

Educational reform - Is it for the person or the labour market?

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The Hagiorite Orthodox monasticism is not isolated from the world; it is not unsociable. On the contrary, one might say that the genuine monk is more sociable than the laity, since he directly communicates with the supreme social Being, the Creator of man and society: the Lord. As hagiorite monks we ache and worry about the future of man these days. Many discontented people visit the Holy Mountain, distraught by impossible troubles which cause a deadlock. The wrong way of living is the main culprit for all the hardships; that is, life outside the Church.

Our times are such that everything surrounding us and our values is going through a crisis. Scientific and technological advances affect our social lives; consumerism, hedonism, the ideological chaos and the abundance and confusion of theories as well as globalization indicate that modern man finds himself at a crucial turning point in his history.

Under these circumstances, it is very difficult even for a thoughtful adult to have a

clear cut idea of his status and recognize what his truly personal options are without being swayed by other factors or to understand where he can move freely and how he is being dominated by something or someone. If this is tricky for a mature person imagine how complicated it is for a student or a pupil, who also have to deal with their hitherto unrecognizable fits and starts at an age when they ought to establish their personalities and create their own identity!

Education is an institution which aims to cultivate one as a person, to develop his spiritual values and complete his personality. The Ancient Greek philosopher, Plato, used to say: "All knowledge when separated from justice and virtue is seen to be cunning and not wisdom" (Plato Collected Dialogues: Menexenus: p 196, 246e-247a). If our ancestors thought that knowledge cultivates the soul through virtue and it that it is not an external acquisition, how are we supposed to deal with it since we are not only orthodox Christians but also the descendants of the ancient Greek philosophers, the Apostles and of the Great Fathers of our Church?

In every country, education is irrevocably connected to its history, its culture and its tradition. In our island, Cyprus, Orthodoxy was the model on which education was based, since it was a shaping, life-giving factor, not just for Education but for other institutions as well.

After the British rule which lasted almost a century, foreign elements intruded into our orthodox tradition. Especially after the 'May 1968 movement', which begun in France and influenced the moral and social fabric of our society with the so-called sexual liberation, the denunciation of institutions, of social structures and of religion, Education changed and followed the trends and the demands of the times. It complied with the theory of usefulness and it concentrated in producing graduates who would produce, consume, develop and make money; in other words it promoted the economic and technological advancement in a bizarre way. Thus Education no longer meets the existential needs of a person, neither does it deal with moral issues or cultivate virtue; it is indifferent to religion and does not wish to be defined as 'orthodox'.

We have unfortunately learnt that nowadays our Educational system, at all three levels, does not contribute towards the formation of a responsible, well rounded person, the true person, the traditional orthodox Cypriot. Even at the elementary level there is an attempt to cut off pupils from their traditional roots. Moreover, many intellectuals wish to modernize and secularize the Church and remove the Christian faith from the state; that is, they wish the Church to "conform to this world" (Romans 12, 2) in order to seemingly modernize it. These things cause distress and a lot of pain to the faithful and to those who love our country. Pray,

where do all these take place? They take place in Cyprus, the mainly orthodox and culturally esteemed island of the Saints.

Our Educational system seems to be the product of the modern technological explosion which splits the body from the spirit, dividing man and steering him towards materialism. It deprives him of the ability to genuinely hope, to be honest in his transactions and his conscience and to remain free inside. It mostly supports his ability to move freely in scientific circles, finally feeding him with dry knowledge and education, which according to St Paul merely “puffs him up” (A Corinthians 8, 1). That is, it makes him proud, egoistic, selfish and generally speaking, full of passions. The main purpose of those who attend the Lyceum and the universities is to find a job. Of course this is what they must aim at, but it must not be their only aspiration.

Education as a measure of quality must seek to regenerate one’s heart and transform his soul. It must not seek productivity or meet the needs of the state. It must be independent from these in order to produce free persons, whom it will steer towards self-perception and the knowledge of God and will offer them a comprehensive education, which will transform them. It must not deform them with the supply of dry knowledge or make them chase after grades, inciting their attachment to the ephemeral materialism.

Teachers and those responsible at the Ministry of Education should aim to offer a proper education to the young ones, i.e. an education in Christ. They should travail in birth until “Christ is formed” in their hearts as St Paul says (Galatians 4, 19). The school and the university ought to become spiritual wombs in which a person, man in Christ, will be able to grow and mature spiritually. The school ought to cultivate genuine, eternal persons through Grace, which will be complete in the image of the only true and eternal person, Christ. This can be accomplished with the cooperation of the Church. It is only in the Orthodox Church that Christ and spiritual life are experienced. The Church is not an administrative body, a human institution, but a god-man institution; it is the body of Christ.

Teenagers and young people will not attain a high quality of life through the upgrade and renewal of the external, educational means; but this kind of life is the effulgence of the performance of someone who is cultivated inside through the Holy Spirit. It is the kind of life achieved through the compliance and the sensitization of those people who leave their mark on the lives of the young. However, we are not here to apportion blame but to sensitize people’s hearts.

Pupils and students ought not to think and act for their interest; they ought not to

choose a profession to gratify their pride and their self-interest regardless of whether it will undermine them as persons. In the old days, one would choose his profession according to his skills and his abilities, namely his aptitude. These days, unfortunately the choice depends on the resulting social status or its economic prospects. Thus, one's ability comes second. This trend is aggravated by unemployment and the fact that youngsters can no longer follow the profession they like. In this way a job often becomes servitude.

When choosing his profession a young person, who is faithful, ought to also take into account the prospects for his personal advancement and his culmination in Christ, which is a Christian's main mission. (St Gregory of Nyssa: What is the name of a Christian or his profession?) One's profession ought not to be seen independently but must constitute a means to advance one's life in Christ. The Christian is called to discharge his professional duties "as to the Lord and not unto men" (Colossians: 3, 23).

All professions are good -from the road cleaner to the university professor- so long as they are performed honestly, conscientiously and meticulously. The Lord placed our forefathers in Paradise to "work it and keep it" (Gen. 2, 15). Even Christ, in His life on earth, was working as a carpenter. St Basil, the Great, says that the Church has hunters, builders, farmers, shepherds, athletes and soldiers as its members; each one of them ought to discharge his duties conscientiously. (St Basil: Homily on "watch thyself"). The various professions ought not to just meet a person's needs but benefit others as well. St Paul urges each one of the Ephesians to "labor, doing honest work with his own hands, so that he may have something to share with anyone in need" (Ephesians 4, 28).

Any pupil, student or worker will be consistent in his job, his relationship with others and the Lord, if he has recognized the true meaning of his life. Namely, to accomplish his personal sanctification, his deification, which is the final objective for the creation of man.

For this reason blessed Elder Justin Popovic from Serbia was stressing that everyman is called to sanctification. Thus, a scientist may become a holy scientist, a philosopher- a holy philosopher, a farmer- a holy farmer, a rich man - a holy rich-man, a pauper- a holy pauper, an old man -a holy old man, a student- a holy student and a pupil - a holy pupil. (Justin Popovic: Man and God-Man)

This means that the evangelic message of sanctification can be applied by any man, of any social standing at any age. The struggle to attain sanctification gives life its true meaning. This struggle, albeit hard, is also sweet and full of joy, since

divine Grace is walking along with the fighter. Man becomes sanctified by participating in the uncreated divine energies, irrespective of whether he is at the stage where he is struggling to cleanse himself from the passions or has attained illumination or has reached the final stage of deification. He who tries to become sanctified constantly strives to increase, advance spiritually, touch and taste dispassion. Dispassion according to St John Climax is “a never-ending perfection” (St John Climax: Climax: Homily 19th). He who experiences dispassion, i.e. sanctification, is experiencing a lasting, intense spiritual state. This state, which is the experience of divine Grace, cannot be compared to any joy or experience on earth.

If the young ones are to be better placed against Education and be able to choose the right profession so that Education will not be diluted and transformed into a job-finding vehicle, they ought to give up seeking worldly knowledge but strive to attain spiritual knowledge as described by St Paul. They ought not to seek to appease their selfish, money-oriented interests while ignoring and impinging on their spiritual needs. On the other hand, parents but realize that children are not their property but independent, unique persons. The usual habit parents have in trying to realize their own aspirations and designs through their children, torments their offspring.

Finally, educators- teachers and university professors- ought to recognize that genuine education shapes people who will offer themselves and their skills to serve others. If this is to be achieved, educators ought to demonstrate an honest and genuine care in their teaching and not simply discharge a barren, professional duty with the ultimate aim to make money. They ought to be deeply conscientious, intellectually and spiritually mature and be ready to sacrifice themselves; in addition they ought to live a pure life with integrity and orthodox conscience and ought to acquire sincere faith in Christ. Both teachers and pupils ought to learn at the great school, called Church.

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