

What of the Eucharist in the COVID-19 pandemic?

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It is not necessary that Traditions and Ceremonies be in all places one, and utterly like; for at all times they have been divers, and may be changed according to the diversities of countries, times, and men's manners, so that nothing be ordained against God's Word.¹

*It is precisely the intimate relationship of gospel, liturgy, and service that stands behind the theological principle *lex orandi: lex credendi*, i.e., the law of prayer is the law of belief. This principle, particularly treasured by Anglicans, means that theology as the statement of the Church's belief is drawn from the liturgy, i.e., from the point at which the gospel and the challenge of Christian life meet in prayer. The development of theology is not a legislative process which is imposed on liturgy; liturgy is a reflective process in which theology may be discovered. The Church must be open to liturgical change in order to maintain sensitivity to the impact of the gospel on the world and to permit the continuous development of a living theology.²*

¹ Article XXXIV: Of the Traditions of the Church.

² Book of Alternative Services (1984), 9.

The pandemic has forced rapid adaptation of worship, ministry, communication, finances and use of space in churches around the world, including the Anglican Church of Canada. These adaptations have been at every level, from local Bible studies and compline services to the decennial meeting of the Lambeth Conference. The virus and consequent isolation orders have further threatened the financial viability of many if not most parishes and dioceses as well as national church structures.

We lost all the public rites of the church at once: baptisms, funerals, ordinations and weddings ceased. Anointing the sick and dying became impossible. We were to maintain a “Eucharistic Fast”, an observance without precedent in the history of church. The forms that remained were educational (e.g. Bible studies), monastic (the daily offices), social (coffee hour) and administrative (business meetings). But the central rites of the church were gone.

Without the sacraments, how does the church know God’s presence? Where do we find the Lord when not all of us can reach the minimal level of physical gathering that Christ states in Mt 18:20, “For where two or three are gathered together in my name, there am I in the midst of them.” +Alan Gates, the Bishop of Massachusetts, has recognized that we need to “collectively, communally and deliberately” consider the issue of “remote consecration of elements at a distant location”³.

s have struggled to put as much of parish life on line as possible, creating a parallel schedule of meetings, study groups, and worship services as possible without easy access to musicians, servers, sanctuaries or ecclesial furnishings. The bravest souls have been holding funerals at graveside and rushing home to wash in the hottest water and strongest soap they can stand. Some have conducted last rites by telephone. Even hospital chaplains, heroically entering the hospitals every day, are limited in their ability to perform their normal duties.

In the meantime, people are not baptized. Those called to Holy Orders await their ordinations. Many faithful go to their death without Last Rites, and many of their remains are neither commended nor committed. And Christians who’ve become regular communicants over the last few decades hunger for the Bread of Life. The pace at which theology is deliberated does not match the need for movement.⁴

³ “‘Sacramental Hunger and Eucharistic Practice’: May 8 Pastoral Reflection from Bishop Gates | Episcopal Diocese of Massachusetts,” accessed May 11, 2020, www.diomass.org/news/reflections/sacramental-hunger-and-eucharistic-practice-may-8-pastoral-reflection-bishop-gates. He suggests we “depend upon agape meals while the theological wheels turn”.

⁴ In centuries before, local usage would have provided a means to respond to the demands of the laity. A saint’s day, a blessing, a rite or a new usage would emerge. It would not be authorized

The most urgent issue is that of the Eucharist. Many bishops throughout the Anglican Communion have interdicted the celebration of the Eucharist, which was intended to be a short-lived solution to a few weeks of quarantine. As the lockdowns continue, and as attending a parish Eucharist increasingly appears to combine many of the riskiest behaviours (shaking hands, eating together, singing, spending time in close proximity), the return to pre-COVID norms may be receding.

Clergy and people are impatient. The hurried imposition of an interdict could be tolerated for a short time, but an entire Easter season without any movement toward a solution is disturbing. People hunger for the Eucharist, and most recognize we will need safe means to celebrate for a very long time.

There is little to be gained by revisiting the great controversies over sacramental theology. High and low church Anglicans, those who favour both modern and traditional rites are all deeply concerned about how to maintain our Christian identity without physically gathering. What is the church without the ecclesia? And further, what is the Body of Christ without the Eucharistic Body of Christ?

Delays to the resolution of these difficult issues make the process even more difficult, and the disarray of the church more painful. Considering deep theological issues is made more problematic when public worship, the main arena for discernment, is unavailable.

In the absence of physically gathered church, in order to determine *lex credendi*, what is to be believed, we must now turn to our online experience of worship, *lex orandi*. In Christian communities around the world, the People of God are asking for bread. And while engaging in the online celebrations of the Eucharist, many of the faithful are bringing bread and wine from their kitchens to their computer desks. What does this mean?

What we need now is a hermeneutic, a way of understanding Scripture, Tradition and Reason that can help us more readily identify the ways in which we can move forward as a Eucharistic community.⁵

in advance. It would grow or not, be declared irregular or not. It might persist or gain traction throughout larger regions of Christendom. Or not. These conditions do not seem to prevail today. Bishops identify many institutions and pressures that increase homogeneity.

⁵ The recent action by the Presiding Bishop of the Episcopal Church to constrain the Bishop of Western Louisiana from celebrations of virtual Eucharists hinged on their understandings of the rubrics. "After a gracious conversation with the office of the Presiding Bishop," Owensby wrote, "I understand that virtual consecration of elements at a physical or geographical distance from the Altar exceeds the recognized bounds set by our rubrics and inscribed in our theology of the Eucharist." The use of rubrics written in 1976 to resolve controversies over the use of internet conferencing tools during the worst pandemic since the reign of Justinian presents its own difficulties. George Conger, "WLa Bishop Rescinds Virtual Eucharist Permission," *Anglican Ink*, April 24, 2020, <http://anglican.ink/2020/04/23/wla-bishop-rescinds-virtual-eucharist-permission/>.

What footprints has Christ left, what texts have the canonical writers preserved, what are the scientific truths that create boundary conditions for our practices? What are the guideposts as we go forward?

Reason—Public health and preserving life

The theological principle Jesus most insistently articulated was *pikuach nefesh*, נפש פיקוח, saving a life. This is “the principle in Jewish law that the preservation of human life overrides virtually any other religious rule”.⁶ In Jesus’ ministry, he was constantly being challenged to articulate his position on this law. Was it more important than the Sabbath laws? And Jesus said (in fourteen different pericopes) that the preservation of life was more important than the laws of religious observance.⁷

The dispersal of the church and our sheltering in our homes is truly right to do. We must be guided by epidemiologists and public health experts. There is no level of risk that is acceptable to the One Who Heals.

We need to continue to support our people in their self-isolation until it is much safer to emerge. Instead of forcing people to return to the old norms, we need to find a means to stay at home and be part of a Eucharistic community. We should not presume to create a new Eucharistic norm which can harm communicants or celebrants.

Scripture—Breaking bread is the centre of our life

Eucharist as mandate of the church

The earliest account of what we now call the Eucharist is found in 1 Cor 11:24-25, where Jesus’ command is to “Do this in remembrance of me.” He gives a positive command or duty to take bread and bless it, to “do this” and to do so “in remembrance of me”. Luke repeats this commandment in his narrative of the Last Supper, reflecting his Pauline roots. For Paul already in 55 AD and for his follower, Luke, this was the most important thing we could do.

In Acts 2:42, we can recognize what appears to be a formula: “And they continued steadfastly in the apostles’ doctrine and fellowship, and in breaking of bread, and in prayers.” This passage indicates the marks of Christian communities that persist to this day. These deeds marked the norms of the new Christian community that Luke believed had already been codified before the destruction of the Temple. Luke

⁶ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Pikuach_nefesh

⁷ Nina L. Collins, *Jesus, the Sabbath and the Jewish Debate: Healing on the Sabbath in the 1st and 2nd centuries CE*. New York: Bloomsbury T&T Clark, 2014.

describes (2:46) the community as attending the Temple and then returning to their homes to break bread (κλῶντές τε κατ'οἶκον ἄρτον).

For the Pauline community, including Luke, breaking bread was one of their defining acts. And they did it κατ'οἶκον, in each home.

John makes Jesus' presence in bread one of the most extreme of Jesus' claims (Jn 6:51). "I am the living bread which came down from heaven. If anyone eats of this bread, he will live forever; and the bread that I shall give is My flesh, which I shall give for the life of the world." Jesus' presence in the bread is fleshly. It is more powerful than manna. The claims are offensive to the religious authorities.

The centrality of Jesus' presence in the bread is clear in John's Gospel. It is only by eating this bread that people can have life. Christians gain their lives in this act. There are no substitutions.

Church leadership

For John's community, the central role of the leaders of the Church is to maintain the sacred meal, a role that emerges from Jesus' relationship with Peter. John 13, the Last Supper, and John 21, the post Resurrection narrative, connect Peter to Jesus through the feeding of the community. Jesus repeats his charge to Simon Peter three times (Jn 21:15-17). "Simon son of John, do you love me?" Peter felt hurt because he said to him the third time, "Do you love me?" And he said to him, "Lord, you know everything; you know that I love you." Jesus said to him, "Feed my sheep." Jesus commands Peter to shepherd (Ποίμαινε) the flock once and twice to feed (Βόσκει) His sheep. The most important duty of Peter and his successors is to ensure the faithful are fed with the Bread of Life.

Tradition—The liturgy provides the bread

The Eucharistic bread—not just at the Sunday gathering of the community

The Christians of the second through fourth centuries communicated themselves at home, after the Eucharistic celebrations.

By the time of Justin Martyr's First Apology in 155 AD, it was settled practice for the Eucharistic bread to be sent to the absent from the Eucharistic gathering "and to those who are absent a portion is sent by the deacons".⁸ Justin twice uses the word absent rather than sick. This implies that everyone who was absent, whether sick or not, needed access

⁸ Justin Martyr, "First Apology," in *Ante-Nicene Fathers*, trans. Alexander Roberts, James Donaldson, and A. Cleveland Coxe, vol. 1 (Christian Literature Publishing Co., 1885), <http://earlychristianwritings.com/text/justinmartyr-firstapology.html>.

to the consecrated bread. The meaning and power of this bread persisted away from and after the celebration.

Two centuries later, Basil the Great sent a letter (93) to Caesarea, arguing that she was wrong to believe that communicants should not take the bread in their hands. Basil referred to the example of the Desert Fathers, asserting that they gave themselves communion "from their own hands".⁹ "It is needless to point out that for anyone in times of persecution to be compelled to take the communion in his own hand without the presence of a priest or minister is not a serious offence, as long custom sanctions this practice from the facts themselves. All the solitaries in the desert, where there is no priest, take the communion themselves, keeping communion at home."

Basil is clear that self-isolated monastics were able to remain in communion with their churches through the delivery of a quantity of Eucharistic bread. They would break this off in their hands as required. But he is also clear that although persecution drove earlier Christians to stay away from Eucharistic celebrations, they were able to consume consecrated bread that they kept on their person or at home.

Eucharistic theology: Centuries of disputes

While much ink has been spilled on the topic of the correct theology of the Eucharist, few Anglicans believe that we have exhausted opportunities for debate.

In the late eleventh century, Pope Gregory VII articulated a theology of the Eucharistic presence of Christ which quickly became dominant. St. Francis of Assisi popularized Eucharistic adoration. By the late 13th century, Pope Urban IV had instituted the feast of Corpus Christi. This viewpoint was explicitly rejected by the English Reformers, who insisted that the doctrine of transubstantiation was "repugnant to the plain words of Scripture".

The theology of the Eucharist has not remained settled through subsequent Anglican history. We can look at the current praxis of the church as expressed in the Book of Alternative services to discover a contemporary understanding of the sacrament. A more nuanced view will take the extensive work of numerous historians of theology.

Book of Alternative Services

In the last forty years, the weekly celebration of the Eucharist has gradually become normative. This transformation has driven changes in our ecclesiology, creating a need for Indigenous priests capable of celebrating

⁹ "Philip Schaff: NPNF2-08. Basil: Letters and Select Works - Christian Classics Ethereal Library," accessed May 5, 2020, www.ccel.org/ccel/schaff/npnf208.ix.xciv.html.

regularly rather than flying into a parish, and eventually, an entire parallel Indigenous ecclesial structure. It has redefined churchmanship. It has brought us together into a more tightly knit denomination.

In recent weeks, in defense of the Eucharistic fast, many people have said that for much of its existence, the Anglican Church has not regarded the Eucharist as the principal form of Christian worship. They contend that the absence of the Eucharistic Feast is therefore not a significant privation when we have Morning Prayer and other alternatives.

Baptismal promises

The first promise made by the baptizand echoes the description of the early Christian community in Acts 2:42. Will you continue in the apostles' teaching and fellowship, in the breaking of bread, and in the prayers? For decades, we have asked new Christians to promise to break bread as part of the baptismal covenant. In this covenant, there is a corresponding obligation of the church to make the sacrament available.¹⁰

The Ordination of a Bishop

All bishops in Canada are told they are “to celebrate and to provide for the administration of the sacraments of the new covenant”; and they have had to affirm that they would “encourage and support all baptized people in their gifts and ministries, nourish them from the riches of God’s grace, pray for them without ceasing, and celebrate with them the sacraments of our redemption”. It appears that bishops have a positive duty to celebrate the sacraments, no matter how difficult.¹¹

Maundy Thursday

According to the Revised Common Lectionary, we read not only the Eucharistic narrative from 1 Cor 11:24, “Do this”, as well the commandment

¹⁰ This contractual reciprocity is best expressed in the ordination of a priest, when the bishop prays, “May the Lord who has given you the will to do these things give you the grace and power to perform them.”

¹¹ When Bishop Ronald Hall of Hong Kong had no priest to celebrate the Eucharist in Macao under the Japanese occupation, he ordained Deaconess Florence Li Tim Oi to the priesthood under extremely dangerous circumstances. Such an act was theologically impossible at the time. He was censured by Lambeth in 1948.

In response to COVID-19 restrictions, Pope Francis told his clergy they should absolve and bless from the hallways, where they were allowed to work as chaplains. The canon lawyers objected. Francis replied, “Bishop, fulfill your priestly duty. That doesn’t mean that canon law is not important. But the final canon says that the whole of canon law is for the salvation of souls, and that’s what opens the door for us to go out in times of difficulty to bring the consolation of God.” “Francis Envisions a Post-Pandemic Church ‘Not Closed off in Institutions,’” National Catholic Reporter, 2:28am, www.ncronline.org/news/vatican/francis-envisions-post-pandemic-church-not-closed-institutions.

passage in John 13:34 “I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another.” We observe two commandments together. The Mandatum is dual: to make Eucharist and to love one another. Until 2020, the church annually enacted the giving of both mandates and their performance.

Spiritual Communion

Many clergy are assuring their people that a spiritual communion is a valid alternative to the Eucharist. There are two problems with this. First, it has not appeared in an Anglican prayer book since 1662.

Second, if we tell people they don't need the Eucharist, do we expect them to believe us?

In summary: Rigorism loses to piety

The Donatists were excommunicated. Paul won over Peter. Children receive communion. The Methodists and Tractarians revived and unleashed the latent piety of frosty Britain. Deaconesses were made priests. Queers are priests and bishops. Not all at once. But inexorably the circle widens. Because the people of God thirst for God's presence. Even when it is impossible.

Why are the grocery shelves denuded of flour? It is bread to which we turn in times of trouble. Our faith makes the sacred nature of bread part of our understanding of humanity and divinity. Why would we forego it in the midst of an existential crisis? Especially when we are commanded to "do this"?

God is not like a scarce supply of yeast in jars. God is alive like a sour-dough culture. God's presence grows wherever it is fed. Grasping to hold and control the greatest gift and comfort that Christ has given us is unseemly. The Holy Spirit, the Comforter, is too fluid to allow that.

People have been deprived of the most important things we have: our hope and one another. We must seek hope out and share it in wide communities. Now is the time for generosity, for sharing our abundance widely, for turning our lawns into vegetable gardens, for identifying and holding God's goodness up to the window for all to delight.