

Diary of a Russian priest

by [Carol Zaleski](#) in the [April 18, 2001](#) issue

By a coincidence that must strike a chord in the hearts of all who long for Christian unity, Easter Sunday falls on the same day this year for Christians of both East and West. It's a good time to be reading *The Journals of Father Alexander Schmemmann*, the Orthodox émigré theologian who died in 1983 at the age of 62.

Schmemmann was dean of St. Vladimir's Orthodox Theological Seminary in Crestwood, New York, and a leading light in the renewal of Orthodox faith and worship. He was pastor to Russia through his Radio Liberty broadcasts and to America through his roles as priest, professor, author and spiritual counselor. It was Schmemmann to whom Alexander Solzhenitsyn turned for guidance when he arrived in the West, and Schmemmann who, more than any other Orthodox churchman, communicated to the Christian West the liturgical spirit of the Christian East while conveying to his own church all that was best in the 20th-century liturgical movement.

Urbane, literary, personally charismatic, Schmemmann seems to have felt completely himself only in the midst of his loving family, at the lectern and at the altar. He was never at home in partisan squabbles, and often found himself caught between opposing camps. Traditionalists charged him with selling out Orthodoxy in the name of ecumenism and renewal, while liberals were put off by his fidelity to the time-honored disciplines of his church (his objection to the ordination of women, skepticism about spiritual novelties and moral sadness over homosexuality and abortion). This is just the sort of person—internally consistent, yet ideologically unclassifiable—who makes us wish to know more about his inner life.

And that is what the journals give us—the rare glimpse of a priest and scholar who is also husband, father and grandfather, sitting down at his writing desk to re-create for himself and his readers the climate of his mental and spiritual life, the memories, affective states, images and sensory associations with which his opinions are clothed and by which they are rendered convincingly real.

Schmemmann seems to have sensed that he would not have long to live; at age 52, he is already reminiscing. Childhood memories flood in:

This morning, I remembered . . . walking from home to school and eagerly anticipating how, in four hours, I would go to the cathedral on the rue Daru, to the Akathist to the Virgin Mary. I remember everything: the light; the trees, just beginning to open young, green leaves; children's cries and laughter in the little square.

Schmemmann recalls Paris school days when he would walk down a "noisy, proletarian rue Legendre, slip into the Roman Catholic Church of St. Charles of Monceau where there was always a silent mass being said, and then step back into the street with the knowledge of this hidden Presence." The effect was to make the everyday world more vivid and real, as if the light of the liturgy had spilled over onto the street: "Everything became alive, intriguing: every storefront window, the face of every person I met."

We have an absolute need, Schmemmann believed, to enjoy "in *this* world the experience of the *other* world"—in particular, to experience the kingdom of God in its sacrament, the Eucharist. "The church has been established in this world in order to celebrate the Eucharist," Schmemmann writes; at the same time, he insists that "the church has no purpose, no 'religious life' separate from the world."

This organic sense of the whole worshipping church, dwelling simultaneously in heaven and on earth, was the original vision of the liturgical movement before it split into warring factions. In Schmemmann's liturgical writings, we get a glimpse of an alternate universe in which the liturgical movement has managed to stay more completely faithful to its origins. But while the Christian West may have been taken in by a cult of novelty and this-worldliness, the Christian East, in Schmemmann's experience, faces its own temptations: fixation on the past, false pride "that we have kept and are guarding it all," narrow-mindedness and "a kind of unctuous sweetness."

We devise many ways to make ourselves forgetful of "the one thing needful."

Whether it is running off in search of spiritual experiences, arguing about calendars, priding ourselves on our theological discernment, forming committees to agitate for our causes or soothing the ruffled feathers of our colleagues, it is all so much fuss,

Schmemmann felt, and devours our time and affections. Is this the weariness of an overextended administrator or the wisdom of a genuine theologian, a man of prayer? Both, it seems. By the end of the journals, one can see clearly the reason for the childhood reminiscences. He was trying to recover glimpses of the kingdom vouchsafed to him in childhood, at the altar and in odd moments throughout life, so that when engulfed by his multiple roles, by crises at seminary or church, and by sheer exhaustion, he would be reminded of the one thing needful. "God will forgive everything except lack of joy," he writes, and on this note his journals end, with an entry written in the hospital: "What happiness it has all been!"