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WORSHIP RULES: PART ONE SEVEN WORSHIP RULES FOR WORSHIPERS

- 1 Food journalist Michael Pollan has written a whole shelf of best-selling books, probably the best known of which is *The Omnivore's Dilemma*. Among them he's written a wonderful slim volume with the title *Food Rules*. You can read it in an evening. It's lots of fun. Each page features a single rule about eating. (Among his rules: "Don't eat anything with an ingredient your fourth grader can't spell." Hah!)
- 2 With thanks to Michael Pollan, then, here's this month's posting, "Worship Rules: Part One: Worship Rules for Worshipers." Here's advice for the Baptized about how to get the most out of Christian worship.
- 3 Part Two will follow in due course: Worship Rules for Worship Leaders.
- 4 **FIRST RULE: Attitude.** Remember that, in Christian worship, you are the team on the field. Worship leaders are simply cheerleaders. You're not attending a rock concert or a lecture or a theatrical performance, with an audience sitting passively here in the nave, and those people with funny costumes up there in the chancel presenting something to you that you do not have.
- 5 When you enter a Christian church as a Christian, you are among the actors on stage, to change the figure. The worship leaders – pastor, preacher, scripture readers, choir – are only prompters in the prompter's box. It's God in the audience.
- 6 Worship means work. The Greek word "liturgy" means "the public work of the people". Like helping to build a bridge or serve in the military. Worship is your public work. When worship is over, you should leave here in a cold sweat! (Well, maybe not in a sweat. Worship should also be fun. Exhilarating!)
- 7 So your attitude, your expectation of your role, is significant. You should be willing to play your part. To sing the hymns lustily. To take part in ritual exchanges like "The Lord be with you" / "And also with you." To add your heartfelt "Amen!" to prayers and sermon.
- 8 You are here, as a Christian attending Christian worship, for three reasons. One: To raise your voice in prayer and praise. To commit body and voice and mind and spirit to the entire enterprise. It's your "public work." And Two: To let the experience shape you. To allow the Spirit's work – in prayers and readings and preaching and hymns – to form you into the New Human Being you already are, in your Baptism, only better. Fuller. More complete. More compliant to the Spirit's gentle suasion.

9 When you leave Christian worship after an hour's time, you will be a different person than when you entered an hour before.

10 And Third, importantly – this is all part of Rule One – You are here not just for the health of your own soul, but also for the health of my soul. Your neighbour's soul. You are here because I need to see you here. Your neighbour needs to see you here. Singing those hymns. Praying those prayers. Joining in those ritual exchanges. Christian worship is steadfastly, unapologetically corporate, communal. Not simply private.

11 SECOND RULE: Plan to arrive twenty minutes before worship begins. You will need this time. See below. Chat with friends in the narthex before entering the worship space. Reserve the sanctuary itself for quiet meditative reflection – to centre yourself – before worship begins.

12 THIRD RULE: Position: Sit in the first third of the worship space, not in the last rows. Leave the seats in the last rows for the parent with a wiggly baby. For those who need a quick trip to the washroom. For those only minimally engaged. Or simply for those who want to come in out of the cold for a quiet rest in a welcoming space.

13 Why sit up front? You want to be engaged. And you want to show others what it looks like to be engaged. You are a model for others at all times during worship. Studies have proved that those who sit in the first third of any audience – at a lecture, a concert, a church service, even a movie! – get the most out of the experience. You are more fully involved in what's going on.

14 And: Sit in the middle of a row, if possible, not the end of a row. To sit at the end of a row is to signal “If you want to sit here, you'll have to climb over my knees.” Or even: “This is my row; You're not welcome here.” More positively, to sit in the middle of a row is to send the signal, “Come, sit by me!”

15 FOURTH RULE: Since you've arrived early, spend the time reading the Bible passages for the Day. In church-speak, they're called Lections, from the Latin for reading. They're often printed in full in the guide to worship – the Day's print piece – that an Usher should have handed you.

16 And note, importantly: By no means should you be reading the Lections with your eyes as the Reader – the Lector, in church-speak – reads aloud at the Ambo. That's simply bad church manners. An insult to the poor Lector, who has worked hard to proclaim the Good News with power and authority and Spirit-filled persuasiveness.

17 Read the Lections before worship begins. Reading is a private experience. Then during worship, devote your full attention to what's happening up front. That's a corporate experience. Focus on the Preacher, of course. And on the Lector.

18 FIFTH RULE: Another way to spend your time before worship begins: Look up the hymns and liturgy pages and mark them with the ribbons in your hymnal: Your church does not provide ribbons? Consider devoting part of your weekly offering to purchasing a supply of them for your parish. These ribbons are among your work tools, the instruments of your trade as worshiper. Use them. If you find a hymnal with the ribbons braided into a single strand, un-braid them. Braided or unused ribbons are a sure sign the previous user was a careless mechanic with the tools of the trade.

19 I'd want my car's mechanics in the garage to respect the tools of their trade. Same here.

20 Still a third way to spend your moments before worship begins: Listen to the Musician's Prelude. That ministry – of a church Musician – is too often under-appreciated and un-thanked. Make it a point after worship to thank the Musician.

21 Hey, while you're at it, thank the Lectors, the Ushers and Greeters, the Altar Guild, the Acolytes, and the Preacher! These are all important ministries in Christian worship. We'd be poorer without them!

22 SIXTH RULE: Once worship begins, participate heartily. Again, not simply for your own sake, but also for the sake of my soul, your neighbour's soul. Your neighbour's watching you. See 10 above.

23 Lutherans share with Roman Catholics and Anglicans the long and noble tradition of standing, not sitting, for worship. Standing for the singing of hymns. Standing for all prayers and for ritual responses. (The aged and handicapped are always excepted.) There are three good reasons for standing, not sitting – as with any worship practice.

24 Why stand? First, a functional reason. You sing better when you stand, and you're more engaged, than when you sit, slouching like a couch potato.

25 Then the Second, symbolic or pedagogical reasons: You're showing respect – you stand in the presence of the Queen, eh? And you're modeling, in your very person, the Resurrection posture of the Risen Christ. Both the Greek word (*anastasia*) and the German word (*aufstehung*) for Resurrection mean literally the standing erect of Christ.

26 Third and last, the historic reason for standing at worship. To stand for worship has a long and venerable tradition. Your great-grandmother stood for worship.

27 SEVENTH RULE: By all means, participate in the Communion, the Holy Meal of the Baptized. If you are not Baptized, or if you are Muslim or Buddhist or Hindu or think of yourself as Atheist, then there are special considerations to note.

28 I've written these Rules specifically for the Baptized. But if you have not been Baptized, and if the gracious words of invitation during the course of worship itself – its ritual language, its preaching, its hymns, its readings – have spoken to your heart, who will constrain you from coming forward to Commune? Not I.

29 But do yourself a favour and speak to the pastor after worship concludes, and ask about instruction that leads to Baptism. This process is called the Catechumenate, and prepares seekers to take their place with others among the Baptized.

30 There is a good reason why the Christian church's long tradition has included coming forward to the Table at Communion, rather than receiving Bread and Cup delivered to you at your seat. The act of coming forward to the Table demonstrates your deliberate engagement in the disciplines of Christian discipleship.

31 Christian faith and discipleship includes a cross, remember. The Community of the followers of Jesus is not to be entered into casually. Without counting the cost, that is. Your coming forward to the Table at the Holy Meal demonstrates – acts out – your willingness to “take up your cross.”

32 And it is always legitimate to refrain from coming forward to Commune. That is, to remain at your seat, if you are not yet willing or able to accept that cross. Baptized Christians who attend Christian worship with friends who are Muslim or Buddhist or Atheist might make it a point to “fast” from Communion themselves on such occasions, to show solidarity with their guests.

33 You might want to linger after worship concludes, simply to centre yourself or to pray. Listen to the postlude, all the way through to its end. Avoid chatting with friends until you’re all out in the narthex.

34 Next month: Worship Rules for Worship Leaders.

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