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"A Sort of 'Holy Gamble' . . ."

Nuggets from a sermon by the Rev. Samuel I. Goltermann, Assistant Executive Secretary of the Board for Higher Education of The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod, delivered at the opening of the one hundred twentieth academic year of Concordia Theological Seminary, September 8, 1963. M. J. S.

WHAT WOULD a specialist in the field of Christian education in the Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod have to say to a student beginning a year of "preparation for the Gospel ministry"?

The Rev. Samuel Goltermann, recently appointed assistant executive secretary of the Board for Higher Education, answered this question a few weeks ago in an address to the Springfield Seminary family—"administrators, faculty members, students, secretaries, cooks, custodians, with little significance given to this sequence."

The speaker spent no time describing the Gospel ministry which the students have chosen as their future vocation. Their ministry, he pointed out, would depend greatly on their present vocation. He pictured them as on a journey, with a goal before them, but with the journey itself important enough to occupy their thoughts and efforts.

He spoke of the huge investment which the church has in its schools—not so much "an investment in physical plant or in the annual operating cost"—but "an investment of so much of its future in the people for whom the school exists and in their future ministries."

"The church takes in faith a sort of 'holy gamble' that the 'foolishness of preaching' (to use Paul's phrase) will continue to be God's way of channeling the grace of life into the walking dead who populate the world around us. That in the middle of the 20th century, with its peculiar culture built on the singular relevance of the empirical and the tangible and the sensate, we should continue our mass commitment to this particular mode of operation, and commit to it the finest young people we can find and subject them to years of intensive training—this is the sort of venture in which we should be participating with the awareness that it can be justified only in faith."

Addressing the students in particular, the synodical representative asked that they give primary consideration to their present ministry:

"Deep in your heart is the ambition to be, within the confines of your vocation, 'the world's best preacher.' But I feel compelled to ask you today to have the ambition to be the world's best seminarian."

The challenging question he put to them was this: "Are you ready to begin this ministry with the same resolution and devotion,

with the same enthusiasm and the same readiness 'to suffer all even death' that you are showing for that public ministry which you have in view?"

He spoke of their present ministry as one that would try their faith and test their mettle. "The temptations and trials of this coming year may well be as large as those in any year in your future ministry. . . . When you define your ministry as being that of saving souls, it's very likely that Greek might become insufferable. When you look out the window and see that the world is on fire, it's hard to stay at your desk and write term papers."

But, speaking the mind of our schools, of the Board for Higher Education, and, I trust, of most of our pastors, the speaker stated "that nothing would be more disastrous to the good estate of the church and its preaching and teaching offices than to succumb to these eternal temptations from without and within and to permit entry into the ministry by persons who are long on enthusiasm and short on training. And yet," he added, "your hearts will bleed over this issue."

Goltermann pointed out that "the way in which the seminarian approaches his work and solves his problems is of substantial concern to the church which he will serve, since it seriously affects the ministry he will perform. If he becomes cynical and bitter,—and some have—he will be in no position to reflect the job of the Gospel. If he becomes cold and hard and calculating,—and some have—his genuinely pastoral function is handicapped from the beginning. If his courage and confidence are shattered, he will be in no position to represent the church in the face of many untoward forces in contemporary society. If he becomes mercenary and greedy,—and some have—he will disgrace the church which calls him. If he becomes soft and effete, he will be incapacitated to play the role of the vigorous man of God, courageous and strong in the face of opposition."

The speaker then offered a twofold answer of the Scriptures to the problems of the student at our synodical schools:

"The one is this, that the seminarian, like every other Christian, should take careful stock of his present vocation, with its disciplines and its blessings, and in that consideration carry on within himself the salutary dialog with his Lord about the issues of sin and grace . . . an exhausting and strenuous exercise, which becomes easier only as the Living Lord Himself is permitted to become an active participant, as the words of His ever-living Gospel become the strengthening reply and response to the queries and complaints and the lamentations of human frustration and shortcoming. . . . That the atonement which is in Jesus Christ the Beloved is also the way by which the besetting sins and abundant weaknesses of seminary students are forgiven and controlled and managed is something which needs to be learned early in a professional career. . . . You will recognize the need for uncovering and diagnosing human need in a manner which will make this delicate and cutting opera-

tion nonetheless a manifest and obvious act of love. You will have the similar difficulty of speaking to human need in the words of the Living God, to speak the right word of God for the particular need . . . a Word received and understood *as good news*, the Gospel. Friend, if it is to be done *then*, it must be learned *now*."

"There is a second, related approach to the problem of human difficulties in the seminarian's vocation. This is to use that magnificent set of resources which the Lord has provided within the fellowship of the church . . . a living fellowship, an ongoing interacting of Christian love wherein there is a sharing not only of the problems, but also of the treasures of grace which constitute the solution of those problems. . . . When the church acts as church, it is God's own way of mutual edification and of strengthening individual Christians. . . . What is clearly necessary is that your life together in this school be a life together also in the church. . . . It means that you exist not only *with*, but also *for*, each other. . . . More than you will want to admit, the quality of the common life on this campus and that of your sister schools will be the measure of the sensitivity of the church of tomorrow to the spectrum of human needs, spiritual, emotional, and physical. It is now widely predicted that the church shall increasingly be measured and find its proper role not simply on the ground of the purity and eloquence of its verbal presentations to congregation and community, but on the basis of the quality of its shared life and the degree to which its response to the total human situation reflects the reality of the Gospel which it proclaims. To say that a seminary campus is a laboratory for such experience is perhaps to put it too much on an experimental and educational basis, but to say that this experience needs to be an integral part of the formative life of the embryonic pastor probably reflects the elemental needs which this process supplies. . . .

"These are holy tasks . . . because this is a community of those redeemed by the precious blood of Jesus Christ, who are held and constrained by that love and who now dedicate themselves in all that they are and in all that they do to their Redeemer. . . .

"And it is in that fervent conviction and in the warmth and in the intimacy of our mutual resolve to do all to God's greater glory, that we now invoke the presence and blessing of Almighty God, in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Ghost!"