



# Liturgical Thought

## EXPLANATION AND GUIDE TO THE LUTHERAN LITURGY<sup>1</sup>

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### The Mass (Holy Communion) or Why is Holy Communion Sometimes called Mass?

We are unjustly accused of having abolished the **Mass**. Without boasting, it is manifest that **the Mass is observed among us with greater devotion and more earnestness** than among our opponents. Moreover, the people are instructed often and with great diligence concerning the **Holy Sacrament**, why it was instituted, and how it is to be used (namely, as a comfort for terrified consciences) in order that the people may be drawn to the **Communion and Mass**. The people are also given instruction about other false teachings concerning the Sacrament. Meanwhile **no conspicuous changes have been made** in the public ceremonies of the Mass, except that in certain places German hymns are sung in addition to the Latin responses for the instruction and exercise of the people. After all, **the chief purpose of all ceremonies is to teach the people what they need to know about Christ.**<sup>2</sup>

So states the beginning paragraph of the German text of Article XXIV of the Augsburg Confession. **We Lutherans have not abolished the Mass**, in fact, we celebrate it more reverently than the Church of Rome! But why do we sometimes call Holy Communion the Mass?

To begin with, there are actually several different names for the service we call the Service of the **Holy Sacrament of the Altar**. It is called **Eucharist** (from the Greek word for “thanksgiving”), the **Holy Supper**, **Holy Communion**, the **Lord’s Supper**, and of course, **Mass**. In the earliest days of the Church it would have been known as **“the breaking of the Bread”** (cf. St. Luke 22:35; Acts 2:42, 46, 20:7, 11; 1 Corinthians 10:16).

The term **“Mass”** (or Latin, *missa*) is the term most widely used by Christendom. It has also become a stumbling block for many Protestants because of its association with the Church of Rome. The Lutheran Reformation renounced the Roman conduct and understanding of the Mass stating *“The Mass in the papacy must be regarded as the greatest and most horrible abomination because it runs into direct and violent conflict with this fundamental*

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<sup>1</sup> 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.

<sup>2</sup> Theodore G. Tappert, tr., ed., *The Book of Concord, The Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1959), AC XXIV, The Mass (German) 56. Bold face is my own.

article.”<sup>3</sup> Yet, the context of this statement will determine what it is that is abominable about the Roman Mass, for Luther’s quote continues: “...it has been held that this sacrifice or work of the Mass, even though it be rendered by a wicked scoundrel, frees men from sins, both in this life and also in purgatory, while only the Lamb of God shall and must do this.”<sup>4</sup> From this, it is clear that what Luther opposed was the Roman idea of Mass as an act of man, essentially of re-sacrificing the Body of Christ for sins. For Rome the benefits of the Mass were effected by the work that the priest performed. For Luther and the Lutherans, the benefit was seen in the words, “**Given and shed for you for the remission of sins.**” Thus in the Mass the Sacrament was to be received orally by the communicants in order for them to benefit from it.

Yet the term “**Mass**” was never abandoned on the Lutheran side. Indeed the Lutheran Confessions declare, “...we do not abolish the Mass but religiously keep and defend it. In our churches **Mass is celebrated every Sunday and on other festivals, when the Sacrament is offered to those who wish for it after they have been examined and absolved.** We keep traditional liturgical forms, such as the order of the lessons, prayers, vestments, etc..”<sup>5</sup>

Here, in America, the term “**Mass**” has long been looked upon with no small amount of derision among many Lutherans, which likely stems from inadequate catechesis and a kind of “**Romaphobia**” which can be defined as an irrational bias against anything “*Catholic*.” This bias is unfortunate especially because it leads to the preference of tendencies and terms which are far more harmful **and** in more abundant use among churches and confessions which deny altogether the real presence of Christ in the Sacrament. Dr. C. F. W. Walther, founding father of the Missouri Synod, had this to say about such a bias: “*It is a pity and dreadful cowardice when a person sacrifices the good ancient Church customs to please the deluded American sects, lest they accuse one of being papistic!*”<sup>6</sup>

Since we agree that the Holy Sacrament is truly the Body and Blood of Christ—a point of agreement with Rome, and of disagreement with Methodists, Baptists, and others—and since historically, confessing Lutherans have not shunned the use of the term “**Mass**”, therefore we ought not be ashamed to use it, if only to distinguish ourselves from anyone who would deny that **the Bread is truly Christ’s Body, and the Wine is truly His Blood.**

✠✠✠ Soli Deo Gloria ✠✠✠

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<sup>3</sup> Theodore G. Tappert, tr., ed., *The Book of Concord, The Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1959), Smalcald Articles, II, [The Mass] 293. The “**fundamental article**” is the article of Justification by faith in Christ alone.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid, Apology to the Augsburg Confession, XXIV, 1, 249.

<sup>6</sup> C. F. W. Walther, *Essays for the Church*, (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1992), 1:194.