

OPENING ADDRESS TO THE 2008 GENERAL RETREAT OF THE SOCIETY OF THE HOLY TRINITY

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Texts: Ezekiel 3:1-11; John 21:15-17; 1 Corinthians 4:1-5

Welcome to the 2008 General Retreat of the Society of the Holy Trinity. I might say "welcome home." This place is beginning to feel like the home of the General Retreat. We're grateful for the hospitality of the Roman Catholic Archdiocese of Chicago.

Concordia Theological Seminary offered its hospitality to the Society last year. In spite of good intentions on everyone's part, our presence on that campus created some awkwardness for both the seminary and the Society. I'm aware that President Wenthe drew flak from some of his constituents, including the student body. I agree with an answer he reportedly gave to a student who reportedly asked, "Why did you invite the Society of the Holy Trinity on campus?" His answer was to the effect that the pastors in the Society are hurting and it was a Christian instinct to reach out to them.

If this exchange occurred, it was a true assessment of our Society. This Society wouldn't exist if it weren't for the hurts its founders were experiencing in the crisis of faith afflicting our Churches. We're hurting because we serve as pastors in Lutheran denominations whose faithfulness to the Scriptures, the Confessions, and the catholic tradition has become tenuous. We are surrounded by colleagues in our respective ministeriums who follow the party line whether, in their heart of hearts, they believe it or not. The party lines promote experience over revelation, ideology over theology, success over faithfulness.

We serve congregations or other institutions within these Lutheran denominations, and we are often the firewall between our congregations and denominational projects and resources.

We're tired of having to rewrite materials or go to other publishers to find suitable material to use in Sunday School, confirmation class, or worship. It hurts to do this because we are catholic churchmen, not sectarians. Our desire is to relate the church parochial to the church catholic. We would prefer to lead our parishioners into the wider life and work of the church.

Sometimes our hurts and struggles are also within the church parochial. In many of the congregations we serve, we must painfully acknowledge a gap between the practices we would promote and the practices that are in place. Holy Communion is still not celebrated every Sunday and festival in some parishes. Few parishioners avail themselves of individual confession and forgiveness. Few parishioners are interested in or have the time to engage in regular Bible study, much less study the great tradition. Some prefer singing contemporary ditties to sturdy hymns, or desire contemporary celebrations rather than the historic liturgy. In some congregations members are put into "bad faith" just by removing candelabra or relocating baptismal fonts from a corner to the entry way.

And then there's just some bad treatment of pastors by their congregations. Thankfully this is not true of most situations. But some congregations have acted as though they own their pastor's time and extra-parochial commitments. "We don't pay you to serve other people's needs or spend your

time doing the work of the wider church, or taking time off to go on retreats." Even where we don't have to deal with such parochialism in the bad sense, we work all the harder so that we can't be accused of neglecting our primary duties, as if we don't also have a duty to replenish our knowledge and refresh our spirits precisely so that we can minister to our people more effectively. On the positive side, some congregations are now asking for STS pastors in their call processes.

What Joseph Sittler long ago called "the maceration of the minister" has continued over the decades since the old ponderer, as he was affectionally called, first analyzed the problem. His thesis, in short, was that the expectations of the parish, of the denominational leadership, and of the minister himself or herself cut up the minister into many pieces. "When one wonders what holds the man together," Sittler wrote, what "enables him to bring equal enthusiasm to his practical decisions and his pastoral and proclamatory function, one learns that he is held together (if he is) by his public role of responsibility for the external advancement of the congregation." Sittler observed that as the minister devotes himself to advancing the parish more than proclaiming the gospel, the minister's theological studies "become less and less an occupation engaged in or intrinsic to his role as witness to the gospel and pastor to people, and become more and more frantic efforts to find biblical, or theological, generalities which will religiously dignify his promotional purposes. The will of God has got to be simplified into a push for the parish house. The Holy Spirit is reduced to a holy resource which can be used as a punch line for the enforcement of parish purposes. The theme of Christian obedience must be stripped of its judging ambiguities and forthwith used as a lever to secure commitment which is somehow necessarily correlated with observable services to the current and clamant program. The message, in short, is managed in terms of its instrumental usefulness for immediate goals. 'Arise, and let us go hence' becomes a text so epigrammatically apt that it were a shame to lose it by the complication of context or exegesis."

The minister, says Sittler, knows down deep that he or she is not doing what he or she was called and ordained to do, and this produces a destructive sense of guilt. Sittler wrote: "It is hard for the minister to maintain a clear vision of who he is when he is so seldom doing what he ought. His self-image of a servant of the gospel has been slowly clarified, carefully matured, informed, and sensitized during years of preparation. At the time of ordination the church publicly and thankfully acknowledged a gift, a discipline, and a man's intention to assume a task."

Sittler continued: "All of this is under constant attrition in the present form of the churches. And thus it comes about that honesty in the fulfillment of the minister's central task is gradually laid aside in favor of sincerity. Sincerity is a term a man uses to enable himself to live with himself when he has uneasy questions about his honesty. There remain, however, deep down but insistent, voices and remembrances that tell the man what is going on, tell him that the exchange is not a good one. And the enthusiastic readiness of parish and church to accept, even to applaud, the shift makes the suffering of the minister the more acute."

A number of studies over the years have called attention to clergy burn-out. Among the reasons identified as contributing to this crackup are too much work, too long a day, too various a complex of problems and duties, too unremitting a drain on emotional and mental stores, insufficient opportunity to lift the clerical nose from the parish grindstone, and, not least, a sense that, as Sittler said, one is seldom doing what one ought. This maceration has undoubtedly afflicted our family life as well as our pastoral practice. Because the advancement of the parish has assumed more importance than modeling the Christian life, we aren't always there for our spouses and children

when they need us and clerical marriages continue to dissolve at an alarming rate. Not all failed clergy marriages can be blamed on our work load. Personal issues, and sometimes mental health issues, certainly play a role. But being occupied with our work on evenings and weekends—times when our families are home or engaged in their activities—doesn't help.

Then there are family situations that test our theological convictions and cause some real hurt. Many of you have your own stories to tell. Here is my most recent one. I worked with the chapter deans on the "Pastoral Statement on the Blessing of Same-Sex Unions." I've also written about this in my synod theological journal. In August one of my sons took advantage of the window of opportunity in California to go out there and get married to his California boy friend. We didn't have much notice. I explained my view about this to my son using the Society's pastoral statement as a guide and encouraged him to get pastoral counseling. But we can't disown our son; nor can we ignore his partner who, according to California law, is now my son-in-law. And quite frankly, if Mary and I don't make our peace with this situation we risk alienating all of our children, since these siblings defend each other. So we accept the situation as it exists "on the ground" and will improvise our response to it as time goes on and love them both to death. But they also know my position: that no matter what civil governments allow, same-sex marriage is not possible within the biblical view of marriage and blessing such unions is not an option for Christian pastors whose consciences are captive to the Word of God.

I have no doubt that many others among you have been theologically compromised by family situations, your congregation's practices, your denomination's prevailing attitudes, official positions, and pet projects. With all this hurt, we come together at the beginning of this retreat to renew our ordination vows. And I wonder how we hear the readings read at this service.

Like the prophet Ezekiel we are sent with a clear word to a people whom we know—our pastoral colleagues, our congregations, our families. These people may not listen to the word of the Lord but we must speak it "whether they hear or refuse to hear."

Like the Apostle Peter we are given a commission by our Lord to feed his sheep. Peter was given his commission after failing his Lord. Three denials, three increasingly insistent commissionings. Maybe, like Peter, the very fact that we are ordained is a form of rehabilitation for past unfaithfulness. Maybe healing of recurring unfaithfulness comes from doing what we were called to do: going into our study on Monday morning and preparing another sermon; presiding at another Eucharist; teaching another confirmation class; calling on another shut-in; offering our counsel at another council meeting; prepared and waiting for a penitent sinner to come to confession for the sake of the absolution. I don't know about you, but I always feel re-energized by doing the Lord's work in the ministry of Word and sacrament to which I was ordained.

How shall we think of ourselves and our calling? St. Paul says: "as servants of Christ and stewards of God's mysteries." We usually think of pastors as servants of the church. Some lay people even think of the pastor as an employee. But we are not servants of the church; we are servants of Christ. Much of our time may be spent managing the church's affairs and even its property. But we are not stewards of the congregation's budget and facilities; we are stewards of God's mysteries. The mystery of God, hidden during the ages, is revealed in the cross of Christ. That saving sacrifice is proclaimed in the Word and shared in the sacraments. In fact, the Greek equivalent of the Latin *sacramentum* is *mysterion*. Because what the Western Church calls "sacred signs" the Eastern

Church calls "mysteries," they don't enumerate them but simply recognize where God is at work in a gracious way through earthly means. Pastors serve Christ and manage God's mysteries precisely by preaching and teaching the Word of God and administering the sacraments of Christ. That, and nothing else, is the focus of pastoral work. So let us be clear that as servants and stewards we have a master, and it is not the congregation or institution to which we are called; it is not the denomination in which we were ordained; it is not even ourselves. Our master is Christ. It is Christ whom we serve and Christ will judge us, not the congregation, not the bishop or district president, and not even ourselves. Paul could not be clearer. Since he received his commission from Christ and does Christ's work, the congregation is not competent to judge him. He is not even competent to judge himself. "It is the Lord who judges me," he writes.

Paul does not intend by this to avoid examination or review altogether because he adds: "do not pronounce judgment *before the time when the Lord comes*." Our judgments of one another or even of ourselves are incompetent because they are untimely; we are still in the flesh and history rolls on. We don't know as yet the consequences of our words and deeds. Some of us are near retirement; some of our members have retired already. A few have entered the church triumphant. But as long as life goes on and history continues to unfold, our ministries are still bearing fruit and our work is not yet complete. It is finally and only "the Lord...who will bring to light the hidden things of darkness and will disclose the purposes of the heart." When the Lord comes again to judge the living and the dead, then "each one will receive commendation from God." Only then can an assessment of our life and ministry be made.

This note of eschatological judgment has been removed from ordination rites. But it was present in mine, and in some of yours. In the *Occasional Services* accompanying the *Service Book and Hymnal*, the questions to the ordinand began with: "As you must give account before the Lord in the great day of his appearing..."; and at the conclusion of the ordination vows the candidate said: "Before God and the Lord Jesus Christ, who shall judge the quick and the dead at his appearing, I do promise, with his grace and help, to fulfill these sacred obligations." Among the obligations all Lutheran ministers have undertaken are preaching and teaching the word of God in accordance with the confessions of the Church and administering the sacraments after the ordinance of Christ. There is no other reason for having ordained ministers in the Church, and if these things are not done in the ways specified, nothing else the ordained minister does matters.

I would note, however, that the word "commendation" can mean "praise." Paul apparently expected a positive appraisal of his ministry. The implication is that the Lord Christ, in his omniscience, might find cause for approval where another judge would find none. The time of final judgment is not necessarily a day of wrath. At last we will be understood, and God will disclose the basis for true evaluation or review. The standards of the congregations or agencies we have served, the standards of our denominational leaders, even our own standards will not apply. The only standard that will apply is Christ's. Did you proclaim the word whether it was heard or not? Did you feed the people whether they would eat or not? Did you continue on the way of the cross when hardship and suffering was laid on your life and ministry? If so, "well done, good and faithful servant. Enter into the joy of your master." If we have Christ's approval, who else's do we need?

We come together in this retreat not to strategize on how to take back the Church; it's not ours to take. We come together not to learn how to remake our congregations in our images; they're not ours to make. We come together not to learn how to heal family relationships; there is no health in us. But we come together to be renewed in our calling and ordination to be servants of Christ and

stewards of God's mysteries. Christ will reform his Church and enliven his people and heal our lives through His Holy Spirit. For us healing comes the way redemption comes: through the cross of Christ. Amen.

Society of the Holy Trinity

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Posted -- 4 November 2008

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