

WORSHIP IN THE (WESTERN) MIDDLE AGES (700–1500 A.D.)

1. Trends in the development of worship services on the Lord's Day

- **Continuity of structures:** The elements, forms, and order of the Lord's Day liturgy remained largely unchanged from later part of the early church era.
- **Ceremonial elaboration:** Most of the changes came in the settings and manner in which the Sunday liturgy was performed and theologically interpreted. Genuflections, signs of the cross, prayers, and incensations all increase in frequency and variety.
- **Additions:**
 - *Nicene Creed:* The one major change was the introduction of the Nicene Creed in the western churches (589 in Spain; 794 in Gaul, and c.1000 in Rome)
 - *Corporate confession of sin:* First for the priest himself at the beginning of the liturgy, and later it was repeated by the deacon(s) or server(s) at communion.
 - Music: *Alleluia chant or psalm* following the Epistle reading, and *hymns* that provided commentary on particular festivals of the liturgical year.
- **Contraction**
 - Omission of elements that were part of the original core of the Lord's Day liturgy: *OT readings, homily (sometimes), intercessory prayers of the people.*
 - *Whole psalms* are reduced to isolated verses with portions repeated (antiphons, e.g., Introit antiphons, Graduals, communion antiphons). The non-scriptural chants that had served as refrains interspersed between psalms become independent songs/chants with no accompanying psalms (e.g., Kyrie in west; Trisagion and Cherubic hymn in east).

1.1 Decline of active lay participation in the liturgy

The common people were reduced to passive spectators of the priests and monastic choirs who performed the liturgy on their behalf. Many simply prayed their own private prayers during the liturgy or listened in silence.

- **Space:** Worship space became divided into two distinct "rooms" separated by a *screen*. The front with the altar and monastic choir was the *chancel*, and the open area for the assembly was the *nave*. *Altars moved to back wall* and become larger and more elaborate. Therefore, the priests presiding at the liturgy were separated from the congregation by a large distance and spent most of the liturgy faced away from them. 7(Viewed against the background of the OT, this development restored spatial zones of holiness in the Tabernacle and Temple that Christ's death and resurrection eliminated; cf. the torn veil in the Temple at Jesus' death and the explanation in Hebrews 8–10.)
- **Language:** The western Church retained *Latin as the official liturgical language* even when the common people no longer spoke it or understood it. (In some places, the Latin readings were followed by readings and homilies in the vernacular, but most instruction in the faith for the laity happened outside the liturgy in separate preaching events, or personal confession with the priest.)
- **Ritual:** Priests began to speak much of the liturgy in a *hushed voice*, especially the eucharistic prayer, which they believed effected the transformation of the bread and wine into Christ's body and blood. Hymns and psalms in the liturgy itself became almost the exclusive responsibility of *trained choirs* and *complex musical settings obscured the liturgy*.¹ By the 1200s, most lay people only received *communion once per year* at Easter with special unleavened bread, directly in the mouth *without handling it* and *without the wine*.

¹ Singing in parts began and developed into elaborate schemes involving separate lines of melody, harmony, and even different texts at the same time. This made it increasingly difficult to understand the text as the music overwhelmed the text.

1.2 Changing forms of lay participation in worship services

- **Songs** in the people's languages (especially in German-speaking lands).
- **Standing** for the Gospel reading.
- **Offertory** procession by lay representatives carrying gifts of leavened bread and wine for the poor, and candles for the church.
- **Eucharistic elevation & adoration:** By the high middle ages (c. 1200), priests were elevating the bread for all to see, with accompanying bells, incense, and genuflection. This became the high point in the liturgy for the laity.
- **Pax board** (13th cent.): During the prayers over the chalice, the priest kissed a cross or board with a painted picture of Christ. He then passed it to others, and the whole congregation kissed it in turn. This signified the peace of the whole church with God and one another (but note how an impersonal object replaces personal communion with God in the meal of communion and personal exchanges of greeting between the people).

1.3 From resurrection joy to fearful focus on deliverance from purgatory and death.

The primary ethos of the liturgy shifted from joyful, communal celebration of the resurrection to a quiet, penitential fear centered on the sinfulness of man and the death of Christ. The eucharist became more and more an object of *holy dread and awe*, fit only to be *seen and adored from afar* but not handled and eaten on a regular basis. Priests recited much of liturgy *very quietly* with *many personal prayers of confessing sin* while the *people were mostly silent*.

1.4 Increasing importance of worship events outside the Lord's Day worship service

- **Pilgrimages:** Trips to shrines with relics of martyrs and sites of alleged miracles and sightings of dead saints became public rituals for expressing one's faith. Larger churches established separate altars/shrines in various parts of the church for devotions to Mary and other saints, stations of the cross for private devotions to Jesus, and also aisles surrounding the main altar for pilgrims to venerate the relics of saints encased there.
- **Plays:** Many people learned biblical stories through popular plays that retold biblical narratives.
- **Eucharistic adoration:** Churches put consecrated bread on display on altars in special containers (monstrances), and Christians began to develop private devotions of eucharistic adoration (times of worship before these displayed hosts) outside the context of the Lord's Day liturgy.
- **Preaching offices:** Traveling preachers (often Dominicans or Franciscans) preached at large outdoor settings about the Ten Commandments, Apostles' Creed, the Lord's Prayer, and the meaning of the mass and festivals of the liturgical year. They also recounted the lives of saints honored on particular days, and led the people in devotional prayers to Mary and other saints.

2. Some reasons for trends in the development of worship services in the Middle Ages

Mutual interactions of history, theology, and ritual:

- **Monasticism:** Worship in monasteries influenced Lord's Day services by providing increasing professionalization of music ministry.
- **Transubstantiation:** This doctrine contributed to the aura of fear and awe that influenced declining frequency of communion and withholding the cup from lay people for fear of mishandling the blood of Christ. It also provided the foundation for the practice of bowing to and praying before the consecrated bread.
- **The eucharist and afterlife:** The mass became a quantified "merit" purchased as part of a spiritual "economy" to secure decreased time in purgatory for oneself and one's relatives.

The connection of teaching about purgatory and corporate worship encouraged these ideas: (1) the mass possessed intrinsic merit on its own that was separate from (and in addition to) the death and resurrection of Jesus in a way that re-sacrificed Jesus (even if only in some symbolic way) and thus undermined the unique sufficiency and finality of Jesus' death on the cross, and (2) the merits of the eucharistic sacrifice could be applied to people whether or not they were present for the mass and participating in it by faith or even whether they were living or dead. The mass became a quantified "merit" purchased as part of a spiritual "economy," the reception and benefits of which became divorced from the active, faithful participation of its beneficiaries in the liturgy itself. This led directly to the massive proliferation of masses celebrated by priests by themselves (**private masses**) who were paid by family members or endowments from the wills of the dying (chantries). Some priests (many in monasteries) did no other work except to offer masses for the dead, and in many places specific chapels were built exclusively for these services (chantry chapels). In larger churches, the number of altars proliferated to accommodate multiple priests saying private masses concurrently.