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Miscellanea

The Liturgical Crisis in Wittenberg, 1524 *

E. REIM

It is generally conceded that a proper understanding of Luther's liturgical writings not only calls for careful study of the documents themselves, but also presupposes thorough familiarity with the general historical background as well as the particular circumstances under which the individual papers were written. One gains a far better understanding of the tentative *Von der Ordnung des Gottesdienstes in der Gemeinde* and the sober and thoughtful *Formula Missae* if one considers the disorderly excesses which Carlstadt had provoked in his misguided attempts to reform the worship of the Wittenberg congregation. Further light is thrown on the subject if one is aware of the difficult conditions under which Luther's friend Hausmann was laboring at Zwickau where he was opposing the radical tendencies of Muenzer and yet had no constructive and conservative counter-proposals to offer. These and other contributing factors usually receive ample consideration when this major liturgical work of Luther is under consideration.

Too little attention is, however, being given to a subsequent pamphlet of Luther, "Concerning the Abomination of the Canon of the Mass" (*Vom Greuel der Stillmesse*). It was an unprecedented and drastic step when Luther not only published but also translated into German that part of the Mass which contained the Consecration with the supposed transubstantiation of the elements into the Body and Blood of Christ. For this part was considered so sacred that in compliance with the rubrics it was said in a tone of voice so low as to be inaudible to the congregation—hence the German name: *Stillmesse*. It was even more serious a matter when Luther illustrated this text with a running commentary in which he exposed the idolatrous character of the prayers and the constant reference to the propitiatory sacrifice which was supposedly there being performed by the hands of the priest. For this was pungent and caustic comment, indeed, and withering criticism, such as Luther was capable of when thoroughly aroused. It was Luther at his best—or worst—depending on how one feels about the matter. But regardless of any one's personal leanings, it is historically and liturgically an important document.

It is with a peculiar sense of unreality, therefore, that one reads the English translation of this pamphlet as it appears in Vol. VI of the Works of Martin Luther (Philadelphia Edition). For here we have the Canon alone, without Luther's comments: the object of criticism without the critique! Whether this pro-

* This article appeared in the *Quartalschrift (Theological Quarterly)* of July, 1948, and is here reprinted by the kind permission of that journal.

cedure is justified by the remark of the editor, Dr. Paul Zeller Strodach, that Luther's "comments are not always in good spirit or good taste or fair," the reader may judge for himself by reading the unexpurgated version in some of the other available editions (e. g., St. Louis, XIX, 1198—1213). Dr. Strodach finds the chief value of the document in this that it supplies the exact text of the Mass which was used by Luther. When he then concludes: "As our interest in this pamphlet is a liturgical one only, the Canon alone has been translated," one is tempted to ask whether the form of the text is to constitute the chief interest of the student of Lutheran liturgics or whether subject matter and historical background are not even more important. It is with the intention of supplying this background, which in turn will enable one to judge the propriety of Luther's vehemence in speaking of the "Abomination of the Canon," that this article is written.*

The liturgical crisis which came to a head in Wittenberg in 1524 developed gradually. Luther's chief concern had been, and indeed always remained, about matters of doctrine. But for that very reason it was inevitable that he touched on practices which were inseparably connected with the prevailing forms of worship, particularly the withholding of the cup, the saying of private masses, and the manner in which the Sacrament had been turned into a propitiatory sacrifice. Against these errors Luther testified repeatedly and plainly in his sermons and writings, even after he was confined to the Wartburg. The result was that things began to change in Wittenberg in spite of the absence of Luther. In September, 1521, Communion under both kinds was celebrated in the Parish Church. A month later the reading of masses in the Chapel of the Augustinian Monastery was discontinued. Even at the Castle Church it became impossible to keep up the daily program of masses because of numerous resignations of priests who no longer could reconcile these duties with their newly enlightened consciences.

Luther's elation over these quiet victories of the Word was soon disturbed by the excesses of a radical element which under the leadership of Carlstadt shattered the peace of Wittenberg with the violence of their reforms. This moved Luther to return to Wittenberg (March 6, 1522), where his famous Eight Sermons were soon instrumental in restoring order. The conservative character of his reformation was re-established and vindicated. Radicalism was emphatically disavowed.

But by this same turn of events, ultra-conservatism had also survived in Wittenberg. It soon became apparent that the Castle Church was to prove a stronghold in which was firmly entrenched

* The material is drawn chiefly from the excellent general introduction to Vol. XIX of the St. Louis Edition of Luther's Works, in which the editors incorporate many details to which the average reader has no ready access. The special introduction in Vol. XVIII of the Weimar Edition was also consulted, as were the Luther biographies of Koestlin and Kolde.

a spirit of reaction which stubbornly resisted all reform of worship, even the conservative and evangelical changes advocated by Luther. What was to make matters more difficult was the fact that here Luther found himself constrained to attack an institution which was very dear to the heart of Elector Frederic the Wise, the very man who had been such a staunch supporter at Worms and who had made the Wartburg a sheltering haven for Luther during the dangerous months that had followed.

The Castle Church, from whose very door Luther had launched his Ninety-Five Theses in 1517, was a monument to the piety of Frederic the Wise. It was a church without a regular congregation, since the Parish Church served the citizens of Wittenberg and the Augustinian Chapel the Monastery and the University. Only when the Elector was in residence at Wittenberg, was there a congregation which attended. Yet we are told that shortly before the above-mentioned resignations this church was staffed with a college of eighty-three clerics of various degrees. It was an endowed church, maintained by lavish grants made by the ancestors of Frederic, to which the Elector had made material additions. The original chapter consisted of fourteen prebendary canons, fourteen vicars, and a considerable number of lesser clergy. These were in charge of general devotions and a large program of special masses. To these Frederic added a "Lesser Choir" (in contrast to the other, the "Great Choir"), four priests, eight canons, and sixteen choir-boys, whose sole assignment was to conduct devotional masses in honor of the Blessed Virgin. Another group was added by the Elector as late as 1519, this time for the purpose of a year-round program of masses in commemoration of the Passion of Christ. Luther declined to write the orders for this project on the ground that there was already too much ceremonial and ritual. Spalatin states that at this time the number of masses per year amounted to 11,039. The annual consumption of candles was over 35,000 pounds. Twenty-nine sets of sacramental vessels were required, two of them being of solid gold. No statistics are available as to the number of sacred vestments, except that more than a hundred sets were of the finest and heaviest silk damask, richly embroidered with gold. As late as 1522 Frederic was still adding to the almost incredible number of sacred relics (over 5,000, cf. *CONCORDIA THEOLOGICAL MONTHLY*, December, 1943, p. 879) which were exhibited at this church and which made it a shrine that was visited by great crowds of pilgrims, particularly on the Day of All Saints (to whose memory the church was dedicated).

In view of these deeply rooted traits of character and this ingrained love of pomp and ritual the Elector was obviously going to be difficult when it came to applying the principles of the Reformation to this pet project. He had already proved that when the Deans of the two Choirs had complained of the manner in which their staffs had been depleted by the fact that some of their number had taken Luther's preaching to heart. For then Frederic had instructed them to make every effort to maintain

their full program of masses. Nevertheless, before the close of 1522 Luther began testifying against the system as well as against the personal conduct of at least some of the clergy of All Saints, calling the Castle Church a "Beth Aven," a House of Idols. After February, 1523, the discussions turned around a practical problem, that of finding a successor for the Dean of the Great Choir, who had died. Luther proposed Amsdorf, who, however, felt conscience-bound to declare that he would move for a reform of worship, and whose nomination was therefore not approved by the Elector. Luther had also addressed a letter to the Provost of the chapter, Justus Jonas (who was against the continuation of the old forms), and also to the entire chapter. In this he called upon them to remove those customs which were clearly an offense against the Gospel. When the matter was reported to the Elector by some who opposed this demand, Frederic declared that there was to be no change. A similar letter written by Luther in July met with the same fate.

Almost immediately Luther began to treat the matter from the pulpit of the Parish Church. Thus the issue was made public and became more urgent than ever. Now Jonas informed the Elector that he could no longer conform, would not even attend mass in the future, and that he was awaiting the decision of the Elector on his stand. Frederic's answer was that those canons who objected to serving in this capacity should resign. He seems to have modified this hasty decision, however, for on Michaelmas Day, lessons from the Old Testament were read in place of the mass for souls. Nor were there any resignations.

But Luther was not satisfied. Since many of the objectionable features were still retained, the settlement savored of compromise. It is at this time that he published his *Formula Missae*, apparently not merely yielding at last to the persistent entreaties of his friend Hausmann, but showing what in his judgment constituted an evangelical mass and what he was practicing in his own church in Wittenberg. Not only did he remove the secretive Canon of the Mass, the mysterious *Stillmesse*, as well as all references to the intercession of the saints and to their supposed merits, but he also stressed the need of preaching, in order that the people might receive the instruction of which they were so sorely in need. And yet he preserved the basic structure and the historic elements of the service. One marvels at the moderation of the man who in the midst of such a tense controversy did not permit himself to be carried away to extremes. But that his basic position had undergone no change is apparent from the way in which he entreats Hausmann in the closing paragraphs of this treatise not to be offended at the fact that the "sacrilegious Tophet" was still continuing at All Saints.

This was the state of affairs at the end of 1523. Matters might have remained in this unsatisfactory condition if a final crisis had not been precipitated by the action of one of the Deans who in the following year reverted to the Roman withholding of the cup in

the communion of a lay person. Luther not only protested immediately, but demanded a final decision from the entire chapter, indicating that if it were not forthcoming, he would resort to sterner measures. Since the chapter supported its Dean and appealed the case to the Elector, the issue was now squarely joined. The Elector requested a statement from Luther. Luther's answer seems to have been a document which was subsequently published under the title, *Concerning the Abomination of the Canon of the Mass*, in which he exposed the secret of the Canon and subjected it to his annihilating criticism. The Editors of the Weimar edition consider this a résumé of a sermon preached by Luther on Advent Sunday, 1524. This attack on the Canon of the Mass was made the substance of a final accusation against Luther by the clergy of All Saints, probably in a desperate attempt to retrieve the ground which they had lost. It was in vain, however, for Luther had the endorsement and support of the people, of the Augustinian Friars, and of the University. In a letter to the Elector the Dean of the Lesser Choir (not the one who was under fire) informed Frederic that he could no longer defend the old system, and a few days later the entire chapter signed the "New Order of Worship for the Castle Church at Wittenberg." The Elector gave silent consent. The New Order was inaugurated on Christmas Eve, 1524.

It had been a struggle that was not decided until the very last. More was at stake than we can determine at this distance. On the very day when Luther had preached his sermon against the Canon of the Mass, only four weeks before the end of the struggle, he had informed Spalatin that he would leave Wittenberg if the mass were to be retained. But now ultra-conservatism and liturgical reaction were disavowed, as extremism and radicalism had been before. The "Golden Mean" was emerging as the ideal of the Lutheran Liturgy.

This episode had an interesting and instructive sequel. The Elector Frederic died in May of the following year, 1525. He was succeeded by his brother John, "the Constant," the Confessor of Augsburg. There may be some connection between this change of rulers and the fact that the elaborate forms of worship at the Castle Church were simplified still more, e. g., by discontinuing the use of the rich and ornate Eucharistic vestments of which its college of clerics had such a plentiful supply. But in one respect there was no change. Every service that was held was still a mass. Although it had been agreed in the previous year that the Sacrament was to be celebrated only on Sundays and high festivals, and then only if there were communicants who desired it, and though, as has been said above, there was no regular congregation which belonged to All Saints, yet it would often happen that there was just one communicant. It soon became clear that a few die-hard members of the chapter had made this arrangement among themselves in order to insure that the service would always end with communion. Since this was obviously not a matter of ministering to a spiritual need, but rather of upholding a liturgical form, the

question was opened up once more, with the result that it was agreed that henceforth there were to be communion services at the Castle Church only when the Elector or some members of his Court were present and desired it. Otherwise the clergy of All Saints were to partake of the Sacrament in the Parish Church with the Wittenberg Congregation.

This might be interpreted as an indication of a petty and vindictive spirit on the part of Luther. But Koestlin correctly points out that an important principle was at stake. In his conservative revision of the Liturgy Luther had retained the thought that the service comes to its climax in the communion. But this should not be maintained as an empty form, nor should it be given the status of a mandatory requirement. For Luther the very greatness of the Sacramental Gift presupposed a genuine, unfeigned demand for its administration.

Our generation can learn much from this attitude of Luther. If the Liturgical Movement of our day will see its mission in reviving the interest of the Church in the Sacrament which has been entrusted to it, and in stimulating an increased desire in our congregations for the blessings which are thereby conferred upon us, and if the exponents of this movement will content themselves with patient Scriptural indoctrination and evangelical invitation and persuasion as their means for attaining this end, then they will certainly be rendering a service of the highest order. And if such efforts will lead to a situation where it becomes advisable to provide more frequent opportunities for communion, such steps will surely be welcomed by all concerned. But if the argument for a more frequent celebration of the Sacrament is to consist of attempts to discredit our present Sunday worship because it often is "merely" a service of the Word, if the communion is treated as a liturgical requirement which is needed either for the sake of completeness of the service or for the sake of ancient tradition, then we are on the way to the ritualism against which Luther protested so vigorously.

Dr. Hermann Sasse of Erlangen has summed it up in an article contributed to the latest issue of *Una Sancta*: "It has nevertheless become more abundantly clear that there can be no worship revival without a rediscovery of the Real Presence. The worshipers must know what they receive in the Holy Communion before they can desire it again. It is not the beauty of the Communion Liturgy that can renovate the celebration of Holy Communion, which has fallen into desuetude even in some Lutheran churches. That can be accomplished only by hunger and a thirst after that which is received at the Lord's Table. Only faith in the Sacramental Gift to which the Catechism testifies can renovate our celebrations of Holy Communion and therewith our services. Everything else will remain mere fruitless religious estheticism which one can have in other religions as well."

This recital of the events which transpired in Wittenberg during these critical years may serve another purpose, namely, toward an

evaluation of the relative merits of the two major liturgical works of Luther, his *Formula Missae* of 1523 and the *Deutsche Messe* of 1526. For some time it has been the fashion to praise the former at the expense of the latter. The Latin order is said to show Luther at his liturgical best, while the German is considered inferior by far. Strodach, in his introduction to Vol. VI of the Works of Martin Luther, considers it a pity that Luther did not stop with the *Formula*. He criticizes the *Messe* for what he calls "a forced and entirely overemphasized introduction of the congregational hymn, with its kindred versification of liturgical parts, — the poorest versification of which Luther was guilty." This harsh judgment is supported by Reed in his newly published book, though in considerably less strident terms. It would seem, indeed, that the events which lie between the writing of these two works were of such an irritating nature, particularly because of the stubborn character of the opposition, that they might well account for a drastic change in the attitude of Luther, amounting practically to an abandonment of his earlier moderate and conservative position.* That is the plausible theory upon which the foregoing judgment is based. But a closer examination will prove that the facts do not justify this conclusion.

It is a mistake to assume (as Strodach does) that the controversy with the clergy of the Castle Church came after the writing of the *Formula*. It has been shown above that this document was published shortly after the first phase of that bitter controversy had already been fought, at a time when Luther was still deeply dissatisfied because the entire settlement savored of compromise. Yet he did not permit these matters to affect his judgment when it came to setting down the principles for a proper and evangelical form of worship. Another period of strife followed, and led to his writing *Concerning the Abomination of the Canon of the Mass*. There Luther did relieve his mind of considerable accumulated tension. But when the *Messe* was written, the controversy was over. The outcome had been entirely to Luther's satisfaction. The new Elector was in complete sympathy with Luther's stand. The work that was done in preparation for the *Messe* was very much to Luther's liking. For now he was writing one after another of his immortal hymns, among them *A Mighty Fortress*, and Johann Walther and Conrad Rupff were combining their musical knowledge and training with Luther's native talent in fitting the ancient chants to the translated liturgical texts. Whether the metric versions of the Creed and the Sanctus are merely crude efforts, or whether the quality which offends the modern critic is one of boldness and vigor, is after all a matter of taste. It was the privilege of this writer recently to hear Luther's *Jesaia, dem Propheten, das geschah* (from the *Deutsche Messe*) sung by a well-trained choir. The impression it made on us was definitely not one of crudity, but of overpowering majesty.

* Strodach calls the *Deutsche Messe* a "break with the conservative past in spirit and in fact." (Works of Martin Luther, VI, p. 121.)

It is likewise a mistake to draw unwarranted conclusions from the fact that the *Messe* was entirely in German and made far-reaching provisions for granting the congregation an extensive active role in the service by the singing of hymns and liturgical parts. This is by no means an indication that Luther was yielding to a popular demand of which he really did not approve. Nor does it constitute a lapse from the more ideal liturgical plane of the *Formula*. On the contrary, the writing of a German mass in which the congregation should have a voice is merely the carrying out of a plan already formulated and announced in the earlier work. For in the concluding section of the *Formula Missae* Luther expresses the wish that as many of the songs as possible be in the vernacular, and that thus an increasing measure of participation in the service be assured to the congregation "UNTIL THE ENTIRE MASS SHALL BE MADE VERNACULAR." In the meantime he hoped that German poets might be moved to work out "pious poems" for this purpose.

In order to be properly understood, the two great liturgical writings of Luther should not be set against each other, one being favored at the expense of the other, but they should be recognized as what they truly are, successive steps in a carefully planned and clearly unified program for a sorely needed reform of worship.

A final matter for our consideration deals with the tendency which crops out in almost every liturgical movement, namely, to concern one's self unduly with punctilious matters of form, to make much of garb and ceremony, to bow before the authority of ancient tradition, and to neglect the underlying problem of doctrine. Lest we be misunderstood, let it be said that we do not mean to imply that every student of liturgy is preoccupied with such external and superficial matters, or that this study in itself will lead to such ill-conceived results. But if we draw one last comparison between the things which interested Luther and those which were favored by his ritualistic opponents, there can be no uncertainty as to our attitude toward these symptoms of traditionalism whenever and wherever they may arise. Nor can there be any doubt as to the direction in which such a movement leads. Dr. Sasse states it very clearly in the article which has already been mentioned: "If one does not take the doctrinal content of the Liturgy seriously, all liturgical restoration will remain an external thing, a mere borrowing of formulas, rites, and ecclesiastical forms which one can find done much better in a Roman Catholic church."

We are frank to say that much is being said and done in these matters that we do not like, much that is symptomatic of an unsound trend. Why must we copy the speech of Rome and speak of a "Tre Ore Service"? Why not use the vernacular, — good plain English words? Why adopt the Roman or High Church collar and vest for street wear? Why has it suddenly become "Blessed *

* Merriam-Webster, Def. 5: R. C. Ch. Beatified.

Martin Luther?" Why set one's self apart from the rank and file of Lutherans by an ostentatious genuflection and "signing" one's self in the presence of the Altar? Why do our conferences become "Retreats" and our books of prayer "Breviaries"? Why the persistent efforts to reintroduce the Elevation, or to emphasize "the sacrificial element" in the Sacrament? We know well that the prayers of praise and thanksgiving with which Christians receive the Body and Blood of their Lord *are* a sacrifice that is well-pleasing to God. But surely, we do not *offer* them with that thought in mind, for then they cease to be what they should always remain, truly humble expressions of gratitude for the undeserved mercy of God.

Why should we seek our liturgical ideals in the traditions of Rome when we have a better source? Let us hold fast to our good, sound, evangelical, Lutheran precedent. It demonstrates an ideal that follows the sober middle way. It is the ideal of the "Golden Mean," as Dr. Fuerbringer so aptly called it. That is our Lutheran heritage.

