Public prayer, throughout the nearly two millenia of Christianity's existence, has been an organized affair. The earliest accounts of Christian gatherings from the Acts of the Apostles testifies to this. After listening to the teachings of the Law in the Synagogue, the apostles and laity would gather in a home and celebrate the Agape, the "love feast" which is the Holy Eucharist. This simple format of Word and Meal remained at the heart of the Church's liturgy, even as the much more extravagant elaboration of the Middle Ages rendered it barely visible. With the advent of the Protestant movement, however, Christianity became divided and thus the liturgy became divided as well. Some Protestant groups, especially in the vein of Menno Simon's Anabaptists and the like, sought a formless service of the Word and practically discarded the agape, save for once or twice a year. Martin Luther, on the other hand, found the Church's liturgy to be a rich resource and he valued it. Luther changed many facets of the liturgy which he found at the time to be questionable or even objectionable. Since the Second Vatican Council of the 1960's, however, the Catholic Church has largely returned its liturgy to these early Christian roots by instituting reforms which Luther would have undeniably approved of. While the two traditions have never really reconciled differences, ecumenical dialogue has revealed that much of the modern understanding of the liturgy and of the Eucharist itself is bringing them closer than ever before.

On the surface, the formula of the Holy Mass and the Lutheran Communion Service seem almost identical. In accordance with the early church, each opens with prayers and readings and the teaching of the people by the presbyter in a formal Liturgy of the Word. This is followed directly by the actual Eucharist itself, initiated by the presentation of the gifts of bread and wine by members of the assembly and prayers of thanksgiving for them. Dialogues, hymns and songs, and the lengthy Eucharistic Prayers make up the core of the Eucharistic liturgy. Following the communion of the faithful, more prayers are recited and more songs sung, and the assembly departs after a final blessing and dismissal. Upon closer examination, however, subtle differences arise. The Catholic Mass is entirely Eucharist centered: most of the liturgy centers around this all important piece of theology, even the liturgy of the Word. In the Lutheran Service, on the other hand, when it has communion, the liturgy of the Word will sometimes overshadow the Eucharist in an almost excessive manner.

The language of the two liturgies bear strikingly similar components as well. Luther sought to bring the Latin Mass into the vernacular, and the Second Vatican Council has done the same. The International Commission on English in the Liturgy has done a remarkable
job in capably translating the new Latin texts into Papal-approved vernacular. When examining such modern publications as *Worship - Second Edition* and *Lutheran Book of Worship*, contemporary Roman Catholic and Lutheran hymnals respectively, one finds amazing similarities in most of the translations of their common elements: traditional canticles, dialogues, and creeds. Indeed, it is theology which separates the Catholic Mass from the Lutheran service, and it is theology which is held accountable for the subtle differences in the forms described earlier.

The chief theological item which separates the Lutheran and Roman Catholic understandings of the Eucharist is that of transubstantiation and the sacrificial nature of the Mass. As its Latin roots suggest, transubstantiation is the transformation of the Eucharistic elements into the true body and blood, soul and divinity of Jesus Christ for the remission of sins. Luther attacked this doctrine on the premise that the elements were not truly transformed, but that the spirit of Christ dwelled within the elements, which were still bread and wine. Thus, he claimed, popular devotions and pious acts directed towards the Eucharist were fruitless and idolatrous. All of this he based on his understanding of Biblical documents.

Luther objected to the notion of Eucharist as sacrifice as well. He felt that calling the Mass a visible, propitiatory, and unbloody sacrifice robbed the cross of its meaning and diminished the efficacy of Christ's redemption. Much of his confusion, however, lay in the actual term "sacrifice" used by the Council of Trent in its definitive formulation of Catholic Eucharistic theology. It may, perhaps, be more helpful to make a distinction between a sacrifice repeated, which Luther would justifiably object to, and a sacrifice actualized. This latter phrase captures the Catholic theology in a neatly-knit, bite-sized shell. Because Christ is present in the Eucharist, He is present not only as the risen and living Son of God, but also as the Son put to death for the sins of the world. He is present, His sacrifice is present, and it is actualized for the good of the whole church at each liturgy.

This difference in thought affects the language of the respective traditions' modern Eucharistic Prayers. The Catholic Prayers, of which there are four, often speak of the sacrificial nature of the Mass and ask God to bless the gifts of bread and wine and offer thanksgiving for His mercy which has made them available. The two Lutheran Eucharistic Prayers, on the other hand, mostly contain a retelling of salvation history from creation and Abraham through the Incarnation and His return. While both of these aspects are most appropriate for a prayer leading up to this central moment of the liturgy, the consecration, they also reveal a lot about the churches' respective attitudes. The Catholic Prayers give one the idea that what is about to occur is a living, present, dynamic sacrifice:

"Almighty God, we pray that Your angel may take this altar in heaven. Then, as we receive from this altar the Sacred Body and Blood of Your Son, let us be filled with every grace and blessing." (Eucharistic Prayer I)

And again:
"Look with favour on Your church's offering and see the victim whose death has reconciled us to Yourself.

Grant that we, who are nourished by His Body and Blood may be filled with His Holy Spirit, and become one body, one spirit in Christ." (Eucharistic Prayer II)

The Lutheran Prayers, on the other hand, speak more of an affirmation of a completed action which is to be commemorated:

"Therefore, gracious Father, with this bread and cup we remember the life our Lord offered for us ... and, believing the witness of His resurrection, we await His coming in power ."  

This is the central difference in the Catholic and Lutheran liturgies, and this is the central difference between the Catholic and Lutheran Eucharistic theologies.

In the context of ecumenical dialogue, the traditional wounds which have so deeply divided Catholicism and Lutheranism are finally being slowly reconciled. This is increasingly apparent when one glances at the liturgies which the two churches celebrate. While theological nuances which both sides find objectionable remain, there is still hope that this great sign of Christ's unity, the Holy Eucharist, will not only unite us with Him, but will unite a divided Christianity.
Works Cited


