LCMS

Worship Library

Title: Entering God's Presence
Category: Teaching & Practice

> **"Do not come near; take your sandals off your feet, for the place on which you are standing is holy ground." And He said, "I am the God of your father, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob." And Moses hid his face, for he was afraid to look at God"** (Ex. 3:5–6).

In Canada it's quite common to leave one's shoes at the front door and enter the house wearing only socks or slippers. Perhaps it's because of the extreme climate; who wants all that muck dragged into the house? But visitors unaccustomed to this practice often feel uncomfortable "exposing" what they'd prefer to keep covered up—smelly feet, knobby toes, holey socks.

This simple "entrance rite" mirrors our coming into the house of God in the liturgy. In a sense we're like Moses, quite properly afraid to expose ourselves before a holy God. For his own good, God warned Moses to keep his distance, and to lay aside the filthiness he'd brought with him from the world around. Dare we come before Him without doing the same?

When we confess that we're "poor, miserable sinners," we're leaving our shoes at the door. The Germans refer to this sort of opening as a Rüstgebet, a "prayer of preparation." That's not a bad way of looking at it. In our confession of sins, we prepare ourselves for God to come to us in Word and Sacrament.

But in another sense, a lot has changed since Moses. We no longer just stand at a distance, terrified to approach him. **"But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ"** (Eph. 2:13). Christ bridged the chasm that was too broad for us to span. Christ prepared us to be in God's presence, removing a filth that was beyond our power to cleanse. From this perspective we see that it's really impossible for us to prepare ourselves for God.

Peter said to Him, "You shall never wash my feet." Jesus answered him, "If I do not wash you, you have no share with Me." Simon Peter said to Him, "Lord, not my feet only but also my hands and my head!" Jesus said to him, "The one who has bathed does not need to wash, except for his feet, but is completely clean" (John 13:8–10).

We have been washed and are completely clean. We acknowledge this foundational gift by first speaking the name that was put upon us in Holy Baptism. And Christ Himself returns us to that fountain of life by speaking again those absolving words: "I forgive you." He prepares us.

Confession and Absolution have always gone on in the church, particularly the so-called "private" kind, when you confess the sins that especially trouble you, and your pastor forgives you personally in the name of Christ. It's concerning this kind that we pledge with Luther: "confession and absolution should

by no means be allowed to fall into disuse in the church" (Smalcald Articles III 8:1). But public confession and absolution as an entrance rite in the liturgy is not intended to "compete" with this. In fact, it has its own history that's longer than most people realize.

In our service of Compline (Prayer at the Close of the Day), we've preserved a pattern of confession that goes back to the 10th century. (See below.) In their morning and evening prayer services, monks would confess their sins to one another as a way of healing their community through the Gospel. Sometimes called the Confiteor ("I confess") pattern, this reciprocal confession was soon adapted by clergy as a rite of preparation before the chief service. The priest and his assistants would confess to one another in the sacristy or at the step of the altar before beginning the service with the Introit. When in the 13th century priests began to add an absolution to the rite, they would very often direct their words beyond their assistants to the entire congregation saying, "I absolve you [all]." The people were drawn into the priest's preparation.

L I confess to God Almighty, before the whole company of heaven and to you, my brothers and sisters, that I have sinned in thought, word, and deed by my fault, by my own fault, by my own most grievous fault; wherefore I pray God Almighty to have mercy on me, forgive me all my sins, and bring me to everlasting life. Amen.

C The almighty and merciful Lord grant you pardon, forgiveness, and remission of all your sins. Amen.

C I confess to God Almighty, before the whole company of heaven and to you, my brothers and sisters, that I have sinned in thought, word, and deed by my fault, by my own fault, by my own most grievous fault; wherefore I pray God Almighty to have mercy on me, forgive me all my sins, and bring me to everlasting life. Amen.

L The almighty and merciful Lord grant you pardon, forgiveness, and remission of all your sins.

C Amen.

A second pattern of confession began more intentionally as a congregational act. Although the Western liturgy was in Latin throughout the Middle Ages, it was quite common to have the sermon and prayers in the vernacular. As early as the 10th century, the priest would remain in the pulpit to lead the people in an Offene Schuld ("public confession") in response to the sermon and in preparation for the Sacrament.

Lutherans in the 16th century inherited both forms of public confession. Most of their Church Orders direct the ministers to conduct a form of the Confiteor at the beginning of the service. The Offene Schuld after the sermon was also widely practiced. Luther's German Mass (1525) transformed it into an exhortation to communicants based on the Lord's Prayer (American Edition, vol. 53:80).

Occasionally there was disagreement over whether the confession could be accompanied by a general absolution to the whole congregation. Andreas Osiander, pastor in Nürnberg, refused to pronounce a public absolution because he was concerned that "thieves and crooks" might be present who would be confirmed in their sin. He was also worried that people would stop coming to Private Confession if the absolution were so easily available in church.

Though he recognized the genuine pastoral concern, Luther was unmoved by these objections. He responded to Osiander that the Gospel is available in many different forms, and can be applied both publicly and privately. In fact, the sermon itself is a general absolution, proclaiming to anyone who will

listen that his sins are forgiven in Christ (AE 50:75–78). He also viewed the Pax ("The peace of the Lord be with you always") as a public absolution to prepare one for the Sacrament (AE 53:28). God's gifts must not be played off against one another, but the Gospel is to be received with joyful faith in whatever form it is offered. Although Luther's own liturgical rites did not include a general absolution as such, he did not object to those who wished to use one. Pastor Bugenhagen in Wittenberg continued to use both forms of public confession in the Wittenberg city church throughout Luther's life.

We find the same freedom in the hymnals of the LCMS. Our first German service included an Offene Schuld after the sermon. Our English hymnals have followed instead the 16th-century Lutheran practice of holding a congregational Confiteor at the beginning of the service. Some of our rites have an explicit absolution; others have a declaration of grace. In "many and various ways" the Gospel is given.

Luther wrote several letters in 1533 during the debate over speaking the absolution in public. Here are several excerpts.

"The preaching of the holy gospel itself is principally and actually an absolution in which forgiveness of sins is proclaimed in general and in public to many persons, or publicly or privately to one person alone. Therefore absolution may be used in public and in general, and in special cases also in private, just as the sermon may take place publicly or privately, and as one might comfort many people in public or someone individually in private. Even if not all believe [the word of absolution], that is no reason to reject [public] absolution, for each absolution, whether administered publicly or privately, has to be understood as demanding faith and as being an aid to those who believe in it, just as the gospel itself also proclaims forgiveness to all men in the whole world and exempts no one from this universal context."

(From Luther's letter to Nürnberg, 18 April 1533 [AE 50:76–77])

"Although we hold private absolution to be very Christian and comforting, and that it should be maintained in the church (for the reasons that we have written to you before), nevertheless we cannot and do not wish to burden consciences so harshly as if there can be no forgiveness of sins except through private absolution. . . . And in summary, since the common Gospel is God's Word, which we are bound to believe by God's mandate and command—where such faith is, there indeed must forgiveness and salvation be. Thus, the Gospel itself is a general absolution; for it is a promise that each and everyone must individually receive, by God's mandate and command. Therefore we cannot forbid and condemn the general absolution as unchristian, as long as it serves this purpose: to remind the hearers that each individual must receive the Gospel as an absolution, and that it applies also to him . . . .

(From Luther's letter to Nürnberg, 8 October 1533 [WA Br 6:528–29])

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