



LEX ORANDI LEX CREDENDI

## THE ST. THOMAS MASS

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For years now, the Mikael Agricola Church in Helsinki has been packed every Sunday evening at six o'clock. It is the hour for the St. Thomas Mass, celebrated under the name of the apostle who seemed to have more questions than answers in his faith.

This Lutheran worship service has been influenced by old liturgical traditions of the church as well as by the spirit of ecumenism. The service takes two hours and it requires a team of seventy to a hundred people, all volunteers. Usually the teams differ from Sunday to Sunday, because each Sunday is a project of its own. There is a volunteer project manager for every Sunday of the year responsible to gather his team for the Mass.

Thirty to forty members of the team are musicians. Because the Mass has many exciting parts in the program, the organizers need people to be side altar servants, lay readers, helpers in leading the confession of sins. Communion requires eighteen pastors and laypeople to assist the celebrant with the liturgy and sharing the wine and the bread. Behind the scene we need people to wash the wine cups and prepare the snack and tea for about forty people who stay after the Mass. And of course still others need to give a warm welcome and all the needed material to the worshipers. The Mass requires a group of elders and altogether 250 people as the primary resource group. But each Sunday there is a calendar in the narthex for anybody interested in signing up for different tasks.

The first St. Thomas Mass was celebrated in April 1988. It was preceded by many months of preparation by a small group of people representing different streams of spirituality in the city, charismatics, Taizé, evangelicals, liberals, high-church people, pietists. Once a week we came to pray together, searching for a new way to worship that would communicate especially to urban, possibly unchurched people. The goal was to provide a living worship where the spiritual search is taken seriously and there is room for

those who consider themselves people of little faith.

Nowadays there is a small organization with a little office to coordinate the resources and lead the volunteer work. There are a thousand members in the Thomas community, which is a loose network of friends of the St. Thomas Mass. Members are mainly from the metropolitan area of Helsinki. The mass and the Thomas community

are financially independent from the Church of Finland. Most of the leaders for the Thomas Community are laypeople. The St. Thomas Mass is accepted by the Helsinki Lutheran Church as a vital part of the ministry and the presence of the church in the city. The union of Helsinki parishes has in recent years decided to sponsor officially a wage for a pastor for the Thomas Community, called the "citypastor." In recent years the St. Thomas Mass

has spread from Helsinki to all parts of the country. It is well known in Scandinavia and in Northern Europe.

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### *Sources of the St. Thomas Mass*

It is important to realize that the birth of the Mass was a big surprise to all those involved and present—a happy accident. All we were searching for was a relevant Sunday worship, mainly for ourselves, because we didn't have a place to worship. We all had our spiritual homes. But none of us had a place for regular, dynamic Sunday worship.

Even after a lengthy period of praying and planing together, we still didn't really know what we were doing. The Thomas Mass arose from a healthy chaos of different spiritual movements that all made a contribution during the praying and planning period. Now, a decade later, it is easy to be wise and rational in analyzing the phenomena.

In those days the statistics for Sunday church attendance in "Lutheran" Finland was the lowest among Lutherans. In spite of the low percentage going to church on Sunday, the Finnish church has always been strong. It is as if going

to church had nothing to do with true spirituality. The reason for that has been the influence of low-church pietistic movements with which the Lord has blessed Finns abundantly. These movements had remained loyal to the church, but most of their activities happened outside Sunday service. Yet almost 90% of the population still belongs to the church. Even though they do not have anything to do with the spirituality of their grandparents nor the spirituality of these old revival movements anymore, they still want to be part of the church and definitely want their children to be baptized by the church. They just never want to visit the Sunday service at 10 o'clock.

Why? For two reasons, probably. One: Lutheran Sunday worship seems irrelevant, people usually say. Two: It's deadly boring. For most common people anyway.

People who go to the St. Thomas Mass say it's not irrelevant. And even though it takes two hours, it is not boring. Why? This is a very interesting question.

The ordinary Lutheran service communicates mainly with people's intelligence. There has been surprisingly little room for mystery. Even a few years ago it was still quite common not to have communion in the main service. The central thing for our church since the Reformation has been the word. We have been proud to be called the "church of the word." In many ways the Lutheran church still lives in the age of Enlightenment. Teaching, preaching, and preserving doctrine are still of uttermost importance for the ministry of the church. But teaching, words, and doctrines are not immediately relevant for an ordinary urban person.

What would they look for if attending a service? Probably some kind of encounter with the holy. But the structure of the Lutheran worship does not seem to support their expectation. They mainly encounter the minister who preaches his ideas about the holy—and the organist, who loves the art of classical music.

Teaching the word and performing classical music should not be the main tools for evangelizing the postmodern person. The age of Enlightenment is coming to a close. People are rediscovering intuition, the spiritual dimension of life and human existence; wholeness is the great theme. Secularism is out. Spirituality is in. In this new order of reality, rational argument, reason, words themselves are losing their value, while rituals, experience, symbols, signs, and stories are gaining ground.<sup>1</sup>

This is the reason why people love visiting churches during the week when the buildings are empty. They come as tourists on vacation or as busy businessmen fleeing their hectic job, just to sit quietly a minute or two. "Just to breathe," they say. The expression is not an accident. People are now rediscovering that they are more than just talking heads. They also have a heart and a belly, centers for emotions and instincts. And we in the church should learn to understand these two images.

The heart is the easier of the two. Emotional intelligence is one of the keywords of the day. But the belly—the image for breathing—is as important. It should be familiar for us in the church because the Old Testament word for the Spirit is *ruach*. But for some reason we have only seen the Holy Spirit in the image of a dove descending upon the head of Jesus. Jesus himself said of those who receive the Spirit, "Out of your belly shall the living waters flow." There is a need for a new way of communicating the mysteries. Words will never do it. Doctrines would only anaesthetize. You have to proclaim for the whole person. Therefore it is the time to descend from head to belly.

We were helped here by the Orthodox tradition. The Orthodox church in Finland is small but visibly gaining popularity in recent years. They have had lots of new converts especially among the intelligentsia. The message

of these new converts has always been crystal clear. It is the language of mystery, the liturgy, icons, and richness of symbols that make all the difference. Rituals connect us with transcendence and awe, which have always been emphasized in the Eastern tradition, partly because the Enlightenment never touched Russia or Constantinople. They have always believed in saints and miracles. And they have the prayer of epiclesis, "Come, Holy Spirit!" that has always been like a footnote in the official Lutheran book of liturgy.

Our thirst for relevant worship was not an academic issue for us when we started our preparation process for the Mass. As much as we discussed the Mass, we prayed together. We ended up in the format we now have in the St. Thomas Mass more from the practical (and spiritual) point of view than from theory. That was due to the diversity of the planing group, which meant diversity of spirituality. All spiritual movements had their gift to give.

Charismatics gave us their appreciation of the presence of the Holy Spirit in prayer and healing. From Taizé we got their music and love for silence (and the processional cross!). Evangelicals stressed the need for mission. All of us wanted to get away from the head-oriented worship. We wanted a rich liturgy with lots of room for silence, meditation, symbols, and the drama of the worship.

There is yet another aspect to this. The head-oriented service is a very orderly, well-performed event. The Holy Spirit arrives punctually at 10 a.m. and leaves the church at 11. Everybody sits neatly in their proper pews strictly following the rules, all of them. Now sit, now stand! Now take your place in the communion table! The churches are even built in a rather militaristic fashion, reminding you of barracks or castles.

The head culture is for control. Therefore we in the Lutheran church have always emphasized that the Holy Spirit is the Spirit of order. But postmodern culture rediscovered chaos.

And the very thing that we now lack in Western Christianity is holy chaos. There cannot be any real drama, silence, nor any real movement (physical or spiritual) without an element of chaos. This is probably the reason why we Lutherans have so easily given up the epiclesis. The Spirit is the Spirit of creation, and there cannot be creativity without uncomfortable chaos.

There is much more room for holy chaos in the Eastern tradition. Their buildings with onion domes don't remind you of barracks. There is this continuous movement with participants walking around the church light-

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ing their tapers, bowing before icons, and making constant signs of the cross. How non-dynamic Lutheran worship looks by comparison, with all those frozen bodies sitting like columns in their places.

Control has to do with power. In the Lutheran church, control has always been in the hands of the clergy. That has produced passivity. Laypeople have had a very limited role in the worship, if any at all. The worship has been like a two-person show, the pastor and the organist doing it all. No wonder that the term layman suggests an amateur. The lack of a relevant role in the service has produced insidious alienation. A Lutheran layperson in the Sunday service looks like a stranger at her own birthday party.

If there was one thing certain when we first started the Mass, it was to give the common worship back to the people. In our case it was easy: half of the planning group was nonprofessionals. So we knew we wanted a Mass carried

out jointly by laypeople and theologians, by men and women, by people of all ages and by people with different spiritual and social backgrounds.

There is one more vital thing to add to the question of control. Who owns the worship service? Who has the right to say what is relevant in the worship? Usually at the heart of the ownership is the clergy. Then comes the organist who owns all the copyrights for the music. Then come all those who maintain the building. But that is still not the whole picture. In the pietist tradition there has been a strong split between Christians and non-Christians. There are the saved ones—and all the rest. And the true worship has been in the hands of the true Christians. The true believers are the owners of worship. They could be called settlers. When they found their worship and their church they came in and inhabited it. And when they learned the ways of the house they adopted everything in it. It became theirs for the rest of their life.

There is a something exclusive in pietist and evangelical traditions with their idea of a “true believer.” Mission-oriented Christianity turns against its own mission easily, producing religious alienation. The threshold of the church becomes an obstacle too big for an ordinary, uncertain person to cross. Even if he does come in, he feels much of the time that he is a stranger there with his small and moderate faith.

We wanted to have a service where everybody would feel at home. Even if they could not consider themselves “true believers.” And, the truth is, most of the people in Christian Finland would consider themselves “non-believers.” They believe in God but they presume (and quite correctly) that their belief in God differs from the teachings of the church. On the other hand, they wouldn't call themselves “seekers” either. They definitely do not want to be treated as objects for converting to Christianity. So why do they come, if they don't have religious convictions but don't wish to be evangelized either?

This is again part of the great shift in the culture. Seekers of our time are described rather as postmodern nomads or vagabonds rather than modern pilgrims.<sup>2</sup> Unlike pilgrims, vagabonds do not have a final destination when they arrive. The vagabond does not know how long he will stay where he is now. All he knows is that sooner or later he has to be on the road again. So for many of them the church is just a station on the way.

Certainly there are many who are searching for “something more in life.” Such gluttony is typical for postmodernity. But even though disguised and inexpressible, there is this instinctual thirst for spirituality and an encounter with sacred. Humanity is a ritual-making creature, and that urge is the result of a prior motivation to find a center of focus. Rituals express, and relive, that center or focus.<sup>3</sup>

That is the chance for the church. Our experience in the St. Thomas Mass is that even vagabonds need a spiritual home. Not just to stop for awhile as they first intend, but to stay and commit themselves.

How do you make these people feel at home during their stop at the church? By receiving them as brothers and sisters. By letting them understand that they are part of the ownership of the worship as well as others, even without a commitment to faith yet. The time for committing comes later, if it will. It can be called a solidarity of sinners, but it is more than that. It is solidarity of imperfect Christians incorporating human doubt into spiritual experience. Faith and doubt are related. The first spiritual experience for many is doubt. This is where we got the name for the Mass. Thomas was the disciple known for both faith and doubt. The idea is that there is a doubting Thomas in everybody, even in the most dedicated Christians. We wanted to avoid the seductive idea of two classes among participants in the Mass: those who possess the faith and

those who do not. Or those who communicate the gospel to those who are on the receiving side. We thought that these two elements are usually found in the same person.

It seems that the basic spiritual question in the minds of people of the Enlightenment was a theoretical question of God's existence. Does He exist? Is God real? Is there somebody out there at all? These were good questions in their time. But we have new ones, questions like: are we ourselves real? Do we exist? Because if there is nobody home—no *you* at your end—it is hard to enjoy a true fellowship. It takes two to get connected. There must be somebody at both ends.

Spirituality means waking up. Most people, even though they don't know it, are asleep. People were born asleep, they live asleep, they marry in their sleep, they breed children in their sleep, all without ever waking up. They never understand the loveliness and the beauty of this thing we call human existence. All mystics—Catholic, Protestant, non-Christian, no matter what their theology, no matter what their religion—are unanimous on one thing: that all is well, all is well. Though everything is a mess, all is well. A strange paradox, to be sure. But, tragically, most people never get to see that all is well because they are asleep. They are having a nightmare.<sup>4</sup>

Spirituality is to wake up. And evangelism can be seen as a mission to raise up all who sleep or who are the living dead. But you can't raise the dead by proving that there is God. That would be reviving just their brain. You have to revive the whole person. The whole worshipper, not just his head. But waking up post-Enlightenment people is a complicated mission. It means raising a new awareness of oneself as well as of God.

We all share the difficulty of being fully present in our own lives. We have a lack of connection with our inner

being. And it is difficult to worship God in the mass if the worshipper is not wholly present. It leads to a contradiction in terms. The word communion means fellowship, communing, two becoming one. Communion does not mean only the practical act of receiving bread and wine. It means a total connection on both sides of the agents.

Why is part of us lacking? Partly because we are not in connection with our inner being. Some live in their heads, some in their feelings. But also because we seem to be incapable of living in the present. Some live in the future, some in the past. True worship (like real life itself) is found only at the present. So the key question we should ask is this: how do we find ways to get connected with the present and with our whole being?

We were greatly helped by the people from Taizé. They introduced us to the tradition of silence retreats. With the package came the rich tradition of Christian mysticism. Anna-Maija Raittila, one of the Taizé leaders in Finland, leads a small retreat house in a place called Morbacka. During our preparation time we held many retreats. In the early years we even had a generally accepted rule that everybody among the elders of the Thomas Mass should go at least once a year to a retreat if at all possible.

A retreat means a lovingly guided tour, not just to stillness and presence in my whole life but to the presence of God as well. To experience the presence of my life is vital because it prepares the way to encounter God. And worship is our response to that encounter. The praise begins from that encounter, leading the worshipper to communion.

The culture of the city is so far from silence that to most of the people a silence retreat is a scary thought at first. So we needed a practical introduction to it and guides for the tour. We started to train retreat leaders with the Finnish retreat movement called the Friends of Silence. Nowadays we are well known in the Finnish busi-

ness community for our retreats. We arrange special retreats for executives and also for work places. And we have seen many of these people gradually finding their way to the St. Thomas Mass. There is an old Finnish expression: "The hunger grows from eating." The retreats for seculars have become a powerful tool of evangelism leading more vagabonds to discover the spiritual side of life.

From the very first Thomas Mass we have had the element of silence in the liturgy. To get a crowd of a thousand people silent even for just one minute is a thrilling experience.

### *Holistic Liturgy*

Each part of the Thomas Mass is carefully thought out. It begins with a possibility for a private confession beforehand. For this we have two ministers, usually a man and a woman, receiving people in two separate rooms by the main door an hour before the Mass.

Just before the beginning, the project leader for that Sunday comes forward to welcome everybody to worship. He introduces his team for the Mass and helps participants to get oriented. We call him the host of the evening. We felt that the Mass should in a way be like a dinner party, which always has a host. It is the task of the host to make people feel welcome and comfortable. This is important because so many of those who do not worship regularly feel out-of-place in the church.

The host is an image. Every time Jesus attended somebody's home and ate with the people in the house, there was a host. Somebody opened his house and prepared the meal for Jesus, who loved dining with common people. In the Thomas Mass, the celebrant is not the host. The host is represented by a layperson and could be anybody, speaking ordinary people's language. We have constructed this tension between the liturgical language and the common talk intentionally. For us the celebrant represents the sacred but everybody else the secular.

The music in the St. Thomas Mass is a vital part of the worshipping experience. We do not normally use organs for the music but we have a band, a choir, and a small group of singers to help people sing. Everything is geared to common singing. There is no performing or solos in the Mass. The genre of music varies from Mass to Mass depending on the team in charge. We do not have one music director but each Sunday the music is conducted by a different music leader gathering her kind of band and making her kind of arrangements for songs to sing. This is to guarantee the pluralism in the style of music. So sometimes it is more like jazz, another Sunday maybe more toward the classical. We have produced two songbooks of our own plus we always use the official Lutheran hymnal, too. Many of our songs come from Taizé. The songs for the Sunday are chosen by the host, celebrant, and music leader of that Sunday together.

Even though much of the Mass is done by volunteers, the musicians are paid. In 1998 we paid for 130 different musicians, which gives an idea of the variety in our music.

The St. Thomas Mass has three parts in the two-hour event. We call them the liturgy of prayer, the liturgy of the word, and the liturgy of the eucharist.

### *The Liturgy of Prayer*

The liturgy of prayer begins with the procession from the entrance door. In it the congregation sees the team for the Sunday. It also brings a sense of movement into the still church. It is not just a first act of the drama of the worship. It is a symbol of the journey from the world to heaven.

The celebrant then invites the congregation to take part in the penitential rite, which is a general confession made by the entire assembly, concluded by the celebrant's absolution. There are two laypeople to assist the priest. With their more colloquial language they express their sense of guilt to make the rite more relevant.

Between the confessions the assembly joins singing the kyrie. There are lengthy periods of silence between the kyries.

Then a prayer leader invites the assembly to common prayer. That is the time in the St. Thomas Mass for the holy chaos. Many things happen at the same time. But there is a structure in the freedom. For one thing, people are encouraged to wander around the church to visit the prayer altars along the sides of the church. We assist people who feel that they do not know how to pray. Lighting a taper is already an act of prayer. Looking at the face of Christ in an icon is an act of prayer. Reading the prayers on the prayer altar is praying. We encourage people to write their own prayer requests on a piece of paper available on the prayer altars. We have altar servants by the altars to receive the people and their prayer petitions. At the same time, people are invited to come to the main altar to receive a special blessing or to be anointed with oil. Especially those who are sick or tired, depressed, or in need of a word of encouragement are welcomed to the main altar.

Eighteen people dressed in albs by the main altar are ready to pray with the people who come with their burdens (they also assist the celebrant later on in the liturgy and distributing the sacrament). People respond by coming in crowds, many of them with tears in their eyes.

So the church is full of movement with people wandering to these stations of the sacred. Behind the main altar in the small baptismal chapel we sometimes conduct weddings, baptisms, or confirmations during this period of the Mass. There is a unique mixture of very opposite emotions in the church: plenty of tears but also smiles of relief and joy. Faith in prayer is there as well as wonder and doubt. And in the midst of it all is the sound of worship and music.

One could imagine the altars having far too religious an effect upon the unchurched city people to be relevant. But it seems to be the opposite. The

effect of altars upon city vagabonds is amazing. Anything that even looks like an altar is crowded. We get approximately two hundred prayer requests in each Mass. All of them are prayed for in our prayer groups during the week.

We have started occasionally to export the prayer altars outside of the church building. We have erected them with permission at Stockman's, the main shopping center in the city, and at the Helsinki Olympic Stadium for the Helsinki marathon. We even had a prayer altar for three days in the house of Parliament.

### *The Liturgy of the Word*

Readings from Scripture and the chants between the readings form the main part of the liturgy of the word, accompanied by a homily and the confession of faith. Usually all the texts including the Gospel are read by the laypeople in the St. Thomas Mass.

The homily has a peculiar role in the St. Thomas Mass. We do not have preachers of our own. There are no vicars or senior pastors in the community because our Mass is not concentrated upon visible, charismatic preachers. Instead of having a statue we have a mosaic. That means we do not have one voice nor one theological stance to proclaim the kingdom.

That opens the door for criticism, that we are without a clear theological line. Which is true of course. We did not want to form a traditional movement with all these theological boundaries, and so far we have avoided becoming one. We reasoned that worshippers would find their spiritual home among the many spiritual movements in Helsinki. The Mass was planned just to be a worshipping network of different movements in the city, just getting together once a week for the common Mass. Teaching and all the spiritual nuances would be available somewhere else.

Preaching the word seems to carry the seed of division among the Christians. It is easier to pray with people of different religious opinions than listen-

ing to them teach. So every Sunday half of the audience are nodding their heads while the other half are shaking them.

The confession of faith comes after the sermon, uniting the assembly again. The collection is right after. Usually we give one half of the collection to charity. We have bought a hospital airplane for use in Africa, for instance.

### *The Liturgy of the Eucharist*

The communion is the highlight of the St. Thomas Mass. To distribute the sacrament we need a team of eighteen people, including the celebrant. Usually half of the team are laypeople. The ministers we get from different parishes in Helsinki. We wanted it this way to maintain communication with the clergy of the city. The sacrament is given in nine stations in the church. There is the holy chaos again when people are hastening to the stations in the midst of the sounds of worship.

Vagabonds' attraction to and love for the eucharist underlines the importance of ritual for postmodern culture. Rituals connect microcosm to macrocosm. They connect a creature with the creator. They connect the past and the present. They connect me with my inner self and psyche, with my neighbor, with creation.<sup>5</sup>

The popularity of the St. Thomas Mass proves that the reason why the Lutheran church speaks to a shrinking number of people is partly that the current Lutheran church has denied and destroyed the rituals it had and partly that the rituals the church is using (and the way they are used) are not appropriate for the present culture. Our experience is that while people want more liturgy, the church gives them more words.

In the liturgy the presence of the holy is the center of focus. The liturgy of the eucharist connects the wor-

shiper with majesty, transcendence, awe, and a child's capacity to enter into the moment, to experience wonder.

In God's presence there is no need for cold rationalism. And if you discover the ways to communicate His mysteries, you can raise the dead and wake up the ones who are sleeping. *LF*

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### *Notes*

1. R. Warren, "Worship must link with modern culture," *Church Times* (1994): n.p.
2. Zygmunt Bauman, *Postmodern Ethics* (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 1993), 240.
3. Warren, n.p.
4. Anthony de Mello, *Awareness* (New York: Doubleday, 1992), 5.
5. Warren, n.p.