

SVS 2016 Graduation Speech

Your Beatitude, venerable hierarchs, fathers, brothers and sisters in Christ, Christ is risen! It is an honor for me to stand before you one last time as, together with this year's graduating class, I prepare to leave the cocoon that is St Vladimir's.

For most of you, that has been for the last two or three years; for me, it has been 29 years on the faculty, but 57 years if you count from the time I arrived in New York with my family in 1959, when my father first came from France to teach at the seminary. The seminary at that time was located on Broadway, on the upper west side of Manhattan, near Columbia University and across the street from Union Theological Seminary. Students shared tiny, dark apartments, cooked for themselves, and walked across Broadway to classrooms at Union. Only a few of the students were married, and there was no married housing, so married students had to fend for themselves in the Manhattan housing market. The chapel was the living room of a three-bedroom apartment, and the bedrooms housed the library. It was in that small chapel that my brother and I, then 8 and 9 years old, served as altar boys, with Fr Schmemmann breaking up our occasional squabbles. The faculty and their families lived in apartments in the same building. St Vladimir's was a small, fragile institution then, and, despite our more expansive facilities today, it remains small and fragile today.

Now speakers at graduation ceremonies usually come from outside the institution. They tell the graduating students how great and smart they all are, how wonderful the institution is, what a great legacy they bear, and challenge them to go out and change the world. I, however, do not come from outside the seminary. I have an intimate knowledge of the institution going back for many decades, and I have come to know most of you quite well over the past two or three years. So perhaps I should end right now and wish you all Godspeed!

As I was pondering what to say to you today, the following passage from St Paul's second letter to the Corinthians came to mind:

And to keep me from being too elated by the abundance of revelations, a thorn was given me in the flesh, a messenger of Satan, to harass me, to keep me from being too elated. Three times I besought the Lord about this, that it should leave me; but he said to me: "My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness." I will all the more gladly boast of my weaknesses, that the power of Christ may rest upon me. For the sake of Christ, then, I am content with weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, and calamities; for when I am weak, then I am strong. (2 Cor. 12: 7-10)

Biblical scholars continue to speculate about the nature of that thorn in Paul's side, but for us in the Church the meaning is absolutely clear. That thorn in the side, that weakness, affects not just every individual Christian, but also every church institution. One has but to look at recent crises in our various Orthodox churches and jurisdictions, or read any book on church history, to see the truth of this. Yet, as St Paul affirms, God accomplishes his work not just despite, but through, our weakness.

This is not to say that you graduates and continuing students do not stand on very tall shoulders, and not just those of Fr. John Behr and Professor Peter Bouteneff. The legacy of St Vladimir's has always been connected with the names of a trinity of its deans, Fathers Florovsky, Schmemmann, and Meyendorff, all major figures in 20th-century Orthodoxy. It is they who put the seminary on the map and arguably dragged the Orthodox Church out of its ghettoized existence and into conversation with the modern world.

Yet, while these three had much in common in terms of education, culture, and ecclesial vision, their personalities and approaches could not have been more different. Few people today, for example, know that, at the end of the 1954-1955 academic year, Fr Florovsky, a brilliant scholar, but a man who did not get along well with those he considered his inferiors, fired Fr Schmemmann, who then left for his summer home in

Canada essentially jobless and homeless. In the stormy summer that followed, Florovsky was himself removed as Dean and resigned his faculty position, and Schmemmann was rehired and installed as Acting Dean. It was not until 1962, after the seminary had moved to its present location here in Crestwood, that he was appointed Dean. The clash between them was not surprising: Florovsky was the consummate scholar, not a team player, and had little interest or patience for dealing with pastoral issues, while Schmemmann was, first and foremost, a pastor. And, though his training was primarily in church history, his interest shifted early in his career to liturgical theology, a discipline in which theology intersects with the day-to-day experience of Orthodox Christians. As is evident in his posthumously published *Journals*, Fr Alexander was allergic to purely academic pursuits and often said that these were better left to the “Germans” (ironic given his own, Baltic German roots and name, and the fact that the only other “German” on the faculty was Fr John Meyendorff!). Hence also his allergy to footnotes – they are sparse in his many books, and were typically added for show only after had completed writing. I have known a few students here who do much the same. Yet the clash between Florovsky and Schmemmann takes nothing away from their accomplishments or significance.

While the kind of dramatic clash that happened between Frs Florovsky and Schmemmann did not occur again, the seminary remained a very diverse place. When I enrolled at St Vladimir’s in the fall of 1972, the three main figures here were Frs Schmemmann and Meyendorff, together with Serge Verhovskoy, Professor of Dogmatic Theology. Verhovskoy, like Schmemmann and Meyendorff, was educated at St Sergius Theological Institute in Paris, where he also taught until his arrival to America in 1952. From 1955 until his retirement in 1981, he served as the seminary’s Provost. His academic interest lay primarily in the fields of philosophy and ethics, and he insisted that all seminary students study dogmatic theology during all six semesters of the MDiv program. In true scholastic fashion, his lectures began with “The Problem of God,” and followed the classical 19th-century Russian manual theology curriculum.

Since he suspected the orthodoxy of his colleagues, in his lectures he tried to cover every subject, implicitly, and sometimes openly, but always with a certain sense of humor, correcting perceived deficiencies in the teaching of his colleagues. I admit that I was not always fully awake during his lectures – I would sit in the back of the room, my head resting against the wall, squarely behind a certain Serbian classmate who had played football in college and was therefore sufficiently large to conceal me from the view of the professor. I learned the very useful skill of taking notes in my sleep: whenever he wanted to emphasize a point, he would lower the pitch of his voice (as is characteristic of Russian speakers), and this would be my signal to wake up and write down what he said, as it would surely show up on the final examination. His students also quickly learned the trick of asking a provocative question during class: this would raise his suspicions about your orthodoxy – and would guarantee that he would question you about exactly that particular point during the oral final examinations he always gave. And while he attended church faithfully, he had little use for either liturgics or liturgical theology, and he would compare church services to a “Kitaiskii tsirk,” a “Chinese circus” – lots of people in fancy costumes running around in circles. And when, shortly after he retired, I told him that I would be pursuing a doctorate in liturgy, he rolled his eyes and never talked to me again. I am sure he thought I was throwing my life away.

The diversity of the faculty was not lost on the students, who rarely missed the opportunity, during the socially tumultuous 60s and 70s, to goad professors into criticizing each other. At the regular talent shows at Christmas time or before Great Lent, students would roast faculty members – the most popular were skits dramatizing faculty meetings. Several of these were Oscar-worthy performances. And for several years in that era, students published a satirical journal called “Aha, Aha” – I believe copies may still be found in the library, probably under lock and key. But this was all in good fun, and it did not usually cross boundaries of mutual respect and decency. The seminary in those days was very much a small, “mom and pop” outfit, and it was a very human

institution, operating in a family style that reflected the colorful personalities of its leaders.

The personages I have just mentioned were a diverse group indeed. Their personalities and their approaches varied greatly, and at times they clashed, though never as dramatically as in 1955. Each had strengths, and each had flaws. They are long gone from among us, though in various ways they survive, for some of us in our memories, but for most of us through their writings and the work of their successors.

I assure you that today's seminary faculty is every bit as diverse and colorful as it was in those days, in terms of both approach and personality, of strengths and weaknesses. But I will let you younger faculty and graduating students tell that story when I am gone. And the fiscal challenges the seminary faces today, which may endanger its future, certainly reflect the continued fragility of the institution.

So what does all this mean for those of us who are now preparing to move on to the next stage of our lives? I will make four brief points – I also took homiletics at seminary and was taught to keep it short and simple.

First of all, you are all human, foibles and all. You all have that thorn in your side, be it due to your upbringing, to your various temptations and passions, to your egos, or simply to your own limitations. In this way, you are little different from fallen Adam and Eve, from all the figures in the Old Testament, from the apostles who, as we heard recently during Holy Week, ran away and abandoned Christ in His time of trial. We all fall short, we all have weaknesses – but if we have faith, God works through that weakness and shows his glory – and keeps us from being too arrogant or proud.

Second, avoid easy, one-sided answers or solutions. So often we are asked to provide simple answers: what is **the** Orthodox understanding about this or that? Both Frs Schmemmann and Meyendorff spoke often

about the dangers of reducing Orthodoxy to only one of its aspects, whether to dogma, to the canons, to morality, to liturgy, or to our own notion of what Orthodoxy should be. And how often we Orthodox today seek recourse to what we call “the Fathers,” or “the patristic tradition,” as if the Fathers all spoke with one voice and had immediate answers to all our contemporary questions and challenges. The Fathers were a rowdy group, and if you were able to put them all into one room, sparks would surely fly. It was Fr Florovsky who coined the phrase about “having the mind of the Fathers,” and he is often credited with inaugurating what has come to be called the “neo-patristic synthesis.” For him, however, this did not mean searching through patristic writings to find suitable proof texts that one could then pull out of a hat to answer any question. No, for him it meant responding faithfully and creatively to the questions that are being posed to us **today**, using a language and categories that contemporary humanity can receive and grasp. This, I believe, is what St Vladimir’s Seminary has always stood for, and if we have been able to transmit that ethos to you, then we have done our job.

Third, be prepared for difficulties and troubles. As I can testify for my own experience, life will not unfold the way you planned it. You may get fired, as Fathers Schmemmann and Florovsky were. You will inevitably face tragedies, whether in your parishes, in the communities where you will live, or your own family life. As hard as we at the seminary may have tried, we could not have prepared you adequately for the challenges and difficulties you will face. The examinations you have just passed, the theses you have just completed, were all done in the cocoon of a safe environment. Whether you got an A or a C ultimately matters little. The real test, the one that counts, still lies ahead of you – and failure comes at the cost of real lives, whether your own or those of the people entrusted to your care.

Finally, live your lives with joy! The gospel we proclaim is the good news to the whole world, to all of creation. Let that joy we experienced just two weeks ago on Pascha night permeate every moment of your life. In every sermon you preach, in every lesson you teach, proclaim that

Christ is risen, that death has been defeated. Yes, there will be the Cross, there will be suffering; and you will be called to stand with those who suffer and to suffer yourself. But if you have deep within yourself the firm conviction that the victory has been won – then, and only then, will you be able to transmit that conviction to others. It is not simply a matter of words, but of how you live every moment of your life. It is not something that can be faked. Then, with St Paul, you will be able to say:

For the sake of Christ, then, I am content with weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, and calamities; for when I am weak, then I am strong. (2 Cor 12:10)

So, as I speak before you one last time as a professor at this small, fragile, but nevertheless glorious, institution, I want to thank you with all my heart. I have learned so much from you, both from my colleagues on the faculty and from the many students I have encountered in the classroom over the past 29 years. Thank you also to the trustees and all the supporters of this school – we live through your prayers, as well as your checkbooks. May God grant all of you, and this seminary, many years!

CHRIST IS RISEN!