The Inescapable Choice

reflection by Richard J. Niebanck, STS

To leave or not to leave, that is the question haunting a growing number of us who have labored as shepherds of that rapidly diminishing segment of Christ's flock known as the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, as well as an indeterminate number in the other Lutheran bodies. To leave or not to leave, and, if to leave, which way to go? I address these questions from the vantage point of an ELCA pastor.

To be quite honest, I had thought that I had settled the matter for myself, having decided some time ago that fidelity to my ordination vows and, more important, to my baptismal calling required me to remain where I was, serving Christ by serving the people he had entrusted to me.

Then came the departures of several pastors whom I held in high regard, some to Rome, others to Byzantium, and I found myself challenged to consider my own situation afresh. What might these departures, and the factors leading up to them, signify for me, even at my relatively advanced age. Abraham, after all, was many years older when he was called to set out.

It would, of course, be impossible fully to know the reasons why these colleagues, even those closest to me, have chosen to depart, and it would be quite wrong to guess at them. Their decisions are, after all, profoundly personal ones. Yet as holders of an office that is public in character, they are obligated to make a public accounting for their decisions. It is they who must so account, and it is we who must accept the accounting as having been made in good faith, whatever may be our subjective feelings about their decisions.

What I mean to do here, therefore, is to consider some of the factors that might bear upon a decision to leave and then, in a more personal way, to set forth my own reasons for remaining where I am.

Let me begin by reviewing some of the reasons being advanced for departing. The most obvious one is the contention that the reforming movement known as "Lutheran" has, for all intents and purposes, run its course and that the denominations calling themselves "Lutheran" are in fact not "Lutheran" at all.

On the positive side, it is argued that Rome has finally acknowledged the doctrine of justification by grace through faith in Christ without the works of the law, as witness the recently adopted Joint Declaration. Furthermore, it is asserted that the progress made in the various bilateral dialogues, and the corpus of writings produced by them, show that Lutherans need not fear compromising their evangelical faith by returning "home" to the Western church of which their forbearers were always a part, though long estranged. Believing that "the Lutheran ecumenical destiny [is] reconciliation with the bishop and church of Rome" (The Rule, Society of the Holy Trinity, 1996), the holders of this viewpoint see little or no justification for remaining "separated brethren."

On the negative side, it is argued that those ecclesial bodies retaining the name, "Lutheran," have long since ceased being Lutheran. When asked, "Why have you left your church?," they are likely to

retort, "So who moved?" The evidence is, as the lawyers would say, *prima facie*, whether one looks to right or left.

On the right, one sees a once-great denomination now deeply divided, torn by a power struggle just barely masked by obscurantist pseudo-theological bickering, looking less and less like a church and more like a conventicle. That church's embrace of the combination of mass marketing and revivalist methods is little short of bizarre.

But the disarray on the right pales by comparison to that on the left. It isn't so much that the ELCA has moved as that it has been politically hijacked by a well-organized and well-financed ideological mafia. These hijackers, intent on re-imaging God and reconstructing the world according to the anti-gospel of gender, sexuality, race, and class, have taken full advantage of the ELCA's soft underbelly: a pietistic sentimentality, a "gospel reductionist antinomianism, and a wannabe eagerness to be "relevant." Not surprisingly, this had led to a top-down imposed legalism and a totalitarian political correctness dictating everything from delegate quotas and seminary curricula to the use of personal pronouns.

In view of this sorry state of affairs, the full contours of which are all too familiar to us, is it any wonder that so many who love and serve the Lord and his church feel that they have no choice but to bail out? But what, one may ask, is it they seek? And what guarantee have they of finding it elsewhere?

If there is a single common denominator running through the variety of personal accountings for the decision to leave the Lutheran church it is, I submit, a profound longing to be part of a churchly community, a church possessing what is being called "ecclesial density," a "specific gravity" sufficient to counteract the currents and countercurrents of secular culture.

When the Commission for a [so-called] New Lutheran Church opted to abolish the ministerium as a separate entity charged with guarding its normative doctrine and governing the conduct of ministers, it flung the gates wide to a populist polity; and, in establishing the quota system, made the church into a body of political interest groups. The adoption of a managerial and marketing ethos completed the virtual transformation of the church as *Gemeinde* into a fabricated corporation, its parishes being local outlets.

While many see in Roman Catholicism, with its Petrine Office and Magisterium, the "ecclesial density" so lacking in Lutheranism, others are looking to the Orthodox East. They regard Roman Catholicism as suffering from the same disease which Protestantism contracted in the 1960s: letting the world set the church's agenda and seeking feverishly to be "relevant." A "dumbed-down" liturgy, insipid music, embrace of "the triumphant therapeutic," and, most recently, the official imposition of a lifeless translation of the Scriptures to be read at Mass—recently subjected to a withering critique by former-Lutheran Richard John Neuhaus—are frequently cited as evidence.

These Lutherans see in Orthodoxy a timelessness and stability not disturbed by the upheavals that have plagued the Western Church. They find there both a rootedness in God's good earth and a liturgical spirituality that soars heavenward. Without apology, Orthodoxy is incarnated in ethnicity, undistracted by the Western urge toward engineered inclusivity and diversity. Its catholicity is more

vertical than horizontal, one which draws its variegated mosaic of ethnic families upward toward an eschatological union in *Christos Pantocrator*.

These Lutherans point to the "opening to the East" being made by certain Finnish theologians who claim to have recovered *theosis* as an aspect of Luther's thought, long neglected by the churches bearing the Reformer's name.

So, these pastors are drawn to the earthy ethnicity and the heavenly ethos of Orthodoxy, undeterred by their critical brethren who warn against "aesthetic romanticism" and "triumphalist theology," and regard their move as both an abandonment of the *theologia crucis* and a false equating of faith with sight. This ultimate rejection of the Western ethos, is, I submit, both attractive and utterly wrong. But I'll save that argument for another day.

Why I'm Staying

Up until now I have postponed giving an accounting for my staying put in the ELCA. Now it's past time for me to come clean.

I remain in the ELCA because, notwithstanding its loss of "ecclesial density," the ELCA still contains congregations of faithful Christians where the Word is proclaimed in its purity and the sacraments are rightly administered by pastors who remain true to their vows of ordination. I, my wife of forty-seven years, a son and his family are active members of one such congregation served by one such pastor. I am linked with many other faithful pastors in the Society of the Holy Trinity, a functioning ministerium. I am aware of still more faithful pastors who "soldier on" for the sake of their flocks, refusing to flee from the menacing wolf. I see signs of a new generation intent on reclaiming their baptismal birthright. My own grandchildren are part of that generation. So also are the four gifted home highschoolers who are receiving instruction in Hebrew from our pastor and in Greek from me. In all of this I find that, amid the ruins of denominational Lutheranism, there are living, vibrant communities where the means of grace are being offered and received, and where faith is active in works of love.

The sorry condition of the ELCA in some ways reminds one of that hijacked airliner, United 93, and the heroic passengers who sought to take it back or, at least, to avert an even greater disaster. In the case of the ELCA, there is a doughty band of pastors and laity who are convinced that as "this church" was taken over by a minority of revisionists, it can be taken back by a majority of faithful confessors, observing that "there are more of us then there are of them." Whether these hopeful souls prove to be right or not, I'm pledged to give them aid and comfort until our Lord summons me from beyond that "one more river to cross."

Epilogue

Not long ago an overly-zealous Roman Catholic laid it on me and a couple of hundred other members of the Society of the Holy Trinity that we should abandon our leaking lifeboat and return to "Peter's bark." To this I, however belatedly, reply: I'm not in a lifeboat but the very ark of Christ's

church. I've been there since my baptism, and that's where I'm staying. It's one helluva stinkin' place, but it's full of redeemed sinners for whom Christ died. I intend to do what I can, God helping me, to care for the ones in my little corner until that great day when the ark arrives at its heavenly destination.

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