

# FORUM LETTER

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## The power of love conquers



The angel added: *Go and tell his disciples that he has risen and will go ahead of you to Galilee, and there you will see him.* [Matthew 28.7] The angel here is not sending women, but sending the one Church in the two women; he sends her, in order by sending her to spread her far and wide. The angel here is sending the bride to the Bridegroom. And so the Lord *met them* as they were going and greeted them: *Hello!* [28.9]. *He met them*, and did not terrify them with his power, but came before them with burning charity; he did not disturb them with his might, but he greeted them; he subjects them to the law of betrothal and not to his sovereign majesty, but he honors them with a spouse's love. He greets them: *Hello!* He had said to his disciples: "Greet no one along the way"; and why is it that he comes upon them and greets them here so hastily along the way? He does not wait to be identified, he does not seek to be recognized, he does not permit any questions, but he comes forward solely to greet them, he comes forward impetuously, and he himself abolishes his own mandate by his greeting. He did it, yes, he did it, because the power of love conquers and surpasses all. As soon as Christ greets himself in his Church, he has made it thus become his flesh, he has thus taken it to be his Body, as the Apostle says: "And he is the head of the Body, the Church." —Peter Chrysologus, *Sermon 76 in St. Peter Chrysologus: Selected Sermons* (vol. 3); part of the series *The Fathers of the Church: A New Translation* (Catholic University of America Press, 2005), p. 21.

## Retirement reflections



In February I retired from parish ministry after 37½ years, the last 28½ as pastor of Peace Lutheran Church in Grass Valley, CA. I'm not sure precisely when I made the decision; I had always envisioned myself retiring at 65 after 30 years at Peace, and I fell 17 months short of both the age and the service expectation. But on my sabbatical in the fall of 2011, I began seriously to think about what retirement would mean, and I realized that I was in most respects ready to lay down my vocation as a parish pastor. While on sabbatical, I worked with a consultant from the Alban Institute about the retirement decision, and one exchange with him kept echoing in my mind. What, he asked, is keeping you from retiring right now? My answer was, "Concerns about money." To which he replied, "There are costs other than financial to consider, you know."

And he was right. The truth of the matter is that the emotional, spiritual and psychological stress was becoming a more significant cost. After a ministry with very few conflicts with lay leadership, there were some issues that

emerged that were simply draining. I confess my attitude was coming to be, “Do I really need to fight these battles?”

### Step out of the boat

Still, there was a good bit of anxiety. One day I was having a talk with a good friend. We chatted a little about my retirement angst, and then the conversation moved on. For some reason I was telling him about my experience when I accepted the call at Peace back in 1984. The story is too long to recount in detail, but the gist of it was that I had announced I would leave my previous parish on the 30<sup>th</sup> of June. We were living in a parsonage, so that meant we would be moving out of our home with our two small children. It had gotten to be May, and I hadn’t even had an interview any place. Then in late May we were asked to interview at Peace. Then it was June, and nothing had happened. What should we do? One Friday afternoon I rented a storage unit for all our furniture, and we arranged to house sit for some friends who were going to be on vacation in July. We really didn’t know what was going to become of us. Two days later, I got a phone call telling me the good people at Peace Lutheran Church had unanimously voted to call me as their pastor.

As I was recounting this story to my friend, I practically slapped my head in sudden recognition. We just stepped out in faith back then – sort of like when Jesus says to Simon Peter, “Just step out of the boat and walk to me on the water – it’s going to be OK.” And if we stepped out in faith back then, when things were even more risky, and in fact it was OK and more than OK, then why should I have any anxiety now? It was as if, in the midst of this conversation with my friend, Jesus was saying to me, “Uh – hello. Remember me? Just step out of the boat!”

### Looking for signs

Sometimes we need signs. For the past ten years or so, I’ve been doing some part-time teaching of church history for Fuller Theological Seminary’s Northern California extension program. It has amounted to one class a quarter, three quarters out of every eight, so it’s been manageable. Last year the folks at Fuller asked if I’d be interested in doing some online teaching; it sounded intriguing, so I took the training and had a shot at it. Having opened that door, the offer came to increase my

teaching opportunities to every quarter – and sometimes a couple of classes a quarter.

I couldn’t really say, “No, not now, but ask me in another year.” So I said “yes,” and then announced to my congregation that I was going to retire in order to take advantage of this new opportunity.

### Transition challenges

Retirement is a challenging journey. I suppose it is like any other life transition: no matter how well you think you are prepared, you really have no idea what it’s going to be like. There are moments of exhilarating freedom. At the January Council meeting, some issue came up and they looked to me for my opinion. “You know what?” I said (with a smile). “I really don’t care.” (How many times have I wanted to say that!)

There are also moments that are heartwarming and moving. I was frankly taken aback at how many parishioners stopped by the office in the final weeks, just to thank me for one thing or another that my ministry had meant to them over the years. At the retirement celebration, of course, there were many wonderful words spoken – none more poignant than the remarks of my two adult children, who both flew in for the occasion and who spoke so eloquently about what being “the pastor’s kids” in this congregation had meant to them. And then the completely spontaneous comments of my wife, who doesn’t like public speaking and who didn’t know she was going to say anything until she stood up.

### May be the last time

But then there are moments that are just incredibly sad. I spent much of the last year thinking, “I wonder if this will be the last time I . . .” Then last fall it became, “This will be my last confirmation, my last Advent, my last Christmas Eve as a pastor.” Behind it all, the sober reflection that any Christmas Eve might have been my last, without my knowing it. We, after all, know not what a day will bring forth. Maybe one of the lessons of retirement, especially after a long ministry in one place, is a kind of training in letting go of the things of this life – that lesson that all of us must learn at one point or another along our journey.

That really hit me as I went about the process of packing up books. There were a couple thousand

of them in my office, and there is not room for all of them at home. So I had to go through the exercise, almost daily for weeks: What can I let go? Some days I found myself able to be rather ruthless about it. Other days I found myself taking things out of the discard pile.

I've heard the question so many times from people stepping into my office: "Have you read all those books?" My answer generally was, "Well, I've read *in* all those books." As I started packing them, I realized that wasn't really true. There were plenty of books I bought, intending to read, but never quite got around to it. There were others that I did read maybe thirty years ago, but not since. Still, letting them go is emotionally draining.

### A metaphor

In the midst of it all, something happened that became for me a metaphor of what I was experiencing. My neighbor died. I didn't know him well, but I had known him not well for some twenty-five years. We would chat on the street, wave when we were both out mowing the back forty. I enjoyed an occasional opera or symphony recording wafting down from his house. But hearing he had died was incredibly sad. I didn't know him well, but he was always there, a friendly face, part of my daily life.

That, I mused, was how it was with these books. Maybe I hadn't read them all, or read them very thoroughly, but they were always there. I saw them every day, took comfort in their presence in my life. Now I was having to say goodbye to them.

It has been like that with parishioners, too. Because my wife is still working, we will be staying in the community for a while — and yet all these people who have been our family, we will not see regularly, if at all. I will be very scrupulous about staying away from the congregation; while some parishioners don't really get why that has to be the case, I've tried to be very clear that it must be that way. I bumped into one dear lady in the grocery store the other day; she almost acted as if in saying hello to me, she was participating in a public scandal. Or as if I were among the living dead.

### A shared grief

In most respects, I have realized, this transition is more difficult for my wife than for me. I, after all, am starting something new. She is just leaving

something behind, and something that is perhaps more precious to her than either of us realized. "Peace is the primary place that I have belonged," she said one day. I can honestly say that her grief in leaving has been the single hardest thing for me about the whole process. At the same time, she has been absolutely unwavering in her support for my decision. I am very blessed.

We've begun the process of finding a new congregation. I admit I was surprised to learn that I must be a member of an ELCA congregation in order to stay on the clergy roster. The closest ones are thirty minutes away, and in different counties. I can't see that working for us. We've been attending the local Episcopal congregation; the rector is a fine preacher, they don't tinker with the liturgy, and we know a number of people there. I would have thought that our ecumenical agreements would allow for the possibility of a retired pastor being a member of a full communion partner congregation, but apparently not. My bishop advised me to "park my membership" in some ELCA congregation and show up there once a year. I suppose that's realistic pastoral advice, though it seems a pretty silly kind of churchmanship to me. (My wife suggested that we "park our membership" someplace far enough away that it will be clear to everyone that we won't be there more than once a year.)

### God's sense of humor

God has a sense of humor. My last Sunday at Peace, the Old Testament lesson was the text of the very first sermon I ever preached — the call of Jeremiah. That first sermon was when I was in college, and I glommed on to the "Do not say, 'I am only a youth,'" part. This time I was drawn to Jeremiah 1.5: "Before I formed you in the womb I knew you, and before you were born I consecrated you; I appointed you a prophet to the nations." I reflected a bit on my own life and ministry, my journey — thinking about how the journey that each of us travels is part of God's good and gracious will for us.

I didn't really want to be a pastor. I was in junior high school, at a church camp up in the mountains when I first heard God calling me. But it was gentle. It was no Damascus Road, get knocked off your horse kind of thing; just a sense, sitting around a campfire, that God had a purpose for me and that it was something I hadn't really ever con-

sidered, and certainly didn't understand. I set it aside. I wasn't going to do that. I had other ideas. Through high school and into college, I was making plans of my own about how my life would unfold. But God was persistent. I finally went to seminary, still saying, "Well, I don't know . . . I'm not sure about this, but maybe I'll just try out seminary." And you know how it goes. This is not a story exclusive to pastors. You take one path, and not another, and the path leads you to one place, and not another.

### **If I had only known**

We all have a tendency as we grow older to think things like, "Well, if I'd just known then what I know now, I'd probably have taken that other path instead of the one I took." But what I've realized over the years is that if I'd taken that other path, I wouldn't be where I am now — and while that might mean I'd have avoided this annoyance or that grief or sorrow, it would also mean that I'd not have any of the wonderful things God has given me. If I'd taken a different path at any one of several points, I would never have met my wife. I would never have fathered my two incredible children. I would never have had the joy, the rich joy, of being pastor of Peace Lutheran Church for these 29 years.

A few days before my retirement I happened upon this prayer: "Grant us a ready will to obey your Word; and as we have entered into the labors of others, help us so to serve you that others may enter into our labors; and that we with them and they with us may attain life everlasting; through Jesus Christ our Lord." It is a fine prayer for this part of my journey — a fine prayer for any stage, really. We labor for a time, building on what others have done, and then we step back and allow others to take up the task. It's never entirely easy, but it is the way it works.

### **I love small towns**

There was a lovely article about my retirement in the local newspaper. So the past several weeks, I've been getting it from every direction from people who have no connection with Peace Lutheran Church — neighbors, store clerks, guys at the gym, my doctor. "Well, how's retirement? How's the teaching going?" Sometimes even more touching, like the man I didn't know who stood be-

hind me in line at a community event and said, "Thanks for all your years of service in this community."

It's encouraging to know that your work has been noticed. Once in a while the good Lord gives you a glimpse of how you might have touched people in ways you never realized. In the past few weeks as people shared reminiscences of my ministry, a good number of the things they mentioned were things of which I have absolutely no memory — just ordinary things that every pastor does, but to that person, to that family, not ordinary at all but terribly important.

### **The impact of what we do**

I had an email congratulating me from a woman, Claudia, who is a member of the first congregation I served. She wasn't a member at that time, but has joined subsequently; I don't really know her. I've had an email list for a few years, sending copies of my sermons to a handful of people — mostly family and friends, a few former parishioners or others who asked for them. One woman from that congregation, I found, has been sharing them with others, including Claudia. Claudia in turn printed out one sermon and mailed it to an acquaintance of hers who is in prison. She had received a very kind note from this acquaintance, telling her how much the sermon had meant to her, and Claudia wanted to pass it on to me.

God uses what we do and what we say in ways that we may never know. It is equally true, of course, that things we do and say may cause pain that we never know about. I'm a big fan, when a pastor is departing a congregation for whatever reason, of some form or other of a litany of release that includes mutual words of forgiveness. I believe there's a litany like this available from the ELCA, but there are several versions of it floating around. The pastor and the congregation each ask forgiveness for the sins committed against the other. In 29 years, that's a lot of sins. But the litany is a powerful one, not unlike, seems to me, the commendation in the order for burial where we admit that the dearly departed was "a sinner of [Christ's] own redeeming."

In the litany we used, after the words of forgiveness, there were words of release. The congregation released me from my duties as their pastor. I

released them from their dependence on me as their pastor. Then, after we sang a hymn, we went out to lunch. I was not expected, nor did I feel compelled, to help take down the tables afterwards.

In the six weeks since that day, there have only been two or three emails in the nature of, "The

altar guild wants to know where is the . . ." They'll do fine.

So how is retirement going? Very well, thanks. And so is the teaching. As I said, I am very blessed.

—by Richard O. Johnson, editor

## Omnium gatherum



Occasionally I get complaints that we don't include enough "gossipy news items" in *Forum Letter*. I'm not quite sure what to make of that complaint, but some things have been stacking up, so here goes:

**Anti-discrimination** • Yale University has removed official recognition to Beta Epsilon Chi, a Christian men's fraternity — which, among other things, makes it impossible for the group to reserve campus rooms for its meetings or activities. The reason? The fraternity's constitution requires that its members make "a credible profession of faith in Jesus Christ." This, says the university, violates Yale's anti-discrimination policy. (*Ivy League Christian Observer*, Winter 2013)

**Pro-discrimination** • Luther College in Decorah, IA, is one of the ELCA's flagship colleges, but it seems there's been a bit of controversy there lately. They are in the market for a new president; the current one, Richard Torgerson, is retiring. A search committee has worked for a year, and finally came to the point of nominating Dr. Mark Hagerott, currently a professor at the U. S. Naval Academy. He is a Rhodes scholar and holds degrees from the Naval Academy, Oxford University and the University of Maryland. Unfortunately for him (or for Luther, or maybe both), he is also a member of a Lutheran Church — Missouri Synod congregation. That didn't seem to come up in the process until the very end, when an opinion piece in the college newspaper written by Luther student Noah Lange raised an objection to Hagerott's religious affiliation. "I'm uncomfortable with Luther having a president who is not allowed, by the strictures of his religion, to commune with the students and faculty. Who identifies with a religious tradition that

refuses to ordain women, and believes that men should always be in positions of authority over women. A religious tradition that, in opposition to everything that the Luther congregation's status as a Reconciling in Christ congregation stands for, considers homosexuality an 'intrinsically sinful distortion.'" Of course we wouldn't want anyone to be uncomfortable, now, would we? This led to a flurry of exchanges in the paper and elsewhere. Perhaps sensing that this was just the tip of an iceberg around which he had no interest in trying to navigate, Dr. Hagerott withdrew — but not without expressing his concern about what he considered "a fundamental issue . . . and one that I did not anticipate: a narrowing lens of theological affiliation." Despite his record in the military working with "persons of all faiths, genders, sexual orientations and political persuasions," his LCMS background seemed to trump all else. "Was the debate in the press representative of Luther faculty, alumni, and students," he wondered, "or the voice of a small vocal minority? Is the experience of the past week a sign of things to come, the beginning of a narrow litmus test for future faculty, staff, for even Regents? Might future Regents or staff be required to show decades of church affiliations which will be reviewed for the correctness of their theological stance on certain issues? Will it be unacceptable for the next dean to be a Catholic? In the shadow of the historic 2009 ELCA vote on human sexuality, will Luther show tolerance for persons who hail from more conservative congregations in the ELCA, or for those groups which broke away? Will donations from alumni from more conservative religious viewpoints still be welcome?" Interesting questions. If something like this had happened at an LCMS school, imagine the outcry from outraged ELCA partisans, decrying (or at least clicking the

tongue at) the intolerance and narrowness of the institution, the threat to academic freedom, and all the rest. But of course the ELCA is tolerant, open, welcoming, ecumenical – within certain limits.

**Luther Seminary** • Meanwhile at Luther Seminary, things continue to unfold in sometimes unexpected ways. It appears that faculty members have dodged a bullet, at least for the moment. Interim President Rick Foss has announced that five long-time faculty will retire at the end of this academic year (Roland Martinson, Terry Fretheim, Fred Gaiser, Gracia Grindal, and Paul Westermeyer); they represent a total of some 167 years of service at Luther. Three more faculty have accepted new calls, and at least three others have indicated they will retire or leave next year. This buys the school some time with regard to faculty. There is also talk about offering some incentives for others to retire or go elsewhere in the coming year or so. Among the staff, things are not so good. The seminary had notified 18 of them as of March 19 that their positions were being eliminated; another three have decided to retire, and nine currently open positions will not be filled. In other Luther news, the recommendation *FL* reported last month regarding the termination of the Ph.D. program at Luther has been revised in the wake of faculty discussion. There will now be a three-year hiatus on the admission of new students to that program, as the school explores possible options for continuing it in an affordable way. Also on hold at the moment is the Master of Sacred Music program; no applications are being accepted for the 2013-2014 academic year. (The handful of students in both programs will be “accompanied” as they finish their degrees.) Finally, Luther will close its early childhood education program at the end of June; originally intended for children of students, the majority of the enrollment in recent years has come from the larger St. Paul community. Beyond the havoc that Luther’s financial problems have caused for the school, many are calling for a radically different model for theological education.

**Embezzlement** • It’s not just the seminary having financial issues in Minnesota. A former bookkeeper of the Northwestern Minnesota Synod of the ELCA has been charged with felony theft and check forgery, to the tune of about \$600,000.

**Gustavus Adolphus** • A reader in a position to have an opinion on the matter writes to suggest that our comments about the St. Peter, MN, college and the increasing unhappiness with President Jack Ohle in the last issue may require a bit of nuance. He suggests that the Gustavus faculty, at least some of them, might be described as “cranky and anarchistic,” and that there has been a succession of presidents “who basically deferred to them.” The writer admits that “there are always at least two sides to the story, and in this case, more than two sides. But [President] Ohle is not the only problem here.” Certainly few problems can be blamed on a single individual, I’ll grant you that.

**Children’s Bibles** • Sarah Hinlicky Wilson, our colleague over at *Lutheran Forum*, was the author of the cover story in the March 6 issue of *Christian Century*. In “R-Rated: How to read the Bible with children,” she ponders the tendency of so-called “children’s Bibles” and Bible story books to edit out some of the more problematic Biblical stories. Along with it, she examines how that plays out in real life in several popular Bibles and story books for children currently on the market. In the end she recommends that we “embrace the problematic Bible and abandon our efforts to control it.” A very thoughtful and interesting read indeed, whether or not you have young children in your life.

**Changing minds** • Speaking of *Lutheran Forum*, the most recent issue has a really interesting article by Robert Benne, sometime *FL* contributor and respected Lutheran ethicist. This piece might have been part of the *Christian Century*’s old series, “How My Mind Has Changed,” where they asked theological and ecclesiastical heavyweights to explain, well, how their minds have changed over the years. But *Lutheran Forum* gave Bob more space than the *Century* would likely allow. It is an exercise in theological autobiography, and a fascinating read. Agree with where he’s ended up or not, Benne offers a fine insight into the theological journey of one man over the course of the last few decades.

**Diffused spirituality** • I was struck by a phrase written by David Hein in the March/April issue of *Touchstone*, in an interesting article on the faith and ethics of General George C. Marshall. Marshall, he

says, would not have been tempted by “the project of twentieth-century secularization: a diffused spirituality in which almost everything was a little bit divine, but nothing in particular was.”

**Mekane Yesus** • The well-respected Ethiopian Evangelical Church Mekane Yesus (EECMY) has severed its relationship with the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America and the Church of Sweden over those churches’ decisions regarding sexuality. With roots going back to German missionaries in the 17th century, the EECMY was established in its present form in 1959, and has had a long and warm relationship with the ELCA and its predecessor bodies. Said to be the fastest-growing Lutheran church body in the world, the EECMY now approaches six million members, making it larger than the ELCA. The Ethiopian Church has been a major recipient of funding from both the ELCA and the Swedish church, so this action is not without cost. The EECMY had issued a “pastoral call” to the other two churches, asking them to reverse their recent decisions. “Sadly,” says an EECMY press release, “the repeated endeavors of the EECMY on this line failed to obtain the expected positive response from the two Churches. . . . Being cognizant of the fruitful and long-standing relationships with [the two churches], the EECMY expresses her very deep and sincere appreciation of their historic contributions in God’s Mission. We will continue to pray that, one day, the relationships will be restored.” May that be the prayer of all of us. It remains to be seen what impact this decision may have within the Lutheran World Federation, of which all three churches are members.

**Extending the bond** • Thrivent Financial for Lutherans is in the midst of a membership vote on whether or not to “extend the bond” to other Christians — abandoning their Lutheran identity, though in their public relations campaign for the change, they deliberately use that word “extend.” Far as I can tell, the primary reason for this is not simply to be ecumenically nice, but to expand the client base for Thrivent products. Let’s face it: Lutherans are dying out. In spite of the campaign, there seems to be some significant pushback from Thrivent members who aren’t at all sure this is a good idea. There is some concern that “extending the bond” really

means “diluting the connection” to Lutheran congregations, and so I’ve heard about a lot of folks planning to vote “no.” My own opinion is that Thrivent is kidding itself if it thinks they will find a ready market in congregations of other denominations. Lutherans seem to be unique among Protestants in having a “fraternal benefit organization” — a concept wholly alien to, say, Methodists or Presbyterians. Several times over the years I’ve heard this come up in ministerial conversations, with pastors of other churches expressing astonishment that Lutherans allow, even welcome, access to their congregations by such a commercial enterprise. I’ve even heard a few, and maybe more than a few, Lutheran pastors and lay leaders grumble about it. Let me be clear: I’m a Thrivent member, and I know that the reality isn’t really quite like that stereotype. But I fear it will be how it is perceived by non-Lutheran congregations. Finding a place in their life for Thrivent Financial for Christians is going to be very tough sledding.

**On plundering other traditions** • Kudos to the ELCA for issuing a sensitive caution on its web site about congregations trying to offer what they claim to be a reenacted “Seder meal” — often during Holy Week, in an apparent effort to teach members about the “context” of the Last Supper. The web site does a laudable job of explaining briefly why this is problematic from a historical and liturgical point of view, and at least hints at the theological and ecumenical problem of trying to imitate the traditions of a different church or faith. “It is an admirable and truly Christian practice to be open and welcoming of other religious traditions,” the site says. “Christian liturgical practice, however, cannot simply be an imitation of another tradition nor can it hope to be more ‘faithful’ by being more historically authentic.” (To see the statement, visit [www.elca.org/Growing-in-Faith/Worship/Learning-Center/FAQs/Seder-Meals.aspx](http://www.elca.org/Growing-in-Faith/Worship/Learning-Center/FAQs/Seder-Meals.aspx).)

**On the other hand** • Women of the ELCA has a Facebook page (doesn’t everyone?), and on it they recommend a “Stations of the Cross” created by Mary Button, a sometime writer of resources for WELCA. “Stations of the Cross,” of course, are generally more associated with Roman Catholic piety than Lutheran, but one might argue that this bit of

Roman piety could find a place within Lutheran practice if done evangelically and seriously. Ms. Button's rendition, though, turns out to be ideologically inspired. In her own words, "The series of stations combine images depicting the struggle for LGBT equality through the 20th and 21st century [sic]. Each station illustrates the many ways in which the pursuit of justice for LGBT persons is embedded in the history of the United States." So the pious follower of the way of the cross is led through images of the Crucified superimposed on images of various scenes representing the "struggle for LGBT equality." One of the odder ones, given the artist's affirmation about this struggle being "embedded in the history of the United States," refers to the outlawing of homosexual groups by the National Socialist German Workers Party. But really now . . . hijacking the Passion of our Lord for any political purpose seems a lot more offensive to me than congregations playing at Seder meals.

**Hell of a blog** • I've mentioned the planned conference in June of the Center for Catholic and Evangelical Theology on the theme "Heaven, Hell, . . . and Purgatory?" The Center has set up a blog with some thoughtful commentary on the topic and an opportunity to join in the discussion, whether or not you are able to attend the conference. Worth a look at <http://heavenhellpurgatory.wordpress.com>.

**Francis the First?** • Maybe ELCA Presiding Bishop Mark Hanson has some inside information about what's ahead for the Roman Catholic Church in the decades to come and that's why the initial press re-

lease giving Bp. Hanson's reaction to the election of the new pontiff erroneously referred to him as "Pope Francis I"; the numeral has been expunged from the version of the news release now on the ELCA web site, so apparently someone told them that there can't be a "first" until there's a "second." That *faux pas* aside, Bp. Hanson noted pretty much what everyone else is saying: that "his choice of the name Francis is a strong sign of his commitment to a life of prayer, simplicity, humility and solidarity with those who live on the margins of society." But then he concluded with a hope that "the gifts of the Holy Spirit sustain him as we enter this holy calling." I'm not quite sure what that last part means, other than that he needs an editor; sounds like somebody garbled the pronouns or something. But don't you think the new Pope is impressive, and in just the ways that Bp. Hanson suggests?

**Facts and foibles** • A reader writes, "Thank you. Period! For sharing news, observations, facts and foibles, sins (including 'our own most grievous sins') and forgiven moments (thank God for grace) of our cherished but often tarnished Lutheran faith community. I avidly read each issue and am constantly informed, enlightened, motivated, touched and sometimes embarrassed as I encounter so many different people and insights, all supposedly in our own family!" We appreciate his appreciation, and we urge you yet again: If there is someone in your part of the Lutheran family who needs to be informed, enlightened, motivated, touched, or embarrassed, a gift of the *Forum* package may be just the thing. Do it online at [www.alpb.org](http://www.alpb.org). -roj

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