

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 Cornwell 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.