

## **When Knowledge Becomes a Stumbling Block: Preparing Our Young People for Intellectual Challenges to Faith**



There is a particular tragedy that plays out with disturbing regularity in our time: a young person grows up in the Church, learns the Faith, can recite the Creed and knows the Bible reasonably well, goes off to university—and within a year or two quietly drifts away. When asked what happened, if they’re willing to talk about it at all, they mention questions they encountered that they couldn’t answer, challenges from professors or peers that seemed unanswerable, and a growing sense that perhaps their childhood faith was naive after all.

What makes this especially heartbreaking is not that Christianity lacks answers to these challenges—the Church has been addressing them for two millennia—but that these young people often don’t know the answers exist. They are, as St. Paul warned, “tossed to and fro and carried about with every wind of doctrine” (Ephesians 4:14), not because the Faith is weak, but because they never learned its strength.

### **The Pattern of Proudful Self-Sufficiency**

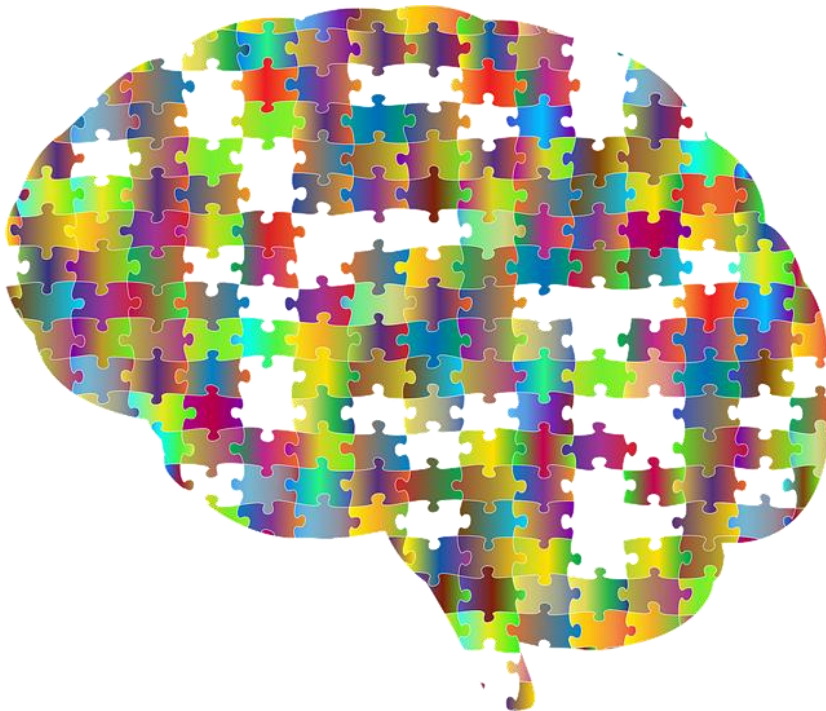
Many knowledgeable young Christians fall into an error rooted in pride: the pride of working everything out for themselves. Having successfully navigated Sunday School and youth group, having perhaps even engaged in some basic apologetics, they develop confidence in their own ability to answer any question about the Faith. This intellectual self-sufficiency mirrors the very self-reliance that Christianity warns against in spiritual matters.

When they encounter challenges they cannot immediately answer—sophisticated objections to biblical reliability, philosophical arguments about the problem of evil, historical criticisms of the Church, or scientific claims presented as incompatible with faith—the foundation shakes. They are completely unaware that these very questions, and even harder ones, were posed many ages ago and answered by the Fathers, the

great theologians, and the saints who were far wiser than they.

The tragedy deepens when fear prevents them from seeking help. They worry that asking questions might be interpreted as doubting or backsliding. They feel shame that they “should” know the answers already. They suspect, sometimes correctly, that their youth group leaders or even their parish priest might not have sophisticated responses. And so they face these challenges alone, in secret, increasingly isolated from the very community that could guide them through the struggle.

## **The Questions They Face**



The challenges young people encounter at university are rarely original, though they are new to the student and often presented with considerable rhetorical force. From professors, they hear that the Bible was written by men to control people, that religion is merely evolutionary psychology, that biblical ethics represent primitive morality we’ve outgrown, or that the problem of evil makes belief in God logically impossible. From peers, the objections are often more emotional: “How can you believe gay people are sinful? That’s bigotry.” “You really think people who’ve never heard of Jesus go to hell?” “Religion causes all the wars in history.”

These questions feel devastating precisely because the student has never encountered them before and doesn’t know that the Church addressed them long ago. Someone hearing Bart Ehrman’s claims about biblical manuscripts for the first time might lose faith—unless they knew that textual criticism is an established field where Orthodox

and other Christian scholars have thoroughly addressed these issues. Someone encountering Freud's claim that religion is wish fulfillment might find it compelling—unless they knew that Christian thinkers wrote sophisticated responses within years of Freud's work, responses that remain intellectually credible today.

## The Witness of the Fathers



The situation is not unlike what St. Augustine faced. He grew up with his mother Monica's simple Christian faith but found it intellectually unsatisfying. He was drawn to Manichaeism, which seemed more sophisticated and better able to answer his questions about evil and the nature of reality. He spent years struggling with objections to Christianity—the problem of evil, questions about free will, difficulties with biblical interpretation.

His breakthrough came when he encountered Christian intellectuals, especially St. Ambrose, who showed him that Christianity could engage his intellect at the highest level. He discovered that many of his “unanswerable” objections were based on misunderstandings of what Christianity actually claimed. He found that the Faith had philosophical depth he had never imagined. His journey back to Christianity, chronicled in his “Confessions” involved discovering that the Faith was intellectually deeper than he had known, not that he needed to abandon reason.

This pattern repeats throughout Church history. The Cappadocian Fathers engaged Greek philosophy at its highest levels. St. John of Damascus synthesized Christian theology with the best of classical thought. St. Gregory Palamas defended hesychastic theology against scholastic rationalism with rigorous philosophical argument. The Church has never been afraid of questions or intellectual challenge—indeed, some of our greatest theological achievements came in response to such challenges.

## What Our Young People Need



If we are to prepare our young people for the intellectual challenges they will face, several things are essential:

### Theological Depth before College

Youth formation must go beyond moral instruction and emotional experiences to include serious engagement with theology, church history, and the intellectual tradition. Young people should know not just *\*what\** the Church teaches, but *\*why\**—the reasoning, the scriptural basis, the patristic witness. They should be familiar with the great councils and controversies, understanding that every doctrine we hold was hammered out in response to real questions and alternatives.

### Familiarity with the Christian Intellectual Tradition

Our young people should know that Christianity has always had brilliant defenders. They should have encountered the Fathers—not just their spiritual writings, but their theological and philosophical works. They should know of figures like C.S. Lewis, G.K. Chesterton, and contemporary Orthodox theologians and apologists who engage modern questions. When they encounter objections at university, they should know instinctively: “The Church has thought about this.”

### Normalisation of Questions and Struggle

We must create a culture where asking hard questions is seen as a sign of mature faith, not weak faith. Doubt and struggle are normal parts of spiritual growth—indeed, many saints experienced them. When young people know they can bring their questions to their priest, their parents, or trusted mentors without judgment, they are far less likely to



face challenges alone and in secret.

## **Distinction between Core and Periphery**

Young people need to understand which beliefs are essential to Orthodox Christianity and which are matters of theological opinion or cultural practice. When everything is presented as equally essential, a challenge to any single belief feels like a threat to the entire Faith. But when they understand what constitutes the heart of the Faith—the reality of the Incarnation, the Resurrection, the Trinity, salvation through Christ—they can hold firmly to these while thoughtfully engaging questions about secondary matters.

## **Resources for Ongoing Learning**

Before our young people leave for university, they should be equipped with resources: books by Orthodox theologians and apologists, websites and podcasts that address common objections, names of Orthodox campus ministries or parishes near their school. They should know that when questions arise—and they will—there are places to turn.

## **Connection to the Worshipping Community**

Most fundamentally, young people need to understand that Orthodox Christianity is not primarily an intellectual system to be defended but a living relationship with Christ in His Body, the Church. Participation in the Divine Liturgy, the sacraments, prayer, and fasting provide a foundation that intellectual challenges cannot shake. When faith is rooted in encounter with the living God rather than merely in arguments, questions become opportunities for deeper understanding rather than threats to the entire edifice.

## **A Call to Action**



For parents: Begin conversations now. Ask your children what questions they have about the Faith. Read together some of the great Orthodox theologians and apologists. Model intellectual humility by acknowledging what you don't know while demonstrating confidence that answers exist. Stay connected with your college-age children not to monitor them but to provide a safe space for questions.

For church leadership: Consider how we can deepen theological education for young people. Can we offer classes on church history, apologetics, or reading the Fathers? Can we connect college students with Orthodox campus ministries or provide mentorship? Can we create a culture where doubt and questions are met with patience and wisdom rather than alarm?

For young people facing challenges: Know that you are not the first to face these questions, and you do not face them alone. The Church has been answering these objections for two thousand years. Bring your questions to your priest, to trusted mentors, to the rich treasury of Orthodox theological writing. Continue to participate in the life of the Church—the Liturgy, the sacraments, prayer—even as you work through intellectual struggles. Faith and reason are not enemies; both are gifts from God.

For all of us: Remember that genuine Christian faith has never required the abandonment of reason or intellectual curiosity. The same God who revealed Himself in Christ also created the rational mind capable of seeking truth. When our young people encounter challenges to their faith, it is not a crisis to be feared but an opportunity for that faith to deepen and mature, rooted more firmly in the two-thousand-year treasury of Orthodox Christian wisdom.

Let us equip our young people not merely with answers, but with the knowledge that answers exist, the humility to seek them, and the confidence that the Faith can withstand any honest inquiry. As St. Peter instructs us, let us be “ready always to give an answer to every man that asketh you a reason of the hope that is in you, with meekness and fear” (1 Peter 3:15). Our young people deserve no less than to be prepared to do the same.”

*Reader Daniel*