

# Living as Sacramental, Eucharistic People amid COVID-19

*A pastoral letter from Bishop Cathleen Bascom to God's beloved in the Diocese of Kansas*

*Note: I want to give thanks to the members of the Episcopal Church's Ecclesiology Committee, to Professor Andrew McGowan of Yale Divinity School, and to Bishop Andrew Doyle of Texas, who have been carrying on a lively conversation on the topic. An article in Christianity Today, "Online Communion Can Still Be Sacramental," also addresses the issue. My own conclusions are uniquely mine but are informed by all of the above.*

We are Eucharistic people. We are sacramental members of the Jesus Movement. As such the 2020 coronavirus and the physical distancing being employed to reduce its spread, present us with unique practical, theological, liturgical and ethical realities. My reflections that follow are based on this methodology:

1. Begin with a definition of what our sacramental, Eucharistic identity means
2. Consider 2020 lived-experience in the time of this outbreak that includes limits on traditional public gathering and the innovative use of various technologies to come together
3. Turning to foundational biblical texts for enlightenment
4. Offering episcopal guidance on liturgy and sacraments for the months ahead

## I. What does it mean to be sacramental, Eucharistic people? And why are we?

Beginning with the opening chapters of Genesis, the Judeo-Christian tradition claims there is a Creator God who delights in materiality: water, plant-life, animals, humankind have a tangible, material existence. Jesus, we believe, was God-with-us in human, fleshy form. The creation and incarnation are why we are sacramental people. We believe in outward signs of inward and spiritual grace.

We are Eucharistic people and rightfully so. Biblical scholars will tell you that Jesus' institution of the Eucharist is the most precisely attested actions and words of Jesus of anything in the New Testament. The accounts of the Last Supper in Mark, Matthew, Luke and First Corinthians are not exact but very close in the descriptions of the actions and statements on the night before his death. The behavior of his first follower – Christians across centuries, including Martin Luther and Thomas Cranmer – all make it clear that Eucharist is a most central foundation that forms who we are as Christian people.

The priest does not say the Eucharistic Prayer for us. We **all** do it, and the priest presides. In his recent statement to the Diocese of Texas, Bishop Andrew Doyle summarizes this well:

“At the core of our questions about Eucharistic theology we find the deep questions about who is praying. Certainly, we may debate this... (But) Theologians across the globe have put their mind to this question in the last two weeks. We have agreed that the very core of Anglican theology, through all of its twists and turns, has determined that it is the corporate body who is making the prayer.”

Also, as important liturgical scholars like Dom Gregory Dix have reminded us, it is crucial to remember that we are Eucharistic people **all week long**, not only when we are gathered to celebrate the rite itself. We believe that in Eucharist the Risen Christ is with us and changes us to be more like himself: close to the love of God, compassionately serving and loving other people, transforming injustice into liberation for all. We are Eucharistic people outside the church walls, being the Body of Christ in our families, neighborhoods and work places. The sacrificial love that the Eucharist

communicates is to mark who we are every day. Our Canon Theologian, Dean Don Compier, describes this reality:

“It is wonderful to think of the effects and realities and practices that go on all week. In this case, the last Eucharist we took, however long ago, is still operating, still conforming us to Christ, still knitting us together with all in the body... As Edward Schillebeeckx taught, the church is itself a sacrament! Maybe more foundationally so than any rite.”

## II. Major curve ball and questions: the coronavirus and virtual reality

None of us imagined a year ago that we would spend this Holy Week and Easter unable to meet for communal Eucharistic worship, unable together to take the physical, sacramental signs of bread and wine (not to mention baptismal water, palm fronds, holy oil, foot towels, holy roods, or Easter lilies...). But so it is, and thus we must ask how can we best remain sacramental, Eucharistic people?

I have nothing but praise for the way in which the clergy and lay leaders of our diocese have rallied and tapped incredible creativity to keep parish communities connected. Every variety of media is being employed, from ancient to post-modern: letter-writing, good old phone tree, Vestry members checking in with neighborhood groups, Morning Prayer by Zoom, coffee hour as Facetime Live, conference call prayer services.

I meet every week with church leaders in numerous Zoom calls so the diocese may truly serve and help to resource our parishes and people. Many congregations have continued to “feed without gathering,” caring for those in our communities who are hungry and those in most need. We pray daily for medical and public servants on the front lines.

However, we must note that the current situation and our responding creative uses of technology confront us with post-modern anthropological and theological questions in a heightened way:

1. When we gather by Facebook Live or phone or Zoom, **are we truly a community?** If we worship through these or similar technologies, not being in the same physical space and not with gathered physical bodies but with linked/photographed bodies, **is it truly communal worship?**
2. What do we do about the physicality of our Eucharistic life? If we hold pieces of bread, but the bread has not been broken together in the same space nor shared, is it “communion”? Can a priest consecrate virtually?

Most members of the Episcopal Church Ecclesiology Committee and Dean Compier would answer “no” to these questions. As I write at the end of this paper, I say, “No for now. But wait upon God and continue to respectfully discuss and weigh this most crucial new subject.”

We need to wait before jumping to conclusions **because** the Eucharist is so central in our legacy from Jesus.

## III. Some Biblical Perspectives

### Humans creatively responding is sacramental

I would like to claim that, on a very basic level, the creative problem-solving we are witnessing amid this pandemic is sacramental. In it, humanity is living up to its calling to exercise giftedness that manifests the “*imago Dei*.” The idea of Genesis 1:26-27, that human beings are in the image of God,

who is the Creator of the cosmos, becomes manifest in times of crisis and new theological challenges.

### **Boldly taking the gospel into new territory rests on strong biblical foundation**

When I think of the clergy and parishes embarking courageously into this new realm, I think of the Apostle Paul, moving by foot or boat into the pagan Greco-Roman world to share the way of Love of the Risen Jesus in a totally foreign landscape and culture.

### **Studying the institution narratives for insights**

Reading the biblical accounts, within the broad sweep of the gospels, I believe it is undeniable that Jesus intended the Eucharist as a gift of compassion, a means of grace for humans who desperately need to draw close to the love of God and through it, post-resurrection, to discover the presence of a Risen Savior. In his radical re-interpretation of the Passover bread and wine as his body and blood, Jesus foretells the mystery that he will be a companion to his followers in both suffering and in new life.

This is the reason I am loathe to immediately rule out so-called “virtual Eucharist.” I imagine our current circumstances are relatively ephemeral, and we should not change centuries of tradition and theology in some knee-jerk fashion. But, we do live in a new age of technological connection, and this virus opens our eyes to important questions that simply will not go away.

**Are** we a community if only gathered virtually? *Christianity Today's* article “Online Communion Can Still Be Sacramental,” March 27, 2020, answers “Yes.” Andrew McGowan of the Berkeley Divinity School at Yale gives a very thoughtful argument against the proposal in “Liturgy in a Time of Plague: A Letter to a Colleague” (March 14, 2020). I personally cannot claim the intellectual or spiritual prowess to form a lasting opinion from the experience of just eight weeks. This will take time.

I found considering the **contexts** of the biblical texts of the institution of the Eucharist to be quite interesting and important for the current situation. When he instituted the Eucharist, Jesus knew that his followers were about to be isolated, at least immediately – from Temple and probably synagogue worship, hiding due to danger. Yet he left them this sacred meal for that circumstance. Not until the time of Emperor Constantine was communal worship an easy come-and-go thing.

Paul’s description of the institution of the Eucharist in I Corinthians 11:17-33 occurs as he is addressing economic injustice and division. We must not let our differences about virtual reality and the sacraments lead us to division when the point of Eucharist is unity, and as long as there are hungry people to feed.

McGowan, quoting Dix, speaks of the four-fold actions of Eucharist **as take, bless, break and share**. I wholeheartedly agree. But in studying the New Testament institution texts, I am struck by the *anamnesis* in the accounts from Paul and Luke: Jesus saying “Do this in remembrance of me.” While the scholars have been discussing the difficulty of the four-fold Eucharistic actions virtually, for myself and the people of Kansas, I will urge us to focus on remembrance (*anamnesis*) as we strive to remain sacramental, Eucharistic people during this pandemic. It, too, is an integral part of Eucharistic worship and identity.

## **IV. Episcopal Guidance for worship and sacraments in the months ahead**

While not expected in every parish, I believe that virtual gatherings and worship are great. I believe we can use our human and technological creativity to retain a sense of community, and that

this creativity is in a basic way sacramental. I believe that the more that these practices can be reciprocal and interactive the better. However, for reasons stated in my theological reflections, **I am not ready to allow virtual Eucharist.** The topic is too weighty. I may eventually be able to see it as sacramental, but I believe this a crucial theological challenge unique to our era, and many great minds and souls need to weigh in on the matter. Because the idea is theologically complicated and health officials and Presiding Bishop Michael Curry have recently stated it is unsafe, **I also am discouraging drive-up communion.**

## **I propose two options for worship until we can gather:**

### **1. Tap the riches of the daily offices (what most are doing now)**

Our Presiding Bishop highlights this way of worship for this time:

“...under our present circumstances, in making greater use of the Office there may be an opportunity to recover aspects of our tradition that point to the sacramentality of the scriptures, the efficacy of prayer itself, the holiness of the household as the ‘domestic church,’ and the reassurance that the baptized are already and forever marked as Christ’s own.”

### **2. Practice Spiritual Communion** (the following comes from The Church of England)

The term “Spiritual Communion” has been used historically to describe the means of grace by which a person, prevented for some serious reason from sharing in a celebration of the Eucharist, nonetheless shares in the communion of Jesus Christ. The form of prayer below offers Christians an opportunity to give thanks for their communion with him, particularly at times when they would ordinarily be present at the Eucharist.

The Book of Common Prayer instructs us that if we offer ourselves in penitence and faith, giving thanks for the redemption won by Christ crucified, we may truly “eat and drink the Body and Blood of our Savior Christ,” although we cannot receive the sacrament physically in ourselves. Making a Spiritual Communion is particularly fitting for those who cannot receive the sacrament at the great feasts of the Church, and it fulfils the duty of receiving Holy Communion “regularly, and especially at the festivals of Christmas, Easter and Whitsun or Pentecost” (Canon B 15).

The Church of which we are members is not defined by the walls of a building but by the Body of Christ of which we are members. In making our communion spiritually, we are joining with Christians everywhere to be nourished by the one who tells us, “I am the Bread of Life.”

**For communal, virtual Spiritual Communion,** a priest and one other may pray the service for Holy Eucharist (Rite I or II), consecrating a small amount of bread and wine. I am asking clergy not to partake, but instead to practice Spiritual Communion with our people. Then reserve the blessed elements to be shared together during the Eucharist when all are joyfully reunited.

**For individuals or family Spiritual Communion** separately or with a meal, note what follows.

**You may wish to find a space for prayer** in front of a cross, a candle or a special place. You might choose to make your Spiritual Communion at a particular time of day.

**Reflect on the day and on your relationships.** What good things have come from God today? Where have I fallen short? What might I do tomorrow? You may wish to say or pray: Lord, have mercy. Christ, have mercy. Lord, have mercy.

**Read the following words from Scripture** (or if you have access to today's readings for Holy Communion, you may wish to read and reflect on them.)

Jesus said, "I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never be hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty.": John 6:35

**Pray for the needs of the world,** for your local community, and for those close to you. End with the Lord's Prayer. Our Father...

**Give thanks** for the saving death and resurrection of Jesus and ask him to be with you now. Thanks be to you, Lord Jesus Christ, for all the benefits you have given me, for all the pains and insults you have borne for me. Since I cannot now receive you sacramentally, I ask you to come spiritually into my heart. O most merciful redeemer, friend and brother, may I know you more clearly, love you more dearly, and follow you more nearly, day by day. Amen.

*After the Prayer of St. Richard of Chichester*

**You might then add** one or more of the following prayers:

"I am with you always." Be with me today, as I offer myself to you. Hear my prayers for others and for myself, and keep me in your care. Amen.

O God, help me to trust you, help me to know that you are with me, help me to believe that nothing can separate me from your love revealed in Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

Lord, in these days of mercy, make us quiet and prayerful; in these days of challenge, make us stronger in you; in these days of emptiness, take possession of us; in these days of waiting, open our hearts to the mystery of your cross

**Over your meal** use a prayer Over Food at Easter (*The Book of Occasional Services*)

Blessed are you, O Lord our God; you have given us the risen Savior to be the Shepherd of your people: Lead us, by him, to springs of living waters, and feed us with the food that endures to eternal life; where with you, O Father, and with the Holy Spirit, he lives and reigns, one God, for ever and ever.