



Holy Communion in the Lutheran Confessions

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I. A MEANS OF GRACE

GRACE (THE FORGIVENESS OF SINS) COMES ONLY THROUGH MEANS, THAT IS, through the word of God and the sacraments: “God will not deal with us except through His external Word and Sacrament.”¹ In numerous other references from the Lutheran confessions the identical insistence is made—God forgives only through these means. This is made even more explicit regarding the sacrament of the altar. Although only one of the narrative accounts (Matt 26:28) specifically refers to the forgiveness of sins, it is clear that the references to Christ’s body and blood being “given for you” and “poured out for you” refer to his coming death, which secured the forgiveness of sins. Such forgiveness is bestowed not only through faith in the crucified one, but is also given in the sacrament itself, received in faith. “The whole Gospel...[is] embodied in this sacrament and offered to us through the Word,”² especially in the words “given for

¹Martin Luther, *The Smalcald Articles* (hereafter SA) 3:8:10, in *The Book of Concord* (hereafter BC), ed. Theodore G. Tappert (Philadelphia: Muhlenberg, 1959) 313.

²Martin Luther, *The Large Catechism* (hereafter LC) 5:32, in BC, 450.

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The Lutheran confessions make clear that holy communion is a means of grace, a fellowship meal, a moment of thanksgiving (or sacrifice), a time of remembrance, and an anticipation of the feast to come.

you” and “shed for you.” “The Word in the Lord’s Supper not only speaks of forgiveness but gives it.”³ The Lord’s supper is the body and blood of Christ “through which forgiveness is obtained.”⁴ In a sense the once-for-all crucifixion of Jesus and the sacrament are not two separate events or occasions but one. We receive forgiveness because we receive the body and blood which was “given and shed” two thousand years ago. “The believer...may become contemporary with the saving events of Calvary in any age.”⁵ Holy communion is not a new crucifixion, but we partake in the benefits of the one and only sacrifice of Christ on the cross by virtue of receiving the one who was crucified. “That Jesus’ body-self is said to be ‘given’ is a reference to his death; it is sacrificial terminology. This body is given ‘for’ those sharing the bread on any occasion.”⁶ In the *Large Catechism* Luther makes clear the unity of the cross and the sacrament: “Although the work was accomplished and forgiveness of sins was acquired on the cross, yet it cannot come to us in any other way than through the Word....Now, the whole Gospel...[is] embodied in this sacrament and offered to us through the Word.”⁷ Holy communion is not merely a reminder that Christ at one time died for us, but the sacrament itself is the forgiveness of sins. “We are told (this) in the words ‘for you’ and ‘for the forgiveness of sins.’ By these words forgiveness of sins, life, and salvation are given to us in the sacrament.”⁸

Clearly one cannot be made “worthy” to receive communion, but by the sixteenth century the idea was prevalent that confession of sins must precede the reception of the sacrament. In this context Luther writes that confession “neither is necessary nor should be demanded. Nevertheless, it is useful and should not be despised.”⁹ The confession of sins is omitted by Luther in both his Latin and German masses. Luther said that the best preparation was “a soul troubled by sins, death, and temptation and hungering and thirsting for healing and strength.”¹⁰ Despite his caution against any concepts of “worthiness,” Luther also insisted that all communicants be examined annually as to their “fitness,” which included knowing the words of institution from memory, and the ability to “answer questions about what the Lord’s Supper is, what its benefits are, and what they expect to derive from it.”¹¹ Failing this test, they “should be completely excluded and banished from the communion of the Supper, since they are without the wedding

³Edmund Schlink, *Theology of the Lutheran Confessions* (Philadelphia: Muhlenberg, 1961) 158.

⁴LC 5:28, in BC, 449.

⁵*The Sacrament of the Altar and Its Implications* (ULCA, 1960) 4.

⁶Robert W. Jenson, *Visible Words: The Interpretation and Practice of Christian Sacraments* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1978) 81.

⁷LC 5:31-32, in BC, 450.

⁸Martin Luther, *The Small Catechism* 6:6, in BC, 352.

⁹*An Order of Mass and Communion, in Luther’s Works* (hereafter LW), ed. Jaroslav Pelikan, Hilton C. Oswald, Helmut T. Lehmann, 55 vols. (St. Louis: Concordia; Philadelphia: Fortress, 1955-86) 53:34.

¹⁰Ibid.

¹¹Ibid., 32.

garment.”¹² On the other hand, the *Formula of Concord* insists that “there is only one kind of unworthy guest, namely, those who do not believe.”¹³

Communion should be received often. Luther said: “Indeed, the very words ‘as often as you do it’ imply that we should do it often...frequently, whenever and wherever you will.”¹⁴ It is especially wicked for people to receive the sacrament only when they feel the need. “What shall I do if I cannot feel this need or experience hunger and thirst for the sacrament?”¹⁵ Luther responds by telling such people to check to see if they are still alive, and if they have doubts, to ask their neighbors. The less you feel your sins and infirmities, the more reason you have to go to the sacrament and seek a remedy.¹⁶ “Those who claim to be Christian should prepare themselves to receive this blessed sacrament frequently. For we see that men are becoming listless and lazy about its observance.”¹⁷ Luther insists that those who abstain from the sacrament for “a long period of time” are not to be considered Christian. The *Apology of the Augsburg Confession* states that “in our churches Mass is celebrated every Sunday and on other festivals.”¹⁸ Citing this reference, the 1978 *Statement on Communion Practices* of the ALC/LCA encourages congregations to move toward the goal of weekly communion so that an increasing number of people “will make the sacrament a normal, rather than an occasional part of their lives.”¹⁹ Indeed, the *Large Catechism* states that “the Lord’s Supper is given as a daily food and sustenance so that our faith may refresh and strengthen itself.”²⁰

II. FELLOWSHIP

The cup of blessing which we bless, is it not a participation (*koinonia*) in the blood of Christ? The bread which we break, is it not a participation (*koinonia*) in the body of Christ? Because there is one bread, we who are many are one body, for we all partake of the one bread. (1 Cor 10:16-17)

Holy communion has an essentially social character; it is the national meal of the new Israel. It is as baptized members of the Christian community that individual Christians receive communion, not only for the strengthening of our faith but also that we may grow in fervent love toward one another. In a graphic illustration of this community, Luther speaks of “grains which lie in a heap and are not ground up, each one is a body for itself, but when they are ground up together they

¹²*Ibid.*, 33.

¹³*Formula of Concord, Epitome* 7:8, in *BC*, 484.

¹⁴*LC* 5:47, in *BC*, 452.

¹⁵*LC* 5:75, in *BC*, 455.

¹⁶*LC* 5:75, 78, in *BC*, 455.

¹⁷*LC* 5:39-40, in *BC*, 451.

¹⁸*Apology* (hereafter *Ap*) 24:1, in *BC*, 249.

¹⁹*A Statement on Communion Practices* (The American Lutheran Church, Lutheran Church in America, 1978) 7.

²⁰*LC* 5:24, in *BC*, 449.

become a single body." The same is true of the wine. If one does not press the grapes, each one retains its shape for itself, but when they are all pressed out the wine flows together. "I need my neighbor; I am poor and indigent, and I let him help and serve me. Thus we are woven into one another."²¹

The unity of which Luther speaks is not mere friendship, but is a gift of God given in the breaking of bread, the body of Christ. It rests upon the Jewish understanding that a meal binds together the participants, a concept to which Paul appeals in 1 Cor 10:18. This unity not only includes the baptized, but it excludes other communities who worship idols. "You cannot drink the cup of the Lord and the cup of demons" (1 Cor 10:21). The congregation is not a loose collection of individuals, but a cohesive body (of Christ) experienced on three levels: "one with Christ, one with each other, and one in service to all the world."²²

Paul writes, "Because there is one loaf, we who are many are one body, for we all partake of the one bread." Here the "body" is not the loaf but the church. "The crucified Jesus—body and blood—and the believers all make one body, one object-entity, in the world, by virtue of what happens in the supper with the bread and cup."²³ It is this incorporation of the believers that is incompatible with any other incorporation. The crime charged against the Corinthians by Paul, that "anyone who eats and drinks without discerning the Lord's body eats and drinks judgment upon himself" (1 Cor 11:29), specifically refers to a failure of that unity associated with the eucharistic community. Sharing the peace, prior to receiving communion (Matt 5:24), points to this unity in Christ. Luther writes, "The Peace of the Lord is a public absolution of the sins of the communicants, the true voice of the Gospel."²⁴

Eucharistic fellowship transcends time and space to include "angels and archangels and all the company of heaven,"²⁵ or "the church on earth and the hosts of heaven."²⁶ This cosmic Christian inclusiveness is also reflected in the Eucharistic Prayer: "Join our prayers with those of your servants of every time and every place, and unite them with the ceaseless petitions of our great high priest."²⁷ This strong eschatological affirmation suggests the celebration of holy communion at funerals, a practice which appears to be growing in Lutheran churches.

Koinonia has clear implications for ecumenism. Ever since the first century Christians have been careful to associate eucharistic reception with unity in faith and life.²⁸ For Luther, such unity included a common understanding of holy communion. In his conflicts with the left-wing reformers ("fanatics"), he wrote,

²¹Martin Luther, *Ein Betbüchlein* (1529), as cited in *The Church: Selected Writings of Arthur Carl Piepkorn*, ed. Michael Plekon and William Wiecher (Delhi, NY: ALPB Books, 1993) 211.

²²James F. White, *Sacraments as God's Self Giving* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1983) 56-57.

²³Jenson, *Visible Words*, 86.

²⁴*An Order of Mass and Communion*, LW 53:28.

²⁵*Service Book and Hymnal* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1958) 31.

²⁶*Lutheran Book of Worship, Minister's Desk Edition* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1978) 208.

²⁷*Ibid.*, 223.

²⁸See Werner Elert, *Eucharist and Church Fellowship in the First Four Centuries* (Concordia: St. Louis, 1966).

“Rather than have mere wine with the fanatics, I would agree with the pope that there is only blood.”²⁹

The gift of fellowship has nothing in common with so-called “communion ecclesiology,”³⁰ understood to be so inclusive as to embrace all people of good will. Holy communion is not a means toward the end of ecumenism, irenicism, social activism, or universalism. It is rather a sign of the unity which already exists in a common baptism, common faith in Jesus Christ, common confession, and a common recognition of the Lord’s body and blood in the sacrament. As such, the *koinonia* of communion can also stand as a counter-cultural activity, as a sign of the particularity of the church in a hostile world, as Dietrich Bonhoeffer demonstrated when he received the water and bread in prison. The prime *koinonia* is with Christ himself.

III. THANKSGIVING (SACRIFICE)

For many Lutherans in North America, the association of holy communion with notions of thanksgiving or sacrifice has been muted, if not challenged. This is because some of the primary abuses in the church addressed by the reformers were the sacrifice of the mass, private masses, and masses for the dead. Here I propose that there is a legitimate, indeed mandated, sacrificial dimension in holy communion.

There are two, and only two, basic types of sacrifice. One is the propitiatory sacrifice; this is a work of satisfaction for guilt and punishment that reconciles God or placates his wrath or merits the forgiveness of sins. The other type is the eucharistic sacrifice; this does not merit the forgiveness of sins or reconciliation, but by it those who have been reconciled give thanks or show their gratitude for the forgiveness of sins and other blessings received.³¹

That the New Testament is permeated with sacrificial imagery, that the death of Christ was sacrificial, and that Old Testament sacrifices played a crucial role in the interpretation of Christ’s death there can be no doubt. The language of the institution narratives is language of sacrifice: “blood of the covenant, shed for many for the forgiveness of sins” (Matt 26:28); or “this cup poured out for you, is the new covenant sealed by my blood” (Luke 22:20 and 1 Cor 11:25). In the context of a passover meal a first-century Jew would naturally have associated this with the ratification of the covenant made on Sinai by the pouring out of blood (Exod 24:6-8). Hebrews is particularly rich in sacrificial imagery, in which Christ is compared both to high priest and victim. There is no dispute that Christ’s death (indeed, his entire life, from conception to resurrection) was a sacrifice of propitiation for us sinners, acceptable to God. Disagreements arise when holy communion is also called a sacrifice.

The Lutheran symbols categorically reject any thought of the eucharist being

²⁹*Confession Concerning Christ’s Supper*, LW 37:317.

³⁰See Nicholas Healy, “Communion Ecclesiology,” *Pro Ecclesia* 4 (1995).

³¹Ap 24:19, in *BC*, 252.

a sacrifice of propitiation: "There has been only one propitiatory sacrifice in the world, the death of Christ."³² The criticism of the mass as a sacrifice was that it was understood as being meritorious, i.e., propitiatory, a good work accepted by God for the living and the dead. Having clearly rejected this understanding, the Lutheran confessors accepted the mass as a sacrifice of praise, i.e., "a ceremony or act which we render to God to honor him."³³ According to the *Apology of the Augsburg Confession*:

If someone wants to include the ceremony here, we shall gladly concede this, so long as he does not mean that by itself, or *ex opere operato*, the ceremony is beneficial....The reception of the Lord's Supper itself can be a sacrifice of praise or thanksgiving....[E]ven a ceremony is a sacrifice.³⁴

We are perfectly willing for the Mass to be understood as a daily sacrifice, provided this means the whole Mass, the ceremony and also the proclamation of the Gospel, faith, prayer, and thanksgiving.³⁵

Now good men can easily see the falsity of the charge that we do away with the daily sacrifice.³⁶

If the use of the sacrament is the daily sacrifice, we lay claim to observing it more than our opponents....In our churches the use is more frequent and more devout. Since we keep both the proclamation of the Gospel and the proper use of the sacraments, we still have a daily sacrifice.³⁷

We are aware of the fact that the Fathers called the Mass a sacrifice; but they do not mean it confers grace *ex opere operato*....They make clear that they are talking about thanksgiving; hence they call it a "eucharist."³⁸

"The Lutheran Liturgy by its never-failing use of the Words of Institution and the *Agnus Dei* and by the emphasis upon Body and Blood, indirectly reminds the participant of the place of sacrifice in the sacrament."³⁹ Other sacrificial motifs in the liturgy include the Offertory, "I will offer the sacrifice of thanksgiving," and the Offertory Prayer, "we offer with joy," and "we offer ourselves." Another durable reminder is the fact that in all Lutheran churches central place is given to a piece of furniture called an "altar." Since we do not sacrifice Christ anew, this designation must refer to another offering, that of praise and thanksgiving.

Some theologians have questioned the propriety of calling a sacrament a sacrifice. The *Apology* clearly permits this: "[In addition to the sacrament] there is also a sacrifice, since one action can have several purposes....It uses the ceremony

³²Ap 24:22, in BC, 253.

³³Ap 24:18, in BC, 252.

³⁴Ap 24:33, in BC, 255.

³⁵Ap 24:35, in BC, 256.

³⁶Ap 24:41, in BC, 257.

³⁷Ap 24:49, in BC, 258.

³⁸Ap 24:66, in BC, 261.

³⁹Kent Knutson, "Contemporary Lutheran Theology and the Eucharistic Sacrifice," in *The Eucharist as Sacrifice*, Lutherans and Catholics in Dialogue III (U.S.A. National Committee of the Lutheran World Federation, 1967) 168.

[of the sacrament] itself as praise to God, as a demonstration of its gratitude, and a witness of its high esteem for God's gifts. Thus the ceremony [of the sacrament] becomes a sacrifice of praise."⁴⁰ In the same place Melancthon points to Ambrose in support of the same sacrament having a "two-fold effect," the comfort of conscience, which is sacramental, and the praise of God, which is sacrificial. In the same way it can be said that a sermon is simultaneously sacramental (a means of grace, in that God comes to us in his word) and sacrificial (the preacher's efforts in writing and delivering it). Indeed, the designation of the supper as the sacrament of the altar combines both motifs. The Greek church is cited with favor as supporting the idea of the eucharist as a sacrifice of praise, not just the elements but "the whole service, prayers, and thanksgivings."⁴¹

In his *Treatise on the New Testament, that is, the Holy Mass* (1520), Luther argues against any propitiatory quality of the mass, but he permits understanding it as a sacrifice of praise. "Christ offers us, and in this way it is permissible, yes, profitable, to call the mass a sacrifice; not on its own account but because we offer ourselves as a sacrifice along with Christ."⁴² Luther allows for sacrifices of praise and thanksgiving, but even these are not to be given as though from us, but as gifts we have received from God.

A sacrifice is a ceremony or act we do to honor God.⁴³ Surely we bring something to the service, and whatever we bring is sacrificial; as we have seen, this includes prayers, songs, and the elements of bread and wine themselves. That is why an offertory (even a procession, i.e., "ceremony") with the gifts and elements seems eminently appropriate. "If God's acts were to be emphasized by de-emphasizing ours, the only sufficient de-emphasis would, after all, be total elimination. There would be no sacraments at all."⁴⁴ "The term sacrifice should rightly be used both of God's activity on our behalf in the sacrament and of our giving of ourselves to him in the sacrament."⁴⁵ The eucharistic sacrifice became an important part of the Lutheran-Reformed conversations thirty years ago, where all agreed that the atoning sacrifice of Christ becomes contemporary in the sacrament. The emphasis is on the self-giving of God in Christ, but "sacrifice is necessarily associated with the celebration of the sacrament."⁴⁶ The 1978 ALC/LCA *Statement* likewise refers to holy communion as a sacrifice of praise with the caution that "the response must never be confused with the gift."⁴⁷

⁴⁰Ap 24:74, in BC, 262-263.

⁴¹Ap 24:88, in BC, 265.

⁴²LW 35:99.

⁴³Ap 24:18, in BC, 252.

⁴⁴Jenson, *Visible Words*, 70.

⁴⁵Knutson, "Contemporary Lutheran Theology," 179.

⁴⁶*Christology, the Lord's Supper and Its Observance in the Church* (U.S.A. Committee of the Lutheran World Federation, 1964).

⁴⁷*A Statement on Communion Practices*, 5.

IV. REMEMBRANCE

In their accounts of the last supper, St. Paul and St. Luke record the words of Jesus, “Do this in remembrance of me.” This memorial aspect of the sacrament is not to be understood as a mere recollection of the past which fades as time goes on. It is more than mere memory. Rather, it is understanding Christ’s sacrifice as a present event. “What was, is; he who *was, is present*; what was given in self-sacrifice is at every moment of need newly available.”⁴⁸ In *Webster’s Unabridged Dictionary* the word “celebrate” includes as one meaning “to remember.” We celebrate only those events that have an on-going significance in our lives, i.e., birthdays, anniversaries, national holidays, etc. Therefore an element in all celebration is memory, and memory leads to hope. So too in the sacrament, to “do this in remembrance of me” is to celebrate Christ’s presence with us here and now, not merely an event two millennia past. To remember is to acknowledge that the event is still with us.

Biblical remembrance also includes present action. The act of remembrance is not a simple inner reflection, but it involves action, an encounter with historical events. In the Old Testament, remembering always leads to action—to blessing, setting free, showing favor, or punishing. The act of remembering leads to action, just as the sacrament strengthens us for service.

When Jesus said, “Do this,” what did he mean? The immediate antecedent of the command in St. Paul’s text is our Lord’s thanksgiving. He took the bread and gave thanks. He took the cup and gave thanks. And then he said “Do this,” meaning the taking of bread and cup and giving thanks. “Do this” refers to the ceremony of the breaking of the bread and the blessing of the cup, i.e., the table grace (thanksgiving) which creates the fellowship of the messianic community.⁴⁹ That is why in Lutheran services the presider invites the people, “Let us give thanks to the Lord, our God,” and the people enthusiastically respond, “It is right to give Him thanks and praise.” But despite this invitation and the people’s response, in many of our churches no thanksgiving is forthcoming; we proceed directly to the words of institution. Admittedly, there is precedence for this in Luther himself, who removed the eucharistic prayer from his masses because of the totally unacceptable emphasis on the mass as a propitiatory sacrifice as well as to the prayers to scores of saints. Today we are no longer in that situation, and we are able again to “give thanks” in the eucharistic prayer.

The entire prayer is really an *anamnesis*, a remembering of God’s mighty deeds, or salvation history. Jesus used a traditional Jewish thanksgiving that lifted up the saving deeds of God for Israel. The structure of this prayer was thanksgiving, remembrance, and invocation. The church made it trinitarian in nature, recalling the Father’s saving acts, Jesus’ life, death, and resurrection, and the coming of the Spirit, with the institution narrative at the center of the prayer. The trinitarian nature of the prayer and its trinitarian doxology, “Through him, with him, in him,

⁴⁸*The Sacrament of the Altar* (ULCA, 1960).

⁴⁹Joachim Jeremias, *The Eucharistic Words of Jesus* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1977) 244.

in the unity of the Holy Spirit, be all honor and glory to you, Almighty God and Father, now and forever," acknowledge the fullness of the godhead. By reducing the "consecration" to the narrative, one not only fosters a unitarianism of the Second Person but also runs the risk of suggesting that these words, standing apart from a eucharistic prayer, have special qualities to "consecrate," perhaps even suggesting to some of the faithful a moment of "change." Strictly speaking, there is no consecration, for we rely solely upon the promise of God that we are receiving Christ's body and blood. Or if consecration means setting aside these elements for special use, that action takes place at the offertory. The early church did not have this problem, for Hippolytus tells us that each pastor should make up his own prayer of thanksgiving, thus avoiding the special power of a set form of words. The Orthodox churches avoid this danger by centering the consecration on the *epiklesis* or prayer for the Holy Spirit, which can be fluid in form.

The eucharistic prayer in calling to mind God's faithfulness is really credal in structure: "He is your Word inseparable from you....He there took on our nature and our lot..., born of the Holy Spirit and of the virgin Mary....to break the bonds of the evil one, crush hell underfoot, show forth the resurrection."⁵⁰ It is a confession of faith in God's promises and of our dependence upon him. For this reason liturgical scholars tell us that recitation of a creed may be redundant when a eucharistic prayer is used.

The ALC/LCA *Statement* of 1978 recognizes that Lutherans have not been uniform in setting apart the elements: "In setting apart the elements for Holy Communion, the Lutheran tradition has focussed upon the proclamation of the Words of Institution. A prayer of thanksgiving which includes the Words of Institution, though not a normative practice within the Lutheran tradition, has been the dominant Christian usage and has been included in our orders of worship."⁵¹ The recent ELCA statement says, "Many [congregations] continue with an evangelical form of the historic eucharistic prayer after the *sanctus*. The full action...is called the 'Great Thanksgiving.' It is these patterns of thanksgiving which our congregations are encouraged to use."⁵²

V. ANTICIPATION

I tell you I shall not drink again of this fruit of the vine until the day when I drink it new with you in my Father's kingdom. (Matt. 26:29)

Truly I say to you, I shall not drink again of the fruit of the vine until that day when I drink it new in the kingdom of God. (Mark 14:25)

For I tell you that from now on I shall not drink of the fruit of the vine until the kingdom of God comes. (Luke 22:18)

⁵⁰Lutheran Book of Worship, *Minister's Desk Edition*, 226. The prayer is that of Hippolytus (c. 215 A.D.), *Apostolic Tradition*, ed. and trans. Burton Scott Eaton (Cambridge: Cambridge University, 1962) 35-36.

⁵¹A *Statement on Communion Practices*, 8.

⁵²*The Use of the Means of Grace* (Division for Congregational Ministries, ELCA, 1996) 19.

As often as you eat of this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes. (1 Cor 11:26)

All four accounts of the Lord's supper look forward to the coming of the kingdom of God. The actual context of the words is more dramatic than it may appear. In the passover seder, four cups of wine are drunk: at the beginning of the meal, during the meal, at the conclusion of the meal (the third cup or cup of blessing—1 Cor 10:16), and at the conclusion of the entire ceremony. When Jesus said after the third cup that he would not drink again until all of his followers were gathered together in the future kingdom of God, he was saying that the last supper was not over yet. We are still living before the fourth cup ends it all—or begins life eternal. This underscores a strong eschatological dimension to holy communion, "a foretaste of the feast to come."⁵³ It looks forward to the messianic banquet, when all things will be accomplished through the coming of the Messiah. "The marriage supper of the Lamb" (Rev 19:9), and "the great supper of God" (Rev 19:17) will be "drinking it new with you in the kingdom of my Father." For Paul, the eating and drinking "proclaim the death of the Lord until he comes" (1 Cor 11:26). Thus the Lord's supper is "an eschatological event, reaching ahead to the limits of time as well as back behind the beginning of time."⁵⁴ The eschatological dimension, so prominent in the New Testament accounts, is repeated throughout the early centuries, not only in the eucharistic prayers but also in such designations for the sacrament as the "medicine of immortality, and the antidote which wards off death but yields continuous life in union with Jesus Christ."⁵⁵ The commemoration of the departed (saint days) was closely associated with holy communion in that the sacrament was celebrated annually at the gravesite of the deceased on the anniversary of death. Polycarp's friends "gathered together with joy and gladness to celebrate the day of his martyrdom as a birthday."⁵⁶ This was long before any value was placed upon masses for the dead; indeed, the fathers were certain that the deceased were safely in paradise, for which reason some began to invoke their aid.

Our meal fellowship anticipates the fellowship that is to come with Jesus and all the redeemed, which is one of the most compelling reasons to celebrate holy communion at the funerals of Christians. Jesus instituted the sacrament on the night before his own death, a sign of the celestial banquet in heaven. What better time than while mourning to receive "the forgiveness of sins, food for the soul, sustenance so that our faith may refresh and strengthen itself, a gift against sin, death, and evil."⁵⁷ The Lord's supper is a sacrament of hope, and it is faith and hope that sustain us. In the words of Luther:

Thank God we are in our churches able to exhibit to a Christian the true Christian

⁵³See Geoffrey Wainwright, *Eucharist and Eschatology* (New York: Oxford, 1981).

⁵⁴White, *Sacraments*, 60.

⁵⁵Ignatius of Antioch, *To the Ephesians* 20. See Willy Rordorf, *The Eucharist of the Early Christians* (New York: Pueblo, 1978) 59-66.

⁵⁶*The Martyrdom of Polycarp* 18.

⁵⁷LC 5:20-24, in BC, 449.

Communion according to the command and institution of Christ and in accordance with the sense of Christ and the church. Here comes to the altar our minister, bishop or parish pastor, who was rightfully, openly, and publicly called, and who before by baptism was consecrated, anointed, and born again a priest of Christ that needs no sectarian unction. Clearly and publicly he chants the Words of Institution, takes bread and wine, gives thanks, and imparts them to us who are waiting to commune by virtue of the words of Christ. And we are kneeling there beside, behind, and around him, men and women, young and old, master and servant, mistress and maid, parents and children, gathered by God, all of us true and holy co-priests, sanctified by the blood of Christ and by baptism anointed and consecrated. Here we are in our indigenous hereditary priestly honor and ornament, have our golden crowns on our heads, harps in our hands, and golden vials full of incense, and we have our pastor proclaim the word of Christ, but not himself or his own person. He is the mouthpiece for us, and in our hearts and with steadfast faith we all address the Lamb. This is our Eucharist, the true Communion which will never fail us.⁵⁸ ☩

⁵⁸Cited by Vilmos Vajta, *Luther on Worship* (Philadelphia: Muhlenberg, 1975) 188 (from WA 38:247).