

THE MEANS OF GRACE

THE POWER OF THE SACRAMENT OF THE ALTAR

STORY

At fifteen, he was so sick that he was sure he would die. He vowed that if God let him recover, he would study theology. Surviving that illness and a city-wide epidemic, Johann Gerhard went on to study theology at the University of Wittenberg, the same German school where Luther had taught nearly one hundred years earlier. He later earned a doctorate in theology and became a pastor.

Throughout his life, Gerhard suffered physical illnesses, including asthma, kidney disease, and rheumatism. Yet he was a devoted pastor, father to seven children with whom he held daily devotions, and author. He is known as one of the great theologians of the Lutheran Church.

Writing volumes ranging from devotionals to dogmatics, Gerhard's most treasured work, still published today, is *Sacred Meditations*. Written when he was just twenty-two, the devotional shows a deep love for Jesus and the Sacraments of the Church. About Communion, he writes, "In this holy supper . . . the soul is spiritually fed with the flesh of his almighty creator. The conscience is cleansed from all its guilty stains in the blood of the Son of God. The members of Christ, their spiritual head, are nourished with His own body. The believing soul feasts itself at the divine and heavenly banquet."

Discuss one-on-one or in small groups the following questions.

1. Restate Gerhard's words about Communion in your own words. *In the Lord's Supper, we receive the very body of Jesus, our Creator. His blood removes our sin and cleanses our conscience. As believers, we join together at this special meal with other members of Christ's body of which He Himself is our head. It is a divine, spiritually nourishing meal.*
2. How did the Lord's Supper sustain Gerhard? *His work reflects his love of the Lord. Despite ill health, God gave him strength.*
3. Why do believers sometimes desire to receive the Lord's Supper before facing a surgery or before going on a journey? *They desire the strength God offers through this holy meal.*