

The Order of Philippi – A Crossings Spin-off

Colleagues,

It's the Feast of Our Lord's Ascension today. And that festival always revives this memory. When I was a seminarian half a century ago, our homiletics prof, Richard Caemmerer, gave us novices a straight and simple answer when someone asked: Why did Jesus go away? "So he might be equally close to all of us," he said. Hmmm. That's worth thinking about. I'll probably mention it this coming Sunday when I'm guest preacher for our own congregation here in town.

But then we had other profs too—some more eccentric than others. The one at the top of every student's eccentricity-chart was affectionately known simply by his first two initials: "J.T." Goldie oldies still quote J.T. aphorisms. Since no seminarian in those days was allowed to be married—yes, so it was!—J.T. also gave us advice on the weighty doctrines of courtship and marriage. Here's one such: "It's a sin to marry for money, gentlemen. The secret is to go where the money is, and then marry for love."

That's a segue to the serious stuff below. Its author is Richard Lyon from Alton, Illinois. Richard's been our family dentist for years—even though it's a 50-mile round trip north across both the Missouri and Mississippi rivers to get from our place to his. Not surprising Richard and spouse Dorothy live in Fairmount, the high-rent district of Alton—where the money is. In the last decade or so he's been at work turning that "burden" into a calling, "The Order of Philippi." Along the way he got a seminary degree from Seminex, despite his lifelong Presbyterian connections. He then pushed on for ordination as an ELCA pastor. Next July 4, God willing, he'll turn 76. Yes, one of these days he may think of retirement from one or the other of these major vocations.

In the meantime he dabbles in Crossings kinds of ventures.

Described below is one he pursues with folks who live where the money is. The text is Richard's own rhetoric. I didn't edit it at all. With him, what you see is what you get.

Peace & Joy!

Ed

ABOUT THE ORDER OF PHILIPPI

About fifteen years ago some selected friends and I founded a religious order called The Order of Philippi. The purpose was, and is, to minister among serious Christian laypersons who have special gifts of wealth and influence, but also to clergy who may lead them. (1 Cor. 4) Though these lay Christians may have unique access to the world, they are often overlooked or taken for granted by the church.

The name was chosen in regard for the apostle Paul's most faithful supporters, financially and spiritually, the Philippians. The rule for the Order is to focus, bi-focally, on God's Law and Gospel, to be able to articulate that double accent in our talk and especially to act it out in our daily callings. At first that may sound self-evident, until one realizes what a unique skill is involved here. The early church called it the "secret discipline" or, perhaps more accurately, "the discipline of The Secret," The Secret being the mysterious Gospel.

The trick is, how to "out-world" the world at its own business, which is the divine Law, but to do so not because we've "got to" but because we "get to". Only the Gospel of Christ brings that kind of freedom. Even the anti-Christian Voltaire knew about excelling in the world. "Study and prepare yourself," he said, "so that while the rest are common thieves, you will be an embezzler." But that sort of cynicism is not what our Lord meant

by being “wise as serpents.” Our Lord was talking about the wisdom of the Cross, his Cross. To the world that does not look like wisdom at all. But it is. Astonishingly so.

The classic rule for religious orders included vows of obedience, chastity and poverty. We accept obedience as key, if that means what Paul called “the obedience” of faith. (The Latin-rooted word, “obedience” means “audiencing/listening toward” something. Because God’s Law and God’s gospel are two quite different words coming from God, audiencing toward one will not be the same as audiencing toward the other. Faith is the appropriate way to “audience” a promise, any promise. Hard work is the appropriate way to “audience” toward a word that says, “Do this.” Paul uses the same word, obedience, for the proper response to God’s Law and to God’s Gospel. But since the two words from God are quite different from each other, the proper audiencing toward each of them will be different too.)

So central is faith that that in turn determines what we do with chastity and poverty, two of our culture’s sorest pressure points. (More on that in a moment.)

First, faith. Typically, our seminars follow this agenda. Prior to Christ the King Sunday we meet for two days in a relaxed, resort-type venue. The assigned readings are the appointed gospel lessons for Advent, soon to follow in the new church-year. Our lead theologian, The Reverend Dr. Robert Bertram, presents an opening paper on the seminar theme and is the “provocateur” as the seminarists (lay and clergy) respond by unpacking the deepest meaning of the assigned scriptural texts, followed by critique from the group. A few months later, in Epiphany or pre-Lent, we come together again for a similar seminar, this time in preparation for Easter and Pentecost.

Underlying our biblical-theological discussions are always these

down-to-earth, practical questions for our own self-examination: What do you do? What do you get for what you do? What do you do with what you get? Where does it get you? Or we've put the same idea in other words: "Making love, making money – how to make them right with the Maker of heaven and earth." Re-enter, now, the issues of chastity and poverty, referred to earlier. These two areas, particularly in our world today, need the exceptional help of God's Christ as he makes us right by faith in his mercy. Together we "Philippians" struggle with new ways to make "Crossings" from his Cross onto our own crosses in the everyday world, also of sex and money. The Secret gets as earthy as that.

As a special project The Order of Philippi supports the Lazarus Project, which in turn supports the Village of Hope in Haiti with work teams and funds. The Order's responsibility is in the area of healing. That we do by bringing clean water, waste management, better nutrition, hygiene, and teaching. A medical/dental clinic is developing.

In, with and under all this theological work there is plenty of time for creative dining, partying and fun-filled collegiality at interesting venues. Recall, one of the theme words in Paul's Letter to the Philippians is "joy."

Richard L. Lyon