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WORSHIP AS WORK

The Lutheran Bishop on our territory likes to point out that the Eastern Synod of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Canada must surely rank among the most culturally diverse Christian judicatories in North America, if not in the world.

Our Lutheran judicatory (Synod) here covers an enormous geographical area: most of Ontario, plus Quebec, New Brunswick and points East. On any given Sunday morning, no fewer than eleven different languages may be heard in the worship of our churches. German of course. The Scandinavian languages, as you might expect. But also Hungarian, Estonian, Latvian, even Chinese Mandarin and Cantonese.

And we're speaking here of the hymnal in the pew. You could as likely find a worship book in the language of the Old Country, in these parishes, as *Evangelical Lutheran Worship* or *Lutheran Book of Worship*.

The cultural diversity in Canada is cherished by most Canadians not as a liability but as a real national asset. Far from encouraging a "melting pot" metaphor in our common life, most Canadian leaders point with pride to our "cultural mosaic".

One enduring symbol for that diversity is Canada's bi-lingual tradition. French and English are the two official languages, established by law only as recently as in the last generation, during the government of Pierre Trudeau. So you find both French and English printed on the breakfast cereal box. More significantly, no Canadian politician has a chance at national office without being at least marginally proficient in both languages.

This brings me to my friend Lutheran Pastor Patricia Giannelia. She's not simply bi-lingual; She's multi-lingual, able to handle not only English and French, but also German and Spanish. And she's provided me with the inspiration and content of my posting this month.

Patricia suggests four wonderful French words that illuminate for me some of the

meanings we might associate with the notion that worship is work.

You've heard before that our term liturgy is rooted in two Greek words, *laos* and *ergon*, which together mean "the work of the people". It even carries the sense of the *public works* of the people, the corporate works of the people. Like building a road, or serving in the military, or even paying taxes.

Patricia recalled at a recent pastors' retreat these four wonderful elaborations of that concept, out of the French language.

1) There's first of all *travail*, Patricia notes: It means simply your labour, your work, your job. I don't think pastors and worship leaders should apologize for the fact that worship is part of your burden as a Christian. Worship is simply one of your responsibilities, part of your discipleship. It's included in your calling as Christian.

Who are Christians? They're people who worship. It's their job.

2) Then there's *tâche*. In French this carries the sense of our English word "chore" or "task". There's no necessary flavour of the odious in the word, but it's simply something you must do regularly. Like taking the recyclables out to roadside every week.

So sometimes worship is an obligation. It can be — ought to be, sometimes — hard work. I have a friend who maintains that worshippers should leave the church on Sunday morning after worship is over in a sodden sweat.

That may be overstating the case a bit. But I'd want people to feel they've got some work to do when they enter the church. Not everything in the experience is going to be handed to you. You're perhaps going to have to struggle to learn an unfamiliar hymn or liturgical form. With our new Lutheran worship book in your pew, you may have experienced some of this feeling already.

I think we can rightly expect worshippers to put some energy and good will into trying to appropriate something new, something unfamiliar. And it may not be necessarily fresh off the presses. It might be a Sixteenth Century chorale you've never seen before.

A parable: I sing in our parish choir these days, and some months ago our ebullient choir director selected a German chorale for us to sing that was — surprise! — totally unfamiliar to me. For the record, it was *Erschienen ist der Herrliche Tag*, "On Earth has Dawned this Day of Days" — J.S. Bach uses it in his *Cantata 67*. I'm a great fan of chorales, but I had never heard this one. Furthermore I found its setting particularly challenging. As our rehearsal ended, I made some smart-mouthed remark like "Well, it's not exactly the kind of thing you go out of church humming on a Sunday morning."

Surprise again: For the next two weeks I couldn't get it out of my head! I still

can't. It's now in my synapses. Next week I repented my remark publically to the choir. A terrific, strong, vigorous melody, a magnificent text. Now it's simply part of me. It's part of my choral repertoire. I like to think I'm better for it.

So I'd be suspicious of any worship form that's immediately accessible. Sometimes the stuff that's difficult to learn turns out to offer the deepest wells of refreshment. And the easy stuff often doesn't satisfy, often doesn't last.

Or consider an unfamiliar arrangement of the worship space. If I had my way, every parish would have a worship space congenial to experimentation in seating arrangement, and would vary the configuration of space from season to season throughout the Church Year. As I've maintained before in these postings, resistance to change is not so much a matter of "I know what I like" as "I like what I know".

3) Next, Patricia notes *devoir*. *Devoir* in French carries the meanings of our English "duty", even "homework", something you're compelled to do. So you could relate it to the two senses in 1 and 2 above.

But Patricia — "Little Dear" — puts a winsome spin on that. She proposes we relate it rather to that lovely Nineteenth Century hymn by Robert Lowry, new to our *Evangelical Lutheran Worship*, "My life flows on in endless song...how can I keep from singing?...."

That certainly has been my own experience through the years in Christian worship. I can't keep away. And even in my declining days, with moderate to severe hearing loss, when I can seldom make out all the preacher is saying in the sermon, I wouldn't miss being there. And singing my heart out.

Like many pastors, I'm terrible in the pew. I'm critical of almost every move in the chancel. The pastor's stole is crooked. The flowers are in the wrong place, and in the wrong colour for the season. I wouldn't have chosen *that* hymn. Sitting in the choir and singing there is only marginally better.

But I'm hooked. Compelled. I'm a worship junkie.

Freud says somewhere something to the effect that booze is the poor man's symphony. You could say the same today of drugs. But you won't need either booze or drugs if you can get high on Sunday with a fix of weekly worship. The strength of a German chorale. The tender sympathies of a spiritual. The stirring measures of an Isaac Watts or Charles Wesley hymn text. The warmth of a human smile or a heartfelt hug or handclasp at the Peace. The savour on the tongue of warm bread or old wine at Communion. "How can I keep from singing?..." How indeed?

4) Finally, Patricia points to *oeuvre*. That's a work of art: a symphony, a painting. At its best, worship can be precisely that. It's your public poem, your corporate symphony. In worship you meet the Ground of Being. And feel its claim upon you.

Great works of art, says Aristotle, purge pity and fear. That's not "purge" in the sense of "gets rid of them", but in the sense of "cleans them out, purifies them". A great *oeuvre* will help you to pity the right things, not the wrong things, help you to fear what's worth fearing, not a phantom, not a shadow.

If nothing else happens in your life this week, that alone would be enough.

Note this last: All of the above meanings require that you DO something. Worship will always be embodied. You're not just listening or thinking or feeling. You are committing the total you — intellect, emotion, imagination, voice, senses, body — to the experience. Even when worship is not at its best, you're still engaged.

Thanks, Patricia. I hope I've done justice to your insights!

