

From the Foreword of "Celebration of Faith" by Fr. Alexander Schmemmann:

Fr. Alexander Schmemmann was one of the leading thinkers and spokesmen of Orthodox Christianity in the 20th century. At the time of his death in 1983, he was Dean of St Vladimir's Orthodox Theological Seminary, in Crestwood, New York, where he had been teaching since coming to the United States from France in 1951. During those years he spoke widely and published many articles and books, but perhaps his largest audience and greatest influence was in the former Soviet Union. Every week, for almost thirty years, he delivered a series of broadcasts over Radio Liberty to reflect upon and explain the meaning of Christianity to an audience deprived by a militantly atheist regime of their freedom to pursue the spiritual search. This was the Soviet Union which shaped Fr. Schmemmann's talks and to which they were addressed. The following sermon is one of those delivered to the peoples held under the yoke of that godless state.

Celebration of Faith

The Church Year

The Elevation of the Cross

On September 14th, for centuries, when the feast of the Elevation of the Cross was celebrated in cathedrals, the bishop would take his place in the center of the church and, surrounded by a great assembly of clergy, would majestically raise the cross high over the crowd and bless the worshippers on all four sides of the church while the choir thundered in response, "Lord have mercy!" This was the celebration of Christian empire, an empire born under the sign of the Cross on that day when Emperor Constantine saw a vision of the Cross high in the sky and heard the words "In this sign conquer...". This is the feast of Christianity's triumph over kingdoms, cultures and civilizations, the feast of that Christian world which now lies in ruins, still crumbling before our very eyes.

Yes, the solemn, ancient rite will once again be celebrated this year. The choir will still be joyfully singing that "the Cross is the strength of kings, the Cross is the beauty of the universe." But today, the tumultuous metropolis surrounding the church does not participate in that hidden triumph and is completely unconnected to it. Its millions of inhabitants will go on with their normal lives and their usual ups and downs, interests, joys, and sorrows, with no reference whatsoever to the goings on within the church building. Why then do we keep repeating words about universal triumph, and singing over and over again that the Cross is unconquerable? Sadly, we have to admit that many, many Christians are unable to answer this question. They are accustomed to seeing the church in exile and on the margins of life, exiled from culture, life, schools and from everywhere. Many Christians are content and undisturbed when the authorities contemptuously allow them to "observe their rites" as long as they are quiet and obedient, and do not interfere in the building of a world where there is no Christ, no faith, and no prayer. Those tired Christians have almost forgotten what Christ said on the night he went to the Cross: "In the world you have tribulation, but take courage, I have overcome the world" (Jn 16:33).

It seems to me that we continue to celebrate the Elevation of the Cross and repeat ancient words of victory not simply to commemorate an old battle that was won, or to recall a past that no longer exists, but in order to reflect more deeply on the meaning of the word "victory" for Christian faith. It may be that only now, stripped as we are of outward power and glory, government support, untold wealth, and of all apparent symbols of victory, are we capable of understanding that all of this was, perhaps, not genuine victory. Yes, the cross raised above the crowds was in those days covered with gold and silver and adorned with precious stones. Yet neither gold, nor silver, nor precious stones can erase the original meaning of the Cross as an instrument of humiliation, torture, and execution on which a man was nailed, a man rejected by all, gasping from pain and thirst. Do we have the courage to ask ourselves: if all those Christian kingdoms and cultures died, if victory was replaced by defeat, was it not because we Christians became blind to the ultimate meaning and genuine content of Christianity's most important symbol? We decided that gold and silver would be allowed to eclipse this meaning. And we decided as well that God desires our worship of the past.

To honor the Cross, to raise it up, to sing of Christ's victory: does this not mean, above all, to believe in the Crucified One and to believe that the Cross is a sign of staggering defeat? For only because it is a defeat, and only to the measure it is accepted as defeat, does the Cross become victory and triumph. No, Christ did not enter the world to win outward victories. He was offered a kingdom, but refused. And at the very moment of his betrayal to death, He said: "Do you think that I cannot appeal to my Father, and he will at once send me more than twelve legions of angels?" (Mt 26:53). Yet, Christ was never more a king than when He walked to Golgotha carrying his own cross on his shoulders while the hate-filled and mocking crowd surrounded him. His kingship and power were never more obvious than when Pilate brought him before the crowd, dressed in purple, condemned to a criminal's death, a crown of thorns on his head, and Pilate telling the raging mob: "Behold your king." Only here can the whole mystery of Christianity be seen, for Christianity's victory resides within the joyful faith that here, through this rejected, crucified and condemned man, God's love began to illumine the world and a Kingdom was opened which no one has power to shut.

Each of us, however, must accept Christ and receive him with all our heart, all our soul, and all our hope. Otherwise, outward victories are all meaningless. Perhaps we needed this outward defeat of the Christian world. Perhaps we needed poverty and rejection to purge our faith of its earthly pride and of its trust in outward power and victory, to purify our vision of the Cross of Christ, which is raised high above us even when neither we nor the world can see it. In spite of everything, the Cross is still elevated, exalted and triumphant. "The Cross is the beauty of the universe." For in whatever darkness people find themselves, and however great the outward triumph of evil in this world, the heart still knows and hears the words, "Take courage, I have overcome the world."