



Liturgical Thought

EXPLANATION AND GUIDE TO THE LUTHERAN LITURGY¹

Why is there a Preface and a Proper Preface?

“The Father gives His Son; the Son freely submits Himself to the Passion and Cross; the Holy Spirit mediates the fruit of Christ’s saving work through Word and Sacrament. The Service of the Word has proclaimed and interpreted the Gospel message so that faith may be awakened and strengthened in the speaking and hearing of the Word and that the congregation may both rejoice and offer prayer. Then, in the Service of Holy Communion God joins His act and deed to His Word; He gives us the Body offered and the Blood shed for the forgiveness of our sins and strength for Christian living.”²

“Drawn toward the gifts of Jesus’ Body and Blood, our hearts are lifted up in thanksgiving and praise as we anticipate the reception of the gifts that carry with them our redemption.”³

With the **Preface** we begin our celebration of the **Sacrament of the Altar**. Here the liturgy includes the **“Salutation”** (**“The Lord be with you.”**), the **“Sursum Corda”** (**“Lift up your hearts.”**), and the **“Eucharistia”** (**“Let us give thanks to the Lord, our God.”**). The **Proper Preface** begins with the **“Contestation”** (**“It is truly meet, right and salutary. . . etc.”**).

The **Preface** is an **“ordinary,”** that is, it is one of several parts of the liturgy that **do not change** with the prevailing season of the Church Calendar, and is a very early part of the liturgy of the Church. In fact, it is mentioned in the 103rd canon of the African code, 418 A.D. and is found even as early as Hippolytus (ca. 215 A.D.), which is long before the advent of the **Holy Catholic Apostolic Roman Church** or what is better known to us as the **Roman Catholic Church**.

The **Preface**, beginning with the **Salutation** and its congregational response, as I said, marks the **beginning** of the Service of the **Sacrament of the Altar**. It **proclaims the presence of the risen Lord as the Host and Liturgist**

¹ Much of the content 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 Charles Evanson, *The Divine Service, Lutheran Worship History and Practice*, p. 419

³ Pless, John, T., *“A Narrative Commentary on the Divine Service.”*

in His Sacrament. With this greeting the Pastor is, in fact, praying that **the Lord would be merciful in granting His people the faith needed to benefit from the great feast of our Lord's Body and Blood.**

The **Sursum Corda** and the **Eucharistia** (also called the **Gratias**), set forth in great beauty, **the reason for the hymn of praise (the Sanctus)**, which follows the chanting of the **Proper Preface**. The call for the lifting up of our hearts **announces the posture of our receptivity.**

The **Contestation** is a hymn **sung in praise** of what God has done for us. This **seasonal Preface (called the Proper Preface because it changes with the various seasons of the Church Calendar)** has **appointed prayers** to sing for each Church season throughout the year as well as special feast days. The **Proper Preface** links our thanksgiving with that of **"angels, archangels, and the whole company of heaven."** (see Revelation 4:8; 7:11-12; Psalm 103:20-22) It provides the **basis and content for our thanksgiving by proclaiming what the Holy Trinity has done for us.**

The **Contestation** ends with the introduction to the **Sanctus**. It announces that **the congregation, together with the whole Church on earth, is joining with the angels and saints** in singing their eternal heavenly hymn. (Hebrews 12:22-24; Revelation 5:11; 7:9-12; 10:1-8)

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