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SIGNING WITH THE CROSS HONOURING THE BODY

As I have noted to you before, I'm asked to lead worship every now and then at our local Lutheran Seminary, where on the occasion of my retirement I was honoured with the title Emeritus Dean of the Chapel. Consequently I was invited to lead worship, a couple of weeks before this writing, during the days that included the beginning of Lent.

At the Ash Wednesday service that week, I invited the congregation into three experiences unfamiliar to many of them. The student population at our Seminary these days is not exclusively Lutheran, nor even exclusively main-line Christian, including as it does representatives from Mennonite and Pentecostal faith communities. So what I was presenting seemed a little bizarre to not a few of those gathered that day.

First, I invited worshippers to take the risk of participating in the Imposition of Ashes.

I introduced the rite — page 251 ff in *ELWorship* — as engagingly as I could, interpreting the ashes not only as a sign of mortality but also as a sign of our solidarity with the created order. All the world's flora and fauna, the stones and stars themselves! — We are all made of the same stuff, I pointed out.

I was gratified to note that literally everyone came forward to receive the Imposition of Ashes.

The second bizarre invitation involved worshippers joining me as Presider in a grand corporate *orans* at the Lord's Prayer. Worshippers at our Seminary are accustomed to observing their worship leaders raise head and hands at moments of public prayer, assuming the prayer posture of antiquity — the *orans*. Jesus would have prayed like this, I noted: The *orans* is the traditional posture of prayer for Jews. And Lutherans have something to learn from Jews — and from Pentecostals.

Perhaps two-thirds of the assembly felt comfortable joining me as Presider in the *orans*

when we prayed the Lord's Prayer together aloud in the Thanksgiving at the Table.

The third invitation was the most exotic of all. I called attention to the Confession of Sin in the Ash Wednesday rite, and held up that three-fold *mea culpa*, on the bottom of page 252. — Do you miss it, as I do, in *Compline*, page 321? — And I explained that ancient tradition allowed a three-fold beating of the breast to accompany those words.

I had fewer takers for that one. Less than a quarter of the congregation joined me in physically ritualizing those *mea culpas*.

In our week's *post-mortem* on Thursday, I reflected on these matters. Apparently the mostly white, mostly Anglo Saxon, mostly Protestant, mostly middle class North Americans still resist committing the body to worship. Still balk at enlarging their words with a gesture. Still find the body an embarrassment.

So. Before we take leave altogether of the disciplines of Lent and its baptismal themes ([Essay 146](#) - [151](#)), I want to call your attention to a treasure that's not printed in the peoples' edition of *ELWorship*, but available only in *ELWorship Leaders Edition*. It's great stuff. We shouldn't allow this kind of thing to disappear.

Turn in *ELWorship* to pages 232 and following. That's a rite altogether new and unfamiliar to us. It comes out of the Adult Catechuminate. The rite assumes that there are adults ready to embark upon the Christian adventure, hence, a Welcome to Baptism.

In the materials proposed for the New Book — but finally included only in the *Leaders Edition*, where it is effectively hidden from worshipers— there's a marvelous physical embodiment of discipleship we should rescue: a full-body (one might say) Signing with the Cross.

But, hey: To be fair, it's a judgement call. You can't put *everything* in the peoples' book. Not if you want to include ten musical settings of the Holy Communion, plus more than 800 hymns, including all 150 Psalms — and still keep everything in one volume. Something has to go in a *Leaders Edition* — where, yes, you risk its being overlooked. The framers of the *Lutheran Book of Worship (LBW)* faced the same dilemma, and made the same judgement. So the peoples' edition (of both books) contains only a bare-bones version of what you can find at its fullest only in the *Leaders Edition*, at least in rites like those pertaining to Holy Week — and to Baptism...

To be sure, the new rite, as published in the pew edition, provides a Sign of the Cross at the top of page 233. But it is a much fuller gesture — a veritable compendium of gestures! — in the *Leaders Edition*.

This prompts in me a reminder: *Always consult the Leaders Edition for almost any rite in ELWorship — as in LBW. In both worship books, the fullest rite is always, by necessity, in the Leaders Edition. If you don't, you run the risk of missing some dynamite material...*

Because I prefer the language as it was first proposed — subject and predicate first, then dependent clause — I quote at length and in full from the proposed *Holy Baptism and Related Rites, Renewing Worship, Volume 3, Formation in faith related to Baptism. Page 28:*



Signing with the Cross

P = Pastor S = Sponsor Congregational responses in **bold**.

Following the hymn of the day, the inquirers and their sponsors gather before the assembly.

The presiding minister addresses the inquirers with these or similar words:

P You have heard the holy and saving gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ. Now receive the sign of that gospel on your body and in your heart, that you may know the Lord and the power of his resurrection.

A sponsor traces a cross on the inquirer's forehead as the presiding minister says:

S Receive the + cross on your forehead,
a sign of God's endless love and mercy for you.
Learn to know and to follow Christ.

One of the following or another response may be sung or spoken by the assembly:

A: **Praise to you, O Christ,
the wisdom and power of God.**

B: **Glory and praise to you,
almighty and gracious God.**

The presiding minister may continue. A sponsor or catechist may trace a cross on each part of the inquirer's body as it is named.

P Receive the + cross on your ears,
that you may hear the gospel of Christ, the word of life. *Response.*

Receive the + cross on your eyes,
that you may see the light of Christ, illumination for your way. *Response.*

Receive the + cross on your lips,
that you may sing the praise of Christ, the joy of the church. *Response.*

Receive the + cross on your heart,
that God may dwell there by faith. *Response.*

Receive the + cross on your shoulders,
that you may bear the gentle yoke of Christ. *Response.*

Receive the + cross on your hands,
that God's mercy may be known in your work. *Response.*

Receive the + cross on your feet,
that you may walk in the way of Christ. *Response.*



Now *that* is embodied worship! I think it's terrific. Congregations who use these rites should be certain to insert these fuller gestures into the more bare-bones rite in the peoples' edition, on page 233. That fuller version of these signings appears in *ELWorship Leaders Edition*, page 594. Nevertheless I personally prefer the language of the rite as it was proposed, above.

Aside: As part of a team that introduced these proposed materials at workshops in our area, I asked for volunteers to model this rite. After the demonstration was over, one of the volunteer participants said, "I was baptized as an adult in another church — and my actual baptism didn't move me as deeply as this demonstration did. And here we were today, play-acting!"



See [Essay 146](#) for an introduction to this brief series.

Pastor and people stand and repeat the Sacrament of the Altar in the Small Catechism, ELWorship, page 1166, the Pastor taking the role of interlocutor.

P Beloved, allow this brief abundance so to live in your hearts that at all times you may use the defense of this gift against all snares of the Enemy. Enjoying the protection of the One whom we confess, let us persevere in the confirmation of our Baptism, so that receiving the forgiveness of sins and newness of life, we may have our share in the fullness of God's Dominion, according to God's promises in Jesus Christ our Lord. **Amen.**

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