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SP = Statement on Sacramental Practices

Sacraments and Pastoral Care: Images of the Sacraments in Daily Life

It once occurred to me that, as Christians, we have very few things with which to work in the mission of sharing and living the Gospel. We have the story of God's people, we have the sacraments, and we have the communion of saints—all bound together by the working of the Holy Spirit. If you were to design the church and Kingdom of God would you make a few more resources available? Yet, perhaps precisely because the resources are so few in number, the church can exist. We are almost forced to rely on those things which are at the very centre of the faith. We are forced to rely on the Christ who is present to us through the Gospel, the sacraments, and the Communion of Saints, all of which are the precious gifts of God.

These things being so central and essential, it would seem that it behooves us to explore how we practice the sacraments, how we teach and encourage their use, and how we relate them to everyday life. A new help with this pastoral task is the *Statement on Sacramental Practices* with its theological and practical insights and guidance. We also have an age-old resource that we must never overlook: the piety and spiritual expression of our parishioners. None of us has had a great deal of time to digest the *Statement on Sacramental Practices*, but even in my less-than-ten-years of ordained ministry, I have been challenged, nurtured, and opened to the work of the Holy Spirit through the sacramental expression of the people I have been called to serve.

In this brief essay I would like to make some links between the *Statement on Sacramental Practices* and the comments of faithful people. I do this in the hope that what has moved and enlightened me will also be an encouragement to you as your love for the Lord who is present in the sacraments grows and shapes your devotion.

Holy Baptism

The *practical principles* we are encouraged to follow in *Statement on Sacramental Practices* give us the opportunity to place Baptism in the centre of congregational activity. We are encouraged to be intentional in instruction for baptismal candidates, parents and sponsors (SP 4.4 to celebrate Baptism in the context of the Sunday Eucharist except in exceptional circumstances (SP 4.5, 4.7); to assume a sponsoring and nurturing role for all persons who are baptized in the congregation; and to make available opportunities for renewal of Baptism (SP 4.9, 4.10). Occasional Services (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1982, page 23) makes available a liturgy for the celebration of a baptismal anniversary.

What I believe is most promising in these *principles* is the opportunity to present Baptism, not as something that happened to someone, once, a long time ago, or as something necessary to have done to a child, but as a reality within which we live each day. There is a change in emphasis from "I was baptized" to "I am baptized."

In terms of congregational or daily life experience, I recall several occasions that indicate to me that parishioners already have some innate understanding of this notion.

At a service on the occasion of the Baptism of Our Lord, the pastor gathered the congregation around the font for a service of renewal of Baptism. Of course, there were those who were not *impressed*, or who couldn't see the need for all that moving around and throwing of water. However, a now-sainted lady of great years remarked to the pastor "That was good pastor. I haven't been to them waters in years." Someone, many years removed from the date of her Baptism, was reminded that she was in no way removed from the benefits of Baptism, nor from the relationship it created, by the mere fact of time.

Members of one of my congregations surprised me at a meeting, in their home, wherein we were gathered to prepare for Baptism. They indicated to me the names of their chosen sponsors, and then said that they assumed that I would choose the third. What I discovered they were referring to was the congregational representative who would present the baptismal candle! I suddenly realized that this presentation had taken on a meaning, in that congregation, that I had not perceived. They were taking it more seriously than I! In this congregation, many parents assume they will teach Sunday School, during the years of their children's participation, as a matter of fulfilling the responsibilities they accepted at the Baptism of their children. Baptism, here, is a matter of nurturing community.

As I now have children of my own, and have participated in their Baptisms, celebrated their baptismal anniversaries, and watched them begin to commune, I have become more acutely aware of the responsibilities I have accepted as baptismal sponsor to several children. I have also become aware that I wish to celebrate the anniversary of *my* Baptism, October 27th. This year, with my children, we will make a baptismal candle for Mom and Dad!

The Evangelical Lutheran Church in Canada is currently working on the preparation of material for the instruction of adult candidates for Baptism. The Church's program will be tied closely to the Church Year and its liturgies, and will take very seriously the involvement of lay people and congregational sponsors. Quite apart from the preparation of a programme, our congregations will be experiencing the Baptism of adults more frequently as a result of the changing nature of our culture.

All of the above insights and factors are going to mean changes to our understanding and practice of Baptism. But we should take heart because of this change. In an age when mobility, the break up of families, and a host of other issues buffet our sense of identity, the return of Baptism to the centre of congregational life is a gracious movement of the Spirit bringing the healing of renewed identity. I am God's child. I am baptized. I belong to God's people!

Eucharist

The *Statement on Sacramental Practices* is, in many ways, just a marker along the way in a great process of change in eucharistic piety. I can mark my own change along that route, from the point of dreading those two white humps on the altar that indicated a longer service due to communion, to my sense of having missed something if communion were not available every week. Along with the growth afforded by regular opportunities to commune have come the insights and comments of parishioners. Consider some of the following comments.

An older gentleman, in response to a question concerning the ordination of women, responded, "I received my physical sustenance from the hands of a woman all my life. Why shouldn't I receive my spiritual food from a woman?"

A gentleman, who had experienced the change from communion four times a year to communion every week, after a very grave and painful illness, remarked, "I don't know why some of these people complain about too much communion. After you've been where I have, you understand you can never have too much communion!"

A woman in a nursing home who was known for speaking her mind, upon my first visit to bring communion, remarked, when presented with the wafer, "Can I eat this? This looks like cardboard! You're sure I can eat this?"

I'm sure that a group of seasoned church people could present and discuss a thousand more comments from parishioners that indicate something of our sacramental piety. Consider some of the above comments in the light of things commended to us in the *Statement on Sacramental Practices*. We are encouraged to use real bread (SP 6.17). The participation of lay people in the administration of the sacrament is commended to help portray the community nature of the church (SP 6.4). The congregation is encouraged to provide for the *distribution of the sacrament to the home-bound* through trained lay people (SP 6.19). We are encouraged to celebrate the Eucharist *every Lord's Day* (SP 6.8).

I believe that piety is developed through experience as much as, if not more than, through our deliberate attempts at education around religious matters. People seem naturally to create connections between their church and life experience. They may not always be *accurate* connections, and they may not always be what pastors and teachers of the church have *intended*, but connections will be made. Some, of course, will involve profound insights that, when shared, move us all to deeper faith.

The inevitability of perceived connections makes it very important that clergy take great care in presenting the Eucharist—and all of our liturgical activity—in such a manner that we help our people form accurate and healthy life-faith connections. Richard Caemmerer recently commented "Why would we ask people to do anything at church they wouldn't do in their homes—like eat plastic or cardboard?" The point is obvious. We have an incarnational faith which means that life and faith will grow out of each other and inform each other. The Christ whose *real* presence we crave is best communicated through *real* bread, *real* touch, *real* people and the ways *real* people serve each other in worship. Our *Statement on Sacramental Practices* provides us with a perspective and resources to help communicate Christ in vivid terms that connect life and faith.

Shaping Piety and Making Connections

If, indeed, piety is developed largely through experience, then we need to be very aware of the experience we are creating for people in worship. Within Lutheran circles, our approach to Holy Communion and Holy Baptism has often been uni-dimensional. For example, we have focused on the connection between Holy Communion and forgiveness of sins to the exclusion of other important realities of the sacrament. Surely, Eucharist is also communion with one another; communion with the saints in heaven; a foretaste of the feast to come; the presence of our Lord to be adored and received; a proclamation of our faith; a witness; a commitment to the death of Christ and a commitment to serve in like manner. It is education, formation, and nurture. It is all of these things, and more, at once!

Liturgical renewal has created profound change in mainline denominations, and their congregations, in the last decade. Change is one of those things that causes us to “bump into” our piety. It also creates the opportunity for growth in faith. We are constantly the makers and shapers of piety. Pastoral practice determines the experience that shapes the piety which underlies the faith and belief of parishioners. Perhaps one of our most important tasks is to create a context in which a piety can be developed, and practised, which is strong, and confident, but which is also open to being deepened by new experience.

Home-made connections between sacrament and daily life already abound. The suggestions of the *Statement on Sacramental Practices* open to us a further wealth of connections between sacrament and life that can enrich faith and piety.

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