

Eucharistic theology on the ground in pandemic times

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It's been a strange season of disruption, self-discipline and renunciation. Many were and still are heart-broken and fearful: losing loved ones to COVID-19, medical and front-line workers risking transmission, loss of work – income – freedom, and surely, loss of Sunday worship (as we used to know it) and loss of Holy Communion. I'm wondering if teachers and parish priests/pastors are among the professions most disrupted by the sudden COVID-invasion.

I am one of those parish priests; I am the incumbent in an Anglican parish and a Lutheran congregation in a rural community on the Canadian prairies, with a total of 69 households. Almost overnight, all my priestly and pastoral ministry got derailed by the invisible virus. All throughout Lent, into Holy Week and even Easter, I had a visceral experience of the meaning of the term discombobulated. I was numb, overcome by grief and loss, paralyzed by anxiety over the well-being of my flock. I mean, I was thrown off guard in my own life, what about them? And how to connect and check on parishioners now if not in person and at church? Moreover, several were holidaying abroad (snow-birds) and I shared their anxiety over whether they could come home, emailing and texting to reassure them of my prayers and concern. It was the most disruptive communication circus I've ever been thrust into.

Much ink is already being spilled on the monumental shifts and changes forced upon all aspects of every Christian and religious institution and organization. I would like to contribute by sharing an experience that illustrates how we can engage our beloved people in the pews in theological reflection while living through a global pandemic-crisis.

This past spring, barely two months into our lockdown, the aching and the questions in the hearts and minds of my people emerged: “I

miss Communion.” “Can we come by the church and get Communion?” “How about virtual Communion? Is that valid?” The weeks without church services extended into months; increasing numbers of Christians were deeply missing the Eucharist, Holy Communion, the Lord's Supper, the Mass. But what do we really mean by this? What exactly were we missing? What does Holy Communion mean?

Seizing a teachable moment, my closest Anglican colleague and I decided to host a series of Zoom chats on the subject. We collected a number of articles on the subject, all written on the Holy Eucharist during the pandemic, from Anglican, Lutheran and Roman Catholic sources. Each week participants received several articles via email with reflection questions. Then on five weekday evenings we met on Zoom to talk about what we had read. Both informal and instructive, we gathered with an open heart and a curious mind, to learn and share and discuss, and to still our spiritual hunger.

The result surprised both my colleague and me. Twelve to sixteen participants from five different towns and cities met on Zoom each week. Moreover, each of the three Christian traditions mentioned above were represented, some through the reality of inter-church marriages, others because they heard about the initiative through personal connections and asked to join. All participants were white and over 55 years old—except for my co-facilitator and colleague who was 28!

The conversations were lively and engaging, with much learning and new understanding. The following theological aspects were engaged in the discussions:

1. First came a clear affirmation of the simple yet profound theological and spiritual intuition of the faithful on the Eucharist. When asked how they would explain to an outsider what Holy Communion is, the answer was spot on: a holy meal given to us by Jesus which we share under the leadership of a priest chosen by God and ordained by the church. When we do this together, we are part of a sacred tradition that precedes us and will be there long after we are gone. It is our spiritual food, and a foretaste of the heavenly banquet God invites us into.

It was remarkable that in the very first conversation participants began tentatively, unsure of their words, but then found themselves building on one another's utterances, and together created a coherent explanation that all could find themselves in. Even when slightly intimidated by the theological density in a given article, the exercise of “breaking open the text” together resulted in greater understanding and clarity.

2. While these regular churchgoers showed a good intuition about the nature and meaning of the Holy Eucharist, very few had thought of the

Lord's Supper as a witness to the world about God's love for all creation and God's redeeming work in Christ Jesus for all people.

One participant wrote in her evaluation: *In our Zoom conversations and in reading and re-reading the articles, I have learned more about the Eucharist. I realize that, in taking Holy Communion, it isn't just about my personal fulfillment, but about those who commune around me and extend this to the greater world. Eucharist seems to be the bigger picture. It involves our becoming nourished for mission and in witness to the whole world.*

What we witness to when we make Eucharist, is that Christ died and rose again for sake of the whole world, giving us all a share in His new life. In Eucharist, we are the sign—that Christ is offering Himself, His body and blood for everyone. That as we show Christ's love to the world, we also bring our love for our neighbours to him in prayer.

3. The group remained diverse on the question of virtual communion with some in favour and others not. Another participant wrote: *The Lutheran perspective by Professor Dr. Dirk Lange was very meaningful. His comments regarding virtual and online communion made sense to me. He gives reasons why we need the complete liturgical celebrations of the Eucharist or Holy Communion: 'The whole liturgical celebration culminates in this great thanksgiving in the Holy Spirit that evokes God's radical, self-giving gift, God's gift of God's self, Jesus Christ, Divine Mercy in our midst.' Again, there is an insistence on the fullness of the rite and on the people gathered doing something together. I myself would not find virtual online communion very meaningful or satisfying.*

Some thoughts from an RC participant: *During COVID-19 as much as I appreciate the online and Zoom services, I miss my community, the physical presence and most of all not being able to receive Communion together, the spiritual food which helps me stay spiritually healthy. (Online) I am able to pray and worship my heart out but the real presence is missing. Would I receive Communion at home consecrated over the TV? I am not ready for that yet. But in the future if that was all that was possible, I would pray for a change of heart and enlightenment. Although I truly believe that for the Eucharist, the Word and the people/community are necessary to make a Communion celebration complete.*

The facilitation model of these Zoom chats was intended to let the conversations unfold spontaneously while using the reflection questions as a way to focus and refocus when we strayed. There was no lecture but only the content of the articles, which provided more than enough food for discussion. Discussing such a central aspect of our faith, the Holy Communion—Eucharist—Mass, with Lutherans, Anglicans and Roman Catholics was a delightful opportunity to grow with, and to learn from, each other. Several participants concluded that our differences seem to lie

primarily in different emphases and different terminology, but that in essence we share a common faith in the Real Presence of Christ in the bread and wine blessed in the presence of the gathered community of faith. And so the question naturally arose: why are we still divided at the holy Table of our Lord? Why indeed?

Debates on the pastoral and ecclesial, liturgical and theological consequences of the current health crisis continue unabated. Is online communicating and praying less real than in-person? Is the church selling the Eucharist short, and/or making it a clerical spectacle, with its explosion of online Masses? Is virtual communion eroding the communal dimension of the Holy Eucharist, resembling more an eating alone at home rather than sharing a meal with family and friends? To what extent has our individualistic culture in the west already contributed to an erosion of people's communal understanding of Holy Communion, and is now exacerbated by the imposed social isolation for health reasons?

Our Zoom series offers an example of how to engage ordinary church members without theological acumen in thoughtful and informed reflection/conversation on the very treasure we are now deprived of in our Christian faith, the Eucharist, while navigating this unprecedented season of isolation and self-discipline, renunciation and stripping down to essentials. The group displayed evidence that the *sensum fidelium* is alive and well in the faithful of each of our traditions, and that our shared hunger for Holy Communion transcends our traditions and indeed can unite us. In some ways, the project gave reassurance that our parishioners are acutely aware of the importance and the need for the communal dimension in the celebration of the Lord's Supper. In fact, our current famine for God's holy food and drink increased awareness of the ecumenical and social consequences of partaking in this holy meal.

An additional question, therefore, that has yet to get due attention is: while COVID-19 is threatening everyone, making no distinctions, ruling the daily lives of literally the entire world population right now, why do the churches insist in clinging to historic divisions and disputes as a reason for closed communion tables? Does the Eucharist need our human protection? Is our faith in the reconciling and healing power of the Eucharist too weak? In the face of the great equalizer that is COVID-19, maintaining distinctions at the Lord's Table seems to serve primarily in amplifying human stubbornness in asserting its right to keep betraying Christ's last prayer on the eve before his death: *"I ask not only on behalf of these, but also on behalf of those who will believe in me through their word, that they may all be one. As you, Father, are in me and I am in you, may they also be in us, so that the world may believe that you have sent me."* (Jn 17:20—21)

Maybe COVID-19 is bringing us an urgent summons to unite in the Holy Eucharist, so that this hurting world, in the throes of the pandemic, may believe in, and cling to, God's unwavering hope, love and mercy for all humanity in Christ Jesus. In other words, what consequences and challenges does the pandemic pose to the churches on the subject of uniting around the Lord's holy Table? If a pandemic cannot throw open wide the holy Table of God's mercy in Christ, what can?

Towards the end of our Zoom chats someone commented how the group had become a meaningful virtual community, and that this virtual nature was definitely real. And that maybe every celebration of Holy Communion has a virtual dimension, because it transcends the natural world. Our joint sharing and learning allowed us to create communion even in the absence of Holy Communion. Just as Christ Jesus is truly and wholly present in the bread and the wine, so we became truly present to one another, forming one Body of Christ in order to be sent out again into the world to be the Body of Christ.

ARTICLES USED IN THE ABOVE-MENTIONED ZOOM SERIES ON THE EUCHARIST

Anglican

Anglican Musings on the Eucharist Rev. Dr. Iain Luke and Rev. Scott Sharman, unpublished

The Eucharist and coming out of lockdown: A tract for these COVID-19 times (Part I) Rev. Dr. Christopher Craig Brittain, *Anglican Journal* website, May 14, 2020. <https://www.anglicanjournal.com/the-eucharist-and-coming-out-of-lockdown-a-tract-for-these-covid-19-times>

Excerpt from *On virtual communion: A tract for these COVID-19 Times (Part II)* Rev. Dr. Christopher Craig Brittain, *Anglican Journal* website, May 25, 2020. <https://www.anglicanjournal.com/on-virtual-communion-a-tract-for-these-covid-19-times-ii>

Our Eucharistic prayer matters—and not just for us Rev. Martha Tatarnic, *Anglican Journal* website, May 28, 2020. <https://www.anglicanjournal.com/our-eucharistic-prayer-matters-and-not-just-for-us>

Lutheran

Digital Worship and Sacramental Life in a Time of Pandemic – A Lutheran Perspective, Prof. Dr. Dirk G. Lange, Lutheran World Federation, March 24, 2020. <https://www.lutheranworld.org/blog/digital-worship-and-sacramental-life-time-pandemic>

Christ is Really Present Virtually: A Proposal for Virtual Communion. Dr. Deanna A. Thompson, March 26, 2020.

<https://wp.stolaf.edu/lutherancenter/2020/03/christ-is-really-present-virtually-a-proposal-for-virtual-communion>

Being the Body of Christ in a Time of Pandemic and Beyond. Dr. Deanna A. Thompson, April 2, 2020. <https://wp.stolaf.edu/lutheran-center/2020/04/being-the-body-of-christ-in-a-time-of-pandemic-and-beyond>

Homily: Virtual Pentecost Communion. Rev. Sebastian Meadows-Helmer, May 31, 2020. *St. Matthew's Lutheran Church*, Kitchener, ON. <http://stmattskw.com/worship/sermons/pentecost-virtual-holy-communion>

Roman Catholic

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Returning to in-person Mass, will we be more attentive and intentional? Judith M. Kubicki, *National Catholic Reporter*, June 19, 2020. <https://www.ncronline.org/news/opinion/returning-person-mass-will-we-be-more-attentive-and-intentional>

The Alarming Consequences of Communion. Fr. Jim Sabak, OFM, Pray tell Blog, June 22, 2020. www.praytellblog.com/index.php/2020/06/22/the-alarming-consequences-of-communion