The Sacrament of the Altar

Note: In this Sacrament, we cling to and trust God’s Word alone. Jesus does not lie to us or deceive us. Therefore, when He tells us the bread and wine are His body and blood, they are what He says. The key to understanding the benefit of the Sacrament is Christ’s words “for you.” What we receive in this Sacrament is a great “treasure”: the forgiveness of sins. The whole Gospel is comprehended in this Sacrament and is offered to us through the Word, which promises that in and under the bread and wine we receive the body and blood that was sacrificed on the cross for our salvation. Those who believe the Words of promise receive the forgiveness this Sacrament promises. Luther urges Christians to receive the Sacrament frequently. Those who realize the enormity of their sin, how many dangers abound, and how great Christ’s gifts are that are given in the Sacrament will receive the Lord’s Supper as often as possible. This is precisely why the early Lutheran congregations began to offer the Lord’s Supper every Lord’s Day and on other festival days to those wishing to receive it. (See AC X; SA III VI; FC Ep VII and SD VII.)

1 Just as we have heard about Holy Baptism, so we must also speak about the other Sacrament, in these same three points: What is it? What are its benefits? and Who is to receive it? And all these points are established through the words by which Christ has instituted this Sacrament. 2 Everyone who desires to be a Christian and go to this Sacrament should know them. For it is not our intention to let people come to the Sacrament and administer it to them if they do not know what they seek or why they come. The words, however, are these:

3 Our Lord Jesus Christ, on the night He was betrayed, took bread, and when He had given thanks, He broke it and gave it to the disciples and said, “Take, eat; this is My body, which is given for you. This do in remembrance of me.”

In the same way also, He took the cup after supper, and when He had given thanks, He gave it to them, saying: “Drink of it, all of you; this is My blood of the new testament, which is shed for you for the forgiveness of sins. This do, as often as you drink it, in remembrance of Me.”

4 Here also we do not wish to enter into controversy and fight with the defamers and blasphemers of this Sacrament, but to learn first (as we did with Baptism) what is of the greatest importance. The chief point is God’s Word and ordinance or command. For the Sacrament has
not been invented nor introduced by any man. Without anyone’s counsel and deliberation it has been instituted by Christ. 5 The Ten Commandments, the Lord’s Prayer, and the Creed keep their nature and worth, even if you never keep, pray, or believe them. So also this honorable Sacrament remains undisturbed. Nothing is withdrawn or taken from it, even though we use and administer it unworthily. 6 Do you think God cares about what we do or believe, as though on that account He should allow His ordinance to be changed? Why, in all worldly matters everything stays the way God has created and ordered it, no matter how we employ or use it. 7 This point must always be taught, for by it the chatter of nearly all the fanatical spirits can be repelled. For they regard the Sacraments, unlike God’s Word, as something that we do.

8 “Now, what is the Sacrament of the Altar?”

Answer, “It is the true body and blood of our Lord Jesus Christ, in and under the bread and wine, which we Christians are commanded by Christ’s Word to eat and to drink.” 9 Just as we have said that Baptism is not simple water, so here also we say that though the Sacrament is bread and wine, it is not mere bread and wine, such as are ordinarily served at the table [1 Corinthians 10:16–17]. But this is bread and wine included in, and connected with, God’s Word.

10 It is the Word, I say, that makes and sets this Sacrament apart. So it is not mere bread and wine, but is, and is called, Christ’s body and blood [1 Corinthians 11:23–27]. For it is said, “When the Word is joined to the element or natural substance, it becomes a Sacrament.” This saying of St. Augustine is so properly and so well put that he has scarcely said anything better. The Word must make a Sacrament out of the element, or else it remains a mere element. 11 Now, it is not the word or ordinance of a prince or emperor. But it is the Word of the grand Majesty, at whose feet all creatures should fall and affirm it is as He says, and accept it with all reverence, fear, and humility [Isaiah 45:23; Philippians 2:10].

12 With this Word you can strengthen your conscience and say, “If a hundred thousand devils, together with all fanatics, should rush
forward, crying, ‘How can bread and wine be Christ’s body and blood?’ and such, I know that all spirits and scholars together are not as wise as is the Divine Majesty in His little finger” [see 1 Corinthians 1:25]. 13 Now here stands Christ’s Word, “Take, eat; this is My body.... Drink of it, all of you; this is My blood of the new testament,” and so on. Here we stop to watch those who will call themselves His masters and make the matter different from what He has spoken. It is true, indeed, that if you take away the Word or regard the Sacrament without the words, you have nothing but mere bread and wine. 14 But if the words remain with them, as they shall and must, then, by virtue of the words, it is truly Christ’s body and blood. What Christ’s lips say and speak, so it is. He can never lie or deceive [Titus 1:2].

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from 1530 Large Catechism

15 It is easy to reply to all kinds of questions about which people are troubled at the present time, such as this one: “Can even a wicked priest serve at and administer the Sacrament?” And whatever other questions like this there may be. 16 For here we conclude and say, “Even though an imposter takes or distributes the Sacrament, a person still receives the true Sacrament, that is, Christ’s true body and blood, just as truly as a person who <receives or> administers it in the most worthy way.” For the Sacrament is not founded upon people’s holiness, but upon God’s Word. Just as no saint on earth, indeed, no angel in heaven, can make bread and wine be Christ’s body and blood, so also no one can change or alter it, even though it is misused. 17 The Word by which it became a Sacrament and was instituted does not become false because of the person or his unbelief. For Christ does not say, “If you believe or are worthy, you receive My body and blood.” No, He says, “Take, eat and drink; this is My body and blood.” Likewise, He says, “Do this” (i.e., what I now do, institute, give, and ask you, take). 18 That is like saying, “No matter whether you are worthy or unworthy, you have here His body and blood by virtue of these words that are added to the bread and wine.” 19 Note and remember this well. For upon these
words rest all our foundation, protection, and defense against all errors and deception that have ever come or may yet come.

20 So we have, in a brief way, covered the first point that deals with this Sacrament’s essence. Now examine further the effectiveness and benefits that really caused the Sacrament to be instituted. This is its most necessary part, so that we may know what we should seek and gain there. 21 This is plain and clear from the words just mentioned, “This is My body and blood, given and shed for you for the forgiveness of sins.” 22 Briefly, that is like saying, “For this reason we go to the Sacrament: there we receive such a treasure by and in which we gain forgiveness of sins.”  “Why so?” “Because the words stand here and give us this. Therefore, Christ asks me to eat and drink, so that this treasure may be my own and may benefit me as a sure pledge and token. In fact, it is the very same treasure that is appointed for me against my sins, death, and every disaster.”

23 On this account it is indeed called a food of souls, which nourishes and strengthens the new man. For by Baptism we are first born anew [John 3:5]. But, as we said before, there still remains the old vicious nature of flesh and blood in mankind. There are so many hindrances and temptations of the devil and of the world that we often become weary and faint, and sometimes we also stumble [Hebrews 12:3].

24 Therefore, the Sacrament is given as a daily pasture and sustenance, that faith may refresh and strengthen itself [Psalm 23:1–3] so that it will not fall back in such a battle, but become ever stronger and stronger. 25 The new life must be guided so that it continually increases and progresses. 26 But it must suffer much opposition. For the devil is such a furious enemy. When he sees that we oppose him and attack the old man, and that he cannot topple us over by force, he prowls and moves about on all sides [1 Peter 5:8]. He tries every trick and does not stop until he finally wears us out, so that we either renounce our faith or throw up our hands and put up our feet, becoming indifferent or impatient. 27 Now to this purpose the comfort of the Sacrament is given when the heart feels that the burden is
becoming too heavy, so that it may gain here new power and refreshment.

28 But here our wise spirits twist themselves about with their great art and wisdom. They cry out and bawl, “How can bread and wine forgive sins or strengthen faith?” They hear and know that we do not say this about bread and wine. Because, in itself, bread is bread. But we speak about the bread and wine that is Christ’s body and blood and has the words attached to it. That, we say, is truly the treasure—and nothing else—through which such forgiveness is gained. 29 Now the only way this treasure is passed along and made our very own is in the words “Given ... and shed for you.” For in the words you have both truths, that it is Christ’s body and blood, and that it is yours as a treasure and gift. 30 Now Christ’s body can never be an unfruitful, empty thing that does or profits nothing. Yet, no matter how great the treasure is in itself, it must be included in the Word and administered to us. Otherwise we would never be able to know or seek it.

31 Therefore also, it is useless talk when they say that Christ’s body and blood are not given and shed for us in the Lord’s Supper, so we could not have forgiveness of sins in the Sacrament. Although the work is done and the forgiveness of sins is secured by the cross [John 19:30], it cannot come to us in any other way than through the Word. How would we know about it otherwise, that such a thing was accomplished or was to be given to us, unless it were presented by preaching or the oral Word [Romans 10:17; 1 Corinthians 1:21]? How do they know about it? Or how can they receive and make the forgiveness their own, unless they lay hold of and believe the Scriptures and the Gospel? 32 But now the entire Gospel and the article of the Creed—I believe in ... the holy Christian Church, ... the forgiveness of sins, and so on—are embodied by the Word in this Sacrament and presented to us. Why, then, should we let this treasure be torn from the Sacrament when the fanatics must confess that these are the very words we hear everywhere in the Gospel? They cannot say that these words in the Sacrament are of no use, just as they dare not say that the entire Gospel or God’s Word, apart from the Sacrament, is of no use.
33 So we have covered the entire Sacrament, both what it is in itself and what it brings and profits. Now we must also see who is the person that receives this power and benefit. That is answered briefly, as we said above about Baptism and often elsewhere: Whoever believes the words has what they declare and bring. For they are not spoken or proclaimed to stone and wood, but to those who hear them, to whom He says, “Take, eat,” and so on. 34 Because He offers and promises forgiveness of sin, it cannot be received except by faith. This faith He Himself demands in the Word when He says, “Given ... and shed for you,” as if He said, “For this reason I give it, and ask you to eat and drink it, that you may claim it as yours and enjoy it.” 35 Whoever now accepts these words and believes that what they declare is true has forgiveness. But whoever does not believe it has nothing, since he allows it to be offered to him in vain and refuses to enjoy such a saving good. The treasure, indeed, is opened and placed at everyone’s door, yes, upon his table. But it is necessary that you also claim it and confidently view it as the words tell you. 36 This is the entire Christian preparation for receiving this Sacrament worthily. Since this treasure is entirely presented in the words, it cannot be received and made ours in any other way than with the heart. Such a gift and eternal treasure cannot be seized with the fist. 37 Fasting, prayer, and other such things may indeed be outward preparations and discipline for children, so that the body may keep and bring itself modestly and reverently to receive Christ’s body and blood. Yet the body cannot seize and make its own what is given in and with the Sacrament. This is done by the faith in the heart, which discerns this treasure and desires it. 38 This may be enough for what is necessary as a general instruction about this Sacrament. What may be said about it further belongs to another time.

39 In conclusion, since we now have the true understanding and doctrine of the Sacrament, there is also need for some admonition and encouragement. Then people may not let such a great treasure—daily administered and distributed among Christians—pass by unnoticed. So those who want to be Christians may prepare to receive this praiseworthy Sacrament often. 40 For we see that people seem weary...
and lazy about receiving the Sacrament. A great multitude hears the Gospel. Yet because the nonsense of the pope has been abolished and we are freed from his laws and coercion, they go one, two, three years, or even longer without the Sacrament. They act as though they were such strong Christians that they have no need of it. 41 Some allow themselves to be hindered and held up by the excuse that we have taught that no one should approach the Sacrament except those who feel hunger and thirst, which drive them to it. Some pretend that it is a matter of liberty and not necessary. They pretend that it is enough to believe without it. For the most part, they go so far astray that they become quite brutish and finally despise both the Sacrament and God’s Word. 42 Now, it is true, as we have said, that no one should by any means be forced or compelled to go to the Sacrament, lest we institute a new murdering of souls. Nevertheless, it must be known that people who deprive themselves of and withdraw from the Sacrament for such a long time are not to be considered Christians. For Christ has not instituted it to be treated as a show. Instead, He has commanded His Christians to eat it, drink it, and remember Him by it. 43 Indeed, those who are true Christians and value the Sacrament precious and holy will drive and move themselves to go to it. We will present something on this point so that the simpleminded and the weak who also would like to be Christians may be more stirred up to consider the cause and need that ought to move them. 44 In other matters applying to faith, love, and patience, it is not enough to teach and instruct alone. There is also need for daily encouragement [Hebrews 10:24–25]. So here also there is need for us to continue to preach so that people may not become weary and disgusted. For we know and feel how the devil always opposes this and every Christian exercise. He drives and deters people from them as much as he can. 45 We have, in the first place, the clear text in Christ’s very words, “Do this in remembrance of Me” [Luke 22:19]. These are inviting and commanding words by which all who would be Christians are told to partake of this Sacrament. Therefore, whoever wants to be Christ’s
disciple, with whom He here speaks, must also consider and keep this Sacrament. They should not act from compulsion, being forced by others, but in obedience to the Lord Jesus Christ, to please Him. However, you may say, “But the words are added, ‘As often as you drink it’; there He compels no one, but leaves it to our free choice.” I answer, “That is true, yet it is not written so that we should never do so. Yes, since He speaks the words ‘As often as you drink it,’ it is still implied that we should do it often. This is added because He wants to have the Sacrament free. He does not limit it to special times, like the Jewish Passover, which they were obliged to eat only once a year. They could only have it on the fourteenth day of the first full moon in the evening [Exodus 12:6, 18]. They still must not change a day.” It is as if He would say by these words, “I institute a Passover or Supper for you. You shall enjoy it not only once a year, just upon this evening, but often, when and where you will, according to everyone’s opportunity and necessity, bound to no place or appointed time.” But the pope later perverted this and again made the Sacrament into a Jewish feast.

So you see, it is not left free in the sense that we may despise it. I call that despising the Sacrament if one allows a long time to elapse—with nothing to hinder him—yet never feels a desire for it. If you want such freedom, you may just as well have the freedom to not be a Christian and not have to believe or pray. One is just as much commanded by Christ as the other. But if you want to be a Christian, you must from time to time fulfill and obey this commandment. For this commandment ought always to move you to examine yourself [1 Corinthians 11:28; 2 Corinthians 13:5] and to think, “See, what sort of a Christian I am! If I were one, I would certainly have some small longing for what my Lord has commanded me to do.”

Since we act like strangers toward the Sacrament, it is easy to see what sort of Christians we were under the papacy. We went to the Sacrament from mere compulsion and fear of human commandments, without natural longing and without love, and never thought about Christ’s commandment. But we neither force nor compel anyone. Nor does anyone have to do it to serve or please us. This should lead
and constrain you by itself, that the Lord desires it and that it is pleasing to Him. You must not let people force you to faith or any good work. We are doing no more than talking about and encouraging you about what you ought to do—not for our sake, but for your own sake. The Lord invites and allures you. If you despise it, you must answer for that yourself [2 Corinthians 5:10].

53 Now, this is to be the first point, especially for those who are cold and indifferent. Then they may reflect upon it and rouse themselves. For this is certainly true, as I have found in my own experience, and as everyone will find in his own case: if a person withdraws like this from the Sacrament, he will daily become more and more callous and cold, and will at last disregard the Sacrament completely. 54 To avoid this, we must examine our heart and conscience [1 Corinthians 11:28; 2 Corinthians 13:5], and we must act like people who desire to be right with God [Psalm 78:37]. The more this is done, the more the heart will be warmed and enkindled, so it may not become entirely cold.

55 But if you say, “How can I come if I feel that I am not prepared?” Answer, “That is also my cause for hesitation, especially because of the old way under the pope.” At that time we tortured ourselves to be so perfectly pure that God could not find the least blemish in us. For this reason we became so timid that we were all instantly thrown into fear and said to ourselves, “Alas! we are unworthy!” 56 Then nature and reason begin to add up our unworthiness in comparison with the great and precious good. Then our good looks like a dark lantern in contrast with the bright sun, or like filth in comparison with precious stones. Because nature and reason see this, they refuse to approach and wait until they are prepared. They wait so long that one week trails into another, and half the year into the other. 57 If you consider how good and pure you are and labor to have no hesitations, you would never approach.

58 Therefore, we must make a distinction here between people. Those who are lewd and morally loose must be told to stay away [1 Corinthians 5:9–13]. They are not prepared to receive forgiveness of sin, since they do not desire it and do not wish to be godly. 59 But the
others, who are not such callous and wicked people, and who desire to be godly, must not absent themselves. This is true even though otherwise they are feeble and full of infirmities. For St. Hilary also has said, “If anyone has not committed sin for which he can rightly be put out of the congregation and be considered no Christian, he ought not stay away from the Sacrament, lest he should deprive himself of life.”

No one will live so well that he will not have many daily weaknesses in flesh and blood.

Such people must learn that it is the highest art to know that our Sacrament does not depend upon our worthiness. We are not baptized because we are worthy and holy. Nor do we go to Confession because we are pure and without sin. On the contrary, we go because we are poor, miserable people. We go exactly because we are unworthy. This is true unless we are talking about someone who desires no grace and Absolution nor intends to change.

But whoever would gladly receive grace and comfort should drive himself and allow no one to frighten him away. Say, “I, indeed, would like to be worthy. But I come, not upon any worthiness, but upon Your Word, because You have commanded it. I come as one who would gladly be Your disciple, no matter what becomes of my worthiness.” This is difficult.

We always have this obstacle and hindrance to encounter: we look more upon ourselves than upon Christ’s Word and lips. For human nature desires to act in such a way that it can stand and rest firmly on itself. Otherwise, it refuses to approach. Let this be enough about the first point.

In the second place, there is besides this command also a promise, as we heard above. This ought most strongly to stir us up and encourage us. For here stand the kind and precious words, “This is My body, which is given for you.... This is My blood ... shed for you for the forgiveness of sins.” These words, I have said, are not preached to wood and stone, but to me and you. Otherwise, Christ might just as well be silent and not institute a Sacrament. Therefore consider, and read yourself into this word you, so that He may not speak to you in vain.
Here He offers to us the entire treasure that He has brought for us from heaven. With the greatest kindness He invites us to receive it also in other places, like when He says in St. Matthew 11:28, “Come to Me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest.” It is surely a sin and a shame that He so cordially and faithfully summons and encourages us to receive our highest and greatest good, yet we act so distantly toward it. We permit so long a time to pass <without partaking of the Sacrament> that we grow quite cold and hardened, so that we have no longing or love for it. We must never think of the Sacrament as something harmful from which we had better flee, but as a pure, wholesome, comforting remedy that grants salvation and comfort. It will cure you and give you life both in soul and body. For where the soul has recovered, the body also is relieved. Why, then, do we act as if the Sacrament were a poison, the eating of which would bring death?

To be sure, it is true that those who despise the Sacrament and live in an unchristian way receive it to their hurt and damnation [1 Corinthians 11:29–30]. Nothing shall be good or wholesome for them. It is just like a sick person who on a whim eats and drinks what is forbidden to him by the doctor. But those who are mindful of their weakness desire to be rid of it and long for help. They should regard and use the Sacrament just like a precious antidote against the poison that they have in them. Here in the Sacrament you are to receive from the lips of Christ forgiveness of sin. It contains and brings with it God’s grace and the Spirit with all His gifts, protection, shelter, and power against death and the devil and all misfortune.

So you have, from God, both the command and the promise of the Lord Jesus Christ. Besides this, from yourself, you have your own distress, which is around your neck. Because of your distress this command, invitation, and promise are given. This ought to move you. For Christ Himself says, “Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick” [Matthew 9:12]. In other words, He means those who are weary and heavy-laden with their sins, with the fear of death, temptations of the flesh, and of the devil. If, therefore, you are heavy laden and feel your weakness, then go joyfully to this
Sacrament and receive refreshment, comfort, and strength [Matthew 11:28]. If you wait until you are rid of such burdens, so that you might come to the Sacrament pure and worthy, you must stay away forever. In that case Christ pronounces sentence and says, “If you are pure and godly, you have no need of Me, and I, in turn, no need of you.” Therefore, the only people who are called unworthy are those who neither feel their weaknesses nor wish to be considered sinners.

But if you say, “What, then, shall I do if I cannot feel such distress or experience hunger and thirst for the Sacrament?” Answer, “For those who are of such a mind that they do not realize their condition I know no better counsel than that they put their hand into their shirt to check whether they have flesh and blood. And if you find that you do, then go, for your good, to St. Paul’s Epistle to the Galatians. Hear what sort of a fruit your flesh is:

Now the works of the flesh are evident: sexual immorality, impurity, sensuality, idolatry, sorcery, enmity, strife, jealousy, fits of anger, rivalries, dissensions, divisions, envy, drunkenness, orgies and things like these. [Galatians 5:19–21]

Therefore, if you cannot discern this, at least believe the Scriptures. They will not lie to you, and they know your flesh better than you yourself. Yes, St. Paul further concludes in Romans 7:18, “I know that nothing good dwells in me, that is, in my flesh.” If St. Paul may speak this way about his flesh, we cannot assume to be better or more holy than him. But the fact that we do not feel our weakness just makes things worse. It is a sign that there is a leprous flesh in us that can’t feel anything. And yet, the leprosy rages and keeps spreading. As we have said, if you are quite dead to all sensibility, still believe the Scriptures, which pronounce sentence upon you. In short, the less you feel your sins and infirmities, the more reason you have to go to the Sacrament to seek help and a remedy.

In the second place, look around you. See whether you are also in the world, or if you do not know it, ask your neighbors about it. If you are in the world, do not think that there will be lack of sins and misery.
Just begin to act as though you would be godly and cling to the Gospel. See whether no one will become your enemy, and, furthermore, do you harm, wrong, and violence, and likewise give you cause for sin and vice. If you have not experienced this, then let the Scriptures tell you about it, which everywhere give this praise and testimony about the world.

80 Besides this, you will also have the devil about you. You will not entirely tread him under foot [Luke 10:19], because our Lord Christ Himself could not entirely avoid him. 81 Now, what is the devil? Nothing other than what the Scriptures call him, a liar and a murderer [John 8:44]. He is a liar, to lead the heart astray from God’s Word and to blind it, so that you cannot feel your distress or come to Christ. He is a murderer, who cannot bear to see you live one single hour. 82 If you could see how many knives, darts, and arrows are every moment aimed at you [Ephesians 6:16], you would be glad to come to the Sacrament as often as possible. But there is no reason why we walk about so securely and carelessly, except that we neither think nor believe that we are in the flesh and in this wicked world or in the devil’s kingdom.

83 Therefore, try this and practice it well. Be sure to examine yourself [1 Corinthians 11:28], or look about you a little, and just keep to the Scriptures. If even then you still feel nothing, you have even more misery to regret both to God and to your brother. Then take this advice and have others pray for you. Do not stop until the stone is removed from your heart [Ezekiel 36:25–26]. 84 Then, indeed, the distress will not fail to become clear, and you will find that you have sunk twice as deep as any other poor sinner. You are much more in need of the Sacrament against the misery which, unfortunately, you do not see. With God’s grace, you may feel your misery more and become hungrier for the Sacrament, especially since the devil doubles his force against you. He lies in wait for you without resting so that he can seize and destroy you, soul and body. You are not safe from him for one hour. How soon he can have you brought suddenly into misery and distress when you least expect it!

85 Let this, then, be said for encouragement, not only for those of us who are old and grown, but also for the young people, who ought to be
brought up in Christian doctrine and understanding. Then the Ten Commandments, the Creed, and the Lord’s Prayer might be taught to our youth more easily. Then they would receive them with pleasure and seriousness, and so they would use them from their youth and get used to them. 86 For the old are now nearly past this opportunity. So these goals and others cannot be reached unless we train the people who are to come after us and succeed us in our office and work. We should do this in order that they also may bring up their children successfully, so that God’s Word and the Christian Church may be preserved. 87 Therefore, let every father of a family know that it is his duty, by God’s order and command, to teach these things to his children, or to have the children learn what they ought to know [Ephesians 6:4]. Since the children are baptized and received into the Christian Church, they should also enjoy this communion of the Sacrament, in order that they may serve us and be useful to us. They must all certainly help us to believe, love, pray, and fight against the devil.¹