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## FAITH AND FORMS

Item: Bach's *Italian Concerto* takes its title from a familiar musical style of the day that features three movements, fast, slow, and fast again: *Allegro*, *Andante*, and *Presto*.

Item: Shakespeare's Sonnets, like others of their type in the English language, are written in fourteen lines of iambic pentameter, with a rhyme scheme of three pairs of rhyming couplets, the last two lines rhyming (an "heroic couplet"), thus: ABAB-CDCD-EFEF-GG.

Item: Late Byzantine Church architecture features, from west to east, two interior vestibules (the exonarthex and esonarthex), then nave, then apse.

What does this disparate list illustrate, you ask? Answer: Each of these expressions of human artistic impulse is created within the constraints of a specific **FORM** or structure. Now, Christian **CORPORATE** worship is an art form, a synthesis of many art-forms, a grand *Gesamtkunstwerk* ([Essay 47](#) above) as I have been trying to argue throughout this series of Essays, once a month now for almost a full ten years in the writing. (Private prayer, significantly, is not an art form; see below.) Hence: Familiarity with the forms and structures of Christian worship is both appropriate and necessary in the training and discipline of worship leadership. Ahem.

In blunter terms: You are simply not prepared to step into the role of worship leadership — no matter how deep and heart-felt your personal piety — if you are not willing to **LEARN** and to master these forms and structures. You are presuming too much. Ahem.

You already know that Christian prayer has a long **HERITAGE**, building upon models of prayer forms from (chiefly) Jewish sources, and elaborated over the centuries into distinctly recognizable Christian liturgical traditions.

The most easily recognized of the Jewish **ANTECEDENTS** of Christian prayer is the so-called *berakah*. (The word is spelled variously in transliteration from the Hebrew.) It is a prayer of praise to God, frequently beginning "Blessed are you, O Lord our God, maker of all things...": see the second of the Offertory prayers, prayer #240, page 68, *LBW*, as well as other models in the Blessings section of *LBW / Occasional Services*.

Note that the *berakah* is a prayer of **PRAISE** to God, reciting the reasons for our gratitude in God's abundant mercy. It often spells out these reasons at some length, and in some detail — as one might say, "telling God what God already knows" — precisely because, as with other Jewish public prayer forms, this prayer assumes that others of the faithful are "listening in", so to speak. It is a mode of public address, therefore, that combines at once both prayer and proclamation. It moves simultaneously in both liturgical "directions", to use an older terminology: the direction of "sacrifice" (addressed to God), and at the same time in the direction of "sacrament" (addressed to the people).

Aside: The *berakah* form of prayer is noteworthy in Christian public worship, consequently, as a **MODEL** for the life of faith. The Christian life is to be a life of praise addressed to God, is it not, but always in the acknowledgment and expectation that other people are "listening in".

It is appropriate, accordingly, that all prayer in Christian worship exhibit at least a measure of this **DOUBLE FOCUS**: addressed to God, but in the expectation that other people are both present and, at least in a sense, participating in it: affirming, approving, endorsing what is being prayed.

It will not be necessary or desirable, therefore, for worship leaders to turn toward the altar (to "**ORIENT**" to the altar) at any moment of prayer. This is most particularly the case when the worship space features a free-standing altar. The *berakah* character of all prayer, that is, suggests that prayer in our assemblies can appropriately be addressed to God wherever the leader is positioned: facing "eastward", facing "westward", or indeed facing "north" or "south".

There are **FOUR** basic prayer-forms used in public worship: 1) the collect form, 2) the litany form, 3) the bidding prayer form, and 4) what might be called the "pastoral prayer" form. I'll examine today only the so-called collect form, my new A), and save the others for another occasion. For the rest, this month, I'll look with you instead at the larger structures of B) the Intercessions, and C) the Great Thanksgiving.

And for what it is worth, it was **FAMILIARITY** with these traditional forms and structures that emboldened me as Presiding Minister, and Colleen as Assisting Minister, to "wing it" at that "Bookless-in-Toronto" Eucharist I described in [Essay 82](#), above. Once you know and love these forms, that is, you're free to improvise, *ex corde* and *ex tempore*.

Note: I'm speaking here of **PUBLIC** prayer. Private personal piety is another

matter altogether. Your own private personal prayer can be formless; It can be — in moments of distress it often is — altogether inarticulate and incoherent. The Spirit surely “covers” for us, when the best we can do is sigh. But *public* prayer assumes coherence, demands coherence. And at least a level of eloquence: You are expecting others, after all, to add their “Amen”! See *1 Corinthians* 14:16.

A) The **COLLECT** type of prayer is derived from classic Latin roots; It is very simple, austere, compressed, and one might say elegant, with a five-part form: See prayer #83, page 25 in *LBW*, for the Sixth Sunday after Pentecost.

1. An address ("O God...")...
2. the so-called "antecedent reason", or basis for presuming to pray ("...You have prepared for those who love you ...")...
3. the petition itself; that is, what we are praying for ("...Pour into our hearts such love for you...")...
4. often, the results desired ("...that... we may obtain...")...
5. a concluding "oblation" or doxology ("...through Jesus Christ our Lord...").

Note that in collect-type prayers, the petition always addresses a **SINGLE ISSUE**; In a collect, one does not string together a series of thoughts or petitions, but focuses on a single issue or intention. This single thought may be somewhat elaborated, but classic collects are usually elegantly brief and eloquent in their modesty and simplicity.

Note further that the **PRAYERS OF THE DAY** (*LBW* pages 13 ff) are all cast in classic collect form; so also are most of the prayers in the section titled "Petitions, Intercessions and Thanksgivings", *LBW* pages 42 ff. Note also the similarity of the collect-type prayer with the classic Hebrew *berakah*, particularly when the "antecedent reason" is extended.

Note also that the people's **PARTICIPATION** in collect-type prayer consists in a simple and vigorous "Amen" ("So be it!") at the conclusion of the prayer — the oblation or doxology ("through Jesus Christ...") providing the "cue-line" for the people's "Amen". The people need not, indeed should not, be encouraged to read collect-type prayers along with worship leaders; It is sufficient for the people simply to assent to the leader's words with their own heart-felt "Amen".

Note finally that many of the collect-type prayers in the *LBW* are beloved **CLASSICS** of Western spirituality — and indeed of English literature. There will be Christians present, in almost every assembly of worshipers, who recognize these words and

cadences; and almost always at least one or two people present who will be able actually to quote many of these classic prayers from memory. Worship leaders do well to keep in mind this beloved familiarity with the classic collects, and will not want to vary their wording or their form. Tampering with the words or rhythms of the classic collects — changing the endings, for example, from the familiar oblation ("...through Jesus Christ...") to the "Lord, in your mercy" litany-form — is a type of literary vandalism that worship leaders may attempt only at the risk of offending the pieties of at least some of the people present.

B) Still another of the forms used within our Sunday Service of Holy Communion is that of the **INTERCESSIONS** or Prayers of the People. Here the issues relate to shape and sequence: What and whom should we pray for? And in what order? Both of these considerations are substantial. Note that both shape and sequence are suggested in *LBW's* rite, rubric #22.

Rubric #22 suggests we are to pray for these concerns and in this **ORDER**:

1. For the Church — and, by implication, for its people and leaders, and for the coming of God's rule and Reign among us...
2. For the nations — and, by extension, for our wounded natural world, for the leaders and parliaments and councils among nations, and for peace with justice among nations and among neighbours...
3. For those in need — and, by implication, those suffering from war, injustice, oppression, and other forms of violence and abuse...
4. For the parish — and, by extension, for those who need our prayers closer to home. The geographic parish is the metaphor here: Should we pray for any who live within the shadow of our local church building? In our local congregation? Among those dwelling nearby who are not members but nevertheless in need?...
5. Special concerns: Anything, anybody, any cause we've left out?...
6. Note that worshippers may volunteer their own petitions and thanksgivings *ex corde*...
7. And that prayers of confession are appropriate here as well...
8. Significantly, note that the FINAL petition is of thanksgiving for the life and witness of those who have recently died...

Note that the various "intentions", the subject matter, of The Prayers **DESCEND** as

through a kind of funnel, from the widest possible concern (the ecumenical, universal Church and the coming of the Kingdom of God among us), through the world and the nations, to the local community and parish, to the narrowest, that is, the personal. It's salutary to keep that sequence in mind, if only to provide perspective to our praying.

Now, does it make any **DIFFERENCE** to the salvation of your soul that this precise shape and sequence be followed, Sunday after Sunday? Not a bit. Does it make a difference for full and vital and transforming worship? Yes, yes, a thousand yeses.

A parable: On two occasions this past Summer, I attended worship at "interdenominational" chapels in cottage country. Among other aspects of the worship, The Intercessions were appalling. They consisted almost exclusively of personal appeals for individual benefactions or blessings. And they were almost exclusively cast in the ghastly form a friend describes as "Jeeziz-Weejiz" prayers: "Jesus, we jus' wanna ask you..." In none of the prayers was there any sense of the wider church or the wider world. Quite apart from their dreadful diction, that is, these Intercessions betrayed an appalling selfishness, a preoccupation with the local, the petty, the personal. In both instances, I left worship with a sense that I'd been cheated.

The moral: The Intercessions allow a Christian congregation to throw open the doors of its sanctuary to let in the whole wounded world. There ought to be, in the Prayers, a scope of concern, a largeness of sympathy, an expansion of human sentiment that includes every human hurt, that excludes the needs of nothing in the created universe. And that makes you bigger for having prayed thus.

C) There is a seven-part form to the traditional (Western) Great Thanksgiving. I listed them in [Essay 82](#); Here they are again. (Note that the sequence is somewhat different in Eastern Orthodoxy.) And note that the Preface ("The Lord be with you...Lift up your hearts..."), the Proper Preface ("It is our duty and delight.."), and Sanctus ("Holy, Holy, Holy...") normally serve as a kind of prelude to this Prayer:

1. A recounting of the Holy History, with thanksgiving...
2. Setting aside bread and cup, usually with the Pauline *verba* ("On the night in which he was betrayed...")...
3. the *anamnesis*, or remembering of Jesus and his life and ministry...
4. the *epiclesis* or prayer for the Spirit...
5. the *prolepsis* or prayer anticipating the coming fullness of God's rule "to us, among us, through us..."

6. an acknowledgment of our unity with the Godhead and with each other...

*and*

7. a concluding Trinitarian doxology.

So, holding that shape and structure firmly in mind each Sunday should not be an impossible, overwhelming task, even as you're reading from a prepared text, such as from the pages of *LBW's* rite.

Now, in keeping with my theme of forms for things, how about limericks? They feature a five-line anapestic rhythm, three beats to lines one, two, and five, with two beats in lines three and four, the rhyme-scheme thus: AA, BB, A. My older brother Herb, a retired teacher of English living in a suburb of Buffalo, is a master of the form, and he's taken it upon himself to write a limerick about each of the small towns in Western New York.

His masterpiece:

If you fall in the pool in Batavia,  
The life-guard will jump in and savia.  
But she keeps on her clothes  
Out of fear, I suppose,  
That the sight of bare skin would depravia.

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