

The Divine Service: The Propers of the Day and the Church Year

The text of the Divine Service for a given day is made up of *ordinaries*, parts that change only slightly from Sunday to Sunday, and *propers*, parts that are particular to each Sunday of the Church Year. The Church Year is governed by a calendar of readings from Scripture, collects (prayers), and hymns of the day. Some churches use a calendar that repeats once a year, which has been the same, for the most part, since about the ninth century. Martin Luther preached on this calendar, leaving us many fine sermons on the Gospel and Epistles (the Old Testament readings were added later). Other churches, following a mid-20th Century change in Roman Catholic practice, use a calendar that repeats every three years.

Both calendars begin with **Advent**, a penitential yet hopeful season leading to the celebration of Christ's birth and Lordship at **Christmas** and **Epiphany**. Lutherans have tended to close the Epiphany Season with **Transfiguration**, where we see the glory of God shining in the flesh of the man Jesus. In the One-Year Calendar, the three "Gesima" Sundays of **Pre-Lent** prepare us for **Ash Wednesday** and **Lent**, another penitential yet hopeful season leading to the celebration of Christ's Supper (**Maundy Thursday**), death (**Good Friday**), and resurrection (**Easter**). The **Ascension of our Lord** and **Pentecost**, the celebration of Christ's keeping his promise to send his Spirit upon his Church, follow as they did, forty and fifty days after our Lord's Resurrection. This first or "festival" half, itself divided between the "Time of Christmas" and the "Time of Easter," leads us annually through the life of Christ and to his death and resurrection as the source of the Church's life.

Trinity Sunday, celebrating the revelation to us of who God is, in the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God the Father, and the communion of the Holy Spirit, begins the second half (roughly) of the Church Year, sometimes called "the Time of the Church." Carefully selected readings, collects, and psalms during this portion continue to unfold Christ's own teaching for his Church. As in the other half of the year, the fixed schedule helps to ensure that the pastor is teaching "the whole counsel of God," and not only on his, or the congregation's, pet topics. Regular repetition from year to year helps us grow in depth in God's Word and not only in breadth, and helps a pastor learn from his fathers in the faith, even of ages past, how to sustain God's people consistently with God's teaching. (*read Ac 20:17-35*)

The *collects* or *prayers of the day* formulate, from the promises of God in the readings, our petition of God—what we want him to do for us in the service beyond the obvious, which is to forgive our sins. This the pastor prays on behalf of the people. The collects all have the same "outline" of *invocation* or *address*, *basis* or *rationale*, *petition*, *desired outcome* or *blessing*, and a *doxological ending*. *How does today's collect break down into these parts? How does such a collect give you a good framework for putting the prayers of your heart into words?*

The *introit*, *gradual*, and *verse* or *tract*, lead us to sing the theme of the day with God-given words from the Psalter, and the *hymn of the day* puts the day's Word from God into a form you might hum on the way home. These round out the *propers* which make this day in the Church Year unique, a part of the time-tested, regular pattern of giving the Church "the whole counsel of God."