

Reclaiming Our Birthright ~ Holy Communion: It's Who We Are; It's What We Do!

Paul Bosch writes to the ELCIC community...

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

We turn in my last Letter to our own day. The last years of the Nineteenth Century and the early years of the Twentieth saw some remarkable changes in Christian life and thought.

- 1) First, the Social Gospel Movement sought to make the Christian witness credible and responsive to human needs and to issues of social justice.
- 2) This was succeeded in many of the Churches by a revived interest in what I have called here the Apostolic Tradition: the so-called Neo-Orthodox Movement. It is Neo-Orthodoxy that reminds us that the term "Holy Communion" is a corporate noun: *We are* the Holy Communion. (Granted: The Holy Communion is also something we do...)
- 3) The Nineteenth Century Missionary Movement transformed itself, in the Twentieth Century, into the Ecumenical Movement, giving birth to such bodies as the World Council of Churches, the various National Councils of Churches, and the Lutheran World Federation.
- 4) And a renewed appreciation for historic patterns of worship, in many of the Churches, led to an enormously productive and truly ecumenical Liturgical Movement, with scholars, pastors and people from virtually every Christian denomination meeting each other, reading each others' papers and books, and swapping shop talk at ecumenical worship conferences and hymn festivals. It would be difficult to exaggerate the importance and the excitement generated in the middle years of the Twentieth Century, as Christian leaders—from Orthodox to Anglican to Roman Catholic to Lutheran to Reformed to Pentecostal—met regularly, asking the same questions and coming up with similar answers. It was in this soil that the Second Vatican Council took root.

Pope John 23 was an old man when he was elected Pontiff, and many assumed he would simply serve as "care-taker pope" until a younger man could be chosen to take his place. He stunned the world early in his pontificate by convening the Second Vatican Council ("Vatican 2"), which was to re-shape Roman Catholicism world-wide, correcting many of the abuses the Reformers had protested 400 years earlier, and setting in motion a series of initiatives within Roman Catholicism that can only be described as unprecedented, some of which have yet to become fully realized. One of the first official documents to come out of Vatican 2 was the *Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy*, which states, "...participation in liturgical celebrations is [our] right and duty by reason of baptism..."

As a result of Vatican 2 liturgical reforms, the Roman Catholic Church, world-wide, experienced some remarkable reforms. On the First Sunday in Advent, 1963, all around the world, Roman Catholic altars became free-standing and the Mass was celebrated in the language of the people. As you might suppose, there was—there remains!—some significant resistance within Roman Catholicism to many of the implications of the reforms of Vatican 2, not least in the role of the laity and women, in the church, and the proper place or context for democratic decision-making. But what Vatican 2 set in motion will be very difficult to turn back. After Vatican 2, the Church of Thomas Aquinas will never be the same.

In consequence of the various Movements cited above, and in particular the influence of Vatican 2, an all-but-unprecedented ecumenical consensus has arisen regarding what Christian worship is supposed to be, and how it should be expressed, in each of the Churches. Not since before the Reformation has there been such agreement among the Churches on such an important issue! (You are living in an exciting time!) Here are the broad outlines of that consensus:

A) Christian worship is participatory, not “presentational”. It is not a performance by one group of people (clergy) for the entertainment, or even inspiration, of another group (laity)...

B) It is inclusive; truly “catholic” (small “c”). The word incidentally comes from two Greek words: “kata holon”, translated literally “pertaining to the whole, to all that is”...

C) It is sacramental and incarnational. Christian worship is “kataphatic”, that is, it is sensitive to symbol and form and metaphor and allusion. The Holy Communion belongs among us every Sunday. Even a “non-sacramental” Christian ritual, such as Evening Prayer, will exhibit an incarnational or sacramental prepossession by the way it honours the “stuff”, the molecules, of the created world, in its

execution...

D) As a consequence of C) above, worship is at its best when it “enlarges the sign” (See *Worship Matters 5*, above); when it honours what anthropologists call “primary experience”: the flickering of a single candle-flame in the Easter Vigil, the hushed breathing of your neighbor during a litany of confession. Worship is “low-tech”, not “high-tech”. Says a beloved teacher: “Never trust anything you have to plug in.”...

E) Worship is at its best when its “post-literate” character is honoured. It should not be necessary for vital Christian worship to keep noses pressed into a page of text. Human beings will always communicate by non-verbal as well as by verbal media...

F) Vital worship includes a commitment to the Church Year and to lectionary preaching. Utilizing each Sunday the scriptures suggested in the ecumenically-created and ecumenically-endorsed *Revised Common Lectionary* has the effect of providing, if not a guarantee, at least a possibility for the full banquet of scripture to be placed before a congregation during the course of a year, rather than simply a succession of the preacher’s preferences...



Well, I hope this brief review of *Where We've Been (Worship Matters 3, 4, 5, 6, and 7)* has been helpful in putting in context our present situation as Canadian Lutherans. I don't think it's helpful to try to assign blame for any present realities: Sometimes things just happen, and I'm certain our forebears were trying to be faithful to the Gospel in their time, just as we're trying to be faithful to the Gospel in our own time. But I am convinced the times—and our Gospel!—are calling us to new adventures in faith.

The church I grew up in, the parish church of my childhood, celebrated Holy Communion four times a year. But I'm glad the parish I now attend celebrates that "Feast of Victory" every Sunday. And when I attend worship at another parish, as when I'm travelling or on holiday, and it's not the Full Banquet of Word and Sacrament, I miss it terribly. And I pray for the day when every Sunday all Lutheran parishes in Canada celebrate around the Table of the Lord. We'll be that much closer to the coming of the Kingdom!

Fondly,

Paul.



Pastor Paul F. Bosch has served a long and fruitful ministry as parish pastor, campus pastor and seminary teacher. A contributor to Lutheran Book of Worship, he served on the ULCA's Commission on Church Architecture, the LCA's Management Committee for Worship, and on the ELCIC's Working Group on Worship. In 1996, Pastor Bosch was named the ELCIC's first Companion of the Worship Arts. In 2002, he was named Dean of the Chapel Emeritus at Waterloo Lutheran Seminary. Pastor Bosch resides in Waterloo, Ontario.