

DISCERNING FROM EXPERIENCE

Orthodox Women in Theological Education

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As my husband and I entered the church hall after his ordination service, a man whom I did not know came up to me and blurted: "Please do not be offended by my question, but why would a woman go to seminary?" In introducing us to the parish as a newly ordained priest and his wife, the bishop had mentioned that I have a bachelor's degree in theology and education from Hellenic College, the undergraduate programme of Holy Cross Greek Orthodox School of Theology, and a master's degree in theology from St Vladimir's Seminary, but I had not expected my seminary experience to be the focus of events at a reception for my husband's ordination. Taken aback – and trembling with some strong dormant emotions – I managed to respond: "To learn everything I can about my faith and to share it in every way, so I can grow in Christ and live in the faith." I wished I had the courage to add, "Why wouldn't a woman go to seminary – and furthermore, doesn't every Orthodox Christian want to study theology?"

That unspoken response is rooted deeply in my heart and confirmed by my experience in the Orthodox church, which holds emphatically that "if you pray, you are a theologian, and if you are a theologian, you must pray". In contrast, this man's doubtless sincere question grew out of a simple equation – "seminary" equals "place where people study to be priests" – which does not correspond to the Orthodox Christian tradition though it obviously reflects many people's understanding of seminary.

Both men and women have been asking me this question ever since I first told people I wanted to study theology. Why would a woman study theology? You cannot become a priest – are you going to be a nun? During the course of my studies and afterwards, these questions conjured up many different emotions, but the most difficult part of responding to them is that I do not share the understanding of theological education on which they are based. My definition of seminary is far broader. For me, "seminary" equals "place for growing in the love and knowledge of God,

in faith, truth and maturity in Christ". Going to seminary was a way for me to respond to God's call to serve him.

To me it was crystal clear why I wanted to study theology: I was called to it, personally and universally. As a baptized member of the Body of Christ. I am a vital part of the church, a means of communion with God, a sign and manifestation of the kingdom of God. Therefore, I have a responsibility to fulfill my calling as disciple and apostle, which is to communicate the gospel and to strive towards the growth, sanctification and well-being of the body. And the church has been commanded to be in continual mission by proclaiming, announcing and teaching the gospel to the whole inhabited earth: "Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you" (Matt. 28:19-20). The church is made up of both men and women called to continue the saving acts of Jesus Christ for the salvation of humanity and the whole of creation. St Paul best articulates who and what the church is:

There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called to the one hope of your calling... But each of us was given grace, according to the measure of Christ's gift... The gifts he gave were that some would be apostles, some prophets, some evangelists, some pastors and teachers, to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ, until all of us come to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to maturity, to the measure of the full stature of Christ... Speaking the truth in love, we must grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ, from whom the whole body, joined and knit together by every ligament with which it is equipped.... promotes the body's growth in building itself up in love (Eph. 4:4-16).

St Paul goes on to say in I Corinthians 12 that the body has many parts and that each part is essential for the body's proper functioning. This belief was fervently practised in apostolic times. In the church of the first three centuries, clergy and laity constituted an organic whole within the ecclesiastical organization. Clergy and laity held an equal, responsible, active position in the church. We have the testimony of countless women who served as apostles, teachers and deaconesses during these times, witnessing to the theology of our church which teaches that as Christians and Body of Christ we are a royal priesthood, which is the foundation out of which the holy priesthood is called.

Let us not forget:

St Mary Magdalene – one of the Myrrh-Bearing Women, equal to the apostles, who was a faithful follower and servant of our Lord during his earthly ministry. She preached the gospel alongside St John the divine, theologian and evangelist.

Thecla – the disciple of Paul, holy martyr and equal to the apostles, who also preached the gospel and brought many people to the faith.

St Phoebe – prototype and first deaconess of the church, who is described by St Paul as “a benefactor of many and of myself as well” (Rom. 16:2).

St Nina the Enlightener of Georgia – who was a great missionary, travelling to Georgia, where she baptized the king, his family and many souls.

St Macrina – eldest sister of St Basil the Great and Gregory of Nyssa, who educated all of her siblings in the faith. Gregory himself named her “the teacher”.

St Olympia – the deaconess of Constantinople and companion of St John Chrysostom, who theologized with one of the greatest theologians.

St Melania the Roman – who travelled through many lands doing good works and converting many to Christianity.

Our holy mother Xenia the deaconess – who educated many women in the faith.

The lives and ministries of these women show clearly that, by virtue of their relationship with Jesus Christ and thus their communion with the life of the holy Trinity, they not only knew their theology and faith but, each being a ligament, doing her part, they supplied growth for the body, building itself up in love.

So why would a woman go to seminary? Why would a woman want to study theology? Asking these questions only underscores that we need women and men to go to seminary to learn and live out their faith in the uniqueness of their persons and gifts. Each woman called to seminary studies knows why she is there. Some may be able to articulate it more clearly: “With my seminary education I want to be a youth director, or a pastoral assistant, or an iconographer, or a writer, or a missionary, or a choir director, or a pastoral counsellor, or a professor or...” Others may not so easily find words to describe their calling to study theology, but their commitment to the arduous and challenging life at seminary speaks for itself.

The kinds of women who study theology vary widely. The universal message of the gospel draws women from the four corners of the earth. At both Hellenic College and St Vladimir’s Seminary I studied with women from all over the USA as well as from Canada, Greece, Turkey, Russia and Finland. They included:

- Women who have been active in their parishes since childhood, who are seeking to deepen their faith and understanding of the teachings of the Orthodox church, in order better and more fully to serve Christ.

- Converts who are striving to learn all they can about the faith so that they can better articulate and witness to it.
- Apostate women who left the church for varying lengths of time and returned convinced by the teachings of the Orthodox church, strengthened by their own “conversion” stories. They come back to the church with the fervour of one newly converted, whose only desire is to requite the love initiated by God, the lover par excellence.
- Wives of priests or seminarians, seeking to enrich their ministries.
- Daughters of priests, nieces of bishops, sisters of priests and bishops, nurses, geologists, mothers, historians, librarians, performing artists, linguists, musicians, iconographers, authors, teachers, single women, married women, nuns and theologians – to mention a few.

Pioneers, entrepreneurs and martyrs go to seminary. The experience of seminary for each woman is as unique as she is. Her response to her call will manifest itself in the person that she is in her given life conditions, where she is in relation to God, herself and her neighbours. And her work at seminary will also reflect these conditions.

However, the general ethos and *phronema* of seminary will be experienced in the same way by all women. And that experience can be summed up very succinctly: *the seminary is a place for men*. Women do not belong at seminary. This message, born out of our brokenness, is crystal clear and permeates every aspect of seminary life. Only rarely does seminary become a place for women. This happens when men turn towards the women and recognize, affirm, support and encourage them, acting out of grace and not brokenness, welcoming women as partners and vital members of the body instead of fearing and hating them.

My experience as an undergraduate was different from what it was in the master’s programme. When I was in the college, all but two of my closest companions were in the school of theology. These friends experienced the same things I did: women’s presence and involvement in the life of seminary was confusing. Similar to the puzzled man who asked me about seminary, most of the faculty and administration asked: “What do we do with women at seminary?”

Women were treated as second-class citizens who did not have a valid voice. They were not taken seriously for their desire to study theology, and could be patronized and even abused. Barred from certain classes, they were deprived of the full seminary experience. For example, it was thought that women should not attend the liturgics laboratory class because it does not apply to their work in the Body of Christ. However, that class contains theology that is not taught in other classes. It is essential for a proper theological education to be as well informed as possible about what we believe and practise.

At the time I attended Hellenic College, no women were permitted to take Byzantine chant classes. However, the dean of the school of theology encouraged me to come to the psalterion for the various services. "If you come," he said, "the others will feel they can too." Never mind that when I did chant some of my male classmates would leave not only the psalterion, but the chapel itself, insulted that they had to share it with a woman. Now these classes are open to seminarian wives and to others who wish to learn to chant.

Other classes could also be a cross to bear. Often a woman would be made to feel militant, feminist or invisible simply because she did her homework and contributed to class discussion. Her voice was not embraced as a vital part of the discussion, but was perceived as a threat to her male peers' masculinity and identity as seminarians. A woman has to fight to be heard, to be recognized, to be; then she has to put up with inane questions like "Why are you so defensive?" A woman's response to this broken reality can be manifold. If a woman is afforded the luxury of community with one or more classmates or faculty members, she can thrive. She will enjoy the many blessings that can come from being in the unique environment which seminary provides for the student of theology. She will succeed. If she does not have this *koinonia*, she may retreat, isolate herself, become paranoid and eventually turn on herself and others, fulfilling the prophecy that she does not belong at the seminary. Or she may internalize and repeat the abuse which daily attacks her.

There were few role models and no mentors for women at seminary. When we did have them, they were chased out. More often than not, the women studying theology were doing so without the spiritual blessing or financial support of their bishops. Nevertheless, many women who have been called to study theology at seminary endure. Though not seeing the light at the end of the tunnel, they keep their lamps lit and keep their focus on Christ, the light, who is our way, truth and life. Not knowing what the end result will be, what fruit it will bear, they simply answer the call to "follow me" and thereby fulfill the vocation of apostleship which comes to all who labour to announce the gospel – and among them were women.

As a student at Hellenic College I found the experience of the liturgy and the sacraments to be the unifying forces that heal, teach, transfigure our life. In the chapel, although the language used was not my native tongue, everything became clearer and illumined all relationships and work done on campus. Fortunately, my undergraduate experience did not crush my desire to study theology at the graduate level. At St Vladimir's Seminary, I enjoyed quite a different experience. Here, women were

treated as persons and vital members of the body of Christ. Professors answered their questions and encouraged the women to express themselves. Women were respected for being who they are. Women participated in all aspects of seminary life, contributing to the multi-faceted workload that was primarily student-run. Hearing the services in English, my native language, I was able to learn the theology of our church and understand it. Chanting is done by a choir which everyone is expected to join. Still, there are few women to serve as role models to the women and even fewer women on the faculty.

The seminary experience for women is definitely the way of the cross. Yet we do not shun that cross. Rather, we recognize the seminary as a place where women as well as men are able to work towards acquiring the mind of the fathers whose

main characteristic of theology was the living connection between their thinking and the Bible. Their whole theology was a living homiletic, dogmatic, pastoral or liturgical interpretation of scripture, which was for them a mystical encounter with the person of the Incarnate Logos, with Christ.¹

We struggle, in the words of Dumitru Staniloe, to "make theology what it is, penetrating beyond dogmatic definitions to the reality itself by our direct and living contact with Christ as a person and with the Holy Trinity as a communion of persons", so that we can maintain the true theology of our church which, as Alexander Schmemmann reminds us, "has always been pastoral, missionary and prophetic".

Seminary can and should be a place that assists the whole body in actualizing itself in the world. And like our fathers and mothers before us, we strive "to make theology an essential belief and a creative function in the lives of all, to make the *ekklesia* a genuine depository as well as an expression of love, sacrifice and an unselfish struggle for society" (A. Schmemmann).

NOTE

¹ Fr Dan-Ilie Ciobotea, "The Tasks of Orthodox Theology Today", *St Vladimir's Theological Quarterly*, Vol. 33, no. 2, 1989.