



AND NOW FOR SOMETHING COMPLETELY DIFFERENT

CROSSING THE TIBER, THE OTHER WAY

David G. Poedel, Edward F. Ambrose, Jr., Patrick J. Rooney

There I was, a tall and lanky second-grader at Blessed Sacrament School in Milwaukee, gazing at the modern chancel of the parish church and just knowing “I want to be a priest.” I had dreams of celebrating Mass in my “fiddle-back” chasuble at the altar of an ornate Milwaukee Polish-American parish church. Was it the daily Mass? Was it the ornate vestments of this parish? Perhaps it was the incense on the holy days’ solemn high mass (all six candles on the altar were lit, giving us a hint of what was to come). Was it the visits of young Fr. Richard in his cassock to our classrooms, where on his entrance we all stood at attention and exclaimed, “Praise be to Jesus Christ; good morning, Fr. Richard”? Something was born there that never completely went away.

A few years later Vatican II brought changes, not just in the mass, but in our family. An apparent disagreement between the principal and my parents about my brother resulted in my being removed from the parish school and enrolled in public school. With that came a new parish, one more modern and not identifiably ethnic. Would I serve as an acolyte? Of course; the nuns at my previous school used that “office” as a carrot, a reward for good behavior. I was too talkative, at the wrong times apparently, to be afforded that privilege, though I longed to be vested in cassock and surplice. The priest at our new parish asked me when I would be able to start and was delighted that I already memorized all of my parts in Latin. The journey was on full-tilt—until my parents said no to minor seminary; public school would be my fate. “Your cousin tried that and all he did was party,” I was told, “so there’s no way you’re going there.” In retrospect perhaps I was being protected from the abuse that came to light so many years later. Adding insult to injury was the discouragement from my parish priest.

The tumultuous years of post-Vatican II Roman Catholicism brought changes to the mass: guitars and drums in the chancel? You’ve got to be kidding! What’s wrong with

the organ? You need a commentator to guide the faithful through the mass? Sure... I’ll serve. Public high school, draft, Vietnam War, normal adolescent development, girls, steady girlfriend, graduation, enlistment in the Air Force, medic school, compassionate care of sick patients, skill building, severe headaches. Maybe God was opening the door for me to go into the priesthood; I could cross-train as a chaplain’s assistant—but only if I extended my enlistment. No thanks! I was reassigned to the desert Southwest, became a volunteer lector at the base chapel, then assigned to the emergency room, went through EMT training, became a teaching assistant and an EMT instructor, got discharged from the Air Force. Then on to being a paramedic, accepting a full-time teaching job, and getting married.

This girl I was smitten with (she less with me!) doesn’t want to be Catholic. Her little brother goes to a Lutheran school, so we decide to check it out. There’s a cassock, there’s a surplice, there’s a stole instead of a chasuble; there’s no weekly eucharist. This is a little weird, but close enough. I meet with the pastor, my bride and I take adult instruction, we get confirmed... and I am a Lutheran! Somewhere along the way someone asks, “What kind of a Lutheran are you?” I can’t fathom what this means. “You know: ALC? LCA? WELS? LCMS?” I don’t know; I don’t understand how can there be different kinds of Lutherans. I ask someone and discover I am LCMS, whatever that means. Oh well. We attend services on and off, mostly off. The marriage is not going well from the beginning. I meet with the pastor, get good advice... but we drift away.

Seven years later, I finally convince my wife to have a child. And, we should get back to church, you know, for the kid. Let’s find a new church with lots of kids. We find Fountain of Life, and there’s tons of kids. The pastor visits and says he’ll arrange a transfer for our membership. I think to ask what kind of Lutheran this parish is and find out it’s LCMS. Oh, OK, that again.

This time I am serious about church. Who are those

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guys in alb and cincture who read the gospel and distribute communion? I'm told they're elders; would I like to become one too? Sure. The latent "virus" of wanting to become a priest is reactivated. I want to do more of the liturgy. In preparation I'm given *The Proper Distinction between Law and Gospel* by C. F. W. Walther." Wow, this is cool!

In the meantime, the wife is not handling this mother thing well, the baby is difficult to console. I am the up and coming young professor at the local community college, pouring myself into school. I need to get some degrees, though because I am teaching vocational courses I don't need them, but I want them. The wife finds solace in her mothers' "Bible study" led by the widow of a Methodist pastor. (What's a Methodist?) She comes home with a notebook and is starting to get some really weird ideas. She is not a sinner anymore, so she doesn't need to confess in the liturgy. She now "speaks in tongues" and is growing in perfection. I start researching; this is not Methodist, but maybe... charismatic? Pentecostal? No, we're the "manifested Sons of God, and I am in the process of becoming a spiritual male," she tells me after much questioning.

I am studying my Lutheran faith more intensely, serving as a pastoral assistant, doing services at nursing homes, and making hospital calls. I complete a certificate in lay ministry from Concordia Wisconsin, so I ask for ordination as a deacon. My pastor says, "Sure, whatever makes you happy." For the next eight years I serve part-time on the pastoral staff. I explore church growth, attend Fuller Seminary classes and workshops on small groups, I start a Stephen ministry. I start reading a journal called *Lutheran Forum* and discover that there are various streams in Lutheranism. I am drawn to the evangelical catholic stream, but find the irenic spirit of the LCA pastor down the street much more to my liking than what I read in *Christian News*.

The marriage fails after nineteen years of exhausting work on my part, I colloquy into the pastoral ministry of the LCMS under a provision of the bylaws, and I am blessed with a struggling inner city parish. God grants me a new Lutheran wife; God is good!

This vignette is the story of my journey from the church of Rome to the churches of the Augsburg Confession. There was no *Anfechtung* about the "Romanish errors" and the truth of the Lutheran Confessions. In fact, I strongly resented the anti-Catholicism I noted in many of my professors and vowed to show these Lutherans that we are really only Catholics with wives! Kind of anticlimactic, on my own reading of my story, I must admit. Perhaps I should have had a ceremony at my ordination that renounced my Roman faith, but why? That was not necessary. This is the fulfillment of my second grade dream to become a priest. I wear clericals every day and celebrate the eucharist at every mass, including weddings and funerals. I was taught "close communion" in school, but never experienced it in the parish, even to this day. My theology is very conservative, but my pastoral practice is very open. My role models to this day are the parish priests of my Roman Catholic parish as a teenager in Milwaukee. I have re-established email contact with the then-newly ordained priest of my high school years and share greetings during every season of the church year.

In 2003, my new wife and I enrolled in a class I meant to take during my doctor of ministry program: "Ecumenical Theology from a Roman Catholic Perspective," offered by the Franciscan Friars of the Atonement at the Centro Pro Unione in Rome. This wonderful three-week course, which I highly recommend to my brothers and sisters, was my opportunity to see if there was any "Roman" left in me and whether pursuing the "pastoral provisions" offered to Anglican and occasionally Lutheran clergy to become a Roman Catholic priest was an option (though this objective, admittedly, was

not known at the time by my wife). In God's wonderful sense of humor, the reluctance to travel after the events of September 11, 2001, made this one of the smallest classes the Centro had ever had, and so it was "supplemented" by several Franciscan members of the Order. It turned into a *de facto* Lutheran-Roman Catholic dialogue for those three weeks. As the discussions moved along, it became evident to me that I was quite "Lutheran" after all.

I returned from Rome with some really cool and inexpensive clergy shirts, a couple of stoles, a pectoral cross, and a renewed sense that God had, indeed, called me to be a priest, though my parishioners call me "Pastor" and my Air Force colleagues "Padre." My time in Rome caused me distress when I learned that Rome did not recognize my ordination because it was not performed by a bishop in apostolic succession, and equally importantly, in fellowship with the bishop of Rome. My sense of call, and my divine call from the congregation I serve, helped me to get over it.

That being said, I still pray daily for the reunion of the church of Rome with the churches of the Augsburg Confession and that, someday, I would be welcomed at the altar of Blessed Sacrament Catholic Church in Milwaukee, Wisconsin, to celebrate the eucharist. I am old enough to realize that this is not only unlikely, but likely impossible. But a kid can dream, can't he?

DAVID G. POEDEL is the Pastor at Mt. Calvary Lutheran Church in Phoenix, Arizona.

I'd like to present a glimpse of my early life as an introduction to my grace-driven adventure from Roman Catholicism to Lutheranism. I received baptism as an infant at a Roman Catholic parish about twenty years prior to Vatican II. My devoted parents encouraged my two brothers and my sister in

our Catholicism by celebrating enthusiastically our first communions and confirmations. In addition, the four of us attended Roman Catholic parochial schools, and my mother, with her warm diligence, ironed and starched our altar boy cassocks and surplices whenever we needed to serve at mass or benediction. Through these positive and loving influences, I soon identified with Franciscan and Vincentian priests who supplied at our parish on weekends, and by the age of twelve, I felt a call to the Roman Catholic priesthood as expressed through the active-contemplative life within one of the many religious orders.

My parents stood firmly behind me when, at the age of seventeen, I was accepted into Saint Joseph's College, the Minor Seminary of the Vincentian community. My life in religious community developed positively until illness prevented me from taking the "monastic" vows when I was about twenty-one years old. As a result, my superiors at Saint Vincent de Paul Novitiate steered me with their typical Vincentian kindness towards the secular Catholic life. The pre-Vatican II Roman Catholic church had limited opportunities for the laity to participate in the ministry of word and sacrament. Therefore, until I became Lutheran a few years later, no avenue seemed to exist for exercising my pastoral calling.

Nevertheless, God led me to an awesome vocation as a high school teacher and counselor during which I served troubled teenagers in a large comprehensive secondary school in New Jersey, until illness raised its ugly head again after twenty-six years. During those years, through interaction with the young people entrusted to my care, I was developing unwittingly as a pastor. That is, in spite of my own unawareness, God had already started teaching me how to walk with Him on the Lutheran path while I was shepherding confused and occasionally belligerent teenagers.

As a former Roman Catholic, I stepped into the Lutheran expression

of Christ's church without enduring emotional pain. In the first place, the Vincentian community, where I

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had spent significant youthful years, followed a rule of life similar to the Augustinian order, the monastic community of Martin Luther. Also, my Roman Catholic family never indulged in anti-Protestantism and encouraged our relationships with people of many other denominational and national origins.

Thus, I always thought like a Lutheran without actually knowing I was doing so. I had never understood why the sacrament of penance was necessary to salvation, since we have redemption by the merits of Christ's atonement. Since Jesus is the only Way, I never fully accepted Mary as mediatrix of grace, a heresy peculiar to the church of Rome. Similarly, because Jesus saved us, I refused to believe sincerely in the indulgence doctrine, and I could never understand why forgiven people had to endure God's wrath by cooking for awhile in purgatory, a notion without scriptural basis. In addition, since priests were free to enter into marriage in the earlier days of Christianity, I could understand celibacy as proper only for monks, friars, and nuns.

In other words, I was Lutheran before I knew I was Lutheran. As God found a place for me in education when illness forced me from the monastic life, He graciously found a place for me in the Lutheran denomination when circumstances removed me from the Roman Catholic church. God had been growing my Lutheranism beneath the surface since my childhood. When I said "yes" to His promptings, He graciously renewed my vocation to the beloved life as an ordained minister.

Currently I serve as an associate to

the pastor of a struggling ELCA parish in an impoverished neighborhood. I enjoy the fulfillment of my childhood dream whenever I preside at the eucharist. Also I relish every opportunity to assist people in their meaningful exchanges of communication with God; for example, when I distribute holy communion, I feel each communicant touching resurrection magnificence by way of Christ's lavish overflow of grace. I love to glorify God by enhancing assurance of salvation through teaching within the adult Christian education program. In my preaching, I strive to be sufficiently transparent to His presence so that the Holy Spirit carries the Word from my heart to the hearts of hearers. In addition, whenever I visit homebound and hospitalized people, God uses me as a vehicle of faith, grace, and healing. In these ways I know that God has called me to the pastorate. Indeed, He has motivated and used me as His shepherding tool.

My ministry is truly exciting work, and it is shared with my spouse, who is the parish nurse in the congregation where both of us serve God and neighbor. Most exhilarating, though, is the total realization that God has carried me in His own arms from Rome to Augsburg.

EDWARD F. AMBROSE, JR., is the Associate to the Pastor at Trinity Lutheran Church in Phoenix, Arizona.

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 his 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 have been 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 list 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 laypeople have left the church of their heritage, the tradition they embraced when they subscribed to the Lutheran Confessions, to “swim the Tiber” and join the Roman Catholic church. A smaller number “cross the Bosphorus” to embrace Eastern Orthodoxy. Some have written of their journey, including the eleven former pastors who wrote *There We Stood, Here We Stand*, which chronicles the 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 is that I swam the other way. Raised from my earliest days in the Roman Catholic church (after all, my very name Patrick Joseph John Rooney reveals my heritage!), I was trained in the faith by priests and nuns and lived 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 II, I found myself wandering for a number of years in desert where I could not hear the voice of God. 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 it 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. I was often comforted by the offertory hymn in the *Service Book and Hymnal*: “Create in me a clean heart, O God, and renew a right Spirit within me.” The psalmist’s words gave me hope and strength

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and understanding that it was God at work in me, not my own doing. 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 than ever 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 threefold 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, so that 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 the decision to finally break with its confessional identity and embrace a new role as simply another Protestant body with all its attendant postmodern 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, 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,” tells me one of my friends who has taken that swim. And we have been admonished that the barque of Peter has now been fixed of any holes it had, and so the time has come for those of us in the lifeboats 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 anticlericalism and an understanding of the office of the holy ministry that is so functional as to be reduced to the level of just another job?

The answer for me is provided by, I believe, 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 tradi-

tions 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 II; and we now have the Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification that has at least begun to address the neuralgic point of the Reformation and 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. 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 *solus Christus* as the root of my faith. While Pope John Paul II graciously stated in his encyclical *Ut Unum Sint* that, if his office were 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 women 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. 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 that is now and will always be our one Lord and savior, Jesus the Christ. May that blessed day come quickly among us. LF

PATRICK J. ROONEY is the Senior Pastor of Christ Lutheran Church in York, Pennsylvania, which just celebrated its 275th anniversary.