

Address at the Opening Service.
Society of the Holy Trinity General Retreat.
St. Mary of the Lake Conference Center,
Mundelein, IL September 12, 2005

Text: Philippians 1:1-11

St. Paul could not have held his dear Philippians in greater fondness than the fondness with which I greet you, dear brothers and sisters, and welcome you to the Eighth General Retreat of the Society of the Holy Trinity. Not in spite of, but perhaps because of, our struggles to remain faithful to our ordination vows in the present crisis of faith in our churches our numbers continue to grow. Each General Retreat has brought a higher attendance than the previous one, and this General Retreat will be no exception. Isn't it great to be part of something in the Lutheran Church that is actually growing?

But let's put away the numbers right away. It would be important to come together in Retreat even if our numbers were declining. We're not among church growth enthusiasts who espouse a theology of glory. We're among those who live under the sign of the cross. Like Paul's Philippians, we endure opposition and sometimes even suffering—not just from a hostile society but also from fellow Christians in our own communities of faith who regard our desire to be faithful as misbegotten.

We are grateful for those bishops and church leaders who recognize what our Society offers for the renewal of the Holy Ministry in the Lutheran Churches. Other bishops and leaders, and some of our own pastoral colleagues and lay members, look upon us with suspicion, identifying us with reactionary elements in the Church and impugning holier-than-thou attitudes to pastors who are struggling to grow into the Rule of the Society.

How different it has sometimes been in church history. Pope Gregory the Great employed Benedictine monks as leaders of public prayer in Roman basilicas and evangelization in England. Pope Innocent III received Francis of Assisi and his Little Brothers and used them as a buffer against the Albigentians and other anti-clerical and anti-sacramental heretical movements in the 13th century. Pope Paul III endorsed Ignatius Loyola and his Companions and turned loose the Society of Jesus as an agent for the spiritual and intellectual renewal of the Catholic Church

in a time of ecclesiastical crisis. Most of our bishops and church leaders have not yet seen the value to the whole church of a pastoral oratory, a society committed to supporting its members in a life of obedience to Jesus, a cadre of learned teachers who find in the Great Tradition the resources for renewal of the faith, life, and mission of the Church.

Yet even if such recognition never comes (and official recognition is not without its own set of problems), we do not come together in Retreat with grim determination to be obedient no matter what but to be renewed in the Joy that comes from knowing Jesus as Lord, Savior and Brother. Paul's joy is renewed as he remembers in prayer and with thanksgiving the saints in Philippi, together with their bishops and deacons. My joy in ministry is renewed each time I think of you in prayer and give thanks for our common life and work. I trust that same joy is yours as you remember your brothers and sisters in this Society.

Many of you have been engaged in great struggles during the past year to keep your church bodies and congregations faithful to the word of God and the catholic tradition. The outcomes of decisions made by our denominations in solemn assemblies have been encouraging even though we know the struggles are far from over. But I would hope that, like Paul and his Philippians, we will temper the hardships we have endured with a sense of joy in the Spirit of the crucified and risen Lord Jesus who will come again to judge the living and the dead. I hope that the theme of faithfulness in ministry that we pursue in this Retreat will also sound the note of joy.

Of all the accusations ever uttered against Christians, perhaps the most damning was spoken by the atheist philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche when he said that Christians had no joy. Alexander Schmemmann wrote in his little classic, *For the Life of the World*, "...from its very beginning Christianity has been the proclamation of joy, of the only possible joy on earth. It rendered impossible all joy we usually think of as possible. But within this impossibility, at the very bottom of this darkness, it announced and conveyed a new all-embracing joy, and with this joy it transformed an End into a Beginning. Without the proclamation of this joy Christianity is incomprehensible. It was only as joy that the Church was victorious in the world, and it lost the world when it lost this joy, and ceased to be a credible witness to it."

Pastors especially can undermine their best efforts in ministry when that ministry is pursued with grim determination to be faithful rather than in the joy of serving Christ among his people.

What a sparse commodity joy is in our world and in our churches. Why is that? That irascible apologist for Catholic Christianity, G. K. Chesterton, wrote in

the last pages of his little masterpiece, *Orthodoxy*, “The mass of men have been forced to be gay about the little things, but sad about the big ones. Nevertheless (I offer my last dogma defiantly) it is not native to man to be so. Man is more himself, man is more manlike, when joy is the fundamental thing in him, and grief the superficial. Melancholy should be an innocent interlude, a tender and fugitive frame of mind; praise should be the permanent pulsation of the soul. Pessimism is at best an emotional half-holiday; joy is the uproarious labour by which all things live.”

This joy is no longer found in the modern (or the post-modern) world even though we wear ourselves out in the pursuit of happiness. But Chesterton asserts that “Joy, which was the small publicity of the pagan, is the gigantic secret of the Christian.”

As he turned again to the book of the Gospels and the towering figure of Jesus who hardly restrained his emotions, Chesterton wondered if there was something that Christ hid from everyone when he went up on the mountain to pray. “There was,” he wrote, “something that he covered constantly by abrupt silence or impetuous isolation. There was some one thing that was too great for God to show us when He walked upon our earth; and I have sometimes fancied that it was his mirth.”

Chesterton took up this theme again several years later, after his conversion to Catholicism, when he wrote a splendid little biography of *St. Francis of Assisi*. In the chapter that describes Francis’ conversion Chesterton probed the idea of joy in suffering that I think is one of the themes of Paul’s Letter to the Philippians. If there are any texts from Philippians that are generally well-known, they are the *kenosis* passage in chapter 2, which extols the obedience of Christ even unto death on the cross, and the “rejoice in the Lord always” exhortation in chapter 4; “and again I say rejoice.”

St. Francis manifested like no other Christian before or since both an identification with our Lord in his suffering, even receiving the stigmata, and a sense of “hilarity in God.” Chesterton writes, “The whole point about St. Francis of Assisi is that he certainly was ascetical and he certainly was not gloomy.” There was nothing negative in the discipline of self-denial that Francis undertook; it was a passion that Chesterton said “had all the air of being as positive as a pleasure. He devoured fasting as a man devours food. He plunged after poverty as men have dug madly for gold. And it is precisely the positive and passionate quality of this part of his personality that is a challenge to the modern mind in the whole problem of the pursuit of pleasure. There undeniably is the historical fact; and there attached to it is another moral fact almost as undeniable. It is certain that he held on this heroic or unnatural course from the moment he went forth in

his hair shirt into the winter woods to the moment when he desired even in his death agony to lie bare upon the bare ground, to prove that he had and that he was nothing. And we can say, with almost as deep a certainty, that the stars which passed above that gaunt and wasted corpse stark upon the rocky floor had for once, in all their shining cycles around the world of labouring humanity, looked down upon a happy man.”

This is not the kind of man one can easily deal with; but he is the kind of man who can have a salutary affect on those who are prepared to deal with him. Francis and his Little Brothers did not live at the center of church and society, but at the margins. They were not in the mainstream, but on the fringes. That was the whole point of their voluntary poverty. Embracing poverty requires a degree of foolishness that mainstream society in all its sagacity cannot comprehend. Yet their community was able to exert a renewing influence on both church and society. That’s precisely the purpose that religious communities and societies serve, from the earliest monks to—dare I say it?—the pastoral Society of the Holy Trinity: renewal of the center comes from the margins. That is a sociological certainty.

But so is the tendency of groups on the margins is to move to the center. Doing so has undermined the common life and witness of every religious community in the history of Christianity. Every religious community found ways to rationalize disobedience to its Rule. Many times when it became apparent that the Rule of the community was not being observed, reformers emerged to bring that community back to a strict observance. One thinks, for example, of the Cistercian Reformation in the 11th century. That’s why Heiko Oberman, in his biography of Martin Luther, *Man Between God and the Devil*, wrote that The Reformation was “a medieval event.” Luther was deeply involved in the life and work of the Observant branch of the Augustinian Order, and he carried that reforming zeal into the rest of the Church and society. Luther had been a very sour monk; but he became a very happy husband and father. I think his joy had to do with more than sex. Being a monk had become a conventional lifestyle. It was a mainstream part of society in theyear 1500. Being a married pastor was on the cutting edge at the time. It was possible to be obedient to the word of God, in this case concerning the human estate, and to be joyful.

That’s the insight that I hope will come to all of us during this retreat: that obedience to Jesus is not a grim affair but a joyful act of foolish abandonment of the wisdom of the world and of the world within the church. The possession of joy does not come from theological analysis but from participation. “Enter into the joy of your Master,” said Jesus (Matthew 25:21).

Chesterton ended *Orthodoxy* saying that his mirth was the one thing God did not show us when he dwelled on earth among us in his Son. But Chesterton wrote that wonderful little book before he had entered the Communion of the Catholic Church. I fancy that there was plenty of mirth around the tables where Jesus received or extended hospitality and fellowship with both Pharisees and sinners. I fancy that the reason the early church was so interested in the stories of Jesus at table or feeding multitudes was because the Christians themselves had experienced the joy of entering into table fellowship with Jesus at the Lord's Supper. So pervasive was this joy in the presence of their Master that they called the whole event *eucharistia*, "thanksgiving."

Last year we began our Retreat by entering into the joy of Christ's presence in the Eucharist. Well, September 21 was a feast day and the church observes such days with the eucharistic meal. We have another feast day this year—the Feast of the Holy Cross on Wednesday. By the gift of the liturgical calendar we will thus conclude our Retreat by entering into the joy of our Master.

Between now and then let us be led by the Holy Spirit, through the reading and preaching of the word of God, by engaging in common praise and prayer, and by practicing confession and absolution, to that joyful banquet in which we "leave the gloomy haunts of sadness" and extol our Lord Jesus as "source of lasting pleasure, truest friend, and dearest treasure." Amen.

—Frank C. Senn, STS, Senior of the Society of the Holy Trinity