

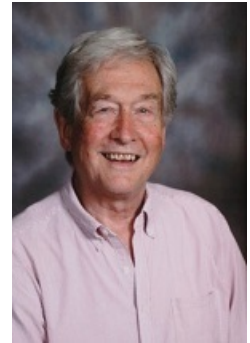
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HONOURING ALL FIVE SENSES IN WORSHIP: Sight, Sound, Smell, Taste, Touch

1 "There seems to be no good reason to lavish attention on how a given liturgical event is to engage all the human senses except the olfactory."

2 The sentiment is from Aidan Kavanagh, our era's premier liturgical superstar. He's defending the use of incense in worship. What I want to attempt in this posting is a defence of the propriety of honouring all the senses in liturgical worship.

3 Let's take a look at each of our five human senses – sight, sound, smell, taste, and touch – and see how each may be honoured in Christian worship. I'm inspired in this enterprise by own words in last month's posting, where I cite, in paragraph # 1, the table setting in my campfire communion. I mention there "bread in a wicker basket; wine in a ceramic cup..." I'm inspired also by Kavanagh's brave and magisterial pronouncement above.

4 I will never tire of reminding you: Christian worship is necessarily, indisputably, unashamedly incarnational and kataphatic. See Essay 24 above. It requires, demands, cries out for our honest and eager engagement with stuff: "the molecules." Unlike most Eastern religions, unlike even word-reductionist "protestant" worship, "catholic" Christian worship embraces, celebrates, takes delight in the world's "flesh." All five senses are necessarily, indisputably, unashamedly engaged in Christian worship. See Essays 3 and 29 above.

5 Hence the following check list.

6 Sight: Indubitably and unavoidably, the human sense of sight will always be a priority consideration in understanding Christian worship – indeed, in planning Christian worship. What do we see when we enter the worship space? How are the Four Chief Architectural Signs – Ambo, Table, Font, Sedilia – disposed? No drum sets or projector screens or speaker boxes should compete with the visual necessity for these Four Chief Signs to stand forth with utmost clarity in Christian worship.

7 Does the arrangement of the space suggest hierarchy: a two-room space, with nave

here and chancel there? Or does the arrangement signal egalitarian communality: A one-room space?

8 And the people: Are they a diverse and catholic assembly: rich and poor, old and young, black and white, gay and straight? Circumstances and geography sometimes constrain a Christian assembly from embodying the fullness of a truly catholic *pleroma*. Such an assembly is perhaps necessarily a chaplaincy, rather than a true catholic congregation. But can we invent a virtual fullness that's not actually there? See Essay 74 above.

9 Are the vestments, paraments, banners, icons, graphic art, and floral decorations of high quality? Do they give evidence of having been lovingly selected and cared for and put in place? Do worship leaders give evidence of having "preened" and adjusted their vestments, so they're not cockeyed or crooked when in service? Are worship leaders themselves representative of that catholic diversity mentioned in # 8 above: male and female, black and white, old and young, gay and straight?

10 As for my "wicker basket and ceramic cup" in # 3 above: Wicker – willow – is native to where I live in southern Ontario. Bamboo is not. I'll save my bamboo bread basket for a Eucharist in Southeast Asia!

11 Sound: The human voice in speech and song will be the most important bearer of sound in worship. Of course in preaching, proclamation of scripture, and psalms and hymns we should hear the Gospel, first and foremost: the Good News of God's gracious disposition to us and to the world.

12 "People sing when they have something to sing about." This sentiment is also Kavanagh's. So the default liturgy on Sunday should always be a sung liturgy: people and pastor both singing their roles. Always a sung psalm. Always a wide selection of congregational hymns. My home parish worship regularly features no fewer than seven or eight congregational hymns every Sunday. Communal singing in a corporate setting is a distinctly counter-cultural experience today. The church – our world! – is poorer without it.

13 Contemporary congregations are cheating themselves if they do not become familiar with the widest possible selection of hymns from our storied past: plainsong, German chorales, Scandinavian hymns, English hymns, Victorian weepers, Black – and white! – Southern spirituals, contemporary "praise choruses", folk hymns from every culture, world hymns. Christian worship is not only enculturated in our own unique time and place. It is also counter-cultural, trans-cultural (honouring previous ages) and cross-cultural (choosing riches from across contemporary boundaries).

14 Any consideration of sound in worship must also include instrumental music, indeed, instrumental aleatory effects. Organ, piano, synthesizer keyboard, guitar, flute, violin, cello, percussion: all – and more! – are legitimate voices for congregational praise these days. At a Mass marking my retirement from a parish ministry years ago, the creative parish musician accompanied several hymns with a snare drum! It was

marvellous!

15 Smell: Aidan Kavanagh makes a convincing case in # 1 above for the legitimate place of smell in worship. And don't deceive yourself: Every worship space – every human habitation! – develops its own distinctive smell over time. With or without incense!

16 So: Why not incense? I've always loved entering a European Gothic cathedral and sensing that lingering smell of incense in the vaulting overhead. "This is what a church should smell like!" I find myself thinking. There are specific times in the Mass and in Vespers – Evening Prayer – when incense really heightens the whole experience. I'd argue for its legitimate use on such occasions. We have Psalm 141 as witness.

17 But we live in a world swirling with allergies and pathogens. I suppose we must accommodate to real peoples' real allergies. Can we warn beforehand that a specific service will be using incense, and invite those specially sensitive not to attend? That seems counter-productive to me. I'd point out A) that every building develops its own distinctive smell over time, with or without incense, and B) getting accustomed to the smell of incense therefor is probably simply a matter of time for most people ("I like what I know.") and has little to do with actual allergies and C) let worshippers decide for themselves. Or else, D) never use church incense. Pity.

18 Of course Christian worship will include other smells besides incense. The smell of fragrant bread at the Communion; the smell of candle wax melting and burning; the smell of fragrant oil in acts of anointing; the smell of evergreens at Christmas; the smell of lilies at Easter. It's a fool's enterprise to try to do away with all these smells. Conversely, these smells and fragrances add to the total experience. Human life is smelly, and I for one am willing to rejoice in that. Studies tell us that smell is among our most primary senses, active even in sleep.

19 Taste: Here's a sense most active – exclusively active? – at Holy Communion, when we actually savour the taste of bread and wine. There is a type of human temperament that finds this sense offensive – too bodily, too incarnational. Such a temperament would probably find attractive other spiritualities than catholic Christian. Sorry to have to say it again: Christian spirituality is resolutely, uncompromisingly tied to the stuff, the molecules of matter. Bodies. Flesh. Put another way: Christian piety is sacramental. "And blessed are those who take no offence..."

20 Touch: Here I'm thinking of that sense active in kinetic experiences of all kinds that occur in Christian worship. Of course the human touch at the exchange of the Peace. (You're aware it was anciently an actual kiss on the lips, men to men, women to women?)

21 But there are other less obvious, more subtle experiences of touch in Christian worship. The touch of your feet to the floor as you move forward to receive the Bread and Cup at the Table – a splendid demonstration of engagement and commitment! – or in procession to the Font at a baptism. The same experience in any church procession,

which I never tire of describing as a kind of protest march: "Our allegiance of citizenship is not to the Emperor, but to Christ..." The touch of knees to pavement or kneeler in acts of confession. The touch of hand to head in individual absolution or blessing. The touch of fragrant oil to forehead in anointing. The touch of hands to naked foot at Maundy Thursday's Footwashing. (*There's* an experience fraught with offence for those who choose to take offence!)

22 One more thing: Texture – the texture of our fabrics in vestments, paraments and banners – could be thought of as a kind of inwardly appropriated touch. You're not likely to reach out as the Presiding Minister passes at the distribution of Communion to actually feel the fabric of her vestment. But I'll bet you do that in your imagination. That's why texture is so important in designing or selecting fabrics for vestments and paraments. Fabrics speak their own language directly to the human heart. Vestments and paraments made unvaryingly of Polyester, no matter the colour, no matter the Day or Season, are cheating worshippers of still another richness of sense experience. Texture is often the orphan voice in church interiors. Take a cue from the splendid textures on stage at the Stratford Festival, as example and model.

23 Sensitivity in worship leaders is all that is required in most cases, not money. A rich sense experience in worship need not cost much at all.

