



# ORTHO-PAIDEIA

## A Strategy for Orthodox Religious Education

GEORGET PHOTOS

When I was called upon by the Archdiocesan Department of Religious Education to write an article on “Teaching Strategies for Religious Education,” I found myself in a quandary. I considered several approaches—some theoretical, some practical and some religious. After much prayer and meditation, and mounds of ripped up paper, I found myself looking for the basic definition of the term “strategy.”

Webster’s defines *strategy* as “the science of military command, or the science of directing great military movements. It is derived from the Greek terms *strategia* and *strategos*.” According to Lidell & Scott’s Greek–English Lexicon, the primary meaning of *strategia* is defined as the “office or period of command; with an emphasis on generalship.” The term *strategos* is defined as the “leader or commander of an army, the general himself.”

Applying these definitions of strategy to Orthodox religious education, the Church school teacher is, within a distinct period of time, directing a great “military movement” in which he or she demonstrates the qualities or skills of a “general.” He is the leader or commander of an “army.” His “soldiers” or warriors are his students. This imagery is reflected in many prayers of our Church. For example, the Prayer of Ablution, which is read by the priest in the Sacrament of Baptism, proclaims, “He who has

put on You, O Christ our God, also bows his head with us unto You. Keep him forever as an invincible warrior against every attack of those who assail him and us; and make us all victors, even unto the end...”

Our Orthodox students battle against sin and evil daily in the society. As a “commander” of our youth, exactly which strategies should the religious educator use to ensure that his “warriors” are invincible against every attack our contemporary society musters? How can we help students become victorious over evil and sin? Simply stated, we must provide the students with the genuine Christian teachings to protect them from the assaults of the devil, and equip them with the weapons of the Faith for spiritual warfare, that lead to victory: salvation! I posit that the only genuine strategy for victory is Ortho-Paideia.

Ortho-Paideia is a combination of the terms *Orthodoxy* and *paideia*. Orthodoxy is the correct and true teaching of the Christian Church. According to Fr. Anthony Coniaris in his book *Introducing the Orthodox Church*, “A church is the true Church of Christ if it can show historically that it was founded by Christ and has maintained a living connection over the centuries with that early Church. We need this historical connection in order to be assured that the deposit of the faith has not been tampered with but has been handed down to us in entirety.” Fr. Theodore Stylianopoulos, in his book *Christ in Our Midst*, writes that “the Orthodox Church is the true Church of God on earth and maintains the fullness of Christ’s truth in continuity with the Church of the Apostles...If a person carefully examines the history of Christianity he or she will soon discover that the Orthodox Church alone is in complete sacramental, doctrinal and canonical continuity with the ancient undivided Church as it authoritatively expressed itself through the great Ecumenical Councils.” *Paideia* is a Greek term and is defined as training, teaching, or education and its result.

Ortho-Paideia utilized as a strategy by the teacher has as its goal the training and teaching of the student in the Orthodox Faith. Its result is to bring about the development of an Orthodox Christian identity, which is vital for the “invincible and victorious” lifestyle of the student.

### THE STRATEGY

According to its definitions, strategy involves “directing great military movements” employing “the qualities or skills of a general.” Ortho-Paideia is a strategy from the perspective of Orthodox Christianity. It provides the objectives for spiritual warfare and the skills for the religious educator, who is the general, to lead his student “warriors” to victory.



Sophie Koulomzin, the Orthodox Christian religious educator and author of *Our Church and Our Children* (St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 1975), greatly expounded and advanced the concept of Ortho-Paideia. This landmark book, even though it is forty years old, provides advice and guidance that is relevant today:

The Orthodox Church today faces a challenge. It needs to discover an approach to religious education that is rooted in the total church tradition. This tradition includes knowledge of God, the life of grace within the Church and relationships with others. At the same time Christian education has as its object the education of a person. Whether it deals with an infant, a young child, an adolescent, or an adult, it must deal in a personal way with the individual at whatever level he exists: speaking his language, understanding and sharing his needs and concerns, loving him as he is. Religious experience is valid at whatever level it takes place, at any stage of intellectual maturity; and the process of Christian education must be a process of growth that is each person’s own experience, a gradual change involving his total person. The task and the challenge are tremendous and can only be met if we live fully the life of the Church.

The following details of the strategy of Ortho-Paideia have been derived from Koulomzin.

## OBJECTIVES OF ORTHO-PAIDEIA

Directing a great military movement involves objectives. This is some advice in the preparation of classroom objectives.

### Approach to Religious Education

An Orthodox approach to religious education must include these five objectives:

1. Help students acquire a sense of the reality of God in their lives.
2. Make them realize that none of them stand alone under God, that they are all a part of the Body, the Church.
3. Cultivate genuine individual growth of intellect and spirit.
4. Bring students as they mature to recognize with awe the Holy Mystery of God, beyond the limits of human wisdom.
5. Help them comprehend that Orthodox Christianity involves the whole person and all of life.

### Objectives of Church School Teaching

The knowledge that children should gain in the Church School has three objectives:

- “God is” – Development in the knowledge about God
- “The Church is” – Development in the knowledge of the Church
- “I am – Development in the knowledge of self

### Skills of Ortho-Paideia

The religious educator as the leader of “warriors” needs to acquire the qualities and skills of a general. This is some practical advice for leadership in the classroom lesson.

### The Lesson

In addition to the curriculum, which determines the subject to be taught, and the liturgical calendar, which determines some of the themes, the teacher must have a personal plan that emphasizes the following:

- Carefully reflect on and consider the lesson. Enhance your lesson by finding what is important to stress about God, the Church, the day, season, human experience, or personal experience. Make the lesson relevant and alive. Only then will the students be interested and see its importance.
- Consider the age of your students. Take into account their individuality. Students grasp information differently at various ages. Home in on what they find interesting and what difficulties you might expect with the group. Be prepared for anything!
- Captivate them with your presentation. Supplement the information with a craft, game, discussion or interactive activi-

ty that will give you results. Encourage discussions and questions that will lead to achieving the goal. Be sure to obtain the approval of your parish’s religious education director.

### Evaluate the Lesson

Review your lesson according to three criteria:

- Reflect on what you are teaching. How will your material impact and assist the student in gaining knowledge about God, His working in the world, and the student’s relationship to Him?
- Lead the students to understand that they are part of the Church through your lesson, and encourage enthusiastic participation in the services during the liturgical calendar. Active participation of the student is key in bringing them to the life of the Church, for example, through youth choir or altar boys. Emphasize the fact that Orthodoxy is the genuine, original and authentic Christian Faith.
- Assist the students, by your lesson and methodology, in developing of an awareness of themselves as unique persons made in the image and likeness of God, focusing on their relationship with God and their neighbors. Emphasize the importance of developing an Orthodox Christian identity.

### THE VICTORY

Having reviewed and expounded upon Ortho-Paideia as a teaching strategy, we can turn to St. Paul, who in his Letter to the Ephesians, best expresses our own preparation and motivation:

Finally, be strong in the Lord and in the strength of his power. Put on the whole armor of God, so that you may be able to stand against the wiles of the devil. For our struggle is not against enemies of blood and flesh, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers of this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places. Therefore take up the whole armor of God, so that you may be able to withstand on that evil day, and having done everything, to stand firm. (Ephesians 6:10–13)

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