

## **Theologia Prima-Liturgical Theology as an Ecumenical Challenge to Lutheran Worship Practice**

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### **Introduction**

For Martin Luther the doctrine of justification is the “*articulus stantis et cadentis ecclesiae*”. Before the Joint Declaration could be signed in Augsburg in 1999, German professors of theology wanted to make sure that this doctrine would not be weakened through the declaration. The Justification by faith alone is not one of many truths leading to salvation, but is the “criteria” for all other statements of faith. And even faith is a gift human beings can only receive from their God.

Discussing the right understanding of the Eucharist some of the best known Lutheran theologians like Dorothea Wendebourg do not want to accept the term “Eucharist” for the Lord’s Supper, because “Eucharist” means “thanksgiving” and this is a human act which could be understood as “offering”, and the church cannot offer Christ’s offering to God.

Thus it seems to be of the highest importance for Lutheran theology that God’s gift comes before any human religious action. Human beings can never earn justification or salvation by their good works or by any offerings.

Regarding their worship practice Lutheran Churches in German speaking Europe seem to be less aware of this priority of God’s actions. Obviously, it is crucial for every parish pastor to prepare each service carefully, and nowadays he or she has learned to encourage parish members to contribute to the liturgy. On all levels of church and parish life those responsible for worship are expected to ask the same question: Which type of worship service do people prefer? From the empirical study “*Wie stabil ist die Kirche?*”<sup>1</sup> in 1974 to the recent study initiated by the Liturgical Institute of the Lutheran church of Bavaria “*Der Gottesdienst*”<sup>2</sup> the perspective remains constantly the same. The question is, how people perceive the service and if they are happy with it. Parish councils try to find out how to improve their “range of worship service types” by questionnaires or parish referendums.

Would it not be more pertinent for the church of “justification by faith and through God’s grace alone” to ask: What is God’s gift of worship to his people? Did we not all receive the gift of worship and Christian rite long before we could accept any responsibility of “doing worship” by preparing worship services for others? But by stressing the “priesthood of all baptized” Lutherans tend to “do” liturgy before they have the chance to discover God’s gift of liturgy. Confirmation classes prepare Sunday services as a part of their educational program.

Parish council members feel the high responsibility of offering the right kind of worship to their congregation. If they did not achieve this the loss of church members could be the consequence. Here the right liturgy, serving people’s tastes as well as possible, becomes the “*articulus stantis et cadentis ecclesiae*”. The right action on behalf of the parish worship will save the church...or further her decline.

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<sup>1</sup> “*Wie stabil ist die Kirche?*” (How stable is the church).

<sup>2</sup> “*Der Gottesdienst. Wahrnehmungen aus einer neuen empirischen Untersuchung unter evangelisch Getauften in Bayern*” (Worship. Observations in an empirical study with ...) in: *Perpektive Gottesdienst*, edited by: Gottesdienst Institut der Evang.-Luth. Kirche in Bayern, Nürnberg

In Orthodox, Roman-Catholic and Anglican churches I found a far more “receiving” perception of worship and liturgy. Christians in these churches are often less suspicious of tradition than Protestants. Nelson Kirst, retired professor of Practical Theology in São Leopoldo, Brazil, told me a similar story about the Lutheran Church in Brazil: Years ago Lutheran congregations in Brazil were suspicious of a “catholic” way of doing liturgy. Thus, Nelson Kirst said, worship services were “like a desert, a dry and stony land.” But once they lost their fear of ecumenical experiences, they could discover the common liturgical inheritance of the Christian Church. They discovered that they can “receive liturgy”.

Liturgy in the Lutheran Church began to blossom. The Faculty of Theology in São Leopoldo installed regular courses in liturgy for pastors and lay people. At the same time the faculty started a new magazine with the aim of keeping congregations informed about developments in liturgical theology. “Liturgy in our churches is now like a flowering garden”, says Nelson Kirst. Here the connection between theology and liturgy is being revived.

In Germany Jochen Arnold, director of the Lutheran Centre of Liturgy and Church Music at St. Michael’s Monastery in Hildesheim (Evangelisches Zentrum für Gottesdienst und Kirchenmusik), did a very detailed research of the relationship between Liturgy and systematic theology<sup>3</sup>. His interest is to show how liturgy and theology are interwoven and cannot live without one another. Arnold’s study was overdue. In German speaking Protestant churches the gap between University training and practical education for future pastors is wider than elsewhere.

In the work of the American theologian David W. Fagerberg, building on his Russian-orthodox teacher Alexander Schmemmann, I found a theology that gives priority to the liturgical service of the Church. In his book “Theologia Prima - What Is Liturgical Theology?” he shows that it is God’s action through which human beings get into a living relationship with the Holy One. This encounter does not leave them alone with their God, but it enables them to live in communion with their neighbors also.

For the Italian Roman-Catholic theologian Andrea Grillo liturgy is the indispensable foundation of all other theological action, but this connection has been lost since enlightenment times. His question is how liturgy can be reintegrated into theology. The human being is “animal ceremoniale” and thus cannot do without rite. For Grillo liturgy continuously reminds us that God’s action comes first.

These concepts cannot be alien to Lutheran Christians. Are we not the church which brings as her inheritance the doctrine of justification not only to her own awareness but also to other churches? Did we not promote the Joint Declaration of Justification, so that others can share in our special gift? God’s action comes first, and we respond by living a sanctified life in communion with others, capacitated by the Holy Spirit.

Is this order not also valid for our liturgy, for our worship assembly? Do we not receive our liturgy from our God? Is it not by his grace only that we can hear his word and receive life through the sacraments and sing and pray in communion with the others?

In my experience ecumenical worship is a good place to find the dynamics of ‘Theologia Prima’. In ecumenical contexts no single church can determine an entire service. Here we have to let others “do”. We can receive what is the wealth of a different tradition. We can lose the very Protestant fear of tradition. We can receive the Word of our God out of other hands. We share in ecumenical worship with the hope to live as the one Church together with

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<sup>3</sup> Jochen Arnold, *Theologie des Gottesdienstes. Eine Verhältnisbestimmung von Liturgie und Dogmatik* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck und Ruprecht, 2004)

others. Here we do not “do” Christian rite. We receive it. We can witness God’s work upon us.

In the last years I had the possibility of witnessing how Church unity can grow through ongoing experience of ecumenical worship. In the Viennese suburb Kagran in the Roman-Catholic Church St. Georg many of the Christian Churches of the Austrian Ecumenical Council gather for ecumenical services twice a year. These services were initiated not by the Ecumenical Council but by a Roman-Catholic nun, Sr. Dr. Lili Fuchs. After 12 years of ecumenical worship in St. Georg and, alternating, in many of the partner churches in Vienna several people in the congregation stated independently: “Now we are **one** congregation.”

## **I. Liturgical Theology**

### a. “Theologia Prima” a liturgical theology in the USA

David W. Fagerberg is an associate professor at the University of Notre Dame, USA. He developed his liturgical theology as a scholar of Alexander Schmemmann’s, the great orthodox theologian (he was born in Estonia, studied in Paris, was professor at St. Vladimir Orthodox Seminary New York, he died in 1983). Whole movements of liturgical theology are to be found in the USA within diverse denominations.

The term “liturgical theology” in a wider sense means “every theology connected to worship”. David Fagerberg develops a more specific understanding: It is the theology done by the congregation as they participate in the liturgical rite. It is “the ritualized response by the body of Christ to the activity of the Trinity.”<sup>4</sup> Theologia Prima is the theology which emerges out of the congregation’s communal act of liturgical worship.

Aidan Kavanagh, O.S.B., is Professor of Liturgics at the Divinity School, Yale University. In his book “On Liturgical Theology” Kavanagh declares that worship is what gives rise to theological reflection, rather than the other way round.<sup>5</sup> He discerns three moments in the liturgical event: “First, the assembly encounters the Holy One; second, by consequence of this encounter the assembly is changed; third, the assembly must adjust to this change, and this change he calls theological.”<sup>6</sup> Fagerberg calls this theological adjustment “Theologia Prima”, primary theology. At this point we still could understand liturgy and Theologia Prima as activities initiated by human beings. But liturgy is the place of God’s self-revelation; liturgy is God’s act upon God’s people.<sup>7</sup> Liturgical theology is not about human ceremony, but about God’s transforming act. “Theology is talk about God in self-revealing action.”<sup>8</sup> So Liturgy is eschatological - if not, it becomes an empty ceremony. Liturgy is eschatological because it is the Church living as the body of Christ. It is the epiphany of the new creation within this world.

Liturgy is not the act of individual persons who want to satisfy their private spiritual needs. This would be human action and a kind of self-salvation. Liturgy is God’s acting upon his people, upon his church. This is not only to satisfy our hunger because we need the heavenly food for body and spirit and also not only to build up the Church and to let it grow -

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<sup>4</sup> David W Fagerberg. *Theologia Prima. What is liturgical Theology?* (Chicago/Mundelein: Hillenbrand Books, 2004) p.7

<sup>5</sup> Aidan Kavanagh *On Liturgical Theology* (New York: Pueblo Press, 1984) p. 73-74

<sup>6</sup> Fagerberg, p. 42

<sup>7</sup> Fagerberg, p. 80

<sup>8</sup> Fagerberg, p. 81

it is on behalf of the whole world. It is the beginning of the new creation. The Greek word λειτουργία stands for the public act a few perform on behalf of the whole community.

Liturgists perform liturgy on behalf of the whole creation. Our God calls human beings into liturgical ministry. They are formed to fulfill this ministry. Fagerberg calls this formation “asceticism”: “Asceticism is necessary in order to think straight - about ourselves (anthropology), the world (cosmology), and God (theology).”<sup>9</sup> People order their lives in order to do ordered, structured service. Liturgical service is festive, ordered, structured and beautiful, aesthetic. It is done by people who have structured their lives in order to be liturgists. These are not in first place academic theologians - but by their baptism all members of the body of Christ are called to do the liturgical ritual service. Asceticism in Fagerberg’s understanding is never a religious act to please God or our own religious needs. It is always the work the Holy Spirit does on human beings, in order to capacitate them to participate in the liturgy - in God’s transforming work upon humankind and the whole of his creation.

Christian liturgy is not cult, because it is not our own doing. It is God’s work in which we participate. It is Christ’s ministry upon us. It is his liturgy. What we could do on our own would be a ritual or a cult. But it would be empty. “Ritual form alone, without a divine content, does not make a liturgy”.<sup>10</sup>

As in incarnation God himself comes to earth and the Eternal One lives in time, “liturgy is the paradox of He who cannot be contained in thought or space or matter, presenting Himself to us in doctrine and temple and feast day and sacrament”.<sup>11</sup>

God himself wants to encounter his people and his creation in the liturgy. Without this content our worship would be empty and in vain. But he wants to meet his people at a certain earthly time at a certain earthly place. This encounter will change his people and will transform his creation, at first gradually and, when the time is come, entirely. We are honored by God through our baptism to become partakers in God’s work. Partaking in liturgy, people learn liturgy’s language and grammar. Through their liturgical lives they will be able to speak about God in a theological way. They will be theologians, even if they never go to university. “The community’s transformation in liturgical encounter with God” is what Fagerberg calls *Theologia Prima*.<sup>12</sup> Liturgies are not only expressions of theology. Liturgy is the foundation of theology. Liturgical language brings reality into existence. It constitutes a new reality. It is transformation, not expression. *Lex orandi* establishes *lex credendi*.<sup>13</sup> Thus liturgy has to be used in an ordered, structured way, with responsibility. Asceticism is needed. To become a theologian of the *Theologia Prima*, asceticism is needed. To become an academic theologian education is needed.

b -Andrea Grillo - a liturgical theology in Italy

Andrea Grillo is a Roman-Catholic theologian in Italy. His liturgical theology<sup>14</sup> builds on his predecessors in the Istituto Liturgico Santa Giustina in Padova, Salvatore Marsili, Luigi Sartori and Aldo Natale Terrin. Andrea Grillo developed his own theology not only in ecumenical openness but also in conversation with theologians of the German and French

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<sup>9</sup> Fagerberg, p. 27

<sup>10</sup> Fagerberg, p. 15

<sup>11</sup> ibidem

<sup>12</sup> Fagerberg, p. 63

<sup>13</sup> Fagerberg, p. 67

<sup>14</sup> Andrea Grillo *Einführung in die liturgische Theologie : zur Theorie des Gottesdienstes und der christlichen Sakramente* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2006)

languages. Until now I could not trace any contact between this Italian liturgical theology and the one developed in the United States of America.

Andrea Grillo's main point is the loss of contact between liturgy and theology since the Era of Enlightenment. That is to say that theology dismissed liturgy out of its life and thinking. Nowadays this separation is no longer admissible. The challenge to be solved now is how to reintegrate rite into theology. Andrea Grillo sees anthropology as the means to help human beings to understand themselves. Human beings are not capable of existing alone, without relationships. They ask "Where do I come from?" and "What will become of me?" A human being is therefore an "animal symbolicum, ceremoniale, liturgicum." In order to understand himself he has to open himself to the neighbor and to God, he has to live in relationship. He has to experience his faith, and he does so using language, he does so in community with others. This interaction is ritual, symbol, and liturgy.<sup>15</sup>

Anthropology helps theology to understand how the connection between theology and liturgy may be and how this connection could be recovered. Modern humanity chose to live faith without any institution or ritual - in what was then called 'freedom'.<sup>16</sup> The present task of liturgical theology is to show that implicitly rite and liturgy were the basis for classical theology, a basis nobody had to talk about because it was self-evident.

The present task is to provide evidence for this connection and to recover liturgy as a basic, logical and fundamental part of theology. If anthropology helps us to remember that we as human beings always live in relationship to God and our neighbor and thus in need of language, symbol and ritual, then we understand that we cannot do theology without an ordered ritual and liturgical basis. We cannot hope to understand God without living in relationship with him. Without language and rite there is no relationship.

Many theologians in the middle of the 20<sup>th</sup> century made an effort to understand the relationship between God and humanity in vertical terms only. Karl Barth developed his Theology of the Word of God. Karl Rahner tried to understand the sacraments in an exclusively spiritual way, where the actual eating of the bread at the Eucharist lost its value, only the spiritual dimension counting. God comes to us without any medium, "directly from above."

Former generations did not do liturgical theology because the interconnection between liturgy and theology was still a living reality. They did a theology of the sacrament, and they asked: „What is absolutely necessary for us that we may be saved and sanctified by God?“<sup>17</sup> They asked the question: „What?“ In our time we want to know about the "Where" and the "How". We want to know how God's salvation can become a reality in our time and in our world. By faith we find ourselves living in relationship to God and to our fellow human beings. But faith is not a human property. It belongs to God. Liturgical rite is the place God gives us to renew our faith and to experience our Christian identity.

Grillo asks three questions: Why do we celebrate? What do we celebrate? How do we celebrate?

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<sup>15</sup> Grillo, p. 198

<sup>16</sup> Grillo, p. 47

<sup>17</sup> Grillo, p.197

### 1. Why?

We celebrate because the human being is an “animal symbolicum, ceremoniale”, because we live in relationship and we need to communicate. To do this we need language, structure, rite and liturgy.

### 2. What?

We celebrate the paschal mystery. We do this as a Christian congregation, which was born out of the mystery. Jesus Christ our Lord is the one who offers himself, who praises God, who saves us by grace. He is the subject, because he is the Lord. We are the object, because he saves us. At the same time we are the subject, because we celebrate him. So he is the object of our celebration.

### 3. How?

We celebrate. Christian Worship is public service. This is not to satisfy religious needs of individual people. It can only happen as a public act in communion with God and the others. We cannot argue: “I don’t understand” or “I don’t like it.” Christian service is not self-evident. It remains mystery. Christian liturgy is more than the sum of the various individual religious acts. We have to grow into it.

Andrea Grillo’s book was translated into German by Michael Meyer-Blanck, Professor of Practical Theology at the University in Bonn, Germany. In January 2009 Meyer-Blanck published an article about a recent study by Giorgio Bonaccorso, a colleague of Andrea Grillo’s at the Padova Institute.<sup>18</sup> Liturgical theology for Bonaccorso is not a theology of liturgy, but the act of liturgy is a form of fundamental theology. Ritual action is not representation of an idea but the “repetition” of the original event. Repetition is to be understood as an actualization of the original event and the institution of a new relationship between the original and the current event.

## II. Liturgical Theology and the Doctrine of Justification

Liturgical Theology as I first found it in Fagerberg’s “Theologia Prima” is grounded in the fact that for the salvation of humankind God’s action comes first. “God shapes the community in liturgical encounter and the community makes theological adjustment to this encounter.”<sup>19</sup> “Making adjustment” to this encounter is the first theology and it is done by the congregation. Only then can secondary theology get to work: academic theologians can begin “dusting the ritual for God’s fingerprints.”<sup>20</sup> Liturgy is a gift of God to his people, so that they can live as one body, the body of Christ.

“It is liturgy that creates the church.”<sup>21</sup> The church can modify certain liturgies; the Church cannot change the Liturgy, the ministry God gave through Jesus, who is the first liturgist. λειτουργία in the profane sense of the word is the ministry one person does on behalf of the whole group of which he belongs. “Liturgy is the work of Christ on behalf of the vital interests of the clan to which he belongs: the family of Adam and Eve”.<sup>22</sup> Through baptism we become members of Christ, so we can be liturgists in order to do Christ’s work in the

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<sup>18</sup> Michael Meyer-Blanck *Bonaccorso, Giorgio: La liturgia e la fede. La teologia e l’antropologia del rito.* in: TLZ 134/1 2009

<sup>19</sup> Fagerberg, p. 9

<sup>20</sup> ibidem

<sup>21</sup> Fagerberg, p. 10

<sup>22</sup> Fagerberg, p. 11

world and for the sanctification of the world. Liturgy is God's gift to his people, but its only purpose is that they may serve the world with ministry in his name. The ultimate aim of liturgy is the transformation of humankind and creation, so that all praise God with one voice.

The joint Declaration on Justification states: "By grace alone, in faith in Christ's saving work and not because of any merit on our part, we are accepted by God and receive the Holy Spirit, who renews our hearts while equipping and calling us to good works."<sup>23</sup>

It is one saving and transforming movement coming from God alone through Jesus Christ that „justifies“ us, saves us, redeems and transforms us, so that we can be part of the new creation and serve the world as we are meant to do in God's name. Where is the point, the place of justification? Where does it happen? Could the answer be: in liturgy? We are incorporated into the body of Christ through the liturgy of baptism. Here our new being begins. Being human, we need constant confirmation; if not, we might forget our calling into God's ministry. So God gave us the liturgy of the Word and the Eucharist, so we may return to him on every eighth day. There we are one with other baptized, one in Christ. We live in relationship with God and our fellow Christians. We leave our daily world, and live an anticipated eight-day-existence, as Fagerberg puts it; we have a break in our daily Christian life, as Grills puts it. This is where the Church and the individual Christian let themselves be brought back to their fundament and their roots in Christ.

This could be our refuge, our place of justification, where God renews the redeemed life in us so that we can live in this world as children of the world to come, serving our Lord and our fellow humans with the love which only our God can provide. For Andrea Grills it is important to overcome the separation of liturgy and theology, of God's doing in liturgy and human participation. He may state that Christ and congregation can both be seen as subject or as object in liturgical celebration. This could lead to the conclusion that human action in liturgy is something like the "good works" a Christian has to do in order to be accepted by God. This would be a step back to the disagreement between Lutherans and Catholics before the Joint Declaration.

But then Grillo states clearly: The Christian task is to testify to the world that there is meaning in life (which is love). This love the Christian has received as a gift and can pass on to others. This sounds very much like the Joint Declaration! And now Grillo shows which is the place of ongoing remembrance: "The liturgical rites exist to maintain the priority of the gift before the task by symbolic speech and by ritual actions as religious experience."<sup>24</sup>

So the gift comes first. God's action in Christ through the Holy Spirit is the first step towards our salvation and justification and sanctification. As sanctified beings we can do holy things, we can accept the task to act in God's name in the world. With Grillo's words we could call the liturgical rites the place of justification.

### **III Ecumenism**

As a theology dealing with the heart of Christian life and with a new consciousness of the separation between theology and liturgy, liturgical theology emerged more or less at the same time in different places of our world and in various Christian denominations. In the US liturgical theology came especially from the orthodox theologian Alexander Schmemmann and was soon noticed and developed by American theologians of various denominations as David W. Fagerberg, Aidan Kavanagh, Robert Taft and Gordon W. Lathrop.

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<sup>23</sup> <http://archive.elca.org/ecumenical/ecumenicaldialogue/romancatholic/jddj/declaration.html>

<sup>24</sup> Grillo, p. 200

In Italy liturgical theology has a home at the Roman-Catholic Istituto Liturgico in Padova with whole generations of liturgical scholars who were not afraid of crossing denominational or language borders to enrich their theology.

I still did not find any connection between the American and the Italian liturgical theology. Even so they do have similar starting points: While Grillo states the loss of liturgy and rite in theology, Schmemmann bemoans the loss of eschatology in liturgical celebration. The aim of both schools is to stress the impossibility to exercise academic theology without the fundament of what we call spiritual life. Both schools underline that Christian spiritual life is only possible in connection with God and our fellow-Christians, and this communal act is open to the world and therefore only possible as a rite, as liturgical worship. Liturgical theology has joined Christians from different denominations from its very beginning. The Liturgical Movement has a similar story: it began separately in different churches. But it soon joined theologians from still separated denominations.

Ecumenical services are a good place to experience what “theologia prima” might be. The ecumenical congregation comes together to witness the growing unity of the Church. People normally do not come to nourish their private piety. They come to see the beauty of the other churches and the riches of Christian liturgy. They do not *do* Christian rite, but they receive it as God’s gift through Christian traditions different from their own. When they return to their own churches they will have learned to understand liturgy in a slightly different way. And when, after a while, they return to the ecumenical worship, the ecumenical congregation will have grown in understanding, confidence and unity.

Sometimes we forget that in front of our God we are the receiving ones. Then, in our own churches, we want to determine every little thing. In ecumenical services this is simply not possible. So we can feel free to receive God’s presence in the beauty of His own Liturgy.

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