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campus commentary



December, 1966

Dear Brother:

As Christmas comes again I would like to write a few words to you — for your meditation on Christmas Eve. In your preparation for the Holy Nativity, I am sure you stopped now and then to look around at the world of Viet Nam, of H-bombs, of fear and hate, of riots in the streets, of the men who say that God is dead.

And then you turned to look again at Bethlehem at midnight when the Word leaped down from heaven and joined us, incarnate and eternal. Was the contrast too great, too unbearable, too much for your soul, bowed down?

A few words for your meditation: Tonight at dusk the first snow of the new winter fell on my town. Driven almost horizontally by a wind from the north, it whirled through the cone of light thrown up by the lamp across the street, from darkness to darkness. On the edge of town, where the road crosses the railroad tracks, the shocks of corn which I had seen brown in October were now white on the side toward the wind. At this hour every day as night falls over my town, the air is alive with the moan of our mainline trains rushing toward New York. These are the last romantic sounds of our clattering age, the only sounds which still remind us of time and distance. All day my town has gone about its work. Later it will sleep. Just now, in this hour between day and night, it is joined for a moment to the city eight hundred miles toward the rising sun and beyond it to Europe, where soon it will be dawn, to the world beyond the end of the rails and the beginning of the sea, where men do not like snow this year, because it makes shooting and bombing more difficult. But here now the wind and the trains make a solemn concert, and the hills are reverent in silence. If I stand close to this tree and raise my collar against the wind, I can think for a while about Christmas.

* * *

The Christmas of childhood. I remember that we were very happy then because, for all we knew, there was nothing in the world but happiness. There was kindness everywhere, as far as we could see, and the snow and the lighted trees and the bright ribbons and the piles of oranges and candies in the shop windows were the natural accompaniment of our joy. We had a crib under the Christmas tree, and there, every year, forever young, forever fair, the Child lay in the manger, the shepherds knelt adoring, and the Kings were coming over the canvas hill from the East. It was natural that they should come every year. We knew as only children can know that they had never been very far away. They were very real, these shepherds and Kings in clay, far more real than the strange, mad world which began to loom before us in the headlines we were beginning to read. We did not know that beyond the carols, the lights, and the snow, there were many to whom these things meant only a new loneliness—the loneliness of being shut out from a brightly lighted house. **We did not know that the full measure of the world's unhappiness can be seen clearly only in the light of Christmas.** Bethlehem, the Manger, the Mother, the Child under our tree! Bedlam, hate, fear, hunger under the stars! Year by year the world stood more solidly against the light of Christmas, and cast deeper shadows. **Long ago we knew that the kings would bring gifts and that the tree would stand until they arrived at the Feast of Epiphany. Today we know, too, that the world's only gifts at Epiphany will be hunger and fear and loneliness. We come to the Manger with less than we ever had before.**

The sound of the wind in the telephone wires rises to a higher note. Now, as dusk falls over my town, I know that all the lights of my brave world are impermanent swamplights. I have no room and no sympathy for easy optimism now at Christmas. We were and are alone, children of the dust, visitors in time and strangers in eternity, lost in the far places of sin. If this were not true, there would have been no need for a first Christmas or 1900 since then. There were soldiers then and wars we have forgotten and fear and pain. The world was what it is, men were what we are, and it was for a world like this and men like us that Christ was born in Bethlehem. So, as night comes down, the darkness drives away the years, and Bethlehem and the twentieth century become parts of the same divine plan, point and counterpoint, strophe and antistrophe. One momentary, the other eternal. Our lighted trees will be our bonfires in the dark, the answer to our loneliness, to the star that came and stood over the place where the young Child lay. A prayer for the night to the Child on Christmas Eve:

Be close. Be with me. Hush the day's last cries
That echo in my ear.
Put out the light that glitters in my eyes;
The Night is here.
Quiet my hands, restless and quivering,
Quench the last tear I weep,
Dismiss my voice, blow out my breath, and sing
My heart to sleep.

Out here in the night I remember, beyond the noise and hate, that our first Christmas was marked by simplicity and grace, by quiet and stillness. In one respect it was, of course, an exciting and topsy-turvy night. God was a Child, angels spoke to shepherds, a proud king in his palace was vaguely troubled. But over it all was this divine tranquillity, all things in quiet silence, and the night at midnight. **We need this now more than ever.**

Quiet are the meadows
Where the Christ is born,
And quiet are the shadows
Of the early morn.
Not a word is spoken
As the moment comes;
Not a star broken
Into silver crumbs.
Here the world's comfort is,
Here the world's wonder.
A Virgin gives her Babe a kiss—
Who treads the serpent under.
Though Herod in Jerusalem
Heed not Rachel's weeping,
Blest has been Bethlehem
With a Child sleeping.
And on our sad hearts sere with care
Glad breaks the morn.
"Hosannah," peals the frosty air,
"A Son is born."

Undoubtedly there are few men and women in the Christian world today who are not aware of the deep tragedy and profound irony of Christmas in this day. Perhaps never in the long and wayward story of man has the day of the Nativity of our Lord dawned upon a world which needed it more bitterly and more desperately. It is now more than 1900 years since the last act in the world's great drama of redemption was ushered in by the trumpets of heaven and the massed choir of angels. The manger became the cradle of all the fair hopes that the hearts of men had ever known, and a messenger of eternity closed all the yesterdays and opened all the tomorrows with the shining words: "Glory to God in the highest: and on earth peace, good will toward men." Today we are once more standing near that silent and holy night in which the frail hands of a baby divided the history of the world, finally and forever, into before and after. Certainly for us who walk so far down the ways of time there is immediate and desperate need to return to the Manger, to tear away the blurred bitterness of the years, and to find once more an old faith and a new joy. **Much has happened these 1900 years since the first Christmas. Sin has followed sin, woe has been added to woe, and ages of cruelty and unbelief lie between us and the Manger Cradle under the singing skies. Today the story is more forgotten than ever—forgotten by the men who believe in the philosophy of power—forgotten by those who find forgetfulness in the lust for gold and the cult of the gutter—forgotten by countless men and women who have lost the faith of Christmas in the mad winds of the world's confusion and pain. Surely it is time for us to pause for a moment in the treadmill of living to see again what the angels saw and to hear again what the shepherds heard more than 1900 years ago. By the providence of God we may still hear it; by the mercy of God we may, perhaps, also believe it.**

* * *

LUTHERAN COUNCIL—U. S. A.

Ever alert to the needs of our leaders, our editorial staff (Theophilus and me) decided to cover the organizational meeting of LCUSA. We borrowed some money from the kids' piggy banks and wandered over to Cleveland to see what was to come to pass. Theophilus was outside the meeting room most of the time with his camp-followers, but between us we got a reasonable worm's-eye view of the proceedings. These are just a few footnotes to a story which has already been reported in the ecclesiastical

and public press. **I liked President Schioltz's opening devotion. Strangely enough, he chose Psalm 46:10 as his theme: "Be still and know that I am God." The knowledge of God referred to, he said, is the knowledge of faith and grace.** Momentarily I felt that the "Be Still" part was also very appropriate for a group of the most loquacious churchmen in Christendom.

There was a touch of a linguistic Pentecost about the meeting. The various speakers could be identified by their occasional lapses into the German, Slovak or Scandinavian accents of their ancestors. It was also very noticeable that there is a difference between the English spoken in Massachusetts, Illinois and Minnesota—not in grammar but in vowels and consonants.

I was also happy to note that most of us are still subject to charming human foibles. At one point in the proceedings, the group suddenly found itself in a beautiful snarl over details of the constitution. While it was not too bad, there was certainly evidence of the this worldly weakness of the Church Militant—so often marked by confusion over words.

The adoption of the constitution took 51½ minutes. So in less than the time of a football game the years of estrangement and isolation had at least partially ended. A brother leaned over to me to say that this should have been done in a church, not in a hotel ballroom. After he turned around again, I thought for a moment of the great cloud of witnesses above and around us on this occasion—Luther, Melancthon Walther, Hein, Knubel, Boe, Lindemann—and many others. I am sure that they were very happy. **I felt, too, that our children would be happy over a Lutheran Church, united as seldom before, to meet a world which now needs loud voices which are still only before God.**

The adoption of the by-laws so necessary for a new organization was a dreary process. Two of the brethren in front of me promptly fell asleep. My talkative friend turned around once more and noted that this was like starting a new club. Individual items—j—lj2—sounded like a Gemini countdown, only not as exciting. It was not long before we could tell the bad guys from the good guys. The bad guys offered amendments, changes, insertions, omissions, and the good guys voted "no."

Those of us who were present just to get a worm's-eye view sat in the back row against the wall. This is the place where rumors are thickest because there is more total ignorance here than anywhere else. During a dull part of the proceedings we played the ancient synodical game of "Rumors." This is the way it started. You begin a rumor—preferably one that does not break the Eighth Commandment because those that do are scientifically unsound and move too fast. The idea is to say something to your neighbor—purely imaginary—and see in what form it finally returns to you. At one point I whispered to the brother at my left: "The LCA wants a woman as secretary of LCUSA." Exactly 45 minutes later the rumor came back from the brother in front of me: "Have you heard that the ALC wants a Negro woman for vice president?" The time for the return of the rumor was a little slower than the Missouri Synod record, but I am sure that this will improve as the brethren get to know each other better.

One thing pleased me greatly. At a meeting like this, one might expect a certain amount of playing for power and position. The contrary seems to be true. I saw very little of it. Seated all over the place were old synodical warhorses who might have gone off the deep end in this area, but they remained on a uniquely high level of ecclesiastical debate. Voice from the rear: You said earlier that you were in the back row. How could you tell what was going on among the big wheels up front? Answer: I have been around so long now that I can tell by the back of their necks when they are plotting something. Invariably their heads go down like a fullback's on the fourth down. I saw nothing like that.

I must confess that my threshold of boredom was very low. Even though the agenda was well planned and the chairman did his very best with the desert stretches of the program, there were a dismaying number of housekeeping resolutions. At one point the Kingdom stopped while the assembled brethren debated the difference between "sessions" and "meetings." By the way the word "meeting" occurs 20 times in the constitution and 61 times in the by-laws. Since there were no relevant Scripture passages, the brethren really went to town. I do not know what the final result was because I fell off the sled at the first turn.

It is clear that the greatest danger confronting LCUSA is that it will turn inward and content itself with housekeeping and moving ecclesiastical machinery around the tornado cellar of our time. **It must—or it will die a deserved death—turn outward and upward—theologically outward to the remainder of Christendom with the tremendous Christology of Martin Luther. In our world of momentariness it must face upward for the God-given unity of speech and action which the world will need bitterly in our apocalyptic times.**

There were several speeches which approached greatness. I was particularly moved by Paul Empie's words: **"We are living in a world of emergency which is continuous and bitterly real but not always very dramatic."** It would be a great and immortal thing if LCUSA would be the first in the world to live in a continuing state of emergency.

On the second day of the gathering the brethren got down to some substantive matters. For example, they discussed the theological study of social issues, and tried to discover who should do this very important task. It seemed to be agreed that in our ecclesiastical discussions, arguments concerning social issues in the church often just echo the world. We are engaged in a **"me-too sociology and theology."** It is evident that the church in its approach to the pressing problems of our day must be much more profound, much more eternal. This is basic.

So we now have LCUSA. All that we in the back benches can do now is to pray fervently and daily that this new machinery will do the Will of God, completely, totally and humbly. If this happens, LCUSA will be a tremendous step forward in the history of the Lutheran Church.

* * *

As we left I suddenly realized that Theophilus had been doing some thinking. He handed me the following letter:

Dear O. P.:

There are still a few leftovers from LCUSA convention which we didn't get around to discussing. Goodness knows we had enough time, you and I, sitting there in the back rows with the other no-counts and onlookers and hecklers. "The seats of the scornful," as one of the ecclesiastical bureaucrats grumbled about us—a little nervously, I thought. You had a nicer name for us: "the terrible meek."

Too bad I can't enclose the ditty I composed for the occasion. The trouble is, every other line rhymed with LCUSA (pronounced Lakooza), but now as one of the new office-holders admonished us, we're not to use that name anymore. We're to say "**Lutheran Council**," which, as you can see, doesn't rhyme so well with "gratia infusa." The implication, obviously, is that the poor Methodists *et al.* would all be getting along much smoother if they'd just find some more dignified name for themselves than that ill-sounding "COCU." Makes you wonder what the original nickname was for something like the Schmalkald League before the executives cleaned it up.

One of the questions we never really finished was this: How do you feel about the kind of high level decision-making the Lutheran Council will be burdened with? The gap between these decisions and the synodical conventions widens. The appointive officials proliferate. But what's the alternative? The convention had to look like a convention, with representatives and votes and all the rest. Still, it was almost completely predictable—like the newspaperman said, a "non-event." The executives had done their homework well. One consolation, as you said, was that the present appointees happen to be a very good crop. Somewhere back in our old church history courses, remember, we learned something about the "conciliar principle." I hope your memory is better than mine.

Do you really think **The Lutheran News** picked up fans by sending that good-looking reporter? Answer: "Yes."

You saw the greeting which the convention sent to the American council of Roman Catholic bishops. Was Buege right? Did the original draft actually include the sentence, "We are glad to hear that you guys are finally seeing things our way?"

You asked me to do a head-count on the number of colored people at the convention. Of the 800 folks at the banquet, I counted one (not including, of course, our liveried waiters). At the convention sessions, I counted none. Our showing was almost as bad on Asiatics and Southern Europeans, not to mention American Indians. Thank God for the Slovaks and for that Irishman from Montana, Mrs. Shannon. By the way, did you see any poor people—I mean in the convention hall, the Euclid Ballroom of the Statler Hilton? One thing about the old name, LCUSA. It still rhymed with "exclusa."

But let's be thankful for small blessings, and try not to count the cost.

Yours,

Theophilus

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Lately I have really been worried about Theophilus. He shows up at the office more often than ever and just sits staring into space. Look, for example, at his latest letter. He is clearly going nuts!

Dear O. P.:

This is official business. I need a **Gutachten**, and since I have been given to understand that one of our seminaries has gone wildly liberal and the other wholly reactionary I turn to your theology department as my only resource for balanced, mature advice.

The question, briefly stated, is this: "Under what conditions, and to what length above the knee, may the female leg be exposed without sin?"

As you will have suspected, the question arose in connection with a discussion of mini-skirts. Don't ask me how we got onto the subject. I was minding my own business, leading the Ladies Aid through the Book of Jeremiah, when one of the ladies present suggested that if Jeremiah were alive today he would undoubtedly take a strong line against the mini-skirt. This brought a sharp reaction from a number of the ladies present, one of whom I recall insisting, over and over again, that "to the pure all things are pure." For a while it appeared that we were going to split right down the middle into a High-Skirt and a Low-Skirt party, but after the discussion had gone on for a while it was obvious that a third party was developing, a kind of mediating party which, for sake of discussion, I shall call the Broad-Skirt party.

This is the party that worries me. The way they want to bring the two extreme parties together is by conceding a little to one side and a little to the other, but in order to do this they have to break the issue down into all of its conceivable component parts and find a rule to cover each of these parts. Thus there appears to be general agreement that bathing suits, when worn with the intent of bathing, are acceptable. At the other extreme, there is almost unanimous agreement that hemlines which do not reach the middle of the knee are inappropriate at communion. But there is this huge grey area in between. What, for instance, do we say about the costumes of the high-school cheer-leaders? (This raised the question of whether these costumes are, in the proper sense of the term, dresses, or whether they should be dealt with under the separate category of uniforms.) The question of age has gotten into the picture, too; there appears to be considerable support for the view that there should be an inverse relationship between the height of the hemline and the age of the wearer. But there is considerable disagreement about the specifics of applying this rule. It has been suggested that the hemline should be firmly established at the base of the knee-cap by the age of twenty-five or at the time of birth of the first child, whichever is earlier. What might have become a consensus was, unfortunately, upset by the complaint of a very young mother that she could not see why the Church wanted to force her into "frumpy clothes" while she still had the figure to wear "nice things."

You may wonder why I do not put a stop to all of this hair-splitting by reading the good ladies selected verses from the Epistle to the Galatians. My answer is that I am hoping that they will learn something from this enterprise, and what I hope they will learn is that once one starts weaving rules he finds himself getting more and more enmeshed in them until finally there is no escape but to cut the net and crawl out of it. Meanwhile, I am taking a calculated risk. If I thought that these otherwise fine people really expected to justify themselves before God by the stand which they take on this issue, I would, of course, have to wade in with some heavy Pauline artillery. But as far as I can see they are merely indulging in the favorite pastime of religious people, setting up hypothetical situations and inventing rules to cover them. I want them to see that this is what they are doing, and I am counting on their good sense and Christian training to show them that, more clearly than I could by stepping in prematurely with what would sound like just more sermonizing. I think we preachers too often pass up the opportunity for truth to emerge out of experience because we don't really trust the power of truth to win out in open competition.

Meanwhile, though, get me that Gutachten, will you? It will make the ladies happy to know that their arguments have been given grave consideration by real theologians and I wouldn't be too surprised if it might give some of your men the satisfaction of thinking that they are involved in the "real life" of the Church.

Your friend

Theophilus

* * *

Notes on a Frayed Cuff: The passing years are heavy and long, and the sere and yellow leaf is now upon me. **I must confess, however, that nothing pleases me more than a letter from a younger brother who pulls his typewriter to his bosom and tells me what is on his mind. Suddenly I get a glimpse of the Church, either militant or malignant, as it moves through time in alleys and country roads, through great churches and storefronts, to its end.** The letters are of three kinds, and I can tell them apart after the first sentence:

1. "You heretic, you traitor, etc."
2. "Brother, are you ever wrong!" The word "brother" puts my heart at peace. He (or I) might be right or wrong, but he is still a relative of whom I am proud—a "brother."
3. "Brother, I think you've got something." Remember the old German proverb: "Ein blindes Kuhn findet auchmal ein Korn." Small praise but better than nothing.

By the way, a brother writes to ask: "What's the idea of the frayed cuff? Why don't you buy a new shirt? My congregation sent Valpo \$12.32 last year, more than enough for two shirts." Answer: The frayed cuffs are very important. When I go to Sauerbraten's new office with my tin cup, I always place my hands on his desk so that he cannot help seeing the frayed cuffs. I always hope that it will unfreeze his deep-freeze soul." P. S. So far it hasn't worked. The last time he gave me a bag of apples. He thought I was from the local orphanage.

For a long time I have been a faithful reader of the local and regional Lutheran journals which drop on the desk regularly. Lately I have been paying particular attention to the Badger Lutheran with the excellent column by Bill Eggers "To Tell the Truth." I find myself in disagreement with him quite often, but the column is exceedingly well written and thoroughly honest. In the same publication I find my old friend, Mr. Herman W. Schaars, talking about "Nature and Nature's God." A recent issue is devoted to the history of the eagle. Did you know that in 1962 Wisconsin listed only 137 eagles, 89 less than the year before? The eagle lives in an eyrie and is mated for life. There is a large eyrie near Vermilion, Ohio, along the shores of Lake Erie. This particular nest was 80 feet up in a shagged bark hickory. It was used for 34 consecutive years. He also devotes some space to: Did you know that the largest white oak in the United States is the Wye Oak in Maryland which is 427 years old? A good sized oak will have as many as 700,000 leaves. During one season this tree will give off about 120 tons of water. The highest tree in the world is a redwood in California 385 feet tall. Osmosis carries those tons

of water up 385 feet. Mr. Schaars asks properly: "Where is there a man who could have planned this technique and then followed through with the means of accomplishing this miraculous feat?" **End of space on frayed cuff.**

* * *

A Word for New Year's Eve: The last candle burned gently on the altar. Beyond the dark windows the midnight was already alive with bells and whistles, but here they seemed now like sounds from a lost world. In a sudden wind from the sacristy door the candle flickered forward and threw into bold relief the face on the crucifix. Shadows played over the red wounds, and in the eyes in which pain has been a prisoner these nineteen hundred years there was darkness. At the foot of the sanctuary steps stood the tree and the manger. The place of His birth was in the gloom, the place of His death was in the light. All the years of His way from the Manger to the Cross were in the brief steps up the sanctuary, up to the Everlasting Altar. Here were beginning and end. Not by the years could His Life and Power be measured, nor by the dust of centuries, but only by the wounds still red against the white dominion of His throne.

Was it the darkness or the hour which seemed to move the patient face in pity? Surely no sculptor had caught the moment of "Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do." That was so very long ago. The bells and whistles beyond me in the dark were marking the end of another year between His heaven and my world. There had been many of them now—almost twice as many as the number of His days before the eyes of men. Strange that all our years should be measured by His days and all the time of man by one day when, in darkness and pain, God was making eternity ready and history was preparing for B. C. and A. D. Strange, too, with the wonder of heaven and hope, that I can repeat His prayer tonight: "Father, forgive." Forgive me—for the lost but unforgotten hours of the dying year, for the erring way and barren heart. The pivot of the year is too brief to say more than the one word which makes the years an altar stair and the time of life the lifting of the angelic trumpets. Midnight is lonely now with lonely bells, and my candle of prayer burns low. There is only one cross on the altar tonight. On the hill there were three, but the children of the man on the cross to the left were blowing whistles tonight, and the children of the man on the right are in sanctuaries the world over. His time was short, perhaps shorter than mine, but his prayer was good, much better than mine. Remember me. Make my failures Thy victories and the years of my sins the eternity of Thy grace. Remember me. Thy footsteps grow brighter as the years grow dim, and no calendar can limit Thy power. Remember me. This moment, not of yesterday nor of tomorrow, is Thine just as the years are Thine.

There are other voices in the sanctuary now, the waiting saints made perfect at last and the great multitude past human numbering who have been remembered at altars in heaven and on earth. In a little while we shall be as wise as they whose wisdom is a song: "**Worthy is the Lamb that was slain to receive power, and riches, and wisdom, and strength, and honor, and glory, and blessing.**"

Blessings for Christmas and The New Year

O. P. Kretzmann