

THE THREE LEVELS OF CHRISTIAN EDUCATION

By Metropolitan Ephraim

Recently, someone asked me to write a Catechism of the Orthodox Church. However, I am reluctant to undertake such a project, because, number one, I find catechisms very boring, and, number two, I wouldn't know where to begin.

The best method of catechizing new Christians, I think, is the method explained to Father Panteleimon, the founder of Holy Transfiguration Monastery in Brookline, MA, by his Elder, Father Joseph the Cave-dweller, of the Holy Mountain, Athos.

Many people in our Church have heard about the Elder Joseph's "method." But it might be a good idea to explain it in writing too, because, if it is written, people will find it easier to remember. Actually, the idea did not originate with the Elder Joseph. Very simply, it is the way the Church has taught its people [and clergy]* since the very beginning.

Essentially, it is this:

The First Level of Christian Education is the Lives of the Saints [this includes the Old Testament saints]. From the Lives of the Saints you will learn about Christian morality, Christian doctrine, Church History, Christian apologetics, etc. In many ways, the Lives of the Saints are a continuation of the Book of the Acts of the Apostles, and they are written in the same narrative style as the Acts of the Apostles. For example, if you read the Life of Saint Athanasius the Great, you will learn about the whole Arian controversy and what the Arians said against the Orthodox, and how the Orthodox responded to the Arians. You will learn what Church councils took place; you will learn about the exiles the Saint suffered. To be brief, you have learned all sorts of information just by reading this one Life of St. Athanasius the Great.

In the old days, before electricity, or radio, or television, families would gather in their parlors, and the member of the family who could read would sit near the lamplight or candlelight and read the Lives of the day for the rest of the family, year after year. So, by the time you were twenty or twenty-five, you had heard each Life several times, and you pretty well knew them all almost by heart. Therefore, if, in the morning on the next day, a Turk, or an unbeliever, or a Protestant missionary, or a Jewish rabbi, or a Jesuit, or a zealous Communist confronted you and said something against your Orthodox Christian faith, you would know how to respond to him in an appropriate manner. Why? Because you had read or heard the Lives of the Saints all those years, and knew what to say. You would not be intimidated or at a loss for words. You had graduated from the Elementary (or Primary) School of Christian Education.

The Second Level of Christian Education is, so to speak, the High School for Christians. Now we begin studying the Holy Scriptures, *together with the interpretations of the Holy Fathers*.

Someone will object: "What? Are you telling me, Your Eminence, that we don't *begin* with the Holy Scriptures?"

Yes, we are *not* beginning with the Holy Scriptures. Why? Because the Gospels [especially the Gospel of Saint John] are more difficult to understand, and on a higher level, than the Lives of the Saints. So the Holy Scriptures come later in our educational system. First, we start with the simpler things, like the Lives of the Saints — which, of course, are permeated with the Gospel of

*Seminaries are a Roman Catholic invention of the 17th Century.

Christ and its words — and then we progress to the more complicated and more advanced things, like the teachings of our Saviour. Of course, in our Saviour's teachings there are many parables and miracles that are appropriate for the First Level also. But, generally speaking, since we Orthodox Christians do not believe in the private interpretation of the Scriptures, we need the interpretations of the Holy Fathers for the Scriptures, so that we will understand the Scriptures *correctly* — especially when it comes to understanding loftier things like our Saviour's redemptive work, or His relationship with God the Father and the Holy Spirit.

At this point, it is important to add that our attendance at the holy services — especially Vespers and Matins — is very important. All the prayers and hymns are filled with instruction and examples from the Holy Scriptures and the Lives of the Saints celebrated every day. They are suitable both for beginners and for the more advanced [as the previous article, "We Celebrate Pentecost" pointed out].

The Third Level of Christian Education. If the Lives of the Saints were the elementary school, and the Holy Scriptures [with the commentaries of the Holy Fathers] were the high school, then this next level is the university. This is for the spiritually advanced. Here, we are talking about the *Ladder of Divine Ascent*, the *Philokalia*, the *Homilies of Saint Isaac of Syria*, etc.

Of course, everybody wants to be the "champ"; everybody wants to be the beauty queen. Everybody wants to go right to the top, right away. We all have seen those bumper stickers: "O God, give me patience — right now!"

However, it doesn't work that way for most of us.

Most of us have to begin at the bottom and slowly work our way up.

So, the Third Level of Christian Education — the university level — is not for everyone, and most especially *not* for the new converts to the Orthodox Christian faith. First, we have to learn the basics — how to count to ten, etc. Then comes the addition, the subtraction and long division; then the algebra and geometry, and finally the physics.

Every school system depends on good teachers. In the Orthodox Church, we have excellent elementary school teachers: our grandmothers. (In the higher levels, our priests and spiritual fathers take over.) So if, perchance, you do not have an Orthodox grandmother in your church, kidnap one from the neighboring parish.

If you add the church services and hymnology to these Three Levels of Christian Education, then, humanly speaking, you have a complete theological course of studies. Beyond this, all you need to become a Church Father is divine illumination.

But if you are looking for a good catechism, the "Method" outlined by the Elder Joseph the Cave-dweller will suffice.

After I described the Three Levels of Christian Education to one group, somebody asked me if the Orthodox Church had anything for pre-schoolers. The answer is: Yes! If you are unable to read the Lives of the Saints in full on a daily basis, then you can go to *The Great Horologion* (published by Holy Transfiguration in Brookline, Massachusetts). There you will find short Lives of the major saints of the day. You will also find short narrations describing the Major Feasts, and also the feasts of the Triodion and Pentecostarion seasons.

Now you have your Catechism, and no more excuses.