

The Eucharist and COVID-19

Some Protocols for the Diocese of Islands and Inlets

In mid-March, the COVID-19 pandemic required us to suspend gathering in person for worship. Our parishes have risen to this challenge creatively and faithfully, crafting services of the word, meditations, online bible studies and many other opportunities for spiritual nourishment.

This sort of Sunday experience was normative just 40 years ago, when many parishes celebrated the eucharist as infrequently as once a month. But the Sunday worship of today's Anglicans is almost entirely eucharistic. Not surprisingly the Church longs to gather again, and to restore our eucharistic practice.

In the meantime, while we remain tethered to the internet, some have wondered if there are other ways of offering the sacrament during this time of isolation. Several possibilities have been proposed, including everything from an intentional "eucharistic fast" as a way of honouring the eucharist, to a "virtual eucharist" where people bring their own bread and wine to a Zoom gathering to be consecrated remotely by a priest online. Somewhere in the middle are two other options, one being an "agape meal," and the other, what is sometimes known as "spiritual communion." There are likely additional ideas and suggestions.

I have been asked to set out some parameters for this conversation within our diocese of islands and inlets.

Let me say first that the conversation itself is welcome and important. Our theology, steeped in scripture, tradition and reason, is a living thing, and must constantly be tested and refined in the crucible of context.

This said, our eucharistic practice and theology are at the core of our identity as worshipping Anglicans. So important are they, that our Canadian church has agreed that any substantive changes to our "doctrine, discipline or worship" must be agreed to by the whole Anglican Church of Canada, through its General Synod. The General Synod has entrusted the stewardship of these questions to its "Faith, Worship and Ministry" coordinating committee. In other words, we are not at liberty to move unilaterally, whether as individual parishes or as a diocese, to chart our own course. (Nor, for that matter, would the Anglican Church of Canada change its eucharistic practice and theology without formal reference to the rest of the Communion, or our ecumenical partners—and especially those with whom we are in full communion, such as the ELCIC.)

Where does this leave us here in this diocese?

An Engaged Conversation

We are initiators, participants and contributors in a national conversation about our developing eucharistic theology and practice. Amongst the questions and issues that need attention are:

- The nature of community (ecclesiology). In other words, what makes the church church? What makes a community “eucharistic”? By the same token, what makes the eucharist “communal”? What is virtual community?
- Our theology of the sacrament: What makes the eucharist eucharist? What precisely are people missing when we cannot gather for the eucharist? What do people mean by stating that the eucharist is “necessary”? Is it?

The results of a pastorally informed and theologically robust conversation could form the basis of a helpful contribution to the work of Faith, Worship and Ministry.

Diocesan Protocols in the Meantime

1. Virtual Communion

By “virtual communion,” we mean a service in which the participants, meeting online but in separate physical locations, bring their own portion of bread and wine to be blessed “remotely” by a priest, for example, on Zoom. This is too great a departure from our historical and normative practice, and we are not in a position to authorize it in this diocese. Where this is happening, it must stop.

2. Spiritual Communion

There is no doubt that this idea appears in our Anglican tradition, notably in the Ministry to the Sick in the 1962 Book of Common Prayer, where it is said that if a sick person is unable to receive the sacrament due to the extremity of illness, but earnestly desires to do so, he or she may still receive the benefits of the sacrament. It is notable that in this circumstance, the sick person making a spiritual communion is in the actual presence of the consecrated sacrament and of the consecrating community. Less common within the Anglican tradition (but more so within the Roman Catholic tradition) is a provision for making a “spiritual communion” when one is unable to attend at a eucharistic celebration, or is ineligible to receive the sacrament on account of an unconfessed sin.

For our purposes here, by “spiritual communion,” we mean either a situation in which participants watch their priest celebrate the eucharist online, and invite them to receive Christ “in their hearts by faith with thanksgiving;” or a situation where there is no eucharistic celebration at all, but the same invitation is offered.

It is worth remembering that a strong point of contention during the Reformation was the objection to “non-communicating masses,” where the clergy celebrated and received the sacrament, and the congregation watched. Nevertheless, the fact that this practice is embedded in an authorized liturgy of our church suggests that it ought not to be disallowed.

3. Agape Feasts

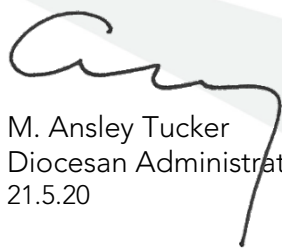
Agape feasts are essentially a potluck where someone gives thanks for bread and wine which are already part of the meal, and these are then shared amongst those present. So long as it is clearly stated and understood that this is *not* a stand-in or substitute for the

eucharist, there is nothing to preclude this kind of online gathering. In order to make this distinction, is it probably best that such gatherings not be scheduled on a Sunday.

4. *Service of the Word*

Non-eucharistic worship fashioned after the daily office or the liturgy of the word is both permitted and recommended.

I want to note finally, that we are moving gradually and steadily towards a time when it will be possible once again to gather in person to celebrate the eucharist. In other words, there is no urgency to conclude this conversation. We have time to think it through carefully, and in company with the rest of the Church.



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21.5.20