**Ceremony and Rites**

**in the**

**Lutheran Church**



**Trinity Evangelical Lutheran Church**

**Palo Alto, California**

**Introduction**

When people come into a Lutheran church, they may be surprised at how the service is conducted. The members certainly believe that they worship with reverence and in the depth of the Spirit. However guests might be puzzled by certain things they see and hear, for example, worshippers crossing themselves, the pastor wearing formal vestments, the chanting by celebrant, choir, and congregation, and the traditional hymns sung by the people.

Since these things likely differ from their usual practices, visitors could be inclined to regard them as un-Lutheran or “catholic” in the sense of Roman Catholic. People often question the unfamiliar, simply because it is unfamiliar. Yet if they approach unfamiliar ceremonies charitably and seek information about them rather than readily reject the unfamiliar, they could be enriched and strengthened in the exercise of the Christian faith. That is the reason for this pamphlet; its purpose is to answer some of the questions frequently asked by a visitor of a traditional Lutheran parish.

Many of the ceremonies mentioned in this pamphlet are no longer commonly used in all Lutheran parishes. That is the reason why they need to be explained. They are not innovations, and those who practice these ceremonies and rites are not innovators. And those Lutherans who employ such practices do not demand that other Christians must uniformly adopt certain practices, for Lutherans have acknowledged that the unity of the Church does not reside in adherence to human traditions, rites, and ceremonies.

However, as an act of faith the Lutheran Church has retained the liturgy. The liturgy is properly the Holy Communion Service of which the sermon is one part. The term liturgy includes also all other worship services of the Universal Church, as well as the traditional rites (order of services), ceremonies (actions, music, symbols, Church Year), and physical properties (building, altar, vessels, vestments) used in the performance of these services. These rites, ceremonies, and physical properties are not in themselves worship, but they are present expressions that accent and draw attention to the nature and principal place of the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

All churches have some kind of rites and ceremonies. These are liturgical if they are expressive of the historic confession of the Christian Church. The rites and ceremonies of the Lutheran Church are liturgical; and they are an evidence of her link with the past, especially with the Western branch of the Universal Christian Church. They are a rich and precious heritage. To appreciate this heritage, the Church must constantly explain it to her members, defend it, and use it.

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**Why is the Lutheran Church a liturgical church?**

At the time of the sixteenth century Reformation, Martin Luther and his followers did not break with the holy, catholic, and apostolic Church. They rejected only that which was contrary to the Holy Scriptures, but reaffirmed all the doctrines of the Church Universal, and retained all the rites and ceremonies and customs (including music, vestments, furnishings, etc.) which were not in conflict with God’s Word. Their idea was not to start a new Church, but to reform or purify the existing practices of the Church and to keep everything that was good and salutary.

This is why it is permissible in saying the Creeds to state, “I believe in one, holy, c*atholic,* and apostolic Church.” This does not mean *Roman* Catholic. It does mean that our Church embraces her historic heritage, and is self-consciously a part of the Universal Church of all ages and places.

Liturgical parishes do not criticize and condemn other Lutheran churches or individuals. They regard externals (or sometimes called *adiaphora*) as matters of liberty in the true Lutheran spirit. Yet theydo not regard the forms of worship as useless and of little account. As good parents desire their children to have good table manners, so our heavenly Father wants His children to follow “good manners” in their life and worship. Reading the majestic, the colorful, and beautiful adornment for worship that God prescribed in the Old Testament moves one to conclude that worship is meant to be beautiful, in word and ceremony, practices that find their most beautiful completion and perfection in Christ Jesus and His perfect life of faith in the Father. Thus, while the Lord has not prescribed any form of worship in the New Testament, He has told us to “prove all things and to hold fast that which is good.” St. Paul urges, “Whatsoever things are lovely, whatsoever things are of good report ... think on these things.” That which is good and beautiful is always good and beautiful; and those things are good and beautiful that hold forth the love of God in Christ Jesus. Times and customs do not change that, even if people change in their personal recognition and appreciation of the good and beautiful.

**Why don’t all Lutherans have the same customs?**

The Lutheran Church confesses that there must be Christian liberty in all such things as are neither commanded nor forbidden by God in the Holy Scriptures. She professes in her Formula of Concord:

“We believe, teach and confess also that no church should condemn another because one has less or more external ceremonies not commanded by God than the other, if otherwise there is agreement among them in doctrine and all its articles, as also in the right use of the Holy Sacraments, according to the well-known saying, ‘Disagreement in fasting does not destroy agreement in faith’ “ (Article X, Ecclesiastical Practices).

Anyone acting contrary to this confession is either misinformed or lacks the true Lutheran spirit. It is not necessary in Christian life and worship that all should express themselves in the same way nor that the same usages should be followed inevery parish; “Therefore let no one pass judgment on you in questions of food or drink or with regard to a festival …” (Colossians 2:16). Yet unity in the Faith and the exercise of Christian love and tolerance are necessary; “Love is patient and kind; love is not jealous or boastful; it is not arrogant or rude. Love does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; it does not rejoice at wrong, but rejoices in the right” (I Corinthians 13: 4-6).

**Doesn’t a liturgical parish overemphasize externals?**

Externals may seem overemphasized because a church should be judged chiefly by its doctrines and not its customs. We shall try to make the position of a liturgical Lutheran parish very clear.

Externals are neither the essentials nor the objectives of a liturgical parish. What the liturgical parish stands for is the preaching of the Word of God in all its truth and purity and the administration of the Sacraments according to their institution by Christ. The Church’s objective is to recognize that God is the real center in the life and worship of its members, individually, in the family, and in the parish.

For that reason the emphasis in a liturgical parish is on Bible study and the use of the Means of Grace; the restoration of the Holy Communion Service to its proper place as the chief service every Sunday and holy day; the restoration of a greater appreciation of Holy Baptism and its meaning in the ongoing life of a Christian; the restoration of the salutary use of Private Absolution; the restoration of the study of the Church’s Confessions for the fortification of our people’s faith and for their guidance in the complex world in which they are living; the restoration of the Christian training of the children, firstof all by pious parents in the home and then by the Church; the restoration of the Church’s daily prayer services and the open church for use as the House of Prayer; the restoration of the rites, ceremonies, and customs (including music and the other Christian arts) which are our precious heritage; and all this for the glory of God and the sanctification of many in time and eternity.

**Why all this formality?**

Worship must, above all, be genuine. “God is a Spirit; and they that worship Him must worship Him in spirit and in truth” (John 4:24). Worship that does not come from the heart and does not conform to the truth is valueless and worse than valueless.

At the same time, since man is not pure spirit but embodied spirit—since he has both a body and a soul—his worship must necessarily also be external. Through external actions and symbols faith expresses itself. Nor is that all. Externals are not only expressive; they are also impressive. They act on the mind in such a way as to stimulate devotion, hold attention, and develop good habits of worship.

While individual or private worship may be more or less informal, that is, without prescribed forms and ceremonies, corporate worship usually assumes a formal structure. “Formal” denotes that certain prescribed rites and ceremonies are followed. This comparison resembles playing music. When an individual plays by himself, he can play anything in any way he likes. Yet when he plays in an orchestra, he plays prescribed music in unison with others. Christ expressed the difference when He spoke to His disciples about prayer. For corporate worship He taught a set or formal prayer, but not for private worship. He said, “When you (singular) pray, go into your innermost room and speak to your Father, who perceives in secret ... But when you (plural) pray ... pray: Our Father … ”

Liturgy is not a question of being formal or informal. For all churches, even the so-called informal, must have some kind of form or order. The question is: “What forms shall we follow? Shall we use the forms that have come down to us in the Church of the ages, the forms that have stood the test of time; or shall we follow our own individualistic likes and dislikes?” We are here confronted not only with a matter of loyalty, but also with a choice between three things: the bad, the good, and the best. Lutherans are a liturgical church, and we seek to offer the best forms and to restore them where they have been discarded. For Lutherans believe that nothing but the best is good enough in Christian life and worship. While the best is that which is offered in genuine faith and always confesses the truth of Jesus Christ, should we be satisfied with whimsical likes and dislikes on the part of individuals and groups or faddish influences of the culture surrounding the Church?

**Why do some people partake of Holy Communion every Sunday?**

From the beginning of the Church, the Holy Communion Service was celebrated on every Lord’s Day and sometimes more often (see Acts 2:46). That was also the common practice of our Lutheran Churches in the Sixteenth Century. Dr. Luther said that Holy Communion should be celebrated every Sunday and feast day and, if some desire it, every day. We have Our Lord’s command for frequent communion, and we have His precious promise that in it He bestows on every believer the benefits and blessing of His redemptive work. Since that is true, we are encouraged to celebrate the Lord’s Supper every Sunday. The Augsburg Confession of the Lutheran Church states in Article V:

“Forasmuch as the Mass (the Holy Communion Service) is such a giving of the Sacrament, we hold one communion every holy-day, and, if any desire the Sacrament, also on other days, when it is given to such as ask for it. And this custom is not new in the Church; for the Fathers before Gregory spoke often of the common Mass. Chrysostom says that the priest stands daily at the altar, inviting some to the Communion and keeping back others.”

Likewise, the Apology of the Augsburg Confession states in Article XXIV:

“At the outset we must again make the preliminary statement that we do not abolish the Mass, but religiously maintain and defend it. For among us Masses are celebrated every Lord’s Day and on the other festivals in which the Sacrament is offered to those who wish to use it after they have been examined and absolved. And the usual public ceremonies are observed, the series of lessons, of prayers, vestments, and other like things.”

**Why is the chalice used in Holy Communion?**

The Holy Communion is a means of participating in the Body of Christ, and it is the purpose of the liturgy to express this fact. One way of expressing it is by the use of the one cup, the chalice. The chalice is a sign and symbol of the communion in the Body of Christ. In the Words of Institution, Christ says that all should drink of the one cup and we are told that they all drank of the one cup.

In the history of the Universal Church, the traditional use of the chalice has come down to us from the Apostles. It was retained in the sixteenth century Reformation, and is still the use of the Roman Church, the Greek Orthodox Church, the Anglican Church, the Episcopal Church, and the overwhelming majority of Lutherans throughout the world.

The chalice is used in the celebration of the Holy Communion Service and not individual glasses or cups because of the liturgical and symbolical significance of the one cup.

The use of individual glasses is an innovation which was started in Germany in the mid 1800s by those who no longer believed in the Holy Scriptures and in Christ’s presence in the Holy Sacrament. The reason for this innovation was the scientific discovery of bacteria and the fear of germs.

**Why do some people cross themselves?**

The word “some” in this question shows that not allworshippers cross themselves. That is their freedom. Those who cross themselves do so because it isone of the most ancient of Christian customs. The practice probably goes back to apostolic times and was in common use in the Second Century; it is therefore in no way “Roman Catholic.” Christians crossed themselves long before there was a distinctly “Roman” Catholic Church. Crossing oneself is prescribed in Luther’s Small Catechism (“In the morning when you rise you shall bless yourself with the holy cross and say:”) and it is authorized in many Lutheran service books. In his Large Catechism Dr. Martin Luther recommends the custom of instructing children to cross themselves for the purpose of recalling their divine Protector in moments of danger, terror, and temptation.

Crossing oneself is done by putting the fingers of the right hand to the forehead, to the breast, and to the left and right shoulders, with the words: “In the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Ghost. Amen.” By doing this we profess our faith in the triune God and in our redemption through Christ crucified. It is also a prayer of thanksgiving or for blessing to God the Father, in the Holy Spirit, through our one and only Mediator, Jesus Christ.

In our daily life we usually cross ourselves upon rising and retiring, at the beginning of prayer and devotions, or as a plea for help in danger and temptation, and as an act of faith at other times by which we express our trust in the grace of God through the Cross of Christ.

In church we usually cross ourselves at the beginning and end of worship and at the following places in the Holy Communion Service: During the Invocation, “In the Name of etc.;” at the end of the Absolution; at the beginning of the *Introit*; at the end of the *Gloria in Excelsis*; when the Gospel is announced (here a small cross is traced with the right thumb on the forehead, lips, and heart, with the prayer that we may understand the Gospel, profess it, and trust in it); at the end of the Creed; during the Sanctus at the words, “Blessed is He;” after the consecration at “The peace of the Lord;” when we receive the holy Body and precious Blood of Our Lord; when the minister says, “Depart in peace;” and at the end of the Benediction.

The holy Cross is the symbol of our salvation. We are signed with it when we were baptized. It is the sign by which the Church receives the blessings in God, in His people and temporal gifts in the congregation. By using this sign we acknowledge our personal participation in the wonderful history of the Christian faith. It is fitting that we should make the sign of the Cross frequently and to glory in it, saying with St. Paul, “God forbid that I should glory save in the Cross of ourLord Jesus Christ.”

**Why do some people bow or genuflect toward the altar?**

It is a very old and proper custom to reverence toward the altar by bowing when entering and leaving the church and when passing before the altar. The altar is a symbol of God’s presence in the midst of His people, like the flag is a symbol of our country. This practice expresses bodily a reverence observed first of all in the heart.

In our irreverent age there is a profound need for genuine acts of reverence by Christians. For that reason we also cherish the ancient and laudable custom of bowing at the mention of the holy Name of Jesus, during the words, “Glory be to the Father and to the Son and to the Holy Spirit,” in the *Gloria Patri*, during the “Holy, holy, holy,” in the Sanctus, and when the pastor blesses us at the end of the service.

Visitors in a liturgical parish often question the attention given to making the church building and its external, visible worship as precious and beautiful as possible. “Is this proper for the faith or a distraction from what is truly necessary?” If at home we show our honor to those we love by putting on our most festive clothes and setting our tables with candles and flowers and fine linen, how much more ought the Church to dress her ministers in beautiful vestments and deck the altar with candles to show her love for God? According to the First Commandment God receives only first place in our life. Surely, then, it is proper and fitting for the people of God to adorn with the beauty of God’s creation and the beauty of salvation in Christ Jesus the place where they hear His Word and receive the Sacraments. Besides, in liturgical worship each object, each ornament, each vestment has been assigned a meaning and purpose for the glorification of God and the edification of man.

**Why do some people kneel?**

Before you and I can worship God and assume a place in His presence, we acknowledge our place before Him – confessing our sins. During that solemn act we adopt a posture of humility, kneeling before God. Kneeling for confession, for prayer, and for many other acts of worship has always been done by the Children of God. We cannot disregard the many statements in the Holy Scriptures which say, “O come, let us worship and bow down, let us kneel before the Lord, our Maker,” or the example of Our Lord Himself who in the Garden of Gethsemane fell down on His knees to pray. We can confess our sins sitting down or standing up or lying down, but we should not let pride keep us from getting down on our knees.

**Why do some people attend church on weekdays for Matins and Vespers, for Private Absolution, and for Private Prayer?**

*For Matins and Vespers.* The Church has always professed the vitality of her life in Christ and that life derives from Christ alone by the daily worship of God. Such worship was also at one time the normal practice in the Lutheran Church. That is why the Lutheran Church retained daily offices, Matins and Vespers. These services were held every day for two and a half centuries in many lands, as, for example, in Denmark.

Every Christian admits the necessity of daily communion with God. He needs forgiveness of sins every day and receives many favors from God every day, and so he desires pardon and wants to offer gratitude and homage to God daily. This he can do at home. Many devout Christians find it fitting to offer worship in the church building, where they may gather for prayers.

*For Private Absolution.* The need for forgiveness of sins is also the reason why regular provisions should be made in church for the administration of Private Absolution, and why a Christian will want to use this means of grace from time to time. When Our Lord “breathed on His disciples and said unto them, Whosoever sins you forgive, they are forgiven to them, and whosoever sins you retain, they are retained”, He made provisions in His Church for an ordinance of vital importance. The fact that non-Lutheran Protestants have discarded it and that it has come into disuse in the Lutheran Church does not make it less important. The official Lutheran position as stated in her Confessions is that Private Confession and Absolution are to be retained, and Luther even provided a liturgical form for its administration in his Small Catechism (“Pray, Propose to Me a Brief Form of Confession”).

**Why are vestments worn by the ministers?**

It has been customary in every age and country to invest people of office in distinctive garments – the judge, the soldier, the fireman, the policeman, all have their special gown or uniforms. They are dressed in these garments both to distinguish them for their work and to make them more conscious of their duties. The same thing is true of ministers of the Gospel.

Vestments are the garb of the ministers of Christ when they are conducting the public exercise of their ministry. If they wear a clerical collar daily, they do so to show that they are on duty daily.

In the Old Testament God Himself commanded the priests’ vestments and specified in every detail their material and shape. Then the basic material was pure white linen, and that some of the vestments were very colorful and elaborate.

In the New Testament God gave no such blueprints. However, it was natural that the ministers should wear distinctive garments, especially when celebrating the chief service, the Holy Eucharist. So the traditional vestments developed. These vestments all have their particular function and significance.

For example, the traditional Holy Communion vestments are:

1. *The alb,* This is a long white linen vestment with narrow sleeves. It symbolizes purity of heart and life.
2. *The cincture and stole.* The cincture holds the alb in place and signifies temperance and chastity. The stole is the special badge of ordination and symbolizes the yoke of service.
3. *The chasuble.* This is the most distinctive Holy Communion vestment. It is put on over the head and is often ornamented with a large cross on the back. It is a symbol of humility, love, and protection against evil.

It is not possible here to describe all the vestments, but your pastor will gladly give you the information on this and other items of Christian life and worship. Some churches arrange for a series of talks on such subjects as: the equipment and ceremonies for the Holy Communion Service, Holy Baptism, Private Absolution, Confirmation, Marriage, Christian burial, and other offices; the Church Calendar; the sign of the Cross; vestments; the Mass; Gregorian chant; church music; hymns; palms; incense; ashes; pictures and statues; fasting and abstinence; symbolism; architecture; the sanctuary lamp; etc.

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It is, indeed, a wonderful thing to live and worship in a liturgical parish once you realize the significance of the rites, ceremonies, and practices. There all life and worship are God-centered, in the Spirit, through Christ, our one-only Redeemer and Mediator. There fellowship with the saints of all ages is a reality. And there Lutheranism is confessed as part and parcel of the One Holy Universal Christian and Apostolic Church.

“Give unto the Lord the glory due unto His name:

bring an offering, and come before Him:

worship the Lord in the beauty of holiness.”