

Author: Paul F. Bosch [ [paulbosch31@gmail.com](mailto:paulbosch31@gmail.com) ]

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## WHAT MAKES WORSHIP LUTHERAN?

1 I've been challenged by Anglican friends in recent days by the question in my title. How can you tell when liturgy is authentically "Lutheran"? Put in other ways: Are there distinctive qualities in Christian worship that can be identified as Lutheran? What constitutes a Lutheran liturgy? Is there anything at all distinctive in worship that calls itself Lutheran? What can you find in worship in a Lutheran church that's different from, say, worship in an Anglican church? a Presbyterian church? a Methodist church? a United Church?

2 I'll stick out my neck and say, Yes. There are distinctive qualities that mark Lutheran worship from others. Sure, most of those who read these postings are likely to be Christians. But Lutheran is a "different breed of cat."

3 I'll cite below some distinctive Lutheran qualities, as I have come to know and love them. Granted, not every Lutheran, nor every Lutheran parish, will share – or even endorse! – these qualities. I'm listing here some qualities of Lutheran liturgy at its best, as I perceive it. Sadly, we're not always at our best! But anyhow...

4 Herewith: Five qualities of Lutheran worship.

5 First, Lutheran Sunday worship will be the Mass. Holy Communion. Eucharist. The Lord's Supper. It will not be a Service of the Word. It will not be Matins or Morning Prayer. It will not be a "Praise Service". It will not be – the current favourite of the mega-churches – a kind of Nineteenth Century Revival Meeting glitized out in Twenty-First Century technology, with projectors and screens and PA systems, with drum sets and woofers and tweeters. Distinctively Lutheran worship will not be any of these. It will be the Mass.

6 That Mass will be the reformed Mass of the unprecedented ecumenical consensus that reached its flower in the Second Vatican Council. By which I mean: It will be cast in the local vernacular. It will feature a free-standing Table, with the Presiding Minister facing the people across it. It will feature full and active participation by the entire assembly. It will feature lay people in roles of leadership. It will feature the ecumenically agreed upon shape or *ordo*: Gathering, Word, Meal, Sending.

7 Martin Luther went to his deathbed convinced he was a faithful Catholic. (The Pope of Luther's day was not convinced, but that's another story!) And in our confessional documents, the *Augsburg Confession* states "Our churches are falsely accused of abolishing the Mass. Actually, the Mass is retained among us and is celebrated with the greatest reverence..." (*Aug. XXIV.*) If it ain't the Mass, it ain't Lutheran.

8 Second: The Mass will be evangelical. The gospel of God's radical grace will shine through the Mass at every moment. In the prayers, in the hymns, in the readings, and supremely in the sermon, you will be able to discern Radical Grace, Radical Diversity, Radical Inclusion, Radical Justice, Radical Promise.

9 The term evangelical has been greatly debased in recent generations so as to come to mean right-wing Christian piety, practice and politics. Big mistake. Evangelical simply means gospel-centred. Gospel infused. Gospel witnessing. Lutheran worship will distinguish between Gospel and Law. It will centre in God's grace, not in the human response to God's grace. The sermon will not focus on moral uplift or ethical scolding. It will centre in "the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God and the communion of the Holy Spirit..."

10 Third: Laypeople will be visible every Sunday in major roles of worship leadership. As in other churches, our Presiding Minister (PM) will be specially educated, called, and ordained. But Lutheran worship, at its fullest and best, will also always feature an unordained lay person as Assisting Minister (AM). Vested only in an alb, the garment of Baptism.

11 We'll also make regular use of lay people in roles of Acolyte, Lector (Reader), Greeter, Usher, and Communion Ministers, as in other churches. But among Lutherans, the AM holds a distinctive and honoured place.

12 There are at least four occasions during the Mass when the AM exercises a distinct and irreplaceable role. 1 The AM regularly sings the bids of the Kyrie: "In peace let us pray to the Lord..." 2 The AM regularly leads the assembly in the Intercessions, ideally actually crafting their contents. 3 The AM receives the Offerings at the Table, and prays the Offertory prayer and the post-communion prayer. 4 The AM speaks the words of Dismissal: "Go in peace. Serve the Lord." The last words in Lutheran worship thus belong to the laity!

13 A special word must here be added about responsibility 3 above. The Offering and Offertory represent the chief moment in our worship when Word and world engage ritually. Of course Word and world engage during the sermon, and at other moments as well. But the ritual moment of receiving the Bread and Cup and money offerings at the Offertory belongs supremely to the laity, not to the ordained, in our way of doing things. Here in Bread and Cup the world of nature – and indeed the world of human creativity and commerce! – are presented ritually as signs of their sanctification under the Word. That moment belongs to all the people, the *laos*, the laity, not just to the ordained.

14 So it's important at this moment that clergy, in the person of the PM, not usurp the role of the people, in the person of the AM. Even when there are no competent lay people to fill this role, as in a Clergy Retreat, the ordained person who fills the AM role will not wear a stole, for example. The clergy person, serving in that role, is simply part of the *laos*, the people. He or she is vested accordingly.

15 Fourth: Singing will be an outstanding feature of Lutheran worship. 1 through 9 above may probably be found in the weekly worship of many another Christian denomination. But few other churches or congregations will exhibit the enthusiasm for singing you should be able to find among Lutherans. Singing not just hymns, but also major parts of the entire Mass!

16 Lutheran parishes in North America have an enviable reputation: We regularly sing – in almost every congregation! – the entire Ordinary of the Mass: the Kyrie, the Gloria, the Sanctus, the Agnus Dei, the Nunc Dimitis. I know of no other church body – in any other country! – in whose parishes the entire Mass is regularly sung. Even in our smallest, most remote assemblies! Sunday after Sunday! We don't always sing it well. But by golly, it's High Mass among us, almost every Sunday! In almost every parish!

17 Our current Lutheran worship resource, *Evangelical Lutheran Worship* (ELW) provides no fewer than ten – 10! – musical settings of the Ordinary, from traditional organ and keyboard, to guitar, to African-American Gospel, to Hispanic, to hymn-paraphrase settings. You can count on hearing one of these musical Masses sung, with gusto if not with grace, in almost any Lutheran parish in North America!

18 And hymns? In my own parish, we regularly sing seven or even eight hymns every Sunday. And from the widest possible sources, truly cross-cultural: Plainsong, metrical psalms, German chorales, English hymns, Scandinavian hymns, Black and white Gospel hymns, Victorian hymns, contemporary hymns, present day "praise choruses", African and East Asian hymns. If an assembly can sing them, they're there!

19 And among Lutherans, the Hymn of the Day (HOD) takes special pride of place. This is the hymn sung directly after the sermon, and it presumably extends the sermon's themes and metaphors and meanings. The HOD is frequently elaborated among us in a practice called *alternation*. Singing specific HOD stanzas in SATB harmony. Or singing in canon, where that's possible. Or lower voices invited to sing one stanza; higher voices another. Or one side of the hall singing the verses and another side the alleluias. Or in the case of a plainsong melody, lower voices singing words and melody identical to the higher voices, but a fifth below, in a practice called *parallel organum*. (Sounds off the moon, at first, but when the ear clicks in to it: Marvellous! The very first stirrings of harmony in Western music, folks!)

20 This prompts in me another observation about song in distinctively Lutheran worship. Among us, the people are the chief choir. There may well be trained and practiced voices in a group up front, as in other churches. But they are not there to present a concert every Sunday. They are there chiefly to support and to enrich congregational song. It's the assembly itself that should be having the fun in singing at worship.

21 Alas, few enough Lutheran parishes are aware that the HOD holds such an historic place in our tradition. But I'm not aware of any other denomination, church body, or parish that embellishes weekly worship with special attention to the HOD.

22 A fifth and final distinction: Our Lutheran terminologies. A glance at our current Lutheran worship book, *ELW*, will perhaps shock you. Among us, it's not the Mass. It's not Eucharist, It's not the Lord's Supper. It's not Divine Worship. It is...Wait for it!...the Holy Communion. And Holy Communion is hands down the best designation of them all. Here's why.

23 The term Mass is an old English corruption of the Latin that ended the service: "*Ite. Missa est.*" A literal translation of that Latin would be this: "Go. It is sent out." What is sent out, you ask? Probably the Bread and Cup from the day's Eucharist (Gotcha!), sent by servers to "the farthest pew," in the graceful words of my daughter's Presbyterian (Yes!) parish, to those shut in their own homes or hospices by age or infirmity. With this explanation – and familiarity with this praise-worthy practice – the term Mass is a pretty good one. And it carries world-wide cachet. But Holy Communion is even better.

24 The term Eucharist is also a pretty good term. It's from the Greek, and means "Thanksgiving", which is a fine description of what we're supposed to be doing here: Giving thanks. But the term describes only what we do. I'd prefer a designation that at least alludes to what God is doing, as well. Hence: You won't find the term Eucharist anywhere in the *ELW*, except in hymns. So visitors to Lutheran worship might be confounded. "What's this? Somebody who plays that card game?..." Holy Communion is even better.

25 The designation Lord's Supper is OK too, I suppose. But it's usually morning when we meet on Sundays, so "supper" is not quite accurate either. Holy Communion is even better.

26 The term Holy Communion, unlike the others 23 - 25, is a marvellous description of the transactional character of Christian worship. The term Communion suggests: God interacting with me, and me with God. You with God and God with you. You with me. Me with you. You see my point.

27 The term even suggests in its etymology the very nature of what's happening here: Meeting the Holy in the Common. The Holy using the Common to invade our wounded world.

28 I make it a principle, in teaching, to use all the designations I've outlined above in 23 through 25. Each has its value and its teaching potential, so I use them all. But in any Lutheran print piece, I'd stick to our preferred and distinctive designation: Holy Communion.

29 There are other distinctively Lutheran designations – since the publication of *ELW* at least. In spite of its somewhat flat-footed pedestrianism, I prefer the term Presiding Minister (PM), rather than Celebrant. We all celebrate, eh? Not just that clergy person up there at the Table. Our PM's great prayer at the altar isn't a Eucharistic Prayer. It's...Thanksgiving at the Table. We don't hear Lessons read from our Bible, as in a schoolroom. We hear Readings. Our service ends not with a Benediction (high-flutin' Latinate), but with a Blessing (good ol' Anglo-Saxon).

30 Well. These are some of the distinctions and authenticities that mark a Lutheran liturgy. Other churches and parishes are welcome to appropriate any of the above. We have a Good Thing in the Lutheran tradition. I'd be happy to export any of it!

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