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Christ's Body, the Church's Supper, and the Real Presence in Social Distance

Jason Goroncy — May 3rd, 2020

Among other things, COVID-19 has brought with it an invitation to rethink what we imagine a safe society to be.

It has also exposed, again, the failures of unbridled capitalism and the fickleness of so much that we call "living." And it has brought to the surface significant questions about what it means—existentially, philosophically, practically, morally, and economically—to speak of human community. Such conversations are most welcome, and I am grateful for their being brought to the fore.

The Christian community is not immune to such conversations, of course, and most of its leaders are, as far as I can deduce, trying their best to quickly reimagine what faithful witness might look like under these unfamiliar and dislocating conditions.

(There are, mind you, those trying to carry on with business as usual,^[1] for who knows how long, and who are arguing that suspending or cancelling gathered worship services not only betrays a duty of spiritual care but also signals the church's capitulation to "the spirit of our age, which regards the prospect of death as the supreme evil to be avoided at all costs."^[2] Others are warning that "it would be extremely dangerous, even in the short term, to accustom the faithful to Mass online. It would amount to wishing for a kind of 'disincarnation' of Christ."^[3] While a sympathetic observer might recognise the real theological and pastoral dilemmas that such communions, Roman Catholic and other, face during this time, it is difficult to take such voices seriously.)

Imaginative efforts now being offered are a reminder of just how adaptive the church has proven to be over the centuries. The leaders of these communities are discovering and embracing less-familiar ways of keeping their communities connected, and of serving the wider communities of which they are a part, especially those

persons within it who are most affected by this pandemic—those suffering from ill health, the poor, the elderly, the victims of domestic violence, the isolated, and the unemployed.

Understandably, many faith communities have moved their public gatherings into various forms of online space. Those of us who belong to such communities, and who can access the technology, can be grateful for such connection. But, as teachers and many others are quickly learning, it's never a question of simply doing something familiar and which has been developed in the "real" world and then replicating—or "delivering"—it now through other means. Technology changes things. But what exactly? How does the mediation that technology makes possible change the character of both participation and participant, and how the latter understand the relations between themselves?

These are not new questions; and now might be an opportune time for some of us to refamiliarise ourselves with the work of someone like Jacques Ellul, and to re-read Aldous Huxley. And on the specific matter of worship, Garry Deverell's fine essay on "Worship as a Technological Apocalypse," written some seventeen years ago, still reads as surprisingly contemporary.^[4] These, and works with like concern, have taken on a fresh urgency in the age of Zoom, and then again in recent months.

Along with others,^[5] I've been wondering what it means for Christian communities to celebrate Holy Communion online. Some expressions of the Christian church have been unequivocal about this:

Virtual reality is no substitute for the Real Presence of Christ in the Eucharist, the sacramental reality of the other sacraments, and shared worship in a flesh-and-blood human community. There are no sacraments on the Internet; and even the religious experiences possible there by the grace of God are insufficient apart from real-world interaction with other persons of faith.^[6]

[A] priest cannot preside at a Eucharist if they are the only person actually present. So a priest cannot sit in front of a camera and preside with people 'participating' online. The Eucharist requires people to be actually present, not virtually present ... People cannot sit in their homes watching a live-streamed Eucharist and take bread and wine themselves as if they are then receiving the sacrament. Our Eucharistic theology is that a priest presides at the Eucharist but that the gathered community who are present give effect to the celebration. The Eucharist is something we do when we are actually *physically* gathered and it cannot be replicated in a virtual way.^[7]

Others have called for churches to intentionally abandon this practice for the time being,^[8] to embrace "a eucharistic 'fast' until the virus has finished its work" and to instead use this time to dive "more deeply into Lenten quarantine,"^[9] to fast from communion "for the time being" and to sit with this experience of walking with the Shepherd through this "valley of the shadow of death."^[10] Such an abandonment represents a concrete way to confess something basic to Christian faith and so at odds with the spirit of much that the modern world celebrates—namely, "we cannot always have everything we want right away."^[11] I have been provoked by such reflections. And I am grateful for them.

On one hand, we are living at a time of many losses—the loss of physical proximity not least among them. And while most of us are thankful for the provision of technology that enables us to overcome some of the isolation, there is something about our being embodied creatures that is feeling particularly compromised and under-acknowledged at the moment. *Embodied community* is, of course, at the uncompromising heart of what Christian community means, lest the experience of "church" be reduced to that of an idea.

Writing some eighty-three years ago, the German theologian and pastor Dietrich Bonhoeffer encourages us to reject suggestions that the *church-community* is only ever an invisible entity. Christ's body, he insists, "takes up physical space here on earth ... Thus the body of Jesus Christ can only be a visible body, or else it is not a body at all."^[12] It is a gift that faith communities can continue to meet in online spaces—spaces which themselves represent a different mode of our physicality. But it is simultaneously a *confession*, is it not, of what they have lost, or of that which is being threatened. To try to carry on with business as usual—like celebrating Holy Communion—might represent a failure to acknowledge that loss.

Conversely, to make a point of not celebrating the Eucharist might be a sign of that inability to meet together—or at least a sign of the additional limitations of the modes under which we currently "gather." This too seems to be an important feature to name at this time. In this way, delaying celebrating communion really might be an act of *hope*—the hope of our being rejoined; the hope of truly being able to pass the peace and to pass the cup to one another; and the hope of being again the "visible body" that can be bumped into, and which can bump into others.

On the other hand, Bonhoeffer also reminds us that it is in Christ *alone* that "the continuity of [our] existence [is] preserved."^[13] In which case, delaying celebrating the Eucharist (or Easter, for that matter) risks locating the joy of the Eucharist (and of Easter) in a change of our current conditions rather than in the Crucified and Risen One. Perhaps such a risk is worth taking? I don't know. But in such a context, celebrating the Supper, even with the limitations under which we currently gather, might be a way of embracing this promise that *only in Christ* is

the continuity of our existence preserved. Of course, the Eucharist functions as a sign of this reality, a sign that many of us welcome at such a time of high uncertainty and, for some of us, anxiety. There are, therefore, pastoral reasons why it might be important to eat and drink virtually together.

There are also some theological reasons. Graham Ward encourages us to think about the ways that the unstable body of Jesus witnessed to in the Gospels is now, in this time after or during the ascension, "an extendible body." He suggests that it is not that Jesus "stops being a physical presence. It is more as if this physical presence can expand itself to incorporate other bodies, like bread, and make them extensions of his own."^[14] He continues:

[It is] as if place and space itself is being redefined such that one can be a body here and also there, one can be this kind of body here and that kind of body there. Just as with the transfiguration, the translucency of one body makes visible another hidden body, so too with the eucharist, although in a different way, a hidden nature of being embodied is made manifest. Bodies are not only transfigurible, they are transposable.^[15]

For those who think, as my friend Garry Deverell has suggested, that Ward's logic at this point represents an unintentional but "decidedly gnostic ghost," one might equally make the same kind of argument by turning to someone like Louis-Marie Chauvet^[16] who insists that while the body of Christ is extendable, such extensions are discernible only insofar as they maintain continuity with Jesus' words, patterns, and deeds as they come to us in the primitive *kerygma*, which includes primitive liturgical formulations. "This," as Garry says, "puts a break on what might count as the body of Christ, especially in the world of the postmodern iteration where even vampires are claimed as symbols of the church."

Such reservations notwithstanding, Ward's rendering of Christ as a transposable body holds out promise to communities committed to celebrating Holy Communion during this time of social distancing. Such communities readily confess that Christ can make himself available to us by other means, and some theologians have been speaking for some time about the implications of "digital embodiment."^[17] In which case, celebrating Holy Communion would be a way to bear witness to this Christ who is continually being transfigured. Ward also suggests that Jesus's body is "continually being displaced so that the figuration of the body is always transposing its identity." He goes on:

Poised between memory and anticipation, driven by a desire which enfolds it and which it cannot master, the history of the Church's body is a history of transposed and deferred identities: it incarnates a humanity aspiring to Christ's own humanity.^[18]

I wonder if we are now living during such a time when we are experiencing in other ways such "transposed and deferred identities," and how continuing to celebrate Holy Communion at this time might bear witness to One in whom alone "the continuity of our existence is preserved."

For faith communities currently wrestling with such matters, perhaps one way forward would be to celebrate the Eucharist by means of an online platform (such as Zoom), to read "together" the liturgy of the Supper, to eat "together" food that is available, but to keep cups that are present empty? There are, of course, some significant problems with this tentative proposal. Theologically, it unavoidably draws further attention, for example, to significant and difficult questions about the character of mediation in our virtual spaces. And for those (say Anglicans and Lutherans) who can't or won't imagine an edited version of their liturgies, there will be real questions about what it might mean to consecrate an empty cup (something, by the way, that I am *not* arguing for here, although I can *prima facie* see no real theological problem with exploring the developing of a liturgy that included such a practice).

At this point, many Zwinglians and others will be wondering what all the fuss is about, and insist that any challenges are mostly technical ones that can be overcome with technical and pragmatic solutions. Pastorally, it may simply be too confusing to depart so radically, and so quickly, from familiar practices, and that at a time when we are confused enough. It also assumes that people are "confident about handling the Eucharistic elements at home."^[19] These may well be reasons enough to refrain completely.

Still, practicing something like my tentative proposal now might mean continuing to celebrate this meal as a graced sign of what by faith is true in degrees at all times, but which is experienced now through other modes—both the presence of Christ by the Spirit and the compromised but hopeful orientation of Christ's body, "broken for you."

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[1] Andrew Roth, Shaun Walker, and Dom Phillips, "Churchgoers All Over World Come to Terms With Physical Distancing Advice," *The Guardian*, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/mar/29/church-goers-around-the-world-ignore-social-distance-advice>.

[2] R. R. Reno, "Keep the Churches Open!," *First Things*, <https://www.firstthings.com/web-exclusives/2020/03/keep-the-churches-open>.

[3] Edouard Husson, "An Open Letter to the Bishops of France." *First Things*, <https://www.firstthings.com/web-exclusives/2020/03/an-open-letter-to-the-bishops-of-france>.

[4] Jacques Ellul, *Presence in the Modern World*, trans. Lisa Richmond (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2016); Aldous Huxley, *Brave New World* (London: Grafton Books, 1977); Garry Deverell, "The Making of the Body of Christ: Worship as a Technological Apocalypse," *Australian Journal of Liturgy* 9, no. 1 (2003), 19–34. A version of Deverell's paper is available online: https://cp.unitingchurch.org.au/worship_technology.pdf.

[5] See, for example, Andrew McGowan, "Liturgy in a Time of Plague: A Letter to a Colleague," *Saint Ronan Street Diary*, <http://abmcg.blogspot.com/2020/03/liturgy-in-time-of-plague.html>; "Stated Clerk's Advisory Opinion – Communion in an Emergency/pandemic," *Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.)*, https://www.pcusa.org/site_media/media/uploads/oga/pdf/advisory_opinion_communion_in_an_emergency_or_pandemic.pdf; Simon Rundell, "Sacraments in Digital Space – a Theological Reflection of Three Church's Position Statements," *Fr. Simon Rundell*, <https://www.frsimon.uk/ma-dissertation-sacraments-in-digital-space-a-theological-reflection-of-three-churchs-position-statements/>; Deanna A. Thompson, "Christ is Really Present Virtually: A Proposal for Virtual Communion," *St. Olaf College*, <https://wp.stolaf.edu/lutherancenter/2020/03/christ-is-really-present-virtually-a-proposal-for-virtual-communion>.

[6] The Pontifical Council for Social Communications, "The Church and Internet," *The Holy See*, http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/pontifical_councils/pccs/documents/rc_pc_pccs_doc_20020228_church-internet_en.html.

[7] Bishop Ross Bay, "A Pastoral Letter During COVID-19 Level 4" (unpublished letter, 30 March 2020). Ross Bay is the Anglican Bishop of Auckland.

[8] Scott Kirkland, "Eucharist and Absence," *Trinity College*, <https://www.trinity.unimelb.edu.au/theological-school/news-and-media/meditations>.

[9] Garry Deverell, "On Deferring Easter and Diving More Deeply into Lenten Quarantine," *Uncommon Prayers*, accessed 27 March, 2020, <https://uncommonprayers.blogspot.com/2020/03/on-deferring-easter-and-diving-more.html>.

[10] Alison Sampson, "Why We Won't be Sharing Communion Via Zoom," *Sanctuary*, <https://sanctuarybaptist.wordpress.com/2020/03/26/why-we-wont-be-sharing-communion-via-zoom/>. Similarly, Eileen Scully, Director of Faith, Worship and Ministry for the Anglican Church of Canada writes: "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." Eileen Scully, "On this Eucharistic Fast," *The General Synod of the Anglican Church of Canada*, <https://www.anglican.ca/wp-content/uploads/On-this-Eucharistic-Fast.pdf>.

[11] Dirk G. Lange, "Digital Worship and Sacramental Life in a Time of Pandemic," *The Lutheran World Federation*, <https://www.lutheranworld.org/blog/digital-worship-and-sacramental-life-time-pandemic>.

[12] Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Discipleship*, vol. 4 of *Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works*, ed. Geoffrey B. Kelly and John D. Godsey, trans. Barbara Green and Reinhard Krauss (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2000), 225.

[13] Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *No Rusty Swords: Letters, Lectures and Notes 1928–1936*, vol. 1 of *Collected Works*, trans. Edwin H. Robertson, John Bowden, and Eberhard Bethge (London: Collins, 1970), 64.

[14] Graham Ward, *Cities of God* (London: Routledge, 2000), 102.

[15] Ward, *Cities of God*, 103.

[16] Louis-Marie Chauvet, *The Sacraments: The Word of God at the Mercy of the Body* (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 2001).

[17] Kathryn Reklis, "X-Reality and the Incarnation." Christian Theological Seminary, <http://www.cpx.cts.edu/newmedia/findings/essays/x-reality-and-the-incarnation>.

[18] Ward, *Cities of God*, 112–13. The very logic of the Ascension, Ward argues, suggests a continuation of the logic of Christ's opening-up, of "the Logos creating a space within himself, a womb, within which ... the Church will expand and creation be recreated."

[19] Sampson, "Why We Won't be Sharing Communion Via Zoom."