

11-1-1992

Lex orandi, a new lex credendi: 'The burial of the dead,' 1978, from an historical perspective

Eric E. Dyck

Follow this and additional works at: <http://scholars.wlu.ca/consensus>

Recommended Citation

Dyck, Eric E. (1992) "Lex orandi, a new lex credendi: 'The burial of the dead,' 1978, from an historical perspective," *Consensus*: Vol. 18 : Iss. 2 , Article 5.

Available at: <http://scholars.wlu.ca/consensus/vol18/iss2/5>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by Scholars Commons @ Laurier. It has been accepted for inclusion in Consensus by an authorized editor of Scholars Commons @ Laurier. For more information, please contact scholarscommons@wlu.ca.

Lex Orandi; A New Lex Credendi: "The Burial of the Dead," 1978 from an Historical Perspective

Eric E. Dyck

*Pastor, St. John's Lutheran Church,
Montreal, Quebec*

I. A Converted *Lex Orandi*: Repercussions

The revised rite (1978), "Burial of the Dead",¹ marks a significant change in structure from previous Lutheran funeral rites. The *lex orandi* is the first North American Lutheran rite to take clear notice of the deceased and to depart from the previous structuring of the burial rite as an office based on the "Office for the Dead". Its immediate predecessor² clearly maintained such a form: Invocation, Psalms (with antiphons), Lessons, Responsory, optional Sermon and Hymn, *Nunc Dimittis* or *Benedictus*, Prayers, and Benediction. Significantly, it excluded mention of the deceased, particularly by name, at any point in the service. Similar to the Roman rite, the current rite places the burial into the context of the Eucharist. The *lex orandi* has been converted from an office to a eucharistic structure; from prayers to encourage the faith of the living to inclusion of the deceased as a symbol of the paschal experience.

Such a shift in the *lex orandi* will have a consequent effect on the *lex credendi*. The inclusion of the deceased serves as an indicator for evaluating the resetting of the burial rite into a paschal context. As a eucharist, rather than an office, the rite proclaims the triumph over the grave and the Easter victory. (Penitence, loss, and grief are elemental to the prior rites of "Commendation of the Dying" and "Comforting the Bereaved" which are meant to be taken together with the "Burial of the Dead" as a unified service.) The eucharistic meal celebrates dying and rising as the *beneficium* bequeathed by Christ's own death and resurrection (the *testamentum* gifted to us by God).

The deceased symbolise the sacrifice of the eucharist: the offering of one's self to God. Structuring the burial rite within the eucharistic framework acknowledges that at baptism the baptised were joined to the death and resurrection of Christ. God's promise of eternal life, made real by the testament of Christ in the Lord's Supper, finds expression in the community which gathers as the body of Christ and who celebrate now the future promise. The eucharistic meal unites the baptised, who live and benefit as heirs to Christ's testament, and those whose faith has realised the promise of eternal life: they have passed over, as in baptism, from death to life.³ The eucharistic meal unites the church militant and the church triumphant; it makes new Christ's passion, death, and resurrection.

The unity of the communion of saints, which death can no longer separate because they are one body in Christ and united in their baptism, receives particular emphasis in the 1978 rite.⁴ The dead are not forgotten since they are a part of the community united in baptism and gathered at the one table. Prayer for the faithful departed becomes an expression of solidarity with the communion of saints, living and dead, and the unity of the church. As Philip Pfatteicher aptly summarises: "The 'Burial of the Dead' is a baptismal and an Easter liturgy setting forth the paschal passage from death to life."⁵

Several strands of Lutheran teaching and tradition have been gathered together in order to reset the *lex orandi* of the rite. In so doing, a revitalized *lex credendi* expresses itself. The Prayers for the Dead and the recognition of the deceased within the *lex orandi* of the rite provide a hallmark for the structural and theological shifts characterising the 1978 rite. Reestablishing the presence of the deceased and including the commendation, by name, of the deceased as aspects of the rite reflects a practice of the Lutheran reformers which was quickly overshadowed by fears that such a practice would readmit abuses (i.e., the proliferation of masses for the dead in connection with the Doctrine of Purgatory).⁶ The context for these abuses regarded the deceased as a passive victim of death, the enemy. Consequently, the "fruits" or "benefits" of a mass offered on behalf of a loved one, who may at death experience the purging fire (purgatory)—and who could be certain—were to liberate, in pity, the deceased. For the Lutheran reformers, incorporation of the deceased into the rite expresses a fundamental characteristic of Lutheran teaching regarding death: death fulfils

baptism.⁷ Resetting the burial rite, in light of the sixteenth century proliferation of masses for the dead and the reformation penchant for an "office", requires according the deceased the status of one who in death consummates her/his baptism. Joined to Christ in baptism, this corpse in the assembly's midst symbolises the completion of the sinful Adam's drowning and God's creation of a new Adam.

If then the burial liturgy is to be baptismal and paschal, prayers for the dead and recognition of the deceased within the rite are instrumental in establishing a context for baptism as a new creation. The deceased are symbolic of dying and rising, creation and new creation, and as such "completely born". Prayers for the Dead and an incorporation of the deceased into the rite allow for an experience of the paschal mystery in terms of the community's relationship to the person in the coffin. The death and rebirth at baptism characterises the life of the Christian who will pass from death to life.

Before drawing conclusions as to the effect of this *lex orandi* on the *lex credendi* of the rite, characterised for purposes of this discussion primarily by prayer for the dead, it is important to consider several sixteenth century factors which eventually ceded a nuanced view of the Christian in death in favour of a burial office concerned with admonishing and exhorting the living, emphasising the hope of resurrection at the Last Day, and performing burial as an act of charity toward the departed. Despite their scripturalism, the burial offices contain little paschal imagery.⁸

II. Sixteenth Century Reformation Concerns

With the reformation a plethora of burial rites come into use or at the extreme left, fell completely out of use. The Lutherans (and Anglicans) were the most conservative in their revision of liturgical rites at burial. The Lutheran principle of *adiaphora* dictated an acceptance of many local customs. Luther's works contain no prescriptions for burial liturgies. One of the earliest references to such liturgies is in a set of guidelines for reform adopted at the Synod of Homberg (October, 1526):

... psalms may be read at the discretion of the bishop, and that prayer should be offered for the living, "that they may live and die in holiness." All should be in the vernacular, unless all those

present understand Latin. Extravagant funeral ceremonies should be avoided out of respect for the poor. A homily in which the word of God is sincerely preached is commended, but there should be no mention of purgatory, "for it is only by faith that God purges and cleanses his church from sin."⁹

Brightman in comparing Lutheran orders in Germany concludes that there is no ceremonial deposition of the body, no commendation or intercession for the departed, no mass; "the only interest is the edification of the living".¹⁰ The *Media vita*¹¹ is found in all rites and the *De profundis* is also popular. Orders variously comment that the dead are still brothers and sisters and are not separated from the community by death; all still remain members of a single body¹² or they direct the pastor to read a lesson at the graveside concerning the death and resurrection of Christians.¹³

Church orders outside of Germany similarly follow the style of a burial office. In Norway the *Media vita* and other elements of the office are used although orders in the seventeenth century simplify the rite even further.¹⁴ The Swedish services include the "Hallowing of the Dead" and an order for burial.¹⁵ The exhortation in the Swedish rite emphasises, as in Germany, Christian hope and sleep until the Last Day of Judgement.¹⁶

These rites in their *lex orandi* reflect a *lex credendi* consistent with the period. The burial served as a reminder of one's own death, as was typical of the Middle Ages.¹⁷ Philippe Ariès summarizes the social context in which both the *lex orandi* and *lex credendi* developed: "Since the High Middle Ages Western man [sic] has come to see himself in his own death: he has discovered *la mort de soi*, one's own death."¹⁸ Concern for judgement, personal reckoning, and a fascination with death and decay abounded. Hence, the obligatory sermon and items of the office dwelt upon the hope of the resurrection and the admonishing and exhorting of the living. For example, the committal prayer used at Waldeck in 1556 asks that the body and soul may rise again with the righteous on the Last Day.¹⁹

Various instances of prayer for the dead can be noted, although they are carefully annotated to guard against any implication that such prayers relate to liberation from the purifying fire localized as purgatory. In a sermon on the eve of All Souls' Day, Luther warns against the abuses of this feast but affirms that prayer, once or twice, imploring God's mercy for the souls

of loved ones, is no sin.²⁰ The *Hannover Church Order 1536* amongst others²¹ acknowledges that such prayers are an acceptable, ancient custom, but must be done properly, i.e., not as an offering for the deceased's sins.²² Luther commended the dead to God's care but objected to the transfer of merits to the dead and the use of the mass to effect such transfers.²³ Finally, the *Apology of the Augsburg Confession* recognises the ancient tradition pertaining to prayers for the dead while restating that the mass does not *ex opere operato* justify the wicked to whom it is applied.²⁴

It is the ancient usage which the Lutheran reformers indicate as valuable, but which the social context of their time made impossible. In the aforementioned sermon,²⁵ Luther suggests prayers for the dead as a way, not to force or hound God into accepting a soul, but rather to commend it to God, allowing it to rest in peace and believing in God to answer one's prayer. The prevailing attitude toward death, however, dwelt upon one's own death and an individual eschatology; the burial was a reminder of *la mort de soi*. Prayer for the dead should, in the Augustinian sense, join the living and the dead as the communion of saints.²⁶

La mort de soi, however, nurtured the *lex orandi* which emerged: a rite purged of possible references to purgatory and almost all prayers for the dead but containing a christocentric sermon which was regarded as a substitute for the Mass of the Dead.²⁷ Luther's funeral sermons retained a focus on the deceased and their death along with a clear call to abandon human vanities in favour of Christ's death and resurrection as expressed in Word and Sacrament.²⁸ Later sixteenth century Lutheran preachers increasingly moved away from mentioning the deceased and focused on the pains of hell, eschatological expectations, and became increasingly didactic.²⁹ This development reflects the social attitude which from the fifteenth century onwards increasingly thought of death "as a transgression which tears man [sic] from his daily life, from rational society, from his monotonous work... a rupture."³⁰ The *Apology's* appreciation for the "ancient" prayers (Augustinian) emphasising the fellowship which the deceased will enjoy with the saints and the unity of the church, living and dead, dwindles.

The break with the Mass for the Dead provided the opportunity to incorporate a contemporary *lex credendi* into the

lex orandi. It is hardly surprising that in the seventeenth century a review of the person's life was added to the rite and the eulogy eventually became a major element.³¹

III. Characteristics of the Revised *Lex Orandi*

The *lex orandi* of 1978 nurtures a conversion of the *lex credendi*. In recognising the presence of the deceased, offering prayers for the dead, and utilizing the structure of the eucharistic liturgy it achieves the nuances which Luther and the *Apolo-gy* suggested. The paschal context of the liturgy expresses Luther's decisive call at funerals to focus on the death and resurrection of Christ made tangible to us through Word and Sacrament.³²

The expression of this focus is highlighted in the *lex orandi* by a number of items. The strong sense of recalling to our memory the deceased echoes St. Augustine's counsel³³ and is reflected in the first, and most usual, choice for the Prayer of the Day (no. 279). The various references to baptism, particularly the use of the pall,³⁴ keep the paschal imagery in focus. The guidelines for the sermon (required) consider it necessary to confront death directly, not become overly cheerful, take into account guilt in terms of the deceased, and proclaim the forgiveness of sins and the hope contained in the death and resurrection of Christ.³⁵ The introduction to the Apostles' Creed places it in the context of baptism. The Prayers of Intercession emphasise the church in heaven and on earth: the communion of saints unbroken by death. The eighth petition, particularly, gives a sense of the type of prayer for the dead implied by the early Lutheran reformation, but which, for centuries, was evacuated from Lutheran rites:

Grant us grace to entrust (*name*) to your never-failing love which sustained *him/her* in this life. Receive *him/her* into the arms of your mercy, and remember *him/her* according to the favour which you bear for your people.³⁶

The Proper Preface restores Early Church imagery of future resurrection in a translation of the Mozarabic preface (also used in the Roman rite)³⁷ and the Post-Communion Prayer emphasises the triumph of the Reign of God. The Commendation Prayer³⁸ expresses trust in what God has done in baptism, recalls the words and actions at baptism, and consoles the living

by presenting death as the consummation of baptism. The Committal Rite begins with a prayer for the sanctification of the grave and a request to keep the deceased in the company of the saints.³⁹ The Committal Prayer uses the deceased's name, praying that he or she may join in the resurrection of Christ.

These highlights from the *lex orandi* illustrate points where the rite prays for a peace wrought by the cross and enjoyed in a proleptic manner now. The deceased, whose baptism is being brought to fulfilment, now experiences the dying and rising which the congregation still only knows via symbol: the water bath, the meal, a corpse in their midst. Most effectively, the prayer of this revised rite makes the deceased the symbol of God's Reign: the prayers name the one from the midst of the community who is engaging in the passover from death to life and who grapples with hope, mercy, and judgement. The prayers do not hound God for a favourable verdict, but "remember... today our brother/sister" and seek "grace to entrust" this individual to God's care. It is the concern of a community united to one another and to Christ in Baptism. No longer is the prayer only for oneself at the time of death—as in previous burial offices—but rather it seeks to integrate the deceased and thereby recognizes the unity of the church. These prayers ignore any notion of a "rupture" between the living and the dead. The corpse and its mention, by name, challenges each individual to examine his or her own unity with the cross, welded at baptism. The words of commendation apply equally well to their situation: "a sheep of your own fold, a lamb of your own flock, a sinner of your own redeeming." The baptised are called to reach beyond themselves. This was Luther's plea as he admonished people in death to look to the death and resurrection of Christ and adhere to Word and Sacrament (*vide supra*).

A new *lex credendi* emerges. The Lutheran reformers desired a nuanced understanding for inclusion of the deceased in the funeral rite, but both the fear of perpetuating medieval abuses of the Mass for the Dead and the social context which sought a "rupture" between the living and the dead prevented informed reform of the burial liturgy. Perhaps the variety of reformation rites witnesses to a frustration regarding expressions for the very thing which the Lutheran reformers saw to be the fulfilment of baptism (i.e., Luther's discussion of baptism, *vide supra*, n. 5). No doubt, the liberation from the cult

of masses for the dead allowed for an insurgence of prevailing attitudes: *la mort de soi*, soon, in the seventeenth century and following, to become *la mort de toi*.⁴⁰ Both attitudes could be served by a burial office, but neither one allowed for a testing of hope, mercy, and judgement such as a liturgy centred on the paschal experience could do.

The framers of the 1978 rite admit, "It is a service for members of the Christian community, and adaptation for others is possible but not without awkwardness."⁴¹ If the corpse symbolises the baptised at the threshold between the proleptic and the consummated, then the community must regard this "brother or sister" as a "servant" who is engaged in the struggle between saint and sinner. The new rite challenges the community to take seriously the burial of a Christian. Those who have failed in their baptismal vows are commended to God's discretion, but those "without the sign of faith" corrupt the rite. These latter situations might be better served with a burial office which more readily divorces itself from the deceased. In the present rite, the *lex orandi* instructs a *lex credendi* based on the faith of the baptised: "Help us, we pray, in the midst of things we cannot understand, to believe and trust in the communion of saints, the forgiveness of sins, and the resurrection to life everlasting."⁴²

Notes

- 1 Inter-Lutheran Commission on Worship, *Lutheran Book of Worship. Ministers Edition* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House & Philadelphia: Board of Publication, Lutheran Church in America, 1978) 331–339 (rite), 190–191 (proprs), 37–38 (detailed rubrics).
- 2 "Order for the Burial of the Dead", The Commission on the Liturgy and Hymnal, *Service Book and Hymnal (SBH)* (Minneapolis: Augsburg & Philadelphia: Board of Publication, Lutheran Church in America, 1958) 253–269.
- 3 For an excellent discussion of Luther's thought regarding the eucharist as *testamentum*, *beneficium* and a sacrifice of one's self, cf. Robert C. Croken, S.J., *Luther's First Front. The Eucharist as Sacrifice* [Ottawa: University of Ottawa Press, 1990] 73–81, 87–91. Croken notes that Luther relied not on the tracts of theologians but rather on the mass practice of his day and this led to a "fundamental flaw which neglects to understand that the Mass is primarily the work of Christ" (89). If the eucharist is both the work of Christ—death and resurrection—and an offering of self in continuation of that work, then those who participate join the work of Christ, dying to self and rising to God.

- ⁴ Rubric nos. 4, 13, 14, and 24 and prayers nos. 279, 281, 282, 285, 286, 287, and 288.
- ⁵ Philip Pfatteicher, *Commentary on the Lutheran Book of Worship. Lutheran Liturgy in its Ecumenical Context* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 1990) 477.
- ⁶ Cf. Robert Croken, *Luther's First Front*, 90ff. Croken traces Luther's thought on masses for the dead as well as recognising the work of medieval theologians. Croken's work elucidates the difficulty in pastoral liturgy when there is discontinuity between theology and praxis (i.e., no dynamic between *lex credendi* and *lex orandi*).
- ⁷ "This significance of baptism—the dying or drowning of sin—is not fulfilled completely in this life. Indeed this does not happen until man [sic] passes through bodily death and completely decays to dust. As we can plainly see, the sacrament or sign of baptism is quickly over. But the spiritual baptism, the drowning of sin, which it signifies, lasts as long as we live and is completed only in death. Then it is that a person is completely sunk in baptism, and that which baptism signifies comes to pass. Therefore this whole life is nothing else than a spiritual baptism which does not cease till death, and he who is baptised is condemned to die... [Romans 6:4]... The sooner a person dies after baptism, the sooner is his baptism completed... Therefore the life of a Christian, from baptism to the grave, is nothing else than the beginning of a blessed death. For at the Last Day God will make him altogether new. ... Then shall we be truly lifted up out of baptism and be completely born, and we shall put on the true baptismal garment of immortal life in heaven." [Martin Luther, "The Holy and Blessed Sacrament of Baptism (1519)", *Luther's Works (LW)*, Vol. XXXV: *Word and Sacrament I*, ed. E. Theodore Bachmann (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House and Philadelphia: Fortress, 1955ff) 30–31.]
- ⁸ G. Rowell, *The Liturgy of Christian Burial* (London: Alcuin Club/S.P.C.K., 1977) 80 and Philip Pfatteicher, *Commentary*, 480.
- ⁹ B.J. Kidd, *Documents of the Continental Reformation (1911)*, pp. 227–228 cited and summarised in G. Rowell, *ibid.*, 74–75.
- ¹⁰ F.E. Brightman, *The English Rite*, Vol. I (London: Rivingtons, 1915) cxxvii. Comparison of rites for Brandenburg-Nürnberg (1533), Brandenburg (1540), Calenberg, and Cologne (1543).
- ¹¹ The antiphon, *Media vita in morte sumus*, was an established part of popular piety at death. Luther provided a German hymnic form for this text, *Mitten wir im Leben sind*, which made it a hymn of faith rather than a desperate crying out against death.
- ¹² *Schwäbisch-Hall 1526* in A.L. Richter, *Die evangelischen Kirchenordnungen des sechzehnten Jahrhunderts*, Vol. I (Nieuwkoop: B. de Graaf, 1967; reprint of Weimar: Land-industrie-comptoir, 1846 ed.) 47.
- ¹³ *Hannover 1536* in A.L. Richter, *ibid.*, 277.
- ¹⁴ G. Rowell, *The Liturgy of Christian Burial*, n. 6, 122.

- 15 E.E. Yelverton, *The Manual of Olavus Petri, 1529* (London: S.P.C.K., 1953) 49–54 (commentary) and 92–101 (text).
- 16 *Ibid.*, 101.
- 17 *Württemberg 1536*, in A.L. Richter, *Die evangelischen Kirchenordnungen*, 273.
- 18 Philippe Ariès, *Western Attitudes Toward Death: From the Middle Ages to the Present* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1974) 52.
- 19 *Waldeck 1556* in A.L. Richter, *Die evangelischen Kirchenordnungen*, Vol. II, 171.
- 20 Martin Luther, "Predigt Nr. 59, 1522", *D. Martin Luthers Werke. Kritische Gesamtausgabe*, Vol. X/3 (Weimar: Hermann Böhlhaus Nachfolger, 1905; reprinted, Graz: Akademischen Druck- u. Verlagsanstalt, 1966) 409.
- 21 E.g., *Württemberg 1536*, in A.L. Richter, *Die evangelischen Kirchenordnungen*, Vol. I or the carefully worded prayer of the "Hallowing of the Dead" *The Manual of Olavus Petri (1529)* for the Church of Sweden [E.E. Yelverton, *The Manual*, 94].
- 22 A.L. Richter, *Die evangelischen Kirchenordnungen*, Vol. I, 277.
- 23 M. Luther, "The Babylonian Captivity of the Church", *LW*, Vol. -XXXVI: *Word and Sacrament II*, ed. Abdel Wentz, 35–36.
- 24 *Apology of the Augsburg Confession (Apology)* in *The Book of Concord, The Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church* trans. and ed. T. Tappert (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1959) 267, §94–96.
- 25 M. Luther, "Predigt Nr. 59, 1522", 409.
- 26 Saint Augustine, *The City of God* in *The Fathers of the Church*, Vol. XXIV, trans. Gerald G. Walsh and Daniel J. Honan (New York: Fathers of the Church, 1954), II.9, 277–8.
- 27 Eberhard Winkler, *Die Leichenpredigt im deutschen Luthertum bis Spener* (München: Chr. Kaiser Verlag, 1967), 42–49 presents an excursus concerning the general practice of funeral liturgies in Lutheran parishes in the sixteenth century. He is concerned less with the texts of the rites as with how they were used and applied contextually within the period.
- 28 *Ibid.*, 40–41.
- 29 *Ibid.*, 50–103.
- 30 Philippe Ariès, *Western Attitudes Toward Death*, 57–58.
- 31 Paul Graff, *Geschichte der Auflösung der alten gottesdienstlichen Formen in der evangelischen Kirche Deutschlands*, Vol. II (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1939) 275–276.
- 32 Eberhard Winkler, *Die Leichenpredigt*, 41.
- 33 St. Augustine, "Care for the Dead", *The Fathers of the Church*, Vol. XXVII, trans. John Lacy (New York: Fathers of the Church, Inc., 1955), §6, 358–359.
- 34 The text which accompanies the placing of the pall is directly derived from the medieval formula, also used by Luther, for giving the baptismal robe (*Westerhemd*).

- 35 Philip Pfatteicher, *Commentary*, 490 and P. Pfatteicher and C. Meserli, *Manual on the Liturgy. Lutheran Book of Worship* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1979) 360.
- 36 *Lutheran Book of Worship, Ministers Edition*, 335.
- 37 Philip Pfatteicher, *Commentary*, 497.
- 38 Into your hands, O merciful Saviour, we commend your servant, (*name*). Acknowledge, we humbly beseech you, a sheep of your own fold, a lamb of your own flock, a sinner of your own redeeming. Receive *him/her* into the arms of your mercy, into the blessed rest of everlasting peace, and into the glorious company of the saints in light [*Ministers Edition*, 336].
- 39 *Ibid.*, 337. The prayer is taken from the Roman rite.
- 40 Philippe Ariès, *Western Attitudes Toward Death*, 55-56.
- 41 Philip Pfatteicher, *Commentary*, 475.
- 42 *Lutheran Book of Worship, Ministers Edition*, 335.