

Conception — Gestation — Birth: The *Urgeschichte* of the Society of the Holy Trinity

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Prologue

This retrospective is, I hope, the beginning of a work-in-progress to which others of you will contribute, supplying both your recollections and such documentary evidence as you may possess. In this connection I wish to acknowledge with deepest thanks the invaluable assistance of Pastor Ronald B. Bagnall. With apologies to the late Dean Acheson and with a nod to Proverbs 8:22ff, I acknowledge Ron as one who was "present at creation",^[1] indeed as one who participated in our Society's conception and was one of its midwives. His recollections have done much to fill my own memory-gaps. Whatever errors of fact, distortions, or omissions there may be in the following narrative are my sole responsibility.

In this brief retrospective I have mentioned the names of very few of the principal actors and have focused instead on times, places, issues, and events. The "human side" — personalities, controversies, and defections — I leave to others more able to tell the story.

I. WHERE AND WHEN

Paraphrasing the guileless Nathaniel: "Can anything good come out of New Jersey?"

Of the original thirteen states of the Union, New Jersey has from the very get-go been something of a joke. Ben Franklin likened it to a beer keg with a bung at either end. The place seems altogether lacking in a personality of its own. At its northern end people talk like Brooklynites; halfway down, like Philadelphians; and at the very bottom, like Eastern Shore Marylanders.

So, can anything good come out of New Jersey? Borrowing the disciple Philip's words, I say, "Come and see."

In late September of 1996, in Morristown, New Jersey, at a Jesuit conference center appropriately named, Loyola House, a small company of parish pastors met for prayer, reflection, mutual conversation and consolation, and with the intention of refining and making public a declaration entitled The Society of the Holy Trinity - A Founding Statement." Nineteen signatures were affixed to the statement, most of them by pastors in attendance but at least one at a later time, hence the date, September 1996, without a specified day.^[2]

In the statement the signers said of themselves:

[W]e form together a society of pastors. We commit ourselves to gather regularly for hearing the Word, celebrating the Lord's Supper, prayer, and theological reflection. We will gather to help one another to be faithful to the promises spoken when we were ordained.

The statement concludes:

In repentance and prayer we welcome one another in Christ and form together a pastoral and priestly society, a living *oratorium*, for the renewal of the office to which we have been called.

One might well conclude from these words that our Society was "born" in September of 1996, albeit on a day unspecified. However, sensing the need to line out in greater detail what was encoded in the Founding Statement, the assembled pastors appointed a committee to draft what would become the [Rule of the Society](#). Two members of that committee, Michael McDaniel and Louis Smith are now in the Church Triumphant.

Drafted in July of 1997, the Rule was presented for debate and adoption to a considerably larger gathering of pastors, again at Loyola House, the following September 23, where it was solemnly adopted and subscribed. Ronald Bagnall then conducted the pure ecclesiastical balloting by which, praying for the Spirit's guidance, the infant Society chose its first Senior, Phillip Max Johnson.

If this later meeting marked the Society's birth, what happened at the earlier one? Its conception? No, for by September of 1996 the "baby" was for all intents and purposes fully formed with just a little growing left to do before "seeing the light of day." All the essentials were there in the Founding Statement. They only needed a bit more fleshing out. But, then, if conception didn't occur in September of '96 at Loyola House, then when — and where — did it?

Pinpointing the time and place of a conception can be more than a bit tricky. Not to say that every conception is veiled in mystery. Victor Hugo — so reported his father — was conceived atop a peak in the Vosges Mountains. Some wag has since marked the spot with a monument.

II. How Far Back?

The date was June 18, 1992, the place, Grace Lutheran Church, Trenton, New Jersey. The *pastor loci*, Ronald Bagnall, had called a handful of his colleagues together for "a day of repentance and reflection" in the wake of a most troubling assembly of the New Jersey Synod.

At that assembly a group of ideological feminists (both men and women) had proposed a resolution demanding of the Conference of Bishops that it rescind its recent directive that baptism by ELCA pastors be only in the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. The bishops had stated that the substitution of "inclusive language" for the Divine Name was theologically unacceptable, a violation of the confessional norm. The New Jersey feminists were contending that the bishops' ruling had been without feminist input and should therefore be withdrawn until such input could be secured. (So forthright a ruling from ELCA bishops today is unimaginable.)

While we who had opposed the resolution had managed to get it postponed, the issue was far from dead. To be sure, at a tension-filled confrontation between representatives of the two sides at Synod headquarters on March 24, 1993 — Annunciation Eve! — Bishop Roy Riley would grudgingly rule

that a synod assembly was not the proper arena for arguing a change in fundamental doctrine. We knew, however, that the "revisionists" would be coming back again and again in what has now become a campaign of attrition. So it was that a process began which would culminate in the birth of our Society. This, I submit, was the moment of conception: June 18, 1992.

Little did we know what all this would lead to. That is not to say that the idea of a pastoral oratory had not yet been thought of. It had, by Phillip Johnson.^[3] Our immediate concern, however, was to alert the ELCA to the mounting confessional crisis and to stimulate discussion of the issue throughout the church. To that end we devoted ourselves over the next two years to drafting the statement now known as the 9.5 Theses.

Published and signed at Loyola House on the Feast of the Annunciation, March 25, 1995, the Theses were circulated churchwide and signed by many, both clergy and lay. The Advent 1995 issue of *Lutheran Forum* was devoted almost entirely to an exposition of the *Theses*.^[4]

Not a few of us were hoping against hope that, with the election of H. George Anderson, as Presiding Bishop, there would be a new openness on the part of church leadership toward our appeal for a renewal of confessional seriousness in the ELCA. In his "hail and farewell" editorial (*Lutheran Forum*, Advent 1995) Leonard Klein, noting Anderson's expressed support of the Conference of Bishops' action on the baptismal formula, expressed the guarded hunch "that H. George Anderson is the best bishop the ELCA could actually elect," that he "seems to be on the right side," not "the bishop for which the CNLC could have hoped." It was with such guarded optimism that signers of the *Theses* asked the new presiding Bishop for an audience.

Anderson politely replied that such a meeting would be superfluous; that the matter of canon, creeds, and confessions was firmly fixed in the ELCA constitution, and that there was therefore no problem to discuss. Meanwhile, he busied himself with conversations with interest caucuses.

So the moment of truth came with blinding clarity. Having been told in effect, to "go fly a kite," the little band, now considerably augmented, saw no alternative to the formation of a ministerium/oratory of pastors desirous of spiritual support in their conduct of a faithful ministry in keeping with the Lutheran Confessions and their ordination vows. Soon after, a decree went out from Chicago forbidding the synodical bishops to allow discussion of the *Theses* at their forthcoming assemblies.

III. AN EMERGENCY MEASURE

Notwithstanding the Presiding Bishop's assertion that "it's all there in the ELCA constitution" it was clear that the "confession of faith" articles had become so much window-dressing in an otherwise worldly association in which the popular will and interest politics trumped Holy Scripture, Creeds, and Confession. The ministerium as an institution charged with the maintenance of standards and with the discipline of the apostate and immoral had been scrapped. Ministers of the Word were now, for all intents and purposes, hirelings subject in every way to the whims and preferences of "the people." To be fair, it should be admitted that this state of affairs did not come about overnight but had been the *de facto* situation in both the ELCA and its predecessor bodies for some time. The difference was that now religious populism, with its insistence on representative democracy even in matters of sacred doctrine, and its embrace of the "quota system" was now officially in place.

Instead of the confessional standard governing proclamation and ministers the church now honored the anti-gospel of "political correctness," the enforcement of which can only be described as total, regulating everything from seminary curriculum to the use of personal pronouns.

When confronted by such all-pervasive apostasy, faithful Christians may be tempted to choose one or another of two paths, either of which would render "the second state worse than the first." On the one hand, schism, on the other, political factionalism. Seeking to avoid these false alternatives, the drafters constructed the Rule in such a way as to constitute our Society as an "emergency ministerium": an order of pastors dedicated to the maintenance of the pastoral office in keeping with Scripture and the Confessions, understanding the ministry to be divinely instituted by Christ himself (Matthew 16 and 28, John 20) for the administration of the effective means of grace which by the Holy Spirit "calls, gathers, enlightens, and sanctifies the whole Christian Church on earth." (Small Catechism, Third Article)

In the economy of salvation the Word and the office of preachers are inseparable. (Romans 10:14) Thus, through the ministry of Word and Sacrament, God "daily and abundantly forgives my sins and the sins of all believers," thereby creating and ever recreating the church on earth.

It was the decision of the ELCA to subsume ministry of Word and Sacrament under the catch-all category of "professional leadership," making it accountable not to a ministerium but to a bureaucratic office that moved the Society's founders to fashion, not another sect, not an advocacy group, but an emergency ministerium to do what the church had ceased to do: uphold and hold theologically accountable its ministers of the means of grace.

The drafters of the Rule were governed by two fundamental principles: a principle of capaciousness — roominess — born of our freedom in Christ, and a principle of boundedness reflecting the limits imposed by Canon, Creeds, and Confessions — the *regula fidei*. The drafters knew that, paradoxically, the proclaimers of the liberating Word are themselves bound, bearers of Christ's yoke, obligated to adorn their ministry with a holy life and conversation. They knew that the stewardship of the liberating Word was itself hard work requiring constant exercise (I Corinthians 9:27). Like Luther, they saw every pastor a theologian, and, like Luther, they saw the theologian not as a speculative theoretician but as one formed in the crucible of constant *oratio*, *meditatio*, and *tentatio* — prayer, reflection, and testing.

IV. WHAT NOW?

So, here we are, fifteen years from conception and from birth ten years, with little evidence that the "emergency" is anywhere nearly past. It almost seems that "emergency" is now "normal," and that it will be so for the foreseeable future.

Has anything good come out of New Jersey? That's a question that only our Lord can answer. Meanwhile, he calls us to "keep the faith" and we have our Lord's promise to be with us even to the close of the age. In the meantime it is for us to remain faithful "through thick and very thin."

I close with the prayer offered at an ordination some 49 years ago. Let us pray:

O God, the Giver of every good and perfect gift, Pour, we beseech Thee, upon these Thy servants Thy heavenly benediction; and so replenish them with the truth of Thy doctrine and adorn them with

holiness of life, that, meditating upon Thy law day and night, they may believe what they read, teach what they believe, show forth in their lives what they teach, and faithfully serving Thee in their office, may keep that which has been committed to their trust blameless unto the day of Christ Jesus, Who liveth and reigneth with Thee and the Holy Ghost, ever One God,. World without end. *Amen.*

[\[5\]](#)

NOTES

[\[1\]](#) Acheson's memoirs, *Present at Creation*, relate the formation of the NATO alliance. Could Acheson have had Proverbs in mind in selecting such a title?

[\[2\]](#) Signers of the Founding Statement were:

Ronald B. Bagnall, Trenton, NJ
James M. Culver, Jr., Stendal, IN
John R. Hannah, Bronx, NY
Mark A. Hoffman, Collingswood, NJ
Phillip Max Johnson, Jersey City, NJ
Ray S. Kibler III, Claremont CA
John D. Larson, Cresskill, NJ
Linda S. Larson, Fort Lee, NJ
Ronald F. Marshall, Seattle, WA
†Michael C.D. McDaniel, Hickory, NC

James A. Nestingen, St. Paul, MN
Richard J. Niebanck, Delhi, NY
Mark S. Schroeder, Norfolk, VA
Beth A. Schlegel, Trenton, NJ
Frederick J. Schumacher, White Plains, NY
Frank C. Senn, Evanston, IL
†Louis A. Smith, Waynesboro, VA
William S. Wiecher, New Paltz, NY
J. Larry Yoder, Hickory, NC

[\[3\]](#) Johnson, profoundly influenced by Dietrich Bonhoeffer's *Life Together*, sets out his thinking in an article, "The *Ascesis* of Pastoral Relationships," *Lutheran Forum*, Christmas, 1999, pp. 27-32.

[\[4\]](#) The exposition of the *9.5 Theses* includes articles by those who participated in the drafting of the *Theses*.

[\[5\]](#) Order for Ordination. *Common Service Book of the Lutheran Church*. Philadelphia: Board of Publication of the United Lutheran Church in America, 1917. p. 271.

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