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The Rostered Leaders
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Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ:

Let me express again how honored I was that your bishop (and my booking agent, Khader) invited me to share some of my thoughts with you on celebrating the Lord's Supper in such times. I was heartened by your honest questions and your own struggles to remain faithful to Christ and his promises at this juncture in our church's history.

Khader sent me a complete list of your questions, so I went through and culled out the ones I had not answered (or had not fully answered). I would like to take the time now to address them. You may also communicate directly with me via e-mail (see above). Let me reiterate that the purpose of my remarks was and is not to condemn anyone but rather to cause more reflection by all of us on this extremely difficult issue. May God's Holy Spirit continue to grant us wisdom.

- **Theologically, are we suggesting that God's power in Jesus can reach into our world without bounds, except that Jesus cannot figure out the internet?**

First, we always need to watch how we ask questions. Just as you heard me apologize for misusing the comment about a snack, so this questioner could probably have found a less tendentious way to ask this question. The fact is that although the Triune God has all power, God decided to reach into our world in weakness: choosing the mixed multitude that came out of Egypt; a shepherd for Israel's king; a dresser of sycamores as a prophet; and, most importantly, coming in the flesh to the cross. The Lord's Supper mirrors precisely the weakness of the God's incarnation—coming in bread and wine, the last place we would reasonably look. In this sense, it is not about Jesus “figuring out” the internet but coming to us not in kingdom, power, and glory, but in dust. Then, too, Jesus knows when and how to show up. I never said that Christ is absent from a meal celebrated virtually; I said I worried that such a practice obscured both the communal side to the Supper and our own proclamation of the real (not virtual) presence of Christ there.

- **I don't think it is simply solipsism, but rather a hermeneutic of suspicion toward power structures.**

The questioner here is raising an important issue that must always be a part of our conversation about practices, namely, what is the context to which we are speaking. My attempt to describe this was to call it “a quintessentially solipsistic society.” That does not eliminate other important aspects of our context, which may well include a hermeneutic of suspicion, to which I alluded in my comments about trusting people over 30. I am more worried about the danger of turning the Lord's Supper into personal piety, another bit of “me and Jesus” theology. Our Lutheran Pietist forebears certainly ran this risk. The reason some of our folk may regard virtual communion as a good thing is precisely because our own practices and instruction about the Supper have emphasized an overly personalistic understanding of the meal. But live-streaming is hardly community building *per se*; it may presuppose community and, in meeting a fellow live-streamer in the street may secondarily enhance community as they discuss



what they experienced. Nevertheless, even in the preaching and hymn-singing and praying there is something essential missing. And that lack plays into our society's privatization of religious experience.

- **Online communion symbolizes a continued advance of digitalization and the alienation of the bodily nature of Christ's body in communion, of both the elements and of the community. To me it is docetic and undermines the solidarity of the church community. When Christ shows up, shouldn't our practice prevent any undermining of this tangible, bodily presence?**

I include this here because it raises a very important question, not directly dealt with in my talk. "Tangible, bodily presence" really is something and is crucial for a Lutheran celebration of Christ's presence in the Supper. It is perhaps a good warning to all of us who have been forced into live-streaming, etc., because of the pandemic (not just to those who are trying to find ways to celebrate the Lord's Supper). To be sure, our practice cannot prevent anything—otherwise, Peter would not have denied Christ; Judas would not have betrayed him; and the other ten would not have fled. The human ability to goof things—even good things—up is astounding. But "docetism" (the belief that Christ only appeared to be human but wasn't *really* human) is a real problem in our churches today. The incarnation is still a scandal. The Word became flesh. Philip Melancthon once said that if the meal were merely a spiritual thing, then Jesus would have said, "Take, eat, this is my Spirit given for you." The thing that has most worried me about my leading worship for this small church in Jersey is that I can't see anyone (except for the four or five who help lead worship). I still remember the first time (as an intern in 1976) when I saw a parishioner yawn during my sermon. There is something real, fleshly about the encounter between actual mouths and actual ears (or gaping mouths) via actual sound waves. As much as I might hope that my words today will carry the gospel message via the airwaves, there is a level of uncertainty that I have never before experienced. This doesn't mean that we stopped worshipping; but it does mean that we need to take this problem seriously.

- **If ... having access to the internet is discriminatory, then limiting access to the physical worship space is also discriminatory. It is different in Florida, and we can't be bringing the eucharist to people... yet. After 6 months.**

We always need to be careful when calling out discrimination. My point was simply the observation that some people in the congregation I serve and many in the community (Philadelphia, the poorest of the largest ten cities in the country) where my son works as social worker with those threatened with homelessness do not have access to the internet and, hence, to our live-streaming—with or without Holy Communion. But the practice of limiting access to the worship space is not being done by public health officials to persecute Christians (despite the, frankly, evil things some arch-conservatives are saying) but to save lives. In this situation, as I tried to say with my first practical reflection, the point is not to defy government but to live by the rule, "Love your neighbor as yourself" and "Do unto others, etc." This claim of discrimination is, to paraphrase Justice Oliver Wendell Holmes, another example of yelling fire in a crowded auditorium or (my favorite example) driving the wrong way down a freeway. We are in the midst of a long, Lenten fast (even true of those who practice virtual communion, whether they realize it or not), and it is for the sake of our neighbors. Unlike almost any other nation on earth, ours has citizens who imagine that their own personal freedoms may never be restricted for the sake of the health and safety of others. The results have been disastrous.



- **During this pandemic, I wonder if our practice should be: "if it excludes some, it excludes all." I'm still conflicted about that, but feel closer to that statement. So besides the virtual service, Holy Communion is that in the ultimate. Comment please**

I want to comment not so much on this person's position as on how it well represents a good theologian's attitude toward issues like this. When Pastor Fry talked about RBG [reverent best guess], his emphasis (and mine) has to be on the "guess"—not that we are wishy-washy but rather than we are always open to learning more. Notice how the question says: "I wonder" and "I'm still conflicted," and how it employs the subjunctive ("should"). This is where our conversation needs to take place. Our world has become so divided that we almost assume that differences in opinion must needs lead to warfare—*logomachia* (wars with words).

- **Can one acknowledge the priesthood of all believers gives credence to virtual communion?**

I tried to answer this question but quickly got into an advertisement for my own book. It is in fact a deeply conflicted part of Luther's theology currently, even though I think that our problem lies not with Luther but with later Lutheran use of the phrase, starting with Philip Jakob Spener (the founder of German pietism in 1675), who uses the common priesthood as a synonym for the laity (and its [independent!] authority). Luther meant the opposite: the "priesthood of all believers" was a synonym for the "body of Christ," and was his way of including *all* believers, lay and ordained. This priesthood is given in baptism—the sacrament that links us to Christ's priesthood, which consisted of proclaiming the gospel in the context of one's own calling and suffering for the neighbor. He never imagined that it meant: "Anyone can do what the pastor does" or "The pastor is just a hired worker" or some of the other distortions that I heard in my early ministry in Minnesota and Wisconsin. In fact, every time Luther described the common priesthood we share through baptism in Christ, he always added that this was different from the offices in the church (deacon, priest, bishop, teacher). What first tipped me off to our distortion of this term was discovering that the concept is nowhere in the *Book of Concord* (once a misleading footnote in the Tappert edition to article five of the Augsburg Confession is taken out). But there is something else. In an emergency, Luther argued, anyone (*even*, he argued [patronizingly] women or children) could announce the forgiveness of sins or baptize. But, this was not by virtue of the priesthood of all believers but because the emergency situation thrusts a person into a position of having to act in the absence of a priest in that office. Thus, a midwife baptizing is not doing it out of her baptismal priesthood but in the emergency she is acting in the office of priest. Are we now in such an emergency situation? I don't think so, but if, for example, it became absolutely impossible to meet again together, then in that emergency, we would have to break the rules for the sake of the gospel. May that kind of emergency never come upon us!

- **Body/brain science reveals the fundamental connectivity for homo sapiens in physical proximity and touch.**

I do not know whether this is true, although I do remember reading back when working on my B.A. in sociology at the U. of Michigan (Go Blue!) that they had discovered that infants in orphanages that were not held developed severe physical problems. I do not think any of us want virtual worship to go on forever. I certainly miss people. How unmarried pastors or deacons who live alone are managing is a real worry to me.



- **I think calling the sacrament, if done virtually, a “snack” is doing a disservice to the integrity of the lay people regarding Holy Communion. When Luther describes the Sacrament of the Altar in the Small Catechism he says “It is the true body and blood of our Lord Jesus Christ under the bread and wine instituted by Christ himself for us Christians...” It sounds like you are saying this is not valid unless we are gathered physically. It seems selective to say we can gather for worship virtually and the sharing of the Word, praise, hymns, prayers are all valid, except for Holy Communion which can only be validated in person. Please expound.**
- I apologized to someone else for this language. What I was trying to point out by my language is one of the dangers, which some practices seem to underscore. I think those of you who are providing virtual communion need to worry about these things and make sure, over and over again, that things do not devolve to this kind of thing. The rest of the citation from the Catechism (my translation) is “for us Christians to eat and to drink.” Luther was of course talking about a physical eating and drinking and was assuming an assembly of people together. What is interesting about the argument (in logic, what is used here is an enthymeme), is to imagine that the rest of virtual worship is *ipso facto* real worship. As I said above, I’m not so sure. Certainly preaching seems different; and I have no idea about the prayers. We are so used to hearing music on Memorex (you have to be old to get my allusion) that we sometimes don’t realize that there is a difference between live and virtual. (I am convinced that I am slowly losing hearing in my one ear because of a *live* Janis Joplin concert in 1969, but that’s another story.) When my mother lay dying in hospice, my sister and I sat at her bedside, and we played one of her favorite collections of piano renditions of hymns. Within a few minutes, we looked at each other and realized that it wasn’t enough to have the virtual music, so we searched the internet for the words and ended up singing along. It’s also a very different thing to sing by yourself along with some virtual source and to sing with the whole congregation. The other thing to say is the “validity” is not the issue here. Christ knows when and how to show up with the bread and wine for forgiveness and has often overlooked our stupidity regarding forms of worship. Even the awful masses for the dead performed in Luther’s day were masses—except that Christ would show up and exclaim: “Where is everybody?”
- **Can I use Oreos for communion?**

No. I lived through the 60s, don’t forget, when we did all kinds of silly things. One worship I participated in started with everyone in a fetal position on the floor; the opening words were, “Children of Neon, your god is dead.” This is why Gordon Lathrop’s advice is so helpful: “Staff of Life and Festal drink.” Maybe Scotch in Scotland, but here it is still wine. And Oreos are not the staff of life by any stretch of the imagination—in fact, my doctor warned me that (given the number I was eating) they were more likely the staff of death.

- **When I went to seminary, Eucharistic lay ministers would not be allowed, taking the elements to homes was not allowed; now it is. What is the reason that it is allowed now?**

Things have changed. As I said to the bishop after our session ended, I wish I had remembered to mention that 50 years ago or so, this discussion would not have happened—and not only because there was no live-streaming. In those days, most Lutheran congregations celebrated the Lord’s Supper once a month; some even still four times a year. Waiting six months or more may have seemed somewhat unfortunate but little more. In point of fact our practices of regular communion have finally gotten back to the practice in Luther’s Wittenberg (every Sunday), a practice shared with most all Lutheran churches in Germany and Scandinavia in the sixteenth century. On the



question of bringing the Supper to the sick, this was in fact something that Luther and the early Lutherans did. For example, when Luther thought he was dying in 1527 or 1528, he asked Bugenhagen to bring him the sacrament. Or, in a Table Talk from the 1530s, he mentioned that one of the pastors at table, Konrad Cordatus, would bring the consecrated elements across the street to a sick person (even though Luther didn't). The idea of moving the elements around was a real problem among the early Lutherans because of the practice of processing with the sacrament on Corpus Christi day among the Roman Catholics. This became less and less the case, although Lutheran pastors always gave private communion to sick or dying people or prisoners—unlike the Reformed, who forbade it. (Jesus didn't show up anyway, so why bother.) Only with the liturgical renewal among western Christians in the 20th century did Lutherans discover reasons to reinstitute such practices. And I am glad they did! I only would say that it is best if the elements are taken on the same day if at all possible, because the point is to include all people in the communal gathering.

So here at least are a few random thoughts from an old man written to help foster good, helpful, edifying Christian conversation among us all. May God help us all in these perilous times!

In Christ,

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