

CONCORDIA THEOLOGICAL MONTHLY

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HOMILETICS

OCULI, THE THIRD SUNDAY IN LENT

March 1

Worship Supplement: Form of the
Intercession for Lent (pp. 35—36)

Lent is the favorable time, just as the Intercession suggests—but for *what* has been accented in different ways in the church. Special services, special sermons, devotional series have accented Lent as a time for special meditation on the Passion and death of our Lord Jesus Christ. This intercession is specific about the reason for that meditation. It calls Lent the favorable time to pray "for ourselves and for the Church throughout the world, that God restore us, through true repentance, to the holiness to which we have been called in Christ Jesus." In the final petition we are led to ask the Lord God, "Look mercifully upon our penance; grant that your Church, cleansed of sin, may approach Easter with spiritual joy."

The first meaning of "penance" is given as "an act of self-abasement, mortification, or devotion performed to show sorrows or repentance for sin." It is a favorable time for all of us deliberately to humble ourselves, deliberately to put to death desires and deeds that are clearly of the old man, and deliberately to voice in our devotion to our God the desire for restoration through true repentance to the holiness to which we have been called in Christ Jesus. It is clearly God who must restore us through true repentance, but it is our penance that is clearly the *Point*.

Our *Problem* is evident in our reluctance to take seriously the Epistle's challenge to "be imitators of God, as beloved children" (Eph. 5:1-9). We do not want to walk in love, as Christ did in love to us, nor to give ourselves up as Christ did, an offering to God. We lurk. We sulk. We admit our nakedness and grab the broadcloth of church member-

ship to follow afar off; but when we are confronted with the reality of "the wrath of God upon the sons of disobedience" and what that demands of sons of God, we flee. When penance confronts us with its demand to stand by the Lord, we abandon the sheet and flee in our nakedness. We do not want to be Christlike. We do not want to be holy. We just want to be saved.

We seek *Power* from God, but not only to live in a static state of forgiven-ness, but for true repentance, for true turned-around living. In His mercy He continually forgives our flightiness. What God did in Christ Jesus was done because He knows we are so wavering, so torn, still so fond of the leeks and the onions of Egypt. But what our Lord did was done to change our way of living, to change it all the way. "He who is not with Me is against Me" (The Gospel: Luke 11:14-28). He came not only to mop up the spilled milk but to fill up our every morning with spiritual calcium for our Christian backbones and to deepen the cream lines of our lives. He came to give us life more abundant, to give us life "with Him."

Would we not all prefer to stand firmly at the cross with Him, confessing that His death was for us and that we draw our life from Him? Would we not all prefer to join His dying to sin, earnestly desiring to be consistent with St. Paul, who cries, "How can we who died to sin still live in it?" (Rom. 6:2). Would we not all prefer early Easter morning to walk with all His disciples to the grave we know will be empty with the spiritual joy that comes to those who know "all who are led by the Spirit of God are sons of God"? (Rom. 8:14). What a good way to stride toward Easter!

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LAETARE, THE FOURTH SUNDAY IN LENT
March 8

Worship Supplement: Hymn 725: My Song
Is Love Unknown

Text: John 6:48-51

We have been spared one temptation because Jesus Christ no longer works obvious miracles among us and no longer visibly displays His presence among us. We are no longer tempted to make Him king by force. But the more terrible temptation is still confronting us, that we fail to recognize Him as "the prophet who is to come into the world" and fail to acknowledge that He is the Prophet who has come and is present and is King in the world. We are not so much tempted to think that it was Moses "who gave the bread from heaven." But we are terribly apt to forget that it is the Father of Jesus Christ "who gives the true bread from heaven." A diet of manna lasts only until it is the natural time to die. Refreshment received from the bread of life lasts through the dying time, lets us live while we keep breathing, sustains our life while we stop breathing, and brings us into that eternal life that is not determined by the lungs. "A man may eat of it and not die."

What a tragedy if we let the bread and circuses and washing machines and talking and seeing machines be our manna and die trying to live. What a tragedy if we fail on this "refreshment Sunday" to *recognize the love that gives life*, to eat the bread of life. That love is so incomprehensible as to be called by the hymn writer "love unknown," even as he defines it—"my Savior's love to me."

Point:

This congregation, recognizing the love that gives life from the Father in the Son through the Spirit, now, in this service, while

we sit down in orderly rows at our Lord's command, may take in His flesh offered for the life of the world and live.

Problem:

Obviously, if a person cannot distinguish between manna that permits death and the bread of life, which produces living, he is in a bad way. If the love of God is unknown, how can a person become "lovely"? Not only are the results equally fatal when a man knows the difference—when he recognizes the true bread but neglects to eat—but the results are especially tragic. (John 6:53, 60-61, 64, 66, 70-71; cf. stanzas 2 and 3 of the hymn)

Remember the quick "temper potential" in the back seat of the family car when you are traveling the highway, trying to postpone dinnertime in an effort to be "making time"? Any little thing can make tempers flare. Check out the causes of our temper tantrums—congregational, family, personal. Are they due to our diet—life's husks, shells, and straw rather than Christ, the Bread of life? Loveless instead of "lovely" (stanza 1). Selfish rather than selfless. Complaining instead of complementing one another in love. We'd sooner fight than forgive; rather than rejoice in the joy of others, we ruin it. The seriousness of all this is greater than God's frown, wrathful as it justly is. His is a frown of concern. He sees us wasting away, stuffing ourselves and dying.

Power:

Now eat this! Christ, "our Friend indeed," broke His life like bread for us, spent His life for our need. It is incredible that men could thirst for His death and cry, "Crucify!" But they did. We do if we "ourselves displease" at what He offers us of Himself. But He who performed such "sweet injuries" to men while living with them,

cheerful "to suffering goes" that we might be free.

"This is my Friend,
In whose sweet praise
I all my days
Could gladly spend."

JUDICA, THE FIFTH SUNDAY IN LENT

March 15

Worship Supplement: A Service of Prayer and Preaching, III (pp. 106—109)

After the "Act of Adoration" in this service there is a single-word rubric: *Silence*. It is printed in italics. It is important and should be noted, that type says. No indication is given whether it is a "shall" rubric or a "may" rubric. It might be a command. Might it not for us all be an inevitable fact? If we know the God we adore, we will be struck silent because we are what we are. But what follows that silence will be the actual revelation of ourselves. What begins to happen in that silence will be the tip-off to what will follow and to what we in ourselves really are. Is it possible that ours could be a sullen silence? Could we be saying the Introit in RSV language but with the overtones of demonstrators picketing the office of the President of the universe, "Vindicate me, O God — You'd better vindicate me"? Is it possible that ours could be an empty silence? Could it be that after all we know He has done for us, all for which we adore Him, we could just sit there, not even thinking, certainly not following through? Are we so silent that we are not even ready to call Him greater than father Abraham, even though we are too apathetic to accuse Him of operating with demonic power?

If an approach to the *Problem* such as this were to be taken, it would be most useful to follow the permissive rubric and preach the sermon immediately after the opening hymn. This would not only permit the congregation to express in prayer

the content of the sermon's *Point* in the sequence of its structure, but would also make possible an underscoring of the repeatedly forgotten fact that we Christians must *do* worship. We must realize our sinfulness and the vital necessity of confession—but even more, we must do it. And the same "even more" applies to the other three of this "four-part harmony of worship": *adoration, thanksgiving, and supplication*. But the *Point* suggested for this Sunday would be to move the congregation, in honest self-confrontation, to acknowledge with contrition before God the actual state of affairs in their Christian living, that the offering of Christ might purge them from dead works to serve.

The first section of the *Presentation* might put into words "our contrite sounds in silence," and make specific to the needs of the parish the phrases of "An Act of Contrition": our slowness to learn, failure to follow, reluctance to bear the cross; the poverty of our worship, neglect of fellowship and the means of grace, our hesitating witness, our evasion of responsibility, and imperfect stewardship; our failure to share love, our thoughtless judgments and hasty condemnation, our grudging forgiveness and unwillingness to be reconciled.

The second section would supply the *Power* to move the hearer to both contrition and the purging from dead works that make serving the living God possible. The final plea of the Act of Confession might serve as the sequence—"steadfast love, abundant mercy" and "blot out, wash us, cleanse us, create in us." The materials from the propers can supply content, particularly the epistle. All should be proclaimed in the present tense situation of our *doing* of worship. We are in the time of rejoicing to see Christ's day. He did do, has done all that was necessary, and now He does, is, washing, cleansing, creating in us! "Remember!" in the Sacrament—all is brought into present reality.

Now "let us adore and confess and thank and supplicate."

Another approach to the use of this service is suggested in the "four-part harmony" phrase. The *Point* might be the balanced worship life; the *Problem*, the way the worship of self gets in the way of the worship of God; the *Power*, the offering of Christ Himself to turn us from self to God. When we are facing Him we worship in the true balance of our adoration, confession, thanksgiving, and supplication. Once again, the propers supply Biblical material.

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PALMARUM, THE SIXTH SUNDAY IN LENT
March 22

Worship Supplement:

Offertory for Passiontide (p. 31)

Central Idea:

Offertory is a word that alerts us to our opportunity to present before God gifts, praise and thanks, ourselves—to live life in an offertory style. But "offertory" is ultimately a "responsive" word that describes our response to God's approach to men as He comes offering Himself, His gifts, His promises.

Point:

I would like to get the congregation to receive God's gifts as model and power for their own offertory style of life.

Problem:

Men are so impressed and so protective of their "own resources" that they have little regard for a God who gives.

Power:

"God so loved the world that He gave . . ." A. That God should even care about our offering is a great mystery. That He should desire and want such offering is an even

greater mystery. What, after all, do we have that He should desire? God certainly doesn't have any need which only our offering can satisfy. He is the Creator of the universe. From Him are all things. He is the giver of every good and perfect gift. Anything that any Christian has to offer to anyone, not to mention God, comes first of all from the hand of the generous giver God. We can only give such gifts to God as we have first received from Him. That we want to give at all is evidence of His great gift of a changed heart. We like to think of what we have as the result of our effort and skill. We balance *our* account and take stock of *our* resources. And we cling to what is *ours*. We are not givers, not offerers by our nature. Giving is a grace, a gift. And the fact that our offerings are desired and received, the fact that our gifts have any meaning at all in the eyes of God, is in itself a gift of God.

B. We give because God gives. The stance of the church is an offertory stance because God's stance is an "offering" stance. From cover to cover the Scriptures tell us of God's open-door and open-handed policy with men. From birth to death man's history is one of receiving. God in His wealth constantly comes to us in our poverty. He gives; we receive.

C. His best gift was and continues to be the person and ministry of His Son, Jesus Christ. It is not the Father's nature to hold back. He comes at us with the best He has. His best, His Son, gave His all for us. His life and ministry were a life and ministry of total availability for men. Jesus Christ put Himself at our disposal. In His every relationship with people He offered precisely what was needed. Love, understanding, forgiveness, healing, judgment, acceptance, life were all gifts from His hands. God's "offering" stance reached its climax when Jesus rode up to Jerusalem in poverty. And in His Son's resurrection from the dead, the giver God

gave His best gift, the gift of life itself and the assurance that the flow of gifts would never stop.

D. So we receive what God has to offer. And because it is His nature to give, it is now our nature to give. His style of life is now baptismally and eucharistically ours. We go to the altar to receive the gifts of God in order that we may be able to offer ourselves to Him. We go to the altar of God to offer our public praise and thanksgiving for gifts received. We go to the altar of God so that we might there be empowered to share as God shares, to give as He gives, so that we might be as available to others as He is to us.

MAUNDY THURSDAY

March 26

Worship Supplement:

The Prayer of Thanksgiving, III
(pp. 46—47)

Central Idea:

Thanking God is no small matter.

Point:

I would like to get the congregation to pray "The Prayer of Thanksgiving, III" as a starter for a life of thanksgiving.

Problem:

Men are inclined to feel that a pious, polite speech will get the job of thanking God done.

Power:

Jesus' ministry for us was a total ministry, one that totally alters the life of those who know and love Him. It is a ministry that continues to be effective in many ways, not the least of which is His offering of Himself in the Holy Communion. We receive Him in order to be made thankful and because we are thankful.

A. We give thanks "to you because you have counted us worthy to stand before you and to serve you." That is why we stand before

You, God. But there is more to it than that. And that "more" is the answer to the question: Why did God count us worthy to stand before Him and serve Him?

B. The answer to that question is in "The Prayer of Thanksgiving, III." God counts His people worthy to stand before Him and to serve Him because He, in the person of His "beloved Servant, Jesus Christ," has stood before us and has served us. Jesus' incarnation, His life-and-death ministry, and His victory over the enemy is God's stance of service to men.

C. This has been made particularly evident by Christ through His presence in the blessed Sacrament of Holy Communion. In this meal Christ stands before His people as their beloved Servant. He is the Host. He, the Celebrant. He, the Server. His ministry is a "for you" ministry, a ministry for us. And He, the Servant, serves up Himself. In bread and wine, body and blood, all that Jesus Christ is and ever will be is given to us, His baptized people. When we stand before Him who stands before us and receive what He has to give, we say Yes to Him, Yes to his ministry of salvation, Yes to all those who are His. And in those yeses is the beginning of our living thanks.

D. In the action of this meal of communion is the possibility and the power that God might "gather into one . . . all . . . who partake." Through communion with Christ we receive communion with His people. At the table of God we are strengthened and preserved in the true faith to life everlasting. Christ fills us with His Holy Spirit for the confirmation of the faith in the truth. And in this eucharistic feast we offer our praise to God through Jesus Christ. Our reception of Christ's gifts is the best thanks we can offer. And just as our reception is corporate — for He gives Himself that we might be the people of God — so our thankful response is corporate. We offer the thanks we should in words and lives *together*.

E. And not far down the line from that highest act of praise and thanksgiving is the stance and the service which we through Christ offer toward others. Because of God's service we stand as servants to others. In so doing we stand before God and serve God because He has counted us worthy so to do.

Material supplied by
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EDITOR'S NOTE: *The two items which follow were written with Good Friday and Holy Saturday in mind, but they are capable of more general application in the worship life of Christian congregations.*

GOOD FRIDAY

March 27

Worship Supplement:

A Form of Private Confession and Absolution
(p. 54)

Point:

Confession and absolution, once a common and much-cherished practice in the church, has fallen into lack of use and disfavor, especially in the more recent history of the Lutheran Church. This is the case in spite of the Biblical authorization to the ordained ministers of the church to bind and to loose, to forgive and to withhold forgiveness, and in spite of the demonstrable wholesomeness and healing powers of mutual burden sharing. I would hope that by means of this sermon we might be able to help create an atmosphere in parish life and in pastor-parishioner relationships more conducive to the return of this practice of private confession and absolution to frequent and fruitful use. Basic in this atmosphere must be a sense of mutual trust between and among God's people, a love for each other which humbly accepts responsibility for being the brother's keeper, a recognition of the pastor's role in exercising the power of the keys and in forgiving sins to the repentant, and a lively, active con-

fidence in the strength of forgiveness to mend people's broken lives. (Also the practical details of the time, place, and procedure for utilizing this form and receiving the blessing of absolution must be made clear.)

Problem:

The main problem lying behind the loss of the practice of private confession and absolution is the growing reluctance of people to uncover their sin before others. This reluctance has its roots in:

1. the natural self-righteousness which lurks within the human heart, even the most Christian heart, which makes us all compulsive perfectionists who keep hoping against hope that, after all is said and done, our acceptance by God and man depends on our goodness (hence the almost neurotic attempt to hide our flaws and mistakes from others).

2. an intensive fear and anxiety about personal sin which prompts us to attempt escape by means of ignoring sin, covering it up, hiding it from self and others, thinking that perhaps by and by it will all blow over and go away.

3. the anti-Roman Catholic syndrome in the Lutheran Church which considers private confession and absolution some kind of evil, something less than the pure religion, simply because it is too "Catholic" (and of course also because of past and present abuses of the practice).

4. a common misunderstanding of the role of love in pastor-with-parishioner relations ("I don't want to bother him with my problems").

Power:

We share a relationship with Christ Jesus . . .

1. who by His own perfection and by becoming victim to the sudden explosive uncaging of all the world's "hidden" flaws and

mistakes makes it unnecessary for us to win acceptance, to prove our worth, to look good.

2. who forgives all sin — also that which causes us the most fear and anxiety; His forgiveness makes for peace; in peace we can be honest with one another.

3. who gives His church the power to forgive sins and a ministry to exercise that power.

4. who is always present among His people to inspire in them a mutual love and care which makes burden bearing and confession-absolution a joyful and fruitful involvement in real life.

Biblical Texts:

Much of the material in the Epistle to the Ephesians with its concepts of unity, fellowship, active love, edification, function of ministry, weaponry against the evil one.

Ps. 51 (quoted in the Form) — emphasis on God's acceptance in mercy. This we also demonstrate and practice one to another in the church.

Matt. 16:13-19 — confession of faith in the Christ leads to the practice of forgiveness. Basically there is no other creed than "I believe in the forgiveness of sins" — this is "true religion."

Matt. 18:18-20; John 20:22-23.

The Gospel for Good Friday.

HOLY SATURDAY

March 28

Worship Supplement:

An Evening Service — Vespers (pp. 85—99)

Point:

By this sermon I would endeavor to help the congregation see the special, unique quality of evening worship: a time for recall of God's judgment and mercy discernible in the past day, a time for bringing to the Lord as our reasonable worship our sorrows and

our joys, our guilt and thanksgiving, our recollections of today and our hope for tomorrow. My particular resource would be the structure and the content of the evening service itself. (While this material draws on the Holy Saturday environment, it is not specifically seasonal in accent and could be helpfully used at any evening service.)

Problem:

1. A recollection of the day past brings us face to face with failure, sorrow, disappointment, with sin in the specific grinding away of time spent in the family circle, at work, in the neighborhood, and so forth. It would be easy for us to avoid this face-to-face encounter, to ignore the "unpleasanties" of the day, to bury all the bad in the crowded grave of tomorrow's yesterday — just fall asleep and call it a day! But the corpses of this grave have a way of reviving some future day to haunt us again and rob us of our peace.

Resources: penitential psalm; Our Father ("forgive," "time of trial").

Holy Saturday's silence, gloom, death, and (superficially) defeat.

2. A recollection of the day past brings us face to face with success, joy, achievement, good. It would be easy to savor all this as personal accomplishment and proof of our worth and to forget or ignore the hand of God in all this.

Resources: Song of Mary, Our Father ("daily bread").

Power:

We worship to hear Good News — the good news that Jesus Christ is Lord of day and night, of failure and success, of sin and forgiveness. That means:

1. the bad of the day past is forgiven and sanctified and the darkness of the night ahead is penetrated by shafts of His grace.

2. the good of today has been a demonstration of His power and mercy and tonight "He giveth His beloved sleep."

3. there will always be a tomorrow because our Savior is Lord—either a string of earthly tomorrows, each controlled by the Lord of grace and care, or the final bright daybreak into the final “tomorrow,” whose light and joy and unmixed pleasure never end.

Resources: Our Father (“Your kingdom come”; Creed; Song of Mary). Holy Saturday: tomorrow is Easter; it’s always Easter tomorrow — a new day of life, victory, peace.

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**THE FEAST OF THE RESURRECTION OF OUR
LORD**

March 29

Worship Supplement:

The Prayer of thanksgiving, II (p. 46)

Today we remember a resurrection. It is the resurrection of the Son of God, and it is worth remembering because it means that He whom we love lives. Equally important, it is worth remembering because His living means that we too live, now and forever.

We also remember a death. The “Lord of heaven and earth” of His “tender love for mankind gave His only Son, Jesus Christ, to take our nature upon him and to suffer death on the cross for our redemption.” It is worth remembering, because by that death we have been given life, now and forever.

Which do we remember most — the death or the resurrection? Take a small sampling of our living — two days. Which is the more typical of our realization of our relation with God — Good Friday or Easter? Take a small sample of our activity — participation in the celebration of Holy Communion. Could anyone by observing our faces, if he had no other knowledge of what day it was, tell whether it was Good Friday or Easter? Faces are notoriously difficult to control, and none of us is totally responsible for his own. Make

the question larger: Can people who observe our day-by-day living tell we are remembering the whole work of redemption, both the dying and the rising again? Jesus Christ gave us the sacrament of His body and blood to help us remember. The church has called it the Eucharist to remind us our remembering ought to be full of thanks. This “Prayer of Thanksgiving” is one of the forms by which Christians have expressed this thanksgiving in their celebration of the Sacrament. As we do all these things, “remembering His whole work of redemption,” we are enabled to live our whole lives as “sacrifices of praise and thanksgiving.”

The *Point* has been phrased in that last sentence by taking the beginning and the ending of the fourth paragraph of the Prayer of Thanksgiving.

The *Problem* could be illustrated by reflection on the fact that the celebration of the Eucharist often presents a picture of a funeral. Questions raised about how often a person should receive the Sacrament and about what Holy Communion “does for us” indicate a certain amount of misunderstanding. But Christian lives lived somberly, or even gloomily as if Jesus Christ were still dead, or even worse, had not died to redeem us from our sin may indicate deeper problems. Some may not believe that what our Lord did He did for us and that all has been done. Some may, like Ananias and Sapphira, be holding back part of the price that they claimed to have paid. The attitudes and practices that indicate an unbalanced view of the Eucharist may indicate an even deeper misunderstanding of the relationship with God in Christ. And that misunderstanding may indicate a rejection of the life of God and a refusal to live for God.

The *Power* inheres in the fact that in Christ’s sacrifice we have been brought into perfect union with our Father. Through the Sacrament we are given the offered body and blood and receive “forgiveness of sin,” which

is a *condition*, totalling out as "life and salvation." Just as it is not sufficient to talk about going to the altar to receive the Sacrament, there is more to be done than to talk about what was achieved by Christ's coming to earth and going to the cross as a sacrifice. We remember all that He has done, "His whole work of redemption," and thus bring it again into a present reality for us. As we say it in words into the ears of the hearers, the Word accomplishes that for which God sends it, as surely as the Word accomplished

His purpose when He became flesh. God put Himself into the action of giving us life. God Himself stood with us, so that if we were going to refuse His life we would have to say it to His face. He continues His presence among us, showing us that He lives and telling us that through every day He goes before us. As we hear and eat and drink and follow, we shall see Him.

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