

FORUM LETTER

Volume 39 Number 2

February 2010

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The American
Lutheran Publicity
Bureau is on the web
www.alpb.org

FORUM LETTER is published monthly by the American Lutheran Publicity Bureau (www.alpb.org) with LUTHERAN FORUM, a quarterly journal, in a combined subscription for \$26.95 (U.S.) a year, \$48.95 (U.S.) for two years, in the United States and Canada. Retirees and students, \$21.50 a year. Add \$7.50 per year for overseas delivery. Write to the Subscription Office for special rates for groups. Single copy, \$2.50.

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Telephone 607-746-7511. Postage paid at
Delhi, NY and additional mailing offices.

POSTMASTER: Send changes of address
to P. O. Box 327, Delhi, NY 13753-0327.

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ISSN 0046-4732

The broad-minded turnip



“The vice of the modern notion of mental progress is that it is always something concerned with the breaking of bonds, the effacing of boundaries, the casting away of dogmas. But if there be such a thing as mental growth, it must mean the growth into more and more definite convictions, into more and more dogmas. The human brain is a machine for coming to conclusions; if it cannot come to conclusions it is rusty. . . . Man can be defined as an animal that makes dogmas. As he piles doctrine on doctrine and conclusion on conclusion in the formation of some tremendous scheme of philosophy and religion, he is, in the only legitimate sense of which the expression is capable, becoming more and more human. When he drops one doctrine after another in a refined scepticism, when he declines to tie himself to a system, when he says that he has outgrown definitions, when he says that he disbelieves in finality, when, in his own imagination, he sits as God, holding no form of creed but contemplating all, then he is by that very process sinking slowly backwards into the vagueness of the vagrant animals and the unconsciousness of the grass. Trees have no dogmas. Turnips are singularly broad-minded.”

—G. K. Chesterton, *Heretics* (John Lane Co., 1905)

Lutheran blues



Take a look at most any periodical and you will find, tucked away in a corner of some issue late in the year, an interesting compilation of statistics. The postal service, for reasons obscure to me, requires magazines to publish annually a “statement of ownership” which includes circulation figures. Whenever I run across these (usually by accident) I’m always interested to see just how many other people read each of the rather eclectic assortment of magazines that I read.

I take a new interest now that I’m an editor — though actually, we at *Forum Letter* apparently don’t have to publish this statement any more because we switched from “periodical rate” back to “non-profit rate” midyear. The interesting result is that most subscribers seem to be getting their *FL* earlier in the month, while we’re paying less in postage; win-win, I’d say.

Since I don’t have any involvement in the business side of things (one reason, no doubt, *Forum Letter* hasn’t gone belly-up), I don’t normally track the subscription figures. They’re going to make me feel good, or they’re going to make me feel bad; either way, it’s likely to be spiritually destructive. And I can’t do much about them anyway.

I do take an interest, though, in how others are doing — mostly out of

curiosity. I recently noted the circulation figures published in the December issue of *The Lutheran*, and then decided to compare them with previous years for as far back as my file goes — which, turns out, is three years. Things do not look so rosy. One might have guessed that, of course, when the last round of staff layoffs was announced. But circulation figures tell a rather bleak story.

Going downhill

The figure I looked at was the paid circulation for the issue nearest the reporting date. In 2006, that figure was 315,779. The next year showed a 4.4% decline to 301,824. About the same decline the next year, to 288,752. The figure for 2009 was only 252,725 — a 12.5% decline from the previous year, and nearly a 20% decline over the three year period.

That can't be good for the magazine, or for the church body.

The Lutheran, of course, is in an unusual situation because a certain percentage of its circulation is through the "every home" plan. If an individual gets mad and decides not to renew a subscription, that's one subscription. If a congregation decides not to renew, that may be 100, or 500, or 1,000 subscriptions. That's not an easy problem to deal with. But it doesn't take much business sense to see that losing 20% of your subscribers in three years is a recipe for failure.

A dozen reasons

There could be a dozen reasons why *The Lutheran* is facing this kind of crisis, if I may call it that. At the top of the list would have to be the fact that print journalism is in jeopardy just about everywhere. I was an avid reader of *The Washington Post National Weekly Edition* from its inception 25 or so years ago. It was a quality newspaper, with thoughtful and interesting in-depth stories, particularly about politics — and it stopped publication at the end of 2009. Cultural shifts, and especially those related to how Americans get their information, have made this a time of crisis for many publications.

"Cultural shifts" in another sense contribute to *The Lutheran's* situation. There was a time when denominational loyalty was strong, and people were interested in knowing about their church in all its dimensions. That time is long past. The "brand loyalty" of ELCA Lutherans is at an all time low — and

it isn't just subscriptions to *The Lutheran* that suggest this. It used to be that people joined a Lutheran congregation because they were Lutheran; now they join a congregation — if they even do — primarily because of local and personal considerations. They don't care much about the "wider church," and they certainly don't care much about denominational promotion. Some would argue that the day of the denominational family publication is simply past, and I suspect there's some truth to that.

Economic indicator

The big drop at the end of 2009 likely has as much to do with the economy as anything else. Things are tough all over. If money is tight in a family, canceling a magazine subscription is a painless way to save a few bucks; if money is tight in a congregation, the same principle applies. My own congregation has had the every home plan for decades, for *The Lutheran* and for *The Lutheran Standard* before that. Occasionally someone suggests eliminating it to save money. I've always had councils who have said, "No, that's important, and it isn't that much money anyway." But I know that isn't the case in every congregation.

There are some who would say that *The Lutheran* has lost readership because of its content. That's hard to evaluate. There are sometimes things published there that cause me to gnash my teeth. There are often things that cause me to roll my eyes. There have been articles I'd rather had not been published. I confess that I do not read it cover to cover. That being said, I also think *The Lutheran* serves a good purpose, and I would be very sorry indeed to see it go under.

What's coming next?

But I fear that may be the direction things are heading. The 2009 figures probably do not reflect much in terms of reaction to the sexuality decisions of the churchwide assembly, since presumably most "every home" subscriptions ran through the end of the year. Obviously congregations leaving the ELCA will be dropping their subscriptions (if they had them in the first place). Other congregations who are not leaving will likely drop the every home plan, either because of money or because pastors and other leaders are tired of putting out fires when members read things they don't like about the

ELCA. Or maybe both.

One thing seems clear. If the figures for next year show another subscription loss in the neighborhood of 12% or more, the ELCA is going to have to

do some serious thinking about the continued viability of its official magazine.

— by Richard O. Johnson, editor

In search of an orthodox seminary

by Brett Jenkins



Occasionally one hears the lament or at least the suspicion that seminarians who are orthodox in their faith are being “forced out” of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America by our church’s theological seminaries. As a fairly recent graduate of Lutheran Theological Seminary at Gettysburg, I would like to offer a different perspective based on my own observations. In so doing, it is not my wish to accuse any specific faculty member or even the institution as a whole of malfeasance. I simply wish to comment on the current state of affairs as I see it, which I believe to be due more to the confluence of complex cultural factors than malicious intent. Put bluntly, I think the issue is not one of orthodox students being actively “forced out”; rather, the issue is that orthodox students are being “educated out.”

What I mean is that when the average student enters seminary, he or she is fairly orthodox, possessed of what is often pejoratively referred to on campus as “a Sunday school faith.” After all, as Richard John Neuhaus noted a few years ago, people won’t give their lives for a question mark.

However, once students have mortgaged their lives for the sake of the mere *possibility* of serving in ordained ministry, there is a huge amount of leverage on them to “follow through” with the step they have taken, to see God’s will in whatever may be happening to them. Exposed to the unremittingly revisionist teaching of our ELCA campuses and feeling a real and valid sense of the existential abyss opening beneath their feet, there is a tremendous amount of pressure upon them to see in that process God at work shriving them of their “Sunday school faith.”

Demythologization

The emotional turmoil brought on by such challenges often makes students cast about for something solid to hold on to. Ready at hand are the very professors who have brought on the crisis in

the first place, but who seem to be emotional rocks in an otherwise stormy sea. These people care for them and (what is more important) have in some dimly imagined past emerged triumphant from the same existential darkness the students are now experiencing.

The light into which these bastions of sanity have emerged — the thing that seems to provide their emotional stability — appears to be the “demythologized” Christianity they espouse. The professors are Christians, to be sure, but Christians of a different stripe. They eschew some or all of the creedal and conciliar doctrines that have historically defined that identity, but this seems to be the very source of their self-assurance. The professors are fully and completely convinced that they are acting as God’s instruments. Since this is what the poor students came to seminary to do in the first place, the professors’ presence in their students’ lives lures the students towards revisionist theology as much as anything they explicitly teach.

To put it bluntly, the decidedly revisionist system afflicts the students and then provides them with the ostensible cure for their ills. It is a system conceived in (and, one suspects, actively nurtured by) hell. It bears more than a passing resemblance to a cult I had experience with earlier in my life (Scientology), though certainly the system is not maliciously designed by the professors to do this. The situation on our campuses is simply the natural extension of the professors’ convictions, which — despite the diversity evident between their various tribalisms — are amazingly uniform in their post-Bultmann, anti-revelatory assumptions.

The silence of the orthodox voice

In order for this system to work effectively — to turn out a new “religious left” to counter the real or imagined power of the “religious right” — what must not by any means be permitted is the presence of intelligent, articulate, charitable voices of Chris-

tian orthodoxy on our campuses. Many of us know well-qualified representatives of orthodoxy who have been let go, or who have not been hired in the first place.

Faculty with orthodox Christian views are indeed permitted on our seminary campuses, but only in limited ways:

(1) Such views may be held only on particular issues by otherwise liberal professors who evince discomfort at their backwardness and a willingness to have their mind changed by articulate proponents of revisionist perspectives. In no way is Christian orthodoxy to be seen as “a seamless cloth” wherein each dogmatic proposition buttresses the others.

(2) They may be quietly and circumspectly held by tenured professors or visiting clergy of impeccable credentials, like bishops or retired pastors. Such people are permitted their troglodyte views, so long as they hold them as private theological opinions. In no way is orthodoxy to be considered a more genuinely Christian belief, a prescription for the same, or a perspective deserving of peculiar deference and credibility.

(3) They may be held by people who received their theological formation prior to the 1970s and whose scholarly or ecclesiastical contributions are otherwise indisputable. Such people are to be carefully lauded for the work they have done within the clearly-recognized limits of their own understanding of the gospel, conditioned as it was by the unenlightened times in which they labored. Such backhanded compliments abounded at the passing of Dr. William Lazareth—few of which noted his theological commitments when listing his professional accomplishments.

No proselytizing allowed

Under no circumstances are the holders of orthodox views to articulate them as principled positions worthy of new adherents, or to put the case persuasively for Christian orthodoxy to students in defiance of other faculty or institutional pressure, whether at the level of the seminary or, now with the advent of *Evangelical Lutheran Worship*, the broader ELCA.

So, for instance, at my own alma mater, a tenured professor might persist in continuing to use the pronoun “He” for God when grammatically appropriate, but he or she is not to defend that use to

students, advocate for students to do the same based on principle, or defend students that do so in defiance of guidelines for chapel liturgy and academic paper writing.

A professor may hold the private opinion that the Great Tradition’s prescription of certain sexual practices and proscription of others represents the collective wisdom of a faith community based on historic experience, but she or he is obliged to acknowledge that our modern culture’s perspective, informed as it is by the social “sciences,” may be *and probably is* vastly superior and more humane.

No reformation likely

I believe that the reformation of the existing seminaries of the ELCA is untenable. Not only is the institutional momentum too set against those of orthodox persuasion (both at the level of the seminaries and the broader ELCA), the process that gave the institutions to the revisionists will not repeat itself in reverse. Orthodox Christianity believes in the power of truth and that “all truth is the Lord’s.” The revisionists gained their seats at the academic table because the orthodox felt that they had nothing to fear from frank discussion with honest interlocutors.

But a central tenet of postmodernism is that all talk about truth is merely the veiled use of power, so if you are convinced of the justice of your cause, it is incumbent upon you to give no quarter to those with whom you disagree. The orthodox will never be able to shift the institutional momentum of our seminaries, because the understanding of those they would seek to persuade is impervious to change. Persuasion is precluded because genuine conversation is precluded. To postmodernists, whatever their particular commitments and causes, all is rhetoric and naught is truth.

We need to do what the Episcopalians did with Trinity School for Ministry (where I spent the most edifying week of my seminary education): found a new institution whose governing principle is Great Tradition Christian orthodoxy. I have no idea how you do that (I’m young), but there are others wiser and more experienced who may have an inkling and have the necessary academic credentials to give such a project the *gravitas* it would need to attract the financial support of the necessary large donors.

An intermediary step toward the creation of

such an institution might be the development of Lutheran houses of study at institutions sympathetic to our goals such as Trinity School for Ministry or Fuller Theological Seminary. The existence of such houses could convince would-be donors of the need for an orthodox Lutheran institution.

I am convinced that the longer we delay taking such action, hoping against hope—and without a plan—that the Lord will deliver the existing institutions of the ELCA back into orthodox hands, we will not only lose more and more of our clergy to

heterodoxy, we will lose the generation of lay people whose catechesis was orthodox and who believe God's purpose for our lives is greater than self-fulfillment—the sort of people who would love to leave the legacy of an orthodox Lutheran seminary to their great-grandchildren.

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Thanks, but no thanks

by Brad Everett



Often one can make an accurate judgment of an event based on the quality of the invitation. If it's on embossed linen stationery, better get the suit dry-cleaned; a wrinkled and smudged photocopy, make other plans.

The cover of the October/November *Canada Lutheran* proves the point. A photoshopped desktop image of an invitation, as contrived as it looks, reads as follows: *"You're Invited. We cordially invite you to participate in the ELCIC Study of Human Sexuality. Deepen your faith, grow in witness, and help us explore and debate emerging church issues. Time: Now. Place: Your home, a small-group setting, or your congregation. Why: To help the church develop a historic social statement that proclaims and encourages faithfulness to our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ."*

Talk, talk, talk

With a title like "ELCIC Study of Human Sexuality," one might think the purpose of this document would be to teach what the ELCIC (and, one would hope, Scripture and the Confessions) holds to be true about human sexuality. There was a task force established to develop a new social statement for the ELCIC on human sexuality for the 2011 National Convention; perhaps they would use this opportunity to share their findings and establish some foundation for the upcoming social statement.

But no; apparently the "primary purpose of these studies is to generate conversation."

Hey, that's exactly what we need—more conversation! We have had previously commissioned "studies" on sexuality that congregations were en-

couraged to utilize. Back in 2005 there was a series of papers from select ELCIC theologians on the issue of same-sex blessings, as well as a free-for-all of submissions from anyone and everyone wanting to give their perspective on the issue, all of it posted to the ELCIC website. We voted on and defeated the issue of same-sex blessings in 2005 and 2007 (with all the accompanying hype, hysteria and the avalanche of articles). The votes were close ("inconclusive," I think, is the term kicked around). Oddly enough at those same conventions we elected National Bishops by equally close margins, yet those election results have never been questioned or revisited. So on the surface one might think that the ELCIC has adequately covered the required amount of conversation for this given topic. But I guess not.

Swallowing some spirit

So to enable further (and apparently needed) conversation the task force has created seven "study sessions," covering the topics of Disciples, Relationships, Sin, Families, Justice, Orientation and Spirituality. Each session follows "a worship process," beginning with a gathering prayer, a reading from Scripture, time for silence, opportunity to work through the material with specified breaks and questions for discussion, and concluding with a section entitled "Listening to the whisperings of the spirit" and closing prayer. "Listening to the whisperings of the spirit" might bring to mind the derisive quote from Luther about those who have "swallowed the Holy Spirit feathers and all," except that "spirit" here is lower case and thus not clearly

referring to the Holy Spirit, third person the Trinity. I'll show some charity and assume the authors meant Holy Spirit – but proofreading this prior to publication might have been helpful.

I won't bother with in-depth analysis of treatment of various topics. Those of you who read the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America's materials on this issue have suffered enough already and should be spared. Those who haven't, well . . . On the farm or ranch one can correctly identify a pile of bovine excrement using the senses of sight and smell; there is no need to dive in head first. The same principle applies to this "study." (If you are feeling adventurous, you can read the materials at <http://elcic.ca/Human-Sexuality/default.cfm>.)

Humble but bold redux?

This comparison might seem harsh, but it's accurate. Among the litany of disclaimers in the introduction, the task force says it "humbly presents this study as our best effort, given the limitation of time and resources." If this is the best they can do, then they should have quit while they were ahead. Called a "study" and intended to generate conversation and feedback to help the task force develop the ELCIC's statement on sexuality, it is more an exercise in shaping opinion.

The document doesn't purport to teach what Scripture and the Confessions say on these matters. Instead it has a lot of questions – as if asking questions is virtuous and edifying in itself, regardless of whether one actually reaches any conclusions.

Unending questions

These questions don't lead us to any deeper understanding of what Scripture and the Confessions teach on sexuality. Rather they create considerable ambiguity which allows all involved to believe and do what they want, yet continue to remain in the same ecclesial communion. What is sexuality? What is marriage? What is family? Doesn't sin occur in married heterosexual relationships? Those who have followed this debate in the ELCA know the questions, and each is followed by a series of others, all of which serve to create doubt ("Did God really say?").

By the end there is an atmosphere that not only allows but encourages a diversity of belief and

practice. Since we can't be sure any one position is true, shouldn't we leave the possibility open for a variety of positions to co-exist? Can you say "bound conscience"? Yes, they borrowed that line from the ELCA, even though it is being demonstrated as nonsense on a daily basis as the ELCA struggles to figure out what it looks like in practice. Yet even in the face of evidence to the contrary, the task force seems to think this is a salutary approach – as if unity can be maintained or enforced after encouraging diversity on what is obviously a divisive issue.

Reversing the order

There is talk of unity in Christ and the importance of honoring the opinions, consciences and beliefs of those with whom we may disagree so we can continue to be, in the wretched words of our denomination's tag line, "in mission for others."

But there's the problem. The order of the two greatest commandments is love of God then love of neighbor, which implies that our love and worship of God will then inform and guide what it means for us to love our neighbor. This study has it backwards, being more concerned with appearing non-offensive and thus "loving" towards others than with learning and teaching what is God-pleasing through study of Scripture and Tradition. If our unity is in Christ, then shouldn't the focus of this project be on what he taught rather than sharing personal opinions while searching for a response to changing social and sexual norms in society? And while our Lord was not averse to asking or answering questions, he also seemed quite comfortable in giving clear and direct teaching on any number of subjects, including sexuality. This leads one to wonder if the ambiguity so highly touted by this study has any virtue in the eyes of God.

So while the invitation to participate in developing this "historic social statement" by giving my opinion and feedback is duly noted, I think I'll simply send my regrets – I have a previous commitment. The Scripture, Confessions and Church Fathers are waiting to be studied and my congregation is waiting to be taught.

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Omnium gatherum



Sobering words • In January there was a gathering of Lutherans in South Carolina who are concerned about the direction of the ELCA. Among the speakers was the Rev. Dr. James Crumley, the last presiding bishop of the Lutheran Church in America and one of the key architects of the ELCA. He spoke sobering words concerning the current situation in the church: "I conclude that there is no evidence based on the text of Scripture which permits or mandates the change as stated in the new policy [with regard to sexuality] adopted at the [churchwide] assembly. The action rather was unconstitutional and violated a part of the Confession of Faith. On that basis, the appropriate question is whether the ELCA is still without question a faithful and confessing church. I conclude that the ELCA has placed itself in a precarious position." An appropriate question, yes, and a disturbing one. (To read Bp. Crumley's remarks in full, go to <http://reformfromwithin.com/downloads.html>.)

All eyes off Delaware-Maryland • Well, turns out the Delaware-Maryland Synod won't be the first to elect a synodical bishop since the 2009 Churchwide Assembly after all. They had scheduled a synod assembly for January, but ran into a little legal issue. It seems their articles of incorporation – which legally take precedence over the constitution – require that at a special meeting of the synod assembly, the voting members be restricted to those who were seated at the previous assembly. This seemed unwise to leadership of the synod, since it would exclude some 29 newly rostered professionals, as well as any congregations who didn't manage to get their voting members to the last assembly. Thus, says the official memo, "the election of a new bishop will take place at the next regular meeting of the Synod Assembly, June 10-12, 2010, in Gettysburg, Pa." Seems like that's probably a good decision, all things considered, though it does raise the question of why the Delaware-Maryland Synod has its assembly in Pennsylvania. I'm told a number of synods in the East and Midwest do this, either for cost considerations or to foster closer ties with an ELCA college that may not actually be on their territory. Out here in the West, that still seems a little odd to me. But then many things do. (Turns out DE-MD wouldn't

have been the first post-CWA bishop election anyway; that honor apparently goes to the Greater Milwaukee Synod, which elected Jeffrey Barrow in December at a special assembly held on their own soil.)

Keep warm and eat your fill • The announcement by the board of Augsburg Fortress that they are terminating their defined benefit pension plan, severely impacting the retirement income of some 500 plan participants, is distressing. Beth Lewis, Augsburg Fortress's CEO, is highly regarded by just about everyone. When she says this decision "breaks our hearts," surely she means that sincerely. Perhaps it was the only possible decision. What is even more distressing, however, is the response of ELCA officials when Augsburg Fortress came to them to see if the ELCA might be able to help. AF was advised that the ELCA "has no obligations or fiduciary duties with respect to the Augsburg Fortress plan." As a matter of law, that is no doubt correct. As a matter of ethics and pastoral sensitivity, it leaves a great deal to be desired. Yes, AF is an entity technically independent of the ELCA. But let's get real: those pensioners or future pensioners are people who, in any ordinary sense of the word, "worked for the church" – the same church which committed itself, in a 1999 social statement on Economic Life, to "provide adequate pension and health benefits" to employees. Maybe AF employees don't officially count; maybe they are not entitled to a financial bailout; maybe there's nothing the ELCA could legally do; maybe there's just no money available to help out. But to say, in effect, "Sorry, not our responsibility" is just plain ugly. They at least could have used Biblical language – you know, something like "Go in peace; keep warm and eat your fill" (James 2.16). Of course as St. James says, "What is the good of that?" But then this is not the first time the ELCA has declined to take advice in its real world actions from the social statements by which it purports to advise others. A sorry situation, all the way around.

Coming soon • Pastors generally take one of two approaches in writing their parish newsletter columns. Either they duplicate the shameless promotion of events already over-publicized, hoping against hope that someone will attend just because

the pastor said so; or they seize the opportunity for theological reflection and catechesis. My *FL* predecessor Russ Saltzman is firmly of the second school. His words to the faithful consistently move one to tears, or to laughter, or to deeper understanding – and often all in the same piece. ALPB is in the process of publishing *The Pastor's Page and Other Small Essays*, a collection of Russ's writing – mostly to his parish, though some of these essays have shown up in one form or another in *Forum Letter* through the years. My opinion: this should be a seminary textbook for teaching future pastors how to communicate – and just how to “be” – with their parishioners.

Prayers of the church • Assisting ministers in those ELCA congregations too denominationally enmeshed or lazy to write their own prayers of the church, and who instead use the sundaysandseasons.com “prayers of THIS church” or whatever they call them, may have been startled to find themselves praying on December 27, “In your love, Mother, hear this congregation's prayers. May your presence be felt in this community in the midst of both joys and sorrows.” Perhaps this prayer was written by a closet Roman Catholic who wanted to slip in a petition to the Blessed Virgin Mary in the season of the Nativity. No, that seems unlikely. This was no doubt the work of those who think the goddess worship at Ebenezer herchurch in San Francisco is a good way to go. They probably figured that, hey, Sunday after Christmas, low attendance, not many will notice, good way to get the camel's nose into the tent before the Magi actually arrive. I

wonder, though, for how many users of sundaysandseasons.com this will be the proverbial last straw as far as the prayers are concerned. Actually, looking closely at the *ELW*, I see we now call these the “prayers of intercession.” It also says they are “prepared locally for each occasion” (an “are” rubric, not a “may” rubric) which leads me to ponder why the editors of sundaysandseasons.com don't just stop providing these prayers entirely. They are frequently banal, occasionally heretical, sometimes just stupid, and they are about as appropriate as providing a sermon for the pastor to read that Sunday. Anyone want to sign my petition?

God bless the tundra • Thinking to do our readers a service, I wasted a few minutes reading the S&S.com prayers of intercession for the next several weeks. I didn't see any more addressed to Mom, but among the many odd petitions, this one stood out, coming right after Easter: “We pray for rainforests and deserts, mountains and tundra, rivers and grasslands, and all creatures that call this planet home.” I'm about as green as the next guy, but it has never occurred to me to pray for tundra. Nor mountains, for that matter, among which I live. But it does make one wonder why they don't have us praying for Saturn or Uranus. Earth-centricism, clearly, and it's offensive. It must violate some social statement somewhere. And how about Pluto? Having been demoted from planetary status a couple of years back, seems like Pluto could use our prayers. I mean, it's a matter of planetary justice, isn't it?

– roj

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