

WHO COMMUNES THE PASTOR?

DISTINGUISHING BETWEEN THE PERSON AND THE OFFICE OF THE PASTOR

Rubrics are the directions in red print in the hymnal and other liturgical books that give instructions and suggestions on the “how” of the liturgical rites and ceremonies. **In *Altar Book of our new hymnal Lutheran Service Book*, the following rubric is given for all five of the Divine Service settings:**

The pastor and those who assist him receive the body and blood of Christ first, the presiding minister communing himself and his assistants. Then they distribute the body and blood to those who come to receive... [*LSB Altar Book*, pages 168, 207, 249, 270, 285].

Likewise, Martin Luther’s *Formula Missae* [Luther’s Latin Mass] (1523) notes: “Then, while the Agnus Dei is sung, let him [the liturgist] communicate, first himself and then the people” [*Luther’s Works American Edition*, volume 53, p.29]. Luther Reed, in his important book, *The Lutheran Liturgy*, states:

Self-communion of the minister has always been an open question in Lutheran liturgics. Luther himself approved it and repeatedly defended it (*deinde communicet tum sese, tum populum* [Formula Missae (Luther’s Latin Mass)]). It is quite certain that for a generation or two this liturgical action, which belongs to the integrity of the rite, was usual in Lutheran services. Later when liturgical knowledge and feeling had declined, dogmatic Biblicism and pietistic subjectivism brought about its disuse. The dogmaticians, however, generally allow it, though advising that if another minister be present he should administer it to the officiant. The Schmalkald Articles forbid self-communion only when this involves reception apart from the congregation (Part II, Art. II). Chemnitz says the minister includes himself in the confession and absolution and he may include himself in the Communion. [Luther D. Reed. *The Lutheran Liturgy*, p.372]

As pointed out above, the “private mass” that Lutherans condemn is not the pastor communing himself in the midst of the regular Divine Service of the congregation. The “private mass” that is condemned is a mass or Divine Service where no one communes or where only the pastor communes without the congregation. Unheard of until the latter half the twentieth century was communion of pastors by those who were not called and ordained. This is why the circuit “Winkel” conference was instituted during the time of Pietism where pastors would commune among each other. While upholding Augsburg Confession, Article XIV, the sad fact was that during Pietism those pastors did not want to be seen communing, lest the congregation think the pastor had sins! But honoring Augsburg Confession, Article XIV and having the pastor commune with the congregation is the most evangelical and biblically faithful. Of course, if there is more than one pastor present, it is certainly fitting for them to commune each other, but it is still not necessary for it to be that way.

One should not read into the pastor’s “self-communion” a motive of thinking he is “holier than thou” by this practice. Hopefully one would accord the pastor what Luther explains in the eighth commandment by “putting the best construction on everything.” It is simply distinguishing between the person of the pastor as baptized and forgiven sinner vs. the office that he holds by call and ordination. (If he thought he had no sin, why would he desire to commune and so receive the forgiveness of sins?) We confess in our Augsburg Confession, Article XIV that, “no one should publicly teach in the Church or administer the Sacraments unless he be regularly called” [*Latin rite vocatus/German ordentlicher beruf*]. The doctrine of the royal priesthood of believers (I Peter 2:9) is not so much about “everyone a minister” or “everyone a pastor” but it is about being a “go between” between your neighbor and the Lord for their sake. We do not appreciate either as a gift if we only compare the pastoral office and the royal priesthood of believers with each other in terms of who does what – each is a unique gift. If one upholds a confessional understanding of the duties of the pastoral office in regard to administering the Lord’s Supper, and if it is still asserted that the pastor could not commune himself, then one is left with the also untenable position of the pastor communing only at pastors’ conferences (and only among other pastors!). So where there is one pastor, and since he too needs the forgiveness of sins given in the Holy Supper, the pastor rightly distinguishes between his person and his office and benefits from the Lord’s Supper that way also – just as he does in absolution or when the Scriptures are proclaimed. So in the Formula of Concord’s denial that, “No man’s word or work, be it the merit or speaking of the minister,” brings about the real presence is not to deny that the body and blood are, “distributed through our ministry and office” (cf. *FC-SD*, VII.74-77). When an elder or deacon assists the pastor in the general distribution to the congregation, he does that as an extension (auxiliary) of the pastor for the sake of the rest of the people and for good order. In conclusion, it is certainly proper and well within orthodox Lutheran practice (and historic Christianity) for the pastor, in distinguishing his person and office, to commune himself in the midst of the congregation in the Divine Service. So the pastor also benefits from the sermon and absolution he speaks within the congregation – his individual person benefits from the ministry of the pastoral office for the church.