

## The Witness of the Worshiping Community

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Christ is risen! Alleluia! (R: He is risen indeed! Alleluia!)

What more does the church have to do than to proclaim this? What else must the church witness to than the resurrection of the crucified One, who is present in its midst through the preaching of the gospel and the administration of the sacraments? Oh, yes, we have to spin out the meaning of the cross and resurrection of Christ; we have to celebrate it worthily and compellingly in our public assemblies; we have to reorder our lives in conformity with its implications, turning away from the way of the world and toward the new life under Christ's reign; we have to invite others to reorder their lives according to this new reality for the world; and we want to invite them to join us in a community of proclamation and celebration.

But in essence, the mission of the church is to proclaim that Jesus, who taught God's will for the world and was crucified for doing so, was raised from the dead by his God and Father, and this same crucified and risen One will come again as judge and universal ruler. The eschatological reign of God has been inaugurated in the resurrection of Jesus and in the mission of proclaiming this good news. This can only mean that the reality of the world is being changed. Many people don't like having their world altered, and they may react negatively toward the messengers of this world-changing proclamation. So for such messengers there is a promise of sharing in the destiny of the crucified and risen One. This promise alone ought to interest people in joining the community of witness by means of baptismal identification with Jesus in his death and resurrection.

Naturally, after the initial missionary impetus, questions arose as to the procedures and scope of the mission. What should be the format of the proclamation? The Book of Acts shows this development. The apostles announced the resurrection of the crucified One, amplified that announcement with narrative content, baptized with his Spirit those who professed faith in Jesus as Kurios ("Lord"), engaged in common but urgent prayer (maranatha), and broke bread together in their homes (by which we assume this meant the sharing of the meal instituted by Jesus on the night in which he was betrayed). Since the first believers were Jews, they felt entitled to continue to pray in the Temple until that was destroyed by the Romans and to continue to engage in Scriptural study and interpretation in the synagogues to which they belonged until they were excommunicated by the Jewish community.

The next issue they had to deal with was the question of who could be included in the community of faith in Jesus the Christ crucified and risen. The apostolic messengers were Jews; they were proclaiming the vindication of a Jewish Messiah; the first members of this community were Jews. Could the

Gentile be included? The decision of the apostolic leadership was that the Gentiles could be included. Once Gentiles were admitted, the question was raised as to whether this was the kind of association in which slaves could have equal status with freemen. The decision was made that slaves would have equal status, at least within the community of faith. Would women share equally in the life of the community? Women would share equally in the community, by prophesying in the assembly (see 1 Corinthians 11) and by engaging in charitable work among the members (see 1 Timothy 5:3ff., which may refer to an order of consecrated widows).

As the church settled down for the long haul through history and extended the proclamation of the gospel into many lands and cultures, these early decisions were stretched. The simple form of the Christian gathering (*synaxis*) was expanded. The story of Jesus made sense only in the context of salvation history, which meant that the Hebrew Scriptures had to be read in the assembly as well as the "memoirs of the apostles." Devotional elements, usually prayers and songs addressed to the Christ (such as the Kyrie and the Gloria in excelsis), found a place. The eucharistic meal of the broken bread and the shared cup of wine was separated from the context of an actual dinner, and the meal prayers became fused into a full eucharistic prayer said over the loaf and cup. Extended processes were developed for initiating new members into the community and for disciplining those members whose conduct subjected the public witness of the worshiping community to a credibility gap.

At the same time, the variety of peoples added to the Christian fellowship required cultural adaptation as the Scriptures and prayers were translated from Greek to Latin, Syriac, Armenian, Coptic, Slavic, and many other languages. There is no doubt that the various cultures in which the gospel was proclaimed had a profound effect on liturgical rhetoric, liturgical ceremony, liturgical architecture, art, and music. There is no doubt that the liturgy underwent periods of encrustation that required reform and renewal. Within the Western Church there were reform movements at the time of Pope Gregory the Great, during the Carolingian renaissance, by the Franciscans and Dominicans in the thirteenth century, by the Protestant reformers and the Council of Trent in the sixteenth century, in the romantic reactions to the liturgical and theological devastations of rationalism in the nineteenth century, and in the Liturgical movement of the twentieth century.

The Modern Liturgical Movement was bearing fruit twenty-five years ago as I slid down Route 30 in a February snowstorm to attend my first Valparaiso Liturgical Institute. 1969 was an auspicious year for liturgy. It was the aftermath of the Second Vatican Council. The *Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy* was on the verge of being implemented. The Standing Liturgical Committee of the Episcopal Church was plodding along, doing some first-rate liturgical scholarship and publishing a series of paperback liturgies for "trial use" called *Prayer Book Studies*. The Inter-Lutheran Commission on Worship had just gotten organized and had appointed sub-committees that would soon be

publishing their own paperback *Contemporary Worship* series of hymns and services. In 1969, with the agreement of the ILCW, the Commission on Worship of the Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod published its *Worship Supplement to The Lutheran Hymnal*. This book foreshadowed directions that would become apparent in the work of the ILCW, including a Service of Holy Communion with several sample forms of the Intercessions and three full eucharistic prayers—one of them an English translation of the Anaphora of Hippolytus. If Hippolytus' *Apostolic Tradition* was an ideal church manual rather than an actual one, this may have been the first time in history that Hippolytus' famous canon was actually used as such in eucharistic worship.

By the end of the 1970s, a considerable ecumenical liturgical consensus had emerged with the publication of the re-formed *Roman Missal* with its *Sacramentary* and *Lectionary*; the *Lutheran Book of Worship* and the 1979 *Book of Common Prayer* of the Episcopal Church. These pace-setting liturgical books would influence later books, including *The United Methodist Hymnal* of 1989 and *Book of Worship* of 1993, *The Presbyterian Hymnal* of 1990, and *The Book of Common Worship* of the Presbyterian Church in the U.S. in 1993. The ecumenical liturgical consensus included agreement on: a common shape of the liturgy of word and meal; common texts for the Creed, the Lord's Prayer, and canticles; a flexible entrance or gathering rite; the use of some form of the three-year ecumenical lectionary for Sundays and festivals; the revival of biblical preaching based on the lectionary; litanized intercessions, with space for additional written or extempore petitions; multiple eucharistic prayers, most of which followed the West Syrian anaphoral structure; Holy Communion every Lord's Day and festival; and a heightened sense of dismissal from the eucharistic meal to Christian mission in the world. It was assumed that the liturgy would be sung, using a variety of musical styles and resources, to engender a sense of participation by the people and also that there would be a diversity of ministerial roles in the liturgical assembly to underscore the communal nature of public worship. (If I may jump ahead in my presentation, I would offer the opinion that congregations that have implemented this vision and practice of liturgical renewal are the ones least interested in finding some form of "creative liturgy" because they already have it.)

There was a renewal also in the so-called occasional services, the most important of which was the Roman Catholic Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults (RCIA), promulgated in 1972. A nod in the direction of this initiatory process was given in the Order for the Enrollment of Candidates for Baptism in *Occasional Services: A Companion to the Lutheran Book of Worship* in 1982. By 1990, however, the Office of Evangelism Ministries of the Episcopal Church published *The Catechumenal Process*, and in 1992 the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Canada published its *Living Witnesses* series on *The Adult Catechumenate*. This process of Christian initiation provides an intentional way of doing evangelization, faith formation, sacramental initiation, and mystagogy leading to Christian vocation in the world.

Seekers of the faith are engaged with the gospel, robustly incorporated into the fellowship of the gospel, and are sent into the world to bear witness to the gospel in their daily lives.

All this, and much more, testifies to a formidable ecumenical liturgical consensus that has emerged since the Second Vatican Council. But history doesn't stand still, and this liturgical consensus is being challenged by three powerful movements. These movements were embryonically present already in the 1970s, and to some extent their concerns are represented in official liturgical resources. But they have gained strength during the 1980s and into the 1990s even as the ecumenical liturgical consensus continued to build; and now they have moved beyond that consensus in their concerns and proposals. The movements I am referring to are inculturation, feminism, and church growth.

Each of these movements has something to do with the larger issue of evangelization: how does the gospel get expressed in various cultural contexts so as to address the needs and hopes of the people who hear and receive it? How can the fellowship of the gospel model inclusiveness in order to demonstrate that the gospel is the new reality for everyone? How can the church reach out to entice back those who have drifted away from the fellowship of the gospel and to invite into this fellowship those who have never been a part of it?

Inculturation (sometimes also called contextualization or indigenization) referred originally to the problem of relating the historic Christian liturgy brought by Western missionaries to African and Asian cultures. There have been increasing concerns that the Christian liturgy comes in Western dress and native churches are looking for ways to put it in indigenous dress. This involves more than translating texts, using native tunes, hanging up native designs and erecting native buildings. It also involves practices of hospitality, reverence, body movement, and initiation. In North America similar concerns have been raised about relating the liturgical styles of mainline, predominantly white European-American churches to African-American, Hispanic-American, Asian-American, and Native American cultures.

On the one hand, it would seem to be easy to address this issue. There have been previous examples of liturgical inculturation in Christian history. These models suggest that there is no reason why the basic shape of the liturgy with its biblical and theological content needs to be altered by the process of inculturation. In fact, the shape of the liturgy, the lectionary system, and the christological and trinitarian focus of Christian worship stand out as essential when certain cultural expressions are removed and replaced by others. The essentials of the catholic liturgy were not affected by Martin Luther's effort at inculturating the Latin liturgy in his *Deutsche Messe und Gottesdienst* of 1526, even though it employed a different literary genre—verse instead of prose—and a different musical style—the chorale instead of Gregorian chant. It should also be possible to maintain the shape and content of the historic liturgy in other cultural contexts, for

example, in an African-American congregation in which styles of participatory preaching, intimate intercessory prayer, cathartic shouting, triumphant singing, and an integration of worship and social action are a normal part of worship. The kind of sensory engagement that is characteristic of African-American worship allows for chanting and processions and even for smells and bells. And it goes without saying that the Hispanic sense of fiesta could go a long way toward helping us Anglo-Saxons recover a true sense of festival in human life.

On the other hand, any group's shared world view and ways of doing things also produces a culture. Thus, we are not dealing only with the liturgical appropriation of cultural expressions but also with the liturgical production of cultural expressions. If you want to see how different styles of worship produce different ecclesiastical cultures, compare Polish Catholicism and Ukrainian Orthodoxy. Poles and Ukrainians are neighboring Slavic peoples, but their church life is considerably different.

There are also some cultural particulars involved in the gospel story that cannot be ignored. Jesus was a Jew, and his story makes sense only in the historical context of God's dealing with his people Israel. The God and Father of Jesus Christ is the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. The essential dogmas of Christianity came to conceptual expression with the aid of Hellenistic metaphysics. The doctrines of sin and grace found expression in Roman juridical concepts and practice. Theology needs to sort out which cultural particularities are constitutive of the gospel proclamation, and therefore irreplaceable.

We may be amused by the lively debate that occurred about a hundred years ago in the Lutheran communities of North America about whether Lutheran doctrine could be communicated in the English language. All those First English or Trinity English Lutheran Churches were making a theological as well as a linguistic statement: Reformation teaching did not have to be confined to German. We may even find it embarrassing that such a debate ever took place. But we are usually appreciative of the fact that thoroughly Americanized Jewish youth learn Hebrew before their bar mitzvah and that Muslims from many different countries learn Arabic in order to read the Qur'an and recite prayers to Allah. We are being told today by multiculturalists that the particularities of each culture need to be respected and that there is no common American culture. The melting pot concept has been replaced by the image of the salad bowl, in which each item retains its individual characteristics, rather than being assimilated into a new substance. The multicultural argument does indeed force us to reconsider whether our teachings are cradled in certain cultural forms and styles; and that, as Mary Douglas wrote more than two decades ago, using the example of cultural and religious changes among the Navaho, "with this shift in forms, a shift in doctrine appears."<sup>1</sup> Liturgists have been saying the same sort of thing when they appeal to the slogan from the church fathers that the *lex orandi* establishes the *lex credendi*. On this basis I would propose

the hypothesis that Lutheran people placed organizationally within the fellowship of the Roman Catholic church will remain theologically Lutheran if they also retain the Lutheran rite and sing classical Lutheran hymns, but that Lutheran people placed within their own Lutheran denominational organization will cease to remain theologically Lutheran if they use a free-church order of worship and sing only generic hymns.

Inculturation is required by the mission of the gospel, and it will happen whether we intend it to or not. We are cultural beings and we do not check our culture in the narthex. There are subtle ways in which our culture influences our liturgical practice<sup>2</sup> (which is why, for example, American Lutheran liturgical practice is so different from European Lutheran liturgical practice). The caveat I am raising here is that we must be about the theological task of sorting through various cultural expressions of the gospel to discern which ones are needed for the sake of preserving the authentic witness of a particular community of faith, if we think that witness is worth preserving.

When we come to the feminist critique, we are faced not just with a challenge to a certain liturgical style, but with a challenge to content as well. We have seen feminist demands escalate from gender-inclusive language in the lectionary and prayer texts, to a greater selection of pericopes that include stories about women and metaphors that draw on the feminine characteristics of God, to non-sexist language for addressing God, to “emancipatory” language and images that move beyond the mechanics of gender-inclusive language by challenging all stereotypical gender references. Feminists such as Marjorie Procter-Smith call for a feminist reconstruction of liturgical memory and a feminist expansion of liturgical imagination because, she says, women’s historical memories and creative imaginations have been colonized by a patriarchal culture.<sup>3</sup> Whether Women-Church can call down the realm of God/ess in all its eschatological power to transform the androcentric church with its deep-seated relationships of domination and oppression remains to be seen.<sup>4</sup>

It may seem “patronizing” even to say this: but I believe there are lessons for all of us to learn from the feminist critique about the inclusiveness and nurturing capabilities of our liturgical assemblies. Sensitivity to lectionary issues—for example, the lack of stories about women read in our assemblies (which is not helped by the Common Lectionary with all its post-Pentecost stories about the patriarchs, Moses, and David)—can give us greater exposure to the biblical witness, which will also enrich our vocabulary of prayer and praise.

Sadly, I must also say that there is a neo-pagan element in radical feminist theology and practice that can no longer pass for Christian orthodoxy, and we may simply have to have a parting of the ways between worshippers of the Holy Trinity and God/ess worshippers, between those who invoke the Spirit of Christ to seal eschatological promises and those who call down “our sweet Sophia” in the spirit of Canaanite fertility rites. The

Name of God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, encapsulated in the ecumenical creeds, is a condensed form of the story of the gospel. The relationships between the Father and the Son and the Spirit who proceeds from them have very much to do with our salvation. Other names or ways of addressing the deity (as opposed to metaphors describing the deity) run the risk of proclaiming some other message than the gospel of Jesus Christ.

As challenging as the feminist critique is, it is still not the most serious challenge to the ecumenical liturgical consensus. Pride of place must be given to the critique of the church growth movement. This movement has sprung up to try to reach the millions of unchurched people in our land, especially those in the so-called baby boomer generation. Wade Clark Roof, in *A Generation of Seekers*, says that 76 million baby boomers were born between 1946 and 1964. Of these, 33% remained loyal to the church, 25% are returnees, and 42% are drop-outs (although he admits that who fits what category could change depending on what day they were interviewed—which itself is a sobering thought!).<sup>5</sup>

The church growth movement has reminded us about such crucial issues as hospitality and accessibility, in all of their myriad details. These were concerns, I would point out, that were already being explored in Roman Catholic literature and practice after the reforms of the Second Vatican Council and are reflected in new forms of church architecture and liturgical environment. If the church growth movement reminds us to give serious attention to the hospitality of our assemblies and the accessibility of our rites, it is doing a salutary thing. But it not only challenges traditional liturgical styles and content; it calls for the utter abolition of anything resembling the historic Christian liturgy (at least on the Lord's Day) in favor of celebrational encounters with the unchurched, using styles of music and forms of entertainment that make the attendees feel comfortable. The Garden Grove Community Church (otherwise known as the Crystal Cathedral) is the granddaddy of the church growth movement; the Willow Creek Community Church in Barrington, Illinois, is the inspiration for the new generation of growth-oriented mega-churches; and the Community Church of Joy in Phoenix, Arizona, has pioneered "entertainment evangelism" and worship for Lutherans. To be sure, most of our congregations that are interested in so-called "contemporary services" or "family worship" are not as radical as Willow Creek or the Community Church of Joy. But congregations across the land are singing "glory and praise" songs rather than classical hymns, listening to "messages" amply sprinkled with the insights of popular psychology rather than sermons that expose the law and gospel in biblical texts, and experiencing testimonies from lay persons who are recovering from some addiction or dramas put on by youth groups or church players. In more than one suburban congregation this year, the Fourth Sunday of Advent was given over to a children's Christmas pageant, with no reading of the gospel of the annunciation and no celebration of the Eucharist. The liturgy of the word and the sacrament was simply abol-

ished, at least for this Sunday, and few thought it made any difference, least of all the pastors who let it happen.

Alternative, creative, engaging, and entertaining worship services are being implemented in hundreds of Lutheran congregations. A recent survey of ELCA congregations by the Division for Congregational Ministries indicates that the *Lutheran Book of Worship* is enjoying a healthy use, at least for “traditional” services, but there is a shift to other resources for additional “contemporary” services. In many cases, using non-LBW material may only refer to the occasional use of hymns and prayers from other sources. If I had had to respond to the survey, I guess I would have said that I too supplement the LBW on occasion with hymns and liturgical material from other sources, such as the *Book of Common Prayer*, *The Hymnal 1982*, or *The United Methodist Hymnal*. There are also supplemental musical settings of the liturgy available from Augsburg Fortress and Concordia Publishing Houses. Some congregations and seminaries have employed the GIA *Hymnal Supplement* with its Marty Haugen musical setting of a liturgy that is similar to, but not identical with, that in the LBW. This and other resources bought by congregations from liturgical entrepreneurs have never been subjected to formal analysis and discussion in our church body. (Indeed, lacking a Commission of Worship, the ELCA has no proper forum for such a discussion—such issues are left to the discretion of denominational staff and the marketing interests of the church publishing house.) But the new wrinkle in liturgical life today is that many congregations are subscribing to “creative liturgy” resources produced by independent entrepreneurs such as The Fellowship Ministries of Tempe, Arizona, which claims to be selling its “Worship Alive” series to over 200 Lutheran congregations. And this is only one of a dozen liturgical entrepreneurs selling to hundreds of congregations in the mainline Protestant Churches.

What is the consequence of this? Liturgical materials, which no responsible persons in our church bodies have reviewed before they are used, are being put into the hands of worshippers. I am not such a responsible person, but I have reviewed some of these “creative liturgies.” I find, for example, Communion Services that give not the slightest evidence of awareness of the classical eucharistic tradition. There is no sense of the bread and wine being presented as fruits of the earth that human hands have made. There is no offering of eucharistic prayer in praise of the Father, in remembrance of the Son, and in supplication of the Holy Spirit, in the framework of which the joint worship of heaven and earth is evoked, the redemptive sacrifice of the Son by means of the bread and cup is proclaimed, and the eschatological feast in company with the whole communion of saints is anticipated. Once creative Communion Liturgy has a format that consistently includes invitation to the table, the words of institution said by the pastor, a song to Jesus during the distribution of bread and wine, and a concluding exhortation such as this one for Epiphany:

Let this be our divine commission: that we take the Light of Jesus to this dying, crumbling world and make His love and grace plain to all around us. We are a part of His eternal purpose! May God grant us grace and wisdom to believe this; may God shower upon us His blessing as we go and share what we believe.

This is entirely moralistic. The whole emphasis is on what we should do, and it implies a causal relationship between what happens in worship and the mission of God's people in the world.

There were Communion liturgies not so different from this in Germany at the beginning of the nineteenth century, influenced by the Enlightenment. Indeed, we seem to be in the Enlightenment all over again. Or perhaps, in America at least, we never left it. It seems as though the Romantic Restoration movements and the Modern Liturgical Movement have not made a dent in our Enlightenment sensibilities. Let us not forget that the major religious movement in America was not the Oxford Movement but the Revival Movement and that it affected all of the denominations. It might seem that the evangelical revivals are as far removed from the Enlightenment as one can get, theologically. But not really. The revivalists shared with rationalists a confidence in scientific and technological progress to the extent that they believed that there was no limit to what one could achieve as long as one used the right techniques. The revivalists also shared with the rationalists the view that the purpose of worship is the edification of the worshipper rather than the glorification of God. Church growth seminars are in the tradition of Charles Finney's *Lectures on the Revivals of Religion* (1835), in which he proposed "new measures" for worship and evangelism. Willow Creek is a high tech form of revivalism, and Finney is its church father.

Churches that focus on the renewal of the self rather than on the proclamation of God's love for the world shown in the saving death and life-giving resurrection of Christ will gain adherents. Indeed, such terms as "sacrifice," "renunciation," "obedience," and "surrender" sound almost un-American. This is because Americans especially have a positive view of the self, which comes from the religion of the Enlightenment. Thus, while the baby boomers surveyed by Wade Clark Roof have diminished confidence in economic, political, and religious authorities, 86% of them say that if you believe in yourself, there is almost no limit to what you can do.<sup>6</sup> If boomers seek therapeutic services and participate in self-help groups in record numbers, it is because they believe that they can get it together, so they shop around for a religion that affirms this positive sense of the self. The liturgies most likely to turn them on are ones that emphasize their personal relationship with God. But is there anything new in this? Is this not the old American gnostic religion, which glories in the personal knowledge of the Jesus-God who "walks with me and talks with me and tells me that I am his own"?

As the old song says, "I go to the garden alone." One does not need a church for a personal relationship with Jesus. It's not surprising that in Roof's

survey of the baby boomers, not only do they shop around for a church, but their church attendance is also a matter of choice. 66% of fundamentalists, 79% of evangelicals, and 94% of the rest of his sample do not believe that church attendance is essential to being a good Christian. One encounters Jesus alone. The church might provide a good support group for one's personal journey, and the human fellowship is nice, but the idea of being part of a community of proclamation with an historically-grounded gospel and a promised destiny is opaque to gnostic Americans. To indicate what I think we are really up against, let me quote an extended passage from Harold Bloom's masterly piece of criticism entitled *The American Religion*.

American religion, like American imaginative literature, is a severely internalized quest romance, in which some version of immortality serves as the object of desire. Compare the Roman Catholic crucifix with the cross of all Baptist churches, as well as of most other American Protestant denominations. The Catholics worship Christ crucified, but the Baptists salute the empty cross, from which Jesus already has risen. Resurrection is the entire concern of the American Religion, which gets Christ off the cross as quickly as Milton removed him, in just a line and a half of *Paradise Lost*.

One of the grand myths of the American Religion is the restoration of the Primitive Church, which probably never existed. The Southern Baptists in some sense take as their paradigm an interval about which the New Testament tells us almost nothing, the forty days the Disciples went about in the company of Jesus after his resurrection. I think that not only the Baptists but all adherents of the American Religion, whatever their denomination, quest for that condition. When they speak, sing, pray about walking with Jesus, they mean neither the man on the road to eventual crucifixion nor the ascended God, but rather the Jesus who walked and lived with his Disciples again for forty days and forty nights. Those days, for the Mormons, include Christ's sojourn in America, where Joseph Smith envisioned him coming soon after the Resurrection, in the greatest single imaginative breakthrough in the *Book of Mormon*. The largest heresy among all those that constitute the American Religion is this most implicit and profoundly poetic of all heresies: the American walks alone with Jesus in a perpetually expanded interval founded upon the forty days' sojourn of the risen Son of Man. American Gnosticism escapes from time by entering into the life upon earth already enjoyed by the Man who died and then conquered death.<sup>7</sup>

The gnostic American has found an escape from the ambiguities and frustrations of history and therefore does not really long for some "other" world. Indeed, the recurring outbursts of millenarianism in our religious history indicate a profound belief that Christ should reign in this world, preferably in America. Gnosticism has provided Americans with an immunity to the historical disasters of economic decline, world war, totalitarianism, and ecological catastrophe that has disabused Europeans of the Enlightenment doctrine of progress. Even in the face of such mortal threats as AIDS, global starvation, and ethnic cleansing, Americans refuse to surrender their confidence in the self. After all, God is to be found in the self, and I have a personal relationship with Jesus the Savior. That which is in me is greater than that which is around me. So we can fix anything. The

revivals that have burned through American history, from the Cane Ridge Camp Meeting in 1801 through televangelism, aim at reigniting the divine spark in the human soul by rekindling the personal relationship with Jesus.

It is not surprising that evangelism and worship should take on the form of entertainment; it is the purpose of entertainment to leave the customer satisfied, not to create dissatisfaction with oneself or with one's world. This is why it is successful in producing numbers. But there is an alternative to entertainment: enchantment which creates a spell that leads us to another world.

So, brothers and sisters, here is the crux of the matter. As we consider the relationship between liturgy and evangelism in terms of the witness of the worshipping community, do we aim at entertainment or enchantment? Do we bless the world as it is, or do we evoke a longing for another world? Do we offer programs catering to every imaginable human need, or do we clearly proclaim the gospel to those engaged in a confusing search for meaning? Do we appropriate myriad new techniques gleaned from studying television, or do we appropriate spiritual traditions that can make sense of it all?

While the Enlightenment lingers and dies a slow death, the fact is that we have entered a post-modern age. We live in a society that lacks a narrative sense of itself because in Transcendentalist fashion it has anticipated Fulfillment here and now. If the world lacks a sense of eschatology, it is because it also lacks a sense of history. The modern world, created by the Enlightenment, had a story that provided its tellers with a coherent sense of reality; it was told in the conceptual framework of the doctrine of progress. It saw life evolving into higher and better forms—"better living through chemistry." But historical disasters and the uncertain results of scientific "advances" have caused sensitive people to wonder whether we have a usable past or a hope-filled future any longer. This situation is prophetically expressed in post-modern literature and the arts. The world's story no longer holds; in fact, there is no coherent story to tell and nothing to anticipate. For reasons we can't remember, we're all just "Waiting for Godot," who never comes.<sup>8</sup> The modern world is disintegrating all around us, and the post-modern world is upon us.

But the church has been through this before—in late antiquity, for example, when there was also a world-weariness and a tendency toward escape from history and eschatology through Gnosticism and Mysticism. The church, going public in the basilicas of the crumbling Roman Empire, countered classical pessimism, Gnostic possibility-thinking, and Manichaean dualism, by telling the story of salvation in lectionary and preaching and by enacting the destiny promised in this story in the rites of baptism and the eucharist.

It doesn't seem like much to go on, but it was enough to remake the world. And why shouldn't it have been? After all, the one present in the word and sacrament of the Christian liturgical assembly was none less than the true Author of the world's story, elsewhere denied. The worshipping com-

munity witnesses to none other than the God who is the source, the ground, and the end of all things, who has entered into our humanity in Christ and is apprehended in sacramental bread and wine. If, beyond word and sacrament, a picture would help, why not one of Christ the universal ruler over the table in the apse? And if many pictures would help a generation reared on video communication, surround the worshippers with icons re-presenting the communion of saints or stained glass portrayals of Bible stories.<sup>9</sup>

In a post-modern world lacking meaning and coherence, which the gnostic myths of addiction or abuse and recovery will not finally be able to supply, because they possess a deficient sense of reality and are not able to move beyond the subjective “aha!” experience to help me mend the relationship I have shattered in my journey toward recovery, the most relevant thing the church can do is to perform its historic liturgy, in all its dramatic intensity, textual density, sensual actuality, and brutal realism, and make this the one exclusive center of its life and mission. And, it goes without saying, that a massive process of catechesis and initiation will have to be in place to assimilate the unchurched into what Robert Jenson calls so simply the “story and promise” of the gospel.<sup>10</sup> But in the post-modern world, anything else—any glossy program from headquarters—is window dressing and mere distraction.

There is much against us, if we would be faithful witnesses. Numbers are not on our side. Political correctness is not on our side. God knows, the church's leadership may not be on our side. But history and eschatology is on our side. We know where we have come from and we know what is promised to us. Moreover, according to the promise attached to the Great Commission, the Lord is with us. He is really present in the meal for the journey. So go in peace and serve the Lord by keeping the liturgy going, and letting it accomplish what it may.

**notes**

<sup>1</sup> Mary Douglas. *Natural Symbols: Explorations in Cosmology*. New York: Pantheon Books, 1973:32.

<sup>2</sup> Frank Senn. *Christian Worship and its Cultural Setting*. Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1983.

<sup>3</sup> Marjorie Procter-Smith. In *Her Own Rite: Constructing Feminist Liturgical Language*. Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1990:81-82.

<sup>4</sup> See Rosemary Radford Ruether. *Women-Church: Theology and Practice of Feminist Liturgical Communities*. San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1980.

<sup>5</sup> See Wade Clark Roof. *A Generation of Seekers: The Spiritual Journeys of the Baby Boom Generation*. San Francisco: Harper Collins, 1993:1,155.

<sup>6</sup> Roof, p.108-9

<sup>7</sup> Harold Bloom. *The American Religion: The Emergence of the Post-Christian Nation*. New York: Simon & Schuster, 1992:40.

<sup>8</sup> Samuel Becket. *Waiting for Godot*, trans. From the French by the author. New York: Grove Press, 1954.

<sup>9</sup> See Robert W. Jenson, “How the World Lost Its Story,” *First Things* No.36 October 1993:9-24.

<sup>10</sup> See Robert W. Jenson. *Story and Promise*. Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1974; reprinted Ramsey, NJ: Sigler Press, 1989.