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The Role of Music in Holy Communion

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CONVERSATION ABOUT EUCHARISTIC PRACTICE FREQUENTLY CENTERS UPON THE kinds of vessels and the modes of distribution used for the sacramental elements. Yet there is another vessel associated with the Lord's supper. Celebrations of holy communion typically rely on music, and especially congregational song, to bear the gifts of word and sacrament to the lips and into the hearts of those gathered to worship. Gabe Huck makes a case for the inherently musical nature of the liturgy:

> There is a place for silence and a place for plain speaking, but singing is all we have when it comes time to acclaim, to intercede, to process....Musical liturgy is a redundancy. Saying "musical liturgy" is like saying "multicolored rainbow." It is liturgy's nature to be sung. Our song is something without which there would be no liturgy. When we come expecting to do and not to watch, we will need our music, our song.[1]

[1]Gabe Huck, *How Can I Keep From Singing* (Chicago: Liturgy Training Publications, 1989) 39-40.

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If it is not musical architecture or stylistic continuity that unifies the liturgy, but rather the essential pattern of worship, then there is freedom to draw from a vast palette of musical expression to sing the church's psalms, hymns, acclamations, canticles, and prayers.

There is widespread agreement that music is highly important, perhaps even essential, as a vessel for holy communion in the Sunday assembly. Where agreement breaks down is over the design of the vessel. What artistic forms, what genres and styles are most appropriate and most effective as musical bearers of word and sacrament? Informing that discussion, however, is a prior question. How does music serve in various ways the structure and movements of the service of holy communion, and what implications does this have for shaping a musical vessel for the liturgy?

What follows is a contribution to the discussion of the latter question, with reference in particular to the music of holy communion among North American Lutherans in this century. Among this group the essentially musical character of the eucharistic liturgy has been the norm. *Lutheran Book of Worship* (henceforth *LBW*), prepared between 1965 and 1978 by denominations representing over 95% of the Lutherans in North America, continues the pattern of many of its predecessor books in presenting the liturgy only as it is embodied in musical settings; it contains no *editio typica* of text separated from music. Moreover, *LBW* was typical of Lutheran worship books in binding together in one volume musical setting(s) of holy communion with a body of hymnody to reinforce the principle that hymns are equally important musical elements in that liturgy.

Although the music of holy communion encompasses all the music that plays an integral role in the unified liturgy of word and sacrament, this article will pay particular attention to the recurring liturgical music assigned to the congregation (the "ordinary," often commonly referred to as the "communion liturgy"). What models of this liturgical music are in use? How does it serve the church's worship? What is its future?

I. The Musical Ordinary

In western consciousness there is a persistent model for the core music of holy communion: the music of the ordinary of the mass. For centuries the fact that these five elements—Kyrie, Gloria in excelsis, Credo, Sanctus (including the Benedictus qui venit), and Agnus Dei—were relatively invariable encouraged prolific treatment by composers who were happy to prepare music that could be used more than one Sunday a year. It also cemented this set in common usage as *the* music of the liturgy, even though additional musical elements (such as propers and presider's chants) were also integral. From the fourteenth century forward an overarching musical continuity was increasingly applied to the set; by the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries the typical choral mass setting was a large-scale, virtuosic musical work in many movements, superimposed over and bearing little relationship to liturgical function.[2]

This model of a fundamental "musical ordinary" has continued to influence liturgies prepared for congregational use. *LBW* reflects the pattern with some modifications inherited from previous Lutheran practice: the creed has become a

[2]"Mass," in *The New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians* (London: Macmillan, 1980) 769-797.

spoken element, and a post-communion canticle has joined the ordinary.[3] Today, many heirs to this pattern have learned that, except for certain historic seasonal variations such as the omission of the hymn of praise in Advent and Lent, to "sing the liturgy" is to sing the "set," all the musical elements of the ordinary.

Eclectic musical ordinaries

Twentieth-century Lutheran worship books in North America have typically contained what might be called eclectic musical ordinaries. Influenced in particular by the compilations in *Evangelical Lutheran Hymn-Book* (1912) and *Common Service Book* (1917), these sets contain music from a wide range of sources, including items attributed to plainsong origins, Anglican chant, and German church orders. Settings 2 and 3 in *LBW* are likewise compilations of material from several sources, blending earlier and newly-composed material.[4] Because of the diversity of sources, many of them not traceable to individual composers, these sets of liturgical music represent something of the universality of the Christian tradition.

Although individual items in these eclectic sets may have originated in widely separated times and places, the compilers of these sets arranged them using a certain consistency of style, so that the eclecticism is not evident to most. Still, there is considerable variety in key relationships, thematic material, and rhythmic motifs. With repeated use, however, the particular musical combinations in these settings have become familiar and predictable to worshiping assemblies. Despite their inherent diversity, eclectic musical ordinaries codified in official worship books convey a sense of integration and completeness.

Individual-composer musical ordinaries

In recent decades a growing number of musical ordinaries for congregational use have been provided by individual composers. The various movements often possess a certain stylistic consistency, use a common or closely related keys, and may share melodic material.[5] Perhaps reflecting a culture in which the composer as artistic individual is recognized, these settings have often become identified by the composer's name. Such "multi-movement" ordinaries represent a widely-used contemporary model for worship music, one which provides a musical structure to the whole and a sense of completeness.

Another step along the trajectory of individual-composer worship music settings is the development of settings in which the composer or another author has paraphrased liturgical or biblical texts and/or written new texts to create a

[3]It could be argued that the general verse and the offertory canticle have become *de facto* parts of the ordinary in many places. *LBW* also introduced the innovation of newly-written alternate canticles for the Gloria in excelsis and Nunc dimittis.

[4]Setting 2 straddles the "eclectic" and "single-composer" categories; it contains original music by Ronald Nelson except for the Sanctus (which appeared in the *Common Service Book* of 1917) and "Thank the Lord" (arranged by Nelson from an African folk song).

[5]Examples include *LBW* Setting 1 (*Lutheran Worship* Divine Service II, Setting 1), Richard Hillert; *With One Voice* Setting 5, Jeremy Young; *Holy Communion*, Musical Setting by John Ylvisaker; *Mass of Creation*, Marty Haugen.

new "ordinary,"[6] in contrast to the settings mentioned above that treat historic and commonly accepted ecumenical texts. The worship music "artist" contributes not only the thread of musical continuity, but also the poetic fashioning of the words that are sung.

The musical ordinary and liturgical function

The musical ordinary is an ecumenical and historical treasure of the church. In this century, however, the relationship of musical ordinary to liturgical function is undergoing reassessment. For example: In what circumstances does the musical ordinary superimpose itself on and overwhelm the basic pattern of worship, so that the "liturgy" is thought of as a particular set of musical elements into which the rest of worship fits? The visual layout on the printed page of a "through-composed" musical worship order can have an effect on the common perception of what constitutes "the liturgy." As presented in *LBW*, for example, the elements of worship in numerical order give the impression of a script or a list to be followed from start to finish. There is no differentiation of the relative importance of items on the list; there is no visual identification of the overall architecture of the worship event. If only because of their relative size (12 out of 18 pages in *LBW* Setting I, for example), the musical items seem to constitute the principal body and thus the most important elements of the liturgy. Perhaps this is why variation, substitution, or omission of these elements, however liturgically defensible, may be perceived as truncating or violating "the liturgy" (= the set pieces of the musical ordinary), while other elements that may be more central (a reading, the psalm, the prayer of thanksgiving) are dispensed with more easily.

The normative musical ordinary

We might also note some pluses and minuses of what might be called the "normative musical ordinary." Among the church bodies in North America that have retained the pattern of the western rite, Lutherans have been distinctive in presenting the eucharistic liturgy laid out complete with music in their denominational worship books.[7] As a result, one or a small number of musical settings of the liturgical texts have taken on a normative, "official" character.

On the positive side, a shared body of liturgical music has been a common denominator linking the worship of individual congregations across denominations which, through merger and expansion, have moved beyond regional and ethnic identifications to a more national character. Knowing the same tunes (better yet, knowing them practically from memory) enables a powerful expression of the unity of a group. (One can imagine the uproar if one of the major league baseball clubs decided to commission a new tune for "Take Me Out to the Ball Game.") In a

[6]Examples include *Chicago Folk Service*, Art Gorman; *Now the Feast and Celebration*, Marty Haugen; *One Body, Alive!* Jay Beech.

[7]The Episcopal Church has divided into separate volumes liturgical texts (currently *Book of Common Prayer* 1979) and the collection of hymns and service music options (currently *The Hymnal 1982*). A variety of publishers serves the Roman Catholic Church with an array of liturgical music settings, none having official recognition comparable to those found in Lutheran worship books.

transient society, there is comfort in finding a familiar friend in the melodies of worship music used across the country. Synod assemblies and other gatherings of the wider church have relied on commonly known worship music to express their unity. A relatively small repertoire of music for classic liturgical texts, used regularly and repeatedly, can help an individual or group move beyond struggling with the notes and enter more fully into prayer sung from the heart.

There are also some challenges related to this Lutheran propensity. One is the rapidly expanding diversity of contexts the churches seek to serve. Even the existing eclectic ordinary settings are diverse only in reflecting various times and places within the western and largely northern European tradition. Is it possible for any one or several musical settings to be expressions in the vernacular of all the various peoples and cultures that make up the church? Does a normative musical ordinary serve to reinforce the cultural hegemony of the majority? Is it possible to codify a new eclectic setting that is truly representative of diverse contexts without succumbing to tokenism?

Secondly, is it an exercise in nostalgia to think that musical ordinaries codified in denominational worship books *are* normative? Hard evidence about actual practice in the churches during the early '60s is difficult to muster, but it seems safe to postulate that the vast majority of congregations, when using a musical order of service, turned to one printed in a denominational book. Three decades later, the picture is quite different. Research conducted within the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America in 1993[8] revealed that, while well over half of the responding congregations reported that they use *LBW* usually or always, 58% said they sometimes or always use supplements to *LBW*. Of these, 30% had developed and printed their own liturgy, 6% used language- or culture-specific liturgical materials, 30% used an alternate musical setting based on the *LBW* liturgical text, and 42% used another published liturgy. Although the above research did not address this issue, observation suggests that the range of usage of these various materials is great. There are congregations that have learned only one musical setting from *LBW* and use it exclusively; there are congregations that rotate six or more musical settings depending on the Sunday of the month or the season of the year. Research is also not yet available on the phenomenon of eucharistic liturgies in which few or none of the historic liturgical music elements are used either with ecumenically accepted or paraphrased texts, but are replaced by songs and hymns that may or may not bear a resemblance to them.

II. Categorizing the Music of Holy Communion

Whatever the style of musical ordinary in use, its perceived independence has contributed to a widespread typology of the music of holy communion that

[8]"Report on ELCA Congregational Worship Resource Needs": Research based on a sample of 400 congregations (349 respondents) conducted September 1993 by Division for Congregational Ministries, ELCA, and Augsburg Fortress, Publishers, in conjunction with the Department for Research and Evaluation, ELCA.

goes something like this: (1) "liturgy" (= musical ordinary); (2) hymns, songs, and psalms; (3) choir music (infrequently identified with the choral propers of Verse and Offertory; more often identified with anthems and "special music," sometimes with the leadership of psalms and hymns); and (4) independent organ or other instrumental music.

There are difficulties with this categorization. It suggests that the "liturgy" (= musical ordinary) stands apart from hymns and other music, though in truth *all* of the above comprise the music of the liturgy and must coexist and support one another as well as the rest of the words and actions of the liturgy. Is this perception perhaps behind the grumble that the "liturgy" (= musical ordinary) is something to be "gotten through," for the sake of getting to the (familiar) songs and hymns? What is communicated when, on Easter Sunday, all a parish's musical forces are stretched to the limit on "Jesus Christ is Risen Today," but the Sanctus is raced through with a lackluster accompaniment and halfhearted singing?

A more helpful typology is based on the premise that *all* the music of the liturgy may be usefully described as "Christian ritual music," a term which emphasizes the various roles of this music in supporting the whole of the liturgical action. As an example, one current definition suggests that there are four types of ritual music: (1) music alone, (2) music wedded to a ritual action, (3) music united to a text, and (4) music wedded to a text accompanying a ritual action.[9]

When the music of holy communion is understood with reference to its role in the overall pattern of worship, some false dichotomies (as between "liturgy" and hymns) may be avoided and a greater sense of integration for all the music employed in the service may be achieved. There is considerable ecumenical convergence around an understanding of a fourfold basic pattern for the eucharist. This fundamental shape consists of the *gathering* of the community on the Lord's day; proclaiming and responding to the *word of God*; sharing the *eucharistic meal* in the context of thanksgiving; and the *sending* of the community to serve in word and deed.[10] Music serves in various ways to support and carry out this essential movement. The following is not an exhaustive description of the music associated with the fourfold shape, but a collection of questions arising from this functional approach to understanding the music of the liturgy.

Gathering. How does music enable the assembling of the community and prepare them for word and meal? Is it intended that preludial music instil silence, serve as background music for greeting and sharing with one another, introduce and reinforce melodies to be used in worship, or simply serve as a signal to the

[9]Edward Foley, "Liturgical Music," *The New Dictionary of Sacramental Worship* (Collegeville: The Liturgical Press, 1990) 865-868.

[10]A sampling of descriptions for the fourfold shape—General Instruction of the Roman Missal (1969): introductory rites, liturgy of the word, liturgy of the eucharist, concluding rites; *The Presbyterian Hymnal* (1990): assemble in God's name, proclaim God's word, give thanks to God, go in God's name; *The United Methodist Book of Worship* (1992): entrance, proclamation and response, thanksgiving and communion, sending forth; *With One Voice: A Lutheran Resource for Worship* (1995): gathering, word, meal, sending.

ministers to get vested? Is the music sung sufficiently familiar that the sense of uniting in song is immediate to most? Does the music at the gathering signal something about the season or the day? Does it lift up an image central to the day's readings, and so prepare for fruitful hearing? How extensive does the gathering music need to be to accomplish its purpose—a brief repeated biblical refrain, in an intimate gathering; a full panoply of instrumental fanfare, hymn with descant, litanic form of the Kyrie, and hymn of praise ornamented by instruments, on a high festival in a space that invites substantial processions; a period of singing a variety of hymns and songs, leading into greeting and prayer of the day?

Word. How does music both proclaim and respond to the word read and preached? Is there a rhythm of speaking and singing to allow an opportunity for the word to be absorbed? Is the psalm sung, and does the congregation participate? Is it sung in a way that makes clear its connection to the day, as through the use of a key verse as a refrain? Is the acknowledgment of Christ present in the proclamation of the Gospel accompanied by an acclamation that brings people to their feet? How does this acclamation balance with the other chief acclamation(s) in the liturgy, at the prayer of thanksgiving? Does the hymn of the day summarize or comment upon key emphases or images of the season and day, not just the sermon? Is this hymn led in a way that reflects the weight given it as the assembly's principal response to and participation in the word?

Meal. What is the function of music during the offering? Does it cover shuffling, check-tearing, and children's trips to the back? Is it seen as an opportunity for an offering of musical gifts, as a musical seventh-inning stretch, as a mini-recital? If an offertory canticle/hymn is sung by the congregation, how does it relate to the music preceding it, to avoid anticlimax or jarring juxtaposition? Do the sung eucharistic acclamations involve the assembly in "great" thanksgiving, or just so-so? Are the acclamations balanced with the music used to acclaim the Gospel, so that both word and sacrament are duly honored? What kinds of songs work best at a buffet dinner with all its accompanying movement and activity? Is the music at communion planned and structured in a way that invites the assembly to participate while in motion?

Sending. Does the music chosen help accomplish the goal of sending the assembly forward into the world with purpose and a sense of immediacy? Is that progress impeded by the duplication of post-communion canticle *and* departure hymn, by a lengthy hymn introduction or hymn, by a choral blessing? When people are told "Go in peace" do we let them go? Is the postlude to be listened to, or is it functional "marching music" to order the footsteps of those re-entering the world?

III. Conclusion

Regardless of the style or genre of music employed, keeping an eye on ritual function within the church's common pattern of worship can help in achieving a sense of proportion and priority in the music of holy communion. This approach reveals the imbalance of a sixty-minute service that contains a twenty-five minute

gathering rite complete with announcements and all musical options, while the eucharistic meal is a "drive-through" in fifteen minutes or less. It suggests a greater focus of attention on key musical elements: the two musical/proclamatory moments in the liturgy of the word (psalm and hymn of the day), and the two chief times of acclamation (at the Gospel and great thanksgiving). And, it allows the music of the liturgy to respond more appropriately to the contexts in which it is celebrated: What is the music that works best—for this assembly, on this day or season, at this place on the map, in this worship space—so that God's people are gathered, the word is heard, the meal is shared with great thanks, and the people are sent to serve?

"Musical ordinaries," as described above, will continue to serve Lutherans well. But each of these will best serve if it is seen as a collection of resources to be drawn from judiciously for the day and the context, rather than as a script to be followed inflexibly; if the choices made are carefully integrated with the rest of the liturgical music; and if its musical elements are seen to serve the basic structure of the rite rather than the other way around. Yet pre-packaged musical ordinaries are not the only options. An assessment of liturgical music by ritual function may support a more dramatically eclectic approach to the choice of music within a given liturgy. If it is not musical architecture or stylistic continuity that unifies the liturgy, but rather the essential pattern of worship, then there is freedom to draw from a vast palette of musical expressions to sing the church's psalms, hymns, acclamations, canticles, and prayers.[11] Worshiping assemblies need not be divided according to an arbitrary menu of musical tastes, but may unite around the essentials while employing the "thousand tongues" of the church's multifaceted song. And thus music can more faithfully fulfill its role as a vessel for holy communion, a common cup of blessing. ⊕

[11]Such an approach is reflected in *With One Voice* Setting 6, titled "All Times and Places." For a number of key service music elements an open-ended series of suggestions is offered, representing a wide range of national origins, a diversity of musical styles, and in certain cases settings of ecumenical texts as well as paraphrases or appropriate hymns.