

**A Pastoral Epistle for the Theologies for Pastoral Ministry Consultation
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Neal D. Presa**

On Liturgical Identities

To fellow co-laborers in service to the Gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ, in the power of the Holy Spirit and the love of the triune God, grace and peace to you. I join you in praying for the triune God to continue to grant us resilience of spirit as we and the communities of churches we serve seek to bear witness of our Savior's love. These have been challenging times where we can fall prey to discouragement, malaise, apathy, sarcasm, cynicism, and despair rather than the fruit of the Spirit (Gal 5:22). And while we know that we ought to set our minds and hearts on that which is praiseworthy and honorable (Philippians 4:8), our human experiences feel the great volume and velocity of suffering and death's shadow in our common humanity.

I am writing out of urgent concern for us as pastors, and, therefore, for the churches whom the Lord has entrusted to our care. In every generation, the Lord has called God's people to worship. We recall that repetitive ascription, "I am the Lord Your God, and You are My people" (Exodus 6:7 and 20:1-2; Lev 26:12; Jer 30:22 and 32:38; Ezek 37:27; 2 Cor 6:16). This divine promise was spoken and shared for generations in the context of God's people worshipping. They lived that out in every part of their daily lives, carrying that promise in their hearts.

Is it that we have compartmentalized our worship to just Sunday mornings or whenever the Zoom schedule says that the so-called worship service is to begin and end? Has worship become a one-day, one-hour event in the week, rather than a state of being of who we are, whose we are, and what we are created to be?

The great creeds and confessions of our shared faith testify of how our forbears regarded who we are. Both the Apostles' and Nicene Creeds are written in trinitarian language in three paragraphs because what we testify about God is about our life in the worship of the living God. The Westminster Shorter and Larger Catechisms confess that our "chief end" of existence is to glorify God and to enjoy God forever. The Brief Statement of Faith (1991) echoes the Heidelberg Catechism (1563) in affirming that in life and in death we belong to God. All of these confessional statements are worship language emanating from the covenantal promise and divine determination, "I am the Lord Your God, and You are My people."

I am convinced that when we become unmoored from our identities as ones created to worship the living God in the entirety of our lives, in every aspect of our lives, in every arena of our human engagement, then we do so at our soul's peril, at the peril of our pastoral vocation, and to the detriment of the Gospel's witness in our churches.

I testify of what I have seen and heard (Acts 4:20; 1 John 1:3), of global siblings who live out worship Sunday through Saturday – from Manila to Seoul, from Jerusalem to Abuja, from Cairo to Matanzas, from East Demerara to Bogotá. These fellow followers of our Lord embody the

praise and prayers of the Sunday gathering in their secular work, in their raising of families, in their marriages, in their farming, in their going to the marketplace. I have witnessed fellow pastors who offer prayerful encouragement to God's children throughout the week so that every person sees their life as worship, what Martin Luther called *coram Deo* ("in front or in the face of God"). In every part of our existence, we live, move, and have our being in the triune God (Acts 17:28).

The ancient church regarded the practice of "leitourgia" (liturgy) as the comprehensive event that speaks to our whole life engaged in worship to God. To speak of *leitourgia* or the liturgy of God's people is to give account to the purpose and aim of the Christian life, which is the individual in relation to the community which is related to the whole of our humanity. *Leitourgia*, or liturgy, is work in service to and for the flourishing of the whole (1 Cor 12:26). *Leitourgia* is grounded in *koinonia* (fellowship). With such a view in mind and heart, we can never regard our individual existences as isolated from the rest, nor that somehow God's salvation was poured out for our benefit alone nor for our personal sanctification. This means, then, that if we can even fathom a statement of "my Christian life" it must be immediately and forcefully connected to the statement "in relation to you and to all of us."

The first four centuries of Christian communities saw the Roman imperial practice of *leitourgia* in the public work projects that Roman citizens would render to benefit the empire. If a person joined a neighbor to fix a neighborhood road or participated in constructing the city aqueduct, they were engaged in *leitourgia*, or public work, because by doing that work they were not only benefiting the rest of the community and the whole empire's well-being, but they also gained a greater sense of their citizenship and their belonging in the empire.

You can see, beloved pastors, that our Christian forbears used that term *leitourgia* for the church's worship. Whenever and wherever two or three are gathered in the Lord's name (Mat 18:19-20), the Lord's work for the benefit of the whole community was being accomplished. This meant that when believers prayed and sang, they were doing the work of worshipping God not just for themselves, not just for the gathered community in that place, but also lifting up the world and offering the world to God. This is what our Orthodox brother Fr. Alexander Schmemmann called "for the life of the world" because he and the Orthodox tradition see that when the bread at communion is taken, blessed, broken, and given, what is happening is the Lord taking, blessing, breaking, and giving God's people in service to the world as Jesus Himself was taken, blessed, broken, and given so that the world may have life.

I am mindful that the term *leitourgia*/liturgy will be met with suspicion or be regarded as an anachronism. There's a widespread counter-reaction of what seems and sounds like something exclusive to our Roman Catholic or Orthodox siblings, or that somehow liturgy is merely about the gestures and rubrics of the Sunday worship event and the actions of us fellow pastors and priests. Still yet, some may mistake the word for what we in the Protestant traditions would call the worship bulletin, the worship order, or even the words and songs that will be projected on a sanctuary screen. Let's dispel those notions. When we embody and live into what *leitourgia* is, it is a robust vision of our pastoral vocation and of who the people of God are about. *Leitourgia* is *koinonia* in service to worship God, which is loving God and loving neighbor and stranger as

Christ loved us and gave his very life. Isn't that, after all, what we pray and hope for will be the result of our pastoral vocation?

We as ministers of the Gospel have been called to take on many roles: preacher, teacher, administrator, community organizer, family chaplain, event organizer, facilities custodian, office manager, just to name the various and sundry responsibilities. So, too, our churches – the people of God – are pulled in many directions where the tasks, responsibilities, and work they and we do following Sunday worship seem disconnected from what we do for the rest of the week. Our call is to equip God's people for the work of ministry (Eph 4:12) so that everyone will offer their whole lives as a living sacrifice in service to God's work in the world (Rom 12:1). This is worship work. This is liturgy.

Recovery of our liturgical identities as pastor liturgical theologians will recalibrate how and why we regard our vocation. And with that, the *raison d'être* of our churches will be recalibrated. We can be salt and light who bear witness of the generous love of Christ in every aspect of our lives. We can embody what we pray and what we praise on Sunday to what we do Monday through Saturday. We can also apprentice God's people to regard their work as sacred arenas of worship. After all, serving *coram Deo* is not confined to the pews and the pulpit. *Coram Deo* is on the factory floor, in the board room, in a classroom, in a hospital ward, on the neighborhood street.

I humbly offer this to you for your consideration. In doing so, this is an act of liturgy for the sake of the Gospel, for the life of the world.

Greet God's people in your contexts with the faith, hope, and love of the Lord given to us all.

Peace be to you,
Neal