

“Philosophy, again, is a love of wisdom. But true wisdom is God. Therefore, the love of God, this is the true philosophy.”

Saint John of Damascus, *The Fount of Knowledge*

In last week’s talk, we observed that there is a strong temptation to completely immerse ourselves in material things. Yet, as Christians, we are called to be in the world, but not of the world. It is necessary, therefore, to be spiritually vigilant.

We also have to be intellectually vigilant. Again, classical education delivered with the Orthodox worldview and mindset as its foundation helps to foster this intellectual vigilance. It helps to lift a person’s mind from physical things to metaphysical things, from carnal things to spiritual things.

Now, let’s recall what we read from Saint John last week. “Philosophy,” he writes, “is knowledge of both divine and human things, that is to say, of things both visible and invisible.”¹

Thus, philosophy is literally the love of wisdom. With respect to “human things,” we must respect truth wherever we may find it. That is to say, the study of the various arts and sciences – grammar, logic, rhetoric, mathematics, natural science, music – ought to be themselves edifying, insofar as they consider different aspects of that natural world, the world which God created.

Then Saint John writes something that might seem like a profound shift, when he says, “Philosophy, again, is a study of death...Still again, philosophy is the making of one’s self like God.” (*ibid.*) Now, we begin to see the fulfilment of the love of wisdom; we begin to see divine philosophy. The remembrance of death is essential to the spiritual life. For, as the wise Sirach says, “In all you do, remember the end of your life, and then you will never sin.” (Sirach 7:36) The remembrance of death fosters godly fear unto salvation. As we discussed in our first talk, godly, reverential fear is essential to the acquisition of the love of God.

Most parents desire to provide their children with an education in order to give them the tools to survive in our modern world. So, we are all seeking education. Hopefully, the majority of Orthodox Christians will rightly recognize that they must provide their children with an education in both natural and spiritual wisdom. We must then setup that education in such a way that, when the child is engaged in study, he sees the light of Christ in all things. We hear in the Presanctified Liturgy, “The light of Christ shineth on all”. And, again, the Apostle Paul says in his letter to the Colossians: “And whatsoever ye do in word or deed, do all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God and the Father by him”. (Colossians 3:17)

¹ Saint John of Damascus, *Writings*, 9-10.

There ought not be a tension between scholastic and catechetical studies. An authentic education trains the student to see natural and spiritual wisdom as a cohesive whole, reflective of the different kinds and degrees of knowledge.

Clearly, Saint John of Damascus and many other saints who pursued the study of philosophy from a Christian perspective found endless reasons to glorify God in their pursuit of knowledge.

Thus, the greatest gift you can give to your children is to form their minds and hearts in such a way that they carry the remembrance of God within. With that formation, they will call to mind His great gifts for us in every waking moment and in every endeavor they undertake.

We must be honest with ourselves and examine our hearts and minds.

The temptation for many of us today, when we attend work or school, is to think as the world thinks. Then, when we are at Church, we think, or try to think, as the Church thinks. This creates a division in our minds and hearts.

We cannot serve two masters; we cannot serve God and mammon. (Matthew 6:24) Education should not be fragmented, just as we should not be fragmented. *Every* part, every aspect of our education, scholastic and catechetical, must be edifying, must build the child, nourish the child, must change the child. As the Apostle says to the Ephesians: "Till we all come to the unity of the faith, and of the knowledge of the Son of God, unto a perfect man, unto the measure of the stature of the fulness of Christ." (Ephesians 4:13)

We must proceed in our efforts in classical education with a proper understanding. We must recognize that our baptism, our acceptance of Divine revelation, and a spiritual life of inner vigilance is the only ultimate way to find true wisdom and true philosophy. Our academic studies are essential, but they are essential stepping stones to this ultimate end. As Saint Symeon the New Theologian wrote:

It is a great good thing to believe in Christ, because without faith in Christ it is impossible for anyone to be saved; but one must also be instructed in the word of truth, and to understand it. It is a good thing to be instructed in the word of truth, and to understand it is essential; but one must also receive Baptism in the name of the Holy and Life-giving Trinity, for the bringing to life of the soul. It is a good thing to receive Baptism and through it a new spiritual life; but it is necessary that this mystical life, or this mental enlightenment in the spirit, also should be consciously felt. It is a good thing to receive with feeling

the mental enlightenment in the spirit; but one must manifest also the works of light. It is a good thing to do the works of light; but one must also be clothed with the humility and meekness of Christ for a perfect likeness to Christ. He who attains this and becomes meek and humble of heart, as if these were natural dispositions, will unfailingly enter into the Kingdom of Heaven and into the joy of His Lord...²

We have been baptized and, as free rational creatures, we are called upon to make an effort to understand the things of God. Our endeavor in the Orthodox Educational Initiative is to enhance students' ability to discern truth from falsehood, but also, to take a different approach to learning. Learning ought to foster wonder about God's creation. With that in mind, I exhort you to listen to a recorded interview with Dr. Xenia Vangor, who is going to teach our Life Sciences course. The interview is found on the blog post section of our website. I suggest you listen to this interview more than once. I did, and I was very edified and excited by what she said. Dr. Xenia has a PhD in evolutionary biology and is a seeker of truth in her profession as a teacher and in her personal life. This desire for truth in her pursuit of knowledge led her to faith in God and eventually to the Orthodox Church. A careful listening to the interview will reveal to you that she is a very rare teacher, and that any child who is able to take this course will participate in an extraordinary learning opportunity. Parents, do not let this opportunity pass you and your child by.

I am including some quotes taken from the interview below in the written text of this talk.

God bless you and your families and may our Lord grant you wisdom in this age of error and confusion.

In Christ,
+Moses, of Toronto

Quotes from the Interview with Dr. Xenia Vangor:

"The joy of being a scientist and an Orthodox Christian is that we are free to do what we are supposed to do with our intellect, which is explore reality and pursue truth. We don't have to worry about anything. We are there to investigate. We [Orthodox Christians] have true freedom to do this, absolutely, no one else does."

² Saint Symeon the New Theologian, *The First Created Man*, (1994) 76, St. Herman of Alaska Library of Congress.

“The proper role of science and biology is this lost term, or lost concept of natural history. You should start there. That’s why at Berkeley no one wanted to do natural history. They all wanted to look at a couple scraps of bone, from presumably millions of years ago, and make all sorts of deductions about a whole complete organism, a species. They don’t want to look at real species and see what they’re doing in the first place. That’s why I left. Let’s look at what’s there and humbly try to understand it. If you do that, you are doing real science.”

Our people in every way need to be informed consumers of knowledge. And there are pernicious false theories being thrust upon us right, left and center. And like I tell my students that you have to be prepared to be a consumer of products and of ideas that effect your life, the lives of your children, your family your freedom, your future, your everything. These are products that people are trying to sell you and worse, ideas that people are trying to sell you that will affect your life and they have to do with biology. So, we need to, ...if I can give you a grounding and understanding how to evaluate these things, that is something you will carry through life that will be useful to you, a tool. It is like knowing how to balance your checkbook.”

“But, the other part is, for an Orthodox Christian, if we are stewards of God’s creation, we have to understand our responsibility ...If you understand it as much as we can, we need to study it, we need to investigate it, we need to document it. That’s part of our job as stewards of the creation and to do that with the proper spirit of humble wonder. ... I see so many young people who don’t have wonder and I try to make a point to them, what you’re studying in this class isn’t what people made up, it’s what is. That’s what makes it tremendous, that’s what makes it unexpected. I’m making you learn these things because they are there, they are real, not because somebody made up a story about the cell membrane, or you know, whatever it is. This is something that is reality and it's the first chance that many of them have had to be exposed to absolute reality, because, when you go to public school these days, how much absolute reality are you exposed to?”

“...Education should be indifferent. It should teach you how to look at what’s there... that’s what I got in Berkeley. Somebody taught me to look at what was there. ...You look at the body of an animal and it is either road kill or it is mystery, pattern and order, when you are dissecting the thing. If you are taught how to look, then you can see. And that’s what education should be about in everything, is teaching you how to look at the subject. ...Seeing the landscape of that subject, how to operate in that subject.”

That’s why I like to work with the idea of models. Models are all around us and most of them are hidden. ...It’s very important to be able to see the models. ...A model is a simplified version of reality that we use to operate within reality, to navigate in that reality, otherwise we are dealing with infinite complexity. It’s a map. A map is a kind of a model and everything real isn’t there. I show my students a map and tell them, “You are standing JBLM, is everything here on this map?” “No.” “...If we put

everything on this map...we would have infinite complex reality. Reality is infinitely complex, and we can't operate in it... we can't navigate in it, we can't do anything with it, as humans, without reducing it in some fashion to a model. Then, we can operate with the model. The map tells you how to get around...You need a different kind of model or a different kind of a map if you want to know different things. ...The street map will keep you from driving into the artillery range by accident, but it won't tell you the altitude of the hill behind the building here... or it won't tell you how much radon is seeping from the ground. It won't tell you anything about the population of field mice..."

"...we have to understand the limits of our model, just like we understand the limits of our flat paper map. It accomplishes certain things for us [rather] than other things. Whatever you're looking at, you're operating with some model. Darwinian theory is a model. It is a bad one, but it's a model. Now let's examine the model and what it's resting on and see if it holds up, rather than taking it as truth. ... It's pretty important to teach students, I think, to understand that we always use a model to organize reality into manageable bites. We have to simplify. When you build a model you are simplifying, you are reducing, you are picking up the salient things and let that guide your view of otherwise incomprehensible infinite complex reality, but you have to bear in mind that you are using a model. ...I think it is very important, it is fundamental to knowledge, to do that."

"...If you take any subject, like biology, you're dealing with absolute reality. You are approaching it on your mental knees with awe and wonder and humility and delight and discovering how things work and how we can learn about how things work. And I think it's a great subject to open your mind...it all starts somewhere with any of us."

"When we appreciate the limitations of the scientific models that we rely upon, [that is] you need a map to drive around a strange place, but you never have to kid yourself that the map tells you everything. It never will. What you want is an accurate map. ...What you want from a map is accuracy and what you want from a scientific model is that it is as accurate as possible at this time, and we will junk it later if it turns out to be not good enough."

"I imagine anybody who is in public school or private school or home school has had some exposure to science, but I am also sure that the course is going to be taking them much further, even though it is limited in what we can accomplish in the time available. We will go further, because, if you operate the way I teach my college class and you lay a foundation properly, the foundation has to be laid with biochemistry, absolutely it does. But, you can build on that and you can go quite a distance into some very complex topics. So, we will be able to do that...And I always would post my videos that I use in class for my students to look at afterwards... But, I always find myself doing the same thing when I'm teaching... Let's find the thing that is the key. Look for the key concept, the bones of the issue ...the thing that we can build on. Let's find those things

and work with them...The materials that we will be using...are superior to what I am using for my college class because they are not cluttered up with junk, not cluttered with politically correct non-knowledge."