**“Bishop, we just do what’s in the Prayer Book.”**

I love Bishop’s Visitations, that is, the official visit to a parish usually on a Sunday morning. What is great fun, in our multi-liturgical world, is that no priest or parish ever says to me, “Bishop, we do everything the wrong way here.” Most priests and parishioners would like to believe that they do everything the “right way” but if you just think for a moment that means that they have a model in mind, and even when a priest makes reference to a Liturgical Manual or book, I say to myself “Ad libitum.” I have concluded that every parish does things the right way, it’s just that every parish does them differently. I do not wish to quibble over that, especially since I was a priest for twenty years before becoming a bishop thirty years ago, so for twenty years I sincerely hope that my bishops knew that I was doing the best that I could. I can imagine that I probably wondered why they didn’t do it the “right way” or maybe the “rite way” or “my way!”

One of the statements I love is, “We just do what’s in the Prayer Book.” All too often there is a tack on sentence like, “except for ” I must listen carefully because I know what to expect with what is in whichever Prayer Book or Missal they use, but some of the “excepts” can catch me a tiny bit off guard! When our eighteen-year-old grandson was about five and I was explaining the Holy Trinity to him, the short version is that I asked him if he could tell me three things I am or do. He chose “ther’pist” (his pronunciation), PaPa, and bishop. I asked him if he could explain each one. “A ther’pist means you help people with their problems. PaPa means that you love us and take care of us, and bishop means that you bless anything the priest holds up in front of you!” There you have it. When I was a parish priest and the (unnamed) bishop made his Visitation, I had the appropriate tray for the slices of lemon after the Chrismation, for him to clean off the oil. The bishop took the lemon and squeezed it over the head of the Confirmand. I recognized that more information is sometimes essential in advance and that liturgical assumptions should never be made.

In spite of having celebrated Mass from four different Books of Common Prayer, numerous “Trial Rites,” and three different “Missals,” I still cannot find the one thing in the Prayer Books that virtually every parish does: the ceremonies and rituals surrounding the offering plates and alms basin. I have decided that there may need to be a hymn entitled “Lift High the Plates!” However, I have discovered that most parishes sing what is commonly called the “Doxology” which is, as the word means in Greek (loosely translated from doxa logia in Greek) a short hymn of praises to God (usually the Holy Trinity) and often a conclusion to Liturgical Prayers such as the conclusion to the Eucharistic Prayer/Canon of the Mass/ Prayer of Consecration — often termed “the Great Doxology.” I suspect, however, that most people associate “Doxology” with the offering plates and the solemn procession that goes with it. I would also suspect that apart from the creative and sometimes seasonal tunes I have heard that go with the offering plate “Doxology” that most people would assume that the “Old One Hundredth” tune is normative. I am not certain if the composer, (attributed to) Louis Bourgeois in 1551, would have imagined how his tune has endured, nor do I think that most parishes sing regularly “All people that on Earth do Dwell” so that they can tack on the “Doxology” with the same tune. When my wife and I were dating, she had never attended a Mass other than the type with which we have been identified in our “churchmanship.” One day we attended a “Holy Communion” at a different parish, that was a very simple celebration, and would then be called “Low Church.” My then girlfriend said afterwards, very innocently, “Now I know what Low Church is. That is where the priest elevates the offering plates higher than the Host and the Chalice.” She was equally unsure of why shiny alms basins were placed on the Altar where the Altar Cards are sometimes seen. I just report the news.

For fifty years I have regularly been instructed by priests and MC’s as to what to do with the plates: bless, touch, lift, etc. A Book of Common Prayer purist will tell me that the rubrics are clear: 1928 BCP:

“The Deacons, Church-wardens, or other fit persons, appointed for that purpose, shall receive the Alms for the Poor, and other Offerings of the People, in a decent Basin, to be provided by the Parish; and reverently bring it to the Priest, who shall humbly present and place it upon the Holy Table.”

“And the Priest shall then offer, and place upon the Holy Table, the Bread and the Wine.”

“And when the Alms and Oblations are being received and presented, there may be sung a Hymn or an Offertory Anthem in the words of Holy Scripture or of the Book of Common Prayer, under the direction of the Priest.”

Out of these rubrics have come quite a few variations, including an interesting one which I call the “traveling offertory sentence” which is said by the priest (not always the celebrant) as he travels in the Chancel or Sanctuary or Pulpit or Lectern to start the Offertory (Altar: Oblations) and Offering (Nave: Alms).

While I am not speaking ill of various practices, I would simply note that there are probably few priests who do precisely what is noted in the above rubrics, and that which is commonly done as it relates to alms and oblations has become a type of liturgy within the Liturgy and is often done with great precision. Having had to balance quite a few budgets over my fifty-one years of ordination, I suspect that I understand the enthusiasm that some display as the plates are presented — especially the treasurer.

It is also fun for me to consider which Prayer Book has shaped the priest. So very often, no matter how many offertory sentences are published in whichever edition of the Book of Common Prayer that is used, whatever is written first is what is used the most. (Check out your Prayer Books and see.). Being brought up with the Missal, and using it for many years meant that the Offertory Sentence from the Minor Propers changes just as the Epistle and Gospel change in the Propers. It is interesting to note that those offertory sentences are thematically linked to the Propers and less focused on encouraging people to give alms. They are also directed towards God in a prayer tone and less directed to the people regarding generosity in giving. Just for fun, look through the various offertory sentences in the Book of Common Prayer and see which ones have a seasonal tone, which ones are directed to God, and which ones are directed to the people in the congregation.

I once had a very, very nervous mother of the bride come to me and express her concern about taking up a collection at her daughter’s Nuptial Mass. I had to ask her to tell me why she thought that would happen. She showed me in the Wedding Bulletin the word “Offertory.” Maybe that’s part of our problem: we think Offertory means taking up a collection instead of that oft forgotten form of prayer: oblation, and we forget that Bread and Wine are placed in the center of the Altar — not the plates.

I have often wondered as we sing the “Doxology” during Lent if we have ever considered the English words: “Praise God,” and the Hebrew or Latin words for that phrase. I wonder if when we do not use the “A” word during Lent, if we should consider an alternative for the Doxology or maybe even have a few moments of meditative silence. Since the Doxology is not written in the Prayer Book, it does present some option. Maybe I wonder too much, BUT when I have the privilege of doing a Visitation, I really want to honor what is done in that parish. I tend not to say, “why do you do that?” Unless it’s heretical I try to honor what is done in that place, and I must say that very few churches where I am privileged to be, do not sing the “Doxology.”

Having now served twice in a previous jurisdiction on the Standing Liturgical Commission, and now for over a decade and a half on the Liturgy Task Force of my current jurisdiction, I must say that Liturgiologists and Liturgists obviously have creative conversations and debates about Liturgy, but we recognize what is sacrosanct in the local parish, and often conversations turn to what happens between the offertory sentence and the next part of the Liturgy. A collective “wink” is usually done by the Committee members.

Recognizing this the 2019 Book of Common Prayer of the Anglican Church in North America writes on p.131 the rubrics:

The Celebrant may begin the Offertory with one of the provided sentences of Scripture.

During the Offertory a hymn, psalm, or anthem may be sung. The Deacon or Priest prepares the Holy Table for the celebration. Representatives of the Congregation may bring the People’s offerings of bread and wine and money or other gifts to the Deacon or Priest.

The People’s offerings stand while the offerings are presented. The following may be said.

Celebrant. Yours, O Lord, is the greatness, and the power, and the glory, and the victory, and the majesty: for everything in heaven and on earth is yours; yours is the Kingdom, O Lord, and you are exalted as Head above all. All things come from you, O Lord,

People. And of your own have we given you.

I Chronicles 29:11, 14

Once again, the “Doxology” is not printed in this version of the Book of Common Prayer, but I have not witnessed a minimization of the Old One Hundredth Doxology, sung with great enthusiasm.

**In the end, I am simply happy that God is being praised, that we acknowledge that all blessings flow from Him, and that we still say “Holy Ghost.” “Praise Father, Son, and Holy Ghost” ……even if the hymn isn’t in the Prayer Book.**