

**H**ave you ever gone to a church service and been puzzled by what you saw and heard? Don't be discouraged! It is not hard to learn the logic and the meaning of a worship service.

Begin by considering why Christian people have come to church to worship. They are there in response to God's love in Jesus Christ and to share their experience with other Christian people.

## Why Come to Church?

People come for these reasons:

- † To acknowledge their sins and to receive again the assurance of forgiveness. In worship language this is called "confession and absolution" and is frequently found at the beginning of a service.
- † To praise God for his grace and mercy. For this they use hymns, psalms, canticles (selections from the Scriptures or poetic statements, usually sung or chanted), as well as explicit prayers of thanksgiving. Some ancient canticles are called by their Greek or Latin names, for example: *Kyrie eleison* = Lord, have mercy!; *Gloria in excelsis* = Glory in the highest!; *Sanctus* = Holy; *Agnus Dei* = Lamb of God.

† To hear the Word of God read and proclaimed. Most services include three lessons: one from the Old Testament, one from the New Testament letters, and one from the gospels (Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John). Most services also contain a sermon or a homily. (These are basically two names for the same thing; sometimes a homily is a little less formal than a sermon.) In both the preacher proclaims the Word of God and applies it to the needs of the hearers.

† To join in prayer. Christians pray prayers of petition and intercession as well as prayers of praise and thanksgiving. Every service also contains the Lord's Prayer ("Our Father ...").

† To receive God's blessing as they go back out into the world to live their lives and carry out their vocations.

## The Sacraments and the Leaders

Christians also celebrate the sacraments in a worship setting. The sacraments are sacred acts in which God works through his Word, which is connected to earthly, tangible media (water, bread, and wine) to convey his love and grace. Baptism is administered upon request (once in a lifetime) to infants and, after instruction, to adults. The Eucharist (the Lord's Supper or Holy Communion) is celebrated regularly and provides repentant sinners with Christ's very personal

assurance of forgiveness and union with him as he gives them, under the bread and wine, his body to eat and his blood to drink.

With these facts in mind you can follow the actions of the ministers of the service. The leader is usually (not always) the pastor of the congregation, probably vested either in a white garment (alb) or a black gown (cassock) with a white covering (surplice) and a stole around his neck or over his shoulders. Historically the stole represents the "yoke of Christ" and is the traditional sign of ordination. The white stands for the pure righteousness of Christ which covers our sinful condition (the black). The minister who celebrates the Eucharist may also wear a chasuble, an ornate poncho-type vestment over his other vestments. Other ministers of the service may be the lectors (readers), the cantors (singing or chanting parts of the service), the assistants for the distribution of the sacrament, as well as acolytes (who serve by lighting candles, receiving the offering, and performing other tasks). If there is a processional cross, the bearer is called the crucifer; if there is incense, it is carried by the thurifer.

Music is a significant element in the service. Musicians assist in supporting and leading the liturgy and congregational song. Finally, there are ushers and greeters, who help the service go smoothly.

## The Structure of the Building and the Service

Nowadays churches represent many different styles of architecture from traditional to contemporary. Almost all churches have some features in common. There is an altar or table for the celebration of the Lord's Supper and for the "sacrifice of prayer." It usually stands front and center. There is a pulpit, a stand (often quite ornate), from which the sermon is preached. Additionally there may be a somewhat smaller stand, a lectern, from which the lessons are read. Finally, there is a font, a container for water for Baptisms. It may be in front, or it may be at the entrance to the church to symbolize Baptism as the entrance into the church.

The order or structure of the service is called the liturgy, which derives from an ancient word meaning "public service" and hence, worship itself. Churches that use considerable ceremony, often historic rites and forms, are called liturgical churches. They follow a calendar based on a church or liturgical year, consisting of a number of seasons as well as special festivals and commemorations. The year begins with the Advent season, four weeks before Christmas. After Christmas (beginning on January 6) is the Epiphany season, which extends until Lent (the six weeks before

Easter). The Easter season lasts seven weeks, until Pentecost ("the fiftieth day"). The "Sundays after Pentecost" continue until the next Advent season (the so-called nonfestival half of the church year) and are collectively called the "season of the church" or "ordinary time."

The lessons, hymns, canticles, and even the sermon topics are chosen to reflect the themes of the seasons and the weeks in which the service occurs. Like all of the elements we have mentioned, they are there to help the worshiper become fully a part of the act of worship and thus to have a rich and total experience. Worship is not a passive experience (a "spectator sport") but an intensely active experience involving great reverence and solemnity as well as joy and celebration.

The worship service is a time of fellowship with the Lord in which his followers adore, pray, praise, and give thanks.



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## The Way We Worship

