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campus commentary



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Dear Brother:

It was Invocavit Sunday and no one had asked me to preach. Theophilus' pulpit is normally wide open, but he had decided to take over himself. (By the way, Theophilus' philosophy of visiting preachers is interesting. He insists that if the chance Circuit Rider (meaning us) is better than he is, his congregation will get a treat; if he is not — as so often happens — Theophilus feels that his congregation will be very glad to see him back in his pulpit on the following Sunday.)

As a result, however, of the absence of invitations, a snowy Saturday morning found us driving to St. Louis to celebrate the 25th anniversary of the ordination of a younger brother (in the flesh). After a term in heathen Africa he had returned to pagan America to build a little church northwest of St. Louis. In a few years he found himself overwhelmed by the little boxes, all in a row, which mark the ragged edges of our great cities.

The occasion was really not unusual — and yet in a strange way it was memorable. There were four crowded services. Each one closed with a speech by the president of the congregation, and the presentation of a gift and a bound volume of congratulatory messages. It amused his older cynical brothers that the cash gift and the usual scroll were rescued by the president of the congregation at the end of each of the first three services — to be used again at the next service. It was like playing an ecclesiastical shell game. Now you see it, now you don't, and we on-lookers were tense with excitement. When brother J finally got it "for keeps" at the end of the fourth service, we all breathed a sigh of relief. We also agreed that the heavy volume of congratulatory messages would make a good doorstep on windy days.

And yet there was something moving about the bustling festivities. There was the thoughtful sermon by the president of The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod — there were the scores of little first generation Lutherans under foot at the end of Sunday School — there was the inarticulate voice of good people — there was the splendidly humbling experience of the four brothers who knew that they were present only because they were relatives of the jubilarian.

At the close of the sermon I gave myself up to my own meditation on the holy ministry. It is still a profession which is unique on this side of the veil. A ray of sunlight was coming through the window and I watched the dancing motes with idle interest. My mind turned to an axiom of church history: "No church can permanently rise higher than its ministry." There may be momentary exceptions but in the long view the welfare of the church depends upon its clergy. The great doctrine of the universal priesthood, brought back into the world by the Reformation, has not invalidated this truth. Practically speaking it has merely increased the **teaching** responsibility of the clergy. We may lay this truth down anywhere. If we seek power in the church, there must be power in the pulpit. If we are looking for an emphasis on soul-winning, or Bible study or the prayer life, we must find these first in the pulpit before we can find them in the pew. There is, therefore, every reason for giving heed to our ministry day-by-day and year-by-year.

We must remember again and again the strange and important fact that the ministry of the new covenant is at one and the same time the **humblest** and the **proudest** of all callings. It is of the essence of our ministry that we must begin where the lowliest child begins — "Except ye become as little children." This is peculiarly and terribly relevant to the holy ministry. I believe that all great preachers have had something childlike about them — a sense of wonder, sublime faith and unquestioning obedience.

The first requirement for a ministry of power is therefore that we daily take our pride in our hands and deliver it to the humility of the Cross—the humility of Him who remembering eternity washed the feet of His disciples — the humility of Him who by His lowliness atoned for our pride

— the lowliness of Him who said: "Come follow me for I am meek and lowly of heart." So we say to our contemporary world: "Come follow me for He who liveth in me is meek and lowly of heart." We daily seek forgiveness from Him — and then, forgiven, we may daily come back with the simplicity and humility of little children — and face all our problems over again — in Christ.

The notes in the sunbeam danced more swiftly, and I suddenly remembered the magnificent scene in the Prophet Isaiah. You will recall that he was standing before the Throne of God, high and lifted up: "Then flew one of the seraphim unto me, having a live coal in his hand which he had taken with the tongs from off the altar: And he laid it upon my mouth and said: 'Lo this hath touched thy lips; and thine iniquity is taken away and thy sin purged.' Also I heard the voice of the Lord saying: 'Who will go for us?' Then said I: 'Here am I. Send me.'" This, then, is the very heart of our ministry: The vision of God high and lifted up — the live coal from the altar which brings God to human lips — the forgiveness of sins — the resulting lifting of the soul and dedication of the heart: "Here am I. Send me."

And so it has been in all of history. Always the same thing! Eight hundred years later an old man was sitting on the shore of an island in the Aegean Sea. He was the last of that first great generation that had nailed the eagles of Rome to the Cross of Jesus Christ. He was now alone. No one else was left. The last thing he had to say to the world — and the very last thing he said about God—was exactly the same vision which had come to Isaiah eight hundred years earlier. He saw God, the angels, the Throne — but now the great burden of the ministry of the new and last covenant — a Lamb in the midst of the Throne and the angelic choirs chanting: "Worthy is the Lamb that was slain to receive power and riches and wisdom and strength and honor and glory and blessing."

"When they were come to a place called Calvary, there they crucified Him." This was the way the Lamb had come to the Throne. This was the ultimate vision of God, as one who was stricken, smitten and afflicted, a man of sorrows and acquainted with grief — the imputed grief of man who had lost God and for whom the Throne was empty and the song unheard. It is our task and our magnificent privilege to set Him again upon His Throne and to speak to men of the song which He puts into the hearts of His undershepherds wherever and whenever and whoever they may be.

* * *

I am very happy to report that Theophilus has gone literary. The last time he appeared in the office on a rainy day the pockets of his 1951 raincoat were filled with paperbacks. I asked him to tell me something about them, and he came through with the following epistle. He also informed me that he would keep us supplied for some time to come with reports on his curious but nevertheless interesting reading. Theophilus speaks:

"Luther tells us that revivals of theology have to be preceded by revivals of letters. Are we pastors doing our part today? 'Letters' involves the modern novel. I get the impression that except for a quick peek at paperbacks on the newsstands most of us do not dip deeply or widely into fiction. We get a bad conscience because we are not reading 'How to Develop a Tithing Church' or because we are reading at all when we should be out calling. Sometimes we dismiss modern fiction and letters because so many novels are cheap and tawdry — a true point about many of them, by the way.

"I thought I'd pass on to you the names of three recent novels every minister ought to read. Whoever digests them will find his view of life enlarging, his style improving, his doctrine of man clarified. One is a couple of years old and can be bought in a Fawcett paperback for four bits: Conrad Richter's **A Simple Honourable Man**. Richter is one of America's most prestigious authors; his book about a Lutheran clergyman was well received critically. How many of us read it? [Editorial Note: "I didn't."]

"This Spring two very fine novels dealt with religious themes. William Golding (who wrote **Lord of the Flies**, a book which every one of our high schoolers or collegians reads) produced **The Spire**. It's the story of an obsessed man who builds the spire of a medieval cathedral but provides no foundation. It topples, and the lives of all around him suffer for his obsession. Even better is Richard Kim's **The Martyred**, another best-seller. This one tells of the Communist shooting of twelve Christian ministers and the sparing of two others. You cannot read this without recalling many of the major themes of the faith. Whoever has a hammock should reserve it for a couple of summer afternoons so that he can read all three. If I get around to reading any preacher books, I'll drop you a note soon."

Theophilus

* * *

Off-the-record-section: How is your vicar doing these days? I know, of course, that most of them are all right. However, I have been hearing some strange tales lately. The trouble does not seem to be (as it was in my day) that they know too little. Today they know too much. They have read one or two books and are ready to take over completely from the old fossil who is running the affairs of St. Beelzebub's temporarily. There is the character who wants to preach his own series of sermons for which the congregation has been waiting impatiently since its founding eighty years ago. There is the humble soul who questions his bishop about his orthodoxy: "Do you or do you not believe in the Virgin Birth? I have read something in some publication that you do not." There is the popular Lutheran youth leader who always tears his pants on sleigh rides with the Juniors and somehow hooks this experience up with Matthew 28.19. There is the great white father whose brand new wife tells the preacher's spouse how to cook and how to run the Ladies Aid — and so on. A few weeks ago I spent an evening with Theophilus. At the moment he is patiently enduring such an ecclesiastical affliction. After a recital of the strange doings of his vicar he said: "Despite all this I think I will give the guy a break when I report to the seminary faculty. After all, he may turn out all right." With that statement, I must confess, I disagreed vehemently. First of all, it is not fair to the seminary faculties who must be responsible for recommending these fugitives from humility to the church. They ought to know what goes on. Secondly, these are the characters who finally become the hair shirts of all pastoral conferences. They will harangue the brethren at great length at every opportunity. They will have the answer to every "Kasualfrage." They will assail the orthodoxy of a brother who buried a man by the name of Murphy. My attitude may be due to senility but it is simple and evangelical: "Out with them. Don't let them into the ministry. The Church cannot afford these barnacles on her sides, and our respect for the ministry and its vitally necessary humility is too great to be lost in the arrogance and cheapness of our time." Many years ago when I was a teacher at one of our seminaries — a curious and momentary lowering of synodical standards — I had some of these characters — proud, dogmatic and sure in their ignorance — in my classes. I still remember my great joy over flunking them into ecclesiastical oblivion as quickly as possible. At the end of forty years I am still inclined to feel that this has been my greatest contribution to the life of the Church Militant.

* * *

Strange doings — or-what-goes-on-here — Department: I have received a letter from the editor of one of the journals that are devoted to the constructive task of tearing down, in a brotherly way, all confidence and trust in synodical officers, seminary professors, Lutheran university teachers, and such ilk. The letter graciously offers me space to refute various charges of heresy, blasphemy, lying, cowardice, and "leading souls to hell (verbatim)."

My answer, of course, is "no." I am recording it here because I know that it will promptly be reproduced and forwarded to pastors and parents of students during the season dedicated to the study and remembrance of the risen glory of our Lord and His strange generosity for Peter and Thomas.

Why am I declining to fill up the space which has been so graciously offered to me? The situation is this: "I have called you a renegade, a heretic, a misleader of souls. I have tried to tear down everything that you have tried to build. I have attempted to drain away your life blood by asking congregations not to support your work. I have implied that you are a liar and completely dishonest. And now I come riding up on my white horse of righteousness to the cave where you are hiding from the storm: 'Come out you rat and defend yourself against my charges. You have already been condemned, but I will give you a last chance to say something before the faggots are lighted. So come out fighting. I will read your stuff with the microscope of fear and the telescope of hate.'"

And there is the end of the matter — until next month. Voice of a thoughtful brother in the rear: "Aren't you impugning motives? Aren't you seeing ghosts and dragons?" Answer: "No. I have compiled a list of words and phrases applied to enemies by this journal and I am ready to submit them to any brother who feels that there is more than one side to this question."

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Correspondence Section: As he grows older Theophilus apparently is becoming more and more articulate. In addition to his literary criticism he now wrote me the following letter — all within two weeks.

Do you remember the old German saying: "Occasionally a blind chicken also finds a kernal of corn." I have applied that to your last effusion — I liked your remarks about the evolution business — all of it, that is, except the suggestion in the last paragraph that you are apparently going to try to get out some sort of statement on the matter.

The older I get, the more I appreciate the wisdom of the preacher. He was right — "to every thing there is a season, and a time to every purpose under the heaven." And when he says that there is "a time to keep silence, and a time to speak" I find myself asking what time it is for the Church. So far as the "accepted time" is concerned, the time to speak is always NOW. So far as the "day of salvation" is concerned, it is always NOW.

But so far as judging whether a scientific idea or a political structure or an economic system is valid, the time may well be tomorrow or next year or a hundred years from now. I seriously question whether in a revolutionary age such as ours the Church can give a quick answer to every question as it arises. Our first job, it seems to me, is to be very sure that we know what the question really is and what it really implies. "There is a time to keep silence," to listen, to wait, to take things under advisement. I want the Church to be relevant to its day and to the questions of its day, but sometimes the highest expression of this relevance is that silence which says, "This is a new thing you are asking and I am not sure that I fully understand your question. You do the talking for a while and I will listen, and perhaps when I am clear on just what you are saying I will have something to say in the way of an answer."

Applied to your present situation, what I am suggesting is that maybe we are not ready yet to ask your men the right questions, and maybe they would not be ready yet to give us an answer even if we were asking the right questions. I can live with a lot of unanswered questions, as long as I know that serious-minded men of God are wrestling with them and trying to find answers. So I would be satisfied with the assurance that your men are humble men of God who gladly hear and learn His Word, who regularly nourish their faith at the Sacrament, who go about their scientific business with a deeply Lutheran sense of vocation, and who listen with an open mind to the questions and criticisms of their brothers and sisters in the Faith.

Some day, I would expect, these men will be ready with an answer that most of us can accept because we will recognize it as an answer given from inside the circle of the Faith. Or maybe they won't be the ones to give the answer. Maybe they will simply help to prepare the way for another generation which will give the answer. That's all right. The Church has been around for a long time and it is going to be here as long as the world stands. So we can wait, if we must.

I am not unaware, of course, of your public relations problem. If I were in your place I am sure that I would like to go to Detroit next year with some kind of a statement that would confound all of the critics and gladden the hearts of all of us who are for you. But don't underestimate the plain human decency of the brethren. We know this evolution question is a tough one. I can think of half a dozen equally tough ones that we could ask you if we wanted to. (There are some real doozers in psychology and sociology!) We're asking them because they are on our hearts and minds and consciences. But we are not pressing you for an answer. All we ask is that you not forget the question and that you keep working at it.

Silently yours,
Theophilus

* * *

News and Views: Questions about the second session of the Vatican Council are multiplying. There can be little doubt that the second session of the Council was not nearly as progressive and effective as the first. The important "schema" on the liturgical life of the Church was adopted,

but this was the Council's only contribution of any significance. Apparently the Curia really swung into action with its delaying tactics and they were joined by the three moderators who did not help the situation at all. How much of this roadblock is due to the new Pope is somewhat difficult to tell at this time and distance.

One of the most curious developments in the Council was noticed only very slightly in the public press. *Commonweal*, the liberal Catholic journal, pays more attention to it. It writes: "By vote of 1114 to 1074 the fathers decided to include their exposition of the Blessed Mother's place in the economy of salvation in the 'schema' on the 'church' rather than in a separate statement. The very closeness of the vote, however, is indicative of significant differences among the assembled bishops on the issue. And it is by no means a matter of interest only to theologians. Though usually denied prior to the Council, the fathers now appear ready to recognize that devotion to Mary has, in some places, usurped the primacy of devotion to Christ. . . . The frequent complaint of the liturgists that in some churches the side altar is more prominent, better cared for, and more beautifully decorated than the center altar is a case in point of a seemingly minor practical discrepancy with important major theological implications. (Please note this very carefully.) At the very least it then supports the contention of Father Yves Congar that some type of Marian piety conceals a latent monophysitism — as if Christ's humanity is forgotten, as if Christ cannot be approached directly. . . . It should be made clear beyond the possibility of popular Catholic or non-Catholic confusion that in Christ is our salvation."

Before we turn away from this topic it might be well to turn to the inaugural speech of the new Pope which was the subject of considerable comment in both Catholic and non-Catholic publications. The *Commonweal* describes it: "The Pope is here in dialogue with modern thought — his whole speech written in the style of modern theology. It opens with the summary of Pope John's contribution to the renewal of the Church. Then follow several Christological paragraphs of such extraordinary force that the text resembles a solemn hymn to Christ, the Lord of the Church. He is the one Mediator between God and man, the One source of truth, and our thinking and acting in the Church must be altogether derived from Him. The Christological theme echoing the Pope's conciliatory speech in his last session as Cardinal Montini, is so powerful and surprisingly emphatic that one wonders if this contains a hint with reference to a discussion which will come up later in the Council, namely where to place the blessed Virgin in the church and what specific role she has in the Christian's daily experience of his redemption." Apparently that has now come to pass — not by a very great majority, but at least it has come. For that we can thank God, the Lord of the Church.

* * *

These paragraphs are culled from a journal called "The Cresset." It is written by Missouri Synod Lutherans for the rest of Christendom. I am the author of the following:

Many a winter night in the past three months I have spent in what I call "reading around." I am, of course, aware of the fact that my scholarly colleagues look upon this process with horror. It is, they say, the typical dilettantism of the administrator — by definition a red-necked extrovert who should stick to scanning telephone books for the names of rich widows so that his scholarly companions in the way can have more time and money to criticize dilettante administrators.

Nevertheless, I have done it. My desk is damning evidence of it. I have dipped into Tillich, Bultmann, Bonhoeffer, Camus, Sartre, Goetz (What! You don't know Goetz?), Barth, Brunner, Ahrendt, and so on. I have ignored practically everybody who writes clear, unmistakable German or English. If I can understand what a modern or post-modern theologian is saying on first reading, I assume he isn't important.

(Voice from the front of the classroom: "This is just some more of O.P.'s crypto-obscurantism or, even worse, his crypto-anti-intellectualism. Pay no attention to it.")

Be that as it may, I must confess that during my reading hours I felt impelled, again and again, to rise from my chair and holler: "Hey, this ain't fair! You are killing all the meaning of words. You take a perfectly good Scriptural word, give it a new meaning, and then proceed to build a theological or philosophical system on your private semantics." This makes me mad. I have learned not to mind being bamboozled (God knows it happens often enough), but I do object to being led astray so obviously and contemptuously. If these boys would make their theology as clear as John 3:16, I would listen hungrily; but it seems to me they are using their minds to destroy God's gift of clarity, so that even the divine gift of grace becomes obscure and dark. Examples: Old word God; Newspeak: Ground of our being. Old word Gospel; Newspeak: A collection of kerygmatic folk tales. Old word Christ; Newspeak: The spirit within. Old word Resurrection; Newspeak: The story of some hysterical women which need not be true to be effective.

Of course, the fundamentalists are just as bad. If my up-to-the-minute theological friends insist on making words just as foggy as possible, my fundamentalist cronies raid their freezers for snowballs shaped by the cold hands of theologians long since dead, both physically and intellectually. On both sides there is a dismaying forgetfulness of God the Holy Spirit Who, Someone once said, "will lead you into all truth." The last I heard, He was still alive and brooding over the dark waters of our chaos. In Him alone I can really become "Honest to God" and "Honest with God" with that kind of humble spiritual honesty which we all need against the gainsayers to the left and to the right.

* * *

Now I have reached the end of my allotted space, and have not said one word about the University. Perhaps it is better so. I would hope, however, that, as we approach the end of another year and five hundred graduates march across the chancel, you will find time to include us in your morning and evening prayers. Pray that we have given them skill, knowledge, freedom and faith so that they will be ready to do what needs to be done.

O. P. Kretzmann