Orthodoxy/Orthopraxis/Orthopathy

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Assignment #4 – Course Learning Journal

The journal is a written reflection of your learning journey while working in each course. The Learning Journal integrates the essential elements of the course within your professional field of interest. The objective of the course journal is to produce a degree of acculturation, integrating new ideas into your existing knowledge of each course. This is also an opportunity to communicate with your professor insights gained because of the course. The course learning journal should be 3-5 pages in length and should include the following sections:

1. Introduction –Summarize the intent of the course, how it fits into the graduate

program as a whole, and the relevance of its position in the curricular sequence.

2. Personal Growth - Describe your personal growth–how the course stretched or

challenged you– and your progress in mastery of course content and skills during

the week and through subsequent readings – what new insights or skills you gained.

3. Reflective Entry - Add a reflective entry that describes the contextualization (or

adaptation and relevant application) of new learning in your professional field.

What questions or concerns have surfaced about your professional field as a result

of your study?

4. Conclusion – Evaluate the effectiveness of the course in meeting your professional,

religious, and educational goals.

This subcore consisted of two courses, Orthodoxy/Orthopraxis/Orthopathy and Contextualization. Their topics complimented one another well and were additive to my learning and professional skill building as a pastoral leader, congregational advisor, and as I have begun labeling myself, a cultural exegete. These courses did not introduce me to brand new areas of consideration. As a theologian and pastor, the questions and issues related to correct teaching and practice and how they are applied into a particular context is at the heart of what I do. They did, however, provide the opportunity to consider the importance of orthopathy and how that is related to how we practice our faith. It also allowed me to address a controversial issue that is very much in the public eye, that of transgenderism. Following the previous courses that have explored the social sciences, research, and meaning making, these courses provided the opportunity to do a quick deep dive into the topic of transgenderism considering what does Scripture say and not say about the issue, and how can the social sciences and medical sciences serve to help with a faithful Scriptural pastoral approach to individuals and families or congregations seeking to better equipped to minister to those who experience gender incongruence.

My personal learning began with the consideration of orthopathy. With my background in philosophy and theology at the undergraduate and graduate level, I am knowledgeable and comfortable operating in the realm of orthodoxy. I understand what I believe, why I believe it, and how it aligns with my faith tradition. Additionally with thirty years of pastoral experience in the parish, in the institutional settings of the clinical and military environment (I am a retired clinically trained military chaplain), and with congregational consulting (I am in intentional ministry), I also am competent and understand the practice decisions I make or counsel upon, not to say I do not make mistakes. Indeed, assignment two for the Orthodoxy class focused on mistakes I and others made that lead to some serious consequences for a former congregation. In examining this issue, it was helpful to bring in the lens of orthopathy to consider motivations beyond teaching or traditions of practice that shaped these decisions. It is not that consideration of personality and emotional issues was new for me as this is very much a part of my chaplaincy training. But the idea of “right” feeling or pathos as a major theological lens is a new approach. Orthodox confessional Lutheranism is skeptical of feelings as seen in its strong criticism of the Pietist movement. I had previously considered how my emotions may have led me to do wrong things in this encounter, but this time around I considered also where my emotions communicated faithfully to me and motivated me toward faithful actions. The importance of feelings was not lost as I studied the issue of transgenderism. I had not too long before this been exposed to a couple of LCMS pastoral advocates and found myself not particularly convinced by the arguments; they were making nor impressed with the practical advice they had given. The contextualization course allowed me to look at Scripture and to consider how my faith tradition applies Scripture to this issue. The key learning here was to come to a better understanding that not everyone who contemporary culture puts under the umbrella of transgender, is in the same place. There are biological and psychological conditions that impact gender incongruence. So while one can be rightly critical of the grand anti-foundational narrative that all things, including gender, are fluid, this study helped me realize how the culture catches up people with genuine issues that cause suffering on their part and how the culture can catch up the church and stimulate emotional energy inside believers to react to these people with misinformed information. I find myself remaining critical of the cultural narrative, but with far more sympathy toward those who may be suffering legitimate biological or psychological problems.

This study added some tools to my toolbox. My study of my Lutheran tradition was surprising in some regard to find that Luther and early Lutheran theologians incorporated an understanding of emotions into their treatment of various issues during the Reformation and that affirmation of emotion as a serving instrument of our faith finds expression in our foundational confessional documents. This is helpful for when I engage other Lutherans, often pastors and very conservative traditional ones, who are struggling with the congregational relationships, as I cannot bring a confessional emphasis to bear to attempt to gain a hearing. This will be helpful regardless of the issue, if I am helping them to address for instance a transgendered parishioner or a family wrestling with this matter or if I am addressing any matter of practice. As a starting point I am better equipped to ask the question in a validating way of pastor or congregants of how do they feel about a particular thing and how do their feelings guide their actions, are they heteropathic or orthopathic? On the specific issue of transgenderism, I am having to spend some more time considering how to take what I learned and speak it faithfully. Within my church body there is such a heightened sensitivity in the culture wars to LGBTQ advocacy of any kind, that to gain a hearing will require intentional effort. To advocate for any degree of compassion for some who is intersex or for someone who may have been sexually abused as a child and experiencing major feelings of incongruence with their own bodies will require careful language and intentional education that reinforces the truth of Scripture but also how Scripture recognizes brokenness from the corruption of this fallen world.

These courses provided me the opportunity to revisit my theological training, to claim valuable insights from Scripture as expressed in my faith tradition, and to consider an issue of importance more closely. These courses provided the opportunity to take all that has come in the program before, and to bring my previous training in orthodoxy and practice to bear in a focused way, adding more insight and awareness of orthopathy into the mix. It has helped me process recent traumatic events and pull additional learning from them, as well as to help me gain new insight and some level of skill added to my consulting toolbox in dealing with those experiencing gender incongruence themselves, in their families, or in their congregations.

David, this was an excellent and thoughtful final journal reflection. I especially appreciated your new appreciation of orthopathy as an important dimension of faith and practice. It makes me think of Jesus being asked about the greatest commandment and how we are to love God with all our heart, soul, mind, and strength. Orthopathy speaks of the heart and how God cares about our heart towards Him. Of course with your background this course was not new material but I appreciate the way you engaged it. Good job!