



Liturgical Thought

EXPLANATION AND GUIDE TO THE LUTHERAN LITURGY¹

Why does Sunday Divine Service always begin with confession and absolution? Just what is the difference between corporate and private confession and absolution?

While our worship on Sunday morning always begins with the service of confession and absolution, in truth, this is not the beginning of the Divine Service. As our worship ordos (bulletin or folder) indicate, the service of confession and absolution is **actually preparatory** to the Divine Service and is titled **“The Preparation.”** This is even more obvious here at Redford during our observation of the season of Lent, when we use the Service of Corporate Confession and Absolution as a completely separate service set apart even by the vestments that I wear.

Therefore, corporate confession and absolution, serve as preparation for the Divine Service (or if you prefer the more historic term, **“Mass”**) which itself actually begins with the **Introit**. Corporate confession, also more technically called the **“Confiteor”** (Latin for **“I confess”**), is usually introduced by an opening hymn of invocation, which at Redford, we sing during the procession, followed by the invocation itself (**“In the Name of the Father,”** etc.) with which we call on God to be present with us.

Corporate confession and absolution is actually an adaptation of the more historic practice of **individual or private** confession and absolution, which at one time was the norm among us, but in these latter years, due I believe to what I call Protestantism, has sadly fallen into disuse and even derision. In earlier days, Lutherans would routinely go to the church to confess their sins **“privately”** before their pastor, and receive private individual absolution. Here in America this custom gave way to simply declaring for Communion (another custom that has disappeared almost completely) prior to worship while corporate confession and absolution were added to the service as a preparatory rite..

Though to some degree corporate confession and absolution have replaced individual confession and absolution, it can be argued that the corporate nature of such a rite does not allow one the opportunity to confess sins which weigh heavily upon one’s heart and grieve one’s conscience, even as we learn from Luther’s Catechism. In both

¹ Much of this series on the Liturgy of the Church is found in *Why? A Layman’s Guide to the Liturgy*, by Rev. Burnell F. Eckardt Jr., Repristination Press, (Malone, TX.), and first published in *Gottesdienst, The Journal of Lutheran Liturgy*, in a series by the same name between the years 1985-2005. Used by permission.

the Large and Small Catechism of Martin Luther, Luther himself extols the benefits of individual confession as a blessed gift and abiding comfort for the Christian whose conscience is tormented by particular sins.

There has been an effort among Lutherans in recent years to recover the benefits and practice of individual confession. Our newest hymnal (Lutheran Service Book) for example, contains an adaptation of Luther's rite of private or individual confession which can be found on pages 292-293.

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