

Response to Pastor Lehrke

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[Pr. Lehrke's presentation](#) challenges us on several levels: 1) how we view and practice a pre-Service confessional office – and has this rite precluded the unconditional speaking of the Gospel *sacramentally*; 2) in light of current practice, how are we to restore the true office of the keys; and 3) what are we to do, given the general acceptance of a pre-Service rite, over against its impact on the Sunday Mass in our evangelical-catholic tradition. I found myself resonating at every key point in this presentation. I have been wrestling for my 33+ years in the ministry with the appropriateness of a pre-Service Confession & Forgiveness (hereafter labeled C&F) office – something I knew was not part of Luther's *Formula Missae* or his *Deutsche Messe*. In spite of this, we are dealing with an ingrained practice, having C&F as part of the Sunday Mass in most places. It's part of our liturgical fabric. And whether we agree or disagree with Pr. Lehrke's thesis regarding C&F, as over against the confessional practice of the "office of the keys" practiced in Private Confession, I believe that we are being challenged in all aspects of this to search for what is indeed proper parish practice, that which Chapters V and VII in [The Rule](#) encourage us to do:

Offer regular opportunities for individual and personal Confession and Absolution to the faithful with instruction in this use of the means of grace. (*Chapter VII, article 4*)

The challenge for true Lutheran practice will always be: is the generalized confession a norm we wish to keep? Are we willing to open up an office whose doors have been closed for too many years – that is, the office of the keys? And how do we do this, biblically and confessionally?

Scratching away at our theological veneer, we must admit that C&F is not *the* sacrament of the keys. Does C&F misrepresent what we, as Pastors of the Church, have been clearly called to do when we took our ordination vows: forgive or retain sin? A pre-Service order for Confession with a loosely worded, at best conditional, Declaration of Forgiveness is, as Robert Jenson claims in his book, *Visible Words*, nothing more than "pseudo-absolution." And repeated forms of confession prior to the Sunday (or any other day) Mass, fits no one at all. There is no real confrontation with what ails us. And while we ponder this, it is important for us to consider where the visibility of the Gospel is, if indeed we are to affirm Sacramental status for the Office of the Keys. If the sacramental reality of Absolution is determined only by the mouth of the one who speaks it, the question is begged: So what is wrong with keeping things as they are – especially if the use of the word, "Absolution," appears in our Sunday bulletins? If, on the other hand, the "visibility of the Gospel," in the strict Augustinian sense, is where the Word attaches itself to an element or a gesture, such as in the form of the laying on of hands, accompanied by those words which solidly absolve the individual penitent, then Pr. Lehrke's challenge is, why should we keep C&F at the beginning of our Sunday or weekday Masses at all? What do we mean when we use the terminology of our hymnals over against what we "believe, teach and confess" about the sacramental significance of holy Absolution?

Having said this, I number myself among transgressors. I admit that my own level of theological comfort has been overtaken – perhaps even compromised - by what I normally do: that – on most

normal Sundays – there is a Confessional Rite prior to the beginning of the day's Liturgy.

Even so, as I have read and re-read Pr. Lehrke's fine presentation, and as I have culled all my books of Lutheran sacramental theology, I believe it worthwhile to rethink the logic of keeping a pre-Service confession rite. Pr. Lehrke has rightly pointed out, though, that the use of C&F – and *Confession and Absolution* in *LSB* – has become so commonplace among us that restoring the true administration of Confession and Absolution will be a very rough road for most of us to travel. None of us would disagree that Pr. Lehrke is "spot on" regarding what the true Office of the Keys is meant to do. This is not something we can claim from a general confession. So, we are left to ponder what we can do to regain the true Office of the Keys as found in Private Confession and Holy Absolution.

But what about confession as preparation: the proverbial "washing up before coming to the Table?" Let me pick up on a couple of hints from Pr. Lehrke's paper: First, the possibility of reframing a confession prayer following the proclamation of the Gospel. Perhaps the use of the Prayer of Humble Access (Prayer 208, pg. 48, *LBW*) might be one possibility as a prelude to the exchange of Peace. Admittedly, the Prayer of Humble Access is most certainly a "general prayer." Yet the genius of this prayer is such that it allows us to affirm our unworthiness and God's great mercy in the sacrament of his Son's Body and Blood. Secondly, Pr. Lehrke hinted at the possibility of placing the Peace following the Our Father; and while it is true that the Our Father picks up all of our *Kyries* and brings us before the throne of grace, prepared to meet our Lord in his Body and Blood, the Prayer of Humble Access — prayed either prior to the Eucharistic Canon [as it appears in the early versions and specifically in the 1928 version of *BCP*] or just before the Peace after the Our Father — might be another option.

Having such a general Confession placed midway in the Service is not novel. A good number of post Reformation Lutheran Church Orders – especially at Leipzig (see Praetorius' *Mass for Christmas Morning*) – incorporated a Confession as a "bridge" between Word and Sacrament. Berthold von Schenk, in his "Chorale or Hymn Mass for the Congregation," proposed having a confession of sins as part of the Offering rite – which also included the Confession of faith. The *Book of Common Prayer* in its original, pristine version follows the pattern of the confession, then the "comfortable words," almost seamlessly. *LBW* freed us from having a pre-Service Confession, though there was no suggestion where it might take place. If Pr. Lehrke is right, and if we wish to rid our Mass of an unsuitable pre-Service confession and declaration of grace, one place to start might be here. Jenson, again in *Visible Words*, has advocated the use of the Prayer of Humble Access as a stop-gap measure, done as part of the Offertory without a generalized pseudo-absolution.

We might also serve the restoration of Private Confession well by having more opportunities to gather the community for Corporate Confession and Forgiveness. But instead of doing a generalized confessional prayer, the confession should address specific, community transgressions, followed perhaps by a time where individual penitents can approach the altar, confess what is ailing them, and receive the laying on of hands and hearing the words of absolution. The *Thomas Mass* in the Church of Finland – even though it uses a Confessional Rite at the beginning –utilizes this format. Preaching at such gatherings could truly be occasions for catechesis – specifically on the 10 Commandments, or admonitions to the treasures of all the Sacraments, including most specifically Individual Confession and Absolution. Once people get used to the notion that true confession and

forgiveness is more than a generalized procedure, we just might find ourselves opening the treasury doors of Gospel-speaking sacramental forgiveness.

Third, it may well be time for those of us who haven't done so to begin scheduling when people can come for Private Confession. If our congregants know from us how important this is – and here I am speaking to all of us – perhaps the Office of the Keys could be restored and practiced among us, underscored. If we don't take it seriously, how can we expect our congregants to do so?

The Rule, again Chapter VII, this time articles 7 and 8, gives us clear purpose in carrying out Parish Practice: "... provide sound catechesis... provide regular instruction in Scripture, doctrine, prayer, liturgy, and morals ..." After reading this paper and pondering the challenges, I am convinced that it's high time for all of us to reconsider what we are doing and continue to do; and what, at times, is very hard work as we carry out our calls to minister to the Word of God with our preaching, and our sound administration of the holy Sacraments – which, of course, includes the Office of the Keys in the form of private confession and forgiveness. In addition, I believe it would be profitable for our discussion to consider where we stand in relation to the pre-Service general confession. We need to think about Pr. Lehrke's premise, that a pre-Service general confession can do such damage to the Mass as to make it – as he quotes in his thesis – virtually irrelevant. That's powerful stuff! Even so, this is brave work that we are doing – especially as we seek to restore the unique Lutheran teaching regarding the office of the keys. If indeed the forgiveness of sins is the last judgment let out ahead of time, then we must take seriously how any pre-Service confession rite impacts the celebration and meaning of the holy Eucharist.

I am grateful to Pr. Lehrke for this labor of love he has presented, and the valuable insights and challenges he has presented to us.

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