

“In the Liturgy We Take a Journey”: Interview with Archbishop Nikon of Boston

The Most Reverend Nikon of New England and the Albanian Archdiocese (Orthodox Church in America) studied at St. Vladimir’s Seminary in the 1960s as it was developing into one of the foremost Orthodox educational institutions in North America. He spoke with The Wheel about his formative years and his encounters with Father Schmemmann as a confessor and a church visionary.

You came to Saint Vladimir’s Seminary when the Orthodox Church in America was in its formative years, inspired by a vision of a united, non-ethnic, autocephalous American church. Tell us a little bit about your background, and what brought you into the orbit of the seminary.

From my early childhood I felt called to the priesthood. My family—my parents and brothers—were all involved in the life of the Church, serving in a number of capacities. My father served on parish councils, my mother served as a choir director, and my brothers served in the sanctuary or sang in the choir. My bishop was Metropolitan Theofan Noli, a pioneer and one of the early translators of liturgical and musical texts into English. I was first asked to serve as an altar boy at the age of four, and I guess I have been there ever since. Even as a young boy, I understood that in the Liturgy we take a journey. When we say, “Blessed is the Kingdom,” we are stating this as a destination. In the Liturgy we have an opportunity to stand in the Kingdom of Heaven, outside of time and in all times. In high school I was involved in theater, and I loved the way that portraying a character allowed me to explore the darkness and the light, the evil and the good, the ignoble and the heroic sides of humanity. But when the house lights come up, all of that is gone. In the Liturgy,

however, we explore the mysteries of human experience on a much more profound level. We stand before God as we are, both good and bad, in all our brokenness and complexity, and by receiving the body and blood of Jesus Christ we are transformed, not into characters of a playwright’s imagination, but into the people that God has created and calls us to be. And the Liturgy is not a show that ends. It is an ongoing celebration of thanksgiving and praise. The Liturgy defines who we are at all times: at work, in school, caring for a sick family member, out running errands—everywhere. This understanding of Liturgy as an opportunity to make sacred all of life, by following Christ to the Cross, is one of the enduring legacies of Father Schmemmann’s teaching and ministry.

What was it like to study under the great luminaries of American Orthodoxy—Father Alexander Schmemmann, Father John Meyendorff, Professor Serge Verkhovskoy, and others?

When I entered seminary, Saint Vladimir’s had just moved from its first location at Union Theological Seminary to its present location in Yonkers. Perhaps I was too young to fully realize what luminaries I was privileged to learn from and observe. As an undergraduate, I did not have graduate classes with Father Schmemmann or Father Meyendorff, but I did have

courses with Dr. Veselin Kesich. Father Schmemmann was an unmistakable presence on campus, though, as a teacher, a father confessor, and an example of priestly ministry. Prior to seminary, confession was unfamiliar and intimidating. It seemed legalistic and oppressive. But during my time at Saint Vladimir's, Father Schmemmann taught me a tremendous amount about the mystery of confession. As a father confessor, he showed me that the priest does not stand over the penitent as a judge and jury. Rather, Father Schmemmann showed incredible empathy and kindness when he heard my confession, and I learned how profoundly liberating and lifegiving it is to confess my sins. As a father confessor, Father Schmemmann stood beside me as an advocate and a witness before our merciful Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, who does not desire the death of a sinner, but rather that he should turn from his wickedness and live.

People often tend to think about Father Schmemmann first and foremost as a writer and a speaker. Can you tell us a little about him as a pastor? What was liturgical life at the seminary like?

Liturgical life at seminary consisted of a full cycle of services, beginning with Matins or morning prayers depending upon the schedule. For me, Father Alexander was a confessor and an advisor. He served as an example for all of us during those years.

One of the primary influences of Father Schmemmann's vision of the Orthodox Church is on our liturgical practices. You have been a serving priest, and then a diocesan bishop, for many years. Can you share with us how this vision is manifest in your own ministry and in your diocese?



It is true that there are some small differences in liturgical practices. Allow me to correct that: there are different traditions or practices, but the liturgical life of our Church is easily recognizable when visiting any of our Orthodox churches, no matter in what language it is celebrated. A Great Entrance is a Great Entrance, the Gospel is the Gospel. Having served in different parishes and dioceses, I would say that one of the enduring legacies of Father Schmemmann's work is that broadly speaking, Orthodox Christians in North America are much more conscious of how and why the litur-

Nicholas Liolin in his room at St. Vladimir's Seminary, 1963. Photo courtesy of Archbishop Nikon.

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gical, sacramental life of the Church is essential. Orthodox Christians have always held the divine services in high regard, of course, but Father Schmemmann helped us better understand how we can encounter Christ in the Liturgy, and how that encounter can transform our lives.

Twenty-five years after the ill-fated episcopal assembly at Ligonier, Pennsylvania, at which American bishops proclaimed their desire for

unity in a statement that was quickly repudiated by patriarchates overseas, American Orthodoxy seems to be even further from becoming a unified local church than during the time of Father Alexander's earthly ministry. We are experiencing great pressure from both foreign tensions and internal strife. And a tremendous influx of converts from Protestantism into the Orthodox Church in America and the Antiochian Orthodox Archdiocese has included many who are trying to shape our jurisdictions into bastions of fundamentalism. The adage "the Schmemmann experiment is dead" gets repeated more and more frequently. What are your thoughts on this?

This is the first time I have heard that phrase. Father Schmemmann presented what Christ commanded us to do, and that is go and make disciples. Father Schmemmann would travel to wherever there were Orthodox Christians, tirelessly teaching, preaching, and advising us as we worked to build up the church in North America.

From the earliest days of the mission in Alaska, the Orthodox Christian faithful has included both people who grew up in the Church and people who were received into the Church as adults. Adult converts to Orthodox Christianity often note how their children are "cradle Orthodox." Most parishes that I serve and visit use English as the primary liturgical language, which is a change since my childhood. Yet it is beautiful to see how each community maintains and celebrates different aspects of immigrant heritage, whether that be the occasional use of Albanian or Slavonic in the Liturgy or the preservation of beloved culinary traditions on Pascha or other major feasts.

The newly-ordained Father Nicholas Liolin preaching his first sermon, July 13, 1969. Photo courtesy of Archbishop Nikon.



Receiving converts into the Church, whether they were formerly non-believers or Christians from different traditions, is part of the DNA of Orthodoxy. As we welcome our brothers and sisters who seek the fullness of the faith, it is only natural for some friction to occur, in the same way that a family goes through an adjustment period when they adopt a new son or daughter. This adjustment requires love, patience, and humility as the new family members learn to live with one another, not as “a biological family with some extra adopted kids,” but as new family, united in the love of Jesus Christ. As

we know, the process of evangelizing the Native Americans in Alaska did not always go smoothly. Yet we also know that the Orthodox Church was ultimately richer as those communities developed their own distinctive Native American Orthodox Christian Spirituality. Similarly, the reception of people from different Christian communities in our time may not always be a smooth process, yet we trust that by God’s grace, the Orthodox Church will be richer for that work that God does through those who are called—and whom God calls us to welcome—to the fullness of the faith in our time. ✠

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The Most Reverend **Nikon** (Liolin) is Archbishop of Boston, New England, and the Albanian Archdiocese (Orthodox Church in America). He was raised in New York City, where he developed an abiding interest in theater. After marrying his childhood sweetheart Sarah in 1967, he served as a parish priest in Massachusetts and in Michigan. His wife reposed in 2000 and he was consecrated to the episcopate two years later. While leading his own dioceses, he also served as locum tenens of the Diocese of the South between 2011 and 2015.