

Protopresbyter Alexander Schmemmann

On “Keeping Orthodoxy Pure”

From Juliana Schmemmann, tr., *The Journals of Father Alexander Schmemmann 1973-1983* (St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, Crestwood, NY: 2000), pages 23-25.

Monday, December 17, 1973 Everyday life

Last Tuesday I met again with Father George Grabbe to continue our dialogue about contacts between the Russian Orthodox Church Outside Russia and the OCA [Orthodox Church in America]. He says, “Our goal to keep Orthodoxy pure.” This is where the essential disagreement is. The purity of Orthodoxy for them consists in an “orthodox way of life”— no thought, no problems. On the contrary, they are organically repelled by them, they deny them. They are convinced that to deny problems is right, for any thought, any problem is a threat to this “orthodox way of life,” whereas the crisis of Christianity consists precisely in the collapse of the of the orthodox way of life, to which Christianity found itself bound and submitted. The question is not whether this way of life was good or bad; it probably was both. The question is whether one can and should hold on to it as a *sine qua non* of Christianity, of true Orthodoxy. They answer that question with a total, unconditional “Yes.” Hence comes their instinctive fear of sacraments (frequent Communion, etc.), because sacraments are eschatological; they do not fully fit in an orthodox way of life. For the sake of the preservation of this way of life, they stay away from culture and theology, which might raise problems, questions, searches and struggles, which would constantly threaten the static character of their way of life. The defenders of this way of life accept culture only when it has become stabilized and when it has become fixed, made harmless by being part of their way of life; when they know what one should think about that culture, or rather not think. These people, stifled by their own chosen limitations, are quite unable to accept or try to understand any creativity. Christianity and Orthodoxy are good and acceptable because they are ancient, because they are in the past, because they are the substance and the sanction of the “orthodox way of life.” Therefore, they simply do not accept any words, any creative works, even genuine and true, that do not have a familiar “sacred form.” They feel threatened, endangered, they feel that some essential foundations have been shaken. The fruits of this sort of mind-set are fear, narrow-mindedness, a total inability to discern the spirits.

Christianity in general, and Orthodoxy in particular, are now undergoing a real test to determine what will enable them to remain alive in the world of today. The defenders of the orthodox way of life express one clear and profound answer as they define it. But there is no clear, total answer from any other side except reductions, like return to “Byzantium,” or spiritual individualism, or reading the ascetics, or escapism from reality. I hesitate to come forward with my feeling— it sounds arrogant— that I have an answer! In everything that I preach, or teach, or write, I want this answer to appear, hopefully to shine through. But that answer cannot be squeezed into any system, any recipe, any defined way of life. No rules come out of that answer. It is simply a vision of life, and what comes from that vision is the light, the transparency, the referral of everything to the “Other,” the eschatological character of life itself and all that is in it. The source of that eschatological light, the lifting up of all life, is the sacrament of the Eucharist. The error of the defenders of a concrete and clearly defined way of life is not in attributing great importance to the external forms of life. In that, they are right against all the pseudo-spiritual people, whether religious or cultured, who are obsessed by the idea of breaking with any forms or destroying them altogether. It does not mean that Christianity leads us into some sort of “other-worldliness.” It means that the image of this world in Christ and through Christ becomes passing, dynamic, open, outreaching.

To understand St Paul when he says, “The image of this world is passing away,” to make it real, we need in this world the experience of the other world, its beauty, depth, treasure, the experience of the Kingdom of God and its Sacrament— the Eucharist. The Church has been established in this world to celebrate the Eucharist, to save man by restoring his Eucharistic being. The Eucharist is impossible without the Church, that is, without a community that knows its unique character and vocation— to be love, truth, faith and mission— all of these fulfilled in the Eucharist; even simpler, to be the Body of Christ. The Eucharist reveals the Church as a community— love for Christ, love in Christ— as a mission to turn each and all to Christ. The Church has no other purpose, no “religious life” separate from the world. Otherwise the Church would become an idol. The Church is the home each of us leaves to go to work and to which one returns with joy in order to find life, happiness and joy, to which everyone brings back the fruits of his labor and where everything is transformed into a feast, into freedom and fulfillment, the presence, the experience of this “home” already out of time, unchanging, filled with eternity, revealing eternity. Only this presence can give meaning and value to everything in life, can refer everything to that experience and make it full. “The image of this world is passing away.” But only by passing away does the world finally become the “World”: a gift of God, a happiness that comes from being in communion with the content, the form, the image of that “World.”