



# Anglican Diocese of the West

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Holy Week

Greetings and blessings in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ!

Some of you have requested some further clarification on the issue of Virtual Communion, that is a novel practice blessing the Holy Communion elements over the internet arising from the current pandemic of the novel virus known as COVID-19.

It is perhaps important to begin by asking two questions. First, what is the Holy Communion or the Lord's Supper; and second, what is the appropriate context for celebrating it? Here is how the Most Rev'd Dr Glenn Davis, Archbishop of the Anglican Diocese of Sydney, answers both questions:

The Lord's Supper is a sacred meal for Christians. It expresses our fellowship within the body of Christ, both among fellow members of Christ's body, and also with the head of that body, our risen Lord. Three elements of the Lord's Supper are found in Paul's instructions to the Corinthians.

- Communion: a participation in Christ's body and his blood (1 Corinthians 10:16)
- Remembrance: 'Do this in remembrance of me' (1 Corinthians 11:24)
- Proclamation: we proclaim the Lord's death until he comes (1 Corinthians 11:26)

Paul rebuked the Corinthians because they had abused the Lord's Supper. Their conduct failed to recognize the corporate nature of the meal and resulted in divisions among the assembly. He therefore encouraged them to examine themselves and not to eat or drink in an unworthy manner. They needed to discern the body when participating, lest they bring judgment on themselves. This discernment, of course, is recognizing the body of Christ gathered, because our participation is a corporate activity, not an individual activity.

As you all already know, we are in the midst of a most unusual season in the life of the Church wherein our ability to physically gather as the Body of Christ has been hampered by COVID-19 and the resulting need for social distancing. In perhaps no greater area has this been felt than in our Sacramental life. After all, most of us are accustomed partaking of Holy Communion weekly. Furthermore, Easter is traditionally a day when all the Confirmed are to partake of the Lord's Table. While there have been numerous creative propositions on overcoming this challenge, we absolutely cannot "virtually" consecrate the Bread and Wine over the Internet.

To that end, Bishop Orji had issued the following statement:

No priest in this Diocese is permitted to do virtual Holy Communion services over the internet or drive-through Holy Communion services in the parking lot. There is potential for irreverence and contamination in such practices. As important as the sacraments are, please exercise self-control and the virtue of hopefulness through this time of crisis knowing that our salvation is in Christ alone through faith alone. We will, no doubt, have a deeper appreciation and understanding of God's gift of Holy Communion after this crisis has passed.

There are several important theological and liturgical reasons for such a statement:

1. When our Lord instituted Holy Communion, the disciples were physically present. That is, our prototypical example from Scripture is an incarnational one. In celebrating the Supper, we are to do so in a Scriptural manner, following the biblical example. Hence the Consecration always beginning with the words "On the night in which he was betrayed..."
2. Similarly, our Rubrics and Canons have always required a congregation to be physically present when celebrating the Sacrament. Indeed, Communion is necessarily a communal act. For example, the 1662 Book of Common Prayer contains the following rubric: "And if there be not above twenty persons in the Parish of discretion to receive the Communion: yet there shall be no Communion, except four (or three at the least) communicate with the priest."
3. Additionally, our polity, theology, and rubrics have always required the priest/presbyter to consecrate the Elements physically. We are required to touch the vessels that hold the Bread and Wine during the Consecration in order for the Sacrament to be valid.
4. Furthermore, we have no precedent in the Anglican Communion, nor in any form of historic Christianity for virtual or physically dispersed Communion. As St. Vincent of Lerins said, our practice and beliefs are catholic when they are those that have been practiced at all times, in all places, and by all Christians.
5. Finally, Scripture does not teach that frequent partaking of Communion is a requirement for maintaining our relationship with Christ. Indeed, the weekly reception of Communion as a normal practice of the all the faithful is less than 150 years old in the Western Church. While this is not to diminish the importance of Communion and our Sacramental life, the need to abstain from the Sacrament is not an excuse for theological or liturgical innovation.

Let me remind you of the final rubrics of the Book of Common Prayer's Service for the 'Communion of the Sick':

But if anyone, either by reason of extremity of sickness, or for want of warning in due time to the Minister, or for lack of company to receive with the Minister, or by any other just impediment, do not receive the Sacrament of Christ's Body and Blood; the Minister shall instruct them, that if they do truly repent of their sins, and steadfastly believe that Jesus Christ has suffered death upon the Cross for them, and shed his Blood for their redemption; earnestly remembering the benefits they have thereby, and giving him hearty

thanks therefore; that person does eat and drink the Body and Blood of our Saviour Christ profitably to their soul's health, although they do not receive the Sacrament with their mouth.

With the above in mind, I commend to all clergy the venerable practice of Morning Prayer and/or Ante-Communion (i.e. the Liturgy of the Word) during the COVID-19 crisis, as per the rubrics of the Prayer Book. These services have a long history as principle Sunday Services within the Anglican tradition. They are useful for virtual participation, as the primary means of participation is the hearing of God's Word proclaimed and preached. Additionally, as we have previously discussed, "Spiritual Communion" is an important aspect of our theology. While our communal and Sacramental life is certainly diminished by the lack of Holy Communion at this time, such a period of "fasting" is temporary. How much sweeter will our Paschal meal when we can once again gather according to the norms of our Church?

Yours in Christ,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Isaac J. Rehberg". The script is fluid and cursive, with the first name "Isaac" and last name "Rehberg" clearly legible.

The Reverend Canon Isaac J. Rehberg.  
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A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Felix Orji". The script is fluid and cursive, with the first name "Felix" and last name "Orji" clearly legible.

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P.S. If you have any questions about using Morning Prayer or Ante-Communion as the Principle Sunday Service or any other liturgical matter, please contact Canon Isaac Rehberg and he will be glad to assist you.