

Even Rome Can be Home, but . . . Should Today's Augsburg Catholics Long to Go There? Not Really

Dear Sabbatarians,

He's baaack! Ed's passed on the Sabbatheology duties to some of us, but he's still got plenty to say – as you'll discover in this wonderfully provocative piece he's offering us today. "Thursday Theology" is the latest addition to Crossings on-line. On Saturdays you'll get a pericope study for the upcoming Sunday and on Thursdays you'll get a piece from Ed about some current topic of interest.

Enjoy!

Robin

Forum Letter (May 1998) reported on three ELCA pastors who recently swam the Tiber, i.e., "left for Rome." Admitting his perplexity, yes, his "anger at the news," the editor nevertheless concludes that "evangelical catholicism does lead to Rome," that "properly speaking, Lutherans are Catholics in exile, an exile that must someday end and for which one must offer ardent prayers." For the fuller picture of how exile happened, even Blessed Martin is co-culpable. "The historical failure on the part of Luther . . . is that he presented the revitalizing doctrine of justification by faith in such a way that his opponents could take it and make a plausible case for heresy." Perplexity apparently overcome and anger swallowed, the

editor concludes: "Recognizing that the direction of evangelical catholicism is toward Rome, one may properly regard [these three Tiber-crossings] as proleptic events."

Herewith a "Nein" (maybe even a "Nein!") to all three assertions.

I. The Image of exile. In Old Testament rhetoric there are two "ex-" terms for separation and departure: exodus and exile. Both are exotic (=having to do with a foreign country). Lutheran sentiment—past and present—has yin-yanged between exodus and exile in reflecting on Rome. Was the Lutheran Reformation exodus or exile—or something else? My dictionary (1997 ed.) says exile is "the state or a period of forced absence from one's country or home" with the implied nuance of returning "home" some day. FL's editor opts for the exile image. If Augsburg catholics are Roman exiles, the only question is: whether today is not that "some day" to swim back. Lutherans who have opted to take that plunge—from the famous erstwhile editor of FL to other less public persons—are answering that question with an embodied yes. Salty Saltzmann calls such moves back to Rome "proleptic," a sneak-preview, an event really ahead of its time, signalling what at some later date all Lutherans will do. "It is inevitable: there will be a reunion." Just how the Seer of Stover, MO received this vision of future church history, he does not tell us. But he's not the only stateside Lutheran with that vision, and as long as they talk to themselves, they reinforce their convictions. Nevertheless other Augsburg catholics ask: Is this most certainly true? As painful as exile may be for the exiles, the term exodus carries even grimmer connotations: mass departure from that "foreign country," and good riddance to be out of there. Was 16th century Roman catholicism the western church's era of slavery in Egypt? Was it a Babylonian captivity of the church? That

is admittedly a feisty historical judgment, yet one that Luther affirmed and documented in his essay of the same name. If so, the new country to which Augsburg catholics have come is our real homeland. Thank God we've been brought to the land of "promise." Return? Never. Talk of return is a symptom of unfaith.

The scruples some ELCA folks have had about the Concordat with Episcopalians, I suggest, is linked to the exodus image of the Lutheran Reformation. The historic episcopate—no matter how *bene* or *bene esse* it is as a theologoumenon—has in remembered history seldom, say these critics, eschewed enslavement. So often it has become *male esse* in practice. Safeguards to bind Babylonian binges on the part of bishops are hard to find in the past practice of episcopacy. Nor are they much easier to find in the current discussion. When exodus is the image of our Lutheran past, bishops with status because of their historical hookups and no functional safeguards for their own evangelical disciplining, raise the spectre of Babylonia and Egypt all over again.

Once more, that is an historical judgment. But it was the judgment of the Augsburg confessors. For the bishop of Rome in the 16th century, and local Roman bishops too, there were no institutional structures in place to have the bishop's word and deed normed by the Good News, to constrain him to be "a bishop according to the Gospel" (AC/Apol 28).

Lutheran sentiment—past and present—has yin-yanged between exodus and exile in reflecting on Rome as home. But I want to propose a third option, an option more readily grounded in the Augsburg Confession itself, I suggest, the Magna Charta of our catholicism—and in the NT. But first this interlude.

II. Luther's "historical failure" to articulate the good news of justification and faith so that it would not sound like heresy to his critics. What notion of justification by faith alone underlies this historical judgment? Luther may well have often been a bull in a china shop, but it was irenic Melanchthon who articulated justification in the primal documents that were the text for the ongoing debate all the way up to Trent. And no matter how Augsburg catholics said it, it still sounded like heresy to the opposition. How does one articulate justification without its being offensive (heretical) to one who believes otherwise? Then even Jesus "failed historically," right? He failed to articulate the Good News of the Kingdom in such a way that it sounded kosher to his critics. No wonder they strung him up for blasphemy. And Peter preaching in Jerusalem and Stephen before the council, and Paul exiting over the wall by rope, and, and.... Historical failure to articulate the Good News so that it wouldn't sound like heresy? What kind of Good News is it that is guaranteed not to offend? Crystal Palace stuff? What is the Good News really? Ay, there's the rub—and the FL editor is usually not far from the kingdom in articulating that Good News—also to the offense of many (whom he patently intends to pique with his prose). This must have been a glitch. The editor owes us a re-take on this one. But now on to the third option—neither exodus nor exile in their O.T. meanings are suitable for church use, but "exile revisited," exile "baptized."

III. "The direction of evangelical catholicism is toward Rome." Those already having made the move are "proleptic." Not really. Viewing Augsburg catholics as exiles, as the FL editor does, is not a bad image. But it needs to be baptized. It needs to become a New Testament term. FL still reads exile in Hebrew, not in Greek. Ironically

enough, it is the NT letter to the Hebrews that baptizes exile out of its Old Testament meaning into becoming a Gospel term. Hebrews chapter 10 is the venue. Abraham, Sarah, Isaac and Jacob, says the unknown writer, 13“all died in faith, not having received what was promised, but having seen it and greeted it from afar, and having acknowledged that they were strangers and exiles on the earth. 14For people who speak thus make it clear that they are seeking a homeland. 15If they had been thinking of that land from which they had gone out, they would have had opportunity to return. 16But as it is, they desire a better country, that is, a heavenly one. Therefore God is not ashamed to be called their God, for he has prepared for them a city.”All Christians, Augsburg catholics and Roman catholics too, are exiles. But the homeland from which they are exiled is not one “back there,” but a homeland up ahead, a place they have never yet been to. To “look back” to “that land from which they had gone out,”—isn’t that what “return to Rome” is saying?—is at best a dangerous shift of vision, at worst a turning away from the homeland up front that God is preparing for them. The first audience of the letter to the Hebrews are “looking back.” And not without reason, not frivolously. They are on the verge of “burnout.” Listen to the writer’s rhetoric: drooping hands and weak knees, on the verge of selling their birthright for a pot of (some other) message, longing for Sabbath rest, their confidence and endurance waning, looking for encouragement, faith and patience slipping, needing someone who always makes intercession for them, weighted down in running with perseverance the race that is set before them. Leaving aside the question of whether or not such burnout describes the current ecumenical scene, this baptized picture of exile is ecumenical good news. First of all

because it is congruent with the Good News. In Hebrews that Good News comes via the image of Melchizedek, an outsider high priest mentioned only twice in the O.T. Christ is the new Melchizedek, an outsider high priest whose altar was the cross and whose sacrificial lamb was himself. His priesthood has gotten us started on our way home. So Rome is not home, nor Canterbury, nor Constantinople, nor Geneva. Home is something up ahead of us. The issue for Melchizedekian catholics is not which historical river did our stream branch off from and how might we get back there? Rather it is in which streambed is our river flowing—and in which direction?

This can segue us to the view of “church unity” that the Augsburg confessors divined from the Good News in their century. AC 7 (in the German text, here clearer than the Latin): “It is sufficient for the true unity of the church that the Gospel be preached purely [i.e., without legalist adulteration] and that the sacraments be offered according to the divine Word [i.e., according to the Gospel].”

There are at least two ways to read this passage. In my LCMS years I read it as my church then did: Hold doctrinal discussions in the hope of finding agreement on Gospel and sacraments, and when all parties can sign the document then you have unity. But that can hardly be what the confessors had in mind given their situation. They were not seeking to show their critics that their take on the Gospel and sacraments was also what was at home in Rome. No, their claim, their chutzpah, was that church unity had nothing to do with the bishop of Rome. Wherever Gospel and sacraments (unadulterated) are happening, there church happens. So Augsburg catholic parishes where this was happening were church. No need for further witnesses.

The theo-logic of their case was simple. Gospel and

sacraments unite sinners to Christ. Christ-connected sinners are the church, the only church there is. And the unity of that church, what holds it together, is the same glue that holds forgiven sinners to their Lord—the one Gospel and sacraments. Satis est. That's all it takes.

It's not that Augsburg catholics getting together with Roman ones today is something to ignore. But exiles returning home it is not. Lutherans are not exiles from Rome, because exile in the gospel-glossary is something else. Exile is true for the entire Christian church. The focus is whither, not whence. It is not where we once came from, but where we're going. So Rome when it is church is in exile too, and the Eastern orthodox churches as well, and . . . and . . . all Christ-connected forgiven sinners.

The nature of today's ecumenical gatherings gets a specific twist from AC 7. Instead of "celebrating" our unity, as we now often hear, the better term is the NT one of "maintaining" it. AC 7 says there is only one way (ONE WAY!) to do such maintenance work, "preaching the Gospel and offering the sacraments" unencumbered by legalisms. "Celebrating" can easily betoken return from an O.T. kind of exile; we were separated but now are home together. Isn't that wonderful!

"Maintaining" unity sends a different message. "You need help and we need help, not so much in staying connected to each other, but definitely in staying Christ-connected. We're all like the folks in Hebrews. We both need that great cloud of witnesses to assist us in staying embodied with the pioneer and perfecter of our faith. So we'll do it to and for you, and you for and to us."

With the Hebrews image of exile comes another element.

Besides us who are doing mutual maintenance work, there are others we'll bump into—not yet exiles—as we press on toward home. That signals mission, a notion that usually surfaces in today's discussions as the product, the programmatic product, of ecumenism: "let's get together so that we can do mission better." But that's a notion of mission too skimpy for Lutherans. How so?

Let's take a look at Luther's "take" on the term "apostolic." In his introductions to the 1522 publication of his translation to the N.T. he re-grounds the word "apostolic" in the Gospel itself. Apostolic doesn't mean, he claims, something historically connected with the original 12. [Draw your own conclusions for the historical episcopacy—even if it could be verified historically.] Apostolic means doing what Christ authorized the twelve to do: preach the Gospel and baptize. That sounds pretty close to AC 7. Thus even Peter is not apostolic, says Luther, if he's not doing this. But Caiphas, of all people, would be apostolic if the Good News would ever have come from his lips.

Robert Scudieri, LCMS mission exec, makes a strong case in his doctoral dissertation (published 1995) that the term "apostolic" in the Nicene Creed's third article—"one, holy, catholic, and apostolic church"—was understood back then in much the same way. Apostolic didn't signal the original twelve, but signalled the job, the task, implicit in the Greek word "apostolos," someone sent out on assignment. So apostle/apostolic would better be translated "missionary," says Scudieri. The Nicene Creed is about "the one holy catholic and missionary church." Mission is linked to the "one" word, the unity of the church, as new sinners get connected to Christ through the only known media whereby that happens—preaching the Good

News and offering the sacraments.

The last figures I saw showed that there were 14 million Lutherans in Africa and Asia. That's more than we count in North and South America, and before long that may be more than there are in the European lands from which many of us went out. If recent returners to Rome are proleptic, what are they prolepsing? Do they offer any advance enactment about the Good News to these Asian and African Lutherans? Are these confessional siblings of ours in any sense in exile from Rome? Not in terms of their own histories, for neither the Nile, nor the Ganges, nor the Mekong ever connected with the Tiber—nor the Rhine nor the Elbe, for that matter. Yet they claim to be Augsburg catholics. Their only exile is the gospelly one that Hebrews proclaims. If Rome herself is going home ala Hebrews, these Augsburg catholics will meet them on the way, as fellow exiles exchanging the peace along the path.

It's hardly a secret that the Roman church today, despite John Paul II's immense clout for uniformity, is as theologically diverse about the one Gospel and sacraments as most other Christian groups today. That includes the ELCA and even the LCMS. So of anyone "going home to Rome" Augsburg catholics ask: which Rome? And of the ELCA Lutherans who opt for this homecoming, it's a fair question to ask: from which Lutheranism do you shake the dust of your feet?

AC 7 and its Gospel-grounding does not authorize leaving one Christian group to find a better one—even a better one on the very rubrics of what is sufficient for the true unity of the church. Doesn't the AC from start to finish rather say: wherever you have been planted in the body of Christ pursue the cause of the church's true unity? When

burnout is at hand, jumping ship—as tempting and appealing as it may be—won’t help “maintain” the unity you so long for. Jumping ship can also be proleptic, proleptic of widespread burnout. But the way to cope with burnout, the ecumenical kind too, is as the Hebrews-writer recommends. Stay on track, which could mean: wait till the rascals throw you out! Be mindful that the Sabbath rest is up at the end where the homeland is, and not before. Everything between here and there is exile. There is no non-exilic Christian communion. If you do find one with no marks of exile, be warned: this one is not the church of “the pioneer and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross, despising the shame” and is now up front cheering us on.

Isn’t the angle on church unity for Augsburg catholics this “exile with a twist?” Isn’t our model for ecumenical conversation with other Christians inquiring about their exile and talking about our own? If so, then basically that’s Gospel. For unity maintenance don’t we urge the same thing, the one Gospel and sacraments as enough, all that it takes for connecting sinners to Christ and keeping them there? Isn’t Scudieri right on the term apostolic? It means mission to not-yet Christians we encounter on the way, where we do what Christ’s sent-ones are authorized to do. Once more that’s Gospel. Wouldn’t this theology bring some changes to ecumenism? I think so.

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