



**North/West Lower Michigan Synod**  
**Evangelical Lutheran Church in America**  
God's work. Our hands.

Holy Communion in a Time of Crisis  
Bishop Craig Alan Satterlee, Ph.D.

Holy Week 2020

Beloved in Christ,  
Peace be with you!

In my March 12 letter about the COVID-19 virus, I wrote, “I do not encourage or support video Eucharist. Though we do not know how long the present situation will last, I am certain it will not last forever. We will gather in worship as a community again. We will be fed at God’s table again. And we trust that nothing can separate us from the love of Christ. Let this time be a Lenten fast from the sacrament, so that our Easter joy may be even greater when we are welcomed again to taste and see that the Lord is good.” I subsequently said that I would fast from the Lord’s Supper and feast on Christ truly present in the Word until we could gather together again, unless I come near death. This continues to be my practice and best wisdom. As Holy Week and Easter approaches, I am asked to share the thinking that brought me to this decision and to offer additional guidance.

**Pastoral Decision-Making**

Professor Timothy J. Wengert observes that, during this pandemic, “while we can stream our worship service on-line, the Lord’s Supper poses a particular problem for Lutherans, who in the last fifty years have gone from quarterly to monthly to weekly communion in our congregations...”<sup>1</sup> Wengert asserts that, in addressing this problem, outside of following the guidance of medical professionals, there is no one “right answer.” He wisely counsels us to guard against projecting our anxiety upon others who may find other solutions to this problem. Dr. Wengert reminds us that the frequency of the Lord’s Supper is not fixed in the New Testament and is not part of the Ten Commandments, so we must not assume that what we do is the only right way. For Wengert, the problem of whether and how to celebrate Holy Communion in this time of pandemic is *adiaphora*, “a word that does *not* mean that it is not important but rather means that we cannot clearly determine the right or wrong practice.”<sup>2</sup> Therefore, we should not judge one another.

As a seminary professor, I taught students to think of a three-legged stool when making difficult pastoral decisions. One leg represents Scripture; another leg represents the Church’s history and theology; the third leg represents pastoral considerations and concerns. The goal is to keep the length of all three legs even, so the stool—the church, the congregation, and your ministry—does not tip over. My friend, Bishop Kurt Kussrau, said it much more profoundly when he used the words of Jesus to inspire his Synod: “With deeper wisdom and utter simplicity, our Lord Jesus put it this way: ‘But strive first for the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things shall be yours as well’” (Matthew 6:33).

<sup>1</sup> Timothy J. Wengert, “Holy Communion under Quarantine.”

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*

In times of crisis, the temptation, even inclination, is to lengthen the pastoral leg of the stool to demonstrate care and provide comfort and stability. Unfortunately, lengthening the stool's pastoral leg often results in unanticipated consequences. The example I used with seminarians, who had spent time as chaplains in the hospital, was a newborn baby dies and the parents ask the chaplain to baptize the dead baby. Responding pastorally, the chaplain baptizes the dead baby and unintentionally reinforces a theology that professes a god who turns god's back on babies who die unbaptized. The pastoral leg got a bit too long. Thankfully, we now have wonderful pastoral resources for this difficult and painful situation.<sup>3</sup>

More than a container of our theology, what the church does, particularly in worship, makes theology. *Lex orandi, lex credendi*, I was taught, "the law of what is prayed [is] the law of what is believed." Worship is "primary theology" or *theologia prima* -- an experience of God rather than the church's reflection on its experience of God. This is distinct from the *theologia secunda* or "secondary theology," which constitutes formal or systematic theological reflection.<sup>4</sup>

In this crisis of global pandemic, what we pray, how we worship, the manner in which we do or do not celebrate the Lord's Supper, will shape what we believe for generations to come. So, I am as concerned with how we decide as I am with what we decide. Ideally, my preference would have been for the church to decide together--the apostles "constantly devoting themselves to prayer, together with certain women, including Mary the mother of Jesus, as well as his brothers" (Acts 1:14). Yet, I know that both Peter and Paul acted unilaterally when they were convinced the Holy Spirit was leading them to do so.<sup>5</sup>

I am *not* so convinced. In the creeds, we confess that we believe in the holy catholic Church. I believe that, as a particular responsibility of the Office of Bishop, God has called me to attend to the unity of the Church. I am mindful that we are part of the ELCA and the Lutheran World Federation, so I look to our Presiding Bishop and my colleague bishops for guidance. I am also concerned about our full communion partners, especially because we have congregations served by an Episcopal priest and pastors of the Reformed Church in America, the United Methodist Church, and the United Church of Christ; I do not want to jeopardize those relationships. We also believe in the communion of saints. I therefore feel obliged to consult church history to see how those who came before us responded in times of pandemic.<sup>6</sup>

I have for some time held that the church in terms of its denominations will be redefined and realigned according to social issues and worship practices. I do not believe we are prepared to hasten this process by acting unilaterally. At least I am not. I am also aware that I am not at my best trying to discern the Holy Spirit on my own. My hunches, impulses, inclinations, and conclusions may very well be fruits of other spirits, including my own needs, anxieties, and biases.

For the sake of all these relationships and realities, as part of my own discernment about Holy Communion in a time of crisis, I consulted with fellow theologians, colleague bishops, including our Presiding Bishop, as well as pastors and laypeople.

<sup>3</sup> "When a Child Dies," *Evangelical Lutheran Worship, Pastoral Care* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2008), pp. 260-266.

<sup>4</sup> Aidan Kavanagh, *On Liturgical Theology* (Collegeville: The Liturgical Press, 1992), pp. 74ff.

<sup>5</sup> Acts 10:9-23; 13:44-14:7.

<sup>6</sup> See, for example, Glen Scrivener, "Responding to Pandemics: 4 Lessons from Church History" (March 16, 2020). <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/article/4-lessons-church-history/>

## The Word in the Sacrament

Lutherans confess that Christ is truly present in both Word and Sacrament. In *Concerning the Sacraments* (1523),<sup>7</sup> Martin Luther points out that the Lord's Supper is itself a proclamation of the gospel, given that Christ commands it be done "in remembrance of me" and Paul states that "as often as we eat ... and drink ... we proclaim the Lord's death."<sup>8</sup> Dr. Wenger concludes,

Thus, the Supper is not some sort of separate, required spiritual magic but it is another form of the Word, what St. Augustine called a "visible word." Thus, we must not confuse our desire to receive the Lord's Supper with a kind of necessity that leads us away from faith and trust in God's promises and toward a belief that worship is not really worship without the "mere performance of the work" of the liturgy. What matters is faith in the Word of God, who comes down from heaven and in aural and visible Word whispers, "You are mine," to which faith answers: "I'm yours."<sup>9</sup>

Echoing Luther, *The Use of the Means of Grace*, the ELCA statement on the practice of Word and Sacrament, declares,

Jesus Christ is the living and abiding Word of God. By the power of the Spirit, this very Word of God, which is Jesus Christ, is read in the Scriptures, proclaimed in preaching, announced in the forgiveness of sins, eaten and drunk in the Holy Communion, and encountered in the bodily presence of the Christian community. By the power of the Spirit active in Holy Baptism, this Word washes a people to be Christ's own Body in the world. We have called this gift of Word and Sacrament by the name "the means of grace." The living heart of all these means is the presence of Jesus Christ through the power of the Spirit as the gift of the Father.<sup>10</sup>

Maxwell E. Johnson, an ELCA Pastor who teaches at the University of Notre Dame, argues that the Word in a Eucharist is "This is my body/blood given and shed for you." That is the Word needed to be heard giving rise to our communion with Christ whether we receive the elements or not. That is why Luther said that with or without literal communion any Christian can celebrate Mass at any time or place by clinging to these Words in faith.<sup>11</sup>

Pastor James Smith of our Synod confirms this.<sup>12</sup> In *Treatise on the New Testament* (1520),<sup>13</sup> Luther argues for emphasizing the Words of Institution over the traditional sacrificial priestly role. Luther is particularly appalled that people are not hearing the actual words of promise (not in German, or, even at all given that it was the priest's softly spoken prayer), which are the main point of the Lord's Supper. Luther writes:

17. Let us learn, then, that in every promise of God there are two things which one must consider: the word and the sign. As in baptism there are the words of the baptizer and the dipping in water, so in the mass there are the words and the bread and wine. The words

<sup>7</sup> Martin Luther, *Luther's Works* [LW] 40:7-44.

<sup>8</sup> Mark 14:22-25; Luke 22:18-20; 1 Corinthians 1:26.

<sup>9</sup> Wenger, "Holy Communion under Quarantine."

<sup>10</sup> ELCA, *The Use of the Means of Grace: A Statement on the Practice of Word and Sacrament*, 1.

<sup>11</sup> Maxwell E Johnson, 18 March, 2020.

<sup>12</sup> James Smith, 4 April 2020.

<sup>13</sup> *Luther's Works*, American Edition, Vol. 35.

are the divine vow, promise, and testament. The signs are the sacraments, that is, sacred signs. **Now as the testament is much more important than the sacrament, so the words are much more important than the signs. For the signs might well be lacking, if only one has the words; and thus without sacrament, yet not without testament, one might be saved. For I can enjoy the sacrament in the mass every day if only I keep before my eyes the testament, that is, the words and promise of Christ, and feed and strengthen my faith on him.**

Luther continues:

God has here [the Lord's Supper] prepared for our faith a pasture, a table, and a feast; **but faith is not fed except on the word of God alone. Therefore you must pay attention above all else to the words, exalt them, highly treasure them, and hold fast to them. Then you will have not simply the little drops of blessing that drip from the mass, but the very fountainhead of faith, from which springs and flows every blessing.** It is as the Lord says in Jn 4, "He who believes in me, out of his heart shall flow rivers of living water"; and, "Whoever drinks of the water that I shall give him will never thirst; it will become in him a spring of living water welling up to eternal life."<sup>14</sup>

During this time of separation, the preacher's task is to move toward saying in words what the bread and cup would say—Christ given for you; Christ shed for you. One or two lay people in our Synod shared with me their observation that, when we celebrated communion once a month, the congregation truly relied on the preacher to proclaim the gospel. With weekly communion, the church has come to rely on the celebration of the Eucharist to proclaim the gospel and devoted the sermon to other purposes: social justice, moral exhortation, and congregational promotion. They grieve that we have lost our ability to talk about Jesus and implore me to provide opportunities for pastors and deacons to grow as preachers. I can only say that, after preparing sermons for every day in Holy Week, I am wondrously exhausted and depleted of everything except God's grace from working hard to find the words to speak of Jesus in this time.

After much prayer and reflection, I determined to fast from the Lord's Supper until we can again celebrate it together, unless I come near death, and feast on Christ's presence in the word of God. I am encouraged that the Presiding Bishop and the ELCA Worship team also recommend that we refrain from sharing the Lord's Supper together for the sake of our neighbor.<sup>15</sup> In my daily videos, I shared that I made this decision and encouraged joining me in this fast and feast. If you view my Easter Vigil sermon, you will hear about the holy work of waiting and fasting as we feast on Christ present in the word.<sup>16</sup> Maintaining this fast and feast continues to be my best guidance and personal response.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 91-2. Emphasis added by Pastor Smith.

<sup>15</sup> Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, "Worship in Times of Public Health Concerns: COVID-19," Updated March 20, 2020.

[https://download.elca.org/ELCA%20Resource%20Repository/Worship\\_in\\_Times\\_of\\_Public\\_Health\\_Concerns.pdf](https://download.elca.org/ELCA%20Resource%20Repository/Worship_in_Times_of_Public_Health_Concerns.pdf)

<sup>16</sup> Sermon will be available on April 11 at 7pm ET. See: <https://facebook.com/MittenSynodELCA>

## No One “Right Answer”

Yet, I understand that, while waiting is imposed, fasting is embraced. Some find it difficult to fast and wait and ask for additional guidance on celebrating Holy Communion during this crisis. I find wisdom and guidance in our risen Christ’s encounter with Cleopas and a companion on their walk to Emmaus.<sup>17</sup> After a time of speaking of Jesus (24:19-24) and opening the word to encounter Christ truly present “in all the scriptures” (24:25-27), Cleopas and his companion invite Jesus into their home and to their table, and Jesus is revealed to them in the breaking of the bread (24:28-32).

I wonder: After a time of speaking of Jesus and experiencing Christ truly present in the Scriptures, a time that might be part of virtual worship, families might go to their table for a meal and invite Jesus to join them: “Come Lord Jesus, be our guest. . . .” They might tell the story of Cleopas and his companion to one another, or read aloud 1 Corinthians 11:23-26 together. Then they might pray the Lord’s Prayer together, and break bread for each other in the name of Jesus, saying something like, “Jesus loves you” or “Jesus died for you” or “You belong to Jesus.” Then they might eat dinner—or breakfast.

This is certainly an agape feast, a celebration of Christ’s Love for us. Is it the Lord’s Supper? Some theologians would suggest it is not:

The Lutheran Confessions teach that the Lord’s Supper is to be celebrated in the assembly of the baptized, and not privately or by individuals in their own homes. In this communal celebration, we do not invite Jesus to our family table. Jesus invites us to his family table to share his body and blood, which unites and strengthens the body of Christ, the church, in faith and service.<sup>18</sup>

Others contend; indeed, this is Holy Communion since the pastor speaks for the assembly and, in this instance, the assembly speaks for itself.<sup>19</sup>

Is this Holy Communion? Perhaps it is *virtual* communion in the traditional definition of that word—almost, nearly, a sacramental experience if not the sacrament. I do not know. Do we have to decide today? I suspect we will find out. Hopefully, people will do as Cleopas and his companion did. The time will come when the church can come together again. I pray that, at that same hour, people will get up from the table and return to church, find the assembly gathered together proclaiming, “The Lord has risen indeed!” Then they will tell how Jesus was made known to them in the breaking of the bread (24:34-35).

I am quite certain Martin Luther would not be pleased with my suggestion. In 1523, Luther wrote *Concerning the Ministry*.<sup>20</sup> There he reminded his correspondents that in each household the head of that household could preach and, in an emergency situation, baptize. But, for Luther, the Lord’s Supper was somewhat different and was intended to take place in the Sunday gathering and not privately. He also had high respect for the public office of ministry, so he did not think that the Lord’s Supper should be celebrated without a properly called minister. Luther wrote: “For it would be safer and more wholesome

<sup>17</sup> Luke 24:13-35.

<sup>18</sup>Kathryn “Kit” Kleinhans, Cheryl Peterson, and Joy Schroeder, “Concerning Online Communion.” [https://associationdatabase.com/aws/SOS/asset\\_manager/get\\_file/439016?ver=2&fbclid=IwAR0g66r7go4M50O2oeWyV3WsUpLxFVC6MDvj4oEJehvetrC0-e4ATwpuW6g](https://associationdatabase.com/aws/SOS/asset_manager/get_file/439016?ver=2&fbclid=IwAR0g66r7go4M50O2oeWyV3WsUpLxFVC6MDvj4oEJehvetrC0-e4ATwpuW6g)

<sup>19</sup> Allen Jorgenson, “Corona and Communion,” March 29, 2020. <https://stillvoicing.wordpress.com>

<sup>20</sup> Martin Luther, *Luther’s Works* [LW] 40:7-44. This summary is from Wengert, “Holy Communion under Quarantine.”

for the father of the household to read the gospel and, since the universal custom and use allows it to the laity, to baptize those born in his home, and so to govern himself and his according to the doctrine of Christ, even if throughout life they did not dare or could not receive the Eucharist. For the Eucharist is not so necessary that salvation depends on it. The gospel and baptism are sufficient since faith alone justifies and love alone lives rightly.”<sup>21</sup>

Some pastors struggle with this kind of celebration out of fear that people will not feel assured if they do not somehow receive communion *from them*. Pastors and deacons can certainly be involved in the Service of the Word, finding words to speak of Jesus and, by their example, teaching others to do the same. However, if Christ’s presence in bread and wine depends on receiving them from a particular pastor, we have reduced the Sacrament to some sort of magic or, worse, confused a relationship with the pastor and a relationship with the Christ. I understand the importance of keeping people connected to a particular faith community and fostering an appropriate pastoral relationship. These relationships can be tended through Bible study, prayer, regular contact, and pastoral care. Connecting to a particular congregation and pastor are not the purpose of the Lord’s Supper and, in my estimation, constitute a misuse of the Sacrament.

Cathy and I will not try this, because we can tell you stories of how Christ is present at our family table, just as Jesus was revealed at a wedding banquet in an abundance of wine, at a dinner party in an abundance of oil, at an intimate supper through water and basin, and in fish on the grill at a breakfast by the sea.<sup>22</sup> When I taught the Gospel of John, my friend, New Testament scholar Barbara Rossing, delighted in reminding me that these meals were not the Eucharist and Christ was truly present. So I will eat the meals Cathy prepares, which are expressions of God’s love in themselves, fast from the Eucharist, and feast on Christ’s presence in the word of God until we can celebrate the Lord’s Supper with you.

### **Virtual Communion**

I am not spending a lot of time on Facebook these days. I understand we are having a “debate” over “virtual communion” in which people are taking “sides.”<sup>23</sup> I have not weighed in because this seems to be largely a virtual issue in our Synod. In all honesty, so-called “virtual communion” presents me with more questions than answers. For starters, I do not understand the urgency. Not that many years ago, we communed once a month. In many congregations this remains standard practice for homebound members. Statistically, only 30% of our members attend worship regularly, and pastors tell me weekly worship has become a thing of the past for most people. Our constitutions define active members as people who commune once a year or once every other year. And we have only been apart for four Sundays. Is it already time to make a decision about virtual communion?

Apparently, for some it is. With all that is happening in the world, some seem to think the most pressing issue before us is to decide whether virtual community is authentic community and whether consecration of bread and wine can happen over the Internet. Even when I assume both things are true, I am nevertheless left confounded by virtual communion. I wonder: If I set out bread and wine when I

<sup>21</sup> LW 40:9.

<sup>22</sup> John 2: 1-12; 12:1-8; 21:1-14.

<sup>23</sup> Kleinhans, Peterson, and Schroeder, “Concerning Online Communion.” I appreciate these scholars’ reminder that “our conversations about this matter should be governed by the fact that we belong to the one body of Christ, the church, and thereby to each other; this suggests that disagreements should be stated with respect and honor for one another, as we strive faithfully to navigate the extraordinary situation in which we find ourselves.”

watch mass from the Vatican or from Notre Dame, can I commune with Pope Francis or with my colleagues in the Department of Theology? If my pastor presides at 10 AM and I sleep in and don't watch the service until 1 PM in the afternoon, does it still count? I sometimes watch my sermon videos and genuinely receive the gospel from myself. Can I do that with the sacrament by virtually presiding and then watching myself later with bread and wine and commune with myself? If my pastor gets too political and preaches about immigration or gun violence or climate change, can I become a virtual member of a congregation in another part of the country that is more in line with my values? Can I virtually preside at Holy Communion from my office in Lansing to all of our congregations? That would certainly alleviate the crisis caused by the shortage of clergy. It would also be a lot less expensive.

I do not know the answer to these questions. I do know that, in time, these questions will be asked. From serving for seven years in the Office of Bishop, I also know that, for some people, every exception a bishop makes for a pastoral reason quickly becomes a general rule that must be followed universally and a precedent to which a bishop is bound. Our decisions will last longer than the pandemic. I do not believe we are ready to make a decision on virtual communion. At least I am not.

Then there is the issue of justice. One of the consequences of this pandemic is that it heightens the "digital divide," the uneven distribution in the access to, use of, or impact of information and communication technologies (ICT) between any number of distinct groups. For example, 12% of Michigan students do not have access to high-speed internet. We have members and congregations that do not have access to high-speed internet, or who cannot afford the equipment necessary to live stream, or who lack the expertise to do it. This is certainly true for our brothers and sisters in Puerto Rico and Papua New Guinea; I cannot say about Honduras. We have never allowed homebound members to share in communion over the telephone.

The injustice that currently appears to be inherent in virtual communion begins to remind me of the situation in Corinth, where the supper was more about division than communion.<sup>24</sup> As the pastor of our entire Synod and as a bishop of the church, I am not prepared for the Eucharist to contribute to the growing divide between the "haves" and the "have nots." I am not prepared to in any way suggest that Christ comes to those who have internet access in a way that Christ does not come to those who do not. In fact, Jesus tells us he is present in the least of these our brothers and sisters.<sup>25</sup>

"I do not encourage or support video Eucharist." I hope you better understand why. Unless I come near death, I will fast from the Eucharist for the sake of my neighbor and in solidarity with the least of these. I will feast on Christ's real presence in the word until the church comes together. I once again invite you to join me.

## **Guidance**

Some outside our Synod allege that I am overthinking things and allowing you all to starve because I do not care about you. I heard the same thing over synodically authorized ministers, pre-consecrated elements, and the sale of a camp, which were also presented as a response to a crisis. I thank God that, this time around, no one in our Synod has said such a thing to me. This sort of accusation, coupled with our genuine love for our people and desire to care for and comfort them, leads us to lengthen the pastoral leg of the stool.

<sup>24</sup> 1 Corinthians 11:17-34.

<sup>25</sup> Matthew 25:40.

The goal is to keep the legs even, so the stool does not tip over. To do this, I have had to develop a thick skin; perhaps you do too. My guidance is to remain vigilant for the coming of Christ, think things through, consult and pray, take a break each day from social media, and be mindful that we are making theology that will last for generations. “But strive first for the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things shall be yours as well” (Matthew 6:33).

As for me and my house, we will keep the fast, feast on Christ truly present in the word of God and wait for that day—we will long for that day—when we can again celebrate the Lord’s Supper with you. Until that day, I am grateful for the feast of God’s word that you are serving up. I am so very proud of our pastors and deacons. I worry that you are working too hard. I worry that you and those you love be safe. And I hold you in my heart and in my prayers.

Your Bishop and brother in Christ,

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