

## Essay 2. Hymns of Luther's *Deutsche Messe*, 1526<sup>1</sup>

In Essay 1 we noted that in Luther's opinion, the laity as part of the priesthood of all believers [1 Peter 2:5] were to be allowed to participate in the liturgy of the Mass and in singing hymns. Pragmatically, doing so was a tremendous aid in teaching the faith. The Augsburg Confession<sup>2</sup> states: "Falsely are our churches accused of abolishing the Mass... Nearly all the usual ceremonies are also preserved, save that the parts sung in Latin are interspersed here and there with German hymns, which have been added to teach the people." Luther initiated reforms not only for theological reasons but also with careful attention to the effect they would have on the people. In the preface to "An order of Mass and Communion for the Church at Wittenberg," (the *Latin Mass*, 1523), Luther writes:

Therefore I have used neither authority nor pressure. Nor did I make any innovations. For I have been hesitant and fearful, partly because of the weak in faith, who cannot suddenly exchange an old and accustomed order of worship for a new and unusual one, and more so because of the fickle and fastidious spirits who rush in like unclean swine without faith or reason, and who delight only in novelty and tire of it quickly, when it has worn off. Such people are a nuisance even in other affairs, but in spiritual matters, they are absolutely unbearable.<sup>3</sup>

Apparently, as the saying goes, Luther did not suffer fools lightly! He later continues:

We therefore first assert: It is not now nor ever has been our intention to abolish the liturgical service of God completely, but rather to purify the one that is now in use from the wretched accretions which corrupt it and to point out an evangelical use. We cannot deny that the mass, i.e., the communion of bread and wine, is a rite divinely instituted by Christ himself and that it was observed first by Christ himself and then by the apostles, quite simply and evangelically without any additions. But in the course of time so many human inventions were added to it that nothing except the names of the mass and communion has come down to us.<sup>4</sup>

He then continues to detail the original parts of worship which came down from the early church fathers, commending that which he believed to be laudable but condemning in the strongest terms other additions and changes which subverted the holy Supper into a sacrifice and work. It was in response to the latter that Luther undertook to purify worship and remove these "abominations."<sup>5</sup>

Following similar principles as he did in the *Latin Mass*, Luther undertook to provide a form of worship in the vernacular German. He published his *Deutsche Messe* in 1526, essentially substituting hymns for the parts of the Ordinary. The outline of this service is in *Lutheran Worship (LW)*, pages 197-98 (called "Divine Service III) and with a little more detail in the *Lutheran Service Book (LSB 213-18)*, there called "Divine Service Setting Five"). The hymnal numbering is not significant. *LW* contains three settings of the Divine Service and *LSB* five settings. All these hymns were included in *The Lutheran Hymnal (TLH)*, but one must search for them among the body of hymns throughout the hymnal.

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<sup>1</sup> This and all other "Essays" may be reproduced as handouts. Subsequent "Suggested Activities" can be adapted as desired.

<sup>2</sup> The Augsburg Confession, Article 24 "Of the Mass."

<sup>3</sup> Ulrich S. Leupold, ed., *Luther's Works: Liturgy and Hymns*, Vol. 53 (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1965) "An Order of Mass and Communion for the Church at Wittenberg," p. 19. This is known as the *Formula Missae et Communionis*, Luther's *Latin Mass*.

<sup>4</sup> Leupold, p. 20.

<sup>5</sup> Leupold, p. 22. Luther's preface and the entire *Latin Mass* can be accessed from pages 19-40.

Luther never intended to impose this service on anyone. He wrote it largely because there were many attempts at that time by others to provide a vernacular German Mass, and Luther considered many of these to be unacceptable. His friends prevailed upon him to provide a service, and this he did with the following admonition:

In the first place, I would kindly and for God's sake request all who see this order of service or desire to follow it: Do not make it a rigid law to bind or entangle anyone's conscience, but use it in Christian liberty as long, when, where, and how you find it to be practical and useful. For this is being published not as though we meant to lord it over anyone else, or legislate for him, but because of the widespread demand for German masses and services and the general dissatisfaction and offense that has been caused by the great variety of new masses, for everyone makes his own order of service. Some have the best intentions, but others have no more than an itch to produce something novel so that they might shine before men as leading lights rather than being ordinary teachers—as is always the case with Christian liberty....<sup>6</sup>

For our present purposes comparing the *five parts of the Ordinary* with German (vernacular) hymns Luther used as substitutes is sufficient. Please note that translations vary slightly from hymnal to hymnal. Essay 3 and the Hymn Study Resources to follow discuss these and other Luther hymns in greater detail.

## **The Correspondence of the Five Parts of the Ordinary to Luther's German Mass**

**Kyrie eleison** – Lord have mercy upon us

*TLH 6, LW 209, LSB 942* – “Kyrie! God Father in Heav'n Above” (Latin, 9<sup>th</sup> century; German, 1537)

**Gloria in Excelsis Deo** – Glory be to God on high

*TLH 237, LW 215, LSB 947* – “All Glory Be to God on High” (Nicolaus Decius)<sup>7</sup>

~ OR ~

*TLH 248, LW 210, LSB 948* – “All Glory Be to God Alone” (Martin Luther)

**Credo in unum Deum** – not strictly the Apostles' nor the Nicene creed (but much closer to the Nicene)<sup>8</sup>

*TLH 251, LW 213, LSB 954* – “We All Believe in One True God” (Martin Luther)

**Sanctus** – Holy, holy, holy, Lord God of Sabaoth

*TLH 249, LW 214, LSB 960* – “Isaiah, Mighty Seer in Days of Old” (Martin Luther)

**Agnus Dei** – Lamb of God

*TLH 148, LW p. 151, LSB 198* – “O Christ, Thou Lamb of God” (German 1528, Johannes Bugenhagen)<sup>9</sup>

~ OR ~

*TLH 146, LW 208, LSB 434* – “Lamb of God, Pure and Holy” [*LW*: “Sinless”] (Nicolaus Decius)

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<sup>6</sup> Leupold, “The German Mass and Order of Service,” p. 61.

<sup>7</sup> Nicolaus Decius (c. 1485-1541) studied at the University of Leipzig, obtained a master's degree at Wittenburg University in 1523, and became a monk and later a pastor. He advocated for the Reformation and was a disciple of Martin Luther. His *Gloria* hymn was used more than ten years before Luther's was written and became more popularly sung than Luther's.

<sup>8</sup> *TLH 252, LW 212, and LSB 953*: “We All Believe in One True God” is a paraphrase of the Apostles' Creed by Tobias Clausnitzer that first appeared in 1668 in Darmstadt. It was *not* part of Luther's German Mass though later generations may have used it as such.

<sup>9</sup> Johannes Bugenhagen (1485-1558) was Luther's pastor at St. Mary's church, Wittenberg. It was he who performed the marriage of Luther and Katharina von Bora. Bugenhagen was the most important figure in the Protestant Reformation in Northern Germany and Scandinavia.

## Suggested activities for Essay 2:

1. For those who are so inclined, read the *Order of Mass and Communion for the Church at Wittenberg* (the *Formula Missae*) and the *German Mass and Order of Service* (the *German Mass*) in the American Edition of Luther's Works, volume 53, "Hymns and Liturgy."<sup>10</sup> For a more detailed side-by-side comparison of the *Latin Mass* and the *German Mass*, see: <https://luthersliturgicalreforms.wordpress.com/>

2. Sing or read one or more of the parts of the Ordinary from a setting of the Divine Service with which you are most familiar and to the corresponding hymn/s in *TLH*, *LW*, or *LSB* listed in the chart above. Some hymn texts more closely parallel the text of the Ordinary than others. Discuss why this might be so or not so and what the differences appear to be. Below are a few details regarding the *German Mass* hymns.

***Kyrie, God Father in Heaven Above:*** This is a "troped" *Kyrie*. A "trope" is an insertion of new text within an existing text to explain or elaborate upon a point. The original text of the *Kyrie* is "*Kyrie eleison, Christe eleison, Kyrie eleison,*" Greek for "Lord, have mercy; Christ, have mercy; Lord, have mercy." Note that in each stanza additional words are inserted (troped) between "*Kyrie*" and "*eleison*" to explain the work of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. It is as if to say, "Lord (Lord who? Which Lord, and what about Him? Why do we call Him 'Lord?'), have mercy."

***Gloria in excelsis Deo:*** Decius's paraphrase "All Glory Be to God on High" contains three equal length stanzas referring respectively to each person of the Trinity, and then a concluding summary stanza. Luther's "All Glory Be to God Alone" is a much more detailed paraphrase, following the original text more closely. With forty-eight syllables per stanza, Luther's hymn is a nearly 250-word explanation (as Luther said, "What does this mean?") of the *Gloria*.

***We All Believe in One True God:*** The very opening is a melisma, a musical "flowering" over one syllable for emphasis. Unfortunately in the English translation the for it reason is lost. In the German, "*Wir glauben all' an einen Gott,*" the melisma sets the beginning of the word for "believe" – "*glauben.*" If we were to sing the hymn without regard to accent, translating it exactly, we would sing, "We *be*...lieve all in one God," not "We *all*... believe." What a difference this makes! There sadly appears no way to translate to English to place believing on the notes of the melisma. Note further, each hymn stanza is of equal length, a feature not present in either the Apostles' or Nicene Creeds. Luther is able to expound more on the work of the Father and Spirit than he can of Christ, who receives a standard narrative of His life. Lay open the Nicene Creed and compare it with Luther's text, and this becomes evident immediately.

***Isaiah, Mighty Seer in Days of Old:*** Interestingly, this is not a paraphrase of the traditional Latin *Sanctus* text but a paraphrase of Isaiah's vision recorded at the beginning of Isaiah 6. Luther was criticized in his day and after for not hewing more closely to the traditional text. However, by using the words of Isaiah 6, Luther ably paints a grander picture of what the traditional words mean. Heaven is opened; we see the angels hovering over the Throne of God; there is fire and thunder and majesty. Here again we see Luther's "What does this mean?" in action.

***Agnus Dei:*** As with the *Gloria*, two versions of the *Agnus* were used. Bugenhagen's "O Christ, Thou Lamb of God" ("*Christe, du Lamm Gottes*") is a fairly strict translation of the traditional Latin text. Decius, who supplied one of the *Gloria* paraphrases, departs once again from the traditional text (based upon John 1:29: "Behold the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world."). Decius reflects on Christ's suffering on the cross, His attitude toward His sacrifice, and the effects of it for us. These thoughts are troped (remember

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<sup>10</sup> See footnote 1 for the American Edition. Adventurous spirits may enjoy reading the German of a critical edition of Luther's works: Karl Drescher, ed., *D. Martin Luthers Werke, kritische Gesamtausgabe*, Vol. 35 (Weimar: Herman Böhlhaus Nachfolger, 1923).

the troped *Kyrie* above?) between the opening address to the “Lamb of God” and “have mercy on us/grant us peace.” The difference in length between the two hymns is notable. Decius’s lengthier hymn, especially if it not sung hurriedly (as is sometimes done to move through it more quickly), allows for a more meditative approach to the *Angus Dei*.

**For your reflection and response:**

3. What attitudes toward worship might we catch from what Luther wrote in the preface to the Wittenberg *Latin Mass*, 1523?

How might these attitudes apply in a practical way to worship in your parish/congregation?

4. The Augsburg Confession states that hymns were included in the Mass to teach the people Christian doctrine. Keep in mind Luther’s famous words, “What does this mean?” especially when considering the hymns that are most *different* from the texts of the Ordinary.

What do the hymns teach *specifically*?

Can these hymns be used as commentary on the various parts of the liturgy?

Might singing the hymns of the *German Mass* provide a good didactic function for us?

Do you have to be an “old German” to appreciate and learn them?

5. Sometimes people comment that older tunes are difficult for them to sing. Are the tunes associated with the hymns in the *German Mass* an impediment to singers today? To you?

Are they worth the effort to learn? Why or why not?