

# The Eucharist belongs to none alone

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I write this reflection from the perspective of an Anglican priest and theologian. However, I do so also as an ecumenist, one whose formation and present ministry context is profoundly shaped by the context of the contemporary ecumenical movement, and someone with substantial personal involvement in ecumenical dialogues with a wide range of Christian traditions.

I begin by noting this because I believe it to be a profoundly relevant element to any consideration of the sacrament of Holy Communion. To a degree like few other topics in theology, reflection on the Eucharist calls to be carried out ecumenically. This is so because there is no such thing as the Anglican Eucharist or the Reformed Eucharist or the Roman Eucharist—there is just The Eucharist of the Lord. Whatever we might do, or not do, or say, or not say in this area of ecclesial life has an impact on our fellow baptized members of the body of Christ. As such, I would argue that such things ought only to be contemplated in conversation with, and in active accountability to, our ecumenical partners.

The Anglican Church of Canada has official bilateral dialogue relationships with the Roman Catholic Church in Canada, the United Church of Canada, and the Mennonite Church in Canada. We also enjoy a full communion relationship with the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Canada, which, though no longer quite properly classified as ecumenical, still requires many of the same skills and practices of dialogue. Through the Canadian Council of Churches, our church engages in conversation and collaboration with Christians from the Evangelical / Free Church, Reformed, Oriental, and Orthodox families of churches, and others. In pretty well every one of my own recent (online) engagements with these ecumenical partners in my ministry as part of my role as General Synod staff support in these relationships over the last 5-6 months, people across the

ecclesial spectrum want to talk about how we are handling Communion during the pandemic, and what the debates are on this matter in their own and other churches. A key point of discussion is around whether the preferable option is ‘online communion with spiritual reception’ versus ‘online communion with remote consecration.’

In the list above, I mentioned only the formal points of ecumenical contact that occur at the national level. Of course, on the ground, pretty well every Anglican is related to, working with, and partnering with Christians from across the ecclesial spectrum all the time, in varying forms and degrees, and trying to process the impact of this experience on their spiritual life. Today, it is virtually impossible to be a follower of Jesus who does not interact ecumenically, and this seems to be only becoming more and more the case in this part of the world.

I think the existence of every one of these ecumenical relationships ought to give us as Anglicans a measure of pause prior to any kind of potential development in our Eucharistic thinking and acting during this time (and beyond). While the ‘spiritual communion’ option seems to be a less controversial one, with some precedence in the Anglican tradition, the idea of ‘remote consecration’ is particularly novel and therefore needful of cautious reflection. But I also want to emphasize that this ‘pause’ may be one which nudges us in more than one direction, depending on which partners we are in dialogue with.

On the one hand, our ecumenical accountability suggests we should act with a healthy prudence and restraint when it comes to new thinking about the Lord’s Table. This pandemic came upon us quickly, and, though it has lasted longer than perhaps most of us ever thought, at the time of my writing it has still been less than six months. This is barely a blip on the radar in the scope of Church history. In addition, much of that time has seen people and churches and leaders of churches in full or at least partial crisis mode. To seriously consider the possibility that the Eucharist, which is centred in large part on expressing the Christian theology of bodily/material nature of the Incarnation of God in Christ, and on manifesting the interdependent multi-unity of the members of the Body of Christ the Church, can occur both when church members are physically distant from one another and the elements of the act, is a massive stretch from anything we’ve contemplated in this regard before. To attempt to do so while in the middle of chaos, confusion, and uncertainty only enhances feelings of concern. Therefore, many of our ecumenical partners, though sharing the same pain we feel of not being able to celebrate the Supper of the Lord during these times, speak powerfully to us of the value of holding to the stability of Tradition during times of significant challenge. This is

not the moment, they caution, to be calling into question the core foundations of one of the most central spiritual practices of the faith, or for one group of Christians to strike off into experimentation without waiting for the others. This is a season for unity and consistency.

However, other ecumenical relationships can also present a challenge to us about falling into an undue complacency. The Holy Spirit has often moved in unexpected ways during times of great upheaval and transition, and it is the task of the people of God to embrace the new things that become possible and necessary in life of the times and circumstances we find ourselves in. If a pandemic is forcing us to keep distance from one another, but the technology at our disposal now thankfully allows us to experience a form of mediated togetherness, why should we not seek to keep the feast in the face of this reality? Some of our ecumenical partners therefore exhort us that surely this is not an insurmountable obstacle to the grace of God, and why unnecessarily deprive ourselves of a means of that grace simply because it requires us to move into uncharted territory.

We do well to hear each of these voices of all our siblings, and to respect them in our own discernment. As one family within the wider family of the catholic Church, the Anglican communion has sometimes styled itself as being a church of the ‘middle way’. Central to the Anglican ethos at various moments in history has been a desire to keep what some wish to portray as polarized options rather as standing together in a dynamic tension. In the area of liturgy, this has expressed itself as a commitment to ‘vernacular catholicism’. Put differently, Anglicans have often sought to carry ourselves as a community of Christians who are profoundly loyal to the principle of maintaining a family resemblance with our ancestors in the faith, but never slavishly so. We prefer to preserve long held traditions, articulations, and forms as long as they continue to authentically and effectively communicate truth and mediate grace to people in ways they can receive. But we do not hold onto these things indiscriminately either. If and when the place or time or culture or circumstance has shifted to the point that the way we have always done something is no longer working as an evangelistic and missional vehicle, then it ought to be reformed and renewed – carefully, but without fear. Such is the balance we ever strive to strike. Whether this charism is a uniquely Anglican one or not, it certainly finds an application to the questions at hand for us as a church, and as churches. I would like to think that it is part of our vocation as a church to bring this commitment to balance into the wider conversation on how our sacramental practices might adapt to a pandemic and post-pandemic reality.

Being merely one individual Anglican voice, I certainly do not profess to have the answers about whether or not online celebrations of the Eucharist are possible, or valuable, or harmful, or anything else – be they with spiritual communion only, or with a priestly celebrant in one place and individual elements at home, or with unique celebrations in each person’s home. I affirm wholeheartedly the importance of submission to the present discernment of the bishops and councils of our church in this regard, and that seems to me to be the essential starting point. But I also think it is critically important to keep the lines of conversation and consideration open, to invite and welcome all perspectives into the discussion, and to genuinely imagine that this discernment may not be settled for all time, and might, in time, come to different conclusions, in one direction or another. This is true not only now, but going forward, because, while the presenting issue at this time might be the impact of physical distancing on the celebration of Holy Communion, the questions about the nature of online community, the difference between physical and digital presence, technology’s impact on the connections between the physical and spiritual, the evolving roles of clerical and lay ministers, and so on, will not be going away.

As we carry on that task of perpetually taking council in these and other matters, let us ensure to also do so with ecumenical voices in mind as well – both those that urge unity and consistency, and those that urge boldness and adaptability. We need them all.

By way of conclusion, as we continue these discussions, here are some of the questions I have encountered in my dialogues and encounters with ecumenical colleagues, and which I think we might want to consider together further with our fellow followers of Christ:

- Is it uniquely spiritually beneficial to receive the Eucharist? Is it uniquely spiritually harmful not to receive the Eucharist for long periods of time?
- If you had to say one way or another, do you experience the Eucharist as more of a vertical (God to us) or horizontal (Us to Neighbour) sacrament? How does this influence our thinking about the question at hand?
- On what theological basis would you argue for or against the possibility of spiritual communion? Is this rational relevant to the question of remote consecration with home reception, or is it a different question?

- How important is eating and drinking from the same cup and bread to the integrity of the sacrament? Is it essential or only beneficial? In what ways do we already stretch this symbol?
- Is gathering through the mediation of technology ‘real’ and ‘bodily’ or is it ‘virtual’ and disembodied?
- Is it possible to truly participate in liturgy through digital audio and video, or are we limited to being mere spectators?
- Can we experience ourselves as a genuine human community through an online gathering?
- What is the role of a presbyter/priest in presiding at the Eucharist, and is it essential to the act or only beneficial? On what basis do you come to this opinion?
- In what sense are the gathered people also celebrants of communion? Can such ‘concelebration’ occur at a distance?
- What would be lost by doing Communion online (with spiritual communion or with remote consecration)? What would be gained?
- What are the justice issues and barriers related to inclusion in online worship, and how does this impact our thinking about whether or not to celebrate Eucharist?
- Is it possible to have one set of sacramental regulations in place during a crisis situation and another during a more stable situation?