5-1969

May 1969

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Dear Brother: Did you recently hear a suspicious “bump” in the middle of the night? Like something — big and soft — hitting the floor?

If you did, it was me getting rid of some strange bedfellows that had piled in on me. For several months now I have found myself in partial agreement with the Chicago Tribune, the Christian News, the Lutheran Free Press, Edge, the Northwestern Lutheran, and other such examples of movable type. Last night I woke up screaming and with one fell swoop tossed all these strange new bedfellows to the floor. Theophilus and I would have no more of them — no more slanted journalism, no more half truths, no more pious assurances of neutrality in the midst of great storms.

Of course (before the brother in the third row suggests it) I should have kicked myself out of bed, too. My only excuse for not doing it was and is:

(a) It is a little hard to do.
(b) I never pretended to be half true or piously neutral.

I do not know enough to see both sides of things; every time I read the “Letters to the Editor” in the publications mentioned above I get all mixed up. “Somebody” I say to myself “must be wrong about this matter, but I can’t tell who.” And with that admission of defeat — or victory — I push them a little closer to the final judgment seat.

That night before I retired again to my restless pillow I remembered Westbrook Pegler’s famous remark in similar circumstances. He had said something somewhere and suddenly found that the Communist world was in joyful agreement. Pegler’s next column was on the theme: “Give me my pants — I’m in the wrong bed.”

For me this will be very tough. I have lived with my editorial brethren (see above) so long that I respect them. I really look forward to the prospect of spending eternity at their side. But here — here and now — they trouble me. Often I wonder what Luther meant at Marburg: “Ihr habt einen andern Geist.” Is this really the problem? Holy Cow — a “Geist” which fits neither time nor externity! I must turn this over to the final Judge or go mad.

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WHAT’S — GOING — ON — HERE SECTION:

You know, of course, that about 80% of the student “restlessness” stuff and an almost equal amount in our church journals of the Armageddon “syndrome” in our own march to Denver are due to the mass media. Armed with a TV camera and microphone they approach Sauerbraten, Jr., a second year man at the Seminary, with the honeyed words: “Just a brief statement for CBS.” There are students standing around who have some wise and good things to say — but the networks have an inspired eye for the man who walks over the earth with his foot in his mouth. Whereupon, in answer to the question, our youthful brother says: “We are reacting against the system that brought us here.” Whereupon various periodicals devoted to the truth quote the intoxicated young man as evidence that the Seminary and the Concordias have gone to Hades.

The whole business leaves me aghast. Sauerbraten, Jr. is nothing but his old man plus three courses in Greek. He will do a little better later on, after his diploma in pontificating. But his “we are rebels against the system” is a dubious and sorry thing. Yet his words of wisdom are picked up by my TV set and hurled into my living room as the Law and the Prophets. The New Testament ain’t in it; he gets a course in the New Testament only in his third year.

Comment? I can think of none but the plural of the noun “Nut.” Nevertheless, I am worried. Am I becoming a defender of the status quo? Will I now write an article “The Perfection of Concordia Seminary” — and hope to get an honorary degree for it? Note to the Seminary: “Never mind, boys, I got a reluctant one about thirty years ago. What I need now is an overcoat for the winter.”

Let us hear the conclusion of the matter. Concordia Seminary is not perfect. It is a school run by the Church Militant. Only in the Church Triumphant will there be perfect seminaries. I hope to enroll there very soon for a freshman course entitled: “Little Children.” The sub-title of the course will be: “Studies in St. John.”

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HIS AND MINE TOO: When these lines reach you, you will, I hope, be helping a movement called “His Too.” It is a campaign for $5,500,000 (a little less than the cost of one battleship or a B-52) to undergird our work at the institutions devoted to helping the very poor, the very lonely, the very helpless, the most mysterious children in God’s world. It’s well worth doing.

Many years ago I was with two of our alumni who had just been told that their child, their first born, would probably never walk but would shuffle through life as a “retarded” person. (By the way, that cold word “retarded”—don’t use it any more unless you absolutely have to. It is a weasel word through which we try to escape the real meaning of something very real — the years of work and tears, the years of love, only dimly understood.)
I hope that you will tell your good people that in one way "His Too" is a very dangerous campaign. They look at men and women who have had the problem, and then they look at their own happy, healthy families, and the words of the Pharisee come rolling down: I thank Thee, Lord, that I am not as these Publicans." — "They must have done something to deserve this punishment."

True, you can say to your people that they should be thankful that they have never been in that silent room where all the normal values of life seem to have been disarranged and only the inexorable ticking of the clock on the wall reminds us that life goes on.

Perhaps, too, you should say a special private word to Sauerbraten. As you know, his life and work have been very successful. He gets a new car every year, he is building a bigger house, and all his children are doing very well. He is the oldest son is valedictorian of his class at City Junior College and there are rumors that he may study for the holy ministry (You may have to stop this—Greek will always be Greek to Sauerbraten, Jr.)

But over the years — and this is the problem — Sauerbraten has come to believe that he really deserves all these good things. Even when he fell off the ladder in his store and never broke a bone, he felt that he had really earned this minor miracle of divine Providence.

And here, brother, is where you come in. You must hit him not where he lives but where he ought to live. Perhaps you can persuade him to change the slogan “His Too” to “Mine Too.” He has been accustomed to “selfish” giving. Money for missions returns in larger amounts for his corner of the Church; funds for Education will bring vast returns for the world and the church tomorrow. He knows that this is just good business.

But this? “His Too”? It will bring him nothing — no pastor or friend when he needs one, no schools for the training of leaders, no teacher for his healthy brood.

Nothing? Well, not exactly. If God is good (as He is) He will come to Sauerbraten on a quiet night and show him. Well, eyes of a child a little brighter — he will hear a very little one begin to stammer a confession of faith — he will see new safe buildings for the helpless ones—all done because he, Sauerbraten, lived and saw and answered. And he will finally see the only reward he will ever get — a divine finger writing on his forehead: “Inasmuch.”

FROM THE TROUGH: News item from a publication "inside" the Church: The Christian Liar reports that “Mr. Schlunk of our Concordia is a liar, a skunk, an adulterer, and a stealer of lollipops. His opponents in the election have emphasized these points.” (Schlunk has told the Babylonian News that there is absolutely no truth to the charges against him. Ed.) That editorial note should protect Schlunk’s good name. This is nonsense. The harm to Schlunk has been done, and no pious footnote will alter this.

Nomination for the “best stories” in a parish paper — a bulletin published with deadly regularity by Brother John F. Kutz of Orlando, Florida. He has met the second requirement for a good ministry — an irrelevant and sometimes irreverent sense of humor. Quotes: "The story of the creation of the world is told in Genesis in 400 words. The world’s greatest moral code, The Ten Commandments, contains only 297 words. Lincoln’s immortal Gettysburg Address is but 266 words long. The Declaration of Independence required only 1321 words to set up a new concept of freedom for the world. But the Office of Price Administration uses 2500 words to announce a reduction in the price of cabbage seeds.”

"Housewife to butcher: 'Please send me a dollar’s worth of steak. If I’m not at home tell the boy to push it through the key hole.' ” . . . This he wrote for me — “Minister to young boy: 'Which parable do you like best?' Young boy to minister: 'I like the one where somebody loafs and fishes.' ”

More from Brother Kutz: “If you are wondering what causes the traffic jams on Easter Sunday morning, they are due to the many people who were driving around trying to find their church. Some people just can’t seem to remember anything from one year to the next.”

Pitiful ad in the same issue: “Lost. Anyone finding two stray goldfish please return to Mrs. Spanholz’s Kindergarten class.” That one really got me, and I immediately suspected Sauerbraten. On the other hand, it may have been the brother who puts a dime in the collection plate and takes a nickel change.

TEARS-OVER-SPILLED-MILK-SECTION in two scenes:

SCENE I: A few minutes after five I left the hall where the freshmen were registering. As I started down the hill I was stopped by a freshman: "Sir," he said, "my pastor said I should talk to you. The following conversation ensued:

I: What about?
He: You see, I am a member of the Wisconsin Synod.
I: Yes?
He: You remember that we broke fellowship with you last year?
I: Yes, I heard about it.
He: Well, my pastor said I could not come here, but my father insisted. Then my pastor said I must never come to your chapel.
I (suddenly hard): Did your pastor tell you why?
He: He said we had broken fellowship and I should never worship with you.
I: Did he say why our fellowship was broken and who broke it?
He: No. (a long pause while he looked at me with a strange hopefulness) It was something about Communion, wasn’t it — or something?
I: This may take a while. Will you come to my office tomorrow morning?
Dear O.P.,

It's been a rough day. This afternoon I buried a boy who got it in Viet Nam. This evening there was Council and the usual exasperation over the monthly balance sheet. After Council I sat for two hours with a man who gets his picture in the local paper about six times a year, usually under some headline announcing his appointment as chairman of some civic organization or committee; he wanted me to tell him why he shouldn't just "walk off into the sunset." And now I'm sitting here, too tired to sleep and wondering — honestly wondering — what in all the world we are going to be doing those ten days in Denver.

Between us, as I calculate it, we and the ALC account for something like one-tenth of one percent of Christendom. Humanly speaking, at least, whatever decision we may make about pulpit and altar fellowship will hardly make a ripple in the ongoing life of the Church, even in our own generation, not to mention the generations that will follow us. And yet, from all of the debate that is going on in Synod, you would think that we were gathering for some latter-day Council of Nicaea and that the issue was on the same order of importance as the Ariean controversy. What in the world has happened to our sense of proportion?

I know the counter-argument: it may be a small matter, but it is one matter in which our Lord has called us to exercise love and wisdom and evangelical concern for His Church. But surely the question of priorities has to be faced. If what I read (in the little time I have for reading) is true, there are far more urgent matters that ought to be engaging our attention in these dreary years when "some have never spent out in the wilderness of the world where, while we are meeting, one poor lost sheep after another will be bleating his despair and, in his simple sheep-like way, wondering why nobody comes to help him. These are late-at-night thoughts. After a good night's sleep I suppose that I will be all set to take off and throw myself into the atmosphere of the convention. I will look forward to seeing the old gang again and I will start to relish, in anticipation, the play of strategy and counter-strategy and I may even persuade myself that in the mysterious ways of church conventions the living God moves His wonders to perform. But tonight I wish that I could stay right here with my people, here where there is so little time and so much need.

I was saying something along these lines a few days ago to Oscar Halvorson, my ALC neighbor here in town. And I thought that his answer pretty well summed up the situation in which our church bodies find themselves at this moment. He said, "I know what you mean, Theo., and I guess we will just have to let the Spirit decide whether we are going to be allowed to exchange pulpits and altars. Meanwhile,
let's help each other carry the cross when the going gets rough. That's fellowship too, you know, and maybe it is the only kind that really matters."

Cheers —
Theophilus

Well, Theophilus is Theophilus and what he needs now can be done only by the Holy Spirit. By the way, I like that greeting at the end of his epistle: "Cheers." That's almost as incongruous as St. Paul's admonition at the end of his letter to the boys at Rome. He had forgotten the admonition he wanted to hand out — and he turns with an impatient shake of the head to what we know as Romans 16, 17, 18. "Cheers" he says, "and keep those bellicose tom-cats out of your backyard." And he was not talking about the American Lutheran Church.

THE GRASS ROOTS SPEAK

This letter from a parish priest happened to drop into my mailbox. I don't know why, but it was addressed to "John the Just." It says, "Assume you read the Christian News under date of May 5, 1969 with the headline 'The Harms' Years'." It goes on:

Now you're a learned man — explain something to me. How come candidates for election, even in Synod, are alleged to be guiltier in an election year than any other year?

This doesn't make sense to me, either: all the actions (sins to some people) of every Board, Commission, Committee, Faculty Member, District President, Counsellor, Pastor, and Layman can somehow be cumulatively packaged and collectively laid at the 'front door' of the President of Synod.

Another complete anomaly is the attempt of the men of the pen to offer such statistical distortions and odious comparisons between Conquest for Christ (1953—final figure) and Ebenezer (1967—preliminary figure). Dr. Behnkken would be the first to cry 'Foul!' (Just for the sake of the record, the facts and figures of Synodical Stewardship since 1962, considering our always evangelical approach, are impressive.)

Let's not forget the concluding paragraph: 'The Harms' Years have been marked by one crisis after another.' That's just what they said about Paul, Luther, and Walther.

Could this kind of Journalism have anything to do with natural concupiscence, intellectual dishonesty ... or just plain sin?

Dr. Harms, as most of us in the Church have learned to know him, is a Man of God and an astute leader; a gentleman of wisdom, compassion, and patient forbearance; a good listener, observer, and analyst; a man wholly dedicated to his responsibilities as President; and a great and good servant of our Synod, and of the Una Sancta.

I was just going to start painting a portrait of Dr. Harms with all these saintly characteristics. Could you add some more? You know him better than I do.

— Signed, Raphael

Raphael: Keep painting.

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Here And There — Cont.

The custom of naming our high schools for events and persons in the "Heilsgeschichte" sometimes comes up with some strange results—a proof of the fact that you must never read things out of context. So from recent issues of our Lutheran journals: Long Island gets revenge by beating Our Savior,—Messiah overpowers Trinity—Resurrection ousts St. Peter (must have been some game)—St. Paul gets by Redemption and Resurrection—Faith doomed Redeemer—St. Peter overwhelmed St. James (this last one Luther would have approved of; he never had much use for St. James).

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A note from a beloved brother: —

Well, in America I have long thought Lutheranism should be the great and needed bridge-church between Rome and a confused Protestantism, if we get together. Some of our brethren sometimes remind me of Oliver Cromwell's reaction after presiding several days over the obstreperous shouting of his Round-Head Parliament, when in exasperation he burst out "Bethink ye, gentlemen,—by the bowels of the mercies of God I beseech ye,—consider that at times ye may be mistaken."

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Wise words from a story by Julia Whedon: "Rubbings." She is describing a visit to an old New England cemetery: "That Biblical coming and going so unremarkable in the country confronted us like a sermon. Death in the city is so abrupt, untimely, and altogether ugly. It is part of nothing. It would be fatuous to suggest that a New Yorker had gone to his reward." I'm not so sure about that. I lived in that town for a decade, and I am certain there must be some reward.

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Do you want to do something curiously illuminating—perhaps on your vacation or at the synodical convention in Denver? It will cost you $1.95. Buy "The Diary of a Country Priest" by George Bernanos, and "The Autobiography of Malcom X" by the late lamented Malcom X himself,—and then read the two side by side — "Malcolm X" in the morning; "The Diary of a Country Priest" late at night just before you retire. Results guaranteed: You will work harder by day and sleep better at night. Malcom X lost his way in the world of Harlem, racism, and cold bitter hate. The last lines of "The Diary of a Country Priest" end with the words: "A dying man (speaking): Does it matter? Grace is everywhere."

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Another contribution from a brother in a difficult parish: "I have had a lot of trouble getting our
garbage collected. Finally I put it in a nicely shaped box, wrapped it in a beautiful gift paper, tied a nice ribbon around it, and put it in the middle of the street. Of course, the inevitable happened. A motorist brought his car to an abrupt stop, stealthily got out of his car and whisked up the beautifully wrapped package and quickly went on his way. My garbage was gone, and he who picked it up would have the pleasure of at least thinking that he had found something valuable. This reminds me of certain independent publications in the church. Garbage is garbage!"

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ODYSSEY OF LUKE THE LEAST — Perhaps I should not mention it because I like the guy personally — but Luke the Least is becoming a real problem. Letters from him come about twice a week and they always begin with the revealing words: "I have been reading, etc."

This is bad — very bad. When our laymen (sometimes even women) start to read we are in a bad way. What’s more — Luke understands what he has read, and that’s even worse. We are heading for troubled days. All would be well if Luke would confine his reading to the Kinder und Jugend Blatt, or “at the most” This Day. But he has to read the Lutheran Witness Reporter, or even the Lutheran Witness itself — journals, as you know, which are full of heresy and truthful reports, neither of which is good reading for a layman.

Occasionally Luke even gets hold of an ALC publication and his letters are full of reflections of a particularly gross kind of synergism. For example, he informs me that he gave $100 to the Kinderheim and I can tell that he expects credit for this on the heavenly gates.

There is no solution for Luke’s problem. As long as he continues to read he will be a potential danger. As a desperate last resort I have urged him to study Hebrew. I figure that by the time he learns it I will be resting with my fathers — with a pious caveat I can turn him over to the next generation — unless he has joined the ALC by that time.

Here are a few paragraphs from his latest epistle:

"It has been observed by students of Religion that there are only two kinds of religion in the world: Revealed religion and the religion of quest. In revealed religion, truth and good have been given to man in some way by an all-wise and powerful God; the task of man is to know what God wants them to know and do to follow the revealed divine directive. In the religion of quest, truth and good are not yet already unveiled and in hand. Truths of life and values of living have to be discovered and thought out through experience, trial and error. . . .

Luke feels that somehow these two approaches to religion coexist in all of us as well as in our denominations. He applies this to the situation that will confront us at Denver: “I do not place much faith in the tortured efforts to make ALC fellowship palatable to the traditionalists in our midst. To them every seeker thier the truth ‘is suspect.’ With their prejudices, whispering disapprovals and silent rejections they will vent their anger by the unkindest cut of all — the insinuation that the seeker’s faith is no faith; that his belief is only unbelief.”

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One more, perhaps minor, reason for thanking the Lord once a day for President Harms of the Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod. Laymen should take special note — more and more he speaks in monosyllables. Witness a paragraph from a recent editorial: “It means that we do not only confess our faith in the Gospel of grace in Christ Jesus. It does mean that we also live wholly in that grace. We take God at His word. We trust Him to do by His grace what He said He would do. We show our confidence in this grace by the fact and by the way that we use it in our common life. The message of grace has always been what the church and the world need to hear.” Please note there are just eighty-six words in this paragraph. Only nine of these are more than one syllable. They are: “confess, Gospel, Jesus, also, wholly, confidence, common, message, always. Read these words again. There is a whole good theology both in the monosyllables and all the rest of the words.

The man who speaks in monosyllables in these days of Polysyllabic hogwash is a good strong man. Perhaps this is the fundamental reason why I — and many other brethren — were so deeply shocked over some shamefully personal attacks on the President of Synod in recent issues of the “Christian News.” At the suggestion of several equally disturbed brethren I had decided to comment at some length on these disgraceful diatribes. However, I decided against that — except to say now — as sadly and softly as I can — that this is a new low in Missouri Synod history and that the ultimate, terrifying accounting for this sort of thing must be made in a world beyond ours.

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I have not yet seen Helmuth Thielecke’s latest book of sermons: “I Believe: The Christian’s Creed.” (Fortress Press) Nevertheless, I venture to call it to your attention for summer reading and a reflection of his ideas for inclusion in your preaching program this fall or winter. My reasons for this sophomoric temerity are varied. First, I like Thielecke, despite the difference in our historical and philosophical assumptions. You can handle this easily. Second, I like the chance for some doctrinal preaching; and sermons on the great tolling phrases of the Creed are what we need. Third, (negatively) such sermons could be a real antidote for much of the shoddy theology sounding from contemporary pulpits. A review in the “Lutheran Forum” points out that Thielecke’s treatment of “Resurrection” and “Hell” are especially perceptive. He also says something about “cheap doubt”, a phrase which I find strangely intriguing. So— locate a whispering pine tree on your vacation, start reading, and make notes for a series of sermons which your people need — and, curiously enough, which they will probably like. After all, they ought to know the full meaning of the words they mouth every Sunday while they watch the joyous antics of a robin beyond the window.

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SHADES OF TRENT

There can be no doubt these days that the ghosts of Trent march around at midnight with their heads tucked under their arms. It is not generally known that Luther College and St. John's in Minnesota have been exchanging a professor each year for some time. This past year the Reverend Father Emeric Lawrence, O.S.B. was the visiting professor at Luther. In the description of his experience in the strange surroundings of Luther he writes: ‘Much of Protestantism has lost Luther’s central insight into the primacy of faith — in a bog of building campaigns, service agencies, relief programs and other church-instigated good works.’ . . . Four hundred years of theological formulation and preaching, featuring defensive Catholicism against Martin Luther rather than a deepening of the Scriptural understanding of the Church and the people of God loved by Him dies hard. Actually to stand poor and destitute in the Lord’s sight, to trust Jesus’ love, to accept the whole Gospel as a guiding influence in one’s life, to trust confidently in the Father’s fatherhood, to say ‘Yes’ to Him as the Catholic liturgy would have us do — all this is difficult for any person no matter what his religion.” What goes on here? He sounds like Martin Luther himself.

A section which applies particularly also to Valparaiso University: “The Honor System may have some abuse, but generally it works. It would be unheard of for a prof to preside over an exam. He brings it in, smiles apologetically, then leaves, the understanding being that no student will seek or share help. It seems to me that this faculty trust is an incomparable element in the overall education and formation of a young person, an element in his or her education which will endure long after the facts and ideas on which exams are based will have been forgotten.” VU has had a good Honor Code for more than twenty years.

I am quoting the preceding from a recent issue of The Lutheran Standard which in turn reprinted Father Lawrence’s article from his own college publication. (In the same issue of The Lutheran Standard I note with interest that a poll of fifty-nine Protestant denominations reports that the contributions during 1967 were $3,612,671,689.) This is an increase of $346 million over 1966. More significant than these figures is the fact that the poll has included some information on the attitudes of twelve western nations. A large proportion of people of all nations of the Western world believe that there has been a breakdown in moral standards, honesty and religion. Those answering in the U.S. took a more alarming view — 78% of them stating that life is getting worse in terms of morals, 61% in terms of honesty, and 50% in terms of religion. Time out while we move into our prayer corner for meditation.

I have begun packing for Denver. I shall have a suit case and a brief case; the latter will be much heavier for it contains all the material which has landed on the desk in the last year. It will not only be heavy for my hands, but also heavy on my heart. Among the memorials and resolutions there are some that only prayer can carry.

In the upper right hand corner of the suit case there will be a little German prayer-book given me by Grandpa Hueschen many years ago. “German” because I want to be reminded of our past; “Prayer” because we need to remember constantly His will, His way, and His love.

So — finally, a few words from an essay on the Holy Ghost presented at a conference not so long ago: “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 its own history. History is great but Christ is greater. He is a present Lord; with a present will; and the Church abides in Him.

“Doubtless for the Church, as for the first disciples, what lies before differs widely from what lies behind. For that which runs through both is the Way, the same yesterday, today and forever to be traced alike in the successes and failures of the past and to be followed unflinchingly through whatsoever unlooked for windings it leads among the unfolding hopes or fears of the ages yet to come. Therefore, it is a progress and a gain for the Church to go forward in the Spirit. For the dispensation of the glorified Christ is the dispensation of the Holy Ghost. The Way and the Guide along the Way were revealed together.”

Here more than anywhere else we are face-to-face with the ultimate and unique “mysterium” of the Christian reading of God, man, life and history. Here is the mystery and miracle of the Crib, the Cross, the open Tomb, and the Fire and Flame of Pentecost and the Apocalypse.

In the Trinitarian equilibrium of our faith and worship we can find rest for our souls in the post-modern world; because this is our unique heritage and only in this can we face a contemptuous and frightened world. For us the ancient prayer is especially relevant: “O God, mark us with the seal of the Holy Chrism; we shall bear Christ in our hearts so that we may be an abode for the Holy Trinity.”

Perhaps this is the ultimate mission of the post-modern Church — to make broken man once more sensitive to the Paraclete, the eternal Bystander, the Executive of the living God. Preached and lived by a Church aware of her task and destiny she must speak of the Almighty power of the Father; the Redemption by the Son, and the insistent whisper of the Holy Spirit by Whom everything in life and time becomes an offering to the blessed Holy Trinity.

And perhaps, too, a theology of the Holy Spirit will lead us to answer our ultimate need — a theology of obedience to Him so that we may know, as seldom before since Pentecost, an imperative vision of the Holy Trinity which may release in our darkenning time new springs of compulsion and compassion for the broken hearts of men.

This can happen at Denver — if we all pray hard enough.

Blessings,

O. P. Kretzmann