

## NOTES ON THE LITURGY: THE SANCTUS

BY RICH LUSK

“Sanctus” is Latin for “holy” (e.g., “sanctification,” “sanctuary”). The Sanctus is part of the church’s traditional communion liturgy and has been called “the most ancient, the most celebrated, and the most universal of Christian hymns” (Luther Reed, *The Lutheran Liturgy*, 313-14). While there are variations, the basic form leading up to and including the Sanctus looks something like this:

Pastor: The love of God the Father, the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, and the communion of the Holy Spirit be with you all. Holy things for holy people!<sup>1</sup>

**People: The gifts of God for the people of God!**

Pastor: The peace of the Lord be with you!<sup>2</sup>

**People: And also with you!**

Pastor: Let us give thanks to the Lord our God.

**People: It is good and right to do so!**

Pastor: Truly it is good and right that we should at all times and in all places, give thanks to you, O Lord, Holy Father, almighty and everlasting King. Therefore with angels and archangels and all the company of heaven and all the Church on earth, we praise and magnify your glorious name, evermore praising you and singing:<sup>3</sup>

**The Sanctus:**

*Holy! Holy! Holy! Lord, God of Hosts!*

*Heaven and earth are full of your glory!*

*Hosanna in the highest!*

*Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord.*

*Hosanna in the highest!*<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> “Holy things for holy people!” is called the *sancta sanctis* and is found in ancient Eastern liturgies. It is both an invitation to the table (we are holy in Christ, so we have access to the holy meal) and a warning (because holiness of life is essential to proper participation).

<sup>2</sup> “The peace of the Lord be with you!” is called the *pax* (Latin for “peace”) and at times has been associated with what the NT calls the kiss of peace. Sometimes it placed earlier in the liturgy, in conjunction with the call to worship or the declaration of absolution. Luther connected the *pax* with the gospel: “It is the voice of the Gospel announcing the forgiveness of sins, the only and most worthy preparation for the Lord’s table . . . hence I wish it announced with face toward the people as the bishops were accustomed to do” (Reed, *The Lutheran Liturgy*, 342). This resonates well with Jn. 20:19-21. But the *pax* also reminds us of our duty to be reconciled horizontally with one another before offering worship vertically to God and especially before participating in the Lord’s Supper (cf. Mt. 5:21ff; 1 Cor. 11:17ff).

<sup>3</sup> These sentences tie together thanksgiving with heavenly access. From the beginning, the Lord’s Supper has also been known as the Eucharist (“thanksgiving”) because Jesus prayed two prayers of thanks at the Last Supper, one over each element. Traditionally, a great prayer of thanksgiving is offered before the Lord’s Supper liturgy actually begins in order to flavor the entire event. By focusing on gratitude, we are not only worshipping God but also being trained in how to live the rest of our lives. The reference to the angels and all the company of heaven indicates that New Covenant worship takes place in the heavenly sanctuary. These lines are loosely based on Heb. 12:22ff as well as the book of Revelation.

<sup>4</sup> Another version of the Sanctus reads:

*Holy is God, the Lord of Sabaoth!*

*Holy is God, the Lord of Sabaoth!*

*Holy is God, the Lord of Sabaoth!*

*Behold his glory filleth all the earth!*

Yet another version reads:

*Holy, holy, holy, Lord God of hosts!*

*Heaven and earth are full of Thy glory:*

These spoken sentences<sup>5</sup> and the sung Sanctus are usually referred to as the Preface to communion. Taken together, they provide a majestic and celebrative introduction to the holy feast. They drown out any morbid introspectionism as we approach the Eucharist by giving an objective basis for our common praise and thanks. These words build anticipation for the meal and set our hearts and minds in a joyful frame. As Reed says, "There is nothing homiletical or didactic about these crisp but lofty sentences. At this point the church is not endeavoring to make or instruct believers. It is unitedly pouring out its love and gratitude in reverent commemoration and praise" (*Worship: A Study of Corporate Devotion*, 101).

The Sanctus is also known as Tersanctus, or the Hymn of the Seraphim, or the Triumphal Hymn.<sup>6</sup> The version of the Sanctus above is a combination of Isa. 6:3 and Ps. 118:26/Mt. 21:9. By linking the words of an OT prophetic text with words from the Psalter spoken to Christ in the gospels, the Sanctus bears eloquent witness to the unity of Scripture. The Isaiah passage is taken from the account of the prophet's commissioning as he is called into his office by means of an awful, overwhelming vision of God's holiness. The second passage originates in the Psalter, but was also used at Jesus' triumphal entry, as he rode into Jerusalem on a lowly donkey just days before his sacrificial death. By juxtaposing these passages, this version of the Sanctus gives us an amazing portrayal of God: He is both high and exalted, filling the earth with glory, and yet at the same time humbly serving his people who will reject and crucify him. Thus, the Sanctus encompasses the whole of the gospel, both God's glory and God's grace, both God's holiness and God's humility.

In connection with the Lord's Supper, the Sanctus reminds us that the table is the climatic conclusion of the worship service. God has served us through his Word; now he serves us at his table. We are to approach the meal with praise on our lips and gratitude in our hearts. We are to come knowing we are at peace with our fellow Christians. We are to come hungry, ready to receive the body and blood of our Lord with the open hand of faith. The combination of Isa. 6:3 and Mt. 21:9 shows that God is holy and lifted up, and yet he humbles himself to come to us in the common elements of bread and wine.<sup>7</sup>

The Sanctus is part of a glorious, exalted celebration. In this hymn, we boldly put the words of heaven on our lips. We join with the sinless angels and the spirits of just men made perfect in singing, "Holy, holy, holy!" We are participating in the heavenly liturgy, witnessed by the apostle John (Rev. 4:8). The Sanctus accents our greatest privilege as members of the New Covenant: access to the Most Holy Place has now been granted to us through the crucified flesh of Christ (Heb. 10:19ff). For just a moment, we become a part of the unceasing worship of

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*Glory be to thee, O Lord Most High.*

<sup>5</sup> Note that these sentences can be altered according to the church season or special occasion. The Preface is found in various forms in most ancient liturgies. It was formalized by 400 at the latest. Hippolytus' liturgy, perhaps the oldest complete liturgical service we have, includes a preface but does not include the Sanctus, most likely out of reaction against Jewish (OT) elements in the Christian liturgy (Reed, *Lutheran Worship*, 314-15). But the Sanctus is found in every other major liturgy from the early church (e.g. the liturgies of St. James and St. Mark, Apostolic Constitutions, etc.).

<sup>6</sup> The Sanctus should not to be confused with the Trisagion ("Holy God, Holy Mighty, Holy Immortal, have mercy upon us") or another angelic hymn, Gloria in Excelsis Deo (taken from Lk. 2).

<sup>7</sup> Remember that Mt. 21:9 is a quotation from Ps. 118:26. The fragment from Ps. 118 is especially fitting as part of the communion liturgy since most scholars believe Jesus and his disciples sang Ps. 118 at the Last Supper (Reed, *Lutheran Worship*, 314).

heaven. Singing this hymn reminds us that at the Lord's Table, we are feasting in the heavenly sanctuary (Heb. 12:22ff) and receiving a foretaste of the promised eschatological banquet.

The Sanctus has been used in every branch of the church as far back as liturgical historians can trace. It is undoubtedly part of the oldest liturgical tradition. Several very early church fathers, such as Clement of Rome (died about 104), Tertullian (died about 220), Origen (died 254), Serapion (died 360), Athanasius (died 373), Cyril of Jerusalem (died 373), and John Chrysostom (died 407) make reference to it. M. F. Sadler claims the Sanctus must be apostolic in origin. If the apostles desired congregations to take part in the Divine Service, they must have established some basic forms of worship such as the Sanctus:

A form, of course, may be used as a mere matter of form [e.g., vain repetition], just as extempore prayer may be made the vehicle of anger, wrath, and blasphemy; but there are forms to the full spirit of which the soul of man here on earth can scarcely hope to rise; such is the prayer which Christ taught, and such is the simplest of all forms, the angelic hymn, "Holy, Holy, Holy, is the Lord of Hosts." What tainted soul can ever hope to rise to these words as the pure spirits do, from whom we have learnt them? . . .

Forms are essential if the congregation are to take any orderly part in public worship beyond the repetition of the single word "Amen" at the end of prayers . . .

The evidence of all Christian antiquity on the subject of ancient Liturgies puts it beyond all doubt that the Apostles themselves ordained the use of certain forms in the Service for the Administration of Holy Communion, which both Scripture and antiquity unite in testifying to have been the leading service of the Church when gathered together on the Lord's Day.

By these forms the lay people, as priests of God, were able to co-operate in the most sacred parts of their most sacred service . . .

The use of these [ancient liturgical] documents reaches to a time when there was no central ecclesiastical authority recognized all over Christendom – such as the Pope – to recommend to distant churches the adoption of any form used by his own Church, and when there was no union of Church and State to compel obedience to any ritual.

These Liturgies, whilst in some respects differing from one another very widely, all agree in certain remarkable features. They all contain particular forms of words, which are in substance the same, and the most noticeable of these are forms which the people either use wholly, or in which they take their part along with the celebrant by response . . .

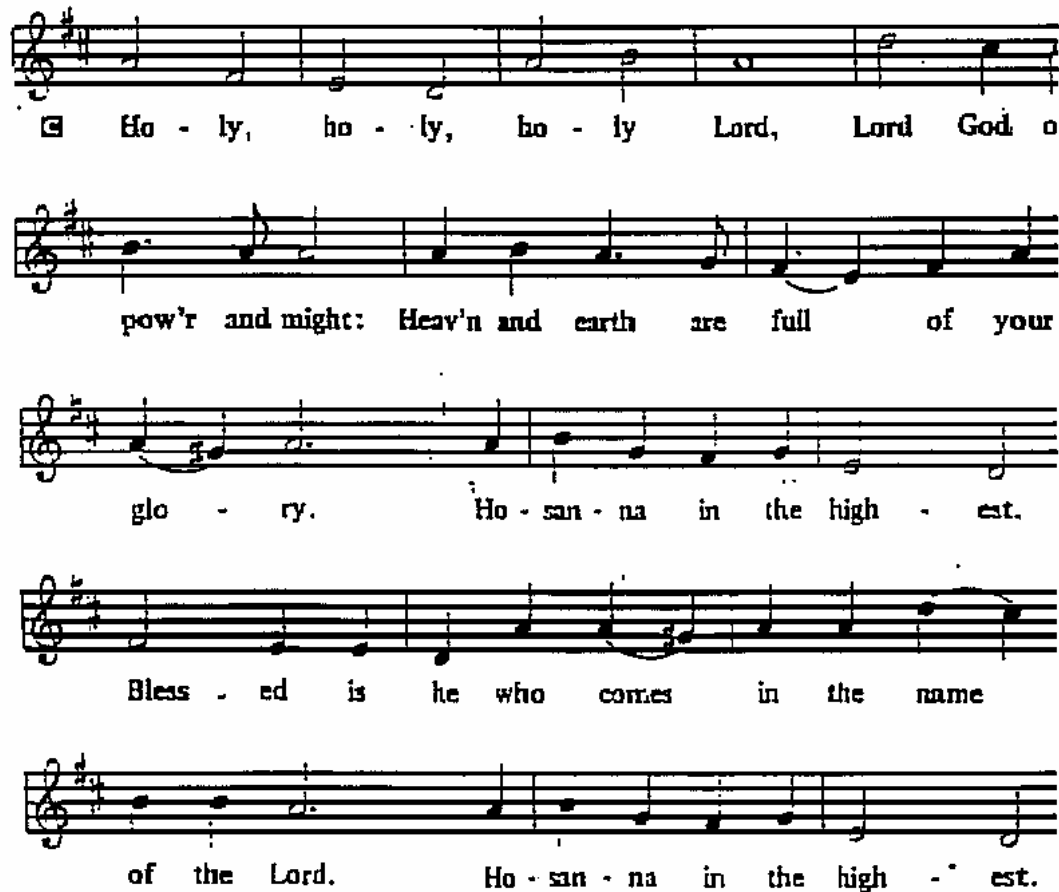
The Hymn of the Seraphim . . . is embodied in six ancient Liturgies used in all parts of the ancient world [from the remotest times]. . .

[T]he hymn itself, though always prefaced by words used by the priest, is invariably sung or said by the people (*Church Doctrine – Bible Truth*, 273ff; see also 200ff).

In the Medieval period, with the rise of sacerdotal tendencies, the Sanctus was often the only portion of the liturgy still sung by the people. Charlemagne commanded it to be sung by both clergy and laity in 789. At the time of the Reformation, the Sanctus (and, in fact, the entire Preface) was fully restored in most Protestant prayer books and liturgies. Today, the Sanctus is perhaps the most widely used liturgical text in all branches of the church East and West.

The Sanctus has been put to various tunes, of course. The Sanctus found in Rev. 4 inspired Reginald Heber's famous hymn, "Holy, Holy, Holy." We will seek to use Sanctus chants and melodies that are both reverent and joyful. We should never tire of singing the Sanctus. After all, if the angels in heaven sing it day and night (Rev. 4:8), surely we can sing it once a week!

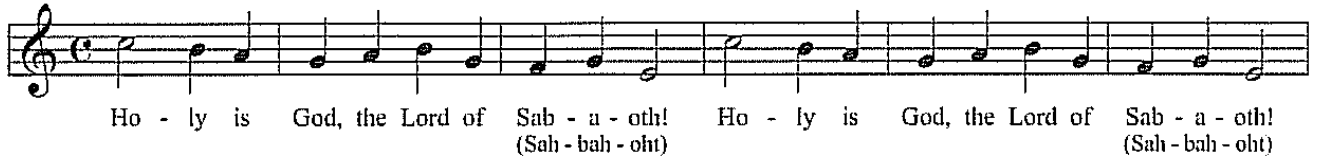
During the seasons of Advent and Lent, we will use this version:



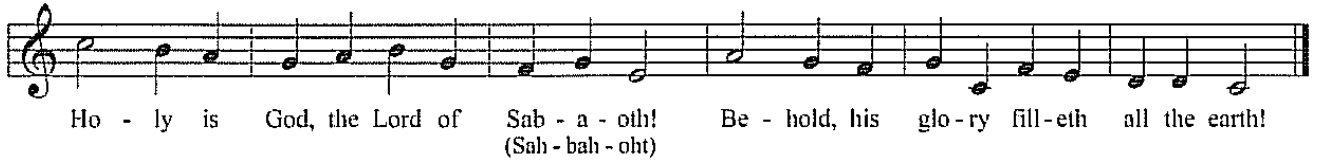
Ho - ly, ho - ly, ho - ly Lord, Lord God o  
pow'r and might: Heav'n and earth are full of your  
glo - ry. Ho - san - na in the high - est.  
Bless - ed is he who comes in the name  
of the Lord. Ho - san - na in the high - est.

This version is especially fitting during these seasons since it includes the aspect of divine humility.

During the rest of the church year, we will use this version:



Ho - ly is God, the Lord of Sab - a - oth!  
(Sah - bah - oht) Ho - ly is God, the Lord of Sab - a - oth!  
(Sah - bah - oht)



Ho - ly is God, the Lord of Sab - a - oth!  
(Sah - bah - oht) Be - hold, his glo - ry fill - eth all the earth!