

# **Schmemann between Fagerberg and Reality: Towards an Agenda for Byzantine Christian Pastoral Liturgy**

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Let me begin by shielding my flank: Notwithstanding the hint of acerbity in the title of my paper, nothing of the following is intended to detract from the genius of either Fagerberg's or Schmemann's work. Instead, it should be viewed as an attempt to enter into conversation with two outstanding liturgists in the hopes of analyzing how their formulations might be amplified or otherwise nuanced in order to facilitate a worship more in keeping with *logiké latreia*.

In his engaging volume, *Theologia Prima: What is Liturgical Theology?*, David W. Fagerberg constructs a definition of liturgical theology as the "stab at meaning" epiphanized by the concrete worship event. He then showcases the writings of Alexander Schmemann, especially his book, *The Eucharist: Sacrament of the Kingdom*, as a privileged example of such a theology.

After briefly outlining Fagerberg's construct, I will proceed to expose a number of important counter-examples in the writings of Alexander Schmemann, that is, examples of his attempts at interpretation in which the meaning that Schmemann derives from a worship event is not in fact the meaning epiphanized by the event. In tandem, as a corollary to my exposure of this interpretive fissure, I will analyze several sections of Schmemann's works which demonstrate his appreciation, on the one hand, for the way in which a given rite *is supposed to* en flesh a particular theological meaning, but on the other hand, his refusal to propose the liturgical modifications that would enable the rite to actually do so.

I will then delve into several conceptual flaws that undergird the fissures in Schmemann's interpretation of worship and at the same time indicate how, paradoxically enough, Schmemann himself provides the insights for the "welding" of these fissures.

In a final section of this paper, I will provide a list of examples of how Schmemann imbues a mistaken reading of liturgical history with incongruous meanings. This will help illustrate the importance of a correct reading of liturgical history for liturgical theology and liturgical reform, for as those familiar with liturgical interpretation know, the past is frequently invoked in dialogue with contemporary theological or pastoral concerns, with deleterious consequences, of course, when the past has been misread.

## **Fagerberg's Masterful Construction of "Liturgical Theology"**

For decades the term "liturgical theology" has been in circulation, with a wide array of definitions ascribed thereto. In 1992, Fagerberg synthesized the insights of Alexander Schmemann, Aidan Kavanagh and Robert Taft in his re-worked doctoral dissertation, *What is Liturgical Theology?*, in order to create a conceptual convention. As Fagerberg stated succinctly in the second, substantially revised, edition of this book, published in 2004, this convention relies on two defining attributes: *i*) liturgical theology is *theologia prima*, that is "first order," pre-discursive theology, in other words a "stab at meaning" that precedes the analytical cogitation of second order (classical, academic) theology, and *ii*) liturgical theology "is found in the structure of the rite, in its *lex orandi*."

Those familiar with Fagerberg's work and the intellectual tradition inspiring it, appreciate the genius of his synthesis. Armed, incidentally, with Fagerberg's insights, liturgical theologians easily cast off their status as systematic theology's poor (and "woefully pious") cousins. This is because Fagerberg's construct re-sources some of the better currents in post-modern theology (though oddly enough, he nowhere explicitly references them) which stress the holistic nature of knowledge and *communal* enactments of meaning. To put it most plainly, *i*) even the simplest of believers engaged in worship is theologizing because

that very act of worship is an attempt to locate, define and en flesh meaning; and *ii*) that worship event in turn can be rigorously studied in order to understand some of the profoundest truths about God, humanity, and the cosmos.

Those familiar with Schmemmann's writings will immediately understand why Fagerberg privileges his thought. Fagerberg in fact quotes the following passage from the former's *The Eucharist* twice within a space of less than 100 pages. "The first principle of liturgical theology is that, in explaining the liturgical tradition of the Church, one must proceed not from abstract, purely intellectual schemata cast randomly over the services, but from the services themselves – and this means, first of all, from their *ordo*."

Earlier in his book, Fagerberg quotes another key, albeit hyperbolic, assertion of Schmemmann's: "Everything I have ever written is about theology, not liturgy – about the faith of the Church as expressed, communicated, and preserved by the liturgy."

### **Interpretive Fissures in Schmemmann's Thought**

Let us now turn to several liturgical services as interpreted by Schmemmann to analyze some of the interpretive fissures referred to above.

#### ***Christian Initiation***

Schmemmann's thought regarding Christian Initiation is an appropriate place to begin, if only because he himself has written: "The proper celebration of Baptism is indeed the source and the starting point of all liturgical renewal and revival." Even though one might question the validity of the aforementioned assertion, the following are some of Schmemmann's central ideas regarding Baptism and the theology it reveals.

The whole life of the Church is rooted in the New Life which shone forth from the grave on the first day of the new creation. It is this new life that is given in Baptism and is fulfilled in the Church. We began this introduction [of the book *Of Water and the Spirit*] with the mention of the initial liturgical connection between Pascha and Baptism. This whole study is indeed nothing else but an attempt to explain the meaning of this connection [between Pascha and Baptism] and to communicate, in as much as it is possible for our poor human words, the joy with which it fills our Christian life.

Later in the same book, *Of Water and the Spirit*, he asserts: "Whenever and wherever Baptism is celebrated, we find ourselves – spiritually, at least – on the eve of Pascha."

Then, commenting on how the entrance of the newly baptized into the church constitutes a revelation of baptism's power to re-create humanity, he writes:

Early commentaries always present and explain this procession [of the newly baptized from the baptistery into the church] as an essential and integral part of the liturgy of initiation, as the final "epiphany" of its meaning. And this it remains even today, in spite of all transformations and developments, in spite also of the liturgical divorce between the administration of Baptism and the celebration of Pascha.

And finally, stressing more explicitly this link between Christian initiation and the *ecclesia*, Schmemmann states: "Their [the baptizands'] first experience of the Church is not that of an abstraction or idea, but that of a real and concrete unity of persons who, because

each one of them is united to Christ, are united to one another, constitute one family, one body, one fellowship.”

Anyone familiar with contemporary Byzantine liturgical practice will note that only a handful of parishes worldwide have even attempted to restore baptism to Pascha (and none of these are part of the Church to which Schmemmann belonged), and only a few more have restored a regular communal celebration of baptism, for example, in conjunction with the Sunday Eucharist. Consequently, to speak of the “joy with which [the connection between Pascha and Baptism] fills our Christian life” and the way in which “the [actually non-existent] procession [of the newly baptized into the church] ...remains even today... the final ‘epiphany’ of [the liturgy of Initiation’s] meaning” since the newly enlightened “concretely” enter “one family,” smacks of blatant nominalism.

Ironically enough, Schmemmann himself bemoans the elimination of Initiation from Pascha, but he continues to *i)* write as if the two are still joined, and *ii)* refuses to suggest ways in which the two might be re-joined in actuality as opposed to notionally. In fact, Schmemmann considers the possibility of such a restoration unfeasible and proposes instead that baptisms be celebrated on Saturday mornings (in the context of the Divine Liturgy) because, in his words, “by analogy with Easter, the best day ...is *Saturday* [*sic*].”

Let us now systematically untangle this conceptual morass. To begin from the end, only someone who has reconciled himself to celebrating the ancient paschal vigil on Holy Saturday *morning* could ever suggest that celebrating baptism on (ordinary) Saturday mornings is somehow “analogous” to “Easter.”

Secondly, if indeed initiation into Christ’s body is to be “real” and “concrete,” that is, a grafting of the newly baptized into a “fellowship” that is not merely an “abstraction” or an “idea,” (to quote Schmemmann) then, at a minimum, the *Sunday* assembly should be the locus of this celebration.

Finally, for the procession of the newly enlightened to be the epiphanic moment that Schmemmann insists it “remains,” it would have to be restored as a movement of disclosure. Considering that most Byzantine Christian communities are not about to embark on the construction of baptisteries from which baptisands could process, it would seem wiser to simply stop fantasizing about its significance and reconcile oneself to the fact that the present-day procession around the baptismal font remains semiotically a serviceable expression of the celebrational joy appropriate to the post-baptism/chrismation section of Initiation. In one sense, the “epiphany” of the baptizands’ bonding with the community is then transposed to their reception of the Eucharist, which in any case is the ultimate *telos* of their procession into the church to begin with.

As mentioned in my introduction, in other parts of his writings, Schmemmann does express his discontent with several aspects of current Byzantine baptismal practice. The following memorable quotation is illustrative:

Why involve the parish, the congregation, the people of God in all this? Thus today it takes some fifteen minutes to perform in a dark corner of the church, with one “psaltist” giving the responses, an act in which the Fathers saw and acclaimed the greatest solemnity of the Church ... a mystery for which the Church prepared herself by forty days of fasting and which constituted the very essence of her paschal joy. A decadent liturgy supported by a decadent theology and leading to a decadent piety: such is the sad situation in which we find ourselves today and which must be corrected.

Unfortunately, however, Schmemmann himself rejects the implications of his own arguments. Let us begin with the “fifteen minutes.” What does Schmemmann propose instead? One hundred and fifteen minutes. In other words, instead of restoring the

preparational character of Lent, Schmemmann suggests that thirty minutes before "Blessed is the Kingdom," that is, before the fully communal part of his proposed Saturday morning Initiation rite, the family, sponsors and baptizand gather to undergo the preparation that took place, as he himself admits, "during the entire period of the catechumenate."

I am at a loss to explain this nominalism, especially in view of Schmemmann's superb insights regarding the power of preparation and anticipation. In the same *Of Water and the Spirit*, for example, he writes:

We must realize first of all that preparation is a constant and essential aspect of the Church's worship as a whole... They [worshippers] experience no fulfillment because they ignore preparation...

What preparation means, therefore, is a total act of the Church, the recapitulation by her of all that makes baptismal regeneration possible.

Anyone even superficially familiar with the history and structure of Byzantine Initiation rites, knows how easy it is to restore the prayer for the making of a catechumen to early Lent, the exorcisms to subsequent days or even Sundays of Lent, the renunciation/adhesion to Good Friday, and the actual baptism/chrismation/eucharist to Pascha. Such a graded, ritualized form of preparation enables even the lukewarm to sense that the "way" (*cf.* Acts 19:9) being embraced in Christian Initiation is indeed a journey, one requiring arduous efforts if one is to avoid descending along the wide path that, owing, *inter alia*, to minimalistic (existential) nominalism, "leads to perdition" (*cf.* Matt. 7:13).

In view of Schmemmann's refusal to propose a restoration of Lent's pre-baptismal character, it is not surprising that in his classic *Great Lent*, he entirely omits reference to the baptismal themes of Lenten Saturdays, and devotes only several pages to the baptismal themes of the Sunday pericopes. And notwithstanding the latter, he nowhere suggests how those Lenten Sundays might regain their pre-baptismal character.

Incidentally, the present-day minimalization of Initiation practice helps explain a problem that Schmemmann blames solely on the deficiencies of "modern theology." I have in mind Schmemmann's understandable frustration with the way in which the reality of dying and rising with Christ sometimes fades from theological and/or popular reflection on Initiation. But instead of presuming that it is thought alone which generates theology, Schmemmann should consider how the squeezing of what initially was long-term "conversion therapy" into a relatively brief service impacts on the theology thereof. For, if, on the other hand, candidates for baptism were required instead to undergo a process of ascetic effort, personal scrutiny, community service and regular study, it would be much easier for everyone to see that something is indeed dying while "making room" for a new way of life.

Of course, the fact that most baptisms involve infants, for whom "dying and rising" is far more notional, requires additional interpretative nuancing, but in either case, the transformative paschal themes, whose neglect Schmemmann so appropriately bemoans, hardly stand a chance of recovery as long as in Schmemmann's own words, cited above, we continue to celebrate "a decadent liturgy."

Elsewhere in *Of Water and the Spirit*, Schmemmann has written: "Even though it is probably impossible simply to reintegrate Baptism into Pascha, the paschal character of Baptism – the connection between Baptism and Pascha – remains the key not only to Baptism but to the totality of the Christian faith itself."

As I have stated above, it is hardly "impossible" to "reintegrate Baptism into Pascha," but even if it were, how could one justify prolonging their separation if indeed their connection "remains the key not only to Baptism but to the totality of the Christian faith itself."

In view of Schmemmann's reluctance to restore their connection, I must gainsay Fagerberg's misplaced appreciation for Schmemmann's alleged stress on the meaning derived from the rite itself. Instead, Schmemmann himself is partially guilty of "squeezing [the Church's liturgy] into [his] own *a priori* approach" – a fault that is all the more frustrating in this case because his approach, that is, his theology, is frequently solid, even though he sometimes refuses to re-enflesh it in *theologia prima*.

### ***The Eucharist: Misalignments in Schmemmann's Mystagogy***

Let us now turn to Schmemmann's interpretation of the Divine Liturgy. Those familiar with *The Eucharist: Sacrament of the Kingdom* know the lengths to which Schmemmann goes to evoke a theology of offering out of the transfer of gifts and its accompanying formulae. Schmemmann devotes page after page to correlating the Great Entrance to a putative "Sacrament of offering"; describes the Cherubicon as a "hymn of offering"; and even suggests that the *oudeis axios (nemo dignus)* prayer is really not a presbyteral prayer for the priest himself after all, but an oration whose real purpose is to identify "the priesthood of the Church with the priesthood of Christ, the one priest of the New Testament who through his own offering of himself sanctified the Church and granted her participation in his priesthood."

Now my point, of course, is not to suggest that a theology of offering is an inappropriate emphasis for Eucharistic theology – quite the contrary. It is rather to indicate that for someone who allegedly was an exemplar of "a liturgical theology" understood as "first of all and above everything else the attempt to grasp the theology revealed in and through the liturgy itself," the identification of an offertory with the transfer of gifts is odd indeed.

One may object that Schmemmann did much of the writing for his book on the Eucharist before the publication of Robert Taft's *The Great Entrance*. But two rejoinders are in order. First, Schmemmann's *book* appeared nine years after Taft's, and second – and certainly more significantly, -- one did not have to know the history of the transfer of gifts in the Byzantine tradition to realize that as the texts and formulae stand, offering is really not what this transfer is about. In the Byzantine tradition, the theology of offering is more properly aligned with the prothesis rites before the communal part of the Liturgy, or with texts and rites rehearsed during the anaphora.

But Schmemmann's faulty mystagogy is not only problematic because it is illogical. Far more important from the perspective of proper New Testament and patristic eucharistology is how this faulty mystagogy impacts on his approach to the kiss of peace. Because Schmemmann has gone to such lengths to interpret the Great Entrance as an offering of gifts, when it comes time to reflect on the PAX, he nowhere even hints at its scriptural inspiration, that is, Matthew 5:23-24. Naturally, he cannot adduce this text, because according to his mystagogy the offering has already taken place.

*Inter alia*, this may even be one of the reasons why in spite of his truly inspiring reflections on love and unity in his chapter devoted to the part of the Liturgy during which the clergy exchange the PAX, he nowhere actually argues for its restoration among the laity. The closest he comes to doing so is when he writes: "The kiss of peace, though now performed only among the clergy, is accompanied by the exclamation 'let us love one another' and thus relates to the entire gathering." How it "relates to the entire gathering" remains notional not only in Schmemmann's exhortations but in most Byzantine Christian communities as well.

Another part of the Divine Liturgy for which Schmemmann's mystagogy remains inadequate is the initial, so-called "entrance" rites. This is one more area where Fagerberg's criticism of *other* theologies might be applied to Schmemmann's as well: "The Church's liturgy is thought to be the mere symbol of a reality that exists not in the actuality of the Church, but somewhere else, as something else."

What I have in mind is the following: whether anyone likes it or not (and Schmemmann does not), as it stands today, the Byzantine Eucharist begins with a semiotic of *descent* and *revelation*. The sanctuary is frequently partially revealed, a deacon emerges to cense the nave and then lead it in prayer, and the gospel is eventually brought either into the midst of the assembly for its veneration by the faithful, or at least onto the solea.<sup>1</sup>

No one committed to theologizing from the actual rite, as opposed to “abstract, purely intellectual schemata” should be allowed to ignore this semiotic of descent and revelation. The first reason, of course, is that one thereby avoids ignoring reality. The second is that this semiotic is entirely acceptable, -- in fact, eminently inspiring. If Byzantine worship is, as is frequently noted by scholars, quintessentially an encounter with the heavenly Jerusalem descending from God in heaven, radiant with His glory (*cf.* Rev. 21:10-11), then there is no reason not to embrace a mystagogy that stresses the katabatic dynamic of God’s *prevenient* “embrace.”

The fact that for centuries in the past the Byzantine Eucharist began with a real entrance of the clergy and faithful into the church does not mean that one should be allowed to *theologize* on the basis of this “archeology.” Schmemmann should have either insisted on the restoration of this practice or -- and I would prefer the following -- interpret what is actually happening. There are few things in liturgical theology more frustrating than being exhorted to experience the significance of something that is actually not happening -- especially when it need not be happening for the worship to be sound. But almost all twenty-two pages of the chapter “Sacrament of the Entrance” is devoted to precisely this kind of reflection.

Before moving on let us analyze one final detail of Schmemmann’s eucharistic thought. Throughout his corpus, Schmemmann frequently and appropriately criticizes the individualistic ethos that reigns within many Eastern Christian worshipping communities. The following quotations are illustrative: “Liturgical piety has become thoroughly individualistic.”

...the Eucharist has long since ceased to be perceived by the Orthodox themselves as communion and “union with each other,” if not only because for simple believers but also in theological definitions it has become a particular, individual “means of personal sanctification” to which each resorts or from which each abstains according to the measure of his personal and self-understood “spiritual needs,” frame of mind, preparation or unpreparation, etc.

And finally:

The experience of worship has long ago ceased to be that of a corporate liturgical act. It is an aggregation of individuals coming to church, attending worship to satisfy individually their individual religious needs.

Surprisingly then, not only does Schmemmann, -- as we have seen, -- not argue for the restoration of the kiss of peace, he actually polemicizes against congregational singing, and suggests that its promoters are in league with devotees of “relevance” who want to “remove the iconostasis” and “abolish everything that is not related to ‘togetherness’” Now while it is certainly true that some communities where congregational singing is the norm have ended up abolishing choirs -- certainly a horrific mistake -- it is also true that without congregational participation in more than the “token” creed and “Our Father,” worship is bound to exude a certain individualism.

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<sup>1</sup> This is a Volhynian, Bukovinian, Galician, and Transcarpathian practice that I strongly favour as it obviates the need to “explain” why the gospel is being carried in procession back to where it came from.

And incidentally, in spite of Schmemmann's reference to the fact that "the diaconate has been converted into a certain 'decorative' appendage," he nowhere argues for the restoration of the practice of bringing communion from every Sunday eucharist to those absent due to illness, etc. There are few practices more conducive to the overcoming of an individualistic piety than the organizing of lay people to either accompany the deacon during such "sick calls," or somehow commissioning the laity themselves to undertake such sharing.

### *Vespers*

Before concluding this section, let me draw attention to what is certainly one of the more surprising examples of interpretive "disconnect" in Schmemmann's corpus. Even though Schmemmann spent decades legitimately arguing against allegorical interpretations of divine services, in the very middle of his outstanding classic, *For the Life of the World: Sacraments and Orthodoxy*, we find just such an allegorical explanation of vespers. Schmemmann applies the late Byzantine schema of "i) "creation," ii) "fall," iii) "incarnation," and iv) "encounter with Symeon" to the i) opening, ii) psalmody, iii) lucernarium and iv) *Nunc dimittis* of Byzantine evening prayer. The theological pitfalls of such an approach were exposed decades ago, *inter alii*, by Schmemmann himself: any interpretation of worship which applies a pre-determined chronological schema to an ordo that was never intended to conform to that schema, and which constrains the worshipper to imagine a Christ "of the past" who, as it were, repeatedly and segmentedly "reveals" what no longer is, that is, His pre-glorification "biography" – is a deleterious interpretation.

For our purposes the important thing to note is that it is another case of theologizing on the basis of something that is not actually happening. This not only refers to those occasions when the order of vespers is as Schmemmann describes it, but especially to those occasions when vespers begins i) without the solemn opening, ii) when the kathisma is not "lamentational" and when, for example, during Bright Week, iii) there is no *Nunc dimittis*.

### **Conceptual Flaws Undergirding Schmemmann's Interpretive Fissures**

Among the greater ironies of Schmemmann's thought is the fact that someone so renowned for his stress on the need to see the liturgical act, the rite itself, as theological, reverts to a kind of philosophical idealism the moment that liturgical reform is discussed. For some reason, Schmemmann is unwilling to accept the obvious fact that it is not only thought that engenders action, but action that engenders thought as well. This, coupled with a kind of Platonic historiography, leads him to make the following (outrageous) statement: "In the tradition of the Church nothing has changed. What has changed is the perception of the eucharist, the perception of its very essence."

Liturgical history is replete with examples of how the perception of a rite changed precisely because the rite itself underwent modification. And anyone who would suggest that the Byzantine rite has not changed, obviously knows nothing of its history.

A similar flaw in logic is evident when Schmemmann writes: "It is not reform, adjustment 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." Bracketing the question of "modernization," it is nonetheless uncontested that a "return to that vision and experience" are unattainable without "reforms and adjustments" that would (re-) en flesh that "vision and experience." "Experience" can only be "concrete."

Elsewhere we read: "Our task, therefore, consists not so much in making various changes in our liturgical life, but rather in coming to realize the genuine nature of the eucharist." And again we must ask: is not the "genuine nature of the eucharist" dependent on implementing some of these "changes"?

This is not the place to engage in a psychoanalysis of Schmemmann, but I suspect that the conflicting roles of leading churchman on the one hand, and prophetic scholar on the

other, help explain Schmemmann's "completion anxiety" in the area of liturgical renewal. Certainly his recently published *Journals* provide a sense of how often the coupling of these two roles proved burdensome.

[IMBUING A FAULTY READING OF LITURGICAL HISTORY WITH INCONGRUENT MEANINGS]

**Conclusion**

Let me conclude by briefly sketching an agenda for liturgical renewal – which means theological and pastoral reflection as well. Hopefully, this will "faire le point" and provide a summary of "where we should be heading" and "what remains to be done."

This agenda is grounded in much of what I have stated here. I think one will agree that it conforms to Schmemmann's insistence that such an agenda "have a rationale, a consistent set of presuppositions and goals, and this rationale...be found in the *lex orandi* and on the organic relationship to the *lex credendi*."

I believe that the exigencies of *logikê latreia*, not to mention the incontestable practice of the Church during periods when her liturgical life was healthier, require that Byzantine pastoral liturgists engage far more systematically and comprehensively in studying how the following practices can be restored. And by "comprehensively" I mean re-sourcing not only history and theology, but anthropology, ritual studies, semiotics, psychology and sociology, not to mention other disciplines. Unless one accepts a deforming divorce between nature and grace, one will have to admit that these disciplines also relate to the *lex orandi* and *lex credendi*, most basically because they relate to the *vita ecclesiae*, which is where these *leges* are rooted to begin with.

[NOTE THAT THE FOLLOWING LIST IS PRESENTED HERE TELEGRAPHICALLY. THE PUBLISHED VERSION OF THIS PAPER WILL DISCUSS THESE AREAS IN DETAIL, RELATING THEM TO THE THOUGHT OF SCHMEMANN AND FAGERBERG AS WELL AS LITURGICAL HISTORY AND OTHER RELEVANT DISCIPLINES.]

- 1.) Congregational singing (without the dissolution of choirs).
- 2.) The restoration of a diaconal practice that integrates ritual and *diakonia*.
- 3.) The restoration of an Old Testament reading to the Divine Liturgy.
- 4.) A "mechanism" for facilitating the regular inclusion of variable petitions into the Augmented Litany.
- 5.) The revival of the kiss of peace among the laity.
- 6.) The consistent reading of the anaphora – including Basil's – aloud.
- 7.) The restoration of truly communal celebrations of baptism (at Pascha as well), and
- 8.) The restoration of the blessing of "bread, wheat, wine, oil" on the eves of feasts as the blessing of a "food bank" for distribution to the hungry and marginalized, so that the "entire Body" might celebrate the feast.

Before concluding, I cannot stress enough that *none of this presumes a diminution of the ascetical accents and "theocentric" ethos of Orthodox liturgy. Thus, communities restoring such practices while eliminating liturgical fasting, the liturgy of the hours, and the commitment to beauty, all of them fortunately still fostered by Eastern Orthodoxy, will be building on sand.* The task then is to simply regain a "patristic" liturgical "mind," reviving the treasures of the past and joining them to the glories of the present, all in the hope of recovering that "experience of the Church which is the only source of a truly Orthodox worldview and of a truly Christian life."