

Classical Education: What Is It and Why Do We Need It?

Out of all the possible approaches to education, we have chosen the **classical model** for our Orthodox online program. What is classical education? Why do we need it today?

Simply put, **classical education is the kind of education the saints received as children.** It is the system created by the ancient Greeks and perfected by our Christian ancestors, and it was essentially in place in all Christian nations, East and West, until the 20th century. It formed the basis for the public schools in Greece until the 1970's! It is, therefore, our inheritance, and we can and must return to it.

We all need the ability to think clearly, to understand what we read and hear, and to articulate our understanding. Classical education emphasizes grammar, logic, and rhetoric: grammar to help us organize our thoughts, logic to help us understand clearly the words we read, write, and speak, and rhetoric to help us express ourselves accurately and persuasively. Mainstream education today does not accomplish any of this; on the contrary, it is designed purposely to produce the opposite, to make us confused, irrational, and inarticulate. Classical education also employs traditional and simple methods for teaching mathematics instead of the trendy and confusing methods often used today. God created our minds to be orderly and beautiful. Classical education is, simply put, the kind of education that cooperates with Him in forming the mind to do what He designed it to do.

At the St. John of Damascus Orthodox Educational Initiative, we offer ancient Greek and Latin to teach grammar, an introduction to formal logic, and, to teach rhetoric, we offer a class in composition for the younger child using the writing exercises developed by the ancient Greeks and perfected in Orthodox Byzantium, and a class in Orthodox apologetics to teach the high school student how to articulate and defend the Faith. All of the great Fathers of Orthodox theology we revere - The Three Great Hierarchs, St. Photios the Great, St. Gregory Palamas, St. Mark of Ephesus, et al - they *all* went through this kind of training as young people. We could do no better than to imitate them!

Building a firm structure of the mind with the *skills of language* - grammar, logic, and rhetoric, along with the language of mathematics - classical education then goes on to adorn that structure with the *knowledge* that is the inheritance of Christian culture: the best in literature and history, along with an approach to the natural and physical sciences that is compatible with the Orthodox, Biblical, and patristic worldview. Instead of politically correct, ugly literature written in the past few years to manipulate the child's emotions and enslave him to the lower passions, classical schooling offers the child the noble, enduring, and timeless secular literature that has stood the test of centuries, which forms a natural preparation for studying the divinely revealed wisdom of the Church. Instead of being brainwashed into the religion of evolutionism, the child learns real science and acquires wonder, reverence, and awe as he grows in understanding the complexity and beauty of God's creation.

Please look at our course offerings and prayerfully consider enrolling your child this fall in one or more of our courses. Your child's soul - including his intellect - has been entrusted to you by the Lord. You know that you must feed his spirit through Orthodox worship, and you know that you must feed his body with healthy food. You are also going to be held responsible for how you feed his mind through education. If you stood before the Lord today to answer for this, how would matters stand with you?

Commonly Asked Questions:

Q: *Is classical education practical? How will learning classical languages and reading great literature help my child get into college or find a job?*

The reading, writing, speaking, and math skills learned in classical education equip the student to learn anything! His strong basic skills and wide knowledge equip him perfectly for the future specialization that may be needed for this or that career. Students from classical schools routinely score far above students from "mainstream" schools on the ACT and SAT. A classically trained mind is adaptable and can move quickly and easily from one career to another, because of superior thinking, reading, and speaking skills. Instead of giving the student a fish, the classical training teaches him how to fish. Also, classical schooling in no way interferes with technical and practical training - many students today formed by classical schools or from classical homeschooling families are going on to training in the skilled trades, farming, construction, nursing and other allied health fields, etc.

Q: *Someone told me that classical learning is suspect from the Orthodox point of view, because Orthodoxy emphasizes prayer of the heart and not using our logical minds.*

Correctly forming the rational intellect and curbing the passions through natural wisdom does not interfere with but rather promotes prayer of the heart and true spiritual life. The consensus of the Fathers upholds this. To oppose true spiritual life to traditional Greco-Roman and Byzantine intellectual life characterizes not the Holy Fathers but heretics: the Gnostics and Tertullian in ancient times, and the various modern heresies that preach irrationality, such as Fideism and "Christian Existentialism." God's revelation transcends reason and science but does not contradict them. Prayer transcends correct intellectual training but does not eradicate the need for it, except in the case of full-time hesychasts leading a life of solitude or illiterate tillers of the soil or craftsmen in pre-modern societies. If you are not fasting on bread and water 24 hours a day, but rather are eating a variety of foods, you need to understand what is healthy and what is poison. If you are not going to be only praying 24 hours a day, but rather you are going to be using your rational mind to understand earthly things, you need to understand what is healthy intellectual food and what is mental poison. The Church guides the whole person, not a disembodied spirit.

Q: *Someone told me that logic is from Aristotle, and that only Roman Catholics, not Orthodox, follow Aristotle, and therefore Orthodox Christians should not learn logic.*

This person must believe that St. John of Damascus was not Orthodox, since he devotes the first part of his great work, *The Fount of Knowledge*, to explaining Aristotle's terminology and categories as necessary preparation for studying the Orthodox theology in Part III of the *The Fount of Knowledge*, which today we call *The Exact Exposition of the Orthodox Faith*! The Fathers did not *enclose* theology in Aristotle, as did the medieval Latin theologians, but rather they "baptized" both Aristotle's and Plato's insights and terminology, and employed them constantly when articulating and defending the Faith. We are not more Orthodox than they!