

The Eucharist in a time of Physical Distancing

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A paper from the London College of Bishops:

Since the earliest days of the Church, Christians have gathered together to bless, break and share bread and to bless and share a cup of wine in obedience to the Lord's command, given on the night before He died, to 'do this in remembrance of me.' The Church of England which emerged from the upheavals of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, has maintained in its 'historic formularies' the centrality of the Eucharist in its account of Christian living. Along with Baptism, the Lord's Supper, or Holy Communion, is a 'Sacrament ordained of Christ' (Article 25) and 'a sacrament of our redemption by Christ's death.' (Article 28).



The Canons of the Church of England teach the importance and centrality of the Eucharist. Canon B14 requires the celebration of the Holy Communion in at least one church in every benefice on all Sundays and principal Feast days, as well as on Ash Wednesday and Maundy Thursday. Canon B15 teaches that it is the duty of all who have been confirmed to receive the Holy Communion regularly, and especially at Christmas, Easter and Pentecost.

What, however, of the present circumstances in which, however desirous they might be of attending Holy Communion, the faithful are prevented by the strictures of lawful authorities both secular and ecclesiastical from doing so?

Rubrics at the end of the BCP Communion office plainly declare that 'there shall be no celebration of the Lord's Supper except there be a convenient number to communicate,' a number which is further defined in a parish of twenty persons or less to be 'three at the least.'

This reflects a 'rule,' which is both desirable and to be enjoined in all normal circumstances, that there should be communicants other than the minister at every celebration of Holy Communion. In teaching and holding this position, the Church of England does so in common with Christian tradition reaching back to apostolic times. The Eucharist is intended, normatively, to be a corporate, not a private act, because it is

given to offer the people spiritual nourishment (to “*feed on the banquet of that most heavenly food*”)[1], to build up the body of Christ in love and fellowship (*Christ ordained the sacrament to move and stir all men to friendship, love and concord*”)[2] and to “*strengthen and confirm our faith in him.*”[3]

In Anglican understanding, sacraments are signs that both point to and embody the things they refer to. They are both “*sure witnesses, and effectual signs of grace*” (Article 25). They both direct our attention to the ascended body of Christ, yet they also make the ‘benefits of his passion’ available to us here and now. There are therefore two aspects of sacraments as signs – they both point to *and* embody the reality to which they refer – the benefits and presence of Christ given to us and received by faith.

In our current circumstances, to the extent that they *embody* and *offer* the spiritual food of the body and blood of Christ, not being able to partake of the sacrament physically is an occasion for sadness and lament, as we are denied the opportunity of this particular aspect of this ‘holy communion’. At the same time, to the extent that they *signify* the promises of God and the gift of Christ, they can still benefit those who observe but cannot partake.

There is a benefit to be had for those who are ‘present’ at a celebration of Holy Communion, yet unable physically to partake of the elements. Because the sacrament is “*given, taken, and eaten, in the Supper, only after an heavenly and spiritual manner*” (Article 28), even if a person cannot physically receive, their faith and love can still be strengthened by seeing, even if not tasting or feeling the gifts of bread and wine that signify the body and blood of Christ. As an example, the rubrics at the end of the order for the Visitation of the Sick in the 1662 Prayer Book envisage a situation in which someone might be in such grave or advanced sickness that they are unable to receive the Sacrament at a bed-side celebration of the Holy Communion. In such circumstances (and for a number of other causes), the sick person may, by associating him or herself with the benefits of the Sacrament which is not being physically received, nevertheless receive the gifts and graces which it brings.

Consistent with this position, we offer several options for parishes as long as the current physical distancing restrictions apply:

1. Some parish churches may wish temporarily to suspend the celebration of Holy Communion until they are able to meet together in person again. We are already having to cease the practice of public Baptism for the duration due to the restrictions placed upon us, and so a church may choose to do the same with the other dominical sacrament. As one incumbent put it recently: “We will take this opportunity to fast from the Sacrament while we feast on the Word.”

2. To ensure congregational involvement, where a parish church wishes to continue to celebrate the eucharist within the current advice issued by the London College of Bishops, and only the priest can be present, it should, whenever possible, be livestreamed, so that others can at least (as Cranmer put it) “*see with our eyes*” even if they cannot “*smell with our noses, touch with our hands and taste with our mouths.*” This enables the kind of spiritual reception that is at the heart of the sacrament, even if physical partaking is not possible.
3. If that is not feasible, at the very least, it should be clearly advertised in the parish and among the congregation when the Holy Communion is to be celebrated in the home of the priest, with or without the presence of another member of that household. Such public advertising is insisted on in the ‘Exhortations’ in the BCP that are inserted between the Prayer for the Church Militant and the Confession. This way, others can be invited to pray and perhaps read the Scriptures at that time, so that the service takes place within some kind of extended communal act of worship in that parish, even if dispersed, and does not become merely a private act of devotion. Some prayers that would enable people to take part in such a celebration might be prepared.

In granting permission, exceptionally, for the clergy to celebrate Holy Communion in this way, our prayer must be that this time will be short. We pray too that God will give us a hunger and a thirst for that time when once again we can gather **together** to lift up our hearts in praise and adoration, to be nourished by the bodily reception of this sacrament which the Lord instituted on the night before he died and which he commanded us to continue ‘until he comes again’, to do again, indeed, all that is ‘meet, right and our bounden duty’ so to do.

The London College of Bishops

[1] Exhortations in the BCP service of Holy Communion

[2] Thomas Cranmer’s Treatise on the Lord’ Supper (1550)

[3] Article 25.
