

Can God spread a table in the wilderness?

R.H. GRANT RODGERS

Preamble

In the midst of the anxiety, confusion and outright danger posed by the COVID-19 pandemic, I write from the perspective of one who is in the high-risk category health-wise.

I write from the perspective of one who has had the celebration and experience of the Eucharist as the core of his priestly spiritual and religious life for almost 40 years; for the past five years, I have also taught subjects like Anglican Liturgy and The Theology and Practice of the Eucharist at Vancouver School of Theology.

By virtue of ordination in the Anglican Church, I am a Catholic priest. As such I am not about to trifle with something so central to my own identity and purpose as well as that of the one, holy, catholic and apostolic Church. I was mentored in the Anglo-Catholic tradition and remain grateful for the ways it continues to inform and guide my ministry.

At the same time, I write with the awareness that Anglican eucharistic theology has never been strictly defined. What happens during consecration remains a mystery. I write this from the point of view that there is always room for interpretation and development of existing practices.

I also write from the point of view that says “Where Jesus Christ is, there is the Catholic Church.”¹ As a pastor whose theology has been shaped by many years of liturgical practice and pastoral interaction with people in parishes, I am going to suggest that creating options in our eucharistic practices is a positive way to respond to this crisis that can open doors to greater participation and a larger sense of the Church. I want to speak to

¹ Ignatius of Antioch, *Epistle to the Smyrnaeans*, Chapter 8.

the issue of virtual² Communion as it relates to the existing practice of “Spiritual Communion,” and as an optional way of offering the Eucharist. I reflect too on the meaning of presence, and of the pastoral imperative which is before us in this time of worldwide crisis.

Considering liturgical/sacramental precedent

Stranded in the desert, anxious about what lies ahead, we hear the people of God asking, “Can God spread a table in the wilderness?”³ The implied answer is Yes, as “bread” is provided in the form of manna. That same pattern appears in the New Testament as Jesus is challenged by the people to provide bread in the wilderness and is portrayed in all the Gospels as doing so for large crowds, quite indiscriminately, no church in sight.

The life of Christ is an expression of God’s goodness, generosity and grace, exemplifying the expansive, liberal nature of God’s love. Eucharistic theology is rooted and reflected in the New Testament witness of the feedings of multitudes, wedding feasts, table fellowship, and moments in places like Emmaus where Jesus was “known to them in the breaking of the bread.”⁴

From the beginning, the Christian approach to the Eucharist was pastorally sensitive to the needs of as many people as possible, and not specifically associated with churches. Wherever it happened, a significant part of its intent was to make sure that all were included, extending the agapic/eucharistic experience of fellowship and belonging (κοινωνία) especially to the vulnerable and those on the margins.

The Church has experienced many situations in which providing/accessing Communion has been difficult, e.g. in times of plague, war, natural disaster, distance, pastoral indifference and theological confusion.

We inherit the pastoral practice of taking Communion to people, whether in their homes, in hospitals, or on the battlefield, expressing the theological belief that all members of the Body matter, and the pastoral concern of making sure everyone is included one way or another. It may be hard for a church long accustomed to a maintenance mode of church life to realize that the focus in many times and places was never merely about those individuals fortunate enough to be able to be present in person for the liturgy.

2 “Virtual” defined as closely approximating, nearly equivalent, manifesting a high level of similarity, or in almost all respects the same (as opposed to unreal, non-actual or non-existent).

3 Ps 78:19 NRSV.

4 Lk 24, especially vv30-31.

The long-standing, generally authorized practice of making a “Spiritual Communion” is referenced in a recent Church of England document:

The Book of Common Prayer instructs us that if we offer ourselves in penitence and faith, giving thanks for the redemption won by Christ crucified, we may truly ‘eat and drink the Body and Blood of our Saviour Christ’, although we cannot receive the sacrament physically in ourselves. Making a Spiritual Communion is particularly fitting for those who cannot receive the sacrament at the great feasts of the Church, and it fulfils the duty of receiving Holy Communion ‘regularly, and especially at the festivals of Christmas, Easter and Whitsun or Pentecost.’

—Canon B 15⁵

The pure and simple yearning for God, as described by St Thomas Aquinas, or in *the Cloud of Unknowing*, or by Brother Lawrence of the Resurrection, or Thomas Merton, is “in fact” to experience the reality of God. Without that yearning, that intent, the most perfectly contrived liturgy loses any sense of meaning and purpose.

A Roman Catholic position on Spiritual Communion is articulated by Fr. Hugh Barbour:

Whenever we make a prayer or an act interiorly of desire for that sacrament, we receive the grace of the sacrament. It’s not a small thing ... It’s a very powerful thing, much more powerful than we would think. It’s not like a second best, you know, ‘Well, if I can’t get to Mass, I can make a spiritual communion.’⁶

This is such an important point about the possibility, validity and even merit of participating from a distance. If Spiritual Communion (participating in the eucharistic celebration without being physically present) may in some way be equated with full participation, then certainly that yearning, that desire, combined with the ability to be “present” via electronic means, suggests that Communion is possible in ways we may not have considered until now.

A 1916 Anglican guide⁷ to Spiritual Communion states the following:

⁵ The Church of England, *Guidance on Spiritual Communion and Coronavirus*, <https://www.churchofengland.org/sites/default/files/2020-03/Guidance>.

⁶ Fr. Hugh Barbour, O. Praem., *Spiritual Communion in a Time of Coronavirus*, Catholic Answers, www.catholic.com/audio/caf/spiritual-communion-in-a-time-of-coronavirus.

⁷ Cecil John Wood. *A Form of Spiritual Communion Compiled by the Bishop of Melanesia*, Auckland: Wilson & Horton, Printers, 1916, http://anglicanhistory.org/oceania/wood_communion1916.html.

The act of Spiritual Communion is not a substitute for Sacramental Communion, nor is it a make-believe. At the close of the devotion the Communicant gives thanks to God for something definitely received, and during the day [they] can look back to [their] morning devotion and say, This morning I received the Body and Blood of my Lord.

Holy Communion is an outward sign of an invisible grace being communicated. In thinking about the implications of extended worship via technology, we might ask: “Does the local gathering create that communion or does it simply connect with it and point to it as something that is in existence at all times and in all places, as something we can enter at any time or place?” As the old saying goes, “Bidden or unbidden, God is present,”⁸ and as the psalm reminds us, there is nowhere we can be where God is not present.⁹

Traditionally, Spiritual Communion is something that is left up to the individual, an *ad hoc* option people can undertake when the ideal can't be realized.¹⁰ I think the Church needs to take a step beyond its existing understanding of Spiritual Communion and create new eucharistic practices that integrate this larger sense of God's capacity to be present with the intentional corporate life of the eucharistic community. Rather than simply become immobilized, rendered unable to respond by the weight of tradition, I want to urge the Church to operate from the God-given gift of faith, enabled by reason, conscious that our tradition already allows “virtual” communion.

The importance of being present

The question, “*Who is my “neighbour”?*” is an example of the way the New Testament makes us stretch existing definitions, pushing us beyond the conventional and the habitual. Mere physical proximity does not make one a true neighbour, not in the sense that Jesus was suggesting.

Physical proximity is an important consideration, but it does not stand alone. The Pharisee “praying” in the Temple may as well not have been there.¹¹ Those who gathered for worship in Corinth were admonished by St Paul¹² because they were oblivious (i.e. not present) to the people right next to them. The participation of some was considered to be “not genuine” and there is a question as to whether such people “really eat” the Lord's Supper.¹³

⁸ Often credited to Desiderius Erasmus.

⁹ Ps 139:7-12.

¹⁰ See also Book of Common Prayer rubric, 584.

¹¹ Lk 18: 9-14.

¹² 1 Cor 11:17-22.

¹³ 1 Cor 11:19-20.

As people can be together and yet remote, they can also be apart and yet remain connected. In 1 Th 2:17, St. Paul says “As for us, brothers and sisters, when, for a short time, we were made orphans by being separated from you—in person, not in heart—we longed with great eagerness to see you face to face.” Though separated physically, St Paul affirms a real connection of the “heart,” because, in Christ, we are never essentially or completely separated.¹⁴ It is significant to me that in addition to that connection of “heart,” online worship allows us to connect “face to face.”

The concept of the Communion of Saints is another aspect of the way the Eucharist is understood as being “beyond” the immediate gathering. Even something as simple as the ringing of the church bells is an indication that we have always understood the scope of worship as larger than what is happening inside the building and that there are “others” out there for whom more direct involvement is impossible and to whom we are sending a message of solidarity and encouragement, inviting whatever level of participation is possible for them.

We have for a long time dealt with an aging and aged membership, for whom weekly attendance can be difficult to nearly impossible. Even when they manage to get there, they can be preoccupied with physical ailments and limitations. In my 35-plus years as a parish priest I saw countless people becoming shut-ins, then shifting their Sunday attention to the presentations of televangelists, because we offered virtually nothing. Older now myself, I am much more aware of the physical challenges and risks involved in getting to a church. From my experience of offering radio and TV broadcasts, and audio recordings of services and/or sermons, I know that around every parish and community there is an audience and membership that is listening and interested, but virtually never seen. My aim has always been to do what I can to share the life of the Church on as wide a basis as possible.

On the other hand, people who are physically present can be impaired in various ways, as comically illustrated in the Monty Python line “Blessed are the cheese makers?”¹⁵ Distractions, anxieties and preoccupations get in the way for all concerned, perhaps especially the clergy. As Meister Eckhart said, “It is not God who is absent; it is we who have wandered off somewhere.” Being here, now, is never easy and sometimes beyond our capability.

So, is being physically present always better? It depends on our circumstances (health, age, physical disabilities, distance, work, traumatic

¹⁴ cf. Rom 8:35-39.

¹⁵ *Monty Python's The Life of Brian*. HandMade Films, 1979.

church experience, agoraphobia, tied to ailing spouse, etc.) Ironically, some at home might actually be more present or at least more attentive than people physically there, or than they themselves usually are when physically present in church.

Experiencing the Real presence

“Where two or three are gathered in my name, there am I in their midst.”¹⁶

The pandemic challenges us to think again about what “real presence” means. Eucharist is an expression and celebration of being “in Christ.” That reality, of being “in Christ,” part of the one Body, brothers and sisters in Christ, is an indelible bond that is not just present when we gather physically. Brother Lawrence speaks of “this communion of our hearts with God’s,”¹⁷ attained without needing to leave the kitchen where he worked.

The Medieval scandal of infrequent and uncomprehending communion by the (lay) people of God, even though they were obliged to be physically present, is an indication of how far the Church can stray from meaningful eucharistic belief and practice and still survive. Anglican reformers like Thomas Cranmer, in attempting to establish the common prayer tradition (which actually included the laity), while not exactly avoiding the question of “real presence,” didn’t want to get drawn in to being overly specific about the “how” of it. Like them, I want to trust that God’s ability to be present far exceeds our ability to comprehend.

The Reformation generally shifted attention away from the physicality of the bread and wine during Eucharist, and more to their spiritual reality and symbolism, thus opening up the rather closed and fixed understanding of how consecration happens and by whom, shifting attention away from the instrumentality of priests as well. In the reformed understanding the work of Christ is sufficient in and of itself and so John Webster says “the role of the priest is thus relativized, transformed from what was (however mistakenly) perceived to be mediatory sacrifice to that of ministering (or perhaps better), administering the saving benefits of Christ’s passion through Word and Sacrament.”¹⁸

Recently, thinking has focussed on the laity and the role of the entire body rather than merely upon the priests in isolation. If “in, through and

¹⁶ Mt 18:20.

¹⁷ Brother Lawrence of the Resurrection, *The Practice of the Presence of God*, Whitaker House, 1982.

¹⁸ John Webster, “Ministry and Priesthood” Part IV Chapter 6 in *The Study of Anglicanism*, 323.

with Christ, the assembly is the celebrant of the Eucharist,”¹⁹ and “the entire eucharistic prayer is consecratory”²⁰ it obliges us to ask why, in an online celebration of Communion, everyone present (being properly disposed)²¹ would not experience the “real presence.”

Ignatius’ famous passage²² also contains an admonition to maintain the connection with the local bishop, and he concludes by saying “It is not lawful to baptize or give communion without the consent of the bishop. On the other hand, whatever has [their] approval is pleasing to God. Thus, whatever is done will be safe and valid.”²³ In the face of this pandemic, many bishops worldwide have encouraged priests and parishes to share the Eucharist via technology; again, many parishes around the world have found they are connecting with more people (and in some cases, many more) than normal.

The grace we seek is not located in the elements themselves but in Christ.²⁴ The concept of “receptionism” suggests the bread and wine remain physically unchanged, but via faithful reception of the Sacrament the communicant in a real but spiritual (ineffable) way receives the body and blood of Christ. It is “a doctrine of the real presence” but one which “relates the presence primarily to the worthy receiver rather than to the elements of bread and wine.”²⁵

The local act of faith always points beyond itself – to the community around us and also to the universal—and can be experienced in another location not by virtue of the physical bread but by the faith which is open to receiving the universal Christ which that local action signifies.²⁶ It is important to remember the ultimate connection and source, which is God. The presence is God’s, and all we can do is dispose ourselves in such a way as to be open to it.

Ultimately, I believe “the One who holds all things together”²⁷ is capable of creating the unity and integrity necessary for online celebrations of the Eucharist to be “real” and valid.

¹⁹ General Synod of the Anglican Church of Canada, *Liturgical Principles*, 6.6, 22.

²⁰ *Liturgical Principles*, 6.5, 22.

²¹ Cecil John Wood, *A Form of Spiritual Communion*: “Realise yourself specially in the presence of Jesus...”

²² “Where Jesus Christ is, there is the Catholic Church.”

²³ Ignatius, *Smyrnaeans*.

²⁴ As per Article XXVIII: “the mean[s] whereby the Body of Christ is received and eaten in the Supper of the Lord is Faith.”

²⁵ Crockett, William R., “Holy Communion,” in Sykes, Stephen; Booty, John, *The Study of Anglicanism*, revised edition SPCK/Fortress Press, 1998.

²⁶ Hence the possibility of Spiritual Communion being a real act of communion and fellowship with the Body.

²⁷ Col 1: 17.

Some things to consider

Recently, the Archbishop of Canterbury, via an online Eucharist celebrated in the crypt chapel in Canterbury Cathedral, drew some five million people into virtual communion. He and the Archbishop of York have stated that church needs to be “reimagined.”

In the article *Seminaries prepare to reopen, train priests for ministry amid COVID-19*,²⁸ Melanie Barrett, chair and professor in the department of moral theology at Mundelein, told NCR that while it has at times been difficult for seminarians to cultivate a “ministry of presence” by spending time in parishes on a regular basis during COVID, she has been encouraged by the creativity she’s witnessed: “Over the summer, the majority have been very involved in livestreaming Masses and/or faith-formation sessions in their home dioceses; many have produced original podcasts as well.”

There is much anxiety about the future of our church. Let it not be a fear of significance. I think it is wise to explore these possibilities not just out of expedience or desperation but because it is consistent with our theological and pastoral approach to the liturgy of the Eucharist. I think the pandemic has provided us with a catalyst that could stir us up to a creative use of the technologies and means of communication we have in our time so that we might include many who for various reasons have nowhere to be in relation to the local church except on the margins or beyond.

People are “distanced” for many reasons, and we have often been oblivious to the fact that many people’s experience of church is traumatic and destructive. To offer something that allows for distance, personal safety, and personal choice, creates an important option which may generate healing and reconciliation in a variety of ways.

This crisis may continue to threaten and limit our usual gatherings for months and possibly years. If so, many people will be prevented by health issues from ever attending because the risks related to church attendance are high. Even those who can get to the limited-attendance celebrations of the Eucharist we are allowed by law are usually not allowed to receive the elements, so their participation becomes a kind of Spiritual Communion by default. For us not to act now and attempt to find ways of extending the eucharistic celebration and fellowship would be a kind of dereliction of our mandate, it seems to me.

This is not the Church re-inventing itself or attempting to live in some unreal, imaginary world. It is the Church being obliged to remember who we are and why we exist. It is the Anglican Church exercising its

²⁸ Christopher White, “Seminaries prepare to reopen, train priests for ministry amid COVID-19,” National Catholic Reporter (www.ncronline.org/news/coronavirus/seminaries-prepare-reopen-train-priests-ministry-amid-covid-19), August 12, 2020.

inherent gift of reason in order to integrate new information, employing effective means our ancestors could not have imagined, to address new circumstances and challenges.

In person, in church; in person, online: compelling arguments can be made both ways, but for me the point is that it doesn't have to be one or the other. We have one obvious norm and we have options, including Home Communion and Spiritual Communion and now online Communion. Neither Spiritual Communion nor Home Communion has ever threatened to become the norm, though each may be the norm for some people. Our norm remains gathering in person in a specific, dedicated place open to all, with the leadership of a duly authorized and ordained person, and a valid liturgy, but we may be thankful that we have options.

Because this kind of thing is almost always part of an old story, I bring to mind the rabbis in heated debate about how to respond to the conflicting claims being made about Jesus, and the great rabbi Gamaliel being credited with this response:

“If this plan or this undertaking is of human origin, it will fail; but if it is of God, you will not be able to overthrow them—in that case you may even be found fighting against God!”²⁹

Can God spread a table in the wilderness? The answer, of course, is Yes. Some would not have viewed this as “proper bread,” but a poor substitute, while many saw it as a gift from God. Interpretation is everything, almost. Real or not, manna kept the people of God alive at a critical moment.

Any liturgical practice, if it is to be genuinely Christian, must allow room for God, who in Christ promised to be with us always—must expect the Spirit to inspire us and connect us in unexpected and unaccustomed ways—must be aware that we invoke the presence of One who walks right through the walls, is with us wherever we are and takes us to places we might prefer not to go.

²⁹ Acts 5: 38f.