

The Ancient Church: Theological Education within a Hostile Context

(1 of 3)



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First of all, allow me to say that I am greatly honored to have been invited to deliver this year's Smythe Lectures. Over the many years that I have been connected with CTS, I have looked on the Smythe Lectures as one of the high points of the academic year. Also, a few months ago I was telling one of your colleagues that, as I look at the work of Columbia graduates, I know of no institution that is better preparing its students for the practice of ministry for the church as it exists today. Therefore, I now feel both honored and overwhelmed.

But I am convinced that theological education in the United States, or at least theological education as most of us have conceived it and as traditionally practiced by schools in the Association of Theological Schools, is in crisis. I do not believe that church membership numbers ought to be the final criterion on which to base our judgments, but they may well be indicative of some realities we cannot afford to ignore. If we list the denominations in this country that are declining in numbers, and we list also those that most insist on formal seminary education for their pastors, it is obvious that the two lists practically coincide. The main exception is the Roman Catholic Church, but its growth is entirely due to immigration. So, we must be doing something wrong!

When we look at the history of ministerial education, the first thing to point out is that ancient documents tell us little about ministerial training, although there is much we may infer.

First, there is no doubt that in order to lead worship one had to be able to read. Christian worship on Sunday mornings, which usually lasted several hours, had two parts: the Service of the Word and the Service of the Table. In order to lead in the latter, it was necessary to know at least something about the history of Israel and the work of God in the Gospels, particularly since the person presiding had to lead in the great Eucharistic prayer, in which God was thanked for all the divine mercies, not only in the present, but also from the very beginning of creation.

But in order to preside at the Service of the Word, one had to know more. Certainly, it was necessary to know how to read, since most of the service consisted of Scripture readings. We know that the literacy index in the Roman Empire was low. It is estimated that in the Latin-speaking provinces, the index of literacy was between 5 and 10 percent.¹ But there are also indications that most Church members were women, or men belonging to the lower echelons of society. Except in the very high levels of society, few Greco-Roman women knew how to read. Among slaves and artisans, who did not need to read and in any case would have little use for literacy, illiteracy was the norm. The main exceptions were the slaves who served as tutors for children in wealthy families—the pedagogues—and those merchants and artisans who had to use the rudiments of writing in order to keep their accounts and to sustain the communications necessary for their business. Therefore, there would be few among the members of the early church who knew how to read, and it was from among these few that bishops were elected, since one of the main functions of a bishop was to preside over worship.²

Furthermore, the Service of the Word required not only the reading of Scripture but also its interpretation. Those who had some secular studies, especially in the field of rhetoric, were particularly able to perform these functions, since a goodly part of rhetorical studies was devoted to the interpretation of ancient Greek and Roman poets and other authors in order to make them relevant under clearly different circumstances. The principles of interpretation that were applied to those classical texts in the field of rhetoric were also useful for the interpretation of biblical passages during the Service of the Word.³ Once again, the church had no school where it could teach people how to read, and much less the principles to be applied in interpreting ancient texts. Therefore, most bishops had learned these matters in pagan schools.

While there was a measure of continuity between what was taught in pagan schools and what was taught in church, there was also a radical discontinuity. Pagan rhetoric and hermeneutics were a tool for teaching beliefs and codes of conduct that were in sharp contrast with Christianity. This resulted in the apparent anomaly that, while the church frowned on the schools and what was taught in them, many of its most outstanding leaders—people such as Tertullian, Clement of Alexandria, and Cyprian—attended such schools, and much of their power to lead was based on that education.

Bishops were also the link joining churches among themselves. Since frequent contacts with other bishops had to take place through correspondence, this, too, required that bishops know

how to read and write—or at least that they know the principles of grammar and rhetoric sufficiently well to employ an amanuensis. By 411, in an African synod gathered to condemn Donatism, there was only one bishop who was deemed "ignorant in letters."⁴ It is possible that this did not mean that he was actually illiterate, but simply that he was not learned.

In brief, although there are many indications that a good number of the bishops of the early church were relatively learned people who at least knew how to read, how to interpret texts, and how to sustain correspondence with their colleagues, there is no indication that the Church had any schools for the training of such bishops or pastors.

Even when schools began to appear, they were not intended for the training of pastors. The usual procedure was to elect a bishop whose formal education was limited to that offered by pagan schools and who would then place this education at the service of Christian teaching.

From his correspondence, we know that in the third century Cyprian would examine the candidates to various orders, and these in turn had specific functions. At least some of the presbyters were teachers, and some among the readers were entrusted with the instruction of candidates for baptism. In a letter that Cyprian wrote to the presbyters and deacons under his authority, we also see that he took charge of the training and formation of the clergy under his supervision.⁵ Thus, bishops served both as mentors and as supervisors of other clergy who might eventually become bishops.⁶

Even so, there were already Christian schools. The most remarkable and the best known are the one that Justin Martyr founded in Rome and the famous catechetical school of Alexandria.

Justin's school followed the pattern of the ancient philosophical schools. Justin was convinced that Christianity was "the true philosophy," and his school was therefore devoted to expounding this philosophy. But as far as we know, nobody came to Justin's school in order to prepare for ordination.

The same is true of the famous schools of Alexandria and Antioch.⁷ Already by the year 190 there was in Alexandria a school devoted to Christian studies. This school soon became a center for those wishing to know more about their faith, and even for pagans attracted by Origen's fame. Thus, even though there were some similarities between the school of Alexandria and our modern seminaries, its main purpose was not to prepare pastors but rather to study, clarify and explore the Christian faith. In addition, occasionally some of its teachers were invited to places where there was a theological disagreement or concern, in order to help resolve the matter. There certainly were remarkable leaders who had studied in the school of Alexandria, such as Gregory the Wonderworker, Bishop of Neoceasearea in Pontus. But they had not gone to study in Alexandria in order to become bishops.

Again, those who went to study in Antioch or in Alexandria did not do so in order to prepare to serve as pastors or bishops. We must remember that the first requirement to be a bishop was to be elected by the congregation. Thus, although many of those who studied in these schools did

eventually become pastors or bishops, they did not attend those schools as candidates for the ordained ministry but simply as people interested in Christian truth. Most often bishops were elected first of all on the basis of their piety and character; then, on the basis of their having enough education—both pagan and Christian—to be able, first, to show their orthodoxy and theological ability to their fellow bishops and then, to lead the Service of the Word and well as the Service of the Table. A few, such as Origen's disciple Gregory the Wonderworker and Lucian's disciple Eusebius of Nicomedia, may have been elected because their fellow believers appreciated the learning they had received in Alexandria, in Antioch, or perhaps in a school of lesser renown. But such studies were not a requirement for ordination, nor even a step normally leading to it.

This situation continued long after the conversion of Constantine, so that the usual procedure was to elect a bishop whose formal education was limited to that offered by pagan schools. There are many examples that show this. Ambrose studied theology *after* he was elected. Faced with the unexpected and unsought responsibilities of a bishop, he called on his former tutor, Simplicianus, to lead him in theological matters, and then he read extensively what other Christian writers had produced. Before being ordained, Augustine had written extensively on theology, even though he had no other formal education than what he had received in pagan schools. Basil the Great and Gregory of Nazianzus studied in the Academy of Athens—which was still a center of pagan learning. All these would eventually become influential theologians, but they were never formally students of theology.

Given those circumstances, for several centuries the main venues in which Christian theological education took place were the Service of the Word, of which I have already spoken, and the catechumenate.

The word "catechumenate" comes from "catechesis," which means teaching. It is found as early as Paul's Epistle to the Galatians 6.6: "Let him who is taught the word [in Greek, *ho katechoumenos*; and in Latin, *is qui catechizatur*] share all good things with him who teaches [in Greek, *to katechounti*; and in Latin, *ei qui catechizat*]."8

The catechumenate evolved as the church expanded beyond its original Jewish context and began to make headway in a culture that was hostile to much of Christian teaching and practice. Although the New Testament shows that there was significant opposition to Christianity among those Jews who would not embrace it, the fact remains that both groups shared a common religious and cultural Jewish background. But as the church expanded among the Gentile population, an increasing number of converts did not know the religion of Israel nor the moral demands of the God of Israel and of the Church. Therefore, it became necessary to develop means to make certain that anyone who was baptized understood the significance of that event and had already practiced the Christian way of life for a certain time, so as to know by experience what was required of believers as well as the difficulties to be faced in society by the mere fact of being a Christian and belonging to the Church. Converts had to be taught how to think differently and how to live differently. It was this need that resulted in the catechumenate.

It is not possible to say exactly when the catechumenate emerged. Towards the middle of the second century, Justin Martyr declared that:

declare, and they promise to live according to them, they are instructed first of all so that, with fasting, they may ask God for forgiveness for their earlier sins. And we pray and fast jointly with them. Then we take them to a place where there is water, and they are reborn by the same means of rebirth by which we ourselves were reborn [baptism].⁹

Justin gives no more details. What he says is similar to what we know about the practices of the catechumenate a few decades later: (1) a period of preparation; (2) the support and solidarity of the rest of the Church; and (3) finally baptism itself—a process that normally might take two or more years.¹⁰

If someone expressed the wish to become a Christian and join the Church, that person was asked to give proof of firmness of purpose. Once such proof was given to the satisfaction of the bishop—which might take some time—the person was included among the *audientes*, that is, the auditors or listeners. Such people could and should attend the Service of the Word but were dismissed at the beginning of the Service of the Table, that is, of communion.

When *audientes* had shown the seriousness of their purpose through righteousness of life, love of neighbor, and perseverance in listening to the Word, they were included among the catechumens. Admission into the catechumenate was a formal step, marked with a number of

public rites. Once declared part of the catechumenate, such people did not leave the Service of the Word when the *audientes* were dismissed but remained until a special prayer was raised for them. They were then dismissed, still before the celebration of communion.

They had entered a period of instruction, doctrinal as well as moral and liturgical. At the beginning of that period the emphasis lay on moral practices and faithfulness to the Lord. What was underscored was the practice of the Christian life and the need to be faithful in the midst of the daily social pressures exerted against Christians as well as in the face of persecution, which was always a possibility.

The duration of the catechumenate varied. At least until the fourth century, as attested by the Synod of Elvira in 305, it normally was two years.¹¹ If during that period someone gave signs of not being ready to receive baptism, the catechumenate could be prolonged significantly—or the person could be restored to the rank of the *audientes* until signs were given of being ready to reinitiate the catechumenate.

When the catechumens completed their period of preparation, they were included among the *competentes*—or, in Greek-speaking churches, the *photozomenoi*, that is, those who were in the process of illumination, for baptism was often spoken of as an illumination. These *competentes* then went through a period of special and intense preparation before receiving baptism. Since baptism was normally administered on Easter, that final period of special

preparation in which—as Justin tells us—the entire church prayed and fasted for them is the origin of Lent. During that period, the instruction imparted included doctrinal and liturgical matters and was joined by the practice of a strict discipline. Justin mentions fasting and prayer, but other authors also speak of being silent and abstinence in food as well as in sexual matters. As to the liturgy, they were taught only what was necessary to understand the essence of the baptismal rites in which they were to participate. On matters of doctrine, we fortunately have several ancient writings that help us understand the contents of these instructions.¹²

At least in some churches, the *competentes* then went through a series of seven "scrutinies," which took place before the congregation of those already baptized. In each of these, certain questions were asked and certain instruction received, including the Lord's Prayer and several other aspects of Christian doctrine. The last scrutiny took place on Holy Saturday, and it was part of the rites of baptism, through which the *competentes* finally joined the church.

Even then the process of initiation and teaching of these neophytes continued, for they were now called "infants," for one more week. (Which is why even to these days there are churches whose service for the first Sunday after Easter includes the words of First Peter 2.2: "Like newborn babes, long for the pure spiritual milk.") Finally, on the Sunday after Easter, they set aside the white robes of recently born Christians and received a final instruction about the rites through which they had passed.

The reason for this fairly extensive description of the catechetical process is that, as far as we know, this was the only formal theological education that was required of pastors, and it was also required of every believer. Those to be ordained were not required to have had any further studies—although there is no doubt that most people so elected had continued studying in the years between their baptism and their ordination and would continue studying as they prepared for conducting each Sunday's Service of the Word as well as to direct the catechetical process.

In summary, in the ancient church there was no difference between the biblical and theological training that the laity received and that which was required for ordination.

The decline of the catechumenate began shortly after the conversion of Constantine. For some time, the ancient practices were continued. But by the year 506, two hundred years after the Synod of Elvira had determined that the catechumenate should last two years, another council, gathered in the south of what is now France, limited that period to eighty days. And less than a century later, Gregory the Great reduced it even further to forty days.

There were two main reasons for this. The first was the increasing support that Constantine and most of his successors gave the Church. This led to an explosion in the number of people asking to join the church by baptism. This growth was so rapid that the church was unable to find enough teachers and mentors to take responsibility for the catechetical instruction of the

multitudes seeking baptism. Also, before the time of Constantine most of the catechetical instruction was devoted to preparing candidates to live as Christians in a socially and legally hostile environment. After Constantine, that hostility rapidly waned, and it would then seem that a prolonged catechumenate was no longer necessary.

The second reason leading to the decline of the catechetical system was the Germanic invasions. A century after Constantine the borders of the Western Empire began to collapse. The Germanic conquerors wished to take possession not only of the riches but also of the culture of the Empire they were conquering. Therefore, they rapidly converted to Christianity. But these conversions were so numerous and so rapid—and the new converts so lacking in disciplines of study—that the catechumenate either disappeared or was reduced to a minimum, requiring only that candidates to baptism know the Lord's Prayer and a few other rudiments of the faith.¹³

These two factors together—the conversion of the Empire and its being invaded by Germanic and other peoples—led to a radically different situation. If earlier the church had to insist on the contrast between its teaching and much of Greco-Roman culture and social life, now it became the main preserver and transmitter not only of Christian teaching but also of classic Greco-Roman culture. Through a lengthy and often subtle process of accommodation on both sides, the former enmity between the surrounding culture and the faith of the church was resolved. Since it was only the clergy—or rather, a few among the clergy—who had any

significant education, they became not only the teachers of theology, doctrine, and literature but also advisors to kings and teachers for their children, and often administrators of their kingdoms—which is the reason why to this day we speak of "clerical" work, even though most people who do that sort of work are not clerics.

As the former hostility of the cultural and social context seemed to be overcome, and as the number of converts grew exponentially, the catechumenate was practically abandoned. People had to be baptized with much less preparation than was the case a century earlier. By the next generation, both among the previous residents of the Empire and among the more recent Germanic invaders, most children were born of Christian parents and therefore were baptized prior to any catechetical teaching.

However, even though in general the clergy were better educated than the rest of society, most of those who actually practiced the pastorate, particularly in rural and poor areas, had little or no education.

Soon means began to be developed in response to this new situation in which the cultural context was so supportive of the church that there seemed to be little difference between the two. It is to that subject that I will turn tomorrow.

Yet history must not remain an exercise in narrative curiosity about the past but should also

help us raise questions about the present and the future and begin to suggest answers to those questions. Along those lines, there are three very significant elements of early theological education that should be underscored as possible subjects for our present discussions on theological education.

The first relates to the present-day discussion on the place of "formation" in theological studies. For early Christian writers, at least until well advanced into the Middle Ages, "theology" was not primarily an intellectual discipline. In fact, it is not until the time of Abelard, in the twelfth century, that we find the use of the term "theology" in our present sense as an intellectual discipline. Before that time, seldom does one find the phrase, "the study of theology." One studied Scripture. One studied doctrine. One studied the writings of earlier Christians. All of these contribute to "theology." But one practices, one lives, theology. Theology is a discipline that, while including the intellectual study of Bible, doctrine, and history, also has an affective dimension. It was in this sense that Philo used the term in his famous dictum that "philosophy and knowledge are the handmaids of theology."¹⁴ And it is in that sense that it is used throughout Christian antiquity. In theological studies, the goal was not to master a body of knowledge known as "theo-logy," but to be mastered by the *theos* whose *logos* has been incarnate in Jesus Christ. Having such a God as a master was the only way to survive as faithful believers and as a faithful church in the midst of a hostile context. Thus, theological education did not center on the skills necessary to lead a congregation. Most of those skills, particularly for preaching, were acquired in pagan schools. Theological education and inquiry per se took

three forms: first of all, the catechetical process; secondly, the love of God and the quest for truth that led people to such schools as the one in Alexandria, and Augustine to found in Tagaste his community of prayer and reflection; and thirdly, the study that some bishops such as Ambrose undertook in order to teach their congregations and help them discern the meaning of faithfulness in the context of a hostile environment.

The second point is that the early church had no particular program for the training of clergy. What today we would call "theological education" took place first and foremost in the catechetical process and in the Service of the Word and included the entire body of believers. Schools such as those of Justin in Rome, Clement and Origen in Alexandria, and Lucian in Antioch were not intended to train clergy but rather to serve any who wished to know God better. Obviously, quite a few church leaders had studied in such schools. But such studies did not necessarily, nor even normally, lead to ordination, and therefore, one did not attend them in order to be ordained.

These two points seem to lead us to a much wider understanding of theological education than has become common in the last four centuries. In the understanding of the early church, theological education was not the prerogative of an elite, nor the professional preparation of those destined to preside over the worship and life of the church, but the need and the right of the entire church and of every one of its members. Theological education was not primarily about training and certifying clergy. Theological education was about providing the entire

church with the tools necessary to discern the will of God and to remain faithful in the midst of all the pressures and temptations of a hostile society.

The third point, which is actually at the very heart of what I wish to say these three days, is that an important function of theological education and formation in their wider sense was to enable believers to live as faithful Christians in the midst of hostility. Such an education could count very little on the general educational system of the culture at large. It did make use of what was taught in schools of rhetoric but was very much aware of the need to correct much of that material. The culture at large was not sympathetic to Christian beliefs and way of life. The state presented a constant threat of persecution. It was in that hostile environment that the church developed a catechetical system and a life of worship designed to help believers not only understand their faith but also live and even die for it.

I have already pointed out how things began to change after the conversion of Constantine. From that time on, and well after the Protestant Reformation, theological education took place in the context of a supportive society and culture. But today things are different. Today, while there is not the hostility that existed in the early church, the surrounding society and culture are no longer supportive—or in the best of cases, they are not uniformly supportive. This may have far-reaching consequences for the task of theological education in the coming decades. In this new situation, the practices of the early church may be suggestive of alternatives that should be explored. But that is a subject that must remain for the rest of our time together.

Thank you.

Notes

1. William V. Harris, *Ancient Literacy* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1989), 272.
2. Hermas, whose brother was bishop of Rome towards the middle of the second century, was a slave, although sufficiently learned to write the book that is known now as *The Shepherd*. Although he does not tell us what were his duties as a slave, it is quite likely that he was a pedagogue, or at least an amanuensis for his masters. The status of his brother Pius is not known. Since Hermas was a slave, it is most likely that Pius too was a slave—or, if not, a freedman.
3. Which is why the ancient allegorical interpretations of Scripture we now find strange were perfectly acceptable for those who heard or read them. What these interpreters were doing with the Bible was similar to what pagan orators of the time did with Homer or Hesiod.
4. Harris, *Ancient Literacy*, 320-21.
5. Cyprian tells his presbyters and deacons: "Know therefore that I have ordained Saturus as a reader, and Optatus as a confessor, both of whom, by common agreement, we had been preparing to be part of the clergy, since we have entrusted Saturus more than once with the reading on Easter, and later, as we examined carefully those who were to be readers and the teaching presbyters, we ordained Optatus as a reader to serve among those who instruct catechumens, and we have examined all the qualities that must abide in those that are training for the clergy." *Ep.* 21.
6. As for the bishops themselves, no one supervised their instruction, although we do know that by the middle of the second century it was customary that the person who was elected to serve as bishop of a community would write and share with his prospective colleagues a declaration of faith sufficiently detailed to express his main beliefs and theology, and that these other bishops in nearby cities had the authority to determine whether the one who had been elected had the necessary knowledge and orthodoxy to fulfill faithfully the tasks that would be entrusted to him. In that case, several of those neighboring bishops would take part in the ordination of the new bishop, thus giving witness to their theological agreement with him. But, although there was this emphasis on the orthodoxy and learning of prospective pastors, there were no schools devoted to their training.
7. There was a similar school in Antioch, under the leadership of Lucian of Antioch. And again, although its studies were not intended to lead to ordination, this school, too, produced several leaders for the church—leaders such as Arius and those supporters whom he called his "fellow Lucianists."
8. The same verb appears in Luke 1.4, where Luke refers to those things on which Theophilus "have been informed" [catechized], in First Corinthians 14.19, where Paul declares that he would rather teach [catechize] than speak in tongues, and in Acts 18.25, where we are told that Apollos who was "instructed [catechized] in the way of the Lord."
9. *I Apol.* 61.
10. Toward the end of the second century, Tertullian distinguished between orthodox Christians and heretics, among other things, by declaring that "among them [that is, among heretics] one cannot tell the difference

between a catechumen and a believer, for they make no such distinction." *De praes. haer.* 41.

11. In 305, the Synod of Elvira—a city now in ruins, near Granada—speaks of two years, and the same duration appears in other ancient sources. There are, however, complex textual matters regarding the Synod of Elvira, and therefore it is possible that this canon is somewhat later.

12. Among them the most important is the Catechesis of Cyril of Jerusalem. The Catechesis—also known as Catechetical Lectures—of Cyril are a body of twenty-three lectures. The first eighteen are addressed to the *competentes*, or *photozismenoi*, in preparation for their baptism. The other five are more detailed explanations of the sacraments, particularly communion. The most interesting feature of these lectures is that they show to what extent it was thought that the teachings of the Church were too important to be imparted to anyone. The lectures begin with a clear indication of who the audience is: "You already have on you an aroma of blessing, for you are about to be illumined" (*Procatechesis*, 1). But then, near the end of the prologue, Cyril includes the following warning: "These catechetical lectures addressed to the *photozismenoi* you may share with candidates for baptism or with believers who have been baptized. But do not give them to all, neither catechumens nor any who have not been baptized. If you do so, you will be responsible before the Lord. And if you copy them, include this warning at the beginning, as in the very presence of the Lord" (*Ibid.*, 17).

13. In passing, it may be important to note that the presence of the various Germanic nations was the main reason why Latin persisted as the common language of study, trade, and liturgy long after it became a dead language: it was the only means of communication among governments, traders, and scholars.

14. See Yves M.J. Congar, *A History of Theology* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1968), 54.