



Liturgical Thought

EXPLANATION AND GUIDE TO THE LUTHERAN LITURGY¹

Bowing, Genuflecting, Kneeling

A time-honored custom of the Christian Church is to instruct the congregation at worship to bow their heads every time the Name of Jesus is uttered during the Mass/Divine Service.² The same can be said for the daily offices of Matins and Vespers. A congregation that has well learned this practice will be alert to listen for our Lord's Name especially during the appointed Readings or the Sermon, during which it is more difficult to expect the times when Jesus' Name will be heard. This custom therefore provides a means of helping the congregation learn to pay closer attention to the words they hear. More than this, however, it is a powerful testimony and expression of our faith, which knows that the Holy Name of Jesus is the most blessed utterance in all creation, being the Name of Him who has redeemed us from sin, death, and everlasting condemnation, and has brought us to Himself by His Blood. Thus we revere and adore Him in this simple way—simple, in accordance with the words of St. Paul, *“that at the Name of Jesus every knee should bow, of those in heaven, and of those on earth, and of those under the earth,”* (Philippians 2:10, NKJV).

Our Lord once said to the Pharisees that the gold of the temple is sanctified by the temple. So the holiness of the temple dictated that those things pertaining to it were also holy.

Jesus also said, referring to Himself, *“One greater than the temple is here”* (St. Matthew 12:6). Now if Jesus' holiness is greater than the holiness of the temple, surely those things pertaining to Jesus Himself are also holy.

In the Holy Supper Christ Himself is truly present, for He said, *“This is My Body.”* Therefore, according to His own words, it is His true Body which sits on the paten (the plate) which sits on the altar. For the Bread is as much Christ's Body as His Body on the Cross. Since this is so, it is surely appropriate to give highest reverence to His

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.

² While we now call the service with Holy Communion the *Divine Service*, our Lutheran forefathers of the Reformation still knew our Sunday morning worship with Holy Communion as the *“Mass”* even up to and beyond the time of the publication of the Book of Concord in 1580.

Body there, according to this faith. Therefore the people of God rightly bend the knee, bowing, genuflecting, or kneeling toward the altar to honor and adore Him where He is truly found.

Not only do we reverence the Sacrament sitting on the altar, however. Since the temple sanctifies the gold, so also the Body of Christ sanctifies the altar. We call the altar holy because it is the place from which Christ's Body is given.

Therefore, when the Sacrament is on the altar, we kneel (which is more profound than bowing) when we come to the altar to receive the Sacrament; but even when the Sacrament is not there, we bow, whenever we pass the altar.

It is also appropriate to observe this custom before entering or upon leaving the pew: when the Sacrament is present on or near the altar, to kneel and make the sign of the Holy Cross; or when the Sacrament is not present, to bow. There is also a venerable custom of bowing and making the sign of the Holy Cross upon entering or leaving the church. In this small way, we remind ourselves either that Christ's holy Body is present or has sanctified the altar which pertains to it.

There are also several occasions during our worship when bowing or genuflecting or even kneeling are appropriate. After entering the pew your first opportunity to bow comes as the crucifix passes by in the procession during the opening hymn or Introit. Here it is important to note that we are not worshipping the Holy Cross but rather reverently acknowledging that it is upon the Cross of Calvary where our salvation was won with the brutal sacrifice of our Lord upon the Cross in our place. The same can be said of the Gospel procession and the recession at the end of the service. We bow at the waist at the intoning of "*Gloria Patri*" ("*Glory be to the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.*") when chanted or sung by the pastor/kantor, as in the chanting of the Introit, or when singing the canticles such as the Nunc Dimittis. When the pastor chants the salutation, "*The Lord be with you*" it is laudable to respond with a slight bow of the head when you reply, "*And with thy spirit*" acknowledging your pastor as a called and ordained servant and representative of our Lord. We also bow or genuflect (kneeling on one knee and then immediately standing upright again) at the words "*...came down from heaven and was incarnate by the Holy Spirit of the Virgin Mary, and was made man*" in the Nicene Creed. One may also bow the head when the words "*we worship Thee... we give thanks to Thee... receive our prayer*" are read or sung in the Gloria Excelsis since these words indicate an acts of worship.

It is also appropriate (if one is physically able) to kneel from the prayers of the Church through the singing of the Agnus Dei (Lamb of God). Finally, it is most laudable to receive the blessing of our Lord in the benediction at the end of the service while kneeling.

Bowing, kneeling, genuflecting, all are a profound acts of worship. Indeed, whenever we see worship in Holy Scripture, individuals are bowing, kneeling, genuflecting, or laying prostrate on the ground before our Lord, even the holy angels who serve our Lord day and night around His throne.

Our worship should be informed by our theology. What we believe and confess ought to affect what we do. Therefore it is always meet and right to show reverence for our Lord who has promised to be with us always, even to the end of the age.