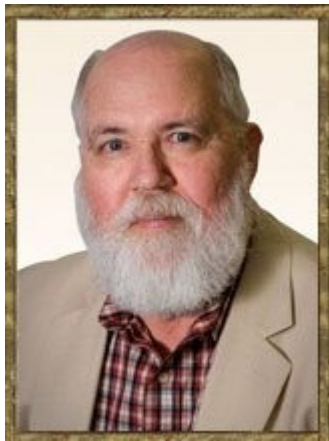


Interview with Dr. James Taylor of St. Raphael Orthodox Online School



A seasoned teacher and scholar, Dr. James Taylor is a member of Sts. Peter and Paul Antiochian Orthodox Christian Church [2] in Topeka, Kansas. As founder of the St. Raphael Orthodox Online School, [3] he has created a program of classical studies for elementary, middle, and high school students. In his career Dr. Taylor has taught in a variety of parochial schools and preparatory academies, including St. Marys Academy in Kansas, Wichita Collegiate School, and Topeka Collegiate School. For five years he was assistant then associate professor of the Education Department at Hillsdale College, Michigan, and later he served at the University of Tulsa, also in the department of education where his specialties were philosophy of education in the graduate school, and Children's Literature classes for elementary and middle school future teachers. Antiochian.org asked Dr. Taylor about his new enterprise and his thoughts on education in the context of his Orthodox faith.

Tell us a bit about your background and how you came to start this school.

While still in high school, I was drawn to the poetry of the past and the culture that informed the art, philosophy, religion and music of these eras, including the modern era. Once out of high school, I realized quite soon that to maintain these interests there was hardly any other place for me to fit in than as a high school or college teacher.

So I set about obtaining a university degree. I was not Orthodox. Rather typical of the times, I had similar experiences as did Eugene Rose, later to be Fr. Seraphim Rose. Going from one journey to another, studying Eastern philosophies, and the like, a kind of Bohemian life that eventually led to nowhere. The first real glimpse of religion being an all-embracing, coherent and ongoing way of life, occurred to me rather early, but actually did not experience it until I became a member of the Ukrainian Greek Catholic Church. It was a remarkable and gift-laden time, the atmosphere really quite Orthodox, that when I began attending Orthodox services (that lead to my conversion), it was more of a hand slipping into a glove than a sudden awakening – though I did shed tears of joy more than once.

With this unspeakable gift from God of the Orthodox Church, it wasn't long before I experienced the response to blend Orthodoxy with my teaching experience and love for the classics as humane paths to the experience of truth, beauty and goodness. St. Basil The Great and other Early Church Fathers encouraged this approach in his "Address To Young Men On The Right Use Of Greek Literature", which I had read earlier, but not in this new light.

I had been teaching online for 12 years, so I was aware how to make the transition from a real classroom to the virtual one for the sake of those homeschooling families who for one reason or another were educating their children at home. It occurred to me there must be Orthodox families in particular experiencing a similar challenge and perhaps I could do something to help them. I approached His Grace Bishop Thomas in March of 2013 regarding this idea and he put me in touch with several of his priests who formed a kind of committee to explore with me the possibility of an online school for Orthodox families who are home schooling. I drew up a curriculum for the Summer of 2013, advertised here and there, and enrolled about 40 students for 4 and 5 week programs in literature, some writing, but all taught in an Orthodox spirit, a mood, an atmosphere, where all were free to make comparisons and references to the truths of our Faith and the truth and beauty of the school material at hand. This encouraged me greatly to find like-minded teachers – thanks be to God – and open our first year this past fall with nearly a hundred students from across the US, from Canada, Alaska, Hawaii, and overseas in England, Greece, Albania, and New Zealand.

What is classical education and what distinguishes this philosophy from other approaches?

This good question has about as many answers today as those proposing an answer! But it was not always thus. After the discovery and practice by the ancient/classical Greeks of what today we call the arts and sciences – literature (poetry), philosophy, history, science and mathematics – and religion (what we refer to as Mythology), the Romans and later under the Empire of New Rome, or the Byzantine Empire, going to school meant first of all to know Greek and Latin if these were not already known. Why? To read the original texts in Greek and later in Latin so as not to miss meaning and significance in translation. This ideal of education under which many of the Early Greek Fathers of the Church were schooled, though primarily in the Greek language, was the standard for anyone to be called educated. Those schools today, if there are any so dedicated, that offer such an education in Greek and Latin as the means to read the "greats", strictly speaking, these alone can be called "classical" in its pure meaning. Obviously, whether we want to or not, today we use the phrase, classical education, in a broader application.

Many of the private academies here in the US use the term classical to describe their curriculum often meaning that have constructed a Roman reconfiguring of Greek education. We see terms used such as Trivium and Quadrivium to designate, in the first case, the skills of reading, writing, and rational logical thought. The latter term, Quadrivium, invokes the old Roman categories of higher education (perhaps high school in our day), for the sciences and mathematics. This is the model from which most of Western education has developed. In secular education and some Christian schools today, K – 12, and college, where the ideas of the Trivium and Quadrivium have been adapted to the modern world, one often finds a rigorous application of these subjects with academic prizes, honor rolls for high achievement, and an overall success oriented future for its graduates. There appears to be a complete absence of knowledge regarding the connection between leisure and "skola", that is, the Greek term for school renders a place and time of leisure – the time set apart not to be lazy but to do better than ordinary things, in this example, to study and converse about the permanent things, things that do not change, the beauty and wisdom of literature and love of wisdom, and the wonder and delight of the universe more as amateurs (ones who love), rather than experts and specialists – a world of competition for being "smart", for superior grades, where exercises in love of neighbor and excellence of virtue are often sacrificed in favor of "My Son/Daughter Is On The Honor Roll" bumper stickers.

As Orthodox teachers and staff, we have followed the wisdom of St. Basil The Great and other Fathers of the Church who have used the image of the honey bee in regard to classical education with much of its foundation coming from pre-Christian authors – we carefully examine each flower in the garden, some are filled with the nectar of truth and beauty, others appear lovely but have not become fertile – these we avoid. How do we decide where the honey is located? Through tradition. Through the grace of God and our experience of discerning both academically and spiritually where the gold lies hidden. We keep in mind also that while God gave and prepared for His Revelation to the Hebrews, the Holy Spirit also visited all the lands of the earth planting seeds of truth and the energies of desire for good things to come even in people's otherwise false religions, in their folk tales and rituals and customs. We also know that Holy Scripture is the Living Word of God throughout, for our comfort, our enlightenment, our Way back to Him. It does not address, however, how we should acquire knowledge of those things that are simply good to know in themselves, and those things that can help sustain man on earth – that is, to learn to listen to true things, to read, write and speak about the "arts and sciences" whether this is poetry, or God's universe and principles of physics and any number of social and technical skills. What SR has been able to do with the grace of God, is to assemble teachers who know and deeply believe in promoting these studies always compatible with the truth, goodness and beauty of Orthodoxy consistent with the ages of development of human persons who live in the light of Christ.

What reasons do families have for choosing St. Raphael for their children?

If this first year's experience with Orthodox families in online education had a number one, top of the list, reason for the school and continuing the school, it is this: they are happy to find a program with a national presence and Orthodox Episcopal endorsement founded precisely to support them in their good work of education. This is especially true for Orthodox homeschool families who have not had much help along the way, who were not aware of other families in the US (and beyond) in exactly the same circumstances they have experienced alone; where professional and dedicated Orthodox teachers and staff offer online assistance at a reasonable cost. For many, it is all so new, this oasis of education with a week of harmonized curriculum where each class retains the integrity of its nature – literature, writing, history, science and math – with the

radiance of Orthodox truth, goodness and beauty, as in the light within, we pray each day, of the Holy Spirit. SR, from the beginning to now, has deliberately targeted Orthodox families, who, as a scattered group across our land, lacked a one stop, and all Orthodox inspired curriculum top to bottom in the middle of an indifferent if not hostile modern world. In this way, a surprising dimension has grown out of our experience and that is the involvement of Orthodox parents in the education of their children. Having carried the challenges of home education as well as the rewards, these come to us as fellow educators in some special ways. They also have a deeper understanding of their children's life, behavior, achievements, weaknesses, and interests that they often share with us in a most helpful way. It has gotten better: Three of these particularly talented and dedicated parents are actively helping us in most significant ways to run the school.

Can a family use St. Raphael as the foundation for their entire school curriculum? What kind of support services do you offer home educators?

We are growing not just in numbers of families and students, but in our plans, looking ahead in our curriculum, extending it to include more courses in the future – who knows, maybe even a college someday? Maybe a centrally placed boarding school for high school students with real classrooms and really real teachers and students learning together!

As it stands now, we're pretty happy and I think most of the parents are too. I cannot speak for all the families, of course; but my sense is that the majority have been able to work with our one major subject a day of our traditional curriculum, and either use that as their main program at home, or, add some of what they were doing before SR for continuity or supplement for some state requirement. Evidently, there are a variety of ways in which our weekly curriculum can be helpful in the family homeschool. All of our teachers have helped in personal cases too, and we remain dedicated to keep the great freedom and flexibility, and personal attention capabilities of home education in view as a very real part of the SR experience.

What have been the blessings and the challenges in this inaugural year?

Where to begin? The last minute help on the technical side, the same cliff hanger moments finding the right teacher, and so many other daily "miracles" that made it so clear to me that in the end, I may have the title of "founder" or "director", but I had nothing to do with what made SR pass from a dream to a reality over the summer into the fall of 2013. This is simply historically true. I should have kept a journal – but we were always too busy! The gathering of this particular Faculty, I mean just these people, is a story and a miracle in itself. Then, the support staff of technicians giving their time, as I mentioned, and Kiernan Schroeder, teacher and Academic Supervisor – I have never seen a teacher work so hard and such excellent results in all my teacher years. Where does her insight come from at such a young age? How does she always make it to class when she lives in London, 6 or 7 hours away from class times? Finally, the most helpful of all additions to our staff is Photini Roegner, one of this storied parents I spoke of earlier, as Administrative Supervisor. I assure you, lieu of a list too long to place here, that those two terms of her title have never been more fitting. Randall Gremillion from the West Coast came forward almost from the beginning as technical support, working with our data bases, ensuring enrollment was secured and students were in the correct classes and rooms. And Freddie Anzivino, our global email specialist, as well as leading the "attack" on sorting out my mess from day one of student and parent lists for particular email announcements and the lik

What about the challenges? Also too numerous to mention. But with the Grace of God so evident, the intercessions of St. Raphael Bishop of Brooklyn and Shepherd to the Scattered Sheep of America – and the dedication along with the Graces, the above mentioned Faculty and Staff of SR, the challenges that left me befuddled and confused, were eliminated.

How has your parish supported you in this effort, and are there Antiochian clergy, hierarchs, or laypeople who have been a help along the way?

You know, I should have mentioned this first, and I apologize that I didn't. The first person I approached with this idea for an Orthodox online school was my parish priest, Right Rev. Joseph Longofono, of Sts. Peter and Paul in Topeka, KS. Fr. Joseph has a particular way about him that if he approves of a project it is with a certain amount of sobriety – unlike my excitement at the time – and, afterward, he stands aside with not a trace of micromanaging or intrusion. He also approved using the parish's website to announce the new online

school with its curriculum and the thoughts on education and Orthodoxy that appear today on SR's main page while our logo and link remains on the parish website. Also, in 2012, I returned to Fr. Joseph and asked: Do you think I could get the ear of a Bishop in the Antiochian "world" of America to read my proposal for a national online school for Orthodox homeschool families? He gave me a name of a priest that worked with His Grace Bishop Thomas and after about a year of correspondence with this priest and His Grace – while SR had begun its Summer Session and was planning for its first semester in the Fall – Bishop Thomas wrote in support of SR in an article, "[Sanctifying Education](#)" that appeared in the [The Word](#) [4].

There have been numerous supporters along the way, priests, deacons, monks, and so many helpful parents. Of course, we can turn these comments from them into advertising blurbs, and perhaps we will from time to time with their permission; but it has been the strength of their kind words to us, and most of all, the evidence of their prayers for us, for which we are energized and so deeply grateful. It has been the spontaneous and guileless praise and "thank yous" from the students that have moved our hearts greatly, as they also invoke our Lord in thanksgiving. What a deep lesson for our humility and our thanksgiving we have found in our students.

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