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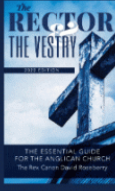
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Spiritual Communion During the COVID-19 Pandemic

By Jonathan Warren P. (Pagán) | March 21st, 2020 | Categories: [Miscellaneous](#), [Sacraments](#) | Tags:

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memory. As of March 19, most state and local authorities are banning meetings of more than 50 people, and President Trump has counseled, along with many public health officials, that people not gather in groups of 10 or more. [John Inazu has recently written](#) that “for the time being at least, mass gatherings are fueling a public-health crisis.”

This is a tough place for the church to be in. The lifeblood of the body of Christ is our corporate gathering for worship. The word for church in Greek, *ekklesia*, describes a public, gathered assembly of citizens and subjects, proclaiming allegiance to our king and receiving his presence among us in word and sacrament. It’s the same word used in the Septuagint to describe Israel gathering ‘as one’ to be ruled and instructed (Deut 4:10; 1 Kings 8:14; Neh 8). It is in our corporate gathering that we are formed and constituted as the body of Christ through word and sacrament.

We believe that in the sacrament of Holy Communion, Christ is really, truly, and objectively present, through the elements to the people of God who are gathered to commune with him and with each other (1 Cor 10; Acts 2:42-6).

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in which Christ was incarnate, crucified, resurrected, and ascended, the social or mystical body which is his people, and the eucharistic body in which we have a fellowship or a participation or a communion in his body and blood. In this threefold understanding of the Lord's body, we can readily see why gathering for public, congregational worship is something distinctive from private devotions in the home, which is in fact the basis and foundation of that private worship.

Gathered worship in word and sacrament is therefore not an optional add-on for Christians. We cannot simply upload our worship online and expect that nothing will be lost. And yet to meet publicly now constitutes a massive public health risk, which is inconsistent with our duty to love our neighbors as ourselves.



We should suspend our gathered worship during this season and move to online formats so as to do our part for the common good, to “flatten the curve” of this pandemic. But at the same time, we must regard the present crisis as an impairment in

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in our private devotions and in our online, virtual gatherings. This is not the way it's supposed to be.

Nevertheless, we need to be encouraged by the fact that this is not the first time the church has found itself in a position in which it was unable to meet corporately. It is not the first time that individuals have been kept from gathering for word and sacrament. Many times in the history of the church, hostile governments have suppressed public worship, making it impossible or nearly impossible for Christians to assemble.

Christians have lived through many plagues and times of disease, in which people have been quarantined and unable to attend public worship. The word "quarantine" itself comes from the practice, beginning in the 14th century, of requiring ships returning from disease-infested ports, to dock for forty days (*quaranta giorni*) before re-entering society. These were times in which no one on board would have been able to gather for public worship. In a more ordinary kind of suffering, parents of sick children have often found themselves unable in various seasons to attend worship.

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upon the sacrament and cultivating an ardent desire for it, asking Jesus to be present to you as he is in the sacrament, even while you are unable to receive it. Pope John Paul II, in his encyclical *Ecclesia de Eucharistia*, says that the Eucharist is at the center of the church's life, and therefore "precisely for this reason it is good to cultivate a constant desire for the sacrament of the Eucharist." The cultivation of this desire is the origin of the practice of spiritual communion, which is commended by all the saints. He quotes Teresa of Ávila who says in her *Way of Perfection*, "when you do not receive communion and you do not attend Mass, you can make a spiritual communion, which is a most beneficial practice; by it the love of God will be greatly impressed on you."

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Poland when the Bolsheviks invaded his town and required him to close down the mission. He escaped eastward into the Soviet Union and lived under a pseudonym for two years, but was ultimately arrested in 1941. For the next two decades, Cizek was either imprisoned in harsh conditions or condemned to hard labor in a Soviet Gulag in Siberia. For nearly two years during this time he languished in solitary confinement.

The suffering of Cizek's story, which he recounts in [He Leadeth Me](#), is almost overpowering to read, but what is more striking than the intensity of his suffering is the joy he experiences in the midst of it. What sustained him through these dark times was the joy of Christ's presence in the Eucharist. In the times when he was in solitary confinement or otherwise unable to celebrate it, he practiced spiritual communion.

[In the BCP 2019](#), occasional prayer #106 (p. 677) is a prayer for spiritual communion:

“Dear Jesus, I believe that you are truly present in the Holy Sacrament. I love you

receive you sacramentally, I beseech you to come spiritually into my heart. I unite myself to you, together with all your faithful people [gathered around every altar of your Church], and I embrace you with all the affections of my soul. Never permit me to be separated from you. Amen.”

As we move into a season in which our public, embodied gatherings are suspended or severely restricted, we should commend the practice of spiritual communion to our congregations. Clergy may, working with their bishops, amend the liturgy of Morning Prayer to include a spiritual communion. Other churches may choose to create a liturgical resource which they can share with their people to be practiced during the week.



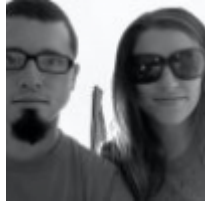
In any event, I believe this is an opportunity:

- to reaffirm the centrality of gathered worship in word and sacrament;
- to grow in our passionate desire to receive Christ in the sacrament; and
- to lament until we can gather publicly again to receive him and confess him together in the assembly.

Until that day we wait in longing, letting this suffering be an astringent which draws out of us the toxicity of our distraction and dissipation, and a quieter time in which we can hear the voice of God calling us back to the one thing necessary. If we allow this protracted time of sickness and anxiety to be an opportunity for repentance, a time to rethink reality, we will come to long for corporate worship, and when we can come together



have been missing.



Jonathan Warren P. (Pagán)

Jonathan joined Anglican Pastor as a writer in May 2014. He was ordained a priest in the Anglican Church in North America in March 2014. He is married to Tish Harrison Warren, a writer and priest in the ACNA, and together they have three children. Jonathan received his Ph.D. in the History of Christianity at Vanderbilt under the supervision of Dr. Paul Lim and Dr. Peter Lake. He currently lives in Pittsburgh, where he is the Associate Rector of Church of the Ascension. Jonathan's contributions to Anglican Pastor focus on Anglican church history.

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[Rev. Dennis Washburn, Ph.D](#) March 21, 2020 at 10:11 am - [Reply](#)

Thank you for this post. Not knowing of your efforts, I also posted on this subject and also suggested a brief private liturgy on my blog-

<http://newbcpanglican.blogspot.com/>

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