

REFORMATION AND REVERENCE

Fall Study Weekend
October 19, 1996
University Lutheran Chapel
Minneapolis, Minnesota

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Article XXIV of the Augsburg Confession states: “Our churches are falsely accused of abolishing the Mass. Actually, the Mass is retained among us and is celebrated with the greatest reverence.”¹ Can the Lutheran Church of today say the same? Yes, most of our churches retain the Mass; but do we celebrate it with the greatest reverence? Sadly one can observe a decided lack of reverence in worship among LC-MS congregations. It is rare nowadays to find a congregation who can boast with the reformers that they too celebrate the Mass with the greatest reverence.

Perhaps you have experienced it. You go to a church on Sunday morning expecting to be edified by the Lord’s Word and Sacrament. But when you walk in the doors, you’ve find yourself not in a real church, but in a pep rally. They hand you some papers at the front door explaining the program for the day. You sit down in your seat and are regaled with emotional and high powered music coming from the band in the balcony or from the so-called praise team in the chancel. Eventually the program itself begins with a few words of encouragement in the so called Confession and Absolution, which really says “I’m OK, you’re OK.” This is followed by an entertaining little children’s message and a high-powered audio visual presentation on how to live life to its fullest by the worship leader. Then the music begins again, pumping you up so that you can go out and face the world - on fire for... um... what was it that you were supposed to be on fire for anyway?

This is the easiest type of irreverence to see: it is irreverence spawned by the Church Growth Movement, about which we have heard so much lately. But it is not only the Church Growthers or Creative Worship crowd who suffer from irreverence. Often its found in Liturgical churches as well. In these churches it is not the Liturgy itself that conveys irreverence, but the attitude and actions of both the pastor and the congregation. This sort of thing usually manifests itself in sloppiness on the part of the pastor while presiding. I’ve seen some pastors meander aimlessly around the chancel while conducting the Service. I’ve seen some stumble through the lessons, showing a lack of preparation. I’ve even seen one picking his nose during the Hymn of the Day. Often times this irreverence in the chancel is done by pastors purposely to affect some sort of casual atmosphere or to convey friendliness. After all, pastors wouldn’t want

to appear like pastors, for that kind of sacerdotalism might turn people away from the church.

I know many such pastors. One in particular explained to me that he wanted to appear as if he were just another member of the congregation. Thus, he often traipsed back and forth in the center aisle during the hymns and sermon, tried to sound super friendly, and even struck up casual conversations during the distribution of Holy Communion. “Hi there Sarah, my that’s a pretty outfit you have on. I’m so glad to see you today.” Now this pastor genuinely believed that this casual atmosphere in worship would further the cause of the Gospel. He didn’t consider that he was behaving irreverently.

It is not only the pastors of the liturgical congregation who behave irreverently. Often times the congregations join right in. An example of this can be found in the practice of passing the peace. This is a wonderful practice taken from the early church in which congregants are to pass the peace of the Lord from one to another, expressing the unity they have as the Body of Christ. However, at most congregations the passing of the peace is nothing less than a social event. Parishioners wander all around the nave shaking hands, greeting their friends and welcoming the visitors. “Hello, how are you? I’m great... are you going to watch the game this afternoon? How are the kids? Good talking with you, I’d better go sit back down.” The pastor, rather than saying “the peace of the Lord be with you always”, may as well have said “take a coffee break... worship will reconvene in five minutes.” Usually these same members who so energetically pass the peace show a marked lack of participation in such things as singing hymns and reciting the creed. They prefer the service to be casual and friendly, not what they would call staunch or solemn or funereal.

But the church is not our living room. It’s not meant to be casual, for casual is nearly the opposite of reverent. Where reverence declares that something meaningful is happening, casualness remarks that nothing of real importance is going on. So why do so many people treat the worship of the Church so casually, so irreverently? There are, I believe, two basic reasons: American Culture and False Theology. The first of these is easy to see. We’re Americans and thus we are by nature laid back and casual. We’d rather talk slang than speak proper English. We’d rather eat at McDonalds than a fine restaurant. And we hate to get dressed up. We would much rather be comfortable and relaxed than formal. This American attitude toward formality has, in recent years, crept into our worship. Where once people came to church dressed only in their finest formal clothing, now they are encouraged to “come as you are” which usually means blue jeans and a sweatshirt. Where we used to attract people through the beauty and power of our liturgy, now we try to attract them with casual seeker services.

This casual attitude, of course, does not come only from the secular side of

America. It also comes from the religious side of America, what I call the American Church Culture. This is a culture whose roots are in the tent rather than the cathedral. It's a culture based on individualism rather than corporate identity in Christ. And it's a culture that is very casual rather than reverent.

There is a good reason why American Church Culture is the way it is. For this culture is founded in American Evangelical doctrine. You see, where we Lutherans believe that Christ is really present in the worship service through His Word and Sacrament, most main line American denominations believe that He is not really present. This flows from the Reformed belief that the finite cannot comprehend the infinite. According to this doctrine, our Lord Jesus Christ could not possibly be really present in bread and wine. For these menial items could not possibly hold His Presence. Likewise, the power of the Holy Spirit could not possibly be conveyed through a spoken word, for language can not possibly express heavenly wisdom. Moreover, Christ Himself could not be possibly be accessed through the pastor, His ambassador. For how can a mere man begin to represent the Son of God or claim to speak with His authority?

At most, therefore, God is only present in worship in a vague spiritual sense to the Calvinist. Thus, it doesn't really matter how you behave in worship, for God is not really present there. If God is not present at the altar, why would you bow to it? If the bread and wine is not Christ's Body and Blood, why bother treating it any differently than the food in the 'fridge at home? And if God is not present in the Church any more than in our living rooms at home, why dress up or spend your time with boring rituals?

On the other hand, if the Almighty God really is present in our worship services, we are going to act differently. If I am approaching God Himself, I'll need to be humble and penitent. If I'm going to hear Christ Himself speaking in the Sermon, I'd better pay attention and listen. If I'm going to eat Christ's true Body and drink His true Blood at Holy Communion, then I'd better be reverent when I approach to receive it. It is God's Divine Presence that makes the worship service different from anything other event we participate in. It is what separates the chancel from the living room. It is what separates baptism from a bubble bath. It is what differentiates a casual conversation from a Sermon. And it is what sets Holy Communion apart from a burger and coke. Luther Reed writes: "Because believers remember the Lord's promise, 'Where two or three are gathered together in my name, there am I in the midst of them,' every assembly of worship is pervaded with solemnity and reverence."²

The Holy Presence of God demands that we be reverent; that we think and act differently than we normally would think and act. The Scriptures clearly teach this. When Moses approached God's presence in the burning bush, what was he instructed to do? He was ordered to show reverence for the Holy ground upon which he stood by removing his shoes (Exodus 3:5). The ground was

made holy by God's presence there, thus Moses had to act differently than normal. When King David was having the Ark of the Covenant transported to Jerusalem, one of His men, Uzzah was killed by the Lord. Why? Because he had acted irreverently, not recognizing the Presence of God in the ark. One of the oxen that was carrying the ark stumbled, so Uzzah reached out to steady it. And because he had dared to touch the ark, He was struck dead. Indeed, the Lord Himself commands that we be reverent in worship because of the His Presence there. Leviticus 19:3 states: "You shall keep My Sabbaths and reverence My sanctuary: I am the Lord." Also Psalm 89:7 states: "God is greatly to be feared in the assembly of the saints, and to be held in reverence by all those around Him." And lest we think that reverence is only required in the Old Testament, the writer to the Hebrews exhorts us: "...serve God acceptably with reverence and godly fear. For our God is a consuming fire." Clearly then, God expects to be greeted with reverence.

This reverential attitude has characterized true Christian worship since the beginning and was held dear by our Lutheran fathers as well. Luther preached in one of his earliest Sermons that: "The fear of God is reverence and the spiritual worship of God... the worship of God in its truest form does not consist in works, however great and holy, but in true and genuine reverence."³ In the Large Catechism, Concerning the Christian's preparation to receive the Sacrament, Luther writes that while the chief preparation is to believe the Word of Christ concerning the Sacrament, it also useful to fast and pray "so that one's body may behave reverently toward the body and blood of Christ."⁴ This attitude of Luther's is reflected in the Formula of Concord which says, concerning the Sacrament: "After the Last Supper, as he was about to begin his bitter passion and death for our sin, in this sad, last hour of his life, this truthful and almighty Lord, our Creator and Redeemer Jesus Christ, selected his words with great deliberation and care in ordaining and instituting this most venerable sacrament, which was to be observed with great reverence and obedience until the end of the world..."⁵ Even at meal-time prayer, Luther exhorts that the Christian show reverence. "The children and members of the household shall go to table reverently, fold their hands and say: The eyes of all... Also, after eating, they shall in like manner, reverently and with folded hands say: Oh give thanks..."⁶

Luther's thoughts concerning reverence in worship can best be summed up with one of his own illustrations. Preaching on the Gospel of John, Luther said: "The following tale is told about a course and brutal lout. While the words 'And was made man' were being sung in church, he remained standing, neither genuflecting nor removing his hat. He showed no reverence, but just stood there like a clod. All the others dropped to their knees when the Nicene Creed was prayed or chanted devoutly. Then the devil stepped up to him and hit him so hard it made his head spin. He cursed him gruesomely and said: 'May hell consume you, you boorish ass! If God had become an angel like me and the

congregation sang: "God was made an angel," I would bend not only my knees but my whole body to the ground. Yes, I would crawl ten ells down into the ground. And you vile human creature, you stand there like a stick or a stone. You hear that God did not become an angel but a man like you, and you just stand there like a stick of wood. Whether this story is true or not, it is nevertheless in accordance with the faith (Romans 12:6). With this illustrative story the holy fathers wished to admonish the youth to revere the indescribably great miracle of the incarnation."⁷

Luther clearly recognized that lack of reverence and humility in God's presence was in reality a display of faithlessness. At the time of Malachi, the priests were chastened for their displays of irreverence. Malachi 6 records the Lord's words to them: "A son honors his father, and a servant his master. If then I am the Father, where is My honor? And if I am a Master, where is My reverence? Says the Lord of hosts to you priests who despise My name." Their irreverence revealed that they not only had little faith in the Lord, but also that they actually despised Him. Professor Kurt Marquart writes: "Slovenly irreverence must be called to repentance, lest priceless evangelical pearls be trampled underfoot by swine."⁸ Why is this? Because irreverence on the part of an individual shows that he or she has no appreciation for the blessings that the Holy Trinity bestows. They neither recognize the Presence of God, the power of God, and the grace of God that are at work in the preaching of the Church and the Sacraments; nor do they care about such. Irreverence is evidence of unbelief and indifference to the Gospel. Therefore it must be done away with in the Church and in the individual Christian.

Which brings us to the question, how should we show reverence to the Lord in worship? What ways best express our reverence for His Real Presence? Reverence must manifest itself in two ways: attitude and action. Paul Lang, in *Ceremony and Celebration*, writes: "God demands reverence. We owe Him reverence. We owe it to Him not only as an inner attitude, but also as an outward expression."⁹ Corporately we are encouraged to be reverent by the very order of the Liturgy. As Melancthon so aptly states in the Augsburg Confession: "nothing contributes so much to the maintenance of dignity in public worship and the cultivation of reverence and devotion among the people as the proper observance of ceremonies in the churches."¹⁰ The historic Liturgy, because it is built upon the reality of Christ's Presence in the preaching of the Word and distribution of the Sacrament, by nature inspires and expresses reverence. Our whole hearted participation in the Liturgy is the primary way that we too can express our reverence for God. By singing our hymns and participating in the prayers and responses of the congregation, we show that we really do appreciate God's Holy Presence and His gifts of grace in Christ. Moreover, we can show reverence by listening attentively to the reading of the lessons and to the sermon, for it is through these words that our Lord Himself speaks to us.

We express our corporate reverence not only by listening and participating in the words and music of the liturgy, but also in liturgical action. Actions such as standing, kneeling, processing, bowing and genuflecting are meant to inspire and express reverence. For this reason we stand at the reading of the Holy Gospel for here Christ comes to us in His Word. On special occasions we may have a Gospel processional which if done properly can not fail but to inspire a reverent attitude in us. Likewise we stand during the doxological verses of hymns in reverent awe over the mystery of the Holy Trinity. We reverently kneel before the Presence of Christ when we receive Him in the Sacrament. Liturgical action is another way we show reverence.

The individual may express reverence through liturgical action as well. These individual actions have fallen into disuse in our own churches out of fear that we might appear “too Catholic” if we do them. Such actions include bowing, genuflecting, and crossing one’s self. It is a great sign of respect and reverence if we bow or genuflect toward the altar when we enter or leave the church, for the altar symbolizes God’s presence there. Likewise, bowing during the doxology at the end of the introits, psalms and canticles gives glory and shows reverence to the Holy Trinity. So also, bowing during the Creed at the words “and was made man” shows our reverence for the miracle of the incarnation of Christ, by which He took on our flesh in order to save us. Concerning this Lang writes: “Bowling and genuflecting are reverences, or when directed toward people, signs of respect. Giving form and expression to inner devotions, reverences help to make our worship meaningful and impressive.”¹¹

Crossing one’s self is a similar act of reverence. This ancient gesture is made by Christians in remembrance of their baptisms and in remembrance of Christ’s suffering and death. Luther, in his Small Catechism, urges Christians to cross themselves. “In the morning, when you get up, make the sign of the holy cross and say: In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Ghost... In the evening, when you go to bed, make the sign of the holy cross and say...” Ancient practice suggests making the sign of the cross during the Liturgy at the Invocation, for we are gathered as baptized Christians, sealed with the sign of the cross in the name of the Father, Son and Holy Ghost; at the Absolution, for we are forgiven in the Triune Name; at the words “and the life everlasting” during the Creed, for we are given eternal life in Baptism; at the words “blessed is He” during the Sanctus, as we prepare for Christ’s coming to us in the Sacrament of His Body and Blood; when receiving the Sacrament at the words “Depart in peace”; and at the Benediction, when the pastor blesses us and sends us out into the world to live out our lives as the baptized people of Christ. Lang says: “It is right that we should make the sign of the cross frequently and to glory in it, saying with Saint Paul, ‘God forbid that I should glory save in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ.’ (Gal. 6:14)”¹²

Likewise, the very architecture of the church can be an expression of a congregation's reverential attitude and can inspire reverence in worship. Wayne Schmidt writes in an article concerning worship space: "Lutheran worship is not entertainment. It is a serious encounter with God that deserves a setting designed to invite and encourage hope, joy, and a spirit of genuine devotion... the place of worship should be a sanctuary where the spirit of reverence prevails and where nothing of what is seen or done detracts from that spirit of reverence."¹³ Luther himself says concerning the arrangement of the chancel: "This has been done, not only for the sake of necessity but also for the sake of solemnity."¹⁴ The way the individual treats the church building and its furnishings should also express a reverent attitude for this is the house in which the Lord comes to us.

In short, if we truly believe that God Himself is present in our worship, then all that we do in worship in attitude and action must be done reverently. While we as a church attempt to recover from the Liturgical chaos that has been plaguing us these past decades we must keep this rule in mind. For the success of liturgical renewal depends upon this. Dr. Arthur Just writes: "The watchwords for our church must be reverence, not relevance, fidelity, not innovation;" and also: "The achievement of [liturgical] renewal requires reverence for the real presence of Christ in our midst and fidelity to the Word by which Christ is made present."¹⁵

We must remember the famous words of Prosper of Aquitaine: "the rule of prayer establishes the rule of belief." If we conduct our worship without reverence as if God was not truly present, eventually we will forget that He is. Hence we would no longer know where to turn for blessing and forgiveness. If, however, we show reverence for the Presence of God in worship we will continue in and be strengthened in the faith that He is Really Present. Thus we always know where to find Him. We will always know where to turn for blessing. For to the faithful, the Presence of God always brings grace and blessing. They come through His Word preached and through His Sacraments given; they come when the church is gathered around these in worship.

If we renew our efforts to be reverent and recognize God's Blessed Presence among us in worship, then we too will be able to boast with our Lutheran fathers: "The Mass is retained among us and is celebrated with the greatest reverence."

Notes:

- 1 Augsburg Confession XXIV:1, *The Book of Concord*, ed. Theodore G. Tappert (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1959) p56.
- 2 Luther D. Reed, *The Lutheran Liturgy* (Philadelphia: Muhlenberg Press, 1947), 4.
- 3 Martin Luther, *What Luther Says*, ed. Ewald M. Plass (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1959), 509.
- 4 Martin Luther, Large Catechism V:37, *The Book of Concord*, ed. Theodore G. Tappert (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1959), 451.
- 5 Formula of Concord, Solid Declaration VII:44, *The Book of Concord*, ed. Theodore G. Tappert (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1959), 577.
- 6 Martin Luther, *Small Catechism*, Ed. Edward W.A. Koehler (Fort Wayne: Concordia Theological Seminary Press, 1981), 14.
- 7 Martin Luther, Seventh Sermon on the Gospel of St. John, in *Luther's Works, Vol. 22*, Ed. Jaroslav Pelikan (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1957) 105-106.
- 8 Kurt Marquart, "Liturgy and Evangelism" in *Lutheran Worship: History and Practice* (St. Louis:Concordia Publishing House, 1993), 63.
- 9 Paul H.D. Lang, *Ceremony and Celebration* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1965), 61.
- 10 Augsburg Confession XXI:6, Tappert, 49.
- 11 Lang, 68.
- 12 Lang, 72-73.
- 13 Wayne Schmidt, "The Place of Worship", in *Lutheran Worship: History and Practice* (St. Louis:Concordia Publishing House, 1993), 175.
- 14 Luther as quoted in Marquart, 63.
- 15 Arthur Just, "Liturgical Renewal in the Parish", in *Lutheran Worship: History and Practice* (St. Louis:Concordia Publishing House, 1993), 25, 31.