

# SUNDAY SCHOOL?



Reston Catechetical Series

# OR CHURCH?

## **Christian Development through Liturgical Experience**

Some thoughts of Fr. Alexander Schmemmann  
from  
Liturgy and Life (OCA, 1974)

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We must recognize that we cannot artificially separate the problem of the religious upbringing of our children from that of a renewal of the entire Orthodox community. We cannot teach what we do not practice ourselves.... And it is obvious that the rebirth of "liturgical catechesis" requires first of all a rebirth of the liturgical life of the Church, its better understanding by the faithful, a more responsible attitude to it, a more active participation in it.... We need a liturgical catechesis for adults, and in the clergy itself. We need a rebirth of the very concept of Church, the spiritualization of the parish, the renovation of our prayer life. All this is the basic condition for a true Christian education of our children, and unless we face this, all our discussions... will be useless.

### **Accepted—Without Discussion.**

Although the need for Christian education is generally accepted in principle, the same cannot be said as far as the forms and methods of Christian education are concerned. We must frankly state that confusion reigns in this field and the situation is all the more confused because the difficulty is not fully recognized, and therefore no effort is made to overcome it. This applies not only to various details, but is true of the basic problems as well. A good example is the general acceptance of the “Sunday School” in the practice of the Orthodox churches in America. Sunday Schools surely are an outcome of a Protestant philosophy of education. Introducing them into the practice of the Orthodox Church should have been preceded by their critical evaluation in the light of an Orthodox conception of the purpose and principles of Christian education. Sunday Schools should have been adapted to serve these. No such question, however, was ever raised and “Sunday School” (frequently taught during the celebration of the Divine Liturgy) became an accepted pattern of our Church education without ever having been discussed. PAGES 7,8

### **My Conviction.**

The Orthodox faith has its most adequate expression in worship and truly Christian life is the fulfillment of the grace, vision, teaching, inspiration and power that we receive in worship. Therefore it is in the organic connection between the liturgical life of the Church and her educational effort that we find the uniquely Orthodox principle of religious education. We are still far from the full application and implementation of this principle.... [*Sadly, 30 years later this observation is still true!—Ed.*] PAGE 5

### **Baptismal Catechesis, Liturgical Catechesis.**

Baptismal catechesis... represents the earliest record in Church Tradition of the manner in which the Church taught its members Christian doctrine and the Christian law of life. It is certainly of importance to us that this catechesis was liturgical in its character. The explanation of Scriptures, the unfolding of the meaning of the Creed (*i.e.*, of Church doctrine), the teaching of Christian morality—in other words, the entire content of Christian education—was transmitted in direct connection with liturgical services, partly even during such services. We find traces of such liturgical catechesis in our church services today. Thus the first part of our Divine Liturgy... was and still is a teaching service, because it is didactic in its very character and purpose. PAGES 8,9

Another example is the structure and content of our Lenten services. They cannot truly be understood unless we know that their purpose is mainly catechetical. In the early Christian Church the baptism of catechumens took place during the vigil service on the night preceding Easter; and Lent, therefore, was a time of intensive preparation for the Sacrament of Enlightenment, as baptism was then often called. We can see it best in the Lenten order of Bible readings. The entire books of Genesis, Isaiah and Proverbs are read during these weeks. Why? Because they contain the real clue to an understanding of the Scriptures as a whole, because they outline the true dimensions of the Revelation fulfilled in Jesus Christ: in Genesis—the themes of creation, fall and covenant; in Isaiah—the theme of the Messianic promise and the image of the Messiah, who takes upon Himself our ills; in Proverbs—the crowning of human wisdom, experience and knowledge with the revelation of Divine Wisdom, the Incarnate Logos. During Holy Week the reading of Exodus replaces that of Genesis, the Book of Job takes the place of Proverbs. Exodus is read because this book describes the journeying of the chosen people to the Promised Land, the “Passover” which is fulfilled when Christ the Messiah performs his Exodus to the Father (John 13.1) and becomes our Passover (1 Cor. 5.7), taking us into the promised Kingdom. The Book of Job is the climax of the Old Testament revelation of the Suffering Servant, the one who conquers evil by his complete humility, love and obedi-

ence to God. Thus all the basic themes of Christian faith and of the contents of Church doctrine are unfolded in their inner coherence. The Old Testament is revealed here in its full spiritual reality, not merely as an abstract truth, but as the foundation of the New Testament, a path leading to Christ, a promise and prophecy fulfilled in him. Yet—and this is of great importance—this truth is unfolded not only through reading and commenting on texts. It is liturgical: the readings are set within the context of services which reveal their true meaning. *PAGES 9,10*

The deep sigh of penitence which continuously resounds throughout the Lenten services, the call to repentance, to the recognition of one's utter weakness and sinfulness, establishes in us that disposition which enables us truly to hear the Scriptures, to understand their real meaning. On the other hand, the structure of the services, the harmony of the reading, ritual and prayers, the entire "movement" of the services, gives life to the texts, gives them that "pitch" which makes them ring true. The

reading of the Gospel and its explanation in the sermon are not merely an insert into the Liturgy.... We are led up to them and prepared by "coming together in the church" (1 Cor. 11.18),... by the Psalms,... the singing of the "Thrice Holy".... These actions are not mere "symbols"; they are sacred acts through which the Church prepares herself for the sacrament of the word of God....

We could multiply such examples. However, those given suffice to make it clear that "Liturgical catechesis" is not just an interesting custom of the ancient Church, but the traditional method of religious education, an organic part of the very nature of the Church and of its conception of spiritual "enlightenment." *PAGES 10,11*



St. Sava Cathedral, on Vračar Hill, Belgrade, Serbia, 2005—Canonizing a new saint.

**C**HRISTIANITY IS NEITHER A PHILOSOPHY NOR A MORALITY NOR a ritual, but the gift of a new life in Christ, and this new life is the Church. In it, we who "now have received mercy" (1 Pet. 2.10) constitute a new nation under God, which offers to God spiritual thanks and offering, carries on his work in the world, is a witness of salvation and grows in the knowledge of Truth and Grace; hence the unique place and function of liturgy in its life. Liturgical services are not one of the "aspects" of the Church; they express its very essence, are its breath, its heartbeat, its constant self-revelation. Through the sacraments and especially through the sacrament of the Holy Eucharist, the Church, as one theologian worded it, always "becomes that which it is," i.e., the Body of Christ, a new unity of men in him. Liturgy implies above all the gathering of the faithful.... In this gathering and through it we, "though many, are one body" (1 Cor. 12.12). Through liturgy we enter into communion with the Word of God, learn to know His will, remember the death and resurrection of Christ, and receive the gifts of the Holy Spirit, indispensable for our Christian life and action in this world. It can truly be said that through its liturgy the Church becomes a "union of faith and love," as it was defined by St. Ignatius of Antioch. *PAGES 12,13*

### **How the Church Understands It.**

Liturgical catechesis shows us first of all the main *purpose*, the aim of religious education as it is understood by the Church. This aim is *to bring the individual into the life of the Church*. I emphasize: it is not merely the communication of “religious knowledge,” not training a human being to become a “good person,” but the “edification”—the “building up”—of a member of the Body of Christ, a member of that new “chosen race” and “holy nation” (1 Pet. 2.9) whose mysterious life in this world began on the day of Pentecost. “And make him (or her) a reason-endowed sheep in the holy flock of your Christ, an honorable member of your Church,” says the baptismal prayer. Religious education is nothing else but the disclosing of that which happened to man when he was born again through water and Spirit, and was made a *member of the Church*. PAGE 11

### **A New Life.**

The sacraments of Baptism and Chrismation bring us into the life of the Church. Baptism is our birth into a new life; the Holy Chrism consecrates us to the service of God together with all the other members of the Church; in the sacrament of the Holy Eucharist we renew the gift of unity, through the offering of one sacrifice and the communion of one Bread and one Cup. In the daily, weekly, and yearly liturgical cycles the Church fills time with the memory of Christ. His presence and the grace of the Holy Spirit permeate all the aspects of our life. To sum up, through liturgy a human society (the “parish”) realizes itself as a Church, *i.e.*, as a new unity, as knowledge of and communion with God. PAGE 13

### **Participation is Key.**

What then should Christian education be, if not the introduction into this life of the Church, an unfolding of its meaning, its contents and its purpose? And how can it introduce anyone into this life, if not by *participation* in the liturgical services on the one hand, and their *explanation* on the other hand? “Taste and see that the Lord is good”: first taste, then see—*i.e.*, understand. The method of liturgical catechesis is truly the Orthodox method of religious education because it proceeds from the Church and because the Church is its goal. In the past the catechumens were first brought into the church gathering, and only then the meaning, the joy, and the purpose of this gathering was explained to them. And what would we communicate in our Christian education today, if explanation is not preceded by experience, by all that we unconsciously inhale and assimilate even before we begin to understand? PAGES 13,14

### **Getting It Wrong Has a Downside.**

Everything I have said above may seem utopian in our present conditions. How can these theories be applied in practice? How can they become effective? There is no easy and simple answer to this question. Whether we want it or not, we are challenged today with the tremendously difficult task of rethinking Church tradition as a whole, of applying it in a situation radically different from that of the past. It will take more than one generation to solve this problem but we must at least face it and also become aware of its meaning. Compromises, temporary solutions, adjustments—all these are admissible only if we firmly refuse once and for all consciously to alter Church traditions, to lower its standards in order to “fit” them into our needs. PAGE 14

The Orthodox way of life consists in... creative “actualization” of Church Tradition; refusing to follow it, we consciously or unconsciously abandon Orthodoxy. PAGE 8

## The Growth of All

The concept of the Church as God's people and as Body of Christ has become abstract for modern Christians. On the one hand the Church is identified with "parish," an incorporated organization with business meetings, elections, votes, property and financial policies. On the other hand, it is to the church building that we come to pray, to "fulfill our religious duty," enjoy good singing, and receive comfort and consolation. The purpose of a parish is understood as a means of assuring the material welfare of the church building and its contents; the purpose of the church as a building is the spiritual satisfaction that the parishioners gain from the beautiful church services and from the sense of having fulfilled their religious duty. But the modern Christian has forgotten, or perhaps has never known, that these aims are secondary when compared to the main goal: the edification of the Church of Christ, the growth of all in the new unity in Christ that they received in Baptism and always receive in the Holy Eucharist: "Let us all share in this one Bread and Cup, becoming one in fellowship in the Holy Spirit with all who share in them" (Liturgy of St. Basil the Great). "For in the one Spirit we were all baptized into one body" (1 Cor. 12.13). "Where the Church is, there is the Holy Spirit; where the Holy Spirit is, there is the Church and the fullness of grace" (St. Irenaeus of Lyons, Adv. haer. III, 24, 1).

PAGES 11,12

Why are we doing all this? Teaching is explanation. Learning is understanding, not simply description. "Why?" is our real question. Of course I cannot answer it fully in one short lecture. But I hope I can give you a taste for further studies. I can hint at something so beautiful, so heavenly, so crucial for real Orthodoxy that when we lose it—even though we can still build beautiful churches with domes and three-barred crosses and even know Orthodox melodies—we cease to be Orthodox.

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—Fr. Alexander Schmemmann,

Liturgy and Life: Christian Development through Liturgical Experience  
(DRE, Orthodox Church In America, 1974)



As I have said before, I do not think that the time is ripe for detailed, practical prescriptions. For we must also face the long-range and difficult task of harmonizing traditional principles of church education with valuable and useful modern educational methods. Loyalty to tradition... merely requires an effort on our part to "test the spirits to see whether they are of God" (1 John 4.1). In fact, it opens the possibility of using—for the glory of God—all the achievements of human reason, of human creativity and knowledge.

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