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SIGNS IN WORSHIP **Utilitarian, Symbolic, and Historic**

- 1 Back in the Spring of 1995, the Evangelical Lutheran Church In Canada (ELCIC) mailed to every one of its pastors a document called Gathered for Worship.
- 2 It was the brain child of Pastor Andre Lavergne – to whom the ELCIC owes a hearty word of thanks, for this and for other initiatives – and it was a hefty volume. Andre enlisted almost a dozen other ELCIC pastors in its preparation. Including me.
- 3 The volume featured:
 - A) Hymn suggestions for each Sunday and Festival in the Church Year, citing our then current Lutheran Book of Worship and With One Voice...
 - B) Hymn suggestions related to the scripture readings for each Sunday...
 - C) Optional prayers...
 - D) Liturgical, festival and catechumenal cross references.
 - E) New and old resource suggestions for each Sunday and festival...
 - F) A section of liturgical helps for each Sunday and festival, called “Crafting Worship”...
 - G) An alternative Eucharistic Prayer...
 - H) Helpful ideas for encouraging lay participation in “Crafting the Prayers”...
- 4 I was asked to write number F above, “Crafting Worship”. A theological and liturgical Essay on each Sunday and festival. It was a major undertaking and I am very proud of the results. To this day I still consult my copy.
- 5 Among the items I put forth was the following, for Tuesday in Holy Week, page 19, in Section 5, Propers and Helps for the Easter Cycle. I reproduce it below in its entirety, almost unedited. My title, for this section in 1995, was “Symbols that Function”. I believe it deserves a second hearing.
- 5 Contemporary liturgical scholars have an aversion to symbols used in worship simply as decoration. Symbols quickly become impoverished, even fraudulent, when they lose their utilitarian function.
- 6 Put more positively, symbols are at their best when they function in the church’s ritual life.

7 Candles, for example, have a simple utilitarian function in worship – as elsewhere. They are meant, first and foremost, to illuminate the task at hand. Candles in a worship space, therefore, should be expected to do just that. Candles become, well, fraudulent symbols when they fail to deliver what they promise. The size and scale and placement of candles, that is, should at least suggest that they are illuminating the worship leader's task at the reading desk or lectern or at the altar or at the sedelia.

8 Likewise, the Bible becomes an impoverished symbol when it is left always on the lectern, open to a psalm, perhaps, covered with dust and never read from. An altar book or missal, left un-used on the altar's missal stand, is similarly inappropriate, fraudulent. So also with chalice and paten, left un-used on the altar. "Because it looks pretty" is never a sufficient reason for such theatrics.

9 Parishes do their people a favour by respecting the utilitarian character of these important Christian signs. And by using them always and exclusively as they were designed to be used. Candles for their light. A book for reading. Chalice and paten for eating and drinking.

10 There are three realities that operate in the church's use of such "signs" as candles, books, vestments. A) The utilitarian. B) The pedagogic-symbolic. And C) the historic.

11 The utilitarian purpose is often clear enough. In almost every case, liturgical signs have an un-ambiguous functional reason-for-being. Candles are meant to illuminate – a real god-send during a power failure.

12 Vestments have the function of directing attention away from the worship leader's personal ideosyncrasies – the gaudy jewellery, the shiny trouser-seat, the mis-matched stockings – and toward the event being celebrated.

13 The pedagogic-symbolic function of such signs is also important. The church teaches by means of them. (Adiaphora? Sure. But also Media of Meaning. Non-verbal "languages".) Candles can be interpreted as a visual metaphor for Christ, the Light of the World.

14 Vestments, in their fabric, their cut, and their colour, can suggest the Season of the church year Calendar, or the type of Service this is, or the rank of office of those who serve. People trained in these niceties do not fail to perceive their nuances. Even unconsciously. They do not fail to teach.

15 The historic character of such signs is also significant. Martin Luther (fifteenth century) would recognize these vestments. St Francis of Asissi (twelfth century) would. St Augustine (fourth century) would. Says one pastor, "When I put on these vestments, I am two thousand years old!"

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