

M O D E R A T O R !

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No one can pretend that consideration of the devotions offered by the Moderator of a Church court is high in the range of our current priorities. However, interesting questions do raise themselves when one looks into this small area of the life and worship of the Church. For the purposes of this article the role of the Moderator in the Kirk Session is not being touched on - rather what is involved in the superior courts of the Church, in particular in the Presbytery.

The Church of Scotland takes practice and procedure as its cue for much of what it does. Leaving aside such binding matters as Acts of Assembly, what this amounts to, often enough, is that we do what we do because in the past we have done what we have done. Normally use and wont serve us well enough, but it is always possible for a circumstance to arise when a particular matter is questioned, such as has never happened before to the knowledge of those involved. All manner of strange norms, justifications, opinions, rulings, etc can begin to fly around before order and decency are somehow restored.

So, for instance, it was reported some years ago that an in-coming

Moderator of The General Assembly, in preparing for the Assembly, made it known that he wished to have hymns, rather than psalms, sung at some diets of worship prior to each session. He was told, apparently, that this was not possible. Again, in one Presbytery, where the Moderator for a particular year did not invariably make use of any expression suggesting the constitution of the court in prayer, the question was raised, after the event and informally, as to whether a particular meeting had ever actually happened, and whether all subsequent meetings of the Presbytery might be equally invalid.

Two aspects, therefore, seem worth exploring : first, the freedom which a Moderator does, or does not, have; second, the actual scope of the devotions themselves.

A Moderator's Freedom

As is well known, a Moderator is primus inter pares. This seems a subtle form of designation, giving with the one hand, while taking back with the other. It would never do for anyone, least of all a Scots minister, to assume airs which might give him or her an undue conceit. (Incidentally, a Moderator is eligible for re-election, but how often has anyone served as a Moderator for two years in succession in a Church court ?)

At the same time, think of what happens with the advent of a Moderator - any Moderator - into the court. The court stands, obviously in respect of the office. The court bows to the holder of the office. And when that is reciprocated by the Moderator, surely nothing more is happening than that the courtesy of the members of the court is being acknowledged ? It is not as if Moderator and members are on an equal footing : if so, nothing would ever be able to take place in the court. Anything that does happen in the court happens with reference to the Moderator, the Moderator being addressed constantly throughout. At the end of the meeting, members remain standing until the Moderator has left.

Obviously, therefore, a Moderator is in a special position within the court. Part of this must include the expectation that a degree of leadership is to be provided during the spell of office. So far as the leading of worship is concerned, a Moderator, as such, has been entrusted with that responsibility among others and should feel free to offer worship on behalf of all others present, as if ministering to his or her own congregation.

This having been said, obviously no Moderator has a completely free hand. Everyone has to know the limits within which business is to be conducted. Hence "Standing Orders", to safeguard everyone, Moderator and members alike. But in the providence of God there are Moderators and Moderators. The gifts are not all shared equally, and, in consequence, any court will have its succession of the good, the bad and the in-between. A good Moderator, by saying the right word, at the right time, in the right way, can be responsible for retrieving a situation which otherwise might be poised to dissolve into confusion and rancour. Such a gift is recognised and welcomed. Why not, therefore, recognise and welcome a gift in the leading of worship ?

Many, probably most, Moderators will be content to arrange that the opening worship should be no different from what is normally offered, year by year. If, however, a minister has a particular gift in the leading of worship in some distinctive way, such as can be recognised and welcomed by fellow-presbyters, then should the freedom not be there to make use of this gift ? The limits would still remain to this extent, that a Moderator is answerable to the court of which he or she is Moderator for the discharge of all that is undertaken on the court's behalf. In other words, in practical terms, the forms of worship used would need to be acceptable to the members of the court. If not, the exercise would be self-defeating. The point of the worship is not to give one person an opportunity for self-indulgence, but rather to lead the members of the court to prepare together before God for what they are about to engage in. If this can be well done in some innovatory way, why should it not be done ? And, if ensuring acceptability means preparing members of the court beforehand, what could be more sensible ?

The Scope of the Devotions

Any meeting of a Church court is constituted with prayer and closed with prayer. Such a statement may seem too self-evident to require any further consideration. However, is there not a peculiar element here ? Prayer can no doubt be defined in many ways. Let us suppose that we call it "The Opening of Ourselves to God". To make that personal and communal dealing with God the constitutional requirement for the opening and the close of a meeting of a court - albeit a court of the Church - does seem a strange conjunction of the spheres of law and grace.

By all means let a meeting of a Church court begin with prayer, and let there be prayer at the end. But the formal business of constituting the meeting and of terminating it should surely be another matter altogether, eg by the Moderator declaring that it is so. And does the habitual use in prayer before the Almighty of such a phrase as, "as we constitute ourselves a court of the Church", not seem unduly laboured ? Further, does it not let legalism run riot to imagine that the omission of such a phrase in prayer puts in question the actual meeting of the court ?

In short, I would prefer that we departed from the practice of constituting meetings of the courts of the Church by prayer. If, however, it proves impossible to make this change, let us simply have prayer offered, with no obligation to use the formal phrase, and, with the knowledge that prayer has been offered, let it be understood that the court has been constituted. This, after all, is what happens at present when a meeting is closed with prayer. No formal words of closure are used : everyone understands that the words of benediction signify the end of the meeting, without any more ado.

The devotions offered are those of a court of the Church, a specific court with particular responsibilities in time and space, but at the same time a part of the Church Universal. The two elements need to be held together. The worship offered should not focus so closely on the needs of the moment as to blot out the purposes of God revealed for all time in Jesus Christ. Nor, surely, is there any need to be so expansive in approach to God as to ignore the concerns and opportunities which are known to be going to turn up in the course of the meeting.

For meetings of Presbyteries the pattern of the Christian Year is an obvious framework within which to prepare suitable worship. The norm of praise, followed by Scripture reading, followed by prayer may have nothing more behind it than use and wont, but it is an entirely appropriate pattern. We approach God in praise, we are then addressed by the word of God, we then respond in prayer to what has been read and heard. The worship, in this form, allows for a proper movement between the worshippers and God, as suitable preparation for embarking on the business of the meeting.

The General Assembly notwithstanding, there seems no good reason why the praise should be restricted to Psalms and Paraphrases, and every good reason why the Hymnary should be used, to allow the possibility of suitable hymns being sung as well. Hymns can be sung unaccompanied, if need be, just as satisfactorily as Psalms and Paraphrases. On the other hand, it is not engraved in letters of stone that any praise in a Church court should be sung unaccompanied. Why not make use of a suitable piano or organ, if it is convenient to do so, and if there is someone well equipped to play it too ?

Finally, on this subject, I wonder if I am alone in feeling that there is usually a considerable disjunction between the worship offered at the start of a meeting and the business of the meeting itself. No matter how helpful the worship may be at the time, it seems that very soon it is completely forgotten. The business assumes a life of its own, and what comes to matter is the success or failure of proposals which come with the business, together with the politics of the meeting.

Much of this may be inevitable and may even be a sign of vitality and enthusiasm. Perhaps, however, there is a case for a Moderator being on the alert for any need that may arise to remind those over whom he or she is presiding exactly whose business it is on which they are engaged. It is difficult to see how interrupting the proceedings for prayer on any regular basis could seem other than contrived. However, breaking off for prayer is not unknown, and can be exactly what is required at a particular moment. A Moderator is appointed, as much as anything, to be the minister in holy things to the court. Any Moderator, therefore, should feel free to exercise that ministry at any stage between the constitution and the close of any meeting.

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