

FORUM LETTER

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Who can describe it?



“The Word was made flesh, but how he was made flesh, we do not know. The doctrine from God, I have; the science of it, I do not have. I know that the Word was made flesh; how it was done, I do not know. . . . Isaiah even says, ‘Who can describe his generation?’ What had Isaiah meant then by saying, ‘The virgin shall be with child and bear a son’? He is telling us what has happened, but when he says, ‘Who can describe his generation?’ he is revealing to us the fact that he has been born, but how he has been born, we do not know.” — Jerome, *Homily 87, On John 1.1-4* (cited in *Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture*, Intervarsity Press, New Testament . – Volume IVa, 2006).

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The drumbeat of social agendas



“Puzzling.” That’s the kindest word I can conjure up in response to Presiding Bishop Mark Hanson’s All Saints Day letter to the people of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America. The letter appeared in the e-mail boxes of “rostered leaders” on November 1.

I’m not puzzled by the subject matter. There wasn’t a thing in the letter with which I disagree. I give thanks for the brave men and women who have stood strongly for civil rights. I grieve the innumerable ones who have been victims of racism and other kinds of hatred. I applaud efforts by the church – by anyone, for that matter – to eradicate the sin of racism (even while I acknowledge this is a task that will never be completed this side of heaven; we are, after all, captive to sin, including that particular sin).

But it is still puzzling. What on earth does the bishop think this has to do with All Saints Day? The connection he draws – that civil rights heroes are among the saints – is so forced, even trite, that it’s embarrassing. It gives the impression, to put it forthrightly, that the good bishop has once again hijacked a festival of the Christian Church to express his social and political agenda. It just isn’t seemly.

Parsimonious drumbeats

I wonder if, back in the day that Bp. Hanson was a parish pastor, he managed to turn every last sermon into an advocacy speech? If so, I wonder how that went over? I suppose there are congregations where that is wanted and encouraged. But in most congregations, seems to me, pastors are expected to be somewhat parsimonious in how often and under what circumstances they beat the drum for social issues. Or how often they beat the drum for anything, as far as that goes. I served a parish once where a few months into it, a very fine

laywoman said to me, "Your preaching is so refreshing. Under your predecessor, every Sunday we got a sermon on love." Maybe you needed to hear the inflection in her voice to get her point: the word "love" was "sticky sweet," as they say. She had nothing against love, of course; this was a woman whose own ministry in daily life radiated Christian love in so very many ways. But she had this sense that there's more to Christianity than "can't we all just get along," which is how she interpreted the pastor's sermons on love. Even sermons on love can grow old, you see.

The church's *raison d'être*

And yet Bp. Hanson doesn't seem to be able to allow any opportunity for advocacy-stumping to pass him by. Last Easter's "message" reminded us about violence, war, poverty, and racism. Last Christmas it was AIDS and nuclear weapons. The Easter before it was "our call to be public witnesses." Does the bishop not understand that "to everything there is a season"? Does he not get that the "public witness" of the church, while certainly an important thing, is not really the church's *raison d'être*? That there is something more to preaching the gospel than urging people to be responsible citizens?

Perhaps even more to the point, does he not realize that his unrelenting social issue advocacy is met with rolling eyes, with groans, even with ridicule? "Oh, there he goes again," seems to be a common response, at least among those who bother to respond at all.

The good bishop has more than once been heard to lament the decreasing influence of the church (read: the officials of mainline Protestantism) in the councils of government. He told a press conference at the churchwide assembly last summer (and I couldn't quite tell if it was with dismay or with a kind of perverse pride) that he understood that President Bush himself has banned any meeting with a delegation of religious leaders that includes Mark Hanson. I'm not a particularly big fan of President Bush, but I can understand his point (if the story is true).

The All Saints statement was the 16th "message from Bishop Hanson" of calendar year

2007. I have just undergone the discipline of scrolling through them all. With one exception (his less-than-stellar response to the Vatican statement on the Doctrine of the Church), every single one of these messages makes some reference to social issues. Sometimes that's the primary topic; sometimes it is mentioned in passing (as when he describes the Christian vocation as being "gospel proclaiming, truth-telling, bridge-building, justice-seeking, neighbor-serving, peacemaking, earth-caring, invitation-extending, enemy-forgiving, intercessory praying people" – a cute phrase he must like as he has used it more than once). One could almost conclude that the new "Trinity" in the ELCA creed is "peace, justice, and care of creation."

A bishop's responsibilities

It is instructive to review the responsibilities of the presiding bishop in the ELCA's constitution. There are twelve specific tasks outlined. This is not an inspiring list. Most of the responsibilities have to do with mundane administrative tasks – sort of like any pastor's real job description, when you come right down to it. Of course the presiding bishop has a "bully pulpit" which isn't really reflected in the constitution. But it is striking that not a single item on this list refers to expressing opinions about social issues. The only place in the job description where you could shoehorn that in would be in the general responsibility to "provide leadership for the life and witness of this church."

One would hope that the "life and witness of this church" has to do with a whole lot of things other than social issues; and that while peace, justice, and care of creation are important things, the real focus of our "life and witness" is really rather different. It is the gospel of Jesus Christ, the good news that Christ came into the world to save sinners – not to lecture us sinners on the need for so-called "public witness." It would be a good and salutary thing to see our presiding bishop providing at least as much leadership in that proclamation as he does in the social justice agenda – good and salutary, and probably a whole lot more effective in the long run. It is, after all, not episcopal pronouncements that truly impact society, but changed lives.

—by Richard O. Johnson, editor

Fixing the call process

By Geoff Sinibaldo



“If it ain’t broke, don’t fix it,” goes the old saying. But what happens when things are greatly out of kilter? I was at an ELCA Synod function recently talking with a colleague who recently began a new call. He is a pastor in good standing. He has served on synod council for years. He is a very capable and gifted pastor, an asset to the church. Yet it took two years from the time he submitted his mobility papers until he was actually in his new call.

When I took my second call a few years ago, things went smoothly. It still took eight months from start to finish. I know I am not the first person to point out the flaws in our mobility process and will likely not be the last. Rather than simply complain, I offer these potential modifications that could ease the frustration level many pastors and congregations experience.

Stacks of paper

Information Sharing. Could there be a standard way that available calls could be made known to candidates? Synods can shape who serves in their territory, but what if there were a national database listing open congregations and contact information with synod offices? Perhaps there also could be a similar structure with password protection for synod offices seeking available clergy. I have heard rumors that this is in the works.

Thumbnail Sketches. Our forms are long. My suggestion is to precede these forms with a cover page that simply answers the question, “What are three things you want others to know about your ministry?” Pastors could share their gifts and emphases. Congregations could share what was unique about their setting. This could also help synods sort the stacks of paper!

Fuzzy new math

Supply and Demand. We are told that in the ELCA there are fewer available clergy to serve than there are open congregations. Changing the focus from how many pastors are available for congregations, to how many congregations are available for

pastors could change not only the pace of how calls were filled, but also the perception. Organizations taking care of its leaders inspire support of the organization by its leaders.

Fuzzy Math. What if, instead of basing assignments on the number of openings available, synods got back the same number of candidates from their synod that have just graduated? It is not that they would necessarily be assigned those particular pastors; but if one synod has thirteen graduating seniors, and another synod has only one graduate, why shouldn’t each synod receive the same number of assignees that they have actually provided? It would tie the distribution to each synod’s ability to help people discern their vocation.

Restricting Restrictions. So you are going to be a pastor? Please be available for call outside a five mile radius. Unreasonable restrictions clog up the whole process for everyone. From what I know of the LCMS’s first call system, it seems more like an assignment than a negotiation. I am sure this system has its own flaws, but at least expectations are quite clear.

Re-Assessing Regions. I might just be naïve, but I have no understanding of what our nine regions do besides funnel candidates to synods in the first call process. What if the regions were organized by “type” rather than by “location?” Perhaps there could be an “urban” region, a “rural” region and so forth. There is a huge difference in ministry needs between the Great Lakes and Metro Chicago synods. Yet they occupy the same region; is that a helpful way to group synods for the assignment process?

Timing is everything

Un-timely Timing. Currently under our system, first call candidates are assigned to regions and then to synods in the months that precede graduation from seminary. During the same time period, many synods are preparing for their annual assemblies. It is no wonder that new candidates feel displaced or unimportant to bishops who are very busy preparing for their biggest event of the year. Changing nothing but the timing of these two functions

could improve the process a great deal.

I close with another true story. A friend was contacted by Synod X, interested in her as a candidate. She spoke with Synod X and with the congregation they had in mind. Months elapsed. Talking with another friend from Synod Y, she discovered that a pastor on Synod Y's staff had taken that call. This had been announced by a letter sent to the congregations of Synod Y. Two months have since gone by, and neither the congregation nor Synod X has informed my friend that someone else has been called there. Where is the communication? Is this partnership?

My parents always taught me to leave things better than I found them. I'm taking that advice to heart. The ELCA's call process is broken, so let's find some ways to fix it!

ELCA Pastor Geoff Sinibaldo is a graduate of Carthage College and Luther Seminary, and serves St. Matthew Lutheran Church, Avon, CT. After an offhand comment about the agony of the first call process, he decided, instead of just complaining, to make some constructive proposals. We're glad he did, and may his tribe increase. And we would welcome any response to his proposals, particularly those that might offer some additional ideas.

Pearls of great price



Merton Jannusch died recently. He was the pastor of Faith Lutheran, the church I now serve in Green Bay, WI, from the early sixties until he was formally defrocked in 1973 and left to start his own church. The whole affair had little if anything to do with the larger doctrinal battles raging in our synod back then — higher criticism, impending liberalism and all that. But it did mirror, on a local level, the intense pain and human cost involved when it becomes necessary for truth to trump unity.

Merton had been serving as a pastor for many years and even as our district's evangelism coordinator when in the fall of 1969 he suddenly claimed to have gotten saved at a revival. The usual things followed — faith healings, speaking in tongues, and so forth — but none of those things, perplexing as some in the congregation no doubt found them, were grounds for dismissal.

White-washed tombs

He proclaimed that those in the congregation who would not say the sinner's prayer with him and make a personal decision to invite and receive Jesus into their hearts as lord and savior were unsaved because they had only a dead, intellectual faith. The whole church was apparently full of such white-washed tombs, and revival, in both the technical and popular senses of the word, was the only answer. And that answer was both enthusiastically received by many and militantly resisted by many,

dividing and almost destroying the congregation, at least as a viable institution.

But, of course, according to Pr. Jannusch, worrying about the viability of institutions was one of the things traditional Christians did that kept them from surrendering their lives to Jesus and being saved. Families were divided. People left for other churches or came from other churches because of the revival. This went on for a few years. As a pastor he subsequently claimed to have been given the gift of discernment; from the pulpit he could tell who was a genuine believer and who wasn't. That's a dangerous "gift" to have. Little things became symbolic of everyone's stance toward revival.

Some prayed and praised with their hands in the air, and pointedly noticed those who didn't, and assumptions and suspicions about these things went both ways. For a while, those who were "saved" sat on one side of the aisle while the "hard-hearted," those who were listening for any slip up, any false doctrine by which they could remove this pastor (which was surprisingly difficult and rested on fine shades of meaning; Pr. Jannusch knew the Confessions inside and out and claimed to follow them) sat on the other. The latter ultimately prevailed. Barely. Jannusch was defrocked by the district.

Averting hell

It is a long story. I've read literally thousands of pages about it. Until his mind was claimed by Alzheimer's, he claimed to have been born again the

same month I was born, October, 1969, when he accepted and received Jesus into his heart. He never doubted that had he died in September of that year, he would have gone straight to hell. And he never stopped trying to get back on the LCMS clergy roster.

That's how I met him—he applied (again) to get back on the clergy roster several years ago, so people were invited to give input to the district about his application. Sensing the potential for an old scab to come off and a painful wound to start hemorrhaging in the congregation I now served three decades later, I decided to drive out and talk to him (he had never moved out of the house the congregation had built for him prior to his conversion), in order to compile and summarize the opinions of people on both sides of the issue who had lived through the ordeal and pass it all along to the district for consideration.

Defrocked pastors

It had been almost thirty years, and he claimed I was the first LCMS pastor in the circuit to speak with him since he was defrocked. We became friends and had many discussions. And as is nearly always the case in the LCMS, we had some previously unknown personal connections: he had gone to school with my dad, his sister-in-law had been my fourth grade teacher, etc.

He never did make it back on the roster, and though he asked me several times to champion his cause, I wouldn't have supported his bid. Someday perhaps I will write up an orderly account of the whole thing. But I will say this—I learned more theology discussing things with Merton Jannusch than in any seminary class.

It reflects somehow on the nature of my church body that I know several former LCMS pastors. Some were defrocked because the synod determined they were teaching false doctrine. Others gave up on the synod in frustration and left on their own because the synod was too rigid or too loose for them. But for whatever reason, I think it noteworthy that the synod has so many ex-clergymen who left or were removed not for reasons of burnout or scandal, but on matters of doctrine. Some see this as evidence of a terminally contentious synodical culture. Others see it as a sign of a church that treats

truth as though it matters, an increasingly rare and underrated trait. I tend toward the latter interpretation, though with a respectful nod to the former.

Some things in common

Another such pastor I know is Paul Bretscher, who baptized and confirmed me and was subsequently (after he had retired) removed from the clergy roster for professing false doctrine. Again, I have discussed theology with him, in person and through long correspondence, and it is far too long a story to relate in full here. Suffice to say Bretscher's theology is nothing at all like Jannusch's. Yet there were many similarities to the stories, and I would say of Bretscher, too, that I learned more theology through discussing things with him than through any class.

Both had unarguable experiences supporting them—Jannusch had his born again experience in 1969, and Bretscher heard a "voice from heaven" in 1957 which, he was and is convinced, was the same voice that spoke at Jesus' baptism, declaring him (Paul) to be God's Son in the very same way Jesus was. Both knew Lutheran doctrine and the particularities of LCMS practice backwards and forwards, and both claimed to have been removed from the roster unjustly.

Both cases understandably divided congregations (Jannusch's more than Bretscher's). Both cases involved one particular truth becoming a "key" to understanding the whole faith, and in both cases, the key that each man held up happened to be the main subject of that man's graduate work—Jannusch did his master's thesis on "receiving Jesus" and Bretscher did his on baptism and sonship as it relates to God's covenant of sonship with Israel.

Both read the script of their own lives as parallel to St. Paul and even Jesus—misunderstood and persecuted by insecure and worldly-minded church authorities who hadn't yet been set free by the truth. And both, in my opinion, had insights worth listening to and learning from, pearls of great wisdom and insight very much needed in the church body from which they were removed. Yet both were very rightfully removed.

Learning from false teachers

So if they were so wrong, why do I say I

learned so much from them? It isn't merely because in defending it one hones one's own position, though that is true. While their answers were problematic, their criticisms of the LCMS and traditional Christianity in general hit the mark. There really does tend to be a problem of dead faith. There really is a missing sense of being children of God by God's own declaration, with all the mundane glory that entails. Both men pinpointed genuine problems, even if their favored solutions were, shall we say, problematic. We may reject the remedy of a quack, but we ignore the diagnosis at our peril.

Another reason I learned so much from them even though I think both were dangerously wrong is that you can't really learn about any false doctrine until you've discussed it with someone who really believes it. Anyone can discuss it in a class, but the professor is there to teach the truth; he can play devil's advocate and propose false ideas, but only to help the class see the problem with them; he can't challenge the class the way someone who truly would give up everything for that false idea would challenge the class.

Testing the nuances

And typically when we do encounter people who hold to some false doctrine or heresy, they are members of other church bodies, stemming from a different history and speaking a different theological language. We can expect people of other church bodies to defend the doctrines of other church bodies. But when a fellow LCMS pastor, quoting Luther and Walther and Pieper as authorities, defends some new doctrine or practice, well, the conversation gets to the heart of the matter far more quickly, with more personal urgency, with more explosive possibilities. Every nuance of everything you've both learned gets tested.

And lastly, I don't think you've ever really learned your own position until you've come very close to accepting the other's, until you've been thrown into a turmoil and lost your sense of security at having the truth. Both Jannusch and Bretscher were drastically more experienced and educated than I when we began discussing these matters. I would guess they that both came far closer to convincing me (closer than either of them might have even known) than I ever did to convincing them. But I think that helps me see things, especially what

I preach, from the inside and the outside.

Standing in the doorway

I arrived a few minutes late to Pr. Jannusch's funeral and had to stand in the back of his Voice of Faith Chapel, the church he started after being removed from office at Faith Lutheran. I was aware of the symbolism of my standing in the doorway during the sermon; I think Mert always thought I was on the verge of being saved, but wouldn't take that step, wouldn't enter fully in but liked the safety of the threshold. The service included reading from his Last Will and Testament, and he made the point emphatically that he renounced nothing, recanted nothing, that his ministry and doctrine were vindicated. And he went further than that, once again announcing his firm belief that "the denominational churches" are filled with a dead faith of mere words and intellectual assent, and this was especially true of the pastors and institutional leaders.

Since Voice of Faith had been founded by former Faith members who had shaken the dust off their sandals when they left . . . well, it didn't matter; few people knew I was there or that I was the senior pastor of Faith Lutheran and the current pretender sitting in Moses' seat. At the lunch afterward in the basement there was opportunity for anyone to get up at the microphone and say a few words, memories, thoughts, whatever. I thought about saying something on behalf of Faith, something that would offer healing or open a door. I think I'm usually pretty good at such speeches. But I thought better of it. Everyone would be looking for fine shades of apology or confrontation, and I didn't want to offer either. But anything else I might say would merely be a polite, "It's good to be here." But even that might have a proven to be a distraction. A funeral ought, quite literally, to give it a rest.

Wrong pearl

Merton Jannusch and Paul Bretscher had valuable pearls of wisdom, but I think they mistook them for the Pearl of Great Price, worth giving up everything to have. And yet, I think I have the same thing, something tested and honed by those men, a true and precious Gospel that is preserved at a very high price. In short, I still think the synod was right and they both were wrong. And I think it matters, even at the cost of unity. But I can't help but think

that the great pearl to have is knowing that you are the pearl, the thing God gave up everything in order to have as his own. I would say, *contra* Jannusch, that we cannot ask to be purchased, and *contra* Bret-

sch, that we must not deny the reality of the cost. But maybe we can, *contra* nobody, look forward to discussing it all again with more information.

— by Peter Speckhard, associate editor

Lessons from St. Jerome



[Editor's note: In going through some files last Christmas, I came upon this little piece, translated from German by my late father-in-law, Richard W. Solberg. He unfortunately did not indicate the source of the original document, which was entitled "A Conversation between the Venerable Church Father, Saint Jerome, and the Infant Jesus in the Manger." Whatever the source, and whatever real connection it may have to Jerome, it is a charming little Christ-mass meditation, and I hope you enjoy it.]

Saint Jerome, to whom this conversation is ascribed not long before his death, spent the closing years of his long life in Bethlehem, close by the birthplace of the Savior — the manger of Christ. When he was called to the exalted office of bishop, he replied, "Nothing can draw me away from the Manger of Christ. There is for me no better place on earth. From that very place at which God gave to me His Son from heaven, I would like to send my soul back to Him in heaven.

"Whenever I look upon this place, my heart holds a sweet conversation with the Infant Jesus. I say to Him: 'Oh, Lord Jesus, how you tremble! How hard is your bed for the sake of my salvation! How shall I ever repay this?'

"Then it seems to me that the Holy Child replies, 'From you, Jerome, I ask only the song, Glory

to God in the Highest! Let that be enough for you. My need will be deeper yet in Gethsemane and on Calvary.'

"I speak further: 'Dear little Jesus, I must give you something. Let me give you all my wealth.'

"The Child replies, 'From the beginning the Heavens and the Earth are mine. I do not need your treasures. Give them to the poor. I shall receive that as if you had done it to me.'

"I speak again: 'Dear little Jesus, this I shall do gladly, but I must also give something just for you, or I shall die of sorrow.'

"The Child replies: 'Dear Jerome, since you are so generous of heart, I will tell you what you may give to me. Give me your sins — your bad conscience — and your condemnation!'

"I ask: 'What will you do with them?'

"The infant Jesus says: 'I want to take them upon my shoulders. This shall be my glory, and my glorious deed, as Isaiah once said, that I shall take your sins upon myself and carry them away.'

"At this I begin to weep bitterly, and say: 'O, Child, dear, holy Child, how deeply you have touched my heart! I thought you wanted something good — but you want everything in me which is bad! Oh, take what is mine! Give me what is Yours! Then I shall be free from sin, and assured of eternal life!'"

Ex libra forum



■ *Heresies and How to Avoid Them*, edited by Ben Quash and Michael Ward (Hendrikson, 2007). A great refresher course on ancient heresies and why they are still relevant today. Developed from a sermon series at Cambridge, ten theologians tackle topics from Arianism to Donatism. Explaining each simply and thoughtfully, they demonstrate how these heresies

are related to one another, and how they are pervasive in the life of the church. — *roj*

■ *Uncle Abner, Master of Mysteries*, by Melville Davisson Post (Fredonia, 2004). I was turned on to this book by Joseph Bottum, writing on the *First Things* blog. Post's collection of short detective stories is elegant indeed, a sort of American parallel

to Chesterton's "Father Brown Mysteries." Bottum calls Abner "our greatest [American] religious detective." Indeed, the stories are filled with a rich sense of the providence and the law of God — Calvinistic themes perhaps more than Lutheran, and yet certainly reflective of the ethos of American Christianity. Besides all that, they are just fun to read. This is a reprint edition from an obscure publisher, but I ordered it on Amazon.com. — *roj*

■ *The Nine: Inside the Secret World of the Supreme Court* by Jeffrey Toobin (Doubleday, 2007). I actually listened to this as a book on CD while driving around making hospital and communion visits. Hearing it read as an audio book is a riveting experience. It's kind of like the "great lectures" CDs, only

better, because Toobin is a great writer and apparently writes with an ear for a listening audience. I was fascinated by a chapter where O'Connor and Souter conspired as a troika with Kennedy to uphold *Roe v. Wade*, a surprising development given that Kennedy wanted to overturn it, and O'Connor and Souter both came onto the Supreme Court as nominees conservatives hoped would overturn it. This is why the book is so great. It presents judicial history as compelling national history, and does so in such a way that you feel you are also getting a primer in constitutional law, American culture, and the lives of these Supreme Court justices. I have not found a better way to get a grasp on some of the more complicated moments in politics and American law. — *Pr. Clint Schneklath, Cambridge, WI*

Omnium gatherum



Take my region . . . please. • I shared an advance copy of Pr. Sinibaldo's piece in this issue with a colleague who works on a bishop's staff, to get his reaction (I being something of a stranger to the call process, now in my 24th year in the same call). Some of it he thought was right on, some he didn't, but concerning one point he was quite blunt: "Just do away with regions. Period. If synods want to cooperate, they will find a way to do it without bureaucracy and overhead. Just do it. Now. Please." Seems a straightforward opinion, and one we've heard a time or two from other quarters.

Nice clam bake • It was a real nice clam bake, the October ALPB dinner in honor of my predecessor, Russ Saltzman. The keynote speaker was his predecessor, Richard John Neuhaus. Neuhaus, of course, is always interesting and provocative, but Saltzman's response was, I thought, the highlight of the evening. If he ever gets the copy to me, I'm going to share it with you.

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