

# **The Dynamics of Faith in the Triune God**

## **Report of the President, Part II**

### **57<sup>th</sup> Regular Convention, Atlantic District, LCMS**

Greetings in the strong Name of the Holy Trinity – Father, Son and Holy Spirit! Amen.

I remain thankful and grateful to God for the vocational privilege of serving rostered workers, member congregations, the manifold ministries and agencies in our midst, and God's design on the Eastern half of New York State as your elected President. To be able to make that simple statement, after 18 years, means a lot, because basically, when it comes to you and me and all that is out there in the world, there's a part of me that says I've just about seen it all. And let's be real – this position will wear you down. So in addition to the report presented in writing about the state of the Atlantic District, I thought I would explain where the energy I continue to have comes from, theologically, as a way to pray that you receive a double dose of the same from the Word of God.

But first, on the human level, allow me to thank God for my partner in life, Judy. When a guy has as much sense of Divine Call to the pastoral office running through his veins as I do, with the very difficult balancing act between all of you and the parish I serve horning in on virtually any private moment, there can be and are many, many evenings alone for Judy Benke waiting for me to arrive from upstate, Long Island, Bronxville or through the Jackie and Grand Central back from Brooklyn. Her ability to stick with me through thick and thin can only be attributed to love, which she demonstrates to me every day. Her own abilities and talents are apparent in our district, to the wider Missouri Synod and in the agency she serves, but she remains a rock by my side as well. Our date nights are now the Mets games we attend from time to time, which are officially blocked out of any meeting nights with you – just so you know in advance, and just so you know where our rooting interest lies.

Secondly, I want to thank our able and talented Atlantic District staff including Yankee and Philly fans among them, both of which are painful but which allow us to practice the biblical concept of forbearance at the maximum level. Due to the realities of our own budget, we have cut staff in ways that we pray have not been detrimental to our mission priorities. But in many regards, the overload of assignments has fallen to them, as well as to me. With a pretty dramatic increase in troubled parish, school and worker situations in the past three years, we have attempted to maintain focus not only on the urgent which threatens to tyrannize, but on the central goals of service for mission that we hold dear.

As everyone may have figured out over 18 years, I'm more comfortable in the field than sitting at the desk in the office. Recently a pastor informed me that in the years he has contacted me by telephone, he has spoken to me only while I am on the phone in my car. This may be true for many of you, and I'm certainly thankful for a sturdy car! So the staff also has to bear up under an often absentee boss, which is not easy. But God's grace is sufficient for my weaknesses, and He has given you all and me an extraordinarily dedicated staff. Bless them in thanksgiving with me.

Third, I want to thank the elected leaders of our District for their commitment, involvement in so many differing circumstances, and in the case of our Praesidium, for their pastoral heart for the parishes, workers and ministries in their regions. Their countless volunteer hours, fueled by love for the Lord and His people, allow us to extend our arms in human care, helping hands, and proclamation of the Gospel in all circumstances. The Praesidium hears and guides me all the time through the thickets of difficulties and trials, by the discerning power of the Spirit.

I would like also to thank our convention committee including all the staff but especially Kristen Schulz and the special committee of two – Andrea Masley and Pastor Deric Taylor – who have had my back and know how things work here for a long time, and whose love and dedication is deeply appreciated.

I recently attended the installation of the Archbishop Dolan, head of the Roman Catholic Archdiocese of New York. Several things struck me there – one was the centrality of the Holy Meal in the installation, and how refreshed I have been through life and ministry and we will be this evening in the reception of the Body and Blood of Christ. Another was the Archbishop's statements about his dual call, to the cathedral parish of St. Patrick as Pastor, and to the parishes of the archdiocese as bishop. I embrace the same duality, although St. Peter's, my Basilica there in Cypress Hills is a slightly less imposing address than St. Patrick's on Fifth Avenue. Finally, the Archbishop referenced the priests under his supervision. He used a term I'd like to borrow in thanking the pastors of the Atlantic District. Without denigrating in any way the labors of the baptized and the incredible dedication of our commissioned rostered workers and district-rostered deacons, our pastors are, in his words and now mine, the apple of my eye. The focus of Gospel ministry in each parish must be centered through the called office of the Holy Ministry. I pray my way through our pastoral roster every day, and bring to mind your parish mission stations in those prayers. Please join me in thanking God for these chosen vessels of His love and exemplars of Christ among us.

Well, the longer you're around, the more time is taken in saying thanks.

Where do I get my energy? Long-time residents and denizens of Cypress Hills who have known me now for over 35 years often say, "You know you always look the same." And my response is invariably, "Good grief! I must have really looked old when I was young!"

The secret to my spiritual energy is my baptism. And yours. On the weekend of the Holy Trinity, know that Holy Baptism accomplishes the indwelling of the Holy Trinity in me and corporately in us. This is the mysterious and yet completely real replacement of me/us with Christ. In the Pauline equations I have been crucified with Christ (Gal. 2:20), died and buried with Christ (Rom. 6:4), risen with Christ (Romans 6 and Ephesians 2), ascended with Christ to be seated in the heavenly places (Ephesians 2), and my life is hidden with Christ in God (Col.3). Wherever Christ has been, I have gone, so that wherever I go, Christ is in and with me. This is what is called the Unio Mysticum, the mystical union of the believer with God in Christ. And it's ours. (Jack Preus) I love expressing this Lutheran truth, because it takes us out of ourselves and into the mind and life of God and directly out into the world, for every breath we get to breathe every day of our lives. So I want to encourage you to live the way I try to live in daily baptismal repentance and renewal –

- We are

1. **Authentically Joyful**—we celebrate victories and accomplishments in society from an ego-liberated perspective that is stated in latin, “Soli Deo Gloria” – to God alone be the glory.”
2. **Irrepressible**—why be repressed? Why hold it down and in? The inner workings of the Trinity are being manifest in and through us! Let it out.

Depressing times, even an economic period when things recede so far there’s an apparent rupture in the ground beneath us – a depression – do not depress US.

3. **Resilient**—we bounce back no matter the setback because the power of God in us and through us is always available.
4. **Absorbent**—we retain pain, because any pain we have is shared with and absorbed by God who abides in us.
5. **Collaborative**—we labor with all the baptized because the Head of the Body who is Christ has labored for us and the dynamics of Trinitarian authority and power are working among all of us and we’re in this thing together!
6. **Conspiratorial**—we share the same air, and the air we share is the breath of the Spirit moving among us and the whisper of the Almighty directing us.

In sum, we engage because we are baptized and because of the way we understand the dynamics of our baptism. I want for the next three years to be the elected leader of a Missouri Synod district filled with people with those attitudes. Folks, we have so much to bring the world at our doorsteps – let’s let them see the Christ in us at work!

And that, dear friends, is my final exhortation to us here at this convention. **We need to be depended on to be there** in the world in deed and word, cheerfully proclaiming and living in the freedom of baptismal community, daily dying and rising, unafraid, simply irrepressible, engaged, fed with heavenly food, taken care of and taking care of business in the Name of the Triune God. God’s promises are our only surety. And sure they are, in Christ Jesus!

Recently I had the privilege of administering Holy Baptism to a baker’s dozen infants, children and youth on Palm Sunday at my home parish. It’s a gorgeous mosaic there at St. Peter’s in East New York – Bengalis, Koreans, Latinos, Caribbean Islanders and more. What sticks in my mind beyond the throng of people is all those baptismal candles burning at once, burning like hearts captured by the love of God, reflecting beaming parents and relatives. But the reality is that underneath it, all of us there that Sunday were linked to one another, energized by one another, and locked and connected to you by the slender common streaming droplets of water connected to the Word of promise .

My hope is secure in the promises of God. I have, we have, hope in Christ our Lord. Hope that will not fail. Hope always gives me a spring in my step and I know it to be a hallmark of our character, our genetic code, our grace-based identity. So - Tell your story. Tell God’s story. Tell it with pride and joy. And hope.