

Fulfilling all things in Christ

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One of the words heard repeatedly as we have made our way through the COVID-19 pandemic is “unprecedented”. While there has been much grief and suffering experienced both in our country and around the world from the coronavirus, and while we are right to be taking it seriously, responding with the deepest empathy for those who have and are suffering, it must also be noted that, while this experience is unprecedented for the current generations of western society, the impact and disruption we are experiencing is not unprecedented for most of our contemporaries in much of the rest of the world. Such experience is also more the norm of history than its exception. Specifically, for the Church, our ministry and mission has been carried out for two thousand years in the midst of hardship, persecution, poverty, oppression, famine, drought, violence, war, plague, isolation and social upheaval.

Upheaval and disruption, however, without denying the very real suffering of the situation, also present us with circumstances which push us to think once more about what we do, why we do it, and how we do it. In that light, the cessation of church services has presented us with questions about our worship and Eucharistic celebrations which are not only pertinent to the current circumstances, but also to the digital world and way of life which has been unfolding around us for several decades, and will continue to unfold as we make our way through the next few decades.

One of the gifts of the liturgical renewal movement over the last century has been to remind us and re-emphasize that the Eucharist is a communal meal. It was not that we did not know it, but as often happens with much cherished and oft repeated observances, referring to the Lord’s Supper as “making one’s communion” and “receiving the sacrament” had often overshadowed the communal dimension of shared meal. To remind ourselves of that core piece has, in my view, heightened our awareness that the Eucharist is the people of God gathering at the

Lord's Table. It is this final piece that is also at the heart of what troubles us in suspending worship.

As so often happens in human life, however, in focusing on one piece we often drop or lose track of others. Yes, this is a meal, but the words "Body of Christ" and "This is my blood of the new covenant" signal powerfully that this is a meal like no other: we eat, but we feed on our host; we share food, but the very act binds us in covenant commitment to the one who gives it, and to one another; we are fed, but in the feeding we are obligated to feed others and be agents in and to the world of the one who feeds us; we receive food for Life – but doing so "proclaims the Lord's death until he comes."

The celebration both resonates with and celebrates the rich narrative tapestry of the story of scripture – of creation, fall, the call of Abraham and Sarah, the giving of the law, prophetic call and challenge, redemption and sanctification – and orients us to the fulfillment of all things in Christ in the great and blessed feast which is the world's telos. The Eucharist is memorial and anticipation; it is both corporate and personal; it is an act of worship and a gift by which we are fed and strengthened for service; it is meal, proclamation of faith and truth, (our sacrifice of) praise and thanksgiving, offering (ourselves, our souls and bodies), an expression of and a means to unity. And just as we encounter the infinite and eternal divine presence in the fully human, finite and temporal person of Jesus, so in the Eucharist, under the simple elements of bread and wine, we encounter and receive the divine life of our Lord in the sacrament taken within ourselves. Just as in a body with many parts and organs, all of these things function as the heart, lungs, mind; hands, feet, ears and eyes that make the one whole celebration, and are always present whether we are aware of them all at any given celebration or not.

As its central act of worship, the eucharist is an act of Church in the largest sense of "Church"; and therefore, we articulate norms of how it is conducted, who may preside and under what conditions it is appropriate to receive. Cultural norms around individualism, consumerism, egalitarian rights to access, privilege and secular power constructs do and will always struggle to grapple with this. It is no wonder that for some centuries in the early life of the church, catechesis and formation for discipleship were seen as indispensable and inextricably linked to participation in the Eucharistic feast; word and sacrament here are not separable – only through the immersion in the Word do we come to the table with our eyes increasingly opened and our minds continuously transformed to see and apprehend the deepest mystery of God's love for us and the life into which we have entered and are entering through Jesus Christ in the power of the Holy Spirit.

There has also always been in the life of the Church adaptation to situation and circumstance. While Christian formation and learning have been the expected norm, we adapt that to the capacity of the recipient. While normatively we would share both bread and cup, we have acknowledged, when necessity arises, that we receive Christ fully in either. The norm has been for members of the Body to gather bodily – be physically present – but when members are unable to be present, they can receive at the hands of those delegated by the community to carry the sacrament to them. When members have been unable to receive physically because of sickness or other “just impediment”, by faith in Christ they can receive the Body and Blood, even though they have not taken the sacrament “with his mouth.” (BCP, 584)

But there is a difficulty in speaking of norms and exceptions however – particularly, perhaps, for modern minds. Once the exception has been accepted, then it is easy to assume that, both being acceptable, one is as good as the other. It is easy to see how the equation can be made that, if it works, then, well, it works. This is something that might fuel current uneasiness with online worship and celebrations of the eucharist viewed online. What if people, after the pandemic is over, think that, since they could stay home at their computers during the pandemic, there is no reason why they shouldn’t do the same after the pandemic. And in a world in which we seek to be permissive and inclusive, we might wonder how we could resist such an equation. If that is how they want to do it – then how can we say no. The exception becomes the norm. This requires some careful thinking about what underlies the allowance of exceptions (and what does not). There is a problem with the equation. The exceptions are allowed on the basis of two things – a desire and intention to receive on one hand, and justified impediments on the other. Someone viewing on line and receiving Christ by “Spiritual Communion” intends to be part of the gathered community for its celebration of the Body of Christ, within the Body of Christ, to the extent that is possible, but are being kept from it. It is difficult to see how someone who is able to be present, but chooses not to be because of convenience or simple preference, can fit into that description. St. Paul’s warning in 1 Cor 11 about those who participate “without discerning the body” (vv29) bears consideration here. While the passage refers to those “eating and drinking” without discerning the Lord’s Body, we might consider that choosing to not be present is another way to fail to discern the Body. The “exception” involves being kept from coming; trying to make that a “norm” involves choosing to stay away. One is a desire thwarted, the other might well be understood as an act

of willful denial or even rebellion against the body. More gently, at the least, it is an act of uninformed choice – or a choice driven by a lack of formation in the faith. In the former case we might ask if someone can be said to truly desire to participate in the one Body sacramentally when they have *chosen* to not participate in the Body gathered? In the latter case, we might be led to see how continuing to have our Eucharistic celebrations viewed online could act, not only as spiritual communion for those unable to be present, but as a form of catechesis for those who have chosen to view rather than attend. Those who are not coming to receive are being invited through the community’s celebration, and may be drawn in faith to join fully in the Body gathered where they can truly receive and be fed in the Body and Blood of Christ. This in itself should challenge us to consider how, within our Eucharistic norms, we might enhance the celebration to more fully take advantage of a catechetical opportunity.

There are two further dimensions of the Eucharist that I want to touch on here. The first relates closely to the foregoing discussion with respect to “the Body.” In the circumstance where members of the Church are *unable* to be physically present to receive the sacrament we need to perhaps be reminded that our theology of the Body of Christ is not limited to physical gathering. We do not cease to be the body when we are sent forth from the eucharist; and someone separated by being isolated from the rest of the community of faith physically (by virtue of necessity or circumstance) does not cease to be part of the body. I am reminded that we continue to say the Lord’s Prayer with the words “Our Father” even when we say it in the privacy of our own room. There is a fundamental recognition of our connection to the whole community of faith even in our “private” prayer. “There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called in one hope of your calling; one Lord, one faith, one baptism; one God and Father of all, who is above all, and through all, and in all.” (Again, keeping in mind the distinction between willful separation and just impediment) is there a sense in which some part of the body that is able to continue the celebration and reception of the eucharist may do that vicariously on behalf of those not able to be present? Perhaps there is even a synergy between the remnant gathered on behalf of the whole and the communion of desire, the Spiritual Communion, by which the separated member receives the Body and participates in the Body, by visual and/or auditory connection and, of course, above all, through the presence and activity of the Holy Spirit.

The second is a consideration of the nature of the Church’s worship and ministry, and in this case particularly the Eucharist, in relation to

the world, and indeed the whole of creation. The celebration of the Eucharist is not about the reception of some “good” in the economic or consumer sense of that word. It is not about how I “get mine,” or “my share,” or even “my privilege” (understood as something earned or awarded). It is entirely about my participation in the re-ordering and right ordering of humanity and indeed the whole of creation in its relation to its creator.

From the very beginning, the story of creation tells us through the person of Adam that we are made as a means of God’s grace to and gracious governance of the whole of creation. Adam names the creatures and is given authority as God’s steward; Abraham is called, not as private privilege, but as one “in (whom) all the tribes of the earth shall be blessed.” (Gen 12:3) Israel, God’s people, are called, not simply as a national privilege for their own sake, but to bring all to the love and worship of God: “All the ends of the earth shall remember and turn to the Lord, and all the families of the nations shall worship before you.” (Ps 22:27) And “I will make you as a light for the nations, that my salvation may reach to the end of the earth” (Is 49:6). This last fulfilled in the life, ministry, death and resurrection of Jesus – into who’s Body we have been incorporated in baptism. And so, we are both, as members of Christ’s body, “being transformed by the renewing of our minds” (Rom 12:1-2) and “are a royal priesthood” (1 Pet 2:9), united to Jesus in making intercession and an offering of praise and thanksgiving on behalf of fallen creation, as the “first fruits” of God’s redemptive work.