

The Pastoral Care of Catechumens and Communicants

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Thank God, we confess with Dr. Luther, even a seven-year-old child knows what the Church is: lambs and sheep who hear and follow the Voice of their Good Shepherd (Smalcald Articles III.12.2; Formula of Concord SD 10.19; AC V, VII-VIII; St. John 10:1–6, 26–30; Psalm 23).

That is to define the Church in *pastoral* terms, and thus to emphasize the centrality of the Pastoral Office. From St. Ignatius of Antioch (Smyrn. 8) to the Augsburg Confession (AC VII), from the Word of our Lord to St. Peter (St. John 21:15–17; St. Matthew 16:13–19), and from St. Paul's words to the Church at Rome and to the elders of Ephesus (Rom. 10:11–15; Acts 20:28), even to the present day, the Lord's flock is gathered by and around the Ministry of the Gospel.

There is something lacking when the sheep have no shepherd (St. Matthew 9:36; Titus 1:5). So the Lord Jesus Christ, the great Good Shepherd of the whole flock in heaven and on earth (Heb. 13:20; Rev. 7:17; St. John 10:14–16; Ezekiel 34:23), provides pastors and bishops to care for His Church in this world (St. Matt. 10:1–8; Eph. 4:8–13; 1 Tim. 3:1–6; 1 Pet. 2:25; 5:1–2).

I. The Goal and Purpose, Ways and Means of Pastoral Care

So, what does a shepherd do? How does a pastor care for the sheep of the Good Shepherd? He is duty bound to feed and nurture the flock (St. John 21:15–17; Jer. 23:1–4; Ezekiel 34:11–16), and to guard and protect the sheep from the ravenous wolves and raging lions that would fleece them and devour them through falsehood and deception (Ezekiel 34:1–10; St. John 10:10–16, 27–29; 1 Peter 5:1–8; 2 Timothy 4:1–5; Titus 1:5–14).

In the Name and stead of Christ, in the Spirit and the Truth, the pastor leads the lambs and sheep through the green pastures of the Word of God and the living waters of Holy Baptism to the Feast of the Lord's Table in the Lord's House (Psalm 23; St. Mark 6:37–44; Acts 2:38–42).

Which is simply another way of saying that he makes disciples of the Lord Jesus by the way and means of Baptism in His Name and Catechesis in His Word (St. Matthew 28:18–20), and that he also then communes those same disciples with the Body and Blood of the same Lord Jesus Christ (St. Matt. 26:26–29), in remembrance of Him, with the proclamation of His death until He comes (1 Cor. 11:23–26). We could hardly summarize the Pastoral Ministry and Pastoral Care more comprehensively or more simply than that.

Use the old means in the old ways, Wilhelm Löhe advised and admonished the pastors in his day. That means the preaching and teaching of the Word of Christ, and the faithful administration of the Sacraments in accordance with the Gospel (AC V & VII). And that is exactly right. That is what pastors do, and that is how they care for the flock of God entrusted to their oversight.

Ordinary Pastoral Care is thus liturgical in its character and content. By “ordinary” I describe what is primary and persistent. *Extraordinary* Pastoral Care is more personal, addressed to the particular needs and circumstances of the one sheep who is wandering, lost, hurt, in danger, or caught up in some dire straits. This “extraordinary” care is vital, but is not the norm by which everything else is determined and governed. It is the exception that proves the rule. Not only because it is incidental and intermittent, but because it is still rooted in the Liturgy of the Word and Sacrament, and it has for its purpose the reconciliation and restoration of the individual to the liturgical life of the Church, that is, to the green Pastures, the quiet Waters, and the banqueting Table of the Lord in His House. On the cusp between the ordinary and extraordinary is the practice of Confession and Absolution, which preaches the Gospel of Christ to the individual from the Sacrament of Holy Baptism to the Sacrament of the Altar.

“Word and Sacrament” is not simply a cliché, but really is the definitive and decisive content of Pastoral Care. The means of grace are the Lord’s own Staff and Stay for both His shepherds and His sheep. We dare not lose sight of that fact, nor lay aside those means and let them go.

Nevertheless, using the old means in the old ways does not mean following a mechanistic checklist. Pastoral Care does not “just happen” by way of an automatic assembly line process. It is rather undertaken with *paternal* discernment and discretion.

The Lord does not simply provide a book of instructions, with rules and regulations for each and every situation. There surely *are* rubrics to follow, both divinely given in the Holy Scriptures and established in love by the Church. But the Lord also provides shepherds for His sheep, and fathers for His children, both at home and in the household and family of His Church (1 Tim. 3:1–5). Among His good gifts are these men who know and love the children under their care, who deal with them according to the Word and Wisdom of God, and who also adjust and accommodate their work and service, as needs may be, in the genuine freedom of the Gospel (1 Cor. 9:19–23). Indeed, the faithful exercise of this fatherly flexibility is the evangelical place and purpose of *adiaphora*. The reason the Lord has left so many of the details and particulars unspecified, is not so that every man may do whatever seems right in his own eyes, but so that the Church in each time and place, and the pastor in each parish, may care for the flock in the midst of mortal life in this perishing world. *Adiaphora* are not for the sake of anarchy, but for adaptability within the parameters of the Lord’s sheepfold.

Within this evangelical freedom of faith and love, the pastor does not compromise the confession of Christ, but engages the hard work of listening to and learning from His Word, in order to confess Him clearly and concretely in language appropriate to each context. Whether to the congregation gathered for the Divine Service, or to the individual Christian who has come for Confession and Absolution — to the catechumens and communicants entrusted to his Pastoral Care in a variety of circumstances — the pastor labors to speak of Christ with tangible clarity, transparent simplicity, and faithful integrity. It is not an easy job, but a necessary one.

In approaching the task of preaching and teaching the Word of Christ and caring for His lambs and sheep with His good gifts, the pastor should take to heart and be encouraged by the exemplary faith of little children. It is the Father's good pleasure to give them His Kingdom, and so, by His good and gracious Will, He reveals His divine Wisdom to them through the Word and Spirit of Christ Jesus (St. Luke 12:32; St. Matt. 11:25–27; 18:1–4, 10–14; St. Mark 10:13–16). We confess this truth in our practice of infant Baptism, and in the baptismal rite itself, because we trust the Word of God to work faith, where and when it pleases Him, in those who hear the Gospel (AC V). We baptize according to His divine command and with His Holy Name, and we are confident of His Word and promises, which are for us and for our children (Acts 2:37–38).

This confident confession and practice are in tension with many common assumptions and assertions about infants, toddlers, and young children, as to what they can and cannot do. Without a Word of the Lord to support the claim, it is often stated that little ones below a certain age are unable to believe, comprehend, or confess the Gospel of Christ Jesus. Or, if it is acknowledged that even infants may have such faith, it is still maintained that, prior to an age of discretion, these young Christians are unable to discern or grasp the particulars of the Gospel.

Admittedly, there is development of cognition, linguistic ability, and reason over time. The Scriptures do speak of an age prior to which a child does not yet know “to refuse evil or choose good” (Isaiah 7:15–16). And there are ways in which Christians are admonished to grow up from childishness into maturity (Eph. 4:14–16; 1 Cor. 14:20; Heb. 5:12–14). Our Lord Himself grew and increased in wisdom and stature (St. Luke 2:40, 52). Yet, it is also made clear that infants and little children are able to believe and rejoice in the Gospel (St. Luke 1:41–44; 18:15–17; St. Matt. 21:15–16). In fact, the greatness of their faith is the model for all Christians, which puts to shame the sophisticated knowledge and intelligence of this world (St. Matt. 11:25–27; 18:1–4).

Aside from the testimonies of Holy Scripture, it has seemed to me, in the course of my lifetime, that the more we learn about the human brain, infant life, and child development, the more we discover rather amazing capacities for learning, language, and relationships of love and trust. Frankly, I don't believe that anyone really knows or understands all that's happening in the mind of an unborn or newborn infant, or even in the case of a toddler, although there's already a great difference between an infant and a two-year-old, as any parent can testify from experience. My sense is that science will continue to discover and demonstrate that little ones are capable of far more than past assessments and expectations have supposed. Such insights can be helpful to us in discerning how best to teach and care for the youngest disciples of our Lord Jesus. But to a certain extent, such things are still beside the point at hand. Faith is obtained and nurtured by the Word and Spirit of Christ, and not by anyone's reason or strength, regardless of age or ability. Pastoral Care seeks to know and love the flock as well as possible, but, from first to last, it relies upon the ways and means of the Gospel, rather than attempting to read hearts and minds.

My purpose in referring to these considerations of early childhood is simply to suggest that, in these matters, we ought to be agnostic in our assumptions and cautious in our conclusions. By contrast, we are right to proceed with bold confidence in that which is sure and certain, because it is given to us by the Word and Wisdom of God, no matter if it seems foolish and odd in the perception of our fallen flesh.

Infant Baptism is a case in point, and the way the Church has gone about it, the Lutheran Church included, is instructive. The infant baptismal candidate is addressed and regarded as a Christian, a servant of Jesus Christ. He or she prays to the Lord, renounces the devil, confesses the Holy Trinity and the faith of the Church, and requests the gift of Holy Baptism, albeit through the lips and mouths of parents, godparents, pastor and congregation.

Lutherans do not consider this practice to be a pretense or play-acting in the case of infants, because the Lord is faithful and His Word does not return empty. The infant comes to the Font embraced by that Word and promise of the Lord; he comes to the water already immersed in the preaching of repentance for the forgiveness of sins, and that, not only before, but during and after the rites and ceremonies of Holy Baptism. The little lamb is cared for by his shepherd, and his Baptism into Christ provides the precedent and pattern of ongoing Pastoral Care for his Christian faith and life. His pastor continues to pray with him and for him, to call him to repentance and faith, to assist him in resisting the devil, and to bring him to the Father by the Spirit in the Son.

Remarkably, Dr. Luther points to the importance of this ongoing Pastoral Care, not only for the benefit of the baptized child, but also for the sake of the Church. Far from regarding the little children as helpless liabilities or burdens, he admonishes pastors and parents to catechize them and bring them to the Lord's Supper, in order for them to serve and assist the whole Church in fighting against the devil (Large Catechism V.85–87).

II. Ongoing Catechesis: to and from the Font, to and from the Altar

It is the Word of Christ that arms and armors the Christian of whatever stage in life against the assaults and accusations of the old evil foe. That is why Pastoral Care, broadly speaking, is a continuous Catechesis. In many and various ways, the pastor is always preaching, teaching, confessing, and exemplifying the Word of Christ.

Pastoral Catechesis does impart knowledge, it does assist with a growing comprehension of the Mysteries, and it does provide guidance in the way Christians are called to live. However, at its heart, Pastoral Catechesis is always proclaiming the Law and the Gospel unto repentance and faith in the forgiveness of sins. That is the foundational word and work of all Pastoral Care. As it precedes, accompanies, and follows the administration of Holy Baptism, so does it also extol and

establish the pattern and shape of the entire baptismal life. It is the Word that accomplishes the daily dying and rising of the Christian with Christ Jesus.

Catechesis is not simply nor even chiefly academic. It is far broader and more comprehensive than that. Perhaps it is helpful always to think of Catechesis and Pastoral Care in tandem, so that care is not attempted apart from the Catechesis of the Word, nor Catechesis attempted apart from the care and compassion of Christ, as a shepherd caring for the sheep, as a father for his children.

This catechetical care does not coddle. It does include discipline and training: In knowledge, yes; and in the fear of the Lord, which is the beginning of all true wisdom; and in the righteousness of faith and life. It is a discipleship in the Way of the Cross, a lifelong apprenticeship in the Way of Christ, crucified and risen. So it includes the Bible stories, as more than great stories, more than historical facts and information, as the very Life of Christ by which we live in Him.

The Ten Commandments, likewise, are the way that we should live in faith and love, and the criteria by which we examine ourselves and seek Absolution for our sins, because they are the way that Christ has lived in love for His Father and for all of us, for our salvation.

The Creed and the Our Father are prayers and confessions of faith in the Gospel. We teach and learn them best by praying and confessing them, and we hand them over to our children and our catechumens by praying and confessing with them, in the confidence that whoever calls on the Name of the Lord shall be saved (Romans 10:8–13).

Memorization of these key texts is beneficial and ought to be encouraged and stressed for the sake of instilling the Word of Christ in the heart and mind of every Christian. But, in any case, whether sooner or later, Christian disciples will believe, and they will learn to pray and confess, in the way they are catechized. The Word of the Lord that is spoken to them, for them, and with them, is the Word that is near them, in their ears and in their hearts, which also opens their lips and mouths to show forth the praises of God in Christ Jesus (Romans 10:8–10; Psalm 51:15). The stories of the Bible, the chief parts of the Catechism, the Psalms and hymns and Spiritual songs of Christ will shape the Christian catechumens in heart and mind, in body and soul, and provide them with a pattern of sound words for their confession and prayer of faith (2 Tim. 1:13).

Now, then, here is the problem and challenge: Contrast this comprehensive view of Catechesis with what “Confirmation” has often been, driven as it is by its competing interests and concerns. There are positives, no doubt, among them a consistent use of Luther’s Small Catechism with its profound, straightforward simplicity and its rather unique quality as a prayer book. An emphasis on the basics of the faith, on the need for instruction in the Word of God, and on the seriousness of the sacramental life must also be applauded. In these ways “Confirmation” has been a positive blessing. Unfortunately, that is not all there is to it.

“Confirmation,” as we have come to know it, does have a checkered history with questionable origins and convoluted developments. It began as a subtle-sacramentarian response to a crass-sacramentarian challenge, when Martin Bucer attempted to answer Anabaptist criticisms of infant Baptism by requiring a mature personal confession, a commitment to Christ, and a vow of obedience to the discipline of the Church as prerequisites to the Holy Communion. Implicit in this move were doubts about the faith and confession of infants, and a shift away from confidence in the Word and Sacraments to a focus on human reason and resolve.

I’m not going to attempt a rehearsal of “Confirmation” history, especially since this has been done often enough and well enough by others. It is a tedious tale, which leads further and further away from the catechetical center which has always been its only real merit. There has been little unity or consistency in the various ways it has been used and understood over the years. From its suspect start, it was further skewed by the dogmatism of Scholastics in the 17th century, by the subjectivism of Pietists in the 17th and 18th centuries, and by the secularism of Rationalists in the 18th and 19th centuries. The end result has been a pseudo-sacramentalized graduation ceremony and coming of age party. Not a great pedigree.

All of these developments are bad enough, in turning away from the objective Gospel of Christ to the intellect, emotions, and experience of the confirmands. Even more unfortunate and troubling is the combining of Catechesis in preparation for the Holy Communion with a stress on personal maturity, commitment, and academic achievement. The consequence of this combination has been a later age of “Confirmation,” and thus a later age of First Communion. Whereas Lutherans in the 16th Century were typically admitted to the Sacrament between the ages of six and twelve years, Lutherans of subsequent generations have generally not communed until anywhere from twelve to sixteen years of age or later.

Despite all the rigor, expectation, and hoopla surrounding it, “Confirmation” has been marked by frustrations and failures. And notwithstanding the good that has resulted through instruction in the faith, attrition rates have been notoriously high among “graduates” of this process. At the same time, it is disturbing to hear Lutherans speak of their “Confirmation” and their “vows” in terms reminiscent of a protestant altar call, and in higher esteem than their Holy Baptism.

The ghost of Martin Bucer’s contribution haunts the Lutheran practice of “Confirmation” to this day. Brothers, it should not be so. That other Martin, Dr. Luther himself, was ambivalent at best about any such thing as “Confirmation,” but he did insist upon the need for ongoing Catechesis. That is where our focus needs to be.

With or without a rite of “Confirmation,” Catechesis in the Word of Christ should undergird and permeate the entire life of the Church. It is not a terminal degree program. As the Christian is to pray without ceasing, so he must be catechized without ceasing. So, too, the Christian home and family ought to resonate with the Word of God and prayer throughout the week.

Homeschooling provides a unique opportunity and a clear advantage in this regard, although, of course, that option is not universally possible or necessary. Fathers and mothers will, in any case, certainly make time to pray with their children, to engage them in conversation with the Holy Scriptures, to observe with them the festivals and seasons of the Church Year, and to lead them by example. They will also bring them to the Lord's House on the Lord's Day, no matter where and how they are being schooled.

Lutheran parochial schools do not replace the roles and responsibilities of parents in the Christian home and family, but they are able to assist parents in providing a context of Catechesis in the Word of God and daily prayer. A solid Lutheran school with a sound theological base and a rich liturgical piety can be tremendously valuable in this regard. Obviously, a less pious, heterodox, or secular educational environment will require an extra effort and proactive vigilance on the part of Christian fathers and mothers, who remain accountable to God for the Catechesis of their children (Deuteronomy 6:4–25; Large Catechism).

The responsibility for family Catechesis belongs especially to the father as the head of his household, although it is often the mother who will be the main catechist of the children, especially in their youngest years. I am persuaded that young Samuel, for example, was catechized at Hannah's breast and on her knee before she entrusted him to the Lord and to Eli the priest at Shiloh (1 Samuel 1–3). Certainly, Luther has taught us that the head of the household is to catechize his children in the chief parts of the Christian faith and life: How they are to live, how they are to remember their Baptism, how they are to examine themselves and confess their sins, and how they are to pray and confess the Word of God. Fathers should also teach their children, or have them taught, what the Sacrament of the Altar is, what it is for, and how they are given to eat and to drink the Body and Blood of Christ in faith and with thanksgiving. As Pastoral Care is paternal, so is paternal care *pastoral* in a father's Catechesis of his children (Deut. 6: 4–25; Luther's Prefaces to the Small and Large Catechisms; Hebrews 12:3–11; 13:17).

In all of this, Luther clearly places the catechetical burden, not on the catechumens, but on the parents and pastors. Those children (and servants) who refuse to receive instruction or rehearse the faith are to be disciplined (Large Catechism Preface). Luther's emphasis, however, is not on the catechumen's achievement, but on the persistence of the Catechesis that fathers and mothers in the home and pastors in the Church are to provide.

The aim and purpose of memory work in this process is to establish a stable scaffolding and structure for securing the Word of God in the catechumen's heart, mind, and life. A similar but superior scaffolding and structure are provided by the context of God's Word and prayer in the home, and by the family's consistent participation in the liturgical life of the Church. A child immersed in that catechetical context will be formed and filled up by it. He will learn the faith by heart, so that he is able to recall his Baptism and the Gospel, to call on the Name of the Lord in

every trouble, and to praise and confess Christ Jesus throughout his life. Thus, the good and gracious Will of God is done among us also.

It should already be evident that the Catechesis of a Christian home and family takes its cues and draws its content from the Divine Liturgy, which is itself the primary Catechesis of the entire Church in the Word and Sacraments of Christ. In fact, all Catechesis finds its orbit in the Liturgy, and its gravitational center in the Sacrament of the Altar.

The catechetical rhythm of daily prayer moves from the Divine Service on the Lord's Day, through the week, back to the Divine Service on the Lord's Day again. That is the weekly ebb and flow of the Liturgy, whether gathered for Matins and Vespers with the congregation or with the family for morning and evening prayer at home. The Christian is always living from the Font to the Altar, and from the Altar through all his days and nights back to the Altar again.

There is also the larger rhythm of the Church Year, the Sundays and Seasons of which are a school of faith in the Gospel of Christ. Luther points to this liturgical Catechesis of the Church Year in his discussion of the Second Article in the Large Catechism. It's actually one of the shortest sections of the Catechism, precisely because, Luther says, the confession of the Son of God, His Person and Work, are treated in detail and at length through the Gospels and Festivals of the whole year. We note that Lent and Easter, in particular, are catechetical in their origins.

The ancient catechumenate focused on *Procatechesis* during Lent, in preparation for Holy Baptism and participation in the Holy Communion at the Easter Vigil, and then on *Mystagogical Catechesis* in the meaning and significance of the Holy Sacraments throughout the Octave of the Resurrection. There is still a benefit to thinking of these distinctions between Procatechesis in preparation for the Liturgy, and Mystagogical Catechesis in explanation of the Liturgy. The one focuses on stories of the Bible and on the first three chief parts of the Catechism, the other on the Holy Sacraments and on their significance for the Christian faith and life. But this is not a one-shot program culminating in "Confirmation." It is the pattern of the Divine Service itself, and of the daily, weekly, and yearly cycle of Christian prayer and Catechesis in the Word of Christ. It is for this reason, for example, that I deliberately use the term "catechumen," not only for baptismal candidates or confirmands, but for all Christians, notwithstanding their growth and maturity in the faith. Even pastors, parents, and other catechists are still catechumens in this sense.

Not only what is said in the Liturgy, but also what is done; and not only what is done, but how it is done, confesses Christ and catechizes His Church. The way a pastor approaches his preaching and conducts himself in the pulpit, and, above all, the way he administers the Sacrament, his reverence and decorum at the Altar, catechize the congregation in the Mysteries of Christ.

The Lord made clear in the Old Testament that His Name would be sanctified before the people by the construction and treatment of His Tabernacle and its furnishings, and by the vestments and

conduct of His priests (Lev. 10:3; Exodus 28–31). Although we now live and serve in the broad freedom of the New Testament, it remains the case that ceremonies confess what we believe and catechize the people in that faith.

Christian Catechesis, in all of these ways and means, is always aiming at a worthy and fruitful communion with Christ in His Body and His Blood, by way of faith in His Word and Holy Spirit. As constant Catechesis is necessary for the sake of ceaseless prayer, so is ongoing Catechesis needed for the ongoing faithful reception of the Holy Communion. We are not concerned with the completion of a once-in-a-lifetime program of study. Rather, every Divine Service includes the Catechesis of God’s Word and the preaching of it, in order to bring the congregation to the Altar as worthy communicants. Such Catechesis is fundamental to Pastoral Care.

III. The Holy Communion: Fellowship in the Body of Christ

Pastoral Care and Catechesis do include both preparation for and explanation of the Holy Communion. But that is not all. The actual administration of the Holy Communion is also an exercise of Pastoral Care, undertaken within a context of ongoing Pastoral Care and Catechesis. The preaching, teaching, and confessing of the Word of Christ belong to the right administration of the Sacrament “in accordance with the Gospel” (AC VII). There is no Holy Baptism apart from the preaching of repentance for the forgiveness of sins and the Catechesis of all that Jesus has commanded (St. Luke 3: 3; Acts 2:38; St. Matt. 28:19–20). Nor is there any Lord’s Supper apart from the remembrance of Jesus; for as often as we this bread and drink this Cup, we are to do so in remembrance of Him, by and with the proclamation of His Cross (1 Cor. 11:23–26). That proclamation happens by way of the Verba, which consecrate the Sacrament, but so also by the Propers, the Preaching, and the Prayers of the Day. The giving and receiving of the Body and Blood of Christ are comprehended within this Catechesis of His Word.

So it is that “discerning the Lord’s Body” in the Sacrament (1 Cor. 11:29) necessarily begins with the Pastoral Ministry. First of all, by the consecration of *this* bread and *this* cup with the Word of the Lord, which is the very thing that actually distinguishes the Sacrament from ordinary food and drink. Then, also, the pastor discerns the Body and Blood of Christ by his reverent conduct at the Altar, and by His carefully deliberate handling and distribution of the Sacrament. His preaching and teaching catechize the congregation in what the Sacrament is, what it is for, where it is found, and how it is rightly received. But it is by the liturgical rites and ceremonies of the consecration and distribution that the pastor identifies the Sacrament itself and gives it to the disciples of Jesus. There are no other ways or means by which anyone discerns the Body and Blood of the Lord than by this Pastoral Ministry.

The self-examination of those who would receive the Sacrament (1 Cor. 11:28) is likewise not a do-it-yourself exercise or personal achievement, but is always by the Word and Spirit of Christ

Jesus. No one is able to examine himself rightly without help, for there is nothing in the self to begin with other than sin and death, from which no one can set himself free. Recognizing the reality of that sin and death, repenting, and calling on the Name of the Lord in the righteousness of faith is accomplished in the heart by the Spirit through the Law and the Gospel. It is the Holy Spirit who convicts the world of sin, of judgment, and of righteousness through the preaching of repentance for the forgiveness of sins in Jesus' Name (St. John 16:8–11; St. Luke 24:46–49).

The self-examination of repentance is not achieved by cognition, intelligence, reason, or philosophical introspection. The “self” is not so much the subject as the object of examination. It is worked in each Christian's heart, mind, and soul through whatever capacities the Lord has given to the person, but always and only by the Word and Spirit of God. As also in the case of the renunciations and confession of Holy Baptism, we rely upon the Lord to search the heart and try the mind (Jer. 11:20; 17:10; Rom. 8:26–27; 1 Cor. 2:6–16; Psalm 139:23–24), to kill and make alive (1 Samuel 2:6), to bring to repentance and bring forth faith where and when it pleases Him (AC V). And that does not exclude the little children who are baptized and believe in Christ.

Again, as Dr. Luther exhorts in his Large Catechism (V.85–87), the little children are also to be catechized and communed, in order to help the grown-ups fight against the devil. If St. Michael and his holy angels are known for defeating that old dragon and throwing him down, they do so beholding the face of the Father in the face of His little ones (Rev. 12:7–9; St. Matt. 18:10).

Whether literate or illiterate, everyone has help (and must have help) of one kind or another. That help comes from the Lord through the means of His Word, whether it is spoken, written, memorized, or otherwise expressed and explained, depicted, or signified. As the Catechism puts it, “the pastor may ask, or one may ask himself” the questions prepared for those who would receive the Sacrament. The answers, too, are not self-invented, but are provided from the Word of the Lord. To be sure, it is no child's play, but it is for both young and old.

We need to guard against an intellectualizing of examination and discernment, as though they were an academic exercise, pursued and accomplished by one's own reason and strength. Neither age, nor ability, nor academic achievement is adequate preparation for the Sacrament, though all of the above will participate in the fine outward training of the body. But these personal qualities and capacities are no more germane to a worthy reception of the Holy Communion than wealth or poverty, genealogy or gender.

The worthiness to eat and drink the Body and Blood of Christ comprises nothing else, nothing more nor less than repentant faith in His Word (Formula of Concord Epitome VII.18–20). Such repentance belongs to the lifelong significance of Holy Baptism, which cleanses the conscience (also in the case of infants, toddlers, and young children) through the Resurrection of Christ Jesus from the dead (1 Peter 3:21; 1 Timothy 1:5; Romans 6:4–7).

The Six Chief Parts of the Catechism are an excellent summary of such faith. It may also be confessed even more simply or at far greater length; not as any merit or achievement, either way, but as a good fruit of the very faith that is confessed (Rom. 10:8–10; Hebrews 13:15). There is growth and maturing in this confession, but also a need for daily renewal. We benefit, not only from Dr. Luther’s Catechisms, but from his own example and encouragement: To become like a little child every day, by returning to the Ten Commandments, praying the Creed and the Our Father, recalling our Holy Baptism, confessing our sin and being absolved, and waiting on the Lord to open His hand and feed us with His Bread of Life.

Repentant faith in Christ derives from and depends upon His Word (Romans 10:14–17; AC V). There is a need, therefore, not only for a solid foundation of Catechesis, but for ongoing Catechesis in the Word of Christ. It is this Catechesis that brings the catechumen, week after week, to a worthy reception of the Holy Communion in the faith and confession of Christ Jesus.

The Holy Communion is the beating Heart and Center of the Church and Ministry, because it is the Gospel of Christ giving Himself most intimately to His disciples with all of His gifts and benefits. This Sacrament confirms the baptismal faith and life of the catechumen. It gives not only the assurance of forgiveness, but the actual forgiveness of sins, and with it the life and salvation of Christ. It is union with Christ in body and soul, and the unity of the Church in and with Him, with the Father and the Holy Spirit. The Body and Blood of Christ are the Christian’s Spiritual Food and Drink, his Manna in the wilderness, the Medicine of Immortality, the Surety and Pledge of the Resurrection.

The Holy Communion is also Catechesis, teaching disciples the Love of God in Christ Jesus, and so also to fear, love, and trust in Him above all things, and to love the neighbor as He does. These are among the reasons, Dr. Luther indicates, for which we desire to receive the Sacrament frequently (Small Catechism Questions & Answers). And from the earliest days of the Church, as also in Luther and Chemnitz, the bread made from many grains and the wine made from many grapes signify the communion of many Christians in the one Body of Christ. The Sacrament actually achieves what it teaches.

The Holy Communion is not interchangeable with Holy Baptism or Holy Absolution; neither is it in competition with any of the Means of Grace. It has its own proper place and purpose in the life of the Church. As such, it should not be flattened out into a general theoretical category of “Sacrament,” nor reduced to a generic means of forgiveness. No, the Sacrament of the Altar is what it is, an irreducible gift of the Lord Jesus Christ, which He gives to His Christian disciples to eat and to drink — that is, to those who are baptized, catechized, and cared for in His Name (St. Matthew 26:26–29; 28:18–20). Pastoral Care for the Lord’s flock will therefore seek to serve His lambs and sheep with His Body and His Blood as faithfully as possible.

IV. The Pastoral Fellowship of the Church

Along with everything else the Sacrament is and does, it is more than simply an expression of fellowship. The Holy Communion *is* the Church's Fellowship in and with Christ Jesus. We who are many are one Body in Christ, because we all eat of His Body (1 Cor. 10:16–17). We share this fellowship of the Sacrament with those who share the same Catechesis and Confession of the faith, because the preaching and teaching of Christ belong to the administration of the Holy Communion (1 Cor. 11:23–26). The Word and Sacrament belong together and are inseparable in practice.

Admission to the Sacrament of the Altar is therefore an exercise of Pastoral Care within the fellowship of the Church; not only within the local congregation, but in the larger fellowship of each pastor and congregation with other pastors and congregations. Whoever communes at one Altar participates in all the other Altars of the same fellowship, under the shared Pastoral Care of the entire fellowship. We commune the members of our sister congregations because they are under the care of brother pastors.

It is important for pastors and congregations of the same fellowship to have and use the same criteria for admission to the Sacrament of the Altar. Which is why it is so alarming that the Missouri Synod is all over the map on precisely this point. I'm not referring to a diversity in age, ability, or academic achievement on the part of communicants, since these differences are of no theological consequence but simply belong to the variety of gifts and the diversity of many members in the one Body of Christ. The troubling diversity is that which is found in Catechesis, Confession, and Pastoral Care, the very things that ought to be the basis and the common ground of our fellowship. What I mean is not simply that we are inconsistent in our preaching, teaching, and administration of the Gospel, but that we do not respect or adhere to these criteria in our Communion practices. Not only is open Communion rampant across the Missouri Synod, but what is meant by "closed Communion" also varies dramatically. Couple these trends with wide variations in catechetical methods and standards, and with a vast range of opinions regarding the Pastoral Office, and it becomes difficult even to identify what or where our fellowship is.

The inconsistencies are especially obvious in cases, such as I have witnessed, where members are not permitted their First Communion until their eighth grade Confirmation, while yet the same congregation welcomes visitors of every stripe to commune at a fully open Altar. By contrast, even a much earlier First Communion does not equate to open Communion, not when the criteria of genuine Church Fellowship are consistently applied. Those Christians who are baptized, catechized, and cared for by pastors of the same fellowship are communed within that fellowship, whether at home or away. And by the same criteria, those Christians (or otherwise) belonging to another fellowship (or to no fellowship at all), because they are under a different Pastoral Care, are not communed at our Altars. It is not a measure or judgement of worthiness in the heart, but an objective fact of Church Fellowship: The Sacrament is given within a context and fellowship of ongoing Pastoral Care and Catechesis, and not apart from that context.

The practice of Church Discipline, on the other hand, functions within the context of Pastoral Care to exclude from the Sacrament those members of the congregation who would commune unworthily on account of their persistence in false doctrine or some other blatant sin for which they refuse to repent. The goal, of course, is to call them to repentance and the forgiveness of sins. In the meantime, it is an exercise of Pastoral Care to withhold forgiveness and the Sacrament from the unrepentant, so long as they do not repent.

Such discipline applies, wherever it is called for, without respect or prejudice to persons or their age. Young communicants who persist in false doctrine or immoral living should be put under discipline until they repent. But here is where their lack of sophisticated reason serves the little children very well, since it is quite rare to find a young Christian guilty of unrepentant sin or heresy. They do routinely sin and commit theological errors, but they also tend to accept correction from their pastors and parents, to repent of their sins, and to learn from their mistakes.

The point is that the vital unity of our Church Fellowship is found in a common Catechesis and Confession of Christ, and in a mutual context of Pastoral Care. I do not refer to some abstract doctrine or theory, but to the work of the Ministry in practice, the preaching, teaching, and administration of the Gospel by pastors who are committed and accountable to one another. That also requires an active communication among those pastors, especially within circuits, but as broadly as circumstances permit. There is never enough time for everything we should like to do, but there needs to be time made for the exercise of our pastoral fellowship.

It is a false and superficial sort of unity to rely on the rite of “Confirmation” at some standardized age or grade level as our bond of peace. The question yet remains, What is the character and content of the Catechesis preceding, undergirding, and following that rite? And again, What is the nature and practice of the Pastoral Care encompassing all of the above?

In the interest of full disclosure, let me offer my own pastoral practice as an example of what I have in mind. It has been fairly settled now for the past five or six years, although I continue to wrestle with the questions and concerns that touch upon my practice, especially as it pertains to the unity of our fellowship.

When I was ordained at Emmaus in 1996, there were no confirmands, nor any on the foreseeable horizon. It was an aging congregation with very few children on the rolls, even fewer in church. Among the children who were attending regularly were my own DoRena and Zachary, ages nine and seven, and of course we were teaching them the Catechism at home.

Early on, it was brought to my attention by the Board of Elders that Emmaus had a precedent for giving First Communion prior to Confirmation. Already then, on the basis of what I knew of early Reformation practice, I was in favor of an earlier First Communion. I was also leery of the exalted,

even “sacramental” terms with which I heard the people speak of their “Confirmation.” So, in view of past precedent, and with the blessing of the Elders, I began to offer First Communion to younger children following a public examination in the primary texts of the Catechism (along with the basic explanations of Holy Baptism, Holy Absolution, and the Holy Communion). DoRena, Zachary, and another young lady, the three of them ranging in age from eight to ten years, were the first of my First Communicants.

In subsequent years, and really for quite awhile, I generally began Catechesis — one-on-one with each catechumen — between the ages of six and eight years. Usually after a year or so, when I was confident they knew the basics of the Catechism, I would publicly examine a group of them at Vespers, and then admit them to the Holy Communion at the next Divine Service.

As the number of children at Emmaus increased, I made the move to holding regular catechesis classes, since I could no longer meet with each and every catechumen individually. It was in the context of such classes that I noted the differences between the various children, with respect to their piety and personalities, their maturity and academic abilities. Nothing shocking in that, but it pressed me to consider the criteria I was using for their First Communion. What was I looking for and measuring in these children? Was it simply a matter of memorization? I had some very bright catechumens who were in class every week and able to memorize and recite the Catechism easily enough, but who weren’t in church with any consistency, and whose families were not exactly proactive in daily prayer. I also had some other catechumens, who were not only in class every week but faithfully in church, often several times a week, and whose families were praying and confessing the Word of God at home every day, but who struggled with their memory work.

It was in light of those observations that I began to consider the family context as a higher priority and more decisive than memory work. I’m still a fan of memorization, and I require it of all my confirmands, but I don’t treat it as a pre-requisite for the Holy Communion. Where a family is faithful in Catechesis at home and in the liturgical life of the Church, I know that, sooner or later, the children will know the Catechism by heart. In the meantime, I recognize that one can know something without having it memorized, or have something memorized without really knowing it. So I’m looking for a stable context of ongoing Catechesis, and I work at establishing a pastoral relationship and rapport with each and all of my catechumens and their families.

One of the reasons I am able to take this sort of approach at Emmaus is that most of my families are homeschooling. Not all of them, but almost. The parents are proactive in educating their children, and they emphasize Catechesis as a fundamental part of their curriculum. They’re also able to participate in weekday prayer offices and festival Services at church. They don’t think of education in terms of grade levels, but are geared to thinking of each child as a unique individual.

My weekly catechesis class comprises children ranging in age from seven to fifteen or sixteen years, and each of those children is likely to be in that class with me for about that span of time

before they are finally confirmed. Prior to my class, they have catechesis class with Deaconess Rhein on Sunday mornings, usually from three or four years of age until six or seven. So, there's no lack of formal Catechesis at Emmaus, and the children all learn to know the Bible and the Catechism well, along with Psalms, Hymnody, and the Church Year.

And, from very early on, the young catechumens of Emmaus are also receiving the Body and Blood of Christ in the Holy Communion. No one communes automatically at any particular age, but almost all of the children of the congregation are receiving the Sacrament by the time they are five or six years old. My youngest First Communicants have been three or four, admitted to the Sacrament on the basis of their family context, my pastoral communication with them, and their confession of Christ and His Body and Blood according to their own abilities and vocabulary. Some of them are quite precocious, but what I'm measuring is their Catechesis and Confession, not their intelligence, bravado, or eloquence. I don't put them under the spotlight of a public examination, but I care for them, examine and absolve them individually.

I realize that I'm pushing the envelope with respect to the age of First Communion, but I haven't done so to be provocative. I simply aim to be a faithful pastor to the families and children under my care. It is with caution that I have proceeded, in conversation with many colleagues, including open discussion in my Circuit Winkel. I have not done anything covertly, but have sought the guidance and feedback of fathers and brothers in Christ. I desire to be a faithful steward of the Mysteries of God, and so also a faithful shepherd of the lambs and sheep of Christ.

The first time I communed a three-year-old was after that particular child had been asking me for months already to give her the Sacrament. When she looked me in the eye and asked me point blank, one Sunday at the Altar, why I wouldn't give her Jesus' Body and Blood, I spent the next several weeks trying to answer that question, even to my own satisfaction, and I could not. She was baptized, catechized, and cared for. She knew and confessed the Gospel. She knew and desired the Holy Communion, clearly discerning the Body of Christ from ordinary bread. And she did actually know the primary texts of the Catechism, well enough to pray them by heart with her family and the congregation. She would often chant the Verba right along with me from her pew during the Divine Service. I could not in good conscience deny her request for the Sacrament, which her parents also desired for her.

What I have found over the years, and what should not surprise any of us, is that the Holy Communion bears good fruits of faith and love in the lives of young Christians. The children of Emmaus who began communing at a comparatively early age have remained faithful and active in the life of the congregation. The attrition rate has been extraordinarily low. The young communicants have continued in catechesis classes without dropping out, and have continued coming to church week after week into adulthood. They tend to be quite loyal, in fact, because they love the Liturgy and, above all else, they love the Lord's Supper.

The fruits of the Holy Communion that I have witnessed in my catechumens and communicants at Emmaus have confirmed for me the approach that I have taken. Yet, I am fully aware that other pastors and congregations of our fellowship are at a variety of different points in their practice. Many do not understand or agree with my approach. Others are sympathetic, perhaps enthusiastic about our practice at Emmaus, but would not be able to follow the same path in their own context. Which is why I teach my families to honor the practice of congregations they visit, and to respect the discretion and care of the pastors in each place. Sometimes that is difficult and disappointing, but I believe it is the only way to proceed.

What I ask of you, and of my colleagues across the Synod, is a similar patience with me, and a serious consideration of these matters, perhaps from a new perspective. My chief concern is to emphasize the central and salutary significance of the Sacrament, the necessity of ongoing Catechesis from infancy to old age, and the pastoral character of Church Fellowship. Where these criteria are clearly defined and established, the age of First Communion will no longer be the issue.

On that note, I suppose that I do need to say something about Infant Communion, since it has been a topic of interest and of some controversy in our circles. Given my references to Holy Baptism and infant faith, and the relatively young age of my First Communicants at Emmaus, you might conclude that I am advocating Infant Communion or inching toward that practice. However, that is not the case. I am actually not in favor of the practice.

I do not believe that a newly baptized infant would be an unworthy communicant, but neither do I believe that he or she should be communed at that point. First of all, because it would break with our tradition and our fellowship. Lutherans have begun communing children across a diversity of ages, but, historically, not infants, who are unable to speak. Although it is somewhat inconsistent to accept the confession of infants by proxy in the rite of Holy Baptism, but to deny the confession of infants otherwise, the fact remains that we have baptized infants, and that we have not communed them. Even my youngest communicants at Emmaus are able, in their own simple way, to confess their faith in Christ and His Sacrament. So that is a decisive point for me.

Second, I am persuaded that a child should be weaned, at least, before being given the solid Food of the Holy Communion. I know the ancient and Eastern churches have found ways of providing the Sacrament to nursing babies. Yet, there is a natural transition from mother's milk to solids, and it seems to me that should be respected.

Finally, because I am convinced that the administration of the Sacrament includes and requires an active exercise of Pastoral Care, I need to be able to engage the catechumen in conversation, even if only at a very basic level, before admitting him or her to the Holy Communion. With some of my youngest communicants, depending on their personality, my communication may be very simple, and their responses limited and quiet. However, there is a threshold that has been crossed, typically between three and four years of age, after which I am able to connect and engage with

the child in a way that I could not before that point. That is one of the key things I am looking for, and another decisive factor for me, in assessing a candidate for the Holy Communion.

Conclusion: Earlier First Communion, Ongoing Catechesis, and Delayed “Confirmation”

What, then, do I advocate? Not a new age of First Communion, but a focus on the criteria of Catechesis, Confession, and Pastoral Care. I want to see the Christian disciples of Jesus communed as early as feasible, but also faithfully “in accordance with the Gospel.” That means ongoing Catechesis in all that Jesus has commanded, unto daily repentance and faith in His forgiveness of sins. Such Catechesis will be liturgical, rooted in Holy Baptism and always leading to and from the Sacrament of the Altar. It will include a lively practice of Confession and Absolution for both young and old.

As far as “Confirmation” is concerned, if we are going to keep and use the rite as we have received it, I would just as soon reserve it until 18 or 21 years of age, or until the young adult is leaving home for higher education, military service, or to get married. I certainly prefer to wait as long as possible before asking a child to make the vows and promises included in the rite of “Confirmation.” But I do not want the reception of the Holy Communion to be contingent upon the maturity expected and implicit in such vows. Rather, let us revel and rejoice in the Gifts Christ freely gives, which enable us and our children to grow up into Him who is the mature Man, who became the little Child for us, that we might become the children of God in Him.