

FORUM LETTER

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For our own steadfastness



"...[I]t is plain that the tenderness of dealing, which it is our duty to adopt towards a heathen unbeliever, is not to be used towards an apostate. No economy can be employed towards

those who have been once enlightened, and have fallen away. I wish to speak explicitly on this subject, because there is a great deal of that spurious charity among us which would cultivate the friendship of those who, in a Christian country, speak against the Church or its creeds. Origen and others were not unwilling to be on a footing of intercourse with the heathen philosophers of their day, in order, if it were possible, to lead them into the truth; but deliberate heretics and apostates, those who had known the truth, and rejected it, were objects of their abhorrence, and were avoided from the truest charity to them. For what can be said to those who already know all we have to say? And how can we show our fear for their souls, nay, and for our own steadfastness, except by a strong action?" — *from The Arians of the Fourth Century by John Henry Newman (Works V. 4)*

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I'll stay here, where I stand

by Frank C. Senn



In recent years there has been a rivulet of pastors and teachers leaving the Lutheran church to be received into other communions, especially the Roman Catholic Church. About ten of them have been members of the Society of the Holy Trinity (*Societas Trinatis Sanctae*, or STS). One of the most recent to be received into the Roman Catholic Church is Phillip Max Johnson, a respected pastor of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America and the first Senior of the STS. Because of Phillip's involvement as a founding member of the Society and its leader for six years, this decision is very troubling. It raises questions about what the purpose of the Society is.

Ecumenical vocation guided by the Holy Spirit

STS exists to renew the Lutheran church by supporting Lutheran pastors in being faithful to their ordination vows. It is an inter-Lutheran ministerium. But it also confesses that the Lutheran ecumenical vocation is reconciliation with the bishop and Church of Rome. I do not believe that at the time of its founding, the members of the Society understood this to be a matter of personal decision but one of working toward ecclesial communion under the guidance of the Holy Spirit.

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I think one of the ways in which we evangelical catholics especially have led ourselves astray in our thinking is by insisting on calling Lutheranism a reform movement within the Western Catholic Church. This mantra used to be regularly chanted in the pages of this *Forum Letter* and in the companion journal, *Lutheran Forum*, by Richard John Neuhaus, previous editor of the former, and by Leonard Klein, previous editor of the latter. Both have since become Roman Catholic priests.

Christian ecclesiastical groups

Of course Lutheranism was a reform movement in the 1520s. But then it produced a confession of faith in 1530 that was adopted by the churches in some territories. At that point *churches* became Lutheran. Within the Holy Roman Empire these churches attained equal ecclesiastical status with the papal church in the Peace of Augsburg in 1555. One by one the churches of other lands adopted the Lutheran Confession of Augsburg and reorganized themselves accordingly.

This reform of the church of the city, territory, or land was initiated by decisions of city councils, at the instigation of princes and kings, and sometimes by a decision of the church itself — as when the Church of Sweden adopted the Augsburg Confession in 1593 *against* the Catholic confession of its king, Sigismund III Vasa.

We contemporary Lutherans have not come out of a movement. We have come out of the churches that were the Catholic Church of their place. They embraced the entire population of their lands; they had all the theological marks of a true catholic church, and they became intertwined with the folk culture of their people. They were as catholic as the Orthodox Churches of the East, and in a sense even more so, sociologically speaking, since they embraced a majority of the people rather than a minority (as in the case of the Orthodox patriarchates living under Muslim rule).

Once these churches were transplanted in other lands they became what sociologists have called denominations — one Christian ecclesiastical group among others. There were exceptions — the Roman Catholics in Latin America, the Congregationalists in New England (the latter also described themselves as a Particular Catholick

Church). There have been places in the United States and around the world where the Lutheran church also became the dominant denomination. But Roman Catholicism is also a denomination in our country and in other countries.

This is not a great situation as far as Christian unity is concerned, but it is the reality we have to deal with.

Confessional drift

My point in rehearsing this history is to say that Lutheran and Roman Churches simply parted company in the 16th century over issues that became hardened confessions of faith. Lutherans were not just “kicked out” of the Roman Catholic Church. The only excommunicate was Martin Luther himself. Instead, Lutherans and Romans simply drifted apart confessionally and both Evangelical and Roman Catholic Churches renewed church life in the light of their confessions. Ignatius Loyola and Charles Borromeo may be counted among a number of prominent Catholic reformers. Lutheranism is no more a reform movement today than the reform Catholics of the 16th century (whose position got hardened at the Council of Trent) constitute a reform movement today. So we are talking about *churches*, not movements.

It may be that at this particular moment the leadership of the Roman Catholic Church gives more evidence of remaining faithful to the gospel and the great tradition than the leadership of many Lutheran churches in the northern hemisphere. The See of Peter has enjoyed enormous prestige throughout Christian history. But as we are well aware, the Roman Catholic Church is not without massive problems of faith and ethics in numerous local dioceses and parishes, in the United States, in Europe, and around the world. There are no greener pastures.

Waking up one morning

Leonard Klein has said in defense of his own conversion, that if one wakes up some morning and realizes that one believes what the Roman Catholic Church believes, then one is justified in deciding to become a Roman Catholic. Maybe some of our recently departed and departing members of STS have come to that same realiza-

tion.

But I don't believe that one is justified leaving one's calling just because one finds oneself in a state of confession over against one's church body. I happen to know several faithful Roman Catholic priests who are in open disagreement with the Archdiocese of Chicago. In some respects they might be great Lutheran pastors. Yet it would never occur to them to leave their vocation or abandon their flock. They stay and make their witness. They are as much models of faithful pastors as Pope Benedict XVI is a model of an evangelical bishop. And, since a couple of them are near retirement age, they have done what some Lutheran pastors have done. They have worked the system to groom their successors so that years of faithful ministry will not go down the tube.

(I report this without any disrespect for Francis Cardinal George, whom I admire greatly as a bishop, but just for the sake of comparison with our own situations.)

Here I stay

I have been personally troubled by the

number of conversions to other communions out of our Society. The decision of Phillip Max Johnson to be received into the Roman Catholic Church has truly forced me to think about where I stand. I have come to the certainty that we are called to be pastors in *churches*, not partisans of a movement. So as I've wondered about whether I would leave or stay, as pastors whom I admire leave, I have come to the decision: here I stay.

My concern to be faithful to my ordination vows does not depend on the faithfulness of my church to its confessions. I have the *ministerium* that is the Society of the Holy Trinity to support me in remaining faithful.

And in my congregation, at least, I don't have to fight a cultural battle to raise the level of liturgical music, such as several former Lutheran pastors have experienced in Roman Catholic parishes. That's got to be some benefit of this decision!

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The inescapable choice

by Richard J. Niebanck



To leave or not to leave, that is the question haunting a growing number of us who have labored as shepherds of that rapidly diminishing segment of Christ's flock known as the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, as well as an indeterminate number in the other Lutheran bodies — to leave or not to leave, and, if to leave, which way to go? I address these questions from the vantage point of an ELCA pastor.

To be quite honest, I had thought that I had settled the matter for myself, having decided some time ago that fidelity to my ordination vows and, more important, to my baptismal calling required me to remain where I was, serving Christ by serving the people he had entrusted to me.

Then came the departures of several pastors whom I held in high regard, some to Rome, others to Byzantium, and I found myself

challenged to consider my own situation afresh.

What might these departures, and the factors leading up to them, signify for me, even at my relatively advanced age? Abraham, after all, was many years older when he was called to set out.

A public accounting

It would, of course, be impossible fully to know the reasons why these colleagues, even those closest to me, have chosen to depart, and it would be quite wrong to guess at them. Their decisions are, after all, profoundly personal ones.

Yet as holders of an office that is public in character, they are obligated to make a public accounting for their decisions. It is *they* who must so account, and it is we who must accept the accounting as having been made in good faith, whatever may be our subjective feelings about

their decisions.

What I mean to do here, therefore, is to consider some of the factors that might bear upon a decision to leave and then, in a more personal way, to set forth my own reasons for remaining where I am.

No longer Lutheran

Let me begin by reviewing some of the reasons being advanced for departing. The most obvious one is the contention that the reforming movement known as “Lutheran” has, for all intents and purposes, run its course and that the denominations calling themselves “Lutheran” are in fact not “Lutheran” at all.

On the positive side, it is argued that Rome has finally acknowledged the doctrine of justification by grace through faith in Christ without the works of the law, as witness the recently adopted *Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification*.

Furthermore, it is asserted that the progress made in the various bilateral dialogues, and the corpus of writings produced by them, show that Lutherans need not fear compromising their evangelical faith by returning “home” to the Western church of which their forbearers were always a part, though long estranged. Believing that “the Lutheran ecumenical destiny [is] reconciliation with the bishop and church of Rome” (*The Rule*, Society of the Holy Trinity, 1996), the holders of this viewpoint see little or no justification for remaining “separated brethren.”

“Left” and “Right”

On the negative side, it is argued that those ecclesial bodies retaining the name “Lutheran” have long since ceased being Lutheran. When asked, “Why have you left your church?,” they are likely to retort, “So who moved?” The evidence is, as the lawyers would say, *prima facie*, whether one looks to the right or to the left.

On the right — read Lutheran Church Missouri Synod — one sees a once-great denomination now deeply divided, torn by a power struggle just barely masked by obscurantist pseudo-theological bickering, looking less and less like a church and more like a conventicle. That church’s embrace of the combination of mass marketing and revivalist methods is little short of bizarre.

But the disarray on the right pales by comparison to that on the left. It isn’t so much that the ELCA has moved as that it has been politically hijacked by a well-organized and well-financed ideological *mafia*. These hijackers, intent on re-imagining God and reconstructing the world according to the *anti-gospel* of gender, sexuality, race, and class, have taken full advantage of the ELCA’s soft underbelly: a pietistic sentimentality, a “gospel” of reductionist antinomianism, and a wannabe eagerness to be “relevant.”

Not surprisingly, this has led to a top-down imposed legalism and a totalitarian political correctness that covers everything from delegate quotas and seminary curricula to the use of personal pronouns.

In view of this sorry state of affairs, the full contours of which are all too familiar to us, is it any wonder that so many who love and serve the Lord and his church feel that they have no choice but to bail out?

But what, one may ask, is it they seek?

And what guarantee have they of finding it elsewhere?

Ecclesial density

If there is a single common denominator running through the variety of personal accountings for the decision to leave the Lutheran church it is, I submit, a profound longing to be part of a churchly community, a church possessing what is being called “ecclesial density,” a “specific gravity” sufficient to counteract the currents and counter-currents of secular culture.

When the Commission for a New Lutheran Church opted to abolish the *ministerium* as a separate entity charged with guarding its normative doctrine and governing the conduct of ministers, it flung the gates wide to a populist polity. In establishing the quota system, the CNLC made the church into a body of political interest groups. The adoption of a managerial and marketing *ethos* completed the virtual transformation of the church as *Gemeinde* into a fabricated corporation, its parishes being local outlets.

While many see in Roman Catholicism the “ecclesial density” of its Petrine Office and *Magisterium*, so lacking in Lutheranism, others are looking to the Orthodox East. They regard Roman Catholicism as suffering from the same disease which

Protestantism contracted in the 1960s — letting the world set the church's agenda and seeking feverishly to be "relevant." A "dumbed-down" liturgy, insipid music, embrace of "the triumphant therapeutic" over pastoral care and, most recently, the official imposition of a lifeless translation of the Scriptures to be read at Mass — recently subjected to a withering critique by former Lutheran Richard John Neuhaus — are frequently cited as evidence.

These Lutherans see in Orthodoxy a timelessness and stability not disturbed by the upheavals that have plagued the Western church. They find there both a rootedness in God's good earth and a liturgical spirituality that soars heavenward. Without apology, Orthodoxy is incarnated in ethnicity, undistracted by the Western urge toward engineered inclusivity and diversity. Its catholicity is more vertical than horizontal, one which draws its variegated mosaic of ethnic families upward toward an eschatological union in *Christos Pantocrator*.

These Lutherans point to the "opening to the East" being made by certain Finnish theologians who claim to have recovered *theosis* as an aspect of Martin Luther's thought, long neglected by the churches bearing the Reformer's name.

So, these pastors are drawn to the earthy ethnicity and the heavenly *ethos* of Orthodoxy, undeterred by their critical brethren who warn against "aesthetic romanticism" and "triumphalist theology," and who regard their move as both an abandonment of the *theologia crucis* and a false equating of faith with sight. This ultimate rejection of the Western *ethos*, is, I submit, both attractive and utterly wrong. But I'll save that argument for another day.

Why I stay put

Up until now I have postponed giving an accounting for my staying put in the ELCA; time for me to come clean.

I remain in the ELCA because, notwithstanding its loss of "ecclesial density," the ELCA still contains congregations of faithful Christians where the Word is proclaimed in its purity and the sacraments are rightly administered by pastors who remain true to their vows of ordination.

I, my wife of forty-seven years, a son and his family are active members of one such congregation served by one such pastor. I am linked with

many other faithful pastors in the Society of the Holy Trinity, a functioning *ministerium*. I am aware of still more faithful pastors who "soldier on" for the sake of their flocks, refusing to flee from the menacing wolf. I see signs of a new generation intent on reclaiming their baptismal birthright. My own grandchildren are part of that generation. So also are the four gifted home high schoolers who are receiving instruction in Hebrew from our pastor and in Greek from me.

Grace amid the ruins

In all of this I find that, amid the ruins of denominational Lutheranism, there are living, vibrant communities where the means of grace are being offered and received, and where faith is active in works of love.

The sorry condition of the ELCA in some ways reminds one of that hijacked airliner, United 93, and the heroic passengers who sought to take it back or, at least, to avert an even greater disaster. In the case of the ELCA, there is a doughty band of pastors and laity who are convinced that as "this church" was taken over by a minority of revisionists, it can be taken back by a majority of faithful confessors, observing that "there are more of us than there are of them." Whether these hopeful souls prove to be right or not, I'm pledged to give them aid and comfort until our Lord summons me from beyond that "one more river to cross."

This is the ark

Not long ago an overly-zealous Roman Catholic laid it on me and a couple of hundred other members of the Society of the Holy Trinity that we should abandon our leaking lifeboat and return to "Peter's bark." To this I, however belatedly, reply: I'm not in a lifeboat but the very ark of Christ's church. I've been there since my baptism, and that's where I'm staying. It's one helluva stinkin' place, but it's full of redeemed sinners for whom Christ died. I intend to do what I can, God helping me, to care for the ones in my little corner until that great day when the ark arrives at its heavenly destination.

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Synodical silly season



Forum Letter has previously reported on the Metropolitan New York Synod's attempt to do an end run around the churchwide assembly, calling for "restraint" in the administration of discipline of clergy who find themselves unwilling to abide by the ELCA's expectations regarding sexual conduct.

Then we followed up with a story on the ELCA church council's somewhat wishy-washy determination that the New York resolution advocated something unconstitutional. (*FL*:34:12 and 35:5)

Of course other synods have been chomping at the bit to weigh in on the matter. Not a few want to ride this hobby horse into an exhausted, frothy lather. Even before the church council made its determination, there were synod councils lining up to tell them what they ought to do about New York. Advice was mixed; would you expect anything else?

Northwest Washington's council, for example, supported MNYS's resolution, while the Northeastern Iowa leaders expressed their "disappointment and concern" at what MNYS had done. And so it went.

Synodical silliness

The fact that the church council determined the resolution to be (more or less) unconstitutional might, one would think, have put an end to it. But we entered into the silly season of synod assemblies (or maybe put it, the season of silly synod assemblies). They, too, lined up to say what they thought — not just of the original resolution, but also of the church council's view of it.

Several synods considered resolutions so similarly worded we must conclude that the Holy Spirit simultaneously whispered identical phrases to "restraint advocates" all over the church, not unlike the rabbis said to have translated the *Septuagint*.

We don't know what's going on everywhere; it's tedious enough keeping track of one's own synod assembly without bothering to nose around in others. But the New Jersey Synod handily approved a New York-like resolution

calling for "prophetic witness and disciplinary restraint" in cases involving out-of-compliance pastors. New Jersey is not New York but has always wanted to be, so New Yorkers tell it. That may account for the sympathetic support.

The assembly was carefully informed of the church council ruling. The resolutions committee made note of it and recommended defeat. The ELCA's representative at the assembly also emphasized the church council decision. Lots and lots of people understood: the resolution was contrary to ELCA constitutional polity.

Calculated ignorance

Now, why the New Jersey bishop, Roy E. Riley, didn't rule it out of order is beyond our understanding — unless it is the case that the bishop has no understanding of the *constitutional* duty of a presiding officer to rule out of order propositions that are *unconstitutional* to the organization.

If that's the situation — we'll mince no words here — he is ignorant. But, not to be too hard on the poor guy, as we've observed in many ELCA synod assemblies, a presiding officer's parliamentary ignorance is 9/10ths of the law.

If, however, his inaction was an act of calculated defiance, we think the ELCA should send him a bill for the extra staff time and man-hours lost to the church council, as it will again be forced to grapple with an issue it has already handled.

(An additional note of a general nature: beware "prophetic witnesses" trumpeting the "prophetic" content of their "witness." It's a bad, bad sign.)

Inappropriate debate

And then there's the Sierra Pacific Synod. Long a leader in the campaign to open the doors to sexually active gay and lesbian clergy, one would have thought the SPS would have found this kind of resolution to be a no-brainer at their assembly, meeting near the San Francisco International Airport. The restraint resolution, of course, was duly presented, and many thought it was a *fait*

accompli.

Except it wasn't.

The presiding officer, Bp. David Mullen, ruled the resolution out of order. Taking note of the same information shared with the New Jersey Synod but ignored by Bp. Riley — that the church council already had judged the MNYS approach unconstitutional — Bp. Mullen simply stated that it was inappropriate for the assembly to debate it.

Let it be noted here: whatever Mullen's personal feelings are on "restrained" vs. "un-restrained" discipline (and from his public history, we suspect he tends more to the former than to the latter), he did exactly what a responsible presiding officer is supposed to do. Strange this should merit praise, but such are the times we live in.

Of course the bishop's ruling was challenged from the floor, and sharply, but the assembly sustained the bishop (which is to say, the challenge got a majority, but failed to receive the necessary 2/3rds vote to overrule a decision of the chair). The resolution went dead in the water.

In our decided view, this ruling demonstrated wisdom on the part of Bp. Mullen, and not a little courage, either. Where Bp. Riley allowed a similar resolution to proceed, whether from sheer ignorance or from some other motive, Bp. Mullen did the right thing for the right reason.

Bp. Mullen, though not a vocal advocate of the gay/lesbian cause, is generally regarded as sympathetic to it and supportive, and has not taken public action against any of the synod's pastors who are rather openly living in violation of *Vision & Expectations* (though that, of course, doesn't mean he has not taken some more private action). Additionally, our view, Bp. Mullen has been negligent for not dealing with Ebenezer Lutheran Church and its thoroughly paganized pastor of *herchurch.org* fame.

Yet here the bishop personally derailed a likely majority of those at the assembly who would have endorsed the MNYS action, the ruling of the ELCA church council notwithstanding.

Putting the bishop on notice

In response to Bp. Mullen's ruling, the "restraint advocates" brought up another resolution, approaching the matter from a different direction. This one is worth quoting, with some

emphasis added:

Resolved that the Sierra Pacific Synod Assembly, *as the calling body of this Synod's bishop* and in its relationship of both mutual support and mutual accountability, hereby advises the bishop of this Synod that, in exercising the discretion explicitly granted by the ELCA's governing documents, the bishop should be guided by restraint in the administration of those policies that impede the service of rostered leaders partnered with a person of the same gender . . . further . . . that this advice shall continue to be the advice of the Sierra Pacific Synod Assembly (*as the calling body*) to this Synod's bishop (as its called pastor) unless specifically revoked at a future Assembly.

There was one more "resolve" which would have sent a copy of the resolution to the entire ELCA church council, and to the officers of every ELCA synod.

There's more than one way to put a bishop on notice.

Slap the bishop

It would be hard to think of wording offering a clearer slap at the bishop. The gay/lesbian lobby was sending a remember-who's-in-charge-here-fella resolution, and a warning: dance-with-the-one-who-brung-you. The electoral hint in the two-time use of "calling body of this synod's bishop" is unmistakable. Especially sharp are words like "hereby advises" and "mutual accountability" — though one does wonder why proponents didn't talk about accountability between churchwide assembly decisions and synod actions defying those decisions.

Unfortunately for the "restraint advocates," Sierra Pacific resolutions presented after the deadline require a 2/3rds vote to be considered, and this one didn't get it. Perhaps the tone was too strident even for some of its sympathizers. Or maybe it was just getting too late and everybody

wanted to go home.

Fallback strategy number two was a resolution taking still another tack: “Resolved, that this Sierra Pacific Synod Assembly commends the office of the Bishop of this Synod for its exercise of the discretion explicitly granted by the ELCA’s governing documents, and encourages that the Bishop’s office continue to be guided by restraint in the administration of those policies only applicable to sexual minority rostered persons.”

That’s quite a change in tone from the previous resolution. Instead of overtly warning the bishop that he’d better exercise restraint (since he, after all, works for the synod), this one instead commended him for the restraint he has already exercised.

Well, that seemed to be the intent, anyway. Some wondered whether it was actually the bishop they were talking about, or some file cabinet or desk, with all the talk about “the office of the bishop.” What it might mean to commend an office seemed a little obscure. But everyone got the point.

Objectionable commendation

Bp. Mullen, again to his credit, relinquished the chair to the vice-president, and then came down to the floor and stood in line to speak. When he was recognized, he expressed appreciation for the sentiment, but said he thought the resolution was inappropriate and unhelpful, and urged the assembly to defeat it. The assembly thought it knew better, however. Members repudiated the bishop by nonetheless commending “the bishop’s office” — over the bishop’s objection — by a vote

of 162 to 146. This all took place in the last hour of the assembly on Sunday morning, after many voting members had left (at one point earlier there had been well over 500 members present and voting).

Compelling visibility

A motion to commend the bishop, of course, sounds good and supportive, but things are not always as they seem. One of the proponents of this resolution told us that its real purpose was to force the bishop’s hand. “He doesn’t like to be visible,” this pastor said. “We want to force him to be more public” in support of the agenda.

Covering an iron fist with a velvet glove is nothing new, of course, and it is a tactic that often works well. For our part, and even though we haven’t always agreed with him, we believe Bp. Mullen to be a good pastor who loves the church and who honestly wants to do what is right. We expect things will be harder for him, now that he has taken actions which some will see as impeding their agenda.

But the actions of Sierra Pacific, and of other synods, should put to rest any notion that the churchwide assembly settled the question of the ordination of gay and lesbian persons in “committed relationships.” It is often pointed out that the word *synod* means something like *walking together*. On this issue and others, the ELCA isn’t having a bit of that — not as long as bishops, pastors, synod assemblies and congregations feel free to defy the policies of this church. — *by the editors*

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