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June 9, 2020

Office of the President  
Rev. Timothy Teuscher

Dear Brothers and Fellow Workers in the Gospel,

In my last letter I focused on a few things that the Holy Scriptures and our Lutheran Confessions have to say about the physical assembly or gathering of believers for the Service of the Word in view of COVID-19 government restrictions being relaxed in various provinces of our nation. Some practical considerations concerning the ‘reopening’ of our congregations for the Divine Service, by the way, were sent to all pastors this past Friday by the President’s Ministry Council (PMC). At this time, I want to focus on the Service of the Sacrament . . . and, again, not so much on practical matters connected with celebrating the Lord’s Supper in these coronavirus times; but, rather, on some theological issues related to the Lord’s Supper itself.

Such, of course, should always be our starting point on this or any other so-called practical matter that might arise in the church; as Article X of the Formula of Concord reminds us. In other words, what we believe, teach and confess is to inform and direct our practices, and not the other way around. The 1999 CTCR document, *Closed Communion in Contemporary Context*, puts it this way: “Practice is based upon what the church professes. The Scriptures are to be our source and norm for practice as well as for doctrine, because practice is based upon doctrine. Thus, practice is derived from the Word of God, either by explicit command or by implication from other clear statements of Scripture. Properly understood, ‘practice’ is not just ‘what we do,’ but what is required because of what we believe” (p. 7).

Echoing, as it were, the words from the Augsburg Confession: “The church is the assembly of saints in which the Gospel is taught purely and the sacraments are administered rightly” (AC VII.1); C. F. W. Walther says the following in *The Right Form of an Evangelical Lutheran Local Congregation*: “An Evangelical Lutheran local congregation is an assembly of believing Christians at a certain place among whom God’s Word is preached purely according to the Confession of the Evangelical Lutheran Church and the holy sacraments are administered according to Christ’s institution as stated in the Gospel” (p. 1). Three things in particular I would call to your attention in this regard: First, the “assembly of believing Christians at a certain place” . . . not a virtual or online gathering, but a real flesh and blood gathering of people at a real place. Second, “among whom the holy sacraments are administered” . . . a real flesh and blood pastor giving the real body and blood of Christ in real bread and wine to real flesh and blood people who are really gathered together. And third, done “according to Christ’s institution” . . . namely, “that in a Christian assembly bread and wine are taken, consecrated, distributed, received, eaten and drunk, and that thereby the Lord’s death is proclaimed” (FC SD VII.84), and not how we think it should or might be administered.

“The cup of blessing that we bless, is it not a participation in the blood of Christ? The bread that we break, is it not a participation 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). So the apostle Paul says concerning the Lord’s Supper. Notice especially that word ‘participation’ which is translated from the Greek word *koinonia*; that is, ‘a participation in, a communion, a coming together, a joining together with, a fellowship.’ In fact, in the Lord’s Supper there are actually four ‘holy communions’ or ‘coming togethers’ taking place.

First, there is the communion or coming together of the body and blood of Christ with the bread and the wine. And not just the presence of Jesus in some vague, spiritual, or general sense, but the coming together or participation of His real and true body and blood in and with the bread and the wine. The Large Catechism explains it this way: “Though the Sacrament is bread and wine, it is not mere bread and wine, such as are ordinarily served at the table. But this is bread and wine included in, and connected with God’s Word. . . . So it is not mere bread and wine, but is, and is called Christ’s body and blood” (LC V. 9-10). And such is why we sing in the communion hymn these words: “Under bread and wine, though lowly, I receive the Savior holy, Blood and body, giv’n for me, Very Lamb of God from heaven, Who to bitter death was given, Hung upon the cursed tree” (LSB 620:3).

Second, there is the communion or coming together of the individual who eats of the bread and drinks of the cup with the body and blood of the Lord Jesus Himself . . . and by which and through which he or she receives the blessings of the shed blood and pierced body of Jesus – “forgiveness of sins, life and salvation” to use those familiar words from the Small Catechism. The Apology, quoting Cyril of Alexandria, states that not only are we joined spiritually to Christ by faith, but are also connected with Him according to the flesh: “Since this (the bread) is in us, does it not also, by the communication of Christ’s flesh, cause Christ to dwell in us bodily? . . . Therefore, Christ is in us . . . also by natural participation” (Ap X.56). Because we are also physically joined together with Christ in the eating of His body and the drinking of His blood; this sacramental gift of ‘life’ is not only a spiritual blessing, but it has physical ramifications as well . . . and which are especially relevant for these COVID-19 times in which we are living. This is expressed by St. Paul in a negative way in these words: “For anyone who eats and drinks without discerning the body eats and drinks judgment on himself. That is why many of you are weak and ill, and some have died” (1 Cor. 29-30). In a positive sense, the Large Catechism – reflecting the words of Ignatius of Antioch who called the Lord’s Supper ‘the medicine of immortality, the antidote that we shall not die but live forever’ – says: “We must never think of the Sacrament as something harmful from which we had better flee, but as a pure, wholesome, comforting remedy that grants salvation and comfort. It will cure you and give you life both in soul and body. For where the soul has recovered the body also is relieved. Why, then, do we act as if the Sacrament were a poison, the eating of which would bring death?” (LC V.68). So we sing in the communion hymn: “My Lord, You here have led me To this most holy place And with Yourself have fed me The treasures of Your grace; For You have freely given What earth could never buy, The bread of life from heaven, That now I shall not die” (LSB 642:2).

Third, there is the communion or coming together of those who partake of Christ’s body and blood. This is what St. Paul is especially getting at where he says: “Because there is one

bread, we who are many are one body, for we all partake of the one bread” (1 Cor. 10:17). Later in 1 Corinthians he elaborates on this in these words: “For just as the body is one and has many members, and all the members of the body, though many, are one body, so it is with Christ. . . . Now you are the body of Christ and individually members of it” (1 Cor. 12:12, 27). The Formula of Concord thus says that the Lord’s Supper is also “a firm bond of union of Christians with Christ, their Head, and with one another” (FC SD VII.44). The recently published *Confessing the Gospel: A Lutheran Approach to Systematic Theology* explains it this way: “Through this eating and drinking a bond of unity between each of the participants is nurtured and strengthened. Communicants are united with one another in the body of Christ. . . . Although one of the benefits of the Lord’s Supper is the strengthening of the bond of unity of faith, this does not mean that this sacrament should be celebrated in order to create such unity. Rather, it should be celebrated precisely because God has already brought about this unity. Since it is a Supper of unity, or of fellowship, Paul is very concerned that it not be celebrated in a context where there is dissension or conflict, especially about doctrine (1 Cor. 11:17-22)” (p. 859). So we again thus sing in the communion hymn: “One bread, one cup, one body, we, Rejoicing in our unity, Proclaim Your love until You come To bring Your scattered loved ones home” (LSB 623:4).

Fourth, there is the communion or coming together of those who partake of the Sacrament with believers in Christ throughout the world, throughout time, and even into eternity. Such is described, as it were, in these words from Hebrews: “You have come to Mount Zion and to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem and to the innumerable angels in festal gathering, and to the assembly of the firstborn who are enrolled in heaven, and to God the judge of all, and to the spirits of the righteous made perfect, and to Jesus, the mediator of a new covenant, and to the sprinkled blood that speaks a better word than the blood of Abel” (Heb. 12:22-24). The Proper Preface in the communion liturgy refers to this in those familiar words: “Therefore with angels and archangels and with the whole company of heaven.” Likewise, the Prayer of Thanksgiving says: “Gather us together, we pray, from the ends of the earth to celebrate with all the faithful the marriage feast of the Lamb in His kingdom” (LSB Divine Service, Setting One, p. 161). Is not this truth something that our small, struggling, and isolated congregations especially need to be reminded of . . . that at the Lord’s Table they are participants in something much larger and glorious than what might meet their eyes!? Wilhelm Loehe expresses it this way in his communion hymn: “The cherubim, their faces veiled from light, While saints in wonder kneel, Sing praise to Him whose face with glory bright No earthly masks conceal. This sacrament God gives us Binds us in unity, Joins earth with heav’n beyond us, Time with eternity” (LSB 639:3).

In conclusion, and in connection with this latter point, I would share with you again these words from Hermann Sasse: “In the Lord’s Supper, the church looks back into the past to the historical hour of the first Supper in that room in Jerusalem ‘on the night when He was betrayed.’ At the same time, her gaze is directed to the future, to the great supper in the kingdom of God. Just as each Lord’s Supper is a repetition of the first, even so it is at the same time an anticipation of the heavenly meal Jesus Himself had spoken of at the institution: ‘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.’ . . . The Supper bridges the space of time between Jesus’ days on earth and His return. By us ‘upon whom the end of the ages has come’ (1 Cor. 10:11), it is celebrated between the ages of the world, that is, between the old aeon, which extends from the creation of the world to the last

judgment, and the new aeon which has already begun with the resurrection of Christ as the first-fruits from the dead and goes on into blessed eternity. . . . In the Supper, time touches eternity and the here and now meets the beyond . . . (and) in the Supper we join with believers of all ages in the prayer of unshakable Christian hope, ‘Amen. Come, Lord Jesus!’ whereby we proclaim the Lord’s death until He comes” (*The Lonely Way*, Vol. I, pp. 391, 393-394).

May the above assist you and your congregation as you deal with many of the practical issues surrounding the celebration of Holy Communion in light of the gradual ‘re-opening’ of churches. I especially encourage you to use this time as an opportunity for much-needed teaching on the Lord’s Supper to those entrusted to your care; as the Augsburg Confession reminds us: “The people are also advised about the dignity and use of the Sacrament, how it brings great consolation to anxious consciences, so that they too may learn to believe God and to expect and ask from Him all that is good” (AC XXIV.7). May the Lord of the church bless you in this sacred task.

Finally, I can think of no more fitting way to close than with those familiar words of dismissal from the Service of the Sacrament: “The body and blood of our Lord Jesus Christ strengthen and preserve you in body and soul to life everlasting.”

In Christ,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Rev. Timothy Teuscher". The ink is dark and the handwriting is fluid, with a large initial 'R' and 'T'.

Rev. Timothy Teuscher, President  
Lutheran Church–Canada