

The Church Has Left the Building

*Faith, Parish, and Ministry in
the Twenty-First Century*

EDITORS

Michael Plekon
Maria Gwyn McDowell
Elizabeth Schroeder

FOREWORD BY

John McGuckin



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THE CHURCH HAS LEFT THE BUILDING
Faith, Parish, and Ministry in the Twenty-first Century

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The Home that Joy Built

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O heavenly King, Comforter, the Spirit of truth, who are everywhere and fill all things, Treasury of Blessings and Giver of life, come and abide in us. Cleanse us of every impurity, and save our souls, O Good One.

—Orthodox Daily Prayers

The beginning of love is the will to let those we love be perfectly themselves, the resolution not to twist them to fit our own image. If in loving them we do not love what they are, but only their potential likeness to ourselves, then we do not love them: we only love the reflection of ourselves we find in them.

—Thomas Merton, *No Man Is an Island*

FOR AS LONG AS I can remember, the church has been my building, my home, my *ekklesia*. Its sounds, sights, and smells—no matter where I heard, saw, or smelled them—would assemble themselves around me, as if I were there, as if I were touching its walls, kneeling on its rugs, kissing its icons.

Always. Still. It is my home. It just isn't necessarily *there* anymore.

Balanced precariously with the older kids on the steps to the altar, I watched our priest describe his vestments. The cords to the cuffs were so long! At five or six years old, I didn't understand, but I remember that each item meant *something*. I remember wanting to understand.

A few years later the same priest came to find me and my friend. He walked us past the people hanging icons on the bare walls, unrolling rugs across empty floors, reassembling stands for music, icons, and candles. “I want to show you the altar,” gesturing us in. He took us around all three sides of the altar, showing the table of preparation, the menorah-like candlestick, the place where the altar boys stored the processional items. He described everything on the altar table. I was enthralled. I remember him saying, “I want you to see this now, before you aren’t allowed in here anymore.”

As a teen, my Sunday School teachers asked us to memorize John 3:16. This seemed like a very nice verse to pick. (I knew nothing about the particular Protestant fascination with this text.) Our teachers challenged us to find the verse in the liturgy. I listened for it, avidly. There it was! Tucked away in the prayers the priest said quietly while preparing Communion. For the first time, it occurred to me that the liturgy is full of Scripture. I was intrigued.

Intrigued enough that at summer camp, I looked forward to the extra assignments, usually in the form of knowledge scavenger hunts, searching from icon to book and back again. Peter was a few years older than me. He was nice enough, popular with everyone at camp. I wasn’t so sure about him since he teased me about my curiosity when the priests weren’t around, but he sure seemed eager when they were around. We both asked questions, we both shared what we knew, and the priests—they liked our interest, our enthusiasm, our curiosity. Everyone said he would make a good priest.

When I was thinking about college, I told a friendly priest that I was interested in seminary. I wasn’t sure why. I just knew that was where you went to learn about church and God. I wondered what he thought. He said I should go to college first.

I chose my college in part because it was in a city full of Orthodox churches. Somehow I missed that it doesn’t matter how many Orthodox churches there are in Los Angeles if you don’t have a car. By the end of the first semester, the monthly campus liturgy included me, the priest, his *matushka*, and two young daughters. I returned to college for my second semester, unhappily realizing that I had no church community. The Bible study across the hall that I had been assiduously avoiding suddenly looked more interesting.

It was. I joined an inductive study of the Gospel of Mark and for the first time, intensively studied this person Jesus. I knew all the stories but I hadn’t quite understood that Jesus was as interested in challenging injustice

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as I was, that Jesus wanted the world to change too. Well, to be honest, he was far more interested than I was. He actually did things and got in trouble for it. I was hooked.

I was also growing worried as I realized that Christ was at the center of my Orthodox community *and* this community of Protestants (and a few Catholics). No one had told me that this was possible, and I had the distinct impression that many Orthodox seemed to think it was actually *not* possible. Logically reconciling the clear presence of God *here*, among these people with no building, no icons, no candles, and music that would make my mother cringe, with a God who was supposed to be *there*, was troubling. Nothing I read seemed to allow for *both/and*, especially in the heyday of mass conversions to Orthodoxy that tended to drip with sneering rejection of the converts' immediate, usually Protestant, past.

I was comforted by the daily reminder that the Spirit was everywhere and working in all things. While I knew, having diligently read *The Way of the Pilgrim*, that the Jesus Prayer was supposed to be my prayer without ceasing (my Protestant friends couldn't quite decide what to do with my application of their Pauline striving for constant prayer), for me it had always been the prayer of the Comforter, "everywhere and in all things." I don't remember when it began, I just knew I felt a little guilty that my head always echoed with the wrong prayer, a prayer that now seemed so particularly *right*.

Periodically I found my way to an Orthodox liturgy, borrowing a car and braving the tangle of LA freeways. One Sunday the bishop declared: "The church is here," pointing at the floor. "It is in these walls," gesturing around us at the icons. "The church is *this* building, it is in *these* walls. *This* is where we need to be." I drove home, weeping in frustration as I returned to where I also knew the church to be, outside those walls, away from that building, among those that had never seen an icon, had never smelled incense, and who sang in a pleasantly predicable Western scale.

One day my non-Orthodox friends held a Eucharist on the Thursday before Western Easter. It was one thing to study Scripture and serve the needy with my friends. It was another to take the Eucharist with them. I grew up in an Orthodoxy of frequent Communion where the eucharistic gathering both made us a community, and was the sign of our participation in *the* church. Orthodoxy was the one true church and other churches were *not* church. And yet here, among these people without a building, Christ was present. I chose to receive.

After all, I was a good Orthodox Christian who understood that Eucharist and community are integrally tied. One does not happen without the other. I was participating in the body and blood of Christ surrounded by the body of Christ. Here, *and there*, was the King, the Comforter, the Spirit of truth. I somewhat frantically reminded myself that Orthodox theology declares that we know where the church is, but we don't know where it isn't.

I visited the same priest of my youth and asked him what he thought. He simply offered that by taking Communion outside of the Orthodox Church, I was now “out of communion.” I had excommunicated myself.

Over the next nine years, I thrived, grew, and struggled with practices new and strange. At first, I wept almost every night at the loss of my beloved home, the building I loved. Periodic visits only made me feel a stranger. Over time, my grief subsided, becoming as periodic as visits to Orthodox churches.

In seminary I was dubbed a “reluctant Protestant.” I did not enter seminary with any intent to seek ordination and chose the shortest degree possible, the MA. I knew perfectly well I was avoiding the MDiv. When I finally switched to the MDiv, I viewed the extra classes as academic gravy. Despite my clear aptitude for preaching, despite my joy at using words to make Scripture and theology engaging and challenging to listeners, despite the consistent positive feedback and the invitation to serve as the homiletics teaching assistant I received, and accepted, from my professor—a female Presbyterian minister—I took my interest in preaching as a proclivity for lecturing and teaching. My pastoral ministry teacher thought I was too theologically-minded for practical ministry. I pushed aside the rebellious thought that perhaps theology and pastoral ministry should be better integrated, a reflection of my Orthodox upbringing. Instead, I happily interpreted this as an indication that I was unsuited to ministry.

Not everyone agreed. I was well-received in my requisite pastoral internship. The supervising pastor said she was a bit taken aback by my certainty that I wasn't called to church ministry, but was hardly going to press me. The supervisor affiliated with my seminary was not so hands-off: she said she was disappointed that I was not seriously considering ordination because the ministry needed women like me. I thanked her, and then ignored her.

I was a puzzle to others and to myself. I openly supported the ordination of women, critiquing Orthodoxy and conservative evangelicalism on

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this topic, often in the same breath. But I was not interested in pursuing ordained ministry. I did not quite fit into the models of ministry or of liturgy that surrounded me, and I certainly seemed inclined towards the academic.

Not once, however, did I act on repeated suggestions to visit an Episcopal church, despite the fact that the Episcopal church across the street from my school was undergoing a revitalization that even the evangelicals knew about (and rejected because, well, it was what later came to be known as an “open and affirming” congregation). Orthodoxy was flooded with former Episcopalians who decried its descent into unorthodoxy and I was less immune to their rhetoric than I wanted to admit. I wasn’t quite ready to truck with those who rejected the resurrection (as if Spong actually represented all Episcopalians). I diligently avoided Episcopalians, even my pastoral seminar director, who was a member of that vibrant church across the street, and who I rather liked. I didn’t do stuffy English liturgy. I did vaguely chaotic Orthodox liturgy. Period. Besides, every time I glimpsed a woman in clerical collar, my breath caught. Surely I couldn’t bear an entire liturgy without breathing!

I wrote my final paper in our series of required systematic theology courses as a personal statement of faith, a bit against my better intellectual judgment. I was not a fan of personal faith statements; I had the Nicene Creed. To my horror, this assignment made it very clear that I was not simply a reluctant Protestant. I was just not very Protestant at all. Somehow, this wild evangelical seminary with over eighty denominations had confirmed my love for the vibrancy and openness of Orthodox theology. It did not confirm it because those around me failed the test of Orthodoxy, but because what I saw embodied in their lives and practices was the presence of God, of the Spirit who is everywhere and in all things. Orthodox theology seemed the best expression of what I was seeing, even as so much Orthodox rhetoric rejected that very possibility. What I missed, what I longed for, what I wept over, was not the absence of the Spirit, but the particular beauty through which the Spirit expressed itself in Orthodox prayer and practice. I left seminary having witnessed the presence of God “everywhere and in all things,” in buildings and bodies of unexpected dimensions. The home I wanted, however, was the building which housed the sights, sounds, and smells so distinct to Orthodoxy.

Returning to my home parish after seminary was a struggle. There was no outlet for any pastoral or teaching ministry. Within Orthodoxy, there is no significant understanding of a priesthood of all believers, much less an

established practice of sharing ministerial work with the unordained. The few times I shared my thoughts on women and ministry, someone would inevitably find and gently correct me. Or they would relate that, when they were young, they shared my passions, but wisely grew out of such radicalism. I made the priest very uncomfortable: “No one without a degree from an Orthodox school will ever teach or preach as long as I am the priest.”

I knew perfectly well that the issue was not a degree, but the fact that I disagreed with commonly accepted practices, that I challenged the status quo regarding women and their roles. As long as I held such belief I would be dismissed, degree or no. Maybe he hoped that seminary would serve as a corrective, maybe it would cure my intransigence. As much as I wished that I could be a contentedly Orthodox woman, considering seminary as a cure felt like drowning.

Apparently, it no longer required a female cleric to stop my breath. During that particular Lent I was acutely aware that by the time I reached the eucharistic cup, I was seething. I wanted to shriek out my frustration at receiving the body in a place where I could not participate in the body in a way that aligned with the gifts of my body. I was unable to discern whether I felt this way because of the circumstances of this particular parish or Orthodoxy itself, but I knew this throat-tightening anger was a problem. I gave myself until Pentecost to sort it out. By Pentecost I realized that I couldn't sort it out in this place, so I left the building. Again.

When I finally decided to pursue a doctorate in theological ethics, I did so fully aware that theology is done from within a praying community. In Orthodoxy, the theologian is one who prays, and prayer is corporate as well as private. In my new city, I found a priest who knew my interests, my beliefs, and welcomed me wholeheartedly into his parish. He offered me the willingness to converse about difficult issues without reactive fear, scolding, or vague dismissals to just be content with all the wonderful things I *could* do in the church. More than that, to the extent that he was permitted within the bounds of acceptability, he gracefully and consistently sought to encourage the fullest possible participation of women and girls of all ages, recognizing and encouraging their gifts. He saw that, like boys, girls can and should be nurtured in their love for all parts of the church and its life, and that love is best nurtured through welcome and participation.

Yet he could not fix the underlying problem: women were excluded for any number of reasons from full participation in the ecclesial life of the church. Even as Orthodox seminaries enroll women, and some in the

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church make heroic efforts to place these women, such positions are few and far between. Even were they a dime a dozen, some gifts possessed by women simply cannot be exercised with any consistency in the Orthodox Church. Female participation, from reading the epistle, to chanting, to holding the Communion cloth, to teaching, to preaching, is entirely up to the whim of a particular priest in a particular parish, and can change almost without warning.

My point here is not to argue for why this practice of exclusion is actually a failure of Orthodox ecclesiology and theology, not its natural outgrowth. I have done that elsewhere. Rather, it is to speak to its effect: the abrogation of joy, and the failure to love.

I grew up in a church whose theology emphasized joy—in particular, liturgical joy. The liturgical theology of Alexander Schmemmann, who taught most of the priests of my youth, was motivated by a relentless pursuit of liturgical joy since “joy is the only really transforming power in the world.”¹ But my experience, as a girl-child always outside the altar, gifts passed over for a boy who chided her for sharing his inclinations, was of growing joylessness.

I experienced moments when the liturgy was rich, glorious, and full of joy. Yet my joy lasted only until I looked up from my choir book, or away from a beautiful icon, and my gaze was filled with the *iconostasis*, that barrier I was never allowed to cross except for that once, as a child, before the space it contains was consecrated, made too holy for my female body.

Once I was in a large church with an ample supply of altar servers. Looking up from my music, my eyes widened as I watched thirteen men and boys come out of the deacon doors in exact formation, coming together in the middle, perfectly lined up, candles ablaze as the gospel was carried out by the priest. All I could think was, “I am watching a phalanx of men” and I could not help but cynically wonder at what point the liturgy became a parade ground for military maneuvers.

Then there was the evening I was chanting the overwhelmingly beautiful and mournful Holy Week burial service, a perfect expression of “sorrowful joy.” When the time came for the lights to be lowered, the chanters did what they had always done: they joined the priest in the darkened altar, ready to bear the body of Christ while chanting the funeral hymn. Suddenly I was alone at the chant stand, the only woman chanting that evening. It wasn’t that I was any less capable than the men with whom I had just been

1. Schmemmann, *For the Life of the World*, 55.

chanting, but that I was a woman and women do not go in the altar during liturgy. When a woman (or even a man) dares to question this custom some defender will patiently point out that only those that are necessary go into the altar. Yet here I was, unnecessary when every male peer was necessary. I was immobilized with horror and shame, unnecessary simply because I was woman.

Others, of course, will point out that it is not that women *per se* are not allowed. After all, nuns enter the altar in their monasteries during the liturgy. These brilliant interlocutors don't seem to notice that the requirements for women to engage in the most basic of liturgical altar service far exceed anything demanded of males, from committed priest to wavering altar boy.

Over and over again, the liturgy reminded me that I was a woman who was not permitted to participate fully alongside my male peers who shared my interests, my gifts, my joy, but not my body. That niggling sadness I had experienced, knowing that I was only allowed to see the contents of the altar because it wasn't yet consecrated, or grief-laced jealousy (quickly suppressed and never admitted to until now) that Peter would get to spend a whole summer being thoughtfully encouraged to consider the priesthood, or the catch in my throat every time I glimpsed a woman in a clerical collar, became insuppressible grief and rage.

I am hardly alone in my struggle. From the work of the theologian Elisabeth Behr-Sigel to the steady trickle of grateful, but almost always private, responses to my online writing, others share my dissatisfaction. A friend once asked me about the topic of my dissertation, and with some hesitancy, I told her. She paused, looked at me, and then looked away. "I have two little girls," she said. "I don't ask those questions because I think the answer might make me really angry." For many frustrated Orthodox, it is better to just not ask.

Women such as me present a serious problem for Orthodoxy. Contemporary Orthodox anthropology posits human persons as unique and irreducible and yet so much contemporary theology reduces men and women to sexed roles which proscribe permissible participation. At the same time, Orthodox theologians argue that joy is nurtured through participation according to the gifts granted to each unique person. When sex-based roles trump gift-based participation, joy is truncated.

Joy-filled participation requires we attend carefully to Merton's recognition that love sees others *as they are*. This is a key component to joy:

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recognizing oneself and others as unique and irreducible. Only through such truth-filled recognition can we *relate* in love according to this mutually recognized uniqueness. Otherwise, as Merton says, we love only ourselves, our preferences, our inclinations, our own image.

The repeated irony for me was that *outside* my ecclesial building, *outside* my household, I was competent and capable, a leader who had much to offer her communities. Outside this building, I was recognized as a competent and creative theologian. Within this building, I was accused of misinterpreting my gifts and the gifts of all women. I was accused of refusing to be content with the many other things I could do in the church (few of which actually exercise pastoral or teaching gifts, but that minor detail aside . . .). I was told to fit myself into the image of (presumably) content Orthodox women of every century. I was accused of unbridled arrogance—of believing that my desires, my interests, and my preferences were substantive enough to challenge the church, which has always been this way.

My love for Orthodoxy, for its rich traditions, its beautiful buildings, its dynamic liturgy, its open and generous theology could not be consistently returned in this building, in this space, in this home. Orthodoxy cannot fully love women like me because it cannot even *see* women like me. The insight of a few theologians simply does not outweigh the approbation, confusion, or denial encountered in the ecclesial every-day by those women (and I strongly suspect, some men) who do not fit their appropriately-gendered mold.

This constant denial of the unique giftedness of men and women is a repeated and persistent failure to love, embodied in the very liturgical practices of the church. Such practices fail to encourage the transformation of her and her community into a people able to fully represent God in and to the world.

I am, at this time, no longer participating in an Orthodox church. I left the Orthodox Church because I had to: I was denied Communion because I finally came to deeply love someone who also came to love me. I am now married to her, and we are not welcome to either receive Communion or even attend any of our local Orthodox churches. Few experiences have been more painful than being repeatedly told by more than one priest that I should not come back his church, that I was unwelcome to even set foot in these beloved buildings. There are parishes, in other cities, where we would be welcome, where “don’t ask, don’t tell” is alive and well, just not

in my hometown. I finally went, with my then partner and now wife, to an Episcopal church.

I may have left Orthodoxy because of my choice in partner, but that is not why I cannot return.

For the first time in my life, I am participating in a liturgy that consistently brings joy. This is not to say that I am always satisfied. I will carry my preferences, and sometimes my prejudices, wherever I go. But no longer is worship an exercise in girding up my loins just to survive the service, eking out moments of joy in the midst of a practice that constantly reminded me that my gifts were not welcome because my body could not be imagined by others as the bearer of such gifts.

Joy, as it turns out, is also terribly disconcerting. How strange, that joy should feel this way, that I should be thrown off-balance by the experience of this very thing for which I have so longed. How odd that I should find it odd to love the liturgy without anger, to say the prayers of repentance without feeling that I must defend my very self against the constant perception that I am, myself, *wrong*, that my very desires, my gifts, my joys, are things from which I should turn away. What a relief to be able to see, acknowledge, and repent of my actual sins, not those put upon me by a community that can only form me into its image, not the one given to me by God. How astonishing to look up from my hymnal and see not some of us, but *all* of us. Sometimes it still takes a moment to register that when I look up, I see the embodiment of God's many gifts, freely distributed, joyfully exercised. That moment is disconcerting and the invitation to enter into joy is harder to accept than I wish. It saddens me to realize how much energy I lost to swelling anger, and how hard that habit is to put aside.

I have wished for years that I could simply be someone else: someone willing to accept my place, someone more malleable, more content, who had gifts that were actually welcome. I wanted, almost more than anything else, to be a person who could be joyful in a particular building, in a particular house, in a particular *ekklesia*. Instead, someone else welcomed me into their home.

Now that I have tasted the joy of belonging in a place where I am welcome, where my gifts and passions are sources of delight and interest for others, I cannot imagine returning to a community that refused to see me and other women like me for who we are, for the gifts we can bring.

Joy requires nurture. I may always miss the ancient beauty of Orthodox liturgy. But its beauty is nothing in compare to the beauty of a love that

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sees, that recognizes, and that encourages the flourishing of each unique and irreducible person. This is the love that makes a building and a people a home, an *ekklesia*. This is the love that nurtures joy.

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