

The Eucharistic Feast: participation, representation and sacramental integrity in the time of social distancing

Dr Charlie Bell, Girton College, Cambridge



Charlie Bell is currently training for the ministry at St Augustine's College. He holds a PhD in medical genetics and is a medical doctor, as well as a policy adviser to UK Parliament; later this year he will take up a role as Academic Clinical Fellow in Psychiatry at King's College, London. He is John Marks Fellow, College Lecturer, Praelector and Director of Studies at Girton College, Cambridge, a Fellow of the Royal Society of Arts and a Senior Fellow of the Higher Education Academy.

Abstract

The coronavirus pandemic arose somewhat out of the blue, posing substantial challenges to a national church that had to adapt to rapidly changing circumstances. One key tension of this period has been between continuity and change, with questions raised about what is fundamental to 'being' the Church of England. This paper offers a response to this question by suggesting that 'new ways of being Church' must be grounded in what the very nature of the Church is in the first place. From an understanding of the church's Biblical origins, history, organisation and liturgy, it draws a line to the right ordering of the Church of England's sacramental life and ministry in a time of social distancing and isolation, and provides some answers to the question – how might we be, truly, the Church of England in the time of pandemic?

The Church of England, like other constituent members of the Anglican Communion, and sister churches around the world, has been faced with significant challenges in response to the recent coronavirus Covid-19 pandemic which reached the UK in mid-March. The Archbishops described the challenge as 'unprecedented peacetime measures to control the spread of the virus, with restrictions on public gatherings,

transport and working', and thus envisioned the Church of England becoming 'a radically different kind of church rooted in prayer and serving others'.¹ Whilst the situation which the church finds itself in may be new in terms of the specifics of the lockdown measures imposed, it is by no means unprecedented in historical terms (as described below) that the Church, in its many manifestations, has had to adapt to restrictions being placed on the public celebration of the sacraments and the meeting for corporate worship, for example in times of persecution such as the Tokugawa shogunate in Japan.² However, what appears to pose particular theological questions in this current situation is the presence of virtual communication methods, which enable some form of community experience, yet in a way which clearly lacks the physicality of gatherings envisaged in New Testament witness (for example the early community being described as having 'come together as a church' to 'eat the Lord's supper' (1 Corinthians 11:18-20) and within the Letter to the Hebrews) and throughout Christian history.

This paper seeks to interrogate the scriptural and Church traditions that underlie the celebration of the sacraments, and identify those key elements that might help us form an effective, valid and pastorally understandable form of communion (both the act of Eucharist and the communion of fellowship) when faced with the challenges of global pandemic. By doing so, it follows in the Anglican *via media*, after Hooker,³ of Scripture, reason and tradition – in essence, by using reason (and through it, a thorough interrogation of incarnated experience) to understand and apply what the tradition and Scripture say about the celebration of the sacraments in the light of pandemic. The UK Government slogan, adopted by the Church of England leadership, of 'stay home, protect the NHS, save lives' is certainly important and to be attended to by the Church of England;⁴ it does not, however, in and of itself express anything of the theological understanding that enables the Church to continue in its historic mission and ministry to 'go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptising them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you' (Matthew 28:16-20a NRSV), or to 'do this in remembrance of me' (1 Corinthians 11:24-26). Sacramental theology is essential in such a time as this, not least so the Church can believe with confidence 'remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age' (Matthew 28:20b).

This paper's contention is that far from requiring 'a radically different kind of church', what is required is a radical faithfulness to the very nature of the Church itself, its ministries, mission and sacraments. It is only through such faithfulness that it is possible to envision what the Church's current manifestation might be, not as an act of discontinuity but as an act of deep and deliberate continuity with the faith of the apostles, as lived out through the two millennia of Christian community. The starting point of the Church must be its nature, and it is this nature that must define our theology of communion and thus be that against which any new situation is tested, rather than the other way around. This may indeed lead to new dimensions in our theology, and new ways of expressing it, but it is not clear that such a situation should lead to a fundamental shift or change in our sacramental theology, as this would lead to, or require, a change in our understanding of the nature of the Church.

For the Church to be 'the Church', there must be some central, essential element to its nature that cannot be lost. John Booty highlights the historical continuity that runs through thinking on this topic, from Ignatius of Antioch to the Lambeth Quadrilateral. Ignatius is described as believing that

'The essential nature of the church rested in a people united in the one God, witnessing to the saving Gospel, professing faith in Jesus Christ, his cross and resurrection, worshipping in the one Eucharist under the one bishop who is the symbol of their unity and the agent by which their union with God is accomplished'.

He compares this with the Lambeth Quadrilateral that believes that

'The visible unity of the church consists in its acceptance of Scripture, the Nicene and Apostles' Creeds, the sacraments of Baptism and Holy Communion, and a ministry rooted in the historic episcopacy.'⁵

From Patristic times, the sacraments (and their right ordering under the bishop) have been seen as a fundamental part of the Church, and therefore inseparable from it.

Anglican thinking, as displayed by the Lambeth Quadrilateral, situates the two 'Sacraments ordained by Christ Himself' within the four fundamental elements of what constitutes the Church in full *koinonia*.⁶ By also recognising the 'Historic Episcopate', it likewise makes a definitive link between the celebration of the sacraments and the authorised, or ordained, ministry of the church. Within the Anglican fold there have always been different legitimate ways of understanding the meaning of the Eucharist and the ordained ministry, but the Quadrilateral gives an agreed list of the essentials that form the foundations of the Church. It is very difficult to see how the current social distancing would justify any move against these, thereby altering something so fundamental to the church's self-understanding, both historically and to the present day.

The key questions that have arisen as a result of the pandemic principally relate to the inability of the people of God to meet together in one place and to celebrate the sacrament as a physically gathered group of Christians – threatening the embodied and corporate nature of the Eucharist.⁷ These distil into several arguments that relate to the right ordering of the Eucharist (that is, where, whether and how might it be celebrated when people cannot physically gather, and who might preside at that celebration), how the faithful might themselves participate in such a celebration, and what the essential nature of the sacrament is itself when considering the validity of the consecration of the elements at a distance. As described, at the heart of this question is the nature of the Church itself, and the role of authority, intention, representation, communion and participation in the Church's expression of an incarnate faith. These will each be considered in turn, but initially the underlying theology of the sacraments and their developments in the Anglican Church will be investigated. This paper primarily focuses on the Eucharist as the most visible sacrament of *koinonia*. However, whether holding to a definition of two dominical sacraments, or extending to the seven in the catholic tradition, the theological principles that emerge also cast light on the right ordering of all sacramental action in such unusual times.

What is a sacrament?

The sacraments, in the light of changed circumstances, do not fundamentally change. Davison states 'sacraments are signs that promise and point to salvation. However, they are also more than signs, since they convey that salvation to us.'⁸ Article XXV of the Thirty-Nine Articles similarly states that

Sacraments ordained of Christ be not only badges or tokens of Christian men's profession, but rather they be certain sure witnesses, and effectual signs of grace, and God's good will towards us, by the which he doth work invisibly in us, and doth not only quicken, but also strengthen and confirm our Faith in him.

The dominical sacraments, those which were instituted by Christ in the Gospels,⁹ are of particular importance here, as they contain the indelible mark of Christ and are therefore in a fundamental sense fixed by this indelible character. Therefore, for sacraments to both signify, but also to convey, salvation, their matter and form must be that imbued into them in an unchangeable and metaphysical way during their institution. It is from their institution, therefore, that we can best derive what matter and form are required for them to be sacraments at all.

It is such indelible character that strongly suggest that (with the qualification described below) the use of anything except bread and wine in the Eucharist by itself would render the Eucharist in most cases null and void. An example would be the use of Coca Cola in the place of the wine as an element for consecration. The use of Coca Cola is not illegitimate solely because such a substance did not exist when Christ was on the Earth; instead, it is illegitimate because it is quite specifically not what Christ used when he stated that 'this fruit of the vine' was 'my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins' (Matthew 26:28-29). Even where such a change is described in sociological or even theological terms, for example the use of Coca Cola in Apartheid-era South Africa where this substance was described as 'made by the hands of the oppressed for the oppressor' and the liturgy described as, quite deliberately, 'a powerhouse for the struggle for liberation' and 'a powerful agent for the transformation of the oppressive structures in our society', it is difficult to understand such an act as truly that of the Eucharist.¹⁰

Complications, of course, arise over the inability to use wine for those suffering from alcoholism or bread for those with Coeliac disease, but these issues can in many cases be resolved through the doctrine of concomitance.¹¹ For those quite literally unable to use bread and wine, such as Cardinal Nguyen van Thuan, imprisoned by the Communist government of Vietnam, the intention of the act (as discussed below) proves important. Nonetheless, the Church, and thus the Christian who is a member (let alone ordained and thus authorised delegated Eucharistic president) of the Church, does not, unless truly *in extremis* have the authority or even ability to alter what was instituted by Christ. McGowan suggests that there is a historical legitimacy to alteration of these elements in very particular situations, such as the use of bread and water (or indeed bread alone) in an ascetic situation; indeed, he argues that bread and water, 'understood as polar opposites to meat and wine' in the Greco-Roman religion may have been used to signify 'resistance to or avoidance of sacrificial *cultus* and the society that enacted it'. He similarly suggests that other substances may have been added to the bread and wine which 'may have expressed festivity, but usually assumed the same ascetic logic', although such additions appeared to reduce (although may have continued to some extent) as time went on and 'greater standardisation and a purely token liturgical eating and drinking held sway'. He further argues, however, that 'the food and drink of the Eucharist...stem not from the particularity of a single historical meal of Jesus, but from the commonality of ancient Mediterranean diet', the ordinariness of which provides a 'surprising and powerful quality' when Christ is 'genuinely present and received in the meal' – in so doing, it 'represented a symbolically bold, economically accessible and religiously accommodating compromise or synthesis'.¹² There may, therefore, be an argument for using similarly culturally grounded elements, albeit tested against the underlying tradition and Scriptural record; however, within this discussion the incarnational and physical, instituted nature of Christianity becomes very clear.

The incarnational nature of Christianity thus becomes clear: there is a physicality and a temporality to the institution of the sacraments which fundamentally defines their underlying nature. Sacramental theology cannot be newly formed to meet each different situation; there is something deeper, and metaphysical, that is required for the sacraments to perform their role in salvation. St Thomas Aquinas, a Dominican Friar and significant Scholastic theologian of the thirteenth century, describes sacraments as

having *matter* and *form* in his theological treatise the *Summa Theologica*.¹³ This definition stemmed from the writing of William of Auxerre,¹⁴ and sacraments were defined in this manner by the Catechism of the Council of Trent.¹⁵ Matter is the element or 'the stuff-and-gestures' (which includes the substance used), and 'form is the words that are spoken'; God communicates with us 'by means of a mixture of words and gestures'.¹⁶ God communicates with us in ways in which we can receive and know Him – 'certain stuffs such as bread and wine...are naturally laden with significance' therefore 'if God comes...through such 'media', then of course his gestures will have power'.¹⁷ Jesus is seen throughout the Gospels as engaging, and indeed healing, each of the basic human senses (sight, hearing, smell, taste and touch) in his interactions with the people he meets, and in particular his disciples.

Because of their institution during his lifetime, there is an unbreakable line between the 'stuff-and-gestures' nature of sacraments and the earthly life of Jesus, and both of the dominical sacraments involve sensory engagement in this way. The 'stuff-and-gestures' of the sacraments must, therefore, embody openness to the senses, or more specifically each celebration of a particular sacrament should, surely, be offered as a physical reality that engages the senses of all those who are participating (accounting, of course, for those who are in some way unable to do so by cause of nature). Therefore, whilst 'ritual actions themselves...have the possibility to create liminality, and in performing them, the presence of God may be keenly felt',¹⁸ is it clear that in the sacraments the very reason that such presence might be felt and some liminality created (or perhaps better, revealed) is that there is a connection to physical elements that firmly identify Christianity as an religion of incarnation. Whilst it is, of course, possible to say that 'nothing will be impossible with God' (Luke 1:37), it is of key importance that the way that Christ chooses to impart grace is through sacraments that involve physical stuff, action and presence. It therefore appears out of keeping with not only tradition but their nature to attempt to divorce sacraments from their physical source.

The approach to the sacraments in the Thirty-Nine Articles focuses on the sacraments as being 'effectual signs of grace', through which God 'doth work invisibly in us, and doth not only quicken, but also strengthen and confirm our Faith in him'. This builds on the definition of St Augustine of Hippo, commonly described as 'an outward sign of an

inward grace'.¹⁹ In the Catechism of the Catholic Church (1123),²⁰ their purpose is described as 'to sanctify men [sic], to build up the Body of Christ and, finally, to give worship to God', relying on faith. In further describing them, the Catechism states 'the law of prayer is the law of faith: the Church believes as she prays. Liturgy is a constitutive element of the holy and living Tradition' (1124). It is because of this that 'no sacramental rite may be modified or manipulated at the will of the minister or the community', nor even 'the supreme authority in the Church...arbitrarily...but only in the obedience of faith and with religious respect for the mystery of the liturgy.' To conclude, it states that 'the *lex orandi* [the law of prayer] is one of the essential criteria of the dialogue that seeks to restore the unity of Christians'.

It is clear, therefore, that not only is there significant agreement between the Anglican and Roman Catholic Church on the nature of the sacraments (as further described below in the statement from the Anglican/Roman Catholic International Commission, or ARCIC), but also that the liturgical enactment (which is an embodiment of the form and matter) of the sacraments holds a key role. The emphasis on the authority (whether tradition or Scripture) imbued in the form and matter of the sacraments may vary between denominations, but the Catechism highlights an important element that is also relevant to Anglicans, the *lex orandi, lex credendi* (the law of prayer is the law of faith). To change the form and matter of the sacraments would not only harm the ecumenical project; it may also lead to a fundamental change, and hence divergence, in the faith of the church catholic. To alter the sacraments, however pastorally appropriate this may seem, may effect significant theological change.

The Eucharist in the Church of England

'The Church of England is part of the One, Holy, Catholic and Apostolic Church...it professes the faith uniquely revealed in the Holy Scriptures and set forth in the catholic creeds, which faith the Church is called upon to proclaim afresh in each generation'.²¹ These words, from the Preface to the Declaration of Assent, made by bishops, priests and deacons (and in more recent times Readers and Lay Workers) provides a clearly defined self-understanding of the Church of England. It situates the Church of England as part of a wider Church, and in so doing places emphasis on several key elements,

amongst them its apostolic nature (to be considered below), and its catholicity (that is, its continuity with the universal church). This catholicity is balanced with its reformed nature, a tension which has seen different emphases over time but which has also enabled several different theological strands to co-exist under the same institutional structure.²²

A key figure in Anglican Eucharistic theology is Richard Hooker. In his *Works*²³ he delivers a doctrine that, whilst it states that 'the elements...remain in their natural substances and are not changed into the fleshly presence of Christ's body and blood' nonetheless 'God's power gives the communicant...Christ's body and blood by means of the instruments of the bread and wine'. Douglas, in his review of Hooker's theology, points out that 'how this happens Hooker is unable to explain, other than it is by God's power'. Hooker, indeed, speaks of 'real participation' in the sacrament, and his theology is thus 'realist in its philosophical assumptions, expressing the view that by means of the sacrament the communicant has a real participation in the body and blood of Christ and thereby in Christ himself'. This suggests the fundamental importance of the form and matter of 'stuff' in the Eucharist – real participation thus suggests the form and matter the consecrated elements to be 'instrumentally a cause' of such participation.²⁴ On the question of the sacrifice of the Mass, which loomed large during the Reformation, Hooker likewise 'follows the same balanced and judicious path' and 'argues that the proper use of sacrificial language in the Eucharist has a metaphorical rather than a literal use'.²⁵

Hooker, therefore, whilst more cautious about sacrificial language than Roman Catholic usage (certainly of the time) imbues the bread and wine with significance, and recognises the role of the presbyter (not, for Hooker, priest, given his concern over correct use of sacrificial language) in administering 'the Eucharist in remembrance of Christ'. Neelands states that 'Hooker is very clear about the fact that these [which includes administering the Eucharist but also baptising, absolution and preaching] are not human instructions but divine commands', where 'God's ministry...depends upon the dialectics of humanity and divinity'.²⁶ The Eucharist, whatever the role of the minister in the metaphorical sacrifice, is thus divinely ordained, and this is inextricably

linked with the authority given to ministers (bishops, and by extension presbyters) to administer the Eucharist.

Hooker's position overall is described by Neelands as 'minimalist', in which he chooses 'to stand by the common elements of divergent positions...an old theme in the Reformation', and it is somewhat in this line that current Anglican doctrine of the Eucharist resides.²⁷ The Thirty-Nine Articles (XXVIII) similarly offer a generous definition of 'The Lord's Supper, although are clear that 'the Supper of the Lord is not only a sign of the love that Christians ought to have among themselves one to another' but is a 'Sacrament of our Redemption by Christ's death' in which 'the Bread which we break is a partaking of the Body of Christ; and likewise the Cup of Blessing is a partaking of the Body of Christ'. The Church of England's website states 'The Eucharist...can take many different forms...and it may be understood by Christians in different ways, but at the heart of the celebration there is always a...Eucharistic Prayer...offered by the priest who presides at the service in the name of all who are gathered', together with 'an outward... shared meal of bread and wine' (although the meal is, indeed, more symbolic and indeed might be described as 'the prefiguration and foretaste of the Heavenly Banquet (Revelation 19:7)²⁸).²⁹

There are a variety of theologies of the sacrament that can be found compatible with these teachings, although most of these include belief in the real presence of Christ in the Eucharist. Douglas explains that the phrase 'real and essential presence' describing a rejected doctrine in the 1552 Book of Common Prayer was replaced with 'corporeal presence' in 1662, which 'some argue...indicat[es] an affirmation of the real presence of Christ in the Eucharist'.³⁰ The exact meaning of real presence is not clearly defined: current Anglican theologies range from corporeal presence (the actual bodily presence in the elements), pneumatic presence (in which there is a spiritual real presence in the elements) to receptionism (which 'relates the presence primarily to the worthy receiver rather than to the elements of bread and wine'³¹). However, key to the Anglican understanding is the aforementioned *lex orandi, lex credendi*, in which the form of worship speaks to and embodies the underlying theology (hence differences in Evangelical and Anglo-Catholic worship). Indeed, each of the Eucharistic Prayers in Common Worship Order 1 has a particular charism and influence that may make it

more appropriate for each underlying theology (for example the *epiclesis*, or calling down of the Holy Spirit, may focus more on those receiving the elements – such as Prayer D – or the elements themselves – such as Prayer E – although a creative ambiguity remains throughout the authorised Eucharistic Prayers).³² However, all these forms of worship require the elements to be consecrated, with the words and actions of the *anaphora* (Eucharistic Prayer) spoken by a priest, and thus to form a sacrament by grace and through the Holy Spirit. As Davison describes, ‘Christ comes to be with us and, through his presence, to unite us to God and to one another. He comes to teach us, to be our food, to be our sacrifice, to make us friends of God’.³³ These different elements are to be found, then, in the Eucharist.

It is interesting to note that in the 1971 document on Eucharistic Doctrine released by the First Anglican/Roman Catholic International Commission (accepted as Resolution 8 of the 1988 Lambeth Conference), it was stated that ‘substantial agreement’ had been met ‘on the doctrine of the eucharist’, and ‘if there are any remaining points of disagreement they can be resolved on the principles’ that the declaration contained (12).³⁴ Within this document, the commission is clear that ‘The Lord’s words at the last supper...do not allow us to dissociate the gift of the presence and the act of sacramental eating’, and ‘the bread and wine become the body and blood of Christ by the action of the Holy Spirit’, through ‘the consecratory prayer’ (9-11). That such an agreement has been reached remains extraordinary and is still questioned by the Roman Catholic Church,³⁵ yet this bears tribute to the importance of careful understanding of the meaning of theological language. However, it also provides a warning, in that any deviation from current practice risks moving further away from such a shared theology that fosters ecumenical understanding and, ultimately, unity. There is, ultimately, no such thing as an Anglican Eucharist; there is the Eucharist, and an Anglican expression of it. In finding new ways of expressing it, if such new ways are needed, Anglicans must be sure not to lose sight of the fundamentals.

The Eucharist and the Church

As described earlier, the Eucharist has always been fundamental to the self-understanding of the Church. In the upper room, Christ gave the bread and wine to his

disciples as his body and blood and called for them to do this in remembrance of him (1 Corinthians 11:23-26). Gregory Dix suggests that with this call for such *anamnesis*, the Eucharist itself makes the church – ‘week by week, month by month, on a hundred thousand successive Sundays, faithfully, unfailingly, across all the parishes of Christendom, the pastors have done this just to make the plebs sancta Dei – the holy common people of God’.³⁶ He further states that ‘sometimes [in the Fathers]...the sacrament becomes the body of Christ because it is offered by the church which is the Body of Christ. Sometimes, as in St Augustine, the church is the Body of Christ because it receives the sacrament which is his body’, which he links to the writing of St Paul in 1 Corinthians.³⁷ De Lubac (a Roman Catholic) and Zizioulas (Orthodox) build on this, the former stating that ‘The Church is the gatherer as well as the result of the gathering’, binding both church and sacrament together, each necessary for the other to exist.³⁸ Zizioulas develops this idea by suggesting that ‘the body of Christ is never guaranteed by the past or by any formal institution, but only comes in *epiclesis*, in the renewed pleading of the faithful that the Holy Spirit enact the Kingdom in their midst.’³⁹ The question therefore follows as to whether it is possible for the Eucharist to exist outside the Church, or ‘can [it] only be genuine in the Church’:⁴⁰ is partaking of bread and wine in memory of Jesus’ death and resurrection yet without delegated episcopal ministry and rites of the Church truly Eucharistic?

During the pandemic, there have been calls for a conscious break to be made between the authorised ministry and the celebration of the Eucharist, including from a leading member of an ‘alternative worshipping community’ of the Anglican Church, Jonathan Baker, who stated that people should ‘share communion in [their] own home and resist the power of religious control’.⁴¹ In this article, he states that ‘the church has a lot of regulations about communion – what prayers, who can preside’, and bemoans ‘the church of england [sic] says on the one hand that it values creativity, that the shape and integrity of worship is what is important and not the words in themselves and we need new ways of doing things but in practice it is still extremely controlled and locked down’. He rejects the idea that this may be down to ‘sacramental theology’, stating this is a ‘clever sounding ruse’ and ‘really it is an issue of control’ – ‘things the church has constructed, made up, nothing more...in direct opposition...to the way of christ [sic]. He refers to a ‘priestly caste who control access to god because it is only through their

magic actions that people can have communion...the religious power of domination is alive.'

This objection to the authorised ministry highlights an underlying disagreement in fundamental sacramental theology, that of whether the Eucharist is more than a symbolic meal between friends being brought to memory – usually referred to as Memorialism, a doctrine favoured by Zwingli – or a sacrament that brings into effect the real presence (as described above). It is hard to see how Baker's form of memorialism can be at all compatible with the basic sacramental teaching of the Church of England; it appears to be 'the thoughtful but rather passive contemplation of events that are long past', and thus the 'mere symbol' that remains 'leaves the Eucharist as a kind of vague aid to devotion, likely more dependent upon the subjective mood of the believer than on any objective reality communicated to the believer', bread and wine merely being used because these were the substances used by Christ himself (see discussion above).⁴² In short, it is unclear how such an understanding of the Eucharist can in any meaningful way embody an Anglican sacramental understanding; instead, it appears more to suggest that, like Zwingli, not only is the term sacrament disliked because it is alleged to have been 'misused and misunderstood', but also there is the underlying sacramental theology that states 'signs cannot save'. This is in direct contradiction to Article XXV in which 'sacraments ordained of Christ...[are] effectual signs of grace'; if the Eucharist is 'a Sacrament of our Redemption by Christ's death' (Article XXVIII) then a memorialist understanding does not begin to describe the fullness of what is occurring at the Eucharistic feast.

However, whilst this addresses the underlying theological deficit in Baker's thesis, the question of authorised ministry remains. The Form and Manner of Ordering of Priests of the Church of England gives priests 'authority to...minister the holy Sacraments in the Congregation': this reflects a catholic and apostolic understanding of the Church, in which the bishop was the president at earliest celebrations of the Eucharist.⁴³ Priests then, over time, took over the presidency, principally because the number of celebrations and congregations grew, yet remained linked to (and commissioned by) the Bishop (hence the license required in legal terms in the modern Church of England). The bishop's presidency, however, was not about authority but about 'the nature of the

eucharist as the sacrament of the Church, as an act in which the unity of the Church and her otherworldly and universal nature is fulfilled and realised'.⁴⁴ It is this link with the bishop that means the eucharist is an 'act of the whole Church, the surmounting of the natural narrowness of the parish' – thus the local partakes of the corporate, and the parish altar becomes 'the place of the offering, presence and coming of the whole Christ, in whom we are all the body of Christ, in whom...all divisions are overcome...and given the gift and grace of the new life and above all the fulness of life.'⁴⁵ The authority to preside, therefore, is necessary, because it speaks of and to the whole church – any change to this presidency thus affects not only the individual celebration of the Eucharist, but the nature of the celebration and, ultimately, the nature of the Church of which it is a part. The 17th century Anglican writer and bishop John Cosin similarly states that the Eucharist 'is offered for the sins, for the benefit of the whole world, the whole Church, that both those alive and those departed in the faith of Christ, may feel and partake in its affect in virtue', stating 'truly the Eucharist is an oblation made for all in order to be effectual to all', interestingly 'not only offered for the living but also for the dead'.⁴⁶

This, then, helps explain the development of the ordained ministry in churches that describe themselves as apostolic and catholic – the bishops receiving their authority as successors to the apostles and delegating this to priests as a sign of the unity of the Church. Indeed, the Church of England recognises that 'apostolic succession in its fullest sense is a succession of the whole community', and that there is 'an apostolic succession essential to the life of the Church', yet notes that 'the concept of a sacred tradition of teaching antedates the concept of an apostolic succession of pastors, but the second became necessary to safeguard the first'.⁴⁷ Such succession in the context of revealing unity (as prayed for in Eucharistic Prayer G) and thus linking the local with the church catholic does not conflict with the priesthood of all believers (1 Peter 2:5-9) but rather complements it. It is thus that the Church of England can state that 'the responsibilities of presidency [at the Eucharist] are neither to be sought, nor to be guarded as a symbol of status'.⁴⁸ However, likewise it recognises the 'seriousness of the lifelong commitment' in Eucharistic presidency through 'examination of the ordinals of the Church', and 'how necessary that Order is in the Church of Christ' – the Church 'find ourselves keen not

merely to affirm that tradition, but to celebrate it' 'even if there is a shortage of those who offer themselves for this office'. The Theological Statement concludes:

Where a community believes that it has been given by God a person with the requisite gifts for the priestly task, there exist ways and means by which the Church may test that identification, and the person once chosen may be trained for his or her demanding and sacrificial vocation. Ordination to the priesthood in the Church of God is the publicly recognised mark of that call.

In the context of the pandemic, therefore, it does not appear consistent to introduce lay presidency, as the nature not only of the sacrament but of the ordained ministry would be indelibly changed. The current pandemic is unlikely to be a semi-permanent state, unlike the persecutions and suppressions that the Church has faced in the past;⁴⁹ it is therefore not clear how a consistent priesthood (lifelong, authorised through the laying on of hands,⁵⁰ representative of unity) could be reasonably expanded to meet current needs, and nor is it clear that the suspension of any of these elements is warranted by the current situation. The Eucharist by its nature is of the Church, and this must be the starting point for the authorisation of Eucharistic presidency.

Participation

If the Eucharist is therefore the local Church in union with the wider Church meeting liturgically to remember sacramentally, in thanksgiving (*eucharistia*), the death, passion, resurrection and ascension of Christ, then in a time when the community cannot physically gather, the question of participation in the liturgy arises. At first sight, it appears that the advice from one bishop is clear – that laity in their homes, watching the Eucharist by live-stream, should be encouraged to participate rather than simply spectate, with clergy instructed to 'say only the words of the priest or reader, and the words that priest and people say together'.⁵¹ By doing so, in the words of another bishop, '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", which 'enables...spiritual reception that is at the heart of the sacrament, even if physical partaking is not possible'. In so doing, the people are not simply watching an act of

worship but also, by extension, partaking in some way in it. It is because of this (referring to Article XXVIII that states 'The Body of Christ is given, taken, and eaten, in the Supper, only after an heavenly and spiritual manner. And the mean whereby the Body of Christ is received and eaten in the Supper is Faith') that the Church of England has recommended Spiritual Communion as a way of separated laity participating in the Eucharist. This is a 'means of grace by which a person, prevented...from sharing in a celebration of the Eucharist, nonetheless shares in the communion of Jesus Christ'.⁵² This further draws on Cranmer, and in particular his rubrics for the Communion of the Sick, whereby 'he doth eat and drink the Body and Blood of our Saviour Christ profitably to his soul's health, although he do not receive the Sacrament with his mouth'.⁵³

The Presiding Bishop of the Episcopal Church of the US stated that 'gazing at a celebration of the Eucharist is one thing; participating in a physical gathering and sharing the Bread and Wine of the Eucharist is another. And, God, of course, can be present in both experiences.'⁵⁴ It is clear, therefore, that whilst this is a form of participation, it is in some way imperfect. Curry draws attention to Hooker's statement that 'through corporate prayer...Christians participate in communion with Christ himself, "joined...to that visible, mystical body which is the Church"'. Those participating in the Eucharist are, therefore, performing a corporate but not gathered fellowship – significantly different to that experienced by the early church, albeit in their houses (and to which unfortunate (and thus, rather misleading) comparisons have been made by senior bishops⁵⁵). The Eucharistic community is considered by St Paul in 1 Corinthians 11: here, it is clear that it is not family groups that should be combining for the Lord's Supper but instead that, when celebrating the Eucharist, Christians should 'come together as a church' (1 Corinthians 11:18).

Communion

The absence of a congregation has cast doubt on the validity of a priest saying the Eucharist if there is no congregation present. Whilst it is true that the Book of Common Prayer states that 'three at the least'⁵⁶ are required for a celebration to occur, it is important to see this in its historical context: opposition to widespread private masses in Roman tradition.⁵⁷ However, 'the Eucharist is a conversation: with the members of the Church on earth, and

with the angels and saints in heaven, and with the persons of the Holy Trinity.⁵⁸ In principle, Mass said alone does not appear, therefore, to be in contradiction with the concept that the Eucharist is a 'corporate act' if, as the Anglican Church does, we profess belief in the communion of saints; the corporate act becomes even more clear if congregations are able to partake of Spiritual Communion.⁵⁹ In normal times, it would be preferable to include the church militant as well as the church triumphant; however, in such a time as this, that both form part of the Church must surely lie behind the permission given by bishops to celebrate the Eucharist 'alone'. In addition, the priest is, to some extent, acting in a representative fashion – offering the Mass for others *in extremis* (similarly to others answering for infants in baptism), particularly pertinent over the Easter Feast where the very nature of the Church suggests that the Eucharist should be celebrated, albeit vicariously. Indeed, on Sundays (the day of Resurrection), acting as representative of the scattered church appears to be more in-keeping with the role of the priest than of fasting from the Eucharist in solidarity with their congregation, as has been suggested by some clergy.⁶⁰

Fr Peter Anthony develops this point, suggesting that, in the Eucharist, the priest is called by St Paul (1 Corinthians 11) to proclaim not only words but an action, and in so doing is 'bringing the reality of the cross into the world' by proclaiming the Eucharist and thus 'the power of the Gospel becomes a reality in the lives of those to whom the Gospel is proclaimed'. This is perhaps more than Spiritual Communion: the Eucharist itself becomes an 'effectual sign of grace' by virtue of being proclaimed. This makes the practice of bellringing as the sacrament is celebrated all the more important, to draw attention to this saving act of grace mediated through the sacrament. In addition, such representation might best take place (and if possible be imperfectly and virtually participated in) in the church building, which itself by its very physical presence holds a prophetic role in any such celebration as the place where the community would normally gather, and which links the particular parish to the wider church, both living and departed. This highlights the importance of place in our Eucharistic theology, and casts doubt on the sovereign importance of the 'solidarity' shown by priests in remaining at home, particularly when this is advice based on (somewhat defective) sociology rather than an underlying Eucharistic theology.⁶¹ Indeed, given the role of priests in representing all members of the community, such 'solidarity' might be better described as 'setting an example', although this then calls

further into question the legitimacy and appropriateness of such an approach when considering the prophetic and representative role of a priest in their community – to ‘lead God’s people in the offering of praise and the proclamation of the gospel...share...in the oversight of the Church, delighting in its beauty and rejoicing in its well-being...to set an example of the Good Shepherd...to sustain the community of the faithful by the ministry of word and sacrament’.⁶² That the Archbishops required churches to close to clergy as well as laity despite government advice appears to be in contradiction to this prophetic role of the church building and representative, sacramental, shepherding role of the priest, and might warrant reconsideration; indeed, priests might more correctly be acting in solidarity with the people they serve when celebrating the Eucharist with the people on their heart in the place where the local community is most frequently connected with the church catholic.⁶³

Consecration

Questions have finally been raised about the possibility of consecration online, with comparisons drawn with the efficacy of blessings.⁶⁴ However, there are fundamental differences. Whilst the preface to the *anaphora* of the BCP states that we ‘should at all times, and in all places, give thanks’,⁶⁵ there is a physicality that is intrinsic to a meal, albeit a spiritual one. Indeed, the risk of seeing the consecration as an incantation rather than an incarnate reality becomes heightened when the physicality of ‘one bread’ is removed (which makes plain why the advice from the Church of England is that bread and wine should not form part of any Spiritual Communion⁶⁶). 1 Corinthians:10 is clear that there is ‘one bread’ (v.17) which itself is symbolic because ‘we all partake of the one bread’ despite being ‘many’, highlighting the key theme of unity in the Eucharist. As a religion of the incarnation, the concept of disembodied anthropology (and its equivalent in the virtual sharing of bread) is incompatible with the Eucharist: as above, whilst those at a distance are participating, it is nonetheless imperfect, and does not constitute the same celebration as if there were physical sharing.

This physicality is intrinsic to the sharing that takes place at the Eucharist, but also to the consecration as seen in Anglican practice. As previously described, Davison notes that sacraments are both matter and form, and the matter is not only the stuff, but also

the gestures that accompany the form. Church of England liturgy has a history of the inclusion of gestures: this is seen particularly in the BCP, where there are instructions as to 'take the Patten into his hands', to 'break the Bread', to 'lay his hand upon all the Bread', to 'take the Cup into his hand' and 'to lay his hand upon every vessel in which there is any Wine to be consecrated'⁶⁷, highlighting the embodied nature of Eucharistic worship (likewise in Common Worship, the priest talks of, in the singular, 'this bread and this cup' in the consecration).⁶⁸ This physical action of touching is therefore intrinsic to the nature of the celebration of the Eucharist, as reflecting the physical actions taken by Jesus in its institution. It is not possible to embody this sensory relationship between the priest and the elements in any form of consecration that does not bring them into physical contact, and therefore a key facet of the celebration would be lost were the consecration to be performed across a computer screen. Indeed, it is arguable that it would not simply lose a key facet; it would no longer be consecration in the way that has been received by the church catholic and apostolic.

The importance of physicality and ritual is not only seen in the tradition of the church but is grounded in the actions of Jesus in the New Testament and also within the Old Testament. Davison notes that in 'the Old Testament...faith in God is very much rooted in physical things and physical actions, in times and places',⁶⁹ and as above states that 'we naturally communicate by means of a mixture of words and gestures', much as Jesus does in performing miracles.⁷⁰ He states that 'the elements themselves, and the bare minimum of gesture needed to relate them to the last supper are defined as the matter of the sacrament',⁷¹ and thus to strip the Eucharist from these 'bare minimum' gestures is to strip the sacrament of its connection with the incarnation, with the 'scandal of particularity' that is inherent to Christ's incarnation.⁷² It is this that negates the key element of the argument made that if Christ was alive now, he would make use of Zoom and other forms of virtual communication. Jesus Christ was God incarnate as a human in a particular time, in a particular way, in a particular place: the fact remains that he did not come in the age of online communication, and he did institute the Eucharist in the place and time of his coming. It may prove scandalous, but it is a truth that the church catholic proclaims anew each time it comes together for the Eucharist. As Davison concludes, 'we are disposed in time and space, we are finite, we are creatures and we are cultural. Our salvation, therefore, is accomplished and communicated in time and

space, by finite, creaturely and cultural means'.⁷³ This is a cause for celebration, yet one which by its nature places physical, creaturely, sensory limits on how we remember these saving events.

Indeed, Christianity is, more particularly, something 'that is worked out bodily'.⁷⁴ In his study of the embodied nature of the faith, Irvine highlights the key importance placed on the physical and incarnated nature of Christianity that is evident from the writings of early Christian centuries. He shows that in his *On the Resurrection of the Body* (8.6-12) the second-century North African writer Tertullian links the 'receiving of the elements of Communion' to 'the story of salvation', thus 'what Christ offers and gives to humanity is effected through sacramental actions, using the elements...to convey a spiritual currency through the medium of the physical body'. He continues 'the salvation proclaimed in the gospel is assimilated bodily, we might even say ingested, in both the receiving of the Word....and the physical sacramental eating and drinking of Communion...it is precisely because salvation is physically transacted through the body that the very idea of a 'virtual' Christian church through the Internet is an oxymoron'.⁷⁵

One practical element might be considered, which is that the virtual consecration may occur in a variety of different ways. It may be live, but one-way (that is, the priest cannot see the congregation, or indeed the proffered bread and wine); it may be live but two-way; or it may be watched in a recorded fashion. It would appear that for any form of effective communication to occur, only the middle of these options would suffice. It is surely impossible for a priest to pronounce even a blessing virtually without the intention of the act being required in order to be efficacious.⁷⁶ Davison states that 'the proper minimal intention is that the minister of the sacrament must intend to do what the Church intends to do by that sacrament'.⁷⁷ This is because the minister's intention is secondary to that of God; it is unclear that even if the individual minister had the intention to consecrate over the internet, that this would be accepted by even the local congregation, let alone denomination or church catholic. The Eucharist is a sacrament of the Church – the Church's intention is therefore key, and indeed must be grounded in what is actually possible by virtue of the nature of the sacraments themselves.

A further element, of course, is the potential exclusivity of the means of internet consecration, and hence, building on an earlier point, the lack of the character of the gathered church in dispersed homes. Some people may not be able to access the internet, and in a time of social distancing if virtual consecration is considered normal, then those without internet access (or access to the required elements) will be denied the Eucharist, a situation actively avoided by the public celebration of the sacraments in church buildings in ordinary time. In addition, as described earlier, the nature of twenty-first century households, which will generally include only immediate family, is in direct contradiction to the theology of a gathered, intentional church community, even in the context of early house churches.⁷⁸ In ordinary time, it is permitted for the priest, in the company of the faithful, to consecrate the elements and then take it out to those who are sick, housebound, or otherwise unable to attend the communal service (in the form of the reserved sacrament) – interestingly a practice that is found in the earliest descriptions of a Eucharist by Justin Martyr.⁷⁹ However, this is fundamentally different to allowing internet consecration, in that the recipients of such a sacrament are participating in a sacrament that has been brought into being in the bosom of the church corporate, and are thus sharing in fellowship that emanates from the physical gathering of the people of God in a particular place.

Conclusion

Following such an Anglican theology of the Eucharist, in particular, and sacraments, in general, leads to the conclusion that the current circumstances do not provide theological justification for any fundamental shift in the catholic understanding or celebration of the Eucharist, and, given the current circumstances, do suggest that the Eucharist might rightly and fully be celebrated by the priest without the church militant in attendance (as opposed to a more imperfect form when in normal times). Whilst it may appear pastorally insensitive to a ‘deep need among [a] congregation’ not to allow online consecration or lay presidency,⁸⁰ it nonetheless is in line with the current teaching and self-understanding of a church that calls itself part of the one, holy, catholic and apostolic church. It is difficult to see how sacraments celebrated by the unauthorised, or performed across the internet, can truly be described as sacraments by the church universal. Instead, such a model would appear to place the ‘consciousness of

the celebrating community' at the centre (as Davison quotes Bauerschmidt),⁸¹ rather than Christ. When such actions are undertaken by those in authorised, ordained ministry, then wider concerns must be raised. Tradition, Scripture and reason form the three-legged stool of Anglicanism, and thus serious theological decisions that affect and direct the nature of the Church are best made not in the heat of conflict or changing circumstances but grounded in that three-legged stool. Christian history is full of conflicts over doctrine that led to grievous and sad outcomes (one need only think of the Tudor period in England): caution must, then, be taken when raising a pastoral need above the level of fundamental, theological reality. Pastoral sensitivity is never an excuse for defective theology, for if we are to be the church, then we must have a Gospel to proclaim in the first place.

If we move to a position whereby the physicality of the Eucharist becomes secondary, then we may end up questioning whether the other dominical sacrament requires physical embodiment as well. This question has already been addressed, with the baptism of very sick infants through pipette requiring flowing water nonetheless, in a way which is not harmful to the child but still reflective of the underlying nature of the sacrament.⁸² Touch, and indeed all the senses are not something we can put to one side as Christians, and nor should they be. Our proclaiming afresh in every generation requires there still to be something fundamental to be proclaimed, and as Anglicans that includes both the word and the sacrament.

This is why the concept of an online-only church is so incompatible with the Christian faith, and why new ways of being church must focus on what 'being church' is as much as 'new ways'. The Church of England must be clear and confident about what a Eucharist is and what it is not, continue to celebrate the historic sacraments and rejoice in the gathering together of different people in one place once the coronavirus lockdown is lifted. The Church has a Gospel to proclaim that speaks of physical reality, of incarnation and of communion. This pandemic offers us the chance to widen and develop our Eucharistic theology, rather than denigrate and cheapen it. Technological change is happening, and our Church needs to be ready to meet this change and read the signs of the times. It was from radical *ressourcement*, a return to the authorised sources, that *aggiornamento*, a bringing up to date and contextualisation, led to a

renewal for the Roman Catholic Church at the Second Vatican Council.⁸³ Perhaps a similar focus on the very nature of the Church itself will best help us to meet the challenges of the modern world in our own Church of England.

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