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Contents

Page

EDITORIAL: Detroit Post Scripts 1

PROFESSOR D. HERMANN SASSE: CONGRATULATIONS FOR A SEPTUAGENERIAN 2

Heino O. Kadai, Professor, Department of Historical Theology

PROBLEMS IN ESCHATOLOGY: THE NATURE OF DEATH AND THE INTERMEDIATE STATE 8

Howard W. Tepker, Professor, Department of Systematic Theology

THE CHURCH AND POVERTY: FROM CONCERN TO ACTION 30

Henry J. Eggold, Professor, Department of Practical Theology

BOOK REVIEWS 36

BOOKS RECEIVED 51

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Professor D. Hermann Sasse:

Congratulations For A Septuagenerian

HEINO O. KADAI

IT WAS AN EVENT not soon forgotten when Professor D. Hermann Sasse, responding to an invitation of Dr. George Beto, then president of the seminary, appeared on the Springfield Seminary campus in the winter quarter of the 1961-62 school year. He came to teach in the field of historical theology and to offer a number of scholarly presentations to the seminary family.

Unassuming in manner and presence, sensitive to the feelings of others, a perfect gentleman at all times, the German-born Sasse, who now makes his home in South Australia, impressed students and faculty with his theological insight, confessional stance, and scholarly competence. Wrote Dr. J. A. O. Preus in *The Springfielder*: "*Veni, vidi, vici*. Seldom . . . have Caesar's famous words been more completely fulfilled than they were by Latin-German-Greek-Hebrew-quoting Hermann Sasse during his two-month stay in Springfield" (XXVI, no. 1, pp. 3f.).

To the very marrow of his bones Professor Sasse is a *Lutheran* theologian. His theological accents become quickly obvious to those fortunate to hear him lecture. In a characteristically Lutheran spirit his theology is strictly Christocentric. Steadfastly he stresses the presence of Jesus Christ in the Word of the Gospel and His Sacrament. According to him the church exists by the presence of Christ alone: *ubi Christus, ibi ecclesia*. The great truth which the Lutheran Church is privileged and responsible to proclaim is the sinner's justification *sola gratia, sola fide*. *Sola Scriptura* is the authority by which doctrine must be judged. Sasse once remarked that it is not the Lutheran liturgy, which he dearly loves, nor the Symbolical Books, in which his theology lives, that really count, but ultimately everything depends on the Gospel of the Scriptures. The moment the Lutheran church has ambitions of becoming something other than the stand on which the light of the Gospel is placed, it forfeits the right to exist.

Proceeding from the Christologically conceived vantage point of the authority of the divine Word and the real presence in the Sacrament, Dr. Sasse draws a rich and harmonious picture of biblical truth. His appreciation for the Lutheran doctrines of the church and the ministry, his emphasis on the work of the Holy Spirit, his eschatological orientation, and his deep appreciation for the heritage of Christian worship life deserve to be underscored. Particularly impressive is his emphasis on *theologia crucis* over against all forms of *theologia gloriae* when interpreting the life of the church and the destiny of the individual Christian.

Dr. Sasse's life and work distinguish him as a confessional theologian and a modern day confessor. His love for and commitment to the Lutheran Confessions are inspired by his devotion to sound biblical theology, not by a spirit of separatism. He insists that obedience to the Word of God requires confessional loyalty. To be true to its Lord, the Lutheran Church cannot accept any interpretation of the Word other than set forth in its Confessions. Of course the Confessions are for Lutherans *norma normata*, not *norma normans*. But because they are the correct theological exposition of the *norma normans*, the Holy Scriptures, they must neither be surrendered nor compromised.

As Dr. Sasse sees it, the nature of Lutheran confessionalism is in perfect harmony with genuine ecumenical concerns. The two Lutheran statements that 1) the Lutheran Church which is faithful to its Confession is the true church of Jesus Christ, and that 2) the church of Christ is not limited to the church of the Lutheran Confession are not paradoxical but genuinely ecumenical assertions about the doctrine of the church. He knows and believes that there is *one* Lord, *one* baptism, *one* church, and that the Son of God intercedes for us before His heavenly Father with the prayer "that they may all be one." But he also knows that there is *one* truth of the Gospel. He knows that the quest for ecumenicity cannot be pursued at any price. True unity is achieved only by the grace of God and in our Lord Jesus Christ when there is oneness in the understanding of what God's saving Gospel is and what He gives us in His Sacraments. Such unity of spirit is adequate but also necessary for ecumenism.

As a young theologian Sasse became involved in the ecumenical dialogue. He participated in the work of the Faith and Order endeavor, the Lutheran World Convention, and British-German Conference of Theologians. For a time he served as a member of the Continuation Committee and as Continental Secretary of the Faith and Order movement. He was entrusted with the editorial duties of the German edition of the Lausanne Report. With genuine joy he now remembers the personal encounters and ties with such ecumenical notables as Bishops Charles Henry Brent and William Temple. But inevitably the time arrived when he, true to his theological convictions, had to turn away from the main stream of the Protestant ecumenical revolution, becoming one of its persistent but responsible critics.

Sasse's confessional loyalty came to a crucial test in conjunction with the Confessing Church movement in National Socialist Germany. The victorious Nazi Party and the so-called German Christians promoted the dissolution of the German Evangelical Church Federation of 1922 and the formation of a single unified Protestant church, the German Evangelical Church (July 11, 1933), which would acknowledge the equality of the Lutheran, the Reformed, and the various Union Confessions. Sasse could not help but regard this as incompatible with confessional Lutheranism.

As the German Christians gained control of the German Evangelical Church (DEK) an evangelical counter-thrust in the form of the Confessing Church movement was born. Ignoring possible reprisals by the state, Sasse participated in the work of the Confessing Church, being one of the few professors of theology who dared to work for and attend meetings that led to Barmen. Soon, however, it became evident that the Confessional Front, under the leadership of Karl Barth and his friends, favored union between the Reformed and the Lutherans and was determined to work out a common evangelical confession with which to withstand the nationalistic and racist notions that were creeping into the DEK. It demanded courage and conviction on the part of Sasse to refuse to sign the Barmen Declaration (1934) and thus almost certainly alienate a significant segment of the Confessing Church in the face of the powerful common enemy, the state and its puppet church. Against tremendous odds he bore witness for Lutheran confessional loyalty.

Years later, after the Second World War, Sasse, again for confessional reasons, found it impossible to be brought into affiliation with the Evangelische Kirche in Deutschland (EKD) and the Vereinigte Evangelische Lutherische Kirche Deutschlands (VELKD). When the Lutheran territorial churches of Hanover and Bavaria became involved in their German ecumenical movement, he, as a member of the theological faculty of the University of Erlangen, found himself in the embarrassing position of being required to train young men for the ministry in a church that was, in his judgment, guilty of unionism. No alternative remained but to resign from the territorial church and to join a Free Church congregation (St. Martin's in Frankfurt). This meant also a resignation from his excellent teaching position at Erlangen (December 1, 1949). Again confessional loyalty had taken its toll.

Hermann Sasse's public stand for loyalty to the Lutheran Confessions is a matter of historical record (cf Arthur C. Cochrane, *The Church's Confession under Hitler*, 1962). What is perhaps less widely known, yet equally significant, is the fact that Sasse regards all theology as a confession. For him every great theological work is a confession. That is why he lectures with utter seriousness, carefully formulating his thoughts and expressing them with the pathos of a confessor who is willing to live and die by what he teaches. One gets the feeling that all his theology is worked out *coram Deo*.

To his penetrating theological insights and confessional orientation Sasse brings an impeccable scholarly competence. He handles the necessary philological and historical tools with the ease of a master craftsman. No doubt many a student, after listening to Sasse's lectures, wished that his biblical, ecclesiastical, and modern languages were in better shape. As a professional church historian who loves his calling he is fully at home in the history of Christian thought. When discussing a dogma he is likely to be in constant dialogue with the fathers and brethren of the total Christian heritage.

His favorites, however, are the early church fathers (Irenaeus, Athanasius, Augustine) and Luther. During the course of his studies he has mastered surprisingly varied aspects of church history. At ease in patristics and especially interested in the creedal and liturgical life of the early church, he has also established himself as a recognized authority in Luther studies. To this must be added his competence and first hand acquaintance with American Lutheranism, and a more than passing familiarity with the life and thought of the Roman Catholic Church.

The man whose theological profile was just sketched was born seventy years ago (July 17, 1895) at Sonnewalde, Niederlausitz, in Germany, in the modest home of a pharmaceutical chemist. He was the oldest in the family of two sons and three daughters. While attending schools in Mecklenburg, Luebeck, Breslau, and Berlin, he financed most of his education by scholarships. At the University of Berlin (1913-1916) he majored in classics and theology, his special interest being New Testament studies. At this time both Adolf Harnack and Karl Holl lectured in Berlin. Sasse studied history of the early church with the former and nineteenth century theology with the latter. Then the First World War interrupted his studies (1916-1918). The budding theologian became a common infantryman and later a corporal. The heated battles on the Western Front, in Flanders and France, and the rough life of the soldier—his feet still bear the marks of long marches—confronted him with the ultimate questions in a most personal way. Would his spiritual heritage stand the test of naked war and suffering? Said Sasse later: it was easier to live by Harnack's theology than to die by it.

War matures those whom it does not crush. In 1918 Sasse was back from war and struggling to continue his studies. After passing his first examination and becoming a candidate for the holy ministry he served a year of vicarage in Potsdam (1919). Then followed the final examination and ordination into the ministry (1920). The young pastor served parishes in Oranienburg (1921-1928) and Berlin (1928-1933). Both academic pursuits and personal life claimed part of the busy pastor's time. In 1923 he received the *lic. Theol.* degree for work on the *aion* and *kosmos* concepts. The following year he was married to Charlotte Naumann, a postmaster's daughter from Oranienburg. The newlywed struggled financially but built a happy home. The marriage was blessed with three children, two of whom survived (Wolfgang, b. 1928; and Hans Christoph, b. 1936). In September, 1925, he made his first trip to America on a scholarship extended to him by the International Missionary Council. He studied a year at the theological faculty of the Hartford Seminary Foundation in Connecticut and earned a Master of Sacred Theology degree for his research in the field of New Testament studies.

His call to St. Mary's congregation in Berlin brought him close to the University. He worked hard and enjoyed a sense of real accomplishment. These perhaps were the happiest years of his life.

An appointment as *Sozialpfarrer* for the church of Berlin (1928-1930) established a stimulating contact with the Christian labor leaders, local pastors, and laymen. The editorial duties for *Das Kirchliche Jahrbuch* (1931ff) kept him in touch with the academic community. Then on January 1, 1933 important news arrived. He was invited to join the theological faculty of the University of Erlangen as *professor extraordinarius* in the field of church history. He accepted. The university recognized his scholarly accomplishments by conferring on him the degree of doctor of theology (December, 1933). Sasse now counted as his colleagues such well known theologians as Professors Procksch, Strathmann, Preuss, Elert, Althaus and Ulmer.

The year 1933, as is well known, however, also signaled the rise to power of the National Socialists in Germany. Professor Sasse did not remain untouched by the life and struggles of the Christian church under Hitler's rule and its aftermath. Perhaps enough already has been said on the subject. The political and ecclesiastical power struggle and the constant threat to confessional Lutheranism in Nazi times drained much of the energy that under more favorable conditions might have been utilized for scholarly research and other positive pursuits.

After resigning from the faculty of the University of Erlangen, Sasse accepted a teaching position at the Immanuel Theological Seminary in North Adelaide, Australia, thousands of miles away from his native land. On September 11, 1949, he and his family arrived in Melbourne to make a new home in a strange land. Adjustments needed to be made, and some of them were not always easily achieved. The move to Australia, as it turned out, was more than Mrs. Sasse could handle. Her health deteriorated rapidly and she was forced to live the life of an invalid for many years. Dr. Sasse lost his life companion when she passed away in 1964.

Personal hardship and tragedy, however, did not break the spirit and vitality of Dr. Sasse. He dedicated himself to the service of the Lutherans in Australia, helping them to clarify their theological differences and lending a hand to their efforts towards fellowship (cf. Henry Hamann's article, "Efforts at Lutheran Union in Australia," in *The Springfielder*, XXVIII, no. 1, pp. 20-31). Dr. Sasse has also kept in close touch with confessionally oriented Lutheran churches in the United States and elsewhere. Most of the leaders of world Lutheranism are his personal acquaintances. His friendship with Dr. John W. Behnken is valued and respected by the long-time president of The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod. Twice he has been asked to be guest professor at Concordia Seminary in Springfield (1961-1962 and 1964-1965). His reputation as a confessional theologian is highly regarded in the Missouri Synod circles generally.

It is amazing that Dr. Sasse, Mr. World Citizen of confessional Lutheranism, has found time and energy to do more scholarly publishing than can be enumerated here, in spite of the destructive world

wars that devastated Germany and despite the tension-filled years sandwiched between fighting. The American reading audience is best acquainted with his *Here We Stand*, a translation of *Was heisst lutherisch?* (1934; second enlarged edition in 1936), dealing with the real character of Confessional Lutheranism, and *This Is My Body: Luther's Contention for the Real Presence in the Sacrament of the Altar* (1959). Several other works deserve attention: *Amerikanisches Kirchentum* (1927), *Die Weltkonferenz für Glauben und Kirchenverfassung: Deutscher amtlicher Bericht über die Weltkirchenkonferenz zu Lausanne 1927* (1929), *Jesus Christus der Herr: Das Urbekenntnis der Kirche* (1931), *Kirchliches Jahrbuch für die evangelischen Landeskirchen Deutschlands* (1931-1934), *Vom Sinn des Staates* (1932), *Das Volk nach der Lehre der evangelischen Kirche* (1934), *Kirchenregiment und weltliche Obrigkeit nach lutherischer Lehre* (1935), *Union und Bekenntnis* (1936), *Kirche und Herrenmahl: Ein Beitrag zum Verständnis des Altarsakraments* (1938), *Vom Sakrament des Altars* (1941). Since late nineteen forties Dr. Sasse has published a unique series of scholarly essays as "Briefe an Lutherische Pastoren" ("Letters to Lutheran Pastors") many of which were printed in *Lutherische Blätter* edited by pastor Friedrich W. Hopf of Bleckmar. Unfortunately only very few of them are available in English translation. A frequent contributor to scholarly reference works, his contributions have appeared in such prestigious publications as *Die Religion in Geschichte und Gegenwart* (2nd ed. and 3rd ed., IV, 1016-1018, 1437-1438) and Kittel's *Theologisches Wörterbuch zum Neuen Testament* (aion, I, 197-209; kosmeo and kosmos, III, 867-898). The periodical publications run into hundreds, including *The Springfielder* ("Theses on the Seventh Article of the Augsburg Confession," XXV, no. 3, 13-17; "The Future Reunited Church and The Ancient Undivided Church," XXVII, no. 2, 8-21; "The Confession of Faith According to the New Testament," XXVIII, no. 3, 1-8).

A look back at the seventy years of Dr. Sasse's life offers a portrait of a faithful Lutheran confessional theologian and confessor. Hard work, unselfish dedication to his calling, and faithful commitment to his Lord Jesus Christ have brought to him joy and suffering. Perhaps in terms of *theologia gloriae* his life has not always been adorned with conspicuous success. In terms of *theologia crucis*, however, it is an admirable record of witness to the love and mercy of Jesus Christ.

Congratulations, Dr. Sasse, on your seventieth anniversary! May the Lord of the Church bless you and keep you. We thank you.