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WW '72: CHAPTER 6 ~ HOW TO CONSTRUCT NEW FORMS FOR WORSHIP

In these paragraphs, we turn to the actual work of **CONSTRUCTING** new worship forms. In the final chapter, we'll be concerned with inaugurating new forms in a parish — the dynamics involved in introducing anything new into the worship life of a congregation.

How do we construct a new form? We've done some previous homework, of course. We've kept in mind the standards for renewal which come to us out of the Tradition (Chapter Three) and the Times (Chapter Four), and we've laid out the raw materials for our work (Chapter Five: *Nihil humanum alien est*). Now we're in position to begin building — not masterpieces, perhaps, but **USEFUL MODELS**, nevertheless, where Word and world might meet.

1. THE ELEMENTS OF WORSHIP

Joseph Sittler has pointed out that all worship, whether of the traditional or experimental variety, is composed of five basic **ELEMENTS**.



a) **RECOLLECTION**: In Christian worship, recollection will include remembrance and representation of the mighty acts of God in the history of Israel and in Jesus Christ. We are called upon in Holy Communion, for example, to “do this in remembrance” of Jesus. As we shall see, remembrance in the Biblical tradition goes beyond mere memorial to include participation in faith's future as well as faith's past.

b) **THANKSGIVING**: A second element in Christian worship will be praise and thanksgiving.

The psalms, for instance, include recollections of God's saving power in Israel's history and frequently proceed to acts of praise and thanksgiving for God's goodness or deliverance or mercy.

c) **PARTICIPATION**: Jews at Passover are encouraged to recollect the story of the Exodus from slavery in Egypt in such a way as to feel they are themselves participants in it: "Our forebears crossed over ... Then we gave thanks ..." and so on. Corporate worship is representative and participatory in character: We stand in solidarity with our parents and grandparents in the faith, and with our children's children in the faith yet to be born. In The Holy Communion, we participate in the Messianic Banquet with Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, with Miriam, Hannah, and Mary, and with the whole church triumphant — "with angels and archangels and all the company of heaven." There is a sense, as I have already suggested, in which we also participate with all people, even non-Christians, in their sins and successes, their fears and hopes. We represent them, in our worship as in our work.

d) **PROCLAMATION**: Biblical worship also includes the element of proclamation — a recitation of the Saving Events in such a way as to point up their present reality and relevance, and in such a way as to elicit response in decision and action on the part of the hearer. For example, the sermon in Eucharistic worship assumes the presence of a commonality in faith, and therefore will not be "evangelistic" in the same sense that the witness of believers to unbelievers on the job during the week will be. A sermon in the context of a Service of Word and Sacrament will always be "from faith to faith". On the other hand, since we are living through tumultuous times, an element of unbelief is certainly present in every Christian assembly today, as well as in each human heart! So receive Good news of God's victory in Christ must always be proclaimed anew, even to believers.

e) **EXPECTATION**: The final element of worship is anticipation, confident expectation, eschatological *prolepsis*. We have seen God's mercies in our past; We also await them in our future. We do more than await them; we anticipate them, we claim them. Not waiting for tomorrow: Today. Since the coming of God's Spirit among us, we can dare to expect and to anticipate many of those signs of fullness and completion which were otherwise only to be enjoyed at the End of the Age.

So, for example, it was one of the sources of scandal to the Pharisees that Jesus in his ministry actually enacted "on earth" the mighty works of God that would have been reserved to "heaven:" Forgiving sins. Welcoming women and children with men. Receiving the un-circumcised with the circumcised. Sharing table fellowship with outcasts and sinners. "But that you may know that the Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins..." The spirit of prayer is the spirit of confident expectation. We dare to **CLAIM** today the gifts of God promised for tomorrow. To anticipate them today and to claim them, today. In the Lord's Prayer, some scholars argue, we claim today the "bread for tomorrow."



Most acts of worship, in fact, will **COMBINE** one or more of these elements, although it is also possible to utilize them separately. The preparation at the beginning of many of our services, which often includes an act of public Confession and Absolution, will contain motifs of 1) recollection of God's readiness to forgive in the past; 2) thanksgiving for that forgiveness; 3) acknowledgment of participation in the sins and guilt of our society and of our age; 4) a proclamation or announcement of the present reality of sins forgiven; and 5) the expectation and anticipation that we may now forget them and venture forward into life, confident that God is faithful and will always remain faithful to that promise.

II THE MODES OF WORSHIP

There are four modes of worship. These differ from the elements of worship as the **MODES** or key-signatures of a sonata or symphony differ from its various structural parts. The modes of worship can be said to represent the various flavors or nuances of import in an act of worship. John P. Milton has suggested the psalms noted below.

a) **PRAISE**: Praise is the mode of thanksgiving and blessing. It is *berakah*: an acknowledgment in gratitude for the goodness of God. A case could be made that praise is the only legitimate mode of prayer since God knows what we need and want before we ask. All that remains for us to do is offer thanks. Psalms of thanksgiving and praise include 9, 30, 33, 34, 48, 65, 66, 95-100, 103, 136, 145 as well as the Hallelujah psalms 146-150, which are one sustained song of praise.



b) **ADORATION**: Adoration is the act of worship or prayer which meditates on God's goodness. It differs from praise in being more restrained, perhaps even more subjective. Meditative psalms include 1, 8, 18, 19, 29, 46, 99, 103, 119, 139, 145. Psalms reflecting subjective personal experience of God's mercy include 3, 4, 6, 16, 22, 23, 28, 32, 34, 40, 42, 66, 73.

c) **PETITION** and **INTERCESSION**: Strictly speaking, prayers or acts of petition seek to bring before God the requests of our own hearts; to petition means to ask. Prayers or acts of intercession bring before God our requests for or on behalf of others. In both instances they are modes of asking. Psalms of petition and intercession include 4, 5, 13, 25, 27, 28, 43, 51, 61, 86, 141, 143.

d) **CONFESSION**: We use the word confession with two meanings: to admit guilt or need, or to profess faith. Prayers or acts of worship may express either or both modes. The seven so-called penitential psalms are useful examples of confessional prayers of need: 6, 32, 38, 51, 102, 130, 143. For examples of prayers of profession or confession of faith, see psalms 3, 4, 11, 16, 37, 42, 46, 56, 62, 73, 91, 131. The twelve so-called Messianic psalms might also be thought of as professions of faith, since the church has for centuries read into them reference or allusion to the person and work of Jesus Christ: 2, 8, 16, 21,

22, 40, 41, 45, 69, 72, 110, 118.

III. THE LANGUAGE OF PRAYER: THE TWO SINCERITIES

John Vannorsdall suggests **FIVE STANDARDS** for the language of corporate prayer: Corporate prayer should be a) elevated but comprehensible; (b) terse but communicating more than its terseness; c) beautiful in sounds, patterns and rhythms, without attracting undue attention to its beauty; d) fresh, without the novelty that distracts, and (e) reflective of our place before God — neither ignoring our creaturehood nor minimizing our redemption.

What is needed in corporate prayer today, it seems to me, is a very difficult **BALANCE** in language that steers somewhere down the middle between the “beseeches” and “vouchsafes” of the old *Prayer Book* forms and the chatty informality of Malcolm Boyd. This is not to deny the value of both the prayer books and Malcolm Boyd in private meditation. But contemporary corporate prayer demands something else, and I feel Vannorsdall is close to it.

In any form of responsive prayer or **LITANY**, it is best to keep the people’s role both brief and easily appropriated, and to give the long, extended prayer-forms to the worship leader. The person in the pew should be able to take part in a responsive prayer or litany even without a text in front of the eyes. The spirit of responsive corporate prayer will not be unlike the spirit of children’s nursery stories and rhymes. The rhythms and repetitions of *The Little Red Hen* (“Not I, said the duck. Not I, said the goose. Not I, said the cat. Not I, said the pig...”) provide a useful model for the writing of litanies and responsive prayer-forms.



Repeated, brief congregational responses such as, “Lord, in your mercy, hear our prayer.” are much to be preferred over the long, complex paragraphs of prose or poetry which worshippers are sometimes expected to read in many so-called contemporary litanies. Remember, good corporate prayer should be easily appropriated by all worshippers, including children, the blind, and the illiterate. It is the responsibility of the worship leader, after all, to be the literate one, the eloquent one. The best Christian worship needs no texts. Christian worship is always “**POST-LITERATE**”.

And while we are considering language, let me add this word about **SINCERITY** in prayer. There are those who criticize written prayers — prayers “out of a book” — as somehow insincere. In response to that suspicion, may I suggest that there are two types of sincerity — spontaneous sincerity and what might be called “appropriated” sincerity. Not everyone is gifted with the ability to use language fluently or gracefully. It is to authors and poets that we must often turn, if only to find words to better express our own thoughts and feelings. By all means, if you have the eloquence, feel free spontaneously to invent your own prayers on the spot, in corporate worship. But don’t dismiss the humbler practice of appropriating another’s experience as one’s own.

IV HOW TO CONSTRUCT AN ACT OF WORSHIP: A METHOD

We consider now, for the first time, the actual **PROCESS** of building a new form of worship. We will want to ask three questions as we begin our work:

- 1) Who are these people in the worshipping assembly?
- 2) What are they willing to affirm and enact together as a community? (The “religious” question of Chapter I.)
- 3) How can we provide for the presence of God, the Father of Jesus Christ, in what they will affirm and enact? (The question of “revelation” from Chapter II.)

Let’s look at the process a little more closely via a simple **FIVE-STEP METHOD** for preparing specific acts of worship.



- A) Identify the **CONSTITUENCY** of worshipers. Are they a typical Sunday-morning congregation? A youth group meeting in a weekend retreat? A gathering of members of different churches? It should be possible to construct acts of worship that any group would be able to affirm and enact.
- B) Determine the “**RITUAL CONTRACT**”. See [Essay 13](#) above. What are we inviting people into, in this act of worship? By means of this form or series of forms, what is this specific assembly being asked to recall, to celebrate, to anticipate or to participate in? Why should we gather this assembly in the first place, and what is it that we expect of the gathered congregation in this act of worship? How does this act of worship provide opportunity to discern and enact something real, important and authentic for people in their daily lives? How can this act of worship provide an occasion for meeting with the Lord of Life?
- C) Determine the **MOVEMENT** or sequence of parts. What is the relationship between the various separate elements in the form of worship: recollection, thanksgiving, participation, proclamation, expectation? Which should properly come first? Which last? What is the movement or momentum between the various separate acts or elements? There are often very delicate questions of theology or psychology at issue in what could be called the movement of worship. For example, at what point in worship is an act of Confession and Forgiveness most appropriate? At what point an act of offering?
- D) Determine the “**RITE**.” Now for the first time we concern ourselves with the actual words to be used: the texts, prayers, responses, psalms, hymns, lessons, readings. It is best to know as precisely as possible the answers to the three steps above before selecting the specific verbal forms. Otherwise, we run the risk of falling victim to the misunderstanding that worship is something people listen to individually rather than something they do together. The words of worship are, of course, crucially important. But we should not begin with them.

E) Determine the “**CEREMONY**”. This involves the individual gestures, movements and actions of people and worship leaders. Obviously, questions of “ceremony” or liturgical movement can vary in importance depending on the form of worship. Preparing a form of worship centered in the reading and proclamation of scripture most likely will not require the attention to ceremony necessary in preparing an order for The Holy Communion, where the actual eating and drinking is crucial, or an order for food-washing, where some attention must be directed toward the vexing problems of how to handle footwear, water basin and towels.

And as you might suppose, no order of worship is well-prepared until it has actually been **WALKED-THROUGH** — not simply read-through but walked-through and gestured-through. Problems of liturgical ceremony should be so well-planned that worshippers are hardly conscious of them. Yet, to achieve that kind of naturalness and nonchalance in an actual worship situation requires scrupulous attention to detail in the preparation of an unfamiliar form.



F) **FINALLY**, determine the architectural setting, the music, vestments, symbols and other appropriate cultural forms. The use of these may vary from situation to situation — all the way from the richly elaborate to the simple, to the austere, to the absolutely minimal. Remember: A seven-course formal dinner with the Lord Mayor is quite a different thing from hamburgers at a backyard barbeque. Both are valid ways of finding food, and each is quite appropriate in its own situation and on its own terms. The significant difference between the two need not be in nourishment, nor in richness of human community, but rather in dress, deportment and furnishings.

V THE ECUMENICAL CONSENSUS OF THE 1960's

Before we close out this Chapter, I want to hold before you the truly amazing **ECUMENICAL CONSENSUS** that was achieved by all the Churches in the last half of the Twentieth Century. The document *Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry* of the World Council of Churches spells out this consensus in greater detail.

For our purposes here I'll simply list my own version of eight major areas of **AGREEMENT** that Christian churches acknowledged together in the days preceding and following the (Roman Catholic) Second Vatican Council. Not since before the Reformation have so many diverse Christian communities — from Eastern Orthodox to Roman Catholic to Anglican to Lutheran to Reformed to Pentecostal — shared so many important convictions about Christian theology and practice. (Earlier Essays in this website enlarge on many of these topics.)

So in designing new forms for worship, be **CERTAIN** to keep these convictions too firmly in mind.

This truly unprecedented, truly heartening and surely Spirit-directed consensus in worship

has included the following **CONVICTIONS**.

1) The Holy Communion, by whatever name it is known — The Mass, The Eucharist, The Divine Liturgy, The Sacrament of the Altar, The Lord's Supper — belongs among us as the **CHIEF ACT** of worship each week...

2) Worship in our day demands the **VERNACULAR**. People should know and affirm what they pray. Accessibility, comprehension, "trumps" whatever presumed universality that a Mass in Latin, for example, could claim to provide...

3) A **ONE-ROOM** worship space is preferable to a two-room (nave-and-chancel) space. Nave-and-chancel spaces send three disastrous signals. a) They re-enforce a hierarchical view of ministry. b) They are strongly presentational or theatrical, suggesting that leaders are on stage presenting to an audience of spectators. c) They frustrate community: You see no faces, only the backs of others' heads, an unbecoming sea of hair...



4) **LAY PEOPLE** should be expected to exercise their rightful roles of leadership at every gathering for worship...

5) Ceremonial is best when it is **SIMPLE**, functional, and self-evident. Further, we are coming out of a period of a crippling liturgical minimalism, where the question has too often been: "What's the least we can get away with and still keep the sacraments valid?" Hence two or three dribbles of water have become sufficient at Baptisms, in too many instances. And at Communion, a fish-food wafer and a shot-glass of wine. Such minimalism ignores the sign-value of ceremony: See [Essay 46](#) above. Luther speaks of "enlarging the sign". Hence emersion is becoming the preferred method for Baptism, a real loaf preferred at Eucharist...

6) The **DAILY OFFICE** is being re-discovered among all communities of faith. Morning Prayer and Evening Prayer and Compline are no longer perceived as the treasure of monastic communities alone, but of the whole people of God, and indeed within family households and by individuals...

7) **PREACHING** is normally lectionary-based. The value of an ecumenically-established lectionary has long since been demonstrated: We're spared thereby a weekly re-iteration of the preacher's prejudices, and treated rather, week by week, to the fullest breadth of Scripture. To honour textual preaching, however, does not mean we may not preach on occasion about the why's and how's of worship. So-called *mystagogic* preaching — interpreting worship to worshippers — also has a long and noble history. Mystagogic preaching is especially appropriate in the Easter season....

8) The witness of all the **ARTS**, and insights from the study of anthropology and phenomenology, are appreciated once again as bearing directly on Christian worship

practice. The arts, all of them, converge with faith precisely at 11:00 a.m. on Sunday morning: In worship. The arts as well provide the Word with additional voices of great persuasiveness. And **RITUAL STUDIES** inform and deepen and enliven our understanding of all worship, Christian worship not excepted...

It should be noted that the totally unprecedented consensus outlined above is by no means altogether unanimous in the Churches. Particularly in these early years of the Twenty-First Century, this consensus has been challenged, ignored, and indeed **ATTACKED** — from the “right” by traditionalists in the Vatican and elsewhere, and from the “left” by partisans of “church growth” and the “mega-church” movement, “neo-Revivalism”. But, in the long view, a consensus so grand and so Spirit-inspired cannot but prevail.



VI SOME HOMEWORK: PREPARE AN ORDER FOR.....

A glance through the table of contents of the various prayer books and occasional services books will indicate the wide range of possibilities for experimental worship coming out of the Tradition. There is good reason to re-examine them today and prepare some new ones. My own feeling is The Holy Communion should receive our first attention, followed by some simple orders for Morning and Evening Prayer, and schemes for personal and family use in prayer at home.

I invite you to produce your own!

Our seventh and final Chapter next month: Making it happen in your parish!

