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Confessions, Ecumenism, Ethnicity: A Lutheran Charism

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I. Context of the Question

Despite the universalizing tendency that churches in North America have sometimes presented themselves or authoritatively proposed their forms and questions (both ritual and theological) to the global church, a considerable degree of myopia has reigned within their own borders. Speaking from within the context of North American Lutheranism, ethnic loyalties, ethnically embodied confession curiously and surprisingly still rules both hearts and minds. East coast Lutheranism in the United States, with its multiple points of origin in both German pietism and German orthodoxy is noticeably different from mid-western Lutheranism, with its far-reaching and deep roots spreading from Swedish orthodoxy to Norwegian pietism (and everything in between).

These sundry ethnic origins of Lutheranism in North America, no matter how diluted today (very few people, for example, speak the “mother tongue” let alone worship in it), still maintain a considerable spiritual and theological control, sometimes conscious mostly unconscious, over both worship and theology in parishes, at the seminaries, and in church-wide discussions. Though there is an interest in the “global church” and things global (for example, “global music”), our own deeply ethnic expressions of worship and theology remain unnoticed. It is from the midst of these often unnamed ethnic tensions and expressions that I write the following reflection on worship as it is presented in the Lutheran Confessions.

Surprisingly contextual in its origins, the Lutheran Confessions proposes an agenda for worship that is ecumenical and, I want to argue, charismatic. The specificity of the Reformers’ confession in this very city (Augsburg), almost 500 years ago, breaks open many boundaries that were subsequently placed particularly on worship and ritual interpretation. In order to highlight the way in which boundaries are broken within the text of the Confessions itself, I turn to trauma theory. The turn to trauma theory also places this study squarely in a North American context with its deep interest in understanding the movement of the human psyche and the relation of the human person to history. Trauma theory however will allow me to name a particular provisional characteristic of worship that lies behind the vocabulary of the Lutheran Confessions and that allows the specificity, the very contextual nature of the Confessions and its proposal, to engender a dynamism of the Holy Spirit.

II. Trauma Theory and the Lutheran Confessions

According to trauma theory, the “thing” that is unceasingly repeated – the traumatic event – is not the event itself but that which made the event traumatic in the first place. What is repeated is the fact that the traumatic event was not known in its happening or was not fully experienced in its happening. The traumatic event is experienced as a shock of survival – why did I survive? Or as Cathy Caruth states, it is an awakening one moment to late. “Trauma... does

not simply serve as record of the past but precisely registers the force of an experience that is not yet fully owned.”¹

The event that I name as traumatic is the Christ event.² And the question raised is then: how is this traumatic event – an event that we cannot be fully grasp, an event that is only “registered” as a force of experience, a force that continually returns – how is this traumatic event remembered, repeated, and therefore, of course, ritualized? A reading of the Christ event through the lens of trauma theory suggests that the repetition or ritualization is not a remembering on a facile level. Remembering is not simply physically or conceptually representing a past event. It is not such a “recalling to mind” because the event itself is inaccessible to the mind. Rather, the Christ event returns as a force that continually disrupts our usual forms of remembering and ritualizing. When Martin Luther asks the question “how do we remember this event?”, he is pushed to find a language for this force of a return and he finds it in the liturgy and specifically in the eucharistic liturgy.³

In worship and particularly in the sacraments, the force of a return – that which cannot be captured, known, represented, memorialized by ritual – the force of a return is not some abstract notion of grace or forgiveness of sins or other theological construct but is the irruption of the Holy Spirit as “other,” as body, as that which resists all human attempts at control, manipulation, mastery. Worship, and particularly the eucharistic celebration, confronts us with a failure of meaning – with the failure of the self, the individual to define meaning. The Word, in worship, through the sacrament, reveals to us the depth of our need. At the heart of worship is this action of the Holy Spirit: a body continually returns, the body of Christ, the body of our suffering neighbor.

II. Devotion

Freed of the obligation of finding a perfect form of memorial or remembrance for the Christ event, freed of the temptation to immortalize a particular ethnic or cultural representation of worship, the “ceremonies and rites” (of liturgy) can be that place where the Holy Spirit continually returns or irrupts to reveal both human need (terrified or troubled conscience) and comfort. The Augsburg Confession, Article XXIV, Concerning the Mass, begins with a short but succinct statement: “Our people have been unjustly accused of having abolished the Mass. But it is obvious, without boasting, that the Mass is celebrated among us with greater devotion and earnestness than among our opponents.”⁴ The statement that the parishes/communities of the Reformation celebrate liturgy “with greater devotion and earnestness” opens up for us today the possibility of discussing worship, not from the perspective of specific, well-controlled or maintained, rituals but from the perspective of the work of the Holy Spirit within different worshipping traditions and ethnicities.

¹ Cathy Caruth, ed., *Trauma: Exploration in Memory* (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1995), 151.

² Dirk G. Lange, *Trauma Recalled: Liturgy, Disruption and Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, forthcoming 2009).

³ Lange, *Trauma Recalled*, see chapter 5.

⁴ The Augsburg Confession, Article XXIV (German Text) in *The Book of Concord: The Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church*, ed. Robert Kolb and Timothy J. Wengert (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2000), 68,1.

How are we to understand “great devotion and earnestness” (in the German “*grosserer Andacht und Ernst*” and in the Latin text, stated slightly differently, “*summa reverential celebratur*”)? Isn’t devotion an expression of human piety? Doesn’t it depend on human investment, human reverence, human seriousness, human prayerfulness, human discipline in the accomplishment of its task of sanctification? Don’t we risk turning “devotion” into acts “that justify”?⁵ Obviously this cannot be the case for the Reformers.

Devotion or piety, viewed from the angle of the “old person,” is only emotional investment in a particular form as if that form were itself salvific. Emotional investment, without guidance or instruction, remains in its own arena. It simply uses forms to reassure the self and reproduce the desired effect, the desired emotional outcome. Such “devotion” can be the perpetuation of a particular cultural or ethnic insight as if the original intent behind the reforming insight – the original response to a particular Gospel crisis – demanded encapsulation for eternity. The mere repetition of a form out of a desire “to be faithful” to a particular reforming insight ends up being nothing else than wishful thinking or nostalgia.

Isn’t this normalization of a particular ethnic embodiment (for example, German pietism) as if applicable in all situations, in all contexts, the object of the Reformers’ critique of *ex opere operato*, by the mere performance of the rite? By the mere performance of the rite or ceremony, it was argued, people receive its benefit. By the mere repetition of a form of worship, the desired “effect” is achieved, whether emotional or intellectual satisfaction. An original, Spirit-filled insight, a pneumatic moment, is captured, controlled, “put in a box,” fossilized. Form, in this scenario, whether ethnic or other, trumps gospel. Devotion as a human activity, as emotion, is turned in on itself. Unfortunately, it is with this understanding of devotion that much of Christianity has been “exported.”

How then are we to understand “devotion” (*Andacht, Ernst, reverentia*) in Article XXIV? The vast majority of references to “devotion” (or *Andacht*) in the Confessions are precisely references to failed human works. What is different in this Article? If devotion is not a human activity or self-nurtured piety, what is it?

In the Preface to the Large Catechism, Luther himself defines devotion as a work of the Holy Spirit. Admonishing pastors, Luther writes that they can never study the Catechism enough – it is a lifelong activity. In that study, in “such reading, conversation, and meditation the Holy Spirit is present and bestows ever new and greater light and devotion, so that it tastes better and better and is digested...”⁶ Light and devotion are bestowed; they are a gift of the Holy Spirit. It is through the practice of reading, conversation and meditation, through immersion into the Word, that the Holy Spirit accomplishes its work of driving the devil, the world, the flesh and all evil thoughts away and conforming the believer ever more fully into Jesus Christ.

In Article XXIV of the Augsburg Confession and its Apology, the Mass itself is a practice through which the Holy Spirit does its work. But now the Mass is celebrated, not as rote ritualization, *ex opere operato*, but rather as something that the Holy Spirit is working on the community of believers. To use the language of trauma theory, something “returns” in worship that disrupts subject and context revealing human need, revealing human inability. Devotion, as

⁵ Apology of the Augsburg Confession, Article XXVII, *The Book of Concord*, 281, 24.

⁶ Martin Luther, Preface to the Large Catechism, *The Book of Concord*, 381, 9.

work of the Holy Spirit, is the revelation of human need. We might even say, it is being marked by the cross. The cross, as mark, is not our possession. Rather, we are possessed by it. And isn’t this what Luther means by “holy possession”? The ceremonies and rites are then “reformed” so that they speak the Word, so that the Word admonishes through them, so that they draw the people into an experience of the Word (through participation and instruction).⁷

Melanchthon underlines this charismatic activity in the Apology, even though the Spirit is not specifically named. “Ceremonies should be observed both so that people may learn the Scriptures and so that, admonished by the Word, they might experience faith and fear and finally even pray. For these are the purposes of the ceremonies.”⁸ Worship will be about learning the Scripture but this learning is not an end in itself. The learning is catechesis; it is an admonishment “by the Word.” The Word, through the ceremonies and rites, impacts the participants, disrupting their piety, disrupting their invented self, disrupting their imagined devotion, revealing human need, so that they come to or experience (*conspiciant* – take in, absorb) “faith and fear.” This experience of faith and fear of God then leads (finally!) to prayer. Through worship, we are becoming Christians!⁹ Prayer itself is now conceived, in Pauline fashion, not as our work but as the work of the Holy Spirit within us (Romans 8).

III. Authenticity

Lurking behind the question about devotion is a question about authenticity. Part of the argument in Article XXIV concerns the valuation of worship in the churches already subscribing to reform (Latin text) or among “our people” (German text). What is authentic worship? This question certainly doesn’t come as a surprise. It sounds very familiar!

The Augsburg Confession approaches the question of authenticity in this Article through the lens of devotion. Though initially that would seem to be a rather subjective manner in which to consider “authenticity,” I have shown how devotion is, for the Reformers, not a human work but the impact or irruption of the Holy Spirit, revealing human need and comforting the terrified conscience. The Augsburg Confession pushes worshipers (and those who study and write about worship, I might add) away from a modernist, totalizing understanding of the adjective authentic. In the Augsburg Confession, authentic worship is not defined as faithfulness to a model, to a particular ethnic embodiment of worship, as if there were an ideal form of (Lutheran) worship. Authentic worship is related to the quality and purpose of devotion.

In the particular case of the Confessions, the ceremonies and rites of the Roman Mass have remained basically unchanged. Melanchthon goes to some length to point this out and underline it in the Apology of the Augsburg Confession.¹⁰ The argument for authenticity, however, is not found in this simple maintenance of a form or model or tradition. Authenticity is found in the way in which the form is put to use and how the Word is experienced.

⁷ This point about “instruction” is important but cannot be developed in the current form of this paper.

⁸ Apology to the Augsburg Confession, Article XXIV, *The Book of Concord*, 258, 3.

⁹ “But such orders [of worship] are needed for those who are not yet Christians so that they may make Christians out of us.” Martin Luther, Preface to the German Mass, LW 53:62.

¹⁰ Apology of the Augsburg Confession, Article XXIV, *The Book of Concord*, 258.

The tone of the word “authentic” shifts away from its usual alignment in contemporary speech with “right” or “correct” or even “only” way. That which is “authentic” is now much less tangible and therefore also much less controllable. Authenticity is not established by imitating a pre-established model. Authenticity, to use the language of trauma theory, is the force of an impact, the force of something that returns and that cannot be captured or controlled. Authenticity is the work of the Holy Spirit disrupting models rather than blindly imitating them.

The consequences of this understanding of authenticity can be stated very simply: one particular (ethnic, for example) ritual embodiment of faith can never impose itself as the only true way for worshiping God. The truth of any particular embodiment is, as always with the work of the Holy Spirit, a provisional embodiment. This is what renders it dynamic, even “authentic.”

The initial suggestion of Article XXIV is radical. Authentic worship has nothing to do with “form” but with devotion. Authenticity is not about the imitation but about the work of the Holy Spirit, about the irruption of the Spirit in a particular time and place. The challenge presented to worship by this reformulation of “authentic” is the arduous task of continually adapting form so that the Holy Spirit can always do its work. It is the challenge of remaining within the “provisional” of the Spirit rather than in the “firmly established” of human tradition.

IV. Confessions and Charism

Submitting to the trauma of the Christ event, worship embodies that force that can never be purely and definitively repeated. Ceremonies and rites are given, even handed down from generation to generation, from tradition to tradition, but require that continual work of pastoral discernment so that they allow the Spirit to irrupt in every context, in every heart, leading to faith and fear and finally to prayer.

The particular charism of worship, as understood in the Lutheran Confessions, is precisely that “authenticity” is not found in any one particular form or manifestation but in the failure of all forms. Every culture is then challenged to translate that which is un-translatable. Every culture, every ethnicity is challenged to remember and repeat that which defies repetition – the Christ event. The mark of authenticity is not found in any one particular representation but in that continual disruption of all our forms, all our styles, all our traditions by the Holy Spirit, who comes to us as the other, as a body.

This does not imply an elimination of forms or ceremonies and rites. By no means! The Confessions continually insist that they “keep” the Mass; they keep the form. And the people are instructed in the form and invited into continual participation. But this instruction and this invitation is not by compulsion, as if we had the “perfect” ceremony to which all must adhere. The form – the ceremonies and rites – do not “represent” the Christ event. Worship is always a failed enactment of that event but in its own failure it translates that event so that believers come to a recognition of their need, their hunger, their poverty. In that recognition, they are aroused to faith and fear, the people “make themselves come without our law,”¹¹ they are “drawn to Communion and the Mass,”¹² they are drawn to the sacrament as communion, as “real

¹¹ Martin Luther, *The Small Catechism, The Book of Concord*, 350, 22.

¹² The Augsburg Confession, *The Book of Concord*, 68, 7.

fellowship.”¹³ They are drawn to the sacrament that is now not a bridge between the secular and the sacred, not a “peep-hole” into God’s reality or not an escape into some heavenly height but an encounter of God’s grace through and in our need and the world’s need. In that encounter, life, community, worship and finally human need is re-oriented. And prayer becomes possible.

¹³ Martin Luther, *The Blessed Sacrament of the Holy and True Body of Christ, and the Brotherhoods*, LW 35:50-51.