

THEOLOGICAL ISSUES CHALLENGING THE ELCA

*An address given at La Casa De Cristo Lutheran Church, Scottsdale, Arizona,
sponsored by the Lutheran Coalition for Reform (CORE), October 14, 2008*

by
Carl E. Braaten

I will get right to the point. People in the ELCA are riled up about sex. And it's not because they wanted to be. This was not the topic of their choice. It's been foisted on them from above. And they are worried about how the lengthy process of discussion and deliberation will end. No doubt many of you here tonight are among those who believe that the future of the ELCA may well be at stake depending on the decisions made at the next church-wide assembly in Minneapolis in 2009.

I. The Deep Underlying Problem

Fifteen years ago James Crumley, former presiding bishop of the Lutheran Church in America, wrote: "To say that the church is in trouble has become almost a cliché today." James Crumley is no rabble-rouser. His statements are always carefully measured and to the point. The trouble he had in mind had nothing to do with sex. The problem was much deeper and more pervasive than that.

Leading up to the merger of the ELCA in 1988 the Lutheran journal of theology, *Dialog*, of which I was the editor, ran a series of columns entitled, "Merger Watch." We were monitoring the procedures and negotiations between the LCA, the ALC, and the AELC that resulted in the merger. We saw the handwriting on the wall, trouble was a-brewing, but we did not foresee that it would have anything to do with sex and the nature of marriage.

When I was teaching theology and ethics at the Lutheran School of Theology at Chicago, I planned a conference that we called, "How New Can the New Church Be?" Special interest groups were chanting their mantras, "We want the church to be so new, no one will be able to recognize it." Our conference dealt with the paramount theological issues, such as, the confession of faith, ecumenism, authority in the church, the ordained ministry, the episcopal office, the vocation of the laity, inclusiveness, and so forth. But again, the issue of sex did not get a mention in a single lecture or discussion group.

A few years after the ELCA was organized, many pastors and laity were alarmed by the new directions church headquarters was taking the church. The editors of the three leading Lutheran theological journals, *Lutheran Quarterly*, *Lutheran Forum*, and *Dialog*, convened a conference at St. Olaf College in 1991, only three years after the ELCA came into being. We called the conference, "A Call to Faithfulness." It struck a chord; over one thousand pastors and laypersons attended. We addressed the neuralgic issues already troubling the church at that time: the traditional threefold office of ministry, pastors, bishops, and deacons, the ecumenical policy of the ELCA, the mission of the church to preach Christ as the only way of salvation, the church's responsibility to society, and so forth. But again the matter of sex and the ordination of practicing homosexuals were not on anybody's radar screen.

I rehearse all of this early history to show that the theological issues troubling the ELCA were looming large long before the ELCA took up Hollywood's favorite topic as its chief preoccupation. The underlying theological problem in the ELCA is much deeper than sex. The lack of consensus in the church on the ethics of sex is epiphenomenal, that is, it is a secondary complication of a much deeper condition that the ELCA shares with all other mainline Protestant churches in North America, especially The Episcopal Church, the Presbyterian Church USA, the United Methodist Church, and the United Church of Christ. I would further add that the condition about which I will be speaking is one that also affects Catholics, Orthodox, Evangelicals, and Pentecostals, but in different ways. I want to talk about this deeper underlying theological problem that affects all of Christianity in America, because if we do not grasp and deal with that in a fundamental and systemic way, nothing that the ELCA church-wide assembly decides one way or the other next year in Minneapolis will make any difference in the long run.

Our beloved church, the ELCA, is awash in the culture of American religion but, as I said, we are in the same boat with many other churches. By all the polls America is a very religious nation, but its religion is predominantly not New Testament Christianity but neopagan gnosticism. We must pause to explain what we mean by gnosticism. Gnosticism was the ancient form of pagan religion that the early church had to fight tooth and nail for its very survival. The word gnosticism comes from the Greek word "gnosis," which means "knowledge." The knowledge in question concerns the secret mystery of life that arises from within the self. The God of gnosticism is the experiential God identical with what seems most authentic and real in each individual soul. The God of the Bible is exactly opposite from that and comes from the outside through the Word that he speaks. The God of the Gnostics and the God of the Bible are mortal enemies. It was so in the Old Testament when Elijah, the prophet of the God of Israel, defeated the prophets of the pagan gods of Baal. It was so in the New Testament when the apostles had to combat the false prophets who denied that Jesus Christ had come in the flesh. That's gnosticism. It was so in the early church when Irenaeus had to reject the second century heresy of Marcion who taught that the Old Testament God who created the world is not the same as the New Testament God who redeemed the world through Jesus Christ. That's gnosticism.

This thesis about the connection of gnosticism with religion in America is admittedly not original with me. In his book, *The American Religion*, Harold Bloom demonstrates that for its two centuries of existence the American religion is irretrievably gnostic.¹ Bloom writes, "Gnosticism is now, and always has been, the hidden religion of the United States, the American Religion proper."² This is kind of hard for us to swallow, because we hear politicians claim so often that American is a Christian nation. The truth is that gnosticism that is deeply embedded in the culture of American religion has found a happy home in the mainline denominations of Protestant America.

The most horrific modern example of gnosticism invading Christianity, Protestant and Catholic, was the complicity of the churches and their leaders in the Nazi attempt to exterminate the Jews. The "German Christians" wanted to get rid of the Old Testament and everything Jewish that remains in historic Christianity. That's gnosticism. The Protestant churches are filled with mil-

¹ Harold Bloom, *The American Religion*, Simon and Schuster, 1992, p. 42.

² *Ibid.*, p. 50.

lions of Americans whose spiritual priorities violate the normative principles of classical Christianity based on the Bible. Gallup-style findings show that American believers are religious in a general sense with scarcely no correlation to the specific beliefs of historic Christianity. They do not realize how little they share with the core contents of Christian doctrine. That is because churches and their teachers have lost the will or the ability to teach the Christian faith to those who enter through the front door, and so they have only themselves to blame for the masses who are now exiting the churches through the back door. All the Protestant churches are losing members, and they wonder why.

Not all who write about the predicament of American Protestantism would trace it to gnosticism, as I have done. Their diagnosis of the deep division in the Protestant churches is that a different gospel is being preached, precisely in the sense of the apostle Paul who wrote to the churches of Galatia: "I am astonished that you are so quickly. . .turning to a different gospel -- not that there is another gospel, but there are some who are confusing you and want to pervert the gospel of Christ." (Galatians 1: 6 & 7) Preaching a different gospel is not only heresy, but it leads to apostasy and then schism.

Christianity is like a bucket brigade. It is something handed down from generation to generation. Each generation of believers must take responsibility to pass on the "faith once for all delivered to the saints." (Jude 3) The cumulative result of churches doing that for 2000 years is the mainstream of the Christian tradition. That's where we want to situate ourselves. We have received that tradition, founded on the Bible, and it is our turn now to pass it on to our children and grandchildren without abbreviation, without compromise, and without tailoring it to suit our own whims and fancies. In other words, we are called to be faithful. But today something of a paradigm shift is occurring in American Lutheranism, such that the church we are passing on to our children is vastly different from the church we received from our fathers and mothers in the faith. I saw a graffito that said, the church is not what it used to be.

Of course the church must change since it lives in history. Nothing remains exactly the same. The church must change in order to remain the same. But some changes are good and some are not, and that is what the controversy in the church is all about. We must discern the spirits. Not everything is up for grabs. We have sound criteria to tell what kinds of change are good for the gospel and what are not. We do have an agenda faithful to our confessional Lutheran tradition, a tradition that claims to be true to the classical teachings of the one, holy, catholic, and apostolic church, standing firmly on the pillars of Holy Scripture and the orthodox Creeds. This is not an agenda of a right-wing coalition of conservatives trying to turn back the clock. Martin Luther was not a right-wing conservative in his day. His reform movement was an attempt to retrieve the tried and tested truths of the Bible and the classical Christian tradition. That's what his Short and Long Catechisms were all about.

Our central concern is theological, what we believe about the triune God, salvation through Christ alone, the sanctifying work of the Holy Spirit, true preaching of the Word and faithful administration of the Sacraments, the divine institution of the holy ministry signified by the sacred rite of ordination, the ecumenical work to promote the unity of the church, the Great Commission of our Lord to preach the gospel of salvation to all the nations, to teach and to baptize people from all religions or no religion at all, so that they may become disciples of Christ and members of his body. This is not all strange stuff, is it? This is Christian dogmatics 101, en-

compassing the core convictions that all churches affirm in their constitutions and confessions of faith. These are the central truths in the Great Tradition of evangelical, catholic, and orthodox communities down through the centuries and across all cultural boundaries.

II.

The Pervasive Issues and Isms

The ELCA Constitution and Confession of Faith are just fine. We have no quarrel with them. But they are often treated as just a piece of paper. Even some bishops ignore them. We know the rules of the game, but there is no penalty for ignoring them, and no discipline, no accountability. That's the end-product of rampant individualism, again the hallmark of ancient and modern gnosticism. Article 28 of the Augsburg Confession states: "According to divine right, it is the office of the bishop to preach the gospel, forgive sins, judge doctrine and condemn doctrine that is contrary to the gospel." We do not have time to cite the many shameful examples of bishops, from New York to California, flaunting the rules, openly thumbing their noses at the governing documents of the ELCA.

All of this criticism may seem rather vague and lacking in specific identification of the theological challenges facing the ELCA, as well as all the Protestant churches in the same leaky boat. So let me give you a laundry list of the hot button isms shaking the foundations.

1. The first is the doctrine of the Triune God and the challenge of radical theological feminism. Let us be clear, we are totally in support of egalitarian feminism that champions the equality of women and men, in society, in the church, in families, in schools, in the work place, everywhere and always. There may be some who have a problem with the ordination of women, but we are not among them. We want equal justice, honor and respect for our mothers, wives, and daughters. But to change the proper name of the triune God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, is something else and totally unacceptable. The church's liturgies, hymns, prayers, and Psalms are now being edited to conform to the demands of radical theological feminism. It makes preachers talk funny too, like, "God sent God's only child so that God might have mercy on those who call upon God." God, God, God, and forget the pronouns, because masculine pronouns have become dirty words. All male-referring terms for God or Christ must be legalistically avoided, terms like father, son, son of man, son of God, Lord, master, king, and so forth.

At the Lutheran School of Theology at Chicago, where I taught for thirty years, one professor baptized the child of a student in the triune name of God -- Parent, Child, and Spirit. A few years ago I addressed a conference of pastors in Minnesota, and during the Q and A a woman asked me this question: "If a pastor baptized a baby in some other name of God than "Father, Son, and Holy Spirit," would the baby be saved? My answer was that I believed the baby would go to heaven, but the pastor would surely go to hell. At LSTC I quit going to chapel because I could not be sure of the identity of the God being worshiped and glorified.

2. The second major issue challenging the ELCA and other churches, again a symptom of the disease we have called gnosticism, is the uniqueness of Christ and the challenge of radical religious pluralism. From the start Christianity entered a world of many religions, but not one of the apostles believed that they are all equally valid as ways of salvation. But that is exactly what the Protestant gnostics of today are teaching in the name of the pluralistic theology of religion. All

religions, they say, are so many bowls of the same religious soup, all equally valid pathways to God. Jesus may be the right way for Christians, but he's not the only way for everyone else. So wave the missionary movement goodbye! We have no need for missionaries if Christ is not necessary as the way of salvation for all.

What we used to call "world missions" is virtually dead in the mainline Protestant churches, including the ELCA. Why evangelize, if all religions attain the same goal? If my father and mother would have believed that, they could have been spared going to the harsh bush country of Madagascar and making me grow up in what I felt at the time was a god-forsaken place. But, of course, I was wrong to feel that way. Today almost half of the 16 million Malagasy people are Christian, and half of those are Lutheran. On any given Sunday more Malagasy Christians attend church than all the Lutheran Christians in Norway, Sweden, Denmark, and Finland put together. The Malagasy Lutheran Church is a missionary-sending church. The missionaries taught them well. But all that sort of thing is becoming by-gone history for the ELCA.

3. The third critical issue has to do with the authority of the Bible and the challenge of historical relativism. Another name for it is reader-response hermeneutics. Truth is in the eye of the beholder. You italicize the words of Scripture that turn you on, and chalk all the rest up to the primitive notions of an ancient Semitic people. The Bible becomes a wax nose, so much putty in the hands of the artist who makes it conform to the culture of modernity. Thomas Jefferson did that in a big way. Two hundred years ago he took a pair of scissors to the King James Bible and cut out all the parts he could not believe, like the miracles of Jesus, and the most important one, the resurrection. Today we don't use scissors, but we use alien modes of interpretation to make the Scriptures speak our language, our ideology, our religious beliefs, and our moral sensibilities. Jesus is modernized to look and sound like the Dalai Lama.

The ELCA is just now embarking on a five-year campaign of Bible-reading, first proposed by a resolution of the North Carolina Synod and approved by the 2007 Churchwide Assembly in Chicago. Some weeks ago I was speaking to a group of Lutherans in North Carolina and during the discussion period a pastor asked me if they should feel guilty for having made the proposal. He had just read the book put out by Augsburg Fortress entitled, "Opening the Book of Faith, Lutheran Insights for Bible Study." He was not encouraged. He saw the little book as a way of softening up Lutherans so they will fall in line with the agenda church headquarters is pushing. Who can be against reading the Bible, and with Lutheran insights to boot? Reading the Bible as a book of faith sounds like a Lutheran thing to do. "Faith" is a big little word in our Lutheran vocabulary. We teach the doctrine of justification by faith alone. But the Bible is not primarily about faith, not primarily about the faith of the patriarchs and prophets and evangelists and apostles. The Bible is about God, the mighty acts of God, the word of God. Faith is a human response to the initiative of God, to the divine indicatives and imperatives, the words of the law and the gospel of God inspired and transmitted to us through the Old and New Testaments, which we call Holy Scripture. And to encumber our reading of the Bible by traditional Lutheran insights is to shortchange our understanding of God's Word. That may sound strange for a Lutheran theologian to admit, but the truth is, reading the Bible that way is a sectarian thing to do, no better when Lutherans do it than Baptists or Pentecostals. We understand, don't we, that Lutheranism began only in the sixteenth century, less than five hundred years ago, whereas Christians were reading the Bible centuries before that. Should not Lutherans today read the Bible as

a book of the whole church reaching back centuries to its birthday on the first Pentecost? I do not want to be a sectarian Lutheran in an ecumenical age.

4. The fourth issue is of concern to every pastor, the absolute gospel and the challenge of American religion, the neo-pagan gnosticism infiltrating the practices of worship. Religion sells when it can satisfy the search for self-fulfillment. Gnosticism is all about the self; it appeals to the sovereign autonomous self. It's all about me. The churches that grow best in a mass culture engage in Christianity-Lite, throwing over-board all the excess baggage like traditional dogmas, liturgies, hymnody, and moral codes of conduct. Success is quantifiable in terms of numbers -- members, budgets, buildings, and programs. The new pagan masses do not understand the meaning of things like pulpits, altars, baptismal fonts, hymnals, prayer books, clerical vestments, stained glass windows, Bach chorales and organ preludes. These things make the church seem so other-worldly, bedecked with icons that tell the story of a pilgrim people "not of this world." Well, isn't that who we are supposed to be, *in* but not *of* the world? American religion is a consumer's delight; it can be altered and tailored to meet the taste of the individual consumers. Traditional creeds, ceremonies, symbols, sacraments, and practices are set aside for the immediacy of experience, leaving our people adrift in a narcissistic culture of decadence and death. The bottom line of American religion is all about what I feel. It had better express my experiences or I'll stick with Yoga. No one can tell me what is right and good and true. I'll find my own way to God, a nice God who makes me feel good inside.

5. The fifth issue is about the Church as a divine institution and the challenge of the democratic cult of egalitarianism. We live in a democracy, and we have a right to be thankful for that. Democracy is a form of government, as Abraham Lincoln orated in his Gettysburg Address, "of the people, by the people, and for the people." But the church is not a democracy. It is not "of the people and by the people." It is of God! Christ is king, the Lord of the church. Mistakenly we often take our doctrine of the "priesthood of all believers" to mean that we are all equal in the church. The doctrine of the priesthood of all believers is important; it means that we all have equal access to Jesus Christ who is the sole Mediator between God and human beings. It is not a definition of the church. Ordination is a sign that God calls certain ones to be leaders. Hebrews 13:17 says: "Obey your leaders and submit to them, for they are keeping watch over your souls." Some are shepherds, some are sheep. Authority in the church must be a function of the ministry to which God has given special responsibility to make the church the church, where the gospel is truly preached and the sacraments are rightly administered. Gnostics don't like that and never have. It does not square with the spirituality of the new age mysticism that was grotesquely exhibited at the various "Reimagining God" conferences in Minneapolis some years back and the new Christianity being invented by the "Jesus Seminar" that puts more trust in the ancient gnostic gospels than in the canonical Gospels of the New Testament.

When the Commission for the New Lutheran Church wrote the Constitution for the ELCA, they did it without any clear notion about the nature of the church. I get this from James Crumley, one of the 70 commissioners. He wrote, "We did not agree on a basic ecclesiology."³ When Bill Clinton campaigned for the office of president, one of his managers wrote on the blackboard,

³ James R. Crumley, "Setting the Church's Agenda," *Either/Or: The Gospel or Neopaganism*, edited by Carl E. Braaten and Robert W. Jenson (Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1995), p. 116.

“It’s the economy, stupid!” Someone should have done something like that for the 70 Commissioners, the Sanhedrin, we called them. “It’s the church, stupid!” Instead, pragmatic and political decisions were made without any prior agreement on the nature of the church. One of the most questionable was the adoption of a church polity based on the quota system. The membership of the Commission itself was mandated by an arbitrary scheme of quotas, some of these, some of those, and a few of those others, etc. In truth it was a coalition of special interest groups fighting to advance their own identity agendas. The ripple effects of those decisions are still being felt adversely throughout the church. The former editor of the *Lutheran Magazine*, Edgar R. Trexler, wrote this about the merger process, “No one ever put a church together the way the Lutheran Church in America, the American Lutheran Church, and the Association of Evangelical Lutheran Churches did in the mid-1980’s.” (Edgar R. Trexler, *Anatomy of a Merger*, Augsburg Fortress, 1991, ix)

6. The sixth issue has to do with ecumenism and the challenge of modern Protestantism. The ecumenical commitments of the ELCA have been extremely controversial and still are. As a Lutheran I feel bound to be an ecumenical theologian. But we cannot make any sense of ecumenism without having a clear doctrine of the church in mind. So there we are stuck. There is no consensus in the ELCA on any of the ecumenical agreements we have reached with other churches. This is such a huge topic that we can only scratch the surface and then go on. With Roman Catholics we have adopted a “Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification.” I am for it, many of my friends are not. With the Episcopal Church we adopted a “Call to Common Mission.” I am for it, many of my fellow theologians are not. Nordic Lutherans adopted the Porvoo Statement with the Anglican Churches of England and the British Isles. I am for it, some Lutherans are not. Are all these statements perfect? No, they are not. Do I agree with them theologically 100 %? No, I do not. If I wished to belong to a church with which I was in 100% theological agreement, I would be the only member of that church. That is not the purpose of an ecumenical concordat of agreement. Its purpose is to foster the kind of unity for which Jesus prayed in his high priestly prayer, that all of his followers may be one, that the world may believe. (John 17: 20-21) The criterion of such unity is that Christians love one another and come together, welcoming each other in eucharistic fellowship, eating and drinking together with Jesus at the Table of which he is host. It is a scandal that we are forbidden to commune at the altars of some churches whose members are our brothers and sisters in Christ, who confess the same Lord and belong to the one undivided body of Jesus Christ. It is a scandal! And that’s why as a Lutheran I am unapologetically an ecumenical theologian.

But there are limits to unity. We cannot be for church unity at all costs. There are sects with which we cannot be in altar and pulpit fellowship. Where there is heresy and apostasy in the church, that calls for separation. There is one thing worse than schism, and that is commingling with idolaters and blasphemers. It has come to that at previous times in church history. It reached that point under Hitler when Karl Barth and his friends put forth the Barmen Declaration. It reached that point in South Africa when the Lutheran World Federation met the challenge of systemic racism by pronouncing *status confessionis*, in effect excommunicating white churches that would not commune their black sisters and brothers in Christ. We in the ELCA have not reached such a point, but let there be no mistake about this. It could happen here and there in American Christianity, triggering a kind of realignment of churches that some are already calling for. I have warned against the ELCA becoming just another liberal Protestant denomination, and with others I am watching to see whether anyone is putting on the breaks.

7. The seventh issue has to do with the integrity of the church and the challenge of confusing the law and the gospel of God, of failing to make the proper distinction between law and gospel. Such a failure means that we end up legalizing the gospel, on the one hand, and substituting the gospel for the law, on the other hand. The end result is what Luther called “antinomianism.” Antinomianism literally means “against the law.”

This brings us to the big elephant in the room, the issue of homosexuality that is causing some of the mainline Protestant churches to teeter on the brink of schism. The worldwide Anglican Communion is in the process of splitting over the unresolved issue of blessing homosexual unions. The Presbyterian Church USA is next in line, engaged in a lengthy constitutional fight over whether to allow the ordination of practicing homosexuals. Circulating throughout the ELCA is a draft of a “Statement on Human Sexuality.” It fails utterly to observe the proper distinction between creation and redemption, law and gospel. The Statement improperly builds the ethics of sex on the gospel of the incarnation and justification by faith alone, the twin pillars of the Christian doctrine of salvation. Lutheran theological ethics is based on the law of God, which comes to us through two channels, through the Bible and through the structures of creation. By reason and conscience people can know the difference between right and wrong, good and bad, by the way “things have been made.” (Romans 1:20) People do not need to believe in Christ to learn what is against the law of nature. Humanists can be quite moral people without confessing Christ. When God created the world and human beings, he designed all things to obey certain laws. To ignore the law of God and to replace it with the gospel is pure antinomianism, something Luther condemned when it reared its head among some of his closest disciples. They said that since we are saved by faith in the gospel, we are free from doing the works of the law. Antinomianism is the stepchild of gnosticism.

Marcion, as I said, was the second century heretic who threw out the Old Testament because it contains the story of God’s creation and the giving of his law -- the Ten Commandments. He wanted to keep only a few New Testament books and the sweet honey of the gospel and the love of God. He was a gnostic. The ELCA “Draft Statement on Human Sexuality” follows in Marcion’s line. It ignores the Old Testament, the doctrine of creation, the Ten Commandments and appeals only to the New Testament gospel of the incarnation and justification by faith. It is so wrong.

III.

Where Do We Go From Here?

How did we get to the point where our church is being inundated by the onrushing waters of a neopagan gnostic culture hostile to the core convictions of orthodox Christianity? As in the case of Katrina, the traditional levees that kept Lutheranism from conforming to the surrounding culture of American religion no longer hold. They are broken. We will leave it to church historians to explain the paradigm shift that is occurring to transform a confessionally based church into just another liberal Protestant denomination. We don’t have time to do that here and now.

Some ELCA pastors, theologians, and even some congregations, are looking for the exit, choosing to join other churches or associations. I have expressed myself clearly and often, that I am

not in favor of shopping around for another church. It is a romantic notion to think that there is a more perfect church out there. Every one has its own share of problems. Our situation is not altogether bleak and hopeless. Thousands of pastors and congregations are doing things just about right. Many reform-minded confessors are doing ministry faithful to the common core of evangelical faith and orthodox doctrine. We have the Bible; it is the Word of God. Who knows what will happen when we take the initiative to actually read it? Those who interpret the Bible with an alien hermeneutics will not necessarily succeed in muzzling it. Theologians may get tired of doing boring theology in captivity to the trends of the times, and instead do theology under the authority of Scripture for the church, in line with its Creeds and Confessions.

Ecclesia semper reformanda! That is a Latin slogan of our Lutheran tradition. The reformation of the church must continue. When the church finds itself living in the dark ages, as it is today, we trust that God will create movements for renewal and reform, as he has always done in the past. We have his promise that the gates of hell will not prevail against the church. We must understand that we are back into the raw missionary situation of New Testament Christianity, one in which true Christian faith cannot count on its cultural plausibility in a neopagan environment. The only thing that matters in true Christian worship is the presence of the living God through the audible words of preaching according to the Scriptures and the visible words of holy communion according to our Lord's institution. Such worship will not cater to the worldly gurus who tell us that it must be simple, fun, and entertaining, to make people feel good about themselves.

The church should always be in the business of reaching out to add new members, of course, but more importantly today it needs to re-evangelize the members it already has, to make clear its difference from the world, stressing that the Christian faith is utterly unique and fundamentally different from other religions and ideologies, and that what she has to offer the world cannot be provided by any other agency or community in the world. To pray and work for a new reformation is not to wait for things to happen elsewhere than in each of our local congregations. That is where the action is. Don't think it is in Chicago or Rome or Geneva. We meet Christ at home in our local parish, not in the church bureaucracy that we create to do some of the things we cannot do on our own. Every ordinary congregation is endowed with an extraordinary message. It is a message of the dying and rising of Jesus and that all who believe in him share in the salvation he brings. What more do we want? What more do we need?