

V. Rev. Dr. Silviu N. Bunta

Introduction to Orthodox Hermeneutics (online course February 21-June 27, 2025)

All meetings will take place on *Saturdays between 12:00-3:00 CST*. The zoom links will be shared ahead of each meeting!

Office hours: by appointment. If you wish to speak with me, let me know and we will find a convenient time when we can speak over zoom.

Absences and class recordings:

If you miss a meeting or several meetings, it is not a problem. All our meetings will be recorded and the recordings will be loaded in the subfolder of each class. My only request is that you do not share the recordings or distribute/publish them in any way. Also, if you miss a class, once you have watched the recordings, please do not hesitate to ask me for zoom conversations so that all your questions and comments can be addressed.

Cost:

The cost of the entire course (21 hours) is \$300. Please pay with Venmo (@sbunta1, end of phone number 2853) or mail a check to:

P.O. Box 1509

McAllen, TX 78505

Course description:

As the title indicates, this course is meant to be a broad introduction to Orthodox “hermeneutics.” What does this mean? The focus of the course is not on *what* we Orthodox read in the scriptures (that is, concrete meanings of particular texts), but on *how* we Orthodox hear the scriptures.

The first interest would be futile. Indeed, one would be very hard pressed to find any one verse in the scriptures to which Orthodox interpretive texts give one and the same meaning. In other words, the question “What is the meaning of this verse in Orthodox understanding?” is always a wrong question. To the untrained eye, this Orthodox diversity of meanings may give two wrong impressions: that Orthodox scriptural interpretation has no unity, no governing principles and limits (in a sort of “everything goes”), and that it has nothing serious and permanent to say. This class will explain why both these presuppositions are wrong.

There is another line of inquiry which this class avoids intentionally; it can be called “history.” This class will not ask historical questions, such as, “Where do the scriptures come from?” and “How were they composed and gathered?” It will not even ask the question, “What did the Fathers of the Church say about the Old Testament?” Or, the New Testament, for that matter. Of course, there is a time and place for approaching Orthodox scriptural interpretation through a historical lens; many classes available today will do that, inside and outside of academic circles. This class is not interested in asking historical questions, which—even though such a historical focus has taken over the imagination of many contemporary Orthodox—truly belongs only to academic circles. There are two reasons for this avoidance. First, such focus can only obscure the quality of Orthodox interpretation as tradition, as the living and ongoing inheritance of God’s own life. Second, such focus can only miss *the essential quality* of Orthodox

interpretation as informal, practical, and soteriological. In other words, Orthodox interpretation serves solely the transformation of the hearer of the scriptures, and not his/her information. In front of the scriptures, Orthodox interpretation does not seek to understand, but to melt. In front of them, it does not ask the questions “What does this text mean?” and “What is the method by which I can understand what it means?,” but rather “What is this text saying about my life?” and “How is this text taking up my life into God’s own?” Therefore, the Orthodox scriptures are of such nature that a historical and intellectual lens, as much as this lens is aimed at them, will never see them, but it could at best observe the dead letters in which they are wrapped. And Orthodox interpretation is deeply informed by the assumption that melting is precisely the manner in which *the scriptures themselves want to be approached*. In light of this, this course can be described this way: it is an exercise in love as *the* method of reading the scriptures.

Therefore, this class will look at Orthodox interpretive texts (liturgy, hymnography, homilies, commentaries, and iconography) with the purpose of discerning *the interpretive principles and practices at work in them*. In these lies the Orthodox manner of life, the very life which put out these interpretive texts and which the hearer of the scriptures is expected to take on.

Often the emphasis of the class will be on interpretive traditions which differentiate the Orthodox interpretation—often radically—from other hermeneutics, non-Orthodox and/or scholarly, such as the historical criticism dominant in today’s academia. Yet, this class is for everyone with an interest in Orthodox interpretation, Orthodox and non-Orthodox alike. It requires no prior knowledge of Orthodox interpretive traditions, but only an interest in them. It is also meant both for people with and without formal education in Christian scriptures or, more broadly, in “theology.” Yet, it does presuppose a general familiarity with the content of the scriptures in general.

Class structure:

Each meeting will have assigned readings. Please read the assigned texts in advance, not for memorization, but for comprehension. Simply make sure that the text makes sense, at least in broad lines. Do not worry if you do not understand everything! Write down the main ideas of the text and the points of it which do not make sense and on which you would like to comment or ask questions. This preparation will allow you to participate fully in the class, to draw all its benefits, and to ask informed questions.

Each meeting will begin with a lecture (approx. 40 minutes) which will explain the readings and supplement the readings with information related to their topics. The rest of the class will be dedicated to open discussions on the text (approx. 120 minutes, with a 15 minute break in the middle). This structure will provide you with plenty of opportunities to ask any questions.

Readings:

This class requires only one purchase: Silviu N. Bunta, *The Life of Our Fathers: An Introduction of the Bible in the Orthodox Church* (St. Vladimir’s Press, 2025). All other readings for the class will be made available online, in pdf format, in a folder which will be shared with the email address you provided at registration. Please do not share these files with anyone else! They are shared under strict copyright laws of fair use and their wide dissemination contravenes these laws.

The readings for each meeting will not exceed 100 pages. The readings will consist of primary texts—the scriptures themselves and both older and recent patristic texts—and secondary literature, that is, literature analyzing these texts.

The pdf's will only be shared after the end of the previous meeting, so that you do not read too far in advance and the materials are fresh in your mind.

Please do go through the readings of a class in advance, and in the order in which they are in their subfolders. Yet, read the texts not for memorization, only for comprehension. Do keep in mind that at least 2 hours of each 3-hour meeting will be dedicated to questions and answers, so it is useful to have the readings done so that any question you may have gets addressed.

Class schedule:

<i>Day</i>	<i>Topic</i>
February 21	Before the scriptures were turned into a reading and a book: a brief history of scriptural interpretation
March 14	Scripture in liturgy
April 4	The scriptures to the heart, or where the intellect cannot go
April 21	The five me's: The scriptures for me, to me, about me, in me, and by me
May 16	The scriptures are my life
June 6	Outer biblical hermeneutics, or how the scriptures want to be read: the Old Testament
June 27	Outer biblical hermeneutics, or how the scriptures want to be read: the New Testament