

On Anglican sacramental theology

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In the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic, I have done some writing on the impact it has had on Anglican worship, particularly on the practice of the Eucharist. I offer you these two links from the *Anglican Journal* as indications of what I think are crucial aspects of Anglican sacramental theology and the Anglican approach to liturgy:

- “The Eucharist and coming out of lockdown: A tract for these COVID-19 times” (14 May 2020)
www.anglicanjournal.com/the-eucharist-and-coming-out-of-lockdown-a-tract-for-these-covid-19-times/
- “On virtual communion: A tract for these COVID-19 Times (Part II)” (25 May 2020)
www.anglicanjournal.com/on-virtual-communion-a-tract-for-these-covid-19-times-ii/

Much of what I would emphasise to the committee is contained in these two blogs. Rather than repeat the content there, below I offer one additional general remark about Anglican sacramental theology and liturgy and share two observations about reactions I have received to the blogs above.

Eucharist and liturgy as a gift, rather than performance, right, or entertainment

In *The Shape of the Liturgy*, Gregory Dix describes the human person who is shaped by God through the Eucharist (“*homo eucharisticus*”) as being someone who is defined by communion (with God) rather than by consumption (of material goods, objects of desire, etc.). In other words, the worshipping Christian is someone attentive to and receptive of the gift

of God's presence and grace. This is a standard and much celebrated description of the core understanding that Anglicans have brought to Christian worship and the celebration of the Eucharist. These acts are done in thanksgiving for the gifts of grace and God's work among God's people. This is why the church undertakes worship, and this recognition is what gives shape to how Christians worship. This core understanding of the source and purpose of worship needs to be constantly emphasised to remind Anglicans of the source and purpose of their liturgies, and to guide decision-making surrounding the practice worship. Forms of worship that diminish this core understanding, or deviate from it, should be avoided.

In the wake of COVID-19, while many Anglicans have operated out of this recognition, I have observed some deviate rather far from it. A few clergy have said in my presence, "I must conduct the Eucharist because my people demand it," as if the Eucharist is a right, rather than a sacred rite to be conducted with reverence and responsible discernment. It is not something to be performed in unsafe circumstances – as Christians throughout the history of the church have emphasized.

Moreover, some clergy appear to be unsure of their purpose and role if they are unable to preside at the Eucharist – as if their ministry and mission is reduced to formal performances rather than the practice and example of Jesus. Indeed, a number of clergy from various dioceses across Canada contacted me to share the ways in which they were continuing to practice the Eucharist in the midst of the lockdown. They seemed motivated more by a pride over the complicated ways they had devised to offer the Eucharist to a few people rather than by the meaning and intention of the sacrament. A slogan in the liturgical movement is the fact that "symbols speak." The media theorist Marshall McLuhan makes essentially the same point when he wrote "the medium is the message." Too many clergy ignore the fact that *how* they practice the sacraments shapes what the sacraments communicate to those participating in them. Modelling the Eucharist, for example, on a drive-through coffee shop renders its meaning to the participant as something individual and private and sustaining, rather than corporate, missional, and transforming.

Both examples suggest that some clergy and lay people would benefit from better theological education on sacramental theology, and on the meaning and purpose of the Eucharist in particular.

Confusions over Eucharistic sacrifice

One reaction to my blogs by clergy who disagreed with me accused my description of the Eucharist as reducing it to "Table Fellowship," while asserting that the Eucharist is not just a meal, but also a sacrifice. From this

claim, they insisted that it must be celebrated, regardless of the public health situation. Although the liturgical movement within Anglicanism has emphasised that the Eucharist is the gathering of the community of the Body of Christ, this is certainly not to the exclusion of other aspects of Holy Communion, including participation in the death and resurrection of Christ, and in his sacrifice on the cross. Indeed, the *BEM* document highlights five different elements of the Eucharist, only one of them being table fellowship. Yet the Christian tradition, and Anglicans in particular (with its emphasis on *Common prayer*), has emphasised that these different aspects of the sacramental nature of the Eucharist are most clearly understood, and thus appropriately practiced, within the context of the gathering of the full congregation together in one place. In other words, it is only during the gathering of the community of faith around God's altar, that one comes to truly understand the nature of the Eucharist as a "sacrifice." Indeed, the clearest evidence of misunderstanding by some Anglicans was their refusal to sacrifice their own agendas and desires to continue Holy Communion in the midst of the *COVID-19 lockdown*.

What a few of my interlocutors appeared to imply is that when the priest presides at the Eucharist, s/he performs a key function of uniting the sacred and the material, the divine and the creaturely, thus maintaining an essential sacrificial act that unites God and the world. There are numerous problems with this understanding. First, it effectively turns the priest into the agent of the Eucharist, rather than someone who directs the attention of God's people to the activity of God and the agency of the Holy Spirit. Second, it implies that God the Creator and God the Holy Spirit aren't always already present in God's Creation. Third, it implies that Christ's sacrifice on the cross is somehow repeated and enabled through the performance of the Eucharist, as if the victory of Christ on the cross over the death was not full and complete. The Reformation reacted against such a view, and Roman Catholic teaching today also rejects this position. This suggests that greater teaching in the Church is required on the concept of the Eucharist as "sacrifice". The sacrifice being referred to during Holy Communion is that of Christ, once offered, to the world. The secondary theme is our own self-offering back to Christ in thanksgiving and gratitude of God's self-offering to us through the incarnation of Christ.

The role of the clergy

When I engaged in a Zoom meeting with a group of clergy during the *COVID-19 lockdown* who were resisting some of the decisions made by their bishops, they lamented that it appeared their bishops were telling them to simply go on vacation, since a declared "sabbath rest" from the

Eucharist (an expression I think problematic and would not encourage) implied there was nothing for them to do. I was frankly shocked by this attitude. As central as the Eucharist is for Anglican piety and worship, Anglican tradition teaches that other forms of worship are also avenues to experience and engage with God's presence and life-giving Spirit. That these clergy were so prepared to diminish the importance of the offices, bible study, and pastoral care astonished me. They appeared to diminish the essential need to respond to the lockdown with increased pastoral care activities (such as phone calls to shut ins, video reflections on scripture, etc.), which suggests that increased attention and study of the theology of ministry and the nature of the vocation of the priesthood is required in the life of the Church.