

Ecclesia Migrans

By Hermann Sasse

Dear Brethren in the Ministry:

The sermon-free Sunday after Easter makes it possible for me to write this long-projected letter concerning

The Wandering Church

and to consider in the light of Theology some of the practical questions with which the large-scale contemporary migration of nations confronts the Churches of all confessions.

1.

“The *one* Church of God on the march” was Wilhelm Loehe’s designation for heathen missions. It is possible to understand these words in a still wider sense and view the entire history of the Church as the history experienced by the *one* Church of God in its wandering through countries and continents, through nations and races, through the civilizations and eras of human history. Such a view of Church History would correspond with the New Testament where Paul (esp. I Cor. 10:1ff.) and the Epistle to the Hebrews (chapters 4 and 11–13) view the Church as the wandering people of God, typified long ago by Israel’s wandering through the wilderness. Already delivered from the “Egypt” of the old eon by the redemptive miracle of the *Passa Christi* but not yet at home in the promised land of the coming eon, God’s holy nation makes its pilgrimage through the cheerless wilderness of this world. It is exposed to temptations to apostasy, yet wonderfully sustained by its spiritual food, the Bread of Life (cf. I Cor. 10:3f and John 6:48ff.), and its spiritual drink in the Lord’s Supper. This thought is basic for an understanding of the Church. It is a constantly recurrent thought in the liturgies of Christendom, one which each of our congregations knows when it sings:

Heavenward still our pathway tends;
Here on earth we are but strangers,
Till our road in Canaan ends,
Safely passed this wild of dangers:
Here we but as pilgrims rove,
For our home is there above.

The same thought finds expression in the distinction which the Eastern Church makes between the Church in the *patris*, in the homeland, and the Church in the *paroikia*, in its sojourning as a stranger in this world.

One might suppose that escape from this world follows as the logical consequent of this view of the Church. And, as a matter of record, individual Christians and whole Christian communities have time and again drawn from this fact that the world is not the Church’s home the false conclusion that it is necessary to renounce the world and to forsake it as speedily as possible. The confessors who sought martyrdom; the ascetics for whom even the Church was too worldly and who consequently went off into the desert; the countless Christians who forsook the world for the cloister; the Protestant Pietists who sought a substitute for the monastic type of world-renunciation; the Christians of our day—but not only of ours—who live wholly in the imagery of the Revelation of St. John and are impatient for the end of the world; all these have appealed to this: that the Church can be the Church in the New Testament sense only when it knows that it is homeless in this world. And Christendom would do well to permit itself to be reminded by such voices that we are after all (as Loehe so frequently observed) the wandering people of God who are to eat the Lord’s Passover “in haste” with the pilgrim’s staff in our hand (Ex. 12:11).

“Jesus, to whom be peace, has said: ‘This world is merely a bridge. Go across, but don’t build your dwelling there!’ ” Thus runs an enigmatic inscription on a certain gate in Northern India. Is this a creation of the Indian genius, an attempt to find the way to Jesus? Or is this a lost saying of the Lord, one which has been preserved here because of the impression which it made on the world-renouncing spirit of ancient India? Be that as it may, the very existence of such a saying, as well as the fact that there is a world-renouncing, ascetic type of Christianity, serves as an exhortation to Christendom to come to a clear understanding of what this really means: The Church is God’s homeless and wandering people on this earth.

2.

How shall we explain the fact that this same Church, which senses that it is a foreign entity in this world and is so regarded also by the world, strikes such deep roots here on earth? Everyone knows how deeply the Church penetrated the nations and provinces of the ancient world. It is no longer possible to speak of a Greek nation in its former sense. The Byzantine Empire is nothing more than a mere memory. But the *Church* of the Greeks lives on and in it lives the very best and the greatest of all that was ever thought and said in the Greek language. The Roman Church represents a transposition of the Roman Empire into the sphere of Christian religion, and in this Church the spirit of Latin culture is a world power even to this day. In the sorry remnants of the former great Churches of the Copts, the Syrians, and the Armenians there is a continuation of that which these nations once became when the Church of Christ came to them. The great nations of Europe—from the Spaniards and the English to the Germans and the Russians—whatever they are today, are the products of their Churches; and perhaps it will one day be said of these Churches what can be said of the Churches of antiquity: they have outlived their nations.

Experiences on the mission fields point in the same direction. It may take a long time before a nation, or a part of a nation, embraces the Christian faith. But once this happens, then a close interaction sets in between folkways and the Church that is inexplicable in terms of mere ethnic psychology. In other words, the Church, which of all social structures is in its essence the most foreign to this world, proves to be one of the forces which influence the world most deeply.

How does this come about? Certainly not in this way that the Church forgets its supramundane character and non-worldly nature, or that it goes from the one extreme which tends to flee the world to the opposite extreme of courting the world, and becomes more worldly itself. This occurs again and again; in fact, like the tendency to flee the world, it constitutes a standing temptation for the Church. But it must be noted that the strongest influence upon the world is never exerted by a Church that has become worldly. That is the sad discovery of all epochs of secularized church-life. The Church in the days of Rationalism failed to exert even the slightest influence upon the world. Liberalism and Modernism in the Church have made no impression whatever upon the world. The Reformation, on the other hand, shook and transformed the world. When does the Church exert its greatest influences in the world? When it is Church, wholly Church, and nothing else! When it brings its message, which is alien to this world, to a world that wants to know nothing of it! This does not imply that the Church will then be successful under all circumstances. But the Church will never be successful, will never exert any influence upon the world at all if it runs after the world and attempts to ignore the great gulf which separates it from the world. It is only the Church that is alien to this world that shall inherit the earth.

3.

The key to an understanding of this influence of the Church upon the world lies in the New Testament concept: “*In* the world, yet not *of* the world” (cf. John 17:13ff.). No one will want to misinterpret the wonderful harmony between the “in the world” and the “not of the world” in our Lord’s High Priestly Prayer as some sort of compromise between two possible attitudes of a Christian over against the world. When will men have done with such crude methods of interpreting the Scriptures? It simply is not true that the New Testament sets forth two different attitudes over against the state (that of Romans 13 and that of Revelation 13, the view that the

state is an ordinance of God and the view that it is the beast from the deep) and that somehow the personal experiences of the Apostles before and after the Neronian persecution determined their teachings. The position of the Primitive Church over against the state is clearly unified. The Church ignores the state. “Our commonwealth is in heaven” (Phil. 3:20). “We have here no abiding *polis* but we are searching for that which is to come” (Heb. 13, 14). Strictly speaking, these are the only utterances of the New Testament concerning the state. The Christians stand face to face with a political power greater than any other in the world’s previous history. But the terrifying awe with which other citizens of their day regard the state is unknown to the Christians. “We have here no abiding city!” This statement from one of the documents connected with the congregation at Rome is the answer to the cult of *Roma Aeterna*. It is not surprising that charges of lese majesty and a lack of patriotism (*odium generis humani*) were leveled against them.

That the divine ordinance of government exists even in a political body, which, like all things earthly, has come under the judgment of God and is doomed to destruction, is another matter. The meaning of this ordinance cannot be more clearly perceived or more unambiguously expressed than it is in the New Testament where the Apostles stand in complete accord with the statement of the Lord in St. Matthew 22:21. The bearers of the governmental office are capable of perverting and destroying the divine ordinance; a divinely appointed ruler is capable of falling away and transforming himself into the beast from the deep; all this is self-evident also to these Apostles. How well they know the power of sin and the reality of the divine judgment! It is incomprehensible that some see incongruities or contradictions here.

The message Of the New Testament is at first glance the most revolutionary that a man could hear in the Roman Empire of that period. This entire glorious empire together with all the might of its rulers is falling away into decay! But actually the New Testament message was the most conservative force in history. For it is not man’s prerogative to execute judgment and to establish a new government. That is God’s prerogative alone. And so it is neither an inconsistency nor a compromise for the Church to remain in the world that is not her home. For the Church knows that her Lord is bearing her home, and so she can rest content to remain in a foreign land. She continues steadfast in her prayers for His coming: “Thy kingdom come!”, “Even so, come, Lord Jesus!” No deferment of His *parousia* can perplex the Church, not even when men scoffingly ask: “Where is the promise of His coming?” (II Pet. 3:4). Modern theologians contend that Jesus, the Apostles, and the Ancient Church were in error and that the Church cannot at all times hold fast to their hope of the Lord’s early return. But with this contention they demonstrate that they do not know what it means to believe in Jesus Christ. Faith knows that God’s clocks keep different time from man’s docks, but they always keep right time! Only the believer in Jesus Christ is able to live under this tension, which would break the heart of the nonbeliever. The ability to do this belongs only to the “aliens and exiles” (I Pet. 2:11), to the “foreigners and strangers” (Heb. 11:13), to the Christian as *homo viator*, to the people of God as the *ecclesia migrans*. Buried with Christ by Baptism into death and born again to a new life, yet at the same time still waiting for the redemption of the body; directed to the daily forgiveness of sins, yet at the same time actually living by forgiveness; sinners, yet at the same time righteous—such is the existence of the Christian. And only in the light of this existence can the meaning of “in the world” and “not of the world” be comprehended. It is the existence of the man who is *in Christo*, and in whose life something of Christ’s relationship to the world is relived: “I have given them Thy word; and the world hath hated them, because *they are not of the world, even as I am not of the world*. I pray not that Thou shouldest take them out of the world, but that Thou shouldest keep them from the evil. *They are not of the world, even as I am not of the world*” (St. John 17:14ff.).

4.

The uniqueness of the Church’s existence “in the world” Can be seen in the change of meaning that the word *paroikia* has undergone. In I Peter 1:17 the word represents an existence as foreigners, as sojourners (cf. 2:11). In the first of the Clementine Epistles the Roman congregation emphatically designates itself as “the Church of God which sojourns (*paroikousai*) at Rome.” *Paroikia* in the sense of a “sojourning” now becomes *paroikia* in the sense of a “parish.” The local congregation is a colony of citizens of the heavenly City of God (Heb. 11:10;

11:16; 12:22; 13:14; Rev. 21:2; 21:23; 22:14; Gal. 4:26), who are stopping off here only in passing. But the *paroikia* in this sense now remains in its particular locality until Christ comes to take it home. Thus the *paroikia* has become a “parish,” a congregation of Christ permanently remaining in a given locality. This does not imply a secularization of the Church. It does not mean that the Church, which formerly was “at home” in heaven and only a sojourner on earth, has taken up its fixed abode here on earth and estranged itself from heaven. It means rather that the prayer of Jesus has been fulfilled: “As Thou hast sent Me into the world, even so have I also sent them into the world” (St. John 17:18).

Nothing more clearly reveals the earnestness with which the Church of Christ carries out its commission to go “into the world” and to work “in the world” than the tenacity with which the Church endeavors to strike roots in a given district, nation, or locality. What a temptation it must have been for the primitive Church, with its keen awareness of being the wandering people of God, to roam nomadically about the world and quickly pass on the Gospel to all people, within one generation if possible—as the Student Volunteer Movement for Foreign Missions endeavored to do, seeking on the basis of Matthew 24:14 to bring on the end of the world by means of “the evangelization of the world in this generation.”

It is highly significant that the wandering apostles, evangelists, prophets, and teachers of the earliest Christian era were very soon supplanted by a resident clergy: the bishops, presbyters, and deacons. The local congregation, i.e. primarily the city congregation (*Stadtgemeinde*), is the form in which the Church of Christ appears in the world. To this day a Catholic bishop uses as his surname not his family name but the name of his diocese. The Church of Christ, God’s wandering people, exists through all centuries in the churches of Antioch and Alexandria, Ephesus and Smyrna, Rome and Carthage, Lyons and Treves, Cologne and Canterbury. The city may be destroyed, the church building may fall into ruins, the shepherds may be killed, and the flock scattered. The Church, however, endeavors to rise again even in such a place. The church in Treves died out as a Latin church, but it rose again as a German church.

After the Church had in this manner struck roots in the world and in so doing had indeed entered again and again into false alliances with the world, the monastic movement sought to realize anew the old ideal of “the wandering people of God.” “Wandering for Christ’s sake” arose as an attempt to achieve the perfect Christian way of life. The monks of Eastern lands wandered westward, the monks of the West wandered to Palestine, while those of Ireland and Scotland (*Iroschotten*) wandered as far as America. But the Church condemned this as spiritual vagabondage, and Benedict established *stabilitas loci* as the highest virtue for God’s wandering people in occidental monasticism. The monk is to remain in his cloister during his entire lifetime. There he lives and there he dies as a member of the wandering people of God.

It is in conjunction with this emphasis on *stabilitas*, this state of being bound to a certain locality, that the Church already in ancient times becomes possessed of landed interests. In the eyes of men, landed property becomes the most valued earthly possession of the Church. It is more than an after-effect of a late-ancient and medieval framework of economy that churches today are still property-owners; also that they make every effort to compensate for the great losses which they have suffered in this respect—as e.g. the Catholic Church does by means of its imposing system of globe-encircling real estate and business interests. Underlying this is not merely a lust for power, but also the realization—one which has been confirmed by the experiences of history—that the Church can influence the world only when she actually enters into the world as her Lord and Master did and as He expects His Church to do, without, to be sure, losing her identity as the wandering people of God in a strange land.

5.

This change from *paroikia* to “parish,” from Christ’s homeless congregation in this world to a fixed parish church, is the basis of the Church’s influence upon the social life of humanity. All nations of the Christian world have been molded by their churches. Without the Orthodox Church there would have been no Russian nation, but very likely only a number of nations with different languages. It was only as Roman Catholics that the Spaniards became what they are today. Corresponding statements can be made about other occidental

nations. But the significance of the Church for human social life is never more apparent than it is in those times of great crisis when governments and kingdoms are crumbling, when nations are dissolving and the communities of men are disintegrating. The Church has lived through and outlived two such periods of decay. She grew up in that period in which the ancient world was decaying. She also witnessed the death of European Medievalism at whose cradle she once had stood. Today she stands, together with all humanity of the 20th century in all quarters of the globe, in the midst of another catastrophe whose full impact and extent cannot yet be known by our generation.

One symptom of this catastrophe, in addition to the rapid fall of European governments, the death of large masses of people, and a growing impoverishment, is a homelessness that reaches gigantic proportions. Not only millions of individuals but entire nations have lost their homes. A new kind of migration of nations has been under way for three centuries and it has led millions of Europeans into other regions of the earth. It is complemented by an internal migration of a type which has never been experienced before, namely by the migrations within the individual countries resulting from the great increase in population as well as the migration of the masses into the large cities and industrial centers. This alone confronted the Church with the greatest of assignments. The Church had to become “wandering Church” and follow her members into distant corners of the earth—something that has been accomplished only in very incomplete fashion.

The migration began in part with the Church itself, at that time, namely, when many forsook their fatherland under the pressure of *cuius regio eius religio*—as e.g. the Pilgrim Fathers in England, the Palatine and Salzburg Lutherans, and the French Huguenots. The problems raised by these internal migrations have never been solved. The forty million people who represent the approximate increase in the German nation in the century from 1810 to 1910 and who migrated into the large cities and industrial centers have never really been won for the Church. The same is true of all countries of Europe. And there is small comfort for the evangelical churches of Germany in the statistical fact that the city with the greatest shortage of churches, the city where church buildings today are most crowded, is the well-churched city of Rome. For the residential areas of modern Rome are located at great distances from the ancient and medieval city.

If these slow migrations of the last centuries already confronted all churches with almost insuperable problems, these problems are growing today by virtue of the fact that the migrations of our day are threatening the very existence of the Church in many countries. This is something that has not been experienced in this way since the Islamic invasion and the collapse of the Nestorian Church of Central Asia in medieval days. Through the contemporary migration of nations the Church today is literally becoming a wandering Church, *ecclesia migrans* in a physical sense. True, the Church wanders over the face of the earth in its work of missions as well as in its care for its members that have been scattered abroad. But the characteristic feature of the contemporary situation is this that the Church of entire countries emigrates together with its people. The devastated evangelical churches of Silesia and East Prussia, as well as the Catholic churches of Eastern Germany that have now fallen into other hands, betoken the end of a church history of many centuries. The emigration of the twelve million refugees from the east who are now in Western Germany included the emigration of their churches as well: congregations, pastors, bishops, consistory councilors, and Catholic canons, the faculties of all denominations, Old Lutheran, United, and Catholic alike.

This same thing is being repeated in other countries now that the mass-deportation of entire nations is being revived as a political weapon. The same enlightened age that discovered the right of national self-determination has also discovered the “right” of national leaders to push their people about like herds of cattle. The South Tyroleans learned one day that they would either have to become Italians or immigrate to North Tyrol. Their beloved *Führer* had irrevocably ceded their country. The newspapers brought similar news one day to the Baltic Germans. Disposition has been made of Germans even in North and South America. These methods had their beginnings particularly in Turkey. But who in Germany—except for a few theologians who were soon silenced—became aroused over the atrocities suffered by the Armenians? The ancient Church of Asia Minor was destroyed by the deportation of the Greek; but who in the Christian world sensed the ignominy of this? We reap what we have sown. But, according to the eternal statutes of divine justice, other nations, too, will have to pay for their silence in the face of the expulsion and extermination of whole countries and for their

cooperation in these acts. The processions of suffering exiles whom we now see wandering over Europe's endless highways from west to east and from east to west, from north to south and from south to north, will not be the last in this world's history. We must in any case reckon with the possibility that they are but the beginning of a new migration of nations.

6.

What is the Church's duty at a time like this? By her own experiences she is being reminded of the fact that she is essentially a wandering Church. As parish again becomes *paroikia* we Christians are again being reminded in a tangible way that we really have no abiding city here; also that it was a great misunderstanding to suppose that our churches and our congregations would necessarily maintain their *status quo* until Judgment Day. To be "in the world" certainly means this: to stand there where God has placed us and maintain our stand to the very end. But it does not mean that God could not allow the place where we stand to be smashed to bits. The churches of the East, the churches of Silesia, East Prussia, Latvia, and Estonia had to take their pilgrim's staff in hand together with their nations and their congregations, after all possibility of physical existence had ceased.

It is self-evident that the Church will accompany her wandering people. On the other hand, it is not self-evident that ecclesiastical organizations will be maintained under all circumstances. Thus it was pure romanticism to maintain a Silesian church superintendence in Western Germany that laid claim to ecclesiastical administration. But where there are no longer any congregations, there, according to evangelical conception, can be no church superintendence. The individual Silesian, Latvian, or Estonian refugee acknowledges the oversight of his pastor but not of a bishop, except when the latter is at the same time his pastor. Since it was neither possible nor, from a churchly standpoint, necessary to gather the refugees into parishes and congregations made up for their own countrymen from Eastern Germany (such compatriotic ties ought to continue, but it is not the province of the local congregation to provide this), it is proper that these Christians join an existing congregation which shares their confessional convictions, and it then becomes the duty of this congregation to see to it that they are faithfully cared for. The same is true, *mutatis mutandis*, of the refugees from either Latvia or Estonia, wherever they are able to find a congregation of their faith and their language. When they cannot find such a congregation then they must establish one, which, already for practical reasons, ought to be in affiliation with a church body of their own confession—as, e.g., is the case in Australia where such congregations exist within both of the Lutheran church bodies while maintaining their own church language.

But under no circumstances can or should there be such a thing as, e.g., an "Estonian Church in Exile"—a concept which originated in England under the influence of the thoroughly unevangelical canon law of the Anglican Church. The Church of England regards every Englishman as its member until there is definite proof to the contrary. Nation and Church are equated in the mind of the Englishman, who thinks only in terms of a national church. Thus every Englishman, regardless of where he may be living at any given time, has his bishop whose authority he recognizes. By analogy it is fancied that the members of the respective Baltic nations scattered through the world, inasmuch as they are nominally Lutherans, still today constitute "the Church of Estonia in Exile," "the Church of Latvia in Exile," etc. Our sympathy with those brethren in the faith who, together with their entire nation, have had to live through the terrible experiences of being uprooted and exiled, dare not prevent us from pointing out the untenability of this notion of a "church in exile." There are Christians in exile. There are Christians who are sharing the fate of exiles together with their nations and who perhaps are suffering more under it than their unbelieving countrymen. But there can never be such a thing as a "church in exile" since the Church, as the Church of Christ, is always in exile and is always an alien. Even those churches which are in close union with their nations, such as the churches of Sweden, Finland, Estonia, and Latvia, insofar as they are actually Christ's Church and not merely the official religious organization of their nation, are or were even in their own land *paroikousai*, not at home, but in a foreign land. The Christians who formerly lived in Dorpat and Riga and those who now live in Helsinki and Stockholm are "strangers and foreigners," "foreigners and pilgrims" exactly as were those Christians who once lived in ancient Rome or Ephesus. No

national-church ideology, no national missionary program, no *Sveriges folk Gud's folk, Deutschland für Christus*, or any other rousing slogan can hide the stark fact that nation and Church are incommensurable immensities. Nations as such cannot believe. A nation cannot be baptized—even though this has been repeatedly attempted in the history of missions. Nor can nations, therefore, be saved; and when God spares a nation from the judgment of His wrath, He does this every time only for the sake of the ten righteous that are therein.

This was also the viewpoint of Luther, to whom the protagonists of the national-church heresy, the confusion of nation and Church, wrongfully appeal. The devil, says Luther in his explanation of the Lord's Prayer in the Large Catechism, would have destroyed all Germany in its own blood "except that the prayer of a few godly men intervened like a wall of iron." These "few godly men" within a nation, the congregation of the Lord known only to Him, the true Church of Christ whose existence in, with, and under the Church on earth we acknowledge by faith because we know the power of the Means of Grace, this Church—and not the external organization of congregations and bishoprics, of a territorial or national church—is that very thing to which a nation owes its life in its times of greatest need. This Church travels with a nation when it is scattered abroad, and it survives a nation's destruction. Within this Church the treasures of a nation's life are preserved. So long as there are people anywhere in Christendom who pray in the language of a given nation and sing the praises of God; so long as God's Word is preached in the language of that nation and the faith of the one holy catholic and apostolic Church is confessed in the confession of the Ancient Church and the Church of the Reformation; so long as God's holy, peculiar people which He has called out of that natural and historical nation still stands before His presence: so long is the best and noblest of that nation still at work in the world, even when it has lost its identity as an independent nation and has gone the way of all things earthly.

7.

For us Lutheran Christians who came from the territorial and national churches of Europe it is infinitely difficult, in fact for many it is plainly impossible, to make the distinction between nation and Church which is required by the Word of God. The deep-seated human need to localize the holy and divine meets within the framework of Christianity the fact that God's revelation has taken place at concrete places and at definite times ("under Pontius Pilate"). That we Christians have no "holy city" other than the heavenly Jerusalem, no "holy land" other than our heavenly Fatherland, no "holy nation" other than the nation of the saints of the Most High—this New Testament truth had to be learned again and again by Christendom ever since the days when the Early Christians abandoned the romantic bond between the Church and Jerusalem and did so, in fact, under the influence of the divine judgment upon the very place where God's majesty and God's glory once literally dwelt (Ps. 26:8; cf. Is. 6). Thus the Church of the Reformation had to say farewell with a heavy heart to the holy city of the West as she perceived that the Antichrist had erected his throne over the graves of the Apostles. And just as little as evangelical Christians made pilgrimages to Rome in order to find the *ecclesia apostolica*, so little will a present-day Lutheran travel to Eisleben or Mansfeld, Eisenach or Erfurt, Wittenberg or Magdeburg, in order to find there the Church of the Reformation.

Where do we find the Church of the pure Gospel? Contemplating the possibility that the Lutheran Church in Alsace might be unable to maintain itself and that the Lutherans would have to emigrate, the Alsatian Hans Michel Moscherosch wrote during the Thirty Years' War: "Do not go to the West; go to the North... In the West you will find reason holding sway, conceited self-glory and arrogant notions regarding God and salvation. But the North, on the other hand, —the Hanseatic cities, all of Denmark and Sweden—has God's pure Word in rich abundance. Yes, rather go still farther, all the way to the barbaric nations, if you desire to serve God alone and turn your back on all human ordinances." (Quoted according to H. Boehmer: *Gesammelte Aufsätze*, 1927, p. 27.) What would he say today? Would he remind us of Luther's forceful dictum about God's Word being like a driving rainstorm that never returns where it once has been? Would he recall for us the Reformer's words to the ungrateful German people warning them that what happened to the lands of ancient Christianity which lost the Gospel might one day happen also to them? Is not the Church of Christ *ecclesia*

migrans also in this sense that she wanders from land to land, from nation to nation, from one quarter of the globe to another, never to return where people have rejected her?

So we must have the courage to say farewell to that false view which identifies Church and nation. This view is not of the essence of the true Lutheran Church (it is unknown to both Luther and the Confessions); it is rather a late glorification of the concept of a national or state church—a concept which existed in embryo already before the Reformation, receiving its fullest development later in regions which were altogether un-Lutheran (Zurich; England), finally breaking through also into Lutheranism. Luther's clear insight into the reality of his own as well as other nations and his sober judgment regarding *Herr Omnes* in the Church were lost. And when Pietism and Rationalism lost all understanding of the Church, then the nation supplanted the Church in the faith of the people. Since the 19th Century the cultured German—and this is true of the members of other nations as well—believes in his nation as he should believe in the Church of God. Faith in the Church is for him an entirely theoretical matter. Faith in his nation is a matter of vital concern. "Thou shalt believe in Germany's future, in the resurrection of your nation." This was actually the tacit Third Article in the years between World Wars I and II; it was the faith also of Lutheran Germans. They did not, of course, give up the confession *quod una sancta ecclesia perpetuo mansura sit*. But no one lived by that confession. Nor would anyone die for it as many were ready to die and did die for the confession of faith in Germany. Here perhaps lies the deepest cause of the tragedy of Lutheranism in Germany. Of course they wanted the pure doctrine of the Gospel. They wanted the Church of the Lutheran Confession. But when it came to a choice between that which the Confession required and that which the national welfare required or seemed to require, then without fail the decision was made in favor of the national requirement and against that of the Church; and all this was done under the guise of "Christian love" despite the fact that such action in no way benefited the German nation. This is the cause of the death of the Lutheran Church within the German state-church. And apparently the same is true of the remaining Lutheran Churches of Europe, at least of several of the Nordic Churches. May the Lutheran Church in other areas of the world learn from this tragedy what the true Church and faith in the Church really are, before it is too late.

8.

It is the wandering Church that is calling the rest of Christendom back to the real meaning of Church and faith in the Church. For in the *ecclesia migrans* of our day, in the congregations and in the unorganized and unorganizable fellowship of Christians now wandering over the earth in search of a new home, the Church of Christ is returning, as it were, to its original status as God's wandering people. "These all died in faith, not having received the promises, but having seen them afar off, and were persuaded of them, and embraced them, and confessed that they were strangers and pilgrims on the earth" (Hebrews 11:13). How puzzling these words must have been for those Europeans at the beginning of this century who, assured of their pensions, felt themselves insured against all of life's misfortunes! The only "wandering" for them was their next vacation trip or a promotion to a still better and more secure position, with moving expenses paid in full plus insurance against any possible damage en route. The refugees, however, who for more than thirty years have been wandering over the highways of Europe and Asia, know something of what these words mean. Their wandering, waiting, hoping, despair, resignation, their ardent longing for a land of rest, their inexpressible homesickness—all this has become a means toward an understanding of the deep truths of the New Testament regarding the Church as God's wandering people. Anyone who has become acquainted with the Russian émigrés in Berlin and Stockholm, Paris and New York in the years following World War I and the indescribable homesickness which animated them will understand why their emigration inspired the deepest thoughts which our generation has thought concerning the Church and the communion of saints.

However, if Christendom is to understand its destiny, it needs more than just a new understanding of the Church, more than just a new faith in the Church. What humanity of our day longs for—even though it has no clear vision of the object of its longing—is the "realness" of the Church, a new realization of what the Church and the fellowship of the Church really are. The Church of Christ grew up in a declining world, in a world

empire lying on its deathbed, in a society on the road to dissolution. The *Te Deum* first rang out in a world shrouded in the shadows of death. Its first notes ring out at the end of Cyprian's treatise "On Dying," written in a time of plague and warfare, which gave the ancient world its first presentiments of death. The *Te Deum* was finished when the migration of nations began. It was over the ruins of the Roman Empire that the last of the Latin poets sang his great hymn celebrating the Cross of Christ and the victory of the Crucified: *Vexilia regis prodeunt, Fulget crucis mysterium.... O crux, ave, spes unica....* To be sure, Christendom too shared in the general decline. Christians were murdered no less than other people. Christian families died out no less than heathen families. Churches were burned no less than other buildings. The universal spiritual and moral decay laid hold on the people in the Church no less than on the others. Still the Church remained. She outlived the universal downfall. The state had crumbled to dust; all human corporate bodies were in a process of dissolution. Even the Christian congregations were destroyed. But they rose again. Wherever there was an altar and the Holy Supper was celebrated and divine service was held, there a Christian congregation rose again. There were different people, but the congregation remained. The "Holy Communion" proved itself to be the great means of re-establishing Christian fellowship. The congregation of Christ gathered round about the altar. Out of the congregation grew Christian matrimony and Christian family-life bringing with them the basis for renewed human fellowship.

The experience of that era has repeated itself in history and has done so in an especially evident way on the mission fields of the last century. It will also be the experience of Christendom in our day as the shadows of night fall ever deeper upon modern Western man and his culture. And in this connection the wandering Church of the refugees and the homeless poses a weighty question to Christendom. These people are knocking at the doors of the churches that are still living in peace and security. Is it true that the Church is what it should be according to the New Testament: the home of the homeless? Itself without home in this world and, paradoxically, for that very reason the home of those who have no home? Is that answer still given to the refugees which was once given to those who came from the nations of the world into God's nation of the New Covenant: "Now therefore ye are no more strangers and foreigners, but fellow-citizens with the saints, and of the household of God" (Eph. 2:19)? Would the refugees in Western Germany be able to testify that they have experienced something of this in the congregations to which they came? If not, why not? The blame is to be sought on both sides. One of the leading Catholic theologians in Germany, the late Provost Paul Simon of Paderborn, addressed a warning exhortation to his church in his will stating that the future of the refugees will be the future of German Catholicism. Perhaps the same is true, *mutatis mutandis*, of all churches that today are faced with the question of what they should do with the refugees of their faith.

This question is none other than the very practical question of whether the Church, and that means, quite concretely, whether the local congregation can also today become the home of the homeless. It is one of the noble achievements of American Lutheranism that it was able to offer to the Lutherans of all European nations congregations in which they were really "at home." The same is true also of congregations of other denominations in America. In fact, this feeling of being at home was so strong that those who for some reason returned to Germany brought with them a life-long homesickness for their congregation back in America. Nor was this feeling of being at home in a congregation in a strange land in any way dependent on the fact that this congregation was a haven of German culture or that it retained the German language and German customs. That was not lacking, but it was always secondary. And certainly no one joined a congregation merely for the sake of language; even though that congregation had strong claims on him, unless he shared in his heart that congregation's confessional stand. The achievements of a congregation toward the preservation of language and culture, often so highly praised by politicians, were always incidental by-products. Experience teaches that the culture of a nation is nowhere preserved more faithfully than in its congregations. But this is only because here a nation's culture is in the service of something far higher. It was not as German congregations but rather as Lutheran congregations that our local congregations in America and Australia were able to retain their language for so long a time. This will undoubtedly also be the experience of the Estonian and Latvian congregations that are arising out of the great emigration of our day. They too will find that a nation's folkways disappear most

rapidly wherever people recognize nothing higher than the nation. They too will learn that the surest way to lose their native language is to take the language more seriously than the message that should be proclaimed in it.

What the nations of the world need is the Gospel. It should be brought to each nation in its own language. But it should not be proclaimed in a dead language. Even the Roman Church does not preach in Latin. But it would mean withdrawing God's Word from men if we were to preach it only in a dying language that in a short time no one will understand. If it were possible to determine how many people were lost to the Lutheran Church because of the foolish refusal of pastors and congregations in America to introduce the English language into their churches and pulpits, these statistics would constitute a terrifying indictment against our Church. Here the Lutheran Church must learn from Holy Scripture and from the experience of Church History. In its role as wandering Church, God's nation wandering over the face of the earth among the nations of this world, the Church was compelled time and again to be multi-lingual. The Bible itself was given to us in two languages; in fact, strictly speaking, this was true already of the Old Testament with its Aramaic portions. God's Word, as it were, is so rich and full that no single human language is able to give it full expression. The Apostles themselves had to learn additional languages, as, e.g., Peter did. The Church of Rome was for centuries bilingual. To this very day the Epistle and Gospel in the papal masses are read also in Greek; and in our own liturgy, in addition to the Hebrew *Amen* and *Hallelujah*, we still have the Greek *Kyrie eleison*. Thus every Sunday in our divine service we pray—for the *Kyrie* is in reality a prayer—also in a foreign language, unless we are merely thoughtlessly babbling like the heathen.

It cannot be determined who first made the assertion that a person can pray only in his mother tongue. It is true that praying in one's mother tongue is the normal thing and that we can put our language to no higher use than to use it in prayer; but this does not mean that we can never pray in any other language. To the very end of his life Luther prayed also in Latin. The New Testament speaks of praying in other tongues (I Cor. 14:14) and not only of praying in the mother tongue. Thus the wandering Church can and must, according to circumstances, become a Church of more than one language in order to proclaim the Gospel to those who, driven by the circumstances of life to a border territory between adjacent language-areas or to a transition to another language, have become bi-lingual. This was true in Germany, even in days of quiet peace, among the Wends of Lusatia and the Lithuanians in East Prussia. God commissioned His Church to preach the Gospel in all languages, not in order that the Germans might remain Germans and the Letts remain Letts, but rather that sinners from all nations under heaven might be saved.

These appear to me to be some of the things that the *ecclesia migrans* has to say to us. These are questions that are addressed to all of Christendom, problems which confront all churches. To an amazing degree it is, fundamentally, these very same questions and problems which confront all of Christendom despite the many differences between regions and nations on a political, spiritual, and ecclesiastical level; all of which points to the fact that Church History actually is the history experienced by the *one* Church of God in its wanderings through all nations of the world and all eras of history.

This letter will reach you, honored brethren, during the Pentecost Season. Let us remain united in the prayer for the renewal of our Lutheran Church through the Holy Spirit: *Emitte Spiritum tuum, et creabuntur, et renovabis faciem terrae. Alleluia.*

Greetings in the fellowship of the faith.

Hermann Sasse

Translation by W. Wegner