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SP = Statement on Sacramental Practices

Faith-Filled Singing

The Role of Music in the Maintenance and Growth of Intergenerational Piety

Some might have thought that the *Statement on Sacramental Practices* was controversial. Combine that with the politics of church music, in a single article, and see what you get! Let's face it we are in a time of great debate over the nature of worship. People want everything from entertainment evangelism to a Lutheran version of the Tridentine Mass. Not being one to fear the battle cries, of banner bearers or androgynous persons looking for a place to put their amps, I have decided to clear some space of my own, on the continuum, and waddle into the fray.

The Role of Music

It is my firm belief that we cannot overestimate the wise and judicious use of hymnody in the development and nurture of sacramental beliefs. Music is an important adjunct to "Personal and corporate educational activities of a life-long nature as a means of developing an awareness of and receptivity to the gifts of Word and Sacrament."

Notice that music is an adjunct, for music supports, reflects and informs living sacramental piety/spirituality, but it does not, and cannot create it. Music has to be a partner in the whole ministry of the church which together fosters a faith that perceives the Good News as news good enough to be a foundation for living. This includes music's most important partner, the devotion and excitement of the people.

This last statement needs to be tempered with an understanding that for worship to be a multigenerational experience, the music and texts should have a multigenerational appeal as well as a clear, devotional message. Music needs to be an enduring reflection of what we believe. What we sing now, must be satisfying now. Yet it must have meaning for our children and for us, still, when we are old enough to be grandparents.

These are not easy categories to fill. Take this blast from the past (circa 1970): "Sons of God, hear his holy word, gather 'round the table of the Lord..." Do you remember it? Aside from alienating half of our community, its folksy beat is dated. How many of us remember the great liturgical experiments of the past-expressions like *Contemporary Worship 2, Setting 4*? I've still got ten copies in my basement!

However, these are not the only hymns and liturgies that have fallen by the way. How about these contemporary eucharistic hymns of the 1550s *Ihr Schwenkfeldischen Schwenker*, ("You swaying Schwenkenfelders" E. Tribauer) or consider the thirty-two polemical verses of *Calvinus, du Und Dein Kind* ("Calvin, you and your child" anon.).

Even today, I am not convinced of the durability of *Come, Let Us Eat* (LBW 214), or *Now The Silence* (LBW 205), though I have a feeling that a Song like *Let Us Break Bread Together* (LBW 212) will last because of its haunting southern melody. Yet I must confess that I have no idea what we learn from the song. Why is it that I am "on my knees with my face to the rising sun?"

Hymns that Sustain Sacramental Faith

Now, there are those hymns which have stood the test of time hymns that have been accessible to people of all ages for generations: Consider *Schmucke Dich, O Liebe Seele* (J. Franck, b. 1618), which enters English-translation hymnals as "Soul Adorn Yourself with Gladness" (LBW 224) or *du Lebensbrot, Herr Jesu Christ* (J. Rist, b. 1607), the familiar "Oh Living Bread from heaven" (LBW 197).

The appeal of these hymns lies in relatively strong, impressionable tunes and relevant texts, no matter what one faces, in any age. While not reaching the status of canon, these are songs that have endured and sustained sacramental faith for centuries sustaining this faith to the point that they made the great transition from their original languages, to English, by hands other than Lutheran. Rarely do we translate and transmit material of low impact. What these songs seem to have going for them is that they are chock full of the faith we confess!

Perhaps what all this indicates is that short-lived manneristic music may draw people for a short while, but it will not keep them. There has to be something else: a sense of the sacred; a sense that we are entering on holy ground; a sense of connection with faithful people of the past. There has to be a sense that the faith these songs profess is real for all the people it serves, in all ages. The music that lasts will be that which reflects this longevity and this reality. It is music that ultimately speaks to us no matter how old we are or what we face.

Hymns: Educational and Devotional

These hymns have typically been educational as well as devotional. The idea is that if you cannot memorize a spoken text, perhaps you will remember better if it is sung. When I was growing up, many scripture passages were sung as they appeared in the King James Version. As a result, most of what I know of the Psalms and other scriptures is what I remember through strong melodic attachments. This educational function was the motivation behind many of the hymns Luther wrote. The idea was to write hymns of simple immanence we are here and this is what is happening.

The Foundations of our Faith

With the reception of the *Statement on Sacramental Practices*, we should not see a big change in hymnody, as the Statement does not represent a change in our fundamental faith. The *Statement on Sacramental Practices* reflects developments in practice. Hence, what is needed is not new hymns, necessarily, though more inclusive texts, reflecting the multigenerational sense of gathering around the table or at the font, would be helpful. The advent of *Statement on Sacramental Practices* does give us an opportunity to hear clearly the foundations of our faith regarding the sacraments and then to use hymns to strengthen what we have learned as we celebrate those sacraments.

As I was looking through Lutheran Book of Worship, I was impressed at how many of our hymns reflect and secure the theological notions and themes expressed in the Statement on Sacramental Practices, including Christ's command to eat and drink (LBW 20, 203) Christ's real presence in, with and under the forms of bread and wine (LBW 211, 197, 199); our duty to leave the table and share the love we have experienced (LBW 214, 206); Christ's Great Commission (LBW 187); the experience of death and resurrection with Christ (LBW 191); sealing with the Holy Spirit and marking with the cross of Christ (LBW 195,192). The list goes on!

Never too Young

A significant concern, that runs parallel to the Statement's notion of the communion of the baptized, might be seen as influencing our choice of hymns. The worry may be that the old hymns are somehow not accessible to a younger generation.

This kind of thinking puts us in the dangerous position of changing for the sake of change. We risk losing some of the security of knowing that a hymn or a text has comforted thousands before us, comforts and encourages us now, and will comfort untold generations to come, until we see that new, fairer land.

This is not to say that contemporary hymns have no place in our worship. Neither is it to say that enduring hymns are not being written, or will not be written. What I am saying is that we need to include those hymns that have stood the test of time, and encourage their use in the daily lives of those who believe. In their words we discover the foundations of our faith, and, more specifically, the nature of what we celebrate in the Eucharist.

Contagious Enthusiasm

The secret to using the enduring hymns of faith is the knowledge that children like what we show we like. They pick up on our enthusiasm! They need to see the depth of devotion as it runs from parent to grandparent, and parishioner to parishioner.

So what is a pastor to do? Ask children's choirs, as well as adult choirs, to sing the great hymns as "special music." Use them often. Quote them yourself.

Enthusiasm for the great hymnody of the church will bring inspiration to an understanding of the sacraments faster than any new version of "C is for cookie," or any new translation of *Kommt Her Zu Mir, Spricht Gundermann* (Come to me, says Gundermann).