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# Spirituality, Luther, and Our Liturgy Today

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**T**he act of meditation (*meditari*) belongs actually only to human beings.<sup>1</sup> In meditation, human beings explore the innermost part (*intimus*) of their lives; they take a deep inner look and “chew over” (*ruminare*) in their heart. They place themselves under the Word.<sup>2</sup> Luther understood meditation to be, not only an integral, but a constituting part of our lives. We are engaged with words – with a word – deep within us. A rich spiritual life characterizes us as human beings. Today, a growing awareness of the spiritual permeates North American culture. Wherever we go we are confronted by signs of a re-awakening spirituality. The human soul is deeply yearning for an intense meaning to life. Yet, the very noticeable shallowness of the many contemporary attempts at satisfying that yearning is what strikes the many believers who have tried to nourish a dialogue with the Creator.

Walk into any bookstore and let yourself be overwhelmed by the number of sections and titles which propose some form of inner awakening, healing, or “spirituality.” They are as endless as the problems we, as human beings, confront. Usually religion is still relegated to a back corner of the store; it is surrounded, if not swallowed up, by many other pseudo-religious sections: Angels and Astrology, Spirituality and Occult, Personal Reflection and Encounter, Inspirational, Relating, New Age, Metaphysics and Tarot (whatever might be understood by that combination!), and, one of the hottest-selling subjects among young people, Wicany. Enter a bookstore which expressly advertises its spiritual content and the surprise will be even more overwhelming: Charismatic Glory,

Laws of Prosperity, Millennium, Final Dawn, End Times, Prince of Darkness, Spiritual Warfare, and How to Meet the Enemy! The classical subjects such as religion, metaphysics, and philosophy, which once framed our exploration of the world, have been either reduced, thinned out, or vulgarized into mere “ideas” or techniques. The search is on: how to succeed, how to find balance and well-being, incorporating finance, fitness, and fulfillment. What happened to faith? What happened to dialogue with something greater or beyond ourselves? What happened to that mystery, that sense of holiness, rooted in the struggles of life?

Even Christian spirituality has been domesticated.<sup>3</sup> The restlessness of the human heart that Saint Augustine explored with such integrity in his *Confessions* has been tamed. The restless human heart is still active but its goal seemingly is no longer the Eternal but the finite, no longer inner peace but immediate success. It can certainly be argued that, throughout history, human beings have always relativized their restlessness. We have always sought its resolution in temporal and material objects. The difference today is that we resolve our yearning for meaning by relativizing the experience of God. God is not dead, God is simply human. The search for God has collapsed into a search for ourselves. The spiritual is acknowledged, different forms of God are acknowledged, but God has become an attainable God, a God devoid of the sacred, a God attainable through good fitness, proper eating, good investments, and a multitude of exotic exercises. This is the new age.

The spiritual craze has hit almost all generations. People are no longer embarrassed to talk about their spiritual lives and the ways in which they “connect” to some power. It’s considered therapeutic. But it is primarily among the youth that the search takes on its most acute form. Paradoxically, for the young people, with their great thirst for the spiritual, the church is like a dry well. Why has the church been unable to respond? What follows is a reflection on why the church – guardian of an intense spirituality for almost two millenniums – finds it so difficult to respond to the thirst of young people. The question “why” can never be answered exhaustively, yet it is also essential to explore possibilities: ways in which the church could respond.

A haunting question all churches must ask is to what extent are we responsible for the de-sacralization of “God.” Have we, as church, been so concerned with preserving tradition that we have forgotten what the tradition is mediating? Are we so fixed into a particular form of liturgy

that we have forgotten the dialogue, the hymn of Christ,<sup>4</sup> which the liturgy essentially is in its heart of hearts? Have we become so enslaved to a dogmatic formulation of the message that we forget the One who speaks in the assembly? These questions come close to home for Lutherans: have we been so focused on a 16<sup>th</sup> century proclamation – justification by grace alone through faith alone – spoken in a very specific historical situation in response to a very specific historical (and human) dilemma that we are unable to reformulate and revitalize our proclamation at the dawn of the 21<sup>st</sup> century? As early as the 17<sup>th</sup> century, Lessing, struggling with the Lutheran orthodoxy of his own day, asked rhetorically of Luther: “Great, misunderstood man! You have freed us from the yoke of tradition; but who is to free us from the intolerable yoke of the letter?”<sup>5</sup>

Let it be clear: I am not minimizing Luther’s fundamental insight. I am simply questioning our sometimes-blind adherence which ignores the issue of evangelical proclamation. Valuing the doctrine of justification is not the point of debate, the question is how shall we value it? Stating the crux of the issue, Robert Kelly asks how we live the “doctrine of justification way of life in the midst of a culture that opposes such a way”?<sup>6</sup> He explores a fundamental characteristic of North American culture – its consumer-capitalist ideology which confuses success with the Eschaton. He concludes that “[g]iven the contradiction between the basic belief of Lutheranism and the basic belief of the North American consumer culture, it seems that the only option, if we are to remain Lutherans, is to become counter-cultural.”<sup>7</sup>

The analysis, though true, does not warrant Kelly’s conclusion that the church is to be counter-cultural. If we are interested in preserving or even better revitalizing the doctrine of justification in a spiritually sensitive culture, it will not happen through a recognition of the counter-cultural nature of that doctrine. First of all, Christianity, in whatever denominational expression, is, by virtue of the Gospel, counter-cultural. Recognizing this common stance, we grasp a key element of the ecumenical dialogue. Secondly, and perhaps even more importantly, we must ask ourselves if we really want to be “counter-cultural,” especially in a society where, for so many people, being counter-cultural is the “in” thing. Being counter-cultural has been the “in” thing, the politically-correct thing, with high and low tides, over that last forty years beginning with the explosion of the 1960’s with hippies, rock, drugs, and Woodstock; it has persisted in some form or other ever since. What are MTV, rave

parties, and idolized music, cinema and celebrities, and sex symbols today, if not all ways in which young people attempt to be counter-cultural?<sup>8</sup> Counter-cultural activities have actually become symptoms of the bankruptcy of the sacred in our society rather than a meaningful dialogue inciting transformation.

How then are we to value the freedom of faith expressed in the doctrine of justification in a culture that either ignores or capitalizes on counter-culture? We cannot begin "living" the doctrine of justification in an authentic manner if it remains only an "idea." We need to rediscover the dynamics of a relationship with God. As a church reaching out to young people who search in an ever pluralistic fashion, we must be attentive to the dynamics of faith. We must be attentive to ways in which we can again engage the young people – and all generations – in the mystery of God. The liturgy, the shared events of the Sunday assembly, offers the occasion of gathering all those hearts with all those aspirations, lifting them up, imparting meaning and sending them again into the world of daily activities revitalized in a relationship with God and one another.

Why is the liturgy the way to engage people in the mystery of God? The liturgy is first of all the place of communion. If there is one characteristic trait of young people's searching it is this deep desire, a desire which I understand, after many years of work with young people, as a desire for wholeness in themselves and with the other. Young people are seeking dialogue, solidarity with others grounded in commitment. Observe them in their relations to the world and the society around them. They are filled with fascination, fascination with life and all its possibilities. They engage in sports, challenging the body to the extreme; they explore nature, investigating the natural in all its forms, overwhelmed by the beauty and peace. Primarily they long for authentic relationships; they are not satisfied by the mediocre or hypocritical. Physical and emotional "highs" are the order of the day but therein lies a danger: when they cannot be achieved through personal engagement and sacrifice, they are imitated and artificially maintained through drugs, alcohol, sex, and even violence.

For young people, experience is a key element of life. If the church wishes to offer them something of the realities of the Gospel, then we must find ways of integrating God's reality into the people's lived experience. Otherwise young people will be frank in their rejection of the church as irrelevant. When the church offers a theological reality for reflection

but does not actualize that reality in its prayer life, the doctrine will find no echo in people's lives. Praying will be considered boring. The fundamental realities of faith – justification through grace alone by faith alone being one of these – can, however, come alive for young people in the liturgy. This happens already in a unique way at the ecumenical community of Taizé in France.<sup>9</sup> This community is itself unique. It is a monastic community comprised of brothers from all the major church denominations. Taizé welcomes people, and especially young people, by the tens of thousands every year, organizing meetings and holding three daily prayers. The fact that so many young people will participate in the particular meditative prayer of the brothers three times a day raises some questions. In our churches, we are acutely aware of the absence of these very same young people and, to enhance the prayer, congregations often try many things: praise songs, folk or rock or jazz services, innovations that might “attract” them. We are not, however, responding to their deepest yearning and, even more, we are not letting our liturgy meet that yearning.

The liturgy in Taizé is characterized by three main elements: often repeated, simple chants (songs), the Scripture, and silence. Words are kept to a minimum much in the spirit of Luther's commentary on the *Our Father*:

Our prayer must have few words, but be great and profound in context and meaning. The fewer the words, the better the prayer, the more words, the poorer the prayer. Few words and richness of meaning is Christian; many words and lack of meaning is pagan.<sup>10</sup>

Worshippers at Taizé discover, within the Christian tradition, a meditative prayer, a prayer with only a few words. They need not take flight to eastern religions and transcendental meditation. Taizé brings into the common prayer an ancient yet living form of personal prayer: singing or saying over and over again a biblical verse.<sup>11</sup> For many young people, this repetition allows them to concentrate on a few words, letting them sink in, “chewing them over,” so to speak. At the same time, all the impressions, emotions, tensions of daily life are appeased and refocused in the context of the song, the words, the Scripture, the silence.

The young people are introduced to the mystery of God present in the mystery of their own heart. They experience prayer and understand that it is not something foreign to them but rather that the Holy Spirit is praying deep within them (Romans 8:26). People, particularly the young,

who had never been able to connect with a formal prayer, repeated mechanically every Sunday, discover in the simple repetition of a song an opening, an opening to their own heart, to God present within them, to their own reality as children loved by God.

This discovery of prayer and mystery is further enhanced in the liturgy at Taizé by the reverence and simplicity with which the Word of God is read and by the aural space given the Word that it may penetrate the heart. After the reading, at the climax of the prayer, is a long period of silence, a silence which can last for up to ten minutes. Even when there are 7000 people present, a complete silence reigns. Again Luther's words ring true: meditation belongs to the human being. In the silence, worshippers can encounter Christ alive within them, singing the Easter hymn deep in their heart, deep in every activity in which they are engaged, deep in every suffering they have experienced.

What do we, in North America, do with our silences? We pass them over; we feel uncomfortable; we wonder if someone has forgotten what comes next in the liturgy. In our Sunday context, silence is frightening, it is threatening. Just as the world banishes silence, filling every minute with activity, filling every space with image, so we in our liturgy, far too often, fill in every space and every minute.

Stated in other terms, our Sunday liturgy reflects our head-space much more than our heart-space. In Taizé, the silence is embraced by song and by the Word of God. Silence touches the heart, silence becomes prayer. In liturgy, as it is celebrated at Taizé, an opening exists for the head and the heart to unite. Doctrine becomes a lived experience of the heart. Through the liturgy, doctrine becomes a re-calling of the memory of Jesus. Liturgy is not taking us back to some form of the historical Jesus – critical biblical methodology has taught us all too well how elusive that Jesus is. Liturgy gathers us in a retelling, an enactment, an experience of that initial Easter “doctrine,” in which the memory of Jesus is proclaimed: “God has raised Jesus from the dead.” And “Christ will return” (Acts 2 and 3). Doctrine is caught up in this living proclamation as an experienced truth and is prevented from becoming tyrannically normative for the identity of the community. In the liturgy, justification through grace alone by faith alone is not a boundary against which we stumble and fall or over which we try to jump. Liturgy involves us in a transfiguring relationship with God.

Liturgy keeps us from distancing ourselves from experience, offering

a transfiguration of our daily experience through the enactment of the mystery (the memory) of Christ. Distancing, however, happens when we establish and sacralize as normative those traditions or teachings that have come out of the valid experience of others. Our challenge is the constant rediscovery and recovery of the meaning of biblical revelation, making it the “place of experience,”<sup>12</sup> the place of our experience. This is possible in the liturgy when we can leave our agendas behind us, when we can leave our expectations and even our watches behind us and welcome the prayer as a gift, as grace given by God, as that Paschal hymn of Christ which Christ sings continuously among us. Then liturgy opens up the vast expanses of the human heart; it opens up the heart to the mystery deep within and to a reorientation of experience. It opens us to the mystery of communion in Christ which is our faith.

Is such a liturgy possible on a Sunday morning? Can the uniqueness of the liturgy at Taizé be localized in our Sunday worship? Not many things can be transported into the parish as anyone who has ever participated in the prayer at Taizé will know. The prayer at Taizé is the prayer of a monastic community; it bears the mark and imprint of the faith-commitment of that community. However, the essentials of that prayer – adoration, silence, praise – are part of liturgy throughout all the ages and therefore an essential part of our Lutheran liturgy. How much are we willing to adapt, to be free with our liturgy, with our tradition? As Gordon Lathrop points out, Luther himself was very pragmatic with the peripheral aspects of liturgy but not so with the centre: Luther insists that we distinguish “these formal and ceremonial matters from the centre which is thanksgiving and Christ’s gift.”<sup>13</sup>

Luther was free with the liturgy, adapting it to the circumstances as required but never losing sight of the “centre.” Frank Senn, in his monumental study on Christian liturgy,<sup>14</sup> has outlined Luther’s adaptations of the liturgy (particularly the liturgy of the mass) and the basis for these adaptations. The characteristics of the liturgy and even the *ordo* were always in response to a particular need that Luther understood as important for the assembly. For example, in the medieval mass the priest spoke the words of institution silently or in a whisper. Luther believed that this central element needed to be heard by the whole people. Therefore he placed them during the Preface which was sung out loud.<sup>15</sup> He did not upset the whole structure of the mass. But he did alter the Roman order so that the essential elements would respond to the spiritual



needs of the people. As Luther saw the needs of the people and the objectives of the reform changing, he adjusted and modified the liturgy, that place which is the heart of Christian communication and nourishment. In the first decade of the Reformation, a once uniform liturgy took on a multiplicity of forms; Luther, however, was adverse to imposing a specific set of ceremonies and rituals. He finally did publish the *German Mass and Order of Service* in 1526 but warned that it be not taken as a "rigid law to bind or entangle anyone's conscience."<sup>16</sup> Luther was ultimately concerned that the people find a meaningful participation in the mass (the Eucharist) and that the central elements of the liturgy truly communicate what they were meant to communicate.

The liturgy and, of course, the central elements of that liturgy – Baptism, Scripture, and the Lord's Supper – are given us as gift. We have been entrusted with a gift and, every time we enter the liturgy, we participate in its grace, in an invisible love. "For this reason the mass and this sacrament are a sign by which we train and accustom ourselves to let go of all visible love, help, and comfort, and to trust in the invisible love, help, and support of Christ and his saints."<sup>17</sup> We are taken out of our worldly time and space and are opened to the effusion of the Holy Spirit. "Thus the sacrament is for us a ford, a bridge, a door, a ship and a stretcher by which and in which we pass from this world into eternal life."<sup>18</sup>

I have mentioned Luther's emphasis on the signs of the *ordo* of Christian liturgy. Gordon Lathrop has, more than any other liturgical theologian, directed us towards those central elements (those "holy things").<sup>19</sup> He has named as normative for the liturgy Bath (Baptism), Word (Scripture), and Table (the Eucharist).<sup>20</sup> These normative elements are at the core of all Christian liturgy and find their roots already in the second century as witnessed in the writing of Justin Martyr.<sup>21</sup> These are the same core elements that Luther underlines over and over. The centrality of the Word goes without saying. "This word of God is the beginning, the foundation, the rock, upon which afterward all works, words, and thoughts of [human beings] must build."<sup>22</sup> Baptism and the Sacrament of the Altar (the Eucharist or Mass) constitute the very meat and bones of Christian existence.

...this sacrament [the sacrament of the altar] is received many times, while baptism is received but once. Baptism is the taking up or entering upon a new life, in the course of which boundless adversities assail us,

with sins and sufferings, both our own and those of others... Therefore we need the strength, support, and help of Christ and of his saints (through the sacrament of the altar). These are pledged to us here, as in a sure sign, by which we are made one with them – incorporated into them – and all our woe is laid down in the midst of the community (of saints).<sup>23</sup>

Luther understands the liturgy not only to be the bridge and teaching foundation of the church, but to be the place where our spirituality finds its fullest expression as community. The unity of believers is contained in the Sacrament of the Altar. That Christ “might not give further occasion for divisions and sects, he appointed in return one law or order for his entire people and that is the holy mass.”<sup>24</sup>

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Our reflection on the spiritual yearning of seekers of all generations, and especially young people today, and on the nature of our liturgy has shown that our Lutheran tradition has within it a potential contribution. Liturgy is gift; it is thanksgiving; it is nourishment and call, a place of silence and communion. Our question is the one Gordon Lathrop ponders over when he asks about our willingness “to read faithfully” the seventh article of the Augsburg Confession.<sup>25</sup> This question demands of us a very concrete reflection: are we willing to be creative with our liturgy in order to respond to the spiritual life not only of the young people but all generations? What are the areas which we can explore in order to make the liturgy much more a place of encounter with God and with the other, in order to help nourish the spiritual lives of believers and non-believers and communicate the essential realities of faith? A couple of these areas have already been discussed: silence, adoration, repetition can all be ways in which the heart is opened to the signified in the Bath, Word, and Table. There are, of course, other areas which I have not expanded upon in these pages: the role and presence of the presiding minister (Is she/he directing the prayers of the assembly or is she/he an integral part of the adoration of the community?), the use of space (Is the space arranged so as to provide a focus on the central elements or is the worship cluttered with distractions?), and the notion of time (Is the prayer taking us out of our schedules or is it just another thing we have to do?).

The question also asks us about the way in which we express the reality of justification through grace alone by faith alone. It is clear that the realities of faith do not find any resonance when treated as "ideas" or "methods of living." They will find expression and hopefully an experiential reality through the liturgy. Then they will become a "way of life," then they will become inspirers and sign-posts of a deep inner, spiritual life. The power and authenticity of Luther's searching, his battle with sin and justification, with *Anfechtung*, found in the doctrine of justification their critical expression. Their experiential expression for Luther was found in the dynamic of an intense prayer and liturgical life where the mystery of the heart is opened to the mystery of God through the gift of God alone, that is, through the gifts of Baptism, Word, and Table.

First and foremost an individual struggle, Luther's struggle became the struggle of a whole country, of a whole continent, of a worldwide church for generation upon generation. Yet, being historically minded and always in that freedom which characterized Luther, we must remember that his individual struggle cannot be idolized. We must recognize that the struggle of seekers and young people today occurs on different terms. There is much less concern about salvation, about individual salvation and its components: justification and sin. Young people are even tired of the word "sin" and turn away whenever they hear it. They turn away from a church that so often speaks in the language of the controlling paradigm of 16<sup>th</sup> century mindset.

Liturgy as gift offers us the opportunity to address the issues of human fallenness, of human need, of human desire, of human life, of inner life, of mystery in a totally fresh and unique way. Liturgy offers the possibility to respond to that desire for spiritual authenticity and for a communion (for community) which is prevalent among the young. Luther's freedom in applying his insights to his particular, historical situation and dilemma can be our beacon, directing us as we negotiate through the narrows of our day to find harbour in a grace-filled spirituality. The liturgy is that place where a spiritual life is anchored and hopefully, with care, it now will refresh believers in a dynamic of a lifelong dialogue with God. Hopefully, the liturgy can again be that place where seekers of all generations will come flocking because their inner yearning is heard and actualized.

## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> WA 55, II, 1; 11,26
- <sup>2</sup> WA 55 II, 1; 1,1-24 and WA 5, 34, 5-7.
- <sup>3</sup> Ronald Rolheiser, *Spirituality for a Restless Culture* (Mystic, CT: Twenty-Third Publications, 1991) 3-4.
- <sup>4</sup> "Jesus Christ, high priest of the new and eternal covenant, taking human nature, introduced into this earthly exile that hymn which is sung throughout all ages in the realms above" (The Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy, no. 83), Flannery, Austin, O.P., *Vatican Council II: The Basic Sixteen Documents* (Northport, NY: Costello Publishing Co., 1996) 144.
- <sup>5</sup> As related in Thomas Mann, *Essays of Three Decades*, tr. by H. T. Lowe-Porter (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1948) 199. The complete German text is to be found in Thomas Mann, *Gesammelte Werke*, vol. IX (Frankfurt am Main: S. Fischer Verlag, 1974) 229-245.
- <sup>6</sup> Robert A. Kelly, "Lutheranism as a Counterculture? The Doctrine of Justification and Consumer Capitalism," *Currents in Theology & Mission* 24 (1997) 497.
- <sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>8</sup> In a recent article in the *National Post*, "In Defence of Our Culture of Celebrity" (Saturday, May 27, 2000), Tyler Cowen contends that celebrities have replaced heroes. This is nothing new, though Cowen argues that there is nothing wrong in losing heroes. "By making more fame and more stardom possible, we spur creative performances. We have more music, more movies – and more science and entrepreneurship – than any previous era. We use fame to reward stars, thus helping to draw forth a dazzling and unprecedented array of diverse achievements. The much-maligned celebrity, in short, is central to nothing less than progress itself." Celebrities have become "agents of civilization." There may be much more offered but there is also terribly much less, much less of an awareness of the depth and beauty of an inner life.
- <sup>9</sup> The Community of Taizé is a monastic, ecumenical community. There are brothers from some twenty-five different countries and from every continent. By its very existence, the community is a sign of reconciliation among divided Christians and among separated peoples. It wants to be a "parable of communion," a place where people seek to be reconciled every day. Reconciliation between Christians is at the heart of Taizé's vocation but has never been an end in itself. Christians are to be a leaven of reconciliation between people, of trust among nations, and of peace on earth. More information can be found at the Community's website: [www.taize.fr](http://www.taize.fr).

- <sup>10</sup> WA 2, 81,13-17.
- <sup>11</sup> Olivier Clément, *Taizé: The Meaning of Life* (Chicago: GIA Publications, 1997) 51-52.
- <sup>12</sup> Francis Guibal, "Le Kérygma et l'Histoire: La Christologie de J.-L. Segundo." *Revue d'Histoire et de Philosophie Religieuses* 79, no. 3 (1999) 348.
- <sup>13</sup> Gordon W. Lathrop, "A Contemporary Lutheran Approach to Worship and Culture: Sorting out the Critical Principles," in *Christian Worship: Unity in Cultural Diversity*, ed. S. Anita Stauffer (Geneva: LWF, 1996) 138.
- <sup>14</sup> Frank C. Senn, *Christian Liturgy Catholic and Evangelical* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1997).
- <sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 276.
- <sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 282.
- <sup>17</sup> Martin Luther, *The Blessed Sacrament of the Holy and True Body of Christ and the Brotherhoods* vol. 35 (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1960) 66.
- <sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 66.
- <sup>19</sup> Gordon W. Lathrop, *Holy Things: A Liturgical Theology* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress Press, 1993).
- <sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, 89.
- <sup>21</sup> Lucien Deiss, C.S.Sp., *Springtime of the Liturgy*, tr. by Matthew J. O'Connell (Collegeville, Minnesota: The Liturgical Press, 1979) 89-94.
- <sup>22</sup> Martin Luther, *A Treatise on the New Testament, that is, The Holy Mass* vol. 35, (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1960) 82.
- <sup>23</sup> LW 35:55.
- <sup>24</sup> LW 35: 80-81.
- <sup>25</sup> Lathrop, "A Contemporary Lutheran Approach," 139. "It is also taught that at all times there must be and remain one holy, Christian church....It is not necessary for the true unity of the Christian church that uniform ceremonies, instituted by human beings, be observed everywhere." Robert Kolb and Timothy J. Wengert, *The Book of Concord: The Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2000) 42.