

Reviving the Liturgical Enterprise of Alexander Schmemmann

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¹ David Fagerberg, "The Cost of Understanding Schmemmann in the West," *St Vladimir's Theological Quarterly* 53.2–3 (2009): 179–207. Also see the survey essay by David Bresciani, "La réception de la théologie liturgique du père Alexandre Schmemmann dans l'Église catholique romaine," in *La joie du Royaume: Actes du colloque international "l'héritage du père Alexandre Schmemmann," Paris, 11–14 décembre 2008* (Paris: YMCA Press, 2012): 196–202.

² See Robert Taft, "The Liturgical Enterprise Twenty-five Years after Alexander Schmemmann," *SVTQ* 53.2–3 (2009): 139–77; Paul Meyendorff, "The Liturgical Path of Orthodoxy in America," *SVTQ* 40.1–2 (1996): 44–49.

³ Alexander Schmemmann, *The Eucharist: Sacrament of the Kingdom*, trans. Paul Kachur (Crestwood: SVS Press, 1984), 229–244.

Thirty-five years have elapsed since the untimely passing of Father Alexander Schmemmann, but there seems to be a consensus that his legacy remains alive and well in both the Church and the academy.¹ Since church leaders and scholars generally take Schmemmann's influence for granted, rare is the attempt to review the impact of his thought on the liturgy.² This essay briefly surveys Schmemmann's efforts towards eucharistic revival and presents steps for reimagining the enterprise of liturgical renewal in North America today.

Schmemmann's Influence on Liturgical Practice: A Review

In the eucharistic revival attributed to Schmemmann, which built on the work of Kyprian Kern and Nicholas Afanasiev, there are three primary changes to liturgical practice that confirm his legacy as the North American proponent of eucharistic ecclesiology:

- First, in parish practice, the people were encouraged to receive Holy Communion frequently—ideally at each Liturgy.³
- Second, the priest was encouraged to engage the entire Divine Liturgy with the people. This engagement took the ritual form of reading appointed prayers aloud, especially the Anaphora.
- As a necessary consequence of the frequent reception of Communion, the

theology of worthiness for partaking of Communion was revised. Requirements for rigorous fasting, prayer, and the mystery of Confession as prerequisites for Communion were eased.

Concrete changes in ritual practices in response to these proposals are the primary markers of the positive reception of the eucharistic revival.⁴

These changes triggered a domino effect of related liturgical changes. For example, recognizing the need for ecclesial penance before the Liturgy, Schmemmann recommended and distributed a service of General Confession that parishes could pray at Vespers.⁵ This service honored the Orthodox tradition of fasting, prayer, and penance in preparation for the Liturgy, while setting aside the notion of *Govenie*, the received practice of a week of intense preparation through these disciplines that made one worthy of partaking in Communion.⁶ For a time, many parishes prayed the service of General Confession after Vespers on Saturday evening, and some parishes continue that practice. Moreover, the simple math of having more people receiving Communion changed the process of distributing it. Parishes needed a larger diskos, larger lambs, and more prosphora for the Liturgy, and in many parishes Communion took a long time if only the presiding priest distributed it. In parishes with more than one priest, both distributed, and many (but not all) dioceses authorized



Communion, Holy Trinity Cathedral, Boston. Photo by Inga Leonova.

deacons to assist with the distribution of Communion.

Schememann's genius lay in the energy he devoted to North America as fertile ground for planting liturgical renewal, especially since the Orthodox communities in America remained beholden to the prevailing liturgical forms and theologies that migrated with them from their native countries. Notwithstanding all the accolades Schememann received for his academic achievements, his greatest tribute consists in the generations of clergy committed to the eucharistic revival whom he formed as a teacher.

Schememann sought changes in the performance of *existing* ritual forms, and in this way differed significantly from his Roman Catholic and Protestant contemporaries. His program of liturgical renewal did not include the composition of new eucharistic prayers, the revision of the lectionary, the revival of the catechumenate, or the critical excision of liturgical elements that had become ossified over the course of time. Schememann's private thinking as recorded in his journals collides with his practice in this regard. Despite his disdain for

Byzantinism and the mystagogy of the Fathers epitomized by the neo-patristic synthesis, Schememann did not call for the removal of specific Byzantine components from the liturgy. A good example of this disjunction is Schememann's attitude towards the Canon of Saint Andrew of Crete, a series of poetic verses sung during the first and fifth weeks of Lent, which encourage the participant to adopt the identity of a sinner. In his journal entry for March 2, 1982, he wrote:

In the evening, the Canon of St Andrew of Crete. Again, I am convinced that it is impossible to translate it for the contemporary man. Eastern Orthodoxy remains and cannot remain foreign to the Western ways that are dominant in the world. Encounter with the West, conversion of the West, can occur through contact with the Bible and the Eucharist; and in no way through contact with Byzantine mysteryology.⁷

Despite his distaste for the Canon, nowhere does he call for its removal from the liturgy or replacement with a suitable alternative. Schememann rejected liturgical surgery and supported revivifying

⁴ See Alexander Schememann, "Confession and Communion: Report to the Holy Synod of Bishops of the Orthodox Church in America," February 17, 1972, <http://www.schememann.org/by-him/confessionand-communion.html>.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Schememann presents an excerpt of *Govenie* taken from Metropolitan Filaret Drozdov's *Catechism in The Eucharist*, 230.

⁷ Alexander Schememann, *The Journals of Father Alexander Schememann: 1973–1983*, trans. Juliana Schememann (Crestwood: SVS Press, 2000), 314.

⁸ Bernard Botte and Alexander Schememann, "The Role of Liturgical Theology: A Debate on Liturgical Theology," in *Liturgy and Tradition: Theological Reflections of Alexander Schememann*, ed. Thomas Fisch (Crestwood: SVS Press, 1990), 21–29.



Baptismal Liturgy,
Holy Myrrhbearers
Mission, Toronto.
Photo by Joseph
Clarke.

the received liturgical tradition.⁸ Instead of the composition of new hymns, prayers, and offices, one finds emphasis on liturgical catechesis: a pastoral initiative to convert the people to the liturgy as opposed to changing the liturgy for the people, to paraphrase Thomas Pott.⁹

The Objective: A Eucharistic Church

The goal of Schmemmann's liturgical enterprise was to reconnect Eucharist and Church. His study of the Eucharist is essentially a reading of the structure of the Divine Liturgy, and he establishes a theology on that basis: the entire Liturgy establishes the unity of the people in the communion of the Holy Spirit.¹⁰ Schmemmann's writings on the Eucharist emphasize this point over and over again, but we will limit our citation to this foundational text:

The cooperation between the celebrant and the people—their concelebration—finds further expression in the Eucharistic prayers, which are all, without exception, structured as dialogues. Every prayer is “sealed” by the gathering with one of the key words of Christian worship, “amen,” thus binding the celebrant and the people of God at whose

head he stands into one organic whole. . . . All of the constituent parts of the solemn Eucharistic ceremony—the reading of the word of God, the anaphora, the partaking of communion—begin with the exchange of peace. . . . Finally, all of these prayers have as their content our praise, our repentance, our thanksgiving, our communion—“unite all of us to one another who become partakers in the communion of the Holy Spirit.”¹¹

In this section, Schmemmann demonstrates his reception of Nicholas Afanasiev's eucharistic ecclesiology, elucidated in Afanasiev's pithy exposition on the Eucharist, *The Lord's Supper*.¹² Afanasiev examined documents from the early church to argue that the entire Church offers the Eucharist. His theological statement reconnected the liturgical president with the people and clarified the proper titles of ministerial officials, identifying the bishop as celebrant and the laity as concelebrants.¹³ Afanasiev's other major work, *The Church of the Holy Spirit*, argued that the Mysteries of Baptism and Chrismation are essentially ordinations of the people to the priestly order of the laity, thus supporting his identification of the people as the liturgical president's concelebrants. Schmemmann expounded upon this dual unity accomplished by the celebration of the Eucharist: unity with one another in the communion of the Holy Spirit.

His consistent presentation of this sophisticated eucharistic ecclesiology notwithstanding, Schmemmann did not ignore the practical issues people experienced at the parish level. In a 1971 parish lecture, he addressed the problems parishioners occupy themselves with and stated that the goal of true active participation in the Eucharist is not merely correct doctrine but for the

⁹ Thomas Pott, *Byzantine Liturgical Reform: A Study of Liturgical Change in the Byzantine Tradition*, trans. Paul Meyendorff, Orthodox Liturgy Series 2 (Crestwood: SVS Press, 2010), 95–96.

¹⁰ Schmemmann, *The Eucharist*, 17.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 16–17.

parish to become a communion of the Holy Spirit. When the parish ascends to the Kingdom of God in the Liturgy, the people partake of the life to come. Partaking of the Eucharist should shape the way that the parish conducts its business: the budget, communication, and education, among other activities.¹⁴ Schmemmann is perhaps most profound in his explanation of the meaning of the kiss of peace when he states that we regard the stranger standing with us in Church as an alien and therefore an enemy, and that exchanging the peace is a way of transforming this enemy into a brother or sister in Christ.¹⁵

The onus to form the parish into a communion of the Holy Spirit falls on the pastor. Referring to the rite for the ordination of a priest, Schmemmann remarks that the moment the newly-ordained priest holds a portion of the consecrated eucharistic loaf in his hands signifies the core of presbyteral ministry. He implies that this act symbolizes communion between the priest and the people, and that the priest's ministry is to demonstrate the connection between eucharistic Communion and everything that happens in the life of the parish.¹⁶ Schmemmann's complaints about the tendency for seminarians and clergy to become obsessed with a particular idea, practice, or ideology elucidate his concern that the priest's ministry should not become a project of nostalgia, seeking to rebuild some imagined notion of Byzantium or Rus' in the contemporary church.¹⁷

His theological emphasis was consistent: the kingdom of God that is upon us and in which we partake at every Eucharist must shape the content of our everyday lives. The *telos* of the Liturgy is to facilitate the assembly's becoming a communion of the Holy Spirit. Our participation in the future life in God occurs during the Liturgy, and this foretaste of the future is to shape the way

that we live now. In other words, for Schmemmann, ritual forms constitute a means for entering into the communion of the Holy Spirit and into union with one another. Schmemmann's attempt to reform the Orthodox Church as a eucharistic body was a giant step toward liturgical and ecclesial renewal.

In the post-Schmemmann era, Orthodoxy in America has experienced episodic reversals of his proposed liturgical renewal. A casual observer might not notice that the eucharistic revival has plateaued if some of the prayers continue to be recited aloud and one can still receive Communion without being interrogated at the chalice about one's preparation (although such incidents are reported frequently enough). Today, a neoconservative liturgical movement demanding a more rigid observance of the *Typikon* advocates the return of a maximalism that contradicts the spirit of Schmemmann's legacy. Schmemmann viewed the liturgical *ordo* as a pattern to be adapted to a parish's situation, not a prescription to be rigidly imposed on all parishes. Two foundations underpin the emergence of liturgical neo-legalism in American Orthodoxy: the hegemony of the definition of liturgy as ancient and unchangeable and an ecclesiology that defines the clergy as caretakers and administrators of Liturgy and the Mysteries to the people. This reversal is not universal, but its mere existence shows how a preference for a particular kind of ecclesiology associated with the past can be implemented through the liturgy. This clerical and legalistic ecclesiology collides with the eucharistic liturgical vision that Schmemmann shared with Afanasiev, which explicitly identifies the laity as the Liturgy's concelebrant.

Schmemmann's legacy remains relevant today. His renewal was intended to ensure that liturgical identity would pierce through other identities (clerical

¹² Cited by Schmemmann in *The Eucharist*, 14, 17, 19.

¹³ Nicholas Afanasiev, *The Church of the Holy Spirit*, trans. Vitaly Permiakov, ed. Michael Plekon (South Bend: University of Notre Dame Press, 2007), 23–31.

¹⁴ See Nicholas E. Denysenko, *Liturgical Reform After Vatican II: The Impact on Eastern Orthodoxy* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2015), 131–3.

¹⁵ Schmemmann, *The Eucharist*, 138–40.

¹⁶ Schmemmann, "Transformation of the Parish," lecture at St. Andrew's parish, 1971 (unpublished).

¹⁷ Schmemmann, *Journals*, 268–9.

and ethnic identities, for example). Liturgical renewal would not necessarily remove these other identities but would emphasize a communal identity as citizens of God's kingdom, and would thereby provide lenses to see and interpret the other contributing factors to identity. However, Schmemmann's legacy will only remain effective if it is updated, and I conclude with a modest agenda for a new era of liturgical renewal.

Reviving Schmemmann's Liturgical Enterprise

Reimagine the Rules of Liturgical Development

My proposal for reviving Schmemmann's legacy begins with the suggestion that we renegotiate the rules of liturgical development. The prevailing tendency in contemporary Orthodox liturgical work is toward fine-tuning the tradition rather than deconstructing its content and composing entirely new material. Liturgical fine-tuning is its own art: arduous, careful, and slow, in honor of what has been received. But the result is that the newest material is nothing more than a repackaging of Byzantine and Slavic texts and an updating of translations. Orthodox liturgists might therefore be encouraged to become more self-critical.

Opponents of further-reaching liturgical reform might appeal to Schmemmann's aversion to the changes wrought by Vatican II, especially his perception that the actual ritual forms were not supported by liturgical principles. Certainly, Orthodoxy should safeguard tradition by rejecting innovations that are clearly foreign to the Church, but it is also able to recognize the tradition in new forms.

The defense of a liturgical canon as unchangeable and subject to only minute correction relies, at least in part, on the correlation of "liturgy" with "texts."

As long as liturgical books are printed and celebrants are warned to refrain from omitting or changing anything under pain of canonical interdict, the Church will continue to use the printed text as the measure against which fidelity to tradition is evaluated. But, properly speaking, liturgy is not *text*, but a ritualized communal *event* initiated by God. The performative nature of liturgy makes it changeable as the people engage with their local contexts.¹⁸ Orthodoxy honors the local nature of the Church, a principle which has long enabled the development of aesthetic and communicative idioms within native cultures. If, in Schmemmann's era, liturgy needed to be liberated from its definition as merely a branch in a larger tree of systematic theology, this generation's need is to redefine the canon of liturgical tradition as a pattern that might permit the evolution of new forms in diverse contexts.

Promote Liturgical Creativity

The caretakers of liturgy—pastors and theologians—should not stifle liturgical creativity. Just as these same caretakers have supported aesthetic liturgical creativity, they should extend their advocacy to the composition of new prayers, offices, and poetic texts. Supporting liturgical creativity does not imply that every new liturgical composition will be suitable for the entire Church; it simply honors the ancient tradition of theologians adding to the repository of liturgical texts in the languages and symbols of their epochs. The addition of new liturgies—which could be subject to critical revision—would enrich the liturgical culture of the Church and challenge the notion that the traditional liturgical offices must be preserved in their current medieval forms. Liturgical creativity would function as a

¹⁸ Vassa Larin argues that the Typikon is a pattern that can be adjusted for parish liturgy as opposed to an absolute rule that must be observed. Vassa Larin, "Feasting and Fasting according to the Byzantine Typikon," *Worship* 83 (2009): 133–48.

natural continuation of Schmemmann's renewal, taking the step from reviving muted offices and polishing forms and texts to composing new ones.

Revive Schmemmann's Liturgical Ecclesiology

Despite Orthodoxy's distrust of globalization, the Church embraces advances in technology and communications that permit people to talk to one another again easily. But this has not necessarily yielded consistent results within the commonwealth of churches. On the one hand, dialogue between the churches is impeded by a number of disputes. On the other, some are advocating for more common actions and conciliarity at the global level, as epitomized by the Holy and Great Council in Crete of 2016 (despite its imperfections). The emergence of a universal Church that is not merely a theological idea but a political agent potentially strengthens the identification of the Church with the clergy, the bishops especially. But Schmemmann's promotion of the local eucharistic assembly, in which all concelebrate, as the Church in her fullness, gives the lie to this identification of the Church with its clergy alone. His theology of concelebration is the liturgical outworking of a commitment to the active participation of the laity in the life of the Church, and both demand liturgical renewal.

Furthermore, emphasizing the dignity of the laity would inaugurate a

discussion of the meaning and roles of all the Church's orders, protecting the Church from slipping more deeply into a reality of presbyterianism cloaked in an official policy of mon-oeπισcōpacy: that is, a church where one encounters and experiences the priestly order almost exclusively. This aspect of the ecclesiological renovation movement illuminates and is illuminated by the dialogical nature of the Liturgy and its dependence on all the orders, and thus challenges the usual experience of the Liturgy as performed by the parish priest alone. The adoption of an ecclesiology honoring the dignity of the laity would initiate a discussion of ritual forms that might more effectively manifest the laity as concelebrants of the Eucharist. It could also contribute to the much-needed revival of the diaconate—an order often reduced to competent chanting of the assembly's prayers, despite the need for true diaconal ministry in the Church and world today. The renewal of ecclesiology is perhaps the most important component of Schmemmann's liturgical legacy.



Schmemmann's legacy is thus eucharistic and ecclesiological. The ascendancy of competing ecclesiologies and identities within the Church has challenged the hegemony of his legacy. It is clear that Schmemmann's achievement—remarkable as it was—remains incomplete, and we have presented a detailed case for resuming his work in earnest. ❁



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