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DO THEMES COMPROMISE ECCLESIOLOGY ?

You've had the experience: You're sitting in a pew on Sunday in a Christian Church, and the pastor announces a Theme for the Day. It's Mothers Day, perhaps. Or Fathers Day. Victoria Day. Fourth of July weekend. Labour Day. It happens on both sides of the border, in Canada and in USA.

And if the surrounding culture doesn't happen to supply a decent theme on this particular Sunday, we feel we're somehow obliged to provide one. Rally Day. Sunday School Teachers Appreciation Day. Stewardship Sunday. Youth Sunday. Environmental Sunday. There's a mode of thought in many Christian congregations today that's hesitant to let any Sunday go by without assigning some theme. Worship would be somehow incomplete without a theme for the day.

Lurking behind this widespread prejudice is the perception that Christian worship every week has a programmatic purpose. We're in the business, on Sunday morning, of selling something. Sure, it's never quite so crass as an actual consumerist transaction. We're not selling soap or deodorant or pharmaceuticals or automobiles, after all. We're selling Christian stewardship or Christian discipleship, you can be assured. And if the cultural calendar — Thanksgiving Weekend, Mothers Day — can provide a theme to help us in the selling, we'll acquiesce.

Further: We'll impose a theme, invent one, if there's no theme at hand from the surrounding society. We wouldn't want to leave any weekend without a Sunday theme. We'd be cheating our people.

That's the reasoning I perceive in many churches.

Now by a not so curious coincidence, there's a history in the Church of sure-enough themed Sundays. There're only a few of them, but I for one have found them useful in

my own ministry. I'm thinking of those Sundays after Easter with those splendid Latin names. In each case the Latin name derives from the first words of the Day's old Introit, the psalm antiphon.

I've remarked in an earlier Essay about the Second Sunday of Easter, *Quasi Modo Geneti*, set aside anciently to honour the newly-baptised. And I suggested an amplification of the Communion on that Day by offering milk and honey and even a variety of finger foods along with bread and wine. See [Essay 90](#).

Cantate, the Fourth Sunday of Easter, has had a history of honouring music and the role of singing in worship, by congregation and by choir. I've observed it without shame as "Church Music Sunday".

Rogate, the Fifth Sunday of Easter, has been observed as a kind of Environmental Sunday, with prayers for the Blessing of the Fields, preceding as it does the three traditional Rogation Days, the Monday, Tuesday, and Wednesday before Ascension Day, when prayers were traditionally offered for the fulness of seedtime and harvest.

Furthermore, you could argue that there are themes implied in the use of the so-called complementary, or typological, system of readings within the Revised Common Lectionary (RCL), where the First Readings, on the Sundays after Epiphany and after Pentecost, have been specifically selected, usually from the Hebrew Scriptures, to echo some theme or motif in the Day's Gospel. (You're with me on this?) I suppose you could make the case that these First Readings, together with the Gospel for the Day, do present a set of themes, from Sunday to Sunday during those weeks. The ELCA, south of the border, has elected to follow this system.

But you'd have to scramble to find a single cohesive theme for any Sunday in the so-called semicontinuous system in the RCL. (You're still with me?) That's the optional system of readings, which the ELCIC and Canadian Anglicans have elected to use on the Sundays after Epiphany and after Pentecost. In this option, on those specific Sundays, the First Reading follows, for example, the Patriarchal stories in some kind of sequence, or the David stories.

In any case, it's the Good News, after all, that we want to uncover, wherever we find it.

So — I'll confess it — my argument in these paragraphs is already somewhat compromised by history and tradition. Nevertheless I'll stick with the major thrust of my thesis. Christian weekly worship is not primarily thematic. Or programmatic. Too often Sunday themes are introduced, perhaps with the best of intentions, to sell something. Perhaps it's only stewardship or discipleship we're trying to sell. It's still selling.

And I'm worried about obscuring the very nature of the Christian Church and its worship life. Is not the Church's calendar, the Church's year, the Church's lectionary,

precisely and deliberately inimical to the imposing of supposed “themes”? For almost *any* Sunday?

Particularly, especially, themes imported from the surrounding culture. We’re in trouble when civic religion intrudes into Christian worship.

Here’s my prejudice: Themes from secular culture have no place in Christian worship, whether it’s to be Literacy Day or Holocaust Day or Women’s Day or Mothers’ Day — or whatever. What the surrounding culture memorializes or extols on a given day is almost beside the point in a Christian Church on Sunday. The Church’s Year is deliberately, radically counter-cultural. We should celebrate that. Jesus says “My kingdom is not from this world...” *John 18:36*.

Christians should be in the business of challenging the surrounding society, not uncritically reinforcing it.

Sure, on the Sunday after Kennedy’s assassination, or M.L.King’s, or the Sunday after what has become known as “9/11”, our worship should make some mention of such things, in sermon and in prayer. But those events — whatever terrible or notable events — should not be allowed to define the Day for Christians.

On the Sundays in Advent, for example, the Church’s colour is blue. Everywhere around us, in our current culture during these weeks, the colours are red and green. That blue is a counter-cultural message, and I for one find it refreshing. And invaluable beyond words. ([Essay 1](#).) On those weeks in December, I want Advent hymns, not Christmas carols. No matter what the world may want.

More than that: On Sundays when our “civic religion” itself does not supply a theme, like Mothers’ Day or Earth Day? On such Sundays, in my view, it’s not necessary — or even legitimate, in a truly “catholic” ecclesiology — to search the pericopes in order to discover there some presumed unifying theme. Nor should you impose one from without.

As for such themes as “Youth Sunday” or — Heaven forbid! — “Laymen’s Sunday”: These are patently illegitimate. They deny the Church’s “catholicity”. Youth and laity should be part of our assemblies *every* Sunday. *Every Sunday* should be youth Sunday, laity Sunday. To set aside a Sunday service out of all the year as “Youth Sunday” would be the same as to set aside a Service for red-headed parishioners.

As you are probably tired of hearing me argue in these postings, faithful reader, one of the finest glories of the Christian Church is its diversity: Rich and poor, black and white, old and young, gay and straight, “Jew and Greek, slave and free, male and female...” *Galatians 3:28*. The kind of diversity you see in the Church at worship is all but unknown anywhere else in Western societies. Our assemblies for worship should welcome that diversity. Should reflect that diversity. Model it. Each and every time we

gather.

And if in fact your assembly is not that diverse, you should invent that diversity, that human variety, pretend it's there. And make clear to all, in preaching and in teaching, that, at its fullest and most complete — at its most “catholic” — that diversity, that variety, that human plenitude would be there. [Essay 74](#).

Sundays with themes obscure the nature of Christian worship. And the nature of the Church itself. Is our ecclesiology at stake here? Our self-understanding as Church?

Surely one of the glories of a lectionary system of weekly readings is its *pleroma* — its fullness, its richness of themes and topics and motifs and nuances, sometimes to the point of mutual contradiction. I for one feel cheated, whenever I'm asked — compelled? — in the congregation's printed bulletin or guide-to- worship or pastoral announcement, to ignore this richness and to focus instead on only one specific supposed “theme” for the Day. “Here's this Sunday's theme, folks. Turn off your imagination for considering any other possibility.”

Sure, give your *sermon* a theme. I find that perfectly legitimate. But don't spend time or energy searching the Day's pericopes for a theme for the *whole Day*. Or imposing a theme. That's a Protestant predilection: Sectarian. Not sufficiently “catholic”. (See in [Essay 29](#).)

I'm willing to mention Remembrance Day in my prayers and preaching on November 11. But that's not the “Theme for the Day”. Sundays in a truly “catholic” liturgical tradition do not have a specific theme.

We've got other business to attend to. Like modeling the astonishing fulness of the Reign of God.

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