

The essential nature of the Eucharist and the modes of its reception

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The Faculty of Theology at Queen's College held two well-attended consultative sessions by means of GoToMeeting on June 15 and June 22, 2020. The discussions were lively and informative, and although a great deal of ground was covered, there were three questions of major concern. All three pertain directly to the nature and reception of the Eucharist during the present pandemic. First, how inclusive should the Eucharist be? Or, putting it another way, who constitutes the Body of Christ at the Lord's Table? Secondly, since the physical reception of the Eucharist – the bread and the wine – is precluded at the present time, in what way or ways can we understand its spiritual reception? And thirdly, can the Eucharist act in a similar way to an icon, namely, as a window connecting this world with the transfigured cosmos?

The overwhelming opinion of those present at both sessions was that the Eucharist, which is a multi-faceted celebration, should be as inclusive as possible, and that – once the physical reception is again made possible – no one who presents themselves at the altar should be refused. It is not the business of any member of the clergy to try to channel God's grace and, as a consequence, anyone who wishes to receive communion should do so – what happens after that is entirely up to God. All those, therefore, who participate in any form of online worship may be regarded as belonging to the Body of Christ, and we must remember that Christ himself said that he had many sheep which were not of this fold (Jn 10:16). The Church is not an institution but a living being, the People of God. It is not defined by walls and buildings – the present COVID-19 crisis has made that abundantly clear – but by the presence of the Holy Spirit, and the Holy Spirit blows

where it wills (Jn 3:8). It is essential, therefore, to be open to the inspiration of that same Spirit, though it must be admitted that all the Churches, in the recent past and throughout history, have sometimes done an excellent job of refusing to listen to its voice.

Given the inclusive nature of the Eucharist, how should it be received? The unanimous opinion of all present at both sessions was that, ideally, it should be received under both species of bread and wine, just as Christ distributed his own Body and Blood under the form of bread and wine at the Last Supper. Putting it another way, at the heart of the Eucharist is the fact that it is a communal meal. In the earliest Church, it was a full meal which, as is clear from Paul's first letter to the Corinthians, could sometimes get out of hand. By the second century, however, it had become the symbolic meal we enjoy today. This is perfectly clear from the fascinating description of a second-century Eucharist provided for us by Justin Martyr who was executed in about 165. Communion in both kinds was standard in the West until the Middle Ages when the Roman Catholic Church, for reasons which are not here our concern, introduced communion in one species alone, that of the bread. The Reformers, following their Master Jesus, re-introduced communion in both kinds, and that has been the Anglican tradition from its beginning. At the moment, however, this is not possible, so what is to be done? This brought up two questions:

- (i) the question of intinction, and
- (ii) the question of communion in one kind in the present crisis.

First of all, it is obvious that in the course of a pandemic, the common cup must be avoided. There is no wine with a sufficiently high alcoholic content to kill any germs of any sort. The overall opinion of those attending the sessions, however, was that intinction should be avoided, except when medical circumstances demand it or where there is a severe allergic reaction to any more than a trace of alcohol. Apart from the fact that intinction in itself may be unhygienic, it also does away with the symbolism of the Eucharistic meal. So what of communion in one kind, namely, the bread? There are solid theological arguments (which we do not have space to present here) demonstrating that reception in one kind is the reception of the whole Christ. To deny this is, effectively, to separate the natures in Christ, and that was a heresy roundly condemned at the Fourth Ecumenical Council, the Council of Chalcedon, in 451. But though this may be the case theologically, there is no doubt that, for some parishioners, their *perception* of what they are receiving may not be in accord with this. This presents a pastoral challenge for pastors to

ensure that changes in liturgical practice are explained by appropriate educational means, and accompanied by support for those who resist changes to established Eucharistic practice and devotion. In the end, however, although the clergy may try to explain why communion in one kind is communion in the whole Christ, if a parishioner does not see this, there is really nothing else to be said. It is their choice whether to communicate or not. This leads us to the question of spiritual, or, as some prefer to call it, contemplative reception, in which neither bread nor wine is consumed.

Even under normal circumstances, there are some who attend a celebration of the Eucharist and choose not to receive. They nevertheless regard themselves as fully participating members of the Body of Christ, and who are we to judge? As we said above, it is not given to any of us, ordained or otherwise, to declare where, when, and how the grace of God will operate. The twenty-eighth of the Thirty-Nine Articles states that “the Body of Christ is given, taken, and eaten, in the Supper, only after an heavenly and spiritual manner. And the means whereby the Body of Christ is received and eaten in the Supper is Faith.” At the present time, of course, the bread cannot be eaten since there is no congregation there to eat it, but in the view of those who attended the consultative sessions, the key to the spiritual reception of the Eucharist is faith and the Holy Spirit. To participate in an online Eucharist is to assert one’s membership of the Mystical Body of Christ, and if we opens up ourselves to the power of the Holy Spirit in faith, then we may assume that, as Christ himself is there with us (the Second Person of the Trinity is not bound by the laws of physical space), so, too, is his grace. Saint Augustine stated that God is *ubique praesens et ubique totus*, “everywhere present and everywhere whole,” and that, in essence, is all we need to believe and know.

An online gathering is not, of course, ideal. It necessarily lacks the aspect of the symbolic meal, and it lacks that physical fellowship which is undoubtedly of great importance to many people. The thing that distinguishes the Christian God from the God of Judaism or Islam is not unity, but trinity, and the essence of the Trinity is relationship. The Christian Church, therefore, which is the Mystical Body of Christ is, by definition, a communal Church, a Church of inter-personal relationships and of our collective and individual relationship with the Trinitarian God in whose image we were created. This is something which is also demonstrated in the offering. This should not be regarded as a collection, which is a gathering in, but as an offering, which is a giving out. The purpose of the offering is not merely to pay for the oil to heat the

church (though this, too, is important), but to assist those members of the Mystical Body who need our assistance. This is also a demonstration and affirmation of our responsibility to and for each other. It is perfectly possible to make such an offering online in an online service, though there is no doubt that this has seriously declined during the COVID-19 pandemic. Given, then, that a physical Eucharist with the physical reception of the Eucharistic elements is not, at the moment, possible, what of Morning Prayer and Evening Prayer?

Here in Newfoundland and Labrador, Morning Prayer was, for many decades, the standard mode for Sunday worship. The question was raised, therefore, as to whether the far more frequent celebration of the Eucharist in recent years – assuming, naturally, that such a celebration is possible – has diminished the importance of Morning and Evening Prayer. In the opinion of the majority of those present, it had not. It was also pointed out that Morning Prayer did not, obviously, involve a Eucharist (though it is an ideal preparation for it), but that those who attended were quite sure they were attending a service which was in itself a channel for God's grace. Some, of course, attended because that's what you always did at a certain time on a Sunday morning, and/or to see their friends and catch up on the latest news, and/or to enjoy the music and the singing. How God deals with that is up to God, and is none of our business. The essential point of this, however, is that Morning and Evening Prayer clearly show (i) that God's grace is not restricted to the celebration of the Eucharist, and (ii) that attendance at a service online can be a rewarding experience, even if it lacks the physical companionship which so many of the members of the Body of Christ so enjoy. The recent significant uptake of online real-time connectedness for dispersed families, businesses, and organizations is allowing for an ease of use and genuine rapport that may allow for enhanced engagement in faith communities for many restricted for health, location, or other reasons. In a truly responsive faith community, in-person and online participation may not be a case of either/or, but both/and.

The last thing to be considered at the consultative sessions was whether the Eucharist might be regarded in a similar light to that of an Orthodox icon. Given that one of the writers of this document was Orthodox for forty-five years and ordained as an Orthodox sub-deacon before returning to his Anglican roots, this is home territory for him. The theological principle behind an icon is that the veneration of the icon passes through the icon to the prototype behind it. The veneration of an icon of the Mother of God, for example, passes straight to the Mother of God herself, and the icon also acts as a point of communication for

the assistance she might vouchsafe to give us. Basil of Caesarea is eminently clear on this point, and John of Damascus even clearer. May we regard a consecrated wafer in the same way, namely as a point of communion and communication between the material and spiritual worlds, between the Mystical Body of Christ and its Head?

There were mixed feelings on this question. Some of those attending saw no problem with the idea, but others pointed out the very real danger that this could all too easily lead back to the medieval idea that the veneration of the Host, when the priest elevated and displayed it, was sufficient in itself for salvation. This is not something to be encouraged, and there was no majority support for the idea of viewing the consecrated wafer as a type of icon.

In conclusion, among all those attending the consultative sessions there was unanimous agreement on two points. First, that the present situation is obviously difficult, more difficult for some parishioners than for others, and there is no easy solution. And second, that the key to understanding and combatting the crisis is surely to be found in being open, in faith, to the grace and inspiration of the Holy Spirit, and to remember at all times that, as Saint Augustine said, God is everywhere present and everywhere whole.