Witting or Unwitting Ritualists

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We are all ritualists. We may find that hard to believe, because Lutherans don't usually rate ritual very highly.[1] Like many of our contemporaries, we tend to associate ritual with hocus-pocus, superstition, and magic. At best, ritual is used by Roman Catholics and High Church Anglicans to obscure the Gospel and to mystify ordinary people. There is, therefore, little serious reflection on ritual in our circles.[2] It is, after all, a matter of personal preference whether we use ritual or not.[3] It is still common to hear Lutherans speak quite disparagingly about the dangers of empty ritualism, as if ritual were in itself insignificant and even harmful apart from our piety. Yet, practically speaking, ritual is just as important for us as for any Catholic, and so it should claim at least some of our attention.

We are all ritualists of some kind or other. In fact, Mary Douglas, a noted contemporary English anthropologist, makes the provocative claim: "As a social animal, man is a ritual animal."[4] I would agree with her. On reflection, I am convinced that, for Lutherans, ritual is just as important as doctrine. In fact, the one cannot be understood properly apart from the other. Humanly speaking, the existence of the Lutheran Church of Australia depends

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[1]. I would define ritual as a traditional and ordered sequence of words and actions, regularly re-enacted in similar circumstances, by which a group of people expresses its common convictions, and achieves a common purpose. M. Douglas, however, regards it more simply as a 'routinized act diverted from its normal function' (*Symbol: Explorations in Cosmology.* Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1973, 20).

[2]. As far as I know, the only Australian Lutherans who have done any work in this area are: H.P.V. Renner, *Ritual As An Effective Instrument In Pastoral Care* (Unpublished Master's Thesis: Brisbane, 1977), and N. Habel, who, together with B. Moore, has analysed ritual rather well in: *When Religion Goes To School* (Adelaide: South Australian College of Advanced Education, 1982, 92-97 and 204-210). The best and most exhaustive Lutheran work on the subject is by W. Jetter (*Symbol und Ritual: Anthropologische Elemente in Gottesdienst*, Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1978), whom I follow at many points in this discussion.

[3]. Much of our carelessness in ritual arises, I believe, out of a misunderstanding of Article X in the *Formula of Concord* on 'The Ecclesiastical Rites That are Called Adiaphora or Things Indifferent'. Ritual is not a matter of adiaphora in the sense that we can either do without it or change it at will, but rather in the sense that it is secondary to the means of grace, and so can take different shape at different times and in different places in accord with tradition, need, and common consent.

[4] M. Douglas, *Purity and Danger* (London and Henley: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1966), 62.

in large part upon its ritual. That would be obvious to any unbiased observer, even if we ourselves are barely conscious of its importance for us. A trained anthropologist, for example, whose task it was to figure out the operation of the LCA, would most probably begin with its rituals.[5] And if Luther Seminary were included in the study, the anthropologist would try to discover how well its students were being trained to assume responsibility for the performance of those rituals essential for the continuity of the church.

Australian Lutherans are not the only Christians who are largely unaware of how important ritual activity is for the life of Christian communities. Since Western culture as a whole tends to disparage ritual, the problem is common to most Western churches. This prevailing climate of anti-ritualism is shown, for example, by the attitude of most Old Testament scholars to those sections in the Pentateuch which legislate Israel's worship. Take, for example, the book of Leviticus. It must surely be the least popular and most neglected part of the whole Bible. Yet it is obvious that this ritual legislation was of paramount importance to the Israelites, otherwise it would not now occupy about a half of the whole Pentateuch. With a few notable exceptions, most Christian (and even Jewish) scholars either ignore or play down any reference to the performance of ritual in the Old Testament.[6]

Yet there are some people, such as the Australian Aborigines, who truly value ritual. I found this out for myself when I was guest speaker at an inservice conference for Aboriginal pastors and evangelists near Hermannsburg in 1983. In dealing with the stories of Abraham in Genesis, I had come to Genesis 15, where Abram is said to have believed God, and to have been reckoned as righteous, when God had promised him his own son as an heir, and as many descendants as there were stars in the sky. After that, God made a covenant with Abram to give him the land of Canaan by getting him to perform a strange ritual. Abram slaughtered a three- year-old heifer, a three-year-old she-goat, a three-year-old ram, a turtle dove, and a young pigeon. After halving them and

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[5] More than any other anthropologist, V. Turner has pioneered and publicized the use of ritual to interpret an alien culture in *The Forest of Symbols,* Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1967, and *The Ritual Process*, London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1969. In the two works already cited, Mary Douglas develops his insights further, and engages in dialogue with theology and biblical scholarship. See also her collection of essays entitled: *Implicit Meanings*, London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1975, as well as E.R. Leach, *Culture and Communication,* Cambridge: Clarendon Press, 1976.

[6] Apart from scholars like S. Mowinckel and J. Eaton who assume a general ritual pattern common throughout the Ancient Orient which occurs in modified form in the Old Testament, the most sober and illuminating student of ritual is J. Milgrom who has, in my opinion, solved many of the problems associated with the interpretation of the various sacrificial rituals in the Pentateuch, in *Cult and Conscience: The ASHAM and the Priestly Doctrine of Repentance*, Leiden: Brill, 1976, and *Studies in Cultic Theologyand Terminology*, Leiden: Brill, 1983. G.J. Wenham has gone on from Milgrom and applied some of the techniques developed by anthropologists to interpret ritual in his commentaries on *Leviticus*, London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1979, and *Numbers*, Leicester: Intervarsity Press, 1981.

setting the halves opposite each other, Abram stayed there to drive away the birds of prey until night came. Then, when he had fallen into a trance-like sleep, he had a vision of a smoking fire pot and blazing torch which passed between the animals, as God made a covenant to give him the land.

Since it was the last session in the afternoon when we covered this story, I skipped over the details of the ritual to dwell at some length upon the theology of the covenant as shown in this passage. During the evening meal, there was an air of unrest in the camp as various parties went from one campfire to another, until finally a deputation came to our campfire to ask whether we could perhaps discuss that ritual next morning. We did just that, and it was a good lesson for me on the interpretation of ritual. From their questions I learnt how they went about interpreting ritual. In all, we spent a whole session on that ceremony, as they quizzed me about its details, and argued about its interpretation. They saw, correctly, that the ritual was the centre of the story. For them as Aborigines, sacred rites and ceremonies are the most important elements in their tradition and culture. For them, rituals are not just dramatic teaching aids; they are decisive, supernatural transactions by which their communities were created and maintained. In fact, according to their mythology, the whole world was created and preserved by the correct performance of right ritual. More than any other single factor, that incident has stimulated me to consider the place of ritual in the life of Israel and the church.

At present, there is much controversy about worship in the Lutheran Church of Australia. Some people are impatient for liturgical change, while others are uneasy about the changes which have taken place. Laymen complain that pastors are either careless or mechanical in their performance of the liturgy. Presidents speak dramatically about liturgical chaos in some congregations. No other topic, I believe, generates quite so much heat as liturgical change. And rightly so! Yet many find it hard to fathom what the fuss is all about, as these liturgical changes seem to have little or nothing to do with doctrine. In considering the importance of ritual in a general way, I would therefore like to reflect on the function of ritual in congregational life, and to alert pastors to their responsibility in that area. I would also like to stimulate those who are interested either in the Old Testament or in cross cultural evangelism, to consider ritual as a key to understanding any alien culture.

1. Rituals Constitute and Maintain Communities

Many anthropologists claim that rituals reveal the most-basic values and beliefs of a particular community.[7] The most important events in any community, such as the beginning and end of an academic year in a Seminary, and the most significant parts of people's lives, such as meals, birthdays, and weddings, are shaped by ceremonial enactment. Rituals therefore represent what the members of a community have in common with each other, what binds them together and moves them all most deeply. Since they express what is taken for granted by everybody, people are largely unconscious of their significance. Hence, they usually remain unexplained, and do not need to be explained, until they are contested. Nobody needs to tell you the meaning of a hug or of holding hands. So, when customary ceremonies are challenged, ordinary people

[7] See G.J. Wenham, *Numbers*, 26-29 and W. Jetter, *Symbol und Ritual*, 98-100.

find it hard to say just what they mean. The patriotic Englishman won't be able to explain why he is so moved by the ceremonial trappings associated with the monarchy, just as certain older people in our country will be quite at a loss to tell you why they value good manners so highly. In fact, ritualized behaviour cannot easily be explained, just because it is part of the whole world-view and system of values which is shared by a community.

Yet rituals do not just embody the basic values of a community; they constitute and maintain its common life. The Lutheran Confessions acknowledge this function when they insist that rites and ceremonies are necessary for 'the good order' and 'well being' of the Church.[8] Rituals are not just dramatic performances which celebrate what people have in common; they are performative actions which **do** what they mean.[9] So, for example, the ceremony of marriage doesn't just express either the real or ideal form of relationship between a man and a woman; it **makes** them husband and wife, and so **creates** a new social unit. The ritual of ordination **makes** a person a pastor in the church.

Generally speaking, rituals constitute communities in four different ways.[10] First, rituals **found** new communities. Think, for example, of how Captain Philip founded Australia in 1788 by raising the flag in Sydney Cove. Secondly, rituals **initiate** people into existing communities. A convert to Christianity becomes a member of the church through Baptism. Children who were baptized as infants are drawn into communicant membership of the church through the rite of Confirmation and the instruction associated with it. Rites of excommunication and reinstatement are also closely connected with rites of initiation. Together they determine membership within a community. Thirdly, rituals integrate people with each other, so that individual differences are transcended, and people cooperate with each other. Think, for example, of how the Lord's Supper maintains fellowship within a Christian community. Fourthly, rituals **order** the operation of communities by conferring legitimate authority and status on those with positions of responsibility within it. The proper exercise of power in a community is, therefore, largely a ritual matter. Rituals, like the installation of a pastor, authorize and set up leaders who are in turn responsible for those rituals, such as our common worship, which maintain that community.

Since rituals constitute and maintain a community, alienation from a community coincides with a refusal to participate in its ritual activity, just as integration into it can be measured by the degree of involvement in its rituals. Moreover, the closer the community, the more important is ritual participation; the looser the community, the less significant is ritual participation. Where there is no ritual, there is no community, but only an assortment of people going their own way, or trying to impose themselves on each other. Where there is a strong tradition of ritual and a sense of active participation in it, a community is healthy enough to survive most threats to its existence. So, then, if you

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[8] See the Augsburg Confession (AC) XV, 1; XXVI, 40; XXVIII, 53, and the Formula of Concord (FC SD) X, 1, 7, 9.

[9] F.E. Wilms, *Freude vor Gott: Kult und Fest in Israel* (Regensburg: Friedrich Pustet, 1981), says on p. 24: "Kulthandlungen bedeuten nicht nur etwas, sie bewirken auch etwas (Ritual acts do not just mean something; they also enact something)."

[10] See B. Moore and N. Habel, *When Religion Goes To School, 204-210*, for a classification of various rites and their functions.

wish to undermine and destroy a community, or if you wish to reform and lead it, you need to deal with those rituals which sustain it.

2. Rituals Communicate a Whole Way of Life

Everybody agrees that rituals are meant to communicate, but most people are not clear on what they communicate, and how. The crudest and commonest explanation is that they merely reinforce the verbal communication of ideas. They are, if you like, enacted visual aids which dramatize what is said.[11] As such, they are not essential to the process of communication, but merely decorate its contents. Those who hold this view would therefore maintain that a hug says exactly the same thing as the words: "I love you." When it comes to worship, they claim that the liturgy adds nothing to preaching, and that preaching loses nothing when it stands apart from any ritual context. The problem then is that preaching becomes lecturing, and the Christian faith is reduced to its intellectual content.

Ritual does not just communicate ideas. It is, in fact, rather poor at communicating on an intellectual level, and so it has always been belittled by intellectuals. Ritual, however, communicates **a whole way of life** to **the whole person**. It offers actual, rather than theoretical, experience to those who participate properly in it. So, for example, the rite of absolution **offers** forgiveness to those who receive it and live by it.

Ritual communicates a way of life to a person. It offers participation not only in the common life of a community, but also in the cycle of human life from birth to death. This accounts for the prominence throughout the world of the so-called 'rites of passage'[12] which sustain people at critical points of their lives, such as birth, adolescence, marriage, sickness, and death.[13] Ritual can also harmonize and synchronize people with the natural and cosmic order which surrounds and sustains them. So, for example, our daily pattern of worship and prayer, meals and sleep, are coordinated with alternation of day and night; whole liturgical calendar in the Old Testament corresponds with order of creation as revealed in annual cycle of the seasons.

Even though ritual communicates a way of life, it does so discreetly, without imposing itself upon a person, by invading his privacy. It creates the time and space for voluntary involvement. Its demands are minimal. It merely requires the presence of a person.[14] The

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[11] . Despite his excellent insights into the nature and interpretation of ritual, G.J. Wenham tends to this view. In *Numbers*, 29, he says: "Old Testament rituals express religious truths visually as opposed to verbally ... On the one hand they are dramatized prayers, expressing men's deepest hopes and fears; on the other hand they are dramatized divine promises or warnings, declaring God's attitude towards men." H.D. Hummel, *The Word Becoming Flesh* (St Louis: Concordia, 1979), 79-86, speaks more adequately of the sacramental operation of the rituals listed in Leviticus.

[12] For a discussion of these rites, see M. Eliade, *Rites and Symbols of Initiation,* New York: Harper and Row, 1958, and A. van Gennep, *The Rites of Passage*, London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1960.

[13] See H .P.V. Renner, *Ritual*, for a treatment of the rites of passage associated with death.

[14] See W. Jetter, *Symbol und Ritual*, 97, 98 and 132.

nature and extent of involvement depends upon the person, as, for example, with the singing of hymns in worship. Ritual caters for all sorts and conditions of people at all stages of maturity and levels of sophistication. It is, therefore, apt for initiating and involving people in the mysteries of life and of the Christian faith which surpass human grasp. In fact, I would argue that we have no access to the mystery of Christ apart from ritual mediation and participation.

Rituals not only communicate a whole way of life, but they do so to the whole person. First of all, since they involve bodily action, they communicate physically. That is their unique mode of operation. This is also true for religious rites which communicate spiritual realities physically, and so draw the physical life of a person into the divine domain.[15] Thus, for example, we believe that we receive the Lord's Supper for the benefit of our bodies as well as our souls. The formula for dismissal in our liturgy makes that point quite clearly.[16] What is more, the ritual element in our worship not only conveys spiritual power to us via physical means, as in the water of Baptism, but it also helps us to respond physically. It not only tells us how to react to God's grace, but actually helps us to react properly by providing us with habitual models of confession, prayer, and praise. In fact, if the ritual aspect of worship is working properly for us, it should focus our physical attention so completely on what is given, rather than on our response, that our response becomes quite unselfconscious and physically unaffected. C.S. Lewis once said:

> When our participation in a rite becomes perfect, we think no more of ritual, but are engrossed by that **about which** the rite is performed; but afterwards we recognize that ritual was the sole method by which this concentration can be achieved.[17]

Like eating, ritual then becomes effective by engaging our bodies in an habitual way.

Secondly, since ritual affects us physically and sensuously, it can also move us imaginatively and emotionally. It does not merely express what we feel, which may in any case be of little significance, but also makes us feel something other than what we had previously felt. It can make us rejoice at Easter and at funerals, even when we don't

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[15] SeeW. Jetter, *Ritual und Symbol*, 100-103. The best account of this that I have discovered comes from W. Eichrodt, Theology of the Old Testament, Vol. I (London: SCM, 1961), 98—101. On page 99, he says: "The cultus is, however, not only the inwardly necessary expression of spiritual realities by means of the physical, but also the medium by which divine power is presented to men for their participation. Such a conception rests on the deep conviction of the ancient world, that the deity gives himself to men not merely through the subjective channels of the conscious mind, but also uses the body as a means of access by which he may effectuate weal or woe... In the outward actions of the cult the power of the divine blessing is communicated to the actual mode of man's existence. The sacred action becomes a sacrament."

[16] The formula in the *Australian Lutheran Hymnal* (Adelaide: LPH, 1973, 14) is: "The body of our Lord Jesus Christ and His precious blood strengthen and preserve you in body and soul to life eternal." The orders of service in the American *Lutheran Book of Worship* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1978) and the *Lutheran Book of Worship* (St Louis: Concordia, 1982) lack this emphasis.

[17] C.S. Lewis *A Preface to Paradise Lost* (London: Oxford University, 1942), 61.

feel happy in ourselves, and have no subjective reason for rejoicing, just as it can make us mourn in Lent, when we feel no personal sense of loss.[18] I would even dare to claim that in our worship it not only helps us share the joy and sorrow of others, but also the joy and sorrow of our Lord. How else could that be conveyed, except ritually?

Thirdly, since ritual combines words with bodily gesture and activity, it also communicates cognitively. But it does so more symbolically than conceptually.[19] It does not give knowledge about something new, but it rather gives us the spectacles to make sense of something, like the celebration of the Lord's Supper which opens for us the meaning of Christ's death.[20] It does not necessarily give new information to add to our existing stock of facts, but it reshapes our way of thinking by imposing the particular frame of reference needed to make sense of something. Let me give two examples to illustrate this rather difficult point. The annual re enactment of the Exodus by the Israelites in the rites associated with the Feast of the Passover forced them to think about their relation with God in historical rather than mythological terms. Hence, they gradually began to interact with him differently from their pagan neighbours. The celebration of the Lord's Supper with the Words of Institution caused Luther and his followers to think in non-spatial terms about heaven and Christ's presence,[21] and that, in turn, has shaped the consciousness and piety of every Lutheran. Ritual, then, shapes how we feel and think, because it touches us physically.

All this is of great importance when we consider the rituals associated with Christian worship. Lutherans all agree that the liturgy should communicate the Gospel. Now, the traditional danger in this is that we then think about the Gospel only in intellectual terms. But since the Gospel is Christ's life incarnate for us, and our life incarnate in Christ, that is, a whole way of life lived by the grace of God, it must be communicated totally to the whole person. And that happens via the ritual proclamation of God's Word, and the ritual performance of the sacraments. The Gospel requires ritual enactment for it to take its full effect. Yet, we must always remember that even the best ritual is never an end in itself; it must always serve the Gospel and communicate it effectively to those who are to receive it.

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[18] Note the judgment of C.S. Lewis, *A Preface to Paradise Lost*, 22, on the connection between ritual and emotion: "Ritual ... is a pattern imposed on the mere flux of our feelings by reason and will, which renders pleasures less fugitive and griefs more endurable, which hands over to the power of wise custom the task (to which the individual and his moods are so inadequate) of being festive or sober, gay or reverent, when we choose to be, and not at the bidding of chance."

[19] W. Jetter, *Symbol und Ritual*, examines the connection between symbolization and ritual performance in a thorough and exhaustive way.

[20] See M. Douglas, *Purity and Danger*, 62-69, on how ritual aids perception and modifies experience. Ritual does not therefore merely express what has been experienced, as is often asserted, but it also shapes experience.

[21] See FC VII, 90-106, and W. Elert, *The Structure of Lutheranism* (St. Louis: Concordia, 1962), 414,415.

3. Christian Ritual Allows the Faithful to Participate in the Life and Work of the Triune God

In the discussion to this point I have not yet mentioned the most decisive feature of Christian ritual. From what has been said so far, one could perhaps have gained the impression that human beings were the main agents in the ritual performance of Christian worship.[22] But that is not so at all. We believe that the Triune God is at work in the ritual of our worship. In it he reaches out and communicates himself to those who believe in him. By it he creates and upholds the church. This is so, because Christ has instituted certain rituals like Baptism, by which he continues his ministry in the church between his ascension and the close of the age.

Consider for a moment what our Lord Jesus does for us in our common worship. He calls us into the presence of h Father, and forgives us our sins. He speaks his Word to us, which performs in us what it says to us. He hears our prayer and attends to our needs. He gives us his own eternal life in his body and blood, and draws us into his own fellowship with the Father as children of God. He blesses us and pours out his Spirit upon us to empower us to work with him in his mission to the world. All this is mediated to us **ritually** through word and action in our worship.

The Augsburg Confession defines the Church ritually. It maintains that since faith is created through the ministry of the Gospel in Word and sacrament,[23] the unity of the church is constituted by their proper administration.[24] The Word and sacraments are the ritual means by which God's Spirit works in us and all Christians. These holy things make and keep us holy. With this emphasis on the means of grace, with their interplay between word and action, the Lutheran Church can therefore never minimize or avoid ritual. It has generally avoided the anti-ritualist temptation to base the church on something subjective, such as the experience of conversion, or on some charismatic manifestation. Rather, it has traditionally defined membership in the church ritually, by speaking of baptized and communicant membership. Pastorally speaking, it has always regarded participation in the Lord's Supper as the best human measure of spiritual health.

While Luther and the reformers with him were critical of many contemporary ceremonies and rites, they did not attack and abolish them - as did the enthusiasts who were totally averse to all external ritual, and wished to de-ritualize Christian worship in favour of inner experience. The reformers were bent, rather, on sorting out the ritual confusion all around them. They therefore made a number of crucial distinctions. First, they insisted on the primacy of **the means of grace** which Christ himself had established by his command and backed up by his promises.[25] These were the essential parts of Christian worship, and

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[22] F.E. Wilms, *Freude vor Gott*, 25, claims: "Durch das kultische Tun der Menschen wirkt Gott sein Werk an der Welt und den Gläubigen. Kult ... erhofft immer neu das Wirken Gottes an seinem Volk und an seiner Welt (Through the ritual performance of people God does his work with his people and the world. Ritual ...hopes ever anew for the work of God with his people and the world)."

[23] AC V.

[24] AC VII.

[25] AC V; VII.

so were not subject to negotiation. The Word of God then instituted and decided what was absolutely necessary in Christian ritual.

Secondly, the reformers recognized that there were certain 'rites and ceremonies' which were either inherited from Judaism or invented by the church to communicate the fullness of the Gospel and to elicit a full response to it.[26] They realized that, even though these rites had not been instituted by Christ, they were necessary for the 'good order', 'well being', and 'discipline' of the church.[27] Nevertheless, these rites could vary from time to time and place to place, provided that they were in accord with God's Word and consistent with the Gospel.[28]

Lastly, the reformers condemned as idolatrous those rites and ceremonies which were either forbidden by Scripture or incompatible with the Gospel.[29]

Now, none of this makes any sense unless the reformers were convinced that ritual was important in worship, because it involved the activity of the Triune God in the means of grace.

The purpose of Christian ritual, then, is to communicate the Gospel as a way of life to people, so that they can participate in the life and work of the Triune God. No rite of worship is, however, of any importance in the church, no matter how personally impressive and socially constructive it may be, unless it is governed by God's Word and promotes his gracious activity.

Conclusion

Every pastor is either a witting or unwitting ritualist. He is, after all, responsible for the performance of that ritual which is necessary for the communication of the Gospel to the members of his congregation. That is not always an easy business, nor is its importance always appreciated; for, while the Lutheran Church has traditionally been a liturgical church, it exists in a culture where liturgical worship, with its emphasis on corporate and supernatural activity, has become alien, incomprehensible, and even nonsensical to many people. So, unless the pastor understands the role of ritual in worship, and creates some appreciation for it by his leadership, both he and his congregation will suffer confusion. They will be caught between the devil of trendy, liturgical innovation, and the deep blue sea of obstinate, liturgical traditionalism.

As a church we, therefore, need to perform our rituals wittingly, without becoming either reactionary ritualists, insensitive to the needs of people, or individualistic anti-ritualists who damage our congregations. We may even eventually come to a rather unexpected appreciation of the liberating power and enriching beauty of ritual. No one has expressed that better than Yeats at the end of his poem: 'A Prayer for My Daughter':

> How but in custom and in ceremony
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> Are innocence and beauty born?

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[26] AC XV; XXVI.
[27] AC XV, 1; XXVI, 40; XXVIII, 53; FC SD X, 1, 7, 9.
[28] AC VII.
[29] FC SD X, 16.

Ceremony’s a name for the rich horn,
And custom for the spreading laurel tree.