

# Father Alexander Schmemmann, The Virgin Mary, and the Ordination of Women

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The reader who engages with Father Alexander Schmemmann's mariological thought—as articulated primarily in *The Virgin Mary*, the third volume of his *Celebration of Faith* trilogy—encounters a challenge.<sup>1</sup> The challenge is to reconcile Father Schmemmann's treatment of the issue of women's clerical ordination with his theological reflection on the place of the Theotokos within Orthodox theology and worship. His statements on the topic of women's ordination appear to contradict his understanding of Mary and her role in the history of salvation.

the question at hand seems an appropriate place to start.

I begin with Schmemmann's brief preface to the 1982 collection of essays *Women and the Priesthood*, edited by Father Thomas Hopko. Here Schmemmann puts forward three essential contexts within which Orthodox thinkers can begin to address the question of women's ordination. These three contexts—Father Schmemmann's criteria, as it were, for legitimate discussion of the ordination of women—are as follows:

Rather than make a case for the Orthodox ordination of women—even if I would welcome such a development—I propose to address a number of issues with Father Schmemmann's arguments against it, particularly in the face of his robust theological understanding of the role of Mary. By attending to this disjunction, I wish to suggest—as did Elisabeth Behr-Sigel, “the Western mother of Orthodoxy”—that the question of female ordination in the Orthodox Church ought to remain open, and that the role of the Theotokos in Orthodox thought and practice might provide a fruitful avenue. First, however, we must examine how the question of women's ordination is typically discussed in the context of Mariology. Given the great influence of Father Schmemmann's thought and ministry, his treatment of

1. church tradition (principles such as faith in the Trinity, the movement from creation to fall to redemption, and the mystery of the Church's “theandric” life);

2. the scriptural doctrine of man and woman (in other words, Orthodox Christian anthropology); and

3. Orthodox ecclesiology, that is, our understanding of the Church and the mystery of salvation.<sup>2</sup>

I suggest that Orthodox mariological tradition unquestionably meets Father Schmemmann's criteria for the legitimate conditions within which the question of women's ordination may begin to be addressed. Indeed, for Father Schmemmann, Mary's particular role in Orthodox worship and theol-

<sup>1</sup> Alexander Schmemmann, *The Virgin Mary*, vol. 3 of *Celebration of Faith* (Crestwood: SVS Press, 1995). The volume is a compilation of a series of radio presentations made in the former Soviet Union and academic lectures in the United States. Subsequent references given in text.

<sup>2</sup> Alexander Schmemmann, “Preface to the 1982 Edition,” *Women and the Priesthood*, ed. Thomas Hopko, 2nd ed. (Crestwood: SVS Press, 1999), 3–4.

ogy is inextricably linked to the shape of the entire tradition, as he says clearly in *The Virgin Mary*:

...the “cult” of Mary is not an autonomous element in the rich tradition of the Church, an element that can be studied “in itself.” It is an essential dimension of Christian cosmology, anthropology, ecclesiology and eschatology. It is not an object of faith, but its fruit; not a *nota ecclesiae*, but the self-revelation of the Church; not even a doctrine, but the life and fragrance of Christian doctrine in us. (93)

According to this logic, Mariology provides the theological space in which we can reflect productively on the place of women in the church. And, in fact, some of Father Schmemmann’s only statements about women’s ordination arise in the context of his theological reflection on Mary. We will explore these in due course, but first we will provide a brief summary of Father Schmemmann’s articulation of the Mariology of the Orthodox Church.

Central to Father Schmemmann’s theological and liturgical account of the Orthodox veneration of Mary is his statement that she is not only the *human* instrument by which Christ was born, but also “the ultimate expression of fundamental humanity and obedience to God’s will” (51–52). Mary provides us with the “ultimate” example of Christ’s teachings and calling, and is therefore, “a self-evident and essential ‘dimension’ of the Gospel itself” (60). Through her life and “deathless death,” she provides a consoling and encouraging reminder of the transcendent calling of humanity to participate in the divine life, for she is one of us. She is, furthermore, an icon and personification of the Church itself, for her response to



God is the very content of humanity’s ideal response to God in the Church. In fact, her submission to God at the Annunciation, which ushered in the incarnation, simultaneously ushered in a new creation, restoring that which Eve had destroyed. Father Schmemmann even goes so far as to claim that as an icon of the Church, Mary is also “the image and personification of the world” (65). Finally, this woman, who is at the heart of the new creation, “eternally stands at the very heart of the Church,” and is even “the icon of Christ” (55, 91).<sup>3</sup>

This comprehensive theological account of the significance of Mary should suggest a positive approach to the issue of women’s ordination.<sup>4</sup> However, at this point there emerges a puzzling disjunction in Fr. Schmemmann’s thought. Despite his claim that Mary is an example for all humanity, an icon of the Church, of all creation, and even of Christ himself, when he moves to celebrate Mary’s specific attributes, he connects them inextricably to her femininity. For example, when he identifies Mary as a representative of all creation, he assigns her these (in his words) “feminine” qualities: “responding love, obedience, self-giving, the readiness to live exclusively in, and for, the Other” (90). Here we might rightly ask why these qualities are distinctively “feminine,” given the example set by Christ himself, not to

The Theotokos communing the fathers of St. Sabbas Monastery (Mar Saba). Fresco at St. Sabbas Monastery, Jerusalem.

<sup>3</sup> Unfortunately, Father Schmemmann does not elaborate on the latter suggestive statement.

<sup>4</sup> Indeed, Behr-Sigel’s theological reflection on place of Mary within Orthodox worship and theology was a productive site for theological argumentation about women’s ordination. See Elisabeth Behr-Sigel, *Discerning the Signs of the Times: The Vision of Elisabeth Behr-Sigel*, ed. Michael Plekon and Sarah E. Hinckley (Crestwood, NY: SVS Press, 2001), 101–114.

Metropolitan Georges Khodr of Byblos and Botris (Mount Lebanon) serving with girl and boy acolytes.



mention the scores of men and women throughout history who have embodied these characteristics in imitation of Christ.

When Father Schmemmann comes to address what he describes as “fashionable interest” in the place of women in the church, he claims that even those Christians impacted by the various waves of feminism have not turned to Mariology as a resource. This he explains by appealing again to her apparently “feminine” traits of humility and silence, claiming, “she can hardly serve as patron for the noisy and arrogant feminism of our time” (72). Again, we might wonder why humility and silence are distinctively feminine. In Greco-Roman antiquity such virtues were commonly ascribed to males. At the very least we should ask why the implicit dichotomy between male and female characteristics is drawn at all, given that Mary, as he argues, is the ultimate expression and fulfillment of “all humanity.”

Father Schmemmann’s claim that Mary is an iconic representation of the whole

of creation is itself bound up in an essential yet highly questionable dichotomy between male and female qualities.<sup>5</sup> Father Schmemmann argues that when Mary responded to God with the words, “I am the handmaid of the Lord; let it be to me according to your word” (Luke 1:38), the previous order of the world, which was characterized by authority and submission (masculine), was transcended, and the cosmos was infused with a new life of communion and love (feminine). From here, Father Schmemmann claims that as a result of Mary’s obedience, “When God looks at his creation, the ‘face’ of the world is feminine, not masculine” (65).<sup>6</sup> Having set up this dichotomy, and having established that creation in its renewed form is feminine, Father Schmemmann addresses the topic of women’s ordination, saying:

We men are, to be sure, co-workers with God. We are the heads of families, churches, institutions, etc. We become bishops, priests, [and] superintendents. Unfortunately, some women today think that they should also become priests and bishops.

<sup>5</sup> Schmemmann inherits this dichotomy from his widely recognized predecessor, Paul Evdokimov, who, in turn, follows Vasily Rozanov in simultaneously eulogizing “the great feminine” and using it to assert the submissive role of women in human order.

<sup>6</sup> Cf. Alexander Schmemmann, *For the Life of the World: Sacraments and Orthodoxy*, 2nd ed. (Crestwood: SVS Press, 1973), 83–87.

They are wrong, for when it comes to holiness and joy, to ultimate reality and transfiguration, it is the “feminine” qualities of humility, beauty, obedience and total self-giving that triumph in the ‘new creation’ and crown it with Divine glory. . . . The world is the “receptacle” of his glory, and in this it is “feminine.” And in the present “era,” Mary is the sign, the guarantee that this is so. (65–66)

There are several questions we must raise in response to this position. First, do we not desire that male leaders of the Church possess the “feminine” qualities Schmemmann lists, given that the age of the new creation has already been ushered in through the obedience of Mary and the subsequent incarnation? Second, what of “holiness and joy”? Again, are not our male leaders to embody both? Third, is not the Church, though it operates in a world disfigured by sin, also simultaneously living in the new creation and the eschatological age *here and now* through its Divine Liturgy and sacraments? Does this argument against women’s ordination not imply that the Church at present is not a place where we can expect the rules of the new creation to prevail? Or conversely, if these ostensibly feminine qualities triumph in “ultimate reality,” why do these same qualities disqualify women from serving as priests? Fourth, it is not clear why exactly a “receptacle” of glory is of necessity feminine. Yes, Mary was female, and her womb was filled with Christ, but does affirming that she represents the Church and indeed the whole world require us to affirm also that being a receptacle—especially a receptacle of God’s glory—is a distinctively feminine attitude? Is it helpful, in the end, to hold rigidly to the dichotomy of male and female with respect to the created world, or even to the Church?

Ironically, in the same context, Father Schmemmann laments that the world today, and indeed the Church itself, are decidedly “masculine,” for, he claims, they are “governed by pride and aggression, where all has been reduced to power and weapons of power . . . to violence, to the refusal to willingly back down or make peace in anything” (21). Both the world and the Church, he argues, are focused on “forms and structures,” on “institutions and categories,” a focus that, he suggests, has contaminated theology itself (66). He continues by arguing, “We think we can solve all problems today by ‘masculine’ means—by changing institutions and adopting new laws, by planning and calculating,” and he suggests that instead, we ought to live in the “victorious humility of the Church as personified by Mary,” and to embrace her “feminine” qualities of “compassion, tender-heartedness, care, trust, humility” (22, 67).

Father Schmemmann appears inadvertently to have created a contradiction, by decrying the “masculine” methods of church governance while simultaneously affirming male prerogative in this governance. If the troubling state of affairs he describes is that the currently male-led Church tends to solve its problems via the “masculine” means of the old order of creation, and what is needed are means more “feminine,” then what is preventing us from at least considering the ordination of female leaders, who presumably possess the feminine attributes celebrated in Mary?

I will conclude by raising another set of questions in response to a final theme in Father Schmemmann’s reflection on Mary that, while not directly concerned with women’s ordination, is certainly related. Throughout his treatment of

the theological significance of the Theotokos, one gets the impression that the attributes he ascribes to her—which, I might add, do not entirely align with the Mary presented in the biblical account—also serve as prescriptions for living women in contemporary Church settings. For example, as Father Schmemmann outlines the Church’s answer to the (male) world’s bleak anthropology, he argues that in the Virgin Mary we find the humility, compassion, and tender-heartedness that have been lost. He proceeds to claim that Mary “is not out to teach or prove anything” (22). Similarly, as we observed above, Father Schmemmann claims that Mary is not a suitable patron for those interested in the place of women in the Church today, for she is “humble and silent.” Yet is this really the case? It does not quite agree with the person portrayed in the Gospels. Does not Mary teach us through the Magnificat (Luke 1:46–55), a song which contains the central theological themes of the Gospel according to Saint Luke? Do not Mary’s interactions with Christ at the Wedding at Cana (John 2) suggest a woman who sets out to prove something about her divine son? Finally, was not Mary’s affirmative response to God’s challenge to bear his Son, “I am the handmaid of the Lord; let it be to me according

to your word” (Luke 1:38), the loudest and wisest of human sounds? Unfortunately, these claims of Father Schmemmann read more like implicit prescriptions for what is expected of women in the present Church, prescriptions he justifies through an idealized construction of the attributes of the Theotokos.

The prescriptive nature of his claims about Mary is compounded as Father Schmemmann argues that Mary represents all of creation, and, by extension, that creation is “feminine.” For in making this argument, he draws not only on the Church’s traditional veneration of the Theotokos, but also on the figurative scriptural characterization of the Church and creation as the bride of Christ (Eph. 5:22–33, 2 Cor. 11:2). Father Schmemmann’s debt to these ideas is best demonstrated in his discussion of the mystery of love and the sacrament of marriage in his book *For the Life of the World*. Here he claims that we must begin by looking at Mary, for in her obedient response of love, she accepted to be what all creation was created to be: “the temple of the Holy Spirit, the *humanity* of God,” and thereby fulfilled “the *womanhood* of creation.” The claim that the cosmos is feminine because of Mary’s loving response to God Schmemmann



Altar servers at the  
Mariamite Cathedral  
in Damascus, Syria.

justifies in the figurative language used by the biblical authors to express God's relationship to the Church, an image of marital union and love. Having established this premise, Father Schmemmann argues that the contemporary attempts to address the role of women in society and in the Church do not exalt but instead belittle women, by denying the "specific vocation as woman."<sup>7</sup> This vocation, he goes on to say, is that of motherhood, which for him is the fulfillment of womanhood itself—and of course it is Mary, *the Mother*, who allows him to get there. This, of course, raises the question of the womanhood of unmarried women or those unable to conceive, not to mention those committed to the monastic life.

In this context as well, Father Schmemmann argues that Mary is an example for all of humanity, not just women, for the whole Church is to find its response and obedience to God in her. Yet when he goes on to describe how this obedience should play out with respect to both men and women, he again uses Mary's attributes to assign women a distinct position. The male response to God, as apparently dictated by Mary's example, is to behave as a "king of creation," as a priest and minister of God's creativity and initiative, submitting in love and obedience to creation (not to one's female partner). By contrast, the female response, also apparently in imitation of Mary, is to accept totally as one's own life the life of the other (presumably the male,

given that Schmemmann is discussing marriage). In this instance, Mary's exemplary attributes are invoked to represent the Church's traditional position on the subordinate role of women to men, despite Schmemmann's claims that Mary is exemplary for all.

He cannot have it both ways. Father Schmemmann's discussion of the importance of the Theotokos—in Orthodoxy and his argument concerning the place of women in the Church embody a significant disjunction. When he does reflect on the place of women in the Church in *The Virgin Mary*, Mary's supposedly feminine qualities—which he encourages all Christians to emulate and embrace—are at the same time said to preclude women from clerical orders, especially the priesthood. It is not only human qualities that are questionably dichotomized as either masculine or feminine in Father Schmemmann's work, but also the old and new creation, the world and the Church. The "feminine" qualities of the new order are puzzlingly cited as the reason that women cannot serve as priests. Mary is assigned attributes that do not align with the biblical account of her, and these attributes are prescribed for women in the Church. I submit that this kind of argumentation simply does not cohere, and that the centrality of the Theotokos and the role of women in the Church need to be reconciled if Mariology is to contribute—as I believe it can—to reflection on the question of women's ordination. ✪

<sup>7</sup> Schmemmann, *For the Life of the World*, 83–84.



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