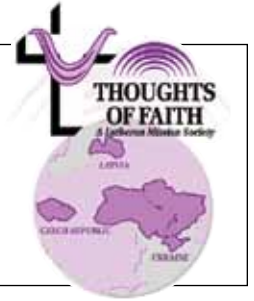


Thoughts of Faith

Thoughts of Faith is a confessional Lutheran mission society dedicated to spreading the gospel of Jesus Christ to Ukraine, the Czech Republic and Latvia through printed materials and personal ministry.



February 2010
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Donations for the Lord's work in Ukraine, Czech Republic and Latvia may be sent directly to Thoughts of Faith. Please see the enclosed envelope to donate by check or by credit card.

Feasting and Fasting – Useless Without Christ

In Matthew 11:16,18-19 Jesus is asking: *"To what can I compare this generation? . . . John came neither eating nor drinking, and they say, 'He has a demon.' The Son of Man came eating and drinking, and they say, 'Here is a glutton and a drunkard, a friend of tax collectors and "sinners."'"* But wisdom is proved right by her actions." Indeed, wisdom can come in different shapes and forms, but blind sinners and fault-finders are hard to please. The people in the Czech Republic are among them. But thanks to the Thoughts of Faith mission, the wisdom of the Gospel comes to them in a sober, yet powerful and fruitful way.

The Czech Republic bears the marks of a long-lasting and strong Catholic influence. The Communist philosophy later succeeded in removing religion from the minds and hearts of many, but it could not completely eliminate the festivals the church had celebrated. The result is that now, 20 years after the fall of Communism, many church festivals are popular. However, in almost all cases, they are deprived of any religious significance. They are presented as folklore, and many forms of celebration include pagan-like features.

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A typical Masopust parade in the Czech Republic includes costumed and masked characters.

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It's Lent in Europe, Too!

Open the newspaper these days and get ready to face some bad news: international conflict, homeland insecurity, economic turmoil – the list goes on. Close examination of realities around us can leave a person more than a little troubled.

During the season of Lent, we don't look outside ourselves, at the world. We look within ourselves, at our own condition. And the realities of our fallen, sinful human nature are disquieting – in fact, terrifying, if we're honest. Lent is a time of spiritual introspection, a time for judging ourselves against God's standards, which makes it a time for repentance, because God's law shows us our sin.

Thoughts of Faith supports pastors who preach the Law of God in the often-Godless cultures of Eastern Europe. They don't preach moralizing anecdotes about how to gain financial success. They don't preach obedience as a means of winning God's favor. They preach the Law the way our faithful pastors do in U.S. parishes: with clarity, so hearers know all are included in God's demand for perfection; and with severity, so hearers know the eternal consequences to sin.

That kind of Law preaching – it's Lenten preaching, it's Lutheran preaching – is needed in Ukraine, Latvia and the Czech Republic if the sweet Gospel of Jesus is to be appreciated and believed there. Just as surely as the comforting assurance of Easter follows the penitential time of Lent, so the pastors who Thoughts of Faith supports in Europe bring the Good News of forgiveness of sin in Christ Jesus to repentant sinners.

Disconcerting news in the media is nothing compared to the terror of the guilt-stricken conscience. It is our privilege to send and support those who preach powerful Law and comforting Gospel on our behalf in Thoughts of Faith fields. Thanks for your help!

Rev. Steven P. Petersen
Administrator
Thoughts of Faith



Rev. Steven P. Petersen

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In a recent interview in a popular magazine, Professor Halik – a Catholic priest, psychologist and philosopher – complained that today's attempts to renew celebrations like Masopust (Fat Tuesday) have one big disadvantage. They offer opulent feasting without the following season of fasting.

What is even more alarming is that the feasting and the rare subsequent fasting are usually void of any relation to Jesus. If any spiritual meaning is mentioned at all, it is the development of self-control and self-discipline.

The Masopust carnival is a good example. All of you know that Lent is the period of 40 days before Easter, beginning on Ash Wednesday. It is a season of inner reflection and preparation before the celebration of our Savior's suffering for our sins and subsequent victory over the grave. Masopust is a festive period between Epiphany and Ash Wednesday, culminating three days before Lent begins. The Czech word Masopust is a combination of two words: maso = meat, and pust = fasting. It is also known as fashank (from German fasching). In English it corresponds to Fat Tuesday (Mardi Gras in French). It is one of the many old popular festivals that are now being revived and commercialized. Each district of the Czech Republic has its own variations, but in general the carnival is characterized by masks and costume parades, dancing, hog-killing and eating bacon

and doughnuts. The parades include participants dressed as an old lady with a back-basket, a bear and a horse and rider. This tradition goes back to the 13th century. Today, although presented as the last chance to feast before Lent begins, there is no fasting following the Masopust celebration, with the exception of a few devout Catholics.

Our Czech Lutheran church, with its leaders and members, will again look for ways to bear witness about the underlying meaning of feasting and fasting. We are like guests at a wedding party. We fast in spirit – and outwardly if we choose to – as we remember the Bridegroom being taken away from us and nailed to the cross. And we feast in spirit – and outwardly if we choose to – as we remember the Bridegroom victoriously coming back to life and to us.

Thank you all who help and pray for our mission among the Czech people! Your support is invaluable. You are giving us chances to unmask people's inner emptiness and blindness and to cover them with the snow-white coat of Jesus' righteousness. The Word we spread gives us the reason to fast and to feast, to mourn and to dance, to die and to live.

Rev. Petr Krakora
Czech Evangelical Lutheran Church
Plzen, Czech Republic

Would You or Your Congregation Like to Help?

The Ukrainian Lutheran Church – as well as all mission projects of the ELS and WELS – has had to live with substantially reduced financial help from the U.S. in 2010. We can thank and praise the Lord that he has given us faithful pastors and committed Christians who are working hard to keep their congregations healthy and growing in spite of serious financial limitations. As a result of the funding cuts, however, many valuable and important projects have been left unfunded. At the suggestion of Rev. Steven P. Petersen, the Thoughts of Faith administrator, the Ukrainian Lutheran Church (ULC) in its October convention approved a list of four projects for which special funding would be sought. All were included initially in the budget, but then needed to be dropped. All these projects were recognized by unanimous vote of the convention as being important for the continued health of the church. Following are the four projects placed on the list by the convention.

SUMMER QUARTER of continuing education for the pastors of Eastern Europe – \$5,000

Each June for the past three years, pastors have gathered at St. Sophia Seminary from across Europe for two weeks of theological study conducted by guest professors. Pastors have come from Bulgaria, Belarus, Georgia (the country), Moldova, Latvia, Russia, Sweden, Norway, Germany as well as Ukraine. The number has ranged between 15 and 25. This year Dr. John Brug of Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary has agreed to teach if financial support can be found. The \$5,000 covers the guest professor's travel and living expenses as well as travel and food grants for the students, many of whom must take unpaid vacations from their secular jobs in order to attend.

YOUTH FORUM 2010 – \$3,000

As a service and learning project of the seminary students, a youth forum (i.e. youth rally) was held last May. Fifty teens and young adults attended from across Ukraine. Some travelled more than 24 hours by train each way to attend. The three-day youth forum included Bible studies, an evangelism project, sightseeing, worship, and lots of Christian fun and fellowship. The seminary students planned and carried out the entire program. Each youth paid a fee that covered much of the total cost. Additional costs were covered by a special gift from an American couple. Since many of the congregations are small with only a handful of youth, this event serves the important function of showing the youth that they are not alone, but rather have Christian brothers and sisters all across the country. The congregations in the Crimea area of Ukraine have offered to host Youth Forum 2010 if funding can be found.

DEACON EDUCATION PROGRAM – \$2,000

Budget limitations have forced the pastors of the ULC to seek secular jobs since their pastoral take-home pay has been reduced to \$35 a week. In order to keep the congregations



Pastors from throughout Europe attend the summer quarter. To continue in 2010, \$5,000 is needed.

functioning and growing, an ambitious program of deacon education has begun. This name is a bit misleading. We are not talking about a formal paid office, but rather about preparing a corps of mature and committed volunteers in each congregation to help the pastor and assume many of the responsibilities that a full-time pastor would be doing. This program involves a year-long study, with some courses taught by the pastors and some taught by the seminary. As seminary rector, for example, I traveled 2,500 miles to eight locations in November to teach courses. In December the first graduates were given their diplomas. The funding for this travel and lodging had to be removed from the budget and will need to be covered by a special gift.

PARSONAGE PURCHASE – \$15,000

Pastors need to live in the communities they serve if they are going to serve their congregations well. In most cases this means that an apartment needs to be rented, but apartments are hard to find. As a result, our pastors have often found themselves forced to move a couple of times a year, and congregations find rent constantly increasing. The only good way out is for the congregation to own its parsonage (i.e. apartment for the pastor). With the worldwide economic downturn, suitable apartments can be purchased in Ukraine for as little as \$30,000. The ULC set aside \$15,000 last year for an apartment purchase and selected the Kremenets congregation as the first beneficiary of this project. The idea is that an apartment be purchased and then the congregation continue to pay rent on it until the original money has been returned to a revolving fund for future parsonage purchases. An additional \$15,000 is needed to get this plan and perpetual fund started.

Thank you for your consideration of our needs. You or your congregation may be the answer to our prayers by helping with one of the above projects.

*Rev. John Vogt
Rector of St. Sophia Seminary
Ternopil, Ukraine*

Encouraged by Children in a Ukrainian Village

On Dec. 6, 2009, the Ukrainian Lutheran Church congregation in the small village of Vorobiivka in the Ternopil region celebrated the 10th anniversary of its first worship service. Rev. Oleh Yuhimenko and members of the congregation invited me to celebrate this anniversary with them. The congregation in Vorobiivka was my first place of service after graduating from St. Sophia Seminary. The Vorobiivka congregation has a special place in my heart and it always gives me encouragement and endurance.

This December turned out to be without frost and snow. Everything around me seemed more like spring than winter. Such is this “global warming.” But I remembered that December in 1999, when I went to Vorobiivka for the first time. The old road to the village was covered with snow, so that it was impossible to get to the building where we were supposed to have a worship service. We had to stop the car outside the village and walk the rest of the way. On that day there were approximately 10 of us and that was wonderful!

At the 10-year anniversary celebration I saw the congregation members and the children, memories of whom always warm my heart. This is a story about trials, patience, Christian love and trust in our Savior.

There has always been one traditional church body in this area, so the appearance of a Lutheran congregation in this small village sprouted interest in some and worry in others. The local Greek Catholic priest warned that this was “his territory” and there was no place for us. Later he used different means to make us go away. We were threatened that the house where we gathered for worship would be burned down. The parents of the children who attended our Sunday school were told to remove their kids immediately or they would be banned from attending their church. On more than one occasion our children and adults had to listen to hurtful remarks and threats from their neighbors. But



Youngsters stirred the congregation with song.

nothing could stop us. We knew that the Lord was with us, that he would take care of us and protect us.

Do you know what it was that encouraged me the most in those difficult times? It was the children who attended the worship service and Sunday school classes. Every Sunday, no matter the weather, they walked several kilometers from a neighboring village to hear the good news of Jesus about the forgiveness of sins, life and salvation! In rain and snow, early in the morning they walked along that rough village road to hear the Word of God in an old village house. That was something special!

Today those children are grown and matured, almost done with high school. They prepared Christian songs and poems for the 10-year anniversary celebration. They were very nervous. But everything was so sincere that tears filled my eyes. These children from the village are special. From early in their life they knew what this difficult village life is all about. In their eyes shine love and an almost adult-like wisdom. Just like 10 years ago, after the worship service we drank delicious tea made from raspberry and currant branches, reminisced about the past and thought about the future. I felt very comfortable and happy, surrounded by my old friends. Their faith in the Savior, just as before, gave me encouragement to further preach the Gospel of salvation. For when you see these children’s eyes, these people who trust in Christ and who love him with all their heart, then you understand that it is the biggest reward for your daily work as a pastor.



Pastor Kokovskiy, front row, poses with members of the congregation in Vorobiivka.

*Rev. Taras Kokovskiy
President of the Galich District of ULC
Vorobiivka-Ternopil, Ukraine*

Great – On So Many Levels!

Those who return from teaching Vacation Bible School in Ukraine often talk about what an amazing experience it was. I have been blessed to be a part of this program twice, in two locations, with two completely different experiences, and yet I thoroughly loved each visit.

What makes it so memorable on so many levels?

First, you are involved in doing the Lord's work of bringing the Gospel to others who are often isolated in small congregations scattered throughout Ukraine. The churches love having guests who share their same love for Christ. What could be more satisfying and enjoyable than that? Even worshipping in a foreign language you can still sense the bond of a common confession. The presence of Americans often draws non-member children to the church for VBS.

Second, you are working with children, which gives it an added dimension of joy and excitement. They receive you with so much enthusiasm, and love VBS just as much as those in America. They especially love the crafts! When I think back on my memories of Ukraine they always begin with remembering the children. I recall the day we sang "Jesus Loves Me" on the same city park platform where Vladimir Lenin's statue once stood.

Third, you are experiencing another country and culture for the first time, but in a very safe and guided way. Ukraine is an exciting and different land, with much to see and experience. The long train ride is quite an experience. Yet, despite the great differences you still feel at home with the church members, pastors, translators and children. It is their goal to have you love their country, and to show you their appreciation for coming. The food ranges anywhere from "good" to "fantastic." I finally tried rabbit for the first time! It tasted like chicken, of course.

Fourth, you create new friendships with fellow Christians -- among the children you teach and the fellow American



A VBS classroom in Kremenez, Ukraine.

volunteers. It is common to see an exchange of e-mail addresses on the final day. Last summer, after arriving in Kiev, I ran into Olav, who had driven me around two years earlier. We were so excited to see each other again that we ran and hugged, even though we could barely speak to each other without a translator.

I have yet to meet one of our volunteers who has not felt blessed to have been along on the trip. If you are considering going and just want to know more about it, contact me or one of the other previous attendees, but be ready to have your ear talked off.

Chaplain Don Moldstad

Dates have been set for VBS 2010 in Ukraine from June 30 to July 13. There is need for 35 volunteers in 13 locations. Minimum age is a graduating senior in high school. If you have questions or would like an application, please e-mail Chaplain Moldstad at Don.Moldstad@bhc.edu or Pam Schultz from Thoughts of Faith at pamtof@bhc.edu. Applications are due to Pam by March 30, 2010.



The American volunteers in 2009. In 2010, 35 volunteers are needed in 13 locations

Seven Weeks of Velyky Pist

Velyky Pist literally means the Greater Fast – greater than Advent, or many other fast days on the calendars here. It begins seven weeks before Easter and is one of four periods of fasting in Ukraine. Fasting doesn't mean no food; it means dietary limitations. What follows is a description of some of the Lenten foods and ritual prescriptions that were observed here in the late 19th and early 20th twentieth centuries.

During Lent, porridge-like dishes were particularly popular. On the first day of Lent breakfast was not eaten.

On the first Monday of Lent nothing hot was cooked, which meant there was no borsch that day – a big sacrifice for people who like it every day. The first week of Lent was quite stringent in dietary restrictions – no varenyky (stuffed dumplings with a butter sauce) and no fish. Borsch, pancakes, kasha (a porridge like oatmeal) and pickles were the usual foods. Garlic, onions and radishes were allowed to provide some spiciness to the otherwise bland food.

The first Saturday of Lent was the day of remembrance of dead relatives. The names of the dead were written on pieces of paper that were given to the priest who mentioned them during the service. It was believed that the dead, if they were “properly” remembered, would have a better chance of entering the Kingdom of God, taking a shortcut through purgatory.

During the second week of Lent, fish, mushrooms and vegetable oil were added to the list of approved foods. During this week young people were allowed to meet in the streets where they engaged in games, singing and dancing, rather than staying at home all the time. The third week of Lent offered no additional food or activities.

During the fourth week, khresty (crosses) were made from flour. Dough was shaped into a cross and baked. Every family member got a khrest to eat. Eating it was believed to give health. In some Ukrainian districts (Poltava for example), khresty were used for fortune-telling. A short length of red thread and a small periwinkle leaf were put inside the khrest and if, after baking, the leaf and thread were not blackened,

it was believed to be a sign of good fortune. Also, instead of leaves and threads, coins were used and those who discovered a coin in their khresty were believed to be blessed with good luck. In some areas the khrest was buried in the garden or field “for a good yield.”

During the fifth week of Lent or Pokhvala – giving thanks to the Virgin Mary was the main event. No work was to be done except for planting in the vegetable gardens. It was generally believed that certain vegetables were to be

planted on a certain day to be tasty – for example, cucumbers on Pokhvala.

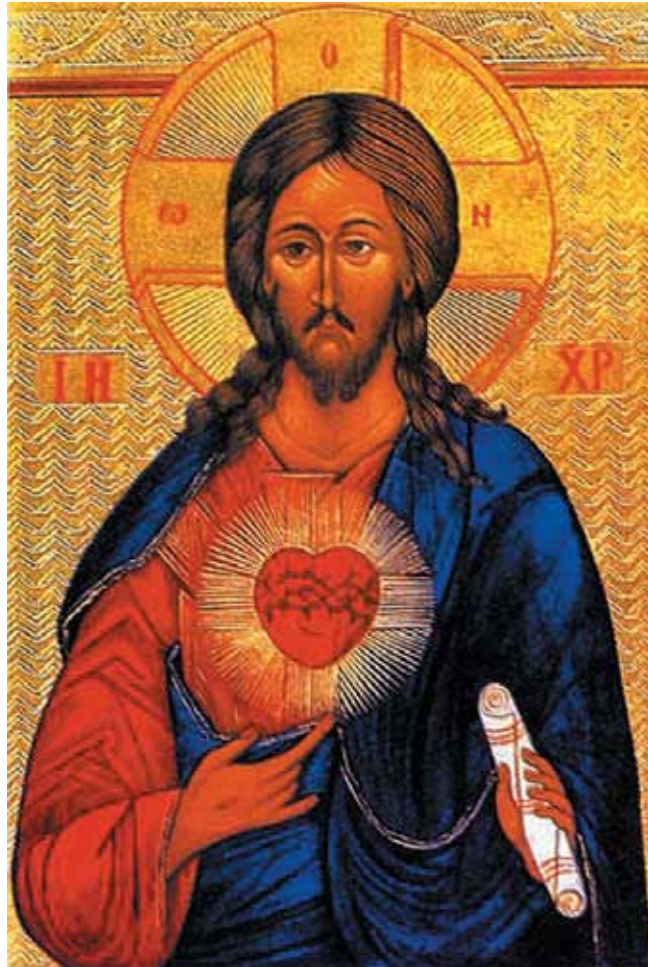
The sixth week of Lent ended on Verbna Nedilya – Willow Sunday (palms are not available in Ukraine). There were no further restrictions on food observed during that week.

But the final week of Lent was special. It was called Strastny tyzhden – Passion Week, Bily or Chysty tyzhen – White or Pure Week. On Thursday of that week, people washed themselves in rivers, lakes or in the absence of any lakes or rivers, they poured on themselves water taken from wells. This seventh week of Lent was particularly strict – no fish, no oil, no dairy products, no hot meals and – heaven forbid – no lard.

Candles lit during the Easter night service in the church were taken home where they were snuffed out and crosses painted in the house with soot from the candles. This was believed to be protection against evil forces, lightning in particular.

One might wonder – why would Thoughts of Faith plant and

nurture another Christian church in a country where Christianity exists? Well! First of all, Eastern Ukraine is largely atheistic and Western Ukraine has many, many atheists and agnostics. In fact, the agnostic population is growing – but why? People instinctively realize that some of the visions and “miraculous happenings” they are told about are contrived and promoted by mainstream churches. They believe that the myths, superstitions and rituals are not based on the truth, so they look elsewhere for it. That is why this is a good place to proclaim the word of God in its truth and purity, without semi-pagan superstitions, myths, legends and near-impossibilities.



Christ and his crown of thorns are depicted in this icon.

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Educated Ukrainians need Biblical religion, not the medicine shows that used to impress credulous and illiterate peasants. Informed Ukrainians are ready for a reform movement in Catholicism, and that's what Lutheranism has always been. And that is exactly what we bring them, not only during Lent but all through the year. Help us bring Ukraine back from atheism and superstition to Biblical religion. Because, as Jesus said, "Anyone who breaks the least of these commandments and teaches others to do the same will be called least in the kingdom of heaven, but whoever practices and teaches these commands will be called great in the kingdom of heaven." (Matthew 5:19)

Nick and Kerry Laper
 Gift of Life
 Ternopil, Ukraine

In Ukraine, Lent is a time of reconciliation.

Favorite Lenten Dishes in Ukraine

Borsch Pyryatynsky

Water – 4 liters
 Red beet – 1 big root
 Carrot – 1
 Onion – 1
 Potatoes – 2
 Cabbage – 1/2 big head
 Several dried mushrooms
 Flour – 2 spoons
 Beans – 1 cupful
 Parsley, parsnip or celery
 Tomatoes, or tomato sauce, or beet kvas (drink made from beet juice)
 Salt, vegetable oil



Slice beets and carrots and fry them lightly on the skillet with a bit of oil added; do the same with diced potatoes, sliced onions and parsley, and put all of it into the water boiling in the saucepan. Boil the beans separately and when ready put into the borsch together with the water in which they have been boiled. Slice the cabbage and put it into the borsch and boil until these ingredients are ready.

Mushrooms are also boiled to readiness separately, diced and added to the borsch.

Fry the flour on the clean skillet without any oil until it becomes golden in color. When it cools off, add some warm water, stir and put into the borsch.

Put in the grated tomatoes or a spoonful of tomato sauce or beet kvas; if, to your taste, the borsch needs to be sweetened a little, add a bit of sugar, or if it needs to be more sour, add more tomatoes, or vinegar.

After all the ingredients have been added, bring the borsch for a moment to boiling.

Serve with pampushky (small soft buns laced with garlic and butter).

Potato with Nuts

6 potatoes
 A cupful of shelled nuts
 (walnuts or hazel nuts)
 Breadcrumbs
 Salt, pepper, oil

Boil the potatoes to readiness without peeling them. After the potatoes cool off, remove the skin, sprinkle with salt and pepper and warm up in a little oil. Crush or mince the nuts and sprinkle them on the potatoes.



Varya

Red beet root – 1
 Pickled red beet root – 1
 Dried plums – 1 pound
 Beans soaked and cooked – 1 cupful
 Salt, sugar, oil

Bake or boil the beet root; boil the plums and the beans separately.

Peel the boiled and pickled beet root, dice the beets, put into a bowl and add the beans and the plums from which the stones have been removed. Mix and stir, add salt and sugar, sprinkle with oil and stir again.



The Tradition of Good Friday in Latvia

During the Lenten season, Christians around the world contemplate the meaning of Christ's innocent suffering and atonement for the sins of the world. Even though we know very well what happened on Easter morning, and we know that Christ's death and resurrection have become the sure foundation for the forgiveness of all our sins, we should not neglect to consider our lost condition if God's Son had decided to avoid his humiliation from the hands of sinful blind people and his dreadful death on the cross.

Some of the church traditions during Lent serve the purpose of turning the minds and hearts of believers to consider the depths of their own sins and God's grace and faithfulness to his own promises to save sinners from the wages of sin. So also Latvian Lutherans have certain traditions during Lent. Let me focus on one of them – the Good Friday service.

Many of the members and pastors of our Confessional Lutheran Church of Latvia came out of the confessional movement inside the Latvian Evangelical Lutheran Church, the center of which was Gustav Adolf's Mezaparka Lutheran Church and its patriarch Roberts Feldmanis.

In that tradition, the Good Friday service is held at night. The liturgy differs from the other Lenten services. There is no sermon. Instead, all of Christ's passion stories are read from the Gospels. Also read are passages from the Old Testament prophecies and Psalms foretelling Christ's suffering and death. There is no Holy Communion, which might seem unusual, yet the focus is just on the Law, which is merciless and requires sin to be punished.

If God's salvation had stopped at the moment of Christ's death, there would be no Gospel and no hope for the world even though Christ's death is the very heart of salvation. Christians today, of course, look on Good Friday with a knowledge of what happened during the 50 days after

Christ's resurrection. Yet the purpose of this tradition is to remind people that without Christ's resurrection, we would have nothing to preach and nothing to distribute to the spiritually thirsty and hungry.

Also, the altar decoration at the service is distinguished by its modesty and chastity of style. There is no decoration except the black cloth over the simple marble altar. There are only two candles. There are no flowers on the altar. Rev. Feldmanis never allowed any flowers grown in soil to be put on the altar. His idea was that the altar was a place where sacrifice and death took place; therefore just cut and dying flowers are allowed on the altar.

When the service comes to the part where Holy Communion is to be celebrated, the lights in church are turned out, the candles extinguished, and the altar, crucifix and altar Bible are covered with a black veil. "Our God was dead," just as Martin Luther described what happened on the cross. There is silence in church and no final hymn is sung. People depart in darkness without the usual chatter and handshaking. There is also no offering during that service.

This is a great symbol of the life of a sinner without salvation and without the eternal hope. The Good Friday service focuses on the human sinful and lost condition and the high price which the holy God Man Jesus had to pay in order to bring people out of the grim darkness of the sinful world. After Good Friday, every believer is longing for Easter morning, which we celebrate joyfully and loudly with every possible splendor and glory, singing praises to our risen Lord and Savior. Christ is risen indeed! To him only belongs all glory and praise!

*Rev. Gundars Bakulis
Superintendent
Confessional Lutheran Church of Latvia*

