

Eucharistic practice and sacramental theology: Praxis vs. intent

NANCY FORD

In the interests of full disclosure, I am not a cradle Anglican. I grew up in a “closed assembly” of the Plymouth Brethren. Praxis in that context, as it often does, belied the intent of the faithful. The basic desire was to be seen as God fearing living lives faithful to the Bible. However, in practice, judgement and narrow dualism were used to see others. Love and forgiveness were conditional, based on strict rule-bound interpretations of scripture.

The respect for communion is perhaps one similarity between the church of my youth and the church of my adult years. My decade long search for a coherent thoughtful theology lived out in daily life brought me into the Anglican church. There I was/am welcomed and given opportunities for spiritual growth,

In the Assembly, attendance at “The Lord’s supper” meant that all the accepted and baptised members could participate. They gathered around a wooden table covered in a white cloth. On it was a loaf of bread and silver cup of wine. The similarities end there. Everyone remained seated in silence until a male elder, (there were no clergy) who “felt inspired by the Holy Spirit” would begin to pray.

After another prayer or two a senior elder would give thanks for the bread and wine that was to be shared with those whom the community deemed to be upstanding enough to receive. The circle of chairs had more than one row. The back row was reserved for those who were not allowed to participate on communion. It often held visitors who had no letter of recommendation from another assembly, the unbaptised (children, teenagers etc.) and those under judgement by the elders. It was

felt the observers would be strengthened by being present. The miracle of Christ's death and resurrection was not to be shared widely.

As a teenager, I observed in my journal that the Holy Spirit seemed to be a creature of habit. The same two men would pray similar prayers before communion each Sunday. As an adult I realise that the silence which surrounded communion did not feel prayerful nor sacred. There were undercurrents of fear not reverence. That was perhaps one consequence of the culture of judgement. This rule bound community did not feel safe nor inclusive even to someone who had grown up in it.

My journey into the Anglican church began with the study of theology and introduction to rich spiritual practices and mysticism. The centrality of communion was the core of something hoped for, something I could not name but it bridged my journey into Anglicanism. I now have different language and understanding of the eucharist. But it was in considering the impact of COVID-19, I revisited my youthful experience.

As the Cathedral where I serve began the process of re-opening the church to a limited number of people for a service of the eucharist, the signup process had some hiccups. Some parishioners who had not signed up came anyway and the person at the door was caught in a difficult position. It was interesting to observe that of those who attended the first services some sat in their usual seats and others chose to sit close to the front which as we know is a very un-Anglican act. The virtual coffee hour which was instituted early in the closure continues and these days is a mix of those who have attended the service in person and those who attended "virtually. I was struck by one person's comment at one coffee hour. They said to the presider, "thank you, even though I was watching at home I could feel the prayerful way you celebrated eucharist today." This all serves to remind us of the complexity of individual spiritual practice and how that can be community building.

We know there is a wealth of different spiritual practices which can nurture and create growth. Most of which are not dependent on the eucharist. Make no mistake, I do grieve for the well-crafted, diverse and theologically thoughtful the liturgies from that of the Anglo Catholic Mass to the outdoor informal "wild church". Yet there is a spiritual coherence which affirms the firm place/experience of the sacred in varied practices.

As a Deacon, I find myself in a rather curious position. My vocation calls me out of the church into work in the community. And yet that work is anchored in the sacred and symbolized in liturgy. From the proclamation of the Gospel, receiving and praying over the gifts, setting the table and the sending forth of the people, each action is both symbolic,

an integrated part of the liturgy and affirms/grounds my work outside of church. After some months away from the liturgy, and as I re-invent the way I work in the community I have been facing challenges. At this point my guiding principles are to acknowledge this is a time of discernment and can be fuelled by the energy found as potential opportunities.

Personally, I crave the prayerful and sacred gathering around the eucharistic table, but I also sense there is something new on the horizon. But I have questions: as we become more accustomed to a life of streaming of services, Zoom worship, limited musical options and we connect separately in our “pods” are we becoming mere observers of those few who perform sacred acts? Are we in danger of developing modern day versions of the medieval “squints” found in ancient churches? The squint was where privileged people could observe the priest celebrate the eucharist. It was thought this served to emphasize the sacred/holy nature of the priestly acts and thus when or if one received communion (in one kind) it was intended to be full of spiritual and sacred meaning. Does this enforced distance irretrievably challenge the evolved way in which the sacred is understood to be available to anyone? How then do we encounter the “real presence”? Perhaps the question should be, has it ever been absent?

My physician recently asked me, “are you are going to close all the churches, and do something else now that it isn’t safe to have communion?” While no longer a church goer, he was reflecting on his own unexpected sense of loss and innate curiosity. Communion for him was still understood to be the central act of being Christian. That both interests and disturbs me. Would I rather be known for my Christian compassion, prayer life and commitment to justice and equality? Or, would I be known simply as someone who faithfully participates in an ancient ritual that has meaning for those involved? This is not what our choices are but as we seek to restore on some level what was, I feel we must be cautious. How do we communicate who and what we continue to be, and what we will be? I wonder what and who we might be leaving behind? Who are we continuing to exclude?

Perhaps there are other voices which need to be included in our discernment. Having worked with marginalized people for nearly a decade I have been lovingly educated about my assumptions, my privilege and my ignorance. I have learned to listen very carefully and to reject any knee-jerk problem solving. I have also learned that their spirituality can be deeper than mine. The complexity of acceptance and respect in their lives has taught many of them a patience and wisdom which is humbling. Perhaps this group has hard fought wisdom they might to add to our

discussions? We are concerned for their needs but in listening perhaps the dilemma we face would take on a different shape.

COVID-19 has pressed a reset button on our practices of communal worship. While a pandemic is not new, it is a devastating reminder that even in the 21st century we are not so very different to our ancestors who lived through the plague or the Spanish flu pandemic of 1918. We, as with them, fear we are a small step away from being “as dust”. Praxis in our current context speaks not only to our true identity but also our unhidden intent. This is a time when we are called to be prayerfully and theologically different.