

# FORUM LETTER

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## But I am baptized

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“Lord God, when I get swallowed up in my own sin, doubting that anyone loves me, much less you, remind me to quote Luther: ‘But I am baptized.’ When it is necessary Lord, when I am really discouraged with myself, and have no hope, remind me to say to myself again and again, like a litany: ‘But I am baptized. But I am baptized.’ In baptism, Lord God, I became your child, and now nothing can separate us one from another. Though I do wicked things, you will not let me go. Through I walk through a valley of disgrace, and you show much displeasure with me, you will not disown me. You will haunt me and hound me all the days of my life, because I am your child. Before I repent, your arms are uplifted in a welcoming embrace. If I do not repent, you will not give up on me until I hear your word of grace: ‘You are my beloved child.’ Grace upon grace, is what you are, and I thank you for being the only God. Amen.” — *by Richard F. Bansemer, former bishop of the Virginia Synod, Evangelical Lutheran Church in America; found in O Lord, Teach me to Pray (ALPB Books, 1995).*

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## Sober and persuasive decision



The Evangelical Lutheran Church in America's Committee on Appeals (COA) has ruled in favor of Bp. Ron Warren of the Southeastern Synod in the well-publicized disciplinary proceeding against Pr. Brad Schmeling. Though this has provoked howls of outrage from Schmeling's supporters, the COA's judgment was sober and persuasive, and we believe that they have rightly decided.

The original Discipline Hearing Committee (DHC), with considerable hand-wringing, opined that they really had no option but to remove Pr. Schmeling because he publicly admitted living in a homosexual relationship with another man. They agreed, by split decision, to remove him from the roster effective August 15, the point being that maybe — just a possibility, you know — the churchwide assembly meeting this month might be persuaded to change the rules about gay pastors. And then Pr. Schmeling wouldn't have to be removed after all.

Of course they made it perfectly clear they earnestly hoped that would be exactly what might happen, and offered advice to anyone who cared to listen about how the assembly in fact might be induced to act.

### Two appeals

The COA was actually considering two appeals.

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Editor: Pr. Russell E. Saltzman <[rhlcpastor@sbcglobal.net](mailto:rhlcpastor@sbcglobal.net)>.  
Editor-elect: Pr. Richard O. Johnson <[roj@nccn.net](mailto:roj@nccn.net)>.  
Member: Associated Church Press.

EDITORIAL OFFICE: 10801 Ruskin Way, Kansas City, MO 64134-2931.  
SUBSCRIPTION OFFICE: American Lutheran Publicity Bureau, PO Box 327, Delhi, NY 13753-0327 <[dkralpb@aol.com](mailto:dkralpb@aol.com)>. Periodicals postage paid at Delhi, NY and additional mailing offices.  
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First, Pr. Schmeling appealed, arguing that the DHC had abused its discretion — apparently by finding him guilty of what he publicly acknowledged. His claim was that the provisions in *Vision & Expectations* and *Definition and Guidelines for Discipline*, which preclude persons in homosexual relationships from serving as pastors, violate the constitution of the ELCA, and that by following these policy documents rather than the constitution, the committee erred.

Second, Bp. Warren filed a counter-appeal, alleging also that the DHC abused its discretion, but in quite different ways. They should not, he claimed, have made the removal effective August 15 (some six months after the fact); and they should not have advocated changing the policy; it was not their job and their findings should have been limited to fact.

Now the COA has made its decision. It dismissed Pr. Schmeling's claim that the provisions about gay pastors violate the constitution, pointing out that the constitution specifically gives the COA and the ELCA church council authority to develop these policies, and they were developed and approved in the appropriate constitutional way.

Bp. Warren's appeal, on the other hand, was essentially upheld. The DHC was out of bounds when it put off the effective date of removal by six months. The ELCA documents are clear that the removal of a pastor is effective immediately, though if an appeal is filed the COA itself can grant a stay. The DHC, however, has no authority to stay its own decision. (That's a pretty important provision, seems to us. Otherwise, a panel could simply vote to remove a pastor, and then stay their own decision for, oh, a year, two years — until the pastor is ready to retire?)

### **Artless and callous weeping**

The COA consequently made it clear that Pr. Schmeling's removal is effective immediately, on July 2, the day of the decision. His supporters, of course, are spinning this to make it look like the COA maliciously moved the removal date up six weeks ("artless and callous" wept Lutherans Concerned executive Emily Eastwood). In fact the COA followed the constitution, as they are charged to do; and they made it clear in passing that the local Discipline Hearing Committee had utterly

botched their constitutional responsibility.

The COA also suggested the DHC had engaged in pointless grandstanding by essentially advocating a change in the rules. While declining to take a position on the policy itself, the COA pointed out (they "feel compelled to comment," they said) that the DHC had absolutely no right or reason to make policy suggestions. Since these "suggestions" didn't effect the outcome, the COA didn't actually "overturn" anything; but they did make clear that the panel "exceeded the authority granted" by the constitution. We hope the DHC members are duly embarrassed by all this. We doubt they are, but they certainly should be.

### **Complementary reading**

There is one other aspect of the COA decision that bears noting. While much has been made of the fact that the provisions precluding "practicing homosexual persons" from ordained ministry come in the policy documents rather than the constitution and bylaws, the COA pointed out that all the documents must be read in a complementary way. In other words, when the constitution provides for the removal of pastors for behavior "incompatible with the ministerial office," that phrase must be understood to mean "practicing homosexual persons" because the constitution itself gives the authority for defining that incompatibility to the church council and COA, and they have so defined it.

### **Digging bishops**

So, the COA argues, whether you agree or disagree with the policy, it *is* the current policy, and it must be upheld if there is to be any coherence in our disciplinary provisions.

We read this as something of a dig at those bishops who are simply refusing to enforce the policy in their synods; or who are hiding behind the "I may have administered private admonition, maybe, can't say for sure publicly you know" gambit.

While episcopal discretion is a good thing (and a necessary pastoral tool), it is really intended for gray areas. When the documents specify that a particular behavior is "precluded," there's no gray area. It means that pastors who engage in that behavior should be removed from the ministry of

the ELCA, unless they agree to amendment of life.

Bishops who think they don't have to follow the constitutional provisions in this matter — who deliberately undermine the coherence of the ELCA — are abusing their discretion just as

much as the disciplinary panel, which decided to stay its own decision while lobbying to change the policies it was mandated to uphold. — *by Richard O. Johnson, editor-elect*

## Instantly non-human



“I do not believe,” the fellow told me some years back, “that when egg and sperm meet it is instantly human, infused with a soul.” The remark has stayed with me for a while.

Whatever else, one is moved to ask, is propagated by the union of human sperm and human egg, other than a human being? From the first moment, the microscopic concoction would be indistinguishable — speaking at a cellular level — from, say, an average pro-choice advocate. At the same time the resulting union would be genetically distinct from every other human being on earth. We are each uniquely individual, set apart by the strands of DNA woven into our interior. Even the question of when the body finds fusion with the soul is but marginally interesting. If God intends

human life to have a soul, one presumes the presence of a soul in each individual human life.

The question isn't whether human conception has produced a human being — obviously it has. Nor is the question even one of when or whether our flesh is infused with a soul.

The true question is, when is human life worthy of being called human? When do humans become endowed with their humanity?

If we would kill the unborn, we must first declare their “unhumanity.” This happens in a variety of ways, not least of which is denying from the very beginning that anyone is “instantly human.” Once it is decided there are categories of human beings that are non-human, then all things humanly impossible instantly become inhumanly permissible. — *by the editor*

## Which true church is truly church?



You need to understand, the Vatican hasn't said anything it hasn't said before. I'm talking about the recent declaration that the Roman Catholic Church constitutes the fulfilled intentions of Jesus Christ when he said “upon this rock I shall build my church.” And the church he built is *that* church, not some other church.

This isn't the first time Rome has said so. There was the declaration of *Dominus Iesus* in 2000 (“On the Unicity and Salvific Universality of Jesus Christ and the Church”), which addressed the notion that one religion is as good as another. Among other things, *Dominus Iesus*, written by then Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger, now Benedict XVI, said, “The ecclesial communities which have not preserved the valid episcopate and the genuine and integral substance of the Eucharistic Mystery

are not Churches in the proper sense.” Baptism provides, at best, only a “certain communion” with Rome and, therefore, an “imperfect” one. Yeah, maybe. But some of us are happy enough to take our *communio* any way we can get it.

Issued at the end of June, the latest document — *Responses to Some Questions Regarding Certain Aspects of the Doctrine on the Church* — repeats the same theme. The Eastern Churches though presently separated are “sister Churches” to Rome, while Lutherans and others may be regarded as “ecclesial Communities.” Both of these designations stem from the Vatican II Decree on Ecumenism, *Unitatis Redintegratio*. There we learn more, namely,

. . . these separated churches and

Communities, though we believe they suffer from defects, are deprived neither of significance nor importance in the mystery of salvation. In fact the Spirit of Christ has not refrained from using them as instruments of salvation, whose value derives from that fullness of grace and of truth which has been entrusted to the Catholic Church.

Note, please, our “value” as an “instrument of salvation” is derived from the “fullness of grace and of truth” first entrusted to the Catholic Church.

### A “new” “true” church

Inasmuch as the Lutheran confessional movement arose from within Western Catholicism, I can appreciate that perspective. Our seventh article in the Augsburg Confession wasn't written to define a “new” Church, after all, or even a “true” Church. It was written amid all the competing claims for and about Church in the 16th century:

It is also taught among us that one holy Christian church will be and remain forever. This is the assembly of all believers among whom the Gospel is preached in its purity and the holy Sacraments are administered according to the Gospel. For it is sufficient for the true unity of the Christian church that the Gospel be preached in conformity with a pure understanding of it and that the Sacraments be administered in accordance with the divine Word.

This is not a minimalist definition of Church and church unity, as sometimes charged. There is similar language in Vatican II documents. The seventh article must instead be read within the context of history, and from within Western Catholicism. The Western church institutions of the 16th century still were all in place, working a little fitfully, perhaps, but all there. Article Seven says the essence of Church is in the Word and the

Sacraments. Other articles rather firmly assert these cannot be done without the divinely instituted office of the ministry. Article Seven does not envision tiny, isolated pockets of faithful parishioners and pastors valiantly holding the line against a rising tide of faithlessness and apostasy. It does mean, the true Church is found wherever and whenever the true Gospel is preached and the Sacraments are ministered according to the Gospel. When Church is a dynamic activity — proclaiming, hearing, responding, receiving — that is something more than mere institutional organization.

### Dancing with Druids

The reformers, best I understand things, had no thought of creating a Church, nor any intention of issuing a declaration of independence from *the* Church. History required them to cobble together some temporary structures over time and space, but it wasn't Lutheran purist particularity nor Roman apostasy they had in mind when subscribing to Article Seven. They had in mind the whole Church through all time and in all places. Seeking to locate the “real” Church — then encased in empire, papacy, monastery, convent, hierarchy — they lifted up again Word and Sacrament, the centered worship of believers who are the Church. So “Lutheran” isn't anything ultimately institutional at all. So far as I know, Lutheran institutions — the Evangelical Lutheran Church in American and the Lutheran Church Missouri Synod — are not the licensing agents for the true Gospel, nor brokers for the Sacraments. And neither is Rome.

And there lies Rome's critique. We lack the institutional stuff, an ordered ministry in apostolic succession, and absent that, we therefore equally lack the fullness of the Eucharistic mysteries an ordered succession is said to guarantee.

That can be argued, and we have. We have at different times replied, apostolicity cannot be confined to a succession of *teachers*. Apostolicity may equally be located in the faithful succession of apostolic *teaching*. There is nothing ultimately institutional about that. If institutional leaders — say, ELCA Presiding Bishop Mark S. Hanson, LCMS President Gerald Kieschnick, and Pope Benedict XVI — start dancing together with Druids at midnight on Winter Solstice, the church as

Church, teaching apostolically, remains. (Though which of those three guys is most likely to . . . never mind; I don't want to go there.)

### A call we may heed

What Lutherans forgot was a magisterium, a teaching office. Not thinking to create a "true" church, the reformers created something more "temporary" — an "ecclesial community," if you will. Lutherans have gathered and organized, and reorganized so many times; we change structure at will and when necessary. Rome regards this as deficient, but we didn't worry about it much. We had our confessions and these ultimately make Lutherans Lutheran.

But what happens when the confessions take a back seat to the institution? I've never felt especially deficient as a Lutheran, until the last two decades or so. As long as cultural isolation kept Lutherans wedded to our confessional roots, everything was fine. But now we find our teaching strangely adrift, and we have proven subject to all the shattering temptations that have always tempted the Church. These seem to have afflicted

big-time Protestantism with especially devastating effect. Even the confessions themselves have failed to provide adequate guidance to our denominational structures, which makes me wonder if it wasn't less the confessions and more our cultural backwardness that made us Lutherans. In either case, I do not foresee any ready remedy.

Nevertheless, over and against all that stands the confessions and the Tradition out of which they arose, calling us all to greater faithfulness. We may heed that call. The game is afoot, not up. The challenge of evangelical catholicism, if indeed it is a movement and not a party slogan, is to actively engage the present confessional crisis, and to do it for *the* Church which is catholic, and also for the sake of our institutional bodies which are not.

Meanwhile, just an observation, if the Church of Rome was thinking to woo back her, uh, inactive members, *Responses to Some Questions Regarding Certain Aspects of the Doctrine on the Church* might have benefited from some little refinement. — *by the editor*

## Sentimental smarmy stuff — the editor's last word



The associate editor, now editor-elect (until the next issue when he becomes the editor), expressed his fear to me that this, my last issue as editor of *Forum Letter*, would be filled with "all the sentimental smarmy stuff" I never got to say before. Well, that sort of took care of any plans I had for this issue.

But if I cannot indulge my penchant for smarmy sentiment, I shall at least try and explain what I have tried to do with *Forum Letter* during my 17-year tenure. To do that, I must recall from 11 years ago a board meeting of the American Lutheran Publicity Bureau. A board member questioned me about the *Letter's* audience. "Who do you write for?"

I frankly didn't then and still don't have a clue, but possible answers raced through my mind at the time. Pastors, laity, ELCA folks, LCMS folks, the theologically literate, cranky dissidents? I really didn't know, and none of it would have been true

in any event. I wasn't writing for you; I never did.

What 17 years have come down to is: I write for myself. If anybody wants to read over my shoulder, I'm glad to let them and grateful when they do.

And that, more or less, is what I said to the board member who asked the question. Had I been thinking a little faster, I might have added something about my gratitude for the privilege and opportunity the board had entrusted to me. But, no, I got stuck spouting my own impossible arrogance and just letting it hang there in the air.

I have thought about that remark through the years, and that seems to be where I get stuck. If I did not first of all write what I wrote to please myself, was there anybody else I could have expected to please?

### Better than I said

Thank God for Glenn Stone at that meeting.

He fished me out. Stone, recall, is emeritus editor of *Lutheran Forum*, former executive director of the ALPB, one-time associate editor of the Lutheran Church in America's version of *The Lutheran* before the merger. He is also the first editor of any religious publication to publish anything I ever wrote. He was, I recall, an exacting editor, but nice enough to print my stuff anyway.

Okay, Glenn said. But he writes for himself coming from a background in and a commitment to the Lutheran confessions, and a parish practice arising from that. He writes from within a perspective defined by the ALPB itself.

Cool. Sounded better than anything I said.

### **Down here in the parish**

So, writing *Forum Letter* for myself, means I write as a parish pastor who encounters the church at her elemental level, in the parish, and more particularly, a Lutheran parish. This is where I meet people summoned by the Word and the sacraments, who struggle with varying degrees of success with daily faithfulness, and who know — whether or not they can say it in a prescribed “Lutheran” way — that faith is a gift of the Spirit and not their own work. I write then as a parish pastor who is convicted by the truth of the Gospel, and who finds himself constrained to protest when it appears that the truth of the Gospel has become imperiled. I write as I preach, in service I pray to the Gospel that has saved even me.

Now this, down here in the parish, is exactly what every pastor is supposed to do, serve the Gospel. Some days that's easier than others. It may mean patiently demurring when a pregnant bride thinks it would be cute to have *Yummy, Yummy, Yummy, I Got Love in My Tummy* played at her wedding. It has meant explaining to a young father why his Unitarian brother would not be a good choice as a baptismal sponsor, and telling a host mother why her Muslim foreign exchange student should not be expected to seek Holy Communion with the other members of the host family. I've had to cool Grandma's jets when she wanted to sneak the grandchild to church for a quickie baptism, and then patiently explain matters to the church council when she complained about my refusal. I've had to tackle racism, sometimes subtle, sometimes not, and once I pointedly told a council president to go pound sand when he

objected to me conducting a funeral for a gay man who had died of AIDS. It has also meant just throwing up my hands in frustration — all right! let the damn dog be the ring bearer. (That one really wasn't my fault. I was a visiting pastor. I didn't know about the dog until almost the last minute. Besides, I was assured the animal was house, er, church broken.)

Nearly every pastor has encountered things like these, and some of us have encountered even sharper challenges. These, for our parishes, are relatively clear instances where, if permitted, the Gospel itself would be put at risk to greater or lesser degrees. For us in the parish, these are moments of crisis, big and small. We do not seek them, but they come to us anyway and our confession is required. It is not our own confession; it is given to us and it is the one we have pledged by our vows of ordination. Confronted with occasions like these, there is little else we can do and remain faithful pastors — concessions to doggies and other occasional forms of bad taste, when the Gospel is not at stake, notwithstanding. When the Gospel must be taught, we are the ones to teach it. In teaching it, we incidentally teach as much for ourselves as for anyone else.

So too on these pages — examining the state of Lutheranism — come those moments when this parish pastor tries to teach the Gospel, as much to himself as to anyone else. Objecting to a Unitarian baptismal sponsor is of a piece with objecting to the apparent invocation of a Gnostic substitute for Christ and him crucified.

In short, what I have tried to write in *Forum Letter* is not only what I want to write for myself, but what I must write for myself if I am to think of myself as a pastor. It is the parish that first feeds *Forum Letter*.

### **Fair and unbalanced**

Over the course of 17 years, I have argued as my predecessors did for the Lutheran confessions as an evangelically catholic standard for the Lutheran churches. The *Forum* publications challenge the Lutheran churches to take the confessions as seriously as the confessions take themselves. I've tried to do that with some verve and punch. Sometimes I've used polemic (not that there is anything wrong with a well-packaged bit of polemic judiciously applied), sarcasm (same deal),

and satire (think of it as puncturing the balloons of pretentiousness). And when I covered news, I hope it was fairly done, even factual, while never balanced. The balance at *Forum Letter*, remember, always tips to the confessions.

### Peace and God bless

That's what I did, I wrote for myself with those points in mind. It has been a gratifying and, oddly, a humbling experience, knowing that what I

produced was eagerly received by so many (whether they agreed with me or not is another matter). Others may judge how well I have succeeded, but I have sought always to advance understanding of the Lutheran confessions, to stimulate parish renewal, and provide encouragement to the laity and pastors alike.

I trust you will extend to my successor the same kindnesses you have extended to me. Peace and God bless. — *by Russell E. Saltzman*

## Omnium gatherum



**Episcopal incomes** ● My remarks last issue on hiding the salaries of bishops within a “programmatic” rather than a “line-item” budget provoked some mail, all from bishops. I heard from several but two are representative. Wrote one ELCA bishop: “I am one bishop who wants my salary to be shared with our synod assembly and it is published (along with my assistant’s salary) in the pre-assembly report each Spring. My salary, including housing, is just under \$80,000. Further, my wife provides the family medical insurance for us at her employment and by so doing saves the synod \$17,000 a year. I am well paid but not over paid.”

Wrote another: “I find your preference for public disclosure of salaries for bishops (and often pastors) less than persuasive. Having attended congregational meetings as well as synodical meetings where some of the most conservative and stingy members have been given a public forum to express some of the most stupid and uninformed comments about salaries, I am relieved that these decisions are left to representative councils. Reporting these decisions in annual reports, as you suggest, would, in my mind, only lead to that kind of public discourse, described above, at the next congregational/synodical meeting and would enable a repeat of the practice we have tried to avoid. This is what makes church reporting of salaries different from public reporting.”

As you might guess, I much prefer the first to the second. The “stupid and uninformed” may always be challenged, and should be sharply, but being stupid and uninformed is no reason not to

let folks know how much the pastor and the bishop are being paid, and why. (For the record, I’m presently paid \$46,000, housing included.)

**LCMS convention details** ● Peter Speckhard is the new ALPB *Forum Online* administrator at [www.alpb.org](http://www.alpb.org) and a pastor in the Lutheran Church Missouri Synod. That means he is also the new associate editor of *Forum Letter*. If you have not read his day-by-day, blow-by-blow commentary on the latest LCMS convention just ended, you should. You’ll find it under “LCMS 2007 Convention Reports” at the site. Pr. Speckhard’s extended coverage of the convention will appear on these pages next issue.

**ELCA assembly details** ● Which reminds me to note, the present associate editor now editor-elect (and won’t you be glad not to read that phrase any more) Richard O. Johnson will be providing the day-by-day, blow-by-blow account of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America meeting in Chicago, beginning August 6.

**About the LCMS hyphen** ● Alert readers know that under the Saltzman regime at *Forum Letter*, LCMS was rarely LC-MS and Lutheran Church Missouri Synod with equal rarity was ever Lutheran Church-hyphen-Missouri Synod. Properly, I’ll admit, the hyphen should be present. Except it looks dumb and I never liked it. Being editor, I could decree its absence. My guess is, the new editor will put it back in. If he does, I trust readers will howl and demand he remove it. Not that I want to meddle or anything.

**Terse historical curiosities** ● Richard O. Johnson has a Ph.D. in church history. Pity. He clearly finds himself much too easily sucked into obscure historical curiosities. In a recent list-serv discussion I followed, about the extent to which various Lutheran hymnals have been formally “authorized” by their sponsoring church bodies, Dr. Johnson was driven to his archival collection, which, I’m given to believe, is the largest private archival collection west or east of the Mississippi. There he discovered — and of course just had to tell the rest of us — the following note in a 1917 report to the General Council from the worship committee working on the service book for the United Lutheran Church in America: “The request of the General Council that a *terse* [emphasis added] title for the book be chosen was considered, and the following finally adopted: *COMMON*

*SERVICE BOOK OF THE LUTHERAN CHURCH WITH HYMNAL.*” This left him wondering, he related, whether the “terse” request was answered yes or no. Obviously, more historical study is required here.

**Jesus does the rest** ● “In an age when it is difficult to sustain faith and community, there can be no better advice than that of Jesus himself: Gather around the Word of God and break the bread together. We do not have to even understand what we are doing and we do not have to be brilliant, imaginative, or stimulating. We just have to gather in His Name and around the simple, clear rituals He gave us. Jesus has promised to do the rest.” — by Fr. Ron Rolheiser, O.M.I., in *Seeking Spirituality* (Hodder & Stoughton, 2007)

## ALPB Board Dinner

Saturday, October 13th 2007

Immanuel Lutheran Church, 122 East 88th Street, Manhattan, NY  
6 PM

Honoring Pr. Russell E. Saltzman, retiring editor of *Forum Letter*

Speaker: Fr. Richard John Neuhaus, editor-in-chief, *First Things*  
Response by Russell E. Saltzman

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