

ADDRESS TO THE 2007 GENERAL RETREAT
OF THE SOCIETY OF THE HOLY TRINITY
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Text: Luke 10:1-12 (the mission of the seventy)

Welcome to Fort Wayne, and the tenth annual General Retreat of The Society of the Holy Trinity. We pray that this will be an occasion of uncommon spiritual, theological, and pastoral renewal for all who are attending—as well as a celebration of our tenth anniversary, which we will mark tomorrow night with a banquet and a hymn festival.

This is the first time in the history of the Society that we are meeting in a Lutheran facility. Concordia Theological Seminary graciously invited us to meet here. The seminary was able to host us at a time we wanted to meet, and it can accommodate our needs for a general retreat that has grown in attendance every year.

However, a problem has emerged. The need to respect the sensitivities of the Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod while also maintaining the integrity of our Society clashed over the issue of having a woman pastor preach in Kramer Chapel. Trying to accommodate us, President Wenthe suggested that the sermon by the woman pastor be given in Sihler Auditorium, but not in Kramer Chapel. Before I tell you how we are responding to that situation, let me take you back to the first years of the Society.

In 1997, when the *Rule* was received by consensus, those ready to subscribe to the *Rule* were invited to come forward and do so. Both Missouri Synod and women pastors came forward and subscribed. The same thing happened in subsequent years. So, from the beginning, it was apparent that we would be an inter-Lutheran Society that included members from church bodies that do and do not practice the ordination of women. We concluded that, as a Society, we could not fix the problems created by our denominations. We had to live in the tensions created by the divided state of the body of Christ, including divisions among and within our Lutheran church bodies. But all members of the Society had to be granted equal membership status and receive equal support in our ministerium.

With this in mind, I decided that if one of our members had to preach in Sihler Auditorium, all members would preach there—except for the Missouri Synod pastor who is preaching at our closing Eucharist. (Our thanks to Pastor David Poedel and Mt. Calvary Lutheran Church in Phoenix, Arizona, for sponsoring our Eucharist!) Therefore, the prayer offices with sermons will be held in Sihler Auditorium and not in Kramer Chapel. This may not be an ideal arrangement, but it seems to satisfy Missouri sensitivities and STS integrity.

But the fact that we had to deal with this issue should prompt us to consider what it means, in terms of our vocation as a pastoral society, a religious order, to be holding meetings in institutions of the church. Religious orders exist on the margins of the church structure. Meeting here or in any seminary means moving from the margins to the center. While educational institutions also have a vocation to be at the margins of society, most of them are not. They occupy positions of power and

prestige and sometimes of great wealth when one considers endowments. Theological seminaries are not wealthy, but they are owned lock, stock, and barrel by their denominations. If we are going to move to the centers of our church bodies, we have to play by their rules. The problem with that is that then we are not in a position to be what religious orders have always been: agents of renewal — renewal both of their members and of the church at large. The history of monasticism and of religious orders shows that these groups lose their ability to renew church and society by moving from the margins to the center, by acquiring wealth, power, and prestige.

The anthropologist Victor Turner concluded, on the basis of his studies of processes of initiation in various societies, that groups on the margins of a society are resources for the renewal of that society. These groups accomplish this by being expressions of anti-structure over against structure. They possess the characteristics of liminality and *communitas*. "Liminal entities," he writes, "are neither here nor there; they are betwixt and between the positions assigned and arrayed by law, custom, convention, and ceremonial."^[1] What develops among liminal groups like novices in rites of initiation, recruits in military boot camp, and religious orders is a strong bond that he calls "*communitas*." (He prefers "*communitas*" to "community" to distinguish it from an area of common living.) *Communitas* is a way of simply being with and for one another; it is the opposite of social structure.

Turner develops the contrasts between *communitas* and social structure in a series of binary oppositions.^[2] I don't want to make your head spin by going down the whole list, but let me highlight and apply some of the binary oppositions to give you a sense of where we, as a pastoral society, should line up over against our church structures.

We are in a constant process of transition rather than a state of permanence.

Our commitment to rules and norms, such as the Sacred Scriptures, the Confessions, and the *Rule* of the Society is total rather than partial, as is our obedience to Jesus, as indicated in chapter two of our *Rule*.

Members of the society are equal rather than unequal.

We tend to be uniform in our dress (black shirts, cassocks) rather than choosing our dress as expressions of personal statement.

We minimize sex distinctions by emphasizing the office of the ministry rather than maximize sex distinctions for ideological purposes of either the left or the right.

We gather in retreat for sacred rather than for secular purposes. That is, we come to receive sacred instruction rather than to acquire technical knowledge.

At least in retreat, and hopefully in our lives and ministries, we make continuous rather than intermittent reference to divine powers. We practice devotion for the sake of glorifying God rather than for any practical benefit that might be derived from it.

The very way we conduct our affairs bespeaks foolishness and simplicity, which is characteristic of liminality, rather than sagacity and complexity, which characterize social structures.

Finally, as Turner notes, liminal groups, unlike social structures, accept rather than avoid pain and suffering. We are open to practicing a theology of the cross.

We can see that such attributes as these that characterize the liminal group should ideally characterize the social structures, such as our denominations. Christianity as a whole should be characterized by passage, the transitory state: "we have here no abiding city." But transition is a permanent characteristic of monastic communities and religious orders. They remind the rest of the church of its calling to be a pilgrim people, strangers and exiles who are "in but not of the world."

It is not surprising that Martin Luther, an Augustinian monk of the Observant branch, called the Church to a state of transition or conversion rather than permanence or status. If you looking for the Church, he said, don't look to *places* like Rome or even to Wittenberg; he would have added today, don't look to Chicago or St. Louis or Winnipeg. Look to the *marks* of the church—to the preaching of the Word of God, to Holy Baptism, Holy Communion, Holy Absolution, the existence of the Holy Ministry, public prayer, and the presence of the cross. The community (*Gemeine*) that gathers around the use of these means of grace constitutes the true Church; the rest of the life of the Church is hidden and known only to Christ.

The idea that the true church is hidden was already developed by Augustine of Hippo in his controversy with the Donatists. He insisted that the visible church is a mixture of wheat and weeds, saints and sinners, that will be sorted out only in the last judgment. As an Augustinian, Luther embraced this idea and added to it. Given the apostasy of the papal church (the only church at the time), it would be easy to say that Christ has abandoned his church. But Christ promised his disciples, "I am with you always, even to the end of the age." So Christ has not abandoned his little flock. But the church must be an article of faith, not a certainty of sight. That's why we profess *belief* in one holy catholic and apostolic church, precisely because it is hidden in sin, in error, and in persecution.

In his Lectures on Genesis, the description in Genesis 32 of Jacob limping away after wrestling with God led Luther to this depiction of the church and its marks:

For what is this whole assembly called the church? It is a tiny flock of the most wretched, forlorn, and hopeless people in the sight of the world. What is this flock compared with the whole world, what is it compared with the kingdom of the Turks and France, indeed, compared even with our adversaries, the papists? So if you asked where the church is, it is nowhere in evidence. But you must not pay attention to external form but to the Word and to Baptism, and the church must be sought where the sacraments are purely administered, where there are hearers, teachers, and confessors of the Word.^[3]

This, I submit, is an expression of liminality—the true church is not found in places of power and prestige; it is found in the margins and in humility. The true church is not manifested in boards and committees, but wherever Christians assemble to hear the word of God preached and to celebrate the sacraments of Christ. Rome and Wittenberg, Chicago, St. Louis, and Winnipeg can be the church if they have the word of God and the Holy Sacraments, but not because they are headquarters of ecclesiastical institutions.

Our Society, I submit, exists to renew the church in its true calling and character precisely by practicing liminality and experiencing *communitas*. Our focus is not on gaining political power or worldly glory within church structures, but on cultivating the marks of the church. You can probably find all seven of Luther's "marks" in our *Rule* (although his list could be less or more than seven).

I also submit that when we practice these marks we even put the devil to rout. Let us never forget that we are engaged in spiritual warfare. We do not contend against flesh and blood, but against spiritual hosts of wickedness in high places. The devil still prowls around like a ravenous lion seeking someone to devour. Jesus sends us into to his vineyard to announce and enact the nearness of God's Kingdom. And what does Jesus say when we report back? "I was watching Satan falling from heaven like a flash of lightening."

What? All I did was preach the plain sense of the biblical text. "I was watching Satan falling from heaven like a flash of lightening." What? All I did baptize the child and catechize the parents. "I was watching Satan falling from heaven like a flash of lightening." What? All I did was take Holy Communion to the shut-ins. "I was watching Satan falling from heaven like a flash of lightening." What? All I did was pronounce absolution to a repentant sinner. "I was watching Satan falling from heaven like a flash of lightning." What? All I did was take time to pray the offices. "I was watching Satan falling from heaven like a flash of lightning."

It might all seem very mundane when you're one of the seventy sent out with no sandals to say "Peace to this house." But Jesus can see the whole game plan. Jesus sees the demonic structures begin to topple and fall as we do our little bit of chipping away at the bottom. A little bit here and a little bit there, and soon the whole edifice collapses.

The harvest is plentiful, but the laborers are few. Therefore ask the Lord of the harvest to send out laborers into his harvest to say to those who listen and to those who do not, "The kingdom of God has come near." You might not be able to see the full significance of your little part of Christ's mission, but through you and many others God's tide of truth and love is pushing back the currents of confusion and deception. Your little drop of baptismal water in the ocean of the world might not seem like much, but when the tide turns every drop is in it together and nothing can stand in the way of God's kingdom. It is our calling—we who have intentionally embraced the foolishness and humility of the cross—to show the church structures how to take on the world, the flesh, and the devil, and so to do the mission of God's kingdom. This is best done from the margins, where we can attack, not from the center, from which the structures can only circle the wagons in defense. Liminality and *communitas*, conversion and community, is what we have to teach our church structures, whether denominations, congregations, or seminaries. Amen.

FOOTNOTES

[1] Victor Turner, *The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-structure* (Chicago: Aldine Publishing Company, 1969), 95.

[2] *Ibid.*, 106-7.

[3] *Luther's Works*, American Edition, 6:149

Society of the Holy Trinity

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