

Why We Need . . .

WHY WE NEED ALEXANDER SCHMEMANN

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“Our crisis is one in which liturgy is no longer the source of our vision, theology is alienated from life, and piety is fed by soft sentimentalism.”



The question “why do we need Fr. Alexander Schmemmann?” elicits a question in response: “who are we?” That is, who are the ones who could benefit from Schmemmann’s insights? It turns out in this case that it is not only the readers of *Communio*, because Schmemmann is also beneficial to scholars and laity, liturgical studies and theological studies, the academy and the Church, Eastern and Western Christians, for having effected a paradigm shift in the understanding of liturgical theology. Instead of treating liturgy like an object, Schmemmann recognizes liturgy as a source. Prior to his influence, liturgy tended to be treated as one among many objects of study—for history first and theology second—but for Schmemmann liturgy is “the ontological condition of theology, of the proper understanding of kerygma, of the Word of God, because it is in the Church, of which the *leitourgia* is the expression and the life, that the sources of theology are

functioning as precisely ‘sources.’”¹ This was a Copernican revolution.

The word “liturgy” became commonplace thanks to the Renaissance writers in the sixteenth century (in the Middle Ages, *officia divina* or *ecclesiae ritus* were more common), and the academy caught its glimpse of liturgy through a crack in the door of historical studies, as A. G. Martimort explains. “Scientific liturgical history, which was a seventeenth-century creation, showed the clergy and faithful the value and riches of the liturgy, its importance in the Church’s tradition, the precise meaning of rites and prayers.”² Then, and only then, comes the theological step, he says: “The results gained by historians must then become an object of theological study.”³ This normed the relationship between liturgy and theology for the succeeding centuries. When speaking about “liturgical theology,” some scholars treated the former word as an adjective modifying the latter word (as biblical theology talks about the Bible, so liturgical theology would talk about sacramentaries and processions and vestments). Other scholars treated the former word as a methodological approach to the latter word (as one might approach theological questions systematically, historically, or morally, so one might approach theological questions with data mined from the quarry of ritual practice). File liturgical theology under “T” in the academic filing cabinet if you think liturgy should be examined not only by historians, ritualists, medievalists, and musicians, but occasionally by theologians too. File liturgical theology under “L” if you think liturgy is one more theme to be added to an existing range of theological topics already crowded with Bible, dogma, history, morality, ecclesiology, and systematics; squeeze it in between process theology, feminist theology, liberation theology, and so forth.

Does this state of affairs mean liturgy is primarily an object of historical study and only secondarily an object of theological study? Does it mean that liturgy exists for the devotion

1. Alexander Schmemmann, “Theology and Liturgical Tradition,” in *Liturgy and Tradition*, ed. Thomas Fisch (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 1990), 18.

2. A. G. Martimort, “Definitions and Methods,” in *The Church at Prayer*, vol. 1 (Collegeville, MN: The Liturgical Press, 1987), 16.

3. *Ibid.*, 17.

and piety of ordinary believers but is irrelevant to theology? Does it mean that theology is a science that can get along quite well without liturgy, and thus that liturgy is a practice that can get along quite well without theology? If the true theologian only resides in the academy, then calling liturgy “primary theology” is really only saying that it provides straw for an academic Rumpelstiltskin to spin into real theological gold later. But here is the novel question that Schmemann presents: What if liturgical theology is not something we produce but something we receive? What if liturgy is not an object of theology but a source of theology? Schmemann first challenges the divorce between liturgy and theology that let them drift into separate corners, but he goes on, secondly, to challenge the reconciliation advised by most scholastic marriage counselors when they merely set liturgy and theology side by side, failing to discover their true unity. For Schmemann, “liturgical theology” is an organic definition: it is a single term consisting of two words that envelops three realities, as we shall see. To put it colorfully, liturgical theology is not yellow liturgy marbles mixed with blue theology marbles to make a jar full of yellow and blue marbles; liturgical theology is green marbles.⁴ The reason we need Schmemann is that he is not just adding liturgy marbles to the academic jar; he is affirming that liturgical theology can be found where the Church is in motion, and from that place it expands outward to the life of the world.

Adapting ourselves to this new environment, strange to many in the academy, will require some effort, so we will spend most of this essay inside Schmemann’s thought, starting with some biographical details.

1. SCHMEMANN’S LIFE AND CAREER

Schmemann’s life is symmetrical: he spent thirty years in Europe (1921–51) and thirty-two years in America (1951–83). Schmemann was born in Tallin, Estonia, where his family had gone to escape the civil war that was raging in their Russian homeland. He was a Russian who never lived in Russia. His widow, Juliana, writes,

4. David Fagerberg, *Theologia Prima: What Is Liturgical Theology?* (Chicago: Hillenbrand Press, 2003), 7.

He was Russian first; he loved the culture, the religious thought, the poetry, the literature. His deep love for his heritage stayed with him throughout his life. Russian was his mother tongue and he wrote in Russian with ease and flair and literary finesse. (Alexander Solzhenitsyn was amazed that a man who had grown up outside of Russia was able to write with such literary elegance.)⁵

The family eventually ended up in Paris, a city that was receiving thousands of Russian immigrants after the revolution. As a boy, he was enrolled first in a French public school, then in a Russian military school near Versailles. After the director of the military academy died, he transferred to the prominent French Lycée Carnot in Paris and, after graduation, enrolled in the Russian gymnasium (high school), obtaining his final baccalaureate in philosophy. Juliana writes that “throughout his years at the *lycée* and the *gymnasium*, while living at home, Alexander never missed a single church service at St. Alexander Nevsky Cathedral. It took an hour to walk to church where he first served as an altar boy, then a reader, then later a sub-deacon.”⁶ It was no surprise that he embarked on specifically theological studies in his higher education by attending the Orthodox Theological Institute in Paris from 1940 to 1945, usually abbreviated simply as St. Sergius. He met his future wife, Juliana Osorguine, while she was studying classics at the Sorbonne. They married in 1943, when Alexander was twenty-two, and three children were born to them in Paris during this happy time between 1944 and 1948. He was ordained a priest in 1946.

Schmemmann was invited to continue on as a lecturer at St. Sergius upon graduation, where faculty members were influential on his developing mind. In the present context we will mention only four. First, the school was dominated by the personality of Fr. Sergius Bulgakov. “The influence of Bulgakov is evident even in journal entries that are critical as well as in an article that Schmemmann later wrote about him and in a remark made toward the end of his own life. When asked which of all the intellectuals had the most impact on him, the instantaneous reply

5. Juliana Schmemmann, *My Journey with Father Alexander* (Montreal: Alexander Press, 2007), 22.

6. *Ibid.*, 20.

was Bulgakov.”⁷ This son of a priest “shared in the ‘wanderings’ of Russian intelligentsia,” says Schmemann, “and returned to the church *via* Marxism and idealism.”⁸ Although Bulgakov wrote on virtually every major area of systematic theology, his work on Sophia (introduced into Russian religious thought by Soloviev and Florensky) was opposed by many and declared heretical by the hierarchy. Regarding this controversy, Schmemann simply says it is “certainly not closed, and only future and more dispassionate studies can show how much of Fr. Bulgakov’s system will remain an integral part of Orthodox theological development.”⁹ Schmemann himself was more drawn to Church history, and he became a pupil of the second professor we should mention: A. V. Kartashev. Schmemann wrote a candidates thesis (equivalent to an M.Div.) on Byzantine theocracy under this man and was named an instructor in Church history at St. Sergius. The third and fourth professors are described by his friend John Meyendorff:

Fr Cyprian [Kern] taught Patristics at St Sergius, but his love was for the liturgy and his liturgical taste had a lasting influence on Fr Schmemann. Both also shared knowledge and appreciation of Russian classical literature. Intellectually more decisive, however, was Fr Schmemann’s acquaintance with and devotion to the ecclesiological ideas of Fr Nicholas Afanassieff [alternatively spelled Afanassiev], a professor of canon law whose name will be forever attached to what he called “eucharistic ecclesiology” and whose ideas are reflected in many of Fr Schmemann’s writings.¹⁰

Paris was one big roundtable for ecumenical conversation—often around a literal kitchen table in the home of one of the theologians. Schmemann’s thesis and later publications indicate that he was familiar with many thinkers from the Western

7. Michael Plekon, “The Liturgy of Life: Alexander Schmemann,” *Religions* 7, 127 (2016): 2, available at <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel7110127>.

8. Alexander Schmemann, “Russian Theology: 1920–1972. An Introductory Survey,” *St. Vladimir’s Theological Quarterly* 16, no. 4 (1972): 179.

9. *Ibid.*

10. John Meyendorff, “A Life Worth Living,” *St. Vladimir’s Theological Quarterly* 28, no. 1 (1984): 3–10, at 4; also available at <https://www.schmemann.org/memoriain/1984.svtq1.meyendorff.html>.

Church, especially those associated with *ressourcement*: Baumstark, Congar, Brilioth, Botte, Bouyer, Daniélou, and Dalmais. The Catholic dialogue partners learned an appreciation for the ethos of Eastern Liturgy, and the Orthodox dialogue partners learned an appreciation for the reforms advocated by the liturgical movement, on which Schmemmann comments several times. We will cite but a few examples. Regarding the special value of the liturgical movement for ecumenism, he says,

I would define the first contribution as the rediscovery of a common language. In this, the liturgical movement, it seems to me, has a unique value. . . . Something has happened to the liturgy, and this everyone can agree with. . . . The great fact of the liturgical movement is that from our various backgrounds we are rediscovering it all together.¹¹

He speaks of the movement as a kind of breakthrough. “The unique and truly exciting meaning of the Liturgical Movement as it began and developed during the last fifty years lies precisely in its ‘breaking through’ the theological and pietistic superstructure to the genuine ‘spirit of the liturgy.’”¹² He believes the Orthodox Church also needs “a liturgical movement: the rediscovery of the meaning first, then its ‘reincarnation’ in adequate words and categories.”¹³ “The Orthodox Church needs a liturgical revival and renewal not less than the Christian West,” he proposes, and the fact that so many pastoral manuals are “deprived of theological, historical and spiritual perspective and even elementary liturgical knowledge, only indicates how far we still are from the real concern for the ‘right’ things in liturgy.”¹⁴ Louis Bouyer is often singled out, and in a review of his book *Liturgical Piety* Schmemmann gives the goal of the movement of which Bouyer is one of the recognized leaders. “The liturgical movement is precisely the effort to understand the Liturgy, to

11. Alexander Schmemmann, “Liturgical Movement and Orthodox Ecumenical Feeling,” *The American Benedictine Review* 14, no. 2 (1963): 178, 179.

12. Alexander Schmemmann, “Prayer, Liturgy, and Renewal,” *The Greek Orthodox Theological Review* 14, no. 1 (Spring 1969): 13.

13. Alexander Schmemmann, “Problems of Orthodoxy in America: II. The Liturgical Problem,” *St. Vladimir’s Seminary Quarterly* 8, no. 2 (1964): 183.

14. Schmemmann, “Problems of Orthodoxy in America: II,” 169.

replace the formal approach to it by the rediscovery of its real essence and implications.”¹⁵ Even though the liturgical movement arose in the West, Schmemann believes “it has nevertheless a deep internal bond with the Church in the East, and is therefore of special interest to Orthodox theologians. From a certain point of view and with a critical appraisal of each of its achievements, it can be regarded as a kind of ‘Orthodox’ movement in a non-Orthodox context.”¹⁶ His friend Meyendorff concludes that Schmemann learned liturgical theology and the Paschal mystery from the milieu of two movements, one liturgical and the other a return-to-sources.

The names and ideas of Jean Daniélou, Louis Bouyer, and several others are inseparable from the shaping of Fr. Schmemann’s mind. And if their legacy was somewhat lost within the turmoil of post-conciliar Roman Catholicism, their ideas produce much fruit in the organically-liturgical and ecclesialogically-consistent world of Orthodoxy through the brilliant and always effective witness of Fr. Schmemann.¹⁷

The world of the Russians in Paris was stimulating, but its members could only think of Orthodoxy in Russian ethnic terms. “The ‘Russian Paris’ of the 1930s was a world unto itself. Numbering tens of thousands and including intellectuals, artists, theologians, grand dukes and former tsarist ministers, publishing daily papers and settling political divisions in hot arguments, Russian émigrés still dreamt of a return home.”¹⁸ In Juliana’s assessment, the faculty of St. Sergius “acknowledged nothing except what was in Russia before, should be today and would

15. Alexander Schmemann, “Book Review—Liturgy,” *St. Vladimir’s Seminary Quarterly* 2, no. 2 (Spring 1958): 49–50.

16. Alexander Schmemann, *Introduction to Liturgical Theology* (New York: St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 1966), 13.

17. Meyendorff, “A Life Worth Living,” 5. While on sabbatical in the 1990s I sat in on lectures by Paul Meyendorff, son of Fr. John Meyendorff, and although I am quoting from memory he said something like this: “You will not find anything in my father or in Schmemann that you will not first find in Bouyer, Daniélou, de Lubac, or Congar. But you find it in these Catholics because they were reading the Greek fathers in addition to the Latin fathers.”

18. Meyendorff, “A Life Worth Living,” 1.

be forever.”¹⁹ Hence when Professor George Florovsky invited Schmemann to come and teach at the very fledgling seminary of St. Vladimir’s in New York City (lodged at the time in several apartments belonging to the Union Theological Seminary), he accepted.

Florovsky was teaching, preaching and being dazzled by the incredible potential of missionary work that he saw in the Orthodox Church in America. He wrote to Alexander inviting him to come. Exactly the same time, Alexander was invited to teach Eastern Church History at Oxford University in England. Without hesitation Alexander chose America. He was young, energetic and full of missionary zeal.²⁰

Schmemann accepted the invitation in 1951, at age 29, and his friend John Meyendorff followed in 1959. Together they were the twin pillars of St. Vladimir’s Orthodox Seminary for three decades. Schmemann was named dean in 1962 when the seminary moved to suburban Crestwood, NY, a position he held for two decades until the end of his life. The two of them worked for an indigenous Orthodox Church in America (OCA), which was granted autocephalous (self-governing) status in 1970.

If there was any commitment which was constant in his life, already in France, it was the hope that the uncanonical overlapping of “jurisdictions,” which was the single most obvious obstacle to Orthodox witness in the West, would be replaced by local Church unity in conformity not only with canons, but with the most essential requirements of Orthodox ecclesiology.²¹

He felt strongly the importance of overcoming the silo effect of different ethnic Orthodox churches standing side-by-side without common jurisdictional authority. He had seen this problem already in Paris.

I remember Alexander’s total commitment to this effort. Diplomacy was essential since the resistance was fraught with emotions of people who had suffered so much at the

19. Juliana Schmemann, *My Journey with Father Alexander*, 53.

20. *Ibid.*

21. Meyendorff, “A Life Worth Living,” 9.

hands of the Communists. Deal with the Communists? Yes, precisely to become independent from them! Will we lose our very roots, our language? Will all services be forever only in English? Will the world recognize our Church? Of course. These issues had to be addressed.²²

Therefore, in addition to his duties as professor and dean, Schmemann worked as a theologian with the Standing Conference of Orthodox Bishops in America (SCOBA): he promoted international groups for theological education (such as Synodos, the Orthodox Theological Society); he was involved with the seminary's *Theological Quarterly* and its influential publishing house, and he lectured as adjunct professor at Union and Columbia universities. Throughout this time, Juliana remembers he read intensely, not only in liturgy, theology, and Church history, but also poetry and novels, both Russian and Western. Browsing bookstores was pure bliss, and she confesses feeling guilty at having to hurry him along at times.

The variety of literature he consumed was astounding, but his favorite seemed to be biographies, memoirs, autobiographies. He was fascinated by the depth and diversity of human lives. He would read the lives of atheists, never critical, simply wondering how and why it is possible to be one. . . . Poetry was not only close to Alexander's heart, it was part of him. He had an amazing memory and could recite by heart Verlaine, Pushkin, Tchutchev, Robert Frost, e.e. cummings, Rimbaud, just to name a few.²³

One more task, worth mentioning here, occupied him during these years. For thirty years he broadcast to audiences behind the Iron Curtain through a station called "Radio Liberation," the shortwave voice of an organization called the American Committee for the Liberation of the Peoples of Russia. These were weekly talks, homilies, sermons, addresses—it is hard to categorize them—on matters theological, philosophical, cultural, and political. They have only recently been digitized and transcribed, and in fact a selection is being published in English in two volumes titled *A Voice for Our Time: Radio Liberty Talks*. He did this ministry for

22. Juliana Schmemann, *My Journey with Father Alexander*, 74.

23. *Ibid.*, 88–89.

three decades without knowing how many were listening, but this lack of confirmation made no difference. In his journals Schmemmann recalls a priest who visited the radio station after returning from a visit to Russia. When he told him of his immense popularity there, Schmemmann wrote candidly in his private diary, “Nice to hear that my work does reach someone there.”²⁴ In the two English volumes, one published and the other forthcoming, there is only one wistful expression: “Whoever you are, my distant listeners, and wherever you are, under whatever conditions, happy or sorrowful—to you, as to me, is directed the light of the Christmas star, the joy of the Christmas doxology.”²⁵ Thirty years of addressing an unknown and unseen audience was an act of priestly hope. Schmemmann’s son, Serge (a former Moscow correspondent for the Associated Press) remembers the experience from his childhood.

My father and other Russians in New York called it simply “komitet.” The weekly visit to the komitet became a fixture of my father’s life, and with time it became far more than a duty or a chore—it became a weekly visit to other dimensions of his life. For me, accompanying him was an adventure. . . . Father Alexander began taping his weekly broadcasts almost from the time the station was founded, shortly after Stalin’s death, and he continued them for the rest of his life, more than thirty years.²⁶

This opportunity made his name known to many repressed Christians in Russia. One of the first things a certain listener, an admirer named Alexander Solzhenitsyn, did after his 1974 exile was to make the acquaintance of Schmemmann and forge a friendship in person.

The title chosen by John Meyendorff for his friend’s memorial, published after his death, seems fitting indeed: “A Life Worth Living.”

Since I am, myself, Catholic, I am not going to attempt to place Schmemmann on the progressive–conservative tape measure

24. Alexander Schmemmann, *The Journals of Father Alexander Schmemmann* (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 2002), 67.

25. Alexander Schmemmann, *A Voice for Our Time: Radio Liberty Talks*, vol. 2 (Yonkers, NY: St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 2022).

26. Alexander Schmemmann, *A Voice for Our Time: Radio Liberty Talks*, vol. 1 (Yonkers, NY: St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 2021), xiii.

that people so often like to take from their utility belt to evaluate a man. He has his detractors. An Orthodox colleague once told me he was warned by his professors not to read Schmemann. If so, it might be due to the fact that Schmemann accepted invitations to speak to non-Orthodox audiences, that he engaged in ecumenical dialogue, that he did not grow a proper-length Orthodox beard, and that he championed certain liturgical reforms. A different Orthodox writer assesses the situation thus:

It is necessary to say that he met with often bitter resistance and rejection in his own lifetime, from the hierarchy, clergy and laity of his church. And since his death I would say his work has been either politely ignored or contradicted, often diplomatically, without express reference to his name. While his name is still officially honored, his vision is very much in eclipse. While a few of his liturgical renewal efforts have held on, such as frequent, even weekly reception of communion, much of the rest of his efforts are rejected by present practice and rationale. His effort to return baptism to communal celebration, his arguing for saying the prayers of the liturgy aloud and reverently, his critical ideas on specific rites such as those of burial are not practiced or even discussed as they now are cast as innovations. Especially in his last years, he was extremely critical of what he saw as increasing sectarianism and a rise in clericalism, both rooted in for him, a pseudo-traditionalism among many Orthodox laity and clergy.²⁷

Concerning Schmemann's own attitude toward liturgical perfection, his wife recalls,

Once Alexander concelebrated with a young Antiochian graduate of the seminary at a hierarchical Divine Liturgy. This priest made so many mistakes! While taking off his vestments, sweaty, disheveled and walking into the middle of his congregation a happy young man announced to his people, "I learned everything I know from my beloved Father Alexander!" Alexander cringed and wondered whether the seminary had taught him anything, but he quickly realized that in spite of mistakes and awkwardness in serving, the young man knew "the one thing needful" and he had it: he loved the Lord.²⁸

27. Plekon, "Liturgy of Life," 5.

28. Juliana Schmemann, *My Journey with Father Alexander*, 88.

2. OVERCOMING A “TRIVORCE”

Schmemmann was concerned about a divorce that had taken place. He chooses the term “divorce” because it describes the severing of a connection, a disuniting of what should be unified, a simplification of a complexity.

This double crisis—of theology and liturgy—is, I submit, the real source of the general crisis which faces our Church today. . . . A crisis is always a divorce, a discrepancy, between the foundations and the life which is supposed to be based on these foundations; it is life drifting away from its own foundations. . . . If today both theology and liturgy have ceased, at least to a substantial degree, to perform within the Church the function which is theirs thus provoking a deep crisis, it is because at first they have been divorced from one another; because the *lex credendi* has been alienated from the *lex orandi*.²⁹

It is not difficult to find half a dozen examples of his use of the idea of divorce to explain what is taking place. “Not only has theology been divorced from liturgy as ‘source,’ but it paid very little attention to it even as to one of its ‘objects.’”³⁰ Liturgical theology “means, above everything else, the overcoming of the tragical divorce between the thought of the Church and the experience of the Kingdom of God, which is the only source, guide, and fulfillment of that thought, and the only ultimate motivation of all Christian action.”³¹ The basic defect of theology is “its almost total divorce from the real life of the Church and from her *practical* needs.”³²

Theology did not care about the liturgy, and the liturgy did not care about theology. There was a real divorce. . . . My point is that theology remained an intellectual preoccupation. It was cut off from the living source which makes it not only an adequate expression of the Church’s truth, but something more than that, a real and living testimony to the life and

29. Schmemmann, “Liturgy and Theology,” in *Liturgy and Tradition*, 88–89.

30. *Ibid.*, 98–99.

31. *Ibid.*

32. Alexander Schmemmann, “The Task of Orthodox Theology in America Today,” *St. Vladimir’s Seminary Quarterly* 10, no. 4 (1966): 182.

spirit of the Church. . . . The time has come for putting those two realities back where they belong together. The liturgy is to become again the source of theology.³³

There is a third constituent involved. “The tragedy of all these debates on the liturgy is that they remain locked within the categories of a ‘liturgical piety’ which is itself the outcome of the divorce between liturgy, theology and piety.”³⁴ Orthodox theological schools “remained for a long time an ‘alienated’ body within the ecclesiastical organism—alienated because of that divorce of ‘theology’ from ‘piety.’”³⁵ Perhaps, then, it is more proper to speak of a “trivorce.” Schmemann believes the task of liturgical theology is to reunite *liturgy and theology and piety*. A binary connection is not enough for him (liturgy plus theology); a pair of binary connections is not enough for him (liturgical theology plus liturgical piety); he wants a trinary union (liturgy plus theology plus piety).

The goal of liturgical theology, as its very name indicates, is to overcome the fateful divorce between theology, liturgy and piety—a divorce which, as we have already tried to show elsewhere, has had disastrous consequences for theology as well as for liturgy and piety. It deprived liturgy of its proper understanding by the people, who began to see in it beautiful and mysterious ceremonies in which, while attending them, they take no real part. It deprived theology of its living source and made it into an intellectual exercise for intellectuals. It deprived piety of its living content and term of reference.³⁶

Theologians became those with Ph.D.s; liturgists became those with skill in following rubrics; pietists became those with very strong religious feelings. Liturgical theology must bring liturgy,

33. Schmemann, “Liturgical Movement and Orthodox Ecumenical Feeling,” 181–82.

34. Schmemann, “Liturgical Theology, Theology of Liturgy, and Liturgical Reform,” in *Liturgy and Tradition*, 46.

35. Alexander Schmemann, “Thoughts for the Jubilee,” *St. Vladimir’s Theological Quarterly* 13, no. 1–2 (1969): 96.

36. Alexander Schmemann, *Of Water and the Spirit* (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 1974), 12. His reference to having tried to “show this elsewhere” is to his book *Introduction to Liturgical Theology* (New York: St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 1966).

theology, and piety back together in order for us to focus on its real subject matter: God, world, and man. “To understand liturgy from inside, to discover and experience that ‘epiphany’ of God, world and life which the liturgy contains and communicates, to relate this vision and this power to our own existence, to all our problems: such is the purpose of liturgical theology.”³⁷ This reunification is Schmemmann’s goal, and the reason we need him today. A real divorce took place, which is to be grieved, and which will only be overcome when liturgy is recovered as *lex orandi*.

3. LEX ORANDI EST LEX CREDENDI

Since this ancient saying has stirred debate, it will be beneficial to devote some time to Schmemmann’s understanding of it.

“The ‘essence’ of the liturgy or *lex orandi* is ultimately nothing else but the Church’s faith itself or, better to say, the manifestation, communication and fulfillment of that faith. It is in this sense that one must understand, it seems to me, the famous dictum *lex orandi est lex credendi*.”³⁸ Historians can search for expressions of this essence, theologians can lend words to elucidate this essence, rubricists and canonists can protect this essence, but Christians—priest and people—celebrate this essence and do not manipulate it. A Christian lives by this essence, this unchanging principle, which we might also call the *ordo* of the liturgy.

To find the *Ordo* behind the “rubrics,” regulations and rules—to find the unchanging principle, the living norm or “logos” of worship as a whole, within what is accidental and temporary: this is the primary task which faces those who regard liturgical theology not as the collecting of accidental and arbitrary explanations of services but as the systematic study of the *lex orandi* of the Church. This is nothing but the search for or identification of that element of the *Typicon* which is presupposed by its whole content, rather than contained by it.³⁹

37. Schmemmann, *Of Water and the Spirit*, 12.

38. Schmemmann, “Liturgical Theology, Theology of Liturgy, and Liturgical Reform,” 38–39.

39. Schmemmann, *Introduction to Liturgical Theology*, 32.

Schmemann thinks the tragedy of the post-patristic age was the reduction of liturgy to cultic categories alone, accidentally and arbitrarily collected. All sorts of problems have arisen “because theology ceased to seek in the *lex orandi* its source and food, because liturgy ceased to be conducive to theology.”⁴⁰ The sad result was that theologians now neglect to learn “the oldest of all languages of the Church, that of her rites, the rhythm and the ordo of her *leitourgia*.”⁴¹

Agency and terminology must be kept clear: liturgy is a work of God, though it is an activity of human beings.⁴² This is a sacramental observation. The divine *res* is accomplished by God Almighty in the *sacramentum tantum*. God is the principal cause; the human minister is an instrumental cause. In parallel fashion, human beings are busy with their ritual tasks, but this bush burns with the power of God without being consumed. A frequent and faulty train of thought runs like this: *lex orandi* is liturgy, and liturgy is ritual, and ritual is a human product because it is a human activity; therefore saying that theology rests upon *lex orandi* sounds like saying that theology rests upon ourselves. That is, the law of belief rests upon the law of prayer we have legislated for ourselves. This is surely incorrect, and in fact more than incorrect: at best it is tautological; at worst it is blasphemous. Schmemann is not proposing that the liturgical tail wags the doctrinal dog.⁴³ Schmemann is proposing that the formula identifies the very possibility of theology.

The formula *lex orandi est lex credendi* means nothing else than that theology is *possible* only within the Church, i.e.

40. Schmemann, “Liturgical Theology, Theology of Liturgy, and Liturgical Reform,” 46–47.

41. Schmemann, “Liturgy and Theology,” 65.

42. David Fagerberg, *Liturgical Dogmatics* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2021), 9.

43. In my view, this was the erroneous view that Pope Pius XII was justly correcting when he clarified the formula: “We refer to the error and fallacious reasoning of those who have claimed that the sacred liturgy is a kind of proving ground for the truths to be held of faith, meaning by this that the Church is obliged to declare such a doctrine sound when it is found to have produced fruits of piety and sanctity through the sacred rites of the liturgy, and to reject it otherwise. Hence the epigram, ‘*Lex orandi, lex credendi*’—the law for prayer is the law for faith” (*Mediator Dei*, 46).

as a fruit of this new life in Christ, granted in the sacramental *leitourgia*, as a witness to the eschatological fullness of the Church, as in other terms, a participation in this *leitourgia*. The problem of the relationship between liturgy and theology is not for the Fathers a problem of priority or authority. Liturgical tradition is not an “authority” or a *locus theologicus*; it is the ontological condition of theology, of the proper understanding of kerygma, of the Word of God, because it is in the Church, of which the *leitourgia* is the expression and the life, that the sources of theology are functioning as precisely “sources.”⁴⁴

Liturgical theology is the process of overcoming the trivorce; liturgical theology only results when the trivorce has been overcome.

Sourced in the liturgy, theology can act upon us (our piety). This was a lesson Schmemmann learned from the Church Fathers, who “rarely speak of the Church and of liturgy in explicit terms because for them they are not an ‘object’ of theology but its ontological foundation.”⁴⁵ The loss of a rooted attachment to the work of God occurring during the human activity of liturgy results in a theological plankton that floats in the currents of the various ideologies of the day. The essence of liturgy does not come out of our human mind; it does not even come out of a networked academy of minds. Here is a collection of remarks by Schmemmann to make this clearer still. The essence of the liturgy is the Church’s faith itself, and “it is in this sense that one must understand, it seems to me, the famous dictum *lex orandi est lex credendi*.”⁴⁶ “The formula *lex orandi est lex credendi* means nothing else than that theology is *possible* only within the Church.”⁴⁷ “The affirmation *lex orandi est lex credendi* means that it is again in the mystery of the Church that theology finds its inner fulfillment.”⁴⁸ When we turn to the liturgy itself we discover “the forgotten truth of the ancient saying: *lex orandi est lex*

44. Schmemmann, “Theology and Liturgical Tradition,” 18.

45. Schmemmann, “Liturgical Theology, Theology of Liturgy, and Liturgical Reform,” 42.

46. Schmemmann, “Liturgical Theology, Theology of Liturgy, and Liturgical Reform,” 38–39.

47. Schmemmann, “Theology and Liturgical Tradition,” 18.

48. Schmemmann, “Liturgy and Theology,” 64.

credendi.⁴⁹ Liturgy's ecclesial function is to reveal the faith of the Church by being "that *lex orandi* in which the *lex credendi* finds its principal criterion and standard."⁵⁰ "Theology must rediscover as its own 'rule of faith' the Church's *lex orandi*, and the liturgy reveal itself again as the *lex credendi*."⁵¹ "Theologians have forgotten the essential principle that *lex orandi* constitutes the *lex credendi*; they have forgotten the absolutely unique function of Christian worship within all theological speculation."⁵²

The reader understands by now that Schmemann thinks something disastrous happens when this link is sundered. It turns theology into something else.

I am saying this out of a very deep conviction—something has happened to theology itself in the history of the Church. It was disconnected from its living source, from the only living source, and that is the liturgy. . . . Theology became a void, a mere intellectual status in the Church without any real reference to the liturgy. . . . What also happened was that theology became a professional occupation for theologians. . . . Theology did not care about the liturgy, and the liturgy did not care about theology. There was a real divorce. . . . My point is that theology remained an intellectual preoccupation. It was cut off from the living source which makes it not only an adequate expression of the Church's truth, but something more than that, a real and living testimony to the life and spirit of the Church. . . . The time has come for putting those two realities back where they belong together. The liturgy is to become again the source of theology.⁵³

The foundation of theology is not our cleverness, and although it can rankle Western ears, Schmemann labels this condition "scholasticism." Students reading Schmemann must get over this

49. Alexander Schmemann, "Symbols and Symbolism in the Byzantine Liturgy: Liturgical Symbols and Their Theological Interpretation," in *Liturgy and Tradition*, 128.

50. Alexander Schmemann, "Liturgical Theology: Remarks on Method," in *Liturgy and Tradition*, 138.

51. Schmemann, "Liturgy and Theology," 68.

52. Alexander Schmemann, "Liturgy and Eschatology," in *Liturgy and Tradition*, 95.

53. Schmemann, "Liturgical Movement and Orthodox Ecumenical Feeling," 181–82.

speedbump. It is what he calls theology when it is disconnected from the Church's self-experience as communion with the Holy Spirit. "It is indeed the 'original sin' of the entire western theological development that it made 'texts' the only *loci theologici*, the extrinsic 'authorities' of theology, disconnecting theology from its living source: liturgy and spirituality."⁵⁴ Perhaps to understand what Schmemmann means, the reader will have to substitute his own experience of a meeting in a professional society to which the pejorative phrase "it's only academic/intellectual" perfectly applies. In Schmemmann's vocabulary, "scholasticism" means places where theories swirl around like academic dust bunnies but do not impact life. This is not only a problem of the geographical West, which is proven by the fact that he gives examples of it in the Orthodox East.

By "scholastic" we mean, in this instance, not a definite school or period in the history of theology, but a theological structure which existed in various forms in both the West and the East, and in which all "organic" connection with worship is severed. Theology here has an independent, rational status; it is a search for a system of consistent categories and concepts: *intellectus fidei*. The position of worship in relation to theology is reversed: from a *source* it becomes an *object*, which has to be defined and evaluated within the accepted categories (e.g., definitions of sacraments). Liturgy supplies theology with "data," but the method of dealing with these data is independent of any liturgical context.⁵⁵

Imagine: theology as relevant to life; liturgy as a guide and balm; personal piety as conditioned by Church tradition; liturgical theology as arising from the Church's corporate experience of the Paschal mystery; dogma experienced instead of merely talked about; a liturgical mysticism that aligns the individual soul with the mystical Body. All these descriptions explain what liturgical theology seeks to effect. "All genuine theology is, of necessity and by definition, *mystical*. This means not that theology is at the mercy of individual and irrational 'visions' and

54. Schmemmann, "Liturgical Theology, Theology of Liturgy, and Liturgical Reform," 42.

55. Schmemmann, "Theology and Liturgical Tradition," 13.

‘experiences,’ but that it is rooted in, and made indeed *possible*, by the Church’s experience of herself as *communion of the Holy Spirit*.⁵⁶

4. THE DAMAGE DONE TO LITURGY, THEOLOGY, AND PIETY

The consequences of the trivorce has yet further reverberations. At the dissolution of the triad, each of the elements is distorted. The consequence for piety is that its “interest is narrowed to the question of one’s personal fate ‘after death’”;⁵⁷ the consequence for liturgy is that “the beginning of an ever-deeper infiltration of ‘illustrative symbolism’ into the explanation of worship”;⁵⁸ and the consequence for theology is that the Church’s “‘*lex orandi*’ simply cannot be properly ‘heard’ and understood.”⁵⁹ *Theology* retreats from the ecclesial shoreline, like a receding wave, into the ocean of academia; *liturgy* swells with arcane and archaic expressions that are theologically vacuous; and *piety* becomes subjective singularity unregulated by theological tradition. When theology is divorced from liturgy it “is imprisoned in its own ‘data’ and ‘propositions,’ and having eyes does not see and having ears does not hear”; when piety is divorced from liturgy it becomes “entangled in all kinds of liturgical experiences save the one expressed in the *lex orandi* itself.”⁶⁰ One can claim to be in love with the gewgaws of liturgical celebration, and yet

completely fail to see in them, in the totality of the Church’s *leitourgia* and all-embracing vision of life, a power meant to judge, inform and transform the whole of existence, a “philosophy of life” shaping and challenging all our ideas,

56. Alexander Schmemmann, “Freedom in the Church,” in *Church, World, Mission* (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 1979), 188.

57. Alexander Schmemmann, *The Eucharist: Sacrament of the Kingdom* (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 1988), 42.

58. *Ibid.*, 44.

59. Schmemmann, “Liturgy and Theology,” 58.

60. Alexander Schmemmann, “Theology and Liturgy,” *The Greek Orthodox Theological Review* 17, no. 1 (Spring 1972): 94. This essay was reprinted in *Church, World, Mission*.

attitudes and actions. As in the case of theology, one can speak of an alienation of liturgy from life, be it from the life of the Church or the life of the Christian individual. Liturgy is confined to the temple, but beyond its sacred enclave it has no impact, no power. . . . A liturgical pietism fed by sentimental and pseudo-symbolic explanations of liturgical rites results, in fact, in a growing and all-pervading secularism.⁶¹

Our crisis is one in which liturgy is no longer the source of our vision, theology is alienated from life, and piety is fed by soft sentimentalism. “The essence of this crisis—*secularism*—is the divorce from God of the whole of human life.”⁶² Schmemmann wants each term to become more profound, more nuanced, and more connected.

4.1. *Leitourgia*

Since we are prone to picture liturgy in our mind first as the human activity we could record with a camera, Schmemmann frequently employs the Greek term *leitourgia* instead. He does so in order to deepen our understanding by linking it to the etymological meaning, but he also believes that the primitive Church chose this word for a reason. The selection of this word

indicates her special understanding of worship, which is indeed a revolutionary one. If Christian worship is *leitourgia*, it cannot be simply reduced to, or expressed in terms of, “cult.” The ancient world knew a plethora of cultic religions or “cults.” . . . But the Christian cult is *leitourgia*, and this means that it is *functional* in its essence, has a goal to achieve which transcends the categories of cult as such.⁶³

The Church is more than a shrine; an icon is more than a religious picture; sacrament is more than a souvenir; the priest is

61. Schmemmann, “Liturgy and Theology,” 51–52.

62. Alexander Schmemmann, “Confession and Communion: Reports to the Holy Synod of Bishops of the Orthodox Church in America” (February 17, 1972), emphasis original, available at <https://www.schmemmann.org/byhim/confessionandcommunion.html>.

63. Schmemmann, “Theology and Eucharist,” in *Liturgy and Tradition*, 79.

more than temple staff; *leitourgia* is more than liturgy. Christianity is not on a par with other religious cults, even though Christianity celebrates in cultic form. The *leitourgia* has a different goal.

This goal is precisely the Church as the manifestation and presence of the “new eon,” of the Kingdom of God. In a sense the Church is indeed a *liturgical institution*, i.e., an institution whose *leitourgia* is to fulfill itself as the Body of Christ and a new creation. Christian cult is, therefore, a radically new cult, unprecedented in both the Old Testament and paganism.⁶⁴

To interpret *leitourgia* merely as liturgy is like interpreting the Church as the Jesus club. “The deficiency of a certain theology, as well as of a certain liturgical piety, is that they not only overlook the radical newness of Christian *leitourgia* but rather define and experience it again in the old cultic categories.”⁶⁵ The Christian celebration of the Paschal mystery transcends religion, and *leitourgia* transcends old cultic categories. We could summarize Schmemmann’s definition of *leitourgia* as the work of a few on behalf of the many. “We know that originally the Greek word ‘*leitourgia*’ had no cultic connotations. It meant a public office, a service performed on behalf of a community and for its benefit.”⁶⁶ The work can first refer to the work of three on behalf of the human race (liturgy originates in the Trinity); it can refer to Israel, “the chosen people of God whose specific ‘*leitourgia*’ is to fulfill God’s design in history, to prepare the ‘way of the Lord’”;⁶⁷ and now it refers to the Church’s functional work of preparing the world, and individual lives, for the Kingdom of God. This is why the term *leitourgia* in the early Church was “applied indeed to all those ministries and offices within the Church in which she manifested and fulfilled her nature and vocation; it had primarily ecclesiological and not cultic connotations.”⁶⁸ Even theology can be understood as a *leitourgia*, with the proper depth of the term.

64. Ibid.

65. Ibid.

66. Ibid.

67. Ibid.

68. Schmemmann, “Liturgy and Theology,” 56.

Theology, like any other Christian service or “*leitourgia*,” is a charisma, a gift of the Holy Spirit. This gift is given in the Church, i.e., in the act in which the Church fulfills herself as the communion of the Holy Spirit, in which she offers in Christ and offers Him, and is accepted by Christ and receives from Him; in the act which is, therefore, the source of all charisms and ministries of the Church.⁶⁹

There is no one in the Church who is not a liturgist. There is no one in the Church who is not a theologian, ascetic, mystic. *Leitourgia* is “a corporate, common, all embracing action in which all those who are present are *active participants*.”⁷⁰ This is what the Second Vatican Council meant by “fully conscious and active participation.”⁷¹ This was a picture of the laity’s liturgical role that Schmemmann received from Afanassiev.

Often enough we hear de Lubac’s famous phrase that the Eucharist makes the Church. Schmemmann further unpacks this insight in various places: *leitourgia* “eternally transforms the Church into what she is, makes her the Body of Christ and the Temple of the Holy Spirit”;⁷² it makes her “the sacrament, in Christ, of the new creation; the sacrament, in Christ, of the Kingdom”;⁷³ it makes her “a realm of grace, of communion with God, of new knowledge and new life”;⁷⁴ she is “the epiphany, the manifestation, the presence and the gift of the Kingdom of God, as its ‘sacrament’ in this world”;⁷⁵ “the essential mystery of the Church [is being an] *experience* of the Kingdom of God,

69. Schmemmann, “Theology and Eucharist,” 87.

70. Alexander Schmemmann, “Clergy and Laity in the Orthodox Church,” in *Orthodox Life* (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 1959), available at <https://oca.org/reflections/fr-alexander-schmemmann/clergy-and-laity-in-the-orthodox-church>.

71. *Sacrosanctum concilium*, 14.

72. Schmemmann, “Theology and Eucharist,” 83.

73. Schmemmann, “Liturgy and Theology,” 57.

74. *Ibid.*, 57–58.

75. Alexander Schmemmann, “The Problem of the Church’s Presence in the World in Orthodox Consciousness,” *St. Vladimir’s Seminary Quarterly* 21, no. 1 (1977): 10.

as its epiphany in ‘this world.’”⁷⁶ The Church’s *leitourgia* is “the realized inaugurated eschatology of the Kingdom and, at the same time, the real knowledge of the Kingdom.”⁷⁷ *Leitourgia* can be called functional because its goal is to be a passage into the Kingdom, which transcends the religious cultic categories alone. *Leitourgia* is “a corporate procession and passage of the Church toward her fulfillment, the sacrament of the Kingdom of God.”⁷⁸ Before we forget it, this experience of the Church as eschatological passage and present sacrament of the Kingdom is precisely an experience of the Church “given and received in the Church’s *leitourgia*—in her *lex orandi*.”⁷⁹ Here, finally and precisely, is the reason why *lex orandi* is the foundation of *lex credendi*: because what the Church talks about is what she has experienced, what she has become. This experience is not in the past; it is a present mystery of Christ.

4.2. *Theology as vision*

Schmemann is leading us to a denser definition of theology, but he understands the diluted kind. In one of his first works, *Introduction to Liturgical Theology*, he calls theology an “explanation, ‘the search for words appropriate to the nature of God,’ i.e., for a system of concepts corresponding as much as possible to the faith and experience of the Church.”⁸⁰ Here is theology as a rational and scholarly endeavor. In a journal entry a dozen years later, however, he explains things differently.

Pascha. Holy Week. Essentially, bright days such as are needed. And truly that is all that is needed. I am convinced that if people would really hear Holy Week, Pascha, the Resurrection, Pentecost, the Dormition, there would be no need for theology. All of theology is there. All that is

76. Ibid.

77. Alexander Schmemann, “Between Utopia and Escape” (lecture, Greenville, DE, March 22, 1981), 7, available at <http://schmemann.org/by-him/betweenutopiaandescape.html>.

78. Schmemann, “Prayer, Liturgy, and Renewal,” 12.

79. Schmemann, “Liturgy and Theology,” 55.

80. Schmemann, *Introduction to Liturgical Theology*, 14.

needed for one's spirit, heart, mind and soul. How could people spend centuries discussing justification and redemption? It's all in these services. Not only is it revealed, it simply flows in one's heart and mind.⁸¹

Theology is meaning, of course, but this meaning can be experienced and does not reside solely in ratiocination. Theology is not necessarily confined to words, however helpful words may be for solving certain conundrums. Perhaps the most accurate and brief description of this kind of knowing is to call it *sight*. "I always come to the same conclusion: it is first of all a certain *vision*, an experience of God, the world, the man. The best in Orthodox theology is about that vision."⁸² Many in the Eastern tradition call this "bright knowledge," as Schmemmann also does in his journals, and it is different from deduction and expressed in other ways than word alone.

I strongly feel that theology is the transmission in words—not of other words and beliefs, but of the experience of the living Church, revealed now, communicated now. The theology that is being taught has estranged itself from the Church and from that experience; it has become self-sufficient and wants above all to be a science. Science about God, about Christ, about eternal life; therefore it has become unnecessary chatter.⁸³

What do we see? The Church bathed in eschatological flux, the river of liturgy spoken of in the book of Revelation. In her *leitourgia* the Church is given "the experience of the new creation, the experience and vision of the Kingdom which is to come. And this is precisely the *leitourgia* of the Church's cult, the function which makes it the source and indeed the very possibility of theology."⁸⁴ Theology is not thinking with an earthly mind about heavenly subjects; it is thinking in communion with the mind of Christ about all things, earthly and heavenly, which is why theology is ontologically dependent upon liturgical communion with Christ.

81. Schmemmann, *The Journals*, 13.

82. *Ibid.*, 89.

83. *Ibid.*, 300.

84. Schmemmann, "Liturgy and Theology," 58.

4.3. *Piety as a form of life*

Schmemann contrasts a cultic religiosity with a functional cult, and it turns out that each produces a different kind of piety. For him, liturgical piety does not mean pious fascination with the liturgy and its celebration—even for Orthodoxy. “I realize how spiritually tired I am of all this ‘Orthodoxism,’ of all the fuss with Byzantium, Russia, way of life, spirituality, church affairs, piety, of all these rattles. I do not like any one of them, and the more I think about the meaning of Christianity, the more it all seems alien to me. It all literally obscures Christ, pushes Him into the background.”⁸⁵ Liturgical piety does not mean being pious about the liturgy; it means that our piety digs its roots into the eschatology that operates liturgically to manifest the Church, bearing fruit upon the branch that sprouts forth from this line for the life of the world. This, he thinks, was the true nature and purpose of the liturgical movement, but it can be sidetracked by applying nothing more than an academic “theology of worship.” “It is true that many still do not understand the real nature of the liturgical movement. Everything is still fettered by the categories of ‘school theology.’ It is thought that this is nothing more than a new awakening of an aesthetically religious, psychological enthusiasm for cultus, for its ceremonial and ritual, for its external aspects; a sort of new liturgical pietism.”⁸⁶ It is important to know what we should direct our liturgical theology and liturgical piety toward. It is life and joy and deification and the eschaton. It is Christ. “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.”⁸⁷ Liturgical piety is a piety that arises from the liturgy, and can be carried from one eighth day to the next.

The rhythm of the Church, the rhythm of the Eucharist which comes and is always to come, fills everything with meaning, puts all things to their real place. Christians do not remain passive between one celebration and the next one, their “temporal” life is not empty, is not “diminished”

85. Schmemann, *The Journals*, 146.

86. Schmemann, *Introduction to Liturgical Theology*, 12.

87. Alexander Schmemann, *For the Life of the World* (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 1973), 25.

by eschatology. For it is precisely the liturgical “eschaton” that ascribes real value to every moment of our life, in which everything is now judged, evaluated and understood in the light of the Kingdom of God, the ultimate end and the meaning of all that exists. There is nothing more alien to the true spirit of Orthodox liturgy than a certain superstitious “liturgiologism,” or an “eschatologism” which reduces the whole Christian life to communion and despises everything else as “vain.” Such liturgical “piety” does not realize that the true significance of the Eucharist is precisely that of judgement, of transformation, of making infinitely important, the whole life.⁸⁸

Although affectivity is part of piety, piety cannot be reduced to feelings because it has a great deal to do with the will. Liturgical piety is not a certain feeling about the liturgy; it is will and affection directed by the intellect toward the true good. Baptism is its source. “The liturgical restoration must then begin at the very beginning: with the restoration of Baptism as the liturgical act concerning the whole Church, as the very source of all liturgical piety which, in the past, was first of all a baptismal piety, a constant reference of the whole life to this mystery of its renewal and regeneration through the baptismal death and resurrection.”⁸⁹

5. SCHMEMANN'S INTEGRATED DEFINITION

Schmemann finds it difficult to convince others that his interest lies less in the nucleus of the liturgical atom and more in the bond of the three atoms that make up the molecule that is liturgical theology. In a published exchange of articles, Schmemann describes what others perceive his goal to be. They suppose he thinks liturgical theology wants to “relegate the ‘accessories’ to their place,” or to “prepare grounds for liturgical reform that would restore the ‘essence’ of the liturgy.”⁹⁰ They assume he thinks that liturgical theology is the effort to tighten up liturgy

88. Alexander Schmemann, “Fast and Liturgy: Notes in Liturgical Theology,” *St. Vladimir's Seminary Quarterly* 3, no. 1 (1959): 7.

89. Schmemann, “Problems of Orthodoxy in America: II,” 179.

90. Schmemann, “Liturgical Theology, Theology of Liturgy, and Liturgical Reform,” 38.

under reforms exercised by historical and theological talent. To this, Schmemmann retorts,

The fact, however, is that such is *not* my concept of liturgical theology. . . . In the approach which I advocate by every line I ever wrote, the question addressed by liturgical theology to liturgy and to the entire liturgical tradition is not about liturgy but about “theology,” i.e., about the faith of the Church as expressed, communicated and preserved in the liturgy.⁹¹

This protest often falls on deaf ears because Schmemmann has the reputation of being a “liturgiologist,” that is, someone who wants to improve the celebration of the liturgy by applying historical precedents under the control of ideological design. He can sense the probable exasperation of his readers.

Finally one may ask: but what do you propose, what do you want? To this I will answer without much hope, I confess, of being heard and understood: we need liturgical theology, viewed not as a theology of worship and not as a reduction of theology to liturgy, but as a slow and patient bringing together of that which was for too long a time and because of many factors broken and isolated—liturgy, theology, and piety, their reintegration within one fundamental vision. In this sense liturgical theology is an illegitimate child of a broken family. It exists, or maybe I should say it ought to exist, only because theology ceased to seek in the *lex orandi* its source and food, because liturgy ceased to be conducive to theology.⁹²

Schmemmann recommends a slow and patient bringing together of liturgy-theology-piety, God-man-world, history-life-eschaton, purification-illumination-deification, and so forth. His definition of liturgical theology is linked with eschatology, and eschatology should saturate every corner of the Christian’s mundane life. The sacramental liturgy exists for the life of the world, to borrow the title of what is perhaps his most famous book. Unlike other authors, Schmemmann does not want to nudge our current understanding of liturgy closer to our current understanding of

91. *Ibid.*, 38, 40.

92. *Ibid.*, 46.

theology, dressing them both in the apparel of piety. He wants to transform our appreciation of each, and to do so for the believer as well as the professor. Liturgical theology is the revivification of liturgy, the regeneration of theology, and the empowerment of piety. He protests that his agenda is not to invite theologians to pay more attention to liturgical data or to invite the liturgiologist to pay more attention to theological data. He is proposing something more radical.

I am trying to go further than that and state, at least as my conviction, that in a very direct and real way, not only in a symbolical or educational way, but in a real way, the Eucharist, the sacraments, and the liturgy of the Church are the real sources of theology.

Now what do I mean? I mean that theology in the Church is a charisma, a gift of the Holy Spirit, not only a system of syllogisms and deductions, but a real power to bear testimony toward God's doing in the Church for the salvation of man. . . . Where is that gift of the Holy Spirit given? Where does theology find its real and divine status if not in that sacrament of all sacraments in which the Church eternally becomes what she is, the temple of the Holy Spirit, the body of Christ, the eschaton, the anticipation of the world to come? . . . This is where the foundation of theology as a phenomenon *bene fundatum* is.⁹³

Schmemmann recognizes the novelty of this when compared to the way liturgical theology is normally treated in the academy, thus he creates two names in order to contrast the two methodologies. He will save the term "liturgical theology" for what he has in mind and use "theology of the liturgy" for what others are doing.

I designate by "theology of the liturgy" all study of the Church's cult in which this cult is analyzed, understood and defined in its "essence" as well as in its "forms" with the help of and in terms of theological categories and concepts which are exterior to the cult itself, that is, to its liturgical *specificity*. In this case, in other words, the liturgy is "subordinated" to, if not subject to, theology because it receives from theology its "meaning" as well as the definition of its

93. Schmemmann, "Liturgical Movement and Orthodox Ecumenical Feeling," 183–84.

place and function within the church. . . . It is to this state of affairs (is it necessary to remind anyone?) that the liturgy has fallen since the appearance of that theology known as “systematic,” which sets itself over against the idea of *liturgical theology*. Liturgical theology, on the other hand, is based upon the recognition that the liturgy in its totality is not only an “object” of theology, but above all its *source*, and this by virtue of the liturgy’s essential ecclesial function: i.e., that of revealing by the means which are proper to it (and which belong only to it) the faith of the Church; in other words, of being that *lex orandi* in which the *lex credendi* finds its principal criterion and standard.⁹⁴

In the latter method, the one Schmemann proposes, the liturgical theologian finds *leitourgia* to be a unique expression of the Church, of her faith and of her life. We can speak of this as a kind of “liturgical *ressourcement* of theology,” because the liturgy becomes “the basic source of theological thinking, a kind of *locus theologicus par excellence*.”⁹⁵ In the former method, the one more commonly followed, the theologian of liturgy,

while admitting the importance of the liturgical experience for theology, would rather consider it as a necessary object of theology—an object requiring, first of all, a theological clarification of its nature and function. Liturgical theology or the theology of liturgy—we have here two entirely different views concerning the relationship between worship and theology.⁹⁶

Object or source—that is the decision.

The contrast between the two approaches could not be sharper; they are diametrically opposed because they move in different directions. Liturgical theology discovers, while theology of the liturgy produces. The former encounters *theologia* in the *leitourgia* of the Church-in-motion, while the latter imports concepts exterior to the cult. The former is subject to the Church’s inspired and operative tradition, while the latter subjects liturgy to hypotheses of the day. The former can produce

94. Schmemann, “Liturgical Theology: Remarks on Method,” 137–38 (emphasis original).

95. Schmemann, “Theology and Liturgical Tradition,” 11–12.

96. *Ibid.*

liturgical mysticism, while the latter produces more bibliography. The former is liturgical dogmatics, while the latter is philosophy of religion focused on ritual studies. Schmemmann brought this distinction with him from his earliest days in Paris. "It is the 'discovery' of this distinction between theology of the liturgy and liturgical theology which stands, in my opinion, as the principal attainment of the liturgical movement."⁹⁷ In our day, Schmemmann would counsel the discovery of genuine liturgical theology, "that theology for which liturgy is not an 'object,' but its very source. We discover, in other terms, the forgotten truths of the ancient saying: *lex orandi est lex credendi*."⁹⁸

6. THREE ANTINOMIES: CULT, WORLD, ESCHATON

Pavel Florensky says that antinomy begins with the conviction that "life is infinitely fuller than rational definitions and therefore no formula can encompass all the fullness of life."⁹⁹ To illustrate the point with an image from *The Chronicles of Narnia*, in an antinomy, the inside is bigger than the outside. What appears to be contradictory is not in fact contradictory: it is only a case of mismeasurement. Schmemmann recognizes antinomy operating on three planes.

First, there is a cultic antinomy. *Leitourgia* is broader than the liturgy that contains it. We noted above that the Church's *leitourgia* is a function, and as a result it transcends cultic categories. Yet the Church finds it necessary to use cult! "In this world, the *Eschaton*—the holy, the sacred, the 'otherness'—can be expressed and manifested only as 'cult.' . . . The Church must use the forms and language of the cult, in order eternally to transcend the cult."¹⁰⁰ Christianity is the end of all religion, Schmemmann says. "Nowhere in the New Testament, in fact, is Christianity presented as a cult or as a religion. Religion is needed where there is a wall of separation between God and man. But Christ who is both God and man has

97. Schmemmann, "Symbols and Symbolism in the Byzantine Liturgy," 137.

98. *Ibid.*, 128.

99. Pavel Florensky, *The Pillar and Ground of the Truth* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997), 108.

100. Schmemmann, "Theology and Liturgical Tradition," 17–18.

broken down the wall between man and God. He has inaugurated a new life, not a new religion.”¹⁰¹ Therefore, we cannot really call Christianity a species in the genus of religion, even though it acts like a religion. The substance of Christianity under the accidents of religion is different. In that case, “the Christian liturgy in general, and the Eucharist in particular, are indeed the end of cult, of the ‘sacred’ religious act isolated from, and opposed to, the ‘profane’ life of the community.”¹⁰² The Church does not gather for the purpose of celebrating the cult; she gathers to become, through cultic activity, what she really is. *Leitourgia* “is the action of the Church itself, or the Church *in actu*, it is the very expression of its life. . . . The *ecclesia* exists in and through the *leitourgia*, and its whole life is a *leitourgia*.”¹⁰³ As I expressed it elsewhere,

Schmemmann is not talking about acts of liturgy; he is talking about liturgical acts of *leitourgia*. And if I may press my luck further, and create a verb, I will say that *leitourgia* is the action being performed when the Church “cults.” By “culting” the Church becomes her true self, enjoys her true mystery, exercises her real *leitourgia*. The Church does not do cult, she uses cult to do *leitourgia*.¹⁰⁴

Schmemmann does not propose that we could do without cult if we got the world right, but neither does he propose we could do without the world if we got the cult right. Rather, the cult is where we bring the world and, standing aright before God, we do the world as it was meant to be done.¹⁰⁵ “Christ did not establish a society for the observance of worship, a ‘cultic society,’ but rather the Church as the way of salvation, as the

101. Schmemmann, *For the Life of the World*, 19–20.

102. *Ibid.*, 25–26.

103. Schmemmann, “Theology and Liturgical Tradition,” 17.

104. David Fagerberg, “The Anchor of Schmemmann’s Liturgical Theology” (“The Schmemmann Lecture,” St. Vladimir’s Orthodox Theological Seminary, Yonkers, NY, January 30, 2019), 406.

105. This was Aidan Kavanagh’s frequently repeated definition of liturgy in class: liturgy is doing the world the way the world was meant to be done. That work is done before the altar so we know how to do it in the world, and so we receive power from the sacraments to do it.

new life of re-created mankind.”¹⁰⁶ Christ did not come so that we might have rubrics, and have them abundantly. He came to recapitulate man, and how is mankind re-created? By liturgical sacrament, liturgical prayer, liturgical sacrifice, liturgical practices. All of these contain a reality (*leitourgia*) greater than the container (liturgy).

Second, there is a mundane antinomy. *Leitourgia* is big enough to hold the world. Why does Schmemmann bemoan that Christianity is being transformed into religion? Because “religion—as we know already—has thus come to mean a world of pure spirituality, a concentration of attention on matters pertaining to the ‘soul.’ Christians were tempted to eject time altogether and replace it with mysticism and ‘spiritual’ pursuits, to live as Christians out of time and thereby escape its frustrations.”¹⁰⁷ Religion should be a thirst for God, as it was in the Garden of Eden. Instead, after the Fall, we have turned religion to our advantage. “No other word indeed is used more often by secularism in reference to religion than the word ‘help.’ ‘It helps’ to pray, to go to church, to belong to a religious group. . . . It ‘helps’ in short to ‘have religion.’”¹⁰⁸ Christ wants more for his brothers and sisters. Christ came to raise us from the dead (our present state), not to adapt us to it. Christ came to give us new life, not to make us comfortable in our alienation. Often enough, however, we will not have it. “This is the paradox, the antinomy, the message, which Christians could not endure because it was too much for them. It is much easier to have a little religion of the past, present and future, of commandments and prescriptions.”¹⁰⁹ So people believe in religion but not in God, because the former is offered at a discounted price. “They simply feel good, comfortable, and calm in church. Since childhood, many of them have become accustomed to this ‘sacredness’ of the temple and its rituals . . . a relief from the ugliness of everyday life.”¹¹⁰

106. Schmemmann, *Introduction to Liturgical Theology*, 23.

107. Schmemmann, *For the Life of the World*, 48.

108. Alexander Schmemmann, “Problems of Orthodoxy in America: III. The Spiritual Problem,” *St. Vladimir’s Seminary Quarterly* 9, no. 4 (1965): 174.

109. Schmemmann, “Between Utopia and Escape,” 7.

110. Schmemmann, *A Voice for Our Time*, vol. 1, 7.

The first Christian attitude toward the world must be to reject it, since it has rejected Christ. “We seem to forget that in the New Testament and in the whole Christian tradition the ‘world’ is the object of two apparently contradicting attitudes: an emphatic acceptance, a *yes*, but also an equally emphatic rejection, a *no*.”¹¹¹ But this is not the final Christian attitude toward the world. The antinomy consists of the Church embracing the world in order to save the very world that rejects her. This is expressed by the fact that every eighth day the Christian leaves the world in a *kairos* moment, only to return to labor for its life during the following week of *chronos* time. Schmemann notes that the first liturgical action on the Lord’s day is to get out of bed and go to the assembly. All the time one must leave the world and all the time one must remain in it, he says. The Eucharist begins as an ascension toward the throne of God, and “then, precisely at the moment when this state of fullness has been reached and consummated at the table of the Lord in his kingdom . . . the second movement begins—that of *return into the world*.”¹¹² Liturgy is an antinomy of rejection and reunion. Withdrawal from this world is not an apocalyptic escape; it is the originating point of Christian mission in the world. “We separate ourselves from the world in order to bring it, in order to lift it up to the kingdom, to make it once again the way to God and participation in his eternal kingdom.”¹¹³

Third, there is an eschatological antinomy. History contains something bigger than itself. This world is saved and redeemed every time a man responds to the divine gift. “The kingdom is yet *to come*, and the Church is not *of* this world. And yet this kingdom to come is already present, and the Church

111. Schmemann, “Prayer, Liturgy, and Renewal,” 8. The same point is made with similar language here: “This is the experience of the Kingdom of God and not a mere doctrine ‘de novissimis’—experience centered on the Church’s self-fulfillment in the Eucharist, on the Lord’s Day—that permeates the whole faith and the whole life of the early Church,” and this “explains the antinomical character of that attitude, the correlation within it of an emphatic *yes* to the world with an equally emphatic *no*” (“The ‘Orthodox World,’ Past and Present,” in *Church, World, Mission*, 29).

112. Schmemann, “The Missionary Imperative,” in *Church, World, Mission*, 215.

113. Schmemann, *The Eucharist*, 53.

is fulfilled *in this world*.”¹¹⁴ The Church in the world is “the mystery of the new creation and she is the mystery of the Kingdom.”¹¹⁵ That is her liturgical identity; that is her functional *leitourgia* in practice. A lawyer practices law; a doctor practices medicine; a Christian practices liturgy. In *leitourgia*, man and woman recover their function as cosmic priests. It is a three-act play. When the curtain opens, we find man the priest in Paradise.

All rational, spiritual and other qualities of man, distinguishing him from other creatures, have their focus and ultimate fulfillment in this capacity to bless God, to know, so to speak, the meaning of the thirst and hunger that constitutes his life. “*Homo sapiens*,” “*homo faber*.” . . . Yes, but, first of all, “*homo adorans*.” The first, the basic definition of man is that he is *the priest*.¹¹⁶

The first act is short, compared to the second act of salvation history extending across centuries. As the curtain opens for the second act, we find that Adam and Eve have forfeited their liturgical careers.

Man was created as a priest: the world was created as the matter of a sacrament. But sin came, breaking this unity: this was no mere issue of broken rules alone, but rather the loss of a vision, the abandonment of a sacrament. Fallen man saw the world as one thing, secular and profane, and religion as something entirely separate, private, remote and “spiritual.” The sacramental sense of the world was lost. Man forgot the priesthood which was the purpose and meaning of his life. He came to see himself as a dying organism in a cold, alien universe.¹¹⁷

Instead of seeing the world as raw material for Eucharist, man saw the world as his to consume. “The first consumer was Adam himself. He chose not to be priest but to approach

114. Schmemmann, “The Missionary Imperative,” 216.

115. Schmemmann, “Liturgy and Theology,” 56.

116. Schmemmann, *For the Life of the World*, 15.

117. Schmemmann, “The World as Sacrament,” in *Church, World, Mission*, 223.

the world as consumer: to 'eat' of it, to use and to dominate it for himself, to benefit from it but not to offer, not to sacrifice, not to have it for God and in God."¹¹⁸ The ruin inside man has ruined two things outside him. First, original sin ruined religion.

The "original" sin is not primarily that man has "disobeyed" God; the sin is that he ceased to be hungry for Him and for Him alone. . . . The sin was not that man neglected his religious duties. The sin was that he thought of God in terms of religion, i.e., opposing Him to life. The only real fall of man is his noneucharistic life in a noneucharistic world.¹¹⁹

Liturgy was evaporating, to be replaced by assorted religions of cheap self-righteousness and self-serving spiritualities.¹²⁰ Our liturgical piety should have been one of serving God in self-sacrificing oblation, but instead we try to tame the lion of Judah with our religious catnip so that he would serve us.

Second, original sin ruined man's relation to the world. Man the priest has become man the consumer. A priest is first and foremost a sacrificer, "the man who can say *thank you*. . . . I've always understood the fall (or what is called 'Original Sin') as the loss of man's desire to be a priest; or perhaps you might say the desire he has *not* to be a priest but a consumer."¹²¹ The result is that humankind tries to extract something the world of nature cannot provide. The world had an ability to feed a lively sacramental and sacrificial life, but now it is dead:

The world is meaningful only when it is the "sacrament" of God's presence. Things treated merely as things in themselves destroy themselves because only in God have they any life. The world of nature, cut off from the source of life, is a dying world. For one who thinks food in itself is the source of life, eating is communion with the dying world, it is communion with death. Food itself is dead, it

118. Schmemmann, *Of Water and the Spirit*, 96.

119. Schmemmann, *For the Life of the World*, 19.

120. Schmemmann, *Of Water and the Spirit*, 96.

121. Alexander Schmemmann, "Sacrifice and Worship," in *Liturgy and Tradition*, 132.

is life that has died and it must be kept in refrigerators like a corpse.¹²²

On the one hand, we are still waiting for the third act. On the other hand, this final act is being staged already, almost as if two plays began to take place on the same stage. The noon-day eschaton has not yet arrived, but the dawning eschaton has begun to enlighten us. Theology is the vision that takes place in its light; liturgy is the latria that takes place under its influence; piety is the abnegation it imprints in our soul. It is an eschatological antinomy, and it fascinates Schmemmann to the point that he calls it the whole meaning of liturgical theology.

Ultimately the whole novelty of Christianity consisted (consists) in destroying this choice, this polarization. *This* is the essence of Christianity as Eschatology. The Kingdom of God is the goal of history, and the Kingdom of God is already now *among us, within us*. Christianity is a unique historical event, and Christianity is the presence of that event as the completion of all events and of history itself.

...

Here is, for me, *the whole meaning of liturgical theology*. The Liturgy: the joining, revelation, actualization of the historicity of Christianity (remembrance) and of its transcendence over that historicity.

Hence, the link of the Church with the world, the Church *for the world*, but as its beginning and its end, as the affirmation that the world is *for the Church*, since the Church is the presence of the kingdom of God.

Here is the eternal antinomy of Christianity and the essence of all contemporary discussions about Christianity. The task of theology is to be faithful to the antinomy, which disappears in the experience of the Church as *pascha*: a *continuous* (not only historical) passage of the world to the Kingdom. All the time one must leave the world and all the time one must remain in it.¹²³

The eschaton appears in the midst of the cultic activities of the Church to make her what she is and to empower her to be Christ's agent of redemption in the world.

122. Schmemmann, *For the Life of the World*, 17.

123. Schmemmann, *The Journals*, 234.

7. WHY SCHMEMANN?

There is a famous story of Dean Inge's response when he was asked if he was interested in liturgy. "No," he replied, "neither do I collect postage stamps." If we asked Schmemann, "why do we need you today?" he would not answer by saying we should be interested in his hobby. He would not say he offers us an idiosyncratic theory about liturgy, an ideological personal use for theology, or a private piety to imitate. Indeed, instead of putting himself forward at all, he would point us to the Church's deep tradition: "It is not reform, adjustments and modernization that are needed so much as a return to that vision and experience that from the beginning constituted the very life of the Church."¹²⁴ □

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124. Schmemann, *The Eucharist*, 10.