

The Praxis of CrossRoad

Ann Bezzerides

Checking Facebook recently, I noticed the CrossRoad summer institute mentioned in a note, “25 things about me,” by a CrossRoad alumna from 2005. The note included this alumna’s desire to learn guitar, her love for Greek dancing, and her college concentration in Peace and Conflict Studies. Her eighth point said the following:

CrossRoad is still, to this day, the best experience of my life. It taught me the beauty of the Orthodox faith in word, belief and practice. I am so blessed to have participated in it and value everything it has taught me. I am still touched by the people and things I learned there, and I am sure that lasting friendships and foundations in my Orthodox faith will last me a lifetime.

This kind of statement suggests that CrossRoad is doing something important—something that makes a CrossRoad alum, four years after the program, say unprompted that it had a profound influence on the “friendships and foundations” of her Orthodox Christian faith. While we will never in this life know the true impact of CrossRoad—for it is only in the next life that we discover whom our Lord will place with the sheep or the goats—we pray that this student’s remark is a sign that CrossRoad has served as water for the seeds of the Gospel. (For “I planted, Apollos watered, but God gave the increase,” 1 Corinthians 3:6.)

So what does CrossRoad do—what is its educational praxis—that leads so many of its alumni to call it “life-changing”?

CrossRoad is a ten-day summer program for high school juniors and seniors held on the campus of Hellenic College in Brookline, Massachusetts. It began through a generous grant from the Lilly Endowment for “the theological exploration of vocation,” and in our promotional literature we explain that the program “helps students match their God-given talents with the needs of the world.” We call it an “institute” instead



of a “camp” because it is held on a college campus and has a strong academic component—in fact, students must submit their high school transcripts when they apply. It has had such overwhelming interest that after just four years, CrossRoad doubled to two sessions, each with thirty participants. Mary Long, in the following article, shares her experience as part of the first staff team and explains the way the program revolves around vocation. Here are a few foundational aspects of the educational praxis of CrossRoad and its vocational focus:

HEARING THE WHOLE GOSPEL

To know the history of Christian education in the United States is to become aware of a tension—a tension between a concept of *nurture in faith* and an idea of *kerygmatic proclamation of the faith*. (For more on this history, see Mary Boys, *Educating in Faith*.) One strand of educators believed that we should simply nurture children in faith, raise them in Christian communities, and in this context children would become Christians. Another strand believed almost the opposite: children should be kept more or less in the dark about things of the faith so that, in their adolescent years, they can become fully aware of their own sinfulness. At this point they can hear a dynamic proclamation of Gospel and have a full-fledged conversion experience.



As Orthodox Christians, we believe both. We baptize infants because we believe a Christian community can and should nurture faith. On the other hand, some of the best preaching in the Patristic era, teaching that is foundational for our theology, was geared toward converting reasoning adults. The lives of the saints have stories of both: the child who from his youth has the call to ministry (e.g., St. Athanasius), and the sinner who has a remarkable conversion experience as an adult (e.g., St. Mary of Egypt).

CrossRoad is structured with both in mind. Teenagers are interested in CrossRoad because, most often, their parish communities and families have nurtured them in their faith, providing remarkable examples and good teaching within the context of our beautiful liturgical life. This leads them to want more.

But then, we all need to hear the Gospel as if we've never heard it before—to be struck by the weight of our own sin and the realization that Christ died for us, first among sinners, and rose in a triumphant victory over death, offering us eternal life. My seminary professors convinced me that the function of every sermon is to preach the Gospel in a fresh way, in the way that the congregation members need to hear it for their particular time and place. If this is critical for adults, then it is even more so for teenagers, who are making deci-

sions that impact the rest of their lives. In short, kerygmatic proclamation of the Gospel is the purpose of CrossRoad. The staff knows that its mission is *to inspire high school juniors and seniors that the way of Christ is the road of the Cross, for in Him we find direction, meaning, hope, love and answers*. “We preach Christ crucified” (1 Corinthians 1:23).

INQUIRING MINDS

CrossRoad places serious value on theology. Too often in parish life we still give high-school youth the fifth-grade answers to questions about the faith. But unless we give teenagers “thick” answers, we risk stunting their spiritual development. Teenagers need to be invited to learn the vibrant challenge of understanding and proclaiming the true faith—that Christianity is not a gospel of niceness or a set of moral rules and liturgical rites, but a radical call to become a *doulos tou theou*, a servant of Christ, to love God and the neighbor. Working out the contours of this love as one's vocation in life takes pursuing Christ, reading and hearing His Word, allowing ourselves to be formed by the liturgical services, knowing our doctrine about Christ, studying the Church history that got us to this doctrine, and more. This knowledge keeps us both humble and steadfast, helping us discern our vocation and occupation with wisdom.

This is not knowledge for the sake of knowledge, but knowledge for the sake of true love. We become servants of Christ through this pursuit, allowing Him to stir our hearts to goodness, truth and wisdom, and then we walk in His way. CrossRoad introduces youth to studying Orthodox theology so that they have some foundational “theological literacy” that will invite a lifelong pursuit.

LIVING ORTHODOXY

CrossRoad exposes participants to one of the most beautiful things about Orthodox Christianity—that the one true faith finds its distinct expression in each particular culture that accepts it. The United States is blessed to have immigrants from a magnificent variety of traditionally Orthodox cultures. CrossRoad draws on the Orthodox diversity in Boston by taking participants to vespers services of many different jurisdictions. Students learn that Orthodoxy is broader than they might have previously conceived it to be, and they learn to appreciate the beauty in the difference. These visits are important not just to demonstrate the universality of Orthodoxy, but also to serve a very practical purpose. When adolescents move away from home for college or work, they will often stop

From CrossRoad Participants

- “We as juniors are at a crossroad in our life. From here on out, our actions and our decisions are going to affect the rest of our lives. . . . When we graduate we have a big decision to make. When we leave for college, no one will be forcing us to go to church, or to make the right choices—we will have almost complete freedom. It is now at this point in our lives that we make the decision to have Christ and the faith be an integral part of our lives.”
- “It only seems fitting that we, being made through Christ, work for Him as well as with Him. The thing that is so big about this is because we are called by Christ to work to His glory for our salvation. We do this through the various gifts which He has given each of us according to measure. We have a calling and in each of us a responsibility.”
- “I’m at a crossroad in my life; I have so many options. What am I to do? I can’t do them all, so that’s what the excellent experience will help me with. It’s not what I’ll do, but more importantly how and why that’s the key.”
- “As for my eventual career, I’ve learned just to blossom where I am and God will reveal what my talents are that I’m meant to use in my career. This makes me so much less worried about applying to college this year because even if I make what I think is a mistake, God can still have me blossom there.”
- “God made us with love to do what we were made to, and the CrossRoad program shows us the way to realize these talents and use them for God no matter what they are.”
- “I was coming into my senior year full of doubts and questions. Lost in the world because I was listening to everyone but the person I was supposed to listen to. Everyone is willing to give me advice good and bad, but it really isn’t helping me make my decision. It is a huge thing to decide what you want to spend the rest of your life doing and I always worry about choosing the wrong thing. I understand the word *vocation* a little better now and because of that I realized that I had locked God out of the process. I would pray, but I don’t think I was listening very well. . . . My vocation today is to be the best student and listener to God that I can be.”



going to church simply because they are not in their home parish. This practice of visiting different Orthodox churches helps students become comfortable with the idea that they can pray in an Orthodox church that may not be identical to



their home parish. Moreover, they can pursue friendships with Orthodox Christians from different backgrounds—and friends who share our faith are essential for keeping us rooted in faith, for they walk the road of the Cross with us.

EXCEPTIONAL KIDS & EXCEPTIONAL STAFF

Against the backdrop of this educational praxis, CrossRoad welcomes a cadre of teenagers whose home families and communities have truly planted the seeds of the Gospel. The students are bright; they have a burning desire to come to a deeper understanding of their faith, yet they are the kind of youth who may lose interest in their faith if they are not pushed to a richer understanding. Some have almost “outgrown” what their local Orthodox camping program can provide. Others will serve as leaders of these camps, but they themselves need to be led to deeper faith so that they have more to give back to these communities. They need peers who will similarly be leaders. They need to meet each other so that they have friendships in their Orthodox faith that will last them a lifetime. And our Church—the earthly reality of our Church—needs them. It needs them to pursue Christ as their Lord and Master now, throughout their college years and beyond, because, quite simply, there is too much suffering in the world. The Church needs workers to serve in local parishes, dioceses, Orthodox schools and agencies, in a multiplicity of capacities—and right now we have a shortage of such leaders. And we need them to serve in the secular world in all sorts of capacities as agents of peace, chastity, humility, patience and love.

By God’s grace, at CrossRoad these teenagers meet a staff of vibrant Ortho-

dox Christian twenty-somethings who have made the decision to attend seminary, who are living a life of theological pursuits, and exude knowledge and passion for their faith. The synergy is miraculous—a gift of God.

CROSSROAD NEEDS COMMUNITIES

None of this work would be possible without the parents, clergy, youth workers, godparents, Sunday school teachers and whole communities who are planting the seeds of the Gospel. And none of the work of CrossRoad will bear fruit unless these communities ask CrossRoad alumni to give back to their communities. More than this, these “CrossRoders” need their communities to help wisely guide them along their vocational walks, which are just beginning. As we look to the future of CrossRoad, we pray that it will sustain its growth and continue to grow in a myriad of ways. We ask you to support us in any way you can, and most especially through prayer.

Ann Mitsakos Bezzerides received a BA from Middlebury College, an MDiv from St. Vladimir’s Seminary, and a PhD from Boston College. She has served as Director of the Office of Vocation & Ministry, which runs CrossRoad, since its inception in 2003, and she is the editor of Christ at Work: Orthodox Christian Perspectives on Vocation (Holy Cross Orthodox Press, 2006).