

Agnus Dei, is Latin for “Lamb of God.” Most of the canticles in the liturgy of the Church have Latin names, named after the first few words of the canticle, and the Agnus Dei is no exception.

For the most part, each composition of the choral Mass has six major components: the Kyrie, the Gloria in Excelsis, the Creed, the Sanctus, the Benedictus, and the Agnus Dei. What we sing in the liturgy is the song our ancestors in the faith have sung for centuries.

It is a benefit for us to learn of these words today because these are the words exclaimed by John the Baptizer when he saw the Lord coming toward him: **“Behold! The Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world!”**

St. John made this announcement for the benefit of his hearers, for it was John's God-given vocation to prepare God's people for the coming of the Messiah, the Lamb of God.

John knew who this Lamb of God was, for the entire Triune God revealed the Messiah to him at the Jordan River, when John baptized the Lord, after which event, the Holy Spirit descended upon Jesus as a dove, and the Father's voice boomed from heaven that this is His beloved Son.

God revealed this eternal truth to him. He revealed it to us last week as we celebrated the Baptism of Our Lord. He reveals it to us today as he has given us the words the Holy Spirit inspired John the Baptist to speak and St. John the Apostle and Evangelist to write.

Because our Lord has spoken these words to us first in the Scriptures, we get to repeat them, speaking them back to Him as we prepare to receive Him who comes to us in His body and blood.

What is the benefit of such a repetition of words? What is so great about using the same words those before us in the faith have also used?

“Saying back to Him what He has said to us, we repeat what is most true and sure. Most true and sure is His Name, which He put upon us in Holy Baptism. We are His.

This we acknowledge at the beginning of the Divine Service. Where His Name is, there is He. Before Him we acknowledge that we are sinners, and we plead for forgiveness.

His forgiveness is given us—and we— freed, and forgiven acclaim Him as great and gracious God as we apply to ourselves the words, He has used to make Himself known to us.” [LW, p. 6]

In this light, we are blessed to not only hear that the Lamb of God has come, but we get to praise God using His own words, for there is nothing truer and surer than the inerrant and infallible Word of God. However, such words are not pleasing to the lips of sinful man.

As sinners, we have little, if any, use for the Word of God. The human ego gets in the way of the tongue and causes the lips to utter words that are not as true and sure as the words God has given us.

The ego would rather have us spew forth our own words. We want to pat ourselves on the back for devising all sorts of creative ways to worship God.

Our sinful flesh wants to pat itself on the back, but our Lord says in **John 4:23-24** “But The hour is coming, and is now here, when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth, for the Father is seeking such people to worship him. ²⁴God is spirit, and those who worship him must worship in spirit and truth.”

What is at issue here is the focus of our worship, and who that focus is. We need to ask ourselves how we look at Jesus Christ.

If we look at Him and think we need to come up with as many ways as we can to serve Him, we have lost our focus on Christ and put ourselves in the limelight, for our faith would then be nothing more than works-oriented, and we become false gods.

If we look at Christ as the beautiful Savior; “**the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world,**” then our focus is where it belongs: on Jesus Christ and Him crucified.

This is the focus of the historic and yet timeless Liturgy of the Church. It focuses on Christ and what He has done for us. God is the Actor in the Divine Service.

He runs the verbs. He acts, and we respond. He comes to us in the Word and Sacraments, and we return to Him our prayers, praise, and thanksgiving. In a few moments we will get to respond to our Lord's coming to us in His body and blood as we sing the **Agnus Dei**.

We unite our voices with John the Baptizer, singing this ancient hymn to the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world, beseeching Him to have mercy upon us and to grant us His peace, that peace which the world cannot give.

These gifts our Lord freely gives in His Supper, giving us His mercy and peace in the forgiveness of sins, and, as Martin Luther teaches us, “where there is forgiveness of sins, there is also life and salvation.” The **Agnus Dei** has an interesting origin within the Divine Service.

Centuries ago, after a presiding bishop had consecrated the elements for the Lord's Supper, he then had to break the loaf of bread into enough pieces for all the communicants. As churches became larger and attendance increased, the need for more pieces of bread was greater.

During this time there was an awkward period of silence. This hymn was added to the Liturgy initially to fill in that awkward silence. The choir would continue to sing this canticle, and repeat it if necessary, until the bishop had enough pieces of bread for the Distribution.

The introduction of the **Agnus Dei** filled a practical need. The continued use of the **Agnus Dei** communicates to us a sacramental reality, for, as the Lord came toward the Baptizer in human flesh, the Lamb of God comes to us today in His body and blood.

The Lamb, who has come to take away the sins of the world by dying on the cross in our place, comes to us today to take away our sins in this sacramental meal. The forgiveness He won on the cross He gives to us in His Word and in His body and blood, given and shed for us for the forgiveness of sins.

By the Holy Spirit at work within you, you have the words from **1 Peter 1:18-21** “knowing that you were ransomed from the futile ways inherited from your forefathers, not with perishable things such as silver or gold, ¹⁹but with the precious blood of Christ, like that of a lamb without blemish or spot. ²⁰He was foreknown before the foundation of the world but was made manifest in the last times for your sake, ²¹who through him are believers in God, who raised him from the dead and gave him glory, so that your faith and hope are in God.”

Isaiah 53:6-7 “All we like sheep have gone astray; we have turned every one to his own way; and the LORD has laid on him the iniquity of us all. ⁷He was oppressed, and he was afflicted, yet he opened not his mouth; like a lamb that is led to the slaughter, and like a sheep that before its shearers is silent, so he opened not his mouth.”

Truly Christ is the Lamb of God, who takes away our sin. On account of the faith our gracious God has given us, we hear these words:

1 Corinthians 1:4-9 “I give thanks to my God always for you because of the grace of God that was given you in Christ Jesus, ⁵that in every way you were enriched in him in all speech and all knowledge- ⁶even as the testimony about Christ was confirmed among you- ⁷so that you are not lacking in any spiritual gift, as you wait for the revealing of our Lord Jesus Christ, ⁸who will sustain you to the end, guiltless in the day of our Lord Jesus Christ. ⁹God is faithful, by whom you were called into the fellowship of his Son, Jesus Christ our Lord.”

Even so, come, Lord Jesus! (Rev. 22:20b). **“Behold! The Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world!” Amen.**