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THE VOCATION OF THINGS: Reprised and Revised: To glorify God; To Adorn the Gospel

A Faithful reader: I wrote a version of the following Essay as # 153 in June, 2010. Because this website was re-designed several years ago, that Essay is not now available to current readers of these postings.

B But circumstances have changed since then – My own perceptions have changed! So I believe the topic deserves a second look.

C What follows below, then, owes its origin to that Essay 153. But I take the liberty in these paragraphs to revise its content somewhat, here and there. I hope these paragraphs, reprised and revised, will strike some resonance with you!

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1 I had a memorable teacher in High School in Buffalo, New York, 1944-1948, one of several memorable teachers throughout my lifetime. I. Marie Coburn taught art at Fosdick Masten Park HS. She often had a peculiar way of speaking, distinct to her teaching style.

2 Madame Coburn, as we called her behind her back, was fond of ascribing motive, intention, to the drawing or painting you were working on. She'd say things like, "This line wants to be a little higher in the composition, don't you think?" Or "This colour wants to have a little more blue in it...." She was an imperious creature, tall and imposing, and you wanted to take her critique with great seriousness.

3 I myself have used that turn of phrase ever since: Giving vocation to what would otherwise appear to be without motive or intention or awareness: "This chair wants to be placed nearer the TV, eh?" It's a crazy way of speaking, if you think about it, but almost nobody fails to get your meaning.

4 So I ask in this posting: Is it legitimate to speak as if things – stuff, the products of any human endeavor, even items in the mute created world – have a will or intention or motive about them? And I find myself asking – of this or that worship space, for example, or of this or that hymn or prelude, of this or that vestment or banner – How does this want to be used, to glorify God, or to adorn the Good News of Jesus in Christian worship?

5 I'll maintain here that that's a legitimate question. Some things, some spaces, some fabrics, some music cry out to be used in specific ways. They announce their vocation to you, if you will. And that vocation can be summarized in two or three sentences.

6 Does this give glory to God? And

7 Does this adorn the Gospel? (*Titus 2:10*) The author here is actually speaking of the responsibilities of slaves to their masters. But the principle remains valid in what I am calling here the Vocation of Things, I'll argue. And, more specifically

8 Can this be used to adorn the Gospel *in Christian worship*?

9 There's nothing new in this insight. Poets, theologians, and hymn-writers have for centuries maintained that the natural world sings the praise of an Infinite Absolute. *Psalms 19*: "The heavens declare the glory of God..." Theologian Helmut Thielicke maintains that to look into the eyes of your family's pet dog is to learn something of faith and trust and mutuality.

10 So: The works of human agency often express as well their own "oughtness", their own agency. It's as if on many occasions you're face to face with what I'd call the Vocation of Things, of stuff, of spaces, of – well, hear me out.

11 My wife Kathy taught me, for instance, to love fabric. She was extraordinarily gifted with needle, thread, and sewing machine. As a consequence, she made some outstanding banners and vestments. I'd often go with her into the fabric stores to pick out material for one or another of the projects she was working on, and I'd get as excited as she was. "This fabric would make a great Lenten chasuble...This one cries out to be used as an Advent banner..."

12 It was as if the fabric itself were announcing its own vocation. “This is how I want to be used....”

13 But it’s worship spaces that profit most from this perception.

14 I’ve told the story before in these postings, how thirty years ago the then-Dean of the Chapel at our local Seminary and I transformed what had been a kind of makeshift student lounge and coatroom, just off our Chapel’s narthex, into a splendid Baptistery.

15 The space had been used as a catch-all for students’ coats, and almost otherwise unused during the week. And the Seminary already had a fine student lounge elsewhere in the building. Furthermore, the space just adjacent to the Chapel was startlingly handsome. It “cried out” for more important uses.

16 The small space, adjacent to the narthex and directly under the Seminary’s bell tower, was enclosed in floor-to-ceiling glass walls, and stood at the intersection of the vertical axis of the building’s landmark bell tower, and the horizontal axis of the University’s main walking path. The space seemed to call out to me: “Give me something significant to shelter – not a coatroom. Or a redundant lounge...”

17 So: We re-configured the space into a splendid Baptistery. The result? During succeeding years Waterloo Lutheran Seminary was the only Lutheran Seminary in North America with its own separate and distinct Baptistery.

18 I should confess that even in my retirement I was fighting a constant battle to position the moveable Font precisely in the intersection of those two perpendiculars. My obsessive-compulsive psyche could not abide seeing the Font off-centre, even by a millimetre!

19 An update: The Seminary has recently undergone a significant renovation and remodelling. In an effort to reflect the changing times, and to welcome an inter-faith clientele, the Chapel itself has had removed every trace of Christian iconography.

20 And our splendid little Baptistery is now once again, alas...a catch-all coatroom.

21 Or consider the glorious interior space of a recently built Lutheran church in my own neighbourhood. Its nave is a marvel of mid Twentieth Century engineering. It's essentially an Akron-style worship space, with curved pews describing most of a half-circle.

22 But its ceiling features what church architects call an overhead "lantern": an illuminated upward projection in the ceiling, centred over the first pews in the space, twice as tall as the surrounding ceiling.

23 To me, that lantern cries out for at least one of the central symbols of faith – probably the Table / Altar – to be positioned directly underneath.

24 Alas, all of the central symbols of Christian faith – Table, Ambo, Sedilia (seats of worship leaders), and even Font – have been squeezed into a shallow eastern alcove-chancel.

25 The interior, to me, "cries out" for a more expansive use of the space. The Akron-style seating could be retained. But the Table could be positioned under that magnificent ceiling lantern. The Ambo could be placed at the middle of the top step of the old chancel, flanked by processional torches. (Ambo is Greek for "a raised space".) Sedilia could remain in the chancel, perhaps centred with Table and Ambo, on an East-West axis. And the Font could be re-positioned in the Narthex. Or on an East-West axis with Table and Ambo somewhere in the Nave.

26 Many Medieval European Gothic cruciform churches – particularly those re-built after the devastations of World War II – have placed the central symbols of Christian faith in the crossing. Not in a chancel in the east. The cruciform space again "cries out" for it, Gothic sensibilities to the contrary notwithstanding.

27 Bottom line: I envision all sensitive pastors remarking during their ministries with great care on the "messages" their buildings are sending out, trying to determine what is the "vocation" of their specific worship space, of Narthex, of Baptistry. Such an investigation will address these concerns:

28 First: How does this space "want" to be used? What is its optimum vocation?...

29 Second: Could this “vocation” be enhanced or made clearer by a re-distribution, a re-positioning, of the furniture now within it? By simply clearing out all extra, superfluous furniture that has accreted there over the years?

30 Most church interiors would be greatly – immeasurably! – improved simply by clearing out all unnecessary furniture, so that Table, Ambo, Font and Sedilia stand forth in utmost simplicity and clarity. Chancel and narthex are both particularly susceptible to accumulating accretions of unnecessary furniture over the years.

31 Action should be taken on these issues, of course, only with Council and congregational approval, and may well require months or even years of patient pastoral instruction and encouragement.

32 I close with another parable. My father, a scholarly Lutheran pietist pastor, was one of those rare people who was able to recognize and to draw out the single commendable characteristic in even the otherwise most obnoxious personality. It’s often easy enough to see what’s wrong with your world, what’s perverse or demonic or simply counter productive, in this or that situation, in this or that social proposal, in this or that human temperament. What’s more difficult – and more Godly! – is to seek and to find what’s good, and Godly, there.

33 Although my father never put it to me in these terms, his principle in life derived from *Philippians 4:8*. “Finally, beloved, whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is pleasing...” (Pleasing!) “... whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence and if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things...”

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