

Eucharistic practice and sacramental theology in a time of pandemic

CHRIS ROSS

I have been an active Deacon in the Diocese of Kootenay for 36 years. In my tenure I have been licenced to two Parishes and to the Diocese. I was also collated an Archdeacon in 2014. I recently retired from Parish ministry but remain licenced to my Diocese in the capacity of Director of Deacons. My retirement agreement was that I not continue to worship in my former Parish. I was just settling into a new home parish and exploring opportunities to resume liturgical duties, when COVID-19 restrictions closed all of our churches. I am familiar with being part of an online presence as an Education for Ministry (EfM) Online Mentor and Trainer. I continue in these capacities and have discovered that it is possible to build an online Christian community that does not include the celebration of the Eucharist.

Personal reflection on virtual worship during the pandemic

In the wake of the COVID-19 restrictions I was suddenly sitting in front of my computer on Sunday morning watching, on YouTube, other people doing worship with little or no sense of being part of a community. I, along with others, was now a spectator; watching, listening and praying in my living room. As time moved on I was invited to become involved in the online worship where I had just been an observer. Now I had to figure out how to preach a sermon, read the Gospel, and pray the prayers of intercession to a camera which was set up on my dining room table. I discovered that one had to be careful about light reflecting off the pictures on the wall behind one and this was after I had made sure the books in the bookcases were all upright and looking tidy. Then I found out that transmitting the video file was not as easy as it first

appeared. I had to learn about new technology in order to share the work I had done with those who were “putting together” the worship service.

- All the while I was at home alone, on my own and feeling the loss of community acutely.
- All the while I was at home alone, on my own and not hearing the words, “This is my body, This is my blood”.
- All the while I was home alone, not seeing in the congregation, a daughter’s concern for her elderly mother, and wondering how *I could be of assistance*.
- All the while, I was home alone not hearing and enjoying the giggles of little children in the congregation. I was also not seeing parents trying to keep those children quiet, without disrupting the service and wondering how *I could be of assistance*.

(Deacons are always wondering how they *can be of assistance*, even during worship.)

Lamenting the loss of participating in the celebration of the Eucharist

In the YouTube services in which I was a spectator of non-Eucharistic services, I grieved the loss my diaconal role in the great celebration of the thanksgiving prayers and the consecration of the elements. Not only was I not able to receive, I was also not able to share in the distribution of the sacrament. I did not get to see the joy and the looks of peace on the faces of the people as they received. A celebration of the Eucharist in community, for me, has always been a foretaste of the fully realized Kingdom of God, here on earth.

I deeply respect the other clergy of my Diocese, walking beside me and our lay people, as we all fast from the Eucharist. In my opinion, the Eucharist needs to be celebrated in community, not in isolation. We need to be together. Joy filled Christian experiences ought to be shared and celebrated with other people. We need to be present with one another, not watching on a screen. This physical presence of the people and the elements are the embodiment of the kingdom; they are the body of Christ. I am discovering in this time that I would rather not participate in the receiving of a sacrament that has been remotely consecrated; while I am home alone in my house.

Building the community in this time

The Anglican Church has a rich tradition of the daily offices and this time has afforded us the opportunity to refocus our energy and attention to these gifts that have been passed down to us through the ages. Many have found more time for the deep spiritual practices of meditation, contemplative prayer, reflective study of the Word, and Christian reading. The tools of technology available to us have provided many ways for us to connect, attempt to support each other, and continue to build relationships that are important in our spiritual journeys.

I embrace taking the time to learn what we need to know regarding what “church” is to all of us, and how it will be different when we return to our buildings. We need to reflect on how this time has changed all of us individually and collectively. Embracing all that is important in our lives as Christians and in all that is important to me in my ministry as a Deacon in the service of God, I offer this prayer attributed to Sir Francis Drake:

*Disturb us, Lord, when we are too well pleased with ourselves,
When our dreams have come true because we have dreamed too little,
When we arrived safely because we sailed too close to the shore.*

*Disturb us, Lord, to dare more boldly,
To venture on wider seas where storms will show your mastery;
Where losing sight of land, we shall find the stars.
We ask You to push back the horizons of our hopes;
And to push into the future in strength, courage, hope, and love. Amen.*