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PET PEEVES: PART 2

Two thought-starters to begin this month's posting:

First, from Alfred North Whitehead: "In some contexts, it is more important that a proposition be interesting than that it be true..."

And from H. Richard Niebuhr: "We are usually more accurate in our affirmations than in our denials..."

I write these words with both of those aphorisms in mind. I think of myself as generally of a positive, affirming temperament. I'd usually rather say yes than no, to almost anything you propose. That said, you'll find me in the paragraphs below a little more negative —cynical? bitchy?— than usual. And these paragraphs represent the continuation of a rant I began long ago, in April of 2003 with [Essay 66](#). I take up my numbering from that piece.

So. Here they are, in no particular order of priority: Yet more liturgical specifics that are certain to set my teeth grinding.

17. "Youth Sunday". Or "Laymen's Sunday", or any other of more than a dozen themed Sundays I could think of. Sundays with themes are all of them always liturgically and ecclesially suspect, in my view: See [Essay 123](#) for my rationale. And such observances as "Youth Sunday" are especially odious, to me, for what they imply. Namely, that the *other* Sundays of the year are understood, in this congregation, as precisely *not* for youth. The implication in designating a "Youth Sunday" is that normal worship in this parish is for adults only, not for youth. That ain't the catholic church I know and love. That's the opposite of catholic, namely, sectarian. (I was going to call it *Protestant*, a favourite pejorative of mine since my Seminary days.)

The catholic (small c) Church should welcome precisely all of humankind, at every service: Rich and poor, old and young, black and white, male and female, gay and straight. You know: *Galatians* 3:28...

18. “Children’s sermons.” I also cite this at [Essay 66](#) as #12. But it bears repeating here. Can’t there be some way to involve children actively in worship without pandering to them, as so-called children’s sermons so often do? And don’t kid yourself: Children know when they’re being patronized. Wouldn’t it be better to dismiss the kids before the sermon for grown-ups, for their own moments of instruction together elsewhere? And then recall them for full participation in Bread and Cup at the Communion rite?...

19. Worship leaders without vestments. At our Synod Assembly this Summer, the preacher was a young woman who preached without notes and without vestments, energetically and conversationally in the midst of our worship space. “I never wear an alb,” she said. She should have. Her sermon was excellent, as I recall it. But what I remember most vividly about worship that day was her short skirt, her spike heels, and her long lovely legs.

There are three good reasons for vestments; that’s one of them. For the other two, see [Essay 21](#). Worship leaders should forgo vestments only in the most informal circumstances, such as at worship around a campfire at Bible Camp.

And lest you accuse me of sexism, I’d say the same of any male with long lovely legs...

20. Tailored albs. I’m thinking of albs tailored like a cassock: close fitting, narrow sleeves, Roman collar. They’re distinctly unflattering, when worn as the chief vestment for worship leaders. Noticeably unedifying, on most human bodies. This is strictly an aesthetic judgment, but those tailored albs have ruined, for me, more than one otherwise uplifting experience of worship.

So: Let’s see no albs in Christian worship that are not full, ample garments, with deep, wide sleeves, the hemline reaching the toe tops. With cowl or hooded neckline gracefully framing the face. And of course never a cincture. See [Essay 17](#).

Sure, that toe top hemline and those deep, wide sleeves take some getting used to when you’re serving at the Table. But hey: You’re supposed to be an accomplished mechanic at your job. You’re supposed to look comfortable in your work clothes. The only solution: unapologetic practice. You’re going to have to learn, for example, to hold your wide right sleeve with your left hand when you reach that right hand across the corporal for the Cup at Communion...

21. *Non-Evangelical Lutheran Worship* designations. I’ve devoted an entire earlier Essay to this issue, focusing on the terminologies and designations in *Lutheran Book of Worship*, see [Essay 28](#). The designations in *Evangelical Lutheran Worship* are not identical to those in *LBW*, please note. It’s not “Eucharist” among us; it’s “Holy Communion”. Those are not “Lessons” we proclaim from Scripture. They’re “Readings.” It’s not “Benediction”; it’s “Blessing”. I plead here for honouring the designations distinctive to our Twenty-First Century Lutheran piety. By such subtleties are you shaping the pieties of your people...

22. Empty offering plates at the altar. In too many churches, the action of the Offering too often begins at the Table, with a minister or acolyte distributing empty offering plates to ushers, who then retreat from the Table to perform their ministries among the people. The offering action should rather *end* at the Table, not *begin* there. The picture is of the world and its riches gathered into the embrace of God. I say: Place those empty plates or baskets at the entrance door, where worshippers have the option of giving their gifts as they enter, before worship begins. Then at the Offering (the Collection?), let ushers take them up, move among the people at the collecting, and bring them to the Table during an Offertory hymn or canticle...

23. Dust covers during the week over Ambo, Table, and Font. That's a certain sign that nobody expects the worship space actually to be used, other than on Sunday morning. Would that our church buildings could be open all week, and our people actively trained and encouraged to pray there, Monday through Saturday...

24. Standing for *Agnus Dei*. Since the *LBW* and again in *ELWorship*, the *Lamb of God* is understood as simply one hymn among others that may be sung as Bread and Cup are administered to the people. The *Lamb of God* was anciently the first of such hymns, sung to cover the action of the Breaking of the loaf. Yes, to sing in a seated position during such meditative moments represents one of those few occasions when "coach potato praise" is appropriate. See [Essay 7](#) above...

25. A sanctuary lamp. A lighted sanctuary lamp in a church's chancel has been a sign among Roman Catholics that the Reserved Host is present in the Chancel Tabernacle. It seems to me therefore inappropriate in a Lutheran church building: a confusing signal to send, especially where there is no visible Tabernacle. Lutheran parishes with a tradition of reserving Bread or Cup for distribution to their sick and shut in might instead make certain such a distribution takes place almost immediately after the parish's own celebration, rather than putting it on reserve for days afterward. I can hear impious Ralph Van Loon, of blessed memory, asking "What's the shelf-life of the Real Presence?"...

26. A pectoral cross worn during worship over the alb on pastors and seminarians. This strikes me as a pretentious affectation. The Pectoral Cross has been a sign of the office of Bishop. I'd keep it that way. I'm even vaguely uncomfortable seeing pastors and seminarians wearing a pectoral cross during the week, with street clothes or even clerics. If you own a pectoral cross, wear it against your skin, under your shirt, not over it. Much more modest and unassuming. Then it's a personal, private reminder of piety, not a public display...

My list continues, but I'll quit. The above is plenty this time, to get *your* teeth grinding.

