

A Guide to Our Order of Worship

Following the Common Order, Rite II (ELH, p. 60)



The traditional Divine Service contains elements which are **Sacrificial** (what we do for God) and elements which are **Sacramental** (what God is doing for us). Though the Sacrificial aspects are important, the Sacramental aspects are where the true focus should be. When Jesus visited the home of friends (Luke 10:38-42), Martha was distracted

with serving Jesus a meal, while Mary sat listening to Him. Martha requested that Mary help her, and our Savior replied: *“Martha, Martha... one thing is needful, and Mary has chosen that good part.”* This has application for our worship life: what Martha was doing for Christ (Sacrificial) was certainly appreciated by Him, but what Mary did by sitting at His feet (Sacramental) was a better part – the “one thing needful.”

As we now walk through the liturgy, note how it presents the life of Christ: His birth, crucifixion, resurrection, ascension, etc. All true Christian worship is centered in Him and performed through Him.

The Baptismal Font was typically in the entryway of churches. Through this Sacrament God had us enter the Holy Christian Church. For that reason the **Invocation** opened the service as a reminder of Baptism, as we worship in the name of the Triune God who has graciously made us His own. The pastor makes the (+) **Sign of the Cross**, likewise reminiscent of Baptism. We note that the sign of the cross opens and closes the service and marks the Sacramental aspects of the service where God comes to us in the Means of Grace during Absolution, the Creed (Baptism), Words of Institution and reception of the Supper.

We come to confess the spiritual truth about ourselves, in **the Confession of Sins**, admitting that on our own we have nothing to offer. We bow before God in humility, confident of His great mercy to us in Christ. This is followed by **the Absolution**, where the pastor stands in the place of Christ to declare God’s forgiveness. This declaration goes out freely without condition.

Four languages are represented in liturgical songs in our service. Hebrew shows our connection to the Old Testament believers; Greek shows our roots in the New Testament apostolic church; Latin shows that we are part of the Western heritage of the church, and English shows that our worship is also present day and relevant for our time.

The Introit is Latin (introitus) meaning “entrance.” Years ago the pastor entered the sanctuary singing the Psalm for the day. We now enter the portion of our service where the Word of God comes to us, connecting us to the worship life of the Old Testament church. The Introit always concluded with the **Gloria Patri**, to demonstrate that our God is Triune: Father, Son and Holy Ghost, and by this distinguished the use of Psalms in Christian churches from that of the synagogues.

The Kyrie eleison is an ancient Greek song from the early church, again reflecting the Trinity. This is not a confession of sin, but a plea for God’s help in all areas of life, similar to the prayer of the 10 lepers.

Dr. Martin Luther once said about **The Gloria in Excelsis**: “This hymn was not grown on earth but came down from heaven.” We are taken back to Christmas, and the angels who sang to the Shepherds. The earliest known date for this in a worship service is 126AD.

The Salutation goes with the next prayer, and represents the love between pastor and congregation. As a little boy I used to think the **Collect** should mean taking the collection. It was a term, however, used to collect or gather the prayers of God’s people based on the assigned readings.

In order to teach the *“whole counsel of God,”* a series of readings unfolded by the 300’s AD to bring a calendar and unity to the worship life of Christians. (see **The Historic Lectionary**, pp. 202-3 in our Hymnary). **The Gradual**, a “bridge,” was a Psalm which tied the readings together. **The Alleluia** is a Hebrew hymn of joy. It is omitted during the penitential seasons of Advent and Lent, and then sung again with renewed joy for Christmas and Easter festivals.

“Credo” is Latin for: “I believe.” The **Apostles’ Creed** received its name because legend had it that each Apostle provided a sentence. Though this is more than likely not the case, it was used very early in the Church during Baptisms. The **Nicene Creed** came in 325AD as an answer to false teachings which attempted to undermine the doctrine that Jesus is the true Son of God from eternity.

The Sermon has traditionally been delivered from the **pulpit**, demonstrating that the focus is not to be on the preacher or his personality, but on the message. This is also why pastors wear robes. Jesus commanded that *“repentance and remission of sins should be preached in His name beginning in Jerusalem.”* Each sermon should contain Law and Gospel, with the Gospel dominating. By the 1500’s the Sermon had been reduced to having little or no significance. Its proper place in the service was restored by Martin Luther during the Reformation.

The Offertory, from Psalm 51, is the words of David after his fall into sin with Bathsheba, and his recovery into God’s kingdom of grace through the work of Nathan. It received its name because church members would **offer** up bread and wine to be used in the Holy Communion while this hymn was being sung.

The General Prayer so beautifully addresses all of the major issues which confront us in this life, and gives ample room for petitions on behalf of those in special need in the congregation.

The Offering was not originally part of the ancient services, but was added in the last 200 years, especially in American churches. Having heard His Word of salvation the Lord’s faithful now bring their gifts of thanksgiving to His altar.

Holy Communion ties us to the Church of all time, to those already in heaven, and also to the angels who are serving at the Feast of the Lamb. **The Preface, The Proper Preface, and The Sanctus** all reflect this. The Sanctus in particular praises the Trinity, reminiscent of the vision given to Isaiah. We now prepare for the special visitation of our God in the Body and Blood of Christ. **The Exhortation** was written to instruct us so that we do not receive Christ’s Body and Blood to our judgment, as St. Paul warns. **The Lord’s Prayer** has

traditionally been included in the Communion order. Then follow the **Words of Institution** by which our Lord Jesus blesses the bread and wine through the mouth of the pastor. As St. Augustine said, “When the Word is joined to the element it becomes a Sacrament.” **The Pax Domini** was a custom in many churches: a kiss of peace was passed among the faithful to show their unity in this blessed Communion. Today we simply sing the response. **The Agnus Dei** quotes the words of John the Baptist regarding Jesus, *“Behold, the Lamb of God that takes away the sin of the world.”* What the Passover Lamb once only pictured is now truly before us in the Real Presence of the Body and Blood of Christ, given to the communicants in **the Distribution**.

Upon receiving the first Supper Jesus’ disciples sang a hymn. The early church continued this practice by singing the wonderful hymn of Simeon, **the Nunc Dimittis**, upon receiving the Christ-child in the Temple. Just as Simeon held the infant Jesus in his arms, we also now have this Savior in our presence, having received His true Body and Blood in the Sacrament. With Christ we can look forward to leaving this world in peace, according to the promises God has given in His Word.

The Collect of Thanksgiving was re-written by Dr. Luther in order to clean up the false teachings sometimes associated with the Sacrifice of the Mass. Note how we pray that this Sacrament would not only strengthen our faith but also our Christian love for each other.

The Salutation & The Benedicamus again remind us of the love between pastor and congregation, as well as our love to God. Then the service concludes with the special blessing of the Lord in **The Benediction** which God commanded the Old Testament priests to use when they addressed His people. Often called the Aaronic Blessing, it again reflects the Triune nature of our God, and reminds us of our Baptism as His children.

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