Liturgical Life in Leipzig

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Editor’s note: This reading is from Christian Liturgy by Frank C. Senn. It is part of a chapter entitled “Liturgy in the Age of Uncertainty.” In this section the author summarizes the rich liturgical life of the churches in Leipzig in the time that J. S. Bach was cantor at the St. Thomas Church. In the background is the altar of the St. Nicholas Church (Nicolaikirche) – one of two where Bach was responsible for the music. Performances of passion music in Leipzig alternated between this church and the Thomaskirche.

Liturgy as defined by Frank Senn is, "the public work performed by a particular community under the leadership of its liturgists to enact its view of reality and commitments." (p. xiv)

The most orthodox of Lutheran territories was Saxony. Orthodoxy flourished there well into the eighteenth century at a time when it had been abandoned elsewhere in favor of a full-fledged Pietism or an incipient Rationalism. Yet the picture of church life in Leipzig, in the heart of orthodox Saxony, belies the accusation of “lifeless” that is often attached as a modifier of “orthodoxy,” in light of Günther Stiller’s thorough examination of the liturgical life in that city at the time of J. S. Bach. One of Stillier’s main sources is the handwritten notebook kept by Johann Christoph Rost, who served as sexton of Saint Thomas Church from 1716-1739, during part of the time in which Bach served as cantor (1723-1750). The sexton’s notes scrupulously detail the types of services held on Sundays, weekdays, festivals, and days of devotion, and the provisions needed for those services. Successive sextons added to Rost's notes, so that we have a detailed picture of liturgical life in that city up to 1820, and may contrast the vigor of liturgical life in the period of orthodoxy with its rapid decline at the end of the eighteenth century under a Rationalist pastor.

What we see in Leipzig was a full round of liturgical services coordinated among the churches of the city. On Sundays, Matins was sung by the choristers in Latin, followed by the Service of Holy Communion at 7:00 or 8:00 a.m. If the number of

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3 Ibid., 35ff. An earlier attempt to investigate liturgical life in Leipzig was by Charles Sanford Terry, Johann Sebastian Bach: Cantata Texts Sacred and Secular, with a Reconstruction of the Leipzig Liturgy of his Period (London, 1926).
communicants was great, this Service could last three to four hours. This was followed by a Noon Service, which was apparently a preaching service. In mid-afternoon Vespers was sung in Latin by the choristers. There were prayer services with preaching on the catechism every day of the week at the various churches, with a communion service on Wednesday mornings at Saint Nicholas Church and on Thursday mornings at Saint Thomas Church to accommodate the people who were not able to receive the sacrament on Sundays. There was also a penitential service with sermon on Friday mornings at Saint Nicholas.⁴

The number of weekday services was considerably higher during weeks when the festivals or days of devotion of the church year were observed. These days included the three chief festivals of Christmas, Easter, and Pentecost with two or three special days following each one, as well as the days of Holy Week. They also included the following greater or lesser festivals that were observed either with the Communion Service, Vespers, or both: Saint Stephen the Proto-martyr (December 26), Saint John the Apostle (December 27), Holy Innocents (December 28), the Circumcision of Jesus on New Year's Day (January 1), the Epiphany (January 6), the Purification of Mary and Presentation of Jesus (February 2), the Annunciation (March 25), the Ascension, Holy Trinity, the Nativity of Saint John the Baptist (June 24), the Visitation of Mary (July 2), and Michaelmas (September 29). Vespers was sung on the eve of each of these festivals, in Latin and without a sermon, and Holy Communion was celebrated on the day of the festival, with a sermon but without catechetical instruction. We also note that the proper eucharistic preface was always sung on these days, as Bugenhagen⁵ had provided in his church orders.⁶

The orders of worship observed in Leipzig differed little from the Reformation church orders. The offices of Matins and Vespers included three psalms with antiphons, scripture reading with responsory, appropriate gospel canticle, and collects. The other prayer services during the week were more free-form, including hymns, scripture reading, sermon, and various prayer forms (e.g., litanies, collects, hymns, and prayers based on the catechism). The chief Service of Holy Communion, in typical Lutheran fashion, admitted of considerable variation of style in its individual parts:⁷

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⁴ Ibid., 48ff.
⁵ [Editor’s note] Johannes Bugenhagen was Martin Luther’s pastor and confessor in Wittenburg and assisted Luther in translating the Bible. Early in the Reformation Bugenhagen organized the Lutheran churches in northern Germany and Scandinavia.
⁷ Ibid., 108ff.
Gloria sung by minister and choir (to plainsong or polyphonic setting) or the hymn “Allein Gott in der Höh” by congregation
Salutation and Collect
Epistle
The Hymn of the Day (*Hauptlied*)
Gospel
Cantata sung by choir, usually based on the Gospel and the Hymn of the Day
(note: Bach always provided a text for the congregation to follow)
Nicene Creed and/or Creedal hymn, “Wir glauben all’ an einen Gott”
Sermon
Conclusion of *Hauptlied* or Cantata

There were two different forms of the liturgy of the sacrament:
On Sundays and Festivals:

General Prayer
Sung Preface (with proper) and Sanctus (polyphonic setting)
Lord's Prayer (sung by the minister)
Words of Institution (sung by the minister)

On weekdays:

Lord's Prayer
Words of Institution
(During Lent: Exhortation to the communicants preceded the Preface)
Ministration of Holy Communion during which hymns are sung
Post-Communion Collect
Benediction
Closing Hymn

Ministers customarily wore a white ankle-length surplice over a black cassock. The celebrant at Holy Communion wore a chasuble in the color of the day or season throughout the service, although the liturgical color scheme is not one we would recognize (e.g., green on Palm Sunday and Maundy Thursday). As we might assume during the cantorship of J. S. Bach, the church music was exceptionally rich. The services were well attended and the number of communicants was high, especially when contrasted with later Rationalism. During the period of Bach's cantorship (1723—1750) the yearly number of communions at Saint Nicholas and Saint Thomas Churches ranged from 14,000 to 18,000 each. These figures remained constant throughout the eighteenth century until the Rationalist Johann Georg Rosenmüller was installed as pastor in 1786, at which point they dipped to 10,000. By the end of Rosenmüller’s tenure in 1815, yearly communions were down to 3,000—and this in spite of the fact that reception of communion was removed from private confession and the communion office was being detached from the service itself. In a few instances Holy Communion was even administered in the sacristy for the few.

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8 Ibid., 65.
communicants who registered to receive the sacrament.⁹ This data belies any thought of a “lifeless” or “sterile” worship life during the age of orthodoxy in contrast with the more “relevant” worship of the age of rationalism.

⁹ Ibid., 131-7, 164-5, 260-3.