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Why not an 'online Eucharist'?:
A Scottish-Episcopal perspective on presence

Michael Hull

The Revd Dr Michael Hull is Director of Studies of the Scottish Episcopal Institute (Edinburgh).

Abstract

The experience of Covid-19's lockdowns, especially living through a period without the Eucharist on Sunday lays behind this theological reflection from the perspective of a Scottish Episcopalian about so-called online Eucharists with remote consecrations. The question I set is simple: 'Can the elements of bread and wine be consecrated outwith the gathered community?' Simple too is my answer: 'No, they cannot.' The pandemic has tested the fault lines of God's presence in our worship, our presence in community and those presences in the Eucharist. I argue that God's presence with us was unchanged by lockdown. I also argue that although many of us began to use 'onsite', 'online' and a variety of related terms in unprecedented ways vis-à-vis liturgies, our presence to one another was changed during lockdown. When we could not gather as a community, even if we were able to communicate via the internet, we could neither celebrate the Eucharist nor consecrate the elements. Theological reflection will, I hope, hone our appreciation of the significance of our humanity, the Incarnation, and the Body and Blood of Christ in the sacramental economy.

God's presence to us

The Covid-19 pandemic and its lockdowns have resulted in innovative Christian worship heretofore unknown. Twenty-first-century technology grants almost instant audio-visual communication among us. In periods of isolation during lockdown – often without an end in sight such as we have

not seen in our lifetimes – we could not worship on Sundays as we had been accustomed to do. We came up with all sorts of substitutes with the marvellous means to hand of the internet and its auxiliaries. Blessed by God's created order, encouraged by the herculean efforts of God's people to work together in crises and enriched by human ingenuity, we worshipped and continue to worship online. Online worship and blended worship (some onsite, some online) are surely here to stay. The isolation of lockdown was not isolation from God but from one another. God was and is ever present to us, always with us.

The Old Testament witnesses to a universe supersaturated with God's presence. The universe continuously proclaims God's glory, handiwork and law (Psalm 19). The Noahic covenant assures us of God's presence to us all (Genesis 9:1–17). There are, furthermore, reports of God's distinctive presence to individuals like Joseph for whom rejection and suffering are part of God's plan (Genesis 39). In the dark days of lockdown, we found solace in the Psalms to the effect that God is near to all who call on him and that God hears our cries (145:18–19); that even if we wanted to hide from God's presence, there is nowhere to go (139; cf. John 6:68). The New Testament witnesses to God's presence among us in an unfathomable way. God becomes flesh and dwells among us in the Incarnation (John 1). Jesus's life and teaching evidence God's presence among us in a plethora of ways apropos to isolation. Jesus withdraws to the desert in solitude (Matthew 4:1–11; Mark 1:1–2; Luke 4:1–13). Jesus teaches the efficacy of private prayer (Matthew 6:6). Whilst Jesus prays alone for a ruler's daughter (Matthew 9:18–26; cf. Acts 9:40) and at Gethsemane (Matthew 26:36–44; Mark 14:32–41; Luke 22:39–46), such instances highlight community and common prayer as the ideal. When Jesus says, 'For where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them' (Matthew 18:20), his point is not to suggest his absence when a person is alone, but to underscore the communitarian nature of Christianity.

Our presence to one another

The importance of community is revealed in Genesis 2:18–24: it is not good for us to be alone. Solitude, never mind an enforced isolation, is not God's plan for us. Our lives, akin to the life of the Holy Trinity, are by

nature communitarian.[1] And though we may pray and worship alone – and the history of Christ's Church bears witness to ascetics, anchorites and others who voluntarily commit to protracted periods of solitude – corporate worship is the Christian ideal, from our first invocation of the name of the Lord in Genesis 4:26 to the final 'Amen' of Revelation 22:21.

Gathering is perforce required for corporate worship. For Jews, a *minyan* (Hebrew: number) of ten is the minimum for a 'community of Israel' and communal worship. Without that quorum, prayers are different (for example, there is no reading aloud from the Torah) and recited privately (in the first person), even if nine Jews are gathered in the same place.[2] The thought behind the *minyan* is that God calls the Hebrew people as a whole, and the whole is greater than the sum of individual Hebrews at one moment in time. Similarly, Scottish Episcopalians celebrate the Eucharist as communities. The Scottish Episcopal Church allows, in 'extreme necessity', for a community of two: a presider and a single communicant to celebrate the Eucharist. This may happen only when a person is unable to be present with others in a church due to illness, and it is meant to happen at the sickbed. The SEC makes no allowance for a Eucharist with a presider alone.[3]

It comes as no surprise that a liturgy to commemorate Jesus's Last Supper is by its very nature a communal event in like manner to the original event (Matthew 26:17–30; Mark 14:12–16; Luke 22:7–39; John 13:1–17:26). The primitive Church's Eucharists, while we know all too little of them, were communal. Indeed, in the earliest extant directives concerning eucharistic celebration, St Paul chides the Corinthians for their

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[1] See, for example, the works of John D. Zizioulas, *Being as Communion: Studies in Personhood and the Church* (London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 2004); and *Communion and Otherness: Further Studies in Personhood and the Church* (London: T&T Clark, 2006).

[2] However, Jewish opinion is divided about the extent to which technology may bring them together. See, for example, Ruth Langer, "Jewish Liturgy During the Early Stages of the COVID-19 Pandemic: Vignettes from Boston Suburbs", *Contemporary Jewry* 41, no. 1 (March 2021): 23–37, https://doi.org/10.1007/s12397-021-09363-5.

[3] See the Scottish Book of Common Prayer (1929), "The Communion of the Sick", at http://justus.anglican.org/resources/bcp/Scotland/Scot_Scottish_Communion.htm; and "Pastoral Offices for Priests", https://www.scotland.anglican.org/wp-content/uploads/FINAL-indexed-Pastoral-Offices-for-Priests-Final.pdf.

lack of unity: the community is, ideally, unified and without division (1 Corinthians 11:17–22; cf. 5:1–8 regarding corporate action). It is outwith the scope of this essay to address the diversity of eucharistic celebrations from those early days until the present,[4] other than to say that a private celebration, that is a priest alone, is peculiar to Roman Catholicism today.[5] Equally, it is outwith the scope here to explain how the Eucharist has become the SEC's principal Sunday liturgy. Not only do almost all 'liturgical' and some 'non-liturgical' churches these days usually celebrate a Sunday Eucharist of one stripe or another, but the SEC also has a liturgy of 'Communion from the Reserved Sacrament' for 'other major feasts', not just Sundays.[6] Prior to the pandemic, with the rarest exception, every SEC charge had either a Eucharist or a 'Reserved Sacrament' liturgy every Sunday. Gathering is particularly poignant for Scottish Episcopalians who suffered the brutal Penal Laws. Episcopal priests were forbidden to minister to more than nine (in 1719) and then four persons (1746) at a time.[7] Though the Penal Laws were relaxed in 1792, at least one SEC 'cottage church' still stands and is in use as a testimony to the significance of place.

When the lockdowns began in March 2020, Scottish Episcopalians, along with the whole human race, were caught unawares. In addition to all the strains of quarantine and sequestration, we asked ourselves: what were we to do on Sundays when we could not gather, and, therefore, could not celebrate the Eucharist? In addition to the Daily Offices already online, the Province and a number of charges offered a superfluity of online liturgies, but the SEC did not offer so-called 'online Eucharists' with 'remote consecrations'. The SEC recommended, instead, a 'spiritual communion', especially with live-streamed Eucharists, for those seeking the benefits of

[4] On this, see Paul Bradshaw and Maxwell E. Johnson, *The Eucharistic Liturgies: Their Evolution and Interpretation*, Alcuin Club Collections 87 (London: SPCK, 2012).

[5] See https://www.ewtn.com/catholicism/library/when-celebrating-mass-alone-4346.

[6] See https://www.scotland.anglican.org/who-we-are/publications/liturgies/communion-from-the-reserved-sacrament-1997/. See also the SEC's *Code of Canons*, 17 and 22:6, at https://www.scotland.anglican.org/wp-content/uploads/Code-of-Canons-2020.pdf.

[7] For Scottish Episcopal Church history in the eighteenth century, see https://www.episcopalhistory.org/18th-century.

the Eucharist when they could not participate in a Eucharist and receive the consecrated elements.[8] By my lights, the raison d'être is that an online Eucharist with a putative remote consecration is a simulation of the Sacrament, inimical to Holy Scripture, right reason, Christian doctrine and church history. Such simulation implies, oddly and at the same time, a fixation on consecrated elements and a deification of high-tech paraphernalia to simulate the presence of those who, by the very use of said kit, are not present to one another.

The dominical sacraments: Baptism

The Scottish Episcopal sacramental economy is based on the two sacraments ordained by Christ (Baptism and the Eucharist). We use the word 'sacrament' to mean an outward and visible sign that is the means whereby an inward and spiritual grace is given. In Baptism, it is water and the trinitarian formula to effect death to sin and new birth to righteousness. In the Eucharist, it is bread and wine and the consecratory prayer to effect the refreshing of our souls by the Body and Blood of Christ. We are on solid ground to make comparisons between the dominical sacraments in two ways: first, the communitarian context of the visible signs; second, the sacraments' efficacy.

In the Baptism, the water and the trinitarian formula are vital. The context is a community of at least two persons. The administration of water and formula by one person to another effects righteousness by God's grace in the baptised. Jesus's words in John 3:5 describe the weight of the matter. Nevertheless, the primitive Church is wont to speak of a 'baptism of desire' (and a 'baptism of blood') that does not involve water or formula.

[8] See the "College of Bishops' reflection on worship during lockdown" at https://www.scotland.anglican.org/coronavirus-updates/college-of-bishops-reflection-on-worship-during-lockdown/. However, Scottish Episcopalians' opinions vary. For instance, see Eleanor Charman, Kelvin Holdsworth, Alasdair Coles, and Stephen Mark Holmes, "Real Presence? Theological Reflections on Online Eucharists", *Scottish Episcopal Institute Journal* 5, no. 4 (2021): 67–103, the papers of a conference convened via Zoom by the Scottish Episcopal Institute on Saturday 25 September 2021. Note also "Church, Ministry and Coronavirus", a special issue of the *Scottish Episcopal Institute Journal* (4, no. 2, 2020), curated by Nicholas Taylor, at https://www.scotland.anglican.org/wp-content/uploads/2020-42-SEI-Journal-Summer.pdf.

Although it may be God's will that all be baptised, God is not bound to withhold the effects of baptism from the non-baptised. It is unthinkable to have a baptism without water and formula, but it is not unthinkable for God to grant righteousness by his grace to a person in a way other than the Sacrament of Baptism. Whatever a baptism of desire (or of blood) is and whatever its efficacy, it is not the Sacrament of Baptism. In other words, to use classic theological terms, there is a difference between something happening in desire (*in voto*) and in reality (*in re*).

St Ambrose of Milan preached at the funeral of Valentinian II, a catechumen who died before Ambrose could baptise him. Ambrose said, 'Has he not, then, the grace which he desired; has he not the grace which he requested? And because he asked, he received, and therefore it is said: "By whatsoever death the just man shall be overtaken, his soul shall be at rest" [Wisdom 4:7)]'.[9] St Thomas Aquinas confirms Ambrose's insight:

> [T]he sacrament of baptism may be wanting to anyone in reality but not in desire: for instance, when a man wishes to be baptized, but by some ill-chance he is forestalled by death before receiving Baptism. And such a man can obtain salvation without being actually baptized, on account of his desire for Baptism, which desire is the outcome of "faith that worketh by charity," whereby God, Whose power is not tied to visible sacraments, sanctifies man inwardly. Hence Ambrose says of Valentinian, who died while yet a catechumen: "I lost him whom I was to regenerate: but he did not lose the grace he prayed for."[10]

Aquinas is clear that a baptism of desire is not the Sacrament of Baptism, though the effect of Baptism is granted by God's grace,[11] because the outward and visible signs are lacking *in re*.

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[9] "On the Death of Valentinian", trans. Roy J. Deferrari, in *Funeral Orations by Saint Gregory Nazianzen and Saint Ambrose* (Fathers of the Church 22: Washington, D.C.: Catholic University of America Press, 1953), 265–99 (288).

[10] *Summa Theologiae* III, q. 68, art. 2, at https://www.ccel.org/a/aquinas/summa/home.html.

[11] *Summa Theologiae* III, q. 66, art. 11.

The dominical sacraments: Holy Communion

Holy Communion or the Eucharist is much the same as Baptism. There is a difference between something happening in desire (*in voto*) and in reality (*in re*). The context for a Eucharist is a community: as with Baptism at least two persons are required. The eucharistic prayer is offered by the community (presider and the faithful) to consecrate the bread and wine so that the community may be spiritually fed with physical bread and wine. Here I stake no claim about what the consecration of the elements entails,[12] nor about the presidency,[13] but about the absurdity of a Holy Communion without gathering in community as, say, for a common meal. Despite the waxing and waning of the manner and means of eucharistic celebration for two thousand years, we ought not to lose sight of Jesus's Passover meal with his disciples as the prototype. We ought, rather, to focus on the reality, the authenticity, of the event: bread that is broken, wine that is shared, feet that are washed, words that are spoken together, etc. In like manner, the Scottish Liturgy engages all the senses: bread and wine, manual acts of touching bread and every vessel, invocations and responses. Nothing is antiseptic. 'Smells and bells' signal an earthy, embodied liturgy. Whilst the liturgy does not repeat, imitate or re-enact the Last Supper, for example there is washing of feet but once a year, its ritualised presentation is the memorial Christ has commanded us to make. It is an experience of God's presence, in Word and Sacrament (Holy Communion), like no other. We participate actively, insofar as we are able, as Jesus's disciples first did. Such active participation demands the whole of our corporeal selves gathered around a very real table, in a very real place and in 'real time', as we are wont to say today.

To note a spiritual presence is to note a real presence in a thing like bread or wine. Accordingly, though some may use the word 'gather' loosely to mean connected or in communication or linked, and speak of us being together 'in spirit' or 'spiritually', that is different. An 'online gathering' by its adjective indicates that we are not in fact gathered, that

[12] For more on the Eucharist, see Henry R. McAdoo and Kenneth W. Stevenson, *The Mystery of the Eucharist in the Anglican Tradition: What Happens at Holy Communion?* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 1995).

[13] For more on presidency, see Nicholas Taylor, *Lay Presidency at the Eucharist? An Anglican Approach* (London: Mowbray, 2009).

we are not in the same place, and that the spatial gap is not eradicated. We are using technology to bridge a physical divide. Human beings cannot gather 'spiritually'; the world, the flesh, is too much with us. This is not, nor can it be, 'virtual', as its antonym is 'actual', and 'virtual' is used, at least in some quarters, to mean unreal as opposed to real. Our tremendous technological advances may have outpaced our phrasing thereof, making theological reflection challenging. Babel has nothing on the contemporary cant about things technical and the blasé way in which techy terms are applied to our worship and liturgies. It is preferable, thus, in order to avoid confusion, to use 'online', whereby we communicate over the internet, and 'onsite' whereby we are in the same place. I do not want to open the Pandora's box of 'real' as opposed to 'unreal' presences of Christ in the consecrated elements, nonetheless there are similarities to be taken into account, for example the difference between Christ being spiritually present or not in the physical elements.

We must take care to avoid sophistry and semantics. The most advanced equipment may link me audio-visually, whilst in my kitchen in Edinburgh to my mother's kitchen in New York, but we are not in the same place, eating the same food, or sharing a common meal. I FaceTime with her constantly through the gear that allows us to communicate so effectively and efficiently, but the medium is not substantially different from smoke signals, telegraphs, telephones, radios and so forth in spanning distances. Digital may be an advance from analogue, but our own handcrafted technology should not delude us into imagining ourselves as some sort of (solely) spiritual or angelic beings who may transcend our physical, corporeal selves. It is just the opposite: the laws of nature bind technology and those who manage to employ them well. Human beings are enfleshed in this life and the next. I make no argument about glorified, resurrected bodies, for I have no experience of them other than what is reported in Holy Scripture (for example, Luke 24; John 20; 1 Corinthians 15). However, to speak of ourselves as being spiritually present in one place and physically present in another is nonsense. We can, to be sure, pray with one another, say, with Zoom, but it is absurd to suggest that human-made equipment can make me present somewhere else, like in a church. There is no such place as a 'Zoom room'; it is just the appellation we give to a microelectronic connection of a particular stripe. Boswell's *Life of Johnson* comes to mind. Johnson's prescient feat is his response to

George Berkeley's denial of matter. Johnson strikes his foot against a large stone, saying, 'I refute it *thus*.'

If isolation keeps us from celebrating the Eucharist in reality (*in re*), though, it does not prevent us from doing so in desire (*in voto*). The pandemic's lockdowns are hardly the first time Christians have been unable to gather to celebrate the Eucharist in the last two thousand years. A theology of 'spiritual communion' (or 'communion of desire') dates back to at least the fifth century. St Augustine of Hippo, commenting on John 6:49 regarding the gift of manna to the Hebrews in Exodus, considers the distinctions between the Eucharist and its spiritual effects.[14] St Thomas Aquinas offers insight akin to that of Baptism. He claims that we may 'eat spiritually, and not sacramentally […]. Nevertheless, sacramental eating is not without avail, because the actual receiving of the sacrament produces more fully the effect of the sacrament than does the desire […]'.[15] This works its way through the centuries to the rubric in the Scottish Book of Common Prayer (1929):

> But if a man, either by reason of extremity of sickness, or for want of warning in due time to the Priest, or by any other just impediment, do not receive the Sacrament of Christ's Body and Blood: the Priest shall instruct him that if he do truly repent him of his sins, and stedfastly [*sic*] believe that Jesus Christ hath suffered death upon the cross for him, and shed his Blood for his redemption, earnestly remembering the benefits he hath thereby, and giving him hearty thanks therefor; he doth eat and drink the Body and Bread of our Saviour Christ profitably to his soul's health, although he do not receive the Sacrament with his mouth.

In various and sundry ways, it is found in SEC rites and orders since. Spiritual communion is not an innovation but a continuance of an ancient practice that leads the SEC to recommend it to those who are unable to

[14] See *Tractates on the Gospel of John* 26, nos. 11 and 15. I leave aside Augustine's understanding of worthy and unworthy reception; for more see, his *Sermons* 71, c. 11, n. 17. For more (un)worthy reception, see Peter Lombard, *Sentences* IV, dist. 8–9; see also, St Gregory the Great, *Dialogues* 4, 59.

[15] *Summa Theologiae* III, q. 80, art. 1. Cf. *Commentary on the Gospel of John* VI, lec. 6, no. 954.

participate in a celebration of the Eucharist and to abjure remote consecrations.[16]

Still, there are Anglicans offering online Eucharists with putative remote consecrations of bread and wine: having folk put elements alongside their devices to be consecrated over the internet.[17] The difficulty here is that, even if there were a congregation of thousands, with priest, choir, sermon, the whole shebang, those online are not onsite. They may be pious spectators utilising sophisticated means to see and hear what is happening, but they are really elsewhere. A gathered congregation (presider and thousands) onsite does not possess the (magical?) power to consecrate far and away over the internet, even in a situation of blended worship. It is not a matter of intention on either side of the internet connection. It simply cannot be done any more than the same congregation could baptise a baby on another continent.

The consecration, like the bread and wine itself and their reception, is grounded in the physicality willed by God for human beings and in the Incarnation. The SEC holds that consecrated bread and wine themselves are changed, in contrast to receptionism (held by some Anglicans). It is a most tactile experience, and it takes the moniker 'realism'. In an onsite community of prayer, the congregation presents the elements, the presider touches the elements in a variety of ways. A clear difference between the realism and receptionism is evident as the consecrated bread is presented to the communicant. In the Scottish Liturgy (1637): 'The body of our Lord Jesus Christ, which was given for thee, preserve thy body and soul unto everlasting life'. The English Book of Common Prayer (1662) adds the codicil, 'Take and eat this in remembrance that Christ died for thee, and feed on him in thy heart by faith, with thanksgiving', which has never been part of the Scottish liturgies.[18] The Scottish Liturgy (1982) says more succinctly, 'The Body of Christ given for you'.

Developments of that realism are to be seen in the Scottish Book of Common Prayer (1929). "The Communion of the Sick" says, 'Any of the consecrated Elements that remain shall be reverently consumed, or else

[16] See the "College of Bishops' reflection on worship during lockdown".

[17] For a defence thereof, see Richard A. Burridge, *Holy Communion in Contagious Times: Celebrating the Eucharist in the Everyday and Online Worlds* (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2022).

[18] Older Scottish liturgies may be found at http://justus.anglican.org/resources/bcp/Scotland.htm.

taken back to the church', whereas the earlier Prayer Book (1637) presumed the elements would all be consumed at the service itself. Reservation in churches was becoming normative. The real presence in the elements is not dependent on the intention of the recipient(s). And, clearly, having a liturgy of "Communion from the Reserved Sacrament" to bring the Body and Blood of Christ to those who would not have it otherwise, bespeaks a real presence in the consecrated elements distinct and apart from reception or intention per se. Other than in Holy Scripture itself, such realism, as opposed to receptionism, is found in the primitive Church in the writings of no less a figure than St Ignatius of Antioch. Ignatius speaks of the elements as 'the flesh of our Saviour', 'flesh of Jesus Christ' and 'medicine of immortality' in his letters.[19]

The sacramental economy, presence and limits

The fruits of the Paschal Mystery and the concomitant sacramental economy are unintelligible without God's presence to us and our presence to each other. God is always with us. Jesus is Emmanuel (Matthew 1:22–23). Human beings always have bodies, as does Jesus once taking human nature, and those bodies are governed by God's laws of nature upon which the sacramental economy is constructed. We do not baptise spirits, but bodies. We do not feed souls with the Eucharist, but human beings. The ongoing advances in technology offer new ways of communicating and manipulating creation, but they do not offer us new ways of being human notwithstanding their enhancing the human experience. There is a risk today that we creatures may mistake our role in God's order. The risk is heightened if we see our bodies as a hindrance rather than a gift, as something to be side-lined or overcome in some fashion for us to be truly ourselves, to revert to a platonic disdain for the flesh. This risk is heightened if we mistake an online connection (with one or more persons) for an onsite gathered congregation.

[19] *Letter to the Smyrnaeans* 7:1; *Letter to the Romans* 7:3; and *Letter to the Ephesians* 20:2, respectively. There is debate about the precise nature of Ignatius's understanding. Yet, as Frederick C. Klawiter observes, 'Bread and wine are not "merely" symbols [even if] a solid historical basis for the belief of sacramental realism cannot be constructed from the letters of St. Ignatius of Antioch.' ("The Eucharist and Sacramental Realism in the Thought of St. Ignatius of Antioch", *Studia Liturgica* 37, no. 2 (2007): 163, https://doi.org/10.1177/003932070703700201).

The pandemic and its lockdowns have tested the fault lines of our appreciation of real presences. We are reminded that God's presence to us is different from our presence to each other in terms of our corporeal nature. Woolly thinking and nomenclature that repudiate real place and real time need, in theological reflection, a renewed appreciation of gathering together, especially to that most crucial of gatherings in the celebration of the Eucharist. There, with all of our five senses engaged, we taste and see that the Lord is good and take refuge in him (Psalm 34:8). Spiritual communion provided the refreshment of the Body and Blood of Christ. God never left us orphans and never took the Holy Spirit from us (John 14:18). It is for that reason that we profited greatly from online worship, particularly in the Daily Offices.[20] The SEC presented livestreamed and recorded Eucharists for our edification in the trying circumstances of lockdown; it accepted limits and avoided remote consecrations in what I take to be an act of right reason and humility and, thereby, maintained a realism in the elements and their consecration proper to the SEC's understanding of the Christian sacramental economy. Thanks be to God, the lockdowns have passed. Thanks be to God, our theological reflection is ongoing. The fault lines may have been tested, but God's presence to us is now, I hope, more closely felt as is the need for us to gather in order to see Jesus and one another in the breaking of the bread (Luke 24:13–32).

[20] See C. Andrew Doyle, "A Reflection on the Eucharist during the time of Coronavirus", at https://www.academia.edu/43075846/On_the_Eucharist_In_A_Time_of_Covid_19.