

Bread of Life: Bishops' teaching series

1 - Life in Unity: *Koinonia* – Bishop Michael Ipgrave

The first theme in *Bread of Life*, our series on the Eucharist, is that of 'Life in unity: *koinonia*'. The Greek word *koinonia* appears repeatedly in one of the earliest bits of evidence for the celebration of the Eucharist outside the gospels: Paul's First Letter to the Corinthians, chapters 10-11. Paul writes to the Christians of Corinth:

The cup of blessing that we bless, is it not a sharing (*koinonia*) in the blood of Christ? The bread that we break, is it not a sharing (*koinonia*) in the body of Christ? Because there is one bread, we who are many are one body, for we all partake of the one bread.¹

Those words are particularly familiar to us because they appear in our *Common Worship* texts for Holy Communion. But *koinonia* and words linked to it are not restricted to the Eucharist; immediately afterwards, Paul goes on to say:

Consider the people of Israel; are not those who eat the sacrifices partners (*koinonoî*) in the altar?²

And then he makes the same point about those in Corinth who participate in the varied religious rites of that cosmopolitan city.³ So *koinonia* is a word which can apply both to the relationships which people have with one another and to the relationships which they have with the divine, whether they are Christians, Jews or pagans. What does it mean?

Koinonia is sometimes translated 'fellowship', and certainly that captures what we could call the 'horizontal' dimension of its meaning, the relationships between humans within a community. Indeed, as Paul goes on to criticise the Corinthian Christians for failing to organise themselves in a fair and reverent way when they come together for Communion, he emphasises the damage which is being done to the community when there are divisions (*schismata*) in the church. As we reflect on the history of the Eucharist, over the past half millennium in particular, it is tragic that this great means of grace which is given to build up our unity should itself have become a bitterly contested source of division among us. One of our hopes for the Church of England at

1. 1 Cor 10.16-17.

2. 1 Cor 10.18.

3. 1 Cor 10.20 - partners (*koinonoî*) with demons

present must be that we can hold together our differing views of the Eucharist without creating further divisions among ourselves.

But alongside the 'horizontal' there is also the 'vertical' dimension of *koinonia*, the sense of participating in something greater than the human; for Paul, this is seen among Jews and pagans as well as Christians. In fact, horizontal and vertical belong together: *koinonia*, meaning 'having something in common (*koinon*)' brings people together precisely because they share in something greater than themselves. The Revd Professor Loveday Alexander expresses this indissolubly double direction of participation clearly when she says:

Sharing implies *sociality*: those we share with become our partners in a common enterprise. But it also has an object: we are sharing in something outside ourselves, not simply focused on fellowship for the sake of it. A *koinonia* is not simply a social club but a partnership with a common purpose.⁴

For Christians, of course, the reality in whom the horizontal and vertical dimensions come together is Jesus Christ, and communion in Christ is the fullest expression we can have of *koinonia*. As we share in the Body of Christ who unites us with the life of the God whom we know as Trinity, we also share in the Body of Christ which is the fellowship of the Church. I have been speaking in the present tense, but this *koinonia* also reaches backwards and forwards in time. The themes of 'remembering' and of 'anticipation' will be among those explored by my colleagues later in this series; for now, I just want to point out that Paul's discussion of the Eucharist in 1 Cor 10 follows on from his account in the same chapter of the people of Israel passing through the sea and into the wilderness, where:

All ate the same spiritual food, and all drank the same spiritual drink. (10.3-4)

As the Lord's Supper reaches back to Passover, and as Jewish tradition teaches that all generations of Israel, past, contemporary and future, were present at Sinai,⁵ so the eucharistic *koinonia* incorporates us in the living past of the Church and in its future.

What does this act of incorporation look like in practice? It is a simple act of eating and drinking together. Like our own word 'common', *koinos* means not only 'shared together' but also 'general' or 'ordinary':⁶ it is everyday bread and wine which are the

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4. Presentation to the College of Bishops' Study Day, 'Holy Communion in 2020', October 2020.
 5. Babylonian Talmud, *Shavu'ot* 39a; those who stood at Mt Sinai, subsequent generations, and future converts are all included in the covenant. Dt 29.14-15 is cited in support of this.
 6. In the New Testament context debate about Jewish food laws, the word *koinos* in this sense is used to translate 'impure' or 'unclean'. There may be a sense of irony when Peter in Acts 10.14 protests that he has 'never eaten anything *koinos*'. He means that he has not violated *kashrut*

means by which *koinonia* is built up. Moreover, Paul emphasises that it is both bread and wine together that contribute to this, not just one or the other, as his couplet of rhetorical questions shows:

The cup of blessing that we bless, is it not a sharing in the blood of Christ? The bread that we break, is it not a sharing in the body of Christ? (10.16)

Throughout the history of the Church, eating one bread and drinking from one cup has been at the same time a way of being united with God in Christ and a powerful destroyer of barriers of race, caste and culture. The second dimension was powerfully underlined in a sermon by Bishop Michael Curry at his inauguration as Presiding Bishop of the Episcopal Church in 2015. He told the story of a black couple attending an episcopal church for the first time together in the 1940s, long before desegregation in many parts of the United States; they were the only black people in that church. At communion, the woman got up and took her place at the altar rail; the man watched from his pew to see what would happen. The priest gave the bread to her, as he had expected; but he had not anticipated what happened next. When the cup came along the row, he watched in disbelief as it was first offered to his fiancée, and then the very same cup was given to the person next to her. Years later that same man talked about why he had become an Episcopalian. He said that it was because what he saw that day was not something he could ever have imagined he would see in America. To quote him: 'Any church where blacks and whites drink out of the same cup knows something about the gospel I want to be a part of'.⁷

So, at the heart of the Church's life is this powerful statement of the Eucharist as what we do and who we are in relationship to one another and to God: as we share in one bread broken and one cup shared, we belong at the deepest level to one another because we belong together to God in Christ. As we receive the Body of Christ we are built up as the Body of Christ. This is the practice and understanding of *koinonia* which Paul presented to the Christians at Corinth, with all their tendencies to division and schism; and it is the vision of *koinonia* held out still to us today in the the Church of England, which is not without its divisions.

I believe that this is a vision which we can all share. However, our immediate reality is that our practice of eucharistic *koinonia* has been seriously affected by the effects of

laws, but by that he distances himself from the fullness of a fellowship which embraces Gentiles as well as Jews.

7. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8fRMUxCmzSE> (from 30 minutes in). I am grateful to The Revd Simon Jones for drawing my attention to this narrative.

the COVID pandemic and the restrictions which have accompanied that. In fact, you could say that it is precisely because we lay such emphasis on the horizontal dimension of *koinonia*, of sharing physically with one another in bread and cup, that our sacramental practice is vulnerable to health regulations which have required geographical separation at some times and social distancing at all times. I want now to talk about this in two contexts: the impact on what we have learned to call ‘in person’ services of Holy Communion; and the question of online celebrations of the Eucharist. In both, we could approach the questions involved as problems to be negotiated or legislated for; certainly we need to find credible ways of holding together to make sure that our different approaches do not reanimate old conflicts from the past, or create new ones. But we can also see these challenges as opportunities to reflect more deeply on the Eucharist and to value more highly the *koinonia* it creates.

(A). Firstly, on occasions when we are able to gather in person for celebrations of the Eucharist our *koinonia* is clearly affected by the withholding of the common cup, which has been in place since March 2020.⁸ This has of course taken place for reasons of public health, and it is a restriction which is likely to remain for some time even when other regulations are lightened or removed. There are at least three ways in which those committed to continuing celebrations of the Eucharist have responded to this challenge to *koinonia*.

(1) The most straightforward approach, and the most commonly followed at present, is for all to receive ‘in one kind’ only. In the current circumstances, it is still perfectly possible to administer Holy Communion safely in the form of bread, and the Church of England’s liturgy makes clear that those who from necessity receive in this way only are still able to receive the full blessings of the sacrament as they ‘feed on Christ by faith with thanksgiving’.⁹

8. The cup is of course not withheld from all, but from all except the person presiding. Some other responses should be noted here. In some churches, either no wine is used or nobody receives from the cup; but it is difficult to consider either of these as being truly a service of Holy Communion. In some other churches, a person other than the president has been designated as the sole person to drink from the cup; but this seems to introduce an unnecessary complication into the organisation of the service, and does not follow the guidance set out in either the *Book of Common Prayer* or *Common Worship*. In any case, the significant point from the perspective of *koinonia* is that the practice of more than one person drinking from one cup is suspended in current circumstances.

9. *Notes to the Celebration of Holy Communion at Home or in Hospital* in *Common Worship: Pastoral Services* – the same provision applies to those who can only receive the sacrament in the form of wine when for health reasons they cannot take solid food.

This position might seem surprising for some Anglicans, who would point to the restoration of the cup to the laity as one of the important ways in which the Reformation redressed abuses of the late medieval church. Certainly, as far as I am aware, nobody in the Church of England would argue that communion in one kind is anything more than a temporary measure necessitated by the current situation; the *XXXIX Articles* make clear that:

The Cup of the Lord is not to be denied to the Lay-people: for both the parts of the Lord's Sacrament, by Christ's ordinance and commandment, ought to be ministered to all Christian men alike.¹⁰

However, I am confident that, in a necessity where communion in both kinds cannot be practised, there are sound theological grounds for believing that receiving the consecrated bread alone confers the same benefits to us, because of the teaching of 'concomitance'. This doctrine formulated by the medieval church was never formally affirmed by the post-Reformation Church of England; but nor was it denied as some medieval teachings were, and that is not surprising since it follows from our core beliefs about Our Lord Jesus Christ. 'Concomitance' literally means 'something existing or occurring together with something else'. In the context of the Eucharist, it is rightly taken to imply that the body and blood of Christ cannot be separated between the bread and the wine respectively; but this is only a consequence of the deeper truth it expresses, that the whole humanity of the risen Christ is indivisible, and inseparable from his divinity.¹¹ We could even see concomitance as an example of *koinonia* on a Christological level, the mutual sharing of God and humanity effected by the mystery of the Incarnation and set out afresh in every Eucharist.

(2) Nevertheless, I recognise that there will be those who are not satisfied even on a temporary basis with communion in one kind as an expression of *koinonia*. Mindful of the Reformation insistence on restoring the cup to the laity, they may be uncomfortable with arrangements that appear to privilege clergy; more importantly, they may wish to find a more evident way of being obedient to the Lord's command: 'Drink from it, all of you.'¹² Acknowledging this desire, our archbishops have

10. *Article XXX*, 'Of both kinds'. Legally, this is reinforced by the Sacrament Act of 1547 (still in force). An Opinion of the General Synod's Legal Advisory Commission (October 2020) has set out the view that the Act's general provisions are exempted in case of necessity such as the current pandemic.

11. St Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, 3a, 76.2, 'Whether the whole Christ is contained under each species of this sacrament?'

12. Mt 26.27. Mk 14.23 describes the apostles drinking from one cup without a command from the Lord. In Lk 22,17, the command to share relates to the first cup (before dinner) not the cup of

commended, to those for whom this seems right, a form of 'Simultaneous Administration' of bread and wine, through giving communicants consecrated bread which has been dipped in the consecrated wine of the one cup.¹³ This delivers the sacrament in both kinds; it could be described as a form of 'drinking' at the same time as 'eating';¹⁴ it preserves one of the signs of *koinonia* by using a common cup in which the bread is dipped; and it is safe; but it will not commend itself to all.

(3) So, naturally the question has arisen in this pandemic, whether we cannot go further, by allowing communion to be delivered in both kinds through administering wine in small individual cups to each communicant, as is common practice in some of our ecumenical partner churches. There continues to be strong resistance to such a change in the Church of England, as well as passionate advocacy for it. Those opposed to the idea point out that this could be seen as a drastic curtailment of the horizontal dimension of *koinonia* which the common cup symbolizes. For example, the individualisation of the sacrament which it involves would undercut the powerful witness to unity in Christ breaking down all barriers which was so powerfully described by Bishop Michael Curry in the story I mentioned earlier. On the other hand, those arguing for a change point out that a degree of individualisation has already taken place in churches which use small hosts to administer the consecrated bread, rather than all receiving portions from the breaking of one bread.¹⁵

There is some force in this, and my own strong preference is indeed to administer the consecrated bread to communicants by dividing a loaf or large hosts, so that all receive bread which has been broken. However, the fact that the expression of *koinonia* has been weakened in the administration of one species does not seem to me a good argument for weakening it further in the administration of the other. On a practical level, it is also the case that a change in the current practice of the Church of England, to allow for the introduction of small cups, would probably require a lengthy legislative process, and it does not feel to me that that would be time or energy well

the Lord's blood. Paul's account of the Lord's words in 1 Cor 11.25 does not explicitly refer to sharing the cup.

13. Available on the Church of England website,

<https://www.churchofengland.org/sites/default/files/2021-01/COVID%2019%20Receiving%20HC%20by%20simultaneous%20administration%20v1.2.pdf>.

14. Cf. Mt 27.48, par. Mk 15.36 for a NT example of 'drinking' through something infused with wine.

15. The point is also sometimes made that at celebrations of the Eucharist with large number of communicants it has for long been the custom to use multiple chalices, so the idea of a common cup is already undercut. However, the invariable pattern on such occasions is for each chalice to be shared by one more than one communicant, so none are vessels for exclusively individual use.

spent in our current situation. Rather than focusing on law and regulation, though, I hope that we can see the challenges that we face as a reminder of the central place of *koinonia* in our understanding and practice of the Eucharist: in this meal, we never take anything for ourselves, but always receive that which is given to us all to be shared; and in so doing we are built up in communion with Christ.

(B). Another major area in which the pandemic has had a major impact on our practice of Holy Communion has been the remarkable growth in online worship seen in so many of our churches. This has taken different forms and used different platforms – for example: broadcasting of recorded services; livestreaming of worship using unidirectional media such as Facebook or YouTube; and celebration of liturgy on video-conferencing sites such as Zoom. Each of these brings its own particular opportunities and challenges, but as we move towards the interactive end of the spectrum in particular there has been a strong sense in many places that technology is making possible new forms of *koinonia* within churches, with a particular emphasis on the horizontal dimension of human inter-relationship. One especially important aspect of this has been the way in which it has enabled the inclusion on an equal basis of people such as those who are housebound, those who have a disability, and others for whom physical attendance in churches was previously difficult. Zoom has also in a significant sense abolished distance, and some churches have found their geographical reach expand dramatically. For some of us at Easter 2020, coming to terms for the first time with the potential of all this, the words of St Athanasius were prophetic:

The miracle of God's kindness lies in this: that he brings together to this feast of Easter those who are far off; and those who are separated in the body he makes spiritually close by the unity of faith.¹⁶

Athanasius wrote those words in 333 AD, but they ring true today of our online worship in general, of online celebrations of the Eucharist in particular. There is a real sense in which we can speak in our own time of a technology-enabled *koinonia*, which Paul could not have anticipated but which he would surely have recognized as a 'coming together' of the church:

When services of Holy Communion are broadcast live (whether live-streamed or through videoconferencing), those who tune in are participating in a real Eucharistic assembly.¹⁷

16. Athanasius, *Fest, Ep. V, 2*.

17. House of Bishops Working Group, 'Holy Communion in 2020', 18. A note adds that whilst services might be pre-recorded for practical reasons, the practice of making recordings of

So our experience over the last year has been that what I have called the 'horizontal' dimension of *koinonia* can be more or less sustained over Zoom; but what of the vertical dimension which is inseparably linked to it? This raises the question about the possibility of spiritual participation in an online Eucharist. Clearly, it is not possible for those joining from different places to eat and drink physically from the same bread and cup. That being so, there seem to me to be two possible ways in which participation might be provided: either through eating or drinking from different breads and cups, or by finding a way of participation which does not involve physical consumption of the elements.

(1) The first of these alternatives would involve people bringing bread and wine to their own computer screens to eat and drink at the same time as others to whom they are virtually linked but from whom they are geographically separated. My sense is that this would be interpreted differently by different Christians according to their differing theologies of the Eucharist. For example, those who take Holy Communion as simply an enacted memorial of Jesus' death and resurrection, and their consumption of the bread and wine as a way of reminding themselves of that, will see little difficulty in extending that to the online world. Eating and drinking at the same time as their separated fellow believers could be a powerful and moving evocation of the narrative of redemption that binds them together. For those who understand the consecration of the bread and wine to be for us the Body and Blood of Christ in a more realistic sense, though, the challenges are obviously greater. Is it possible in some way and in some circumstances to understand consecration as being effected in the online context? The case for this is vigorously made by The Revd Professor Richard Burridge in a forthcoming book in which he argues that it can happen if there is a shared intention among those participating to celebrate the Eucharist, with an ordained priest as president.¹⁸ On the other hand, many strongly repudiate all suggestions for sharing bread and wine in these ways, on the grounds that the depth of *koinonia* which is brought into being by physical sharing in one bread and cup simply cannot be replicated in geographical dispersal.

services of Holy Communion is distinct from live broadcasts, and it affords different opportunities for participation.

18. Richard Burridge, *Holy Communion in Contagious Times* (forthcoming). Burridge develops the idea of a 'zone of intention, which he already sees as implicit in the use of many vessels for bread and wine at large in person eucharistic gatherings, especially where many of these are physically remote from the altar; he argues that there is no logical reason for not extending this 'zone' miles rather than yards.

(2) Alternatively, we can ask if there are ways of participating in a eucharistic assembly that do not involve physically consuming the consecrated bread and wine. This question may at first seem rather odd: surely, we think, it is obvious that the only way to participate in a communion service is to take communion. Indeed this has been one of the great emphases of the Liturgical Movement of the last century, and any other approach can feel like exclusion. Nevertheless, there are many situations today in which people can have a sense of participating in the Eucharist without physically communicating, and there have been many more in the course of Christian history. For example: I have often been at a Roman Catholic mass, unable to receive the sacrament because of the discipline of that Church, yet with a strong sense of participating in the offering of worship; children not yet admitted to communion and adults preparing for confirmation can be strongly involved in communion services in which they do not physically consume the elements; many would agree with that great Anglican John Wesley that the Lord's Supper is a 'converting ordinance',¹⁹ and for those converts who are not yet communicants that must imply some means of real participation that does not involve actual reception of communion.

What all these situations have in common is a strong attitude of desire: those who, for whatever reason, cannot physically communicate are nonetheless reaching out to the presence of Jesus in the sacrament with a heartfelt longing. It is this attitude which lies at the heart of the practice of spiritual communion, which has become an important way for many to experience a real means of participation in the Eucharist. The idea of spiritual communion is widely found in Roman Catholic tradition as a way for the devout to associate themselves with celebration of Mass when, for whatever reason, they are not able to receive the sacrament;²⁰ but it is also clearly presented in the *Book of Common Prayer*:

If a man ... by any just ... impediment do not receive the Sacrament of Christ's Body and Blood, the Curate shall instruct him, that if he do truly repent him of his sins, and stedfastly believe ... earnestly remembering the benefits he hath thereby, and giving him hearty thanks therefore, he doth eat and drink the Body and Blood of our Saviour

19. John Wesley, 'Sermon on Holy Communion', June 1740. Wesley was speaking of the 'conversion' of nominally communicant Anglicans through receiving the sacrament, but his logic reaches further.

20. Cf. John Paul II, Encyclical Letter (2003) *Ecclesia de Eucharistia*, 34 This could be as a result of sickness or other causes of separation from mass, but it could also be because of prior reception of the sacrament at another mass on the same day – Francis Costa, 'Nature and effects of spiritual communion', in *Proceedings of the Catholic Theological Society of America*, XIII (St Paul, 1958).

Christ profitably to his Soul's health, although he do not receive the Sacrament with his mouth.²¹

It has been the experience of many in lockdown that participation through an 'Act of Spiritual Communion', particularly when associated with an online celebration of the Eucharist, can be a means to share in both the horizontal and the vertical dimensions of the *koinonia* in Christ which Holy Communion creates for us. There is much to explore and reflect on here, including the provision of services in which some communicate physically in person while others make a spiritual communion online. I sincerely hope we can do all that learning together in ways that honour our differences, as a source of mutual enrichment for us all, within the eucharistic *koinonia* of our diocese and of the Church of England.

21. *BCP*, 'Order for Visitation of the Sick and the Communion thereof'. The same teaching is repeated in *Common Worship: Pastoral Services*.