

Significant Symbolism in The Lutheran Rite of Holy Confirmation

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Introduction

By the pious people of The Old Testament much importance was attached to The Passover Festival, which was celebrated annually in commemoration of the exodus of The Children Of Israel from The Land Of Egypt.

They had settled there upon the invitation of a certain Pharaoh who held them in high esteem because of their kinsman Joseph, since he had saved the land from famine. And for a time they prospered much and increased mightily, until they became a great nation.

But gradually The Egyptians turned against The Israelites. They feared their size and strength might tempt them to seize the country and government. And so they began to oppress them with increasing severity, until The Israelites were nothing more than slaves.

God, however, eventually raised up a leader for them in the person of Moses. Under his guidance The Children of Israel were able to free themselves from the tyranny of The Egyptians, and leave the country for the promised land of Palestine.

In fact, when the time came for The Israelites to leave, they left in such unexpected haste that they had no time to prepare bread for their journey in the proper way; they had no time to prepare bread with yeast in it, for the yeast required time to raise. So they made bread without yeast. And with this unleavened bread they fled from The Land Of Egypt.

Every year after that The Children Of Israel commemorated this departure with a solemn celebration.

And, among other things, they featured during this celebration the eating of unleavened bread. Year after year, during The Passover Festival, there was always this eating of unleavened bread—from the time of Moses to the days of Christ, yes, down to this very present.

And if anyone were to ask: “Why this eating of unleavened bread?”, the answer is found in the words (Ex 13:9): “It shall be for a sign unto thee.” That unleavened bread was a sign, or a symbol: it was an annual reminder to all who ate it of the haste with which The Israelites left Egypt when they were at last set free.

Now, as The Passover Festival was important to The Old Testament Christian, so Confirmation Day is important to The New Testament Christian, also to the devout Lutheran Christian.

And just as The Passover Festival was connected with certain signs and symbols, so it is also with The Confirmation Service in The Lutheran Church. There are certain things in it of which it can be said: “It shall be for a sign unto thee.”

I. THE SOLEMN PROCESSION

There is, first of all, The Procession. The ordinary confirmand may not realize it, but his walking down the aisle at the beginning of The Service is a symbol. That is not an ordinary walking into an ordinary building. And the properly trained confirmand indicates this step by the way he walks: with measured step, and folded hands, and serious face, and solemn heart. All this shows that The Confirmation Procession is something distinctive. It is an entrance into God’s house, an approach to God’s altar, a coming into God’s infinitely holy presence.

And being that, it is proper to say that The confirmation Procession is a definite sign that the confirmands are aware of GOD’S PRESENCE, and thereby publicly acknowledge before all the world that HE EXISTS.

It is meet and right that such a symbol should be found at the very beginning of The Confirmation Service, for the acknowledgment of God’s existence, the confession that God is, is something fundamental.

It is fundamental for a rational life. The Bible means exactly what it says when it declares (Ps 14:1): “The fool hath said in his heart: There is no God.” Any person who claims to be blessed with common sense and intelligence must admit there is a God. The universe all around him, the order and design which permeate it, the laws which govern it, man’s very existence in it: all these things make a denial of God’s existence something moronic and imbecilic, and unworthy of any creature above the beast of the field.

And just as the acknowledgment of God’s existence is fundamental for a rational life, so it is also fundamental for a rational life. There can be no religion without a belief in God; He is at the bottom of all religion. Wherefrom it follows: if a person has no interest in religion, he has no interest in God; and if he has no interest in God, he has no interest in religion.

But a mere belief in GOD is by no means the foundation of The CHRISTIAN religion. There can be only one God. And He is a very definite kind of God. Any other

kind of god that people may believe in is no God at all, however much he may be called God. The on true God is The Triune God, one God in three Persons: Father, Son, and Holy Ghost. The acknowledgment of Him makes a person a Christian.

And therefore The Confirmation Procession into a CHRISTIAN house of worship before a CHRISTIAN congregation up to a CHRISTIAN altar indicates the basic reason why those who take part in it are accepted into The Christian Church, symbolizing as it does their acceptance of The CHRISTIAN God. For, as The Athanasian Creed declares,

“whosoever will be saved, before all things it is necessary that he hold The Catholic Faith; which Faith except everyone do keep whole and undefiled, without doubt he shall perish everlastingly. And The Catholic Faith is this, that we worship one God in Trinity and Trinity in Unity, neither confounding The Persons nor dividing The Substance. For there is one Person of The Father, another of The Son, and another of The Holy Ghost; but the Godhead of The Father, of The Son, and of The Holy Ghost is all one: the glory equal, the majesty coeternal. Such as The Father is, such is The Son, and such is The Holy Ghost. The Father uncreate, The Son uncreate, and The Holy Ghost uncreate; The Father incomprehensible, The Son incomprehensible, and The Holy Ghost incomprehensible’ The Father eternal, The Son eternal, and The Holy Ghost eternal—and yet there are not three Eternals, but one Eternal, as there are not there Uncreated, nor three Incomprehensibles, but one Uncreated, and one Incomprehensible. So, likewise, The Father is almighty, The Son almighty, and the Holy Ghost almighty; and yet they are not three Almightyies, but one Almighty. So The Father is God, The Son is God, and The Holy Ghost is God; and yet they are not three Gods, but one God. So likewise, The Father is Lord, The Son Lord, and The Holy Ghost Lord; and yet not three Lords, but one Lord. For like as we are compelled by The Christian Verity to acknowledge every Person by Himself to be God and Lord, so are we forbidden by The Catholic Religion to say: there be three Gods or three Lords. The Father is made of none: neither created nor begotten; The Son is of The Father alone: not made nor created, but begotten; The Holy Ghost is of The Father and of The Son: neither made nor created nor begotten, but proceeding. So there is one Father, not three Fathers; one Son, not three Sons; one Holy Ghost, not three Holy Ghosts. And in this Trinity none is before or after other; none is greater or less than another; but the whole three Persons are coeternal together and coequal, so that in all things as is aforesaid, The Unity in Trinity and The Trinity in Unity is to be worshipped. He, therefore, that will be saved must thus think of The Trinity.”

II. THE FLOWERS NEAR THE HEART

There is also an important symbolism connected with the flowers which confirmands usually wear near the heart.

The Bible speaks of Jesus Christ as a flower. For example, in one passage (S of S 2:1) Christ says of Himself: "I am The Rose Of Sharon and The Lily Of The Valleys." Those flowers, then, represent CHRIST. And the fact that they lie close to the confirmands' hearts is indicative of the truth that He dwells, invisibly but actually, in their hearts by FAITH.

If there is one thing impressed upon Lutheran confirmands during their instruction in the fundamentals of The Christian Religion, it is the necessity of believing in Jesus Christ. And not in ANY kind of Jesus, but in THAT kind of Jesus revealed on the pages of The Sacred Scriptures: a Jesus who is at once both Man and God—"God with us" (Mt 1:23)—God manifest in the flesh (see I Tim 3:16)—God who "took upon Him the form of a servant, and was made in the likeness of men" (Phil 2:7)—God "who for us men and for our salvation came down from heaven, and was incarnate by The Holy Ghost of The Virgin Mary, and was made Man" (The Nicene Creed).

As surely as The Christian Religion is BASED upon acceptance of The Triune God, just that surely does it REVOLVE around faith in The Godman Jesus Christ. This is made unequivocally clear by The Church in the words of the Athanasian Creed:

"Furthermore, it is necessary to everlasting salvation that he also believe faithfully the incarnation of Our Lord Jesus Christ. For the right faith is that we believe and confess that Our Lord Jesus Christ, The Son Of God, is God and Man: God of The Substance of The Father, begotten before the worlds, and Man of the substance of His Mother, born in the world; perfect God and perfect Man, of a reasonable soul and human flesh subsisting; equal to The Father as touching His Godhead, and inferior to The Father as touching His manhood; who, although He be God and Man, yet He is not two, but one Christ: one, not by conversion of The Godhead into flesh, but by taking the manhood into God; one altogether, not by confusion of Substance, but by unity of Person; for as the reasonable soul and flesh is one man, so God and Man is one Christ."

III. THE WHITE ROBE

Also the white robes worn by many Lutheran confirmands are a symbol.

They are a symbol of The Christian's HOLINESS AND SINLESSNESS in the sight of his Creator.

Every Lutheran confirmand knows that such sinlessness is not a matter of his own doing. He knows, from personal experience as well as from Scripture, that every imagination of the thoughts of his heart is only evil continually (see Gen 6:5). He knows that in him, that is, in his flesh, dwelleth no good thing (see Rom 7:18). And he knows likewise that of himself he is powerless to make his black and slack record white and right with God.

But by God's grace he has also learned about the cross of Christ. He has learned why that cross had to be. He has learned that on it Christ became sin for us, who knew no sin, that we might be made the righteousness of God in Him (see II Cor 5:21). He has learned that Christ bare our sins in His own body on the tree (see I Pet 2:24); that He was wounded for our transgressions, that that He was bruised for our iniquities, that the chastisement which produced our peace was upon Him, and that with His stripes we are healed (see Is 53:5). He believes, as (pray God!) he may always believe, that the blood of Jesus Christ, God's Son, cleanseth us from all sin (see I Jn 1:7). And believing that, he can look at his white robe and, conscious of its spiritual significance, he can pray confidently:

“Jesus, Thy blood and righteousness
My beauty are, MY GLORIOUS DRESS,
Wherein before my God I'll stand
When I shall reach the heavenly land.”

For Jesus, “who suffered for our salvation; descended into Hell; rose again the third day from the dead’ He ascended into heaven’ He sitteth on the right hand of The Father, God Almighty’ from whence He shall come to judge the quick and the dead” (The Athanasian Creed), has REDEEMED us—may a Lutheran confirmand never let anything on earth or in hell ever rob him of this conviction!—has REDEEMED us, lost and condemned creatures, purchased and won us from all sin, from death, and from the power of The Devil; not with gold or silver, but with His holy, precious blood, and with His innocent suffering and death.

IV. THE BENDED KNEE

Why? Why did Jesus do all this?

No one ever expressed it more clearly and beautifully than Blessed Martin Luther, when he wrote in his Small Catechism: “In order that I may be HIS OWN, and LIVE UNDER HIM in His Kingdom, and SERVE Him in everlasting righteousness, innocence, and blessedness.” He did it in order that He might be man's Lord and Master, and that man might be His slave and servant. He DIED FOR man that man might LIVE TO Him.

And that is symbolized in the Confirmation Service also. There comes a time in it when the confirmand kneels in the presence of God, as that presence is represented by God's altar. Now, a person does not kneel before everyone. Kneeling is a sign of submission, a sign of inferiority. Kneeling is an acknowledgment of someone greater than the person kneeling, whose word he desires to hear, and whose commands he feels constrained to follow. And when the confirmand kneels in the presence of god, he is thereby saying before all the world that god is above him and that he is beneath God, and that His precepts are for him the principles by which he wishes to regulate his life.

It is indispensable that the confirmand feel thus. For faith in Jesus Christ is more than mere knowledge of the head. It is a confidence which continually manifests itself in the actions of the body: the concepts thought, and the words spoken, and the deeds done. He who lives in disregard of the laws of God may know much about Christ, but he is still

far removed from His Kingdom. Only he who loves Him, and out of love to Him seeks to keep His commandments, possesses that kind of faith that avails before God.

“At whose coming all men shall rise again with their bodies, and shall give an account of their own works. And they that have done good shall go into life everlasting; and they that have done evil, into everlasting fire. This is The Catholic Faith; which except a man believe faithfully and firmly, he cannot be saved” (The Athanasian Creed).

V. THE PUBLIC HANDCLASP

Such loyalty to Christ, both in what a person believes and in the way he lives, must be a CONSTANT loyalty, even until death and unto death. Granted that the individual is a Christian at the time of his Confirmation; that is good. But it is not good enough; he must REMAIN a Christian until the end. Only “he that ENDURETH to the end shall be saved” (Mt 10:22).

That is what the handclasp symbolizes, which the confirmand gives in the presence of the assembled congregation. It is a pledge of his promise that he renounces the Devil, and all his works, and all his way; that he will cling to the doctrines of The Bible, that he will remain true to The Confessions of The Lutheran Church, and that he will live as it becometh The Gospel Of Christ all the days of his life.

Let no confirmand make that promise lightly! God will require it of him someday when he stands before His judgment seat! “When thou vowest a vow unto god, defer not to pay it” (Ecc 5:4).

And let him know also that he will sooner or later BREAK that promise unless he nourishes his faith frequently and regularly by means of The Gospel as it is found in sermon and sacrament. Unless he comes systematically and often to church, where sermons are proclaimed and sacraments administered, he is NOT going to endure unto the end. He is going to become a spiritual castaway, and die without God, and without hope, and without heaven!

VI. THE LAYING ON OF THE HAND

To the end that such an unspeakable tragedy may be averted, God’s minister now lays his hand upon each confirmand’s head, and solemnly speaks the words (or others of similar import): “God The Father in heaven, for Jesus’ sake, renew and increase in thee the gift of The Holy Ghost, to thy confirmation in The Faith, to thy growth in grace, to thy patience in suffering, and to the blessed hope of everlasting life.” Thereafter he proclaims The Memorial, a short passage from The Scriptures selected by him with conscientious care for each confirmand, which is designed to guide the individual Christian through all the vicissitudes of the future. It not infrequently serves as the funeral text at his eventual decease.

Thus the confirmand is graced with both a general and a special BLESSING, pronounced by his pastor in the name of The Church.

And in the light of that blessing, he sees the manner in which his church and his pastor are related to him in the eyes of God.

His church is his spiritual mother. Through The Sacrament of Holy Baptism she gave birth to him into The Blessed Communion Of Saints. She nourished him through the days of his spiritual infancy, that he might finally come to his confirmation, from which time on he is considered as having reached the age of spiritual majority. And she assures him that she will continue to feed him, whenever he is hungry and thirsty, with the bread of life and the water of salvation; that she will continue to comfort him, whenever other helpers fail and comforts flee; that she will continue to counsel him, lest he dash his foot against the stones of sin and unbelief; and that finally, in his last agony, she will draw him to her breast, there with the handkerchief of The Gospel to wipe away all tears from his eyes, and call upon God's holy angels for him to transport his soul into Abraham's bosom.

And just as The Church is every confirmand's spiritual mother, so he should regard his pastor as his spiritual father. The Holy Apostle Saint Paul encouraged just such an attitude when he said to those whom he had served as a Christian minister (I Cor 4: 15): "I have begotten you through The Gospel." The called and ordained head of each congregation is many things: a preacher, proclaiming the good news of The Gospel Of God; a teacher, instructing those with whom he comes in contact in all things that Christ commanded; a minister, serving the weak and the needy; a priest, interceding for his people, and offering up to Heaven in their name The Holy Eucharist as a sacrifice of praise and thanksgiving. But let each confirmand think of him especially as a father: a person who dearly loves his parishioners for Christ's sake, who stands ready to help them at every opportunity, and whose consecrated passion it is to make them heirs of everlasting life.

VII. THE BLOW ON THE CHEEK

Even if he does expose himself to the Gospel in sermon and sacrament on every occasion, and conscientiously follows the guidance of Holy Mother Church and of the pastor, his reverend father in Christ, even then it is not going to be easy for the confirmand to keep his Confirmation Vow.

And that fact is dramatically portrayed in The Confirmation Service also. Just before he rises from his knees after his Confirmation, the confirmand receives from his pastor a light blow on the cheek.

That is The Church's way of telling him that he is going to be HURT as he journeys through life—in spite of his church membership; yes, sometimes because of it. That is The Church's way of telling him that all Christians "must through much tribulation enter into The Kingdom Of God" (Acts 14:22), that they must take up their cross if they

would follow Jesus (see Mt 10:38; 16:24; Mk 8:34; Lk 9:32; 14:27), that they must SUFFER with Christ before they can hope to reign with Him (see II Tim 2:12), that the rule has always been and always will be: first the cross, and then the crown. That blow from a representative of Christ's Church is a symbol of the Christian way of life: one blow after the other, until death mercifully puts an end to the conflict.

Christianity is not a guarantee against the woes and blows of life. It is a cross to be carried until God declares it carried long enough.

VII. THE REVERENT RECESSION

And finally, The Recession: the confirmands walking out of church again when The Confirmation Services comes to an end.

Is that not a symbol of their WALKING OUT INTO THE WORLD once more, now that they have been formally accepted into The Communion Of Saints, to take up their daily tasks, living their lives to the glory of God and the service of their fellowmen? Yes, it is that.

But it is more. The recession is also a symbol of their JOURNEY TOWARDS HEAVEN,

“With the cross of Jesus
Going on before,”

a symbol of their march towards Paradise, their everlasting home!

CONCLUSION

“It shall be for a sign unto thee”—all these things in The Lutheran Confirmation Service: the procession a symbol of belief in The Triune God; the flowers next to the heart a symbol of faith in The Godman Jesus Christ; the white robe a symbol of righteousness through The Blessed Cross; the bended knee a symbol of consecration to God's commandments; the handclasp a symbol of loyalty to The Church until death; the imposition of the hand a symbol of The Church's blessing; the blow on the cheek a symbol of difficulties to be encountered; and the recession a symbol of entrance into eternal life.

All these things have been wisely included in The Lutheran Confirmation Service in a laudable effort to constrain those who by God's undeserved and unrepayable mercy have had the high and holy privilege of being confirmed in The Lutheran Church to voice this earnest prayer (written by the author of this pamphlet, and dedicated to the members of The 1953 Confirmation Class in his parish, which may be sung to “Finlandia”, tune 651 in The Lutheran Hymnal):

Me faithful keep! Lord, this my supplication
I tender Thee this Confirmation Day,
Lest hapless I my priceless soul's salvation

For everlasting ages cast away!
Me faithful keep, that I escape damnation:
Bold this petition to Thy charge I lay!

Me faithful keep to Holy Writ, revealing
Thy Law divine, Thy precious Gospel true!
What but Thy Word affords me happy healing
When sin and Satan mighty me pursue!
Me faithful keep in thinking, speaking, dealing,
My ev'ry day, my whole life's journey through!

Me faithful keep to Jesus Christ, my Master!
To Him I live, since for my sins He died!
His bless-ed cross me rescued from disaster;
In His good grace I would fore'er abide!
Me faithful keep; my love for Him grow vaster
Than high the heavens or the oceans wide!

Me faithful keep, my portion pain or pleasure,
To Thy dear Church, by crimson blood made white!
Grant me the grace one day to share the treasure
E'en now enriching all the saints in light!
Me faithful keep, that I at least some measure
Possess of heaven's gleaming glory bright!

Me faithful keep! What other plea, ascending
Up to Thy throne of majesty on high,
More urgent for life's happy, bless-ed ending
That this, wherewith I for compassion cry!
Me faithful keep! Thou this my prayer attending,
I brave can live, and peaceful I will die!