

One body

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The phone rang, it's a vicar from a neighbouring town, "What should I do? Should I encourage people to put bread and wine in front of the telly broadcast the Eucharist, telling them that is okay, and they've truly received the body and blood of Christ?". The question in the past may have seemed to have a simple answer, no. What was the reason people would want to do this? If people are housebound with sickness, or disability, or simply old age what we need to do is to take the Eucharist to them. But all of this has been stripped away. We were now in lockdown and going to them physically was not allowed. What to say?

For a long time, I have been convinced by the move to make the Eucharist central to Sunday worship. I grew up on a diet of matins and evensong, and various other services of the word. But recently I have always looked for churches where the Eucharist central. But now they were closed. The official advice was that we could say the Eucharist at home, as I live alone that seemed anathema. Only once as a priest had the congregation never turned up (there had been heavy snow just before the service, well what we think in England as heavy snow nothing like in Canada), so I went home and had breakfast. I did not think that we had ever been permitted before to preside at the Eucharist alone, a real break from the great tradition.

I was reminded by colleague of the tradition of spiritual communion.¹ I did know about that and had looked up various liturgical texts where this is mentioned, but I always thought the circumstances would be so extreme that it would never be a practical issue.

Anyway, we had gone online, and church had entered cyberspace in a way never before. When I need to physically get to church, I have a limited range of possibilities, particularly if I am keen on walking there

¹ Grant Bayliss, Thoughts from a Cloistered House, 19 March 2020, <https://www.chch.ox.ac.uk/blog/thoughts-cloistered-house>. (Accessed 2020).

(which I am). Once I am in cyberspace the possibilities multiply. Shopping was already online, my teaching was going online, and now church was online. The Franciscan group I am a part of discovered Zoom. When we were meeting physically, I rarely went, suddenly the meeting is in my home and I have become one of the more regular members. Indeed, there is almost a reversal of interaction. The regular but technologically challenged members are now not part of it, and now the irregular but technologically able members are a part. It is all rather strange a world turned upside down.

The next step is the Bishops leading services in the cathedral that are live streamed. You can see the social distancing, but the sanctuary area is quite large and so this strange dance is quite possible. It seemed quite nice to be in the cathedral electronically. I noticed all sorts of things that I never knew were there! But then strict lockdown comes in and the church decides to close its doors. This was actually beyond the government regulation and other denominations did not do the same. But we were told, no entry! This meant that services moved out of churches and into living rooms or kitchens or dining rooms. I found this very hard. I could not electronically connect to our diocesan service, so I ended up in the dining room of the Dean of Chichester who was celebrating with his wife. Now it is a very nice dining room, but it is not the same thing as from a church. Not only am I forced out of my church building, I am also forced out of visiting it electronically. Many said, “the church is not the building”, but the church is a building, and the building and the people go together. There are some churches where the silence is so thin, the presence of God is almost audible. I am sorry for people if they do not get that. It is this unseen presence that keeps me going. It forms and fosters my faith. To shut the church is to pull the rug from under my feet. So, a friend tells me that the Community of the Resurrection is live streaming its services. I end up joining Facebook, something I have resisted for years. It is the best way I can get to see the services. I save the link to Facebook but call it 666. There is a certain seduction in Facebook to draw you in to thinking that you need to have as many friends as possible, and that they are real friends even if only a cyber friendship.

So here I am now on Sunday mornings at the Community of the Resurrection. The big question comes up as to what to do about Easter (and later Pentecost). The knowledge of ‘mass obligation’ weighs heavily on me. I spent time in parishes saying that these were important events which we should celebrate with the Eucharist. I am now locked out of church and possibly locked away from the Eucharist on the great festivals. Being unsure what to do, and thinking it was probably okay in the

strange circumstances, I decided to concelebrate. Bread and wine placed on a white cloth in front of the screen. I am not a big fan of concelebration. There was the classic event at a chrisem mass where the priests were invited to concelebrate. The Bishop launched into a Eucharistic prayer different from the Eucharistic prayer of the service sheet. Some did not notice and just ploughed on. Others noticed and tried to say the right words from memory, not all getting it right. Then there were those who did notice, saw what a mess the whole thing was becoming, and so shut up. I know it does not have to be that bad, but the theory that somehow the more priests bring more grace, I cannot subscribe to. But emergencies lead to some strange solutions. And I find myself doing this while at the same time unhappy about similarly locked down and excluded lay-people. Receiving Communion was however a great comfort.

One of my colleagues said that his church had debated what to do on Easter Sunday. They could not bring themselves to tell people to put bread and wine in front of the screen. But they did do an agape. Different foodstuffs were assembled at home before the screen and prayers were said of table graces. It would seem that the good people of that church found this very helpful and quite acceptable. Interestingly, this is one of the first times I have heard of feedback from laity. So far, we have had many pronouncements and documents telling us what to do. There was not much asking and listening.

As we progressed so gradually people began to address the issue a bit more. I was pointed to a video by Teresa Berger.² She is an old friend from conferences, so I listened intently. She reminded us that the liturgy is not confined to the assembly. We may be in a building, but the spiritual space is huge. We pray for the world. We pray with all Christians. We pray with angels and archangels. We pray with the living and the dead. The geography of our service is truly multi-dimensional and transcends the simple building in which we meet. I think she is wanting to say we should therefore not be so closed minded as to only think we can worship and have the Eucharist in a gathered setting in the building with a limited number of people. The whole concept of the Eucharist is wider and bigger than such small limitations. I even think that she is sympathetic to the idea of Eucharists through the web, but she seems to drawback because her denomination, the Roman Catholic Church, is adamantly against such a practice.

So, I become a regular attender at the Sunday morning services of matins and Eucharist at the community of the Resurrection. There the

² Teresa Berger and Martin Jean talk Digital Worship,
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XIiVBZvAtuU> (Accessed 2020).

practice is the president only receives. Clearly, apart from the couple of occasions when I concelebrated, I am not receiving either. This seems very strange. A couple of times in reaction to this I turn it off at the end of the Eucharistic prayer. The rest of the service preparing for Communion and giving thanks for Communion seemed simply irrelevant. Thinking in this way, I actually begin to see the consecration as particularly important and begin ritualised activity at that point in the service. But then think I am becoming too mediaeval, or like the men I've seen in France who were going to church, cross themselves at the dominical words then retreat outside for a fag as soon as that happened. Is this what we are now reduced to?

I try to look at spiritual communion again in a different way and I notice that Mirfield have added a prayer of spiritual communion.

Heavenly Father:

*as we participate with your people in these holy mysteries,
we pray you now to grant your gift of spiritual communion,
with trust in your faithfulness and your abiding love,
through Jesus Christ Our Lord. Amen*³

I then find other examples, e.g.:

*Thanks be to you, Lord Jesus Christ,
for all the benefits you have given me,
for all the pains and insults you have borne for me.
Since I cannot now receive you sacramentally,
I ask you to come spiritually into my heart.
O most merciful redeemer, friend and brother,
may I know you more clearly,
love you more dearly,
and follow you more nearly, day by day. Amen.*⁴

At first, I found that I barely noticed the prayer for spiritual communion. However, for the brothers it was a reality unless they have presided. Once again distance is eradicated. What is the difference between the brother 10 feet from the altar, and me a 173 miles away, when we are participating in spiritual communion? None I could tell, and spiritual communion, at first somewhat a discipline, gradually seeps in as a reality. The prayer becomes an important part of my Sunday worship.

³ From Liturgy Community of the Resurrection.

⁴ From *Mirfield Team Parish*, May 2020.

So, what did I tell my vicar friend? If he had phoned up any other time, there would have been a definite no. I would have marshalled a variety of arguments as to why this is undesirable and not traditional. The pandemic has changed mine and many others reality. So, to my surprise I am suddenly saying, if this is acceptable to your people go ahead. We muse about the Bishop and what she might think. We cannot see that very much could be done other than a rebuke. But what if it is acceptable to the people. Then it would seem ridiculous not to go ahead. Perhaps this is a time for some courage rather than timidity.

So, to my surprise I am now a part of Eucharistic community 173 miles away, where I have found some sort of home. While it is possible from today to hold services in church, my local parish seems to be very slow and cautious. This leaves me being alongside the monastic community. I am not sure how I feel when I will be able to meet physically in a church building. I might not want to give up some of the new behaviours and patterns that I have gotten used to. I know in work we are moving forward to a new normal. I guess that that will be a part of our church life too. Even if a vaccine comes soon, our life has been so changed that it will not be the same.

Strange things you are doing God. Deliver us from evil, comfort us with your presence, and fill us with your hope.