

## A Pastoral Word about Virtual/Online Communion

Way back in the summer of 1983 I did my required summer of Clinical Pastoral Education in a hospital. There were 14 of us from various traditions there as chaplains. The main theological and ethical debate of that time was, “Is it appropriate to baptize babies after they have already died?” Proponents insisted it was the only compassionate and pastoral thing to do for the assurance of the already-devastated parents. Detractors begged the question of the bigger picture. How LONG after a death can we baptize that person? Can we baptize just babies after they die, or grown-ups, too? How about the ones who made it clear in their lifetimes they did not want to be baptized? And so on. We spent several weeks tossing this around my senior year in seminary as well in a pastoral theology case-study class called “Pastor as Theologian.” Most often in that class there were no easy and simple answers.

Fast forward now over 35 years, and the dilemma is now with the other Lutheran sacrament—Holy Communion. For 35 years I have staked my ministry on the preciousness and frequency of Communion. I turned down two calls because the congregation insisted that my children couldn’t commune there, and I turned down others for refusing even to consider weekly Eucharist moving forward. Each congregation I served eventually moved to weekly Eucharist. I consider myself as sacramental as Lutherans come.

ELCA Presiding Bishop Eaton and the ELCA’s official statement on [Worship in the Time of a Pandemic](#) clearly discourages the practice of online communion. Just last week, the [Lutheran World Federation issued a very well-written discouragement](#) for the whole Lutheran communion not to be hasty in jumping into online virtual communion without considering the ongoing implications. Thinking back to Pastor as Theologian class questions, how is this time of crisis so different from any other time and crisis in the history of Lutheranism and crises that some have changed their minds about the gathered assembly? More important than providing consecrated elements to soldiers in foxholes via short-wave radio? Than over the telephone for congregations without a pastor and three hours away from the next-nearest pastor during World War II? Furthermore, by ELCA policy, a minimum of six weeks without opportunity to receive the sacrament is the minimum time before consideration that we have a eucharistic emergency. This is, in no small part, because we know that as precious as communion is, it is **A** means of grace, not **THE** means of grace. We are, as of today in NC, only three weeks into any of our congregations having not gathered in person. I wrongly assumed we had at least six weeks to consider this before issuing a statement.

I not only choose to believe but truly discern that the above official ELCA policies are increasingly unpopular and somewhat ignored by congregations, clergy, and even a few bishops due to two admirable motivations: 1)the earnest desire among laypeople to receive the precious sacrament of the body and blood of Jesus, especially in such an anxious and unknown time. Again, I myself helped catechize into that perspective over a lifetime of ministry. 2)The genuine deep pastoral concern our clergy have for their parishioners and others and the chance to reach them like never before amid said anxiety, fear, etc. with the fullest possible tangible promise of the real presence of the crucified and risen Christ through the sacrament. [A great article on this side of the debate comes from St. Olaf College.](#)

And yet, I hear Dr. Krodel pressing me in Pastor as Theologian: Can (should) I then baptize someone online? Ordain someone? Marry a bride and groom online while they are in two separate countries? (A real question that came up last week.) And what about the recording of that online virtual communion service that is available in archived perpetuity? Can (should) anyone on the internet be able to Google virtual communion and play that years from now and consecrate their at-home bread and wine? Is a recording gathered community? Could

(should) I have friends over for dinner and just celebrate a little eucharist together via last week's recorded service? And when this crisis is past, once the toothpaste is out of the tube, will it ever go back in? Should it? And why should we ever go back to in-person church when it's so much more convenient to listen to it and consecrate our elements at our own convenience, on-demand fashion, in our pajamas?

Lastly, I should say that I want to be gentle with all congregations and pastors during this time, again assuming all are doing what they have deemed best in a situation like none of us has ever before seen. If virtual communion is celebrated, which I don't endorse but do understand and about which I have read many compelling arguments, I urge that it be done in real time, making sure word is included. Just as in the Small Catechism, Luther wrote that it's not the water that does such great things in baptism, but the word. So it is with the Eucharist, it's not the bread and wine, it's the word. Even better to include confession and forgiveness. And when we're through this wicked crisis and have time to ponder in retrospect, I pledge no ill will toward any decision a congregation or pastor has made in this time—only honest insights to you and my earnest listening ear in discerning together the why, what, and how of this practice as together we move into the future as a Word and Sacrament Church that God in Christ already holds. Interesting times, to say the least.

Bishop Tim Smith

March 30, 2020



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