

Liturgical Asceticism: Where Grace and Discipleship Meet

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In a contemporary global context rife with violent conflict, Mennonites and Catholics have great incentive to collaborate in identifying together what makes for peace. The 2004 document, *Called Together to Be Peacemakers*, provides a promising departure point for such efforts, representing the fruit of five years of international dialogue between the Roman Catholic Church and Mennonite World Conference. But, rightly ordered peacemaking practices undertaken by members of these faith communities will need to be based upon the firm foundation of Christ's peace. Identifying a spirituality of peacemaking that might nourish both Mennonites and Catholics is the first step toward enacting concrete practices of peace together.

Spiritual disciplines of peacemaking embody particular understandings of sacramentality, and so Thomas Finger's contribution to the MCTC, "Sacramentality," is, at root, an act of peacemaking. He offers a careful study of Catholic and Mennonite understandings of sacramentality, presenting an insightful review of the literature that will prove valuable to all scholars interested in exploring the relationship between these two traditions. In response, I affirm Finger's approach in moving beyond discussion of specific sacramental worship practices to explore the notion of *Lebenspraxis* as a fruitful context for considering Mennonite and Catholic understandings of sacramentality, and I would like to tease out a bit more the connection between liturgical practice and *Lebenspraxis* using the notion of liturgical asceticism.

Sacraments, broadly construed, represent the liturgical locus of encounter with God, initiated and animated by God's Spirit. They both shape and are mediated by the life of the

worshipping community. In this view, the church, Jesus, and Scripture can all be considered sacraments. While Mennonites and Catholics differ in their beliefs about the number and, in some instances, the interpretation of what occurs in Christian worship practices formally designated as “sacraments,” I concur with Finger’s assessment that there is more ground for agreement between these two traditions than it might first appear.

One particular area of potential common ground has to do with the role of grace in sacramental worship practices. The Catholic tradition holds that a sacrament effects what it signifies through God’s grace. Finger raises a salient concern regarding an *ex opere operato* account of sacramental grace, noting a Mennonite tendency to think that Catholics “may believe that they receive grace simply by participating in such rituals, even if quite passively. But Mennonites insist that God’s grace does not really transform our lives unless we respond to it in some way, and seek to live as Jesus taught.”¹ Prima facie, the Mennonite approach articulated here seems to me a much more theologically cogent way of living out my baptismal commitment in response to Jesus’ call. But, I think there may be a way to articulate the role of grace in sacramental life that might resonate with both Mennonites and Catholics. If grace is understood as the energy of God’s Spirit appealing to the freedom of Christian believers to express and deepen their faith through communal signs of their commitment, the very presence of each participant in a liturgical celebration already represents a choice to respond to the gracious invitation of God’s Spirit. Given human finitude and sinfulness, the moral quality of my intentionality and the level of my activity in that sacramental worship practice may fall short of the fullness of the Spirit’s desire for me and for the community on a given day. But, I understand grace to be effective precisely in the vastness of God’s mercy: In spite of my

¹ Thomas Finger, “Sacramentality,” paragraph 3.

weakness, somehow God has drawn me to celebrate that sacrament with my local faith community. The graced effects of that communal worship practice surpass my comprehension, and through grace, I surrender to the mystery of God's power to transform a frail human community of believers into the Body of Christ, the church.

The true measure of Christian fidelity in response to the Spirit's gracious animation of the church as the Body of Christ is *Lebenspraxis*, lived discipleship in the world. Finger's account of *Lebenspraxis* expresses a vision of holiness that springs from the traditions of Christian monasticism informing both Catholic and Mennonite understandings of sacramentality. Monastic practice has long affirmed the truth of holiness as a way of life, one that feeds and is nourished by the church's liturgy and permeates one's whole manner of being human. "The ethical is the mode of the spiritual," according to John Rempel's interpretation of Hubmaier's eucharistic theology.² Liturgy meets ethics in the sacramentality of *Lebenspraxis*. Eucharistic breaking of bread in the ecclesial community is of a piece with Christian practices of economic sharing in table fellowship with the most marginalized and vulnerable of society.

As I understand it, this holistic quality of Christian *Lebenspraxis* resembles what my colleague, David Fagerberg, has called liturgical asceticism, which connotes a contemplative awareness of the practices of the worshipping community as *leitourgia*, the work of the people of God at the service of the world. "If liturgy means sharing the life of Christ (being washed in his resurrection, eating his body), and if *askesis* means discipline (in the sense of forming), then liturgical asceticism is the discipline required to become an icon of Christ and make his image visible in our faces," he writes.³ Liturgical asceticism flows from the waters of baptism, giving

² John Rempel, *The Lord's Supper in Anabaptism* (Scottsdale, Pennsylvania: Herald Press, 1993), 81, cited by Thomas Finger, "Sacramentality," section II.D.1, footnote 70.

³ David Fagerberg, "A Century on Liturgical Asceticism," *Diakonia* 31:1 (1998), 41.

expression to the Christian commitment to follow Jesus by renouncing all that would keep us from letting the Spirit's love fill us.

Liturgical asceticism includes all those disciplined practices that find their wellspring in Jesus' baptismal call to discipleship. These are rooted in the liturgical life of the worshipping community and through them, Christians individually and communally become ever more the Body of Christ in the world, by the Spirit's action. Spiritual disciplines of liturgical asceticism might include feeding the hungry, clothing the naked, and offering consolation to those suffering, or what the Catholic tradition has called the works of mercy, based on Jesus' eschatological discourse in Mt. 25. They may also consist in the *askesis* of kindness toward enemies, patient and persevering prayer for persecutors, and choosing to love rather than to judge sinners, i.e., ourselves along with the rest of humanity.

Liturgical asceticism as *Lebenspraxis* seems to resonate with certain Anabaptist spiritual disciplines, particularly that of lived obedience to the words of Scripture, or what Arnold Snyder has called an Anabaptist practice of *lectio divina*: "For the Anabaptists, learning, remembering and repeating the words of Scripture was a means to a practical end: It was *living the Bible continually* that really counted."⁴ As Finger hinted, a counterpart in Catholic *Lebenspraxis* might be found in liberation theology. Gustavo Gutiérrez has often emphasized the significance of biblical faith in a God who reveals God's self in history. As Yahweh liberates the Jewish people, they strive to respond with rightly ordered behavior, measured by fidelity to Yahweh's commandments.⁵ That narrative of covenantal relationship informs the living faith of

⁴ C. Arnold Snyder, *Following in the Footsteps of Christ. The Anabaptist Tradition* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 2004), 116, emphasis in the original.

⁵ Gustavo Gutiérrez, *The Power of the Poor in History* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1983), 5-6.

contemporary Christians when we contemplate its meaning in light of our own circumstances in small community settings.

Because the Scriptural text establishes the Reign of God as the horizon of human history, biblically rooted *Lebenspraxis*, both Mennonite and Catholic, has an eschatological quality. Through his life, death, and resurrection, Jesus Christ draws his disciples to orient our choices in the present moment with steadfast fidelity to the truth of God's Reign and to become like him.

For all Christians, the Incarnation anchors the hope that human beings might live into the fullness of our creation *imago Dei*. One of the most exciting contributions of Finger's paper is his suggestion that the historic Anabaptist notion of divinization bears similarity to the Orthodox concept of deification, or the transformation of the believer through the Spirit. Sharing the eschatological vision of Mennonite and Catholic sacramentality, the Orthodox tradition provides fertile ground for Mennonites and Catholics to reconnect with their common roots in monastic spirituality. For example, Gregory Palamas and other Orthodox wisdom figures emphasize *imitatio Christi* as the cooperation of the human being "regenerate in Christ with the author of this regeneration; a cooperation directed towards the attainment of likeness to God and deification."⁶

In a similar vein, Kenneth Davis notes that the "Evangelical Anabaptists" thought of growth in holiness as "a limited kind of 'divinization' (participation in the divine nature)" of the human being "by a regenerative and healing process in conjunction with one's conscious, voluntary emulation of Christ."⁷ This kind of transformation can be mediated through the

⁶ Georgios I. Mantzaridis, *The Deification of Man. St. Gregory Palamas and the Orthodox Tradition*, trans. Liadain Sherrard (Crestwood, New York: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1984), 64.

⁷ Kenneth Davis, *Anabaptism and Asceticism. A Study in Intellectual Origins* (Scottsdale, Pennsylvania: Herald Press, 1974), 137.

sacramental life, as seen in the *Ris Confession*, with its characterization of baptism as a “*means* of spiritual blessing, regeneration and renewal.”⁸ This speaks to a sacramentality of becoming holy together in the very enactment of communal worship, cooperating with God’s Spirit in building up the church as the Body of Christ in the world in the very doing of *leitourgia*. In John Howard Yoder’s words, “To be immersed and to rise from the waters of the *mikvah* may be said to symbolize death and resurrection, but really it makes you a member of the historical community of the new age.”⁹

As baptized Christians, both Mennonites and Catholics belong to that historical community of the new age, and as such, we share a sacramental vision in which *Lebenspraxis* takes root in the practices of Christian worship. The concept of liturgical asceticism maintains the essential connection between the two and sets the stage for further exploration of a Mennonite and Catholic spirituality of peacemaking that draws deeply from the wellspring of a shared monastic tradition.

⁸ *Called Together to Be Peacemakers. Report of the International Dialogue between the Catholic Church and Mennonite World Conference*, paragraph 123, emphasis in the original.

⁹ John Howard Yoder, “Sacrament as Social Process: Christ the Transformer of Culture,” *Theology Today* Vol. XLVIII, No. 1 (April 1991), 38.