



## **What is a commemoration and How do we celebrate them?**

*The worship staff receives a number of similar inquiries on worship-related topics from across the church.*

*These responses should not be considered the final word on the topic, but useful guides that are to be considered in respect to local context with pastoral sensitivity.*

*The response herein may be reproduced for congregational use as long as the web address is cited on each copy.*

### **Background**

When we are baptized, we are baptized into the body of Christ. We understand this body to be the communion of saints, a diverse witness of men and women across time and space. Throughout its history, the church has sought to lift up Christians who have been unique, exemplary people of faith. As a means of recognizing these witnesses, *Evangelical Lutheran Worship* includes many commemorations that may be observed in corporate worship as well as in personal devotions. Such commemorations enhance rather than overshadow the principal celebrations of Sunday or festivals. Why?

As we remember such Christians, we remember them in the context of remembering Christ. It is not that these people are perfect, as we are all both saint and sinner. Yet their lives point to how God's "extraordinary grace (works) in ordinary people" (*Keeping Time*, p. 134). Our faith in God working in them can be a reminder of God's grace working in all of our lives. "The saints are to be remembered so that we may strengthen our faith when we see how they experienced grace and how they were helped by faith." (Augsburg Confession)

The list of commemorations we have in *Evangelical Lutheran Worship* is not intended to be the final word. As your assembly recognizes these people, they may call to mind others in the past and in the present who like many in scripture, are not known by name but point to Christ. For more background on why we observe commemorations, see *Keeping Time* in resources.

### **Practice**

The commemorations are listed on pages 15-17 of *Evangelical Lutheran Worship*, along with the lesser festivals. (Note that the lesser festivals are printed in all caps.) The lesser festival are largely devoted to biblical "saints" and have a higher priority than the commemorations. ELW provides readings and a Prayer of the Day for each of the eight categories of commemorations (see *Evangelical Lutheran Worship*, pp. 59-61; Leaders Desk Edition, pp. 130-133). For a devotional guide for the commemorations included in *Evangelical Lutheran Worship*, see *More Days for Praise* in resources.

Several guidelines may be helpful to congregations wishing to observe the commemorations.

**1.** When a commemoration falls on a Sunday, (except during Holy Week), it may be included in the final section of the intercessions (before the presiding minister's closing petition), such as:

In remembrance of your servant and martyr Dietrich Bonhoeffer, we give thanks for all the saints. Lord, in your mercy,  
**hear our prayer.**

OR

We give thanks today for your servant Johan Sebastian Bach, and for all who make music for the church. Lord, in your mercy,  
**hear our prayer.**

Other wordings or the inclusion of the commemoration in another petition are possible.

There might be a note in the bulletin or during the announcements of the day's commemoration, giving brief biographical information and explaining briefly why this person is being commemorated. Such information could also be included in the preceding parish newsletter. Such descriptions and in index are provided in *Keeping Time*, pp.197-242 as well as in *More Days for Praise*.

Likewise, there might be mention in the sermon. On a Sunday that commemorates Bach, Schütz, and Handel (July 28), for one example, their music could be incorporated into worship. If the great hymn translators, Catherine Winkworth and John Mason Neale, (July 1) are observed, consider including some of their hymn translations (see the index in back of *Evangelical Lutheran Worship*, pp. 1189-1194).

**2.** When there are two or more commemorations on a given day, the worship planning group may decide which one to observe. Or, both may be observed if they are the same type of commemoration, e.g., the outstanding artists Albrecht Dürer and Michelangelo Buonarroti, are both commemorated on April 6.

**3.** There are eight categories of commemorations: martyrs, theologians, artists and scientists, pastors and bishops, missionaries, renewers of the Church, renewers of society, and saints. A person may fit into two categories (for example, Dietrich Bonhoeffer may be celebrated as a theologian or as a martyr). One may decide which role should be emphasized, or give attention to both.

**4.** There are biographies, readings, prayers, and other thoughts about each commemoration in *New Book of Festivals and Commemorations* as well as *More Days for Praise*. These resources may be used during a weekday service devoted to the commemoration, but most of them should probably not be used on a Sunday. These resources would be a good addition to a parish library or for individual devotional use. Writers of prayers of intercession would find them particularly helpful.

5. To encourage the observance of commemorations in home devotions, parishes may list them in on-line sources, updates through social media, bulletins, and newsletters, perhaps including the appointed Prayer of the Day, readings, and brief biographical information. A paragraph about each person commemorated can be found in *Keeping Time*, pp. 197-242. (Be sure to receive [copyright permission from Augsburg Fortress](#) if anything from a book is printed or used verbatim or even closely paraphrased. See also, “Copyright and Permissions” in Resources.)

For more detailed biographical information, consult the resource list below. Home observances (or church dinners or receptions after worship) could also be made interesting by providing a recipe from the context of the one being commemorated, such as a Swedish recipe celebrating Birgitta (July 23), an Irish recipe commemorating Patrick (March 17), or a German recipe commemoration of Dietrich Bonhoeffer (April 9) or Martin Luther (February 18). Use your imagination!

Families with children may enjoy observing commemorations through learning, crafts, cooking and other activities. Consider celebrating [St. Nicholas Day](#) on December 6.

6. Two worship books published by the ELCA include calendars of commemorations specific to their heritage. *This Far by Faith* is an African-American resource which has a section of "Witnesses to the Faith" which includes four pages (pp. 114-117), plus a page of prayers on page 118 regarding persons who have had particular influence on African Americans. Some of these witnesses overlap with the ELW list.

The ELCA Spanish worship book, *Libro de Liturgia y Cantico* has its own list of commemorations on pages 10-12. Most of these commemorations also appear in the ELW listing.

7. Congregations may add commemorations of local persons or others who are meaningful for the parish. Usually, only Christians and only deceased persons are commemorated. Generally, the commemorations are of persons who have been deceased for at least several decades, if not several centuries. It is customary for these commemorations to be on the persons' death dates ("heavenly birthdays").

## RESOURCES

### [Frequently Asked Questions:](#)

- 🔗 What is a lesser festival? When and how do we celebrate them?

### [Resources Available for Download on the ELCA Website:](#)

- 📄 Copyright and Permissions
- 📞 Ramshaw, Gail. “*Singing through the Year,*” Seeds for the Parish, Summer 2012. Call the ELCA Resource Information Center for a copy of the article.

### [Resources Available from Augsburg Fortress:](#)

- 📖 *Evangelical Lutheran Worship, Leaders Desk Edition*. Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2006.

- 📖 Ramshaw, Gail and Mons Teig. *Using Evangelical Lutheran Worship: Keeping Time, The Church's Years*. Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2009.
- 📖 Ramshaw, Gail. *More Days for Praise: Festivals and Commemorations in Evangelical Lutheran Worship*. Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2016.
- 📖 Pfatteicher, Philip. *New Book of Festivals and Commemorations: A Proposed Common Calendar of Saints*. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2008.
- 📖 *Libro de Liturgia y Cántico, A Worship Book for Spanish-Speaking Lutherans*. Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 1998.
- 📖 *This Far By Faith, An African American Resource for Worship*. Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 1999.
- 🖨 [Copyright and Permissions](#)

#### Other Resources

- 📖 Farmer, David Hugh. [The Oxford Dictionary of Saints](#). Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1979.
- 📖 [Saints and Feast Days: Lives of the Saints: With a Calendar and Ways to Celebrate](#). Chicago: Loyola University Press, 1985. Written from a Roman Catholic perspective, but includes many ELW commemorations and interesting ways to celebrate them.
- 🖨 [St. Nicholas Day](#).

*Updated May 2018*

**Copyright © 2018 Evangelical Lutheran Church in America. [www.elca.org/worshipfaq](http://www.elca.org/worshipfaq).**

*This document may be reproduced for use in your congregation as long as the copyright notice appears on each copy.*