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## WW '72: CHAPTER 3 THE TRADITION: WHO NEEDS IT?

### I. WORD AND SACRAMENTS: INCOGNITOS OF GRACE

Let me take up again what I only suggested earlier: the possibility of discerning the fullness of Revelation within the forms of “religion.” We are dealing here with what we could call the **INCOGNITOS** of Grace. In older language it is the “means of Grace” or the “Word and Sacraments” which concern us in these paragraphs — how does God move among people today?



I'll identify here three incognitos which the **WORD** assumes when that Word comes to dwell with us today: 1) the Word in its written form, 2) the Word in its spoken form, and 3) the Word in its enacted form. With each of these Incognitos of Grace, as with the original Incarnation, there is the real possibility of offense in the form: “Is not this the carpenter’s son? ... And they took offense at him ...” (Matthew 13:55, 57)

1) The **WRITTEN** Word can refer, of course, first and foremost to our Scriptures. The Bible is the supreme treasure of our Tradition. It contains the earliest written record of the earliest oral proclamation of the Good News of the Word-made-flesh. Each of those qualifiers is important, in my view.

In a sense, however, **ANY** written witness to the truth of God, as we know that

God in Jesus Christ, can also be judged to be faithful testimony. After all, it is not as if God has been totally without witness in the ages since the writings of the Apostles! The enduring creeds and theologies of the Church throughout the ages will also mediate that Word to us in written form. So also with surviving sermons, meditations, prayers, hymns and liturgies in printed texts from our past and from our present: Each of these can be witnesses to the Word in written form. I'd even be willing to include the works of certain artists: poets, playwrights, novelists, essayists.

The **ADVANTAGES** of the written Word include the fact that the Word is easy to preserve and to examine in that form. You can hold it in your hand, as scroll or parchment or printed volume. You can learn its languages, parse its grammar, study its metaphors, consider its cultural contexts. There's a palpability, a materiality, in printed or written texts, a "thereness". These aspects of the written Word are assets indeed. Not for nothing do today's TV preachers make it a point of carrying a copy of the Bible in hand whenever they're speaking!

But the written Word suffers **DISADVANTAGES** as well. Chief among the liabilities of the written Word is that it is static — it just sits there until you pick it up and read it. And of course you must be sighted to, as they say, access its meanings. And you must know how to read. You must be literate.

2) The **SPOKEN** Word, however, is anything but static. It is dynamic; it reaches out and addresses you. The spoken Word is alive and lively in a way in which a book will never be. The spoken Word was Luther's favorite medium of the Gospel.



As with the written Word, so also with the Word spoken. We must be careful not to limit our loyalties too completely, not to **RESTRICT** the speaking to the sanctuary. The spoken Word addresses us in sermon, prayer and hymn, to be sure. But the spoken Word also addresses us, convicts us, comforts us as well in "the mutual conversation and consolation" of Christian brothers and sisters.

3) As for the **ENACTED** Word, the Word in action, the Word in sacrament and the Word in the life of sacrificial service: It is probably less palpable, less material, less investigatable than the Word in its written form. And it is probably less precise, less nuanced than the Word in its spoken form. But I would argue that the enacted Word is the most affective form the Word assumes. It affects you. In your emotions, in your heart, in your gut. Jesus not only preached love, he loved — even to laying down his life for his friends. And that, as they say, is

putting your money where your mouth is.

I'm suggesting here this is one way we today may understand the role of **SACRAMENTAL ENACTMENT** as a medium for the Gospel. To take part in an action, to participate in an event affects you even more inwardly, even more viscerally, than to read of it, or to hear of it. As I have already argued, men and women, even modern men and women, are by nature Enactors of Liturgies. We are simply not satisfied with written or spoken attempts to express or to communicate. The handshake, the kiss, the embrace, the blow with the clenched fist: These are actions which do indeed speak louder than words. And although it sounds altogether corny, it is still indisputably true: The enacted life of a believer may well be the only "Bible" others ever read.

The Word: written, spoken, and enacted. If it speaks of the God of judgement and of grace, as Christians know that God in Israel and in Jesus of Nazareth, then it is the Spirit's own witness. It is the Word **MADE FLESH** once again among us. And we had better hear and heed.

## II THE TRADITION: WHO NEEDS IT?



At the very least, therefore, our Tradition **MEDIATES** the Word to us, brings to us all we know of the Gospel of God in Jesus Christ. As I have argued earlier, the Gospel is not "religion". You're not born with it, as you're born with "religion". You don't suck the Gospel out of your own thumb, in the words of a beloved teacher. The Good News of Unmerited Grace must always be taught, announced, proclaimed, enacted.

But are there **OTHER REASONS** for concerning ourselves with the Tradition of the Church in the first decades of the Twenty-First Century?

Tradition today: Who needs it? Let me suggest **THREE** other arguments for respecting the Church's Tradition, especially as it relates to worship.

1) First, it's necessary to respect the Tradition simply to show our love for our **FORBEARS** in faith. Much that calls itself "renewal" in the Church today is simply bad-mannered, adolescent rebellion against age and authority. But surely ours is not the first generation to struggle for reason, relevance, liberty, integrity, justice, the fullness of human potential. The true revolutionary does not have to be an Oedipus; We have an obligation to try to learn to love in our day what our

parents loved in their day. And that spirit is not antiquarian. It is simply one of the marks of maturity.

2) Second, it's prudent to respect the Tradition if we are going to make any claims at all to being well-educated. The Tradition of the Church represents some two thousand years of human history in the West, like it or not. And that history must be dealt with, known and understood by anyone who aspires to a liberal **EDUCATION**. You can't even appreciate the works of Bach or Mozart without some rudimentary knowledge of what I am calling here the Tradition of the Church.

3) Finally, it's necessary to respect the Tradition because it provides **PERSPECTIVE** in the midst of change. It remains as true today as ever: Those who do not study history are doomed to repeat it. Part of the value of a liberal education, for example, is contained in the confidence that, by a study of the mistakes of our parents, we may somehow learn to avoid them. We will make enough mistakes of our own, as it is, without borrowing from others!



In the following paragraphs we will **EXAMINE** the Tradition — the material, for example, handed down to us in *Lutheran Book of Worship (LBW)* and elaborated in the *Renewing Worship* resources — in some detail, in an attempt to identify some invariables.

I'll argue next time that our Tradition is Biblical, catholic, Confessional, national, parochial, and personal. Food for thought in each! I'll further suggest that there is a kind of **HIERARCHY** of values within our Tradition, with each level possessing a priority over the levels below it. Here then is one person's attempt to sift out the invariables, to find standards for criticism or levels of loyalty by which we may judge both the old forms and the new.

