

Author: Arthur Lechnitz

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Series Editor: André Lavergne

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Pastor Arthur Lechnitz is (1999) Regional Expression Officer for North America, The Lutheran World Federation, Chicago, Illinois.

SP = Statement on Sacramental Practices

Let the Study and Dialogue Continue

The “So What?” Question

Someone clutching a bible once approached theologian Paul Tillich, waved the bible in front of him, and demanded to know if he believed in the Word of God. Tillich responded. “Yes, if it grabs you, rather than you grabbing it!”

When God’s Word grabs us, we realize that it has a creative and liberating power, especially because it is a living Word that encounters us and lives with us. In a similar way, the sacraments are much more than things that are “done” or “celebrated.” The sacraments are “means of grace” and “gifts of God’s presence”. This clearly implies a living and dynamic reality that is ongoing and unfolding.

As pastors, we often receive requests from parents to have a child “done.” Even if this lifeless word is not used explicitly, many people still have an underlying understanding that Baptism is like the launching of a ship. You christen with champagne or water, so that the ship or the child is properly dedicated. Preceding Baptism with a period of instruction is helpful as part of our training in discipleship and provides an opportunity to undo the attempt to make Baptism only “a done deed.”

The instruction is a most helpful exercise when it sets the sacrament of Baptism within the ongoing dialogue and interaction of God with the children of God. It is an opportunity to hear the faith community of the church declare God’s intention and promise for this unique person being baptized. Its purpose is to awaken and strengthen our faith. Therefore it is a beginning process for life.

This is where I like to ask one of my favourite questions: “So what?” This question takes us beyond statements and descriptions, and encourages us to step toward the future. It is a modern equivalent of Luther’s catechetical question, “What does this mean?” and it also expects something more than a statement about meaning or significance.

In meeting with people for instruction before Baptism, a pastor can easily tell them many things about Baptism, the Christian life, our theology and our practice. By doing all the talking and declaring how Baptism is not merely “getting done,” pastors can unwittingly make the period of instruction into their own new “done deed.” However, if people are encouraged to struggle with the “So what?” question, perhaps we can enter together into the dialogue of living the baptized life. Believing that in Baptism we are made people of new beginnings and new possibilities, let’s listen to their response to the “So what?” question. Then let’s enter the dialogue with them.

“Rock Logic” and “Water Logic”

Let’s digress briefly to consider how we think and speak about our faith. Our logic, even in matters of faith, has a tendency to want to use categories and absolutes. Edward de Bono describes our traditional thinking as “rock logic.” He explains: “A rock has a shape of its own. It is hard, hard-edged, permanent and unchanging. We can see and feel its shape. We can say that a rock ‘is.’ It is not going to let us down and change into something else. There is the sense of an independent absolute.” (de Bono, page 8).

For example, our legal system uses rock logic and makes a sharp distinction between “guilty” and innocent,” and proscribes punishment for those found “guilty.” Apparently the Japanese legal system gives the prosecutor considerable freedom to release offenders who apologize and seem intent on behaving better in the future. The emphasis is not on judgement categories but on what comes next. This reflects what de Bono calls “water logic.” “Water is very different from rock, but just as real. It flows. The emphasis is on ‘to’ rather than ‘is.’ Water flows according to the gradient (context). It takes the form of the vessel in which it is placed (circumstance)” (page 8)

I “find water logic to be a helpful approach for me in thinking about the sacraments. (Baptism and water logic” sound good together.) Statement on Sacramental Practices 3.4 and 5.2 suggest that the sacraments are imaginative and mysterious, and 2.5 indicates that they are signs and testimonies. They open doors and windows to reveal new horizons. They lighten our darkness, as 3.5 implies.

This suggests that when people meet together to discuss these means of grace, as for example when a pastor meets with people for instruction before Baptism, it is not for a sharing of fixed, rigid truths (rock logic). It is for dialogue and mutual edification concerning the possibilities and realities of what God is doing here (water logic). Rather than the request, “When can we get her/him done” leading to the pastor saying, “Here’s all you need to know,” we begin to experience the question, “So what?” leading to a cooperative expression, “Let’s talk about this new life we share in Christ.”

I find this shift from rock logic to water logic to be significant and helpful. It is one thinker’s way of upsetting the way we think, so that new ways of thinking become possible. However, the sacraments in themselves already do this. The sacraments are provocations because they upset our comfortable worldview and view of self. Baptism and Holy Communion invite us to risk being transformed by God’s self-emptying love. This is reflected in sections 3.2, 3.3 and 5.7. There is God’s declaration that we are saints, and there is our experience that we continue to be sinners who are empowered faithfulness to God’s calling.

Some Pastoral Suggestions

There is one short section in the Preface which provides a very significant basis and direction for our use of *Statement of Sacramental Practices*. Section 1.3 states, “This statement is intended to encourage continuation of the process of study and dialogue which led to its formation.” This reflects the reality of what the sacraments truly are. Discipleship certainly includes the process of study and dialogue. Therefore study and dialogue are characteristics of our sacramental practice and experience.

There are several practical suggestions that can help us give life to the emphasis on study and dialogue found in Section 1.3.

1. During instruction concerning the sacraments, use these periods as true opportunities for dialogue and mutual edification. Listen to the varieties of experience and need.
2. Take seriously the need for our practice to be consistent with our theology. Encourage constructive dialogue and feedback at all times.
3. Find appropriate settings and times to communicate within the community the essence of what *Statement of Sacramental Practices* says. Involve many in presenting and interpreting the Statement.
4. Review the diversity of practices that are reflected in *Statement of Sacramental Practices*. There are many choices and opportunities presented. Which ones are practised by your congregation? How are these helpful for encouraging growth in Christian discipleship? Are changes desirable?
5. Provide opportunities to experience some of the varieties of acceptable practice. Use some different settings, rather than Sunday morning in the sanctuary. Encourage feedback and dialogue.
6. Explore in bible study the different themes of sacrifice, unity and hope that are present in the eucharist.
7. Encourage people to reflect on the varieties of their past experiences when they have come from other Christian churches. Have they experienced differing practices? What are the differences of theological understanding that are reflected by the differing traditions?
8. How do those who are different from you experience our sacramental practices? Encourage opportunities to enter into dialogue with people of other communities, cultures, ages, abilities.

Let the Study and Dialogue Continue

In conclusion, I wish to affirm the wisdom of what Section 1.3 states. There are times when we must understand something before we are able to change. Then there are times when we must change before we are able to understand. Sections 1.3 and 2.4 remind us that the sacraments are “means of grace” and “gifts of God’s presence.” The sacraments are not limited by our desire for absolutes and rock logic. They begin and continue God’s creative and liberating work within us, and invite us to risk being transformed by God’s self-emptying love. Let the study and dialogue continue. Let’s dare to live on the horizon of new beginnings and possibilities.