

Theology of the Ordinary

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The topic I have been asked to speak about is the "Theology of the Ordinary." It might not be perfectly clear what that means. "Ordinary," as commonly used, is a word that means "common, average, unexceptional, run-of-the-mill." It came to this meaning by a long and devious path from the Latin "ordo," a word that means "order" in the sense of "row, line, ordered series." Much of the pathway of the word's development led through the Church. We use the word in its original sense of "ordo" today when we speak of the "order of service," the series of elements in order that we follow in our worship, as in the Latin usage of "Ordo Missae."

The Ordinary of the service are those prescribed (or ordered) parts of the service that do not change from Sunday to Sunday, such as the Kyrie, Gloria, Credo, Sanctus, Hosanna, Benedictus, and Agnus Dei. They stand in contrast to the "Propers," the changeable parts of the service that are proper or appropriate to the particular Sunday or season, such as the Scripture lessons, the hymns, the sermon, the seasonal sentences and responses.

The Ordinary parts of the service became "ordinary," I would suppose, through constant repetition—although we ought not read into ordinary the modern ideas of "boring" or "dull." To the contrary, historically the Ordinary, or prescribed, regular, repeated parts of the service, would have been those most eagerly embraced by the worshiper as those most familiar, —time-worn, to be sure, but comfortable and accessible. They were the best known, and therefore most popular vehicles of the people's worship.

Specifically, I have been asked to speak about the "theology" of the Ordinary. So we need to say something here also about the word theology. We commonly use combined forms of words with the suffix "-ology" to mean "study of," as in "psychology," the study of the "psyche," or mind. But there is also a sense in which we use a word like psychology to mean the way a person's mind works. Theology, to theologians, has always been more than just the study of God and his Word. The theologians of the classical age of Lutheran theology commonly referred to theology as *habitus practicus*, or a practical aptitude. The very use of the word *habitus* in the definition of theology suggests attitudes or disposition worked in us by habit or repeated action, and what repeated action in the Christian experience more shapes

who we are as the people of God than our regular, weekly gathering for worship in the Lord's house, and pointedly that part of our worship that is ordinary, prescribed, and regular?

Now something happened somewhere on our way through to the twenty-first century that altered the way we in the West receive information and are shaped by it. Certainly television with its constant bombardment of our senses with images played a major role. One effect of this change is that it has made us a restless people, uneasy with the familiar and bored to tears with the monotony of repeated action.

However, it has struck me in watching the pageantry of graduation or wedding ceremonies or the swearing in of the President of the U.S.A. or Olympic or World Cup ceremonies, that in some ways we are Jeckyl-and-Hyde in this matter of boredom with monotony and repeated actions. A large part of us still craves the repetition of the familiar. In many American communities the removal of Elgar's Pomp and Circumstance from the high school graduation ceremony would meet an intense negative reaction. So in fact it is really a love-hate affair with repeated action that we are dealing with in our times. And we need to understand it in that way when we approach worship and its repeated forms if we are going to deal with this phenomenon effectively in the interest of the people of God and their worship.

Without going too far off onto a tangent, let me just say that in Central Africa, where I served as a missionary for seven years, we do not deal with the same kind of love-hate mentality with repeated forms. The people eagerly embrace things that are given to them as regular, prescribed parts of their worship and make them their own, and feel none of the inner chafing in handling repeated forms that characterizes the worshiper in much of the West today.

The love-hate affair with repeated forms that characterizes life for us in the twenty-first century has made us vulnerable. The church, running scared and uneasy with its own tradition, fearful of committing today's cardinal sin of boring its worshipers, needs to be on the alert that it not slip into worse sins on the other side pursuing novelty. Dean Inge's well-known dictum comes to mind: "The church that marries the spirit of its age becomes a widow in the next generation." To Dean Inge's dictum may be added what might be called Benbow's dictum: "The experience of the centuries has proven that music having an easy and delightful swing and well-sugared is the kind that people will love most readily and afterward loathe most heartily." This is a quotation from the July 1898 issue of *The Lutheran Church Review*.

In saying this we have no wish to exclude innovation, nor to criticize those who are working hard to keep the worship of the church fresh and vibrant. We need freshness and vibrancy in our worship, and we need to encourage not disapprove the efforts of those who work in that direction. But at the same time we will want to exercise caution and care.

Eugene Brand in his book, *The Rite Thing*, has some balanced words on the need and place for variety in our worship: "Variety is the spice of life! That hoary statement has attained an authority almost equal to divine revelation. Many a discussion about the hazard of monotony in the repeated use of a liturgical form has been cut off by quoting it, and people generally assume the matter to be settled.... Where the concept of worship as involvement in a coordinated action is operative, however, variety is recognized as a hazard also. The yen for variety betrays the spectator attitude. Variety does make for better entertainment..., but it seldom results in deeper involvement.... Most stable groups evolve procedures for doing things which remain fairly constant and therefore become hallmarks of the group. Families have ways of celebrating birthdays; nations have ways of celebrating significant events. These are their rites and ceremonies.... Obviously a balance must be struck between a rigid refusal to modify anything and an adolescent faddism."

We crave an ordered repetition in our lives, also in our lives of worship, that makes it incumbent on leadership to keep the great repeating songs of the liturgy repeating for us until Christ comes, in creative ways that leave us untouched by boredom or monotony.

The official blurb on this workshop says that we will take "a deep biblical and historical look" at the texts of the repeating songs of the liturgy. We will focus our attention here on the *Kyrie*, *Gloria*, *Sanctus with Hosanna and Benedictus*, and the *Agnus Dei*, or the major sung portions of the common service as they have come down to us in American Lutheranism.

Kyrie

"Lord, have mercy."

It caught my attention last fall when *Time Magazine* published its 44-page supplement to the September 11 attack on America, that they headed the section on America's spiritual response to the tragedy with the ancient liturgical cry of the church, "LORD HAVE MERCY." This would indicate that the editors of *Time* sensed that, despite contemporary trends in worship, the collective consciousness of America still has this ancient cry, more than any

other, deeply embedded in its soul. That is one function of liturgy. The *Kyrie*, in the opinion of these editors, captured the soul of America in crisis.

Jehan Alain, to preface his composition for organ called *Litanies* (1938), wrote, "When the Christian soul in its distress cannot find words to implore God's mercy, it repeats ceaselessly and with a vehement faith the same invocation. Reason has reached its limits, faith alone can go further."

The Greek word *kyrie* is the vocative form of *kyrios*, and means "lord" in the sense of ruler or owner. It is the word used to translate *Yahveh* in the Greek Septuagint (LXX) translation of the Old Testament. The Hebrew expression Lord God is *kyrios theos* in the LXX. This same Greek word is the common title applied to Christ in the New Testament.

Eleison is the present imperative of the Greek verb *eleeo*. It expresses the urgent cry of the church for mercy, directed to the Lord, the one in supreme command. For those of you with choral or lector responsibility, the correct pronunciation of what we would expect from the Greek koine to be *eleeson*, has shifted to *eleison* by the end of the fourth century. This can be seen in the transcription of the word provided about 390 by the Gallic pilgrim lady to Jerusalem, Aetheria. Parallels to this shift in pronunciation by beginning of the fifth century are seen in the words *Paraclitus* and *himas*.

Mercy and grace are closely related Biblical concepts. It might be said that they are two heads of the same coin. The finest precise definition of the distinction between mercy and grace that I have seen comes from the pen not of a theologian, but a former professional baseball manager, Sparky Anderson: "Grace is getting something you don't deserve; mercy is not getting something you do deserve."

Although the *Kyrie* did not formally become part of the liturgy of the West until the fifth century, its origins lie much deeper in history. The petition *eleison*, with or without the vocative *kyrie*, is found in pre-Christian history. It appears as an element of sun-worship among the Persians and Egyptians, and from them spread throughout the Mediterranean world. At the rising of the sun pagans cried, "O Helios (Sun), have mercy." The cry also was a part of emperor-worship: "O Lord (emperor), have mercy." As late as the fifth century, a preacher in Alexandria felt constrained to denounce the habit some Christians had retained of bowing to the rising sun and crying out, "*eleison himas*," "have mercy on us." In a variety of settings the cry was heard as a repeated acclamation of the people.

We will be comfortable using the Greek title for this ancient song of the church that we in English-speaking Christendom sing as "Lord, have mercy."

Even the Roman Church yielded to the Greek in the case of the *Kyrie* although Latin does have its own translation in "*Miserere domine.*" But for Rome as for all of Christendom this song, wherever it is sung, is known by its Greek title, "*Kyrie eleison.*" The non-Greek liturgies of the Coptic, the Ethiopian, and the West Syrian Churches also took the *Kyrie* into their liturgies untranslated.

Some have speculated that the use of the Greek *Kyrie eleison* in Rome reflects the early days until the third century when Greek was still the language of worship in Rome. But in fact the *Kyrie* did not enter the liturgy of the West until the fifth century. The reasons why it was incorporated untranslated into the Latin mass are not perfectly clear. The most plausible explanation is that *eleison* was so widespread and deeply engrained in the culture of the Mediterranean world as an instinctive acclamation and cry of the people that it carried the most force and meaning in the liturgy to retain it in the original Greek.

The early Christians were simple folk, and their earliest primitive Christian worship is thought to have consisted largely of just such brief acclamations, or praise-shouts, by the people, repeated fervently and heartily, as the responses, "Amen," "Hosanna," "And with your spirit," "Lord, have mercy."

It is not difficult to go beyond the pagan sources to find a wealth of precedent for the Christian cry *eleison* in the Scriptures themselves, both in the Old Testament, particularly in the Psalms, directed to God, and in the Gospels to Jesus. "Be merciful to me, Lord, for I am faint" (Ps 6:2). "Have mercy on me, O Lord! Consider my trouble from those who hate me, you who lift me up from the gates of death" (Ps 9:13, NKJV). "Hear my voice when I call, O Lord; be merciful to me and answer me" (Ps 27:7). "Be merciful to me, O Lord, for I am in distress; my eyes grow weak with sorrow, my soul and my body with grief" (Ps 31:9). "I said, 'O Lord, have mercy on me; heal me, for I have sinned against you'" (Ps 41:4).

There are several instances of the cry *eleison* addressed to Jesus in the Gospels, all in connection with appeals for physical healing, viz., the Canaanite woman pleading for her demon-possessed daughter (Mt 15:22), the man who approached Jesus on behalf of his demon-possessed son who had seizures and frequently fell into the fire or into the water (Mt 17:15), the two blind men who accosted Jesus as he was leaving Jericho with their repeated cry, "Lord, Son of David, have mercy on us!" (Mt 20:30-31). The ten lepers cried out to Jesus as he passed, "Jesus, Master, have pity on us!" (Lk 17:13). This last in the NIV is not the most fortunate translation of *eleison*. "Pity" is a feeling or emotion, while "mercy" is the emotion carried

out in concrete action, which is the force of the original. *Eleison* is "have mercy," the call to action, not "have pity," or merely feel bad.

There are two things that I would want to draw from these passages. First, the same cry, "*Lord, have mercy,*" is addressed to *Yahveh* as Lord in the Old Testament and to Christ as Lord in the New. This leads to the inescapable conclusion that the New Testament believers in their inspired Scriptures recognized Jesus as Jehovah God and publicly acclaimed him as such. This title, "Lord," the early Christians refused to give to the Roman Emperor because they understood what it meant. They were prepared to incur the wrath of the Empire by withholding from the Emperor what they would give to Christ only.

Secondly, it is clear that the *Kyrie* is not restricted to a penitential use in the Bible. While the *Kyrie* is, in fact, found in a penitential setting in Ps 41:4 and Ps 51:1, the pleas for mercy in Scripture are addressed in a broad way to the God who heals, teaches, provides for us, and protects us from our enemies. So we would have to conclude that the long-standing practice of the Lutheran Common Service of using the *Kyrie* as a penitential cry for forgiveness of sins unduly narrows the broad, original Biblical appeal of the cry. *Christian Worship* in the litanies of the Service of Word and Sacrament (p. 27) and Evening Prayer (p. 59), following the practice of early Christendom, has much better captured the true sense of the Biblical cry.

We will want to ask whether the original of the liturgical cry was the brief form, *Lord, have mercy,* or the longer form, *Lord, have mercy on us* or *on me*? The overwhelming evidence is that the pure form of the cry was the briefer without the limiting addition of the words that focus the petition on us or me. Although there is ample Biblical support for the addition of these words, it is unfortunate that the extended form has become the most common among us through the use of the Common Service. *Christian Worship*, in the services other than the Common Service, shows a decided preference for the pure form. Interestingly, the *Time* magazine supplement to the September 11 attack on America uses the pure form as the heading to their section on America's spiritual response to the attack: *Lord, have mercy.*

Aetheria, the fourth century Gallic pilgrim to Jerusalem, gives us the first mention of the formal liturgical use of the *Kyrie* as she experienced it in Jerusalem. She describes how at the end of a vespers service the deacon read a list of petitions, and "a crowd of boys stood there and answered him each time, *Kyrie eleison,* as we say, Lord have mercy (*miserere Domini*); their cry is without end." (Jungmann, p.334).

At about the same time (end of fourth century) a report of the type of prayer which has come to be known as a litany comes to us from Antioch. The deacon reads the petitions of the litany, and the rubric then specifically states: "At each of these petitions which the deacon pronounces, the people should say, *kyrie eleison*, especially the children" (Jungmann, p. 334). The litany was transported to the West, possibly by pilgrims returning from Jerusalem, where it soon found a regular place in the liturgy, the petition *kyrie eleison* sometimes being retained without translation, sometimes translated, sometimes expanded, or sometimes changed to acclamations still familiar to us today: "Deliver us, Lord." "We beseech you." "Hear us."

The *Kyrie* often appears in a threefold or ninefold form, which has led to the question whether the *Kyrie* originally may have been a Trinitarian formula. The fact that the second group in some instances substitutes *Christe* for *Kyrie* lends support to the thesis that first Father, then Son, and then Holy Spirit are addressed in the *Kyrie*. But it was not until the high middle ages that the pattern of *kyrie eleison, Christe eleison, kyrie eleison* developed. The *Kyrie* groups as well as the *Christe* group are, in fact, all directed to Christ. This is in keeping with Pauline and early Christian usage, where *kyrios* is generally applied to Christ. The number of the *Kyries* found Trinitarian significance only when it moved into Gallic territory, as might be expected, where the struggle against Arianism was the most intense. We meet this in Amalar of Metz (ninth century), where God the Father is invoked three times, God the Son three times, and God the Holy Spirit three times. But in the oldest versions of the litany, Eastern as well as Western, all the invocations from beginning to *Agnus Dei*, are addressed exclusively to Christ.

In the East the *Kyrie* followed the reading of the lessons as a litany prayer, where it also sometimes appeared after it was introduced into the West, either as a simple repetition of the cry *Kyrie* or combined with petitions. But also very early in the West it was placed immediately after the entrance Psalm (Introit), as has come down to us in Lutheran liturgical usage. In the liturgical action of worship what was happening was that as the clergy took their place in the church there were continuous and innumerable acclamations of *eleison*, that were finally at a point silenced by a signal from the bishop. This same type of pageantry in earlier days would have accompanied the entrance of the Roman Emperor on an official occasion. But there never was a question in the setting of the church's liturgy as to who was being appealed to: not the clergy who were taking their places, but the Lord only. The number of acclamations was cut down eventually to nine and then to three.

Gloria

*Glory be to God on high,
and on earth peace, good will toward men.
We praise you, we bless you, we worship you,
we glorify you, we give thanks to you, for your great glory.
O Lord God, heavenly King,
God the Father almighty.
O Lord, the only begotten Son, Jesus Christ;
O Lord God, Lamb of God, Son of the Father,
you take away the sins of the world; have mercy on us.
You take away the sins of the world; receive our prayer.
You sit at the right hand of God the Father; have mercy on us.
For you only are holy;
you only are the Lord.
You only, O Christ, with the Holy Spirit,
are most high in the glory of God the Father. Amen.*

The second great repeating song of the liturgy is commonly known by its Latin name, *Gloria*. The *Gloria* (in the West) concludes the litany prayers of the *Kyrie* by proclaiming the glory of God in Christ who takes away our sins and hears our prayers. Following the more somber cries for mercy of the *Kyrie*, the *Gloria* elevates our thoughts from ourselves and our needs to the sublime contemplation of God himself in his glory.

It is believed that the earliest form of the *Gloria* consisted in its middle section, a series of acclamations of Christ. Jesus is the "only-begotten" of the Father. In the early church it was frequently sufficient to identify him simply as "the only-begotten" (*ho monogenes*). Jesus is the "Christ," the promised Messiah of God. He is "Lord God," which no one familiar with the LXX version of the Old Testament could understand as anything other than Jehovah God himself. The acclamation of Jesus as the "Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world" previews the *Agnus Dei* of the Communion liturgy, and produces a mini-litany in the *Gloria*: "have mercy on us," "receive our prayer," "have mercy on us." Jesus is the "Son of the Father," which on the surface appears to say nothing at all, but at the same time says everything that needs to be said about him. He "sits at the right hand of the Father," exalted, where he intercedes for his people.

Then follow three stirring addresses to Christ of "You alone": You only are "the holy one." You only are "the Lord," *kyrios*, one Lord, as opposed to the many lords (*kyrioi*) of the pagan world. You only are "most high." Those familiar with Bach's Mass in B Minor, or other Latin version of the *Gloria*, will recognize these words as "tu solus altissimus." This too is a significant title

for our Lord. The Arians wanted to proclaim only the Father as *altissimus*, "most high." But Father, Son, and Holy Spirit in Christian theology are equally accorded the title. We address the Triune God in Christ as the one most high, *solus altissimus*. The fact that the Holy Spirit is mentioned only at the close of the hymn, and then in passing, is not a slight nor is it evidence of an incomplete song to the Holy Trinity. Christ is central to the song as he is central to all Christian faith and life. It is through Christ that we have come to the Father. The work of the Spirit is not to draw attention to himself, but to point to Christ ("*he will testify about me*" Jn 15:26), who is all in all.

The evidence is that the *Gloria* began with these acclamations of Christ. Then the addresses to the Father were added. Here the praise-words are multiplied and heaped up one on top of the other: We praise, bless, worship, glorify, and give thanks to him. For what reason? Simply, "*for his great glory.*" Jungmann comments: "The magnificent thing about the hymn, and the thing that at the same time makes it so liberal, is the fact that it does not pay God tribute in exact ratio to man's indebtedness, nor does it thank him only in acknowledgment of benefits received" (p. 352). No fine distinction is made of the gifts we have received, but our attention is drawn wholly to God's glory and grandeur. We rejoice and are honored to be permitted to praise his glory. Jungmann adds: "For that reason a song such as this has such wonderful power to free men from any egoistic narrowness and to bring them all together on a higher plane."

And finally the song of the angels, the *Gloria in excelsis*, was placed at the beginning to complete this song and to give it the name by which it is known. The Common Service, followed by *Christian Worship*, retains the familiar wording of the KJV text, "glory to God" and "on earth peace, good will to men." But, in fact, there is no separate item here of "good will to men." The weight of the textual evidence supports as a literal reading: "peace to men of goodwill." Since, however, the goodwill of which the angels sang is God's goodwill, and not men's goodwill, the literal translation does not accurately convey the sense of the original. God's peace comes not to people who show goodwill, but to those who have received the good will, the grace and favor of God. The NIV translation is true to the sense of the original Greek: "Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace to men on whom his favor rests."

Since at least the 11th century the first line of the *Gloria* has been sung by the worship leader, with the choir or congregation joining in the rest of the song, like the single angel singing God's glory over the hills of Bethlehem, suddenly joined by all the heavenly hosts. "Glory to God in the highest!" does not speak of the degree of glory that is to be given to God, that is, the

highest glory, but to the place where this glory is to be given, in the highest place. Luther captured this truth in the final stanza of his Christmas carol, *Vom himmel hoch*, "Glory to God in highest heaven."

The coming of the Savior into our world meant two things, glory to God and peace for men. In fact, the song may legitimately be understood to be a declaration and not a wish: "Glory is given to God and peace to men!" But since the full glorification of God and the granting of God's peace to men lay still in the future in the death and resurrection of Christ, we rightly view the angels' song as eschatological, pointing to the coming kingdom and ultimately to the day when we will join the angels around the throne of God in heaven giving glory to God (Revelation 5:11-13).

The earliest known version of the *Gloria* comes from the fourth century, but it is probably much older. It has no expressions in it other than might have been written in the first or second centuries. It is a great hymn of the early church that helps bind the church of all ages into one in Christ.

Luther, as quoted by Reed, said of the *Gloria* that it "did not grow, nor was it made on earth, but it came down from heaven."

Sanctus

*Holy, holy, holy Lord God of heavenly hosts:
heaven and earth are full of your glory.
Hosanna in the highest.
Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord.
Hosanna in the highest.*

The *Sanctus* is possibly the oldest repeating song of the Christian liturgy. Although its origins in the liturgy are not perfectly clear, as early as the turn of the first century the *Sanctus* appears to have been a part of the worship of the church at Rome, as attested by the words of Clement (*Ad Corinth.* 34:6). Clement prefaces the *Sanctus* with the passage from Daniel 7:10, which in fact is the form that the song takes in most of the liturgies of the Orient. From this it is not hard to surmise that the *Sanctus* may have been sung in the primitive church in Palestine, and may have been taken over directly from the triple "holy" or *Kedushshah* of the Jewish synagogue.

Reed, quoting an uncited author, calls the *Sanctus* "the most ancient, the most celebrated, and the most universal of Christian hymns" (Reed, p. 330).

The word *sanctus* means "holy" and *tersanctus* triple "holy" ("holy, holy holy"). The church's singing this song is a fulfillment of the Prophet Isaiah's

words, "They shall sanctify my name" (29:23). All of the works of God, the benefits for which we give thanks, are expressions of his inmost being—his holiness. Therefore our Lord teaches us in the first petition of his prayer, *sanctificetur nomen tuum*, "hallowed by thy name."

The *Sanctus* itself comes from Isaiah's powerful vision of the splendor, awe, and majestic holiness surrounding the throne of the Lord of hosts (Isaiah 6). Most Bible commentators picture this vision taking place in the Temple although this cannot be stated for certain. Isaiah saw antiphonal choirs of seraphim at the throne of the Lord, which was high and lifted up, the seraphim not above the Lord, to be sure, but gathered around, either singing back and forth to each other, "Holy, holy, holy," or one choir responding with "the whole earth is full of your glory" to the *Tersanctus* of the other.

The vision made a tremendous impression on Isaiah. Twenty-six times in his book he calls God "the Holy One of Israel." "It forms an essential part of Isaiah's prophetic signature" (Delitzsch). The fact that this signature is evenly distributed across the sixty-six chapters of his book (14 times in chaps. 1-39; 12 times in chaps. 40-66) bespeaks the common authorship of the two parts of the book.

The liturgical text of the *Sanctus* departs in two places from the Biblical text. The word "God" is added, "Lord *God* of hosts." More significant is the addition of "heaven": "heaven and earth are full of your glory." This addition is found in all Christian liturgies. Consequently, it is no longer just the Temple or even the whole earth that resounds with the *Tersanctus*, nor is it just the seraphim who cry out to one another. Heaven is the scene, and the whole host of heaven sing their song of praise without end. The widening of the setting corresponds to the breakdown of narrow Jewish sectarian belief. The glory of the Lord which once had dwelt in the Temple, now through the Incarnation of Christ has filled the whole heaven and earth.

Do we find a Trinitarian significance in the fact that the *sanctus* is uttered three times? A Trinitarian meaning is already given in John 12:41, where it is said of Isaiah that he had seen the glory of Jesus. But what Isaiah saw was the glory of God on his throne, the inescapable conclusion being that Jesus is God. While the force of the triple *sanctus* in the original text of Isaiah may have been emphasis, i.e., God is holy in the superlative degree, it cannot be denied that an allusion may be found here to the fuller revelation of God in the trinity of his persons that we find in the New Testament.

To the triple *sanctus* are added the words of acclamation the people shouted when Jesus entered Jerusalem on Palm Sunday: "Hosanna in the highest. Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord" (cf. Matthew 21:9). The original text on which this is based, Psalm 118:25ff, refers to the arrival of a festive procession to the Temple. The "hosanna" which retains its original sense of "Save now!" in the Psalm, becomes at Jesus' entry into Jerusalem almost "Hail!" or as Delitzsch suggests, "God save the king!," as may be seen in the additions "to the Son of David" and "in excelsis" ("in the highest").

The word *Benedictus* from the same Psalm 118 means "blessed." The "One who comes" without the addition "in the name of the Lord" had for a long time been used as a term for the Messiah, and would have been understood as such in first century Palestine. The tense of the *Benedictus* is the present tense, the One who comes, although the early church's placing these words after the Communion in a closing prayer gave them an eschatological sense, pointing forward to the Second Coming of Christ. The oriental liturgies use instead of the single phrase a double phrase that ties present and future together: "he who is come and is to come."

The theory has been advanced that the *Hosanna-Benedictus* was joined to the triple "holy" at a very early date, in Palestine itself, as a Christian corrective to what might otherwise have been interpreted as a narrow Jewish formula. However, apart from an uncertain reference in the *Apostolic Constitutions*, there is no clear evidence of such an early union. Aetheria, the 4th century Gallic pilgrim lady to Jerusalem, does mention it in an entirely different connection, as a responsorial processional chant sung by the people, but without the *Hosanna*. The *Hosanna-Benedictus* may have been first added to the *Sanctus* in Gallic territory, or possibly in Syria at the beginning of the fifth century.

However the time and place where this union may have occurred, the role of the *Sanctus* in creating an environment in which the sacramental presence of Christ is realized, was richly enhanced through the addition of the *Hosanna-Benedictus*. First, the singing of the *Tersanctus* itself evokes for us the awe-inspiring scene of Isaiah standing trembling in the presence of the Almighty as we ourselves stand in the Real Presence of Christ in the breaking of bread and the lifting of the cup. Then, by means of the *Hosanna!* and *Benedictus*: "Hosanna! Blessed is the One who comes. Hosanna in the highest!," we welcome his coming into our midst. Standing in the Real Presence of the Most High God, as did Isaiah, we too are overcome with his majesty and glory and fill his Temple with the shouts of the seraphim, "Holy, holy, holy."

The precise point of placement of the *Sanctus* in the Communion Service became a matter of minor controversy at the time of the Reformation. Luther in his Latin mass placed the entire *Sanctus* after the Words of Institution instead of before, a move, some have argued, that best agrees with the Lutheran doctrine of associating the Real Presence with the administration rather than with the consecration. But, in point of fact, confessional Lutheranism associates the Real Presence with the whole sacramental action and not specifically with either consecration or administration. The Common Service retains the historic position of the *Sanctus* as the climax and conclusion of Preface.

Agnus Dei

*O Christ, Lamb of God, you take away the sin of the world;
have mercy on us.*

*O Christ, Lamb of God, you take away the sin of the world;
have mercy on us.*

*O Christ, Lamb of God, you take away the sin of the world;
grant us your peace. Amen.*

The *Agnus Dei* is the fourth and final repeating song of the liturgy that we will consider here. There is more to the Ordinary, the rich tapestry of Scriptural truth that has been woven through the centuries to form the common path of Christian worship, much more, than what we are able to look at here. But these four songs are at the core of what we want God's people to take home from their worship every Lord's Day.

The *Agnus Dei* is a beautiful song of communion that came relatively late into the liturgy, appearing in the West during the later seventh century. It is thought that perhaps it was brought to the West with the inrush of Greek clerics from eastern lands that had been overrun by Islam. It is considered definitely Eastern in origins. It is known in the West by its Latin name, *Agnus Dei*, "Lamb of God."

The words of the *Agnus Dei* were spoken by John the Baptist when Jesus appeared at the Jordan where John was baptizing. John pointed to Jesus and uttered the profound statement: "Look, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!" It was a moment of revelation and light when God was making known to the world that Messiah was come.

The concept of the sacrificial lamb is deeply rooted in the Old Testament Scriptures and found explicit Messianic expression in Isaiah 53. Paul identifies Christ as "our Passover Lamb" in 1 Co 5:7. Peter reminds his

hearers that they were redeemed “not with perishable things such as silver or gold,” but “with the precious blood of Christ, a lamb with blemish or defect” (1 Pt 1:19). Reed notes that there are “more than thirty references to Christ as a lamb in John’s Revelation” (p. 368).

The liturgical wording deviates from normal grammatical usage in *amnos* (Greek) and *agnus* (Latin) as vocatives in place of the expected *amne* or *agne*. This may be explained as the attempt, out of respect for the text of Scripture, to retain the phraseology of the original text, which is not an address, but a declarative sentence. Or possibly, as Jungmann surmises: “This is in keeping with a grammatical rule which is in effect in many languages: from a feeling of reverence, religious terms are apt to be handled as indeclinable” (p. 338). The Latin substitutes the plural “*peccata*,” (“sins”) for the singular of the original, but in Lutheran use this has reverted back to the singular. In a feature peculiar to Lutheranism, the word “Christ” was added to the beginning of each of the three petitions. This feature is found only in Lutheran liturgies.

The *Agnus Dei*, in the place where it is found in the liturgy, carries with it a strong sacramental sense and is not just a repeating of the confession of sins and absolution. Of course, the Lamb of God who takes away all sins bears us God’s forgiveness, but with forgiveness, we recall, come all the gifts of God’s grace, or as Luther put in his Small Catechism, “where there is forgiveness, there is also life and salvation.” The imagery of the lamb evokes for us not only the sacrificial nature of his death, but also his perfect life (“a lamb without spot or blemish”), his meekness, patience, and kindness, and his voluntary yielding his life for our salvation (“He was led like a lamb to the slaughter, and as a sheep before her shearers is silent, so he did not open his mouth” – Is 53:7).

The setting for the appearing of the sacramental presence of the Holy One of Israel in his Temple, initiated by the singing of Isaiah’s *Tersanctus*, and reinforced by the *Hosanna-Benedictus*, is now complete. The Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world is here in our midst, in the eating of the bread and the drinking of the cup.

We speak in our theology of the modes of Christ’s presence. The high point of the Savior’s presence with his people, this side of heaven, occurs when we kneel at the altar and receive his body and blood. In that moment of the sacramental presence we sing “Holy, holy, holy, Lord God of heavenly hosts: heaven and earth are full of your glory. Hosanna in the highest. Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord.” There at the altar the Lamb who was slain is with us, not only by virtue of his omnipresence (Mt 28:20), and by virtue of his presence in our hearts by faith (Jn 14:23), and by virtue of

his special coming in the midst of his gathered people (Mt 18:20), but he is here truly and substantially in the bread and in the wine. He graciously compounds his presence with us. In that moment of his coming to us in the sacrament he, the Lamb of God who was slain, but who now lives and reigns, is present with us as at no other time or place, when he comes to us not singly, or doubly, or even triply, but quadruply with the blessings of his grace.

The *Agnus Dei* originally found its use, as did many early liturgical songs, in filling an interval of liturgical action, the liturgical action in this case being the "fraction," the breaking of the bread of holy communion. The one simple verse, "Lamb of God, you take away the sin of the world," was repeated as often as was necessary until the fraction was complete. But when the fraction became largely ceremonial and the time period was no longer necessary, the number of *Agnus Dei's* gradually was reduced to the hallowed number three. There is evidence of this transition beginning as early as the ninth century. Since the early twelfth century the *Agnus Dei* has had its present threefold form, and has concluded with the "*dona nobis pacem*" ("grant us your peace").

Conclusion

We are at a point now where we may assess the type of theology or practical aptitude or disposition that is elicited, created, shaped, by the power of the gospel through the godly repetition of these repeating songs of the liturgy.

Let there be no mistake but that we dare not permit nostalgia or love of the traditional or yearning for the novel determine for us what our worship will be. It is far too important for that. The value of the elements of our worship is based on how they relate to the gospel, and how they convey that gospel to us. We commend the four great repeating songs of the historic liturgy for the reason that they are in truth deeply rooted in the gospel of Jesus Christ.

The attitude of humble suppliants, approaching the throne of grace as beggars with cup in hand, would be an expected outcome in the theology of believers whose instinctive cry in need, arising from the deepest recesses of their soul, is *Kyrie eleison*, "Lord, have mercy." "Nothing in my hand I bring. Simply to thy cross I cling." *Kyrie eleis*. The gospel through godly repetition in worship has the power to shape us as suppliants, bringing us into line with God's people from time immemorial and their ancient cry.

The *Gloria* immediately following the petitions for mercy is designed to elevate the worshiper's mind and heart to the theology of pure praise and

glorification of God for his great goodness. Thus lifted up from the earth, we join the choir of angels in the song of glory we will sing with them to all eternity. From that lofty place we view in a timeless way the miracle of the ages, the Incarnation of the Son of God, whose praise is the centerpiece of this song. This too belongs to correct theological attitude inculcated in worship. Jesus is the center. We come to God through Jesus Christ, and praise God through the Incarnate One who has been given to us as Lord.

The theology of the *Sanctus* creates for us the hallowed ground where we must remove our shoes in the presence of the Almighty and cry with Isaiah, "Woe is me! For I am a man of unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips, and my eyes have seen the King, the Lord Almighty" (Isaiah 6:5). The attitude of wonder, mystery, and awe characterizes the believing child of God at all times, but never more so than when we stand in the very sacramental presence of the King, the Lord Jesus Christ.

The theology of the *Hosanna-Benedictus* brings us back to earth with the realization that he has come to us, as he came once to Jerusalem long ago. The central mystery of our faith is still Immanuel, "God with us," that God is not somewhere out the east window of the sanctuary, but is in our midst, in Christ, in the bread and in the cup. We greet his coming, "Blessed is the One who comes in the name of the Lord. Hosanna in the highest."

The theology of the *Agnus Dei* announces that this is the time; this is the place. Now he is here, the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world. And we bring him our petitions, "have mercy on us," "grant us your peace."

Whenever we gather to commune, to celebrate the feast of the body and blood of our Lord, could we find more appropriate Scriptures to create the setting for his sacramental presence than what we have collectively in the *Sanctus*, *Hosanna*, *Benedictus*, and *Agnus Dei*?

Now it is necessary to ask: Is it possible that we might frame our worship with other great words of Scripture than these historic repeating songs of the liturgy? Yes, most certainly we could do so. All is freedom here. We have no ceremonial laws that govern us or coerce us into a fixed pattern of worship.

But we would be hard pressed to find better texts. These magnificent repeating songs of the liturgy have inspired the genius of the greatest musicians who have ever lived. Palestrina, Bach, Mozart, Hadyn, all reached the heights of their genius weaving their choral polyphony around these sacred texts, *Kyrie*, *Gloria*, *Sanctus*, *Agnus Dei*. God continue to motivate and inspire musicians and composers among us today to lay their talents at

the feet of the Master and devote themselves and their gifts to keep these repeating songs of the liturgy alive and at work in the worship of the people of God.

I trust you will agree with me when I say that these ancient repeating songs of the liturgy are, in fact, anything but “ordinary,” and fully warrant being an Ordinary part of the week-to-week worship of God’s people until time ends.

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