

On this Eucharistic Fast

Precis:

The present pandemic has, rather swiftly, thrust us into what seems to be the unknown. Clergy and lay leaders across the country are responding in deeply caring and meaningful ways in support of their communities. Cessation of the celebration of the Holy Eucharist is a shock, and pastoral response to this new reality is challenging. The tools of social media and online connection are pastorally helpful in many ways. And we need to ask ourselves what it is that we are using them for. Pastoral care and connection, nurturing community, responding to needs and crises, and offering prayer are to be encouraged. What about the eucharist? Can it be done through the medium of the internet? To answer that we need to ask what is the eucharist and what are we trying to do online? A full theology of sacramentality urges us to enter a time of eucharistic fast, which both honours the eucharist as the celebration of a particular community gathered, and helps to refocus our attentions on the sorts of discipleship we need to live and encourage in others. This – the suspension of eucharistic worship – is not an unknown thing to our ancestors in the faith and to churches even today in situations of war and other distress. We have a treasure trove of liturgical practices that we can and should bring to the fore in order to care for our communities and to nurture discipleship even now. Especially now.

The present pandemic has, rather swiftly, thrust us into what seems to be the unknown. We know we need to do many, if not most, things in new ways, distancing physically and, for those with access to the technology, doing more connecting through digital platforms. Clergy and lay leaders are checking in on parishioners, meeting and holding bible studies by videoconference, and in other ways tending to the local communities in the Body of Christ. Many are offering spiritual leadership in the live-streaming of prayers and worship. As people are at home in isolation, the offering of audio-video prayers, especially when done from the home of the clergy or lay leader, has a way of helping to hallow those homes, which can for some start to feel like a prison. We are reminded that home is, can be, and ought to be, a place of prayer.

One of the most difficult realities that we face as worshipping communities is that suspension of gatherings for worship means the suspension of celebrations of the Holy Eucharist. Whereas musical and theatrical performances can be moved online, the Eucharist is not about performance by one for the many, and cannot move into that mode. The sacrament is made such in and through the gathering of people with a presider, in a place and time, in the physical presence of what we can touch and taste, together, as well as hear and see. And since the 1980s, we have become healthily attached to the celebration of the Lord's Day, weekly, being about the eucharistic paschal mystery. For several generations, this has become the norm, and

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it is good that it is so. We have been blessed to be living in a time when celebration of the Holy Eucharist is not an 'occasional celebration' as it was for several centuries before us.

God is with us. Christ is truly, really, present with us, and the Holy Spirit surrounds us. Even when we cannot gather to make eucharist together we are not without the real presence of Christ in our very real, isolated, midst. Efforts to try to replace the community's physical-and-spiritual gathering with practices that try to offer a eucharistic communion online, though well-intentioned, do not reflect our sacramental theology, which is deeply about the physical-and-spiritual together.

Consonant with the most ancient Christian traditions is the practice of a *eucharistic fast*. In some contexts a fast from receiving communion is a choice – the very early church instructed catechumens (those undergoing formation in the faith prior to baptism) to fast from partaking of the eucharist. Many communities of disciples today know this experience of fast because they do not have weekly presence of a priest.

This is a time of context-necessary eucharistic fasting, in which we join with the whole communion of saints in longing for the bread of new life and the wine of the age to come.

From our baptismal and eucharistic identities shaped over time, we are equipped and challenged to be the real presence of Christ to each other. The world needs that presence always. We are reminded that sacramentality itself – the awareness of the reality of Christ's true presence with us here and now and at all times - is broader than the specific celebrations of baptism and eucharist in which we have shared and will share. We are reminded that the Body of Christ – we disciples – is the sacrament to the world.

Times like these call us to reach, with gratitude, into what has already been given to us, what is known from Scripture and Tradition, and to bring old-new things into light. A treasure-trove of liturgical resources is coming to light as we share online our liturgical texts, our music, and our offerings of prayer through audio-visual recording and live streaming. Words and music and visual connection through the internet are the same in many ways as the tools as Paul used when he wrote his letters to Corinth, Ephesus and Rome. That was the high technology of his day. He reminded those early Christian communities to pray without ceasing, to remember all the saints, to help the poor – in other words to be the disciples Jesus called them to be.

The rhythms of daily prayer and devotion nurture our souls. One essential element of pastoral leadership right now is to support these soothing rhythms. Here are some suggestions of what we can do, liturgically:

- Encourage people to pray at home, whether they are persons alone or domestic communities. Point them to resources (see www.anglican.ca). Invite them to email or

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text particular prayer intentions. Gather them, through the internet or phone, to pray together.

- Those who have the charisms for audio-visual presence can lead Daily Office and other forms of prayer, providing the digital texts for parishoners to join in those prayers.
- Clergy can look to their lay leaders who have the charisms well suited for leading these online prayers, and further nurture their baptismal ministries in prayer leadership.
- Model home-praying when you do audio-visual recording or streaming. We're in our homes, together.
- Our eucharistic fast will continue past Lent. The glory of resurrection will for some feel unreal in very real ways. To what beauty, new life, and joy can you point people, in real ways?
- Now is a time to reflect deeply on what it is to be praying community in the time of "here but not yet"

Though we didn't choose this, it is a time to embrace an intentional eucharistic fast in order to become catechumens again and through that process reflect on and deepen our faith.

"The Eucharistic table is a table like no other table. AND the Eucharistic table is like every other table. The Eucharistic elements are special and singular in that there above all other places and times, we see what God is doing in ALL places and times. Here's the question, then: do you think if we do not gather at the Eucharistic table like no other table that God is no longer at present at all other tables, i.e., at all other places and times? Is it not the case that God's presence to all places and times is the non-binary anchor of this non-binary relationship between the Eucharistic table and every other table, actual and metaphorical?... Think on these things. May we gather again around the Holy Table very soon. In the meantime, look for the Tables around you and among you. God is still at the Table that is spread among us in our hearts, in our prayers, in our service."

The Rev'd Dr. James Farwell, Virginia Theological Seminary