

Author: Paul F. Bosch [pbosch@golden.net]
Series: **Worship Workbench**
Issue: **Essay 141 + August, 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** web site < www.worship.ca > as the source.*

A CUSTOMARY FOR WORSHIP

POSTURE, POSITION AND GESTURE IN WORSHIP

1.0 **INTRODUCTION:** Worship in the Christian tradition is an experience which involves the total person. The Christian faith is an **INCARNATED** faith; We are called upon to worship God with heart, soul, intellect, and body. Pastors and worship leaders ignore the pedagogical implications of their own postures and gestures in worship only at the risk of obscuring the witness of one of their surest and finest instruments for the praise of God. The human body, along with the human voice, is the first and foremost of our instruments for praise. It is only prudent, then, that pastors and worship leaders become comfortable and graceful — Lovely word! Think about it! — with their postures and gestures in worship.

1.1 **POSTURE:** Worship leaders and presiders will want to enter the worship space, and comport themselves throughout the entire service, with a sense of God-given regal dignity and self-awareness — not self-absorbed, in any narcissistic sense, but simply aware that you are privileged to lead God's people in their prayers before the throne of grace.

1.2 This suggests a posture that is not slouching, or slovenly, or stooped, or bent, nor unduly tense or rigid, but instead gracefully (!) erect and **CONFIDENT:** Shoulders squared, gut pulled in, head up, eyes bright with Paschal confidence. Orthodox theologian Alexander Schmemmann argues that this is the posture *par excellence* in Christian prayer: To stand erect and confident, poised and proud of my own God-given humanity and guilelessly grateful that I have been created in the image of God — and that, in spite of sin, God nevertheless still takes delight in me (Psalm 18:20).

1.3 Further: it is no accident that the Greek word for **RESURRECTION** is *anastasis*, literally "the standing-up again" of Christ. We too are honored by God in our baptism to share with Christ that royal privilege. Note also the German for resurrection: *Auferstehung* : "to stand

up again".

1.4 So the simple posture of **STANDING ERECT** becomes, in Christian worship, a visual parable, first, of my creation in the image of a God who delights in me, the *imago dei*. And second, of my participation, in my baptism, with Christ in his own Resurrection, or "Standing Up".

1.5 Two **ABERRANT** postures deserve special warning; They are particularly graceless in worship leaders. First, a self-embarrassed inward pointing of the toes, the kind of cutesy, pigeon-toed posture typical of adolescent females. Avoid it in the leadership of worship. Second, a self-embarrassed straddle-legged posture typical of adolescent males, feet planted wide apart. Avoid it also.

1.6 And the posture most appropriate in leading worship will also be most appropriate, needless to say, in the **PULPIT** and in the act of preaching: A royal self-assurance that says, along with the words of the sermon: "You and I are both the Resurrection-Children of a God who delights in us."

1.7 Finally, needless to say, that same erect, joyful, royal self-assurance will be the posture most appropriate for **ALL OF LIFE**. Remember, you incarnate the Gospel in your very person. Hence, you owe it to the Gospel to allow your body — to train and discipline your body, if need be — to become familiar and comfortable with an erect and noble and joyful bearing, **AT ALL TIMES**, not simply at 11:00 a.m. on Sunday morning in worship.

1.8 Worship leaders do well, therefore, to become familiar with a poised and relaxed "**NEUTRAL**" posture that is appropriate at those times in worship when you are not speaking. Practice standing with hands joined comfortably at waist height. The medieval clerical posture of standing erect with palms pressed together at waist height, right thumb over left, is somewhat fuss-budgitty for our more relaxed and informal age; If you can become comfortable with it, fine. But other postures can be equally reverent and graceful: Hands joined with fingers interlocked; hands joined with one hand supporting the other, etc. To be avoided at all costs in leading worship is the so-called fig-leaf posture, with hands joined in front at arms' length. And the "banker's posture" — hands at waist level, palms apart, fingertips touched together — is likewise particularly graceless in leaders of public worship.

1.9 Be certain to read the note on **KNEELING** also elsewhere in this *Customary*.

2.0 **POSITION**: The position you assume in the worship space (relative to the other worshipers) also speaks of your understanding of your role as worship leader.

2.1 In the **EARLIEST** buildings built specifically as Christian churches, dating from the fourth and fifth centuries A.D., the seats of worship leaders were located in the so-called basilican position, directly behind a free-standing altar; worship leaders thus faced the people across the Table, much in the manner of the head of a household with family

gathered around the dining room table. In later configurations, especially when the altar became located (regrettably!) against the foot of an “east” wall, worship leaders’ seats necessarily were placed to right or left of the building’s central axis, at the foot of north or south wall.

2.2 As worship leader, you owe it to other worshipers to be **VISIBLE** to them at all times during worship; They will expect to take from you and from your example their cues for standing, sitting, and kneeling. You honour other worshipers when you train yourself to become comfortable in serving in this very public role. Although, following Kierkegaard's analogy, all worshipers should think of themselves as actors in the drama that constitutes Christian worship, there is a special sense in which you as worship leader are unavoidably on stage at all times during public prayer — even when other things are happening, as during the singing of hymns, for example. It is good discipline, when you are leading worship, to take for granted that someone is watching you at every moment .

2.3 Your position during worship also signals your understanding of your role as **LEADER**, and your understanding of what is happening at a given moment in worship. To position yourself confidently "center-stage" at the Greeting or at the Blessing; To position yourself confidently at pulpit or ambo during the sermon or scripture readings — to take these positions with poised authority is to honour your audience; And it is to speak volumes about your understanding of your calling as worship leader. No one has confidence in worship leaders who fidget timidly in place, who shift weight nervously from foot to foot, who approach lectern or pulpit uncertain that they belong there.

2.4 In the long history of the Church, we can distinguish between three orders of worship "**MAGNITUDE**": 1) Prayer Services and offices, led from the sedilia (from the latin for “seat”); 2) Services of Prayer and Word, with reading and preaching led from pulpit, or lectern or ambo; and 3) Services of Prayer and Word and Meal (that is, Eucharist), with the Meal led from the altar-table. Each will require of the worship leader a distinct and characteristic position in the worship space.

2.5 Rule of thumb: Utilize the sedilia for all **PRESIDING** or leading in public prayer; utilize the ambo / pulpit **ONLY** for reading scripture and preaching; utilize the altar **ONLY** for Holy Communion (from Offertory on). Each piece of furniture in our worship space has its characteristic and specific use or purpose, and you help worshipers comprehend what is happening in ritual when, in your presiding, you honour that specific purpose; You are honouring what could be called the principle of “ritual clarity”. See Essay 5 above.

2.6 **PRAYER SERVICES AND OFFICES** are the simplest and most austere services in our worship books. These are worship forms such as The Great Litany, Responsive Prayer or Suffrages, and the opening acts of worship in the Holy Communion (from the Greeting through the Prayer of the Day). These consist (quite legitimately, it should be noted) in prayer and praise alone — no sacramental action, no preaching, not even the reading of scripture — and may be led in their totality from the sedilia.

Lighted candles could be placed in position at either side of the crucifix on the retable in congregations which observe this nicety. I'd call these the "**PRAYER LIGHTS**" and they would be lit at any occasion of public prayer; See the pages on "Candles" in this *Customary*.) The sedilia may be honoured and illuminated by processional torches.

2.7 Note most specifically that the **ALTAR** is not utilized at all for these simple services. Note also that the **PULPIT** and lectern are not utilized either, in unembellished Prayer Offices. These most-austere services in our worship repertoire would be led exclusively from the sedilia.

2.8 Services of **PRAYER AND WORD** include the so-called Daily Office (Morning Prayer, Evening Prayer and Compline), the various forms of Service of the Word, and the first half of the service of Holy Communion, from the Prayer of the Day up till the Offertory. These services also may be led from the sedilia, with readers and/or preachers utilizing ambo/pulpit.

Lighted candles (the "prayer lights") are in place on the retable; Processional candles honour and illuminate the lectern, at these services. I'd call these the "**WORD LIGHTS**".

Note, again, that the **ALTAR** is not utilized at all for these services centering as they do on reading and preaching.

2.9 The fullest service in the Christian tradition is that of **PRAYER AND WORD AND SACRAMENTAL MEAL**; That is, the Holy Communion. For this service, the "Prayer and Praise" portion (Greeting to Prayer of the Day) could be led from the sedilia; The "Word" portion (the reading of scripture and sermon) is led from ambo or pulpit; And the "Meal" portion (from Offertory to Blessing) is led from the altar.

Lighted candles are in position on the retable (the "prayer lights"); Processional candles flank the lectern or pulpit or ambo (the "word lights"); and lighted candles are in place on the altar (the "**MASS LIGHTS**", as Roman Catholics call them).

Note that the altar is not utilized at this service **UNTIL** the Offertory. Note also that the final Prayer and Blessing may be led from the sedilia, from the altar, or from somewhere "front and center" in the worship space.

2.10 The brief order for **CONFESSION AND FORGIVENESS**, which sometimes precedes the Holy Communion, may be led ideally from the font, since it recalls our baptismal covenant; Or it may be led from somewhere "front and center" in the worship space. Kneeling at the prayer of confession in this rite is appropriate during the season of Lent, but is not necessary or desirable at other times or occasions. (See the *Auferstehung Christi* above, and the notes on kneeling below.)

3.0 **GESTURES**: Worship leaders in all Christian parishes do well to develop and practice a graceful and natural "**NEUTRAL**" posture (see above, 1.8); And, as well, to

familiarize themselves with three historic gestures. They are: 1) a gesture of welcoming (what might be called the "hospitality" gesture); 2) a gesture of prayer and praise (the *orans*, or "praying" gesture); and 3) the gesture of blessing or benediction.

3.1 In addressing the matter of gestures in worship, two common misunderstandings are frequently encountered. The first misunderstanding is for worship leaders to assume that gesture makes **NO CONTRIBUTION** to worship, and leaders are therefore presumed to be at liberty not to learn the gestures that have become part of our historic Tradition. The response to this misunderstanding can only be that it arises from a docetic or anti-incarnational heresy. The Christian faith is an incarnated faith: Of course the body and its vocabulary of gesture is to be respected and honoured, if we are to remain faithful to our gospel.

3.2 The second error is for worship leaders to content themselves with attempting to utilize a single, **ALL-PURPOSE** gesture for all the functions of worship leadership. The effect of this error is to diminish the witness of the body's expressiveness; It is as if it makes no difference whether we use a screwdriver, a hammer, or a pliers in a given application in the workshop. Of course it makes a difference; Again, to deny this is to content ourselves with a severely limited tool-kit, and to dishonour the witness of the body.

3.3 Note finally that each of these historic gestures requires the use of **BOTH HANDS**; One does not hold a book in one hand and raise the other in one of these traditional gestures.

There are important implications of this **CONSTRAINT**: a) You must have an Assisting Minister or Acolyte at your side to hold your book for you — a "living lectern"! Marvelous! — at the proper height for you to read from its pages; Or b) You must have a reading desk or kneeler with book-rack in front of you, at the proper height for you to read from its pages, with both hands free; Or c) You must be able and willing to speak the words accompanying these gestures *ex corde* ("from the heart"), without any text in front of you.

Of these three possibilities, option c) is the most **DESIRABLE** with short responses or liturgical dialogues, such as Greetings and Blessings. It's part of your burden as a professional. Get used to it!

4.1 The "**HOSPITALITY**" gesture is a welcoming extension of the hands, held out in front of the body, at approximately waist height, palms up and open. It is the gesture you might assume at the door of your home, welcoming an old friend to the circle of your family. (Recalling Romans 12:13 and Hebrews 13:2, it might be called the *philoxenia* gesture, from the Greek for "love for the stranger".)

4.2 The "hospitality" gesture is **APPROPRIATE** at the Apostolic Greeting ("The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ..."); At the Salutation ("The Lord be with you..."); At the opening verse of the Preface to the Great Thanksgiving ("The Lord be with you..."); And at any other moment in worship when a greeting is initiated by the worship leader.

4.3 As noted above, the "hospitality" gesture requires the use of **BOTH** hands: One does not hold a book in one hand and extend the other hand.

4.4 It is appropriate for the presider / worship leader to respond to the greeting's return, at the words "And also with you", with a simple **BOW** of the head, in an exchange of mutual respect between pastor and people that is probably more important, phenomenologically, than any reverencing of the altar. It is the pastor and people together, after all, who constitute the Body of Christ, and for that matter, the Holy Communion. ("Communion" is a collective noun, remember.) To honour each other is to model that conviction.

5.1 The **PRAYER** gesture or *orans* will be comfortable to many Christians familiar with the charismatic renewal of our day, but unfamiliar to many others. It is the gesture of Jewish prayer through the ages; It would have been familiar to Paul and to Jesus (see Luke 18:13). Not incidentally, the ancient Assyrian word "to pray" was "to open the fist".

5.2 The **ORANS** is a version of the *Auferstehung Christi* (see above). Stand poised and erect, raise your arms and hands about shoulder height, palms up and open; And lift (do NOT bow!) your head and face. The eyes are open (Yes!) and unfocused — or focused on the void or infinity (somewhere "out there" and "up").

5.3 In an earlier age, the *orans* was **PRESCRIBED** in two places in worship: at the first words of the antiphon of the Hymn of Praise in the Holy Communion ("Glory to God in the highest...") and at the first words of the Great Thanksgiving ("It is indeed right and salutary..." and "Holy God, mighty Lord..."). If the *orans* is utilized by the presiding minister **AT NO OTHER TIME** in public worship, it should at least be utilized at these two moments of supreme praise.

5.4 But the *orans* may be utilized at **ANY** time of prayer: it is the prayer posture *par excellence*. In any form of Christian worship, the *orans* is appropriate: at the praying of any collect, prayer-of-the-day, intercession, thanksgiving, bidding prayer, or litany.

5.5 Note specifically that the *orans* is particularly appropriate during the praying of the **LORD'S PRAYER**. I personally anticipate the day when all members of the worshiping assembly — not simply worship leaders, but all present — will feel comfortable raising hands in a grand corporate *orans* during communal praying of the Lord's Prayer, if at no other time in worship.

5.6 Note however that the *orans* is a **STANDING** gesture; One does not utilize the *orans* in a kneeling or sitting posture. Note further that the *orans* requires the lifting of TWO hands; One does not hold a book in one hand and raise the other (see the note above at 3.3).

5.7 Note too that the *orans* is a gesture of prayer **TO GOD**; One does not utilize the *orans* along with words addressed to worshipers. The bids of the historic *kyrie* in the Holy Communion (the so-called "deacon's litany") are a case in point. The deacon's / leader's

hands are held in "neutral" at each of the bids of the *kyrie* ("In peace let US pray..."); and the *orans* is appropriate only at the words addressed TO GOD: "Lord, have mercy."

Likewise in the Prayers of the People / Intercessions: "Let US pray to the Lord" is addressed to the people; hence, neutral, not *orans*. The response is addressed to God: "Lord, have mercy"; Hence, at these words an *orans* gesture is appropriate. In the form "Lord, in your mercy" / "Hear our prayer", both of these short verses are addressed to God; Hence an *orans* is appropriate at both. But the bids that precede these words are often cast in the form of an address TO THE PEOPLE: "For such-and-such, let US pray...". At these words an *orans* is not appropriate; A "neutral" posture is appropriate at these bids.

5.8 Rule of thumb number one: In public prayer, pay attention to whom you are ADDRESSING, in every moment. Are you speaking to God in these words? Or the people? If God, then *orans* is appropriate. If the people, *orans* is not appropriate.

Rule of thumb number two: If in doubt, do NOT use *orans*. (Prayer addressed to God in a poised, neutral posture is always appropriate; A bid or invitation to pray addressed to the people in an *orans* posture is not appropriate.)

The effect of all this ritual PUNCTILIOUSNESS can be a lovely little dance, executed chiefly by human hands. And importantly, that little dance can help to make clear to worshipers what is happening at every moment of public prayer.

Will such ceremonial scrupulousness MATTER to God, or to your own eternal salvation? Not one bit. But it will speak to those who are listening. You can be certain: It will not fail to speak. And if you ignore these injunctions, and prefer to stand motionless, or to sit, while leading public prayer, that will speak too.

5.9 Be certain to note below the paragraphs on KNEELING for prayer.

6.1 The BLESSING gesture is reserved for use by the ordained ministry only, according to ancient tradition, and that tradition might profitably be honoured among us. Nevertheless, seminarians and those preparing for ordination should become familiar with it. In blessing (benediction = to "speak well", that is, to bless), one stands erect and raises hands to shoulder height, palms up and out. It is as if you are trying to lay both hands on the head of each worshiper, and failing that, you reach toward them in a gesture of gracious promise.

6.2 Note that the blessing gesture, like the hospitality gesture and the *orans* gesture, requires the use of BOTH HANDS. One does not pronounce a blessing with one hand extended, the other holding a book.

6.3 LAYPEOPLE and seminarians utilize an *orans* gesture, not the blessing gesture, at Blessings or Benedictions, along with the first person plural ("...bless us...") rather than the second person plural ("...bless you..."), in effect changing a blessing into a prayer.

6.4 Blessings are almost always concluded with the **SIGN OF THE CROSS** traced over the assembly with the right hand — the left hand resting at the breast, please, not dangling at the side nor fondling the paunch!

6.5 The custom of marking the **SIGN OF THE CROSS** upon oneself — the fingertips touching first the forehead, then the breast, then one shoulder, then the other shoulder, then back to the breast — is an ancient and honourable custom, and might well be encouraged among worshipers. It is not magic or superstition, but rather a kind of enacted prayer. The body commits itself to the words of a petition or blessing, spoken or internalized. It is suggested, in *ELWorship*, at several moments in our worship, each of them marked with a small red cross in the text of the rite: At the Invocation, for example, at the beginning of the order for Confession; At the words of Forgiveness at the conclusion of that rite; At the Blessing at the end of the Service. It is appropriate, further, whenever the name of Jesus is mentioned in worship.

6.6 But remember: It is **HEAVY STUFF**. By this gesture you are marking your own body with the cross of Christ's suffering; You are taking the cross of Christ into your own psyche, into your own discipleship. See [Essay 131](#).

6.7 Not incidentally, at the **INVOCATION** before the Confession, the Presiding Minister does not mark the cross upon people, as in a Blessing, but rather joins the people in marking the cross upon herself / himself. Its use is intended, here in the Invocation, not as a Blessing, but rather as a personal gestural profession of discipleship, in which the Presiding Minister, significantly, joins the people. See [Essay 54](#).

6.8 And no, **IT DOES NOT MATTER** whether you touch right shoulder or left shoulder first. Western Christians do it one way (left, then right); Eastern Christians the other (right, then left).

Next time: Action at the Offertory. To be continued...

