

Author: Paul F. Bosch [pbosch@golden.net]
Series: *Worship Workbench*
Issue: *Essay 136 + February, 2009*

Copyright: © 2009 Paul F. Bosch.

This document may be freely reproduced for non-commercial purposes with credit to the author and mention of the [Lift Up Your Hearts](http://www.liftupyourhearts.com) web site < www.worship.ca > as the source.



A CUSTOMARY FOR WORSHIP INTRODUCTION

BEGINNING A NEW SERIES

In the last few weeks I've had occasion to review a document I first composed, over the course of several years, as Dean of the Chapel at Waterloo Lutheran Seminary (WLS). And in recent conversations with others, it became clear to me that to re-publish a serialized version of that document at this website might be useful to my wider readers.

So I begin with this posting a new series: *A Customary for Worship*. Faithful readers of these Essays will recognize some familiar themes and even some favourite phrases in the following paragraphs and chapters. I've taken liberty to steal from myself, shamelessly and regularly, in preparing these once-a-month reflections at "Worship Workbench".

In this regard, after thirteen years of it, I'm reminded of what a friend once remarked of Thomas Merton: He never left an errant thought unpublished!

+ + +

A CUSTOMARY FOR WORSHIP

INTRODUCTION

FIRST WORDS

0.1 A *customary* — the term is used here as a noun, not as an adjective — is a set of directions or principles for worship planning and practice in a specific parish or location: "This is how we do things here." The *Customary* in the following pages represents therefore a revision of one I prepared during the years when I served as Lecturer in Worship and Spirituality and Dean of the Chapel at Waterloo Lutheran Seminary (1988-1995).

So these paragraphs were first provided for the use of students and faculty at WLS, taking into account as much as possible the realities — theological, pedagogical, liturgical, architectural, and personal — that control or influence the conduct of daily worship in that specific community of faith: a Seminary-Graduate School on a **university campus** in Ontario, Canada.

0.2 A *Customary* represents, you might say, a "fourth level" of **rubrics for worship**. Rubrics are the "stage directions" that aid worshipers — and worship leaders especially — in the conduct of public worship. In most service books, rubrics are printed in red (*rubor* = Latin for "red"), as in *Evangelical Lutheran Worship*. In *Lutheran Book of Worship* (LBW) they are numbered as well.

RUBRICS

1.1 Thus the directions printed in place in the various services in *ELWorship* may be considered the "**first level**" of rubrics.

1.2 A "**second level**" of rubrics, providing still more background and refinement, may be found in *ELWorship Leaders Edition*, and its photo-reduction, *ELWorship Leaders Desk Edition*, on pages 1-52.

1.3 Yet another level — a "**third level**" — of directions and commentary and elaboration upon these acts of worship may be found in such volumes as *The Sunday Assembly: Using ELWorship*, Volumes One and following, and in Philip Pfatteicher's *Manual on the Liturgy* and his *Commentary on the Lutheran Book of Worship*.

1.4 The document that follows here, therefore, represents a "**fourth level**" of rubrics — directions, elaborations, refinements, and suggestions — composed, originally and specifically, for the use of a particular community of faith, in its daily worship at Keffer Chapel, WLS, with its specific needs and its specific resources in mind. In faithfulness, that is, to the preceding three levels of rubrics and directions, and in working them out in

our specific setting, "This is the way we do things here." And, importantly, "This is *why* we do things this way here."

1.5 The document that follows, therefore, presents author (and reader!) with an inherent **oxymoron**: a "generic" Customary. It is an attempt to revise a set of very specific suggestions and options into a more universal document — useful, I hope, to parishes and people beyond its place of birth.

1.6 Part of my hope is that the following paragraphs might be useful to you in your specific situation. It's a marvelous discipline to try to **create your own** parish *Customary*. Your local, specific parish *Customary*, then, would attempt to honour, that is, all three previous levels of rubrics, and add to them the elaborations and adaptations suggested by your own resources and circumstances.

YOUR OWN CUSTOMARY

2.0 Here's how to create a *Customary* for your specific parish, using these paragraphs as a model.

2.1 First, **enlarge your vision**. Corporate worship utilizes the "voices" of all the arts: architecture or environment, drama (posture, position, and gesture), music, clothing (vestments and paraments), symbols, words. The question is never "Shall we, or shall we not, use the arts?" Of course you will be using the forms that the arts provide: If not these hymns and prayers, then certainly others; If not this specific architectural arrangement, then surely another. You cannot NOT use the arts in Christian worship; They are your voices. We would be speechless without them. It follows, then, that you try to gain some proficiency in their use.

2.2 Activate a parish **worship and the arts committee**. Many congregations already have a "Worship Committee", or perhaps a "Worship and Music Committee". Enlarge it and re-name it a "Worship and Arts Committee". And put it to work!

2.3 The committee's first responsibility might be to **take an inventory** of your parish resources in the arts. People? Is there a weaver or a fabric artist in your parish? An architect? A potter? A dancer or theatrical director or actor? A poet or author? Put them to work on your committee. Non-human resources? How many candle-holders do we own? How many banners? Have we a full set of vestments, in the colours of the seasons of the church year? Can we provide what we're lacking?

2.4 Begin the developing of your *Customary* by **assigning resources** to specific seasons and celebrations. "The brass candle-holders we'll use in Advent and Lent; the silver during the Christmas and Easter seasons": that kind of thing. You'll want to keep in mind the rhythms and cadences of the church's calendar. That ancient elaboration of the year provides for days and seasons of austerity, like Advent and Lent, and still other days and seasons of opulence and splendor: Easter; Christmas. You'll also want to

keep in mind the difference between the various rites and orders of worship you're planning. A service of Holy Communion, for example, suggests greater elaboration and splendor than a service of Morning Prayer.

2.5 Finally, **put it on paper**. Write some of these suggestions in a notebook, for future reference: "Here's how we did Easter last year!" You'll be surprised how useful such a *Customary* can become!

RUBRICS AND INCARNATION

3.1 Each of us comes to worship with already-established **expectations** of propriety and habits of piety. Any set of rubrics or directions for worship, therefore, can be odious, to some; They can smack of legalism, of an empty ceremonialism that places undue human constraint upon the Holy Spirit, which, after all, "blows where it wills".

3.3 Yet ours is an **incarnated** faith; The Christian gospel speaks of God "pitching tent" among us, living and moving and serving among us in Jesus of Nazareth. And Christian worship is incarnated too; "Word and Sacrament" suggests both speaking and doing.

3.4 Further: the Sacraments are themselves "**visible words**", as Saint Augustine reminds us. So what we *do* in worship will not be unimportant; What we *do* will be perhaps as important, phenomenologically, as what we say. In this regard at least one contemporary liturgical theologian has argued that, if our rubrics are correct and clear enough, we won't need printed texts for worship: The words will "be there", if we know what we're supposed to be *doing*.

3.5 The scriptures remind us that God hears the prayers of even the **least** of us; That God's Spirit provides the words for our prayers when the best we can do is sigh or groan (Romans 8:26). But the scriptures also suggest that not every prayer is righteous; that God flatly rejects the prayers of some (Amos 5:21).

3.6 And there is a significant difference between one's private, personal prayer, and the public, **corporate prayer** of a community.

3.7 Further: There are special responsibilities, and therefore **special disciplines and burdens**, which worship *leaders* may rightly be expected to bear. It is one thing to pray with others in the community of faith; It is quite another thing to *lead* those prayers, to serve in a role of public leadership of the people's prayers.

3.8 Finally, readers should be aware that the *Customary* suggested in the following paragraphs can hardly claim to represent the "last word" in worship practice, brooking no deviation or **experimentation**.

3.4 Worship leaders should feel free to **experiment**, therefore, and deviate from the

principles and suggestions in these pages, when that seems good and right. By the same token, they should be prepared to defend and interpret and explain their choices, just as these paragraphs attempt to defend and interpret and explain its choices — see the paragraphs below on "right" and "wrong", 4.1 - 4.8. Almost every human enterprise can be improved and fine-tuned, with loving care. And we can never presume, in this life, to have arrived at anything that can claim to be absolutely flawless. The Christian life consists, after all, does it not, in a series of compromises with reality? "There's no free lunch."

3.5 And, although this *Customary* was originally prepared to address the realities of worship in a specific situation, others, in other specific situations, may find these paragraphs useful in providing a **model** for worship design and leadership in their own parishes.

"RIGHT" AND "WRONG"

4.1 A word about the terms "**right**" and "**wrong**" is in order. There is surely little justification for utilizing either of these terms in discussing worship practice among Christians. It is not, that is, as if the following paragraphs represent the "right" way for Christians (or even, more narrowly, Lutherans!) to worship God, with alternative worship practices correspondingly "wrong".

4.2 Rather than "right" versus "wrong", let us think instead in the following categories: "**Faithful** to the spirit of the church's Tradition" as over against "contrary to the spirit of the church's Tradition". That Tradition is embodied, for Lutherans in our generation in this place, in our worship book, *Evangelical Lutheran Worship*.

4.3 But *ELWorship* itself is a faithful representative of the emerging **ecumenical consensus** in Christian worship, as I am at pains to point out in the following pages; Roman Catholic, Lutheran, Anglican, Reformed, and Free Church worship traditions have all converged in recent years, into an all-but-unprecedented liturgical consensus. We are living in an exciting time; Not since before the Reformation have Christians agreed so unanimously on "the doctrine of the Gospel" and its implications for worship practice, in all the churches.

4.4 The question worship leaders will want to ask, therefore, is not "Is this or that the right way to worship?" but rather "Is this or that faithful to the **tradition** of the church?". That is, for Lutherans, "Is this or that faithful to the ecumenical consensus about Gospel and liturgy as we see that consensus in *ELWorship*?" Anglicans, for example, will ask the question similarly about their own *Book of Common Prayer* and *Book of Alternative Services*.

4.5 One implication of this re-orientation (away from "right" versus "wrong", and toward "faithful to the Tradition" versus "contrary to the Tradition") will be a renewed appreciation of legitimate **diversity** in worship practice: There will be several legitimate

answers to almost every question of liturgical propriety and practice. (There will also, of course, be several inappropriate answers.)

4.6 A second implication will be a relative loyalty, in the planning and the leading of worship, to the **rubrics** of *ELWorship*, and indeed to the **designations** employed in *ELWorship*. (*ELWorship* speaks, for example, not of "Eucharist", but of "Holy Communion".) The rubrics and designations of our book are respected among us, not because these rubrics and designations are the only "right" ones, but simply in an attempt, humbly, to learn, and to appreciate, and to "feel yourself into" the contemporary Lutheran version of the ecumenical consensus they represent.

4.7 Of course, worship leaders should feel free to **challenge** or to change our book's rubrics and designations. And another generation may want to replace them altogether. But meantime, the church has commended this treasure to us in this form; We would be ungrateful stewards to ignore them or cast them aside, unthinkingly.

4.8 More than a question of "right" versus "wrong", therefore, it is a question of **honour**: we seek to honour the Tradition we have been given. And to sit humbly at its feet, to change the figure, seeking first of all to learn from it, and to be enriched by it. Tradition, says the theologian, is one way to give your grandparents a vote in the decisions you must make today. This kind of trans-generational democracy is essential to living worship. To honour our Tradition is simply one of the marks of Christian maturity.

Three final qualifications and, if you will, warnings:

4.9 Without apology, *ELWorship* is the chief liturgical **resource** in most Lutheran parishes, reflecting the Lutheran heritage of this specific community of faith, while at the same time embodying, as it does, the richness of the emerging ecumenical consensus of our day. Single copies of the worship books of other faith communities might also be available in the vestry for leaders' use: Roman Catholic, Anglican, United Church, Mennonite, Lutheran Church - Missouri Synod, and Presbyterian.

4.10 Worship leaders in every parish should make special note of the fact that, although parish worship is planned and conducted largely by members of this specific community of faith, it is **public worship**, like all Christian worship. That is, other members of the wider community are likely to be present at any given occasion of parish worship: strangers, visitors, the simply curious. One might say, that is, that our worship is *by* this parish, but *for* the wider community; indeed, it is "for the life of the world." Worship leaders will want to make certain that our prayers and our preaching will never betray a narrow address to only "our kind". That would be to make of our public worship a kind of spiritual "lobby" for special interests.

4.11 For this reason and others, care should be taken, in every parish, in preparing (or overseeing the preparation of) all the week's readings and prayers in **inclusive**. Lutherans are committed to the principle of inclusive language in worship; see the

Evangelical Lutheran Church In Canada's document "Guidelines for the use of inclusive language in worship". The *New Revised Standard Version* of the Bible is most frequently used among us because of its inclusive language, its scholarly accuracy, and its felicity of expression; It is this version that may normally be found at pulpit / ambo. But every parish, in addition, should have available to worship planners at least one copy of almost every contemporary translation, as well as several inclusive language lectionaries. And worship planners will want to be sensitive in "inclusivizing" other texts.

4.12 Note also that the term "**Jahweh**" is inappropriate in public worship. "Jahweh" represents an English transliteration of the Hebrew for the holy name of God; It is perhaps unavoidable in the classroom, but it is unfamiliar to most worshipers. ("*Jahweh?* Who is that?") More importantly, to hear the word pronounced aloud is offensive to Jews, who have established the convention, when reading aloud, of substituting the word "the Lord" where the term "Jahweh" appears in the text.

4.13 The following paragraphs, therefore, are presented with the hope — the prayer! — that these directions and interpretations and suggestions will be **useful**, first of all, to those whose high calling it is to lead the people's prayers before our gracious God; and therefore useful too, and edifying, to all of God's people, in whom without exception our God takes high delight.

To be continued...

+ + +

Paul F. Bosch
12 July 1990
Revised September 1992
Revised again January 2001
Revised yet again January 2009

+ + +