

Address to STS General Chapter 2016 by Senior Paddy Rooney

2 Corinthians 4:1-18

“Therefore since it is by God’s mercy that we are engaged in this ministry, we do not lose heart.”

“We do not lose heart.” I was tempted to begin by saying that’s nice...but what did Paul know about ministry in the year of Our Lord 2016? In an age where we are buffeted by changes all around us; a world which is hostile not only to our message but, it seems, almost to our very existence; an environment where heresies are abundant and itching ears abound; where our judicatories and ecclesial bodies - which are supposed to support and encourage us - seem to be clueless and lost; and where our little flocks are too often more aggressive than any ravenous pack of wolves, it is easy to say “do not lose heart”...but a whole lot harder to do.

So what did Paul know? Well actually quite a lot, for the early years of the Church were not exactly a walk in the park either! Nothing disheartens us more than the attacks and the accusations made against us by those we set out to help, and that was the situation for Paul as he writes to the church he had founded at Corinth. This fractious community had been nothing but a problem almost from the beginning. Torn by division and strife between Jew and Greek, faced with the immoral practices that were left from their previous lives; burdened with the strong cultural differences between male and female which continued to divide them and defined the roles each could or should play; topped off by theological distinctions and ongoing abuses concerning the Lord’s Supper, we come now, in this Second Letter, to find that opponents and intruders have risen up to challenge Paul’s very leadership, to question his sincerity and what they perceive as his self-commendation.

Surely, any one of these issues could have caused Paul to slap down his pen, let out a great groan, if not a profanity, and ask himself, why in God’s name was he doing this and what the dickens was he about here in this ministry. So...you want to talk about not losing heart, Paul might say to us, well sit down here for a couple of minutes and let me tell you a few things about this group I have in Corinth...or Rome for that matter...or Philippi or Thessalonica. Between them, as my dear mother used to say, they are enough to drive a saint to drink!!

Yet even in the face of all this, Paul does not lose heart. And not just Paul, for by stating that it is “we,” he draws into his frame of reference those who are his fellow workers and, by extension,

all who are called into holy ministry, down to this very day. And the reason for not losing heart is also made clear for it is “by God’s mercy that we are engaged in this ministry.” With such mercy from God, we find that in place of timidity or trepidation there is boldness and strength and a determination for Paul that this Gospel which has been entrusted to him will be proclaimed even in the face of all the difficulties that confront him for “we proclaim Jesus Christ as Lord.”

Yet this statement by Paul is not a simple bandaid to be slapped on when needed - nor is it a platitude to be trotted out when we are feeling down-in-the-dumps about our ministries as though it were some sort of magic panacea which could be applied to the wounds that have afflicted too many of us over the past few years but which will make it all better now!

For those wounds have been real and hurtful and pain-filled! From both Church and society we have been buffeted by questions and challenges ranging from the nature of sexuality to the form, structure and status of marriage; from the proposals to commune the unbaptized to the continuing irregularity in the naming of God; from the issue of the right to life for the unborn to the ethical questions that surround the very definition of life; from the diminution of our liturgical practices to the questioning of the very nature of God; from the matter of the proper role and place of Scripture in our churches to the proposals to reduce Scripture to a mechanistic model where eisegesis rather than exegesis becomes the norm for interpretation. All of these are issues which have weighed upon us, dragged us down, contributed to our weariness and sometimes led us to despair. And such issues have been further compounded by the ongoing process in too many of our judicatories today of downgrading the holy office of ministry in direct contradiction to Augustana V and Luther’s definitions delineated in the “Marks of the Church,” resulting in confusion over the role we are called to live within our congregations as “stewards of the mysteries of God.” Indeed, at least within the ELCA, there now seems to be a questioning of the very nature of the ordained ministry itself! (And yes, in light of recent ELCA Churchwide decisions regarding language in the Constitution, I make no bones about using that word: ordained.) Finally, if we throw in an unhealthy dose of congregational conflict, which too often stems from a fear and uncertainty about their continued viable existence, what we end up with are too many pastors weighed down, burdened beyond belief, stretched to a breaking point and as those who have no joy left in ministry but only a sense of despair.

To be sure, our lives together as pastors serving in God's Holy Church are not always negative. There are often those wonder-filled times in ministry when we are allowed to enter deeply into the lives of God's people and immerse ourselves into the fullness of both their joys and their sorrows. That we are given even the opportunity to engage in this ministry, sharing God's Word and administering His Holy Sacraments, is indeed a wondrous thing and we are all privileged to be able to serve as stewards of those mysteries. But at the same time there can be no doubt that there is a level of discouragement and disillusionment among servants of the Gospel today that is wearing many of us down. Like the torture treatment of old, the steady drip, drip, drip is driving too many of our colleagues to a point of doubt, disillusionment and perhaps even a little despair. So while there remains an underlying joy in the Gospel and in the apostolic ministry to which we have been called, there is also an underlying sense of hopelessness brought about not by one thing but by the multitude of issues that press on us, each one not killing us in and of itself, but wearing us down piece by piece. Or, as the homiletics professor Tom Swears once described it, ministry today "is a bit like being nibbled to death by ducks!"

Yet this is certain – the source of our ministry is the mercy of God. Or, as our Confessions state, "for this reason" that is so that God's people may receive His Holy Word and the grace of His Sacraments - "God instituted the Office of Holy Ministry." And because it is by the mercy of God, then the very nature of this office is the bold proclamation of the message that Jesus Christ is the image of God and is now and always Our Lord. And because of that message, you and I, as ordained ministers of the Gospel, are called into this boldness, into a ministry that is marked by frankness and openness and the call to serve those to whom truth is proclaimed. The result may be a rejection by some but the very act of bold proclamation brings the transforming light of creation that is present in Christ to light up the way for others.

The strength and value of these mysteries is, however, contained in clay jars and it is these jars which are too often found to be fragile and easily broken. But while we may lament the fragility of these clay jars, perhaps that is not a bad thing - for how pathetic and dangerous it is to believe that the work which God has placed within each of us is our responsibility – our belief that the kingdom of God will literally collapse if we do not keep all the balls in the air. Being reminded that we are clay jars reminds us daily that it is by God's grace that we serve and not by our own skill - for we are not co-equals with God in His ministry but rather, as Paul reminds us, slaves

serving our Master. Yes there are times when I wish that He had chosen another vessel for this work; yes I wish sometimes that I were something other than clay, something strong and lasting...but He didn't and, as a result, you and I are it...there is no other plan and no other option. We are the clay vessels and the mysteries have been entrusted to us.

So does this mean that we have to simply suck it up, live with the tough times and hope that there will be enough good times to get us through? No! Christ has died for us and in and through that act, we are marked as those cherished by God and called His beloved children. Therefore the Lord will not abandon His servants but will provide the means with which to sustain us. And for us that means that God has given us this Society which, under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, is here to help support and sustain us. Our charism is clear and concise...to support the vows each of us took at ordination or, as our subscription states so clearly “for the sake of the vows I spoke at ordination.” Our Rule, our common life together, our daily practice of prayer and our regular use of confession; our support for each other in visitation and the mutual conversation and consolation of the brethren, are all the components that support and sustain us in our daily ministries and help us to not lose heart. Our Society began out of a sense of concern about what was happening in our church bodies and how some important, if not fundamental, theologies and practices, were being watered down or simply ignored. We knew then what we were against. But now, after 19 years of existence, we are about the process of clarifying what we are for...and one of those things that we are for is to help us not lose heart in the face of so many challenges and difficulties.

But if a life lived under the Rule with its accountability to each other is for this purpose, so that in our ministries we are “afflicted in every way, but not crushed; perplexed, but not driven to despair; persecuted but not forsaken; struck down but not destroyed” then that means that there are some things that we are not!

I have heard, for example, from some among the brothers and sisters who say that we need to take a firm position in response to the Defense of Marriage Act decision from the Supreme Court. Or others who say that we should be advocating against this or that position in one or more of our ecclesial bodies. But I say this now and as clearly as possible...that is not the role of the Society...it never was in the beginning when many of us were concerned about a host of issues...and it is not to be our way today. We are not an advocacy body, challenging the

positions of Church or Society on a host of issues which concern and confront. I have my concerns about human sexuality, marriage, the communing of the unbaptized, the place and role of Scripture, the right to life for the unborn and a host of others. Many of these issues are ones I feel very strongly about and many of them I have spoken about. But the role of this Society is not to be an advocate for change in these matters...although individually we may oppose them in various ways and express our deep concern about what they are doing to our culture and the One Church. Rather the role of the Society is to support our pastors who have to deal with such changes and challenges on the front lines of ministry. To assist in that work we will continue to issue Pastoral Statements as necessary detailing what we understand to be the traditional and orthodox position on this or that issue and we pray that these will prove helpful to pastors as they teach and preach within their congregations. And make no mistake, where there is an egregious breach of teaching in regard to that orthodox faith, such as in recent proposals or practices to commune the unbaptized or to turn Scripture into a simple black and white mechanistic machine, then we will speak out strongly so that not only those within the Society but also those outside, will know that this Society, as an Order within the life of the whole Church, stands in that long line of continuity with those who have gone before us - so that we too may “pass on that which was passed on to us” with neither a jot or a tittle being changed.

And that means that we will sustain the traditional liturgical practices of the Church, as called for in our Rule - not so that we are understood or perceived by others to be liturgical Nazis or chancel prancers who care only about form but not substance, but rather so that the ancient principle of *lex orandi lex credendi* is kept strong and vibrant and the mysteries are celebrated with all reverence and respect which is God’s due and His right.

And in this life together we will continue to offer support to each other. Among the 12 or more ecclesial bodies represented in the Society, there are vast differences on a number of issues not the least of which is the ordination of women, the role of Scripture and the matter of open or closed communion. Much is still in flux in each of these ecclesial bodies and we do not know the outcome of the many issues which continue to divide us within the Evangelium. But we know this...no one ecclesial body has all the answers, nor is any one of such bodies perfect in and of itself. That means that in our life together, none of us can boast of our righteousness under the Gospel - that we are “more orthodox” than those others over there, that we are correct while

those others are well...confused, lost or whatever. I have heard such things spoken at times – even among the sisters and brothers within the Society - and it is not seemly and it is not right. Rather our refrain should be “God forbid that I should glory, save in the cross of Our Lord Jesus Christ.”

After all it may be that we are seeing the last days of denominationalism in this country (it being more of a cultural American movement anyway!) and we should rather be looking toward to the future of post-denominational Lutheranism and trying to discern what it might look like. And here I believe the Society can be a model for the Church and say that such a pan-Lutheran body might be the way in which we live now and into the future; that working to live together in unity means finding the ways to speak to each other about the deep issues that divide us in mutual love and respect and not lording it over another just because we think we are right and they are wrong...or at least not sufficiently orthodox. Meanwhile judgement one of the other, and I confess that I have done more than my fair share of that over the years, is not to be our way.

This Society is not perfect and the individuals within it are not perfect. Indeed the ancient refrain of “Simul Justus et Peccator” - saint and sinner - rings true to this very day - and, if we are honest there is too often more the latter than the former! Sin is rampant in so many ways in the culture which surrounds us and also within the life of the Church. It is our sin and we cannot but own it when it happens. But we have also bound ourselves together in love; committed ourselves to live together under a Rule; challenged ourselves to a discipline of prayer and reflection; formed ourselves into a community, a ministerium, an Oratory and an Order so that we might strengthen ourselves in that life long process of being conformed to Christ rather than the world.

“So we do not lose heart.” Our outer nature is indeed wasting away and those clay jars get thinner and more fragile as we go. But “for the sake of the vows I spoke at ordination” this Society will continue to be the means under which we choose to live so that we are strengthened for the journey and nourished in our ministry. We will continue to be afflicted, crushed, persecuted and struck down for “we are always being given up to death for Jesus’ sake.” But we do not lose heart for “our inner nature is being renewed day by day.”

Saint Paul is right. The issues facing the Church may be different but they are still the challenges that confront us just as they did at Corinth or Rome or Philippi, wearing down the ministers of

the Gospel, including Paul, so that they would lose heart, give up the fight and retreat to the trenches. But then the evil one would love nothing better than for such to happen...indeed if we did so then he will have won the battle even while he has already lost the war.

As we enter this, the 20th year of our existence as a Society therefore, let us be reminded then that Christ is with us and the gates of hell shall not prevail. And His broader promises for the wider Church are also the promises for each of you, you who are clay jars and weak vessels but who are nevertheless bearers of the Word of God for the sake of the world. So with that promise ringing in our ears, let us recommit ourselves once again to the ordering of our lives in conformity with the Rule so that in all things we may be formed into Christ who is our head. And while the journey may be hard and we may become despondent at times, let us also enter into the perichoresis of the Holy Trinity to whom this Society is dedicated and in whose life we live, so that we may dance with joy as part of their life together while invoking that sacred name to strengthen us in this ministry to which we have been called. “Therefore since it is by God’s mercy that we are engaged in this ministry, we do not, we do not, lose heart.” May the Lord grant this unto us all. Amen