

INTERVIEW WITH FR. ALEXANDER SCHMEMANN

Last month, during a visit to conduct a retreat at St. Michael's Antiochean Orthodox Church in Louisville, the Right Reverend Alexander Schmemmann accepted an invitation for an interview on the ecumenical scene.

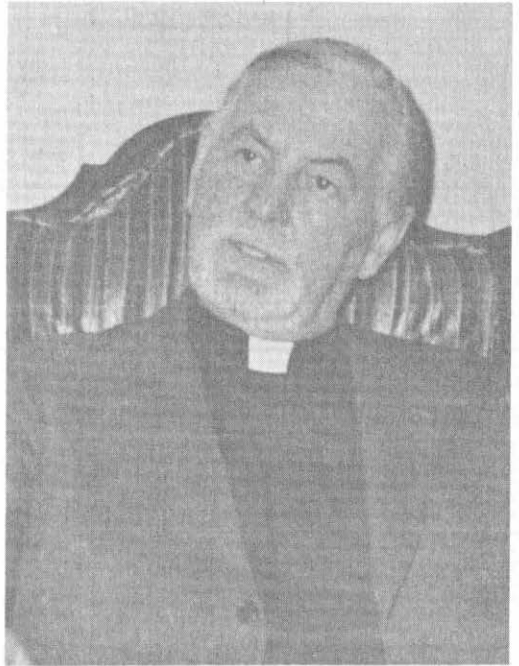
Conversations between the Roman Catholic Church and the Eastern Orthodox Church were encouraged further by the November, 1979 dramatic pilgrimage of Pope John Paul II to visit Patriarch Demetrios of Constantinople (modern Istanbul, Turkey). They endorsed the enterprise of an international Theological Commission of Roman Catholic and Orthodox theologians launching dialogues to explore the growing ecumenical consensus in the two Churches.

In 1967, Pope Paul VI met Patriarch Athenagoras in Jerusalem. It was one of a series of three meetings through which the bans of mutual excommunication dating to 1054 were lifted and new ecumenical overtures followed. This past month, the fifth in a series of official Vatican Secretariat for Promoting Christian Unity and Russian Orthodox meetings saw twelve days of theological discussion between members.

Father Schmemmann, born in Estonia in 1921 and trained at St. Sergius Academy in Paris, is dean of St. Vladimir's Orthodox Seminary in Crestwood, New York. A leading Orthodox theologian, his publications include *The Historical Road of Eastern Orthodoxy* (1963); *Sacraments and Orthodoxy* (1965); *Ultimate Questions* (1965); *Great Lent* (1969); *Liturgy and Life* (1974); and *Church, World, Mission* (1980).

Father Schmemmann was interviewed on March 8 by Father George Kilcourse, Research Director of the Archdiocesan Office of Ecumenical Affairs.

Thomas Merton never met Fr. Schmemmann, but he read and took notes on his books. He reviewed two of them, *Sacraments and Orthodoxy* and *Ultimate Questions*, in his review essay "Orthodoxy and the World."



(1) Many observers diagnose the ecumenical movement at a "standstill." How do you respond to that appraisal?

Fr. Schmemmann: Well, I would say that it depends from what point of view. It is at a standstill certainly from the point of view which is mine -- the meaning of the ecumenical movement as the search for the Church's unity, the unity of Christians in the Church We were all challenged by this problem of restoring unity, knowing what formidable obstacles we encountered there.

I have the impression that this challenge was sacrificed to what seemed to many people a very high and important function: the ecumenical movement serving the world in all its dimensions. I don't deny that this is a Christian duty, but I think that simply because those needs exist is no reason for not still dealing with the most important one. That other problematic is, for all practical reasons, no longer debated or considered as a goal. Meeting and discussing how not to invest money in S. African banks -- I don't deny this is important, but is that the World Council of Church's problem?

(2) Many Roman Catholics were surprised at Pope John Paul II's rather sudden ecumenical pilgrimage last November to visit Patriarch Demetrios in Turkey. How do you read this event?

Fr. Schmemmann: You know, I am not privy to the politics. But it seemed to me it was still something which he accepted from the agenda prepared for whatever Pope would have been elected, in a sense of a certain continuity of the line. Constantinople was one of the poles of the late popes and certainly the Secretariat of Christian Unity. So I think it was not something that was done because he desired it. I do not mean that he opposed it. But it is certainly not very much reflecting his real attitude. It was something arranged by the Secretariat.

(3) Do you think the fact that he was an Eastern European and that his only ecumenical contact had been with other Christians who were Eastern Orthodox could have created this urgency?

Fr. Schmemmann: I do not know how much should be said of guesswork. But I think that this meeting in distinction to that which we had before (Pope Paul VI and Patriarch Athenagoras) was very formal, rather unemotional. And I think it was a sign, a signal that the basic policy would continue. But I do not think that his attitude, his stand in all problems -- inasmuch as I understand him theologically -- would make the Orthodox a spiritual priority.

I think that what he really wants is to put the Catholic Church in a certain order. It is all theologically very deeply felt. But he says simply, "Fine! We continue what was started before me -- without too much involvement in that."

(4) To follow-up that question, many commentators expect this new phase of the Orthodox-Roman Catholic dialogues to gravitate to a discussion of "collegiality." Do you think that there will be real development on the role of the Pope in a re-union of the Catholic traditions of east and west?

Fr. Schmemmann: Only one thing I can say. The Catholic part of the commission is brilliant theologically. They are responsible and well qualified people. Which unfortunately, I cannot say about the Orthodox side, which is really slightly accidental. They are not representative of the entire Orthodox theology.

Whether that will go into the collegiality, again I did not see anything in the Pope as he has acted so far -- whatever reflects his personal views! I do not think he is tempted or interested by a kind of radical revision of the rather classical Catholic scheme of things -- Ecclesiology. Therefore, I would be rather surprised -- I would be happy! -- but I would be surprised if that dialogue would end up discussing collegiality and related issues.

I think his main pre-occupation is the crisis in the Catholic Church.

On the other hand, the Pope within the first year of his pontificate found the time to go to Constantinople. Obviously if he disliked the whole idea he would never have gone there. He has enough power, I hope, not to obey Cardinal Willebrands! And on the other hand, as a Pole, he might have his own feelings toward Orthodoxy which probably were shaped more than by anything else by the Russians. They are the historical enemy of Poland. So I think by starting with Constantinople, he says: "Okay, Orthodoxy. But Orthodoxy in its own hierarchical order."

(5) Most of our ecumenical dialogues are bi-lateral. But they affect one another across those boundaries. For instance, in the case of the Anglican-Orthodox dialogues, the issue of women's ordination changed much ecumenical chemistry. Last year Father Demetrios Constantellos visited Louisville for a conference and advised us that the Orthodox had not done their homework on the women's ordination issue. Do you agree?

Fr. Schmemmann: He went even further on that somewhere and said that the Orthodox Church has no

theological reasons not to ordain women. I would say that he is absolutely off track in speaking for Orthodoxy on women or on Hans Küng. I was leaving Washington recently and there was a big front-page news story on the Washington POST: "Protestant and Orthodox Theologians Defend Küng." It boiled down to Father Constantellos and Father Papademetair, the Chairman of our Orthodox Theological Society. The article even identified them both as former presidents of the society, without involving the society in their statement. But I have not seen anyone whom Father Constantellos represents.

Of course we have not done our "homework" if by homework it means producing four volumes of theological study. But I think the *consensus ecclesiae* is that it is even unrealistic to speak about this "homework" today. Although we are producing an issue now of the St. Vladimir's Quarterly on certain aspects of that problem.

(6) *In the last decade we have accumulated an enormous theological consensus in ecumenical circles. But the institutional Church has not integrated this agreement in pastoral life. Why?*

Fr. Schmemmann: Because the Orthodox Church does not take even the highest dialogues seriously. It is the old tradition which consisted in having some very high-caliber theologians in the ecumenical movement who would never even report to their churches what was going on. As long as it was an activity *ad extram*, without any counterpart *ad intram*, I am afraid it explains a situation of the Church. For example, if you take the Church, the two probably most important elements of Orthodoxy today, the Patriarchate of Constantinople and the Russian Church, for both of them their ecumenical contacts are motivated mainly by their situations in their respective countries.

I told Cardinal Willebrands that It's a pre-Florentine situation. It was exactly the same logic that led the Greeks to the Council of Florence (1438 - 45) -- -- the threat to Constantinople. Right now Constantinople is in a horrible situation. It is the beginning of agony. I wish the Catholic Church would never give the impression of exploiting that and forcing into dialogues that sometimes are not even reported to the Churches at large.

The same thing is absolutely true of the Russian Church. Any external contact helps the Church inside. So, you see, three ranking Orthodox bishops last Fall, all of the sudden, appeared. The highest metropolitans of the Russian Church go to Cleveland to spend two weeks with one Anglican parish for discussion! You know that those bishops have huge dioceses -- -- they can leave like that? It's obvious, every Western contact helps in the Soviet Union. It is more difficult to liquidate a bishop!

We have to keep in mind those two things. I do not deny the sincerity of many Orthodox ecumenists. But the whole thing develops in such a tragical situation for Orthodoxy right now. I am afraid that in Constantinople it is all so very much motivated by the desperate situation of Istanbul.

Very often ecumenical consensus has been reached in areas which were not too much "differences" in the first place. For example, the Eucharist. Of course we have great theological differences, interpretations. But doctrinally -- -- we have the same doctrine. Sometimes I feel that this "consensus" creates the wrong impression that we are solving problems. We are not solving problems, but maybe bringing two theological interpretations closer to each other. But none of those interpretations has been even on the list of the real divergencies.

(7) *Some are envisioning the next phase of ecumenism as a local grassroots popularization of new understandings. What is the greatest obstacle to this grass-roots style of ecumenism?*

Fr. Schmemmann: I can see, offhand, two. One is a danger of a certain kind of Americanism -- -- we understand the social relations usually in non-controversial terms. "Let's have a good time together." "We'll treat our Catholic brothers to Greek food." And the Catholics will reciprocate.

I would understand Christian love as not excluding conflict. My desire for unity would be such that I would like to *convince* you of something, and not simply have a cup of coffee together. I feel that it is this American "civil religion" (call it what you will) on the other hand, this symbolism of union without unity, of good relations It is like I see people all of the sudden going into synagogues, Christians, to partake of the Passover Meal. It's quite a fad, you know. People go, exchange pulpits, we show them our vestments, they show us theirs. All this maybe is necessary for a certain balance of our society. It is a kind of American instinct to minimize tensions. I am not condemning it, but it is a great enemy of any serious discussion. This is something which satisfies us easily. We can leave in the evening saying, "They were nice, we were nice, everything is nice." We Christians are still, after all, good people, all of us.

The second obstacle is the rather low level of the lay theology. Our laity have very little knowledge on these problems. There must be guidelines prepared. Otherwise, to some people, the whole difference -- now that more and more of the Orthodox Churches are on the new calendar (celebrating the Easter festival with the Western Christian tradition) -- that issue has disappeared. Some decades ago, the difference was mainly in calendar. Romans, "heretics," celebrated Christmas on the 25th of December. And it's on the 6th of January! Or some very minor things. If you take the late Byzantine lists of the Western heresies, they don't include the real ones. They have bishops wearing rings, or crosses, fast on Saturday, I think that first of all there must be some preparatory work within what I call the "Theology for Laity." That is the next step. Theology had been clericalized. Theology has become esoteric. Special languages, special references -- it is a theology for theologians.

If you take our Church, you will find that the theology is not used to our hierarchy. Whatever we find out, it is not used. They have their logics. And theology is ignored by the laity. So what remains is theology for theologians. And that game can continue till the end of the world. But to force it vertically "up" to the hierarchy, and "down" to the laity, would be a fantastic breakthrough. And that is the condition for any real dialogue.

(8) *The much-discussed "Great and Holy Pan-Orthodox Synod" is much like the Roman Catholic Church's Vatican Council II. What can we expect from this imminent Orthodox Council?*

Fr. Schmemmann: When I was asked to speak about it at the Greek seminary -- we had a conference, their International Theological Conference there in August, 1978 -- I said that I hope that this council would be more "holy" than "great." I don't know how "great" it will be, but certainly it can have some holiness. Simply because the Orthodox Church is in its inter-Orthodox relations on the lowest possible level of competition, ambition; quarrels are nothing. What I expect from that is a breakthrough beyond this kind of domination of our Churches by this "non-existent past" -- structures reflecting the situation which doesn't exist anymore, and which has been absolutized.

I don't think we can expect anything unless the Council is very well prepared. And I do not have any guarantee that it is being very well prepared. I think it should mobilize all theological schools. So I would be warning everyone against great expectations. But what worries me no end is that lately I haven't heard much about that Council. It is as if it vanished. No date and no documentation are yet determined for it.

On the other hand, I would feel that maybe the very *fact* of the Orthodox meeting -- even if the results are not spectacular -- has a tremendous value. Because the Orthodox haven't met each other except at ecumenical conferences where we meet because we meet with the Anglicans and Catholics and Protestants. I think it will be very difficult. It might even be, on the empirical level, a failure. But I think that something is still moving within the Orthodox Church. You know that there is an opposition to the Orthodox Council, a very serious one from a man who is now dead, a great theologian Father Jus-

tin Popolich from Yugoslavia. He really denounced this Council in advance as "not a council." So there is an opposition (reprinted, published in many Orthodox publications, journals.)

On the other hand, I think that Bishop Maximos of Pittsburgh, the Greek Bishop, had a rather excellent paper appearing in the Greek Theological Review -- he presented a kind of intelligent apologia (apology) knowing all the limitations of the council. It already provoked a significant debate within the Orthodox Church. I think that is good. Because it forces us out of our little provincial world -- it forces us into taking a look at the whole Orthodox situation. Not simply at my, or your, or his situation.

(9) You are a theologian, the Dean of the Faculty of St. Vladimir's Orthodox Seminary. The Roman Catholic Community is undergoing something of a "nervous-breakdown" in many circles because of the reaction to Hans Küng by the congregation for the doctrine of the faith. Do you have a comment?

Fr. Schmemann: Very simple. I don't understand why a man who is a classical, liberal theologian wants, in addition, to be a Catholic theologian. I think he has made his choices. My critique is not dictated by any anger on my part. I think that the reaction of the Catholics and Protestants was, to me, -- excuse me, I am not a great diplomat, -- "ridiculous."

What did Küng think? The papacy, I think, is not necessarily an object of belief. Küng knew exactly where he stood. You have to take the courage of your opinions.

I read, I have even received things to sign: "It is oppression, return to the Inquisition" -- all this seems to me to be absolutely out of order. Absolutely! Either it's a give or a nervous-breakdown. The only thing the Catholic Church said was that he is not teaching Catholic doctrine. And if, tomorrow, an Orthodox theologian would deny the seven ecumenical councils, question the existence of hierarchy, or the fact that God has created the Church, and then claim that he has to have a paid salary for teaching Orthodox theology, I would say "kick him out!"

We should go back to normal. And this chorus of all Protestants seems to me to be uncalled for and certainly in bad taste.

(10) Would you say Father Küng's work is unorthodox and not in concert with Catholic theology?

Fr. Schmemann: I would say, certainly not. Again, it may be the Pope would have said, "Okay, we are revising the whole thing." But he did not give the permission. So far. And here, without believing in the papal infallibility and the Pope as the ultimate authority, I would say that probably in any Orthodox school the treatment of Küng would be exactly the same. Again, there is an Orthodox theological consensus we can have different interpretations. If the Church is not a divine institution there is nothing we can speak about. I would rather debate, then, "hockey" -- which is a very interesting game the other night. So I don't even detect any real "Romanism" in the sanctions.

I applauded that whole response of CDF. Because what Küng has done is an imposture. Then, do like Charles Davis did. He left! And he continues in Montreal. He is a totally respectable man. If tomorrow I lose my faith in the Orthodox Church, and believe in the Roman Catholic, then I would become a Roman Catholic. And not claim that I must remain as the Dean of St. Vladimir's Seminary and destroy from within.

We are living in a crazy era!

We thank you, Father Schmemann, for sharing your insights and for your kindness.