

## Diocese of York

### Holy Communion during the time of Anti-Virus Restrictions

The bishops are aware of questions that are being raised concerning Holy Communion during Holy Week and Easter, including what is pastorally appropriate, and also, from some clergy, what is 'valid' or 'permissible'. These notes are here to help and guide you.

#### 1 The context: normal practice

Holy Communion is the fulfilment of the Lord's command to 'do this in remembrance of me', and is at the centre of the Church's worshipping life. It is fundamentally a corporate act.

Normal practice, as we all know, comprises a celebration of Holy Communion in a church, or within the context of chaplaincy (e.g. hospital, school, college or prison), or occasionally within a home group.

Communion of the Sick or of housebound people may take the form of a full 'stand-alone' celebration of Holy Communion, or more commonly in practice, using elements that have been consecrated at a full celebration and then reserved decently in a church building or hospital chapel for the purposes of Communion.

#### 2 Is there a minimum number to be present?

This is a matter on which the Canons are silent. However, the order for the Communion of the Sick in the *Book of Common Prayer* includes this rubric that recognises pastoral reality alongside theological principle:

'... the sick person ... must give timely notice to the Curate, signifying also how many there are to communicate with him, (which shall be three, or two at the least,) ...

and the *BCP* rite for Holy Communion envisages that there should be three communicants with the priest in very small parishes. But there is a further pastoral concession in the Communion of the Sick:

'In ... contagious times of sickness or diseases, when none of the Parish or neighbours can be gotten to communicate with the sick in their houses, for fear of the infection, upon special request of the diseased, the Minister may only communicate with him.'

A note issued by the bishops of the Diocese of London discusses some of these points in greater detail: <https://www.london.anglican.org/articles/the-eucharist-in-a-time-of-physical-distancing/?fbclid=IwAR1mQjJTcnzh7 - RzbjR7FDjKHLAfFnup-aN3iC6jiET0wUdvHMd9ZX7pk0>

### **3 The context: present circumstances**

How then do we address the question of Holy Communion in present circumstances? It is impossible to gather in church, or to assemble more people than belong to a single household. If the consecrated elements are reserved in church, they are in effect inaccessible. The normal pattern of visiting housebound people is suspended.

### **4 Exceptional provision for the period of anti-virus restrictions**

During this time, the following directions apply in the Diocese of York.

### **5 The canonical requirement**

In all instances the person who presides at Holy Communion must have been ordained priest and have current authority to minister (Canons B12 and C8).

### **6 Celebrating Holy Communion at home**

Priests may celebrate Holy Communion in their own home, with at least one person from their household present.

### **7 May priests celebrate alone?**

A priest's daily prayer should of course centre on the Offices.

Although it is not in keeping with the Church of England's usual practice, at this time priests may celebrate Holy Communion at home alone, if they live by themselves or if no-one from the household is willing to join them. But this must be regarded as an exceptional practice and an emergency provision, for the present period of anti-virus restrictions only.

### **8 People praying in company, online**

In either case – and particularly if priests celebrate alone – it is good for other people to join in the worship. That may be through a live-stream. Another alternative would be for one person to join by telephone on loudspeaker.

People joining in this way may be helped to focus on the worship through having a Bible, cross or lighted candle nearby (but not bread and wine – see 10 below).

## 9 Reservation of the consecrated elements

Reservation of the consecrated elements at home should also be regarded as exceptional. They must consist of the consecrated Bread alone, and be reasonably intended only for giving Holy Communion to people who are in danger of death. The elements must be stored as carefully and decently as they would be in church, separate from all other food.

## 10 'Communion at a distance' is not permitted

There has been a question whether 'Communion at a distance' or 'virtual Communion' is permissible – in other words that people watching a celebration online might have their own bread and wine ready, and consume them during the streamed worship, perhaps thinking of that as receiving Holy Communion. It has been suggested that there might be a kind of 'remote consecration' of bread and wine in those other people's houses. Clergy must not participate in, or encourage, this practice. Although it may be proposed with good intention, it causes confusion as to the nature of the sacrament.

The Church of England's note at <https://www.churchofengland.org/more/media-centre/coronavirus-covid-19-guidance-parishes/holy-week-and-easter-2020> states:

'Participants in a streamed service of Holy Communion should not be encouraged to place bread and wine before their screens. Joining together to share in the one bread and the one cup as those physically present to one another is integral to the service of Holy Communion; this is not possible under the current restrictions, and it is not helpful to suggest otherwise.'

Bread and wine in separate places, where people are not physically present to each other, must not be thought of as having been consecrated, or to be capable of being received as the Body and Blood of Christ. The following notes on Spiritual Communion may be helpful instead.

## 11 Spiritual Communion

The present restrictions are painful for clergy and for many people for whom receiving Holy Communion frequently is at the heart of their spiritual life. We should nevertheless remember that the unrestricted availability of frequent Holy Communion, to which we have become used, is a privilege not shared by many Christians – for example in places where few priests cover vast areas – or by those who have lived in times and places of persecution. So, as Cardinal Nichols said in a recent video on the subject, the current deprivation means that we may learn to love and cherish Holy Communion even more, and have a real hunger for it which will be satisfied when the restrictions are over.

Nevertheless there is a strand in the tradition of the Church of England (as also in other churches) of Spiritual Communion. There is a fuller note at <https://www.churchofengland.org/sites/default/files/2020-03/Guidance%20on%20Spiritual%20Communion%20and%20Coronavirus.pdf> which includes suitable prayers, and this note:

‘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 Saviour 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”.’

The *Common Worship* order for ministry to the sick includes this note:

‘Believers who cannot physically receive the sacrament are to be assured that they are partakers by faith of the body and blood of Christ and of the benefits he conveys to us by them.’

We recommend Spiritual Communion as a practice of prayer and devotion during this period.

## 12 *Agape*

Worship in the home may take the form of a love-feast or *agape*. The early Christians would gather for a meal: it may at times have included the celebration of Holy Communion, but over the years, the shared meal (often in the evening) became distinguished from the Eucharist (held in the morning). After falling out of use, the *agape* meal was revived, for example in the first years of Methodism. Sharing an *agape* meal may be particularly appropriate in Holy Week. It is not a celebration of Holy Communion or an imitation of the Jewish *seder*, and so it is inappropriate to present it in a way that invites confusion with either of those. There was never a set form for an *agape* meal, and so households should feel free to adapt to their own circumstances. A note on a suggested way to hold an *agape* meal is appended.

## 13 **Conclusion**

We encourage clergy to hold these principles together: *pastoral reality and care for our people; coherent theology; respectful treatment of the sacrament and the consecrated elements; our own spiritual needs.*

If you have any concerns or queries please do feel free to contact your bishop.

## **Agape celebration at home**

One simple symbol of our love for each other can be to share the preparation, setting the table, serving and clearing away – and to look out, throughout the meal, for what each other needs.

After the opening prayer, the other parts of the celebration may be spaced out though the meal. Their order may be changed.

### **Opening prayer**

A space of silence, with a simple improvised prayer thanking God for his love and his blessings. A candle may be lit, to remind us that Christ our Light is with us always and everywhere. We may have a favourite grace to use: or we can use this verse, taken from the Methodist *agape* tradition:

Be present at our table, Lord; Be here and everywhere adored;  
Thy creatures bless, and grant that we may feast in paradise with thee.

### **A Bible reading, for example**

|                      |                                    |
|----------------------|------------------------------------|
| 1 Corinthians 13     | The gift of love                   |
| 2 Corinthians 9.6-15 | Our generous sharing glorifies God |
| Philippians 2.5-11   | Christ was obedient even to death  |
| 1 John 4.7-12        | God is love                        |
| Mark 6.30-44         | Jesus feeds the five thousand      |
| John 6.25-35         | Jesus is the Bread of Life         |
| John 15.1-11         | Jesus is the true Vine             |

What does that Bible reading say to each of us round the table?

**As food is served**, we thank God for it, and pray for everyone who has grown, transported and sold it. We pray for people who do not have such good and plentiful food.

**Reflecting:** How have we seen signs of God's love and glory today or this week? What is on our hearts at this time? Whom and what should we pray for?

**On Maundy Thursday** it might be appropriate in our particular home setting to read the account of Jesus's arrest: part or all of Mark 14.32-50.

**On Good Friday**, the burial of Jesus: John 19.38-end.

### **Concluding prayer**

*The Lord's Prayer and this prayer may be said:*

Lord, you have brought us through this day to a time of reflection and rest. Calm us, and give us your peace to refresh us. Keep us close to Christ that we may be closer to one another because of his perfect love. In his name we pray. Amen.