

THE LITURGY OF THE WALDENSIAN CHURCH

In 1965 the Waldensian Church in Italy printed and submitted for the consideration of its pastors, a 'Liturgy for Public Worship'. The 'Liturgy' contains Orders of Service for the five Sundays of the month and for the various events of the ecclesiastical year as far as the Seventh Sunday after Pentecost. Included also is an anthology of prayers suitable for the various parts of the Service, confession, praise, adoration and intercession. The order is that used in the majority of Waldensian Churches. It includes several elements of the Liturgy of 1912 and it introduces anew the ministry of the Reader, exercised in the churches of the Waldensian Valleys until a few decades ago.

In respect of those elements in which the Liturgy seems to be modifying current usage, the direction is towards a more catholic form. In particular, the Liturgy of the Holy Communion is presented as an integral part of the Sunday service.

Every Waldensian Service begins with a brief proclamation of our complete dependence upon God, expressed in its simplest form in the order for the Third Sunday: 'Our help is in the name of the Father, of the Son and of the Holy Spirit'. On the First and Fourth Sundays, it is 'Our help is in the name of God who has created us and who saves us in Jesus Christ our Lord. On the Second and Fifth Sunday there is a slight modification from the preceding: ' . . . who has saved us in Jesus Christ our hope'.

To this proclamation of our dependence upon God, the Congregation respond with a short hymn of praise and adoration. On the third Sunday this is in the form of the Sanctus.

The Minister then reads an exhortation to worship in the words of Holy Scripture: Psalm 100, vv. 1, 2 and 5 (First Sunday), Psalm 95, vv. 6 and 8 (Second), St. John 4, v. 24 and Psalm 51, v. 10 (Third), and similar passages from the Psalms on the Fourth and Fifth Sundays.

A short prayer of invocation is then offered. On the Fourth Sunday, the form proposed is that of the Communion Prayer, 'Almighty God, unto whom all hearts be open . . .' The congregation respond, 'Amen'.

All this is regarded as but the essential preparation for worship and the congregation have been standing throughout. A hymn of introduction is now sung, congregation seated.

In most Churches, Catholic and Evangelical, confession comes early in the Service. In the Waldensian Church, a preparation for confession is made just after this introductory hymn. It is led by the

Reader, who exhorts the people in the words: 'Listen now, brethren, with attention and respect, to the reading of the Law of God.' (First Sunday, with appropriate modifications on other Sundays.) The Ten Commandments are read on First Sundays, the two Great Commandments on the Second, I John 2, vv. 3-6 on the Third, verses 15-17 on the Fourth, and Ezekiel 18, vv. 30-32 on the Fifth.

A brief exhortation to repentance is followed by some minutes of silence for recollection and individual confession, at the end of which the Minister offers a prayer of general confession. The people then express their repentance corporately in an appropriate verse of a hymn. On First Sundays the three cries for mercy are used, sung in Italian. On Third Sundays the Liturgy proposes the Agnus Dei, again sung in Italian, and on other Sundays verses from penitential hymns.

The Minister, quoting Holy Scripture, gives assurance of forgiveness, and the Congregation respond with a hymn of Thanksgiving. At this point the Liturgy recommends the recital by Minister and Congregation of the Apostles Creed, on all Sundays. There is, however, a tendency to vary this with a shorter, improvised declaration of the Faith, pronounced by the Minister alone.

The Creed is followed by one or more passages of Scripture, The Liturgy does not prescribe a lectionary and the passages are chosen by the Minister in accordance with the theme of his sermon. When there are several passages from different parts of the Bible, they are all read at this point. One misses the separation which marks the distinction between Old Testament, Epistle and Gospel.

After the reading of Scripture, the main prayer of this part of the Service is offered. It opens with praise and adoration, proceeds to thanksgiving for the Gospel and salvation and other gifts spiritual and temporal, and passes into supplication for God's grace, and help to 'submit ourselves with faith and joy to His holy, good and perfect Will'. Here a place is left in the Liturgy for spontaneous prayer with reference to the texts of Holy Scripture which have been read. The prayer concludes with a petition to God to give us the true meaning of His Word, and intercession for the one whom He has called to announce it, 'that he may do so with faith and love, through the power of the Holy Spirit'.

A hymn is then sung and after the hymn some minutes of organ music provide a brief period of recollection before the Sermon. After the Sermon another hymn is sung and so ends the Liturgy of the Word.

The Liturgy of the Sacrament begins with the Grace: 'Grace, mercy, peace be with you from God the Father and from Jesus Christ in truth and in love', on the First Sunday. On the Fifth, the form is: 'The grace and peace of God our Father be with you and

with all those who invoke the name of Jesus Christ our Lord.' On other Sundays the Sacrament begins with a simple announcement: 'We will now commemorate the sacrifice of our Saviour by the celebration of the Holy Supper' or: 'participating in the spiritual communion of His body and blood in the celebration of the Holy Supper'.

On First Sundays this is followed by a prayer on traditional lines: 'It is a thing truly worth, just, salutary, that we should render Thee thanks always and everywhere, through Jesus Christ, our Lord', and culminating in the Sanctus and Hosanna.

The Words of Institution are read by the Reader – on the First Sunday and the third, the Corinthian passage, varied on the other Sundays with the accounts in Matthew, Mark and Luke.

The Minister then gives assurance of the presence of Christ by His Spirit and by the signs of bread and wine, which are signs of His love. 'They remind us of His sacrifice and point to His victory over sin and death.' The Prayer of Approach, which follows, is read by the Reader: 'In the name of Thy Son, O Lord our God, we unite ourselves around this table prepared for communion with Thee . . . and Thou, Lord Jesus, who takest away the sins of the world, receive us as Thy Disciples.'

A hymn is interposed at this point and then the Minister invokes the Holy Spirit in this brief prayer: 'O God, send upon us Thy Spirit, and bless and sanctify this Sacrament, that we may be enabled to receive by means of faith, the body and blood of Jesus Christ crucified for us. Amen.' This is the climax of the Service, the Minister pronounces the solemn asseveration: 'The bread which we break is the communion of the body of Christ which has been broken for us. The cup of blessing for which we render thanks is the communion of the blood of Christ which has been shed for us.' The people come forward to the Holy Table to receive the elements. As they are being given, the bread by the celebrant and the wine by two elders stationed one on either side of him, the Minister pronounces appropriate verses from the Scriptures. When all have communicated, the Minister pronounces a brief Gloria. It is at this point that the offerings are received and placed upon the Communion Table. Liturgically it seems the wrong point, but it provides an opportunity for silent prayer and self-offering by those who have just received the Sacrament. The final prayer is one of intercession culminating in the Lord's Prayer in which the congregation join. There is a brief hymn of praise and then the Benediction.

As an Order of Service for public worship the Waldensian Liturgy has much to recommend it. There is a logical order of development. Starting at the outset with the recognition of our need of God's help even in the act of worship and the natural response in the invocation of His presence, we pass to the recognition of our own unworthiness,

and having been assured of forgiveness and acceptance, we listen to the word from God in Scripture and Sermon and in response offer ourselves anew to Him in the Sacrament, and present our intercessions, culminating in the Lord's Prayer, as our first act in that renewed service to which we have dedicated ourselves.

Some features of the Waldensian Liturgy might well be followed in other liturgies—to their enrichment. The period of silence before the prayer of confession makes for a deeper reality in that act and, where a liturgy does not provide for spoken responses, the use of a verse from a penitential hymn to express vocally what had been thought in silence, serves to strengthen and confirm the silent intention. In the same way, the hymn of thanksgiving after hearing the words of absolution, helps the worshipper to realise the wonder of forgiveness.

Finally, when a printed Order of Service is in the hand of every worshipper, a greater sense of spontaneity is achieved if hymns are not announced by the Minister, but simply introduced by the first bars played by the organist. Such a printed Order too adds to the worshipper's appreciation of the pattern of the Service.

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