

Might we consider taking some action to better prepare for the Sacrament? In his Small Catechism, Luther asked, "Who, then, is properly prepared to receive this sacrament?" (The Reception of Holy Communion.) He answers with the famous words memorized by countless Lutheran confirmands: "Fasting and other outward preparations may serve a good purpose, but he is properly prepared who believes these words: 'Given' and 'poured out for you for the forgiveness of sins.' But whoever does not believe these words or doubts them is not prepared, because the words 'for you' require nothing but hearts that believe."

Lutheran Lite?

by Richard A. Krause

How about our preparation for the Sacrament? Are we prepared to receive Christ's body and blood in the Holy Supper? Are we worthy communicants? What about fasting and outward preparations? In his catechism Luther clearly says that faith in the words "for you . . . for the forgiveness of sins" makes one worthy to receive Holy Communion. Nevertheless, should outward preparations be dismissed out of hand or considered relics of past ages?

If we attend a lavish meal or banquet, wouldn't we make some kind of preparations? At the very least we would shower, take out our best suits or dresses, polish our shoes, and make sure our hair was just right. Are we doing the same for the Lord's great banquet?

My confirmation instruction in the 1960s taught me that such things as fasting and bodily preparations were not very important. I got the impression that outward preparation might lead to accentuating the wrong things in preparation for communing. It didn't take much to convince me that fasting was not for me.

At that same time, I would often visit my Lutheran grandparents who were farmers living in northern Wisconsin. As children, Communion Sunday was always apparent to us. It meant no breakfast. Normally, breakfast was a huge meal of cheese, sausage, milk, and all the extras after long morning hours working in the barn. Yet on Communion Sunday, that was not the case. The fast would not be broken until after my grandparents received the Sacrament.

Twenty years ago I studied for a year in Germany. There I observed worship at an independent Lutheran church. A number of things always caught my attention and demanded reflection.

On Communion Sunday, 20 minutes before the normal worship hour, communicants would assemble for a special confessional service. They would enter the sanctuary, and the doors would be closed. There would be no interruptions. If you came late, you were not allowed to enter. During this service the kneeling participants would make confession, reflect on their sinful condition, and consider Christ's great gift of forgiveness. Most sat up front, close to the altar, not aloof and separate from others. Such a service was full of silence -- a time for reflection and self-examination.

Private confession was also a practice still in use. This was evident by the long line of members waiting outside the door of the sacristy. For those not making private confession, a personal announcement of intention was still made to the pastor.

During the Communion section of the service, the words of institution were chanted as the vessels were lifted in awesome majesty. The magnificence of this section of the service lives with me to this day. This service enhanced and reinforced the great gift of the Sacrament in a most dynamic way.

What about us? What about our preparation? There is to be no doubt that "for you . . . for forgiveness" is the foremost thrust of Holy Communion, and everything else follows from it. Nevertheless, might we do more as we prepare for our Lord's gift?

Spending a year in Germany opened my eyes to what might be termed the Americanization of Lutheranism. Our church is different from the church back in Europe. We are not only different doctrinally but also in practice. As in every generation and place, culture and church collide and cause changes. This path of Americanization is a dangerous one. The Lutheran emphasis that God works on human hearts through the gospel in Word and sacrament is a concept that is easily lost today in the face of American confidence in human capacity.

What about such bodily preparations as making the sign of the cross? Martin Luther gave this formula: "In the morning, when you rise, make the sign of the cross and say, 'In the name of God, the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.'"

Today, such a practice is not only foreign to almost all American Lutherans, but to some it is even repugnant. Some think it Catholic, while to others it appears to be some type of magical incantation -- the sign of a superstitious basketball player standing at a free throw line. A called worker in one of our churches once related how odd one of our congregations appeared to him. As a visitor, he noticed that some people actually made the sign of the cross over their hearts before they sat down!

Here in America we've renounced almost all traces of past practices -- the sign of the cross, private confession, a personal visit to the pastor before Holy Communion, fasting, and so on. We have our reasons for doing this, but have we changed our Communion preparation for the better? Is our new American "lite" generating a positive hunger for the deep things of the faith?

Might we consider taking some action to better prepare for the Sacrament? Perhaps we could forgo reading the Sunday paper before church. We might instead read selected psalms, portions of the catechism, or reflect on the Ten Commandments. One might arrive at church 15 minutes earlier to read through the Communion hymns ahead of time. We could meditate on the readings of the day and ask, "What does this mean to me?" or "How have I failed my God?"

In the early church, repenting was often a joyful act of God's people preparing the way for the Lord. They were members of the bridal party. They did not have in common a personality type or technique for confessing but a sense of need and an awareness that God was addressing them to make them new. They were bonded together with Jesus in a divine meal. Hopefully we will keep growing in this same sacramental piety.

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