

Alexander Schmemmann's *For the Life of the World:* A Retrospective¹

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Abstract

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This article traces the genealogy and genesis of one of the most famous books in Eastern liturgical theology on the fiftieth anniversary of its publication. *For the Life of the World*, by the late dean of St. Vladimir's Seminary, Alexander Schmemmann, went through numerous publishers in North America and the United Kingdom and numerous translations around the world, and remains in print today, widely used in numerous Protestant, Catholic, and Orthodox schools. The author documents, via archival research, how the book came to be in the context of the ecumenical movement, and general social ferment, of the 1960s. The book began as a series of lectures to be delivered to the 19th Quadrennial Ecumenical Student Conference in Athens, Ohio, whose theme in 1963 was "For the Life of the World," which treated broadly of the question of mission and the relationship between Church and world, between liturgy and life. The conferences, organized under the auspices of the National Student Christian Federation and the World Student Christian Federation, brought together thousands of Protestant, Orthodox, and Catholic Christians for intense days of study, debate, demonstration, and prayer. Schmemmann's lectures were some of the first and most memorable exposure conference participants had of Orthodoxy in particular, and a "sacramental" worldview in general.

¹ I would like to thank Mary Richardson, Joan Duffy, and Kevin Crawford, archivists at the Yale Divinity School Library, for their research assistance.

“*For the Life of the World* will have a broad and continuing significance far beyond the student movements. It represents a major contribution, for nowhere else is this fresh and impelling perspective available to contemporary Western Christianity.”²

“Father Schmemmann’s book is provocative in many ways. I have been struck by the new perspective it gives on a number of concerns – not the least of which is the life and mission of the Student Christian Movements. He will have nothing to do with the various pietisms and asceticisms which assume the material world an evil to be renounced, nor will he subscribe to those secularisms which see the Christian mission in terms of catching up with the standards and expectations of general society.”³



2013 is a watershed year for it marks not only the thirtieth anniversary year of the falling asleep of Father Alexander Schmemmann but also the fiftieth anniversary of one of the best-selling books in Eastern Christendom. Written as a study guide for the 19th Ecumenical Student Conference on Christian World Mission in Athens, Ohio, *For the Life of the World* has been well received to say the least. It has been translated into over ten languages⁴ and is required reading at many seminaries and schools of theology.⁵ Even now, fifty years later, this little

² Marketing text on the original book order form for Alexander Schmemmann’s *For the Life of the World* (Fall, 1963).

³ Dr. Roy Enquist, “We Have Been Given a Gift,” *Communique: National Student Christian Movement Newsletter* 20 (October 1963): 1.

⁴ Swedish, Italian, German, Greek, Dutch, Polish, French, Finnish, Japanese, Korean, and Russian. These are the known translations; other, non-authorized or *samizdat* versions of the book may exist but are yet unknown or un-catalogued.

⁵ In a Google search conducted on March 27, 2013 the following seminaries and colleges list *For the Life of the World* as required reading on course syllabi: St. Thomas University, St. Francis University, Seattle University, Furman University, Asbury Seminary, Reformed Theological Seminary, St. Vladimir’s Seminary, Holy Cross Greek Orthodox School of Theology, Dallas Baptist Seminary, Uni-

book, just over one hundred pages long, continues to be read, discussed, and studied. This paper will provide the historical, religious, and cultural context of *For the Life of the World* using previously unpublished sources in the archives at the Yale Divinity School and elsewhere to shed light on the genesis of this seminal work.

The Conference

In a two-page typed letter dated February 21, 1963, C. Alton Robertson, the director of the Commission of World Mission of the National Student Christian Federation, officially invited Father Alexander to be the main speaker at the 19th Quadrennial Ecumenical Student Conference which was to be held in Athens, Ohio. The Quadrennial was a continuation of a series of four-year conferences first sponsored by the Commission on World Mission, formerly known as the Student Volunteer Movement for Foreign Missions.⁶ The Commission on World Missions came under the larger umbrella organization called the National Student Christian Federation with its headquarters in New York City and was also the representative organization of the United States to the World Student Christian Federation.⁷ The National Student Christian Federation was started in 1959 as a larger organizational entity that included many denominational organizations such as the inter-seminary movement along with various other student Christian fellowship groups. It served as a wider network of domestic student Christian college and young adult groups across the United States and Canada. When the Commission on World

versity of South Carolina, Saint Paul University, University of Saint Francis, Wycliffe College, Andover Newton Seminary, Southern Methodist Seminary, Sacred Heart Major Seminary, Gordon Cornwall University, and Lipscomb University, among others. These schools include both small and large, public and private, Catholic, Protestant, and Orthodox.

⁶ Mary N.S. Richardson "Guide to the National Christian Federation Archives," Yale Divinity School Library (January 2013) unpublished document, 5.

⁷ Ibid.

Mission came under the auspices of the National Student Christian Federation, they were the new hosts of the quadrennial conferences.⁸

Robertson's letter emphasizes key themes which were to be highlighted in the conference such as the importance of word and sacrament as well as the overarching theme, "For the Life of the World," focusing on the intersection of the Church and the world and theology and life. He instructed Schmemmann: "do not just talk about the Body of Christ as the Body of Christ gathered, but how the Church and the world interact, how they affect each other. Worship and work for the world."⁹

Seven days later, on February 28, 1963, in a brief handwritten note on seminary stationery, Father Alexander accepted Robertson's generous invitation. It is then that he began writing the first and perhaps most important book of his lifetime, which surprised even him years later.¹⁰

1963 proved to be an important year for Schmemmann. In late 1962, after much searching, St. Vladimir's Seminary moved from their original location at 121st and Broadway to 575 Scarsdale Road, a five-acre tree-lined campus in Crestwood, NY.¹¹ The seminary was dedicated on Saturday October 2, 1962, and little over a month later in late November, Schmemmann was made dean of the seminary by Metropolitan Leonty (Turkevich), a position Schmemmann would hold until his death in 1983.¹² Then in March a longtime friend of the Orthodox Church, Paul B. Anderson,¹³ contacted Schmemmann relaying a

⁸ Ibid., 6.

⁹ Typed letter from C. Alton Robertson to Alexander Schmemmann.

¹⁰ Alexander Schmemmann *The Journals of Father Alexander Schmemmann 1973–83*, trans. Juliana Schmemmann (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 2000), 69.

¹¹ See *A Legacy of Excellence 1938–1988: St. Vladimir's Orthodox Theological Seminary* (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1988), especially 35–40. See also Ted Greeban and Annette Milkovich "St. Vladimir's Becomes a Permanent Home" in *The Russian Orthodox Journal* 35 (November 1962): 8–11.

¹² Schmemmann was made dean on November 30, 1962.

¹³ For more information about Anderson's life and legacy see his intriguing memoir *No East or West* (NY: YMCA-Press, 1985). See

message from Metropolitan Nikodim (Rotov) of the Russian Orthodox Church. This was the first of many meetings that would eventually lead up to the granting of autocephaly to the metropolia and the birth of the Orthodox Church in America (OCA). Schmemmann contacted Metropolitan Leonty asking his advice and archpastoral blessings, but since the latter's health was failing he simply told Schmemmann, "Receive them with love."¹⁴ And so Schmemmann did. This would be the first of many conversations between the Russian Orthodox Church and the metropolia.

The summer and fall of 1963 were also busy for Schmemmann for not only was he preparing for his upcoming fall classes and lectures at the seminary as well as working on the study guide for the conference, but he also attended the fourth Faith and Order Meeting hosted by the World Council of Churches in Montreal.¹⁵ In mid-October Schmemmann spent two weeks in Rome serving as an official observer to the second session of the Vatican Council where he, together with the Greek Orthodox theologian Nicholas Nissiotis, offered comments and suggestions on key working documents of the council.¹⁶ Thus the Quadrennial conference ended a very important year for Schmemmann.

One may ask why a largely Protestant Christian organization would invite an Eastern Orthodox priest to be the main speaker – and, indeed, *the* first Orthodox speaker. By 1963 Schmemmann had already been teaching at St. Vladimir's for twelve years, first as the instructor of liturgical theology and church history and as the dean of students and chaplain.

also Matthew Lee Miller American *The American YMCA and Russian Culture: the Preservation and Expansion of Orthodox Christianity 1910–1940* (NY: Rowan and Littlefield, 2013).

¹⁴ See Constance J. Tarasar, ed., *Orthodox America 1794–1976: Development of the Orthodox Church in America* (Syosset, NY: The Orthodox Church in America, 1975), 262.

¹⁵ The Faith and Order meeting was held July 12–26, 1963.

¹⁶ This discussion on conciliar documents is captured in Yves Congar's recently published diaries: *Yves Congar: My Journal of the Council* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2012), 329–331, 382–383.

During this time he was also adjunct instructor of Russian literature and history at Columbia University, New York University, and Union Theological Seminary. He was also active talking to youth and young adults on college campuses. Prior to his arrival in the United States, Schmemmann had been very active in the Russian Student Christian Movement in France and had been one of the three Orthodox members of the Youth Department of the World Council of Churches which eventually led to the establishment of Syndesmos, the international youth organization.¹⁷ During the summers at his summer home on Lac Labelle, Schmemmann often held mini-youth gatherings for the teens and young adults who were staying there, answering questions and talking about the Church and the world.¹⁸ On a personal level he was also familiar with college students since his son Serge was at that time a student at Harvard University.

In the study guide for the conference Philip Zabriskie outlines some key reasons for the focus on sacramental and liturgical approaches to the theme of mission and Church life. He acknowledges that the majority of church bodies in the ecumenical movement in the United States were mainline Protestants which considered themselves non-sacramental, although he does say that this is really not true since “all churches have some sacramental tradition – either elaborately developed or quite latent – a tradition which includes generally at least significance given to Baptism and the Lord’s Supper.”¹⁹ He also says that when using the word “sacrament” many people merely think of Church services rather than a sacramental

¹⁷ The Orthodox members of the Youth Department of the World Council of Churches were Schmemmann, Nikos Nissiotis, and George Khodre. Their first organizational meeting was held January 8–13, 1949 in Chateau de Bossey in Switzerland and Syndesmos officially established at a meeting in Paris April 7–12, 1953. For more information about the early years of Syndesmos see Janna Possi unpublished M.Div. thesis, “History and Significance of Syndesmos” (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir’s Seminary, 1995) 1–2.

¹⁸ See Juliana Schmemmann *My Journey with Father Alexander* (Montreal: Alexander Press, 2006), 93–94.

¹⁹ *For the Life of the World Student Study Guide*, 9.

approach or vision of ecclesial life. One major thrust then for the Quadrennial conference was to highlight or hold up a sacramental or liturgical approach to Church life, focusing not so much only on the rites and rituals per se, but on the meaning of the rites and rituals, “about the word and God and ourselves.”²⁰ This sacramental vision is further advanced when Zabriskie reminds the students that in the Bible God acts through objects, through physical actions and persons and therefore the sacramental view should not be that foreign to them if they take time to reflect on it. He even says that even the so called “secular” world has its types of sacraments or liturgical rites such as shaking hands, kissing, ways of speaking to one another, letters, and touching.²¹ Finally Zabriskie offers three general reasons why the conference highlights the sacramental view: to see what the broad sacramental point of view may say about the world, our selves, our freedom in the world, our lives and our hopes; to take time and listen to other Christian traditions which have a strong sacramental vision; and to look at our understanding of the word “sacrament.”²²

It is this liturgical understanding of the Church that the conference leaders wanted highlighted during this conference. Zabriskie makes sure to highlight the importance of the missionary perspective too: “nevertheless, it is quite essential that we try, that we seek to understand ourselves, our world, our faith, the Gospel, and that we seek to develop anew a right understanding of the Church’s mission. It is essential for the health and integrity of the Church, and, since the Gospel truly testifies to the source of all life, it is essential for the life of the world.”²³

From December 27, 1963 through January 2, 1964 thirty-two hundred college students, half of whom were international students, gathered together for a week of prayer, dialogue, debate and discussion at the campus of Ohio University in Athens. Students were divided into 133 “living unit groups” that served as the heart of the conference. Each group had

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Ibid., 10.

²² Ibid., 12.

²³ Ibid., 6.

between twenty and twenty-five students and was interdenominational, intercultural, and international. The racial and cultural diversity was welcome to some students and surprising to others, according to one participant, "That was the first time I have ever taken communion with anyone of another race, or of another nation, or of another denomination."²⁴ We must keep in mind that the Quadrennial conference took place during the throes of the civil rights movement and race and religion were on the hearts and minds of many people.²⁵ One participant mentioned in her report that some students were late because their bus from Texas to Ohio was delayed since many restaurants refused to serve the "Negroes" that were on the bus.²⁶ Furthermore, just two weeks after the Quadrennial, Martin Luther King, Jr. delivered a major speech at the National Conference on religion and race at the Edgewater Beach Hotel in Chicago.²⁷

One of the major aims of the Quadrennial was to show students the true diversity of Christianity in both practice and belief. The conference administration housed the living groups in the same dormitories so the students would have plenty of opportunity to mix and mingle during the conference period. Among the students were thirty-one Orthodox Christians and fifteen Roman Catholic. The students ranged in age from eighteen to thirty years old and included a wide range of

²⁴ Ross Terrill *ISF Field Trips: The Athens Quadrennial Report* (undated), 4.

²⁵ See Anna Marie Feckanin "Stand Up and Take Note," *The Russian Orthodox Journal* 36 (1964): 15–16. On September 15, 1963 four young girls were killed in a bomb explosion at the 16th Street Baptist Church in Birmingham, Alabama.

²⁶ Terrill, *ISF Field Trips*, 4. The report is a chilling reminder of the racial divide during this time.

²⁷ The conference was held January 14–17, 1963 and included both whites and blacks as well as Christians and Jews. The well known rabbi and author Abraham Joshua Heschel was the other guest speaker at the conference. King was also the "Person of the Year" and appeared on the cover of *Time* magazine in January 1964. For details about this conference see http://mlk-kpp01.stanford.edu/index.php/encyclopedia/encyclopedia/enc_national_conference_on_religion_and_race.

backgrounds: e.g., nursing, teaching, history, law, missionary work, science, ministry, and forestry. According to a post-conference report from a then-recently married student couple, “the conference was a microcosm of the world.”²⁸ The conference administration was so overrun with applicants that they reported they needed to turn down nine hundred students due to lack of dormitory space.²⁹ Students came from across the United States, some taking buses even from far-flung places such as Alaska, California, and Texas. Additionally, more than seventy-eight countries were represented including Angola, Kenya, England, Germany, Sri Lanka, Syria, and Japan. These students also represented the Christian spectrum including Methodist, Baptist, Disciples of Christ, Lutheran, Quaker, Roman Catholic, United Church of Christ, Eastern Orthodox, Episcopal, Baptist, as well as non-denominational.³⁰ This conference was also unique since it was the first time in its seventy-eight year history that Roman Catholics attended as “fraternal brothers and sisters.”³¹ Representatives from the Peace Corps, the Congress on Racial Equity, and the Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee were also present as well.³²

While Schmemmann was invited to be the main speaker at the conference, he was not the only one. Since these ecumenical student conferences reflected a wide range of the Christian tradition, there were also a variety of speakers: e.g., Milan Opocensky, a senior lecturer in systematic theology at the Comenius Faculty of Protestant Theology, delivered a talk on “The Church in Czechoslovakia Today”; Eliezar Mapanao gave a talk on “Bread . . . For the Life of the World”; Ruben Alvarez spoke about “Injustice and Revolt”; W. Bonar Sidjabat presen-

²⁸ Constantine and Arlene Kallaur, “How it Happened in Athens,” *The Russian Orthodox Journal* 26 (1964): 9.

²⁹ See 19th Quadrennial report, un-named (1964), 1.

³⁰ See student roster list for the conference.

³¹ Fred Myers “National Council of Churches Press Release” dated January 3, 1964, 1.

³² *Ibid.*, 6.

ted on “Christian Participation in Nation Building.”³³ The supplemental talks focused on the social and political implications of Christianity, revealing to many North American students the real trials and tribulations of Christians living in third world countries, many of whom were governed by dictatorships or Marxist governments. As one student, Ross Terrill, reported, “again and again the insistent challenge of political responsibility hit us full in the face, unexpected yet inescapable, as the impact of the truth often is.”³⁴

Every morning after breakfast, Philip Zabriskie, an Episcopalian cleric and longtime member of the student youth movements, led Bible studies on the infancy narratives in the gospel and their importance for life today.³⁵ Worship was led by the Episcopalian Bishop Daniel Corrigan, director of the National Council’s Home Department. A liturgical highlight of the conference was a large ecumenical Eucharist, the first of its kind in the long history of the Quadrennial conferences. The service was led by Bishop Corrigan and assisted by twenty-four presbyters and twenty-four deacons from various churches. They used an edited version of the Eucharist according to the “Apostolic Tradition” attributed to Hippolytus.³⁶ The following is a verbatim reflection on this Eucharist by Roger Spinharney from Sheldon Jackson High School:

At the evening worship of the 30th we had a service of confession. After which we were instructed to go out and solve any differences we had with any of the people at the conference before taking the greeting of peace. At 10:30am on the 31st, 3,000 people gathered in the Alumni Memorial Auditorium for Holy Communion. After the sermon was over with, 24 presbyters

³³ See 19th Quadrennial Conference promotional flyer for speaker biographies and topics.

³⁴ Terrill, *ISF Field Trips*, 3.

³⁵ See conference schedule.

³⁶ The text and rubrics for the communion service were prepared by H. Boone Porter of General Theological Seminary in New York. Two hundred chalices were used to distribute communion at this service.

from 9 denominations and 24 deacons from 8 denominations went to the stage and were seated with Bishop Corrigan of the Protestant Episcopal Church. Things were started off with the greeting of peace. Which was the taking of your neighbors hand and saying, "Peace be with thee" and the other person would respond by saying, "And with thee." Then the person would pass it on to the next person until it had gone through the whole congregation. Then the collection was taken up and then the consecration of the bread and the wine. Then the presbyters and the deacons went out to the congregation to distribute the bread and wine. The communion was held according to the Apostolic Tradition of the early Church which dates back to 200 AD before the present division of the Church. About the only denomination that did not participate in the communion service were the people of the Orthodox faith. This interdenominational international communion service was the first one in the history of the Church since the Reformation.³⁷

Apparently this service was very moving. Some students were worried that gathering three thousand people in one place might make it "circus-like" but the opposite was true: "the service, preceded by a half hour of absolute quiet, was deeply moving."³⁸

Time during the conference was allotted for denominational worship as well. The Roman Catholic observers held a series of weekday Masses at nearby St. Paul's Roman Catholic Church lead by Father Henry Van Kortenaar, a chaplain at the Newman Center at the University of Pittsburgh, and one participant remarked, "this will be one of the last Masses you'll hear in Latin."³⁹ On a very cold and blustery early morning the Orthodox students hosted a Divine Liturgy presided over by

³⁷ Report from Roger Spinharney to Sheldon Jackson High School Sitka, Alaska, dated January 9, 1964.

³⁸ "The Holy Spirit at the 19th Quadrennial," *The Christian Century*, March 18, 1964.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 370.

Father George Timpko⁴⁰ and Father Schmemmann.⁴¹ The assigned chapel for the Orthodox was too small for the six-hundred students who wanted to witness an Orthodox liturgy so the conference planners had to find an alternative venue.⁴² Father Timpko also lead a series of pre- and post-Divine Liturgy discussions, offering time for questions and answers about the basic structure of the liturgy and what the it means for the life of the Orthodox Christian.⁴³

The Quadrennial was more than merely a religious or spiritual gathering: it really reflected the Church and the world, liturgy and life together. A guest artist had a large display of her artwork. There was also a Festival of Nations with drummers, ethnic dancing, and singing of civil rights and folk songs. The Academy Award-winning British film, *Room at the Top*, was shown twice during the week, each time followed by lengthy debate and discussion.⁴⁴ Students also solicited funds and raised over \$1,500.⁰⁰ for Freedom Radio to “educate the Negro” who might be unaware of the larger fight for civil rights in the country. Some students signed petitions to Congress and others volunteered to join sit-ins in Washington, DC.⁴⁵ The spirit of the conference was certainly one of life-giving openness, freedom, and creativity. As one student reported, “we were experiencing a contemporary stage of the World Council of Churches.”⁴⁶ Another participant, Leonard

⁴⁰ Father George Timpko was a graduate of St. Vladimir’s Seminary and a Navy veteran. He served an Orthodox mission in Danbury, CT and eventually moved to Sts. Peter and Paul Orthodox Church in Buffalo, NY. For more information about Father Timpko’s ministry and life see http://jacwell.org/Spring_2001/fr_timko.htm.

⁴¹ The Divine Liturgy began at 6:45am and in their reflections on the conference Constantine and Arlene noted that it was four degrees below zero.

⁴² Constantine and Arlene Kallaur, “How it Happened in Athens,” 8.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 9.

⁴⁴ The movie, based on the novel by John Braine, *Room at the Top* (London: Eyre and Spottiswode, 1957) is a story about the poverty of modern society including infidelity, lust, and socio-economic struggle.

⁴⁵ See Spinharney letter.

⁴⁶ Terrill, *ISF Field Trips*, 2.

Clough, called it “an eschatological experience.”⁴⁷ Clough then goes on to say:

Never have I attended a conference at which so many became so deeply involved personally. This was no academic game of Ping-Pong. People wanted to share rather than to debate. Speakers, both on the platform and in the seminars, led not with their chins but with their hearts. There was plenty of disagreement but little point scoring. The Protestant Episcopal Church and the Orthodox Church might claim a majority of the speakers, but there was no ecclesiastical or theological party line.⁴⁸

Ross Terrill also noted the open and free spirit at the conference, highlighting the “signs of the time”:

The conference scene was a highly decentralized one, with scores of creative pockets of activity and encounter all over the place, where no one had planned them, but where everyone was free to take part in them. Here in the conference offices are 80 vocational resource people, available to talk with those who are wondering what job to seek, or what to do next summer. There in a smoke-filled lounge is the Peace lobby, members of the NSCF, Peace Concern Committee, the Canadian SCM, Young Friends, the Student Peace, and other groups.... Backstage in the auditorium, in a whirl of costumes and welter of melodies, are students from all corners of the earth, rehearsing songs and dances for the daily presentation of a “Festival of Nations.”⁴⁹

It truly must have been quite an experience to gather together this number of students from different cultures, backgrounds, and experiences to share their common faith in Christ. The

⁴⁷ Report titled, “Reflections on the 19th Quadrennial Conference” by Leonard Clough dated February 2, 1964, 2.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 2.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 1.

participants were also encouraged and inspired to keep the conference spirit alive, as one participant said:

We heard so many speeches and participated in discussions on civil rights issues and on problems of the church today that made us want to start becoming involved too, only to return to our University campuses and attempt to find our mission there, amid textbooks and hockey games and dates. I think that I speak for most of us when I say that we have returned home with the realization that we can no longer be content to remain in our Christian ghettos and look out at the rest of the world. We cannot simply dichotomize, calling part of the world "sacred" and another part "secular" and therefore not related to Christian faith and witness. We are called by Christ to be completely involved in his work here, not seeking separation as Christians from the world but rejoicing in our unity with it. We must remember that Christ died, not for the life of the Presbyterians, or even for the life of the church, but that he died for the life of the world.⁵⁰

A mobile conference bookstore was erected with 7,500 theological and religious books as well as a makeshift jewelry and metalwork on sale from the Botolph art center in Boston.⁵¹ They also had sculptures, wall hangings, recordings too. For four days Ohio University was turned into a makeshift religious commune where students from across the Christian spectrum worshipped together, discussed, debated, and learned from one another.

The Book

After Father Alexander agreed to speak at the conference he started on his manuscript. Even though he was the dean and

⁵⁰ Anonymous, undated typed post-conference report, 3.

⁵¹ Carole Spearin, "For the Life of the World: Ecumenical Conference," *Ecumenical Notes* 3 (February 1964): 8.

professor at an Orthodox seminary, Schmemmann was very comfortable in ecumenical settings and speaking to primarily non-Orthodox audiences. According to pre-publication advertisements for the book, *For the Life of the World* is, “to be a book for students which would help us in the Protestant tradition to understand from his perspective the grand source of Christian compassion and joy in the midst of the world’s life, the meaning of the Church today.”⁵² By 1963 Schmemmann was already well known among youth and young adults within the Orthodox and some non-Orthodox circles and in many ways had both the charisma and the ability to translate theology into their language. Even the conference chair, Robertson, acknowledged that Schmemmann was “very busy and receiving many requests from student groups at this time.”⁵³ Schmemmann worked quickly. By April 1, 1963, the conference planners already had the first chapter of *For the Life of the World* in hand for their marketing materials which were planned for distribution in late summer and fall of that year.⁵⁴

As was his custom Father Alexander worked on the bulk of the chapters while on his summer vacation in Labelle, Quebec.⁵⁵ The book was completed on the eve of the Transfiguration, August 18, 1963,⁵⁶ and ready for sale by September.⁵⁷ *For the Life of the World* was first published

⁵² *For the Life of the World* pre-publication book order form (National Christian Student Federation, 1963.)

⁵³ Invitation letter from C. Alton Robertson to Alexander Schmemmann dated Feb. 21, 1963.

⁵⁴ In a letter dated April 1, 1963 from C. Alton Robertson to Rev. B.J. Stiles, Robertson acknowledged that the National Student Christian Movement already had the first chapter of Schmemmann’s book and was ready to engage in marketing and pre-conference publicity. Stiles was the editor of *Motive Magazine*, a magazine of the Division of Higher Education of the Methodist Church.

⁵⁵ Lac Labelle is nestled near Mont Tremblant, northwest of Montreal, where the Schmemmanns had a summer cottage.

⁵⁶ The feast of the Transfiguration is celebrated on August 6 but in 1963 the metropolia was still using the Julian calendar and the Feast of the Transfiguration was August 19.

⁵⁷ It was first printed in September 1963 and then reprinted again in November 1963.

under the auspices of the National Student Christian Federation and sold at \$1.45 per copy. After the conference, however, *For the Life of the World* had a life of its own, changing titles and publishers numerous times.⁵⁸

Schmemmann, however, did not work completely alone. In the preface of the first edition of *For the Life of the World* he acknowledges the assistance from Stephen S. Garmey, an Episcopalian priest and one of Father Alexander's former students.⁵⁹ Although Schmemmann acknowledged Garmey's help, primarily using Garmey's notes, he also admitted that the final version was his alone.⁶⁰ The original text of *For the Life of the World* included seven chapters. In 1973 a revised and expanded edition appeared which included two appendices: "Worship in a Secular Age"⁶¹ and "Sacrament and Symbol."⁶²

When *For the Life of the World* appeared in 1963 it had a ready-made audience. Conference participants read either the entire book or at least part of the book since it was the primary

⁵⁸ The publication history for this book is long and arduous. First printed by the National Student Christian Federation it was then published in 1965 by Herder and Herder Publishers in New York and simultaneously by Palm Publishers in Montreal with a name change to *Sacraments and Orthodoxy*. In 1966 it was published in England by Darton, Longman, and Todd with yet another title change, this time to *The World as Sacrament*. In 1973 St. Vladimir's Seminary Press published an expanded edition of the book, including two additional appendices with yet again a new title, *For the Life of the World: Sacraments and Orthodoxy*. Even with the change of publishers and title this book has continuously been in print since 1963.

⁵⁹ The Rev. Stephen S. Garmey was the vicar of Gramercy Park Episcopal Church (1972–2005) and was a collector of modern Russian art, musician, architect, and sculpture. For more information see <http://cityroom.blogs.nytimes.com/2012/11/14/an-episcopal-vicar-who-loved-avant-garde-russian-art>.

⁶⁰ Acknowledgement page, *For the Life of the World* (1963).

⁶¹ Originally delivered at the eighth general assembly of Syndesmos on July 20, 1971 at Hellenic College, Brookline, Mass. and first appeared in *St. Vladimir's Theological Quarterly* 16 (1972).

⁶² First appeared in *Evangelium und Sacrament* (Strassburg: Oecumenica, 1970).

study guide for the duration of the conference. The book also received positive reviews from across various Christian bodies. The Trappist monk and writer Thomas Merton wrote an extensive review essay and said:

Let the reader be warned. If he is now predisposed to take a comfortable, perhaps excitingly mysterious excursion into the realm of a very “mystical” and highly “spiritual” religion, a gold-encrusted cult thick with smoke and incense and populated with a legion of gleaming icons in the sacred gloom, a “liturgy which to be properly performed requires not less than twenty-seven heavy liturgical books,” he may find himself disturbed by Fr. Schmemmann’s presentation. Certainly, *Sacraments and Orthodoxy* will repudiate nothing of the deep theological and contemplative sense of Orthodox faith and worship but the author is intent on dispelling any illusions about the place of “religion” in the world today. In fact, one would not suspect from the title of this book that is one of the strongest and clearest statements of position upon this vexed topic of the Church and the world.”⁶³

Merton goes on saying that for Schmemmann there is no real difference when speaking about the sacraments per se and the Church. When one speaks about ecclesial life one speaks about the sacramental expression of that life. Therefore, when one speaks about mission, one also must speak about the liturgical impact of that mission: “it is in protesting against false ideas of the Church, her mission, and her relation to the world, that Fr. Schmemmann makes his most valuable and indispensable contribution to current thought on sacramental theology.”⁶⁴ Merton had a point that other people have made; namely, that one hallmark of Schmemmann’s corpus was that he showcased the integral nature of liturgy and life or the Church and the world as

⁶³ Merton “Orthodoxy and the World,” *Monastic Studies* 4 (1966): 107.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 107.

he himself states in the preface of the revised edition of the book:

And thus our real question is: how can we “hold together” in faith, in life, in action – these seemingly contradictory affirmations of the Church, how can we overcome the temptation to opt for and to “absolutize” one of them, falling thus into the wrong choices or “heresies” that have so often plagued Christianity in the past? It is my certitude that the answer comes to us not from neat intellectual theories but above all from the living and unbroken experience of the Church which she reveals and communicates to us in her worship, in the *leitourgia* always making her that which she is: the sacrament of the world, the sacrament of the Kingdom – their gift to us in Christ. And this experience that I tried, not so much to explain or to analyse, but rather simply to confirm in this essay.⁶⁵

Indeed, *For the Life of the World* is not concerned with apologetics, propping up the “Orthodox thinking” about a list of topics which one often finds these days, trying to defend ourselves from the West, from the world, or from anyone who thinks or acts differently than us. What is so refreshing about *For the Life of the World* is its singleness of purpose, revealing the most basic concepts of sacramental vision for life in general, holding up the Eucharist as the source and summit of our faith in Christ. In his pre-conference review of the book, Roy Enquist focuses on what Schmemmann has to say to his Western brothers and sisters and likens it to a real gift that has been given from one brother to another, not forcing himself on the other, but rather an invitation to come and see:

In this context, then, Schmemmann’s book is not so much a thesis to be attacked as a gift from one part of

⁶⁵ *For the Life of the World: Sacraments and Orthodoxy*, revised and expanded edition (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 1988), 7.

the Body to another. In letting us come with him behind the iconostasis of reserve which protects Orthodox sacramental devotion, Father Schmemmann has, in reality, invited us to share, in some way, in the Sacred Banquet of Life. We have been made guests in an exceedingly venerable part of the house of God. The question is not: Shall we move in and renounce our old home? Nor is it, I trust: Shall we convince our host to remodel and redecorate so his place in God's world will be just like yours or mine? Rather, we have been given a gift. We have been privileged to enter into a world which most of us have never known before – a reflection, incidentally, not on its importance but on our limitations. In being privy to the spirit that animates the life of those who live a sacramental life, we are both privileged and given a new responsibility. Christians East and West have not understood each other for over a thousand years. Father Schmemmann's book, is among other things, a little sacramental gift that has the power to open up the meaning of the reality of Christ for Eastern Christians in a new and unforgettable way.⁶⁶

The Lectures

Over the course of the four days Schmemmann delivered four keynote lectures. After lunch he and Zabriskie hosted an informal question and answer session together with time for general discussion.⁶⁷ Then at 3pm the students gathered together in Alumni Memorial Auditorium where everyone heard Schmemmann speak. The four lectures, largely based on his book, were aimed at the main conference theme of liturgy and life and the Church as mission. A post-conference press release published in the *The Christian Century* reported, "Schmemmann made it clear that at this point in the ecumenical movement apologetics are not needed. What is needed is the confession of

⁶⁶ Enquist, "We Have Been Given a Gift," 2.

⁶⁷ See the schedule for the 19th Quadrennial conference.

the prime role of the Church. For the Christians there is no alternative to obeying Christ's command, "Go ye and preach."⁶⁸ One reason for this particular conference theme on Church and mission was that for years Christians were going out on mission trips trying to bring people to Christ but failed to understand exactly what they were doing, or, as Robertson said:

Literally hundreds of students have gone out onto these frontiers to invest their lives. But many who have gone out, upon returning to that part of God's people fathered locally in the Church at First Avenue and Main Street have too often found themselves out of touch, misunderstood, unable to explain adequately what they are doing and why; and consequently, many have either continued in mission unsustained or have left the Church.⁶⁹

Judging from the various student comments Schmemmann stirred up a lot of emotion in the students and spoke with power.

Schmemmann was familiar with the topic of the missionary nature of the Church. Earlier in 1961 he wrote two essays on missionary activity, one which appeared as an editorial in the *St. Vladimir's Seminary Quarterly* simply called "Orthodoxy and Mission"⁷⁰ and then one which appeared a little later in an anthology edited by Gerald H. Anderson called *Missionary Imperative in the Orthodox Tradition*.⁷¹ This theme of mission, an important one for Schmemmann would later re-appear again in different forms especially in a keynote speech to young adults in *Concern Magazine*, simply called "The Mission of

⁶⁸ *The Christian Century*, March 18, 1964, 370.

⁶⁹ C. Alton Robertson "For the Life of the World" – But Why? *The Methodist Woman*, 36 (undated).

⁷⁰ Vol. 3 (1959): 41–42.

⁷¹ (NY: McGraw Hill, 1961).

Orthodox Youth,”⁷² which later would be extracted into a popular booklet published by Conciliar Press.⁷³

A black and white photo taken at the conference depicts a young Father Alexander⁷⁴ in his white collar and suit jacket at the podium against a backdrop of cultural slogans reflecting the signs of the time: WASP, FREE, WAR, IMAGE, THERE. Each of the four lectures, all equal in length, focused on the themes of the conference: the missionary perspective, for the life of the word, mission to society, and the Church and the mission.

Schmemmann begins his first lecture by reminding the students that he does not plan on giving them a “recipe” for missionary work but that the overall *raison d’etre* is Church as mission:

We know that, from the very beginning, to be a Christian meant to be a missionary. The very distinction between these two terms is in itself nonsense. We know it, and this is why we are here. And yet we do not know how to be missionaries. We do not know, not because we have not heard a sufficient amount of lectures and read a sufficient amount of books. This lack of knowledge is deeply rooted in our Christian witness, or rather our weakness as Christians. It is not only on the study of theologies of missions that our missionary activity depends, but on something else. And this something else is difficult to present as a recipe. If Christ failed, who are we to succeed? He could not convince the crowds that followed Him and then abandoned Him; He could not convert them. It is difficult to believe that we can, after one, two, three

⁷² *Concern: Orthodox Concern for the Life of the World* 3 (Fall 1968): 5–9.

⁷³ Alexander Schmemmann *The Mission of Orthodoxy* (Conciliar Press, undated). For a recent analysis of Schmemmann’s thought on mission and Church life see Athanasius Papatansiou, “The Church as Mission: Fr. Alexander Schmemmann’s Liturgy Theology Revisited,” *Proche-Orient Chretien* 60 (2010): 6–41.

⁷⁴ Schmemmann was forty-two years old at the time of the conference.

conferences finally find adequate methods of mission. I cannot speak here of a theology or a theory of mission that I can offer to you and say, "Go back and apply it now." I have no theory with which you will succeed where your fathers have failed and where generations of missions have failed.⁷⁵

In the rest of the first lecture Schmemmann focuses on the fact that in reality Christianity and the gospel were failures in the eyes of the world: after all, Jesus was crucified, and was nobody's idea of a hero. While the cross is the vehicle for Jesus' death it also becomes the source of joy for the Christian since on the cross Jesus defeated darkness, evil, and death itself.

Does not the Christian message teach us that what we have to do is to hold together in our faith the reality of Christ's failure having its name the cross and also the reality of His victory which has as its name the resurrection? It is not just cross or just resurrection. It seems to me that too often we are tempted by choosing between them.⁷⁶

The real missionary activity for the Christian is to embrace the cross of Christ which is both suffering and joy.

After developing the overarching theme of what mission is and is not, he emphasizes that Christianity is always *particular* or *personal*. Christ came and healed persons; not society or humanity in general. To make this point Schmemmann focused on Boris Pasternak's famous book, *Dr. Zhivago*.⁷⁷ The book, Schmemmann says, takes the reader through Yuri Zhivago's life, from the early years as Yuri watches his mother's funeral until much later when Yuri dies. For Schmemmann "what Pasternak teaches us is this: the more you look at one particular man, the more you accept him seriously, the more you *find* him, the

⁷⁵ Lecture One, 1.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, 5.

⁷⁷ Schmemmann earlier wrote a review of *Dr. Zhivago*, "Pasternak," *Volnaia Mysl'* 3 (1961): 18–25.

more he ceases to be just a case of the general situation. You find that there is no man outside this real particular man.”⁷⁸ Schmemmann says that this is the miracle of particularity, of real persons with hopes, dreams, fears, sufferings, and joys. Zhivago then is for the reader not just any doctor but a particular doctor with a particular family and particular problems: “the more you look into all these details, the more this other person, Dr. Zhivago, becomes something which you know from inside, a living reality. You realize the depth of the human existence and in the end, without this being said, you know that we have the story of each man as seen through the story of Jesus Christ.”⁷⁹ Pasternak does not deal with humanity in general but with a human in particular.

All of Christian mission, Schmemmann continues, rests on the general into the particular: “not the reduction of the particular to the general, but the constant transformation of the general into the particular, is the beginning, the fundamental beginning of all Christian mission.”⁸⁰ Basically Schmemmann argues against a merely reductionist approach to missionary activity, one which is common today just as it was fifty years ago. Churches were focusing on more growth, more buildings, more parishioners in the pews, more seminaries, more activities and events – and not on just being the Church, being what God meant us to be. Schmemmann envisions basic missionary activity as simply seeing the image of God in the other person, in honoring people as people and not just some general abstraction:

He is the one who sits next to me in that long, long ride home in the train and who at first is the enemy because he smokes his bad cigar, and then becomes someone whom I have to accept simply because he is there and finally when I make a little effort and ask about his wife and children he becomes interesting. But still it is only when finally when I make a little

⁷⁸ Lecture Two, p.3; emphasis his.

⁷⁹ Ibid.

⁸⁰ Ibid., 6.

effort and ask about his wife and children he becomes interesting. But still it is only finally, in the morning, when after that sleepless night I have to quit him that I have a sense of losing someone. We have met, we have been together. Now this is a victory which cannot be calculated, which cannot be put in any report of any commission or committee. We cannot report this to our churches and organizations and yet, this is the victory that takes place daily. We know, at least with eyes of faith we know, that this is the only foundation on which everything depends.⁸¹

His words may seem odd given the fact that for centuries Christians have worked long and hard in the mission field, both domestic and international. Yet Schmemmann envisions the basis of Christian mission not only as going out and creating more catechumens, which is an important element of missionary activity, but rather he envisions the basis of Christian missionary activity in the right here and now, through our daily conversations, meetings, encounters with “the other” of which there are so many. If we live our Christian faith at work, at school, at home, whether we are teachers or janitors or nurses or retirees we can all be missionaries to those around us.

In his third and fourth lecture Schmemmann turns to the theme of the Church and society and the Church and mission. Here he draws upon themes that are also included in *For the Life of the World* but also which will later appear in his other writings. He first begins by teasing out a theme he introduces early on in *For the Life of the World*: the priestly character of our life, that we join Jesus’ priestly ministry offering our prayer and praise to God and fully entering into this priesthood: “Man was to be the priest of a Eucharist, offering the world to God, and in this offering he was to receive the gift of life.”⁸² In the lecture he says the same thing in a slightly different way:

⁸¹ *Ibid.*, 6.

⁸² *For the Life of the World*, 17.

But the priest does not only assume; he also offers to God; he mediates; he knows that the means and the ends of each action is God and His glory. He is offering the sacrifice of praise to God and this is the initial meaning of sacrifice. The sacrifice of praise, the offering to God is prior to sin and to all the sacrifice of redemption and atonement. If there were no sins this world would still be a sacrificial world because real love is always sacrificial love, it offers everything it has to the ultimate, to God, to His glory. And God is not only glorified by those achievements that can be evaluated and measured; He is glorified by the very essence of Christian life in the world.⁸³

After speaking about the priestly nature of humanity he then turns to the prophetic. Schmemmann says that the prophet was the one who always called people back to God, who reminded people that we are supposed to be in the world but not of the world: “you remember all those Elijahs, Isaiahhs, all those men who stood in the midst of the chosen people of God, in cultures and societies, and denounced them. And there are always bearers and messengers of a vision which cannot be simply identified with anything achieved in this world.”⁸⁴ Yet the prophet is always the one who is disregarded, laughed at, and mocked. The prophets speak the truth and the truth is often difficult if not sometimes impossible to accept. The Church does not just have the priestly *or* prophetic functions but both:

So ultimately the priestly and the prophetic are not mutually exclusive functions. The real prophet, or the one who opposes, who stands against, can only be a real prophet if he is, first of all, a real priest. He can instill in himself and in other people that hunger for the absolute only if he is, first of all, deeply involved in the priestly function of the Christian mission. The one who jumps into the prophetic without first as-

⁸³ Lecture Three, 3.

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, 4.

suming the priestly will be a false prophet. “Not all who say, “Lord, Lord,” will enter the kingdom of God” and there is much false prophecy among Christians. In other terms, these two realities are organically connected and this is what gives the Christian mission to the world and to society its real complexity.⁸⁵

He also brings up a salient point about the prophetic priesthood. The Church has borrowed much of its missionary and growth terminology from contemporary business models, a quantitative approach. Yet implicitly implied in this prophetic approach is failure. If one looks at Jeremiah, Hosea, Amos, and Ezekiel, they always stood apart and spoke against Israel for their sin and idolatry, calling Israel back to repentance. The prophets were certainly not part of the inner circle of leaders and rulers and as the author of the epistle to the Hebrews says, “They were stoned, they were killed with the sword; they went about in skins of sheep and goats, destitute, afflicted, ill-treated of whom the world was not worthy-wandering over deserts and mountains and in dens and caves of the earth.”⁸⁶

Schmemmann also highlights this notion of failure in terms of self-emptying love.⁸⁷ He draws upon *The Diary of a Country Priest* by George Bernanos.⁸⁸ Overall the book depicts this priest not as succeeding, but failing:

In this book we follow step by step the life of a young priest in a small and completely de-Christianized village in which nothing seems to succeed. He himself is dying of cancer and he fails and he fails and he fails – constantly. But as you read the book you feel that there is a real progress in grace and when he finally dies in the room of the prostitute because he went to visit the girl friend of his friend, a defrocked priest – he finally dies in this absurd situation – his last words are: “All is grace” (*tout est grace*). Now every priest – even with-

⁸⁵ Ibid.

⁸⁶ Hebrews 11:37–38.

⁸⁷ Lecture 3, 5.

⁸⁸ First published in English (London: Bodiswood Ltd., 1937).

out going to those extremes, without necessarily dying of cancer in the room of a prostitute – knows that from time to time, be it on a Sunday morning or sometimes on an evening of a weekday – knows that in spite of all those failures that everything is grace; and in spite of these visible failures, there is constant growth of grace in this world.⁸⁹

Ultimately missionary work, according to Schmemmann, is nothing other than being faithful to the Church as the Church, as the Body of Christ and the presence of the Kingdom of God in this world, which is revealed to us in the liturgical gathering. Yes, there are officially sanctioned missionaries that are sent to establish actual physical new missions, but we are all called to be missionaries since we are all members of one another. Schmemmann reminds the participants that no matter what station one finds oneself in this world, we are all missionaries since we are all sent out at the end of the service to “depart” or “go forth” in peace.

The conference certainly ended on a high note. Over the course of four days students and young adults from around the world prayed together, broke bread, listened to some inspirational lectures, debated, dialogued, and learned from one another. They worshipped and had communion. They were challenged to live out their faith not just on Sunday morning but everyday.

Conclusion

Not all books are the same and surely not all withstand the test of time. Browse any theological library and there are plenty of old slowly yellowing dusty books that have long been forgotten and eventually will not make it to the end of this century. Yet some, like Bonhoeffer’s *Cost of Discipleship*,⁹⁰ Merton’s *Seven Storey Mountain*,⁹¹ or Niehbur’s *Christ in Cul-*

⁸⁹ Lecture 3, 5.

⁹⁰ (NY: Macmillan, 1961).

⁹¹ (NY: Harcourt and Brace, 1948).

ture⁹² continue to be read, studied, and re-read again and again. *For the Life of the World* is one of those books. Yet the question still remains: why? Even Schmemmann was surprised at the popularity of this little book. If Schmemmann were still alive today he would still be shocked that it remains in print. In a very small and unscientific and small poll I asked five clergy friends, all unknown to each other, what was it about *For the Life of the World* that they found inspiring. They all answered, nearly in the same words, “*For the Life of the World* gave me a vision for what Church is all about.” They confessed that even though they learned about the ancient rites and rubrics and the importance of the Typikon, *For the Life of the World* gave them a grand vision of things, a broad view of how liturgy and life, the Church and the world, intersect. They also used the words “organic” and “unified” to describe this vision. Robert F. Taft, the doyen of liturgical studies of the Byzantine world has called this the “Schmemmann phenomenon”:

To what, then, must we attribute this “Schmemmann phenomenon”: the surprising fascination he and his work still hold on the minds and the hearts of those engaged in the liturgical enterprise these twenty-five years since his death? I think it is because, unlike, “all the king’s horses and all the king’s men,” Fr. Alexander was the one who succeeded in putting Humpty-Dumpty together again. He took a decomposed and fragmented vision of liturgy: known by the code name “theology of the liturgy,” and transfigured it—the term is not too strong — into a “liturgical theology” expressive of what Christ and his Church is, the “Sacrament of the Kingdom” inchoatively present among us now, in mystery, “*For the Life of the World*.”⁹³

I agree. Schmemmann’s entire *oeuvre*, including *For the Life of the World* is a simple yet profound vision of our life in

⁹² (NY: Harper and Row, 1956).

⁹³ Robert F. Taft, “The Liturgical Enterprise Twenty-Five Years After Alexander Schmemmann (1921–1983): The Man and His Heritage,” *St. Vladimir’s Theological Quarterly* 53 (2009): 174.

Christ. Schmemmann was not a liturgical historian and he often was wrong on key liturgical and historical points.⁹⁴ Yet in all of his sermons, articles, essays, and books, including *For the Life of the World*, we find truth. And as Taft suggests just because one gets some of the facts wrong does not mean that something is not true; not just truth in general, but the truth of our life in Christ. It is for this reason that *For the Life of the World* has maintained such a long and healthy shelf life, and hopefully will continue to be read, re-read, studied, and discussed well into the future.



Резюме

Ця стаття простежує генеалогію і генезис однієї з найвідоміших книг східного літургійного богослов'я та приурочена 50-ій річниці публікації цього твору. „За життя світу” написав покійний декан семінарії святого Володимира Олександр Шмеман. Цей твір вийшов друком у безлічі видавництв Північної Америки й Великобританії і продовжує видаватися й сьогодні, був перекладений багатьма мовами, широко використовується в численних протестантських, католицьких і православних школах. За допомогою архівних досліджень автор статті документує процес постання книги в контексті екуменічного руху і загального суспільного розвитку в 1960-х роках. Книга починалася як серія лекцій для 19 Екуменічної студентської конференції, що відбувається кожні чотири роки в Афінах (штат Огайо), і в 1963 році мала тему „За життя світу”, де широко розглядалося питання місії та відносин між Церквою і світом, між літургією і життям. На конференціях, організованих під егідою Національної студентської християнської федерації та Всесвітньої студентської християнської федерації, збиралися тисячі протестантів, православних та католицьких християн та проводили ін-

⁹⁴ Peter Galazda, “Schmemmann Between Fagerberg and Reality: Towards an Agenda for Byzantine Christian Pastoral Liturgy,” *Bollettino della Greca di Grottaferrata* 4 (2007): 7–32.

тенсивні дні студій, обговорення, дискусій і молитви. Лекції Шмемана щодо православ'я зокрема і „таїнственний” світогляд в цілому були одними з перших і найбільш пам'ятних для учасників конференції.