

## Liturgy as Catechesis: A Rhetorical Perspective on Orthodox Christian Educational Practice

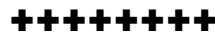
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### Abstract

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Orthodox theologian Alexander Schmemmann (1921–1983) spent his life trying to persuade Orthodox clergy that the liturgy provides not only the context for Christian learning, but also much of its content. Schmemmann’s characterization of the liturgy’s contribution to the education and ultimate transformation of Orthodox Christians resonates with a number of contemporary rhetorical themes regarding personal and collective identities in a postmodern Western world. From the perspective of rhetoric, the need for liturgical revival that Schmemmann identified emerges in part because of the dialogic tension between Eastern and Western intellectual traditions: the tension between the Gutenberg galaxy and the electronic global village that Marshall McLuhan first spoke of, between literacy and the new orality that Walter Ong examined. Once people can find themselves more integrated with culture in their interaction with media and less isolated by their literate cultural assumptions, they can present themselves at the Orthodox liturgy ready and able to be spiritually transformed into disciples of the faith according to the catechetical teachings they encounter. As a new orality emerges in Western cultures, the Orthodox liturgy serves people who more and more will come to church ready for the liturgy to serve as catechesis as it did in ancient times when the Church and the host culture were more strongly interwoven.



### ***Introduction***

Every year, Orthodox priests witness new and improved educational materials published to help with the catechetical instruction that prepares the faithful for baptism and other sacraments. Frequently these new materials seem to presume that catechetical instruction occurs in a context outside and apart from liturgical worship. The materials do not acknowledge that worship services themselves serve as important “classes” in religious education. If church-sponsored educational materials overlook the importance of actively engaging in the liturgy as a means for disciple-making and faith-formation, it is easy to conclude that congregations do too. But as Aidan Kavanaugh wrote, “It cannot be forgotten that the Church at worship is not only present to God; far more significantly, the living God is present to the Church.”<sup>1</sup>

This paper calls attention to liturgical worship as a central means of education and transformation of both individuals and entire communities. We base our appeal on some of the writings of the late Orthodox theologian Alexander Schmemmann (1921–1983) and on the high regard awarded rhetoric, or persuasion, in the scholarly tradition upon which contemporary Orthodox churches are built.

In Orthodox churches, liturgical worship is designed to bring participants into the presence of the crucified and risen Christ. The scripture readings, prayers, hymns, blessings, and symbols of the liturgical services function as vital resources upon which both clergy and laity can draw to educate their congregations in the essentials of the faith. Through their liturgical encounters, congregations learn about their common faith, are shaped and formed into Christ’s body – the Church – and are called to transform the world through love of neighbour. All of the members of the congregation, both those who partake of Holy Communion and those who witness it, return to the outside world as missionaries of the good news of God’s kingdom. Every week the entire process begins again;

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<sup>1</sup> Aidan Kavanaugh, *On Liturgical Theology (Hale Memorial Lectures of Seabury-Western Theological Seminary, 1981)* (Collegeville, MN: The Liturgical Press, 1992), 8.

the congregation participates in liturgical worship to affirm and reaffirm each individual's faith in God and then disperses to enact it.

Schmemmann's characterization of the liturgy, as part of the education and transformation of Orthodox Christians, resonates with a number of rhetorical themes regarding personal and collective identities in a post-modern Western world. From the perspective of rhetoric, the need for liturgical revival that Schmemmann identified emerges in part because of the dialogic tension between Eastern and Western intellectual traditions, between the Eastern Greek-oriented Orthodox tradition with its treasure-trove of "oral residue,"<sup>2</sup> and Western Latin-oriented tradition that has privileged the written word. This tension between competing systems of pieties, systems that provide the framework for a "sense of what properly goes with what,"<sup>3</sup> funds the contemporary argument among Orthodox clergy as to whether or not participation in the liturgy provides catechetical education; the alternative is dedicated catechism classes which may marginalize liturgical experience. Schmemmann worked to mitigate the tension between the perceived compartments of living faith and learning about it, of orality and literacy, with a view to celebrating "the organic connection between the liturgical life of the Church and her educational effort."<sup>4</sup> Schmemmann sought to revive the liturgy and its role in the daily lives of the faithful.

The way that different educational traditions in the East and West embrace or reject rhetorical tenets may be one key to understanding how the liturgy may be at the same time appreciated and dismissed as a rhetorical strategy for catechesis, even within the same religious tradition. Further, contemporary rhetoric provides a useful lens by which to examine Schmemmann's project. Contemporary rhetoric identifies aspects of a

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<sup>2</sup> Walter Ong, *Orality and Literacy: The Technologizing of the Word* (London: Routledge, 1982), 38.

<sup>3</sup> Kenneth Burke, *Permanence and Change: An Anatomy of Purpose* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1984), 74.

<sup>4</sup> Alexander Schmemmann, *Liturgy and Life: Christian Development Through Liturgical Experience* (Syosset, NY: Department of Religious Education, Orthodox Church of America, 1974), 5.