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in the Anglican Communion and beyond*

ARTICLES

- [Church, Ministry, and Coronavirus: An Editorial](#)
NICHOLAS TAYLOR 3
- [Suffering during the COVID-19 Pandemic: Reflections by Scientists with Faith](#)
DEYLTH M. REID 17
- [Novel Coronavirus \(COVID-19\) and Faith Communities: A Pandemic of 'Pandemonium', A Historical Survey of Church Responses in Zimbabwe and Kuwait \(January–June 2020\)](#)
MICHAEL MBONA 33
- [Christian Spirituality in a Time of Isolation](#)
DAVID JASPER 65
- [Eucharist, Church, and Judgment: Initial Questions about the Liturgical and Ecclesiological Implications of the COVID-19 Pandemic](#)
JOHN REUBEN DAVIES 71
- [@Coronaworship: Material and Digital Liturgies](#)
MERETE THOMASSEN 85
- [Proclaiming the Gospel of Holy Week and Easter under Lockdown](#)
DAVID JASPER AND NICHOLAS TAYLOR 99
- [Lament in Times of COVID-19](#)
ARMAND LÉON VAN OMMEN 113
- [Theology and Ethics in a Time of Pandemic](#)
DAVID JASPER 127
- [*Media vita in morte sumus* — In the midst of life we are in death: A Lutheran Perspective on Human Finitude and the Corona Crisis](#)
KATRIN BOSSE 131
- [Finding Hope in these Limiting Times](#)
PAUL WATSON 159

[Coronavirus — Doing Things Differently](#)

ALISON JASPER 169

[Pre-Pandemic Ethics and Preferential Treatment of Those in Greatest Need](#)

MARGARET B. ADAM 175

[Is Saving Lives an Act of Love? A Psychotherapist's Perspective on the Roles of Psychotherapy and the Church at a Time of Existential Panic and Beyond](#)

AVIGAIL ABARBANEL 189

[The Lockdown of Faces: COVID-19, Autism and the Opportunity of New Social Constructions](#)

DENISE MAUD AND ARMAND LÉON VAN OMMEN 219

[Risk and Reward — Theological and Pastoral Questions Raised by the Coronavirus Pandemic: The Response of the Church](#)

DAVID CAMERON 233

[Coronavirus, Healing and Walk into Mystery](#)

LESLIE IRELAND 239

['Peace be with you'](#)

NORMA HIGGOTT 247

BOOK REVIEWS

WALTER BRUEGGEMANN, [*Virus as a Summons to Faith: Biblical Reflections in a Time of Loss, Grief, and Anxiety*](#)

Reviewed by NICHOLAS TAYLOR 251

SAEB ERAKAT AND MITRI RAHEB, eds, [*The Double Lockdown: Palestine under Occupation and COVID-19*](#)

Reviewed by MICHAEL MARTEN 252

THOMAS O'LOUGHLIN, [*Eating Together, Becoming One: Taking up Pope Francis's Call to Theologians*](#)

Reviewed by OLIVER O'DONOVAN 254

ANDREW MEIN, NATHAN MACDONALD AND MATTHEW A. COLLINS, eds, [*The First World War and the Mobilization of Biblical Scholarship*](#)

Reviewed by NICHOLAS TAYLOR 257

PAUL S. FIDDES, BRIAN HAYMES AND RICHARD L. KIDD, [*Communion, Covenant, and Creativity: An Approach to the Communion of Saints through the Arts*](#)

Reviewed by DAVID JASPER 258

Chung Ling Yu, [*Bonds and Boundaries among the Early Churches: Community Maintenance in the Letter of James and the Didache*](#)

Reviewed by NICHOLAS TAYLOR 260

ROBYN WRIGLEY-CARR, [*The Spiritual Formation of Evelyn Underhill*](#)

Reviewed by ANN LOADES CBE 261

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Eucharist, Church, and Judgment: Initial Questions about the Liturgical and Ecclesiological Implications of the COVID-19 Pandemic

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The closure of places of public worship, which began in the UK's Anglican provinces from 17 March 2020, and was still in force at the time of publication, could be viewed as a time of crisis for the churches of these islands. The immediate response of some incumbents and others with the cure of souls was to begin live-streaming services from their churches or homes. While some priests ceased the celebration of the Eucharist altogether, others continued to hold celebrations with their households, either in the church building, or at home, according to their circumstances and the jurisdiction in which they lived.¹ Bishops gave permission for priests to celebrate the Eucharist with no one else present. In Scotland, beginning with the Primus, the diocesan bishops began to webcast, in turn, each Sunday — and on Maundy Thursday and Ascension Day — a recorded celebration of the Eucharist, either from their domestic chapels, their cathedral churches, or their kitchen tables (sometimes with bowls of green bananas, oven gloves, or pots of steaming casserole as liturgical ornaments).² Local incumbents followed the bishops' example. In many congregations — and in meetings of SEI staff and students — the daily office was prayed in virtual gatherings hosted on internet platforms, the most popular being Zoom.

Anyone who reads this journal at the time of publication will know the scenario just outlined. 'The church buildings remain closed — the Church remains open', was the slogan used throughout the country by bishops and many other clergy.³ Indeed, the churches have been fulfilling

¹ Whereas church buildings in Scotland could be used for private prayer, or worship by members of the same household, those in England, on the other hand, were closed for any kind of worship from 24 March to 7 May.

² The services were pre-recorded because the reliability of a live feed was not deemed sound enough for a province-wide webcast. See the [SEC's guidance](#) [accessed 30 May 2020].

³ See, for example, posts from the [Diocese of London](#) [accessed 30 May 2020] and the [Scottish Episcopal Church](#) [accessed 30 May 2020].

their mission through their support for the vulnerable in their local communities. The elderly and isolated, shielding at home, receive a telephone call for comfort and encouragement, and to ensure their needs are being met. Food banks continue to operate from church buildings. The clergy and their lay assistants are displaying heroic charity in their efforts to provide and co-ordinate pastoral care under the new circumstances. Why then might one point to a crisis for the churches of the Anglican provinces in Great Britain and Ireland, brought on by the closure of places of public worship in response to the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic? In what follows I offer some preliminary questions to be considered as we reflect on the liturgical and ecclesiological implications of our experience since mid-March 2020.

The Eucharist and the Church

Let us take the Eucharist as our starting point. We can say that the Eucharist is the sacrament of the new creation where all things are restored by God's love.⁴ As the sacrament of restoration — of putting right — it is therefore also the sacrament of judgment and of salvation. The Eucharist is ultimately the existential and eschatological sacrament, closely related to Baptism, which is the sacrament of new birth by which we enter the family of God and become incorporated in the Body of Christ.⁵ The Church — the household or *familia* — of God, is made, exists, and is sustained by Baptism and Eucharist. The Church is therefore, first of all, a worshipping community of all the baptized, with the Eucharist at the heart of a corporate life.⁶ It is in the Eucharist above all that we meet Christ, truly become the Body of Christ, and are fed by him in Word and Sacrament, and are sent out into the world to love and serve the Lord.⁷

Only with the Eucharist as the centre of our lives, then, can we know who we are, and be known for who we are; and only with the Eucharist as the centre of the life of the Church can the love of God reach beyond the act of worship and into the everyday life of the world. For the liturgy shows us how to see the world, and how to live in the world, and is therefore for the life and transformation of the world — for salvation. What then happens when we cannot celebrate the Eucharist? Do we face an existential crisis?

⁴ [Scottish Liturgy 1982](#), Eucharistic Prayer I, Opening Prayer; Section 24, Prayer (a).

⁵ Ibid., Eucharistic Prayer I, Prayer of Petition; ARCIC I, '[Agreed Statement on Eucharistic Doctrine](#)' (1971), § 11 [accessed 30 May 2020]

⁶ *Scottish Liturgy 1982*, Eucharistic Prayer I, Prayer of Petition.

⁷ Ibid., Thanksgiving and Sending Out.

Just as the High Priest and the Temple existed for the sake of Israel, and Israel existed for the sake of the world, so the Church is gathered and built up in faith through the Eucharist only in order to be sent into the world, for the life of the world, as a witness to God's reconciling love for the world in Jesus Christ. If we cannot gather and be sent out into the world for this purpose, does the Eucharist lose its purpose? Does the Church lose its purpose? For the Church exists not for its own sake; rather, it exists in the world, is part of the world, and is here for the sake of the life of the world. The Church cannot be turned in on itself but exists to reach constantly outwards and forwards.

We must therefore ask how a Eucharistic community gathered virtually on a video-conferencing platform can reach outwards and forwards — and how the faithful sitting at home can participate in a Eucharistic celebration that was recorded several days earlier, or a livestreamed webcast with which they cannot interact.

The administration of Holy Communion: Questions of order

An important set of considerations in the way we think about the Eucharist in the future must relate to order — catholic and apostolic order. Although some may consider these to be legalistic questions, they nevertheless penetrate to the heart of our concerns about the nature of the Eucharist and the manner in which the liturgy can be validly and efficaciously celebrated.

Beyond the classic definition of the Prayer Book catechism, that a sacrament is 'an outward and visible sign of an inward and spiritual grace given unto us', we could say that, in the sacraments, the Church promises the faithful an objective encounter with the living Word of God⁸ In the sacraments the Church promises us that we meet Christ.

The way the Church guarantees this promise is through apostolic order (as acknowledged in the very motto of the Scottish Episcopal Church).⁹ The Eucharist is presided over by a rightly ordered representative of the Church in a controlled environment, as to the matter of the sacrament, the rite, and the participants in the sacrament.

⁸ This is the only official definition provided in the formularies of the Scottish Episcopal Church; *The Scottish Book of Common Prayer and Administration of the Sacraments and Other Rites and Ceremonies of the Church* (Edinburgh: Cambridge University Press, 1929; rev. edn 1962, reprinted 1986), p. 423. Cf. ARCIC I, '[Agreed Statement on Eucharistic Doctrine](#)' (1971), § 8 [accessed 30 May 2020].

⁹ 'Evangelical Truth and Apostolic Order'.

The report of the Anglican–Roman Catholic International Commission, Phase I, on Ministry and Ordination, provides us with, at the least, some kind of consensus view of the role of priests in the Eucharist, which can be accepted by most Anglicans:

[Priests] share through baptism in the priesthood of the people of God, but they are — ‘particularly in presiding at the eucharist’ [*sic*] — representative of the whole Church in the fulfilment of its priestly vocation of self-offering to God as a living sacrifice (Rm 12:1). Nevertheless their ministry is not an extension of the common Christian priesthood but belongs to another realm of the gifts of the Spirit. It exists to help the Church to be ‘a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God’s own people, to declare the wonderful deeds of him who called them out of darkness into his marvellous light’ (1 Pt 2:9).¹⁰

The gathered congregation is the celebrant, on whose behalf the presiding priest, representing also the universal Church, speaks and performs the appointed manual acts.¹¹ What authority does an individual at a computer have to address God on behalf either of a (non-existent) gathered congregation or on behalf of the universal Church. Can a private piece of bread and glass of wine be an offering of the Church?¹²

The eucharistic liturgies authorized after the *Scottish Book of Common Prayer* (1929) (i.e. Scottish Liturgy 1970 and Scottish Liturgy 1982), however, contain very limited rubrics and make no mention of the nature of the elements to be used for Holy Communion or to the number of people who must be present. A sound principle is that, where the Code of Canons and the liturgy is not prescriptive, what has been set down before is the most authoritative precedent to be followed. So, a fair linen cloth should be set on the Holy Table, the finest wheat bread, whether loaf or wafer, is desirable as the Bread for the Holy Communion; a little pure water may be mixed with the Wine. Communion is to be delivered into the hand

¹⁰ [‘Agreed Statement on Ministry and Ordination’](#) (1972), § 13 [accessed 30 May 2020].

¹¹ See [Scottish Liturgy 1982](#), Eucharistic Prayers I–V, Anamnesis and Oblation.

¹² These kinds of questions were dealt with in some detail in 2009 by Nicholas Taylor, *Lay Presidency at the Eucharist? An Anglican Approach* (London: Bloomsbury, 2009), pp. 142–76.

of the communicant by the minister. The presence of the people is presumed though not explicitly required.¹³

The Scottish Episcopal Church may wish to consider its rubrical provisions as the unforeseen circumstances of online worship and quarantine have their effect on tradition. But where such simple provisions cannot be met by force of circumstance, we must ask larger questions.

In the case of ‘online communion’ — especially the currently illicit, but widely discussed, practice of remote consecration — apart from the issue of catholic order and the discipline of the sacraments, where all should happen in a controlled environment, with the priest being the authorized representative of the Church, ensuring the validity of the matter and form of the sacrament, there is also the question of sacrifice. Is there any sense in which sitting in front of a computer with a piece of one’s own loaf and a glass of one’s own wine, so that the individual can ‘receive’ Holy Communion, is sacrificial?

In wishing to point to the rubric that requires the Bread and Wine to be provided by the churchwardens at the expense of the parish, one finds that, as with the rubric requiring the presence of at least three people, what was there in the 1912 *Scottish Book of Common Prayer* was removed in 1929. This seems to have been intentional, but what was the significance of its removal?

The point nevertheless remains, that the matter of the sacrament, the Bread and Wine, must be under the control of the priest, should be bought out of the common fund, taken and offered on the altar, and then shared by the community. If this is not required in our liturgical formularies, we need to have a good answer about why not.

The eucharistic sacrifice

Nicholas Taylor has warned of the tendency in our post-modern society, with its relativistic culture of individualism, to be accustomed to thinking of ourselves as having a private relationship with God, and ‘even to look for ways to experience communion with God which do not involve interaction with other people’.¹⁴

Jesus is reduced to a ‘personal’, meaning [incorrectly] ‘individual’ Saviour, and it has become easy to regard the relationships and obligations which accompany membership of

¹³ Here I summarize the rubrics of the Scottish Liturgy in the *Scottish Book of Common Prayer* (1929).

¹⁴ [Online reflection for Pentecost](#) [accessed 30 May 2020]. Nicholas Taylor took up office as convener of the SEC’s Liturgy Committee in June 2020.

the Church as an irrelevance, if not a nuisance. So it may in fact be quite convenient not to be expected to leave home, commune with other people, and participate in worship in a congregation gathered together for the purpose, praising God together, hearing the Word, receiving the Sacrament, and moving our bodies accordingly. Far easier to stay where we are, relax with a cat and a cup of coffee, and log in.¹⁵

The apparent desire for online Eucharistic worship and even remote consecration and reception of the Eucharistic elements, leads us to ask whether we have developed a liturgical piety that concentrates too much on the reception of Holy Communion — the benefits received by us — and whether we need to pay more attention to a spirituality of participation and sacrifice, where, in making ourselves one with Christ, we offer the Eucharistic gifts of bread and wine to the Father, ‘and with them ourselves, a single, holy, living sacrifice’.¹⁶ Yet, in fact, the theology of the Eucharistic Prayers in Scottish Liturgy 1982 has made a significant shift away from the personal benefits of reception, compared with the orders for the administration of Holy Communion in the *Scottish Book of Common Prayer* (1929) and Scottish Liturgy 1970.

In his study of the Eucharist, Thomas O’Loughlin has reminded us about the ethical demand to feed the hungry and its connection to the theme of food and worship, pointing to Isaiah’s exhortation to the people that ‘fasting, as prayer, was useless unless linked to justice for the poor, the needy and the hungry’.¹⁷

Is this, then, a question of teaching and liturgical practice? Do we need to renew our teaching about the self-giving contributions of the people of God, the collective sacrifice that makes up a full view of the Eucharist? The self-sacrificial offerings of time, money, music, mutual care, and not least the proclamation of the gospel to the world in word and deed, are all a necessary part of the corporate offering.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Scottish Liturgy 1982, Eucharistic Prayers I–IV; Eucharistic Prayer V reads, ‘Together with him we offer you these gifts: in them we give you ourselves’; Scottish Liturgy 1970, together with the Scottish Liturgy of the Scottish Book of Common Prayer, has, ‘And here we humbly offer and present unto thee, O Lord, ourselves, our souls and bodies, to be a reasonable, holy, and living sacrifice unto thee’.

¹⁷ Thomas O’Loughlin, *The Eucharist: Origins and Contemporary Understandings* (Bloomsbury T&T Clark: London, 2015), p. 78.

The presence of God in the Word

In our teaching about the Eucharist, do we also need to re-emphasize the importance of the Word of God? We can say that, in the liturgy the Church experiences God's presence in a special way, but within that context, the two fundamental categories of experiencing God's presence are word and sacrament. Benedict XVI explained that, 'the liturgy is the privileged setting in which God speaks to us in the midst of our lives';¹⁸ and Augustine of Hippo likewise taught that we should 'listen to the Gospel just as if to the Lord if he were present [...] For the body of the Lord in which he arose can be in one place; but his truth is spread out everywhere'.¹⁹

The recognition of the deeply embedded place of Scripture in worship was expressed by Jeremy Taylor in the seventeenth century as he defended the *Book of Common Prayer*: 'Very much of our liturgy', he said, 'is in the very words of Scripture. The Psalms and Lessons and all the Hymns, save one are nothing else but Scripture.'

In fact, one could go further and argue that our liturgies are the most concrete way in which the texts of the Bible have been preserved and transmitted. The liturgy therefore provides the Church with a constant and stable place and space in which the Scriptures are read, authentically interpreted, and passed on from generation to generation. The Eucharist is not only the celebration of the sacrament of Holy Communion but is also a celebration of God's Word. The liturgy, rather than private study, is the place where the Word is definitively received, and the Lord's presence is known.

Luke's account of two disciples who meet Jesus on the road to Emmaus (Luke 24. 13–35) is the classic instruction in such an understanding of the Eucharistic liturgy. The risen Lord asks what the two are discussing, and one of them, Cleopas, recites the whole story about the events of the preceding days. Jesus, after rebuking them as fools, slow of heart to believe in all the things about which the prophets spoke, then sets out for them the whole of the biblical story, 'beginning with Moses', and showing how it was necessary for the Messiah to endure the things that had happened and enter into his glory. Next, sitting down with them for a

¹⁸ Benedict XVI, [*Apostolic Exhortation: Verbum Domini*](#) (2010), §52; official English translation online [accessed 30 May 2020].

¹⁹ 'Audiamus euangelium quasi praesentem Dominum ... Corpus enim Domini in quo resurrexit, uno loco esse potest: ueritas eius ubique diffusa est' (*In Ioannis euangelium tractatus CXXIV* ['124 Tractates on the Gospel of John'], 30, i; trans. by John W. Rettig, *The Fathers of the Church: A New Translation*, vol. 88 (Washington DC: Catholic University of America Press, 1993), p. 22).

meal, Jesus 'took bread, blessed and broke it, and gave it to them.' Repeating the actions of the Last Supper, Jesus made present for them the sacrifice of the cross. And at that moment, when the Scriptures and the meal and the sacrifice came together as a coherent whole, the two disciples recognized him, and he became really present to them.

Can those who are not able to break bread during the period of quarantine take comfort that the risen Lord is encountered in and through the Scriptures? For the proper setting for reading the Scriptures is our common prayer, and when we cannot have gathered prayer or gathered worship, we can still have common prayer. As we say our prayers day by day, and read in common the same scriptural passages prescribed by the Church in the daily office, this hallowing of time can be a participation in the Eucharistic life of the Church, as part of Christ's one offering of prayer to the Father.

Discerning the Body of Christ

Rather than thinking of the Eucharist as being a way of making Christ present, however, of confecting the Lord's Body and Blood, in order that we may receive it, should we rather concentrate our attentions on how the Eucharist allows us to recognize the Body of Christ in the space and action of the liturgical assembly?

Both Karl Barth and Jean-Yves Lacoste have warned that God's revelation or phenomenality is not an object directly perceptible to the human senses. Although we have been given both the natural world and specific signs and symbols through which God can be known, and have been promised an objective and physical encounter with Christ in the Eucharist, there is nevertheless still a hiddenness, and a sense in which the experience and knowledge of God cannot be pinned down.²⁰

Should we therefore be recognizing, rather, what the liturgy lets us see; how the liturgy objectively reveals or manifests the oneness of the Body of Christ, the unity that is the working of the Holy Spirit. For the worshipper is not simply someone who believes, but is also one who sees, spiritually, intellectually, and physically. This seeing, this illumination or

²⁰ See especially *Church Dogmatics. Volume I: The Doctrine of the Word of God, Part 1*, transl. by G. W. Bromiley (London: T&T Clark, 2004), § 4.3; cf. Jean-Yves Lacoste, 'Perception, transcendence and the experience of God', in *Transcendence and Phenomenology*, ed. by Conor Cunningham and Peter M. Candler (London: SCM, 2007), pp. 1–20.

opening of the eyes — heart, mind, spirit — to recognize the Lord, is part of the gift we receive in the administration of the sacraments.²¹

The principle that guided the liturgical reforms of the later twentieth century was the ‘fully conscious, and active participation in liturgical celebrations’ by all the people of God.²² In order to participate fully and consciously, liturgical rites not only have to make sense as text, they need to make sense as action, and allow for a liturgically engaged human body. True worship is not something that happens inwardly, with our eyes closed, and the rest of the world shut out. In fact, our external actions tend to express our internal understanding. External actions are also significant for those whose intellectual capacities are not mature or developed, as well as for those whose sensory perception is impaired. The physical presence of a Christian community, gathered in a real space, in a liturgical action that involves movement and the stimulation of all the senses, makes for worship that involves everyone present, one way or another.

Karl Barth (again) warned about a theology that focused on the human rather than on God.²³ He was concerned for a tendency that Christian piety, the external and internal disposition and emotion of the human person, had become theology’s object of study. To think about God, in this theological mindset, was a scarcely veiled method of thinking about the human.

The point here is that, when we turn our theological attentions to the COVID-19 pandemic crisis of 2020, should not our focus be on what is being revealed about God, and then our response to that revelation, rather than to begin with the response of human piety and emotions? Is it a mistake to think first of our perceived spiritual need? What in fact are we to see in this temporary withdrawal of the sacrament?

The Eucharist: Truth and judgment

If, for whatever reason, we cannot make the act of thanksgiving in which we offer ourselves as a single, holy, living sacrifice to God the Father, through Jesus Christ, in the power of the Holy Spirit, should we not conclude that we have entered a time of testing and a period of judgment?

²¹ Lacoste has written about how the presence and experience of God cannot simply be pinned down to specific things or actions or places, so that the worshipping believer who takes part in the liturgy, while seeking, does not grasp or take hold of what is sought, but only receives (ibid.).

²² [*Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy*](#) (*Sacrosanctum Concilium*) §14 [accessed 13 December 2018].

²³ ‘The Humanity of God’, trans. by John Newton Thomas, *Cross Currents*, 10 (1960), 70–79 (p. 71).

God does not make it difficult to celebrate the Eucharist. The simple requirements, as we have already seen, are for two or three to be gathered together, one of them in priestly orders, a table with a fair linen cloth, a loaf and some wine. If we cannot do this, we must be facing an existential crisis, a point of judgment, an eschatological moment.

Judgment (Hebrew דִּין, *dīn*; Greek κρίσις, *krisis*) is a moment of choice, of decision, and also a time for putting right. It is a moment that sets us in front of the choices that need to be made. All of us have had, and will have, moments of crisis. This pandemic is a moment of social crisis. When we are ill in any way, it is a period of testing and judgment, because we are facing that existential crisis, that eschatological moment.

What, then, is the nature of God's judgment? Joseph Ratzinger argued that judgment can be existential, 'located in our present life, our present history', and exposes us to the truth.²⁴ Judgment is also God's response of love.

How, we must therefore ask, is the power of God's love responding and how are we responding in love to the present crisis? Could the judgment be, 'Love one another as I have loved you'? (John 13. 34). For this new commandment of love is the other side of the ritual sign of the breaking of bread: it is at the heart of the Eucharist, as the celebration of the 'Eucharist of the Lord's Supper' on Maundy Thursday brings home to us. Why is it that the tradition has handed down to us, in this rememorative celebration of the Lord's Supper, the gospel of the new commandment?²⁵ The baptismal significance of the foot-washing reminds us of the corporate nature of the Lord's Supper ('Unless I wash you, you have no share with me', John 13. 8) and shows us what loving the members of Christ's Body means. Can washing our own feet be an act of charity or can watching someone else wash the feet of others likewise be an act of charity ('You also ought to wash one another's feet', John 13. 14)?

If the Eucharist is the place in which we learn how to live in the world, how can we love one another in our isolated fastness? It is possible to maintain a relationship of charitable love with those whom we already know face-to-face, in an established personal connection. Life online, however, is not the way we are called to be in the world. This, I would argue, is one of the truths that is being revealed to us in the reaction to the pandemic. While, on the one hand, we are learning that the internet is keeping us connected, and even re-connected with friends who have moved away to distant parts of the country or even abroad, and we are

²⁴ *Eschatology: Death and Eternal Life*, trans. by Michael Waldstein, 2nd edn (Washington DC: Catholic University of America Press, 1988), pp. 204–09.

²⁵ John 13. 1–17, 31b–35.

discovering the genius of video-conferencing platforms, the imposed isolation is also holding up a mirror to the de facto isolation that we have been imposing on ourselves in normal times through our 'online' lives.

How, then, does one react in a moment of crisis? The way we react at such a time is also a moment of judgment. The Gospel of John (6. 48–71) links a moment of crisis to the Lord's Eucharistic teaching. Having declared that he is the bread of life (6. 48), the Lord tells the disciples, 'Very truly, I tell you, unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you have no life in you' (6. 53). This is about actually 'munching' or 'chewing' (φαγεῖν, *phagein*) the flesh of Jesus. This is necessary — indeed, the physical eating is essential.²⁶

But the Lord's disciples must also go beyond an understanding that reduces their wish to be his followers to a way of being fed with free bread. The Word became flesh, and the Word must also be heard before the flesh can be the bread of heaven that feeds and saves, and for that to happen, the spirit must help them.

Jesus goes on to tell those disciples who question his hard saying, about eating his flesh, which they cannot accept, that 'it is the spirit that gives life; the flesh is useless. The words that I have spoken to you are spirit and life' (6. 63). 'From this time many of his disciples turned back and no longer followed Him' (6. 66). Jesus then questions the apostles. "'You do not want to leave too, do you?'" Jesus asked the Twelve'. The Lord asks them to make a decision. This is the point of crisis. Peter then makes his second confession: 'Simon Peter answered Him, "Lord, to whom can we go? You have the words of eternal life. We have come to believe and know that you are the Holy One of God"' (6. 68–69). When Peter made his first confession, 'You are the Christ, the son of the Living God', Jesus began to explain the passion that was to come. At that time Peter stopped his master and responded, 'God forbid it, Lord! This must never happen to you.' The Lord then rebukes Peter (Matthew 16. 16–23). But in John's gospel, Peter has matured, and he does not remonstrate with Jesus, even though he may not necessarily understand the Lord's teaching about eating his flesh and drinking his blood (John 6. 54–56). He may not understand, but he trusts the Teacher, and he makes this confession, 'Lord, to whom can we go? You have the words of eternal life'.

²⁶ There are questions about the originality of vv. 51c–58, but they are still part of the canonical text; see C. K. Barrett, *The Gospel According to St John: An Introduction with Commentary and Notes on the Greek Text*, 2nd edn (Philadelphia, PA: Westminster, 1978), pp. 283–84, who argued, against Bultmann, that the ideas expressed here are 'complementary rather than inconsistent' (p. 284).

Here we are given an example in how to live through a moment of crisis. Steadfastness in the faith is Peter's response to the decision with which the Lord confronts the Twelve. Those who left sought another teacher who was not so 'hard'. Moments of crisis, including the long periods of confinement and isolation during the COVID-19 crisis, demand perseverance, and a certain degree of silence: to stay where we are, steadfast, listening in the silence in order to receive the words of life. The time of crisis is not the moment to change what we believe about the word of life, about the Eucharist. A crisis is an opportunity for faithfulness.

Nicholas Taylor has written about the Church's situation during the 'Stay Home' regulations in the following way.

When the Body is dispersed, it is not thereby dismembered, and it certainly does not cease to exist. We have received God's Spirit in our Baptism, and we continue to exercise the gifts we have received, conscious that we are doing so as members of a Body which is unable to gather together, but is nonetheless Christ's Church. We are assured that the nourishment we are accustomed to receive in public worship is still given to us; our desire for the blessings bestowed on Christ's Body and received in the Sacrament is assuaged, not through imitating the Eucharist on our own, but in seeking communion with God, and fellowship in the Body of Christ, spiritually, i.e. in prayer.²⁷

In his study, *Paul on Baptism*, Taylor has drawn out Paul's theology of Baptism as expressed in Paul's letters, and has pointed to Paul's focus on Baptism as the means of becoming part of the Body of Christ. Christian identity, for Paul, is essentially corporate, with much of his epistolary writing being about the corporate life of the churches that he had founded. Very closely related to the principle of corporate identity is the sense of identification between the person baptized and Christ himself, that is, identity with Christ in his death and resurrection. For Paul, that identity with Christ is the key to understanding Christian salvation. Related to identity with Christ, moreover, are the gifts of the Holy Spirit; and it is in and through Baptism that the gifts of the Holy Spirit are received by members of Christ's Body.²⁸

Taylor has therefore argued that it is 'precisely because we are the Body of Christ, incorporated through our Baptism and renewed in the

²⁷ [Online reflection for Pentecost.](#)

²⁸ Nicholas Taylor, *Paul on Baptism: Theology, Mission and Ministry in Context* (London: SCM Press, 2016), especially pp. 21–92.

Eucharist, and have received the Holy Spirit given by God to the Church, that we are able to sustain ourselves through this period of isolation'.²⁹

The Crisis of the Eucharist and the existential crisis of the churches

None of this is intended to diminish the central importance of the Eucharist, or the real, physical, and objective encounter with Christ which takes place in the reception of Holy Communion. Far from it. The very importance of the Eucharist as the existential heart of the Church and the Christian life is why I would wish to ask so many questions before drifting into new patterns of online (quasi-) Eucharistic worship. For if these are not really the Eucharist, then we will cease to be the Church. If circumstances prevent us from meeting physically to celebrate the Eucharist, our response cannot be to provide a feigned likeness in order to comfort ourselves or those for whom we have pastoral care.

For the past half century, liturgical theologians and other students of liturgy and worship have been perceiving — in prosperous 'western' societies at least — an inward-looking focus on subjective experience.³⁰ In a post-modern and relativistic age we must beware of coming to the Eucharist in order to find ourselves rather than to find Christ.³¹ As Christians, we are called to worship not simply in order to fulfil our own spiritual needs, but for the sake of the life of the world — the *kosmos*, the created order — in which that worship takes place.³²

The current crisis will come to an end, and is coming to an end. We must recognize that any form of online worship is a temporary solution to a chronologically limited period. It is, as the term 'lockdown' suggests (borrowed as it is from the American penitentiary system) like a prison sentence — or house arrest. A prison sentence, one way or another, is finite. If there ever comes a time when we are not able to worship in person again as a gathered community, or celebrate the Eucharist, then we shall know that we shall have come to the end of the age, the eschaton will have arrived.

²⁹ Online reflection for Pentecost.

³⁰ See David W. Fagerberg, *Liturgy Outside Liturgy: The Liturgical Theology of Fr. Alexander Schmemmann* (Hong Kong: Chorabooks, 2018), pp. 191–205, who explains Schmemmann's work of the 1960s and 70s; Bryan D. Spinks, *The Worship Mall: Contemporary Responses to Contemporary Culture*, Alcuin Club Collections 85 (London: SPCK, 2010).

³¹ See the critique made by N. T. Wright, 'Freedom and framework, spirit and truth: recovering Biblical worship', *Studia Liturgica* 32 (2002), 176–95.

³² Cf. John 6. 51; Scottish Liturgy 1982, Section 19, 'The Breaking of the Bread'.