of the church — at least the mysteries of repentance and the Eucharist. However, the majority of educated people who wanted to come into the church didn’t find this to be an adequate answer. The reason was that though this approach might to a large degree provide an answer on the psychic and material level, it nevertheless failed to provide real food for thought. Nor did it really meet people’s spiritual needs in terms of the experiential cognition of God Himself, whereas people had read and heard about this, or at least sensed such a need and thirsted for such cognition.

For educated people who come to faith at a conscious age (neophytes, as they were called in ancient Greek — νεόφυτος means “newly acculturated”), it is natural to strive for a rational understanding of that which they experience after crossing the border into the Church. But it is just as natural, as Fr. Georgy notes in the same article, that neophytes, having at first concentrated their attention on social, cultural, historical-liturgical and other similar aspects of cognition of God, will quickly recognize that these in and of themselves are insufficient, given that acquaintance with these things opens the door to acquaintance with traditional scholarly theology and philosophy, meaning that there is also a significant need to teach Theology and Philosophy, themselves” [*Kochetkov 1979, 43*].

For this reason, many neophytes came to the same conclusion via different routes: the reading of books (including Holy Scripture), discussion of spiritual problems at irregular meetings, unofficial seminars and the like with priests, does not really help fully bring people into the spiritual treasures of the Church; furthermore, systematic education is necessary for orientation in the spiritual life. But for someone who has already completed his or her higher education — or even

for a current student of higher education — seminary study was a near impossibility given the various restrictions laid down by the atheistic government [*Sazonov, 177; Avgustin, 378–380*].

In addition, it was fairly well known that the seminary system of education, largely due to the politics of the government, was oriented toward the ability to serve liturgy and run pastoral and parish affairs. Theological material was taught in a scholastic fashion.

This situation was described in detail by then Hieromonk Ilarion (Alfeev), now Metropolitan of Volokolamsk, in a paper presented at the Consultation of Orthodox theological schools in Belgrade, Serbia, in 1997 [*Ilarion 1998*]. In this paper he admits to the “necessity for the radical reform of Russian Orthodox spiritual schools”, and calls for a complete review of academic programmes, stating clearly his opinion on what was necessary:

...A new approach to various aspects of the educational process, new methods of training, a new interpretation of disciplinary rules, and the reconceptualization of the relationship between student and teacher [*Ilarion 1998, 39–40*].

The Birth of a New System of Spiritual Education Issuing from Catechetical Practice

One student of the Moscow Institute of National Economy, Yuri (Georgy) Kochetkov, who came to God and into the Church at the end of the 1960’s, ran into the entire complex of issues listed above, when he found himself called upon to answer the serious questions of his peers and other acquaintances regarding his belief in God and the meaning of life. In the aftermath of this experience, he came to the conclusion that it was necessary to create a new system of education for such “seekers”.

The new system was not created as some sort of simplified seminary education or in an intellectual fashion, and took into account what was of most interest to students themselves. Its basis is rather a months-long — and in isolated cases years-long — process of preparing adults for baptism and/or entry into the church, i. e. catechesis (in-person, verbal preparation). This process itself has several stages. The first step is a rather short orientation process of questions and answers, where the seeker has a chance to ask anything at all that is of interest to him or her. Admissible questions are not abstract, but those questions whose answers would lead to a change in life according to the 10 commandments in the Old Testament and the New Testament

as laid out in the text of the Gospels of Jesus Christ. In addition, questions of personal prayer are fielded (not according to prayer book practice, because as a rule none of our seekers have church experience). We also field any questions that arise among the seekers as they begin to enter the process of conscious participation in church worship.

Only after this first stage, are seekers introduced to the teachings of the church, the Niceo-Constantinopolitan Creed, and the mysteries (sacraments) in which they will participate: firstly confession, followed by baptism, chrismation, Eucharistic communion, and then all the others.

In this way, a stage-by-stage system emerged, built in stages which specifically delineate a person's level of perception of the material being covered, and cater to the current level of the seekers' possibilities. This is entirely in line with the primary structural element of patristic catechesis as seen in the age of the early Church [*Gavrilyuk, 10–12; Kopirovsky 2010; Mozgov*].

The experience of lengthy catechesis for adults in the context of the patristic tradition was laid out in brief by Georgy Kochetkov, who was ordained deacon in 1983 and priest in 1989, in a brochure entitled “A Possible System of Catechesis within the Russian Orthodox Church” (“Vozmozhnaia sistema oglasheniia v russkoi pravoslavnoi tserkvi”) [*Kochetkov 2018*]. Putting this system into practice, given the ever increasing number of neophyte catechumens, who are brought in to the church by those who have themselves come in the same way previously, demanded a certain amount of rigour and systematization, as well as the preparation of catechists, themselves; it was natural, therefore, that we should consider the creation of an educational institution founded upon the very same patristic principles.

Another stimulus for the creation of an educational institution was that a repetition of the sort of church persecution that was seen under Khrushchev in the late 1950s and early 1960s was an ever present possibility. It became obvious that it was necessary to create an academic institution unlike the existing spiritual schools and academies which — if push came to shove — might act as a replacement for them.

Fr. Georgy Kochetkov remembers the appearance of the school — the future St. Philaret's Institute, in the following words:

It was born in the underground due to the need to complement what already existed and as a possible help to the church in such case as the other schools — and even perhaps parishes and monasteries — might be closed... I was amazed that the church was unprepared for various possible future vagaries. This all happened

in 1980, and no one knew that the Soviet era was about to come to an end... Therefore, the first thing necessary was to safeguard church tradition, i. e. the pure spiritual tradition, plus church culture and education [Kochetkov 2017, 291].

Specifics of the New Educational System

Fr. Georgy speaks not only of the need for teachers to put special effort into the implementation of the new system spoken about above, but also of the need for students to make special efforts to receive and perceive the material passed on to them — the process must not be one of passive reception [Kochetkov 2017, 292].

And outline of such a system as a framework for the preparation and training of catechists was laid out by Fr. Georgy in his Master's Degree thesis, dedicated to Orthodox catechesis. He began working on the thesis in 1983 and defended it, in 1993, with the blessing of Patriarch Alexy II, at St. Serge Institute in Paris [Kochetkov 1998, 202–220]. One of the thesis's primary conclusions was that the preparation of future catechists should accentuate not the acquisition of specific knowledge, but that it should include existential church experience and the experience of divine grace in the life of the future servant of God and His church; only after this should training associated in the main with “human-ecclesial, earthly, rational-cultural, traditional and the external aspect of tradition be assimilated.” [Kochetkov 1998, 208]. Fr. Georgy underscored that in the preparation and training of catechists: “It is vital not to work in a cookie-cutter fashion, but according to the principle of ‘supplementing and completing’ that, which for each is found wanting” [Kochetkov 1998, 210].

This meant that an individual approach was necessary for every student of the new school — help in opening to himself or herself that, which is personally natural in terms of his or her spiritual and psychic gifting.

All of the principles listed above accorded quite naturally with the process of reconceptualizing the role of education in the world, as it is was being rethought (and re-lived) in the context of the global catastrophe of the 20th c. — given wars, revolutions, and totalitarian repressions. For this reason, in Soviet pedagogics during the second half of the 20th century:

The prevailing 19th c. understanding of the “studying person” began to give way to an understanding of the “person being taught” — not only vis-à-vis various forms of utilitarian knowledge, but even in terms of the context of education as an op-

portunity to become a person, forming his or her unrepeatable personality, understanding of himself or herself, the “other”, and bear responsibility for that which is happening in the world at large [Lukacky, 32].

And we might also note that such a vision of man and his education would in any case be very difficult to actualize in a society with an anti-religious worldview — especially on any sort of a mass level — given widespread disappointment with the ideals of progress and rationalism which lead to a thoroughgoing postmodernist critique of almost any “proactive” approach to education [Lukacky, 32]. Moreover, it could easily have seemed that the creation of such a system — so far from our day-to-day reality and even utopian-sounding — would be impossible... if not only because the creation of such an educational institution was illegal under Soviet law that remained in place right up until 1990, and punishable by a very significant prison sentence¹.

Nevertheless, the educational institution was established in July, 1988, under the name “The Moscow Higher Orthodox Christian School” (original just “Higher Christian School”). The name was a reference to the Alexandrian “catechetical school” which existed from the end of the 2nd c. [Gavrilyuk, 97]. The education we planned for our students, however, was far from on the “school” level, and the ancient school itself was probably more of a spiritual academia — a sort of analogue to the well-known Platonic academy [Gavrilyuk, 98]. The new school, for instance, didn’t provide a step-by-step progression, from the most basic level of biblical knowledge and the typical shorter-term theological modules moving toward a higher education [Kopirovsky 2005, 64]. On the contrary, the new School assumed an immediate focus on higher achievements in the Orthodox Christian tradition, given that students had already received their step-by-step preparation at an earlier stage, during a lengthy term of catechesis.

A second particularity of the Higher School was that students studied not separate subjects, but various significant books in the context of a more integral approach to Orthodox Christian spiritual experience, therefore study assumed the immediate integration of several

1. Article 142 of the Criminal Code of the Russian Soviet Socialist Republic, dated from 1960, with amendments in 1982, for on the “Violation of the laws governing the separation of Church from State, and school from Church”. A three year prison-sentence was assumed for violation of this law; moreover, systema-

tic, group-based religious education was prohibited by Article 190, assuming the same prison term for the “Spreading of deliberate fabrications, verbal or otherwise, slandering the Soviet political and social system”. See: [Ugolovnyi].

subjects at the same time. The foundation of the education offered, and its first stage, was literature collected by Fr. Georgy, which students were asked to read and assimilate in a careful fashion, keeping their “minds in their hearts”, accompanied by the keeping of a diary with commentary evaluating all that was read. This foundation was primarily dedicated to personal questions, convictions and impressions, which were then discussed in monthly consultations in the form of free-form discussions — rather than questions asked and answers demanded — with a single teacher — Fr. Georgy. His archive to this day contains the results of all the entrance exams and subsequent work of the school’s students, including the names of all the students and the materials that they covered in their personalized education, though these have all been encrypted, as per the demands of the time (see: Ill. 1, 2, 3, p. 101–103).

The first two “years” of education — in which a single “year” might last from one to several years of education — corresponded to a complete course of catechesis and mystagogia, and represented a full course of education and preparation for higher education. The culmination of this process was a paper entitled, “The course of my life”, which was generally from 15 to 20 pages long, assuming not an external reference point but an internal spiritual and analytical summary of life lived so far.

The final two “years” of education, which might be received over a number of years, in accordance with the needs of the specific person, were then dedicated to personal higher Christian education on the level of a bachelors or masters degree, in order to prepare each student for service in the Church, primarily as a missionary or catechist. The master’s level was taught in an in-depth fashion — primarily in terms of argumentative (sometimes *sharply*-argumentative!) tutorials, calling for serious discussion, questions and answers to issues relating to the Christian faith, as well as the development of various forms of their resolution.

In 1990, after the recall of anti-Church legislation and the state registration of the School under the auspices of the Russian Open University on a fully independent basis (see: Ill. 2, 4 p. 102, 104), as the legal framework for all similar activities was undergoing a lengthy process of being rewritten and reworked, the School’s pedagogical concept was published in the journal “Orthodox Community” (“Pravoslavnaia obshchina”). (see: Ill. 3, 4, 5, 6, p. 103–106) [*Kochetkov 1991a; Kochetkov 1991b; Kochetkov 1992a; Kochetkov 1992b*].

Changes Needed in Spiritual Schools

In 1999, in the Journal *Christian Reading* (Kristianskoje Chtenije), a teacher of a whole series of subjects for the Russian Church, Hieromonk Ilarion (Alfeev), published an article analyzing the process of spiritual education in the Christian East in the first centuries of Christianity [Ilarion 1999]. In this article, he continued consideration of the changes that were necessary to make in the spiritual schools of the Russian Orthodox Church². He called for an accentuation of attention on “reforming the form”, i. e. a change in the status of the current seminary and academic practices, and a focus on a new vision for the system of theological education [Ilarion 1999, 106–107]. As an example, he brought to view the ancient, forgotten heritage of theological education in the East, which arose in Christian apostolic communities as “spiritual schools”, as well as the early Christian training centres of St. Hippolytus of Rome, Clement of Alexandria, and the Syrian spiritual schools of the 6th–7th c.

In particular, in his article he points to 10 points that he believes necessary to rethink in terms when creating a new educational model for spiritual schools in Russia. Primarily, he believes that it is necessary to revive a “spirit of communality and unity”, which was inherent to ancient early-Christian schools:

There was a single community, a brotherhood among the people — uniting them in one goal, with one task... <...> ...The teachers and the students had a tight and direct connection in brotherhood... <...> ...The Rector was the spiritual director of the school and determined the direction of the school’s activity... he was the “pedagogue and the spiritual father” for the school’s students. <...> The Rector was a theologian and a specialist in his field [Ilarion 1999, 140–141].

Further, Hieromonk Ilarion considers the possibility that the fragmentary theological course material, split into dogmatic, moral and liturgical, be reintegrated, uniting, for instance, dogmatic and liturgical theology into a single subject, according to the study of liturgical texts [Ilarion 1999, 142].

Moreover, he poses the question vis-à-vis the preference for a change from passive assimilation of theological and related knowledge to an accentuation on independent search, in terms of which he proposes that lectures would provide only introductory material

2. See: [Ilarion 1998].

and afterwards present the student with a literature list and extended time for independent research. Naturally, the time allotted for general study would be reduced and the time for independent study — increased. [*Ilarion 1999, 142–143*].

Lastly, quite a significant effort was placed on the teaching of philosophy, and also care was taken that the school would not simply turn into a theological research centre, but truly offer a proper Christian education. The author finishes his article with a rhetorical question: “Is it possible to say that people leave our academy more committed to the Church and more spiritually mature than when they began their studies?” [*Ilarion 1999, 143*].

We can easily notice that the majority of these principles were exactly those put into place in the founding of the Moscow Higher Orthodox Christian School. Moreover, they were successfully implemented at the school, and at its successor institute, St. Philaret’s Orthodox Christian Institute.

Conclusions

In the interview that Fr. Georgy gave on the occasion of the 30th anniversary of the Institute, for which period he was the Institute’s Rector, he said that over the past several years during the period of state accreditation of the educational programmes, the educational system underwent a number of noticeable changes, given the necessity to follow state mandated standards [*Kochetkov 2019, 109*]. For this reason, he comes to the following conclusion:

the personalized character of the educational process obvious at the very beginning has, in a sense, become more internalized within the programme itself and isn’t necessarily as obvious and accentuated as it was in earlier times [*Kochetkov 2019*].

However, this only underscores that the principles according to which the Higher Christian School was created have remained unchanged during its process of maturation into a full-fledged institute of higher learning, even given the unavoidable formalism necessary to a number of aspects of the Institute’s activity.

By way of education, we might offer the following short list:

1. The organization of this new type of Christian spiritual educational institution, unlike an education in Religious Studies or even a

seminary education, requires the participant to enter seriously into spiritual practice. The main educational stimulus here is not so much insufficient knowledge as it is the need to underpin the basis of one's own spiritual life.

2. The foundational level for such an education is lengthy (from 1 to 3 years) and includes catechesis and orientation into the patristic tradition (2nd to 5th centuries), as well as its contemporary analogues. The principle of catechesis, in contrast to the more typical scholastic-type teaching, needs to be an integral perception of the spiritual tradition, and presupposes progress not from the pieces toward a whole picture, but something more akin to the opposite — “expansion” from the centre toward the periphery.

3. Education, in this case, becomes something like a continuation and “fine tuning” of catechesis, rather than a separate centralized process. An orientation toward a single Christian revelation — even when it is in the form of a bachelors or masters degree — doesn't build a staircase in terms of knowledge from lesser to greater, but is aimed at the higher study of every single subject, and places an accent only on the questionable or unquestionable in terms of that subject.

4. St. Philaret's first stage of existence (as the Moscow Higher Orthodox Christian School) provided the possibility to test the principle of independent study of the most spiritually significant literature in various theological disciplines and its subsequent discussion under the leadership of an experienced tutor. This form of educational is extremely promising, insofar as it facilitates the creation of a living foundation which is supplementary to forms that already exist and analogous to various contemporary secular structures such as open university, anti-university, off-university, and other new forms of study: these forms arise out of the need to pull the contemporary system of higher education out of the current crisis [*Anikina, Ivankina*].

At present, the number of spiritual schools in Russia is much greater than just the two spiritual academies and three seminaries that existed before 1991. However, these schools continue to use previous educational forms, which are oriented toward the preparation of clergy and church workers for the church structure. At this point, it is perhaps even more important than before for the church to provide access to spiritual education to those amongst the “faithful”, who are, in the words of the apostle, “also be able to teach others”^{*1}. While remaining at their day jobs, continuing to work in scientific fields, in the arts, in industry, or in services, nevertheless these people can engage in mission work and

*1 2 Tim 2:2

reach a much greater number of people than can only the existing seminaries and spiritual academies, churches, missionary, religious studies and catechetical departments. For this reason, it seems that the forms and methods developed at the Moscow Higher Orthodox Christian School³ in the second half of the 1980s, which assume the sufficiency and presence of even only one teacher and a small group of personally motivated students, might again come into demand in our church — if not at the present moment, then within the foreseeable future.

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