

TEO, ISSN 2247-4382
82 (1), pp. 12-23, 2020

The Pastoral Care and Education of the Theological Seminarians and Students and its Constructive Role

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Abstract

The process of educating or pastoring young people in theological schools is very important because it concerns the formation of vocations for the priestly ministry. The priests, in turn, are trainers and responsible to the souls of those entrusted to them to shepherd on the path to eternal life, as we can see in Jesus Christ's teaching. Therefore, the teachers should consider the body and soul of the person to be educated, the dignity and the call of each one to eternal existence.

The methodological elements in the formation of young people for the life of the Church are diverse and necessary in their application during the years of studies. Holy Scripture and Holy Tradition are the sources of inspiration in the theological educational act, then the lay disciplines are added with their contribution and importance.

Keywords

theology, pastoral care, education, seminarians, students, professors

I. Introduction

In the “Anniversary Year of Pastoral Care of Parents and Children 2020” in the Romanian Patriarchate, we think of an approach regarding the pastoral care or education of young seminarians and students from theological schools in an institutional setting and in a historical context with many social and missionary problems.

Pastoral care or education: we could think and approach the topic of the present study in synonymous terms, because the work of the teacher (sometimes of the priest) in theological schools is also a kind of pastoral care.

The pastoral care of the teachers in the school is a methodological-pedagogical one in the spirit of faith in God. This is interwoven with the priest’s pastoral care in the Church and I believe there is interference between them.

I think “the source of wisdom is God’s word” (Sirach 1, 5) for all, both in Church and in school (Theological Seminary or Faculty of Theology).

We all seek to be educated, but not all seek and find the appropriate means of Christian education based on the teaching of the Holy Gospel. Perhaps the context in which we live does not help us in obtaining a proper civic and Christian education. The development of communication and information technologies are, however, means by which we can connect and access information, studies, books, which can contribute to the education and training of the human person, and of the missionary Christian through reading and discernment.

The Orthodox Church has the means necessary to man for his formation in the world and also for the acquisition of eternal life and she makes them available to all: Holy Scripture, Holy Tradition, places of worship, online and print publications, television and radio.

Education is an act of assimilating all that is good from the environment. In this sense, the words of St. Apostle Paul to Timothy are useful to students, but also to every human being in general: “Take heed to yourself and to your teaching; hold to that, for by so doing you will save both yourself and your hearers” (I Tim. 4, 16).

II. Pastoral care of young seminarians and students in the light of Christian pedagogy

It is known that “education is a necessary and obligatory step in forming the personality of the young man, but prayer is a means of relationship and dialogue between people who love and respect each other”¹.

The exhortation and commandment of the Saviour Jesus Christ addressed to His disciples is valid also for priests and teachers in the theological schools: “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...” (Matt. 28, 19). Learning and transmitting the word of God is a duty of those who have assumed the role of trainers in Christian education.

There are three important considerations in the pastoral care of seminarians and students:

1. Respecting the *dignity of man*, as one who bears the image of God;
2. No one should forget the *eternal purpose* of the human being, in the act of pastoral care;
3. The *free will* should be respected².

For a complete education, both man’s body³ and soul⁴ are considered, because both sides of the human being are God’s creation.

The concern for the education of the body refers to its modelling and discipline through cleanliness, fasting, endeavour, purification of the senses, gestures, not forgetting that “your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit within you” (I Cor. 6, 19).

In the context of receiving the Mystery of Baptism, but also of the Christian pastoral care, St. Paul has an appropriate urge: “put on the new nature, created after the likeness of God in true righteousness and holiness” (Eph. 4, 24).

Also, emphasis is placed on caring for the souls of seminarians and students, knowing that they are sensitive, vulnerable to life problems and their personality is in formation. Both the teacher and the student relate to

¹ *Sfinții Părinți despre educație*, selecție texte și comentarii de preot prof. dr. Constantin Pătuleanu, Editura Cuvântul Vieții, București, 2015, p. 23.

² Preot Profesor Ioan G. COMAN, *Frumusețile iubirii de oameni în spiritualitatea patristică*, Editura Mitropoliei Banatului, Timișoara, 1988, p. 39.

³ Ioan G. COMAN, *Frumusețile iubirii de oameni în spiritualitatea patristică*, pp. 41-44.

⁴ Ioan G. COMAN, *Frumusețile iubirii de oameni în spiritualitatea patristică*, pp. 45-51.

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the importance of the soul (intelligence, feelings and will), and to its value: “For what does it profit a man, to gain the whole world and forfeit his life? For what can a man give in return for his life?” (Mark 8, 36-37).

Referring to the body and soul of the human person, the theology teacher is concerned with sharing knowledge, but also with educating the will, the reason, the senses, the way to think beautiful, constructive, altruistic and useful for oneself, family and society.

Solomon the Wise transmitted many useful teachings to everyone, which once read, must be put into practice: “Wisdom is radiant and unfading, and she is easily discerned by those who love her, and is found by those who seek her” (Wisdom 6, 12).

“In a world where the need for spiritual guidance has become pressing, the Holy Fathers provide the necessary criteria and the balance of authentic spiritual discernment and prove to have a surprising topicality. Their writings, theology, and life represent a practical guide to a forgotten art, but essential and useful to any Christian who desires to achieve and fulfil the authentic spirituality”⁵.

As we understand from the Holy Fathers of the Church, teachers need more norms or methodological elements to be put into practice in the process of pastoral care - education:

1. **Optimism**⁶ or **Christian hope**. Often the students are indifferent, they resist the reception of new knowledge or they show bad will in the process of acquiring knowledge. Then, teachers need to inspire students with optimism about learning the discipline they teach, confidence and hope that they learn for life, and for the formation of a capable and responsible personality. The three theological virtues, faith, hope and love should be cultivated in the lives of students having trust in the truth transmitted, and hope that they will be of real use for the Christian life. But also, for eternal life in the light of God’s love for people, and for the love cultivated in school, family and Church.

⁵ Irénée HAUSHERR, *Paternitatea și îndrumarea duhovnicească în răsăritul creștin*, trad. Mihai Vladimirescu, Editura Deisis, Sibiu, 1999, p. 55.

⁶ Irénée HAUSHERR, *Paternitatea și îndrumarea duhovnicească în răsăritul creștin*, p. 55.

2. Education has a **very broad horizon**⁷: the teaching transmitted to the student helps him to know himself, to know God and the world in the perspective of eternal life. We can say that everything can start from the maxim of Socrates: “Know yourself”, which is very important in the educational process and in knowing the universe, since the human is considered a “*microcosm*”.

Paul Evdokimov said so eloquently that for humans, and for young people in general, “a reading, a meeting, a thought makes a sudden and great light emerge”⁸.

Moreover, Holy Scripture offers man the perspective of life meaning in a dimension of eternity: “And this is eternal life, that they know thee the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom thou hast sent” (John 17, 3).

In *the Sermon on the Mount*, the Saviour Jesus Christ told His disciples and crowds: “Ask, and it will be given you; seek, and you will find; knock, and it will be opened to you. For every one who asks receives, and he who seeks finds, and to him who knocks it will be opened” (Matt. 7, 7-8).

3. **Discipline**⁹ is necessary in an efficient and all-encompassing realization of education, because it ennobles, energizes and streamlines the pastoral care of young people.

Seminarians and students are urged to be disciplined in the family, school, Church and society, seeking the light of Christian perfection. Both during and outside the teaching program, students should maintain appropriate behaviour in relation to colleagues, teachers and people from the society. We notice that theological seminarians and students are often regarded as future priests, and society demands them to behave as models of Christian ethics and morals. Their deeds may serve the Church or undermine the image of the divine-human institution, which is increasingly attacked and disrespected by some.

Over the past thirty years, obedience to hierarchy, respect for superiors and discipline in institutions have been constantly violated and have degenerated for various reasons. This abnormal state started from the family and was continued in the society in a climate of so-called social-economic

⁷ Irénée HAUSHERR, *Paternitatea și îndrumarea duhovnicească în răsăritul creștin*, p. 88.

⁸ Paul EVDOCHIMOV, *Vârstele vieții spirituale*, Editura Humanitas, trad. pr. prof. Ion Buga și Anca Manolescu București, 2006, p. 69.

⁹ Ioan G. COMAN, *Frumusețile iubirii de oameni în spiritualitatea patristică*, p. 88.

development, in a complex process of globalization and egalitarianism in rights.

What to do?

“Therefore, we all, the adults of this society, behaving honestly and civilized, worthy and appropriate, are responsible for forming a macro-social framework based on respect for the hierarchy, where we can cultivate the personality of our children. And conversely, if every parent raises their children in the spirit of respect for others and for themselves, the whole society will benefit”¹⁰.

4. **Discernment**¹¹ is recommended for young people to choose between good and bad. It is harder for young people to always distinguish good things from bad ones, having no life experience, to know what is God’s will and what is the devil’s will. The enemy presents himself as truth, happiness, easy life and in these situations young people must act with discernment to distinguish the truth from the lie, the virtue of sin, the good of evil: “And you will know the truth, and the truth will make you free” (John 8, 32). It is the period when students must learn to take responsibility for their thinking, expression and deeds.

Wisdom is needed for a helpful discernment in knowledge: “If any of you lacks wisdom, let him ask God, who gives to all men generously and without reproaching, and it will be given him. But let him ask in faith, with no doubting...” (James 1, 5-6).

5. During the years of study, the teachers **emphasize the beauty**¹², that is the beauty of children and young people’s soul, so that in their turn they may flourish by cultivating divine beauty. At the same time with the cultivation of the soul beauty, the cultivation of the arts is promoted by stimulating the gifts and talents of young people who have inclinations towards music, painting, literature, vocation for priesthood, monasticism etc. It is very important for teachers to discover the vocations of their seminarians and students in order to advise them and to focus on what they

¹⁰ Psih. dr. Irina PETREA, “Respectul - urzeala vietii sociale”, in: *Familia Ortodoxă*, martie 2020 (314), nr. 3, p. 19.

¹¹ Ioan G. COMAN, *Frumusețile iubirii de oameni în spiritualitatea patristică*, p. 89.

¹² Ioan G. COMAN, *Frumusețile iubirii de oameni în spiritualitatea patristică*, p. 89.

can do better as a profession or ministry. In this endeavour, sincerity, hard work, love and dedication are needed, having this apostolic vision: “you are God’s field, God’s building” (I Cor. 3, 9). Young people should enrich their souls with various beautiful and useful teachings: “we must talk to poets, writers, orators and all people, whom we could have some use from, for cultivating our soul”¹³.

6. “All education must be done **intuitively**”¹⁴. With teachers’ help, it is necessary a correct and responsible education of the seminarian and student’s senses, so then by intelligence and knowledge, they have a realistic conception about God, man and the world. One can reach a spiritual view beyond appearances, following the model of the Saviour Jesus Christ from the conversation with Nathanael (John 1, 43-51), Who discovers unseen things and mysterious soul states.

From the textbooks for seminars and faculties, young people learn that the knowledge of God’s existence and of His creation is revealed to man through the natural and supernatural Revelation: “The heavens are telling the glory of God and the firmament proclaims his handiwork” (Psalms 18, 1).

St. Gregory of Nyssa said: “The eye should look at, and the mind should judge”, that is to go beyond appearances, to understand what one sees, but also the content.

7. **The role of reason**¹⁵ is very important from the perspective of the teacher and of the student because the educator has to transmit the knowledge completely and without unnecessary things. And the student has the duty that everything he receives as a teaching, knowledge and faith should be pass through the filter of reason to establish his beliefs and principles of life. Among the advice given to young people, Saint Basil the Great said:

“You should not give all these men (teachers and wise men) the helm of your mind, as you would give the helm of a ship, nor follow them wherever they would take you, but receive from

¹³ Sfântul VASILE CEL MARE, „Omilia a XXII-a către tineri”, in: *Scrieri I*, coll. *Părinți și Scriitori Bisericești* 17, trad., introd., indici și note de Pr. Dumitru Fecioru, București, Editura Institutului Biblic și de Misiune al Bisericii Ortodoxe Române, 1986, p. 568

¹⁴ Ioan G. COMAN, *Frumusețile iubirii de oameni în spiritualitatea patristică*.

¹⁵ Ioan G. COMAN, *Frumusețile iubirii de oameni în spiritualitatea patristică*, p. 90.

them as much as it is useful to you and know what you need to put aside”¹⁶.

It is said that “reason is the image of God in man”, as the philosopher Immanuel Kant wondered when he said: “*Two things awe me most: the starry sky above me and the moral law within me*”.

St. Isaac the Syrian says: “He who senses his sins is greater than he who raises the dead with his prayer” (*Ascetical Homilies*), learning that first it is needed one’s own knowledge and then of others.

In the same spirit, St. Paul said: “And it is my prayer that your love may abound more and more, with knowledge and all discernment” (Phil. 1, 9).

With his life experience and being involved in the formation of young Christians, St. Basil the Great said: “Before anything and at any price, reason must be mastered with the permanent oversight of thought, so that it does not allow the soul to easily tilt to contrary actions of the body due to irrational desires”¹⁷.

8. In the educational process, students and seminarians must **harmonize their faith with science**¹⁸, following the example of the Holy Fathers (St. Basil the Great, St. Gregory of Nyssa, St. Gregory of Nazianzus, etc.), who emphasized the teaching of the Church together with scientific truths using them to support the connection between man and God, between Creator and creation. In the school, young people study not only the teaching of the Gospel, but also the secular sciences, and then they must harmonize them without excluding the truth. Even if it seems “expired”, nevertheless “the harmony between faith and reason, postulated by the Holy Fathers, remains a wish of modern times”¹⁹.

In the process of knowledge and education, through an objective analysis, students learn to combat what is untrue in the field of science and literature, and harm the teachings of the Holy Scriptures: “If we are wise,

¹⁶ Sfântul VASILE CEL MARE, „Omilia a XXII-a către tineri”, p. 567.

¹⁷ Sfântul VASILE CEL MARE, „Constituțiile ascetice. II: Despre supravegherea gândurilor și că trupul nu este rău cum au socotit unii”, I, in: *Scrieri II*, coll. *Părinți și Scriitori Bisericești* 18, trad., introd., indici și note de Prof. Iorgu D. Ivan, București, Editura Institutului Biblic și de Misiune al Bisericii Ortodoxe Române, 1989, p. 478.

¹⁸ Ioan G. COMAN, *Frumusețile iubirii de oameni în spiritualitatea patristică*, p. 90.

¹⁹ *Sfinții Părinți despre educație*, p. 31

we take from the books what suits us and is related to the truth, and we leave the rest”²⁰.

9. Help young seminarians and students to **generalize and particularize**²¹ the knowledge and information received, to make this transition in a process that helps them to form the notions and ideas, as well as to sharpen the power to judge things. We generalize Christian virtues, but we personalize when we take into account the historical, social and educational context. A text of St. John the Evangelist is eloquent in this approach: “*For there are three that bear record in heaven, the Father, the Word, and the Holy Ghost: and these three are one. And there are three that bear witness in earth, the Spirit, and the water, and the blood: and these three agree in one.*” (I John 5, 7-8)

10. Another important element in the act of educating young people is the **example**²². The power of the example is overwhelming, because all people need models in life, and the teacher can use examples from the Holy Scripture, the Holy Tradition, the Lives of the Saints, literary works, history and so on. The supreme model for any Christian is the Saviour Jesus Christ.

The teachers from theological schools must be role models for their seminarians and students, along with their parents and priests in the parish. First, teachers must adhere to the Church, tradition, laws, hierarchy, rules, and then, by the power of example, they should be able to become role models for the disciples: “Let your light so shine before men, that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father who is in heaven” (Matt. 5, 16).

11. In school, it is absolutely necessary to proceed with a **progressive and complete understanding** and transmission²³ of study disciplines, as the study periods are grouped into 4 years (bachelor’s degree), 2 years (master’s degree studies), 3 years (doctoral studies), which shows that the assimilation of knowledge is achieved over time.

Let us state in this sense that the supernatural revelation has been progressively made, so that man can understand and assimilate.

²⁰ Sfântul Vasile cel Mare, „Omilia a XXII-a către tineri”, p. 570.

²¹ Ioan G. COMAN, *Frumusețile iubirii de oameni în spiritualitatea patristică*, p. 91.

²² Ioan G. COMAN, *Frumusețile iubirii de oameni în spiritualitatea patristică*, p. 91.

²³ Ioan G. COMAN, *Frumusețile iubirii de oameni în spiritualitatea patristică*, p. 91.

“The presence of the Church in the public space through the clergy can be a way of Christian-religious education that derives from the event, from the word of teaching and from the behaviour of the clergy. The presence of the priest at various manifestations in the parish and school can inspire parishioners and students in their behaviour. Openness to people and dialogue with them can create opportunities in providing advices and teachings for a better knowledge of the Church, of God, man, and the world, and for an understanding of the perennial values of life”²⁴.

12. In education, young people are urged to go from **the known to the unknown**²⁵, and the known should stand at the foundation of the unknown. In the work of the Church, we use knowledge based on faith: “Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen” (Heb. 11, 1), because “God desires all men to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth” (I Tim. 2, 4).

Through the theological disciplines, seminarians and students have the opportunity to make the transition from ignorance to the knowledge of God the unknown in Being, unfathomable and boundless, but known and accessible in his work by grace through uncreated energies. According to the Gospel teaching and the writings of the Holy Fathers, we can speak of a knowledge of God through love and faith: “And this is eternal life, that they know thee the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom thou hast sent...” (John 17, 3).

We all receive this useful urge: “You search the scriptures, because you think that in them you have eternal life” (John 5, 39), but young people must also remember the words of Saint Basil the Great, who says:

“But because of your age, it is not possible to understand the depth of the Holy Scriptures words, for now we must first exercise the eye of the soul with other teachings, as in the shadow and in the mirror, that are not completely different from ours, imitating soldiers who carry out combat exercises on the training ground...”²⁶.

²⁴ †Emilian LOVIȘTEANUL, Episcop Vicar al Arhiepiscopiei Râmnicului, *Înfăptuirea misiunii bisericești în parohie și mănăstire*, Editura Mitropolia Olteniei, Craiova, 2015, p. 115.

²⁵ Ioan G. COMAN, *Frumusețile iubirii de oameni în spiritualitatea patristică*, p. 91.

²⁶ Sfântul VASILE CEL MARE, „Omilia a XXII-a către tineri”, p. 567.

13. Seminarians and students are urged to apply the **principle of unity between accumulated knowledge and Christian virtues**²⁷, that is they must go from accumulating knowledge to putting them into practice. If they have learned about prayer, fasting, humility, Christian love, then it is only natural for them to apply these teachings and cultivate Christian virtues. Because St. Apostle James says: “faith by itself, if it has no works, is dead” (James 2, 17).

14. Another important element in education - pastoral care is the **respect and cultivation of natural inclinations**²⁸ of the seminarian or student, that is, the work of cultivating the gifts received from God. Some of them have certain aptitudes for music, painting, priestly ministry, Christian pedagogy, etc. Under these circumstances, teachers can support the formation of the young person's personality by cultivating that vocation. Recommendations for special readings, pedagogical guidance, psychological and material support are means by which teachers can support seminarians and students in cultivating their own vocation.

III. Conclusions

Student pastoral care, and Christian education pursue the harmonious development of the body and soul powers in order to have a normal, and correct life on earth, with the purpose of perfection for the salvation or acquisition of eternal life.

Of course, the perfect model in education is the Teacher of the world, our Saviour Jesus Christ, whose divine-human capacity of wisdom, kindness, love, sacrifice and healing inspires and assists all human factors involved in the act of pastoral care - education, either in Church, family, school and society.

We learn from Christ how to behave in the Christian life, but also how to model the human person in preparation for the responsibility of the earthly life and the acquisition of the heavenly one: “As the Good Shepherd lays his soul for His sheep, so the teacher should carefully follow the evolution of his disciples, leading them to perfection by acquiring the

²⁷ Ioan G. COMAN, *Frumusețile iubirii de oameni în spiritualitatea patristică*, p. 92.

²⁸ Ioan G. COMAN, *Frumusețile iubirii de oameni în spiritualitatea patristică*, p. 93.

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most useful knowledge and the virtues”²⁹. Our Lord Jesus Christ tells us: “Learn from me; for I am gentle and lowly in heart” (Matt. 11, 29).

During the study stages, the teacher-student relationship based on trust, politeness, common sense and respect should be monitorized, as St. Paul points out: “It is beyond dispute that the inferior is blessed by the superior” (Heb. 7, 7).

We observe from history that “the Church has always been concerned with the education of children and young people, since education is the highest form in the work of modelling and training the human character and personality”³⁰.

In the history of the Romanian people, we had and we have a lot of Christian shepherds and educators who formed generations of good Romanians and children of the Church, or who have contributed through their writings to the educational act: “Wisdom is radiant and unfading, and she is easily discerned by those who love her, and is found by those who seek her” (Wisdom 6, 12).

It is true that in pastoral or educational activity it is not easy to educate a person, a class, a community or a nation! We need trained people, practical means, methodology and a lot of sacrifice, and the teachers have to consider the challenges of today’s society and the answers that the young people expect from their trainers. All the more so with regard to religious and theological education, where the teacher works with ideas, principles, dogmas and teachings that do not always belong to the tangible, concrete world, even if we talk about a Church tradition.

²⁹ *Sfinții Părinți despre educație*, p. 40.

³⁰ *Sfinții Părinți despre educație*, p. 88.