

Berthold von Schenk: Out of Step or Before His Times?

Paul Robert Sauer

In the movie *Valkyrie*, actor Tom Cruise plays Colonel Claus von Stauffenberg, a leader of the German resistance. His full name is Claus Philipp Maria Schenk Graf von Stauffenberg. He was a cousin of Berthold von Schenk, or according to his full name, Berthold Friedrich Ernst Freiherr Schenk zu Schwinsberg. Both Berthold and Claus are descended from the same landed German nobility.

Mention of this common ancestry is how Berthold, or "Sammy," as he was known to friends and colleagues, begins his autobiography, not out of a sense of arrogance, although von Schenk was never accused of being humble, but out of a sense of who he was: a noble man with a noble cause, who knew what was right and acted decisively on it, even in the face of opposition in whatever form it took. It is a testament to his charisma, his nobility; nearly everyone who came into contact with him has a von Schenk story to tell. For example, Alberta, a young schoolgirl, who was singled out by name for not paying attention during a feast day Eucharist service at the school, to this day can remember the message of the remainder of the sermon.

Another example is when a young Presbyterian named Frank Hordich went into von Schenk's office during Christmas of 1942 to ask when he could marry a young parishioner of his named Elsa. Von Schenk pulled out his calendar and told him, "January 30 is open. Tell Elsa you will be married then, and that it will be a Eucharist service." They were married on that day, and Frank and Elsa remained faithful members not only of Our Saviour but of the congregation's leadership until their respective passings in recent years.

A third example concerns Sal, the barber who set up shop across the street, who remembers von Schenk's outrage when the community association shut down the kiosk of a blind man named Michael who worked across the street from the school. Von Schenk took it upon himself to set up a new kiosk which was connected to the school's heat and electricity. When the community board tried to shut down the kiosk for violating city zoning laws by being too close to the school, von Schenk's

Paul Robert Sauer is the Pastor of The Lutheran Church and School of Our Saviour in The Bronx, New York, and Associate Editor of Lutheran Forum.

response was to tell the local board to let him know when they were coming so that he could be there with as many reporters as possible to raise a big stink about the city's eviction of a blind man. Every year until Michael died, the church would get a threatening letter from the city. Every year von Schenk called their bluff. Even more amazing, Michael was robbed only once in all his years of working the kiosk near Our Saviour. People knew better than to mess with Berthold von Schenk.

I. Some Parish Experiences

Von Schenk took equally bold positions within the local church. When the fellow Lutheran parishes of the Bronx balked at starting a parochial school during World War II, von Schenk raised the money himself by issuing bonds to parishioners and neighbors. When building materials were in short supply and the church was having difficulty getting permits to build during the war, he miraculously had a chance encounter with the brother-in-law of FDR, who saw to it that Our Saviour received the permits they needed and even pitched in some left-over building materials from the newly constructed VA hospital. The school was the only non-war-related building constructed in New York during World War II. Mayor LaGuardia was so impressed by the school and von Schenk that LaGuardia later appointed von Schenk to serve on the New York City School Board—an unthinkable proposition today. Even more unthinkable, this pastor of a parochial school was made chairman of the board after a year. He served a total of seventeen years on the board.

Parochial school was a key component to von Schenk's sacramental parish renewal. The school he founded at Our Saviour was based on the parish liturgical life with the Eucharist regularly celebrated within the school. The first class of the school, which met in the church basement, quickly outgrew it. Robert Christian wrote that so great was the priority of the school that in December of 1950, in order to make way for school classrooms, Our Saviour—the high church—moved down to the basement of the school building, since by law classrooms could no longer be below ground.¹ To this day the church remains “underground.”

Von Schenk was notorious for being difficult to work with. In the parish, a typical von Schenk church council meeting would involve him sitting quietly throughout the whole meeting until it waned on into the late hours of the evening. As the weary council members would prepare to bring their meeting to a close and go home to loved ones, von Schenk

¹ All quotations from Robert Christian come from e-mails to the author dated 1/9/09 and 1/17/09.

would throw down a bill on the table: "The water heater at the parsonage broke last week. The church has spent \$200 to replace it. You need to find that \$200." Too tired to argue, and too possessed of respect for von Schenk, the council would assent to his request.

Von Schenk took an equally forceful and prescient position on racial integration. A church council member of Our Saviour recalls von Schenk talking very early on about how important it was that the school offer scholarships to people of color, and very early on Our Saviour did. The Piepkorn papers reveal that he had done the same thing in providing scholarships for black students to attend a sports camp on campus while he was at the seminary. It should not be all that surprising that theologians who possessed a deep understanding about full eucharistic participation in the body of Christ would press for full inclusion of all races in the church—a full functioning of the body of Christ.

Von Schenk's prescient understanding bore much fruit. Our Saviour racially integrated at a very early date and, even in the midst of the racial tensions of the 1970s, never experienced the kind of crisis that the surrounding community did as The Bronx burned. Black students who enrolled at Our Saviour would later go on to positions of prominence, including Cassandra Hayes, who would be the first black woman to be named Ms. Teen New York in 1980. Today, the parish serves over twenty different nationalities, and the school serves a population that is ninety-nine percent non-white.

Robert Christian, who came to Our Saviour in 1950 as a young teacher fresh out of Concordia Teachers College, River Forest (now Concordia University Chicago), recalls that when he asked the placement director if there was anything special he needed to know about going to Our Saviour, he was told, "We've been sending teachers there and no one can get along with the pastor." After seventeen years at Our Saviour, Robert Christian would go on to Hong Kong International School (HKIS) with the skills that he had learned from von Schenk and turn it into one of the most successful of the Missouri Synod's international school ministries. He was soon followed as headmaster at HKIS by Our Saviour teachers Dave Rittmann and later Jim Handrich.

Von Schenk held called teachers in the highest regard. Robert Christian relates: "The first week in town Dr. von Schenk took me to a pastor's retreat with the sharing of the Eucharist. He also told me that my installation, with the laying on of hands, was 'ordination' into the ministry of the church, a huge understanding for me of my ministry." At least early on, called teachers were recognized as deacons of the church.

In fact, some of us wore clerical collars while serving. I had my own cassock and surplice, and one year, possibly several, some of us wore cassock and surplice and a deacon's stole as we participated in the processional at the huge outdoor Reformation service at Concordia College, Bronxville. I recall, too, that this raised a few eyebrows among some of the pastoral clergy, but to a great degree many people expected different things to happen at Our Saviour.

Later, as the number of called teachers increased, "Teacher" became the preferred title with pastor or reverend reserved for the pastoral clergy. The practice, however, of called teachers serving as assisting ministers, and reading the Gospel (the deacon's role in the church service), remains to this day at Our Saviour.

Von Schenk's self-confidence allowed him to surround himself with excellent men. His first headmaster of the school at Our Saviour was a towering athletic man named Otto Prokopy, who was part of a prominent Missouri Synod family in the Atlantic District. Prokopy, like Robert Christian, had a multiplicity of tasks, including playing the organ. Robert Christian remembers:

I still have my original call document, approved by OS January 18, 1949. In addition to being a teacher in the school, I would be asked to: Teach music in the school and church, do choir work, etc. I soon found out that the "etc" which bore the imprint of Berthold von Schenk turned out to include doing the youth work in the parish, directing the girls' choir, playing the organ, heading up the Sunday School, coaching church sports teams, etc. I also regularly served as a deacon in the worship services.

Prokopy had come to Our Saviour from St. Stephen's Lutheran School, where in 1909 he taught a young O.P. Kretzman and his brother.

Prior to his own arrival at Our Saviour, in 1936, von Schenk had tried to issue a call to Arthur Carl Piepkorn to serve as an associate at the church he was serving in Hoboken, New Jersey. Piepkorn would provide pastoral coverage while von Schenk was in Europe, and the hope was that they would be able to figure out the finances to keep both of them when von Schenk returned. Instead, Piepkorn ended up working with Walter A. Maier at the Lutheran Layman's League. But Piepkorn's letter to his fiancée Miriam provided some insight into the type of ministry von Schenk was engaged in, even in his early days:

The church is very high and (*entre nous*) almost crazy, but the sacramental life, seems to be genuine, and it's a center for quite a bit of mission work, including a very active Italian mission. There are some thirty or forty

nationalities represented in the Sunday school, including the Scandinavian and Chinese.²

One who did accept the call to serve with von Schenk was Glenn Stone, a graduate of Augustana Seminary, who taught religion on the faculty of Our Saviour along with von Schenk. Stone would serve as the longtime editor of *Una Sancta* magazine before becoming the editor of *Lutheran Forum* and then of the predecessor to the ELCA's version of the *Lutheran Witness*, *The Lutheran*. Countless other pastors who served in various capacities at Our Saviour over the years were all trained, as with the teachers, and then were sent out to serve as leaders in churches and schools around the world. That alone is a powerful testament to the legacy of Berthold von Schenk.

II. Von Schenk's Catholicity in Worship

I will leave behind the historical remembrances in the hope that they have given at least a little insight into who von Schenk was, so that you can understand why his theology often took the form that it did. He was a man who was out of step for The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod of his time because he was a man from a different time—a time when there was an interest in the catholicity of the church. The issues that concerned him most are the issues that still affect Lutheranism today. His voice is a welcome mediating position within the often polarizing political world of The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod today.

In a 1958 article in *Una Sancta*, von Schenk outlined the problem that his participation in liturgical renewal was hoped to address. It could have been written today:

The liturgical revival in American Lutheranism had its beginning because of a great need. There was, and still is, the tragic state of the worship life of the Church and the neglect over many years of the sacramental life, which has produced a spiritual vacuum. There is a sad disorder in devotional life. Added to this is the confusion over the answer to such questions as, What is the Church? And What is the office of the holy ministry? The fact is that Lutheranism, to a large extent, neglected its religious apparatus.³

It was for this reason that von Schenk founded the Society of St. James and began publishing the journal *Pro Ecclesia Lutherana*, to provide an avenue for information on liturgical renewal, resources for carrying out the

² "Oct. 5, 1936 Piepkorn Letter to Miriam" in the Piepkorn Papers, ELCA Archives.

³ Berthold von Schenk, "The Liturgical Revival in the Lutheran Church of America," *Una Sancta* (Advent 1958), 10.

renewal, and a yearly liturgical conference to bring together folks with similar interests and goals.

Von Schenk's interest in liturgical renewal began innocently enough:

The primary reason that I introduced ceremonies, liturgical vestments, and so forth, was not because I thought they were intrinsically important — their introduction had the purpose of bringing color and beauty into the lives of people who lived in the ugly environment of the slums. Why should the Church not be concerned about beauty? Most of my members belonged to the disinherited class; there was no beauty in their environment. By nature I am not a ceremonialist and ritualist, yet there must be form. It was natural that I should give thought to the form of the liturgy. I had to give my people beauty of form and worship, but sadly, this was misjudged by others.⁴

Von Schenk's concern for beauty required a commitment to excellence in matters of worship. His wife Cornelia (Nelly) was noted for having a beautiful operatic voice, which she frequently employed in the liturgical service of the church. On Christmas Eve, von Schenk would routinely invite Shakespearean actor Maurice Barret to perform a reading of the Christmas Gospel. In an article titled "Blueprint for a Catholic Parish" he wrote:

Church leaders have often faced the problem of making worship attractive to people. This was the problem of the author of Hebrews. . . . It was the task of the author of Hebrews to encourage church attendance. . . . There were signs of spiritual decay and a lack of heroic courage to confess the faith. It was high time that they should realize the importance of the church service and their altar. Therefore the author told them that their congregation had a part in the heavenly worship.⁵

The solution to church growth, for von Schenk, involved educating Christians about their worship:

It is not only important to get people to come to church, but they must know why they should come to the church services. The answer, "To hear the word of God," will certainly not be adequate enough to ring true. If they do not know what the service really means, their attendance has little validity.⁶

⁴ Berthold von Schenk, *Lively Stone: The Autobiography of Berthold von Schenk* (New York: ALPB Books, 2006), 47.

⁵ Berthold von Schenk, "Blueprint for a Catholic Parish," *Una Sancta* (Visitation 1958), 5.

⁶ Von Schenk, "Blueprint," 10.

Misunderstanding would follow von Schenk's participation in liturgical renewal throughout his life. In describing the purpose of *Una Sancta* in 1955, he wrote:

Much misunderstanding has arisen through the actions of some persons who identify themselves with the liturgical movement and then give the impression that this revival is centered upon externals. In fact, the liturgical revival is not primarily interested in forms and ceremonies as such, but rather about the theology of true worship. Truly liturgical men are as much opposed to the so-called "ecclesiastical dressmakers" who insist on performing rites and ceremonies ad infinitum without a realization of the theology behind such ceremonies, as they are to the rationalists who believe that Christian faith is solely an intellectual experience. To the "dressmakers" in the Church, the chancel becomes a kind of Mars Hill instead of a Holy of Holies, and worship and belief are two unrelated departments.⁷

Frustrated with the direction that the Society of St. James was headed, von Schenk resigned from it and later noted that "it had served a good purpose but managed to get a bad name. It was like a bad dog—the only cure is to shoot him."⁸ Unfortunately, von Schenk would throughout his life have positions of the wider liturgical renewal movement unfairly attributed to him, which would serve to diminish recognition of his own theology and contribution to liturgical renewal.

For von Schenk, liturgical renewal was to be at its core sacramental. He was a leading proponent for reinstitution of the Rite of First Communion, weekly communion, and communion at the feast day services of the church. In his 1957 article for *Una Sancta*, he argued for the separation of First Communion from Confirmation by agreeing with Adolf Stoecker, who, in words that anyone who has tried to teach confirmation to junior high students can appreciate, wrote: "Confirmation is an extended suicide attempt of the Evangelical Churches."⁹

In the place of this failing approach, von Schenk began his catechetical instruction with Baptism, designing the Lively Stones Confirmation curriculum, and later a Lively Stones First Communion curriculum, to help the child understand who he already is through Baptism.

⁷ Berthold von Schenk, "Una Sancta—The Burden and the Obligation," *Una Sancta* (Lententide 1955), 5.

⁸ Von Schenk, *Lively Stone*, 50.

⁹ Berthold von Schenk, "Confirmation and First Communion," *Una Sancta* (Pentecost 1957), 3.

The insistence that a child must be instructed and confirmed before it can receive Holy Communion is a denial of the doctrine of free grace and therefore the material principle of Lutheranism, Justification by Faith. It has the odor of semi-pelagianism. Luther calls infant baptism God's most wonderful sermon on grace. Why then deny this grace to the child in Holy Communion. Only he is worthy who believes the words, "given and shed for the remission of sins," not he who has finished a course of instruction.

How can man make himself worthy? How old must a child be to believe that God so loved the world that he gave His only begotten Son? How old must a child be to realize that Jesus is present in the bread and wine, and how old must a child be to believe that Christ died, shed His Blood, and gave his Body for the remission of sins? And also how old must a child be to know that it is wrong to lie, to steal, or to commit other sins?¹⁰

The age for von Schenk turned out to be age eight. It should be noted that the Rite of First Communion began with private confession and absolution at the altar rail before the service.

In 1959 von Schenk wrote an article in *Una Sancta* entitled "Christmas Echoes," in which he took LCMS president John Behnken to task for writing in an article on the Liturgical Controversy that "the liturgy is an adiaphoron."¹¹ Von Schenk responded:

An adiaphoron is something one can do or not do—it makes little difference. Every catechumen in the Lutheran Church knows that the Liturgy is the work of the saints in obedience to the Lord's Command, "Do this in remembrance of me." Every Lutheran knows that in the Liturgy Christ is in reality present and that the Liturgy is the reliving of the life of Christ in the Church Year. He also knows that the source of Christian life, and the life of the congregation is in the Liturgy. He knows that the Lutheran Church in its Confessions "maintained the mass," even "with all its ceremonies." They also know that this is the Communion of Saints, the Church. How sad churchmen must be when in an official publication of the Church the Liturgy is called an "adiaphoron."¹²

The article would offer criticism of churches which hold Christmas Eve services without the Eucharist. Even then von Schenk called the Eucharist the solution for "re-Christianizing Christmas" in the face of growing secularization.

Now the neglect of the Holy Mystery at Christmas time is not something which one can be indifferent. It indicates a serious problem, a lack of understanding of the Incarnation. "The Word was made flesh." . . . It is

¹⁰ Von Schenk, "Confirmation," 4.

¹¹ Berthold von Schenk, "Christmas Echoes," *Una Sancta* (Holy Week 1959), 7.

¹² Von Schenk, "Christmas Echoes," 7.

true that the Incarnation happened once, but it is also true that the Incarnation continues. The presence of this great act of salvation is in God's Mysteries, the Word and Sacraments."¹³

For von Schenk, both the marriage rite and funerals were to be Divine Services of Holy Communion. To teach his congregation, he created a little publication called "Holy Communion on the Day of Marriage," which contained the Rite of Marriage and a brief introduction on how marriage is a model of Christ and the church. The introduction concludes:

Husband and wife are united in Christ. That is most perfect when they both receive Holy Communion. If they continue to receive Christ in the Holy Communion faithfully and regularly their earthly fellowship and life will become impenetrated with heavenly love and life, such as exists between Christ and the Church.¹⁴

For funerals, the Eucharist was essential because it was where the grieving would go to meet their loved ones: Christians do not go to cemetery grave stones to meet their deceased loved ones. They meet them at the altar of the Lord.

Von Schenk had little patience for the objections of those who raised the pragmatic problems—what to do with the large presence of non-Lutherans, the practicality of communing large numbers of people on Christmas Eve, and the like. Theology took precedence over externals. Von Schenk used Acts 2:42 as a model for what the church does in worship: "teaching of the Apostles, breaking of bread, and fellowship," and the Confessions themselves which knew of no other service for the church than the Mass. Under von Schenk, and yet today, Our Saviour never has a service of the church without Eucharist, and it was and is the pastor's responsibility to lead this.

In his "Blueprint of the Catholic Parish," von Schenk wrote:

Only if the pastor offers the full service of Word and Sacrament can he honestly insist that people come to the service and not forsake the assembling of themselves together. Church members who have this concept of the church do not have to be coerced into church attendance, nor will they get the idea that church attendance is a good deed which merits the reward of God. How incongruous it is, therefore, for a religious denomination to claim purity of doctrine and yet pass by the sacramental life.¹⁵

¹³ Von Schenk, "Echoes," 6.

¹⁴ Berthold von Schenk, *Holy Communion on the Day of Marriage*.

¹⁵ Von Schenk, "Blueprint," 9.

To this he adds the warning: "Of course, the pastor should have the security of knowing what he is talking about."¹⁶

III. Comments on The Lutheran Church – Missouri Synod

It was this frustration with the official church regarding the reintroduction of the sacramental life of the church that would lead von Schenk to offer some of his more colorful criticisms of The Lutheran Church – Missouri Synod and its leaders:

It is amazing that a church body like the Missouri Synod which prides itself on purity of doctrine has bastardized its official service. . . . The church which neglects her liturgy of Word and Sacrament is just as bad as the Western Church during the godless, superstitious Gothic period. . . . It is almost impossible to try to understand the attitude of Missouri which claims to be so concerned about the pure Gospel and yet tenaciously holds to a Biblicism which neglects the clear teachings and instruction Christ gave to his Church. To substitute ritualism for the spirit of the liturgy is a deadly sin; this, along with moralism and creedalism, is more dangerous than the sale of indulgences.¹⁷

This helps to provide context for von Schenk's criticism of Luther's debate with Zwingli at the Marburg Colloquy in his autobiography.¹⁸ It was not as if in this one case von Schenk denied the importance of the real presence; he did after all write a book on the subject called *The Presence*.¹⁹ It was because the result of Luther's position led to a rationalization of the Mysteries of God which stripped them of their very life. The doctrine was protected, but the soul was lost. For von Schenk, the cure was worse than the disease, and the disease had taken root in Missouri:

It took me a long time to define my attitude toward traditional Missourianism, or Waltherianism. After I had my "spiritual measles" and

¹⁶ Von Schenk, "Blueprint," 9.

¹⁷ Von Schenk, *Lively Stone*, 132.

¹⁸ "The most stupid thing which Luther let himself in for was the Colloquy in Marburg with Ulrich Zwingli. How much time and thought has been wasted by insisting on absolute truth in dogmas! Luther fell into that trap in his controversy with Zwingli and split the Reformation. Zwingli had a much deeper understanding of the liturgy than we give him credit for, and his liturgy is far superior to that of Luther. The argument of *dies bedeutet und dies ist* (this represents and this is) was sheer nonsense. In scientific language *bedeutet* and *ist* are the same thing. Luther was fighting windmills, and his position, 'Ihr habt einen anderen Geist als wir,' was a tragic statement." *Lively Stone*, 126.

¹⁹ Berthold von Schenk, *The Presence: An Approach to the Holy Communion* (New York: E. Kaufmann Inc., 1945). A reprinted edition of *The Presence* will be available from ALPB Books in the spring of 2010.

came to the realization of the significance of *mysterion*, I finally found peace theologically. At the same time, however, I came to realize why the Missouri theologians have so opposed liturgical theology. Many Missourians were quite angry with me when I tried to tell them that Missouri Theology is most rationalistic. I found their doctrine-righteousness just as obnoxious as works-righteousness, perhaps more so.²⁰

Von Schenk saw the common Missouri Synod assumption—if pure doctrine is defended and promoted then God will bless the church for what it was—a faulty theology of glory. The incessant quest for pure doctrine at the expense of everything else, including the mystery of God, was not the solution to Missouri's woes. It was part of the problem. Von Schenk had no problem, then, criticizing Pieper's showpiece dogmatics, or taking other prominent Missouri theologians to task. This is not to say that von Schenk did not have an understanding of the importance of doctrine in the life of the church. He simply rejected the idea that it was the central focus or reason the church existed, or even that pure doctrine was a mark of the church. He states:

The marks of the church are 1. Baptism into Christ—his life, death and resurrection; 2. The meeting of those who have been baptized into Christ; 3. The preaching of the Gospel that God was in Christ reconciling the world with Himself; and 4. The gathering of God's people at his table. Furthermore, the mark of the church is the ordained pastor, presbyter, or bishop. The definition of the Church was stated by the post-Apostolic Fathers: "The Church is the Eucharistic Community, under the direction of the bishop (pastor), to manifest the total presence of Christ." Walther neglected the true marks of the Church and substituted creedalism, moralism, and ritualism.²¹

Missouri has taken the easy way out—its first commandment is "Thou shalt not think." Missouri's sin has been that it has substituted "pure dogmas" for faith, and substitutes have been the sin of organized Christianity down through the centuries. Dogmaticians like Walther have been the blight of the Missouri Synod. Walther's twenty-five theses are a good example: more theological nonsense, they became a "Bible" in the Missouri Synod, and Synod will never recover from this tragedy. Walther, who can be called "The father of the Missouri Synod," did not recognize the Holy Spirit as the prime renewer and theologian of the Church. Walther was as much an anti-Holy Spirit as the Council of Trent which produced the Roman Church. Waltherian theology took the Synod out of history, as did the Council of Trent the Roman Church. Missouri and

²⁰ Von Schenk, *Lively Stone*, 94.

²¹ Von Schenk, *Lively Stone*, 96.

Rome are first cousins — two church bodies without a history, for history is concerned not solely with the past but also with a vision of the future. The council of Vatican II recognized this and at least tacitly confessed it. The Missouri Synod has not been willing to make a similar confession.²²

If his assessment of Walther and the Missouri Synod seems particularly harsh, remember that von Schenk stressed how the Spirit worked through Word and Sacrament. Walther and others had done the theologically unthinkable in allowing the separation of the Sacrament from the service of the Word, elevating one at the expense of the other. Walther had, in essence, truncated the source of God's Spirit and life for the church.

Von Schenk does, however, have some positive comments about the Missouri Synod:

I could give the toast, "My Mother the Missouri Synod— Long may she live; damn the old bitch!" She deserves this toast and yet even a bitch can give birth to something. There are those who be named, "The son of bitch of the Missouri Synod." All religious church bodies have earned the title "bitch" but Missouri is still the least offensive. Even though some must accept that their mother is a bitch, they know that they can't make her grave. I guess there is an instinct in all of us—I love the old bitch Missouri and owe her much.²³

If one would compare it with the school system, Missouri makes a good elementary and prep school, but it can't be an ideal university. Where there is no freedom and catholic spirit there can be no inner growth. One should never build a fence around the Holy Spirit for He is the Spirit of freedom, but this is what so many theologians have done in the Missouri Synod.²⁴

As von Schenk neared the end of his life in 1972, he set about to writing an autobiography, which would remain at Concordia Historical Institute until Pastors C. George Fry and Joel Kurz would edit it for publication as *Lively Stone* in 2006. Although he was aloof from the politics of the Missouri Synod, von Schenk's remarks about the ongoing controversies that had erupted in the synod reveal where his sympathies lay:

Think of the current tragic situation in the Missouri Synod. A new president is elected and all he could produce was a translation of Martin

²² Von Schenk, *Lively Stone*, 98.

²³ Von Schenk, *Lively Stone*, 101. [Although we do not agree with the specific language used by von Schenk here, we are respecting the author's choice to include it as a historically accurate way of capturing von Schenk's attitude. The Editors]

²⁴ Von Schenk, *Lively Stone*, 102.

Chemnitz. While Rome is burning, the president translates Chemnitz—a museum theologian. . . . But the greatest tragedy was the election of Dr. Preus, for under his rule the Missouri Synod has become a Protestant sect, a chop-suey of Pietism and doctrine-righteousness. . . . I consider President Preus an antichrist and heresy-hunter; I know his name in the future will be uttered only in contempt. Synod will very likely not survive him!²⁵

The feeling was apparently mutual. Preus had previously declared that “there were two cancers in the Missouri Synod: von Schenk and Scharlemann.”²⁶

IV. A Parish Pastor among the Laity

More than all of these things, however, von Schenk was a pastor dearly loved by his parishioners. Though demanding of those with whom he worked, he was generous of himself and his time to a fault. Every Sunday involved a spaghetti dinner at the parsonage where all kinds of “strays” from church and school would gather together for a meal. Robert Christian remembers that when he first came to Our Saviour in 1950, his starting salary was only \$2200 for the whole year. Von Schenk surprised him by arranging for him to fly home to Chicago to see his parents and his fiancée Arleen, who was teaching in Iowa. The flight, of course, was on December 25, “not before Christmas Eve as the December 24 Christ-Mass was imperative.” He still has the ticket stub made out to the “Rev. Robert Christian.”

At his retirement in 1961, the congregation gave von Schenk as a farewell gift a trip to the Middle East. He continued to split time between Our Saviour and the congregation that he had founded near the family farm in upstate New York until his death in 1974. In his later years, he began to suffer from dementia. A number of parishioners can remember the final sermon he preached at Our Saviour, where about halfway through his sermon he lost his place and began preaching the whole thing from the beginning. Mercifully, his son James, who had succeeded him at Our Saviour, went up into the pulpit and led his father down by the arm.

As a parish pastor, von Schenk got to put his theology into practice, which provided a helpful counterbalance to the often abstract world of academia. His theological work reached its apex in the “Kingdom Plan” that he developed. The Kingdom Plan was based on this simple rule: every parish must be the church. Word and Sacrament were to be the content of

²⁵ Von Schenk, *Lively Stone*, 103–104.

²⁶ Von Schenk, *Lively Stone*, 103–104.

every official meeting of the congregation. In short, the plan was based on this simple formula:

God would bless the congregation if the members worshipped faithfully by listening to the Word and receiving the Sacrament every Sunday. He would bless the congregation if the members adopted tithing as a way of life and brought their offering. God would bless the congregation if they prayed daily for the parish and members, and if the members of the congregation evangelized, God would also bless them.²⁷

Herb Kern, von Schenk's first vicar, remembers that over the course of his vicarage year he knocked on over two thousand doors in The Bronx as a part of the Kingdom Plan's evangelistic outreach. As von Schenk stated:

A new understanding has been given to witnessing and evangelization. The source of witnessing is the Liturgy. The royal priesthood which has learned the virtues of Jesus in the Liturgy (which is a reliving of His life) now shows forth these virtues to the world. They are now the "sent ones," who must continue to live the Liturgy, the life of Christ, in their daily tasks whatever they may be.²⁸

Central to the Kingdom Plan was an understanding of offering and Eucharist as sacrifice which did not typically find a receptive audience in the Missouri Synod.

I used the ancient Offertory Prayer of Hippolytus: "Here we offer ourselves, both in body and soul, for Thou hast redeemed us with Thy precious blood." We emphasized tithing and that the tithe should not be understood as the offering. The collection (or offering), the confession of sins, the Creed, and offertory prayer bring us to the highpoint of the liturgy and together, compose the Offering in the liturgy. The offering in the liturgy has a much deeper meaning than the simple giving of the tithe, and sadly is much neglected.²⁹

In his "Blueprint for a Catholic Parish," von Schenk describes the Offering as the climax of the Liturgy:

The Offering of bread and wine was the symbol of the common life, reduced to its simplest expression. . . . Here we have the key to the kingdom, for this was the genius of the offering in the Old Testament—the burnt offering, the meal and oil offering, and even the peace offering—in which the offerer identified himself with the sacrifice on the altar. It was a giving of the common life at its best. If the member of the congregation understands the true meaning of the Offering the need of

²⁷ Von Schenk, *Lively Stone*, 65.

²⁸ Von Schenk, "Liturgical Revival," 13.

²⁹ Von Schenk, *Lively Stone*, 65.

the giver to give and his self-identification with the greatest Sacrifice ever brought, which is shown forth at the Eucharist, he will indeed fill the water pots to overflowing with what he has. He knows that here he cannot give a token gift, or participate in a mere collection when the plate is passed. It must always be an offering, and there can only be an offering in the true sense at the Eucharist.³⁰

Von Schenk was accused of Romanizing tendencies. Of the sacrificial language in the Offering of the Mass, he concedes:

I fully realize that this statement may be misunderstood. . . . We cannot repeat the sacrifice which Jesus offered on Calvary, but in the Communion we plead this sacrifice. . . . There is no new immolation of the Body of Christ, but a re-presentation of that immolation once for all accomplished at Calvary, a showing—*kataggelia* or *anamnesis*, a proclamation or memorial of the Lord's death until he comes. . . . At the mass we offer our possessions, our prayers, the bread and wine, and ourselves. Thus we identify ourselves at the Eucharist with the Sacrifice of Christ.³¹

Central to this understanding of eucharistic offering was First Peter 2:5-6: "Come to him, a living stone, though rejected by mortals yet chosen and precious in God's sight, and like living stones, let yourselves be built into a spiritual house, to be a holy priesthood, to offer spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ."

Here von Schenk found clarity in the midst of controversies that continue to rage in the Missouri Synod about the role of laity. Concerning laity, he states:

The Reformation rediscovered the royal priesthood, but it was lost. It has degenerated often into that incongruity, the layman, who tells his pastor off, or even into church boards, vestries and voters. The continuation of the Old Testament priesthood, fulfilled by the great High Priest, is in the royal priesthood, and its participation in the Liturgy. Without the Mass there can be no priesthood functioning in this sense. For this reason the sacrificial thought was basic in the early liturgies. The church of the Middle Ages created a new kind of priesthood, utterly foreign to the spirit of the early church. The Reformation Church quickly followed this error and created a hierarchy of theologians (for it was much more important to have a system of doctrines than to maintain the full Lutheran Mass).³²

Their most important function is to offer spiritual sacrifices. This can be done particularly in the Liturgy of Word and Sacrament. This coming together of the saints, "about the Holy" is the center of the life of the

³⁰ Von Schenk, "Blueprint," 11.

³¹ Von Schenk, *The Presence*, 17.

³² Von Schenk, "Blueprint," 11.

church. This is the Communion of Saints, and in a special sense, the Church, those who are called out of their daily life to perform a public function.³³

The role of the pastor, then, is to help the baptized fulfill their baptismal callings as priests. Von Schenk wrote:

Some people have developed rather strange ideas about the work of a pastor who tries to apply the spirit of the liturgy consistently. They vision him as one who steepes himself in "Liturgical lore" and thus becomes an expert on what is "right and proper," including colors, vestments, paraments, ceremonial. In reality, those who have the spirit of the liturgy have a far different orientation. They have been taken up in the agonizing struggle of the church to be what it is. They are vitally concerned about Christian education, for they realize that children must be trained, not only in a set of doctrines to be accepted with the mind, but more particularly must they be trained to be royal priests with mind and body and heart and soul. . . . The truly liturgical pastor carries on not a one-sided ministry, but one that is catholic and inclusive, both in terms of people and of emphasis, because he recognizes that the Church is the Body of Christ, and not all members have the same function.³⁴

In his understanding of the relationship between clergy and laity, von Schenk was a man before his time, who is still relevant to the issues faced not only in wider Christendom but in von Schenk's own Missouri-Synod.

V. The Ongoing Relevance of von Schenk

It might be helpful to describe areas where I think von Schenk is still relevant for the Lutheran Church today. First, his liturgical approach, which is grounded in the Eucharist, provides a middle way between those who are liturgical dressmakers and those who believe liturgy is an adiaphoron. More importantly, it provides an opportunity for pastors to make the liturgy relevant (in the best sense of the word) in the lives of their parishioners. Second, von Schenk was post-dogmatic long before there was an "emergent church." But the great paradox is that his post-dogmatism is grounded in catholicity, and thus provides an opportunity for the Missouri Synod to move beyond a rigid dogmatism without giving up its catholicity. Third, although possessed of political views, von Schenk understood that the life of the congregation is where real renewal takes place. It did not matter to him who was in charge of the synod. His charge was to incorporate his people into the sacramental life of the church. There,

³³ Berthold von Schenk, *Lively Stones Confirmation Curriculum* (New York: Our Saviour School Press), Introduction, 6.

³⁴ Von Schenk, "Burden and Obligation," 7-8.

and only there, real denominational change can take place. Fourth, he had a clear understanding of offices and roles within the church. He was not afraid to empower those around him to do their God-given tasks. It did not diminish his standing as a pastor to have laity who were priests; in fact, it gave him his identity. It did not diminish his authority to have called teachers take on appropriate ministerial (i.e., diaconal) roles. In fact, it provided great service to his ministry. Last, he provides a helpful counterbalance to the Missouri Synod's seemingly endless slide into Evangelical Protestantism:

The plan is simple: If a congregation continues in the teaching and witness of the Apostles, the simple preaching of Christ crucified and risen from the dead; in the prayers and praises of the Liturgy; in the breaking of bread and in this fellowship, great gifts are bestowed. These gifts according to St. Paul, flow out of the meeting in Jesus' Name (1 Cor. 12). The greatest of all gifts, love, has its fountainhead in the Body of Christ. St. Paul sums this all up in Romans 12:6-8 "Having gifts that differ according to the grace given to us, let us use them; if prophecy, in proportion to our faith; if service, in our serving; he who teaches, in his teaching; he who exhorts, in his exhortation; he who contributes, in liberality; he who gives aid, with zeal; he who does acts of mercy, with cheerfulness." This is the catholic parish, for it is centered in the person of Jesus Christ—through the font, the altar and the pulpit.³⁵

Von Schenk is rarely pictured in photographs without his characteristic pipe. It is only a slight exaggeration to say that von Schenk would have been hauled off to prison for attempting something like this in smoke-free New York City today. In later years, the story is told that von Schenk used to stay in the sacristy smoking his pipe for the first part of the service, allowing the deacon to lead up until the sermon. When it came time for the sermon he would emerge from the sacristy and into the pulpit through a great cloud of smoke!

Of course, times change, and Our Saviour is now a smoke-free campus by New York State law. Times change, but the sacramental worship and its underlying principles of Eucharist and Offering as providing an identity for the church as the body of Christ remain. What changes, however, is the culturally contextual implementation.

Today Our Saviour Lutheran School serves a population that is ninety-five percent non-Lutheran. Two-thirds of our students come to Our Saviour unbaptized, with over half of them not having a church home. In that context, chapel services with the Eucharist would be out of place. But

³⁵ Von Schenk, "Blueprint," 12-13.

the principles which led von Schenk to hold the Eucharist in the service remain. The focus of my preaching and catechetical efforts is baptismal: to help the child to know who he is through Baptism—a priest before God with priestly privileges and responsibilities. The challenge with von Schenk, as with all great theologians, is to avoid the dreamy world of reprimatination, in which if you just do things exactly as he did them you will get the same results. Von Schenk himself, I believe, would call such an approach foolhardy. Instead, I believe, he would take a puff from his pipe and amidst the heavenly smoke call us to embrace the Mystery of God in the Mysteries that the Body of Christ may be the Body of Christ, and the priests of God—his lively stones who have allowed themselves to be built into a spiritual house—may offer their spiritual sacrifices to God through Jesus Christ.



Berthold von Schenk