

Learning to Worship for the Life of the World

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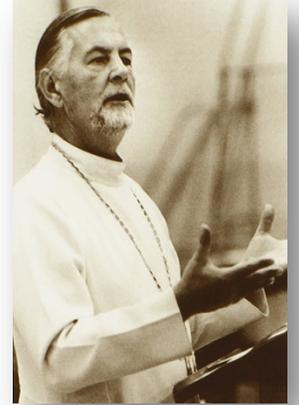
Alexander Schmemmann. (1921 – 1983)

For the Life of the World: Sacraments and Orthodoxy.

Crestwood, New York: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1973.

What is the Life to which we bear witness?

"The very purpose of this essay is to answer, if possible, the question: of what life do we speak, what life do we preach, proclaim and announce when, as Christians, we confess that Christ died for the life of the world? What *life* is both motivation, and the beginning and the goal of Christian *mission*?" (11-12)



1) A Eucharistic Life

"In the Bible the food that man eats, the world of which he must partake in order to live, is given to him by God, and it is given as communion with God. The world as man's food is not something 'material' and limited to material functions, thus different from, and opposed to, the specifically 'spiritual' functions by which man is related to God. All that exists is God's gift to man, and it all all exists to make God known to man, to make man's life communion with God." (14)

"Man is a hungry being, but he is hungry for God. Behind all the hunger of our life is God. All desire is finally a desire for Him. To be sure, man is not the only hungry being. All that exists lives by 'eating.' The whole creation depends on food. But the unique position of man in the universe is that he alone is to *bless* God for the food and the life he receives from Him. He alone is to respond to God's blessing with his blessing." (14-15)

"The first, the basic definition of man is that he is *the priest*. He stands in the center of the world and unifies it in its acts of blessing God, of both receiving the world from God and offering it to God – and by filling the world with this eucharist, he transforms his life, the one that he receives from the world, into life in God, into communion with him. The world was created as the 'matter,' the material of one all-embracing eucharist, and man was created as the priest of this cosmic sacrament." (15)

"In our perspective . . . the 'original' sin is not primarily that man has 'disobeyed' God; the sin is that he has ceased to be hungry for Him and for Him alone, ceased to see his whole life depending on the whole world as a sacrament of communion with God. . . . [H]e made the world *material*, whereas he was to have transformed it into 'life in God,' filled with meaning and spirit." (18) "He does not know that breathing itself can be communion with God." (17)

"Eucharist (thanksgiving) is the state of perfect man. Eucharist is the life of paradise. Eucharist is the only full and real response of man to God's creation, redemption and gift of heaven. But this perfect man who stands before God is *Christ*. In Him alone all that God has given man was fulfilled and brought back to heaven. He alone is the perfect Eucharistic Being. He is the Eucharist of the world. In and through this Eucharist the whole creation becomes what it always was to be and yet failed to be." (38)

2) **A Liturgical Life**

A liturgy, a *leitourgia*, "meant an action by which a group of people become something corporately which they had not been as a mere collection of individuals – a whole greater than the sum of its parts." (25)

Additionally a liturgy "meant . . . a function or 'ministry' of a man or of a group on behalf of and in the interest of the whole community. Thus the *leitourgia* of ancient Israel was the corporate work of a chosen few to prepare the world for the coming of the Messiah. . . . Thus the Church itself is a *leitourgia*, a ministry, a calling to act in this world after the fashion of Christ, to bear testimony to Him and His kingdom." (25)

The Sabbath and the daily hours of the prayer services

"were not meant to be 'prayer breaks,' periods of spiritual refreshment and 'peace of mind,' but truly *liturgical acts*, that is, acts performed on behalf of and for the whole community, as an essential part of the redeeming mission of the Church." (59)

3) **A Sacramental Life**

"A sacrament . . . is always a *passage*, a *transformation*. Yet it is not a 'passage' into 'supernature,' but into the Kingdom of God, the world to come, into the very reality of this world and its life as redeemed and restored by Christ. It is the transformation not of 'nature' into 'supernature,' but of the *old* into the *new*. A sacrament therefore is not a 'miracle' by which God breaks, so to speak, the 'laws of nature,' but the manifestation of the ultimate Truth about the world and life, man and nature, the Truth which is Christ." (102)

Marriage

"[B]y taking the 'natural' marriage into 'the great mystery of Christ and the Church,' the sacrament of matrimony gives marriage a *new meaning*; it transforms, in fact, not only marriage as such but all human love." (88)

In a particularly beautiful passage Schmemmann discusses how the Bride and Groom have crowns place upon their heads as part of the Orthodox wedding celebration:

"Each family is indeed a kingdom, a little church, and therefore a sacrament of and a way into the Kingdom. Somewhere, even if it is only in a single room, every [person] at some point in his life has his own small kingdom. It may be hell, and a place of betrayal, or it may not. Behind each window there is a little world going on. How evident this becomes when one is riding on a train at night and passing innumerable lighted windows: behind each one of them the fullness of life is a 'given possibility,' a promise, a vision. This is what the marriage crowns express: that here is the beginning of a small kingdom which *can* be something like the true Kingdom." (89)

Suffering and Death

"Through [Christ's] own suffering, not only has all suffering acquired a meaning but it has been given the power to become itself the sign, the sacrament, the proclamation, the 'coming' of that victory; the defeat of man, his very *dying* has become a way of Life." (103-104)

"[I]n Christ the new life has already begun. . . . He is Life Eternal, the Fulfillment, the Resurrection and the Joy of the world. The Church is the entrance into the risen life of Christ; it is communion in life eternal, 'joy and peace in the Holy Spirit.' And it is the expectation of the 'day without evening' of the Kingdom; not of any 'other world,' but of the fulfilment of all things and all life in Christ. In Him death itself has become an act of life, for He has filled it with Himself. . . . And if I make this *new life* mine . . . then my very death will be an act of communion with Life." (106)

The Church as sacrament

"[H]onesty to the Gospel, to the whole Christian tradition, to the experience of every saint and every word of Christian liturgy demands [that we] . . . live in the world seeing *everything* in it as a revelation of God, a sign of His presence, the joy of His coming, the call to communion with Him, the hope for fulfillment in Him. Since the day of Pentecost there is a seal, a ray, a sign of the Holy Spirit on everything for those who believe in Christ and know that He is the life of the world – and that in Him the world in its totality has become again a *liturgy, a communion, an ascension.*" (112)

"It is our certitude that in the ascension of the Church in Christ, in the joy of the world to come, in the Church as the *sacrament* – the gift, the beginning, the presence, the promise, the reality, the anticipation – of the Kingdom, is the source and the beginning of all Christian mission. It is only as we return from the light and the joy of Christ's presence that we recover the world as a meaningful field of our Christian action, that we see the true reality of the world and thus discover what we must do" (112-13)

"The Church is the sacrament of the Kingdom – not because she possesses divinely instituted acts called 'sacraments,' but because first of all she is the possibility given to man to see in and through this world the 'world to come' to see and and to 'live' it in Christ. It is only when in the darkness of *this world* we discern that Christ has *already* 'filled all things with Himself' that these things, whatever they may be, are revealed and given to us full of meaning and beauty. A Christian is the one who, wherever he looks, finds Christ and rejoices in Him. And this joy *transforms* all his human plans and programs, decisions and actions, making all his mission the sacrament of the world's return to Him who is the life of the world." (113)

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- 1) What are ways that our churches' life and worship might be eucharist:
acknowledging this-worldly realities as good gifts from God, and offering them back up to God in thanks and praise?
- 2) What are ways that our churches' life and worship might be liturgy:
transforming this-worldly realities (like time, and marriage, and suffering) for the good and the life of this world?
- 3) What are ways that our churches' life and worship might be sacrament:
allowing God to transform present, this-worldly realities into their New Creation fullness?