

A Bishop's Easter Letter

Grace be yours and peace.

Sometime around Maundy Thursday or Good Friday, my wife, Kim, drew my attention to the March issue of the *Eastern Synod Lutheran*. "You should take a look at Bishop Pryse's letter," said Kim. We had just had a discussion at Council about how the Sunday celebration of Holy Communion had been the norm for Christian worship from the beginning, and the norm for Lutheran worship all the days of Martin Luther's life and beyond. Bishop Pryse's letter seemed timely. He was urging the church in the same direction we had contemplated at Council only a day or two before.

Here is Bishop Pryse's Easter letter.

This Is the Feast

This Is the Feast!

"This is the feast of victory for our God. Alleluia!" This beautiful hymn of praise—drawn from the vision of the heavenly banquet described in the book of Revelation—has become a primary component of the Lutheran worship service. The words bombard us with inspiring images of the Lamb's heavenly banquet! This is the resurrection feast that has no end, richly described in all its glory.

How strange, then, to sing such a stirring and anticipatory hymn, only to find - thirty or so minutes later - that the feast is not to be celebrated; at least not on this day. It isn't a "communion Sunday" —a strange phrase in itself! As one old friend once wryly suggested, we ought to be singing, "Where is the feast of victory for our God?"

The first Christians could not have imagined a Sunday liturgy that didn't include the eucharist; a pattern that has continued to be the norm in most Christian churches for all of the intervening two thousand years. Our experience as Lutherans, however, has been less consistent.

Although the Lutheran Confessions strongly affirmed the importance of weekly communion, for a variety of reasons less frequent celebrations became normative for many North American Lutherans in the 18th and 19th centuries. Some of the reasons were very practical —itinerant pastors were rarely able to visit their congregations on more than a quarterly or monthly schedule. Others were more culturally determined, as immigrant Lutheran communities came to be influenced by more dominant traditions whose sacramental piety was markedly different from that articulated by Luther and the early reformers.

Over the past three decades, however, North American Lutherans have made great progress toward restoring the full liturgy of Word and Sacrament to its rightful place as the normative pattern for the church's primary service of worship. For some of our congregations this is nothing new. Some of them have celebrated weekly communion for almost forty years! For others this is a relatively new development and communion is still celebrated on a monthly or bi-weekly schedule. The pattern, however, is clearly established, and slowly but surely, more and more of our congregations have come to the point where they are able to provide both Word and the Sacrament ministry on a weekly basis.

The season of Lent has traditionally been seen as a time of abstinence. It is a time of fasting where we might avoid certain foods or beverages. In our worship services, we deliberately omit certain festive portions of the liturgy. The season of Easter, however, is a time to pull out all the stops. It is a time of celebration where abstinence should be the last thing on anybody's mind! It is our great high feast!

Congregations that have not yet established a weekly Eucharist, might find the 50 day Easter to Pentecost season to be a wonderful time in which to experience a more frequent pattern of communing. "This is, indeed, the feast of victory for our God. Alleluia!" May it be so for us this Easter; not only in word but also in experience!

+ Michael

Michael J. Pryse,
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Reclaiming Our Birthright

Upon reading Bishop Pryse's letter, I wondered to myself whether the ELCIC's newly-formed Program Committee for Worship might somehow assist the church to take up the vital issues contemplated in Bishop Pryse's pastoral letter.

In mid-April, at the first meeting of the Program Committee for Worship, a project took shape which we named "*Reclaiming Our Birthright: Pastoral Letters on the Every-Sunday Celebration of Holy Communion.*" *Reclaiming Our Birthright* would be part of a larger, ongoing publishing effort called "*ELCIC + Worship Matters.*"

The design for *Reclaiming Our Birthright* was simple: We would invite pastors, bishops and teachers in the church to write a series of pastoral letters which would help to answer peoples' questions about the matters at hand. It would flesh out some of what Bishop Pryse alludes to in his Easter letter: What was the communion practice of the early church? When did it *change*? What were Luther's reforms to the Sunday Service? In the *Book of Concord* we read that Holy Communion "is celebrated *every Lord's day* and on other festivals." How did we depart from this practice? Why? And why is restoring the full service of Word and Sacrament as the Sunday norm important for the church?

The idea is that this series of pastoral letters would offer considered pastoral wisdom and contemporary Biblical and Confessional scholarship to inform the conversation and direction of parishes across the church. The letters could be used in parish publications —as in my own parish's *Trinity Dove*, for example— or as teaching tools for Christian discipleship as in a pastor's class, adult learning forum, council study or the like.

Early on, Bishops Pryse and Schultz both lent their enthusiastic blessing to the project. We are grateful to them for their vision and leadership. A letter of introduction from Bishop Schultz follows in *Worship Matters 2*.

The Program Committee for Worship is grateful to all of the pastors, bishops and teachers who so graciously participated in this project. Their letters reflect a lovely variety of pastoral voices, fine scholarship, and a passion for the church. We trust that their work will serve God's people well and will help us all to reclaim the practice of the early church so fondly and passionately espoused by Martin Luther, in his day, and by our church leaders, in ours.

Greet one another in the name of the Lord.

All blessings to you and to your community.

André.

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