

What Your Child Should Know

The Goals and Objectives of Education in the Orthodox Church

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What should our children know about the Faith by the time they are ‘X’ years old?” This question, which is often asked of religious educators, is fueled by a number of influences:

- Schools have expectations that their students should reach certain milestones at various stages in their education. Schoolteachers are expected to prepare their students to meet those points in the course of the year, usually because there will be some kind of test.
- Education itself is goal-oriented. Educational performance is measured by the acquisition of certain objectives. Teachers and students want to check their progress.
- Parents want to help their children in the learning process. Knowing the expectations and what the program hopes to accomplish is beneficial.

The aim of education in the Orthodox Church is to nurture, instruct, and direct each member of the community of faith—the Church—in Christian living, or, as Orthodox writers typically call it, the life in Christ, so that each person grows “in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ” (2 Peter 3:18) and become “a partaker of the divine nature” (2 Peter 1:4).

Alternately stated, the goal of catechesis is for each person to become an icon, a living image of God, a person who lives in continual fellowship—communion—with God, reflecting a particular way—the Christ-like way—of knowing and living in the world. (A. Vrame, *The Educating Icon*, 1999, p. 63). This vision of education involves acquiring information but also involves living according to the precepts of that information.

Thus, an Orthodox Christian ought to be well-informed about the rich content of the Orthodox Tradition. Being able to name, to retell, to identify, to list, and more are dimensions of what it means “to know” one’s faith. A Church school program should be able to transmit these concepts to its students. But knowing the Faith also involves being able to appreciate its

content, to consider how it influences one’s life, to participate in it, and to respond to its call of commitment to faith in Jesus Christ and His Church. For example, what is the benefit of reciting the Lord’s Prayer in a classroom setting, and a teacher’s assessment that the student has memorized it, without praying the Lord’s Prayer at home and reflecting on the words themselves?

The real curriculum for learning the Orthodox Faith is the life of the Church as experienced in a dynamic, faith-filled parish. Our education in faith is a lifelong journey. The Department has created its textbook series with this in mind. Concepts become more involved and the number of stories increase as the learner progresses.

Our textbook series is not structured such that it presents all of the information on a single topic at once, never to return to it. Instead, we revisit key topics, e.g., the Divine Liturgy, in an unfolding pattern of discovery for the learner. These topics are presented in new ways based on the theme of the book and student’s maturity. We always hope for the best circumstances—that child attends Church school faithfully, has a well-prepared teacher, and a family that is involved in the life of the Church, takes interest in the

learning process, and reinforces the concepts at home—but this “looping” of crucial topics helps fill any gaps that may occur.

Yet no Church school curriculum can include or teach everything. Any series of published textbooks is merely the first step of learning. Even in the best series, the authors, editors and publishers make choices about what they believe most valuable for learners to achieve in a certain timeframe. Of course, individual parishes and teachers add material, information (e.g., lives of saints and feast days) and activities that fit the needs of their parish’s students and ministries.

Therefore, on our website, we have distilled our textbooks’ objectives, by grade level. Visit the “Resources for Supervisors” section of religiouseducation.org for our specific answers to the perennial question: “What should my child learn in grade X?”

