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A CUSTOMARY FOR WORSHIP

ORIENTING, GENUFLECTING, REVERENCING AND KNEELING

0.1 Orienting, genuflecting, and reverencing the altar are postures associated with a piety inherited from an earlier age; They are somewhat **PROBLEMATIC** in contemporary worship.

1.1 "**ORIENTING**" means literally "facing east". It made some sense — it was interpretable — in an earlier age when our worship areas were clearly designed as two-room spaces: the chancel *here*, in the "east", where the "holy action" took place; and the nave *there*, toward the "west", where the worshipers stood to watch. Such church buildings were strongly axial in plan and in perception: The really important and holy action was understood to be in the "east", in the chancel — in some cases actually hidden behind a rood screen or iconostasis. And the farther you went to the "west", away from the altar and toward the entrance door, the more secular and profane you became: The back pews and the narthex were for the unbelievers, or for the minimally committed.

1.2 It was this perception that prompted worship leaders to execute a little dance when leading worship: to **TURN** toward the people during "sacramental" moments in worship, when they were presumably speaking for God, and to turn away from the people (to face "east") during "sacrificial" moments in worship, when presumably they were addressing God on the people's behalf. That was how we were taught at Seminary 55 years ago. (But see the paragraphs on *berakah*-type prayer, elsewhere in this *Customary*.)

2.1 So also with the instinct behind **GENUFLECTING** ("bending the knee"). To genuflect toward the "east" upon entering your pew was to acknowledge, to give honour and reverence to, the "Holy" up there in the chancel.

3.1 So also with **REVERENCING** the altar (a bow of the head, either moderate or profound, in an "eastward" direction, when passing in front of the altar). Learned arguments might ensue about both "reverencing" and "genuflecting". Are you intending to honour the altar itself? The sacramental elements on the altar or reserved in an altar tabernacle? A saint's relics enclosed in the altar table? The cross or crucifix set upon or above the altar? The rising sun as metaphor for the risen Christ? The location of Jerusalem, the Holy City? All of the above?

4.1 **CURRENT** theological / liturgical opinion since Vatican 2 suggests that all three of these postures have lost much of their meaning today, especially in a "one-room" worship space with a strong radial (rather than axial) plan. All three of these postures are relics of an earlier piety that we do well to re-evaluate.

4.2 Contemporary piety stresses the primary importance of the **PEOPLE** themselves as the preeminent sign and symbol in Christian worship: The assembly gathered to worship God in Christ through the Spirit. (See the pages on "SIGNS..." elsewhere in this *Customary*.) The "Holy" is no longer so much understood as located up there in the "east"; Rather, the "Holy" has pitched tent among us. More important in worship than our furnishings or our artifacts are our own bodies: Here in our flesh is the "temple of the Spirit".

4.3 So our primary **REVERENCE** should be directed toward honouring the baptismal Christ in each believer — and indeed in all of us together gathered in his name. Note as well the custom in some parishes for worshipers to stand when worship leaders enter the worship space, as a sign of that mutual reverence.

4.4 Hence, as Robert Hovda suggests, the "reverencing" of one another in the Apostolic Greeting **MODELS** our perception of this reality. For the people to acknowledge the pastor's Greeting ("The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ...") with a bow of the head; and for the pastor to acknowledge their response ("And also with you...") with a reciprocal bow — this is the most important "reverencing" in Christian worship.

(The banal "Good morning!" exchanged between presider and people in many contemporary parishes is a grotesque **CORRUPTION** of the tradition's gracious original.)

5.1 Of course, for many worshipers, genuflecting and reverencing remain important and meaningful acts of **PIETY**; It would be insensitive indeed for pastors to cast aside, or to appear to ridicule, established habits of piety among their parishioners.

5.2 But the **PASTOR'S** own practice provides an important model for worshipers. So I for one would be careful, for example, *not* to "orient" at all, ever, during congregational worship.

5.3 To honour the **PEOPLES'** inherited piety, I might pause briefly, with bowed head,

facing "eastward", upon entering and leaving the worship space — intended as a simple but sincere "reverencing" of this occasion and this space. But by the same token, I might also, as well, pause briefly on other occasions, facing north or south or west, upon entering or leaving.

5.4 And I would be certain to "REVERENCE" the people at those gracious words of Apostolic Greeting — and indeed, at the words "The Lord be with you..." each time they occur.

6.1 A word about KNEELING: It is worth noting that the practice of kneeling for public prayer was all but unknown in Jewish worship. And it was unknown in Christian worship too until the fourth century, when it was introduced into Christian liturgical practice from Syria. It models an abject humility — an obsequiousness? — before God uncongenial to Jewish and Christian pieties, recalling as it does the powerless postures of battlefield and warfare. You kneel before your conqueror, that is; You hold out your clasped hands to accept the chains of slavery; And you bow your head — and perhaps, understandably, close your eyes! — to await the sword of execution. It is difficult to conceive of a more servile or humble — or humbling! — posture; only a full bodily prostration would be more demeaning.

6.2 Of course, it should be granted that there may well be times or occasions in Christian worship when such postures might model an appropriate HUMILITY before God. The Christian Eucharist ("Thanksgiving!"), however, is surely not such an occasion.

6.3 Kneeling will be APPROPRIATE, therefore, during moments of private devotion; and appropriate too in public worship during specific seasons, such as Lent; and on specific occasions, such as a service of Corporate Confession, or prayer offices such as the Litany.

6.4 Apart from these moments, seasons, and occasions, kneeling is not a posture conducive to the sense of joy and celebration appropriate at a service of Holy Communion, for example. Worshipers and worship leaders will want to STAND, that is, for the prayers of the Eucharist, recalling and modeling the *Auferstehung Christi* (see above), and stand too at the reception of the bread and cup, except for rare circumstances.

6.5 Part of the exhilaration and challenge of leading congregational worship is to reflect on such matters. ADIAPHORA? Perhaps. But these simple postures and gestures never fail to teach, as well. As Lutheran Bishop William Lazareth maintains, there is practical implication in our theology, and theological force in our practice.

More to come...

