

A FLOWER COMMUNION

**A celebration of the good things of life
as given and received
through the fellowship of a congregation,
symbolised in the giving and receiving of flowers**



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Churches**



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INTRODUCTORY NOTES

This joyful service, a celebration of the life of a congregation, is also a memorial to the life of its creator, Rev. Dr. Norbert Capek, minister to Unitarians in Prague Czechoslovakia and Unitarian martyr. We offer it with acknowledgement and thanks to Rev. Eric Shirvell Price, who first brought the service from America to Britain, and published it as a Devotional Supplement to Faith and Freedom in 1965.

The service in this form was first published by the Worship Subcommittee of the General Assembly of Unitarian and Free Christian Churches in 1990. Rev. John Midgley has revised it for the Subcommittee's successor, the Worship Panel; and it includes an address by him.

Origin

The sunflower, pictured on the title page of this leaflet, is the Czech national flower. The Flower Communion Service originated there in the years of the Czechoslovak Republic before the Second World War. Rev. Dr. Norbert Capek, (pronounced "Chappek") (June 3rd, 1870-October 12th, 1942), a former Baptist minister and journalist, who founded the Unitarian Church in Prague in 1921, felt that the traditional Christian Communion Service, with bread and wine, was unacceptable to many of the members of his congregation because of their strong reaction against the Catholic faith. So he turned to the native beauty of their countryside for elements of a new communion, which would be genuine to them. It became one of their most significant services and was soon introduced in other Unitarian congregations.

Preparation

The best time for this service is probably midsummer (though spring would also be suitable). It may provide a special occasion, about mid-way between Mothering Sunday and Harvest. Many congregations already celebrate a Flower Service, or hold a Flower Festival, of which this Communion could form a significant part. It may also provide an opportunity for an interfaith service.

The service needs to be publicised in advance, with an invitation to everyone attending to bring one flower, selected, if possible, for its special association with \S available for anyone arriving without one.

For the first version of the service, a vase or basket needs to be available near

the entrance of the church, possibly with someone in attendance. Those attending are invited to place their flower in the vase or basket on arrival. At the close of the service each person takes a different flower, thus symbolising the exchange, the giving and receiving, through our human fellowship in worship. For the alternative version the participants take their flower with them to their seat, and the giving and receiving takes place there.

The service is suitable for people of all ages. Children may be encouraged to participate, and it is a highly suitable occasion to which visitors, friends, and, where possible, members of a nearby Liberal or Reform Jewish Synagogue may be invited, each bringing their flower too.

Readings

There is a wide range of literature available for additional suitable readings on the theme of beauty as expressed in flowers.

Music

For recorded music, we recommend Walk to the Paradise Garden by Delius, or Scene 3 from The Seasons by Glazunov, or The Moldau from Ma Vlast by Smetana.

A FLOWER COMMUNION

Version 1

In this version, the flowers have been placed in a vase or basket by the worshippers as they entered the church or chapel.

Prelude

Opening Words

The wilderness and the solitary place shall be glad and the desert shall blossom like a rose. It shall blossom abundantly, and rejoice even with singing.

Altar flowers are of many species, but all worship is one; systems of faith are different, but God is one.

Hymn during the singing of which the vase or basket of flowers is carried to the front and placed on a stand or the communion table

For the beauty of the Earth (HL1A;HWR55;HW63;HFF41)
or All Things Bright and Beautiful (HL243;259HW300;HFF245
or All creatures of our God and King (HL2AI;HWR50;HW59;HFF33)

Call to worship

In this our worship we celebrate the beauty of the earth which is our home, manifest to us especially at this season in the loveliness of flowers. We celebrate also our coming together to make a community of worshippers, each of us bringing our self, symbolised in the flower that each has placed with the others as we entered this, our chosen sanctuary. We come together also to remember and give thanks for human sacrifice, which has enriched our heritage, and bought for us the freedoms we enjoy. Praise be to the God of our lives, for all that is beautiful, all that is shared, all that is given and received in love.

Prayer

O God,
In all the colours and scents and sounds of the world,
in all growing things, in all creatures and their joy,
in the chorus of suns and planets and stars,
in the sacrament of expression of the human heart and mind,
we would see thy signature as the beauty of things.

Blessed are the pure in heart,
for they shall see God,
They shall see him in all things unspoil:
in child and flower and love unblighted,
in mountain stream and ocean's pearl,
And they shall call him beauty and truth.

From unperceptive eye,
From blindness of soul,
From hardness of heart,
Deliver us O God. Amen

Jacob Trapp

Sung Prayer (HL307;HWR52B;HW589;HFF473)

God be in my head and in my understanding.
God be in my eyes and in my looking.
God be in my mouth and in my speaking.
God be in my heart and in my thinking.
God be at mine end and at my departing.

Reading Consider the Lilies. (GT NT p29-3 Matthew Ch.6).

Hymn Daisies Are Our Silver (HL240 5L23;)
or Mysterious Presence (HL238;HWR92;HWIOI;HFF68)
or A Little Sun, a little rain (HL9; HWRI15; HW 104)

Litany of Thanksgiving

Minister: Let us give thanks for all those things which unite us with each other and with the eternal order of the universe, for those bonds of loyalty and affection which unite us with our family and our friends.

Congregation: For the love and support which we have from those nearest and dearest to us, we lift up our hearts in thanks, O God.

Min: For the fellowship which comes from our shared faith and ideals;

Con: For the togetherness we share in our free faith, we give thanks.

Min: For the wider fellowship which springs from our common humanity, a fellowship which transcends all boundaries of race and culture and creed, uniting all humankind in a community far outreaching the things which divide us from each other;

Con: For our common humanity we give thanks, and pray that we may ever live our lives in the ever deepening faith that we are all sisters and brothers;

Min: For the elemental forces which move through all the world of nature, from which we have our being, and through which we are related to the earth and the air, the sea and the stars;

Con: For these and for everything in which our spirits find strength, we lift our hearts in praise and deep thanksgiving.

Min: These flowers which we have brought represent the treasury of our united devotion, gathered from the particular soil of our separate lives. Together they are a token of that beauty which can redeem and transform our lives, and the lives of all people.

Con: May these flowers be to us a symbol of all things which unite us with each other and with the eternal order of the universe.

Prayer

We bow our heads this day, O God, in memory of those who laid down their lives that others might live. They redeemed for us our liberties; they saved us from oppression and debasement; they pushed back barbarous evils that were threatening to engulf us; they gave us, at fearful cost, the promise of tomorrow.

To them, as to us, the life of earth seemed fair and bright; they loved the blueness of the sky, the firmness of the ground beneath their feet, the snows of winter, the blossoms of spring. They loved their homes, their families, the companions they had chosen for life's journey, their intimates and friends. But more than this they loved the virtue that humanity must live by; the truth that was being trampled and the vision that was being profaned.

They loved their honour and their duty. And so they fought and died. Let not their lives be in vain! Let our hearts remember, O God of mercy, the many who waited for them and who learned at last that they would not return. Let there be a stillness in us, a deepness of humility, when we remember the bereaved.

O God! that some should give so much! And others almost nothing! Stir us, arouse us, goad us to new resolve! We have been willing to forget, we have served the trivial moment and not the opportunity they gave us. Turn us away, O God, from living in life's sheltered places. Deepen our soul's disquietude, our heart's unrest. Until we are willing for the claims laid upon us, made sacred by the sacrifice of those who died.

A. Powell Davies

Silent Prayer

Concluding words

May we find the world to be sometimes so beautiful, and life so richly and meaningfully shared, that we shall want this to be true, more often, for more people, everywhere. Amen.

Jacob Trapp

Hymn Spring has now unwrapped the flowers HL266
or When the summer sun is shining HL268
or We Sing the Joy of Living (HL3)
or God Speaks to us HL235, HWR90, HW99, HFF66
or Mother Spirit, Father Spirit HL43

Address

Hymn during which the vase or basket of flowers is carried to the rear of the church

Seek not afar for beauty HL237, HWR86, HFF67
or Now thank we all our God HLI9, HWR75, HWB4, HFF61

Closing words from the great Indian poet, Rabindranath Tagore

God grows weary of great kingdoms, but never of little flowers.

Benediction

May the love that makes life beautiful, the reverence that makes life holy and the truth that makes us free lead us onwards together into a deepening and growing communion of life. Amen

Jacob Trapp

As members of the congregation leave, they are invited to take a flower, different from the one that they brought.

Postlude

Version 2: John Midgley's Version

The members of the congregation bring their flowers with them to their places. After the **prelude**, the service commences with these words.

Opening words

Welcome to this service of worship. Each of you has been invited to bring just one flower. It may be that it is one that you have grown yourself, or one that is a particular favourite, or a flower that has special associations - a memory of a loved one perhaps. You may regard this flower as in some way representing yourself. Look at it for a moment. Consider its form and beauty. Think for a moment of what it means to you, or whom or what it reminds you of.

Now I invite you to give your flower away. In a moment your flower will be received from you to form a collective offering of our united worship. Give it away, knowing that our worship consists of both giving and receiving.

During the singing of the first hymn, one or two people carry a vase or a basket round the congregation, and receive each person's flower.

Words before the Last Hymn

During the singing of the last hymn, you will be offered a flower to take away with you. Choose one that was not the one you brought. It will be a flower that represents some-one else, their thoughts, their feelings and associations. Let this be a symbolic reminder to us that much of our worship consists of what we bring, share and take away.

The, during the singing of the last hymn, one or two people carry a vase or a basket round the congregation, and allow each person to take a flower.

Address: THE STORY OF NORBERT CAPEK

When, in 1938, Hitler's armies invaded the country then known as Czechoslovakia, and throughout the years of the 1938-45 war, terrible suffering was inflicted upon the ministers and people of all the churches in that country. The Czech National Church had a liberal, Hussite tradition. And among the other denominations were the Unitarians, whose church in Prague and in other cities had been founded by Rev. Dr. Norbert Capek.

Capek originated from Radomyšl, a small village in the southern part of what was then Bohemia. He came from a poor family, and after leaving school he trained as a tailor. But his great love was religion, religious ideas and church communities. He was converted to the Baptist church and eventually trained as a Baptist minister. His ministerial work was successful, but under the influence of various teachers and writers, including lectures from the great preacher of the Social Gospel, Walter Rauschenbusch, he became more and more convinced that Christianity should have a distinctly social message, that God was to be regarded as a parent of the human family, the human Jesus was our elder brother, and that our task was to create a new and better society for everyone.

He also had a strong sense of the mystery of God; one of his hymns begins:

Mother Spirit, Father Spirit,
Where are you?
In the skysong, In the forest,
Sounds your cry.
What to give you, What to call you,
What am I?

And the last verse:

Mother Spirit, Father Spirit,
Take our hearts.
Take our breath and Let our voices
Sing our parts.
Take our hands and Let us work to
Shape our art.

As his religious ideas became increasingly liberal, he joined and became active in an international religious organization now called the International Association for Religious Freedom (IARF), founded in 1900 by Unitarians. At the 1910 Berlin IARF congress, he met active Unitarians including officers of the American Unitarian Association. Capek also attended congresses in London, Copenhagen, Boston and Oxford.

He left Czechoslovakia for a while, living and working in America as a journalist. There he encountered Unitarian ideas, and made contact with Unitarian headquarters. But soon he returned to his homeland. With the support of the American Unitarian Association and, later, support from British Unitarians, he was able to establish a new religious movement. It flourished, with large congregations and an active children's programme.

Among the members of this congregation in Prague were many ex-Catholics, who, reacting strongly against the Catholic faith, had come to find the traditional Communion service, with bread and wine, unacceptable. Feeling that they needed some sort of communion ceremony, Capek turned to the native beauty of their countryside for elements of a communion service that could be meaningful to them. The Flower Communion soon became one of their most significant services, and under his inspiring leadership, this new liberal religious movement flourished in Prague, and elsewhere in the country. Small of stature, Capek was nonetheless acclaimed as one of the nation's leading orators. He wrote more than 90 hymns, often composing the music as well as the words.

When it became clear, however, that the Nazis would invade Czechoslovakia, Capek's friends urged him to leave the country. His wide reputation as a religious liberal, his activities as a hymn-writer, newspaper editor, preacher, teacher and lecturer put him in a dangerous position. He refused to go, but his wife, Maja, left at the last moment. Capek continued his work, which became increasingly risky.

Rev. Eric Price takes up the story. He writes; 'Because of the monotheistic beliefs of the Unitarians, he was able to accept into membership a number of Jews, who would otherwise have been rounded up by the Gestapo. This gave them precious time in which to plan their escape from the country. When after two years this merciful plan was discovered, Dr. Capek' along with his daughter Zora was arrested, she for the "crime" of listening to the BBC on the radio, and he for the same "offence" and for "high treason". Several of his sermons were cited as evidence of the latter charge. Listening to foreign broadcasts was a capital offence under the Nazi "protectorate".

Eventually he was sent to Dachau concentration camp, Zora to a labour camp. Almost a year after his arrest, Capek's name appears among prisoners sent, on October 12, 1942 to Hartheim Castle, near Linz, Austria, where he died of poison gas.

Before his death Dr. Capek's courage in the face of torture and starvation was a source of inspiration to his fellow prisoners. Some of those who survived testified that the Unitarian leader could not have been sent to a place where he was more needed than Dachau. Fortified by his words and example, they held on, despite the grim agonies of the camp which was to live in history as a horrible example of Nazi bestiality. When news of Dr. Capek's death reached America in 1945, the

then President of the American Unitarian Association, Dr. Frederick May Eliot, wrote, "Another name is added to the list of heroic Unitarian martyrs, by whose death our freedom has been bought."

Since that time, many of our Unitarian churches in America have celebrated the Flower Communion. In 1965 Rev. Eric Price brought a version of the service and the story of Norbert Capek to Britain. Since then, an increasing number of our congregations have held this service annually. It is held partly for its own intrinsic beauty, partly as a symbolic expression of giving and receiving in our worship together as a congregation, and now also as a fitting memorial to Norbert Capek, who created this service in happier days. So, the day on which we celebrate the beauty of our world in flowers, rejoice in all we give and receive from our freedom to worship together as our hearts and minds prompt us, and at a time when we can see greater freedoms have returned to what is now the Czech Republic and other parts of Europe, this occasion has become for us also a kind of Unitarian Saints' Day.

His life of service reached its climax in great courage in the face of appalling tragedy. We shall remember him in our worship as we share the beauty of a flower. Amen.