

LCMS

Worship Library

Title: Commemorations Questions and Answers

Category: Church Year

In addition to the list of Sundays and seasons (e.g., Advent, Nativity of Our Lord, etc.) that has always appeared in our church year calendars, there has also appeared a group of observances called "Minor Festivals" (e.g., Annunciation of Our Lord; St. Matthew, Apostle and Evangelist; etc.). These festivals typically include events in the life of Christ, as well as individuals who joined Christ in his earthly ministry. The list of Minor Festivals in *Lutheran Worship* included, however, several individuals who do not fall into this category (e.g., Martin Luther, C.F.W. Walther, St. Laurence). More properly, they belong in a category known as "commemorations."

Lutheran Service Book includes a significantly expanded calendar of commemorations. This calendar is separate from that of the Minor Festivals. The questions and answers that follow provide a more in-depth rationale for the observance of commemorations.

What are "commemorations"?

These are days set aside over the course of the year as opportunities to remember some of the Christian men and women who have gone before us in the faith. The dates for these commemorations are usually chosen to coincide with the earthly death of these faithful men and women, which is often referred to as their "heavenly birthday."

We honor the memory of these saints, not as those who are "dead and gone," but as those who are very much alive forevermore in Christ Jesus. We honor not what they did during their earthly life, but what God worked in and through them to his glory. We remember them by giving attention to the Word of God, which nurtured and sustained them in the faith on their pilgrimage from this life into the courts of heaven. Finally, we pray with thanksgiving to God in Christ for the mercy he has shown to his people of all times and places. As in all things in the church, these commemorations resound to the praise and honor of our Lord Jesus Christ.

Why do we observe them?

First of all, we follow the example of Holy Scripture in remembering those whom God has called to be his own, in whom he has demonstrated his grace of forgiveness and his gift of life. We think especially of Hebrews 11, which commemorates many of those who lived by faith before the birth of the Savior. Another good example, taken from the Holy Gospels, is the woman who anointed Jesus prior to his death. Her faith and love, Jesus says, will be remembered wherever the Gospel is proclaimed (Matt. 26:13).

Second, our Lutheran Confessions also indicate a number of reasons for the commemoration of the saints (Augsburg Confession, Article 21). In doing so, we are given examples of the Christian faith and life, which God uses to strengthen our own faith and to encourage us in living according to his Word. In a similar way, when we remember examples of those who were called to repentance and forgiveness by

the grace of God in Christ, we are reminded of his grace toward us and his forgiveness of our sins. In each of these ways, the saints who have gone before us become a kind of living "stained-glass windows" through whom the light of Christ now shines on us in a variety of shapes and colors. Finally, we give thanks to God for the gift of these faithful people, who served his church as pastors, teachers, confessors, and laity.

But aren't we all saints in God's sight?

Of course! Christ Jesus is our righteousness and holiness. In him, by grace through faith, all of us are saints, and we are perfect in his sight. It would be appropriate, in this respect, to remember everyone who has lived and died (and lives again) by faith in Christ--as we do, in a sense, on the Feast of All Saints (November 1).

Nevertheless, among this vast cloud of witnesses with which we are surrounded, it is also helpful to remember the particular and personal details of certain individuals. To do so reflects the personal care and attention that God gives to each of His dear children, as well as the ways in which he blesses each of us in particular and personal ways. What is more, in the history of the church, as in Holy Scripture, there are those whom God raises up—not according to merit, but according to his mercy—to serve his people in very special ways. Examples include Abraham and Moses in the Old Testament and Mary and John the Baptizer in the New Testament. In the long history of the church since the time of the apostles, we would certainly include Dr. Martin Luther as an outstanding servant of the Gospel.

In every case, it is important to remember that when we honor the memory of the saints we are thereby honoring the Lord and God and Savior of us all, who called these men and women to be his own. He redeemed them and sanctified them, and he blessed them to serve to the glory of his name for the benefit of others.

What is the difference between "commemorations" and saints' days ["feasts"]?

There are some saints in particular whose lives on earth are so closely connected with the earthly life and ministry of Jesus that their stories are literally part of the Gospel itself. Along with Mary and John the Baptizer, mentioned above, perhaps the most obvious examples would be the apostles and evangelists. In the history of the church, including the history of our Lutheran Church, the commemorations of these saints have been observed with special distinction—always to the praise and glory of Christ Jesus and His Gospel. These days are really treated as "Feasts of Christ," that is to say, as days when we remember, celebrate, and give thanks for the life that our Lord Jesus Christ lived for us in the flesh. For these reasons, it is appropriate to observe these "Feasts" with the Sacrament of the Altar, in which the Word-made-flesh draws close to us and gives himself to us in much the same way that he came and lived among the apostles and other disciples in the New Testament.

By contrast, the commemorations of other saints from the Old Testament and throughout the history of the church on earth are normally observed in daily prayer within the family, in the Christian day school, in the chapels of our colleges and seminaries, and in parishes where it is possible to gather for Matins or Vespers during the week. In *Lutheran Service Book*, the calendar of these commemorations are found on pages xii and xiii, while the calendar of Sundays and Seasons and the Feasts of Christ are found on pages x and xi.

What are the benefits of observing the commemorations?

The purpose of the commemorations is to focus the hearts and minds of those who observe them on Christ Jesus and his Gospel. Following the examples of Holy Scripture and the guidance of our Lutheran Confessions, these commemorations serve the helpful purpose of teaching the Christian faith and life

and encouraging the praise and thanksgiving of God in Christ. At the same time, by giving this appropriate attention to the saints who have gone before us, we discourage inappropriate and superstitious ways of remembering them. Instead, we give thanks to God for demonstrating his mercy through them, a practice which our Lutheran Confessions call "truly worthwhile" (Apology to the Augsburg Confession, XXI, 36).

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