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O.P. Kretzmann
Valparaiso University

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DEAR BROTHER:

I hope that these notes from a small Midwestern town as the curtain falls on 1955 may provide a few moments of change and relaxation in your holiday schedule. Several weeks ago a wise and thoughtful brother stopped at the office and said: "Do you know that this will be a preacher's Christmas? It comes on Sunday. That means that I won't have to preach two sermons a few days before or after Christmas Day. This year I can concentrate."

He had something there. For a moment my memory wandered back to Perry County thirty-five years ago when Christmas and Easter were celebrated three days in a row. As a lowly Seminarian whose German had strong overtones of Brooklyn and the Bronx, I was always assigned by Grandfather Hueschen to the service on the "dritter Weihnachtstag". If anyone is still living who sat through those efforts his longevity must be partially due to the rest and sleep he enjoyed while I struggled with Christmas and its meaning in that setting. The stove to the left of the high pulpit was a glowing pink, the heat rose straight up to the pulpit, and the deacons, comfortably stuffed with goose and sausage, rested snugly behind the stove. Only one had to stay awake to throw in an occasional shovel of coal. It was a warm, homey and somnolent occasion. Something like that happens even today, I am sure, when we have to preach a day or two after Christmas. Perhaps this is really a "preacher's Christmas".

Of course, in a much higher sense, all of them are. A good preacher always preaches Christ, even in August, but Christmas gives him an unusually warm and magnificent opportunity to bring Him to the hearts of men — close and near — so that even the less faithful, the cold and forgetful, the Christmas and Easter Christians, may catch a glimpse of the glory and power of the Incarnation. For that task — and that privilege — I wish you much joy and strength.

Now to other matters: As these lines are written, the University has moved into its annual observance of Advent and Christmas. It is far and away the most beautiful time on our campus. Apparently our students have decided to have two Christmases each year — one here on the campus which ends about December 15 and the other one at home with their families.

About the time that you will be reading these lines approximately 600 cars (some of them of uncertain vintage) will be fanning out from our campus to all points of the compass, including Massachusetts, New York, Texas and California. I must confess that this annual Christmas exodus always creates about two days and nights of anxiety for some of us who remain here at the University. The ominous jangling of the telephone at an unusual hour always sends a shiver of apprehension through my mind. At the end of forty-eight hours we can assume that all except the California cars have arrived safely, and we begin to turn gratefully to our own observance of Christmas.

* * *

Still at the University: As I indicated in my last letter to the brethren, our congregational collection on January 29, 1956, is of unusual importance to us this year. This is partly due to the fact that our income from this source was sharply reduced last year because it was impossible for some of our good people to distinguish between the "Building for Christ" and the regular support of the University for its current operations. We hope this year to recoup some of our losses; and if you can help us to do that, we shall be most grateful. I am becoming increasingly and painfully aware of the fact that on some levels our faculty salaries are not nearly high enough. The University must make our faithful and devoted teachers just as comfortable and secure as possible. Your support of the congregational collection is one of the most important single factors in the attainment of that objective.

A few nights ago about one hundred of us attended the dedication of a small baroque organ in our ancient Recital Hall. It was built by Mr. Herman Schlicker and provided a very interesting and instructive evening. Under the skillful hands of our own Dr. Heinrich Fleischer the little instrument, which I believe Bach would have liked very much, really can talk and sing. If you are interested, I hope you will stop at the campus sometime to see and hear this significant addition to our equipment in the Department of Music.
While I am reporting on our work at the University, I believe that I should say something about Professor Herman Grunau, who in addition to his work as our librarian, has also become our Director of Pastoral Relations during the past few months. The reason for mentioning his work at this time is that he has done an outstanding job in bringing our library up to a high degree of usefulness and effectiveness. If you should ever be in need of any particular help in working up a bibliography for a given topic, I am sure that Professor Grunau and his faithful assistants would be very happy to help you. I have turned to him several times when I was preparing an essay on something or other, and he has always come through effectively and promptly. In ever increasing measure our library should be at the disposal of our brethren in the ministry.

* * *

Footnotes to Christmas: Is it true that the hardest part of sermon writing is the opening paragraph? Even in an expository sermon and after the text has been chosen the “Einleitung” is still a major difficulty. How can I simultaneously and immediately arouse the attention of the somnolent Deacon Schmidt, the distraught Mrs. Holzopfel, and the fluttery Suzy Schmackebeek? The task is not easy. I hope that the following random notes on Christmas may be of a little help here and there. Since we talk about Christmas at Valparaiso for fifteen days, I have picked up these jottings for a number of years.

One of the minor curiosities about the English language is the fact that the common noun “bedlam” meaning “tumour, disorder, confusion” is the same as Bethlehem, the name of the Judean town where our Lord was born. The term “bedlam” was originally applied to the priory of St. Mary’s of Bethlehem, London’s most famous and at one time most notorious hospital for the insane. It then became a common noun meaning the exact opposite of the quiet stillness and peaceful tranquillity which we usually associate with the word “Bethlehem” at Christmas time. . . . And yet there was, from the human point of view, a good deal of bedlam and confusion and disorder in Bethlehem that first Christmas night. Everything was upside down. Everything was being done just the way we would not do it. God was a baby. The most important family on earth was housed in a stable. Angels were talking to shepherds, and a proud king was restless in his sleep because a Child had been born. The heavenly choirs sang before the smallest audience in their history. Everything certainly was bedlam—at least to our dim, finite minds.

But not to the eyes of faith. This was God’s way of doing things. He always has His own approach, His own time and His own answers. Things happen how and when He wants them to happen and only many years later we suddenly discover that despite its apparent unreason His way was the best way and His answer the most reasonable under the long view of the clarifying years . . .

Whenever we are face to face with a fact in any field of knowledge, human or divine, temporal or eternal, we can do one of three things — accept it, reject it, or ignore it. With the story of Christmas the third is still the easiest and the most popular. To ignore the truth of Christmas because it is hard and disturbing, in other words, to be asleep as Caesar was when God passes by! It is much easier to do. It permits us to mess around with our little hopes, our little fears and our little dreams. And so — there will be many people asleep this Christmas Eve. Some will be asleep in their fears of tomorrow, not knowing that the Child has come to take away all fear. Some will be asleep in their vaunted sophistication, not knowing that the Child brought back the eternal power of faith and hope and the love of God. Some will be asleep in the gutters of their sins, not knowing that the Child brought redemption and forgiveness and salvation. For all of them the Christmas message must be a trumpet: “Wake, Awake, For Night is Flying!”

* * *

Footnotes to life in the twentieth century: Does the following paragraph from a missionary’s report in The Lutheran ring any bells? I can imagine that a number of our brethren can match his experience.

“I calculate that since August, 1953, I have eaten more than my share of church-dinner rations. As an author of textbooks I find it easier to present the facts this way:

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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Noodles and Spaghetti</td>
<td>5,280</td>
<td>feet</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Biscuits, Doughnuts, Rolls</td>
<td>1,491</td>
<td>units</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Apple, Pumpkin, Cherry Pie</td>
<td>242</td>
<td>slices</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Coffee</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>6,001½ cups</td>
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<tr>
<td>Tea</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>5½    cups</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Scalloped potatoes</td>
<td>424</td>
<td>tablespoons</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vegetable Salad</td>
<td>529</td>
<td>servings</td>
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My own list, of course, would still include approximately 530 helpings of that strange, mysterious and tragic mixture called "carrots and peas".

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I hope that some of the brethren in rural areas will comment on the following paragraph. I want to be sure that I am not romanticizing anything. About six weeks ago I spent four or five days wandering around in a rural area somewhat north and west of here. It was a quiet season of the year, and there were few tourists around. As a result I was able to get in on the life of the village more than ever before. Sitting in the general store I discovered that Leo up the road is in bad shape again. The Barnes' are expecting another baby — Joe had a stroke two weeks ago and his left leg and right arm are paralyzed — John got a fox right out on the road just where you turn by the Johnson place. Perhaps the most interesting bit of news was that the high school half-back, Tom Schultz, who had been carrying Smithville's team all during the season of 1954, was the center of a major scandal. During the summer his father accepted a job running a filling station in Jonesville, which is Smithville's bitterest rival, and Tom was now playing against his old teammates. All the leading citizens of the community, gathered around the stove in the general store, suspected some dirty work at the crossroads. Apparently there had been a deep, dark conspiracy. The coach insisted that there had been collusion, deception and fraud. It was also agreed that no self-respecting Smithville citizen would ever again buy any gas (nor even get free air) at the filling station run by Tom's father over in Jonesville. The entire matter was the subject of much heated discussion. The point of all this? Do those of us who live in rural areas come so much closer to the warm, quiet pulse of life, the deep undercurrents of living? More personal, more human, less artificial? Are there real and great compensations for the occasional loneliness, the comparative isolation? Let some brother take pen in hand and sing the praises of a rural ministry.

* * *

Several weeks ago we had an interesting example of the sensitivity of some television sponsors and producers to authentic criticism. Perhaps some of you have seen the show called "Medic". One evening we were informed that the presentation that week would revolve around asthma. Since our oldest boy is troubled quite severely with this distressing affliction, the entire family decided to watch the show. It was a most disturbing and painful experience. It was a sensation produced melodrama in which a little six year old boy finally died of neglected asthma. Aware of the fact that possibly thousands and hundreds of thousands of parents of asthmatic children were watching the show, we decided to write a letter to the Dow Chemical Company, the sponsors of this particular performance. Within a few days we received a long, thoughtful letter from an official of the company in which he sympathetically explained the entire difficulty and the problems they were having with the Hollywood producers who are more interested in sensationalism than in truth. It was an excellent example of a thoroughly understanding sponsor who seems to be having difficulties with the people who see public entertainment only in terms of dollars and cents. I also discovered again that it certainly pays to write to newspapers as well as to the purveyors of our mass media of entertainment.

One more footnote: I was very much impressed by the statement of a character in a recent novel: "I can find no solution to my problem because I am that problem." That may be a good sermon topic.

* * *

In a future issue of these wandering remarks I hope to say something about a statement which I heard twice in the last two or three weeks: "My college is religious, but strictly non-denominational." This is one of those weasel expressions with which the academic world tries to escape from God. The chances are just about 100% that a non-denominational religion is no religion at all, and that a non-denominational college is in no sense of the word religious. This entire approach to religion is also evident on our secular campuses and should receive some thorough and critical attention. It is neither good nor honest.

* * *

A few striking sentences and paragraphs from a recent article in the Hamma Digest of Hamma Divinity School in Springfield, Ohio:

"Christ is all in all or not at all. 'Some of self and some of Thee' rules Christ out. Great preaching comes through a great sense of mission. Christ has honored us by speaking through us. Our personalities and talents must be humbly placed at His disposal. Every skill acquired for clear convincing expression must be a dedicated skill.

Expository preaching is an effective antidote for preacher-pride. To dig deep into the meaning of the Word, to pray earnestly that the Holy Spirit may witness the truth to our hearts and minds, will keep us conscious that we do not speak our own message or on our own authority."
We are heralds of the evangel. If our people are spiritually nourished by our sermons, it will be due to the God-given message, not to the man. No sermon converts sinners from their evil ways. God alone converts. It is the Word transmitted through the sermon that is the power of salvation."

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Back to education for a moment: The Chicago Tribune comments admiringly on the decision of the Trustees of the University of Illinois to spend $870,000 on a new building for the University Band. The Tribune, however, has a suggestion to make: "The only criticism that can properly be directed against the members of the Board in this matter arises from their neglect of the companion art of cheerleading. The young ladies and gentlemen who regard the concerted shouting of 'Oskey wow-wow' as an esthetic experience deserve a temple costing not less than $250,000 in which to practice their mysteries." Just another little reflection of the direction in which some American educators are moving. . . . . 

** * * *

And so into the year of our Lord 1956. May it be a good and blessed and happy year for you. As the shadows lengthen, it seems to at least one observer that our ministry must be prepared to do one of the most difficult and yet one of the most important things in the modern world. As servants of the Lord of the years we must live continuously in two worlds. We are men that are sent. We are really ambassadors from another world. We are living links between heaven and earth, between time and eternity, between the world of faith and the world of sight. Above all men we must preserve a balance between the two worlds in which we live. We are the property of eternity who have been lent to the world for a little while. This view of our task will give us the long perspective for our work which we need in these latter days. We can be full of energy for our daily work because we do it with the calm of one who may not stay to see it finished. Our zeal can be unflagging because our time is short. Working for eternity we care less for what others think or say and more for what we ought to be. We live in the light of our last hope, the heralds of the Way, the lamps of the world's Light, and the messengers of the eternal Dawn. In that spirit we can again bring our own small and humble gift to the Manger of Him Who is still guiding His Church as it moves from Christmas to the final Advent.

Very sincerely yours,

O. P. Kretzmann

President