

**His Grace, Bishop JOSEPH's Remarks at the  
2010 Commencement of  
St. Tikhon's Orthodox Theological Seminary  
May 29, 2010  
South Canaan, Pennsylvania**

Your Beatitude, Metropolitan Jonah, Your Grace, Bishop Tikhon, Your Grace, Bishop Alejo, Your Grace, Bishop Michael, Your Grace, Metropolitan Eusebius, Abbot Sergius and the monastic brotherhood, Reverend Clergy, Faculty Members, Graduates, Students and your families and Friends:

Christ is in our midst!

I am very grateful for the invitation of your beloved dean, His Grace Bishop Michael to address the graduates of St. Tikhon's Seminary on the occasion of this year's commencement. Today, the Church recognizes that you have accomplished the task you had set out to complete many years ago, and through God's grace and your own efforts you have come to this moment. From this point on, you will each go forth to the ministry to which you are called.

You have been changed by your seminary experience. No one can say he came in the same way he left. You have learned things, but, more importantly, you have had experiences that have changed you. It is this difference between learning and growing that I would like to address in this speech. Or, rather, I would like to explain the indissoluble bonds between learning and growth, between thoughts and experiences, between the mind and the heart.

The holy Fathers of the Church have always advocated learning. St. Basil the Great encouraged Christians not to fear pagan literature, but rather to study it with care and to understand its philosophical implications. Yet, he never advocated that Christians become philosophers.

Let him speak for himself: "Into life eternal the Holy Scriptures lead us, which teach us through divine words. But so long as our immaturity forbids our understanding their deep thought, we exercise our spiritual perceptions upon profane writings, which are not altogether different, and in which we perceive the truth as it were in shadows and in mirrors. Thus we imitate those who

perform the exercises of military practice, for they acquire skill in gymnastics and in dancing, and then in battle reap the reward of their training. We must need to believe that the greatest of all battles lies before us, in preparation for which we must do and suffer all things to gain power. Consequently, we must be conversant with poets, with historians, with orators, indeed with all men who may further our soul's salvation. Just as dyers prepare the cloth before they apply the dye, be it purple or any other color, so indeed must we also, if we would preserve indelible the idea of the true virtue, become first initiated in the pagan lore, then at length give special heed to the sacred and divine teachings, even as we first accustom ourselves to the sun's reflection in the water, and then become able to turn our eyes upon the very sun itself.”<sup>[1]</sup>

Notice that St. Basil relegates secular learning to a state of immaturity. This is true. You came to seminary seeking intellectual and spiritual growth. This experience has promoted your growth, as far as you have taken advantage of it. The process of intellectual learning is the opening of the mind to the possibility of greater experience. In the case of the philosophers, their writings opened the fallen Hellenistic mind to the idea that something greater existed in the world beyond mere concerns about rainfall and sheep-tending.

St Basil teaches us that we can and should adopt a positive attitude toward worldly learning (what he called “profane learning”), since training of this kind prepares us for discretion in the higher learning which comes from God Himself, directly to the heart through faith and ascetical endeavor.<sup>[2]</sup> Learning through profane subjects must, however, be taken with careful discernment:

“But when [profane learning] portrays base conduct, you must flee from it and stop up your ears, as Odysseus is said to have fled past the song of the sirens, for familiarity with evil writings paves the way for evil deeds. Therefore the soul must be guarded with great care, lest through our love for letters it receive some contamination unawares, as men drink in poison with honey.”<sup>[3]</sup>

Some fail to heed discretion and become seriously infected with deleterious ideas. In the case of St. Basil, he makes a very critical argument: the knowledge derived from reading Greek literature builds up the ability to think, but it does not inform the Christian what to think about.

Tragically, some scholars suppose that Hellenistic philosophy has changed the very nature of our theology. They assert that Hellenism imposed its own

distinctive ideas into theology. Is our theology, which speaks of Eternal Truth, subject to alteration and development? The academic mind, one that speaks of God apart from God Himself, gives an affirmative answer to this question.

Heterodoxy enters the Church when men who do not know God try to speak of Him. It is this ever-critical experience of God that differentiates the heterodox notion of theology as a strictly academic affair from the Orthodox concept of learning as an all-encompassing way of life, where knowledge and experience speak of one another, for knowledge comes from experience and experience builds knowledge.

It can truly be said that, while the Hellenistic philosophers may have sought after divine truth, they did not apprehend it. Therefore, they bring trivial things to the discussion regarding God, the *Theos* in theology. The holy Fathers used their vocabulary, but hardly with the same meaning.

The mere fact that many heterodox theologians entertain the idea of discussing the Faith on solely an academic level to those without experience is a manifestation of this scholastic mode of thought of which I speak. This contamination of thought centers on the assertion of the primacy of reason. For St. Basil, the use of reason can be likened to an exercise of the mind, training the mind to think.

Reason is commendable, and that which is unreasonable is certainly suspect, but reason is at best an 'educated guess' of the truth. Faith is superior to reason when it is defined as experience. This notion, 'the Theologian is one who prays,' precisely constitutes the *modus operandi* of the Church.

Let me give you an example. A scientist uses reason to develop his hypothesis, but until he impartially tests his reason in the laboratory, all he has is conjecture. Reason is conjecture, not experience and certainly not reality. We as Orthodox submit only to reality. If reason appears to lead one in a certain direction, then we must ask, 'So, can you prove it is the reality?'

It must be stated that the holy Fathers of the Church purified the vocabulary and intellectual methodologies which they received. They were holy men; their thought and confession repaired the errors of philosophy and formed a new Christian intellectual culture, based upon their holiness of life and their experience of uncreated Grace, expressed in high language and art of the time.

For example, the holy Fathers encountered the pagan philosophers who taught the eternity of matter, the transmigration of souls—that is, the soul’s inherent and natural divinity—along with the denigration of the body as a mere “prison” for the soul, and the resultant assertion of the superficiality of personhood. If the soul is eternal, and personhood is superficial, then all ethics become situational and relative to the attendant circumstances of life. These pagan doctrines were abandoned and the language employed in furthering them was taken up by the holy Fathers and purified of their errors. As a result, the holy Fathers used the language and concepts available to them to teach the holy Tradition: the creation of all things from nothing, the creation of each soul with its own body as a human hypostasis with a shared human nature, and the investment of meaning in an eschaton—that is, that all history is headed for ultimate meaning in an End. The pagans were concerned with first principles about which they could never come to definitive understanding—St Gregory of Nyssa said, “(Greek philosophy was as if) always in labour but never giving birth.”<sup>[4]</sup> On the other hand, the holy Fathers pointed to the end of all things as consummated in the New Man, Jesus Christ.

For example, the Patriarch of Antioch, His Beatitude IGNATIUS IV, in his book, The Resurrection and Modern Man, says that we Christians “do not live from the past, but rather from the future.” This is unthinkable to the pagans, but the holy Fathers purified their empty vision by declaring Christ. History is no longer an empty cycle, devoid of purpose, but rather a pathway toward an ultimate Goal: the integration of all things in Christ.

An example which is frequently cited by rationalistic academics is the employment of what they thought was the Alexandrian philosophical term, λόγος, to express the Son of God. However, *logos* never meant only “reason” as it did in Plato’s dialogues; it is the Greek expression of a Semitic term, derived from revelation itself—the creative דבר יהוה *debar Adonai*, “the Word of the Lord.” The doctrine that *logos* is mere human reason erroneously secularizes and trivializes this profound truth. For example, St Paul tells the Romans to present themselves to God bodily “which is your λογικὴ λατρεία,<sup>5</sup>” something like, “your God-conformable worship.” Λογικῆ, the adjective from the noun, λόγος, is difficult to render in English without evoking the wrong connotation. It is not strictly speaking, “logical,” but more like “Logos-based” worship. It refers to the inner-most heart of the soul which conforms with the Logos of God, the *Imago Dei*, ἡ Εἰκὼν τοῦ Θεοῦ.<sup>6</sup>

Man is *logikos* precisely as image of God and competent to hold communion with the divine Logos, the Son of God, and God, by grace.

So, the modern project of “de-hellenizing Christianity” is the expected result from the Children of scholasticism. They created the monster of rationalistic theology and now they think the early Church had done what they did! We can learn yet more about this from another period in the life of the Holy Church when Scholasticism first made its powerful bid for reception into Orthodoxy, in the 14th century. But the Lord raised up a David who used the sling-shot of theology to slay that Goliath! We look to St Gregory (Palamas) the Wonderworker of Thessalonica who breathes with the same spirit as Basil.

“Do you see the swiftest way, full of profit and without danger, that leads to these supernatural and heavenly treasures? In the case of secular wisdom, you must first kill the serpent, in other words, overcome the pride that arises from this philosophy. How difficult that is! “The arrogance of philosophy has nothing in common with humility,” as the saying goes. Having overcome it, then, you must separate and cast away the head and tail, for these things are evil in the highest degree. By the ‘head,’ I mean manifestly wrong opinions concerning things intelligible and divine and primordial; and by the ‘tail,’ the fabulous stories concerning created things. As to what lies in between the head and tail, that is, discourses on nature, you must separate out useless ideas by means of the faculties of examination and inspection possessed by the soul, just as pharmacists purify the flesh of serpents with fire and water. Even if you do all this, and make good use of what has been properly set aside, how much trouble and circumspection will be required for the task!”<sup>[7]</sup>

So, does this mean St Gregory does not like secular learning? No. He poses the rhetorical question, “Is there then anything of use to us in this philosophy? Certainly!”<sup>[8]</sup> But the saint wishes to locate each kind of learning in its proper place, since confusion of the two led his scholastic opponents into grievous error: “It is thus with the ‘iconognosts,’ who pretend that man receives the image (*icon*) of God by knowledge (*gnosis*)—Palamas thus coins a new word to show this, iconognost, “one who makes an ikon of knowledge”—and that this knowledge conforms the soul to God. For, as was said to Cain, ‘If you make your offering correctly, without dividing correctly...’ But to divide well is the

property of very few men. Those alone ‘divide well’ the senses of whose souls are trained to distinguish good and evil.”<sup>[9]</sup> So, proper discernment is necessary in theology and in proclamation. Although St. Gregory is intelligent, mere rationalism does not suffice to make a discernment. St. Gregory’s holiness of life provided him with the charism of discernment to see the dangers in Barlaamism (i.e., Scholasticism) and to fend off its poison.

The purported academic project of “ridding Christianity from admixtures” is flawed from the beginning. The 18th century German philosopher, Immanuel Kant, expressed the *terminus* of that program: the mind and heart become irreparably separated from each other. He asserted, in the end, that faith and knowledge have nothing to do with each other. Faith becomes purely subjective, a matter of private, individualistic experience. There is a loss of incarnational life here when thought or rationalism becomes divorced from ethics. The German academic theologian, F.D.E. Schleiermacher, the “father of modern Protestantism,” published The Christian Faith in 1830, followed Kant in this. For the first time he relegated all dogmatics to an appendix. This radical separation of the *nous* from the rational mind became apparent. From then on, in the Protestant world, Christianity became more a matter of emotionalism and subjective experience rather than a full integration of the whole person into the life of the Church. Of course, as a result, now “dogmatics” is a negative word to many! The correct view must be retrieved, within the life of our Orthodoxy.

By the end of the 19th century, Adolph Harnack expressed the “old liberal” view that Jesus and his message are at best a very exalted morality and nothing more. The New Testament scholar contemporaneous with Harnack, the brilliant and multi-talented Albert Schweizer, saw the vanity of 19th century rationalistic theology and exposed it.<sup>[10]</sup> But he himself failed to see the way forward and concluded that all Christianity had lost its way.

Is it any surprise, then, that in the 20th century, the children of this heritage in the West have been quitting their churches for decades? The ecclesiastical monuments of Europe lack vital worshipping communities. Most of the great cathedrals are in many places only museums; some have become night-clubs, or even circus training grounds<sup>[11]</sup> (e.g., the Cirque du Soleil). In contrast, holy Orthodoxy has never known a period of Scholasticism or its reaction, a Reformation or Protestantism. Our program, if it can be called a “program,” is the Life of Christ, as expressed in our patristic ethos—for example, I

mentioned St. Basil and St. Gregory Palamas above in the same way—saints who lived 1000 years apart! Gregory helps us especially because he clearly indicates the opposite approach from Harnack's; namely, the re-integration of the human person by the descent of the mind into the heart. The hesychastic way, the way of prayer, humility, the right ordering of the various faculties of the soul forms the Orthodox program of salvation. All learning becomes preparation for the transfiguration of the person and through such transfiguration, of communities and the world.

In the end, all cultures are transitory and ephemeral. The Church lives and experiences Holy Tradition, the Life of Christ energized by the Holy Spirit. We express this life in all generations using language and concepts suitable for the purpose. The era of *Romaiosisyne*—the Christian Roman symphonia was especially fertile and later continued in Holy Russia and the Slavonic world. But Orthodoxy does not romanticize about past cultures and languages. The Faith is not politics or a philosophy. We always proclaim the Gospel in the new language and culture of our time. You who are graduating must express the faith in ways which engage our contemporaries, many of whom have lost a Christian way of thinking or have rejected it, based on false premises. This is your task! But you cannot do this without acquiring a deep spiritual experience, you cannot speak theology without living theology. This is the pattern for all the saints from the beginning to the end.

Just as the early martyrs and apologists sacked the intellectual and cultural elements of the old, moribund Graeco-Roman culture and created a new Christian synthesis, an illumined Christian culture, so we too face the same project. As Orthodox Christians bearing the grace of the Holy Spirit, we can take the building blocks around us and fashion an Orthodox Christian contemporary culture. Remember, the ancients took the marble columns and capitals from the decaying pagan temples to build the great cathedrals! So we can do the same. As our secularized and increasingly confused modern culture descends ever deeper into ethical indifference and outright godlessness, we can exercise much discernment and utilize its constructive elements in the fashioning of our Orthodox Christian proclamation and godly way of life. We must incarnate the Faith into the language and ethos of our contemporaries through our own holy practice. We must study to speak effectively from such a holy life; but we must heed Palamas as we do so, lest we become “captive to vain philosophy.” We must be conversant in the issues at stake today.

However, we must remember to lead our hearers and followers away from these “mirrors and shadows” into the Substance itself, our Faith.

So, as you proceed into whatever ministry God is leading you, God helping you, your program is not merely to add yet more knowledge as something added-on, a kind of a never-ending reading and study list; rather, it is to ascend to the higher knowledge using the rungs provided to you already, that higher knowledge is noetic, not rational. What are these rungs by which we must ascend to the “knowledge of the new Man, Jesus Christ”? Are they not the same as those which the saints of all eras ascended: prayer, vigil and participation in the life-giving mysteries of the Church, holy fasting, works of mercy, and ceaseless watchfulness? This noetic knowledge comes through spiritual combat – against the vices, the passions and the inimical armies of logismoi “distracting thoughts”.

What am I saying to all of you? You have learned things about the priesthood, but you still need to live as priests. Be humble and learn from the experience of your Bishop and the senior clergy. Avoid men whose fruits are impure or who are given over to much thinking and radical opinions. Find those who are humble and diligent in their ministries and emulate them. Do not be men of opinion, but men of spiritual experience.

This will take time. Do not be in a rush. Do not be ashamed of your undeveloped experience, because that is what you are and it is natural to your spiritual growth. Do not be satisfied in merely talking about God, but rather in making the spiritual effort to know Him.

May God continue to bless you all.



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- [1] St Basil the Great, *To Young Men on the Right Use of Greek Literature*, 2.
- [2] Cf the Prophet Jeremiah, “*Each shall not teach his neighbor and each his brother, saying, ‘Know the Lord,’ for all shall know Me, from the least of them to the greatest of them*” Jer 38:34 LXX [= 31:34 KJV]
- [3] Basil, *op. cit.*, 4.
- [4] *Life of Moses*, II. 40.
- [5] Romans 12:1
- [6] See Colossians 1:15
- [7] St Gregory Palamas, *First Triad*, i.21
- [8] *Op. cit.*, *First Triad*, i.20
- [9] The quotes from this paragraph also come from the same passage as cited in the last footnote.
- [10] His expose (“*The Quest for the Historical Jesus*”) of the fruitless endeavor to find the “*historical Jesus*” showed up the intellectual vanity of 19<sup>th</sup> century New Testament scholarship in Europe. He caused all to see that their attempts were merely the imposition of their 19<sup>th</sup> century culture on the New Testament. But, unfortunately, Schweizer failed to see past the eschatological message of the New Testament into the Church as the apostolic fulfillment of the Lord’s “*Gospel of the kingdom*.” Schweizer was prisoner to a mere historical reading of the New Testament—a true Protestant, he failed to grasp the sacramental ethos of the Gospel.
- [11] E.g., the *Cirque du Soleil* had, at one time, if not currently, a defunct Roman church for this purpose.