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## THE VOCATION OF THINGS TO GLORIFY GOD; TO ADORN THE GOSPEL

I had a memorable teacher in High School, 1944-1948, one of several memorable teachers throughout my life. I. Marie Coburn taught art at Fosdick Masten Park HS, and she was fond of ascribing motive, intention, to the drawing or painting you were working on. She'd say things like, "This line wants to be a little higher in the composition, don't you think?" Or "This colour wants to have a little more blue in it..." She was an imperious creature, tall and imposing, and you wanted to take her critique with great seriousness.

I myself have used that turn of phrase ever since: Giving vocation to what would otherwise appear to be without motive or intention or awareness: "This chair wants to be placed nearer the TV, eh?" It's a crazy way of speaking, if you think about it, but almost nobody fails to get your meaning.

So I ask in this posting — not forgetting that I have my *Customary* still to finish — Is it legitimate to speak as if things, stuff, the products of any human endeavor, even items in the mute created world, have a will or intention or motive about them? And I find myself asking — of this or that worship space, of this or that hymn or prelude, of this or that vestment or banner — How does this want to be used, to glorify God, or to adorn the Good News of Jesus in Christian worship?

I'll maintain here that that's a legitimate question. Some things, some spaces, some fabrics, some music cry out to be used in specific ways. They announce their vocation to you, if you will. And that vocation can be summarized in two or three sentences.

- 1) Does this give glory to God? and
- 2) Does this adorn the Gospel? (*Titus 2:10*) and even
- 3) Can this be used to adorn the Gospel in Christian worship?

There's nothing new in this insight. Poets, theologians, and hymn-writers have for

centuries maintained that the natural world sings the praise of an Infinite Absolute. *Psalm 19*: “The heavens declare the glory of God...” Theologian Helmut Thielicke maintains that to look into the eyes of your family’s pet dog is to learn something of faith and trust and mutuality.

But the works of human agency often express as well their own “oughtness”. It’s as if on many occasions you’re face to face with what I’d call the Vocation of Things, of stuff, of spaces, of — well, hear me out.

My wife Kathy taught me, for instance, to love fabric. She was extraordinarily gifted with needle, thread, and sewing machine. As a consequence, she made some outstanding banners and vestments. I’d often go with her into the fabric stores to pick out material for one or another of the projects she was working on, and I’d get as excited as she was. “This fabric would make a great Lenten chasuble...This one cries out to be used as an Advent banner...”

It was as if the fabric itself were announcing its vocation. “This is how I want to be used....”

But it’s worship spaces that profit most from this perception. I’ve told the story before in these postings, how twenty years ago the then-Dean of the Chapel at our local Seminary and I transformed what had been a kind of makeshift student lounge and coatroom, just off our Chapel’s narthex, into a splendid baptistery. See [Essay 75](#). For photos see [Essay 120](#).

The space had been used as a catch-all for students’ coats, and almost otherwise unused during the week. And the Seminary already had a fine student lounge elsewhere in the building. Furthermore, the space just adjacent to the Chapel was startlingly handsome. It “cried out” for more important uses: The small room, adjacent to the narthex and directly under the Seminary’s bell tower, was enclosed in floor-to-ceiling glass walls, and stood at the intersection of the vertical axis of the building’s bell tower, and the horizontal axis of the University’s main walking path. The space seemed to call out to me: “Give me something significant to shelter — not a coatroom or a redundant lounge...”

The result? Is Waterloo Lutheran Seminary now the only Lutheran Seminary in North America with its own separate and distinct baptistery? (I should confess that even in my retirement I am fighting a constant battle to position the moveable font precisely in the intersection of those two perpendiculars. My obsessive-compulsive psyche cannot abide seeing the font off-centre, even by a millimeter...)

Or consider the splendid interior space of a Pittsburgh church. Its nave is a marvel of early Twentieth Century engineering: Enormous wooden beams support a coffered ceiling, and converge overhead in the precise centre of the nave. The interior has recently been remodeled, preserving its early 20<sup>th</sup> Century “Akron” style seating, and,

alas, squeezing Table, Ambo, Sedilia, and even Font in a shallow eastern alcove-chancel. The interior to me “cries out” for a more radial use of the space, the chief symbols of our faith centred instead under that magnificent ceiling — the seating disposed around it, perhaps even on four sides.

Maybe in its next remodeling...

Michelangelo did as much with St. Peters, Rome. He placed the Altar-Table under his magnificent dome in the exact centre of the crossing in a floor plan that was originally intended as a Greek cross, all four arms of equal length. Only later was the western arm extended so as to transform the space into its present triumphalist Latin cross. (Granted, it would have been plenty triumphalist in its original Greek cross ground plan...)

And many European Gothic cruciform churches — particularly those rebuilt after the devastations of World War II — have placed the central symbols of Christian faith in the crossing, not in a chancel in the east. The cruciform space again “cries out” for it, Gothic sensibilities to the contrary notwithstanding.

So I envision all sensitive pastors remarking during their ministries with great care on the messages their buildings are sending out, trying to determine what is the “vocation” of their specific nave, of chancel, of narthex, of baptistery. Such an investigation will address these concerns:

- 1) How does this space “want” to be used? What is its optimum vocation?...
- 2) Could this “vocation” be enhanced or made clearer by a re-distribution of the furniture now within it? By simply clearing out all extra, superfluous furniture that has accreted there over the years? (Most church interiors would be greatly — immeasurably! — improved simply by clearing out all unnecessary furniture, so that Table, Ambo, Font and Sedilia stand forth in utmost simplicity and clarity. See “Ritual Clarity”, [Essay 05](#). Your chancel and your narthex are both particularly susceptible to accumulating accretions of unnecessary furniture over the years.)...
- 3) Action should be taken on these issues, of course, only with Council and congregational approval, and may well require months or even years of patient pastoral instruction and encouragement...
- 4) Do not hesitate to apply this perception of the Vocation of Things to almost everything you encounter. Example: I myself am an inveterate trash-picker. I’ve rescued some splendid artifacts from other people’s trash, and given them new uses, new vocations — not excluding vocations in Sunday worship. See [Essay 75](#): “A Thousand Tongues to Sing....”

I close with another parable. My father, a scholarly Lutheran pietist pastor, was one of

those rare people who was able to recognize and draw out the single commendable characteristic in even the otherwise most obnoxious personality. It's often easy enough to see what's wrong with your world, what's perverse or demonic or simply counter productive, in this or that situation, in this or that social proposal, in this or that human temperament. What's more difficult — and more Godly! — is to seek and to find what's good, and Godly, there.

Although my father never put it to me in these terms, his principle in life derived from *Philippians 4:8*. “Finally, beloved, whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is pleasing...” (Pleasing!) “... whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence and if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things...”

