

For the

# LIFE of the WORLD

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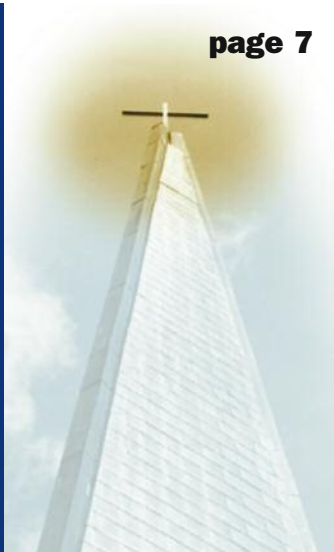
  
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**By the Rev. Richard Nuffer, Supervisor of Vicarage, Dean of Assessment, Assoc. Prof. Pastoral Ministry & Missions at Concordia Theological Seminary**

You are a Christian—baptized soon after birth, raised in church each Sunday, active in your current congregation, perhaps even holding offices in the congregation, LLL, or LWML. You believe in the forgiveness of sins (including your sins) through Christ's atoning life, death, and resurrection. You believe that you bodily partake of Him in his holy supper. Yet you are troubled.

### 7 The Keys: An Identification Mark of the Church

**By the Rev. Terry Cripe, Pastor of Christ our Saviour Lutheran Church, Defiance, OH.**

Would you think it odd if I stood outside a hospital and asked those entering, "How do you know this is a hospital?" I could walk into ours and find a gift shop inside. Is the hospital's purpose to sell books, magazines and candy? I could go over to the hospital thrift shop and purchase a nice second-hand shirt. Is this the hospital's mission? Like many people in our community, I could go to the hospital's cafeteria for a tasty, inexpensive meal. Is this why the hospital exists? Obviously, none of these services is an identification mark of a hospital! Our Lutheran Confessions teach that the marks of the Church are the pure teaching of the Gospel and the administration of the Sacraments in accordance with that pure Gospel teaching (*Apology*, Articles VII and VIII: Of the Church).

### 10 "He's OK, They're OK"

**By the Rev. Larry S. Harvala, North Dakota District President, Fargo, ND.**

A common conversation among members of The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod might be: "What did you think of the pastor's sermon?" Sometimes the work pastors do is considered outstanding by their members. At other times, it is deemed to be downright deficient. Most of the time, however, it is just blandly "ok."

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## For the LIFE of the WORLD

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# Unlocking the



**Yes, you have a skeleton in your closet—something you have done, perhaps a long time ago, that is so sinful you don't even want to remember it. So horrid and wicked that you can't even tell your parents, your spouse, your best friend, your counselor or psychiatrist, or your pastor about it.**

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**Y**ou are a Christian—baptized soon after birth, raised in church each Sunday, active in your current congregation, perhaps even holding offices in the congregation, LLL, or LWML. You believe in the forgiveness of sins (including your sins) through Christ's atoning life, death, and resurrection. You believe that you bodily partake of Him in His Holy Supper.

Yet you are troubled—greatly troubled. You wake at night. Dark thoughts come without invitation into your mind at the strangest times. You find your mind drifting from things present to things past—to a scary and shameful past. Yes, you have a skeleton in your closet—something you have done, perhaps a long time ago, that is so sinful you don't even want to remember it. So horrid and wicked that you can't even tell your parents, your spouse, your best friend, your counselor or psychiatrist, or your pastor about it.

You put the corpse in the closet to hide it from the whole world. It has rotted, smelled, decayed, and simply stunk. Vermin have consumed its rotting flesh. And now, all that is left of it is the evidence of your sin—a skeleton which you do not wish to revisit.

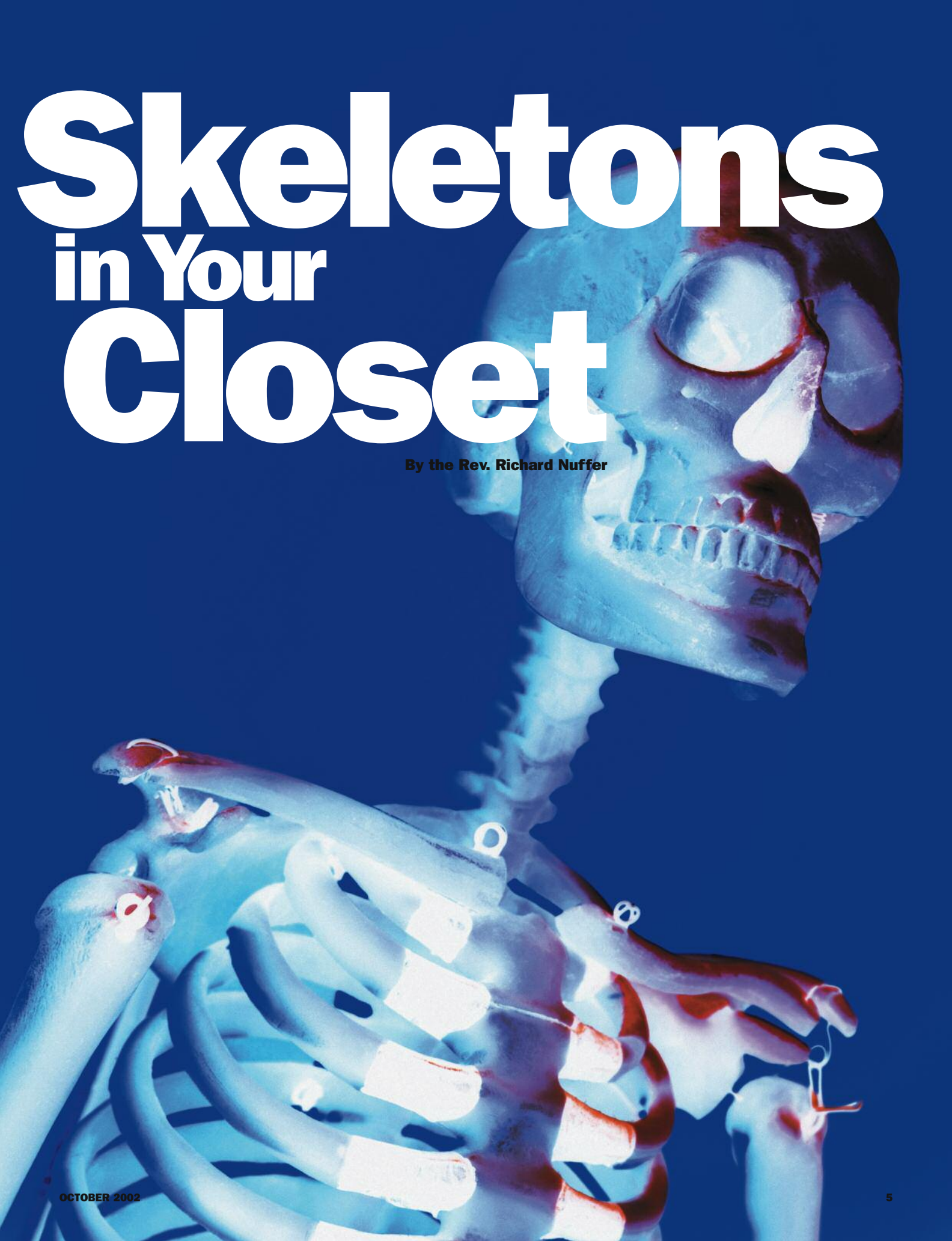
Your skeleton might be an extramarital affair or act of fornication. Or it might be one or more acts of theft, which you got away with and of which only you are aware. Or it might be the time that you totally lost your cool and blew up at your parents or your spouse. Or it might be the night you gambled away an entire paycheck. Or . . . or . . . or. The possibilities are as endless as God's Law is perfect. In any event, the skeleton in your closet is haunting you continually, relentlessly. You must have relief!

Fortunately, Christ has provided the Keys to unlock the skeleton in your closet. All of Christianity is ultimately about the forgiveness of sins—including the forgiveness of sins such as those locked in your closet. Not only does Christ bear your sins to the cross, but He keeps the very Law you violated—in your place. His obedience substitutes for your disobedience. His resurrection from the dead provides you with resurrection from imprisonment to the skeleton in your closet.

How does He do this, practically speaking? The Scriptures are clear. Christ on two occasions gave the church, through His apostles, the ability to forgive and retain sins. One was after Christ's question to Peter, "But who do you say that I am," to which Peter responded, "You are the Christ, the Son of the living God!" Jesus then said, "Blessed are you among men, Peter. Upon this rock (the confession of who Jesus was) I will build my church. Whatever sins you forgive are forgiven; whatever sins you retain are retained" (see Mt. 16). The other time was in the upper room after Jesus rose from the dead, when Jesus said essentially the same words, adding that the binding and loosing of sins by the apostles on behalf of the church would be just as if His Father in heaven had done those things (see Jn. 21).

# Skeletons in Your Closet

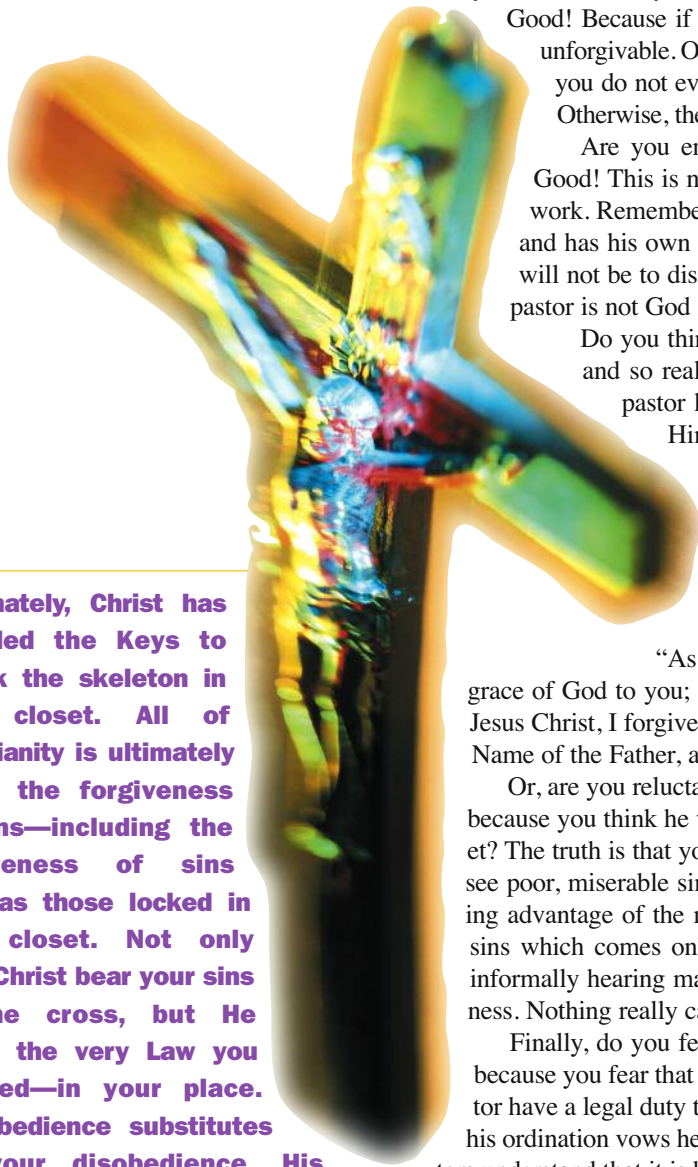
By the Rev. Richard Nuffer



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So, what is preventing you from going to your pastor to reveal to him the skeleton in your closet? Are you afraid that you have committed a sin that is unforgivable?

Good! Because if that is the question in your mind, your sin is certainly not unforgivable. Only sins of unbelief, where you reject Christ to the extent that you do not even think about Him or acknowledge Him are unforgivable.

Otherwise, there is no sin which is not covered by the blood of Christ!

Are you embarrassed about talking to your pastor about your sin?

Good! This is natural and means that your Christian conscience is hard at work. Remember, that your pastor bears the same human flesh that you do and has his own skeletons in his closet. Although the purpose of your visit will not be to discuss these, it might be helpful to remember this fact. Your pastor is not God incarnate—only Christ is!

Do you think that because of his humanity your pastor is just a man, and so really can't help you with your skeleton? Think again! Your

pastor holds a divinely established office—established by Christ

Himself. When the pastor speaks in accordance with the Word

of God, God Himself is speaking to you. Your pastor is not

just giving you his suggestions, his counsel, or his advice

(all of which he might rightly do), but he is actually

God's voice, bringing to you God's forgiveness of the

specific sins that comprise the skeleton in your closet.

That's why you can take such great comfort when he says,

“As a called and ordained servant of the Word, I announce the grace of God to you; and in the stead (place) and by the command of my Lord Jesus Christ, I forgive you all your sins (including the ones in your closet) in the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.”

Or, are you reluctant to see your pastor for private confession and absolution because you think he will think less of you because of the skeleton in your closet? The truth is that your pastor will probably think more of you! Pastors love to see poor, miserable sinners being forgiven! Pastors love to see parishioners taking advantage of the means of grace. Pastors love to deliver the forgiveness of sins which comes only from Jesus Christ! And pastors, through formally and informally hearing many confessions, have seen the full range of human sinfulness. Nothing really can surprise them!

Finally, do you fear talking to your pastor about the skeleton in your closet because you fear that he will reveal it to others? Fear not! Not only does the pastor have a legal duty to maintain confidentiality, but more importantly, as part of his ordination vows he has pledged never to reveal any sin confessed to him. Pastors understand that it is better for them to go to jail or even suffer death than reveal the sins of a penitent person. After all, Christ Himself puts away a confessed sin as east is from west. Forgiven sins are forgotten sins!

Well, what does it feel like to confess the skeletons in your closet to your pastor and to then receive God's forgiveness in Christ through the words of your pastor's mouth? It feels great! Perhaps the best word to describe forgiveness of a skeletal closet sin is “freedom.” You are freed from that sin! You have new life in Christ! Oh yes, occasional thoughts or images might pop into your mind, but you can say with confidence, “Get behind me Satan! I am forgiven for this sin. I have heard it from the mouth of my own pastor!”

Yes, as a Christian you can forgive your brother or sister of his or her sins against you. And you can also hear the general words of forgiveness spoken each Sunday by your pastor in the Divine Service. These are both true words of forgiveness for you. Christ is at work in them, for there is no forgiveness of any sort apart from Him. However, if there is a skeleton in your closet, visit your pastor for that “peace that passes all understanding”—the peace which comes from and is Christ Himself! Christ loves clean closets!

*The Rev. Richard Nuffer is Supervisor of Vicarage, Dean of Assessment, and Assoc. Prof. of Pastoral Ministry & Missions at Concordia Theological Seminary, Fort Wayne, Ind.*