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OFTEN ASKED
BY A NEWCOMER
INTO A LUTHERAN PARISH



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INTO A LUTHERAN PARISH



By

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INTRODUCTION

When the average person comes into a Lutheran church, he is usually impressed by the reverence and deep spirituality of the service. He feels that he has come into a house of God where the presence of God is realized. But he is often puzzled by certain things he sees and hears as, for example, worshippers crossing themselves, the pastor wearing eucharistic vestments, the chanting by celebrant, deacon, subdeacon, choir, and congregation, the stately hymns sung by the people, and the like. Since these things are different from what they did where he came from, the visitor is inclined to regard them as un-Lutheran or "catholic" in the sense of Roman Catholic. This reaction is quite natural. People usually dislike the unfamiliar, simply because it is unfamiliar. But if they are open minded and devout, they will welcome and seek information about these things rather than reject and condemn them. And that is the reason for this pamphlet. Its purpose is to answer some of the questions frequently asked by a newcomer into a Lutheran parish.

Many of the ceremonies mentioned in this pamphlet are no longer commonly used in all Lutheran parishes. They are, therefore, to be regarded as ideals or things to be striven for in the improvement of the liturgical life of the parish. That is also the reason why they need to be explained. But they are not innovations, and those who seek to restore them are not innovators. The innovators are those who brought into the Lutheran Church sectarian and unliturgical programs and practices, and not those who seek to retain and restore the true rites and ceremonies of the Universal Christian Church.

The Lutheran Church is a liturgical Church. This means that she has retained the liturgy. The liturgy is properly the Holy Communion Service of which the sermon is one part. But the term liturgy includes also all other worship services of the Universal Church, as well as the traditional rites (order of services), ceremonies (actions, music, symbols, Church Year), and physical properties (building, altar, vessels, vestments) used in the performance of these services. These rites, ceremonies, and physical properties are not in themselves worship, but they are the inevitable companions of worship.

All churches have some kind of rites and ceremonies. These are liturgical if they are expressive of the worship of the Universal Church. They are unliturgical if they express no more than personal, sectarian, and public devotion. The rites and ceremonies of the Lutheran Church are liturgical. They are an evidence of her link with the past, especially with the Western branch of the Universal Christian Church. They are a rich and precious heritage. To appreciate this heritage, the Church must constantly explain it to her members, defend it, and use it.

PAUL H. D. LANG

Questions Often Asked By a Newcomer Into a Lutheran Parish



Why is the Lutheran Church a liturgical church?

At the time of the sixteenth century Reformation, Martin Luther and his followers did not break with the Holy, Catholic, and Apostolic Church. They rejected only that which was contrary to the Holy Scriptures, but reaffirmed all the doctrines of the Church Universal, and retained all the rites and ceremonies and customs (including music, vestments, furnishings, etc.) which were not in conflict with God's Word. Their idea was not to start a new Church, but to reform or purify the existing Church and to keep everything that was good and salutary.

This is why it is permissible in saying the Creeds to state, "I believe in One, Holy, *Catholic*, and Apostolic Church." This does not mean *Roman Catholic*. It does mean that our Church embraces her historic heritage, and is self-consciously a part of the Universal Church of all ages and places.

But this was not the idea of other reformers. Many of these sought to discard everything they did not like in the existing Church as "popery," including much that was good and pure in itself. Their misguided zeal knew no bounds. They destroyed altars, vestments, pictures, statues, carvings, and reduced the House of God to a bare meeting hall. Music, the sign of the Cross, the Church Year, and many other ancient and laudable usages were condemned, simply because some people wanted something new.

Now, while Lutherans did not go along with this sectarian idea in the beginning, they were influenced by it later on. Especially in the Eighteenth and Nineteenth Centuries, the Lutheran Church suffered from the influence of non-Lutherans, Pietists, and rationalists.

It was only in the last part of the Nineteenth Century that Lutheranism began to recover her heritage. The recovery since then has been slow, but more and more Lutherans are awakening to an appreciation of old Lutheran traditions. The parishes in which there has been a revival do not criticize and condemn or look down upon other Lutheran churches or individuals. They regard externals as matters of liberty in the true Lutheran spirit. But they do not regard the forms of worship as useless and of little account. Just as good parents want their children to have good table manners, so our heavenly Father wants His children to follow "good manners" in their life and worship. Anyone who reads about the majestic, the colorful, and beautiful worship God prescribed in the Old Testament must come to the conclusion that He is pleased with worship that is full of beauty. He has not prescribed any form of worship in the New Testament, but He has told us to "prove all things and to hold fast that which is good." And St. Paul urges, "Whatsoever things are lovely, whatsoever things are of good report . . . think on these things." That which is good and beautiful is always good and beautiful. Times and customs do not change this. But people change in their recognition and appreciation of the good and beautiful. That's why, for instance, parents have to teach their children good manners and schools give courses in music appreciation.



Why don't all Lutherans have the same customs?

The Lutheran Church lives by the principle that there must be liberty in all such things as are neither commanded nor forbidden by God in the Holy Scriptures. She professes in her Formula of Concord: "We believe, teach and confess also that no church should condemn another because one has less or more external ceremonies not commanded by God than the other, if otherwise there is agreement among them in doctrine and all its articles, as also in the right use of the Holy Sacraments, according to the well-known saying,

'Disagreement in fasting does not destroy agreement in faith.'" Anyone acting contrary to this principle is either misinformed or lacks the true Lutheran spirit. It is not necessary in Christian life and worship that all should express themselves in the same way nor that the same usages should be followed in every parish. But unity in faith and the exercise of Christian love and tolerance are necessary; "charity (love) suffereth long and is kind; charity envieth not; charity vaunteth not itself; is not puffed up, doth not behave itself unseemly, seeketh not her own, is not easily provoked, thinketh no evil; rejoiceth not in iniquity, but rejoiceth in the truth."—(1 Corinthians 13: 4-6).



Doesn't a liturgical parish overemphasize externals?

To the average person it may seem as though externals are overemphasized because the externals are the things he notices. The average person judges a church by its externals, by what he sees, rather than what he hears. Of course, he shouldn't; he should judge a church by its doctrines and not its customs. But since he does it anyhow, we shall try to make the position of a liturgical Lutheran parish very clear.

Externals are not the essentials nor the objectives of a liturgical parish. What the liturgical parish stands for is the preaching of the Word of God in all its truth and purity and the administration of the Sacraments according to their institution by Christ. The Church's objective is to make God the real center in the life and worship of its members, individually, in the family, and in the parish.

For that reason the emphasis in a liturgical parish is on Bible study and the use of the Means of Grace; the restoration of the Holy Communion Service to its proper place as the chief service every Sunday and holy day; the restoration of a greater appreciation of Holy Baptism and its meaning in the ongoing life of a Christian; the restoration of the salutary use of Private Absolution; the restoration of the study of the Church's Confessions for the fortification of our people's faith and for their guidance in the complex world in which they are living; the restoration of the Christian training of the children, first of all by pious parents in the home and then by the Church; the

restoration of the Church's daily prayer services and the open church for use as the House of Prayer; the restoration of the rites, ceremonies, and customs (including music and the other Christian arts) which are our precious heritage; and all this for the glory of God and the sanctification of many in time and eternity.



Why all this formality?

Worship must, above all, be genuine. "God is a Spirit; and they that worship Him must worship Him in spirit and in truth." Worship that does not come from the heart and does not conform to the truth is valueless and worse than valueless.

But at the same time, since man is not pure spirit but embodied spirit—since he has both a body and a soul—his worship must necessarily also be external. It is through external actions and symbols that worship expresses itself. Nor is that all. Externals are not only expressive; they are also impressive. They react on the mind in such a way as to stimulate devotion, hold attention, and develop good habits of worship.

There is a great deal of difference between individual and corporate worship. Individual or private worship can be more or less informal, that is, without prescribed forms and ceremonies. But corporate worship must always be formal. By "formal" we mean that certain prescribed rites and ceremonies have to be followed. It is like playing music. When an individual plays by himself, he can play anything in any way he likes. But when he plays in an orchestra, he has to play prescribed music in unison with others. Christ expressed the difference when He spoke to His disciples about prayer. For corporate worship He prescribed a set or formal prayer, but not for private worship. He said, "When thou (singular) prayest, go into thy closet and speak to thy Father, which seeth in secret. . . . But when ye (plural) pray . . . pray ye: Our Father . . ."

And so, it is not a question of being formal or informal. For all churches, even the so-called informal, must have some kind of form. But the question is, What forms shall we follow? Shall we use the forms that have come down to us in the Church of the ages, the forms that have stood the test of time, the

forms that are hallowed by the Apostles, the martyrs, and saints; or shall we follow our own individualistic likes and dislikes? We are here confronted not only with a matter of loyalty, but with a choice between three things: the bad, the good, and the best. We Lutherans are a liturgical church. It is our official policy to follow the best forms and to restore them where they have been discarded. For we feel that nothing but the best is good enough in Christian life and worship. We are not satisfied with whimsical likes and dislikes on the part of individuals and groups, but we rely on the scholarly research and on the judgment of those who are authorities in the field of liturgy. You will notice that a liturgical Lutheran Church follows the rites and forms prescribed in the Lutheran service books.



Why do some people partake of Holy Communion every Sunday?

From the beginning of the Church the Holy Communion Service was celebrated on every Lord's Day and sometimes every day, as we learn from chapter two of the Acts of the Apostles. That was also the common practice of our Lutheran Churches in the Sixteenth Century. Dr. Luther said that Holy Communion should be celebrated every Sunday and feast day and, if some desire it, every day. We have Our Lord's command for frequent communion, and we have His precious promise that in it He bestows on every believer the benefits and blessing of His redemptive work. Since that is true, little can be said against the use of the Lord's Supper every Sunday.

The basic Augsburg Confession of the Lutheran Church states in Article XXIV:

"Forasmuch as the Mass (the Holy Communion Service) is such a giving of the Sacrament, we hold one communion every holy-day, and, if any desire the Sacrament, also on other days, when it is given to such as ask for it. And this custom is not new in the Church; for the Fathers before Gregory made no mention of any private Mass, but of the common Mass they speak very much. Chrysostom says that the priest stands daily at the altar, inviting some to the Communion and keeping back others."

Likewise, the Apology of the Augsburg Confession states in Article XXIV:

"At the outset we must again make the preliminary statement that we do not abolish the Mass, but religiously maintain and defend it. For among us Masses are celebrated every Lord's Day and on the other festivals in which the Sacrament is offered to those who wish to use it, after they have been examined and absolved. And the usual public ceremonies are observed, the series of lessons, of prayers, vestments, and other like things."



Why is the chalice used in Holy Communion?

Without exception the Word of God speaks of the cup in the singular for the celebration of the Holy Communion. In the Words of Institution, Christ says that all should drink of the one cup and we are told that they all drank of the one cup. This cup is called the cup of the Lord.

This terminology of the Holy Scriptures has a liturgical and symbolical significance. The Holy Communion is a sacramental means of participating in the communion of the Body of Christ, and it is the purpose of the liturgy to express this fact. One way of expressing it is by the use of the one cup, the chalice. The chalice is a sign and symbol of the communion in the Body of Christ.

In the history of the Universal Church, the traditional use of the chalice has come down to us from the Apostles. It was retained in the sixteenth century Reformation, and is still the use of the Roman Church, the Greek Orthodox Church, the Anglican Church, the Episcopal Church, and the overwhelming majority of Lutherans throughout the world.

The use of individual glasses is a sectarian innovation which was started in Germany about 100 years ago by extreme Rationalists who no longer believed in the Holy Scriptures and in Christ's presence in the Holy Sacrament. The reason for this innovation was the scientific discovery of bacteria and the fear of germs.

Fortunately, individual glasses are no longer used in any of the Lutheran Churches of Germany. But the custom has spread to America where it is in vogue among the sectarians who do not believe in the Real Presence in the Holy Communion, and where even some Lutheran congregations have inadvisedly adopted it.

In the celebration of the Holy Communion Service we are confronted with something far higher than ordinary eating and drinking. In ordinary eating and drinking we have reasons for an attitude against drinking from the same cup and for using individual drinking cups. But Holy Communion is not ordinary eating and drinking; it is a Sacrament. Our almighty Lord would not say, "Drink ye all of it," and then permit germs to be spread by drinking from this cup. He who is the healer of sickness and whose blood washes away sins can certainly wash away any germs that may be on the chalice. The fact is that no case is on record of anyone ever having been infected by the use of the chalice in Holy Communion. Every year millions go to receive the Blessed Sacrament from the chalice, and this has gone on for more than 1900 years, yet no case of infection is known. Besides, if it were a matter of germs, it can be shown that the usual use of individual glasses is more unsanitary than the chalice.

The chalice is used in the celebration of the Holy Communion Service and not individual glasses or cups because of the liturgical and symbolical significance of the one cup.

In his *Treatise On The Blessed Sacrament*, Dr. Martin Luther says, "To receive . . . this sacrament, then, is to receive a sure sign of this fellowship and incorporation with Christ and all saints . . . Even so St. Paul says: We are all one bread and one body, for we are all partakers of one bread and of one cup." Again, in *The Babylonian Captivity*, he writes, "When the priest elevates the bread and the chalice . . . he shows us also the sign of the testament. Thus the elevation of the bread properly accompanies the demonstrative 'this' in the words, This is my body . . . and in like manner the elevation of the chalice accompanies the demonstrative 'this' in the words, This chalice is the new testament, etc."



Why do some people cross themselves?

The word "some" in this question shows that not all worshippers cross themselves. This is their privilege. But those who cross themselves do so because it is one of the most ancient of Christian customs. The practice probably goes back to apostolic times and was in common use in the Second Century. It is therefore

in no way "Roman Catholic." Christians crossed themselves long before there was a distinctly "Roman" Catholic Church. Crossing oneself is prescribed in Luther's Small Catechism ("In the morning when you rise you shall bless yourself with the holy cross and say:") and it is authorized in many Lutheran service books. In his Large Catechism Dr. Martin Luther recommends the custom of instructing children to cross themselves for the purpose of recalling their divine Protector in moments of danger, terror, and temptation.

Crossing oneself is done by putting the fingers of the right hand to the forehead, to the breast, and to the left and right shoulders, with the words: "In the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Ghost. Amen." By doing this we profess our faith in the triune God and in our redemption through Christ crucified. But it is more than a profession of faith. It is a prayer of thanksgiving or for blessing to God the Father, in the Holy Spirit, through our one and only Mediator, Jesus Christ.

In our daily life we usually cross ourselves upon rising and retiring, at the beginning of prayer and devotions, or as a plea for help in danger and temptation, and as an act of faith at other times by which we express our trust in the grace of God through the Cross of Christ.

In church we usually cross ourselves at the beginning and end of worship and at the following places in the Holy Communion Service: During the opening words, "In the Name of etc.;" at the end of the Absolution; at the beginning of the Introit; at the end of the Gloria in Excelsis; when the Gospel is announced (here a small cross is traced with the right thumb on the forehead, lips, and heart, with the prayer that we may understand the Gospel, profess it, and trust in it); at the end of the Creed; during the Sanctus at the words, "Blessed is He;" after the consecration at "The peace of the Lord;" when we receive the holy Body and precious Blood of Our Lord; when the minister says, "Depart in peace;" and at the end of the Benediction.

The holy Cross is the symbol of our salvation. We were signed with it when we were baptized. It is the sign by which the Church blesses people and things. By using it we become part of the wonderful history of our faith and companions in the company of the saints. It is right that we should make the

sign of the Cross frequently and to glory in it, saying with St. Paul, "God forbid that I should glory save in the Cross of Our Lord Jesus Christ."



Why do some people bow or genuflect to the altar?

It is a very old and proper custom to reverence toward the altar by bowing when entering and leaving the church and when passing before the altar. The altar is a symbol of God's presence in His House, like the flag is a symbol of our country. When the Blessed Sacrament is reserved—and some Lutheran parishes practice reservation—our reverence is expressed by genuflecting (kneeling momentarily on the right knee) or kneeling (on both knees). These are bodily expressions of reverence observed by the Children of God through all the ages. They are done according to the will of God who requires outward as well as inward reverence. When God appeared to Moses in the burning bush, He demanded of Moses not only inward but also outward reverence, saying, "Take off thy shoes from off thy feet, for the ground on which thou standest is holy ground."

In our irreverent age there is a crying need for sincere acts of reverence by Christians. For that reason we also cherish the ancient and laudable custom of bowing at the mention of the holy Name of Jesus, during the words, "Glory be to the Father and to the Son and to the Holy Ghost," in the Gloria Patri, during the "Holy, holy, holy," in the Sanctus, and when the pastor blesses us at the end of the service.

In this connection we might also say something about giving God our best. Visitors in a liturgical parish are often impressed with the attention given to making the House of God and its worship as precious and beautiful as possible. Well, is this not what we should do? If at home we show our honor to those we love by putting on our most festive clothes and setting our tables with candles and flowers and fine linen, how much more ought the Church to dress her ministers in beautiful vestments and deck the altar with candles to show her love for God. According to the very first Commandment we are to give God first place in our life. Surely, then, nothing is too good for the House of God and the worship of God. Besides, in liturgical worship each object, each orna-

ment, each vestment has a meaning and purpose for the glorification of God and the edification of man.



Why do some people kneel?

Before you and I can worship God and take our parts in His worship, it is necessary for us to humble ourselves and confess our sins. This is not hard to understand. And that during this solemn act we should humbly get down on our knees before God is also obvious. Kneeling for confession, for prayer, and for many other acts of worship has always been done by the Children of God and helps us to feel humble and prayerful. We cannot disregard the many statements in the Holy Scriptures which say, "O come, let us worship and bow down, let us kneel before the Lord, our Maker," or the example of Our Lord Himself who in the Garden of Gethsemane fell down on His knees to pray. We should not let sectarian prejudice keep us from getting down on our knees. We can confess our sins sitting down or standing up or lying down, but if we want to make a good confession, then we shall do well to get down on our knees and express to God both with the heart and the body that we have sinned.



Why do some people go to church on weekdays for Matins and Vespers, for Private Absolution, and for Private Prayer?

For Matins and Vespers.

The Church has always recognized the necessity of the daily worship of God. Such worship was also at one time the normal practice in the Lutheran Church. That is why the Lutheran Church retained daily offices, Matins and Vespers. These services were held every day for two and a half centuries in many places, as, for example, in Denmark and other Lutheran lands.

Every sincere Christian, too, recognizes the necessity of daily communion with God. He needs forgiveness of sins every day and receives many favors from God every day, and so he desires pardon and wants to offer gratitude and homage to God daily. This he can do at home. But many devout Christians find it is better to do it in the church, the house of God, the house of prayer.

For Private Absolution.

The need for forgiveness of sins is also the reason why regular provisions should be made in church for the administration of Private Absolution, and why a Christian will want to use this means of grace from time to time. When Our Lord "breathed on His disciples and said unto them, Whosoever sins ye remit, they are remitted unto them, and whosoever sins ye retain, they are retained", He made provisions in His Church for an ordinance of vital importance. The fact that non-Lutheran Protestants have discarded it and that it has come into disuse in the Lutheran Church does not make it less important. The official Lutheran position as stated in her Confessions is that Private Confession and Absolution are to be retained, and Luther even provided a liturgical form for its administration in his Small Catechism ("Pray, Propose to Me a Brief Form of Confession"). Fortunately, this official act of the Church is being restored more and more.

In 1952 the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Hanover, the largest Lutheran body in Germany, voted to reintroduce Private Confession and Absolution according to Lutheran doctrine and practice.

For Private Prayer.

As to keeping the church open for private prayer, here is a statement from a layman's point of view:

"The open door policy practiced by the Roman Catholic and Episcopal churches is a pattern we might well follow. The majority of our Lutheran churches draw back the bolts on their doors only long enough for the congregation to enter, attend and leave the scheduled services. As a house of prayer, we limit the use of our churches to a period of three or four hours per week. I do not believe that there is a vandal lurking behind every bush intent upon slipping through an open door to desecrate our altars. If a perverted mind is intent upon committing such an act, a locked door will not deter him. The spirit of reverence, the peace and quiet, the symbolical furnishings of the church are all conducive to prayer and meditation. In the church, as nowhere else, some can feel a greater and more profound nearness of God. Ferial (daily) visits of the faithful also preach a powerful sermon to those who observe them on their way to and from the church. It will be a blessed day in the life of the parish, the parishioner and the community,

when the church doors stand daily ajar and all are bidden to enter, rest and pray.”



Why are vestments worn by the ministers?

It has been customary in every age and country to invest people of office in distinctive garments. The judge, the soldier, the fireman, the policeman, all have their special gown or uniforms. They are dressed in these garments both to distinguish them for their work and to make them more conscious of their duties. The same thing is true of clergymen.

Vestments are the uniform of the ministers of Christ when they are exercising the function of their ministry. If they wear a clerical collar daily, they do so to show that they are on duty daily.

In the Old Testament God Himself commanded the priest's vestments and specified in every detail their material and shape. It is interesting to note that the basic material was pure white linen, and that some of the vestments were very colorful and elaborate.

In the New Testament God gave no such blueprints. But it was natural that the ministers should wear distinctive garments, especially when celebrating the chief service, the Holy Eucharist. And so the traditional vestments developed. These vestments all have their particular function and significance.

For example, the traditional Holy Communion vestments are:

1. *The alb.* This is a long white linen vestment with narrow sleeves, which is worn over the cassock. It symbolizes purity of heart and life.

2. *The amice.* This is a linen cloth worn about the neck, which was at one time placed on the head, and is a symbol of the helmet of salvation.

3. *The cincture, maniple, and stole.* The cincture holds the alb in place and signifies temperance and chastity. The maniple was originally a handkerchief or napkin and is now fully symbolical, signifying authority. The stole is the special badge of ordination and symbolizes the yoke of service.

4. *The chasuble.* This is the most distinctive Holy Communion vestment. It is put on over the head and is often ornamented with a large cross on the back. It is a symbol of humility, love, and protection against evil.

It is not possible here to describe all the vestments, but your pastor will gladly give you the information on this and other items of Christian life and worship. Some churches arrange for a series of talks on such subjects as: the equipment and ceremonies for the Holy Communion Service, Holy Baptism, Private Absolution, Confirmation, Marriage, Christian burial, and other offices; the Church Calendar; the sign of the Cross; vestments; the Mass; Gregorian chant; church music; hymns; the stations of the Cross; chrism; palms; incense; bells; ashes; pictures and statues; the churching of women; fasting and abstinence; symbolism; architecture; the sanctuary lamp; ember days; praying with uplifted hands; women having their heads covered in church; etc.



Why do some people feel fortunate to belong to a really liturgical parish?

Recently an individual who had received a church bulletin from a liturgical parish wrote the pastor:

"I appreciate your enclosing a copy of your church program which was very interesting. I think your having morning prayer in church daily at 9:30 is a wonderful thing. This is the first time I have ever heard of a Lutheran Church doing this. Wish all did. Also, your two services on Sunday, one of which is Holy Communion. What a comfort it must be to your parishioners to be able to partake any Sunday or every Sunday. May God richly bless your work."

This person saw the advantages of a Lutheran parish in which not only pure Christian doctrine, but also pure Christian rites, ceremonies, and customs are followed, all of which are authorized in Lutheran service books, which unfortunately are ignored in most parishes.

It is, indeed, a wonderful thing to live and worship in a liturgical parish once you realize the significance of the things such a parish stands for. There all life and worship are God-centered, in the Spirit, through Christ, our one-only Redeemer and Mediator. There fellowship with the saints of all ages is a reality. And there Lutheranism is part and parcel of the One Holy Universal Christian and Apostolic Church.

"Give unto the Lord the glory due unto His name: bring an offering, and come before Him: worship the Lord in the beauty of holiness."