

The assembly and Eucharist

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Like many other sacramental theologians schooled in the fundamentals of the liturgical renewal, I take the Christian assembly to be a constitutive element of the sacramentality of Eucharist. Receiving it in body as one of, and alongside of, an assembly of bodies gathered at one shared altar as an (eschatological) new community that felicitously undermines our social adhesion with biological family and affinity groups, and weaves us into a new community called by God, is central to its meaning, not peripheral. Our gathering is not an *addition* to sacramental presence in bread and wine, nor the *occasion* at which it is permissible for a priest to confect some presence with magic hands and magic words. Therefore “Virtual Eucharist” doesn’t do it. Whether it “really is” or “isn’t” the Body and Blood of Christ is the least of my concerns and misses the point. “digital presence” of bodies in separate rooms is not Eucharistic embodiment. Nor does lay presidency in homes, nor drive-through administration, nor disinfected mail-out wafers sufficiently attain the ritual proxemics necessary to Eucharistic performance in bodies with the Body. That embodied gathering is co-extensive with the significance of full sacramental presence. It is why when we take the Eucharistic elements to the sick, we do so *from* the assembly’s communion, before the rite concludes. The exception in this case proves the rule.

How about “spiritual communion?” Eh, maybe, maybe not. I’m still pondering the transmutation of a relatively unusual pastoral exception to a normative principle in the light of our tendency to fetishize, even idolize, bread and wine, which possibility has become disturbingly clear during this episode. (I still find myself sustained by the wisdom of Gregory Of Nyssa, Meister Elkhart, Juan de la Cruz, Miguel de Unamuno, Shusako Endo, and similar others during this time – we need to take care that neither the instruments of grace nor our doctrines become themselves the object of our devotion.) Aside from that issue, I’m simply not yet convinced of the value of spiritual communion or it’s substantial

difference from what happens in the daily office, contemplation, and personal prayer.

So *I long* for a return to Eucharistic gathering with the rest of you. In my particularity as a priest I have not felt the profound joy of gathering the assembly around the table since last December - ironically, when I celebrated my 30th year as a priest. I am really starting to feel the weight of that loss. But what we enact in Word and Sacrament is the *basileia tou theou* in which love of God and neighbor are the conjoined keystone. And love of God and neighbor are now served by *not gathering*. Service to public health *is leitourgia* right now. It's really that simple. Trample the *fumie*. It's why Christ came. (Shusako Endo, *silence*, for those who don't know the reference. I commend the book to you.)

I could trot out the instances of infection that have arisen from recent congregational gatherings now being reported in the news, but that shouldn't be necessary. We *can not* gather right now. Not to gather is the Way of Love. Along that way, let us continue to pray for one another and for the day we may gather again. In the meantime, the Resurrected Crucified One still reigns and moves among us.