June 1963

O.P. Kretzmann

Valparaiso University

Follow this and additional works at: https://scholar.valpo.edu/campus_commentary

Recommended Citation

https://scholar.valpo.edu/campus_commentary/12

This Newsletter is brought to you for free and open access by the University Archives & Special Collections at ValpoScholar. It has been accepted for inclusion in Campus Commentary by an authorized administrator of ValpoScholar. For more information, please contact a ValpoScholar staff member at scholar@valpo.edu.
Dear Brother:

I had hoped to write you this letter before Pentecost but lesser matters always got in the way. Now we are already in the post-Trinity season — a strange part of the year when the army of God rests on its laurels, heads for the beaches and mountains, and reduces the life of the Church to a painful minimum.

By a fortunate fusion of circumstances our commencement this year fell on Trinity Sunday. This gave me an opportunity to say a few words to our graduates about the church year. At a moment when all of them — parents and children — were aware of the relentless marching of time I could say to them that the Holy Christian Church has her own striking way of marking the passing of time. She pays comparatively little attention to the passing of the years, the coming and going of the seasons — spring, summer, fall and winter — or to the marching months, the holidays of the world, or the little changing clocks of men. Alone among all human institutions, as the only organism thrust into the world of time from above, from the world of no-time — she has her own heavenly way of marking the passing of the years. Year after year she repeats in her own life the great dramatic history of man’s redemption from the first Sunday in Advent until the last Sunday after Trinity. The Church lives her life of repentance and thanksgiving under the clocks of heaven and under the magnificent rhythm of the Incarnation, the Cross, the Resurrection, the Coming of the Comforter, and the consequent sanctified life of the believer.

Now and then she may give attention to a day which the world also remembers — patriotic holidays such as Thanksgiving or Memorial Day — because on these days she has something special and unique to say to the hearts of men outside her walls. Normally she lives her own life and has her own time and her life in heaven.

This is very important for our people to know when they come to church on Sunday morning. Suddenly they are no longer in a world of clocks and calendars and seasons. They are no longer in a world filled with the tragedy of time. They are no longer citizens of a country that will pass away. In a moment something new and ancient and everlasting comes into being, and they are a part of the company of all the sentinels of praise, the psalmists and all God’s servants and singers, all the heralds of the divine glory, and all the poor in spirit. Suddenly life is filled with the words which they sing every Sunday morning in our churches — modest, joyous, happy, eternal — the rhythm of children clapping their hands for joy— “We praise Thee, We worship Thee, We give thanks to Thee” “for Thou only art holy” “Thou only art the Lord.” And now — here and now — they are no longer a part of the tearing world outside, the world in which they are always strangers, unless and until God enters it, a world in which they can become again children of the eternal Love through Jesus Christ, their Brother and their Lord.

Now and then it is important for us to say something like that in order to underscore again and again the profound, deep and vital difference between the life of the Church and the life of the world.

Footnotes to history: On Pentecost Monday at 1:49 p.m., Chicago time, Pope John drew his last agonized breath and joined the past. You will remember that for several days the air was full of praise and grief, and the assessment of his life and work began. Most commentators, I believe, made it much too simple and easy. Here was a “great, simple, humble man whose only desire was peace and the reunion of Christendom.” Even at this early date I suspect that the final story will be much more complicated. All of us, of course, rejoiced these past four years at the obvious dismay of the Curia over some of John’s speeches and actions. If he weakened that tight little band of Italian cardinals — especially Ottaviani who wanted to make the Second Vatican Council another Trent — his place in history is secure. Despite their kicking and screaming they had to be dragged into the twentieth century — and he succeeded fairly well. As a peasant boy he had learned to drag things.

For one thing at least he ought to be remembered. He seemed to know what time it was for Roman and non-Roman Christendom. He had heard the clocks strike during his years in the Balkans, and he never quite forgot their warning sound. The result was an openness to the twentieth century which was a far cry from the rigidity and narrowness of his predecessor’s, (Pius XII) “Mystici Corporis” which blandly denied membership in the Body of Christ to anyone not in communion with the Latin See. John seemed to know that this was neither theologically nor historically sound — and he acted accordingly.

What will happen now is anybody’s guess. At this writing the cardinals are locked in the Vatican and no white smoke has yet appeared. I am sure that you will know by the time you read these lines.

Perhaps this is a reasonably good place to add a few notes which I jotted down when some of us were together with John XXIII in a small room in the Vatican about two years ago. It is, of course, evident that the life of the Roman
Catholic church is centered around St. Peter’s and Vatican City. It is easy to be impressed by the splendor and magnificence of St. Peter’s. It is really everything the guidebooks and history say about it. Here is the fascinating patina of two thousand years, the overwhelming sense of past glory, and yet also the feeling of present and contemporary vitality. Here even a casual contact over a few hours brings one face to face with a vast organization, thoroughly alive and in certain areas highly intelligent.

Against this background some good friends had arranged a semi-private audience with John XXIII. These audiences are held with about 20 or 30 people at a time. They consist of a brief informal talk by the Pope, the translation of his address by the interpreter and the papal benediction.

Preparations for such an audience are fascinating. There is, first of all, the formal invitation delivered to the hotel, requesting your presence at 10:30 on Tuesday in the consistory room where the cardinals are now meeting in private conclave. Fortunately we had a friend who steered us through one guard after another, up long steps, through vast courtyards, until we arrived in a room where our credentials were examined by functionaries of the papal court in red velvet uniforms. Properly accredited we were ushered into the consistory room where we sat around the walls in uncomfortable silence. We were surrounded by renaissance splendor, great flowing tapestries, a throne at one end of the room from which the Pope delivers his Christmas message to the world. The minutes passed and we discovered that his Holiness would be late. A knowing friend whispered: “This would never have happened with Pius XII. He had a mania for promptness.” Suddenly an American monsignor approached and asked us to follow him into the audience room. Here we were lined up in order and given final instructions: “When his Holiness enters, he will proceed to the center chair. You will, of course, be standing. He will courteously ask you to be seated, but you will remain standing. His Holiness will speak briefly and then greet each one of you personally. He will also bless any religious articles you have brought with you.”

Again we waited. Functionaries came and went. Officers of the Swiss Guard stood at one end of the room. The guards themselves were at attention at the doors. Slowly the tension in the air increased. There were anxious looks down the corridor. Somewhat perversely I thought about the stable at Bethlehem, the rude Cross, the Via Dolorosa. They were far away now, and this was the end of the road which began in a cave at Bethlehem. Suddenly the functionaries straightened up, the monsignor adjusted his robes and his Holiness entered the room. With quick little steps, remarkable for a man of 79 years, he walked to the golden chair, seated himself and asked us to be seated. Following our instructions we remained standing. I looked at his Holiness curiously as he began to speak. Here was a little old man obviously genial and friendly, hugely enjoying his job. There was something else too — perhaps in his Renaissance face, perhaps in his bearing which reflected power and intelligence. This was not only a little old man whose red slippered feet danced restlessly under his robes as he spoke. This was also a Machiavellian politician who had come a long way from his peasant origins.

He spoke easily and genially in fluent French. He said that he was glad to see us, that he considered himself a part of all Christendom and as the vicar of Christ he was deeply interested in all of us. He asked us if we had been at the great labor rally in St. Peter’s square on Sunday when more than 100,000 workers had gathered in honor of the 70th anniversary of the Encyclical “Rerum Novarum” of Leo XIII — the first evidence that the church was interested in the working man. Several of us been present and he told us that the rug on which we were standing had been given to Leo XIII by some labor unions. After a few words about Communism he gave us his papal benediction and rose to greet us. To his right were some American Indian boys in full Mojave regalia who had come from the Catholic Mission School in Phoenix, Arizona. He was obviously interested in them and permitted them to kiss his ring. After a few more pleasantries he walked to the door and waved farewell. The functionaries escorted us through a maze of apartments and halls until we finally emerged in the great courtyard from which we went our several ways.

All of this probably does not deserve the space I have given it — if it were not for two things. In the first place, there was the magnificent stage managing of the occasion. The pomp and circumstance, the clinking medals, the luxurious setting, the silent soldiers — all these provided a stage setting unique in the modern world. No royalty could have done better.

The other significant factor was not the man himself but the man as a symbol. As I have noted, he was undoubtedly a friendly old man who liked the place where he found himself at the end of a long and climbing life. He was doing his work with zestful enjoyment and confounding his friends and his enemies by not being an “interim pope” but a very active and aggressive leader. His encyclicals will undoubtedly be as important as the “Rerum Novarum.” His
plans for the Vatican Council were moving ahead rapidly. The man as a symbol was therefore vastly important. He represented something that we must understand and with which we must come to terms. He was a symbol of vast power. He was surrounded by hundreds of churchmen who directed the work of Rome throughout the world. At that time (two years ago) it was still a question whether he or they would control the Vatican Council. The conflict would, of course, be behind closed doors although it is evident now that more people saw the basic issues than ever before. At that time I decided that I would bet on the little old man with the red slippers and the Machiavellian face.

Footnote to ecclesiastical history: A few days ago a good brother sent me the latest issue of one of the little unofficial journals that have taken upon themselves the great task of safeguarding the theological and ideological chastity of our Synod and its members. I must confess that I had not seen an issue of this particular journal for several months; the reading time of a harassed administrator is limited, and the few hours that he has free from the demands of other people must be given to the necessary study of the Scriptures.

I was interested, though, to see that this publication has not changed. As always, it breathed a spirit of love and compassion for erring brethren, especially those whom it identified as Mondernists, Neo-Orthodox, blundering officials, and Comsymps. In fact, love was presumably the keynote of its approach to all the problems of the Church in this troubled and apostate time. There seemed to be a profound realization that the great love of Christ for His Church must be reflected in the attitude of brethren toward each other, even in those unhappy situations where it is necessary to bludgeon a brother so that others will not be tempted to follow his example. The towering New Testament principle, “Speaking the truth in love,” was evident on every page.

A quality which I have always found striking in this journal is the truly Christian humility which is evident in all of its articles and editorials. One detects no trace of the desire, so obvious in many other journals, to sit in judgment on brethren. Criticism of heresies which threaten to seduce brethren from their Lord and His Word is always spoken lovingly and in a spirit of true humility — the humility of the children of God who know that they “see through a glass darkly” and that claims to perfection on this side of the veil are the ultimate arrogance of the true heretic. This great principle informed all of its discussions of ecclesiastical problems.

On the level of the Law, I was happy to see with what meticulous care this journal still observes the imperatives of the Eighth Commandment. On every page there was evidence of a sincere desire to put the best construction on everything especially when it concerned the truthfulness of a brother. I found no slightest hint of the great consuming error of all schismatics in the Church — the insistence on putting the worst possible construction on everything said and done by a brother. Nor was there any attempt to sow dishonor, suspicion, hatred, or fear in the hearts of God’s children — least of all in the laity. I could not help thinking that this journal could well be used as a text or workbook in confirmation classes — except, perhaps, in that growing number of congregations where, as the letters to the editor indicate, the pastor himself has succumbed to demonic perversions of the truth and has forfeited all right to the trust of his people.

Finally, I was happy to see that there was no application of what theologians call the “boycott principle” in the struggle to preserve pure doctrine and practice. This principle asserts that the surest way to draw the Church — and especially the wayward hearts and minds of synodical leaders (“bosses”) — back to the Cross and the Word is to “hit ‘em where it hurts,” in the pocketbook. Where this principle has been applied, missions wither and die, educational systems disintegrate, and the people of God become weary of well-doing. Rejecting all variations of this “evangelical blackmail,” the editors of this journal consistently urge their readers to uphold the hands of the elected and appointed leaders of God’s people, to pray for them without ceasing, and to encourage congregations, pastors, and people to stand, united and loyal, against the storms which are beating with rising intensity at the walls of the Church in these last, demonic days.

As I have suggested, I found the appeal of this publication irresistible. As it goes about its lonely and unappreciated task of alerting God’s peoples to the unhappy facts that the greater part of Christendom consists of belly-servers who are to be avoided, that our own Synod has been betrayed by incompetent and apostate leadership, that our lay folk have fallen into the clutches of hirelings who are not shepherds, that our schools and seminaries have betrayed their trust, and that only a remnant remains faithful to the saving Word, it calls out for the support of all of God’s children who have stood under the Cross, who have seen the divine love pouring itself down and away into the hearts of men, and who have heard the Beloved Disciple’s almost desperate plea: “Little children, love one another.”

Notes on a frayed cuff: Undoubtedly you have read some stories about ICPC (Inner-City Peace Corps) which the University is establishing in cooperation with some of our pastors of inner-city churches. I am very happy to report that this program
has caught the imagination of our students. Even though they are not professional servants of the church, they will undoubtedly make a significant contribution to the work of our brethren who are face to face with the many complex problems of churches in the inner-city. I shall report more later.

If you need a paperback to take along on your vacation, I would like to suggest "The Noise of Solemn Assemblies" by Peter L. Berger. It is a thorough and somewhat dismaying description of "religion, in general" in America today. It will undoubtedly persuade you to think long and hard about some of the problems which are confronting our own church.

One of the most astonishing developments at the University in recent years has been the tremendous response to our announcement concerning the establishment of a graduate program leading to the M.A. in Liberal Studies. Our initial enrollment for the summer of 1963 is now 152. I doubt if there has been any graduate program begun in recent years which has had a larger enrollment than this new venture of the University. I am still hoping that some of our younger brethren, both in the ministry as well as in the teaching profession, will avail themselves of this opportunity to acquire a master's degree with a great deal of emphasis on the social sciences and the humanities.

A few weeks ago a news release from Concordia Seminary, Springfield, reported that intercollegiate athletics had been dropped at that venerable institution. I have no quarrel with that decision since the boys were having a hard time in those days of subsidized athletics. I did, however, turn my chair to the window to watch some freshmen playing catch on our tailored lawn. The years dropped away and I lived again those warm, drowsy spring afternoons in Springfield when the classes between 1:00 and 3:00 p.m. were merely an unhappy prelude to baseball. Parenthetically: I taught German literature in those days — an all-time low in the cultural and linguistic life of the Missouri Synod. We wrestled valiantly with Lessing's "Nathan der Wiege" but Lessing always won. Then three o'clock would come, and my heroes and I would head for the dusty old diamond about fifty feet from the present president's home. For the first three weeks of each season we used last year's balls and no hit went beyond the infield. I called my boys "shoemakers" (what they called me is not good reading in parsonages), and, let it be said, we had some first-rate teams. We could hold our own anywhere in college baseball. At the games on Saturdays the sidelines would come alive with theological observers (we had them long before Helsinki) — Klein, Wessel, Neitzel, Engelder, Mayer, Coyner, even occasionally the chairman of the Board of Control, the sainted "Pope" Schultz. For him all victories over Catholic teams were "ein triumph der reinen Lehre" and a vindication of the Reformation. The annual game with St. Louis was a combination of Armageddon, Gettysburg and the Battle of the Bulge.

The freshmen headed for the dormitory, and I turned my chair back to the desk. I am not ashamed to say that there was a little moisture in my eyes — a sudden, poignant homesickness for those long-gone days which were a quiet, happy succession of hours filled with books and friends who were young and gay. If anyone of my "shoemakers" reads these lines — through bifocal glasses and with his grandchildren surrounding him — let them come as an affectionate greeting over the years.

By the way, let it be noted here that the Springfield faculty of which I was only an "Anhanger!" was a notable group in those days — and I am not seeing them through the warm haze of the years. There was Neitzel, the best homiletician in Synod at his time; Wessel, a very capable exegete; Engelder, already a profound dogmatician; Klein, a gentle pastoral soul; Mayer, already beginning to show the ability in Symbolics which later was to make him such a valuable member of the St. Louis faculty; Wenger, a fine exegete who slowly learned to teach; Behrens, a scholar for whom students were always a mystery; and over the entire campus was the long shadow of "Pope" Schultz (5'3"), outwardly a Prussian sergeant but inwardly a warm-hearted and gracious friend with a remarkable mind. I remember the spring evening after a Lenten service at which he had preached. I stopped in the sacristry to tell him that especially the last five minutes of his sermon had been startlingly effective. He looked embarrassed and then said apologetically: "The last five minutes I wrote in blank verse."

Then there were always the annual visits of the "sainted Dr. Pfotenhauer, the president of Synod. Tall, white-haired, erect, he seemed to enjoy these excursions into the academic world. Of course, I always warned my "shoemakers" of his coming, and they would respond nobly. At every question I asked while Dr. Pfotenhauer was in the room all hands in the room would go up. This had two advantages. In the first place, it demonstrated that every member of the class knew the answer. In the second place, it enabled me to choose the hand of the character of whom I could be reasonably sure that he would know the answer. When he was called on, all the rest looked obediently sad in order to make it clear that they had been robbed of a chance to show their great knowledge to the president of Synod.
A great, gallant crew! How warmly I remember the character who would at this season of the year always joyfully wish me "eine frohliche Himmelfahrt." There were giants in those days.

And now after almost forty years have come and gone I am still doing some occasional teaching — probably not nearly so well as forty years ago. Perhaps I should add here that at Valparaiso University we have some students these days who are absolutely unique in the history of the Lutheran Church in America. For example, one of my students this year wrote a magnificent paper on "The Doctrine of the Word in Karl Barth and the Lutheran Confessions." A sorority president wrote on "The Doctrine of Vocation according to the Law and the Gospel." A football player presented a paper on "The Problem of the Brief Statement in the Theology of the Lutheran Church." This, brother, is something new and unprecedented in American higher education. These are the complete and final answers to any criticism of the work of the University. Question from the rear: "Won't these kids, these lay theologians, make trouble for their preachers?" Answer: "No — they are wise enough to know that their knowledge, excellent as it is, is not wide enough to cover the whole field of theology. They have been taught consciously and explicitly to respect the office of the holy ministry, and in most cases they do exactly that."

All of which reminds me that I have learned more and more, as the years move toward the sere and yellow leaf, that one of the great rewards of teaching is the occasional startling discovery of a beautiful mind — a mind that works in order and dignity and grace — a mind that is suddenly and clearly the lingering "Imago Dei." Have you ever had this experience, perhaps in a confirmation class or a Bible study group? I have seen it quite often these latter years, especially in some of my younger colleagues. When such a mind appears on the horizon of life, it brings a massive and nostalgic joy which strangely illumines the shallow valleys and the low hills of life with something fine and beautiful.

Do you need a new story? The college quarterly of Michigan State University brings the tale of the professor whose classes in Bible were regularly filled with members of the football team who had learned that the professor always asked the same question on his final examination: "List, in chronological order, the kings of Israel."

One day a disgruntled non-athlete disclosed the situation to the professor who forthwith changed his examination. On the subsequent day of finals, soon after, the whole team stared with startled disbelief at a different question: "Discuss the major and minor prophets of Judea." Then, one by one, they sadly laid down their bluebooks and filed out of the room. Only one exception, the quarterback, remained behind, scribbling busily. The professor, of course, was tremendously pleased to find one scholar genuinely interested in the subject and looked forward with anticipation to reading the examination booklet. When he opened it, he found: "Question: Discuss the major and minor prophets of Judea. Answer: Far be it from me to distinguish among these revered gentlemen, but it has occurred to me that you might be interested in a chronological list of the kings of Israel."

Then there was also the freshman who defined "voluble": "A game in which an inflated ball is batted back and forth across the net."

A few weeks ago Theophilus and I had a long discussion of "The Right to Criticize." After tossing the idea around for a few hours, we arrived at the following conclusion:

The right to criticize — especially within the Church — must be earned. You can earn this right only by loving the Church, serving her well and contributing to her support. We then solemnly resolved to pay no more attention to the gripes and yelps of brethren whose communicant membership has steadily gone down (check the Statistical Yearbook), whose synodical contributions are below average, who have no aggressive missionary program, and who have never demonstrated, visibly and tangibly, that they really love their Church. They have not earned the right to criticize. We also agreed that the brother who says: "I love all synodical officials and editors; therefore, I will now proceed to kick them in the teeth," is a bizarre caricature of mere Christianity. For every critical sentence they write, they must point to at least one soul which is now in heaven because of their labors. Only thus and so can they earn the right to criticize. Theophilus added that we should also try to discover how such a brother treats his wife, but we finally decided that this would be difficult to publish in the Statistical Yearbook or even in The Lutheran Witness.

If you still read German, I would like to recommend a little paperback: "Das Konzil im Zeichen der Einheit" by Bernhardt Haring. Father Haring's little book is an excellent reflection of the spirit in which some Roman Catholic theologians approach the problems of the Vatican Council. His significance lies in the fact that he is a "Konziltheologe" — one of the small band of learned priests who were briefing the bishops day after day during the sessions of the Council. Apparently some of the bishops have not kept up with their reading. By the way, one of my friends insists that the Pope should now use his infallibility to declare that he is fallible.
I must confess that lately we have received some very violent letters about certain matters. I really do not mind if someone disagrees with something that I have said or something that another brother has done. I have been around too long to resent these evidences that we are still in the Church militant. But I am frightened and shocked.

Meditation before Helsinki: In a few more hours I shall begin a long journey which, God willing, will finally take me to the Lutheran World Federation in Helsinki, Finland. In the old black briefcase there will be in addition to some contemporary documents a copy of the Lutheran Confessions. I am taking a slow boat in order to have time to read them again and to meditate on them as an anchor and a light in the darkness of our troubled world.

It has always been interesting to me that one of the great distinctive marks of the Christian faith and theology is the backward look. Theology is sensitively aware of the past. One of the chief words in the Bible is the word "remember." It is a dynamic word. It incites the memory until remembrance becomes an imperative for action. Our entire faith is summed up in three imperatives — "believe, remember, love." One of the most sacred commands in Scripture reads: "This do in remembrance of me." This emphasis is necessary because Christian truth is largely historical truth; not the vague, disincarnate truth of idealistic philosophy. It is always immediately and passionately concerned with history and with life. It says that once the Eternal entered Time in such a way that in and through a series of historical events God became manifest.

We look back and see Him in the Sacred Record. We remember His words and His deeds. All around Him, before and after Him, are faces in which the light of the Eternal shines and voices in which the wisdom of heaven speaks. The Christ behind us in history becomes the Christ with us and the Christ before us. He becomes our contemporary and the contemporary of all generations. The historical becomes the timeless — and we begin that process with the backward look, the remembrance and the holding of our heritage.

But there is also another side. The backward look must not become a rigid, formal act without any life and strength of its own. The piling of tradition upon tradition is a sort of spiritual primitivism by which all the greatness and power of the Church is assigned to the past. The Now becomes completely subservient to the Then, leaving no room for new insights, new apprehensions of old truths, new applications, even new formulations. On the human level a great historian has said it well: "If we are to take the past as our guide, it is hard to see why we should follow past ages in everything except in the one thing which makes them great, except that is to say, in attempting like them to add something to human knowledge and human achievement. Mere imitation will contribute nothing to the sum of human values." For the consideration and solution of this problem in Christian thought there is, of course, a great deal more than merely human knowledge and human achievement. Almost one hundred years ago Robert Raainy wrote: "Questions arise for us whether we will or no. They force the Church from the mere traditional expression of principles to sink afresh into their meaning and to apply that meaning under new conditions and amid new perplexities. The Church is compelled to submit afresh to the cross-questioning of the ever-moving Providence of God . . . Just by questions that come when we would fain be let alone, God teaches us how great and arduous a thing it is to be that Church and to follow out her calling . . . The Church of Christ has no liberty to become the slave of even her own history. History is great, but Christ is greater; He is a present Lord with a present will and the Church abides in Him."

I hope that I shall learn again that this is the ultimate answer to the paradox of timeliness and timelessness. It is all summed up in St. Paul's moving words to young Timothy: "That good thing which was committed unto thee, keep by the Holy Ghost which dwelleth in us." Twice in these final admonitions he uses the significant word, "Paratheke," equivalent to our "securities or precious things." St. Paul tells Timothy, us, and the Church of each succeeding age just how the preservation of our heritage is to be done — and the only way in which it can be done: "By the Holy Ghost which dwelleth in us." This is the one method of guarding our heritage, both Scriptural and Lutheran. It is to live a life sensitive to the pulse and impulse of the Holy Spirit, within the Body of Christ, the Beloved Community, the Communio Sanctorum. No intellectual exercise based on Aristotle will do! No blind worship of every kind of doctrine will do! There can be only the constant, humble submission to the Spirit of God working through the means of grace which can save us from dead traditionalism, on the one hand, and soft, rootless liberalism, on the other. In the company of the Holy Spirit there is health and strength. He is really the vicar of Christ in the Church — and He alone, the indwelling and unwearying Spirit of the living God, can make any restudy and rethinking of our heritage, also in our own forgetful day, good and true and fruitful.

I hope that your summer will be pleasant and quiet.

Very sincerely yours,

O. P. Kratsmann