



Living the Liturgy

the gifts of God in all of life

*“Saying back to Him what He has said to us, we repeat what is most true and sure. **Most true and sure is His name, which He put on us with the water of our Baptism. We are His.** This we acknowledge at the beginning of the Divine Service. Where His name is, there is He. Before Him we acknowledge that we are sinners, and we plead for forgiveness. His forgiveness is given us, and we, freed and forgiven, acclaim Him as our great and gracious God as we apply to ourselves the words He has used to make Himself known to us.*

~ The Rev.

Norman Nagel,
Lutheran
Worship,
1980 A.D.

The Invocation

At the start of the liturgy, the pastor stands before the altar and says, “In the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit” (Matthew 28:19). When he does so, all may trace themselves with the cross in remembrance of their Baptism. Why do these words and that remembrance begin our liturgy?

Given to us by Jesus Himself, those words are first spoken to us in Holy Baptism. They are pure gift, marking us as the people of God in whom He lives and works for eternal life. He is the one who does the work.

Spoken at the start of worship, those same words now remind us whose we are, and whose worship this is: God’s. Crucified with Christ, we are dead to ourselves but alive to God. In worship, too, He is the one who does the main work, endowing you with His gifts.

That’s what *invocation* means: we are invoking God, or calling upon Him, at the start of worship, for all our actions and life are empty without Him. Thus the invocation acts as a pure promise, promising you who meets you here, and why: the Holy Spirit who binds you to the Son so that you may live with the Father forever.

Sometimes, when a procession starts worship, the liturgy begins with the greeting that typically comes later: “The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the communion of the Holy Spirit be with you all” (2 Corinthians 13:14). That three-part greeting reflects the name of God used at Baptism, and functions in a similar way, proclaiming who meets and works for us in the liturgy.

Making the Sign of the Cross: More than a Sign

In the Lutheran church's Small Catechism, Martin Luther teaches us to make the sign of the cross at least twice a day: 1) once upon rising, and 2) again before going to sleep. Why does Luther teach us to do so?

By tracing the cross over ourselves, we trace God's promise: "We were therefore buried with Him through baptism into death so that, just as Christ was raised from the dead through the glory of the Father, we too might live a new life" (Romans 6:3-4). "I have been crucified with Christ, and it is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives within me" (Galatians 2:20). By dying on the cross, Jesus canceled sin, broke the grave, and started the new creation. Crucified with Him in Baptism, we live in the promise that our graves are broken, our sin forgiven, and the new creation begun in us.

Thus "dying and rising" with Christ is the pattern of Christian living. "Whoever would be my disciple, let him deny himself, take up his cross, and follow me" (Mark 8:34). Or as Luther writes in the Catechism:

What does Holy Baptism indicate?

It indicates that the Old Adam in us should by daily contrition and repentance be drowned and die with all sins and evil desires, and that a new person should daily emerge and arise to live before God in righteousness and purity forever.

To sign ourselves with the cross is to mark ourselves as belonging to the path of discipleship in Christ, the path of daily dying and rising in Him.

It's more than a sign: it's a daily, even hourly commitment to walking the path of repentance, knowing ourselves to be joined to Christ and therefore forgiven.

How to Make the Sign of the Cross

First: should Lutherans even do it? It's not a matter of should, but of "may": you may do it. It is a free gift for you, a way of remembering Christ's death for you and your death with Him in Baptism. Lutherans are free to do it, have historically done it, and are taught to do it in their catechism. So how do we do it?

- 1) grasp your first two or three fingers to your thumb on your right hand.
- 2) Touch your forehead.
- 3) Pull down to your chest or belly.
- 4) Move up to your right shoulder.
- 5) Pull to your left shoulder.

Different churches do it different ways; all are good. This way traces the cross often signed on us at Baptism. If you use two fingers to the thumb: Christ's two natures in one person. Three fingers to the thumb: three persons in one God. Fun for children!