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*SP = Statement on Sacramental Practices*

## Enlarging the Sign: Worship and the Hunger for Primary Experience

### Introduction

0.1 Christian worship reflects an Incarnated faith, and one implication of this reality is its devotion to the principle of the critical importance of SIGN AND SYMBOL in what we do.

0.2 Luther himself would be the first to acknowledge the TEACHING FUNCTION of much that we might identify as “adiaphora:” music, gesture, vestments, architectural setting. All of these are “languages” which human beings utilize to express themselves and communicate. What we do and how we do it cannot fail to teach. (SP 1.2)

0.3 WHAT WE TEACH, by what we do, is the subject of this essay and indeed the subject of all rubrics or directions for Christian worship. Hence our unapologetic concern here with “adiaphora” and with the importance of signs and symbols in worship.

0.4 Further, we in the West in the “First World” live in an age of CULTURAL INFLATION. Our senses are assaulted daily by visual and aural and even tactile stimuli. Music washes over us in the shopping mall, in the supermarket, in the dentist’s waiting room; visual images, chiefly from television, and chiefly commercial in intent, assault our eyes and lodge stubbornly in the subconscious. Not surprisingly, we have learned to tune out; to turn it all off. And we have become culturally and aesthetically cynical, in the process.

0.5 Further still: We modern Western Christians, in our intoxication with innovation and with technology, have largely succeeded in insulating ourselves against “PRIMARY EXPERIENCE” by interposing secondary second-hand! substitutions. Plastic or silk flowers that never die; electric candles that flicker at the touch of a switch; electronic keyboard instruments that simulate pipe organ sounds; electronic public address systems that amplify (and distort) the human voice; even wall-to-wall carpeting—each of these “modern” technological innovations is most often nothing but an unfortunate (if well-intentioned) mistake when applied to the needs of Christian worship. They usually serve only to insulate worshippers to distance us from experiencing the truly authentic.

0.6 Nevertheless, there remains within us a deep cultural hunger for the AUTHENTIC; for the things that matter; a yearning for contact and engagement with the heights and depths of human life. In a word, we are simultaneously over-fed and under-nourished, in our “Plastic Age”. We are over-fed with that which does not satisfy; yet we are also under-nourished, deeply hungering for the primary experiences that our forebears could take for granted.

0.8 Further: these “signs” these actions, these articles and artifacts of our tradition carry three burdens of MEANING: 1) the utilitarian, 2) the symbolic / phenomenological / pedagogical, and 3) the historical.

0.9 The UTILITARIAN function is not often clearly enough displayed among us. The use of candles in worship, for example, is primarily utilitarian: candles are intended, first of all, simply to provide illumination for the worship leaders’ ministry. That fact should tell us something about how we utilize candles: their placement, their size and scale.

0.10 The SYMBOLIC (or pedagogical or phenomenological) function of the signs in our worship represents a teaching opportunity that we ignore to our diminishment. We silence an important voice, we muzzle a potentially eloquent witness, when we are not sensitive to what these signs and gestures teach. (And teach they do, whether or not we are aware of what they teach!)

0.11 And when we attend to the IMPORTANCE of these signs, we are honouring an incarnational principle that is at the heart of Christian faith: “God so loved the world...” Not incidentally, the verb in the Vulgate is not *amo* (“loved...”) as we might expect, but *delexit*: “takes delight in...”

0.12 The HISTORICAL function of these signs relates to our inherited traditions. We are living in an age of exciting ecumenical convergence, not least in a re-appreciation, in all Christian communities, of the value of our common inherited traditions and our common historic roots. It is no accident that historic patterns and perceptions in worship have had enormous staying power: many of these patterns and perceptions have fed the faith of Christian believers for literally hundreds of years. We do well today to regard them with some seriousness: they recall us to our holy history. (SP 2.5)

## The Church as “Holy Communion”

1.1 THE GATHERED CONGREGATION is itself the chief sign and symbol in Christian worship. Our bodies not our buildings! are the temples of the Holy Spirit. (SP 1.4)

1.2 So care must be taken to ensure that the highest honour and reverence in our worship is directed toward THE PEOPLE present. More than that: the church itself, the Christian community, is the chief “sacrament” of Christ’s presence; the Christian assembly is itself “the Holy Communion.” (SP 5.7)

## Architectural “Signs”

2.0 Beyond the assembly itself, however, are certain ARCHITECTURAL signs and symbols important in worship; and what we might call ARTIFACTUAL signs and symbols.

2.1 The FONT is one of the primary architectural signs in Christian worship. It is a place of washing, of death and rebirth to newness of life. (SP 3.2)

2.2 Although pouring and sprinkling remain familiar baptismal practices among Christians, Luther himself favoured baptism by IMMERSION, as the fuller the more “primary” of available baptismal signs. Three dabs of moisture on a baby’s brow is probably sufficient for us to claim we’ve seen a valid baptism. But that kind of sacramental minimalism hardly suggests the fullness of the meaning of baptism. In our own day, we can rejoice that, once again as in an earlier age, congregations are reclaiming the fullness of the sign “enlarging the sign” by providing their worship spaces with substantial fonts, with generous capacities for water. (SP 4.2)

2.3 Further: Pastors and people do well to use some imagination in trying to reclaim at least some of the rich meanings associated with earliest Christian baptismal practice: NUDE baptism by IMMERSION. Certainly infants can be baptized naked in a combination of immersion and pouring, if the font is generous enough. And adults might remove at least some articles of clothing a shirt, a jacket suggesting, as anciently, the putting off of the old life of sin and death, to be clothed after baptism in the white garment of baptism. (SP 4.5)

2.4 Whatever the methods of baptism, COPIOUS AMOUNTS of water should be used. When a baptism is over, “the janitor should know that something’s happened,” as a friend maintains. In the course of a Christian baptism, the congregation, the candidate, and the simply curious should have been brought face to face with our most primary reality as baptized human beings: nothing less than new life out of death.

2.5 There is a potent holy energy at work in baptism. Too often we TRIVIALIZE baptism by our over-scrupulousness for (largely First-World, largely middle-class) proprieties: the tidy, the sanitary, the convenient, the decorous, the practical. As a result of such fastidiousness, the awesome and awe-ful and holy-and sometimes messy! mystery evaporates before our eyes.

2.6 The ALTAR is another of the chief architectural signs in Christian worship.

2.7 As with other signs and symbols, the altar is first of all UTILITARIAN: it is the family table around which the Christian community gathers to share the bread and cup in the Lord’s Supper.

2.8 The PULPIT (or lectern or ambo) is still a third architectural sign: a place where the Word is read and proclaimed. The presider’s or leader’s chair or sedilia (from the Latin = “seat”) is a fourth: here is the place for the leadership of prayer and praise.

2.9 Each of these architectural “signs” has its own utilitarian and symbolic and historic INTEGRITY. The use of the altar, for example, might well be restricted to its serving as Family Table during Holy Communion, and not used at all during other services; the use of the lectern might be restricted to its serving as place of reading and proclamation. Pastors do their people a favour when they keep firmly in mind these architectural and ritual principles:

- + table / Holy Meal / bread and cup...
- + font / Holy Bath / water...
- + ambo / Holy Word / Bible...

## Artifactual “Signs”

3.0 The CHIEF ARTIFACTUAL signs are 1) the Bible of our preaching; 2) the bread and 3) cup of Holy Communion; 4) the water, 5) oil, 6) candle and 7) alb of baptism; 8) the vesper candle of Evening Prayer and the Paschal Candle of the Easter Vigil; 9) other candles; 10) the worship leader’s “altar book;” 11) the altar cross / processional cross; 12) the ministers’ vestments; 13) paraments and banners; 14) flowers and greens; 15) the graphic design of the bulletin / guide to worship.

3.1 Each of these signs, as well, has its own utilitarian and symbolic and historic INTEGRITY.

3.2 A common loaf of bread and a common cup of wine, for example, are essential and indispensable signs of our oneness our “COMMUNION” in Christ. It could be argued in this respect that “individual communion wafers” and “individual communion cups” represent, ritually, an intolerable contradiction in terms.

3.3 Congregations will want to make certain, therefore, that, whatever the LOCAL PRACTICE in the communion of the people, a common loaf and a common cup will be utilized at the altar during the Great Thanksgiving, for ceremonial fullness.

3.4 Of course, almost every Christian assembly will include people who are ALCOHOLIC, or allergic to wine; equally, our assemblies will likely include persons ALLERGIC to the gluten or yeast in wheat bread. Pastors and worshippers, therefore, do well to recall that the total Christ is present in either "sign:" the so-called Doctrine of Concomitance. It will be sufficient, that is, for you to receive either bread or cup alone, when you cannot, for medical reasons, receive both. This would seem to resolve the issue with more compassion and less embarrassment for all than to provide alternate food (such as rice bread, or grape juice) in alternate containers (such as individual glasses).