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SP = Statement on Sacramental Practices

With Style Comes Grace

A Renewed Sense of Hospitality

“Hospitality” seems to be the *buzzword* of the nineties when applied to the liturgy and life of the church. The concept of hospitality could point us in a number of directions. In this essay I will endeavor to look at some of the practical, theological and pastoral dimensions as applied to the mission and ministry of the church in the nineties.

Before we ever used the word in church, *hospitality* was generally used to describe a certain ambience—a pleasant time, good food, relaxed atmosphere, adequate drink, convivial conversation—in short, a pleasurable, satisfying experience. Guests will often thank their hosts for their “good hospitality.”

In an urgent and very real sense, the church needs to practice this kind of hospitality in the nineties. It is a pluralistic consumer society that we seek to serve. Gone are the days when people simply came to our worship services because of Sunday morning’s dawning. Gone with those days is the idea that visitors, guests, strangers will “figure it out” on their own, if they care to. If for no other reason than simply surviving, the church must practice a renewed sense of *hospitality*.

Let’s Be Practical

What does a “renewed sense of hospitality” mean in practical terms? It may begin with a look at the building where the congregation gathers. Is it easy to find offices, washrooms, facilities for child care, etc? Or do we rely on guests’ asking whoever they first see to direct them. I can think of lots of folks in the congregations where I have served who would not have exuded warm hospitality should they have been asked. The evangelism manuals give lots of practical ideas on how to make *buildings* more hospitable.

Ultimately, the problems with hospitality do not begin or end in bricks and mortar, but in flesh and blood! The church is the people of God, after all. The presiding minister, acting as host of the worship hour, should try to convey warmth. Assisting ministers and other congregational leaders should go out of their way to be helpful to all the “guests” who gather. Congregational members, themselves, as recipients of hospitality, will, in response, begin to demonstrate hospitality to strangers and visitors, that they may feel welcomed and even included in the community that gathers for worship. Perhaps we need to learn or improve leadership styles that will at least *enhance* such a feeling of hospitality.

Theological Foundations

Now the problem is that a discussion on such matters often turns into an argument of style over substance, or vice versa. On the one hand, it can be said that developing an hospitable style is “lace and tapestry” or “smoke and mirrors” if there is no substance behind it. On the other hand, it can be said that the greatest ideas or concepts ever developed could never be transmitted unless adequate and appropriate means were devised by which to convey them.

In terms of hospitality in the church of the nineties, I believe that the *Statement on Sacramental Practices* encourages an hospitable style through the examination of some basic theological concepts, thereby providing the substance. The age-old dilemma of whether the chicken or the egg came first pales in comparison to the Lutheran conundrum of grace following faith, or faith following grace. Do we fall into faith, or somehow develop enough faith to be able to receive God’s grace, or is God’s grace the engine that leads to faith, and drives faith throughout life?

The *Statement*, in dealing with the means of grace in Sections 3 and 5—the theological *foundations* for the two dominical sacraments—speaks very clearly its preference for the second approach. The phrases of grace tumble down clearly: “God acts through Baptism to save us” (SP 3.2); “we are made a new creation, reconciled to God, and entrusted” (SP 3.3); “God seals us with the Holy Spirit, who nurtures our life of faith” (SP 3.4); “the crucified and risen Christ awakens faith, saves, forgives, unites, gives life, comforts and strengthens God’s people” (SP 5.3); “we remember and experience anew the creative and redemptive acts of God, receive the gift of the presence of Christ” (SP 5.6); “In Holy Communion the church is nourished and strengthened” (SP 5.8).

These *foundations* suggest that God’s grace is there for everyone. The necessary and sufficient condition to receive God’s grace is our human need for it. Herein lies the theological dimension to hospitality. As an institution administered by human beings, the church has developed many rules and rituals throughout its history which effectively exclude individuals or whole communities of people. Perhaps they served well in their time to express what needed to be expressed. The irony is that the church, in its institutional mode, acts like a club, with such rules and regulations. It states that its purpose is to present salvation to the world, yet, by the very nature of its organizational structure, it denies, or at least erodes its Stated purpose. The *Statement on Sacramental Practices* identifies ways in which the church, as an institution, might deal with that dichotomy, seeing itself ultimately as the Body of Christ embracing all creation.

I find this to be a liberating document. *Liberating* in the same sense that the Reformation of the Sixteenth Century was liberating: allowing and encouraging us to see and receive and celebrate God’s means of grace without the “baggage” of a checkered institutional (and often ethnic) history.

Seven Last Words: “We Never Did it That Way Before!”

Moving from theory to practice is never easy. In the church, with its own seven last words (We never did it that way before!) perhaps even less so. To deal with the implementation of this *Statement* pastorally requires much patience. In my view it is necessary to effect the attitudinal changes that may be necessary even before we entertain any “implementation.” Lace and tapestry will not suffice, nor will “imposing the *Statement* as law”, without some serious discussion, teaching and preparation.

I am reminded of a story told to me by Pastor John Cochran, who was then serving a congregation in Philadelphia that was undergoing renovation to its building. For many years, the chancel had had a problem with static electricity. The pastor, in administering the cup, would always “ground himself” by touching the pulpit microphone before beginning to serve another “table” to prevent the shock of lip to chalice. After the renovations, a new chancel carpet and a new furnace humidifier corrected the static electricity problem. No longer was there any need for the pastor to ground himself before serving. But one of the long-standing members of the congregation stopped communing. Noting her absence, the pastor called on her to see if something were troubling her. “There sure is,” came the answer. “Since the day I was confirmed in that church, the pastor has always gone over to the pulpit to receive strength from God’s Word before giving communion.”

In many of our ritual actions, form follows function, and when functions change, so ought the form! Clearly, that has not always happened. Sometimes new functions are invented—as was the case in the story just related. In other cases, we maintain the forms when the function has long since ceased to have meaning or impact. In one of the congregations I served, I noticed, after several months, that the altar area always looked the same—and rather insipid at that. I asked the altar guild servers if they could not find some bright and vivid and colorful flowers to give the space some sparkle, some sizzle. Whereupon I was told that Pastor Schleggendorffer insisted that whenever Holy Communion was celebrated, the flowers had to be white. Since we had started with weekly Eucharistic celebrations, some of these women had gone from one end of the city to the other to find white flowers every week.

Both of these stories may serve as a warning that changes may involve stepping on popular and/or personal pieties. Often, simple explanations will do. There was certainly a sense of relief in the altar guild when an older form was dropped. It does take patience, understanding, a lot of sensitive listening and tactful response, to be freed from some of the rigid ritual and legalistic language that the church has promoted previously, that hospitality and spontaneity may be the order of the day, and form may follow function, and style may transmit substance.

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On the wider topic of “inclusiveness” that the *Statement on Sacramental Practices* proposes, the same suggestion for pastoral hospitality applies: effecting an attitudinal change in the definition of the nature of the church in the nineties. Many of our people came from smaller communities, where the church was safe and comfortable, strong and established.

Whether it said it or not, the church was heard and understood to say, “We have it. You don’t. If you want it, come and get it, on our terms.” In the nineties, the church needs to be heard and understood to say, “We have it, and we would like to invite you to share it,

on user-friendly terms." Pastors and congregations may be forced to look at their baptismal practices in light of Sections 4.3, 4.4 and 4.9 of *Statement on Sacramental Practices* to determine who might be candidates for the Sacrament. Is it enough to say that anyone who attends services for at least five weeks in a row, or has given a contribution of record, or has communed in the last two calendar years may have a child baptized? Or is it too much to say? Pastoral presentations may go a long way toward fostering the study and implementation of the *Statement on Sacramental Practices*. I believe that such study, in turn, will go a long way toward identifying where our people are and determining where we are going as a faith community. Above all, I believe that the *Statement* is a useful tool for the church to use in developing a renewed, hospitable style, reflecting God's hospitable grace.

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