

Commentary on the War: Toward Gaining Ground in the Ministry

Riding Out the Storm: A Strategy for Creating Confessional Congregations David H. Petersen



he Office of the Ministry is more about endurance than singular feats of strength, intellect, or faith. The word “faithfulness,” which is required of stewards, implies the test of time. The opposite of faithfulness is the self-preservation of the hireling. He flees when the wolf comes. He is unfaithful both to the flock and to his Master.

True, faithful undershepherds of Jesus Christ also suffer from and fall to temptation when the wolf comes. They are not Jesus Christ. They are not the Good Shepherd. They do not redeem the sheep with their lives. Sometimes, like St. Peter before them, when they see the wolf coming, they take a few steps back or they consider running even if they do not do it. True, faithful undershepherds have not yet conquered their passions. The good work begun in them by Jesus Christ is not yet complete. Nonetheless, albeit imperfectly, they still stand, as best they can, against the wolf and for the sheep. Though imperfect, they are faithful and are faithful over time.

In a similar way, despite Peter’s failure on Good Friday, when he heard the good news on Easter he raced to the tomb. He was present that evening in the Upper Room. His denial of Christ was no less damning and dangerous to faith than the betrayal of Judas, but Peter repented. He trusted in God’s faithfulness. He stepped back in weakness and failed, but he did not run away. In contrast, Judas gave up hope. He was not repentant but only sorrowful, and he caved to despair. He indulged his sin, running away not only from the wolf but also from God, not believing that he could still be loved, whereas Peter stood and faced the consequences, expecting not merely reproof and correction but also the mercy that endures forever.

There are Confessional Lutheran pastors, faithful undershepherds, who are suffering in the Ministry from wolves, from sheep in wolves’ clothing, and from sheep terrified to face the truth. These fallible men are tempted by the devil to think there is no divine help and that all the people are against them. Neither idea is true. There is

divine help. David, surrounded by the Ziphites, in the midst of his pleas for help, remembers God’s promises and exclaims, “Behold! God is my helper. The Lord is with those who uphold my life.”¹ Later, he says: “He has delivered me out of all trouble.”² David doesn’t yet know if the Ziphites will find, torture, and kill him to gain favor with Saul or not, but he knows what eternity holds. He knows, by faith, even then that He has already been delivered out of all trouble, for the Lord has promised a Messiah, a kingdom, forgiveness. It is the same for the ministerial descendants of David: even in the midst of earthly trials, they are already delivered. God is their constant help even when He is not noticed or seems to be gone.

I doubt also whether it has ever been the case that all the people in a congregation have been against their faithful pastor. Are the babies against him? All the shut-ins? In the thick of these things, mere mortals are subject to a delusion that is fed by their own vanity and obsession with popularity. In reality, we are not so significant that the whole of the universe conspires against us and that everyone hates us, and yet, at the same time, we are significant where and to whom it actually matters. The Good Shepherd leaves the ninety-nine to come looking for us. In the normal course of parish life, those who are against the pastor for any unjust reason are the most vocal. They drown out the quiet in the land. And even if none of the world notices, the holy angels are watching and rejoicing. For even as they love repentance, so also, they love faithfulness.

But here is some good news for those who want to remain in their calls and are both willing and able to suffer for their flocks. Constitutions accepted by LCMS Inc., will not allow a voters assembly to remove a pastor with a simple majority vote. They must have at least 66 percent to remove the pastor, and, of course, they are supposed to have biblical cause. In actual practice it is very difficult to get that many votes even in the most hostile of congregations. That is because it is rare that there isn’t at least a third of the congregation who feels sorry for the pastor or who fears God and deposing of His servant or who actually, even if secretly, loves the pastor and maybe even what he is teaching. Again, though, those people are frightened sheep, afraid to speak against the bullies among their relatives and neighbors. The pastor is called to speak and to lead, they to listen and follow. If the pastor succumbs to pressure and quits, they will be the biggest losers.

I can’t promise that there is no way that a voters assembly of the LCMS will ever get the needed sixty-six percent of the quorum to remove an innocent man from office without biblical cause. It probably has happened. But my experience is that most voters don’t ever get the chance. Rather than take it to a vote, or after they fail to get enough votes, they figure out other ways to torment

the pastor. They cut his salary. They slander him and his family. They challenge his every word and action and wear him out. Those tactics are painful to endure. They create great stress. In the face of them, many have quit. There is no doubt that some of those who did so needed to for the sake of their own health and for that of their families. In this regard, I judge no one. But, at the same time, some who quit did so because they thought they were about to be thrown out and it might not have been true. I urge all faithful men to resist quitting above all else. If the pastor quits, there is almost nothing to be done, and the sheep lose their under-shepherd.

Besides quitting outright or being thrown out, it is also possible to run to another parish or some bureaucratic position. The fallen reality behind the cliché “the grass is always greener on the other side of the fence” is covetousness. Covetousness impedes our rationality along with our morality. It makes it so that we can only see the problems where we are and not either in ourselves or simply in all of the broken world.

Not all of us are equal to the task. We suffer various weaknesses and defects and have differing family situations. We must not make up laws for one another in regard to these things or judge one another. But we can say this, and we should uphold this reality: pastors are called to suffer and they do not labor for their own benefit. It is possible, through hardship, to change a congregation. The congregation will likely get smaller, but as it does so it will also become more confessional and the people will become more loving toward one another and united. The pastor may not enjoy much direct benefit, but if he stays long enough, he can hand his world over to a successor as a gift to the Church.

This is how the Church is built. It is the ultimate test of faithfulness. As the Psalmist reports:

Yet for your sake we are killed all day long;
We are accounted as sheep for the slaughter.³

And as St. Paul explains: “Yet in all these things we are more than conquerors through Him who loved us.”⁴ Don’t fight fire with fire. Fight it with water. Love your enemies and heap the burning coals of Pentecost upon their heads. Kill them by converting them. Stand your ground. Preach the Word. Honor all people. Love the brotherhood. Be compassionate and kind. If at all possible, with the strength that God gives: don’t quit. ✕

Notes

¹ Ps 54:4. All Scripture quotations in this essay are NKJV.

² Ps 54:7a.

³ Ps 44:22.

⁴ Rom 8:37.

Extraordinary Essays

Ending the Peace of Benedict XVI

John R. Stephenson



he order founded to serve as the storm troopers of the Counter Reformation gained such an evil reputation that its members were expelled from most of the Catholic States of Europe during the seventh decade of the eighteenth century, with the result that Pope Clement XIV suppressed the Society of Jesus in 1773. My *Concise Oxford Dictionary* lists as a secondary definition of the noun “Jesuit” “dissembling person, equivocator,” which is the sense that customarily attends the adjective “Jesuitical.” Given the ill odor in which the Jesuit Order has long stood, and not least because it became the segment of the Roman Catholic Church most addicted to the church-destroying Modernism that broke out at frantic speed in, with, under, and after the Second Vatican Council, the surprise election of the Jesuit Jorge Mario Bergoglio as the first Pope Francis in the spring of 2013 raised eyebrows in not a few quarters. For the next eight years Bergoglio carried all before him as he lambasted traditionalists, cowed and sidelined conservatives, and dismayed even some who stand on the moderate left wing of his vast church. For some time, the rumor hung in the air that the aging and sickening Jesuit Pope planned to rescind his predecessor’s *Summorum Pontificum* of 2007, which generously accorded breathing rights to traditionalist Roman Catholics bound in conscience to celebrate and participate in Mass according to the rite that preceded Paul VI’s stunning unilaterally effected changes of 1969. Well, to cut a long story short, the vengeful Bergoglio did the dastardly deed with his *motu proprio Traditionis custodes* of July 16, 2021 in an act maliciously designed to bring the hoary head of the venerable Joseph Ratzinger down to Sheol in sorrow. But given the reaction that immediately ensued, not only from traditionalist and conservative but also from centrist and sensible leftist Catholics, one wonders whether this posturing ecclesiastical Napoleon might at last have met his Waterloo.

That shrewd Rome-watcher the sainted Dr. Sasse would suspect as much; indeed, he would surely blow a gasket were his eyes to view the sarcastically (in fact, wickedly) entitled *Traditionis custodes*. As for Blessed Martin Luther, his otherwise well-stocked polemical capacities would not be equal to addressing the words