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SP = Statement on Sacramental Practices

Learning Through Experience: Statement on Sacramental Practices as a Teaching Tool

We Learn from Experience

Recent research indicates that people of all ages learn from their experiences. “Experiential learning” is most acute in children and youth, but adults also learn information through what is seen, heard, felt and experienced. This should come as no surprise to the Church, since for centuries we have held to the concept of *lex orandi—lex credendi*; our worship expresses what we believe.

The 1991 *Statement on Sacramental Practices* might be considered a call to harmonize our way of celebrating the sacraments with our Lutheran Confessional understanding. In the eyes of a Christian educator, *how we celebrate the sacraments* is a teaching tool, just as valid as cognitive education. What we learn from the experience of seeing the sacraments celebrated, therefore, must correspond to what we are teaching about the sacraments in our Christian Education programmes.

Holy Baptism: A Community Event

The *Statement on Sacramental Practices* offers, “Baptism normally takes place within the corporate worship of the congregation...” (SP 4.6) In other words, Baptism occurs within the community of the baptized. God is the actor in the Sacrament (SP 3.2, 3.4), and through Baptism, God places the newly baptized person within a community of faith. When Baptisms are celebrated outside of the community, we learn through experience, that Baptism is a “private” affair between God and the one baptized only, and the concept of the Body of Christ is lost. Through the constant experience of Baptisms occurring in the community’s worship, we learn both the vertical (God person) relationship and the horizontal (person - community) relationship which are being established in the Sacrament.

Having *congregational sponsors* re-enforces this understanding, and teaches the congregation its role and responsibility toward the one being baptized (SP 4.9). Although there ought to be prior instruction in the congregation concerning the role of congregational sponsors, the experience of seeing these persons from the congregation standing with the baptized, and acting as sponsors, will teach the community of faith its role as a nurturing, caring, loving community with obligations to those baptized within its assembly. (SP 4.3, 4.4, 4.9)

Affirmation of Baptism

New to our Lutheran congregations would be Section 4.10 of *Statement on Sacramental Practices*, the use of the liturgy of Affirmation of Baptism *apart* from Confirmation, reception of members, and restoration to membership. Section 4.10 suggests that opportunities be given to the congregation to “re-affirm” their baptism; to die to sin and be resurrected in Christ. “In Baptism God seals us with the Holy Spirit, who nurtures our life of faith until we enter into the full possession of our inheritance.” (SP 3.4) Regular opportunities for the congregation to experience the Affirmation of Baptism informs our people and teaches them that Baptism is a life-long process which begins with the washing at the font and continues until death. Baptism then becomes the driving force of the Church’s ministry.

Seeing and hearing members of the congregation affirming their baptism teaches our need for daily repentance and reliance upon the grace of God to achieve wholeness in our lives. These regular occasions of Affirmation of Baptism will teach the community the

importance of Baptism in daily life and struggles, reliance upon the covenant which God makes with us in Baptism, and Baptism as a life-long process as the *Small Catechism* suggests. Through these experiences the congregation will arrive at the idea that “there is more to Baptism than just pouring water over a baby’s head.”

Holy Communion: The Community’s Meal

What we experience in the celebration of Holy Communion also informs our understanding of God and the Church. What we do, and how we celebrate the Eucharist, teaches the congregation just as much as if not more than what we preach and verbally teach about Holy Communion. Much of the *Statement on Sacramental Practices* is a re-affirmation of historic Lutheran understanding of the Lord’s Supper. The Statement does, however, draw out two important principles which may have been obscured in the past: the priesthood of all believers (SP 6.4) and the Lord’s Meal as God’s gift to nourish and strengthen the community of the baptized (SP 5.2, 5.3, 5.7, 6.1).

Often, in the past, the Sacrament (and most of the liturgy, for that matter) was the sole property of the clergy. The pastor celebrated the Eucharist standing, alone, at an “east wall” altar, and the pastor, alone, distributed the Sacrament to the people. Today, we often see the laity standing with the clergy at the altar, assisting with the liturgy, and distributing the Sacrament to the congregation. When the congregation sees its own members standing before them, and receives the Sacrament from other members, the congregation begins to learn the *priesthood of all believers* and the communal aspect of Holy Communion (SP 6.1). The congregation then becomes the community of the baptized gathered together about its Lord, to receive his Sacred Meal.

It is the experience of seeing other baptized lay members involved with the Sacrament which teaches the congregation the priesthood of all believers. It is very difficult to understand the priesthood of all believers, when only the clergy can approach the “holy of holies.” We teach and confess this priesthood, but experience at worship teaches quite another thing when the liturgy and the Sacrament are the sole property of the clergy. We can see from congregations which were uncomfortable with lay participation, that experience at worship has been a stronger teacher than verbal education.

Holy Communion: Many Benefits

The understanding of the benefits of Holy Communion has often been obscured by what congregations experienced on Sunday mornings. Too often, the benefits of Holy Communion were reduced to the forgiveness of sins, ignoring that the presence of the Risen Christ “awakens faith, saves, forgives, unites, gives life, comforts and strengthens...” (SP 5.3)

Although people may have been taught these benefits, *experience* of the Sacrament taught them differently. Infrequent celebration of Holy Communion, while preserving the due reverence of Holy Communion, taught that the Sacrament was not part of the “normal” life and struggles of the baptized. Infrequent celebrations lead to the loss of the nourishing, saving, freeing, life-giving and strengthening benefits of Communion. The faithful were left to struggle against sin, and to live out their daily lives, *without* the experience of frequent reception of the Sacrament, and thus the benefits the Sacrament imparts. In time, many could no longer see the necessity of the Lord’s Supper in their lives *apart* from the forgiveness of sins. Indeed, experience was a more powerful teacher than Christian Education programmes.

Holy Communion Every Lord’s Day

The *Statement on Sacramental Practices* re-affirms the historic Lutheran principle of weekly celebration of the Sacred Meal of our Lord (SP 6.8). With weekly celebration, the congregation experiences the nourishing and strengthening benefits of the Sacrament because the Sacrament becomes a part of the “normal” equipping of the saints (SP 5.3). The benefits which Christ weekly imparts to those who receive the Sacrament become a normal part of living out the Christian life in the world (SP 5.3, 5.6). As congregations experience weekly Communion, they unconsciously learn to rely upon Christ and his benefits, and not upon their own strength, as they seek to proclaim God’s will and seek to integrate issues of faith and life (SP 5.4).

Worship: A Strong Teacher

Clergy, and others who are responsible for the worship life of congregations, need to be aware that experience at worship is often a stronger teacher than is learning in education programmes; while verbal teaching speaks to the mind, experience instructs the whole person. We need to normalize our worship practices with what is taught in our Christian education programmes. While experience at worship is a “teacher” for persons of all ages, it is an especially strong teacher of children and youth in our congregations.

A dissertation recently presented at McGill University demonstrated the power of experience in “faith development.” Children from eight different denominations were surveyed, and the results indicated that children learn more from what they see, how things are

said, and what they sense at worship than in formal educational programmes. Experience as a powerful teacher has been demonstrated from research by Piaget, Westerhoff, Cavalletti and others. What is experienced in worship and liturgy needs to correspond to our Confessional and doctrinal understandings. Otherwise, we are sending "mixed signals" which confuse our people, hinder faith development, and send them seeking answers elsewhere.

Actions Speak Louder than Words

The *Statement on Sacramental Practices* is an excellent guide for harmonizing worship practices with doctrine. While respecting their congregations, persons charged with structuring the worship life of congregations need to critically examine worship practices to see if we are teaching *one thing* while letting experience at worship teach *another*. The expression, "Actions speak louder than words" is true-even in faith development!

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