

## **The Church in the Contemporary World: The 2024 Conference of the Fellowship of St Alban and St Sergius**

*Rev Dr Stephen Sharman*

The annual summer conference is an important feature of the life of the Fellowship of St Alban and St Sergius. We may begin, therefore, by saying a few words about the Fellowship. The Fellowship has its offices at 1 Canterbury Road, Oxford, England. It began in England during the inter-war years as an expression of the friendship between English Anglicans and Russian Orthodox Christians in exile as a result of the Bolshevik Revolution of 1917. There had always been an interest in the Church of England, especially among Anglo-Catholics, for Orthodoxy and members of the Fellowship continued this interest. Their concern for the persecuted Church in Russia found an avenue in practical assistance, theological discussions and conferences. Certain commanding figures were involved in the life of the Fellowship including Metropolitan Kallistos (Ware), Nicolas Zernov, Fr Sergei Bulgakov, Metropolitan Anthony (Bloom), Fr Andrew Louth, Fr Eric Mascall, Archbishop Michael Ramsey of Canterbury, Archbishop Rowan Williams of Canterbury and many other theologians and historians. The Fellowship publishes a journal, *Sobornost*.

The summer conference of the Fellowship of St Alban and St Sergius was held in St Stephen's House, Oxford, England, from Wednesday, the 28th of August, 2024, to Friday, the 30th of August 2024. St Stephen's House is an Anglican Theological college in Oxford which has a history of Anglo-Catholicism. The House moved in 1980 into the former monastery of the Society of St John the Evangelist (the Cowley Fathers). As a result, the House gained residential facilities, common room, classrooms, dining room, library and three places of worship. These are the Church of St John the Evangelist, the Founder's Chapel (on the fourth floor under the roof) and the House Chapel. The walls of the House Chapel are covered with the names of members of the

Society of St John the Evangelist. Among them, this writer noticed the name of Fr Roland Palmer who served in Canada and who was one of the compilers of the 1962 Canadian Book of Common Prayer. It is always possible to find a Canadian link in the United Kingdom.

The heart and reason for any academic conference are the papers which are presented and the discussion which arises from the papers. This conference had seven lectures which explored areas in which the Church engaged in the contemporary world. This was the theme of the conference: "The Church in the Contemporary World." Let us now consider these lectures. The first lecture was given by the Revd Dr Jane Baun of Wadham College, Oxford, and was named, "Mother Maria Skobtsova -prayer for the contemporary world." Dr Baun described Mother Maria's life from her early years in Russia to her life of service in Paris in the inter war years to her death in a concentration camp. Mother Maria had become a devout member of the Russian Orthodox Church. Dr Baun concluded that Mother Maria brought Christ into the lives of the people in need of her time by means of her prayers and her service of others. She suggested that we in our time could do likewise.

The second lecture was given by Archpriest Andrey Kordochkin of the University of Gottingen and entitled "Is Holy War possible in the Twenty-first Century." This was an unsettling paper in the light of the war between Russia and the Ukraine. He talked about the collaboration of the Patriarch of Moscow with the Russian government led by Mr Putin. What can be done when people are sincerely convinced that their war is a holy war in the defence of Holy Russia? He showed us pictures of Russian soldiers depicted as saints and martyrs. This was unsettling because some of us could remember similar identifications in Western European history. The Church in our contemporary world must cope with this and guide the faithful in this situation.

The third lecture was given by Dr Lauren Morry of the University of Oxford and named "Crosses and Crescents: navigating the faith traffic in modern Britain." Her paper was based on her research into interfaith dialogue in Birmingham, England. She described a population shift in which the number of Christians declined, and the number of Moslems increased. She said that interfaith dialogue was not merely talking but required practical work of love and she gave examples. She thought that our basic humanity went before

serious dialogue. Her talk reminded us that the contemporary world was our world in which we live and witness to Christ our Lord.

The fourth lecture was a distressing one. In it, the speaker, Mr Brendan Metcalfe, CEO of the Friends of the Holy Land, spoke about the lot of Christians in the Gaza Strip, East Jerusalem, the West Bank, and the Kingdom of Jordan. He called his talk “The Faithful Few, unemployed for months and living with fear and uncertainty: perspectives of Palestinian Christians in the Holy Land, following the events of 7th October 2023.” Mr Metcalfe stressed that his organization was a humanitarian one and not a political one. He described the practical work that he and his colleagues did to help people. He spoke of vocational training for teenagers so that they could find jobs. Mr Metcalfe described a programme which supplied families with water tanks which they could fill on the few days in a month when water was available. He spoke of the suffering that Christians in the Gaza Strip and the West Bank endured during the war in the Gaza Strip and the increase of ‘settler violence’ in the West Bank. The situation which he described is an exceedingly distressing one.

The fifth lecture was given by Dr Aaron Ceross and named “Artificial Intelligence and human personhood.” This writer confesses sadly that he does not understand artificial intelligence and that for him modern technology is a partially closed book. Accordingly, he will not attempt to explain the lecture. He can say that those people present at the conference who do understand these things were impressed by the lecture.

The sixth lecture was given by Dr Elizabeth Theokritoff of the IOCS in Cambridge and called “Christian Witness in a Time of Environmental Crisis.” She gave an inspiring talk on the theme of how Christians might respond to the environmental crisis of our times. She stressed that Christians must produce a characteristically Christian position as the voice of the Church. The Church’s position must be based, therefore, on theology as well as on science. She referred her listeners to the doctrine of creation as a foundation for Christian thought about the environment.

Shermara Fletcher Hoyte of Churches Together in England was at the last moment not able to attend the conference and so the conference did not hear her lecture “Racial Justice and the Church.” This was deeply unfortunate because racial justice is an important issue in the contemporary Church. It

would have been good to have heard her views on the subject. She was replaced by Dr Daniel Dolley who nobly filled the gap with a paper entitled “Why is God the Father.” This was a strictly theological lecture which he illustrated with reproductions of Icons. It was fascinating to experience Icons being used as matter for a theological discussion.

Worship is an essential part of a Fellowship conference. The services at this conference were all held in the House Chapel. We had an Orthodox Liturgy of St John Chrysostom which was served by Fr Boniface Carroll, an Antiochene priest. We also had A Roman Catholic Mass celebrated by Fr Mark. This Mass was according to the Novus Ordo and celebrated Eastward. When asked about this afterwards, Fr Mark stated firmly that this was the proper way to celebrate Mass. There was an Anglican Eucharist which was celebrated by the Right Reverend Paul Thomas, Bishop of Oswestry. This Eucharist was according to Common Worship and celebrated Eastward. Bishop Thomas wore a fiddleback chasuble and a maniple. There was also a service of Evensong according to the Book of Common Prayer, Compline and Orthodox Morning Prayers and Litya. We covered all the bases.

And so the conference ended. The lectures were first class and the discussions which followed them explored many topics which the lectures inspired. The worship was well organised and devout. The accommodations in St Stephen’s House were comfortable and the meals were very good. The staff of the House were pleasant and very helpful. St Stephen’s House was an excellent setting for this conference. The members of the Fellowship now await next year’s conference.

*About the reviewer:* Father Stephen Sharman is a priest at St. Nicholas parish in Narol, Manitoba. He received his PhD from the University of Wales Trinity Saint David in 2013. The title of his dissertation was *Visions of Light in the Writings of the Venerable Bede*.