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ROSEMARY RADFORD RUETHER

On Sharing the Sacred Sauna

For the past few weeks I have been a theologian on the faculty of a Lutheran camp in the mountains of northern Washington. Holden Village is a mixture of religious retreat, think shop and wilderness playground. Sponsored by the youth departments of the three major American Lutheran churches [Now related to the ELCA—rdh], it is one of those crazy places with a style all its own.

I suppose I should recount what it is like to live, work, play, think and worship with Lutherans. Well, except that most of the people are blond, well tanned, have Scandinavian names, come from some place in Minnesota and graduated from places with names like St. Olaf, it is very much like being with fellow Christians. Again I become aware of how very much alike we are, how the same spectrum of ideas and possibilities cut across all denominations (or at least those that have some breadth of membership and some depth of tradition). There is the conservative wing, who have more in common with churchly American conservative attitudes in general than they differ among themselves on denominational particulars. There are the moderate church reformers who believe that we must do something with the system. There are the underground radicals who talk sympathetically with Black and New Left militants and boast their friendship with the secular city and Post-Christendom thinkers. There is much the same aversion to the institutional church as a self-perpetuating oligarchy sunk into ethnocentric introversion.

One difference is that these people are not as hung up on the scandal of the church because they do not dogmatize its indefectibility. The revelation of the fall of the church throws doubt on

man, but not on God, as it tends to do among Catholics. For this reason Lutherans seem to spend more time talking Christ and faith, rather than church.

Another difference is that this community seems more catholic than most of the (Roman) Catholic communities I have experienced lately. It has more catholicity both in terms of Christianity and humanity (recognizing that Holden represents American Lutheranism at its creative best). There is a sense of the totality of the spiritual and the physical. Mountain climbing, prayer and heated discussion on all topics flow into each other in easy rhythm. No one is ashamed of their bodies, their minds or their faith. There is a range of human interest from science and the arts to the most abstruse philosophy and theology. It is the first religiously oriented community I have seen which has a full range of participation from the scientific community. The range of topics from botany, geology and conservation to urbanization and international revolution is sometimes overwhelming.

But finally there is a Catholicity of the Christian tradition as well; despite the supposed parochialism of American Lutheranism. My friends are heirs of a good theological tradition. We pray the three major monastic hours. I envy the Lutheran Eucharistic liturgy which transmits more harmoniously the Mass of the Western rite than the rootless monstrosity that inhabits many of our parishes. I envy the hymnal too which puts one immediately in the goodly fellowship of the saints from the Psalmists of the Old Testament to the ancient Latin poets, the medievals, Reformation hymnists, and the hymns that flow down through the nineteenth century by many church and national routes.

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Perhaps this sounds too enthusiastic. Like all visitors, I can appreciate strengths, because I am not burdened with the weaknesses. Doubtless, this is why many Protestants sound so much more optimistic and enthusiastic about the “new things” in Catholicism than many Catholics.

There have been some poignant moments when the ghost of churches past raised their heads over the horizon. There was a teenage girl, raised a Lutheran, but attending a Catholic school. Torn between the two communities, she was subject to fits of depression. Several nights we sat up with her as she declared her fears of death, saw devils, and called for her rosary (shades of early Luther!). She told me that she could no longer be a Lutheran because she had discovered that the Lutheran church did not teach what Luther taught. I spent my time trying to get her to appreciate both Luther’s critique of Catholicism and the source of the failure of all the churches, Protestant and Catholic. I especially tried to dissuade her from making a sectarian

decision: that is becoming a Roman Catholic at the expense of Lutheranism, instead of moving forward to genuine catholicity.

Then there was a boy who wanted to go to a non-denominational seminary, but feared that the parochialism of the Lutheran community would not accept his work there. His parents, former Roman Catholics, became Lutherans when they tired of being unable to receive communion because they were remarried. He was on his way to becoming a Christian without a church.

O yes, and then there is the sauna. Huddled together on shelves, we bake deliciously. In the heat, sweat pouring out like salvation by grace alone. Flesh against warm flesh, we knead each others backs and necks. Then with a shout we spring for the door, race to the stream and plunge into the icy glacier-fed falls. It’s the new sacrament! The new fellowship! The new theology! The marriage of heaven and hell! The mystical communion of opposites! God bless the pagan Finns!

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