Address of the Senior:
Implementing Chapter VIII of The Rule

Society of the Holy Trinity General Retreat
25 October 2010

Why is the chapter on ecumenical relations included in *The Rule of the Society of the Holy Trinity*? Other chapters make sense in a rule intended for a pastoral society and ministerium. Classical rules for religious communities provide direction for the use of the daily prayer offices. Individual confession emerged in the monastic communities. Ministeriums gather for meetings and retreats and historically engaged in mutual visitation, encouraged the teaching of sound doctrine, and agreed on common parish practices. On this latter point I note that at its first meeting in Philadelphia in 1748 the Ministerium of Pennsylvania, as soon as it was constituted and elected its first senior, adopted the Agenda prepared by the Senior, Henry Melchior Muhlenberg, and covenanted to use this agenda as their parish liturgy, subject to local conditions. A society that is, in effect, also a *collegium pietatis* will cultivate a personal and corporate life of faithfulness—of obedience—to Jesus. A society will also provide for its organizational structure. All of these items fit naturally into *The Rule* of our pastoral society and inter-Lutheran ministerium.

But Chapter VIII, "Ecumenical Commitments," seems out of place. It doesn't fit in with the other chapters. Why is it there?

I wish I could give a definitive answer to that question, but I can't. I was on the committee of six that drafted *The Rule*. The others were Ron Bagnall, Philip Max Johnson, Larry Yoder, Lou Smith, now of blessed memory, and Michael McDaniel, also of blessed memory. We met over several summer days in 1996 in Bishop McDaniel's office at Lenoir-Rhyne College in Hickory, NC. Bishop McDaniel's interest in the Lutheran-Roman Catholic dialogue was well known, and he established the annual Aquinas-Luther Lectures at Lenoir-Rhyne College. But I wouldn't blame or credit him alone for this chapter in *The Rule*. The truth is that it just seemed right to us. As we circulated the draft of *The Rule* to others who had gathered the previous autumn at Loyola House in Morristown, NJ, suggestions were made on this chapter as well as other chapters, but no one questioned the appropriateness of including such a chapter in *The Rule*. When those who had called for the formation of the Society of the Holy Trinity gathered once again at Loyola House in the fall of 1996 to adopt *The Rule,* we proceeded line by line, sometimes word by word, until consensus was reached on the total document. Again, no one raised the appropriateness of including such a chapter in *The Rule*. Once we had achieved consensus, we marched into the chapel and solemnly signed *The Rule*. The Society of the Holy Trinity was born.

As I ponder why it seemed so self-evident that the Society needed to make specific ecumenical commitments, what primarily comes to mind is this: most of us were convinced of an evangelical catholic reading of the Lutheran Confessions. We had been taught by such scholars as Jaroslav Pelikan and Arthur Carl Piepkorn (both out of the Missouri Synod) that Lutheranism was a movement for reform of the Catholic Church of the West, that Martin Luther had no intention of starting a new and rival Church to the one Holy Catholic Church, that the schism of the sixteenth century occurred as a tragic necessity, and that in the new ecumenical climate of the twentieth century momentum was building through fruitful dialogue for healing the breach in Western

Christianity caused by the sixteenth century Reformation. Richard John Neuhaus, in his Lutheran days at least, never tired of articulating this narrative.

In the days after the Second Vatican Council Max Lackman proposed a Catholic reading of the Augsburg Confession and there was hope that the Confession might somehow be recognized by Rome as legitimately Catholic. Robert Jenson and Eric Gritsch, in their book on *Lutheranism: The Theological Movement and Its Confessional Writings,* argued that the crucial Article IV on justification by faith was an ecumenical proposal of dogma. Carl Braaten, in his controversial essay, "Rome, Reformation, and Reunion," argued that we had to imagine Protestantism as a community in exile whose true home was Rome, and that we had to begin thinking about the possibility of going home once Rome was reformed. We looked and saw the Roman Catholic Church undergoing reformation before our eyes. Ideas about the church as the people of God and the body of Christ, emphasized in *Lumen Gentium,* the Constitution on the Church, had impact on non-Roman Catholic Churches, including Lutheran Churches. The liturgical renewal promulgated in *Sacrosanctam Concilium*, the Constitution on the Liturgy, also influenced liturgical renewal in non-Roman Catholic Churches, not least some Lutheran Churches.

In our discussions during the drafting of *The Rule* I became aware, more than ever, of the importance of the Preface to the Augsburg Confession for stating the hope of the confessors who presented their Confession to Emperor Charles V. I can definitely report that the Preface served as the basis for Chapter VIII of our *Rule*. In explaining why they responded to His Imperial Majesty's summons to present a written summary of their beliefs and practices, both in Latin and in German, the Lutheran electors, princes, and estates said,

> If, however, our lords, friends, and associates who represent the electors, princes, and estates of the other party do not comply with the procedure intended by Your Imperial Majesty's summons, if no amicable and charitable negotiations take place between us, and if no results are attained, nevertheless we on our part shall not omit doing anything, in so far as God and conscience allow, that may serve the cause of Christian unity.

The Preface to the Augsburg Confession shaped Chapter VIII of our *Rule*. As the Lutheran lay leaders assembled at Augsburg presented a united front, so our Society commits itself to Lutheran unity. We have in our membership composition fulfilled our *Rule*. "Our membership is drawn from any and all Lutheran church bodies, particularly in the United States and Canada." Our members are rostered a number of Lutheran church bodies.

As the Lutheran reformers discerned the crisis of faith that existed in their time and sought agreement, where possible, with other reform movements (remember that the result of the Marburg Colloquy in 1529 had been agreement on 14 out of 15 points of doctrine), so we in our Society, recognizing the crisis of faith in our time, seek out those who are in other confessional movements and religious orders (in the churches of the Reformation as well as in the Church of Rome) and invite them to chapter retreats and to the General Retreat. We need to be in conversation with other confessional Christians.

But, at the same time, we hold that "the Lutheran ecumenical vocation is the unfinished business of the sixteenth century Reformation. Together with our forebears at Augsburg in 1530, we long for that reunion of Christians in which the Gospel might have free course and for that unity for which

Jesus prayed (cf. John 17)." In other words, our *Rule* is committed to the profession of desire for Christian unity expressed by the confessors at Augsburg. "Therefore, this ministerium is dedicated to the Lutheran vocation of reform of the Church and the Lutheran ecumenical destiny of reconciliation with the bishop and church of Rome."

We have identified as our particular vocation the renewal of the ordained pastoral ministry in the Lutheran Churches as a means of reforming the Churches in which we are rostered.

We recognize that the Church must always be reformed (*Ecclesia semper reformanda*), and this includes the Churches of the Reformation. For some of our members their sense of the need for reform based on the teachings of the Holy Scriptures has led to their involvement in the organization of new ecclesiastical structures. Others of us remain in our current ecclesiastical structures and continue to work for reform of doctrine and life based on the Word of God.

This work of reform is difficult enough in some of our ecclesiastical situations. But the second part of Chapter VIII, section 4, of our *Rule*—"reconciliation with the bishop and church of Rome"—is seemingly elusive. It seems that the twentieth century ecumenical movement as a whole has run out of gas. The hope for further agreement based on the signing of the "Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification" on October 31, 1999 has not been realized. Some of our Lutheran church bodies have created obstacles for dialogue with the Roman Catholic Church by their official policy decisions. Some other Lutheran church bodies have not always shown much interest in ecumenical dialogue. The Roman Catholic Church is a global organization. Not all Lutheran church bodies are in one global communion or fellowship. Who should Rome talk to if they're interested in talking? Is it up to Rome to get Lutherans together for dialogue?

Some members of our Society have wondered if the initiative of Pope Benedict XVI in offering a personal ordinariate for Anglicans could be a model for a similar arrangement for Lutherans? It should be noted that few Episcopalians or Anglicans in North America have shown interest in this arrangement. And small wonder: it is really a way of making Anglican Roman Catholics. Those parishes that would avail themselves of this arrangement will be brought into the structure of the Roman Catholic Church, keeping only married priests (for the time being), parochial customs, and such elements of Anglican liturgy as Rome will deem acceptable. They will have personal bishops or episcopal oversight of their parishes (hence the term "personal ordinariate"), but these bishops will be appointed by Rome. And they will teach the Catholic Catechism, not the Prayer Book Catechism. This is not an Anglican Rite in communion with the Roman Church; it is absorption into the Catholic Church structure.

Even if such a provision were made for Lutherans, how many parishes would be willing to become Roman Catholic in all but name? Some of you have had the experience of guiding your congregations in voting to leave one Lutheran denomination for another. What would it take to guide our congregations in a vote to leave their Lutheran denomination to join a structure that is regulated by the Roman Catholic Church? I think we need to be realistic about this.

It is always possible for individual Lutheran pastors (even married Lutheran pastors) to transfer into the Roman Communion and become Roman priests. This has been possible since George Witzel did it after graduating from Wittenberg University and serving Luther's home parish in the 1520s. Members of our Society have crossed over into the Roman Communion; others may do so in

the future. But a Lutheran Rite, with its own integrity, in communion with the Bishop and Church of Rome seems unrealistic at this time.

So where does this leave us? Should observance of this article in our *Rule* be suspended as unrealizable? Many aspects of our *Rule* are difficult to fulfill. But if we summon the will to observe them, captive as our wills are to the sin that so easily besets us, we could, in the power of the Holy Spirit and with the encouragement of our fellowship, pray the Daily Prayer of the Church, live a life of obedience to Jesus, use the Office of the Keys when we fail to do so, gather regularly for retreats, visit one another, apply ourselves to the discipline of study and teaching, cultivate evangelical catholic parish practices, and even pay our dues on time. We can work for the reform of our church bodies and witness to the truth of the word of God, even if our efforts are timid at best. But what can we do, since we are not a church body, to advance "reconciliation with the bishop and church of Rome."

It is in the light of these difficulties that I make a proposal. Maybe there are other ways to advance this article in our Rule. But I put this proposal before the Society under the rubric of giving pastoral direction to the Society by my life and teaching (Chapter IX, article 7). You read it in my recent column in *De Trinitate*. It is inspired by what I heard in the Preface to the Augsburg Confession, that "we on our part shall not omit doing anything, in so far as God and conscience allow, that may serve the cause of Christian unity." Reconciliation is achieved only by two parties coming together and putting side past differences. But sometimes one of the parties has to initiate the process.

My proposal is modest. It is something we can do as a Society and it would be consistent with our purposes. I propose that we agree within our Society to intentionally study the teachings of the popes in their encyclicals and pronouncements. To be sure, we would study them in the light of Scripture, the ecumenical Councils, the Fathers and Doctors of the Church, and the Lutheran Confessions—exactly the kind of study to which Chapter VI of our *Rule* commits us. In fact, studying papal teaching would give us a particular reason to dig into the sources listed in Chapter VI. But we would approach the study of papal teaching with an open mind and heart, not intent on looking for error but searching for truth. I don't mean to say that we should overlook error if we discover it. But in the light of centuries of Lutheran anti-papist bias I have to encourage us to be open minded.

Those encyclicals that address the pastoral issues of our day would be especially relevant to our study and coming to terms with their teaching would be edifying to our own ministries and teaching. While popes speak in their own voice, and presumably do some of their own research (this is certainly true of the current pope), the scholarly and pastoral resources commanded by the papal office make our denominational processes look puny indeed. And while some of our denominational teaching resources (especially those produced by the Commission on Theology and Church Relations of the Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod) are solid, well-considered pieces of work, our statements often lack the creative edge evident in some papal letters and addresses that speak to issues within the context of the global mission of the church. Our statements tend to give consolation to the faithful rather than address the world, and that is one reason, I think, why they give in to the *Zeitgeist* rather than *das Heilige Geist*.

I lift up as an example one area of papal teaching that addresses one of the most controversial subjects in modern Christianity: human sexuality. There can be no doubt that this is the great theological issue of our time, comparable to the Christological controversies of the fifth century and just as church-dividing. None of our church statements have explored the manifold areas of human sexuality in relation to other doctrines, including the doctrine of the Trinity, more thoroughly than the series of 129 addresses of Pope John Paul II grouped together as his Theology of the Body. In my opinion, John Paul II addressed human sexuality as definitively as Pope Leo the Great addressed Christology in the Tome he sent to the Council of Chalcedon in 451. Leo's Tome spoke a word of truth to the bickering members of that synod that was immediately transparent, causing them to exclaim, "Peter has spoken through Leo." Perhaps we might conclude, as we absorb this papal teaching on human sexuality, that Peter has spoken through John Paul II, and that we should listen to what he has to say.

Now, I admit that with these remarks I am broaching the contentious issue of the magisterial authority of the papal office. Claims have been made for the infallibility of papal pronouncements to which we cannot subscribe. Or, at least let us say that papal infallibility in declaring what belongs to the deposit of faith, as laid down by the First Vatican Council, is something we need to discuss. We might begin by studying the official Lutheran-Roman Catholic Dialogue on the Teaching Office. And let us recognize that Lutherans who cannot affirm their own confession's position that "it is the office of the bishopÉto judge doctrine and condemn doctrine that is contrary to the GospelÉaccording to divine right" (Article XXVIII) will surely have difficulty with even the most nuanced understanding of papal infallibility. We stand in a Reformation tradition that holds with Luther, in his debate with Johannes Eck at Leipzig, that "popes and councils can err." But we must also recognize that they can speak the truth. Papal teaching has even defended the concept of truth itself, as in *Veritatis splendor*.

Many members in our Society are looking for a magisterium that they do not find in their denominational pronouncements. We question whether our church assemblies and conventions can exercise any teaching authority at all, since they include as voting members (sometimes in the majority) lay people who do not have regular calls to publicly teach and preach in the Church (as per Augsburg Confession Article XIV). The proper role of the laity in the Reformation tradition is to press the magisterium to such clarity of doctrinal articulation that they can assent to it with their "Amen." We need to recognize that our Society itself constitutes a magisterium. We are among those called to publicly teach and preach in the Church. We have in a couple of instances exercised a teaching authority to one another in statements of pastoral guidance. Through our collegial study of papal teaching in chapter retreats we can together discern whether we find truth or error in papal teaching. But we can also invite the magisterium, the teaching office of the See of St. Peter, into the magisterium of our pastoral society. Understand that we will make of the papal magisterium what it means to us as Lutheran pastors, not what it means to Roman Catholics. This is something we will discover by the very act of studying papal teaching with an intention to learn from it. But even in this limited sense it is a granting of recognition to papal teaching authority, even though we ask nothing in return.

I should point out that my proposal says nothing about papal jurisdiction. Authority and power are not necessarily related. Luther, in effect, denied papal primacy in the Smalcald Articles when he proposed that all bishops should be equal (a view shared in the Eastern Churches). Philip Melancthon registered a minority opinion in his subscription to the Articles that for the sake of

Christian unity papal primacy over the other bishops can be conceded as a human arrangement, if the pope allows the preaching of the gospel. Pope John Paul II, in *Ut Unam Sint*, acknowledged the ecumenical aspirations of other Christian communities in heeding "the request made of me to find a way of exercising the primacy which, while in no way renouncing what is essential to its mission, is nonetheless open to a new situation." In particular he was willing to look at models of fraternal relationships between the Churches in the first millennium during which papal mediation was more often invited than imposed.

How to reconfigure papal primacy would be an interesting discussion. But my proposal does not require figuring this out before we study papal teaching documents. We can, as David Yaego suggested, back into these more contentious issues after first recognizing that popes (and not only those *after* the Second Vatican Council) have something to teach their separated brothers and sisters. And, where we hear the gospel in papal teaching, we can incorporate this teaching into our own parochial teaching and synodical deliberations. Our self-imposed discipline of learning from papal teaching might give a boost to the credibility of our own teaching and preaching as we attend more to the mission of the gospel in the world than to shoring up our Lutheran identity.

This is a simple step to take toward "reconciliation with the bishop and church of Rome." But something needs to be dared if we are to pursue this item in the *Rule* to which we have subscribed. I invite your responses to this modest proposal.

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