

THE ROLE OF THE PRIEST IN CHRISTIAN EDUCATION

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A discussion of the priest's particular role in the educational ministry of the Church requires clarification of the terms used. "Role" denotes a patterned sequence of behavior (feelings, words, and actions) which people have come to expect of persons who fulfill a significant function in society. Since the emphasis of the word is on structured activity, the focus here will be on the kinds of things that a parish priest can feasibly do, rather than on theological presuppositions of the priest's teaching ministry.

The "role" with which we are here concerned is a socially expected behavior pattern of leadership determined not only by the priest's ecclesiastical office or his special status in the community. It is also and especially a ministry or *diakonia* of all the parishioners in a community by virtue of the fact that they are members of the Body of Christ.

As in all areas of his pastoral ministry, what a priest does in Christian education he does in the name of Christ and His Church. His "role" is not an ascribed activity or a "part" which he performs for the benefit of passive recipients. It is rather **together with** and as a member of God's people that a priest fulfills his role in Christian education. This means that the **whole** Church has the responsibility for Christian education. The parish priest, the church school teachers, and officers are in a sense representatives of the parishioners. What they teach may be doomed to failure if their witness is contradicted by the witness of the adult members of the parish.

While the teaching ministry belongs to the essence of the Church and responsibility for teaching rests upon the whole Church, there are some very specific things that a priest can do to help educate his people. The New Testament helps us to gain a proper perspective and context for the task.

According to the posture of the early Church, it was not enough for one to repent and believe. He also had to be trained or catechized in the Faith until he knew it so well that he could bear convincing witness to it in his daily walk of life. His guide during this training period was his teacher. The omission of either preaching or teaching signified unfaithfulness to the Church.

There is evidence of an official teaching ministry in the early Church (see Acts 13:1; I Corinthians 12:28-29; Ephesians 4:11; Romans 12:6-7). It seems that the ministry of the *didaskaloi* or teachers was both to know the *hughiainousa didaskalia* or sound doctrine (II Timothy 4:3) and to teach it. This is to say that the *didaskaloi* were theologians as well as educators. With the development and expansion of the order of the catechumenate during the first three centuries of our era, the catechists exercised a similar role, especially in teaching the basic tenets of the Faith to recent converts in preparation for their baptism. The prayers and petitions for the catechumens included in the Divine Liturgy provide vivid evidence of the complete seriousness with which our spiritual forebears looked upon Christian education in the life of the Church.

In the absence today of professional catechists to minister to the spiritual edification of

the communicants and converts, our Church has ascribed the teaching ministry almost exclusively to the province of the local pastors. The point here being made is not that lay people are not allowed to teach religion, but rather that the responsibility for the organization, administration, and improvement of all religious education programs of a parish rest squarely on the shoulders of the pastor simple because he is the duly assigned priest. This is made quite clear, for instance, in the “Regulations of the Greek Orthodox Archdiocese of America,” Article 17, Section 1, on the Clergy:

“The Priest by virtue of his canonical ordination and assignment heads and administers the Parish and exercises on its behalf the priestly duties, which consist in shepherding the Parish entrusted to his care . . . He shall also proclaim the Gospel and impart knowledge of the doctrines, traditions, canons and disciplines of the Church. Further, he shall guide the growth and progress of the Parish in the Christian life through the performance of his pastoral duties.”

There is no question that it is the sacred privilege and responsibility of the pastor to oversee every aspect of Church work in his parish. But an ascribed status does not necessarily mean that one has either the time or the professional training to carry out the entailed responsibilities with the depth and total commitment that a position requires.

In the day-to-day performance of his frequently manifold pastoral duties—duties which escape the notice of most parishioners—the parish priest may well see his role primarily as that of pastor and preacher. Educational responsibility is commonly seen as something added, and not properly belonging, to the office. A parish priest often takes on the duties of director of education because no volunteer layman can be found to do it. Under heavy pressure, he may be forced to leave his educational duty with scant attention. It is with good reason that our priests say that they have no time to train their church school teachers properly.

Note the fair observation made by Fr George Nicozisin in his book, *“The Road to Orthodox Phronema*, pp. 63-64:

“In the American and Canadian parish setting, the parish priest is more than a liturgist, preacher, confessor, counselor and teacher. He is also administrator, organizer, youth director, public relations agent, editor, translator of documents, fund raiser and general coordinator of a host of programs and activities within and without the parish. However, in spite of his burdensome schedule, the priest must not lose sight of his role as leader in the overall program of Christian education in his parish. Great and often will be the temptation to forfeit the burden of responsibility and relinquish his role of leadership . . .”

Pressures of time notwithstanding, the role of the priest is pivotal and decisive as to the success or failure of Christian education in his parish. The possibility for a significant educational ministry derives in large part from the priest’s self-concept and his understanding of the purpose of the Church. The priest is the pastor of the church school as well as of the church. He is its spiritual and inspirational head because he is the overseer of the total church program.

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Systematic, thorough teaching must supplement the pulpit ministry. The church school is the Church itself at work in education and evangelization.

The purpose of the Church is to reveal God the Father through His Son, the Lord Jesus Christ by the power of the Holy Spirit. The Church perpetuates the mission of the Lord Himself, which includes teaching. The Church is concerned not only with evangelizing the world and saving souls, but also with the growth and development in the Christ-likeness and godliness of its members. “As therefore you received Christ Jesus the Lord, so live in him, rooted and built up in him and established in the faith, just as you were taught, abounding in thanksgiving” (Colossians 2:6-7).

The key words of St. Paul here are “rooted,” “built up,” and “established.” It is more difficult and challenging to establish people in the Faith than it is to find and win people to Christ. The same idea is expressed by St. Peter, in another context: “. . . Grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ,” (II Peter 3:18). The important word here is “grow”. It is quite unlikely that our parishes will faithfully respond to this biblical mandate for Christian education without the whole-hearted commitment and support of the pastor.

Many clergymen of other traditions who have specialized in Christian education have found that it gives breadth and depth to their pastoral ministry. They have found, for example, that church school teachers often express great willingness to work in other areas of ministry. Christian education can likewise provide a parish priest with the widest possible opportunities to carry out his teaching and evangelistic ministry. In order for this to happen, however, a priest needs to be grounded in a philosophy of Orthodox Christian education. He must be equipped to exercise solid principles of the field for himself and others, in order to realize an effective and fruitful educational ministry.

The role of the priest in Christian education includes giving general direction and supervision to the total program of the church. This means ideally having a thorough familiarity with the functioning of the church school, and having the skills to develop programs of Christian education for parishioners of all age levels. He should visit the church school as frequently as possible to encourage the staff. He should not run the church school, because he has too many other duties to attend to. As one writer puts it, his particular role is to “develop lay leaders for the various offices—enlisting, training, and directing them, instead of running the show.”

More specifically, there are at least four (4) practical areas of strategic importance in which a pastor should become a specialist in order to minister effectively to the educational program of his parish. These are listed below and then are taken up briefly one-by-one: (1) General leadership and helpfulness; (2) Administration; (3) Building the Program; and (4) Supervision.

(1) General Leadership and Helpfulness. As an overseer (Acts 20:28), the pastor inspires his staff and congregation by keeping the educational work of the church before the parish council and the congregation. He makes frequent use of the pulpit, the parish bulletin or newsletter, bulletin boards, posters, and other media to keep parishioners alert and sensitive to the importance of Christian education for the home and the church. It is very important to keep parishioners informed and responsive to the needs and progress of the church school and the total program of Christian education in his church.

Christian education is taken seriously by parishioners to the degree that they are not given reason to regard it as an isolated, compartmentalized, “cute” activity for children only. “And this is eternal life, they know thee the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom thou hast sent” (John 17:3). When the Lord Jesus spoke these words in His high priestly prayer to God the Father, He wasn’t thinking primarily of children! Unless the adult constituency of a parish is awakened to the need for Christian education as a normal and indispensable dimension of church membership, the children cannot rightfully be expected to take religion seriously.

Translated into practical terms, this means that the role of the priest is to help cultivate a religious climate in his parish. It is beyond the scope of this essay to discuss specific ways and means of doing this. The fact is that our lay people today are very ready and receptive to programs of adult Christian education that take account of the concerns and questions that they are asking.

Many pastors have found it helpful to cultivate an inner circle of spiritually sensitive friends of the church school to support enlightened efforts for Christian education. There is much to be gained from setting time aside to take teachers to conferences, training institutes, workshops, and lectures on religious education. Providing teachers with timely and relevant reading materials is another very helpful service. A concerned priest shows initiative for cooperation with other priests in his area to share insights, concerns, and resources, thereby avoiding unnecessary duplication of effort and expenses. In short, the pastor should utilize all the means and occasions available to challenge and lead his people toward a richer and more meaningful program of Orthodox Christian education.

(2) Administration. The priest, by virtue of his educational background and the spiritual authority with which he is vested, is the most appropriate individual to help organize a **Board or Committee on Christian Education** to help plan and coordinate the total educational program of the parish. The general superintendent or director could serve as the executive officer of the board, and as an assistant to the pastor in carrying out the educational endeavors of the local church. The function of the executive officer and the board members is to integrate the three (3) divisions of educational ministry, that is, children, youth, and adults, into the total program; to overcome overlapping and neglect in all three areas.

The pastor’s role is to make provision for various training schools in the program in areas such as teacher training, leadership development, vacation church school, home missions,

evangelization, and stewardship. The priest should be alert to good facilities, the use of buildings and classrooms for optimum efficiency. More importantly, the pastor needs to be on the lookout for prospective teachers and workers who could become leaders. One of the greatest assets that a priest can have in building up Christian education is skill in leadership selection.

Proper administration of the church school program requires dedicated teamwork among the pastor, the superintendent (in large parishes), and the director of religious education. Working together, they can help the Board of Christian Education establish policies and build up the total program of the church school. The three need to confer frequently and regularly on all matters pertaining to the educational program, but each has specific responsibilities: The pastor is concerned primarily with evangelism and leadership development; the superintendent, with administration; the director, with supervision and teacher training.

(3) Building the Program. The program of the Sunday School is the program of the Church. It is in the pastor's interest to exercise leadership in the development of a coordinated, balanced, and varied program that fits the needs and resources of the parish. He needs to be aware of the archdiocesan curricular materials, adapting them to the particular situation of the local parish. The goal and objectives of the church school become more real for the staff members by the use of a **Manual of Procedure** which includes clear "job descriptions" and a list of duties. This also helps to instill and promote teamwork. The preparation of a **Calendar of Events** for the entire year, or by seasons, is very important for a well-rounded program. This gives the teachers a sense of perspective for the school year and avoids a conflict of dates for events scheduled on the master calendar of the parish.

(4) Supervision In Christian education, this is primarily the duty of the director. However, the pastor and others share this responsibility, and must carry it entirely in the absence of a director. "Where administration places stress upon organization, operation, and management, supervision stresses improvement," notes one writer. The pastor as overseer of the entire educational program stresses excellence and improvement. His role here is to get his volunteers to see and accept the need for improvement or change. It has been found that modification and adaptation of methodology are more effective initially than trying to revolutionize a church program all at once. There is obvious merit in recognizing and building upon the accomplishments of one's predecessors.

Willingness to work closely with the officers and teachers of the church school in the planning and sharing of insights is an index of effective pastoral supervision. Ability to work within a group, rather than over it, is vivid testimony to the pastor's faith in the value of each member of the Body of Christ. It shows that the priest recognizes that lay people have their own spiritual gift(s) and ministry to be developed and used before God.

Suggested Theme Questions

1.) If Christian education is to become integral to the full ministry of our Church, what provisions must be made on the parish, metropolitan, and archdiocesan levels?

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2) In what sense does taking Christian education seriously on the local level suggest a need for a change of priorities in parish life?

3.) How could a parish council utilize current parish organizations for a more effective program of Christian education?

4.) Which aspects of the church schools in our parishes seem to require remedial efforts? What could our parish priests do individually and collectively to promote improvement?

5.) How could the Department of Religious Education of our Archdiocese become more visible and responsive to the educational needs of our parishes?