

The World as Sacrament

An Ecumenical Path toward a
Worldly Spirituality

Michael P. Plekon



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Contents

Introduction vii

Prologue

Ecumenical Journey 1

Chapter 1

To Become Permeable to Christ:

Elisabeth Behr-Sigel's Worldly Spirituality 15

Chapter 2

"The Sacrament of the Brother/Sister":

Mother Maria Skobtsova 35

Chapter 3

"Christianity Is Only Beginning . . .":

Alexander Men and Living Faith 51

Chapter 4

"The Power of Love": Nicholas Afanasiev's

Radical Vision of Community 67

Chapter 5

Limitless Love: Lev Gillet's Generous God 85

Chapter 6

God's Love Is Foolish, We Become What We Pray:

Paul Evdokimov's Vision 105

Chapter 7

“Seeking the True Self”:

Thomas Merton, Living and Praying in the World 127

Chapter 8

“I Sense a Sacredness in Things”:

Marilynne Robinson and the World of *Gilead* 147

Chapter 9

“Everything Belongs”:

Richard Rohr’s Active Contemplation 165

Chapter 10

“Finding an Altar in the World”:

Barbara Brown Taylor’s Everyday Liturgy 183

Chapter 11

“Passion for God, Life, and Justice”:

Joan Chittister’s Prophetic Way 201

Chapter 12

**“Quotidian Mysteries”: Kathleen Norris and the
Struggle with Everyday Demons 219**

Epilogue

“The Liturgy after the Liturgy”:

Michael Plekon, Learning to Be a Pastor 233

Introduction

God calls to us at every moment, and God is life, *this* life.¹

— Christian Wiman

Faith, in the World

We know God is everywhere, present beyond the church services and walls, Bible and prayer book pages, beyond our icons and crosses. We know the Holy One is there, in every corner of our busy, messy lives. “For everything that lives is holy, life delights in life,” as the mystic and poet William Blake said.² We also somehow are drawn to specifically sacred locations, to distinctive religious contexts, somehow feeling that as in the Jerusalem temple with holy of holies and altar of sacrifice and the ark of the covenant, God is more intensely present in those places, so God promises. As Solomon says, in his prayer while dedicating the temple in Jerusalem, no building can contain God; in fact, even heaven cannot (2 Chr 6:18).

Jesus spends most of his time, in the gospels, out on the roads and in the villages. He visits and teaches in the towns of Galilee, in the squares and fields and in people’s homes. We see him in synagogues in his hometown of Nazareth and Capernaum and in the precincts of the temple, but only briefly. So much of the material of his teaching he draws from life, from the chores of ordinary housekeeping—baking and preparing

¹ Christian Wiman, *My Bright Abyss: Meditation of a Modern Believer* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2013), 8.

² “America: A Prophecy,” Plate 8, 10.

meals, cleaning house, and the work by which people support themselves—farming, fishing, carpentry, and other crafts. His parables and healing encompass not only great events like weddings and funerals but also the humdrum tasks of homemakers, managers, and local officials.³

Perhaps the relentless challenge of his teaching lies in its being so mundane, secular, and not what one might expect to find as “religious.” Jesus is absolutely immersed in the faith of his tradition and people. He blesses the bread and fish before distributing it to the hungry out in the fields; he says the blessing as he breaks bread with his fellow travelers in the inn on the road to Emmaus. He knows about legal definitions of what can and cannot be done on the Sabbath, of what family obligations mean as well as the spiritual extension of the law. Not only in solitary locations and at night is he one with his Father in prayer. The Father and Jesus are always one. And after, his followers found it natural to gather, break bread, eat, pray, and learn at home, as people did each Sabbath and at Passover and other festivals. In the words of one of our writers listened to here, they understood the temple to be everywhere, the altar to be in the world, where all was worship, in spirit and in truth.

Not a few figures—writers, poets, activists, teachers—have focused on the presence of the Holy One in the ordinary, on the many possibilities of worldly spirituality. In recent years, in teaching, writing, and pastoral work, I have been exploring the search for God in the lives and thinking of some remarkable persons of faith in our time.⁴ While I began with a few

³ Amy-Jill Levine, *Short Stories by Jesus: The Enigmatic Parables of a Controversial Rabbi* (San Francisco: HarperOne, 2014).

⁴ Michael Plekon, *Living Icons: Persons of Faith in the Eastern Church* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2002); *Hidden Holiness* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2009); *Saints as They Really Are: Voices of Holiness in Our Time* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2012); *Uncommon Prayer: Prayer in Everyday Experience* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2016).

theologians and pastors, I immediately widened the list, simply because church people, at least in New Testament perspectives, have no monopoly on holiness. But the impulse came from some of those most closely connected to the church. They themselves wanted to return to the early church's sense of God acting in the world, of worldly ways of praying and living. It seemed important to include others, less attached, or not attached to church at all, making the journey in the spirit on their own.

So here are the origins of the book. It is an exploration of women and men looking for God in everyday experience. The takeaway is how their actions and thinking could be used by those of us seeking a life with God today. I do not have in mind recipes or formulas from these persons of faith. That would be too easy. Their witness is far richer and more complex. I think they give us fresh, distinctive ways of seeing and of living spiritually today. I invite readers to encounter them with me, to listen, and be moved.

What connects the voices is precisely the awareness, on the part of these women and men, of the everyday world as the place of encounter with God—the world as sacrament. Some lived through revolution, emigration, two world wars, the Great Depression, and in some cases Nazi occupation or Soviet oppression. So, some were part of the tumultuous twentieth century in Europe. But others are still with us. They know well the American context, a society of great opportunity but also great emptiness, need, and anger.

Further, the persons of faith to whom we listen here come from both the Western and Eastern church traditions. I believe this makes the book distinctive. It is therefore an ecumenical encounter—increasingly rare these days. And it is worth noting that among them—these persons of faith, these uncanonized saints—most of them were aware of what still holds Christians together, despite their differences. A number of them actively worked for the reunion of the churches.

“The World as Sacrament”

Sacrament is movement, transition, passage, Pascha: Christ knows the way and guides us, going before. The world, condemned in its old nature, revealed as life eternal in its new nature, is still the same world, God’s good work. Christ came to save it, not to allow us means of thankful escape before it was discarded as rubbish. Thoughts of the “life to come” can be misleading. In a sense, we have no other world to live in but this, although the mode of our occupying it, our whole relationship to space and time . . . will be very different when we are risen again in Christ. . . . Our lives are congested and noisy. It is easy to think of the church and the sacraments as competing for our attention with the other world of daily life, leading us off into some other life—secret, rarified, remote. We might do better to think of that practical daily world as something incomprehensible and unmanageable unless and until we can approach it sacramentally through Christ. Nature and the world are otherwise beyond our grasp; time also, time that carries all things away in a meaningless flux, causing men to despair unless they see in it the pattern of God’s action. . . . [W]e should concentrate upon this world lovingly because it is full of God, because by way of the Eucharist we find Him everywhere.⁵

“The world as sacrament”—what does this mean? It is the title of an essay by Eastern Orthodox theologian Alexander Schmemmann. The citation above comes from his discerning look at how liturgy and life are entwined. It has also been used by Ecumenical Patriarch of Constantinople Bartholomew to refer to the sacramentality of all creation, this in that “Green Patriarch’s” series of writings calling for a spiritual approach to saving and preserving the environment.⁶ There are still

⁵ Alexander Schmemmann, “The World as Sacrament,” in *Church, World, Mission* (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 1979), 226–27.

⁶ See <https://mospat.ru/en/2010/05/26/news19252/>; Bartholomew (with John Chryssavgis), *Cosmic Grace, Humble Prayer*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids, MI:

others who have used this expression, or one very close to it, to express the sacramental theology of various authors.⁷

Here in this book, “the world as sacrament” has to do with the worldly, everyday quality of spiritual life. This is what the writers have discovered in their own experience. And this is what I want to convey—they found interaction with God in work, friends, and family; in ordinary tasks like preparing meals; in conversation and care for others; and in the passage through life—problems of loneliness, estrangement, conflict that are relational and personal, as well as those we all eventually face: of aging, loss, sickness, and death. Beyond this, each faced the larger challenges of social justice and suffering to which Pope Francis has responded.

The figures I present and reflect on here offer perspectives that while ancient, may be new to many readers. This is the second feature that holds them together. They are from both the Eastern and Western churches. They are remarkable for their openness both to the other churches and unity in the faith. All were ecumenical, bridge-building both in their thinking and action. What is more, they all felt it crucial to revisit the Christian tradition, and in so doing, found that our sense of maintaining the legacy was sometimes misguided. Their findings on the power of love, on equality and community as

Eerdmans, 2009); *On Earth as in Heaven: Ecological Vision and Initiatives of Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2011); *Toward an Ecology of Transfiguration: Orthodox Christian Perspectives on Environment, Nature, and Creation* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2013).

⁷ Mathai Kadavil, *The World as Sacrament: Sacramentality of Creation in the Perspectives of Leonardo Boff, Alexander Schmemmann and St. Ephrem* (Leuven: Peeters, 2005), <http://www.peeters-leuven.be/boekoverz.asp?nr=7957>; see also <https://mospat.ru/en/2010/05/26/news19252/>; David J. Leigh, “Toward a Sacrament of the World,” <http://opccentral.org/resources/2015/01/13/david-j-leigh-toward-a-sacrament-of-the-world/>; Stephan Van Erp, “The Sacrament of the World: Thinking God’s Presence beyond Public Theology,” <https://lirias.kuleuven.be/bitstream/123456789/490209/2/Van+Erp+-+Sacrament+of+the+world.pdf>.

necessary in the faith, make them especially relevant voices for us today. They were also convinced that the Gospel was to be lived out in everyday life.

Finally, the name, and thus the preaching, of the bishop of Rome (as he prefers to be called), Pope Francis will appear quite often in these pages—and not by accident. As it turns out, the awareness that we are always forgiven, loved, and sustained by God’s mercy is a realization at the heart of almost every writer to whom we will listen. I cannot pretend to have selected them for that reason, any more than I can take credit for their profound sensibility to grace everywhere. But from Nicholas Afanasiev to Mother Maria Skobtsova, from Marilynne Robinson and Richard Rohr to Thomas Merton, each was shaped by the mercy of God, “mercy within mercy within mercy.”

This book is rooted in my experience of a number of women and men we will shortly meet. But it is also from my experience as a pastor, a teacher, and scholar. In each chapter, I try to go behind the ideas to the experiences in the lives of these individuals, deliberately connecting their encounters with God in the people around them to the landscape of our lives today. Biography and narrative are powerful spiritual tools. Simply put, the thoughts of the persons of faith with whom I reflect here are not the only “texts.” Their lives, as well as our lives, are also texts about looking for and following God in everyday existence. Given my own pastoral experience of over thirty years, I also have offered some insights from that in a chapter.

I have taught honors courses both on contemporary persons of faith and on writers and their spiritual journeys for several years at the City University of New York, a context at once both intensely diverse as well as secular. I bring that experience to this book. I have also given numerous retreats on some of these figures, as well as papers at scholarly conferences and other publications. This book derives from the research and the interactive experience in these classes and the other venues mentioned. This book could be the basis of an adult study class

or a retreat and is a rich resource for personal spiritual reading—*lectio divina*. A photo gallery of the faces of the voices listened to is essential for me. It enables readers to connect the face of the person to whom they are listening. I cannot stress enough that my reflection on and engagement with the writers here is only a start, an invitation, as it were, to feast on their fiction, poems, memoirs, and other writing. There is no replacement for that. Thus I feel strongly that readers should be provided resources for further reading, both online and hardcopy sources. So I have provided generous references that are bibliographic notes, with further recommendations for reading.

Our Persons of Faith

The great lessons from the true mystics, from the Zen monks, is that the sacred is in the ordinary, that it is to be found in one's daily life, in one's neighbors, friends, and family, in one's back yard, and that travel may be a flight from confronting the sacred. To be looking everywhere for miracles is a sure sign of ignorance that everything is miraculous.⁸

—Abraham Maslow

The perennial wisdom of Abraham Maslow is captured in those lines. While none of the writers we will listen to here are Zen monks, a few are indeed monastics, and several are mystics. They are, by intention, ecumenically diverse and diverse in other ways—from both the Western and Eastern churches, women and men, some ordained clergy, others laypeople. Some are from Europe and earlier, in the past century. Others are from America and still active today. So, in each chapter, we will look at leading themes in a person's writing as well as the ways in which life experiences framed their vision—and what this has for us to ponder and follow now.

⁸ Abraham Maslow, *Religion, Values and Peak Experiences* (New York: The Viking Press, 1964), xii.

“To Become Permeable to Christ”—*Elisabeth Behr-Sigel’s Worldly Spirituality*. Elisabeth was a theologian much ahead of her time, among the first women to study theology both at the University of Strasbourg and the St. Sergius Institute in Paris. She was also an early pastoral associate in her local church. She first wrote on the actual history of saints’ lives and later had much to say on spirituality for everyday living. She also explored the place and work of women in the church and served for years in the leadership of Laity and Clergy against Torture.

“The Sacrament of the Brother/Sister”—*Mother Maria Skobtsova*. Mother Maria was a poet, a political radical, married several times, divorced, and a parent of three. She was also a nun, a social activist, and a martyr for hiding victims of the Nazis. Extroverted and persuasive, her perspectives on love and care for the neighbor remain striking, as does her indictment of self-centered religiosity. She was recognized as a saint, along with several coworkers, by the Russian Orthodox Archdiocese in Western Europe, her “local church,” and was canonized in 2004.

“Christianity Is Only Beginning”—*Alexander Men and Living Faith*. After years of having to do underground publishing, the end of the Soviet era enabled Men to become the leading voice of faith in Russia, only to be struck down by an assassin a few years later. Yet his lectures, preaching, and writing contain one of the most realistic appraisals of the decline of institutional religion and yet the possibility of authentic faith in our time.

“The Power of Love”—*Nicholas Afanasiev’s Radical Vision of Community*. Church historian, canonist, New Testament scholar, liturgical specialist, Afanasiev’s rediscovery of what held the ancient church together—love and mutual accountability, is a radical challenge to faith communities and individuals today.

“Limitless Love”—*Lev Gillet’s Generous God*. Lev Gillet was a Benedictine who became an Eastern Catholic then Orthodox

monk-priest. A mystic and activist plagued by depression all his life, his vision of the God without limits and loving faith without boundaries decades ago speak directly to the twenty-first-century situation of believers in a diverse world that does not want to just be condemned for its sin.

“God’s Love Is Foolish, We Become What We Pray”—Paul Evdokimov’s *Vision*. Spouse, widower, parent, layperson, theologian, social activist, Evdokimov had, as the theme of all his teaching and writing, the necessity of a spirituality rooted in our era, a worldly faith, not a museum-object of piety from the past. God’s suffering with us and our making all we do our prayer are major forms this spirituality of our time takes shape.

“Seeking the True Self”—Thomas Merton, *Living and Praying in the World*. Merton has to be one of the best-known spiritual writers of the past century. He left Columbia University graduate work to become a Trappist monk and spent the last half of his life at the Abbey of Gethsemani near Louisville, Kentucky. Enormously productive as a writer—volumes of his journals, letters, poems, books, and articles on the spiritual life have been published—he died in an accident while traveling and lecturing in Southeast Asia. Known also for his commitment to the antiwar and civil rights movements of the 1960s, he was silenced and constrained by his superiors but allowed to write in freedom again in the last few years of his life. He offers us a sense of the integration of life, the location of the true self in God and in the joining of prayer and life, of contemplation and action.

“I Sense a Sacredness in Things”—Marilynne Robinson and the *World of Gilead*. Robinson is without doubt one of the most celebrated writers of the last fifty years. A careful craftsperson, she takes years to create her narratives. In *Gilead*, *Home*, and *Lila*—her recent trilogy—without any pretension or contrivance, she reveals the movement of grace in everyday life, the

collision constantly occurring between God and the lives of ordinary people.

“Everything Belongs”—Richard Rohr’s *Active Contemplation*. Franciscan friar and priest Richard Rohr has become one of the most highly regarded teachers of the spiritual life in the past two decades. Having served as a prison chaplain, educator, and pastor, he also was involved in an experiment to gather a community of Christians committed to prayer and social justice. This, and the profound impact of Merton’s writings, led to his opening the Center for Action and Contemplation in Albuquerque, New Mexico, and to a substantial stream of books, articles, and online posts. With his long pastoral experience, his training as a friar in community life, and his use of psychology alongside the Scriptures, Rohr offers a distinctive vision of contemplation put into practice, a worldly spirituality that refuses to divide the sacred from the ordinary.

“Finding an Altar in the World”—Barbara Brown Taylor’s *Everyday Liturgy*. Taylor was one of *Time* magazine’s one hundred most significant Americans in 2014. She has been acclaimed as one of the country’s finest preachers. In recent years, in three volumes, she has described her failure as a parish pastor and her disenchantment with the institutional church. Even more importantly, she has shared with us her rediscovery of God in everyday life and her encountering the darkness that all of us face in our lives.

“Passion for God, Life, and Justice”—Joan Chittister’s *Prophetic Way*. Benedictine monastic, writer, and teacher Joan Chittister is one of the most prolific spiritual writers and powerful voices of Christian women and religious sisters in the past half century. Not only has she been a powerful voice for women in the church and for the renewal of religious life, she, like so many others here, focuses on the presence of God in the textures, in the struggles and joys of living.

“Quotidian Mysteries”—Kathleen Norris and *the Struggle with Everyday Demons*. Poet Kathleen Norris has been a riveting, discerning voice on the spiritual life for the past thirty years. She not only connected many with monastic life and spirituality but also allowed us into some of the pain and challenges of her own life in a study of *acedia*, or spiritual apathy.

“The Liturgy after the Liturgy”—Michael Plekon, *Learning to Be a Pastor*. Drawing on my own experience in parish ministry, I reflect on popular, that is, humane faith in everyday life. Most of the narrative is drawn from my early days as a pastor, over thirty years ago, visiting elderly and shut-in parish members and visiting and doing services at local skilled nursing centers. Simple as all this pastoral work was, the power of the encounters remains with me, decades later.

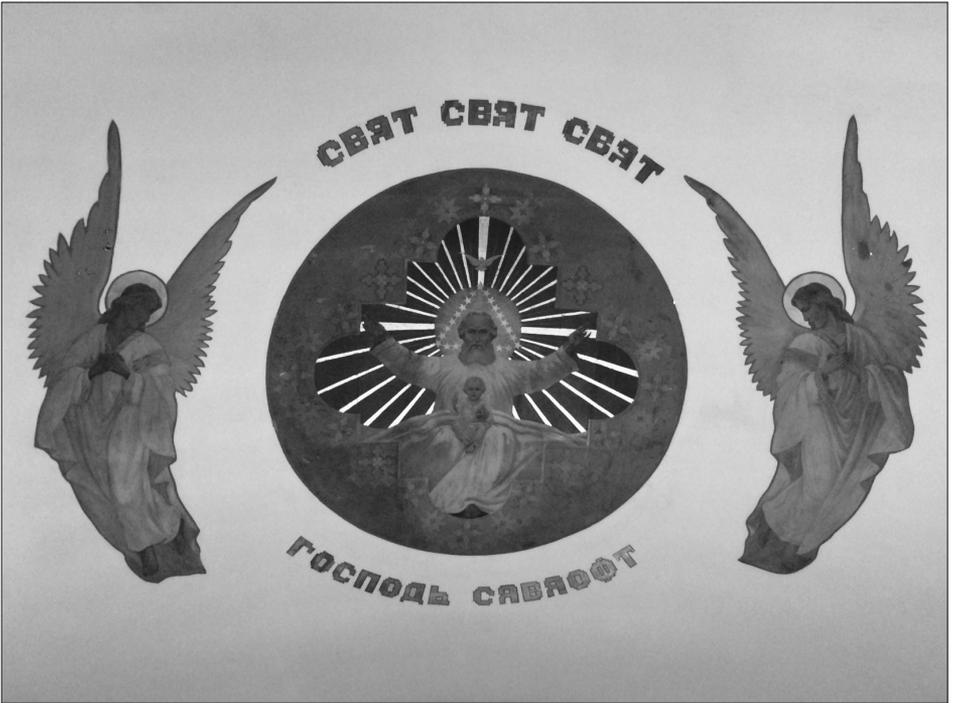
A Feast of Writers and Their Works

It is no surprise that frequently, Jesus describes the kingdom of heaven among us as a gathering of friends to feast—a wedding or dinner party or some other feast.⁹ What I offer here is that, but in words and images. I can well imagine, for myself, the kingdom of heaven being at a party with the women and men in this book, with plenty of wine and good food!

The invitation list is based, as I said, on my own reading and study. But it is also based on teaching experience, on seeing and hearing students open up and respond powerfully to writers who challenged them with the spiritual life. Most of these were authors who they were encountering for the first time. Unlike the religious culture in which I grew up, really none of these writers are interested in prescribing religious beliefs or practices. One need not be an observant religious individual, a churchgoer, to be challenged by these persons of

⁹ Levine, *Short Stories by Jesus*, 107–25, 279–82.

faith and their voices. I think the most wonderful thing is the diversity of their backgrounds. This is really a rich, ecumenical gathering. There are ordinary women and men, laypeople, a couple of monastics and pastors, a scholar and teacher here and there, also folks who raised families, struggled with paychecks, difficult spouses and friends, aging parents, and more. I invite you to the feast!



"The Ancient of Days": God the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit.

Inscription: "Holy, holy, holy, Lord of Sabaoth."

*Photo from the former St. Michael's Ukrainian Greek Catholic Church,
Yonkers, New York.*

Chapter 1

To Become Permeable to Christ: Elisabeth Behr-Sigel's Worldly Spirituality

Elisabeth's Love of Life and of the World

It is rare to actually know important figures that you study or write about. Often we are separated by years and miles. But Elisabeth Behr-Sigel is one of the spiritual giants I have had the privilege of knowing personally. I remember well when Jeanne and I met Elisabeth.¹ We drove round and round the Paris suburb in which she lived, in vain, trying to find her apartment building, not even finding street signs. When somehow we located her, several floors up, I mentioned our troubles. Her response, with a lot of laughter, was that since everyone knew where they lived and their address, there was no need for street signs! How very French, and how very much the personality of Elisabeth!

Having read almost everything she had written and having heard a great deal about her from friends, Fr. John Breck and Lyn Breck, I did not expect the devilish sense of humor that seemed almost to enjoy our being lost, worried, and late. As I got to know Elisabeth over the last few years of her very long life, I came to realize that this was but one aspect of a rich and complex personality, intellect, and soul.

¹ This chapter is based on several earlier pieces by the author, including a part of *Hidden Holiness* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2009), and an essay in *The Ecumenical Review* 61, no. 2 (2009): 165–76, among others.

Anyone who met Elisabeth instantly knew she was a free spirit. She routinely challenged clergy, political leaders, and other scholars. She was indefatigable, an incurable optimist, but equally a relentless critic, even in her late nineties. Her life covered most of the twentieth century, and in it, she saw numerous wars, social upheavals, and personal sufferings. Elisabeth was fearless. When the Moscow patriarchate began to attack her home diocese, she put out an open letter boldly calling out this hostile activity. She signed several petitions asking for reinstatement of women to the diaconate in the Orthodox Church. She played an important role in the process that led to the canonization of Mother Maria Skobtsova and her companions. Mother Maria was a longtime friend and collaborator, especially during the Nazi occupation of Paris. I think you will soon see why Elisabeth offers such a strong, empowering vision of faith in action—both in her thinking and in her life—what we are looking for in this book. For her, the world was very much a sacrament of God’s presence and of opportunities to love.

Elisabeth died in her own apartment on boulevard Foch in Épinay-sur-Seine—the address we found hard to locate. It was in her sleep, in her own bed, with books, journals, letters, and other work spread out around her. She held on to her driver’s license well into her nineties, though it was hard for her to see the road any longer due to her shrinking height. I recall when we visited her that after some conversation, she finally broke out the port bottle and glasses and asked if we minded her smoking. At her age, why not? Around the room were icons by Joanna Reitlinger and Gregory Krug and others who led the renaissance of icon painting early in the last century. There were also paintings of her home city of Strasbourg and one of her as a very young woman. And then quite a few photos of all the friends she treasured, really a who’s who of important religious thinkers in the first half of the twentieth century: Lev Gillet and Sergius Bulgakov, Paul Evdokimov and Vladimir

Lossky, Metropolitan Evlogy, and Mother Maria and so many others. She knew them all, she said, gesturing toward all the images. She was aware that she had surely known some great people in her life.

Elisabeth's life was both colorful and untypical for a theologian. For much of it she did not teach theology. Rather, she administered a secondary school in the state system. A student of historian George Fedotov (noted for using historiographic methods for studying the lives of saints), she wrote a master's thesis that was one of the first Western efforts to examine the lives and outlooks of Russian saints. For most of her career as an educator, she was unable to devote herself to research and writing. Toward its end, however, she began what became a second career as a writer and teacher. She wrote a fascinating biography of her friend Lev Gillet.² Also later in life, she completed her doctoral dissertation on the nineteenth-century Russian theologian Alexander Bukharev. Later she wrote a number of biographical essays on him, Fr. Lev Gillet, and Mother Maria Skobtsova.³ Eventually she collected all of her writing on women in the church.⁴ She did an autobiographical piece as well, though she had to be nudged to write about herself and her own life.⁵ Olga Lossky, herself a writer and the great-granddaughter of theologian Vladimir Lossky, was

² Elisabeth Behr-Sigel, *Lev Gillet: A Monk of the Eastern Church*, ed. Sergei Hackel, trans. Helen Wright (Oxford: Fellowship of St. Alban and St. Sergius, 1999).

³ *Alexandre Boukharev—un théologien de l'église orthodoxe russe en dialogue avec le monde moderne* (Paris: Beauchesne, 1977); see also *Discerning the Signs of the Times: The Vision of Elisabeth Behr-Sigel*, ed. and trans. Michael Plekon and Sarah E. Hinlicky (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 2001), 41–80.

⁴ See the introduction to Elisabeth Behr-Sigel, *The Ministry of Women in the Church*, 2nd ed., trans. Steven Bigham (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 2004), 1–24.

⁵ We included it in *Discerning the Signs of the Times*, 5–11, as we did Lyn Breck's biographical essay, "Nearly a Century of Life," 125–36.

entrusted by Elisabeth's family with the task of organizing Elisabeth's papers. Olga became herself very close to Elisabeth in what would be the last years of her life. Both the papers and their many conversations helped Olga produce a magnificent biography.⁶

She eloquently sums up Elisabeth's personality and spiritual vision.

"Let yourself be astonished," Elisabeth would say philosophically. "Thank God for the beauty of the world," she would add theologically. To examine one's life in order to discern the presence of God there—this was her dynamic depth. This was the spirit she showed throughout all her reflections in response to my questions whenever we met. Elisabeth grappled with the question of how it was possible to integrate the Gospel in one's life if one did not hear it in the Church's preaching. How could you live out Christ's words: "All will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another," if our divisions reached down even to our own bishops? How can there still be discrimination toward women, she wondered, women made in the image of God just like men? Surely one can review all the different dimensions which evolved in Elisabeth's work, in particular the dialogue among religions and the place of women in the church. But beyond all the specific themes, it seems to me that her principal, her unique contribution was anchored above all in what she saw as the one thing necessary, namely to go into the depths of oneself, to make one's being, with all one's singularity and personal history, permeable to Christ in order to witness to his existence to as many as possible. For me, this is really Elisabeth's legacy.⁷

⁶ Olga Lossky, *Vers le jour dans déclin: une vie d'Élisabeth Behr-Sigel (1907–2005)* (Paris: Cerf, 2007), English translation, *Towards the Day without End: A Life of Elisabeth Behr-Sigel; 1907–2005*, trans. Jerry Ryan, ed. Michael Plekon (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2010).

⁷ "'Rendre son être perméable au Christ': Entretien avec Olga Lossky sur Elisabeth Behr-Sigel," *Contacts* 220 (2007); see also http://christophe.levelois.free.fr/fichier/Ent_Olga_Losky.pdf.

A Life Permeable to Christ

Most of the concerns Elisabeth had, all of which became themes in her writing, are mentioned here. With her friends Paul Evdokimov and Lev Gillet, she did not so much see the church as the primary location of spiritual searching. Rather, as she experienced in her own life, it was the struggles of everyday existence—the challenges of a marriage, raising children—that were the primary arena of spiritual engagement. Then, given the historical period in which she lived, war and its accompanying terrors—oppression of ethnic and religious groups, torture—became realities of existence in the modern world with which one’s faith had to deal. These were not just ideological causes but the real suffering of sisters and brothers. And all the struggles Elisabeth experienced as a woman in the church eventually made her one of the most insightful critics and commentators on gender and religion.

With Olga Lossky’s fine biography, it is not necessary to retell Elisabeth’s life story. Yet several elements of it help to flesh out her sense of finding and witnessing to God-permeability—in the world, in one’s ordinary work, and the details of one’s life.

From the start, Elisabeth lived a context of complexity, of mixed identities. Born in Schiltigheim in Alsace-Lorraine on July 21, 1907, she would always have both French and German language and cultural roots. Her mother was from a nonobservant Jewish background, her father likewise from a nonobservant Lutheran family. Yet Elisabeth was baptized in the Lutheran church, and her mother did pray with her every night. Later Elisabeth herself asked to be enrolled in classes in order to be confirmed. And while an undergraduate, she joined the World Christian Student Federation. From this point onward, she became a practicing church member.

She was in the first few classes of women allowed to study theology at Strasbourg. Meeting émigré Russian students there, she was powerfully drawn to the Orthodox Church and its liturgy. When she transferred to Paris, she went to Lutheran