

ADDRESS TO THE GENERAL RETREAT
OF THE SOCIETY OF THE HOLY TRINITY

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On my twenty-first birthday, a college friend penned some verses about me in a homemade greeting card and prophesied, among other things:

"You'll be the first of Luther's crew / Claimed by the Holy Romans too!"

I don't know what she meant by this, although it does give a clue to my theological stability over the years. If she meant it as a prediction that I would become a Roman Catholic, it hasn't happened. But, in fact, the prophecy was already too late in 1964. In that year one of "Luther's crew," Max Lackmann, the German Lutheran ecumenist who had worked for an evangelical catholic reading of the Augsburg Confession, for Roman Catholic affirmation of the Confession, and for Lutheran-Roman Catholic reconciliation, was received into the Roman Church. But he was not the first of "Luther's crew" to "return to Rome." That distinction probably goes to George Witzel, who had studied under Luther at Wittenberg, married a girl from Luther's home town of Eisenach, served as pastor of Eisenach and as a religious consultant to the Duke of Saxony in Dresden. But Witzel was no prize trophy for Rome. While he opted for the pope on the Tiber instead of "the pope on the Elbe" (as he called Luther), he found no great receptivity in the Roman Church for renewal and reconciliation based on a return to the "consensus of the first five centuries." Nor was Rome ready to endorse vernacular liturgy, communion in both kinds, or married clergy. Witzel's humanistic approach to reform, so front-and-center in 1520, had passed out of fashion in the confessional hardening that began in the 1540s.

In that confessional hardening, the Western Catholic Church split into competing confessions that were encoded into law. We today are not only the heirs of Martin Luther's reform movement; we are also the heirs of the *lex reformandi*. When the Lutheran Confession of Augsburg was adopted in cities and lands by vote of city councils and by order of princes, church and society had to be reformed in the light of this Confession. That meant that laws or ordinances had to be drawn up and enacted. There's nothing unusual about this. A reform that fails to attain legal status and to be incarnated in institutions will fail. It will remain just a good idea. But if it is encoded in law, a reform can change people's behavior and even their thinking, no matter how much they may at first begrudge the change. Through law — church ordinances — and official teaching on a popular level — catechisms — Lutheranism became the confessional reality of the Catholic Church in some places across central and northern Europe. Church life went on, but with significant changes that were inculcated into the hearts and minds of the people through consistent preaching and teaching and new patterns of worship.

In most places implementing these reforms required a break with the local hierarchy and therefore also a break in communion with the bishop of Rome. But Lutherans did not think they were breaking with the catholic tradition. They asserted twice in their Confession — once after the twenty-one doctrinal articles and again after the seven pastoral articles — that their churches had not departed, in their teachings and practices, from the Catholic Church, or even the Church of

Rome, insofar as that is known from its ancient writers. Insofar as they were returning to the clear testimonies of Scripture and the church fathers, they implied that the Church under the pope had departed from this tradition. Later on the second Martin, Martin Chemnitz, would examine the Council of Trent and conclude that the Council had proposed a new understanding of tradition that was a novelty in Christian history.

Luther had charged that popes and council could err. The Roman Church was in error. But that does not mean that the Roman Church lacked what was needed to be a true church, because it had the gospel and the sacraments. This does not mean that Luther pitted a spiritual understanding of "church" against a worldly or secular understanding, as some have thought. Rather, he pitted political ties with Rome against the community or assembly of saints gathered for word and sacrament. In his 1520 treatise *On the Papacy at Rome*, Luther wrote: "Not Rome or this place or that place, but baptism, the sacrament, and the gospel are the signs by which the existence of the church in the world can be noticed externally." Almost twenty years later, in a long section of the treatise *On Councils and the Church*, written with a sense of despair over whether the pope — or the emperor — would ever call a free council to deal with the theological differences and practical abuses that were tearing apart Christendom, Luther presented seven external marks of the church. They are:

1. The preaching of the Word;
2. The sacrament of baptism;
3. The sacrament of the altar;
4. The office of the keys publicly exercised;
5. The ordination or calling of ministers;
7. The holy possession of the sacred cross.

In addition to these external marks, Luther went on to say that Christians would be identified by outward signs of the sanctifying work of the Holy Spirit as they observed the second table of the law, that is, obeying the commandments having to do with honoring one's parents and others in authority and serving one's neighbor.

As far as Luther was concerned, the Evangelical Churches had these marks of a true church. They had all the means of grace that God supplies and all the means of response God expects of his chosen people. But — and this is important — he admitted that these marks could also be found in the Roman Church. They also had the gospel of the Scripture. It was not being proclaimed clearly, but the Roman Church was not lacking it. The Church under the pope also had the sacraments of baptism and Holy Communion, the office of the keys, called and ordained ministers, public prayer, praise and thanksgiving, the sign of the cross, and the Spirit-inspired good works of the saints.

It was precisely because Luther took seriously the empirical church and its ministry that he also wanted to take account of the corruptions and weaknesses that afflicted the church. Coming out of the monastic tradition, he knew with St. Bernard of Clairvaux and others that "the church must always be reformed." As a called and installed doctor of the church, he knew it was also his public responsibility to interpret and apply the Scriptures. He repeatedly said that if the pope would allow the gospel, he would do the pope's bidding. Yet it was Luther who was excommunicated — not, for example, Erasmus, who could be more biting than Luther in his satirical criticisms of the papal church.

If Pope Benedict XVI, who was so instrumental in working out the final details of the *Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification*, wants to strike a blow for Lutheran-Roman Catholic rapprochement, let him lift the papal bull of Leo X, *Exsurge Domine*, and declare that Martin Luther is not a heretic. In 1958, Father Joseph Ratzinger addressed a pastoral council in Vienna with these words:

There is no appropriate category in Catholic thought for the phenomenon of Protestantism today (one could say the same of the separated Churches of the East). It is obvious that the old category of "heresy" is no longer of any value. Heresy, for scripture and the early church, includes the idea of a personal decision against the unity of the church, and heresy's characteristic is pertinacia, the obstinacy of one who persists in his or her own private way. This, however, cannot be regarded as an appropriate description of the spiritual situation of the Protestant Christian. In the course of a now-centuries old history, Protestantism had made an important contribution to the realization of Christian faith, fulfilling a positive development of the Christian message and, above all, often giving rise to a sincere and profound faith in the individual non-Catholic Christian, whose separation from the Catholic affirmation has nothing to do with the pertinacia of heresy.... We must try to think our way forward here in the spirit of the New Testament and to apply this spirit to all the things that did not exist then, but are in our world today.

If this still represents the mind of Pope Benedict XVI, then we are grateful that we cannot be regarded as heretics. But can Martin Luther still be regarded as a heretic? He issued his call for reform as a loyal son of the Church. He had widespread support among the clergy and people. His proposals were never dealt with in a free council bringing all theological parties together. If "Protestantism has made an important contribution to the realization of Christian faith," Martin Luther had a lot to do with that. Pope Benedict XVI's admiration for the reformer is well known. Let him advance rapprochement to the next step by rescinding *Exsurge Domine*.

And on our part, let Lutheran Churches declare that the pope is not the Anti-Christ, turn to him for authoritative teaching in matters of faith and morals, and expect his leadership in the pursuit of Christian unity.

In the meantime, we members of the Society of the Holy Trinity are pastors in Lutheran Churches. According to our *Rule*, we are committed to the reconciliation of Lutheran Churches with the bishop and Church of Rome. It is not up to us to say what this reconciliation will look like, although we can use our ecumenically-informed imaginations. What we *can* do is move our Churches closer to the Roman Church by moving them closer to our own confessions, which include the three ecumenical creeds. There are many ways in which our Lutheran Churches have drifted away from their confessional moorings. I need not count them here; our Founding Statement gives such an accounting, and it is worth revisiting that document from time to time. But this Society exists primarily "to work toward the confessional and spiritual renewal of Lutheran churches." It is for that purpose that this ministerium has been formed and convenes in retreats. We will contribute to the renewal of Lutheran Churches by being ourselves renewed in our ordination vows, following the discipline laid out in the *Rule* of this Society.

But let us approach our task with at least as much charity toward our own Churches as Luther showed to the papal Church in his day. For all their theological waywardness, sometimes downright

error, and slippery slide toward unintended apostasy, our churches are still places where the external marks of the church are here and there visible-just as they were in the papal Church before, during, and after Luther's time. If the word of God is not rightly divided into law and gospel, if there is some lack in our use of the means of grace, if the office of the public ministry is not always occupied by reliable incumbents, if our public worship is not quite the "right praise" (*orthodoxia*) it is meant to be, if the costs of discipleship are not being paid, then our work of renewal is clearly laid out. Without the need to be Pharisaical, in the New Testament sense, we need to equip ourselves to offer reliable ministry where we have been called by embracing the training provided in our *Rule*.

We would not claim that our *Rule* is the only way to exercise a faithful ministry; but it is *a* way. Some two hundred colleagues from several Lutheran church bodies have subscribed to the *Rule*. We look forward to those who will do so at this general retreat and be received into this ministerium.

Society of the Holy Trinity

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