

# THE PROBLEMS FACING ORTHODOX THEOLOGICAL EDUCATION IN RUSSIA<sup>1</sup>

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The following article is the text of a report delivered at the consultation of Orthodox theological schools held in Belgrade, Serbia, from 16–24 August 1997 under the sponsorship of SYNDESMOS, the World Organization of Orthodox Youth. Its author, Fr Hilarion, studied at the Moscow Theological Seminary and Academy and went on to teach at both institutions after graduating with honours in 1991 with a degree of Master of Theology. He then went on to do doctoral research at Oxford University, finishing in 1995 with a thesis entitled 'St Symeon the New Theologian and Tradition'. He has published several books, including translations from Greek and Syriac, as well as articles in the fields of Dogmatic and Mystical Theology, Patristics and Orthodox Spirituality. At present Fr Hilarion is Executive Secretary for Inter-Christian Affairs at the Department for External Church Relations of the Moscow Patriarchate.

## **Your Excellencies, Your Eminences, Reverend Fathers, Brothers and Sisters:**

It is a high honour and a great joy for me to address you as rectors, professors and students of Orthodox theological educational institutions.

Many any things in my own life have been connected with theological education. At different times I have taught the Holy Scriptures of the New Testament, dogmatic theology, homiletics, patrology, and the Ancient Greek language at a number of theological and secular educational institutions in Russia and abroad.

Unlike most of those here present, however, I do not represent any theological school at this consultation. This 'privileged' position of being a private individual makes it possible for me to say frankly and plainly, without being afraid of offending anyone or infringing on anyone's interests, what I think about the present-day problems of theological education and possible ways of solving them. I will speak mostly within the Russian context, although what I will say may be relevant to certain educational institutions outside of Russia.

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In my view, a *radical reform* of the system of Orthodox theological education in Russia is essential. Such a reform is necessary above all because the scholastic standards of theological learning at our theological seminaries and academies today at best correspond to the standards which existed in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries and sometimes are even lower. The tradition of theological education in Russia was interrupted after the October 1917 revolution. True, it was continued in the West, and produced such outstanding Orthodox theologians as Archpriests Sergei Bulgakov, Georges Florovsky, Alexander Schmemmann, John Meyendorff, Archimandrite Cyprian (Kern), Professors A.V. Kartashev and V.N. Lossky, and a number of others. However, their books, from which the West is learning about Orthodoxy, have not yet come into use at Russian theological schools; moreover, quite a few teachers at theological schools are mistrustful of these books, seeing ‘non-Orthodox views’ in them. The achievements of modern-day Western theology are also practically ignored at our theological schools.

In order to bring the scholarly level of theological education in Russia closer to present-day standards, I think we have to revise our *curricula*. Closing the gap that has formed over a seventy-year period will be no mean feat: this will require a truly Herculean effort. If we do not make this effort, however, we will risk remaining forever in a ghetto and never reaching the level of modern-day world theological science.

Besides, I am firmly convinced that we need a new approach to certain aspects of the *educational process*, new educational methods, a fresh view of the rules of discipline, and a fresh concept of the relations between teachers and students. Our theological seminaries and academies inherited certain educational methods – which, in my opinion, we need to get rid of as soon as possible – from *bursas* (theological schools which existed in Russia before the revolution). No revival of theological education in the Russian Church will be possible as long as these methods remain in use.

## **I. CURRICULA**

I will begin with a few specific observations and suggestions concerning curricula.

### *1. The Holy Scriptures*

The main flaw in the study courses in the Holy Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments that are being taught at the Russian theological schools is, in my view, complete disregard for the achievements of modern biblical criticism. In the past few decades the West has made great progress in studying the Bible. In our country, however, it is at best *An Explanatory Bible*, compiled by A.P. Lopukhin and his disciples at the turn of the century, at the dawn of the development of biblical science, which is used as the main source of knowledge about biblical criticism.

A biblical scholar is faced with an immense task – that of finding the correct approach to biblical criticism and selecting from its arsenal things that may be of value to an Orthodox scholar, having cast off everything superfluous and irrelevant. In order to be able to make this selection, however, a teacher of Holy Scripture must himself have a good command of the entire arsenal of modern biblical science.

Another aspect of studying the Bible at theological schools must be the need for systematic familiarisation with the exegesis of biblical and evangelical texts in the works of the Church Fathers, in

the texts of divine services and in the Holy Tradition. An Orthodox Christian must be able to read the Holy Scriptures in the context of the Holy Tradition, counterbalancing and supplementing the information obtained in the course of getting acquainted with biblical criticism with what he can learn about the Bible from the experience of the Church.

## 2. Dogmatic theology

At our theological schools dogmatics is more often than not taught on the basis of scholastic schemes which came into theological practice in the Roman Catholic West and which found their way into Russian theological schools through the Kiev Academy in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. For example, the first section of dogmatic theology, *The Teaching of God*, includes such topics as 'Seven Qualities of the Divine Essence', 'Five Qualities of the Divine Will', 'Four Qualities of the Divine Reason', etc. In the West, these schemes have long gone out of use, whereas in our country they still remain in use and continue to be regarded by some people as the unshakeable basis on which Orthodox dogmatics must be built. It is therefore hardly a surprise that the students of theological schools receive dogmatics without enthusiasm, to put it mildly.

It is my firm conviction that such scholastic schemes should be discarded as useless because they only serve to destroy faith in a person and prevent him from being educated in the spirit of the Holy Tradition of the Eastern Church. The teaching of dogmatic theology at theological schools must be conducted on the basis of the Holy Scriptures and the teachings of the Church Fathers.

Take, for example, the very same section, *The Teaching of God*. It may include such topics as 'The Incomprehensibility of God', 'The Names of God', 'Apophatic and Cataphatic Theology', 'The Qualities of God', 'The Essence and Energies of God'. All these topics have been worked out in detail by the Church Fathers. The topic 'The Incomprehensibility of God' may be expounded on the basis of the anti-Eunomian writings of the Cappadocian Fathers and St John Chrysostom. The topic concerning 'The Names of God' may be based on the writings of Sts Gregory of Nazianzus, Ephraem Syrus and Dionysius the Areopagite, who set it forth in the greatest detail. As the basis for the topic 'Apophatic and Cataphatic Theology' we may use the writings of Sts Gregory of Nyssa, Gregory of Nazianzus, Dionysius the Areopagite, and others. The topic 'The Qualities of God' may be expounded on the basis of the corresponding section of the *Exposition [Ekthesis] of the Orthodox Faith* by St John of Damascus. And, finally, the writings of St Gregory Palamas may be used in expounding the topic 'The Essence and Energies of God'.

Dogma is the basis of life for an Orthodox Christian. All our divine services are based on dogmas. A priest who is not versed in Church dogma is like a physician who does not know the fundamentals of medicine.

Alas, the lack of interest in dogmatics among certain members of our clergy and Orthodox students is not infrequently the cause of complete theological ignorance. Here are a few examples. One day I was examining third-year students of the correspondence department of the Moscow Theological Seminary in dogmatics. Most of them had already received holy orders. I organised the examination according to the principle of separating the 'sheep' from the 'goats': I asked the students questions, and if the person being examined demonstrated a heresy he went to sit on my left, while if there was no heresy in his reply he sat on my right. And so by the end of the examination nearly all of them were

sitting on my left. For example, one of the students told me that ‘the Father begot the Son in order to save the human race’. Another one, when asked, ‘What is apophatic [negative] theology?’ answered, ‘This is when they say that there is no God.’ I asked a third one, ‘How many natures do you recognise in Jesus Christ?’ He answered, ‘Two natures.’ I asked, ‘And how many essences?’ The answer was, ‘One essence.’ I asked, ‘How so: two natures and one essence?’ He answered, ‘That’s precisely how it is: one essence in two natures.’ Is it then any wonder that our parishioners have no understanding of Church dogma? If the shepherds are like this, what can you expect of the sheep?

Now here is an absolutely ridiculous example. One day a novice of a big monastery (who is now, perhaps, already a hieromonk or an archimandrite) came to see me in order to take an examination in dogmatics for the second year of a theological seminary. He said, ‘Father, please ask me an easy question because I spend whole days performing obediences and have no time for studying.’ I then asked him, ‘How many Persons are there in the Holy Trinity?’ The novice gave the question deep consideration, gazing thoughtfully at me. I asked him, ‘What is it, are you doing some mental arithmetic?’ At last, after long and painful reflection, he answered, ‘One Person.’ My next question was, ‘Why, then, do we believe in the Trinity if there is only one Person in it?’ He said, ‘Father, I asked you not to ask me any difficult questions, for I am a novice and I have no time for studying.’ And this is not a made-up funny story; it is a case out of my own teaching practice.

### *3. Mystical theology*

Our students regard dogmatics as a dry and uninteresting subject. One of the reasons for this is the fact that it is presented out of the context of a Christian’s spiritual experience, as it were, as if the ‘dry dogmas’ bear no direct relation to what we call ‘life in God’, ‘life in Christ’, our spiritual and mystical experience.

In connection with this, I would like to raise the following question: shouldn’t a separate course in ‘mystical theology’ be introduced at theological schools? Perhaps not everyone will like the term ‘mystical’. And yet, call it as you will, but give the students an opportunity to get acquainted with what constitutes the core of Christian life – the direct experience of communicating with God, which was bestowed upon the holy ascetics of the Christian Church.

As a result of the absence of such a subject as mystical theology at our theological schools, our students do not study the key topics of the Church Fathers’ Tradition such as the vision of God, the experience of the Divine Light, and the divinisation of the human essence.

### *4. Ascetics*

Before the revolution, a subject known as ascetics was taught at theological schools in Russia – a subject which is not included in the curricula of quite a few present-day theological educational institutions. It is my firm conviction that this subject is absolutely essential for future pastors of the Church.

What is ‘soberness’ – the art of fighting down one’s appetites and desires? What is ‘struggle against passions’? What, generally speaking, is ‘passion’? What is ‘sin’? What does the concept of Christian ‘chastity’ comprise? Why is chastity necessary both in monastic and in married life? What is

the meaning of monasticism? What are the main monastic vows? What is the way to struggle with gloom? What is the meaning and the spiritual significance of fasting? Why does an Orthodox Christian make bows? What are the fundamentals of prayer practice in the Orthodox Church? A systematic course in ascetics would provide answers to these and many other questions.

Today such a course is not taught at our theological schools. As a result, our students have no chance to study such outstanding samples of monastic writings as the anthology *Apophthegmata patrum* ('Sayings of the [Desert] Fathers'), the *Spiritual Homilies* of St Macarius the Egyptian, the *Ladder* of St John Climacus, the *Philokalia*, the writings of St Ignatius Bryanchaninov, St John of Kronstadt, St Silouan of Mount Athos, and quite a few others.

### 5. Patrology

The teaching of patrology at our theological schools not infrequently boils down to memorising major landmarks in the life of one Church Father or another and getting acquainted very superficially with individual aspects of his teaching. At some theological schools, lectures on patrology are read once a week in the course of one year, making a total of thirty academic hours, or one hour 'per Father'.

In my opinion, the very concept of teaching patristics should be revised at many of the theological schools in Russia. A course in patrology must be focused on studying the legacy of the Church Fathers and not on cramming a series of dates. It is not enough to glance through a few quotations from the Fathers in a textbook; one should read their writings at full length. A *taste* for reading patristic literature should be instilled in the students. Moreover, they should be encouraged to study the Fathers in the original – in Greek, Latin and other languages.

Nor is it enough to get acquainted only with the writings of the Fathers of the early Church and the Fathers of the Ecumenical Councils. One should also study works by authors of the late Byzantine period (St Gregory Palamas, Archbishop Symeon of Thessalonica, St Nicholas Cabasilas) and the Greek Fathers of the period of Ottoman rule (St Nicodemus the Hagiorite). Special courses are needed in Russian patrology (from St Hilarion Metropolitan of Kiev and St Maximus of Turov to St Theophan the Recluse, St Ignatius Bryanchaninov, St John of Kronstadt and St Silouan of Mount Athos), in Syrian Christian literature (St Ephraem Syrus, St Isaac of Nineveh and others) and in other national traditions of Church writing.

Patrology is a branch of instruction essential for future pastors. Our task is not only to read and love the Church Fathers, not only to study their legacy the way museum exhibits or archival documents are studied, but also to learn to think the way the Church Fathers did. In other words, we should be able to apply what the ancient Fathers said to the present day and to view present-day problems through the prism of the Church Fathers' experience. We should be aware that the writings of the ancient Fathers cannot by any means provide the answers to every question worrying humanity in the twentieth century. That is why it is important to adopt the spirit and not only the letter of patristic theology.

And, certainly, we should learn not only to think but also to live the way the Fathers of the Church did. This is a global task, a task for the whole of one's life. Initial steps in this direction, however, can be made in the period of studying at a theological school.

## 6. Philosophy

At our theological seminaries students either do not study philosophy at all or, if they do, they are given only a most superficial ‘Introduction to Philosophy’, which only leaves the names of a few philosophers in the students’ memory. Even our theological academies do not offer systematic courses in philosophy.

In my view, an extensive course in classical philosophy is absolutely essential for the students of theological seminaries and academies. A student lacking sufficient knowledge in this field will not be able to read and adequately comprehend such writings as, for example, *Pege gnoseos* (‘The Source of Knowledge’) by St John of Damascus or many other works by the Fathers of the Church.

A course in medieval Western philosophy, as well as familiarisation with German idealism, existentialism and other modern-day philosophical movements is also necessary. All this will serve to enrich substantially the world outlook of an Orthodox pastor and will contribute to his intellectual and spiritual advancement.

## 7. Liturgics

As a general rule, the teaching of liturgics at our theological schools boils down to memorising various sections of the Typicon such as ‘the order of the morning divine service on the Feast of the Annunciation when it coincides with Great Tuesday’. A clergyman may come across such an instance where the Annunciation coincides with Great Tuesday once or twice in a fifty-year period of church service. What is the use of memorising the order of such a divine service? One may look through the Typicon before the beginning of the service and conduct it in accordance with what is written in it. Isn’t it easier to teach the students of theological schools how to use the Typicon, instead of making them cram ‘Mark’s chapters’, of which ‘there is no end’?

I think that liturgics should in the first place reveal to students the spirit and meaning of Orthodox divine service. Liturgics should not be reduced to lessons in the practice of divine service. Liturgical theology should also be studied. Students should be introduced to the history of Liturgy, the history of the daily and weekly cycles of divine services and the yearly cycle of Church feasts.

Moreover, the texts of divine services should be systematically studied from the point of view of their theological, dogmatic content. Fr Pavel Florensky believes that Orthodox dogmatics should be nothing other than the systematisation of the dogmatic ideas of divine service.<sup>2</sup> And St Ignatius Bryanchaninov described Orthodox divine service as a spiritual school at which a person can learn ‘everything he needs in the sphere of faith’.<sup>3</sup>

The texts of divine services of the Orthodox Church are our life-bearing heritage, which one must know and love. From a dogmatic aspect, they are no less (and, probably, even more) significant than the writings of the Church Fathers. That the texts of divine services are not studied at our theological schools is a great drawback.

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<sup>2</sup>P. Florensky, *Filosofia kulta (Philosophy of the Cult)*. In: *Bogoslovskiye trudy (Theological Studies)* (Moscow: Publishing Department of the Moscow Patriarchate 1977), No. 7, p. 344.

<sup>3</sup>I. Bryanchaninov, *Collected Works in Five Volumes* (in Russian) (St. Petersburg: Tuzov Publishing House, 1886), Vol. 2, pp. 181-182.

## *8. Homiletics*

The teaching of homiletics at some of our theological schools is in a deplorable state. The very approach towards homily is, in my view, fundamentally erroneous. Here is, for example, how a student at one of the Russian theological schools prepares his homily. The teacher gives him a topic and a scheme for expanding on that topic. The student writes a homily and shows it to the teacher. The teacher then ‘corrects’ the text: that is, he crosses out everything lively, distinctive, unconventional. After that the student must learn the ‘corrected’ version of his homily by heart and, on an appointed day, deliver it before the other students at the seminary’s church after the evening prayer. No diversions from the approved text are allowed. Is this really the way to train a homilist?

Students are forced to speak an artificial, obsolete language. At lessons of homiletics, homilies by nineteenth-century authors such as Archbishop Innocent of Kherson or Archpriest Grigory Dyachenko are used as teaching aids. However good these homilies may be in themselves, they are hopelessly out of date both in their language and in their content.

What such lessons in homiletics at a theological school quite often lead to is that the students, having graduated from it, turn out to be incapable of speaking normal human language and are unable to get the words of Christ through to their parishioners. Why shouldn’t we offer our students homilies by our contemporaries such as Metropolitan Anthony of Sourozh or Archpriest Alexander Schmemmann by way of examples?

One should also take into account the fact that today a clergyman has not only to deliver homilies in a church, but also to address various audiences outside church walls and, in particular, to appear on the radio and television. It may well happen that a priest will have to speak to people who are remote from the Church and who are only likely to be convinced by a lively, well-reasoned, logically sound speech – not by a nineteenth-century style homily written in advance and read from a script.

I think that a teacher of homiletics should make every effort to develop in his students the ability to extemporise. Quite often a priest finds himself in a situation where he has to speak off the cuff and where there is no time for any preparation. If a priest is not trained to speak extempore, he may well lose his head in such a situation and begin to utter incoherent, unconvincing phrases.

## *9. Comparative theology*

At quite a few theological schools, comparative theology is nothing other than slightly modernised nineteenth-century ‘comminatory theology’. The students study all kinds of the Protestants’ and Roman Catholics’ ‘misbeliefs’ and ‘digressions’ from Orthodoxy, learning nothing about the actual life of the believers of these Churches. In some cases teachers of comparative theology seem to be determined to instil in their students a fanatical hatred for heterodoxy.

I think that today’s students of theological schools should be educated in a spirit of tolerance and openness towards other confessions. We are now living not in the Middle Ages and not even in the nineteenth century. It should be borne in mind that many of the future clergymen of our Churches will have to live in a multi-confessional society. They will have to be able not only to see the differences, but also to clearly understand that Christians belonging to most varied denominations have a single dogmatic basis, common belief in the Holy Trinity, belief in Jesus Christ as God and Saviour.

During lessons of comparative theology it is not enough to show the weaknesses of other confessions: close attention should be given to their strengths as well. Only when an Orthodox priest has a thorough knowledge of the strong points of heterodox Churches will he have at his disposal the necessary means for carrying on a dialogue with them. If, however, a student at a theological school learns only about the weaknesses of other confessions, there will always remain a practical danger that, meeting with representatives of these confessions in a real-life situation, he will be unarmed and open to attack.

In my view, representatives of other confessions should be invited to meet with the students and answer their questions. Someone may say, 'How can it be that a Protestant pastor or a Baptist preacher will come to an Orthodox theological seminary?' But then, in real life, our clergymen will have to meet both with Protestant pastors and with Baptist preachers. Wouldn't it be sensible to prepare them for such meetings well in advance?

#### *10. World religions*

At our theological schools there are no systematic studies of world religions – Islam, Judaism, Buddhism. If they are studied at all, this is done solely in terms of their 'digressions', that is, their differences from Christianity.

#### *11. Ancient and modern languages*

At many of our present-day theological seminaries, the Greek and Latin languages are taught for only one year, and both at the same time. As a result the students, as a rule, learn little apart from the alphabet and the simplest basics of grammar. At the academies, more time is allotted for studying the ancient languages. And yet, experience shows that only those students who study the languages on their own acquire a more or less adequate command of them by the time of their graduation. As for the syllabuses, they are oriented towards an absolute minimum of philological training which does not allow an academy graduate to sight-read even the Gospel in the original, to say nothing of the writings of the Church Fathers.

It is my conviction that intensive training in the ancient languages should begin during the first year of a theological seminary and continue for the entire study period without interruption. Seminary graduates should, as a minimum, be able to read the Gospel in Greek and know the fundamentals of Latin. Academy graduates should have a good command of at least one of the ancient languages so as to be able to work with the writings of the Fathers of the Church in the original.

At our theological academies, few students study the Hebrew language. As for other ancient languages such as Syriac, Arabic, Ethiopic, Coptic, Armenian, Georgian and others, they are not studied at all. I am not calling on you to turn theological educational institutions into linguistic universities. They should not be allowed, however, to remain something like preparatory schools, either. At least those students who are interested in church sciences should be given an opportunity to get a thorough training in ancient languages.

As for the teaching of modern languages, this also leaves much to be desired. Only a few graduates of seminaries and academies (as a rule, those who studied at special language-training schools) can fluently speak a foreign language. In these times of ours when state borders are coming down and the world is becoming so small, speaking at least one European language is essential for a

graduate of a theological seminary. As for academy graduates holding the degree of Candidate (Master) of Theology, they should not only be fluent in at least one of the three major European languages (English, French, German), but also be able to read in the other two. This is a minimum in the knowledge of foreign languages without which not a single modern-day Orthodox theologian can do.

#### *12. Some other academic disciplines*

There are a number of other disciplines which, in my opinion, should be included in the curricula of our theological educational institutions. One such discipline is pastoral psychology. Many of our clergymen know absolutely nothing about matters relating to the individual's mental life and cannot distinguish between phenomena of spiritual life and diseases of the mind. What is often understood to be the sin of gloom is not infrequently a grave mental condition which calls for subtle and thorough medical treatment rather than chastening and penance.

Still another subject that should be taught at theological schools is hagiology. At theological seminaries and academies, the lives of the saints are read daily at lunchtime. No attempts, however, are made of scientific conceptualisation of this type of sacred writing. What are the specific features of hagiography as a literary genre? To what extent does the hagiographic canon correspond to historical reality? What is known about the saints of the early Church? A course in hagiology should provide answers to these and other similar questions.

## **II. THE TEACHING PROCESS**

I will now pass on to observations concerning a number of aspects of the teaching process at Russian theological seminaries and academies.

#### *1. Lecture, seminar, special course, examination*

At many of our theological schools the teaching process is organised according to the following pattern. During a lesson, the teacher reads a lecture on his subject and the students take notes. At the next lesson, the teacher quizzes several students about the content of the previous lecture. The answer of a student who has committed the lecture to memory and repeats it in a form as close as possible to the original is regarded as the best one. At the end of the academic year an examination is held, during which each student draws a question sheet and orally answers one, two or three questions on the course he has been taught. If he is lucky enough to know the answers to the questions, he is given a good mark; if not, he gets a bad mark.

What is the main drawback of this system? It is the fact that in the course of an academic year a student receives a certain amount of knowledge about each subject, but he is not required to study anything on his own. A student is only a passive listener who has no opportunity for creatively studying the subject. In using this approach, the efficiency of assimilating the material is minimal and the usefulness of the course taught in this way is infinitely small.

We need a new concept of lecture. A teacher should not aim to exhaust a theme within the limits of a lecture: he should only introduce his students to the problems relating to that theme and pose a number of questions to them. They should look for answers to these questions themselves. After

each lecture, students should be given a reading list on its theme. Then they should be quizzed about what they have read and not about what they heard at the lecture.

This method will, in the first place, promote the development of a student's creative potential, since it presupposes that the student will be digesting the material by his own, unaided efforts. Secondly, it offers the student an opportunity, having assimilated the material on his own, to arrive at his own conclusions, which may be different from those suggested to him by the teacher. In this case, the appraisal of a student's answer should be based on how well he has studied the recommended reading material and not on how accurately he can reproduce his teacher's conclusions. A teacher must respect a student's own opinion if the latter can adequately substantiate it.

To improve the retention of auditory material, seminars should be conducted on each theme being studied. Seminars offer students a chance not only to work on their own, but also to exchange opinions among themselves and discuss the questions posed to them with their teacher. At our theological schools, as a general rule, seminars are not conducted and the teaching process is limited to lectures and tests.

The examination at the end of the year should be serious, detailed and long enough. An oral test lasting three to five minutes such as is practised in some of our theological schools is not sufficient. The students should give written answers, for which they should be allotted one, two or more hours.

Such a system of conducting examinations is in use at many Western universities – for example, at Oxford University. There no one checks attendance: it is up to a student himself to decide whether to attend a lecture or not. But, as a rule, no one misses lectures because everyone knows that, if he does not attend a lecture, he will not stand a chance of getting his bearings in the extensive bibliographic material on the corresponding theme and, consequently, will not be able to prepare adequately for the examination.

There should not be any prejudice in appraising students' papers. At some of our theological schools it sometimes happens that a teacher, having taken a dislike to some student or other, deliberately gives him a mark that is too low. Certainly, one may also come across cases of an opposite nature where students are overmarked. In connection with this, it will be in order to recall that quite a few secular educational institutions use a system under which their students indicate on their examination papers a certain code number unknown to the examiner, instead of their names. This practically rules out the possibility of their being awarded an unfair mark. Wouldn't it be expedient for us to adopt this system?

## *2. Extramural studies*

A teacher who believes that his task is to give his students a certain amount of knowledge of the subject he teaches is grossly mistaken. A teacher's task is to help his students reach their creative potential. The way I see it, the main objective of lectures and seminars should be to quicken students' interest in the themes they study and inspire them to study by themselves. It is precisely extramural studies which students pursue by their own efforts that should be the focus of the teaching process at theological schools.

A future pastor should be taught independently to think, independently to work and independently to answer questions that are put to him. Unfortunately, it has to be admitted that at some of our theological schools every effort is made to *wean* a person from thinking, working, putting questions and answering them. Some students are systematically persecuted for the sole reason that they overstep the bounds of the curricula in their studies; that they stand out from the rest of the students by refusing to be content with memorising the material given to them, and trying to go further and work on their own; that they learn foreign languages more intensively than their teacher requires them to do. Such students are accused of untrustworthiness, unorthodoxy and pride.

One would expect that the curriculum should be organised so that more and more new vistas open up before the student. Instead, it seems that the student is subjected to an ever greater number of restrictions and is prevented in every way from trying to think independently. As a result, the graduates of theological seminaries are more often than not narrow-minded, inhibited, dispirited people.

Many of our students are extremely dissatisfied with the teaching methods and curricula now in use at theological schools. Deprived of the conditions for conducting extramural studies, they try to create such conditions themselves. One priest, who is an acquaintance of mine, studied for four years at a seminary and then for another four years at an academy. When asked, 'How did you manage to preserve the ability to reason?' he said, 'During the last five years of studying, beginning from the fourth year at the seminary, I stuffed my ears with cotton wool and read books – writings of the Church Fathers and philosophical literature. I just had no other choice.'

Another acquaintance of mine, when studying at a theological seminary, drew up his own, parallel curriculum according to which he conducted his own studies. 'This autumn I will be studying Plato,' he told me, 'then, in the winter, Aristotle, and in the spring I intend to switch over to the Stoics. Every day I spend one hour reading the Church Fathers and allot half an hour each to Greek and Latin.' Some may wonder just how that seminarian managed to get so much spare time. I will tell you how: he worked as a night-watchman at a poultry farm and did his studies during the night.

### *3. Specialization: getting a Master's and/or Doctor's degree*

One of the major shortcomings of our system of theological education is the lack of specialisation, that is, selection of students in accordance with their scientific interests. Such selection is necessary above all at theological academies, which are called upon to train theologians and specialists in various fields of church science. At theological seminaries, however, conditions should also be created to enable the student to study those areas of theology which are of the greatest interest to him.

Under the system now in use, the course of study at theological seminaries in Russia lasts four years, and then another four years at an academy. The curricula are designed in such a way that the academy largely duplicates the work of the seminary. This system is quite ineffectual, and the administration of theological educational institutions seem to be aware of this. That is why a reform of theological education is now in the making. My question is, on what scale and how radical this reform will be. If we confine ourselves merely to giving a 'facelift' to the edifice of our theological education, I am afraid that we can hardly expect any substantial progress in that direction.

In my view, the idea of specialisation should be the key to the projected reform. Four-year theological seminaries should offer possibilities for detailed study in the areas of church science which a student will choose for taking a Master's and Doctor's degree at a theological academy. On entering a two-year postgraduate school training theologians and teachers for theological schools, a student will concentrate on a subject of his choice such as biblical science, patristics, church history, etc. During his first year at the postgraduate school he will have to attend lectures on subjects directly bearing on the theme he has chosen, and during his second year there he will be writing his Master's thesis. Having entered a three-year doctorate department training top-class specialists in various fields of theology, a student will pursue only his own studies and write a Doctor's thesis on a theme of his choice.

#### *4. Student exchanges: studying abroad*

Exchanges of students between Orthodox theological schools in different countries are a major factor contributing to the broadening of the theological horizons of these students. I think that such exchanges should occur on a more regular basis.

It is no less important to send students to study theology at secular and heterodox theological educational institutions abroad. In this respect, I would like to mention the Romanian Orthodox Church by way of example. That Church annually sends students to the world's best universities, such as Oxford, Cambridge, Princeton, Tübingen, and Heidelberg.

The Russian Church, on the contrary, has a horror of all things Western, heterodox and foreign. The administration of our theological educational institutions are averse to sending people to study abroad, particularly to the West, out of fear that the students will be 'catholicised' there. But what is the worth of Orthodoxy if it becomes 'catholicised' during its very first encounter with the West? If students do become 'catholicised', it is above all the teachers of Orthodox theological schools who will be to blame for it, for this will mean that they have failed to educate their students in the Orthodox spirit.

Here is a simple example. Among the Ukrainian priests who have become Uniates in the past few years there are quite a few former graduates of Russian theological schools. They were never sent to the West and were educated in the spirit of intolerance and fanaticism, and yet they became 'catholicised' all of a sudden! This means that the problem is not that we send our students to the wrong place to study, but that we ourselves teach them the wrong way.

I, for my part, think that we (meaning the Russian Church) should send twenty students to the West every year. Even if three of them decide against returning to Russia and another two become 'catholicised', fifteen of them will come back and teach at our theological schools. If we take this approach, our theology will substantially improve within the space of ten years.

#### *5. Physical training*

The physical training of students at Russian theological schools is held in contempt as something fundamentally incompatible with 'spirituality'. As a result, by the time of their graduation from a theological school some students develop various illnesses and disorders which they can never subsequently shake off.

The eyesight of nearly all students deteriorates during several years of study at a theological school. For example, at one of Russia's biggest theological seminaries there are no reading lamps on

the students' desks. The dim lamps hanging under the five-metre high ceiling, half of them normally with burned-out light bulbs, are clearly not enough. The students sit in the classroom nine hours every day; naturally, they suffer from eye-strain and their sight begins to fail.

This is not to mention the fact that at some of our theological seminaries the students are accommodated in dormitories which are, in fact, barracks – ten, twenty or even more persons per room – which also has a harmful effect on their health. I am aware that not every seminary can provide its students with adequate lodging. Yet I think that much more could be done to improve the situation.

Certainly, the administration of Orthodox theological schools should show special concern for the physical condition of their students. Seminarians should have at their disposal a volleyball or football ground. They should also have opportunities to visit a swimming pool.

I remember a student at one of the theological schools who went jogging every morning, arousing general indignation among the teaching staff. That student had previously been an athlete. He told me that, if he did not jog for two or three days, his whole body would grow puffy and his heart would begin to trouble him.

I am thoroughly convinced that 'spirituality' should not be detrimental to the body and that theological education should not cause bodily harm to people. That is why the administration of theological schools should not be disdainful of the physical training of their students.

#### *6. Discipline: teachers' treatment of students*

Now I would like to dwell on the methods of taking disciplinary action which are in use at our theological schools. Taken all together, these methods constitute what may be described as 'baculine discipline'. Systematic compulsion of the students is the core of this baculine discipline.

At our theological seminaries everything is compulsory. The attendance of lectures is compulsory, participation in divine services is compulsory, going to meals is compulsory, and three-hour daily 'preparatory studies' are also compulsory. If a student oversleeps and misses the morning prayer, he is marked down for improper conduct and, accordingly, his maintenance allowance is reduced. If he misses the prayer twice or three times, he may be expelled from the theological school.

I will make special mention of what are called 'preparatory studies'. Just imagine a classroom which one may enter but which one may not leave. Inside it, students sit for three hours, chained to their desks, as it were. They have already been sitting in that classroom from nine in the morning till three in the afternoon, listening to lectures. Now, from five till eight, they are compelled to sit here and do their 'preparatory studies'. In fact, some of them are chatting and others are practising chants for the Saturday All-Night Vigil, mending their trousers or just dozing at their desks. The atmosphere in the classroom is noisy and stuffy, making it utterly impossible to do any serious work. Why cannot a student go and do his homework in the library, in the garden or in some other peaceful and quiet place? No, not on your life: a student is compelled to sit through his three hours in the classroom, whatever the price.

The daily routine at our theological schools is organised so that a student has practically no leisure time, nor has he any opportunity to choose how he disposes of what little free time he has. If he would like to go out into town, he has to obtain permission from the school administration. Getting

permission to visit one's parents living in another town is always difficult. Even leaving for the funeral of one's next of kin is not always possible.

Some of the theological seminaries in Russia are a mixture of a monastery, an army barracks and a nineteenth-century *bursa*. In a *bursa*, discipline was maintained by the students themselves. To this end, 'senior dormitory stewards' and 'senior duty students' (who controlled the behaviour of their fellow students out of class), 'censors' (who controlled their behaviour in class), 'auditors' (who tested the knowledge of other students) and a 'secundator' (a student who, on the instructions of the administration, flogged his fellow students) were appointed out of their number.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>4</sup>N. G. Pomyalovsky, *Ocherki bursy* (Sketches of Life in a Bursa) In: N. G. Pomyalovsky, *Meshchanskoye schastye. Molotov. Ocherki bursy* (Moscow: Khudozhestvennaya Literatura Publishers 1988), pp. 245-246.

The system that exists at today's theological seminaries has probably become somewhat simpler, but its essence has remained the same. 'Nothing debases the spirit of an educational institution to a greater extent than the power of one student over another', wrote Pomyalovsky.<sup>5</sup> It is precisely the power of one student over other students which underlies the system of maintaining discipline at our theological schools. From among students, 'inspectors' aides' are elected. They keep watch over the behaviour of the other students. An inspector's aide performs a variety of functions. His main function, however, is that of an informer. An inspector's aide, on his part, may enlist the services of other students, who are to keep him informed about what their fellow students are doing. In this way, students are systematically trained in the vile trade of being an informer.

Many things depend on an inspector's aide. If he takes a dislike to some student or other, he may regularly 'squeal on him' until that student is finally expelled from the theological school. If, however, a student makes friends with an inspector's aide, he may enjoy most varied privileges, such as permission to go into town out of turn, to see his girlfriend, etc.

While an inspector's aide has great power over his fellow students, the power of the inspector himself (he is appointed from among the teaching staff) is almost absolute and unlimited. He has the right to enter the room of a theological academy postgraduate at eleven o'clock in the evening and, seeing him reading a book, turn off the light, saying, 'At this time of day you must be in a horizontal position.' The inspector has the right to search a student's room in his absence. He has the right to leaf through the books that a student reads and the diaries he keeps. The very future of a student is in the inspector's hands, for it is he who hands down a verdict concerning the 'reliability' of a student. It is, as a rule, on inspectors' recommendations that students are expelled from theological schools.

One day I chanced to be present at a sitting of the 'schoolmasters' council' of a theological school. They were discussing a student whom I had known before his entrance to the seminary. The inspector said, 'I don't like this student with a soldierly gait. I propose that he be expelled.' I then said, 'He has a soldierly gait because he finished a military school before he entered the seminary.' On my recommendation, the student was *not* expelled. If, however, I had not happened to be taking part in the sitting, and had not been a chance witness to the inspectorate's arbitrary action, he would surely have been expelled – not on the grounds that the inspector did not like him, nor for his soldierly gait, but for a 'violation of discipline'.

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<sup>5</sup>*Ibid.* p. 246

Students are seldom expelled from our theological seminaries for poor results. More often than not it is a 'violation of discipline' which is given as the reason for their expulsion. The notion of 'violation of discipline' is so broad that practically anything can be interpreted as such. A schoolmaster may feel antagonistic towards a student and, as a result, the student may be declared a 'violation of discipline'.

At major theological schools, demerits and expulsion of students from school are an ordinary daily routine. At one of the theological schools there is a special bulletin board and fresh notices are posted on it every day about a demerit mark given to some student or other (known among the students as *troparia*) or about the expulsion of some student or other from school (so-called 'dismissals'). The administration of a theological school may expel from a seminary a person who has been studying at it for four years one month before his final examinations – just like that!

There are two traditional terms, borrowed from the monastic tradition, which are used in exercising compulsion in respect of students at theological schools. These terms are 'obedience' and 'blessing'. The administration of theological schools make use of these terms in the most diverse situations. A student is obliged to do everything 'in obedience to' and 'with the blessing of' his superiors. Without a blessing he can do nothing – not even so much as go out into town, visit a dentist or get a haircut.

Another term which the administration of theological schools abuse is 'humility'. The monastic tradition of the early Church knew the verb 'to humble oneself'. Today at our theological schools a shorter variant of this verb, 'to humble', is much more popular. School administrations use most varied methods of 'humbling' the students. At old-time *bursas*, students were flogged. Nowadays corporal punishment and torture are prohibited, and so the students are flogged morally. An inspector or an inspector's aide may summon a student and subject him to humiliating questioning about various aspects of his private life. There is still another way to 'humble' a cross-grained student, which is to move him from one room to another every three days, 'so that he should not forget where he is'.

In general, any teacher has the right to humiliate and insult a student any way and at any time he pleases. At one of the provincial theological seminaries in Russia one of the teachers (who, by the way, is a priest) begins his lessons with a roll call. When reading aloud his students' names, he deliberately mangles them so that they begin to sound like invectives. And he does this for the sole purpose of humiliating, insulting and 'humbling' all of them!

The psychological pressure which students of our theological schools experience is sometimes so great that seminarians not infrequently end up in a mental hospital.

Esteemed inspectors and teachers of theological schools: do not humiliate students, do not 'humble' them, do not deride them, do not take advantage of your official position to hurt their feelings, do not tread on them and do not try to break their spirit! For sooner or later you will be called to account – if not in this life, then in the next. Students are human beings, the same as you are. You should treat students as your equals. You should not *tutoyer* them and you should call them by their Christian names, not by their surnames. You should respect and love them. Do not think that by artificially interposing a wall of partition between your students and yourselves you will earn their

greater respect. Students are fond of those teachers who do not demonstrate their superiority over them in any regard. True respect and true love can only be reciprocal; they cannot be all on one side.

The late Fr John Meyendorff was respected and loved not only for his extensive knowledge and encyclopædic learning, but above all for his ability to treat students as equals. He did not 'humble' anyone, nor was he domineering to others. As a matter of fact, he did not shun informal contacts with his students. Once a week students from St Vladimir's Orthodox Theological Seminary gathered at his place for a glass of beer and talked about theological and other subjects. I do not call on teachers of theological schools to indulge in beer parties with their students. It seems, however, that there is nothing wrong with asking your students in to tea.

I am firmly convinced that we need to radically reform the entire system of maintaining discipline at theological schools. A fresh approach to students – more sober-minded, more respectful, more human and more Christian – is needed. The system under which the inspector and his aides exercise absolute power over students should be abolished. 'The power of one student over another' should be eliminated. Compulsion of students at a theological school is inadmissible. Today, at the turn of the twenty-first century, we should not resort to medieval methods of education.

#### *7. The presence of monks at theological schools*

Now a few words about the role of monks in educating future clergymen. As a rule, the executive positions – those of rector, pro-rector and inspector – at our theological seminaries are held by monks. There are also quite a few monks among their teaching staff. Besides, some of the seminaries are situated in close vicinity to monasteries.

This last circumstance undoubtedly has many positive aspects. The students have an opportunity to seek spiritual guidance from experienced *starsy* (elders), to attend monastic divine services, directly to get in touch with the age-old tradition of Orthodox monasticism, and to meet its finest representatives face to face. Some of the students themselves take vows upon graduation from a seminary or an academy.

The presence of monks at theological schools, however, has a number of negative aspects as well. In the first place, among the monks there exists a certain traditional distrust of learning and a dislike for sciences. In his day, Archimandrite Cyprian (Kern) wrote about how difficult it sometimes is for a learned monk to come into his own in an Orthodox monastery:

His position is not only difficult; it is nothing less than tragic ... The folksy mass are indifferent towards learning and far too distant from the needs and interests of that learned monk ... They do not comprehend such a monk and begin to suspect him of oversophistication and untrustworthiness and to harass and even persecute him. There arises a typical contradistinction, 'You've been schooled at a university and we've been schooled by adversity', and, naturally, schooling by adversity is regarded as an essential plus on the road to salvation, whereas learning is perceived as an obstacle blocking that road. Hence the paradoxical inference: obscurantism is an essential condition for becoming an accomplished monk ... But do humility and prayer really rule out learning? Is piety really a hindrance to books and education? ... Learning is also a feat and education is also ministry ... One should be able to

appreciate the saintliness of the feat of learning ... and not to oppose salvation to creative activity.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> C. Kern, *Angely, inochestvo, chelovechestvo (Angels, Monks, Humanity)*. In: *Bogoslovskii sbornik (Theological Collection)*, Issue II (South Canaan: 1955), pp. 36–40.

I will not speak about why distrust of learning is widespread in the monastic milieu: this is a topic in its own right. I will only mention that some monks believe it to be their duty to inculcate in the students of theological schools a negative view of learning. There have been cases where monks who were students' spiritual fathers 'did not bless' their spiritual children to continue their education at a theological academy, for 'this is not needed for salvation'. Even among the monks teaching at theological schools one may come across those who try to instil in their students a dislike for learning.

Another negative aspect of the presence of monks at theological schools is the fact that a monk is not always on common ground with a student when the latter is thinking about getting married. As I have already mentioned, the administration of our theological schools is composed mostly of monks. Most of the students, on the contrary, either are already married or are looking for a bride. A conflict between the monastic administration and a student usually blazes up when the latter has the bad luck to fall in love. It would be better that the administration stretch some point or other in respect of such a student, allot him more free time and let him go to a rendezvous with his sweetheart. This, however, is alien to monks: they just do not comprehend it. And so they begin to discipline the poor Romeo in every way.

At one of the theological schools in Russia there is a 'precentors' class' consisting of girl students each of whom – this is an open secret – is hoping to become a *matushka*, that is, a priest's wife. A seminarian has to ask the inspector, a monk, for his blessing every time he would like to escort a girl student from that class to her home. If, God forbid, someone informs the inspector that a certain student of the theological seminary has been seen kissing a certain girl student from the precentors' class at some place 'round the corner', a formal investigation and a misconduct penalty will follow shortly.

When, however, a student is about to graduate from the seminary, they say to him, 'What? You haven't yet solved the problem of starting a family? Go and solve it at once and then take holy orders!' And the poor student, who has been confined in a cage for four years, begins frantically to look for his future *matushka*. If he fails to settle this problem within what little time he has, the monk inspector (or the monk spiritual father of that student) advises him to take vows. And so the student becomes a monk – not because this is his calling, not because his entire previous life has led him to this, but only because he has not had enough time to find a bride. As a result, monasteries get a supply of monks who are behindhand with the world and who begin to serve time, to rust away, leading a life devoid of joy and inspiration.

Being myself a monk, I will take the liberty of addressing those monks who are in charge of our theological educational institutions. Dear brothers, a theological school is not a monastery! Do not prevent your students from getting married, do not prevent them from going to a rendezvous. Do not think that by multiplying the number of monks who have failed in life you are doing a good turn to the Russian monastic corps. On the contrary, in this way you are destroying it from within. And this is beside the fact that in this manner you mangle people's lives. Let those who have a vocation to monastic life become monks. As for the others, assure them normal conditions for entering into a lawful Christian marriage.

8. *Piety*

An essential aspect of the teaching process at theological schools is the education of students in a truly Christian spirit. Contributing to this is the daily common prayer in the morning and in the evening and regular attendance of divine services.

One cannot, however, become pious 'under the whiplash'. Compulsory participation in divine services and prayers can weaken and even destroy faith in a person instead of strengthening it. Compulsory confession and communion the more so. And yet this is practised in some of our theological schools.

I do not call for participation in divine services to be made optional for students of theological schools. But, on the other hand, those who for some reason feel unable to be present at a divine service in some particular case should not be forced to attend it. This calls for a sensible, discriminating approach. One should respect a person's private spiritual life and understand that not everyone is always equally prepared for a meeting with God. And, in any case, a student should go to confession and take communion only when he himself deems it necessary. A student should settle questions relating to confession and communion solely with his spiritual father. Any interference by the administration in such matters is absolutely inappropriate.

The practice of the administration 'appointing' a spiritual father for a student is also inadmissible. It should be entirely up to a student to choose a spiritual father for himself.

I happen to know of cases where a father confessor, maintaining close relations with the administration of a theological seminary, informed his superiors about what he had heard from a student during confession. There is hardly any need to mention that this is a sin for which any father confessor would have to answer to God himself.

I would like to remind all of us who are concerned with educating future priests in the spirit of Christian piety about the great responsibility that we bear before God for the soul of each student. I will say this bluntly: neither compulsory divine services, nor baculine discipline, nor the system of informing and sneaking, nor compulsory 'preparatory studies' in stuffy classrooms, nor mindless cramming – nothing of this kind promotes the growth of religious feeling among the students of theological schools. The effect of all this is quite the opposite. It is not accidental that the percentage share of the graduates of theological seminaries and academies taking holy orders is falling year after year. Some graduates prefer to remain laymen after graduation; others depart from the Church altogether.

I have more than once come across students of theological academies and seminaries who have told me something like this: 'We came here with such a deep faith, with such a strong fire, with such a great love for God and loyalty to the Church, with such a burning desire to learn! Here we have lost *everything*! We have turned into cynics for whom there is nothing sacred.'

Who is to blame for this? Certainly, to some extent, the students themselves, who have not mustered enough strength to go against the tide. In the first place, however, it is the administration and teachers with whom the blame lies; for instead of kindling the flame of love for God and the Church, and encouraging learning and spiritual life in their students, they have extinguished the small fire which had been burning in them before they entered theological school.

## CONCLUSION

The picture that I have drawn here may seem too gloomy. If anyone has recognised himself in descriptions I have given, I ask him not to take offence, for I had not the slightest intention to insult anyone or to expose anyone's character to attack. What I have said has been born out of the great pain that is caused me by the situation in which the theological schools of the Russian Orthodox Church find themselves today.

Unfortunately, the things I have told you about are not an exaggeration: this is a picture taken from life. Many of these things can be described as developmental diseases which, I hope, will be soon overcome. But the sooner, the better! If our theological schools enter the twenty-first century radically reformed, this will be our best present for the two-thousandth anniversary of the coming of Our Lord and Saviour to this world.

I am absolutely convinced that the future of our Churches depends on what we teach to future pastors at theological schools and on how we do this. The teachers of theological schools are bearing an enormous responsibility. To educate future pastors is a sacred and beautiful trust, but it is no mean feat. It calls for careful, thoughtful, continuous work taking many days. 'Who can mould, as clay-figures are modelled in a single day, the defender of the truth, who is to take his stand with angels, and give glory with archangels, and cause the sacrifice to ascend to the altar on high, and share the priesthood of Christ, and renew the creature, and set forth the image, and create inhabitants for the world above, aye and, greatest of all, be God, and make others to be God?' wrote St Gregory of Nazianzus.<sup>7</sup>

In conclusion I would like to address the administration and teachers of Orthodox theological schools. Reverend Fathers, Brothers and Sisters! Most of the people who enter theological schools are either pure gold or an alloy of gold and silver. Let us not allow this gold to lose its lustre, let us not suppress the tender shoots of independent thought in these people, let us not mangle their souls with baculine discipline, piety born under the whiplash and mindless cramming. Let us give our students an opportunity to fully develop their spiritual, intellectual and creative potential. Let us not extinguish in them the fire of faith; let us make it burst into a flame reaching to the sky! Let us not be afraid that a student will learn more than we know; on the contrary, let us do what we can so that our students should excel us. Only in this way will we be able to raise a generation of worthy pastors of the Church who will take over her helm in the twenty-first century.

I would also like to address the students of theological seminaries and academies. My dear brothers, if you were unlucky enough to enter a theological school whose curriculum does not satisfy you, do not lose heart. Draw up your own curriculum and study according to it. Only do not waste your time, do not squander the priceless days given to you by God for studying.

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<sup>7</sup> Gregory of Nazianzus, *Oration*, II:73.

If you are told that you are not worth sixpence and that no one has any use for your learning, do not believe such things. Each one of you is precious in God's eyes, and the present and future of the Church depend on each one of you. The Orthodox Church suffocates for lack of theologians who combine in themselves profound knowledge in various areas of theology with an absolute and selfless commitment to the Church.

If you are being talked into taking vows, while your heart's desire is to enter holy matrimony, do not pay heed to unwanted advice. Do as your conscience tells you to do.

Dear students, study the Holy Scriptures, read the writings of the Church Fathers, do not get weary of partaking of the 'fountain of knowledge' contained in the affluent tradition of the Orthodox Church. Study ancient and modern languages. Do not be afraid to draw knowledge from the treasury of secular learning. And, what is the most important, constantly stir up in yourselves the fire of faith which has led you to the Orthodox Church and a theological school. Do not let it die out even if everything around you is aimed at extinguishing it.

Translated from the Russian by Michael Nikolsky