

Cracking the Clerical Caste: Towards a Conciliar Church¹

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Clericalism suffocates; it makes part of itself into the whole sacred character of the Church; it makes its power a sacred power to control, to lead, to administer, a power to perform sacraments, and in general, it makes any power a “power given to me.” Clericalism separates all “sacredness” from the lay people: the iconostasis, communion (only by permission), theology. In short, clericalism is *de facto* denial of the Church as the Body of Christ, for in the body, all organs are related and different only in their functions, but not in their essence. And the more clericalism “clericalizes” (the traditional image of the bishop or the priest-emphasized by his clothes, hair, e.g., the bishop in full regalia!), the more the Church itself becomes more worldly; spiritually submits itself to this world. In the New Testament, the priest is presented as an ideal layman. But almost immediately there begins his increasingly radical separation from lay people; and not only separation, but opposition to lay people, contrast to them. Again, the most obvious form of separation in the exclusion of lay people from the communion as the fulfillment of their membership in the body of Christ. Instead of a “faithful image” there appears

¹ This is a revised version of a paper given at an international conference, “The Legacy of Father Alexander Schmemmann 1921–1983,” held in Paris, 11–14 December 2008, at the St. Sergius Orthodox Theological Institute.

the image of “master of sacrality” separated from the faithful, dispensing grace as he sees fit.²

This selection from Alexander Schmemmann’s journals from 2 February 1982 is but one of his many stinging comments about clericalism and abuse of power in ecclesial life, themes that we find throughout his writings, not just in his journals, but in his essays and talks as well. Schmemmann identified clericalism as a problem that not only pertained to the Eastern Church, but was experienced in the West as well.³ In short, clericalism creates an ideological and theological separation among the people of God, the *laos tou theou*, into two separate and seemingly unequal classes or castes: the clergy and the laity, two groups that are seemingly pitted against one another. This term “caste” is actually mentioned in the earlier writings of Schmemmann’s mentor Archmandrite Kyprian Kern, a faculty member at St. Sergius Institute in Paris, under whom Schmemmann served at St. Constantine and Helen’s parish in nearby Clamart. In his essay, “Two Models of the Pastorate: Levitical and Prophetic,” Kern outlines two major thematic visions of the pastoral life in the Bible: the Levitical and the Prophetic. While speaking about the prophetic priesthood, Kern writes,

² Julianna Schmemmann, trans. *The Journals of Father Alexander Schmemmann 1973–1983* (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 2000), 210.

³ Most noteworthy are Donald Cozzens’ two books *The Changing Face of the Priesthood* (Collegeville, MN: The Liturgical Press, 2000) and *Sacred Silence: Denial and Crisis in the Church* (Liturgical Press, 2002). See also George Wilson, *Clericalism: The Death of Priesthood* (Liturgical Press, 2008); Geoffrey Robinson, *Confronting Power and Sex in the Catholic Church: Reclaiming the Spirit of Jesus* (Liturgical Press, 2009); George Dennis O’Brien, *Finding the Voice of the Church* (South Bend, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2008); Michael L. Papesh, *Clerical Culture: Contradictions and Transformation* (Liturgical Press, 2004); Russell B. Shaw, *To Hunt, to Shoot, to Entertain: Clericalism and the Catholic Laity* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1993); Robert McClory *As It Was in the Beginning: The Coming Democratization of the Catholic Church* (New York: Crossroad, 2007).

a Levitical type, in this spiritual meaning, is one from a *priestly caste*, one who is conventional, formal, narrowly nationalistic, inert, and uncreative. In Old Testament times the Mosaic Law priesthood was hereditary and exclusive.... Thus to presume the need for some kind of narrowly conventional state as essential for priestly service is to sin against the very essence of the evangelical concept of the pastoral office. It is an attempt to confuse the living pastoral vocation with Levitical formalism.⁴

It is also important to note that Kern's essay originally appeared in *Living Tradition (Zhivoe predanie)*, a collection of essays by noteworthy Orthodox theologians and thinkers such as Fathers Sergius Bulgakov, Kyprian Kern, and Nicholas Afanasiev, as well as lay theologians Anton Kartashev and Lev Zander. This collection of essays put forward a creative and forceful attempt to bring the joy and beauty of Orthodoxy to a Western culture, leaving behind the rigid formalism and reductionism of what was often considered "school theology." Many of the themes in *Living Tradition* – freedom, openness, ecumenism, pastoral ministry – are incorporated throughout Schmemmann's corpus of writings as well as his own life and pastoral work.

In this top-down model of ecclesial life, power and authority, roles in decision making – especially regarding ecclesiastical administration and the organizing of ministries – as well as fiduciary responsibility, are divided between the clergy and laity. Unfortunately laity wrongly assume that the clergy conduct the "real business of the Church," namely, leading the liturgical services, managing Church administration and functions, and overseeing the daily work of the Church; while the laity, on the other hand, are only to "pray, pay, and obey" (the bishops and priests of course!). One could call this a type of ministerial reductionism, akin to the many types of reduc-

⁴ Kyprian Kern "Two Models of the Pastorate" in Michael Plekon, ed. *Tradition Alive: On the Church and the Christian Life in Our Time: Readings From the Eastern Church* (New York: Rowan and Littlefield, 2003), 110–11.