

# Ontology Matters in Education

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Christian Schools Canada Conference  
September 18-20, 2014, Victoria, BC

A meditation on the possibility  
and impossibility of teaching  
true existence.

# What we will speak about here...

Everything we will speak about concerns just this point: what form of BEING do we wish for our students/children?

Our anthropology is based on our theology.

We are teaching our students/children so that they develop not merely into individuals well-adjusted for earthly life in society, but into eternal persons...not beings who merely exist, or survive, but who live, who truly are.

Sister Magdalen, St. John Monastery, Essex, England

# Why is this question important?

Our children are bereft of love, joy, peace, communion.

Our children are created for love, joy, peace, communion.

Our culture, our schools are wombs that form the being of children more effectively than they teach children information.

Our children are losing their sight, their hearing, their touch, their faith, their life.

Our educators are losing hope and efficacy.

How would you complete this sentence keeping in mind the kind of being/existence you hope for your students/children?

I \_\_\_\_\_, therefore I am.

*How is your educational practice completing this sentence for your students?*

# How does our culture/school system complete this sentence?

I work, therefore I am.

I choose, therefore I am.

I consume, therefore I am.

I win/I am successful, therefore I am.

I am powerful, therefore I am.

I am different, therefore I am.

I have a passion, therefore I am.

I feel, therefore I am.

I think, therefore I am.

I am useful, therefore I am.



# Imaginary paradises/real hells

What am I supposed to do with the success and happiness that they wish and promise me when it does not conquer death? It is like saying to a child, "Do your work with care and a sense of honour, and you'll build a wonderful coffin so that you can have a splendid funeral. The logic of this world is its own coffin...Let all the failures come, just as long as death is conquered and this failed life of mine overflows even now with eternity.

Arch. Vasileios in *Thunderbolt of Ever-Living Fire*

We must prefer real hell to an imaginary paradise. Simone Weil

Do not labour for the food that perishes, but for the food that endures to everlasting life, which the Son of Man will give you...He who comes down from heaven and gives life to the world. (John 6: 27, 29)

# What is True about being?

And the Child grew and became strong in spirit, filled with wisdom; and the grace of God was upon Him. (Luke 2:40)

And Jesus increased in wisdom and stature, and in favour with God and men. (Luke 2:52)

He must increase, but I must decrease. (St. John the Forerunner)

We are children of God and it is not yet revealed what we shall be, but we know that when He is revealed, we shall be like Him... (1 John 3:2)

The first man Adam became a living being. The last Adam became a living Spirit.  
(1 Cor 15:45)

*From being to well-being (with God and men) to eternal being.*

# Eternal Being

...as man is fed heavenly food and joy; the resulting blessing is that man himself becomes Christ by grace. Then he rejoices because he comprehends that his existence, his life, and his words can feed and strengthen others. He understands that his presence and his words are food to be eaten, and drink to be consumed in order to satisfy and quench the thirst of another who is unknown and a stranger, who suffers and grieves, to quench the thirst of this true, precious, actual self, his entire being. This is the goal of life: to reach maturity in order to give and offer oneself to others.

Arch. Vasileios in *Thunderbolt of Everliving Fire*

*“You give them something to eat.”* Mark 6:37

# Our true being...eternal being

I love, therefore I am. I am loved, therefore I am.

I commune/participate, therefore I am.

I suffer, therefore I am.

I offer myself freely, therefore I am.

I am unique and unrepeatable, therefore I am.

I am a child of God, therefore I am.

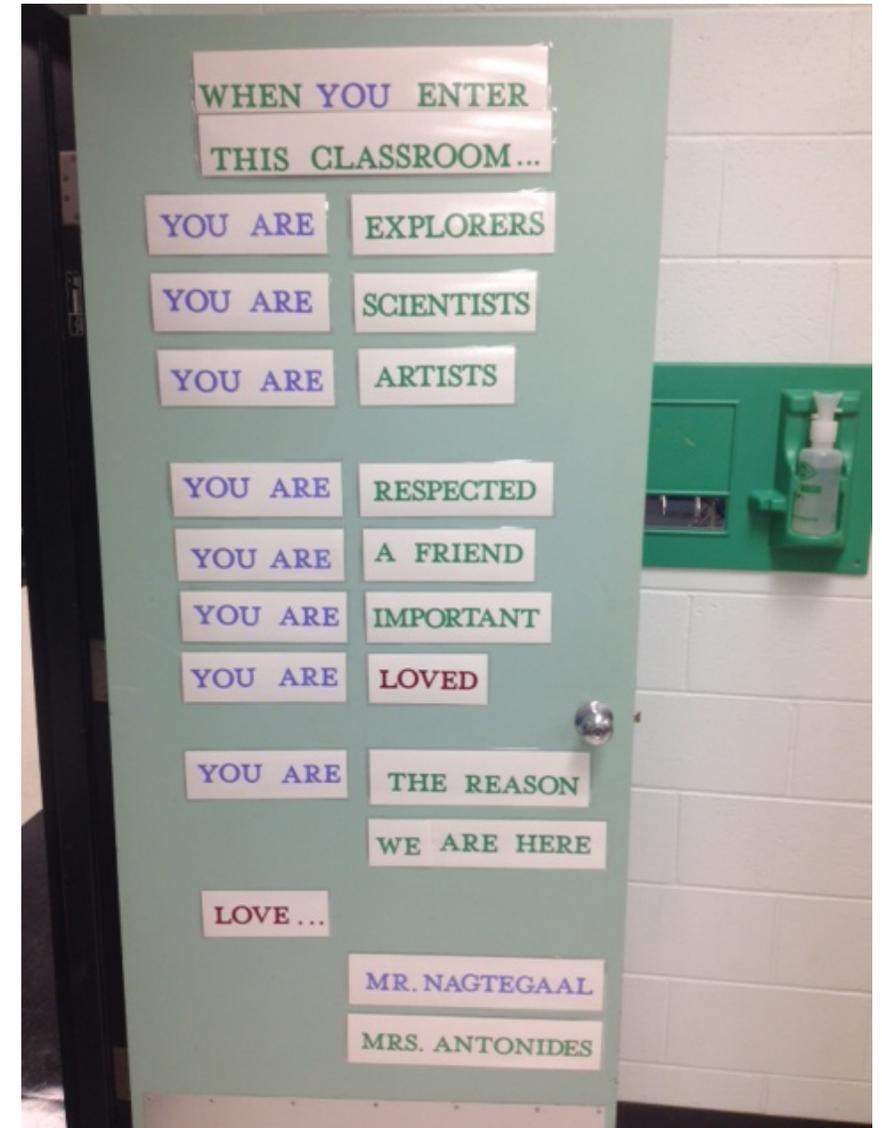
I am a guest, therefore I am.

I am traditioned, therefore I am.

I am food and drink for others, therefore I am.

Because of you/You, therefore I am.

*Glory to You for your eternity in this fleeting world.*



# Integral Life

Life is not separated from spiritual life...Grace comes into the whole man. Peace into all his thoughts. Calm into his being. Rest into his inmost self. Light within and all around. And this light fills the whole creation; it reveals all things. Wave comes upon wave of joy, faith, and hope. Faith is ceaselessly taking flesh; you feel that in Him we live and move and have our being.

Arch. Vasileios in *Thunderbolt of Everliving Fire*)

To be and not to seem.

# Abundant Life

I came that you might have life and have it abundantly.  
For with you is the fountain of life...  
In Your light we see light. (Ps. 36)

An enriched ontology leads to an enriched epistemology.

He who believes in Me, as the Scripture has said,  
out of his heart will flow rivers of living water. (John 7:38)

*Surely man goes about as a shadow!*

*Surely for naught they are in turmoil!*

*Man heaps up treasures and knows not for whom he gathers them!*

*And now, for what do I wait? Is it not the Lord? Even my existence is from you.*

*For I am you passing guest, a sojourner, like all my fathers*

*Spare me, that I may find the place of refreshment before I depart and be no more.*

*(Ps. 39)*



# Communion Life

Christ does not save you individually, in isolation, apart from everyone else. You do not find yourself alive in the middle of a cemetery or morgue...That is not the gift of life but a death sentence... Christ gives man the possibility of knowing God in a way worthy of God, of seeing, of feeling His presence as a light that enlightens and comforts every man coming into the world...to open their eyes (ears, tongues), to sanctify them in both soul and body; to bestow on them the ancient beauty and adoption as sons; to make man a child of God, a free person, a priest of creation.

Arch. Vasileios in *Thunderbolt of Ever-living Fire*

*The eye cannot say to the hand, I have no need of you. (1 Cor. 12:21)*

Can he enter a second time  
into his mother's womb?

Nicodemus

# Can being be “taught”? Can it be healed?

Born of water and spirit. (John 3:4)

God alone is the author/teacher of wisdom. (Baruch 3)

In His light, we see light. (Ps. 36)

God fashions us. God forms us in the womb. (Psalm 139)

No one knows the things of God except the Spirit of God.

And they shall all be taught by God. (John 6:45)

I planted, Apollos watered, but God gave the increase. So then neither he who plants is anything, nor he who waters, but God who gives the increase...For we are God's fellow workers... (1 Cor. 3:6-9)

# Ontological Brilliance

I am the light of the world.  
You are the light of the world.



A pearl is born from a wound  
made in the body of a shellfish  
that lives in the  
depths of the sea.

Arch. Vasileios in *Thunderbolt of Ever-living Fire*



# Give blood, receive Spirit.

St. Anatoly in *Letters to Nuns*

Become visibly what we are in God's thoughts.

A true theologian is one who prays.

# The main thing is prayer.

St. Theophan

Like a swan you swim across the quiet of my heart and make it fruitful.

St. John Climacus



Oh that I could be at peace and  
thousands around me be saved.

St. Seraphim

Acquire the one thing necessary – The Holy Spirit.

Enter into your cell and your cell will teach you everything. St. Basil

# Did our hearts not burn within us?

Shine with goodness and truth.

The perfection of the perfect is unending.



Truth cannot exist separate  
from love.

Nor can it be understood.

Examine the use of  
your freedom.

In what spirit did you offer yourself as a teacher today?

Did you impose or invite?

# Seven pieces of advice

In generosity and helping others be like the river.

In compassion and grace be like the sun.

In concealing other's faults be like the night.

In anger and fury be like the dead.

In modesty and humility be like the soil.

In tolerance be like the ocean.

Either appear as you are, or: be as you appear.

Rumi

# Freedom and Hospitality

# Glory to you for calling me into being.

I was born a weak, defenceless child, but your angel spread his wings over my cradle to defend me. From birth until now your love has illumined my path, and has wondrously guided me towards the light of eternity; from birth until now the generous gifts of your providence have been marvelously showered upon me. I give you thanks, with all who have come to know you, who call upon your name.

Fr. Gregory Petrov in *Akathist, Glory to God for All Things*

Instead of defining others,  
we let them appear  
to us as ever new.

Henri Nouwen in *With Open Hands*

What does a child do in a mother's womb?

My joy!

St. Silouan

Flowers do not open in the  
icy winds of winter...

Arch. Vasileios in *Thunderbolt of Ever-living Fire*



# We were gentle among you.

St. Paul

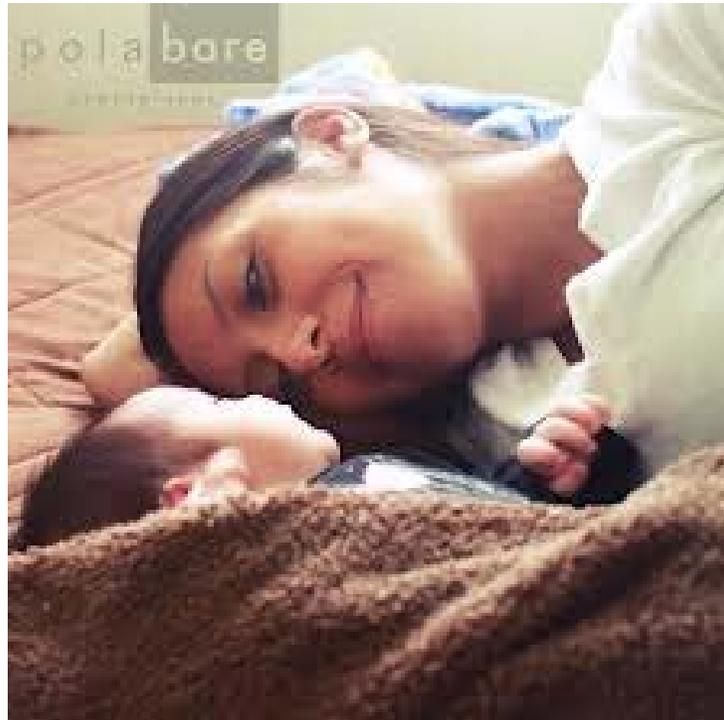
As we draw near to a Saint we feel that he loves us. He does not take advantage of us. Beside him we find a welcoming space, an endless infinity and a warmth. So then we throw down our arms and stop resisting.

Arch. Vasileios in *Thunderbolt of Ever-living Fire*

Our name is safe in God's  
mouth.

Our student's names should be safe in our mouths.

Our gaze will lead us.



Change the paradigm of punishment and reward.



# Open the motivation conversation.

It is oversimplified.

The door to happiness opens outward. (Kierkegaard)

# Time and Place

Love brings the eternal into time  
and makes all places paradise.

Arch. Vasileios in *Thunderbolt of Ever-living Fire*



Where you are not there is only  
emptiness: hearts are smitten  
with sadness.

Fr. Gregory Petrov in *Akathist, Glory to God for All Things*



Fix in your mind the remembrance that God is everywhere, both outside you and within, and never be separated from this remembrance.  
St. Theophan



There is profound wisdom  
which is manifested in the way  
life is organized, in the way the  
whole space has been shaped.

Sr. Michaela



How lovely are your dwelling  
places, O Lord of hosts!

My soul longs and faints for your courts.

(Ps. 84)



# Time, not our time.

From one man he made every nation of men, that they should inhabit the whole earth; and he determined the times set for them and the exact places where they should live. God did this so that men would seek him and perhaps reach out for him and find him, though he is not far from each one of us. “For in him we live and move and have our being.” As some of your own poets have said, “We are his offspring.” (Acts 17:26-28)

*Yours is the day, yours also the night.*

# The violence of speed, activism and overwork.

*“the frenzy of our activism neutralizes our work for peace. It destroys our inner capacity for peace. It destroys the fruitfulness of our work, because it kills the root of inner wisdom which makes work fruitful.”*

Thomas Merton

The routine is getting to us, we  
forget we are caring for souls.

We live our lives as thrown stones.

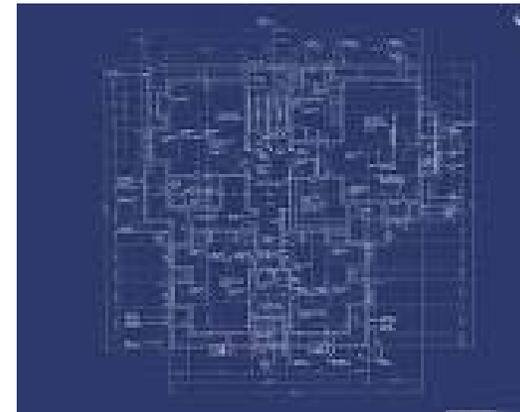




# Sketches, not blueprints

If the Lord wills, we will live and also do  
this or that.

James 4:15



True understanding dawns,  
emerges, flowers...



Begin with prayer, continue with  
hope, end with thanksgiving.

St. Theophan

We are not God. Time is His gift. He comes to us in time.

# Stillness and Presence

Silence, strange as it may seem,  
has become the disturbance.

Henri Nouwen in *With Open Hands*

Less words, more silence, mindfulness, contemplation, "...wise passiveness, alert, alive, and very awake state...a loving experiential awareness of God, seeing everything against the background of eternity, an enlargement of the heart; a long, loving look at the real."

Tessa Bielecki in *Speaking of Silence*



We don't teach children what to do when they are alone.

Think of it: all that speech pouring down, selling nothing, judging nobody, drenching the thick mulch of dead leaves, soaking the trees...What a thing it is to sit absolutely alone, in the forest at night, cherished by this wonderful, unintelligible, perfectly innocent speech, the most comforting speech in the world, the talk that rain makes by itself....It is the voice of the present moment, the present festival. Thomas Merton in *When the Trees Say Nothing*

But in the heart, in the presence  
of Christ, there is light and  
peace and stillness.

The heart sings, Alleluia!

Fr. Gregory Petrov in *Akathist, Glory to God for all Things*



They say an angel flies  
by every time there is a  
moment of silence.

Russian Saying



There emerges the mastery  
of the gentle hand.

Henri Nouwen in *With Open Hands*

*There is another teacher in the room. One we can hear in 1000 places  
and can illumine 1000 places within us.*



# The word is not the thing.

It is true that in the church we have a catechesis of words, but we are brought to life by the silent grace which is eloquent....I want to hear words of quiet since I have had enough of all these beautiful words.

Arch. Vasileios in *The Thunderbolt of Ever-Living Fire*

No, that is not God. That is a butterfly caught in a spider's web.

Shusaku Endo in *Silence*

# This is the Kairos say the stars.

Thomas Merton in *When the Trees Say Nothing*

The time for salvation is now.



# Mindfulness, attention, posture

The Lord has been mindful of us; he has blessed us. (Ps 115)

Praying with our eyes open.

God comes to us disguised by our life. (Richard Rohr in *Breathing Underwater*)

# Beauty and Reverence

# Glory to you, showing me the beauty of the universe.



Spreading out before me heaven and earth,  
like the pages in a book of eternal wisdom.

It is the Holy Spirit who makes us find joy in each flower.

Fr. Gregory Petrov in *Akathist, Glory to God for all Things*

Glory to you: on my knees,  
I kiss the traces of your  
unseen hand.

Fr. Gregory Petrov in *Akathist, Glory to God for all Things*

The praying person looks on the world with compassion, penetrates its hidden meaning and calls it to an always deeper conversion.

Henri Nouwen in *With Open Hands*

At times I can be converted  
by a grasshopper.

Richard Rohr in *Breathing Underwater*

*Marvelous are Your works, and my soul knows it in a manner beyond  
understanding. (Ps 139)*



Take off your shoes...  
See things as they are...  
Know as we are known...  
Hear the voice of God.

The heavens are telling the glory of God; and the firmament proclaims  
His handiwork.

Day to day pours forth speech and night to night declares knowledge.

There are no tongues or words in which their voices are not heard.

Their proclamation has gone out into all the earth and their words to  
the ends of the universe.

(Psalm 19)

# The Moor (R.S. Thomas)

It was like a church to me.  
I entered it on soft foot,  
Breath held like a cap in the hand.  
It was quiet.  
What God was there made Himself  
felt,  
Not listened to, in clean colours that  
brought a moistening of the eye,  
In movement of the wind over grass.

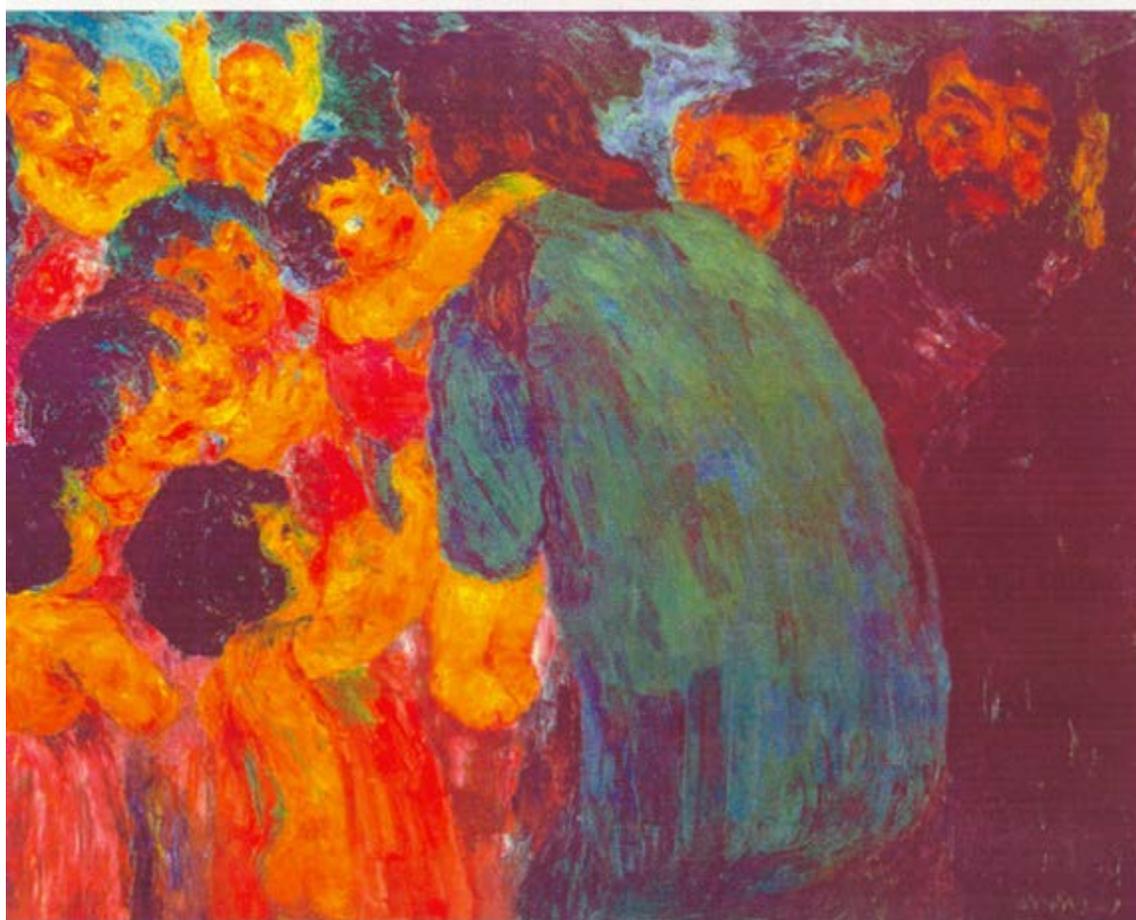
There were not prayers said. But  
stillness  
Of the heart's passions—that was  
praise  
Enough; and the mind's cession  
Of its kingdom.  
I walked on,  
Simple and poor, while the air  
crumbled  
And broke on me generously as  
bread.

# Communion, Simplicity, Gratitude, Traditioning, Creating, Offering...

An enriched ontology leads to an enriched epistemology.

# Continuing the meditation

What have you been reflecting on as I have been talking?



Then he took a little child and set him in the midst of them. And when He had taken him in His arms, He said to them whoever receives one of these little children in My name receives Me...But whoever causes one of these little ones to stumble...