

An Interview with
FATHER THOMAS HOPKO

Keynote Speaker at the upcoming Orthodox Institute, November 3-6, 2011

By Catherine Sullivan

CS:

When I got to know you many years ago, you were the Dean of St. Vladimir's Seminary. It was pretty clear that two of your great passions were Scripture, and Education. I know that you will be our Keynote speaker at the Orthodox Institute at Antiochian Village in November of this year, where our theme will be "Seeing Scripture through the Holy Land," and where most of those attending are involved in church education programs in some way. With that in mind, I would like to focus on these two aspects of our lives as Orthodox Christians as we talk: Scripture, and education.

CS: Fr. Hopko, can you tell us what role Scripture has played in your life personally throughout the years?

FrH: As a Christian priest and teacher of theology, I hope that Holy Scripture has been the foundation of everything that I have tried to be, say and do in my life and work. There is a definite order in Christian life and teaching. We begin with the foundation, not with the roof. If we fail to do this, everything is disordered, and ceases to be what it is, and is supposed to be. I believe that St. John Chrysostom was right when he said way back in the 4th Century that ignorance of the Holy Scripture is the cause of every heresy and scandal in the Church, and of every sadness and failure of a Christian believer. Hearing the Word of God in Scripture, even when a person can't read, is the beginning, center and end of all Christian vision and action.

CS: In this very secular society, do you feel Scripture and its messages are still relevant to people today, and why? If not should it be?

FrH: Scripture is relevant to all ages and generations until the Lord Jesus comes. In our time, we have the particular problem that Christians, and people generally, are ignorant of what the Bible is, what it says in its various literary forms, and how it works in the Church and in a person's spiritual life. And, of course, in our time we have millions of new questions and challenges in regard to Holy Scripture and Christian faith that did not exist in the past, even the most recent past. A huge difficulty today is that most people think that the only choice in Scriptural understanding is between "fundamentalism" where the Bible functions like a Christian "Qur'an" that fell ready-made from heaven and provides the truth about everything, including natural science, and "liberalism" which sees the Bible as a collection of writings of ancient peoples that may be of some literary, cultural and religious interest and value, but surely nothing more.

CS: Having taught about Scripture and experienced it first hand in your own life, what do you feel is the primary attribute Scripture can offer a person in today's world?

FrH: Scripture offers today what it has always offered. It is God's Word incarnate in human words, images and figures, inspired by the Holy Spirit, that provides believers in Jesus Christ with insight into the "mystery of Christ" which provides the deepest and fullest knowledge of God possible to people on the planet earth. We must remember that for Orthodox Christians, the Bible is the book of God's People, the Church of the Old and New Testaments. It is a collection of many different writings, of many different kinds, all of which refer to and are fulfilled in Jesus of Nazareth as God's unique Son and Word, Israel's Messiah and the Lord and Savior of the world. Orthodox Christians read and interpret all of Scripture through the "lens" of the crucified and glorified Christ. And we read and interpret it by the inspiration of the same Spirit who inspired its writing in the first place. And we understand it only to the extent that we believe it and strive to practice what it teaches in our personal lives.

CS: The Orthodox Church as a whole is not only a church that values Scripture, but also, education. What is your opinion of the emphasis (or lack thereof) placed in most parishes to provide good educational programs for their children and adults? Are most doing well in this area, or is there room for improvement, do you think?

FrH: My guess is that not many of our Orthodox parishes have a Bible-based and Bible-centered educational program. Nor do many have a Scripturally-illuminated liturgical life, or a Scripturally-informed ascetical and ethical teaching and practice. As far as the Bible is concerned, I believe that the most important thing is that Church members be exposed to Holy Scripture, beginning with Bible stories told to little children. As people age and mature spiritually, the understanding of Scripture sharpens and deepens. At every stage, however, direction and guidance by informed and experienced older people are necessary. The worst thing that can happen is that parishes have "Bible studies" at which people share with each other what they don't understand.

CS: If you were to pick three things to emphasize in parish educational programs, whether involving the priest or church school teachers or administrators, what would those be?

FrH: I would say there are four things. The basic thing is that Christian education programs, with the preaching at liturgical services, be Biblical. Those involved in these programs, at all ages, must be regularly participating in well prepared and performed liturgical services. It is also essential that pastoral and spiritual guidance be provided for people to assist them in their personal, family, professional and churchly lives. And concrete opportunities for Christian service in evangelical and charitable activities must also be available. In a word, the "work" has four legs: Biblical teaching, liturgical worship, ascetical striving and Christian action. If any of these is missing, the "work" *doesn't work*. It simply collapses, or even worse, it is transmuted into something that it never should be, which is lethal to human being and life.

CS: When it comes to education, what specific things do you feel the Orthodox Church does well? What do we possibly not do so well?

FrH: I feel that this varies greatly among parishes. Some parishes do certain things well, and other things not so well. And some don't do much of anything at all! Probably, referring back to what I just said, some churches do a good job of providing a rich liturgical life for the people, but little else. Others may provide opportunities for Christian action, but fail to provide the actors with sound Biblical foundations and/or liturgical worship. Others may have plenty of counseling services for troubled people, but these services are detached from Scripture and Liturgy. Most important for our present conversation, however, is that we insist that a sound knowledge of the Holy Scriptures, which is to say, a properly understood Biblical vision of reality, is the foundation of everything else. Without it, nothing else is what it should be. And nothing else works. And everything becomes downright dangerous and destructive, whether it be conservative or contemporary, "fundamentalist" or "liberal."

CS: What do you see the educational needs of the church in the next century likely to be? Do you believe we may have to change our approach or thinking along with the rapidly changing society?

FrH: I think it will become more important than ever to provide people who still come to Church with the four things we mentioned, from earliest childhood to old age. I also believe that adults are the key to everything. When people ask me what I think is wrong with our youth today, I always say that the answer can be given in one word: adults! Who, after all, guide and teach young people? Who provide the films they see and the songs they hear and the clothes they wear and the books they read and the technological devices and programs to which they are virtually inseparably attached? Basically we need adults who are committed to Christ, who know what this means, and who know what they are doing. Their educational work will be done not so much in formal classrooms or discussion groups, as in personal sharing and interaction in different ways and settings. This will be more and more important, I believe, as churches become smaller, more voluntary, and more alienated from secularized culture, and less and less the gatherings of ethnic communities for cultural and social purposes that include their peculiar religious customs and traditions.

CS: I would like to thank you for your time in talking with me, and greatly look forward to hearing you speak in November. One last thing- I believe that almost every Orthodox Christian around the world knows who Fr. Tom Hopko is. Would you be willing to share with us some of your personal hopes and plans for the future, and what you are doing at present? Again, thank you!

FrH: I'm doing what I've done all my adult life, but with much less energy, and much less traveling. I serve at the women's Monastery of the Transfiguration in Ellwood City. I counsel people, mostly old acquaintances from my seminary days, in person and by phone and email. I speak on Ancient Faith Radio, and interact with those who contact me. I'm still trying to write some things, without too much success! We're redoing and expanding the "rainbow" catechetical books, which are now wholly or in part in 17 languages. And I'm currently working on a short personal reflection about Orthodoxy in North America in the last 50 years, from the founding of the Standing Conference of Orthodox Bishops in America in 1960 to its replacement in 2010 by the US Episcopal Assembly. So life goes on. May the Lord illumine our way together.

Catherine Sullivan is an Associate of the Department of Christian Education and provides the website for small church schools: "The Mustard Seed."