

## **Transformed and Transforming: What God Effects through the Presence of Christians in the World**

Paul R. Nelson

On the model of mystagogy: remember your experience last night at the vigil, please, and recall these words from the eucharistic prayer:

God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, open our eyes to see your hand at work in the world about us. Deliver us from the presumption of coming to this table for solace only and not for strength; for pardon only and not for renewal. Let the grace of this Holy Communion make us one body, one spirit in Christ *that* we may worthily serve the world in his name.<sup>1</sup>

And from *Welcome to Christ*:

Dear Christian friends: Baptized into the priesthood of Christ, we are all called by the Holy Spirit to offer ourselves to the Lord of all creation in thanksgiving for all that God has done and continues to do for us. It is our privilege to affirm those who are endeavoring to carry out their vocation as Christians in the world.<sup>2</sup>

Three days of institute have given us a time for feeding. We have been fed by Word and sacrament and formed by it; we have been edified, educated, and preached to with power. We have been formed by the power of music and transformed by it. We have been enriched by what we have seen with our eyes, stimulated by presenters and workshop leaders. We have been mutually supported by one another. The institute planners have made all of this possible for us: this taste of transformation, this experience that we carry away with us. I want to offer a word of my thanks to David Truemper, director of the institute, and to all the people who work so very hard to plan and carry out this institute so beautifully.

---

<sup>1</sup>Eucharistic Prayer C, in *The Book of Common Prayer and Administration of the Sacraments and Other Rites and Ceremonies of the Church together with the Psalms of David according to the use of The Episcopal Church* (New York: Seabury Press, 1979), 372, emphasis added.

<sup>2</sup>"Affirmation of the Vocation of the Baptized in the World," in *Welcome to Christ: Lutheran Rites for the Catechumenate* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 1997), 59.

Recall not only the words of the liturgy, but recall the words of Arthur Just in his powerful reminder to us (or was it a revelation to us?) that the very scriptures themselves are not tangentially related to the task of forming Christians—one thing they do among other things. Instead they are the product of an amazing collaboration between the Spirit of God and the earliest communities of faith living in the world for the very purpose of transforming and communicating transforming power first to one generation and then to the next.

Recall too Maxwell Johnson's powerful description of mutually enriching spiritualities of baptism, strong and robust enough to give one another the elbow, from time to time, in the early church's practice and surviving evidence. And remember carefully his clear and orienting outline of an *ordo* for Christian formation that begins with **word** and moves to **prayer**, to **worship**, to fulfillment in **sacrament**, moves to **community**, and issues in **service** in the world: **word, prayer, worship, sacrament, community, service.**

Will you soon forget Susan Briehl's stripping us naked in God's Spirit, and then wrapping us in story and clothing us again in Christ? Surely here we meet the transforming power of God, face to face. Surely, those of you who have the responsibility to proclaim the word of God in the Christian assembly must take heart. There are people listening and listening hard! They are listening desperately for the power God has given to you to exercise through the word of God preached: to strip us naked and then clothe us really—week after week after week. Why do they have to go to Borders when they have you?

This morning, we heard Dorothy Bass's astonishing and helpful corrective to all the talk of doing—a reminder that education and formation live in a relationship of mutuality, not of competition. Formation is grounded in participation with others over time for service to others. Its companion, education, is the transmission and the reflection on the Christian life beyond the Christian assembly. Only together do they form, educate, and create mature and discerning Christian persons who are living a good human life in the world. This is a worthy Christian thing.

Surely the hope of the planners of this institute is that, having been touched by these sources of transforming power, we all will become a transforming power for others; that you in your communities of faith and I in mine will reach out beyond even those communities to be a transforming influence in the world. In the teaching and practice of congregations, the missional intention for the means of grace needs to be

recalled. By God's gift, the Word and the sacraments are set *in the midst of the world, for the life of the world*.<sup>3</sup>

Christians and their communities having been transformed, having been clothed in Christ, are called to be transforming. Like those racks of garments on wheels in the garment district of New York that traverse back and forth across the busy streets, and snarl the traffic, there we are with rack of garments to offer to the naked—in the world. The biblical images of lamp stands, or more properly, a lamp on a lamp stand, salt, and yeast, all speak of a relationship of a minority reality to a larger reality. Yeast and its working does not result in all becoming yeast. And salt does not result in the whole recipe becoming salt. If you are a baker you know this. I call it the “play dough” effect. A pinch of salt has transforming power—both chemically and in terms of human taste. But too much salt turns bread dough into *play* dough—unfit to eat. It is the balance, it is the presence, it is context of being set into the life of the world that gives Christians purpose and focus.

I said when last we talked that God forms Christians. My conviction today is we experience that formation as transformation in our own lives. God uses a Christian community for formation of the unformed, but they experience that as transformation. Christian assemblies, as they are forming those who participate, are themselves being transformed by the Spirit of God. Christian assemblies, while they carefully order and organize, are themselves in the process of transformation. These choices that assemblies make point back to God. Do our assemblies point to the reality that God is in love with the world, or do they point in some other direction? Or do they point nowhere at all? God is transforming us and our assemblies.

In the keynote address for this institute I used the gathering rite as a kind of case study. Here let me use the sending rite of the eucharistic liturgy as my case study. Great liturgists of our generation have already clearly identified there is a problem here. This problem is found both at the historical and at the cultural levels. The gentle and insightful mind and spirit of Anscar Chupungco is a conspicuous example of this. He says:

A strikingly Roman pattern affecting hospitality in the pre-Vatican II liturgy is the abruptness with which the assembly is sent off. In concise and direct words the Roman assembly was told: *Ite, missa est*. In modern English we would simply

---

<sup>3</sup>Application 51B, in *The Use of the Means of Grace: A Statement on the Practice of Word and Sacrament* (Chicago: Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, 1997), 56, emphasis added.

announce, “meeting adjourned.” Under the influence of this Roman pattern the liturgical assembly is quickly blessed and sent away in three words. Some even call this rite of leave-taking the rite of dismissal, which can be quite offensive and is absolutely lacking in social refinements. Something apropos needs to be said here. That people do not find offense at being dismissed is a sure sign that they do not take the words they hear seriously enough or they have formed the habit of not regarding the liturgy as a cultural reality.<sup>4</sup>

The dismissal is that wonderful moment of sending, and it is related to the word *mission*—but not very closely related. At least it does not seem that closely related anymore. The abruptness of this dismissal is, unfortunately, something we have “gotten over.” But that abruptness can be recovered. Let me tell you a story.

As a graduate student at Notre Dame, I was privileged to study with a wonderful professor named Niels Rasmussen. Professor Rasmussen was a Dominican and Danish. This made him literally unique. He was the only Danish Dominican in the world. He was a great stickler for detail in scholarship and in academic form. When I was invited to teach at Notre Dame, I looked forward to the day when I could join him in the academic procession that was a part of the opening mass of each term. Yet when the day actually came, Niels was absent from the procession. Several days later, we learned to our horror that he had died in his home. It was not altogether clear whether it was by his own hand or at the hand of another. Because of the strange circumstances of his death and the finding of suicide by the coroner, and because he was a Roman priest, some conservative Catholics were scandalized at the prospect that a memorial Mass would be celebrated for him in what is now the Basilica of the Sacred Heart at the university.

Hundreds of members of the university community gathered for this Mass and assembled around his memory and Word and sacrament. In the midst of that celebration, shortly after the homily had begun, the rector of Sacred Heart entered the assembly—ashen-faced. He interrupted the homilist and announced that everyone had to leave the church immediately. At that moment uniformed police and firefighters appeared at every door of the church and began to escort people out of the church. The threat of a bomb in the church had been phoned to the police. This threat had the effect of shattering the assembly. We stood disassembled but not dispersed

---

<sup>4</sup>Anscar J. Chupungco, “Liturgy and the Components of Culture,” in *Worship and Culture in Dialogue: Reports of International Consultations Cartigny Switzerland, 1993, Hong Kong, 1994*, ed. S. Anita Stauffer (Geneva: Lutheran World Federation, 1994), 161.

on the lawns outside the church, utterly bewildered and terribly angry and abused. Here was dismissal with no sense of *missio*.

This story does not end here. In a rare experience of law *as* grace, we were rescued by Roman canon law. The requirement of the law that a Mass once begun must be completed, at least by the priest presiding, meant that shortly after our assembly had been so rudely and abruptly shattered, it was almost as quickly reassembled. From the sacristy of the church came the sacristan and his assistants carrying linens and sacramental vessels. Following behind came the homilist, the assistants, the choir, and the presiding minister. At a granite altar on the grounds of the campus (only at Notre Dame!) we reassembled to complete what we had earlier begun, not nearly so fragile and pathetic as we seemed only minutes before.

Is “Go in peace, serve the Lord! Thanks be to God!” abrupt enough to make the point? Or is it so abrupt it fails to make the point? I was always scandalized by that moment in the catechumenate when, week after week, the inquirers were “dismissed” before the assembly moved to the Lord’s table. So it seemed to me. But dismissed does not have to mean “disassembled.” “Dismissed” can recover something of that *missio*. It can mean to be sent. What I learned from those who were experiencing the catechumenate as formation—the catechumens themselves (a strange place to go for evidence!)—was that they were not experiencing this dismissal as disassembly, but as sending for more feeding in the Word of God. I did not know where they were going—they knew. They knew it was for formation and education that would build them, that would insert them, that would “tuck” them more deeply into the Story. They were not dismissed; they were sent for deeper feeding in the Word.

The generation of liturgical forms and reforms that followed Vatican II made only slight advances over the *Ite, missa est* approach to this question. The *Lutheran Book of Worship*, for example, at least attempted to turn the sending into a liturgical unit and not just an announcement: meeting adjourned! It gave the penultimate word to the assisting minister (“Go in peace. Serve the Lord.”) and the final shout (“Thanks be to God!”) to the entire assembly. Importantly, it recognized the reality to which the assembly was being sent was a place to “serve the Lord.” It is in fact *the* place to serve the Lord. This was perceptive, if grossly anticipatory, and perhaps even wishful thinking.

Can it be that in an era of Christendom when the context of daily life and assemblies for worship were more integrated that the “meeting adjourned” was all that was required? Where the culture and the church

coalesced, did it work like an ELCA Churchwide Assembly where this wonderful *Robert's Rules of Order* device is sometimes used? Where the whole churchwide assembly reconstitutes itself as a committee of the whole so that it can—are you ready for this?—talk about something? And then when that time is completed, without anyone moving or anything else happening, someone puts down the gavel and announces “meeting is adjourned” and “we are now reconstituted as the assembly.” Such a model may have worked on a grander scale when the world was a Christian context in which assemblies for worship convened. It may have been enough to say at the conclusion of worship: this meeting is adjourned, now continue with the other meeting—the culture.

The novelist of medieval murder mysteries, Candace Robb, in her Owen Archer detective series, shows us a world where powerful guilds interacted on a daily basis with powerful ecclesiastical realities to form a single unique fabric of medieval culture. Specifically, she looks at the world around the great minster at York and how the guilds interacted with the life of the community and with the administration of a particular archbishop there. There are places where vestiges of this relationship exist. In Chicago, for example, there is celebrated at the Roman Cathedral a mass for lawyers and other officials of the civil courts. How is this possible? A romantic heart may leap at the possibilities here, but a cooler and educated head will react to this as nothing more than quaint. This is a vestige of another world quite different from the one in which most Christians live.

Just as the catechumenate and the formation it embodies and the education it entails depends for its integrity on the reality of transition from one way of life to another, it also depends on another transition back into the cultural context now with a changed point of view—now with a new purpose by those who are formed and reformed and transformed by Word and sacrament by Christian community. What God effects through this community which is organized around Jesus Christ is the organization of individual believers' lives around that same reality—Jesus Christ—so that *this* reality will be present among many others in the world outside the assembly.

One of the powerful cultural icons of our time is Jenny Craig. A part of the icon that she represents is the organization that she has formed. Ostensibly she helps people lose unwanted weight. On closer examination there is a larger purpose at work in this organization. Rather than simply losing weight, Jenny Craig effects a change in the way her clients organize their lives—specifically around their relationship to

food—which is a pretty fundamental relationship. The result of this reorganized life is the loss of unwanted weight. She offers her clients a countercultural approach to this question that changes their lives. The culture says “Eat!” “Eat this to be like this.” She offers a *countercultural* approach to this question, and her clients experience this as transformation. The real test of effectiveness in this program is not measured by the number of meetings one attends. Nor is it measured by how many personal counseling sessions a client attends. The real effectiveness is measured by the loss of weight, and the satisfaction that is achieved with a new way of life.

The Christian church also offers reorganization of human life, with quite a different purpose in mind. The problem is that occasionally we forget this. We are wrapped not so much in Christ but in assemblies. The real point of the assembly is the life of the world. Luther understood this in his own time of late Christendom. In reaction to the enclosed life of the monastery Luther sought to organize or reorganize the Christian life around family—centered in the Christian faith, punctuating the day with prayer—morning and evening. (We are already moving beyond the sixty-minute expectations of our own time for religious practice.) Morning and evening prayer said every day with a ritual gesture that tied it explicitly to baptism—making the sign of the cross. He made families responsible for catechetical instruction for children. This instruction was to be provided by their largely uncatechized parents, who now had to struggle to get catechized themselves so they could exercise this ministry with their children. He could take for granted, you see, that adults were already spending their sixty minutes a week at Mass. That was not at issue. The question was, are they doing anything in the world? While the alliance between culture and assembly was different then than it is now (in fact, it could hardly be described as an alliance today), the need for some real transition from the assembly was already apparent to him. How to organize Christian life when we are not organized as assembly together?

Two ELCA resources support this move from “dismissal” into “sending” into *missio*. *The Use of the Means of Grace*, quoted already, and *Welcome to Christ* try to recover some of this. Principle 52 of *The Use of the Means of Grace* says Christians profess baptismal faith as they engage in discipleship in the world. If Jenny Craig can measure her effectiveness in pounds lost and in satisfaction of clients, we ought to measure our effectiveness with some real tool as well—as our effect on the world—not turning the culture into the church, but being an inescapable presence, witness, in the world. God calls Christians, this document says,

to use their various vocations to witness to the gospel of Christ wherever they work—not wherever they pray! It is why *Welcome to Christ*, in its own halting way, includes this exhortation:

[Names], both your work and your rest are now in God.

Will you endeavor to pattern your life on the Lord Jesus Christ, in gratitude to God and in service to one another, at morning and evening, at work and at play, from this day until the day of your death?<sup>5</sup>

Then the rite prays earnestly:

Almighty God, by the power of the Spirit you have knit these your servants into the one body of your Son, Jesus Christ. Look with favor upon them in their commitment to serve in Christ's name. Give them courage, patience, and vision; and strengthen us all in our Christian vocation of witness to the world and of service to others; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen<sup>6</sup>

Do you remember Alena from Susan Briehl's presentation? "Don't forget. Don't forget. Don't forget." How could we ever forget? When we have moved from **word and prayer** in Max Johnson's *ordo* to **worship and sacrament**, we can't stop moving! Yet there remains **community and service** in that *ordo*. This is work and witness; this is giving ourselves away in the world. There is the *telos* (an end, a goal). Do we tell assembled and transformed Christians what Alena was telling us—remember? Or do we tell them: "The mass is ended. Now forget this. Put your other head back on so you can survive in the world." Is this what we tell people? It is not what we intend. But is it what we say? "Forget all this and reenter the world dismissed, fragmented, unchanged."

A medical school friend of mine tried once to explain to me how they were teaching him to be a surgeon. I said, "Do I really want to know this?" He replied, "Oh, yes! There's nothing to it." Already I was convinced I did not want to know this! He said the way they teach surgery is very simple. You watch one surgical procedure, you do one, and then you turn around and you teach one. (Dear God!) Notice the courage this training entails. The students are not dismissed after having learned how to do it, but they immediately turn to teach it—the final, the ultimate expression of learning. In this process medical students are transformed, from God knows what, into surgeons. We Christians need new seriousness

---

<sup>5</sup>*Welcome to Christ: Lutheran Rites for the Catechumenate*, 60.

<sup>6</sup>*Ibid.*