



The Lord Shall Watch Over Your Going Out and Your Coming In¹

by John Hill



GATHERING AND SENDING

The two least appreciated and most commonly corrupted elements of the Eucharist may be the Gathering and the Sending. Both tend to accumulate pious elements that leave the sense and intention of Gathering and Sending obscure. Frequently, both seem unconnected with the actual pattern of life of those who gather and are sent.

The relation of Gathering and Sending to the celebration as a whole needs to be better understood. Both function as transitions between ritual time and 'real' time. But rather than being seen merely as the 'book-ends' of the liturgy of word and sacrament, they can better be seen as 'book-ends' of the liturgy of daily life of the Christian people. The Sending is a commissioning for the varied ministries of service in the world, and the Gathering is a summation — a gathering up of the threads — of those ministries which are to be offered to God in prayer.

How this happens is in fact largely determined by the conventions (and limitations) of the particular liturgical space, to a greater degree than we usually acknowledge. Ancient church architecture often included an atrium or courtyard attached to the assembly hall, providing space for informal gathering, and contemporary church architecture has rediscovered this virtue, sometimes locating the font in this space. But the intervening centuries have not been so generous. Procession, for example — the ordered movement of all the faithful from one place to another, an icon of the pilgrimage of faith — has degenerated into elegant but meaningless circumambulations of the nave by the sacred ministers while the people of God watch. The difficulty has been exacerbated by our clericalism and our unredeemed notions of sacred space. Clergy, acolytes, choir, etc., are wont to gather and prepare separately from the people of God (with secret prayers) and then enter the congregation with pomp as if granting a royal audience. The reception (or coffee-hour)

that follows the celebration commonly involves a migration of the gregarious to some place outside the holy space, as if to preserve it from any defilement by the profane things of 'real' life.

One of the questions we shall ask, therefore, is whether any or all of these peripheral activities can be reintegrated with the ritual assembly.

SENDING

"The Church is for mission as fire is for burning."² We are formed and fed through word and sacrament so that we may go into God's world to serve as Christ serves, to recognize the crucified and risen one in others — to reveal the presence of Christ's Body and the coming of his Kingdom. If the 'Dismissal' serves only to signal the end of the ritual action, it has failed. Rather than an ending, it is the beginning of our baptized living.³

And so, the ritual that follows communion is meant to serve a greater function than merely withdrawing from the sacramental moment. There is no great need for yet another prayer of thanksgiving after the Great Thanksgiving; our post-communion prayers make more sense when heard as petitions for the grace to live as we have prayed. There is work to be done!⁴

Some of this work may already be implicit in the liturgy: if there are ministers of extended communion to be sent off, they are fulfilling a part of this vocation to serve; if there are announcements that are appropriate to the moment, they will be announcements related to this vocation to serve.⁵ There may be a closing hymn; if so, it is properly a hymn celebrating our vocation to be God's servants in God's world.

In other words, there is more to the transition into 'real' life than safely extricating ourselves from the holy. Nor should we expect the faithful to leave the premises forthwith. Our traditional patterns in weddings and funerals offer a clue: the reception that follows provides us a time not merely to socialize but to socialize around the new reality which the wedding or funeral has enacted. By the same token, after we

have celebrated in the Eucharist the new creation in Christ, we need a time to 'try it on' together. This is actually part of our formation. That is why it is worth considering ways to bring the 'coffee hour' into the space used for worship, if there is no adequate atrium for the purpose: the implicit distinction we make between holy space and profane space is misleading. Furthermore, if the reception is in the same space as the liturgy, there will be no need to cajole visitors to join in. Then, rather than trying to find their way to some new place, they will simply find themselves surrounded by the reception.

Sending (Dismissal), therefore, needs to order these concerns in some intelligible and cogent manner.

QUESTIONS

1. What are the elements of your post-communion ritual? How do they serve the functions noted above? Is this adequate? What other functions are served?
2. What expectations do people have for this closing part of the liturgy? How do these expectations cohere with the functions described here?
3. Do the words of dismissal lead into the transitional action they imply?
4. Is there a distinction between the way the congregation obeys the dismissal and the way the people wearing liturgical clothing obey it? Why?
5. What happens to the strangers at the dismissal?
6. Is there a reception following the liturgy? Does it take place where all are assembled? If not, why not?

GATHERING

Why must there be a Gathering Rite? We know from second century accounts of the Church's liturgy that the first thing to happen after people had arrived in the place of worship was probably the reading of Scripture. But major differences have arisen between that time and our own: Christian people today do not so readily think of themselves as the

"first-fruits of a new creation" and need help in remembering their true identity in Christ; and visitors to the assembly are more likely to think of the church as a consumer outlet for personal salvation.

Recovering an awareness of the authentic nature of the liturgical assembly can be achieved through an intentional rite of Gathering that serves the following particular functions:

1. 'Re-remembering' who we are as a people bound together in God's love through Christ-dead-and-risen in the communion of the Holy Spirit – that is, acknowledging one another as the baptized.
2. Welcoming strangers, affirming and honoring their coming among us and their place in the liturgy without pretending to know their faith or presuming upon their affection.⁶
3. Acknowledging the realities that have dominated our separate lives since we were dismissed a week ago, and naming whatever 'elephants in the room' there may be, including concerns that will be included in the Prayers of the People.
4. Announcing special elements of that day's celebration (and rehearsing unfamiliar music).
5. Giving voice to our gratitude, joy, and expectation in some act of praise.
6. Opening ourselves through prayer to the thing that God will do now, through word and sacrament.⁷

In all these ways we seek to harmonize our diverse melodies, blending them into a chorus of praise. The threads of our lives, scattered across the fabric of our week in the world, are gathered into one for this *opus dei*, this offering of our common life in the liturgy.

Harmonizing diverse melodies is literally what the musicians are typically doing in preparation for word and sacrament; and their rehearsal can be a powerful symbol of the preparation all participants need. Why must the choir be sequestered in some remote rehearsal

space? There is nothing profane about the work they are doing that cannot be shared with all the faithful as they gather. Rehearsing the music in the gathering space can assist everyone in tuning hearts and voices.

So too, if sacred ministers prepare for the liturgy by solemn vesting and prayerful silence, why must they do it in secret, only to materialize fully robed at the magic moment as if they had been safely locked in the vestry all week? When some of their preparation takes place in the gathering space, they model for all the faithful the spirit of reverence with which we greet one another in the assembly of God's people. If silence before the formal beginning of the liturgy is deemed important, this is something the presider can model, sitting in silence in the presidential chair.

The location of this Gathering may be already determined by the limitations of space. But in some settings it will be possible to conduct this part of the liturgy gathered around the font.⁸ This provides a tangible focus for 're-remembering' who we are, and the appropriate setting for whatever penitential elements may be required by this 're-remembering.'

A fitting form of entrance procession may then be the procession of all the people from this initial gathering place into the place of proclamation, led by the Cross and the Bible or Lectionary.

QUESTIONS

1. What are the comparable functions served by the typical courtesies at a dinner party?
2. How many of the elements of your liturgy preceding the first reading serve one of the functions spelled out here? What elements serve some other function? What functions are over- or under-served?
3. What expectations do people bring to the experience of those elements? How do these expectations cohere with the functions named here?
4. Do you normally sing the Gloria in Excelsis? Why?

1. If 'gathering' is a verb (as well as a ritual moment), who is enacting it ritually in your assembly? How?
2. Are there distinctions between the way the congregation gathers and the way the people wearing liturgical clothing gather? Why?
3. Are there distinctions amongst the gathering patterns of
 - a. the core members,
 - b. the occasional members,
 - c. and the strangers?
 Why?

Appendix

The following is a simple adaptation of the dismissal that integrates announcements in a relevant fashion:

After communion, the deacon, or other leader, says one of the following,

Hear the words of St Paul:

"All that is true, all that is noble, just and pure - fill your thoughts with these things. Put into practice the lessons you have learned, the tradition passed on to you; and the God of peace will be with you."

Philippians 4: 8 - 9

or,

Hear the words of St. James:

"Accept the message planted in your hearts, with its power to save you. Do not turn away, but remember what you have heard and act on it, for by so acting you will find happiness."

James 1: 21, 25

or,

Hear the words of St Peter:

"You are a chosen people, a royal priesthood. So go now, and tell the world of the wonderful things that God has done through Jesus, who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light.

1 Peter 2: 9

or,

Hear the words of St John:

"Beloved, since God loved us so much, we should also love one another; for as we love one another, God lives in us, and his love makes us whole."

1 John 4: 11 - 12

and then,

I invite announcements of coming opportunities to serve others as Christ has served us.

When the announcements have ended, the presider says,

Let us pray.

Standing, the community prays in silence. The presider then says the Prayer after Communion.

The presider may bless the people. The deacon, or other leader, dismisses the people.

Notes

¹ This reflection is an expansion of the [one published a year ago](#) in *Open*; it takes into account further discussion of these issues at the most recent council meeting of APLM.

² Attributed to Emil Brunner.

³ Hence, we consider "sending" in this article before "gathering" rather than the other way around (as we might if we thought of these as bookends for the liturgy rather than for daily living). See the appendix to this article for some examples of sending rites.

⁴ In the BCP (1979) this is clear: after communion, a prayer acknowledging what we have received leads into petition that we may fulfill God's purposes for us in the world; then we are blessed and sent out (the blessing being optional in Rite II). In the BAS (1985) the sequence and substance is the same but the intent is obscured by subtitles that distinguish 'prayer after communion' from 'dismissal.' Both are elements of sending. The 1549 BCP dismissal begins with a scripture sentence, potentially making the Sending more clearly a divine commission. For a contemporary form of this pattern, see the Appendix.

⁵ In Evangelical Lutheran Worship (2006), this is explicitly indicated as the first element of Sending: "Communion ministers may be sent to take the sacrament to those who are absent. Brief announcements may be made, especially those related to the assembly's participation in God's mission in the world."

⁶ The presider greets the faithful and welcomes the visitors. Welcoming the faithful is a clerical conceit, implying that they too are merely visitors.

⁷ The shape of Gathering, according to both the BCP (1979) and the BAS (1985), is skeletal, a reaction against the bloated shape that Gathering had acquired in successive editions of the BCP since 1549. In our current books, a greeting that acknowledges the divine presence is followed by an act of praise and then the collect of the day. Both retain as an option the collect for purity, reflecting the sense that some element of penitence may be appropriate at the gathering. This sense is addressed more fully in *Evangelical Lutheran Worship* (2006) which provides, in addition to the greeting-praise-prayer pattern, an option for either confession and absolution, or thanksgiving for baptism, as the first act in the Gathering; see also the next footnote.

⁸ *Evangelical Lutheran Worship* (2006) clearly indicates the font as the preferred focus for initial gathering, and provides a graphic illustration for emphasis.

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