

NB. This article was written by Pastor Rooney and published in the Summer 2009 edition of Lutheran Forum. It is reprinted here solely for the use of Christ Church members and cannot be reprinted without permission.

SWIMMING THE TIBER...THE OTHER WAY

As a Lutheran in the evangelical catholic tradition, the news is often received with mixed emotion. There is joy, as one whom we have watched struggle to discern God's call on their life and ministry comes to a point of resolution and, more importantly, a place of peace. But there is also a feeling of resignation, as though the seemingly inevitable has happened once again, that some of the best and the brightest appear to have left us and we seem powerless to stop it. And there is always a sense of sorrow, that some of those nearest and dearest to us are now divided from us, most especially at the Table of the Lord.

The litany of those who have left the Lutheran tradition, particularly over the past few years is a long one. For various reasons – ecclesiological, ethical, moral or sometimes just out of a sense of futility and hopelessness – Lutheran pastors and many lay people, have left the church of their heritage or that tradition they embraced when they subscribed to the Lutheran Confession, to “swim the Tiber” as they say, that is join the Roman Catholic Church, with a smaller number “crossing the Bosphorus” and embracing Orthodoxy. Some have written of their journey, including the eleven former pastors who wrote *There We Stood, Here We Stand* which chronicles the many and varied reasons for their leaving (many of which I can understand and fully appreciate). Some are well known as authors, editors or teachers of the Church; others are parish pastors. Some have gone with a flourish, a grand gesture; others have left more quietly, seeing the conclusion

of their journey not as a statement but rather as a matter of conscience. But regardless of the reason, no matter the method, no matter how or when, for an evangelical catholic like me it is always painful when a sister or brother leaves this expression of our Confessional heritage to embrace the tradition of another.

But then, in a very paradoxical way, I can understand this journey, for I too swam the Tiber...the difference however is that I swam the other way. Raised from my earliest days in the Roman Catholic Church (after all I come by the name Patrick Joseph John Rooney with full acknowledgment of my heritage); as one trained in the faith by the priests and nuns at the institution in which I was raised; and as a member under vows of a Religious Order for almost ten years, I understand and still celebrate much of that which exists in the Roman Catholic Church.

But having left my Order following those tumultuous times of Vatican Council II, I found myself wandering for a number of years in desert where I could not hear the voice of God. But in preparing to bring my first child to the font for baptism, I heard the call back to the Church, back to a life of faith, back to a gracious and loving God who had been patiently waiting for me to return to Him. But this was not a Roman Catholic Church to which I came but rather the Lutheran congregation to which my wife belonged. It was not an easy journey, for wrestling with God never is. But for me, part of that journey was grounded in the singing of the Psalter in its placement at the Offertory from the SBH "Create in me a clean heart O God and renew a right Spirit within me." The Psalmist's words gave me hope and strength and understanding that it was God at work in me and

not my own doing. And more importantly, it was the pastor in that congregation who placed in my hands the Book of Concord, which I read, and which convinced me very simply that Luther and the Reformers got it right.

I do not mean this as a triumphalistic statement, as though we Lutherans have a corner on the truth of God. Far from it! But I came to know a gracious and loving God in the words of our confessions, a God who, like the Father of old in the parable, watched and waited for His son's return and welcomed him with open arms when he spied him on the road toward home. I came to understand in a way I had never known as a Roman Catholic, the pure grace of the Gospel, the power of the Word proclaimed, the love and forgiveness offered in the Holy Eucharist and the full knowledge of what it means to be justified by grace through faith alone in Christ Jesus my Lord. And so I came to hold that the framers of the Confessions had explicated most clearly that proper and essential distinction between law and Gospel; had stated unambiguously how we are made righteous before God not through our own merits but through the unmerited grace of Jesus Christ; and how the theology of the Cross lay at the heart of our identity, a cross to which I have clung more tightly now in these stormy times like never before.

That does not mean that everything on the other side of the Tiber is wrong while everything on this side is just wonderful! Again far from it! Indeed there is much about Lutheranism today that deeply saddens me, including a poor ecclesiology and the lack of a proper teaching magisterium. There is an inadequate understanding of the Office of the Holy Ministry, especially in its proper three fold ordering, and an even poorer

understanding of the Real Presence in the Eucharist, as is too often seen by what happens to the elements in so many of our congregations following the conclusion of the mass. There has been a wholehearted embrace of a revisionist agenda, with its attendant mistreatment of the Holy Scriptures, leading to us to that point where we seem ready to set aside certain teachings of faith and morals long held by the Church down through the centuries. In short I fear that the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America to which I belong, has made that decision to finally break with its Confessional identity and embrace a new role as simply another protestant body with all its attendant post-modernism baggage. The result can only be a slide into irrelevance with declining numbers, fewer congregations and a burgeoning sense of hopelessness for our future.

It is no wonder then that many of my brothers and sisters have taken that swim across the Tiber, into a church body which seems not to be subject to all that intrigues those “itching ears.” No wonder then that they have sought the sanctuary of a church body which appears to stand rock solid against the shifting winds of change which swirl around us. No wonder that some of those dearest to me, founding members with me of the Society of the Holy Trinity (STS), have taken seriously that part of our Rule which says that our Lutheran ecumenical destiny is “with the bishop and the church of Rome.” (Chapter VIII.4) and have crossed the Tiber to their new home. And indeed it is not for want of invitations that I remain a Lutheran today. “The water is fine, come on in” one of my friends who has taken that swim tells me.” And we have been admonished that the Barque of Peter has now been fixed of any holes it had and it is time for those of us in the life-boats to get back on board.

So why do I remain on this bank of the Tiber? Why remain a Lutheran in such trying and difficult times? Why remain even in the ordained ministry of the Lutheran church which daily confronts a growing anti-clericalism and an understanding of the Office of the Holy Ministry which is so functional as to be reduced to the level of just another job? The answer for me is provided by, I believe, Dr. George Lindbeck, who uses that well known analogy of émigrés and exiles. If the émigrés have gone to a different land and want nothing to do with the customs and traditions of the old country and have no desire to return home, the exiles live in a foreign land, keeping the customs and traditions of the old country until such time as the government changes and they are able to go home. As an evangelical catholic I hold that I am an exile, living in a foreign land but always ready, indeed longing, to return home. But the government has not yet changed. The Barque of Peter may indeed have been righted somewhat in the Catholic reformation and in some subsequent changes at Vatican Council II; and we now have the Joint Declaration on Justification which has at least begun to address the neuralgic point of the Reformation and which therefore remains as a beacon of hope for many of us. But there is still much that I cannot embrace or accept in the Roman Catholic Church. Indulgences are still issued, although thankfully no longer sold. The heart of Luther's theses in the "Babylonian Captivity" regarding the sacrifice of the mass is still not resolved. And while I fully accept and embrace the teachings of the Church regarding the Immaculate Conception and the Assumption of the Blessed Virgin Mary, I cannot accept their dogmatic status, falling back on sola Christi as the root of my faith. And while Pope John Paul II graciously stated in his encyclical "Ut unum sint" that, if his office was an

impediment, then we should talk about it, the very idea of papal infallibility runs counter to those of us who place our faith in God alone. And while I can accept that the decision to ordain our woman as priests among us was made outside of the consensus of the church catholic, now that this decision has been made we cannot go home without them any more than we can leave behind our married priests. And much of this can be summed up in the concern many of us have about the overarching legalism which pervades so much of Roman Catholic theology and the binding, even stultifying nature of Roman Catholic canon law itself, something which many of us would have trouble exchanging for that ethos of evangelical freedom under which we live.

So I remain in exile, living on this bank of the Tiber until such time as we are able to go home. The steady trickle of those leaving may have become steadier over the past few years and may yet become greater if certain changes are made to our long held positions regarding human sexuality at the Churchwide Assembly next year. But I am convinced that going home individually or in groups of one or two is not the way to do it. If indeed Luther and the Reformers got it right and, as I have said, I am convinced that they did, then our role is to hold to that truth and to continue to proclaim it to the whole world, to the Church of Jesus Christ and most specifically to the Church of Rome. When that truth has been received, embraced and celebrated then truly the Reformation will have ended and we can all go home as one body, to be one body and to proclaim One Body which is now and will always be Our One Lord and Savior, Jesus the Christ. May that blessed day come quickly among us.