

Infancy, Childhood, and Adolescence of the Society of the Holy Trinity
 By the Rev. Dr. Richard Johnson, STS
 Given at the 25th Anniversary Banquet

Good evening my dear sisters and brothers. It is a great honor for me to have been asked by our Senior to take this role tonight at our 25th anniversary banquet. This is, actually, the lesser portion of what he has asked me to do; I've also been charged with writing the history of our first 25 years. I had hoped to have that finished by now, but sometimes life gets in the way, and in my case the challenges of a cross-country move meant that the history writing had to go on the back burner for a bit. But it is coming soon, God willing.

What I want to do this evening is to reflect on our early history as a society. For some of you who are fairly recently part of STS, this will be new ground. Others of you have lived much of what I will relate, and the best I can do is to conjure up memories. A few of you have already heard some of what I will say, because I've had the honor of presenting on our history to a couple of chapter retreats. But whether this is familiar or new to you, we know that telling and hearing stories over again, even if familiar, is just what we do. The people of Israel never tired of relating the wonderful acts of God, and the church repeats those stories and its own new stories time and again so that they will sink deeply into our consciousness. That's my purpose tonight—to tell the story of our Society's earliest days. I want to stress “earliest days.” I could not walk through our whole twenty-five years without being unreasonably superficial. You'll have to wait for the full history to be done if you want “the rest of the story.” Of course, historians, if they are sensible, don't make predictions about the future, but I will end with some observations and questions about how our past may inform our present and perhaps our future.

We tell these stories over again so that we do not forget. Pr. Schlegel so beautifully and eloquently gave us the “prequel” of our Society at Vespers this evening. At our tenth anniversary, Richard Niebanck of blessed memory was the speaker, and he entitled his remarks “Conception, Gestation, Birth: The *Urgeschichte* of the Society of the Holy Trinity.” *Urgeschichte*, prequel, backstory, prehistory—whatever word we use, it's an important part of understanding who we are. Maybe we could call tonight's presentation: “Infancy, Childhood, and Adolescence.” But I must start by recapping, more briefly than Pr. Schlegel but not too cavalierly, I hope, the conception and gestation. Back in the 1990s, in the early days of the ELCA, a group of pastors in New Jersey began to meet together to talk about what they saw as the crisis facing their church. This led to the drafting of a document called “The 9.5 Theses” which called the ELCA to faithfulness on several specific matters of doctrine and practice. The document was distributed to thousands of ELCA pastors, several hundred of whom added their names to it; but it met a chilly reception from the ELCA's leadership, which mostly ignored it, declining even to discuss it publicly or privately. Edgar Trexler's history of the early years of the ELCA doesn't even mention it.

In the face of that response, the drafters of the “9.5 Theses” began to consider what they themselves might do to strengthen their own faithfulness as pastors. They invited several other pastors to a meeting September 23-25, 1996, at Loyola House in Morristown, NJ. Philip Max Johnson convened the meeting and presented what he called a “highly provisional” proposal for something he called the “Oratory of the Holy Trinity.” His working title underscored his understanding that prayer was central both to this anticipated society and to the larger mission of renewing the ministry and the church. “I am assuming our time will be structured by the prayer offices ... with conversation in between,” he wrote those planning to come to Morristown. “I will, of course, be looking for leadership to come from any of you. Can we, in prayer, mutual trust, and for the sake of others, take some useful initiative together?”

Johnson had structured his “oratory” proposal in three sections: an overall statement of purpose for this group (which might be summarized in the phrase “to help one another to be faithful to the promises spoken when we were ordained”); a list of specific matters of parish practice toward which members would strive; and a lengthier section of “affirmations and distinctions” which mostly echoed the concerns raised by the 9.5 Theses.

As the group gathered in Morristown that September, Johnson’s proposal was the starting point for a wide-ranging discussion. For the most part, the changes were editorial in nature. The term “Oratory of the Holy Trinity” was dropped in favor of “Society of the Holy Trinity.” Where Johnson had described this as “a free covenant,” the Morristown group preferred the term “a pastoral society.”

While the substance of Johnson’s draft was left mostly intact, the group added two additional paragraphs. The first—and they inserted it as the first paragraph—was a strong affirmation of “the uniqueness and authority of the Name of God revealed in Christ: the Father and Son and Holy Spirit.” This highlighted the significance of the name chosen for this pastoral society. The group also added a paragraph entitled “Concerning right order in the Church’s Worship”—a condemnation of the liturgical chaos evident in the churches and a commitment to “the common liturgy—to the orders and texts that have come down through the catholic tradition [and] been received by the Lutheran reformers.”

The document that emerged was given the title, “The Society of the Holy Trinity: A Founding Statement”—with the proviso that there would be opportunity, after things had settled a bit, for the “founding group” to suggest additional changes. It was left to Philip Max Johnson to receive and incorporate these suggestions into a new draft, which was then circulated to those who had gathered at Morristown. One substantive change was made. At the urging of Frank Senn, a paragraph was added in the “commitments and affirmations” that addressed the role of the magisterium in the church—the teaching office which has been “given to and properly exercised by

bishops, pastors, and theologians”—as opposed to lay-dominated assemblies, which have no such authority from God. An edited version of this paragraph was incorporated into the final draft.

Now that the “Founding Statement” was finalized, the group began to grapple with appropriate next steps. Some of that grappling was very personal. Philip Max Johnson expressed it well in a plaintive postscript to a letter to the group on 15 January 1997: “I am thinking of you all as I try to be more consistent in praying the daily offices. I’m not good at this. Pray for me.” A few days later, in another letter to the founders, he expanded on his own struggle: “One thing about pouring over our proposal time after time: I am forced to examine my daily work as husband & father, priest & pastor in the light of the commitments we have put down in black [and] white. That is, I am taken back to my ordination vows and made a little dizzy and scared by the promise of Grace attached to this call. And I really hope we are learning, if nothing else, to move beyond the pious protocol of ‘I’ll be praying for you,’ to earnest intercession for each other, to put a little heart into that dusty word *ministerium*.” Johnson’s musings were no doubt shared by all who had affixed their names to the statement, who were now forced to ask themselves that old Lutheran question: “What does this mean for me?” Perhaps that question seems familiar to all of us who have signed the Rule through the years.

But beyond the individual wrestling, there were many practical matters to be addressed. The first was how to invite others into this new Society. It was agreed that a mailing containing the Founding Statement would be sent to all pastors who had subscribed to the “9.5 Theses,” inviting their involvement and soliciting their financial support to spread the information more widely. This went out some time in early 1997 over Louis Smith’s signature.

Ronald Bagnall, one of the founders, had recently been appointed editor of *Lutheran Forum*, and he published the Founding Statement in the Easter 1997 issue, without editorial comment but with introductory words by Philip Max Johnson and John Hannah, briefly summarizing the genesis of the statement and inviting interested pastors to contact Mark Hoffman for further information. The responses that began to come varied widely, but nearly all expressed excitement, commitment, enthusiasm, or simply relief that someone was making a positive proposal.

A group of six gathered in Hickory, NC, in July 1997 to draft a Rule for the new Society, considering many suggestions they had received. This draft was then brought to a retreat September 22-24, 1997, again at Loyola House, to which all those who had expressed interest had been invited. This was considered our first general retreat. The group of 30 went about the task of reviewing the proposed rule with prayerful intention. Louis Smith described the process: “Every communication that was received concerning the draft of the Rule was duplicated and distributed to all those present and entered into the conversation. ... The praying of the daily prayer of the Church ... structured and energized our time together. At the very beginning of our deliberations,

it was decided that we would work by consensus. Each chapter of the Rule was read aloud and worked over until all present were able to affirm it.”

The draft of the Rule was accepted as presented with only minor editorial changes. On September 23, in the Loyola House chapel, twenty-eight of the thirty pastors present subscribed to the Rule, and the Society of the Holy Trinity officially came into existence. The gathered Society then proceeded to elect its leadership. The Rule had called for a Senior to be elected by “pure ecclesiastical ballot.” As the Society defined that process, there would be no nominations, but ballots would be cast, preceded by prayer, hymn, and Scripture, until the Society had come to consensus. Ron Bagnall described it this way: “With each successive ballot the members of the Society need to lay aside personal preferences and instead be intent on *achieving a consensus* within the Society. Consensus is achieved when, whether in discussion or balloting, members do not argue their point of view, but rather put forward only what serves the best interest of the whole and only what reflects the agreed-upon common consent of the whole. Consequently, consensus in balloting must be unanimous (not majority opinion or general agreement).”

This was clearly a very different way of choosing leadership, but one which the Society believed would be a salutary process through which the Holy Spirit would give direction. With this in mind, it seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to the Society to call Philip Max Johnson as the first Senior. Shortly after the retreat, Johnson would write that he was “more than a little daunted by the task. ... To my mind there were others who could better serve. However, since we together begged the Holy Spirit’s guidance, I, with you, must put fears and hesitancy behind, which anyway are forms of ingratitude towards God.”

While the majority of those present in Morristown were pastors in the ELCA, the gathering also included pastors from the Missouri Synod and the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Canada who had read the 9.5 Theses and the Founding Statement and had recognized an effort to address problems common to all the Lutheran churches in North America. Thus, the Society from its beginning was a pan-Lutheran fellowship (an increasingly rare concept in the polarized atmosphere of North American Christianity).

Those who signed the Rule that September felt the importance of what they were doing. Again, the new Senior articulated the feelings of many of those initial members: “I was caught by surprise at our retreat when it was time for me to get off my knees to go forward and subscribe to the Rule, by the renewed recognition of my accountability to God, the Church of Christ, my congregation, and my brothers and sisters in the Holy Ministry.”

A few weeks later, Frank Senn, appointed by the Senior to serve as the Society’s first vicar, reflected on the meaning of what had been done in Morristown: “The formation of the Society of the Holy Trinity is evidence of the growing conviction that we must begin by renewing ourselves,

by strengthening and supporting one another as pastors who want to be faithful to the gospel and to the catholic tradition which is the cradle of the gospel. ... Given the lack of intentionality in Lutheran judicatories to encourage and guide pastors in this, some of us are forming a religious society in which fulfilling such vows will be a matter of primary concern. It is nothing less than a religious order we have founded. The closest model of religious order to our pastoral society is an oratory, in which secular clergy pray, study, and sometimes live together in a mutually supportive community. ... As far as possible, the members of the Society of the Holy Trinity intend to pray and study together and, while not living together, to come together in regular, periodic retreats in local chapters and in the Society as a whole.”

Having been established, the Society now began to grow. The second GR took place in 1998 at Techny Towers outside of Chicago. In these early years, teaching theologians at the GR were drawn almost exclusively from the ranks of the Society members. *Lutheran Forum* continued to be a helpful instrument in publicizing the Society; often its pages would include the text of presentations or sermons from Society retreats. The next few retreats took place mostly at Bon Secours Spiritual Center in Marriotsville, MD (though 2002 was back at Techny Towers); the Society then moved to St. Mary of the Lake Conference Center at Mundelein, IL, where it has remained ever since (except for one retreat, 2007, at Concordia Theological Seminary in Fort Wayne).

There is much one could say about the growing pains of the Society over the next few years, during our childhood and adolescence. I will just highlight a handful of them. The fifth General Retreat was scheduled in 2001, less than a week after 9/11, at Bon Secours in Maryland. There was great uncertainty about whether flights would be available and whether people would, in any event, want to travel to the DC area. Members whose parishes were directly affected would surely be unable to attend, as would military chaplains; the US/Canadian border had been closed. But the leadership made the decision to proceed, believing that now, more than ever, it was important to gather for prayer. Their decision was affirmed when some 111 pastors attended—more than 80% of those who had originally registered. At that retreat, twenty new pastors subscribed to the Rule.

As the 2003 General Retreat approached, Philip Max Johnson was feeling it was time for him to step down. There’s no real provision for that in the Rule, of course. He couldn’t really say “Don’t vote for me.” But at the retreat he said, “As your Senior, it is my judgment that the Society should choose new leadership.” The Society chose Frank Senn. Any time there is a change in leadership, things are a bit unsettled, but here the transition was more or less seamless. Frank had been one of the founding members and had served as vicar since the Society’s beginning. He asked Lou Smith to succeed him as vicar, another person who had been closely involved even in the Society’s pre-history. Smith would, Senn said, “complement me in temperament, geography, and

theological emphasis.” At the same time, Senn expressed thanks for the “quiet but determined leadership” that Philip Max Johnson had brought to the Society during its formative years.

Another kind of crisis was presented in 2004 when Lou Smith wrote a controversial article in *Lutheran Forum* admitting that his mind had changed about the ordination of women. He had originally supported ordaining women, he wrote, but “as the 80s moved into the 90s, more and more men and women came into the Ministry with minimal catechization and substantial problematic backgrounds” such as failed marriages or bad work experiences. While this was true of both men and women, women often brought an “extra piece of baggage with them: feminist religion. It is, or at least ought to be, no secret that this neo-pagan religion, deeply entrenched in the modern religious academy, is antipathetic to the Christian faith.” This led Smith to the conclusion that on ecumenical and Biblical grounds, the decision to ordain women had been a mistake.

There was a firestorm of protest from *Lutheran Forum* readers, many of whom were connecting dots in a most alarming way. Smith, they reasoned, is an officer of the Society of the Holy Trinity, so this proves that the Society is a reactionary, misogynistic group! *Lutheran Forum* has been publishing a lot of material from the Society, so it, too, must be in that camp! Some ELCA members of the Society were particularly incensed—though one of the Society’s purposes was to provide a forum for free theological discussion, and it would probably be fair to say the majority of the Society’s ELCA pastors found Smith’s column to be provocative and interesting, but not incendiary and certainly not persuasive.

The controversy led Senior Frank Senn to respond in the pages of *Lutheran Forum*: “The Society of the Holy Trinity is grateful that addresses and sermons from retreats of the Society are periodically published in LUTHERAN FORUM. ... Just so, it may be useful to point out that LUTHERAN FORUM is not an organ of the Society, and that not all views published in LUTHERAN FORUM reflect the position of the Society. ... The Society has no position on the ordination of women. The Rule of the Society identifies its members as those ‘ordained to the Ministry of the Word and the sacraments in Christ’s Church and called to such an office in Lutheran churches.’ ... Two of the twenty founding members of the Society are women. The ranks of women pastors who have subscribed to The Rule and become members have increased since the founding of the Society in 1997, as has the membership in general. At the same time, the Society includes members (mostly, but obviously in the light of Smith’s article, not exclusively LCMS pastors) who have misgivings about the practice of the ordination of women on Biblical, theological, and ecumenical grounds. The genius of the Society is that issues on which members disagree (and there are a number of them) are not suppressed in the interest of unanimity. The Society is, in fact, a ‘safe place’ to engage in confessionally-based debate. In this, as in other ways, the Society provides a model for church assemblies and conventions.”

It was another shocking blow to the Society when just a few months later, Lou Smith died very suddenly. He had been attending a Society chapter retreat when he was struck; he was rushed to the hospital, taken into surgery but did not survive. Philip Max Johnson wrote a moving tribute. “We covered a lot of miles together,” he said, “especially in the early days of the Society. ... With [Lou] I learned to pray in unlikely places, learning, for example, that Matins at 70 miles per hour can be downright exhilarating! ... Lou did not pray and *then* study. For him the intellectual meditation on the Scripture text or even on a work of theology was simply an extension of prayer. Doxology and theology were a single thing.” Frank Senn appointed Carl Voges to step in as vicar—thus for the first time bringing a Missouri Synod pastor into one of the leadership positions.

Another kind of leadership crisis occurred in 2006 when Philip Max Johnson, who had been so crucial to the founding and growth of the Society, announced that he was being received into the Roman Catholic Church. Since its inception, STS had grappled with (suspicions? accusations? fears?) that it was just a waystation on the way to Rome. Indeed, during the Society’s first few years at least a half-dozen members and friends left Lutheranism for either Roman Catholicism or Orthodoxy.

Two years previously, in 2004, one of the preachers at the General Retreat had been Fr. Jay Scott Newman, a Roman Catholic priest. His sermon had been what Frank Senn described as a “straightforward challenge to the catholic capacity of those who are not in the ‘bark of Peter.’” “I was provoked” [by his sermon], Senn wrote, “but I thanked him for the provocation.” But there were others in the Society who were less grateful and who found Newman’s provocation to be distasteful.

Following Philip Max Johnson’s announcement, the Senior felt the need to address the question once again. “Maybe some of us are envious of those who have made decisions to leave,” he wrote. “It’s not always pleasant to remain in place and contend for the truth of the gospel or to champion the great tradition in our congregations and denominations. But it is not a matter of leaving leaking lifeboats to climb back on the bark of Peter, as Fr. Jay Scott Newman argued ... two years ago. There is not only one ship on the sea of the Christian faith, but a flotilla. Storms have tossed us about and we have become separated, to the danger of us all. Our objective is to bring the fleet back together so that we may support one another and so that each ship may contribute the gifts it has been given in service to the mission of God in the world.”

Well, that brings the story at least through our childhood, if not our adolescence, and I’ll have to leave it there for now. As I said in the beginning, historians don’t try to predict the future; but as I’ve reflected on our life as a Society, diving deeply especially into the hopes and dreams of our founders, some questions have arisen in my own mind about our present and the arc of our future. I don’t have answers, but I want to share the questions for your consideration and

pondering as we enter our second quarter century. I offer them in no particular order of priority; these are just things I wonder about.

- (1) Has the evolving reconfiguration of Lutheranism in North America rendered the Society obsolete? Or has it changed its nature and purpose in ways that need to be understood and named? Just an example: As you know, many of our members left the ELCA for the NALC, which is now the second biggest contingent of our Society. Some of those who left the ELCA also left the Society because they believed that what they needed from STS is now available to them in the ministerium of the NALC. Others have stayed, apparently because the Society offers them something still not available in that ministerium. That is one example, but there are certainly others. It would be interesting to have a conversation about why each of us joined the Society, and why we continue with the Society—and then to see if there is a significant difference depending on church body affiliation. In any event, it seems to me that some disciplined study and reflection on how the changing configuration impacts our purpose, our charism, if you will, would be fruitful.
- (2) What does the “graying” of the STS mean? Are we just the last gasp of a generation that will soon be gone, or will there be younger pastors who share our vision and our commitment—and if so, how do we welcome them? The irony is not lost on me that this is the same question that we ask in our congregations and our church bodies!
- (3) This one is perhaps the most difficult, but it has come to my mind again and again as I’ve immersed myself in our history. Are there things we have done or left undone that have undermined the original vision of the STS? One of the things that jumped out at me in reading the original draft of the Rule was a caution against extraneous and trivial conversation in retreats. That sentence was struck from the draft, and that was probably wise; but am I the only one who has noticed a decline in intentionality in our conversations in retreat? Maybe this varies from chapter to chapter, but even at GR, it has felt to me the last few years as if there’s a lot more conviviality and less intentionality. In the early days, we emphasized that Society retreats were not the time and place to complain about our church bodies or our congregations, that church politics were to be left at the door. My own sense is that we’ve lost that discipline, and that there’s a lot of handwringing that goes on both here and in chapter retreats. I am the chief of sinners.
- (4) Have we allowed the “pastoral visitation” commitment of the Rule to lapse? Again, this may vary from chapter to chapter, but it is an aspect of the Rule that seems anecdotally

to be in decline. Yet it was high on the priority list in the early discussions of the founders.

- (5) How have we addressed the ongoing challenge of the Rule in general? Do we spend time in honest conversation about that? Some chapters have taken to reading a portion of the Rule at each retreat, which is a salutary practice, but is that all we should be doing? When was the last time you talked with other Society members about the challenges you face in praying the Daily Office regularly or in living a life of obedience to Jesus? Do we need to be intentionally addressing our personal struggles in chapter retreats?
- (6) Along with that goes the perennial problem of people who sign the Rule and then disappear. I know I as a pastor wasn't as attentive as I should have been to those going out the back door, and as a dean I confess that I wasn't much better. So many of our members have simply disappeared. Have we not provided adequate "formation"? Have they become discouraged with the "otherness" of the Society? Have they been offended by one thing or another? Have they taken a new call, and not gotten connected to a new chapter? Is this kind of bleeding just inevitable?

So many questions, I know, and no answers. But studying history does that to a person. You enter into another time, you try to discern why things unfolded the way they did, and you ask "how did we get here" and "where exactly is this here we've gotten to, anyway?" I hope perhaps you will find some time to ponder some of these things on your drive or flight home, or perhaps talk about them in your next chapter retreat.

Let me leave you with some words offered by our first Senior, Phillip Max Johnson, at the 1999 General Retreat, words which might well be the focus of discussion at a chapter retreat. Pr. Johnson said this:

What is required of us?—those who are publicly pledged by the Rule to the renewal of the public ministry in the Lutheran Church? ... I ask the question, knowing that our plans and hopes and labors may, under the judgment of God, go up in smoke. Institutional and denominational Lutheranism has no covenant promise of survival from God. I ask the question knowing also that many faithful pastors today seem too tired and discouraged to invest much in the future, except as they look with relief to retirement. ... But we have put our hand to the plow. ... When I read this Rule, I am convinced that, if there is to be a recovery of Lutheran integrity, it *will* be marked by such commitments. And if I am to continue as a Lutheran pastor, my

ministry and my life will have to be shaped by such commitments. Because I would rather seek honest employment than to be a shopkeeper for a worn-out Protestantism with a Lutheran label. So I pray daily: let me not be put to shame in this work.”

Johnson went on to list some specific things he thought to be “required of us”—not that the Society grow quickly, but that we “understand the concreteness” of our commitments. These include that we be “unapologetic about reordering our time and money to join in prayer, learning and fellowship with other pastors,” that we “stay up late and rise early to learn and write and publish and teach as true confessing theologians,” that we “no longer resent that the call to the Holy Ministry is a call to a particular form of holy discipline in relationships,” and that “we cast off careerism and our time-measuring professional life-styles.” Certainly a challenge, and one that must confront us again and again. God grant that the Society of the Holy Trinity not become just another fellowship or sodality, as wonderful as such things can be. The Lord has raised up this Society for our mutual and continual support of one another, not for our own sake but “for the sake of the vows spoken when we were ordained to the office of the holy ministry.” That is our commitment, that is our purpose, that is our history, and, please God, that is our future. In the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.