

Holy Week Means No Holy War: Remembering Fr Alexander Men in the Light of Christ's Glorious Passion

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Given what is happening, and what is about to happen, in Russia and Ukraine, Holy Week is an especially fitting time to remember Fr Alexander Men, who was [murdered](#) (some say martyred) in 1990, after more than thirty years of priestly service and public witness in and around Moscow. Unsurprisingly, Fr Men's work for renewal met with resistance from national as well as ecclesial authorities. And, as s Michael Plekon [explains](#), even after his death he remained a controversial figure, at least in some circles.

In the last few years of his life, Men became a somewhat prominent figure, a voice for a truly worldly Christianity. But early on Sunday morning, September 9, 1990, on his way to serve the Divine Liturgy, Fr Men was attacked, struck in the skull from behind with an axe. He managed to drag himself back to his house but died in the hospital from loss of blood. He was only 55 years old. In the days before his death, he seems to have had some sense that the end was near.

The following is an excerpt from one of Fr Men's [sermons](#) commemorating the martyred St Philip II, Metropolitan of Moscow, whom Fr Men revered as an icon of faithful witness. Given its tragic relevance, it is worth quoting at length:

... In the history of our motherland, there were two periods in which tyranny paralyzed our people: the reign of Tsar Ivan, whom we call "Terrible," and again in the time of Stalin, who admired Ivan and tried to follow his bloody example. Across the centuries, he perceived in that executioner a kindred spirit. And so it was that Ivan the Terrible, who struck fear in the heart of the church and the people of Russia, was doomed to live in fear...

When Philip came to Moscow, the Tsar received him warmly, but Philip took care to say, "If you want me to work here in Moscow for the Church, you must give me the right to conduct *pechalovaniia* (in ancient times, this referred to public prayers for the repressed). The Tsar hesitated, but finally agreed, and only on this condition did Philip accept the white miter of the Moscow Metropolitan.

At first, Philip was able to influence Ivan in a positive way, even mitigating his cruelty for a time. On several occasions the Tsar and the Metropolitan came face to face in the Kremlin corridors and Philip would say, "Sire, you must not spill human blood, Christian blood. Why do you believe everyone is against you? If you do not behave reprehensibly, you will have nothing to fear." Chastened, the Tsar would put aside his evil plans. But Philip saw profound changes in the Tsar's face and soul. He had known the Tsar as a handsome and open man in his youth. Now, although Ivan was only about forty years old, he already looked like a bitter old man; he had a frightening countenance and insanity in his eyes.

One day the Tsar joined in another mass murder. Afterward, he and his black-robed *oprichniki*, who were all on horseback, galloped up to the Kremlin cathedral where Philip served. The entire entourage strode into the church. Ivan stared at the Metropolitan and

shattered the silence in the church, loudly demanding, "Why do you fail to bless your Tsar and Sovereign?" Philip turned and answered in a calm voice, "I do not acknowledge the Christian Tsar in his outrageous behavior." "Look out, my monk friend," warned Ivan. "Don't intrude into my affairs, or you will bitterly regret it." But Ivan knew that Metropolitan Philip was an honest and direct man who would never grovel or act contrary to the dictates of his conscience. When Philip was a monk living in the north, he kept quiet about the Tsar, but when he became head of the Church, he took upon himself the responsibility to bear witness. Philip gathered the clergy and discussed how to restrain Ivan's extraordinary cruelty. No one supported Philip; all were silent because they were afraid.

When the next conflict arose between the Tsar and the Metropolitan in the cathedral, Ivan resolved to do away with Philip. His method was cowardly, as is typical of all lovers of violence. He would not do the deed himself; that would fall to his henchmen. He summoned the church leadership and forced them to strip Philip of the title of Metropolitan. During a service, the *oprichniki* broke into the church, arrested Philip and ordered church leaders to strip him of his Metropolitan's vestments. The Tsar's henchmen then tied Philip in an open-air carriage—it was winter—and took him to the Kremlin to subject him to an unfair trial. Judgement came swift and cruel, and Philip was sentenced to exile in a monastery north of Moscow.

Several times the order went out to starve him to death, but Philip was used to long fasts and possessed of a strong constitution, so he lived. When the Tsar was attempting to subjugate the people of Great Novgorod, he decided to stop by the monastery where he had imprisoned Philip. He sent his assistant and chief executioner, Maliuta Skuratov, with these words: "Go, let Philip come and bless us." Maliuta entered the monastery and found Philip at prayer with the other monks.

In the gallery in Troitse-Sergiev Posad, there hangs a 19th-century [painting](#) of Philip on his knees before an icon. He is gaunt and exhausted-looking, but serene in his faith in God. At the same time, Maliuta Skuratov—looking like the grim reaper in his black cloak—breaks into the scene. "Bless us for our dastardly deed!" he bellows. Philip is unmoved. Enraged, Maliuta throws himself at Philip and strangles him with the pillow on which Philip was kneeling. Leaving the body in the church, Maliuta stepped out and informed the monks, "Your Philip has died of poisoning. Bury him!"

Thus ended the life of Metropolitan Philip. Ivan the Terrible died a short time later. Ivan died young; he was not even sixty. He died after having killed one of his sons in a senseless rage and lost many close relatives and friends. He died alone, in deep and bitter despair. His legacy is bloody and violent. By contrast, Philip was canonized by the Church. Many centuries later, he remains a great example, having done what was right regardless of the consequences. Life is short. If we cannot do what is right in this one, is there any use in planning for the next?

We all know too well that man is weak, that he lacks the strength to fulfill his duty here on earth. But we remember the saints and ask that they pray for us and intercede with the Lord Jesus Christ, so that He will raise us out of the ashes and make us servants of His truth through the strength of his love.

Amen.

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Not long after that sermon, Fr Men gave what would be his final lecture. Much like Martin Luther King Jr.'s last [speech](#), Men's lecture, delivered the night before he was assassinated, proved to a culminating, self-realizing word—a last will and testament. He had been leading a group through the history of world religion and philosophy, arriving finally at a talk on the essence of Christianity, calling for a return to the living heartbeat of the faith:

People sometimes say that Christ proclaimed a new moral code. He said, “A new commandment I give you: Love one another as I have loved you.” There had been an earlier commandment about love. The words “Love your neighbour as yourself” come from Moses. But Christ gave the commandment a quite special note by adding “as I have loved you,” because through his love for humanity he stayed with us on this dirty, bloodstained and sinful earth, just to be beside us... Christianity is not a new ethical system, but a new life which leads us into direct contact with God...¹

While still a young priest, Fr Men had [celebrated](#) the end of Christendom in bracing terms: “*Faith, having lost its ties with the state, has been freed from the dead weight of its nominal adherents.*” It is better, he had argued, that people no longer call themselves Christian while giving themselves to the worst evils. “When Christianity was made into an official ideology, the consequences were more often than not ugly consequences and church life was poisoned.” But it is important to note that Men celebrated the demise of the old ideological order not only because it brought about the end of all kinds of evils but also because it opened the way toward new goods: “There are grounds for saying that in the twentieth century, contrary to the forecasts of sceptics, religion has begun to play a role in some ways greater than in past centuries.” He saw signs of new life in the arts, in philosophy, in ecumenical and inter-religious dialog. But he also saw the signs of a reactionary and nostalgic nationalism. In that spirit, he warned against fretting about the rise of “secularism.” Some are “tormented,” he realized, by the question: “Does the church have a future?” But the truth is, they are tormented because they fear, down in their bones, that the church is merely a human institution. Their hearts have lost hold on Christ's promise: “I will build my church and the powers of death shall not prevail against it” (Mt 16:18).

Over the years, Fr Men often observed that human beings struggle to live in direct contact with God because of our evolutionary development. Our nature, he argued, formed by the struggle for survival, instinctively resists the divine-human nature of Jesus at work in us. “Many words of Christ are still incomprehensible to us even now,” he says in that final talk, “because we are still Neanderthals in spirit and morals.” So, Men concludes, humanity is still in its beginnings in large part because Christians have not yet learned to live fully with and within Christ. “Each one of us is a pagan. At difficult times we are always ready to have our fortunes told, to forecast. The pagan lives within us because in each of us there are forty thousand years of paganism and only two thousand

¹ All the following quotations from Fr Men's final lecture are taken from Arturas Lukasevicius, “A Critical Evaluation of Fr Aleksandr Vladimirovich Men's Approach to the Religions of the World in Light of the Declaration Dominus Iesus,” (PhD thesis; The Open University; 2007), 230-248.

years of Christianity.”² But Christ is patient. He has all the time in the world because he has overcome the world for our sake:

So if we once again ask ourselves the question, what is the essence of Christianity, then we must answer: it is God-manhood, the joining of the finite and temporal human spirit with the eternal Divinity, it is the sanctification of the flesh, for from that moment when the Son of Man took on our joys and our sufferings, our love, our labours, from that moment, nature, the world, everything in which he was, in which he rejoiced, as a man and as God-man, no longer is rejected, no longer is degraded but is raised up to a new level, and is sanctified. Christianity is the sanctification of the world, the victory over evil, over darkness, over sin. But it is the victory of God. It began on the night of the resurrection, and it will continue as long as the world exists.

Fr Men’s murder, like St Philip’s, like MLK’s, proves that God’s victory is constantly disputed. The forces of death tirelessly reassert themselves against the new order brought about by Christ and in him. Time after time, here as well as there, dictators of one style or another rise to power—more often than not flanked by a patriarch or two. But Fr Men’s witness reminds us that their antics—and they are no more than that—are doomed to fail because God has already disarmed the powers, has already made a spectacle of them. If Holy Week means anything, then, it means there never can be, because there never *needs* to be, a holy war.

Chaired with the martyrs and confessors, prophets and faithful witnesses, Fr Men’s words continue to give voice to the Word of the Lord, a voice which “sounds like the sound of many waters” (Ezek. 43:2), the same voice John the Revelator heard—first from the mouth of Christ (Rev. 1:15), then from the great multitude (Rev. 19:6). This was their song: “Alleluia: for the Lord God omnipotent reigns.” No power on earth—no Putin, no Kirill—can silence or ignore that refrain for long. Our hope is sure: in the end, the many waters that are the voice of the Lord will wash away the corruption that has inflamed and rotted our lives. In the meantime, these waters will continue to give us life, refreshing us, cleansing us, but also eroding—ever so slowly, but nonetheless surely—the foundations of all worldly systems, including our own political and religious orders. On the strength of that confidence, we can pray with Fr Men to be more and more completely merged with Christ who is our life:

Jesus Christ, Son of God,
Who has shown us the Heavenly Father,
May we be Your disciples.

You promised to give peace to our souls,
But You do not desire negligent servants.
Give us the strength to stand watch and to stay awake.

² Alexander Men, *About Christ and the Church* (Crestwood, NY: St Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 1996), 52.

May we be faithful to You, and to You alone.
Teach us to do everything in Your presence.
Make us Your children.

Give us the strength to fulfill Your will and Your covenant.
Teach us to do good.
Protect us from the yeast of the Pharisees.

Teach us to see what is important in life, to see only what is necessary.
Help us to be free from sin, idleness, and laxity of spirit.

Let everything that is good and wonderful in this world remind us of You.
Let the evil of this world be a warning to us.

May we see in sinners a mirror of our own iniquities.
Teach us to see brothers in those who think differently than we do,
In those of other confessions, and in unbelievers.

Let us remember how short life is,
So that the memory of our mortality
Would be the force behind our work and ministry.

Instill within us the ability to forgive, to love, and to give.
Teach us to live in prayer.
Let us now be participants in Your Kingdom.

Teach us to hate sin, but not the sinner.
Give us the power to testify about You.
Let us not be vain, petty, or shallow.

May You be our Alpha and Omega in this life and in eternity.
May we be Your disciples.

Amen.³

³ Alexander Men, *An Inner Step toward God: Writings and Teachings on Prayer* (Brewster, MA: Paraclete Press, 2014), 106-107.