

# HOLY TRINITY, PRESTWOOD AND ST. MARY MAGDALENE, GREAT HAMPDEN

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## **Eucharistic Worship during the COVID-19 pandemic**

This document discusses Eucharistic worship in the benefice until all COVID-19 restrictions have been lifted.

### **Background**

1. The circumstances we face are unique. The Church of England issued emergency guidance about public health that had a profound effect on the celebration of the Eucharist. Public worship has been suspended, churches closed, and people cannot mix.
2. The CofE did not provide robust theological guidance about the Eucharist alongside its public health guidance. It was an emergency reaction to a public health crisis.
3. Subsequently a lot has been written about the circumstances of the Eucharist during the COVID-19 pandemic. Surprisingly, in the Church of England Eucharistic practice seems to have become something of a matter of conscience. There is a wide variety of practice and a lot has been written both defending and attacking different theological points of view.
4. This benefice suspended Eucharistic worship when the lockdown began. (and we have live-streamed ante-communion on Sundays before the diocesan live-streamed communion service since then.) This is because:
  - a. It was presented as an appropriate response, with the Bishops making provision for it through the relevant canons.
  - b. Celebrating the Eucharist would have entailed the priest presiding without a congregation, and alone, which is not in accordance with the rubrics etc. of the BCP or mainstream Anglican ecclesiology and theology.

- c. Inviting a scattered congregation to observe the Eucharist solely online without a robust theology of the extent and nature of everyone's participation would be a novelty that we did not feel we should rush in to.
- d. The restrictions were thought to be very temporary.

### **The Current Position**

- 5. There is currently a wide range of practice. For parishes like Holy Trinity, Prestwood, where the Eucharist is essential to our self-understanding as a Christian community, there are probably three possible strands of practice roughly categorised in these ways:
  - a. **Exile** is where the Eucharist is suspended until the gathered community can meet again as it did before. The theology of this position is, very coarsely, Jesus said "Do this, all of you, in remembrance of me." Until the congregation of the faithful, in a general sense, can once again do it in remembrance of him we cannot do it at all—and those that can should not in solidarity with those that can't.
  - b. **Remote Celebration** is where the community gathers, each in their own homes, with the Eucharistic elements of bread and wine to hand. The elements are considered consecrated in each place by either the remote action of the presiding priest or by a sort of concelebration alongside the presiding priest in the remotely gathered congregation of the people. Some would argue that whilst this is not a Eucharist, it is the best we can do in the times, and we should therefore do it.
  - c. **Spiritual Communion** is a middle way where observing a Eucharist remotely online, and engaging with the liturgy by listening, singing, making responses as if one were there, is considered to convey the full benefit of the sacrament. This is because i) there is no other way for the person to access the sacrament; and ii) where a person cannot physically consume the bread and wine the BCP (in its rubrics for The Communion of the Sick) allows that a person who cannot consume the Bread and Wine should be reassured they still receive the full benefit of

them<sup>1</sup>. The argument is that the current restrictions prevent us from consuming the sacraments in the same way as if we were physically unable to eat or drink, therefore this provision applies.

6. These are rough sketches of well-argued positions, some of which have been explored before, particularly in ecumenical Eucharistic debate. But essentially they are ways of trying to get around a new problem in a new way.
  - a. There are always times when some people could not attend church and we did not suspend communion because of them.
  - b. There have been many times when a priest was not available to preside at a Eucharist. It has not been the practice of the church for another priest in another place to consecrate the elements by holding them in mind, or saying words at the same time as others, or by video link. It is hard to imagine what a Eucharistic theology would look like that relied on the internet to be efficacious<sup>2</sup>.
7. Spiritual Communion is probably the most common of the three, partly perhaps because it meets our needs (participation in the sacrament) in a practically achievable way (the priest at home with a camera at home or in church, presiding alone or with a family member).
8. Does this approach give us full participation in the sacrament? In any normal circumstances the answer has to be no. The congregation of the people do not eat the bread and wine, they watch and see it being eaten by another. They observe it being consumed, and not in extreme peril of their lives, but comfortably at home. In as much as it is consumed, it is consumed by the priest (and anyone with the priest) alone. It is not the equitable experience of a shared meal. And so the experience of the priest and the people in the main Sunday Act of Worship is fractured between one who truly participates and others who observe. Much has

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.churchofengland.org/prayer-and-worship/worship-texts-and-resources/book-common-prayer/communion-sick>

<sup>2</sup> An interesting question is raised by comparing the idea of Remote Blessing/Absolution with Remote Baptism. Blessing and absolution, the action of which is usually performed at a physical distance, is much easier to understand in online worship than say a Remote Baptism, where the priest saying words of blessing over a phone line or across the internet would be sufficient to bless the water in the bathtub and baptise the individual. Of course, baptism in an emergency does not require a priest at all. Are the current circumstances an emergency and we should forget about all this and “get on with it”? If they are to last a considerable length of time does that make a difference to how we should act?

been written over the centuries as to why this is a problem! One of the drivers of the Reformation was communion by the clergy in the Sanctuary only, observed by the people in church.

9. In thinking about this in our own day, an illustration will help. When it snowed last year we took a last minute decision to live stream the Eucharist. Those that made it through the snow were in church, those who didn't watched at home. We did not think at the time those at home were doing the same thing as those in church—they weren't, they were watching. It was the best they could do in the circumstances. It provided singing, prayer, scripture and sermon, and those at home were truly worshipping alongside those in church. But those at home were observing the Eucharist whilst those in church were participating in it. The little jokes at the end confirmed this. "I'll stay in bed next week!", etc., because everyone knew it wasn't in fact the same.
10. Is this 'Spiritual Communion' the best we can do? It is certainly better than nothing, but it raises all the same questions as were raised at the Reformation. If people are going to be prevented from gathering together (in a church or elsewhere) for a long time we need to make sure we are doing the best we can to give them the fullest access to sacramental worship. Are we right to just consider this form of 'spiritual communion' as truly conferring the full benefit of the sacrament because of the circumstances, or should we admit that it does not and see if there is something else which, whilst also imperfect, is better?

### **'Church-going' in the near future**

11. Now let's turn to what 'church life' might be like for us in the months to come. For the foreseeable future 'church-going' at Holy Trinity is going to be very different to how it used to be.
12. For as long as social distancing measures are in force, the maximum capacity of Holy Trinity church is somewhere between 10-20 people<sup>3</sup>.
13. For as long as vulnerable people are advised to shield or self-isolate we must presume a large proportion of our worshipping community will have to remain in their homes.

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<sup>3</sup> Based on 2m distance between any two people.

14. Whilst it is nice that the church is available in a limited way, we should remember that any worship, including the Eucharist, can take place anywhere. Jesus tells us, "But the hour comes, and now is, when the true worshipers shall worship the Father in spirit and in truth: for the Father seeks such to worship him. God is a Spirit: and they that worship him must worship him in spirit and in truth."<sup>4</sup> However special a church building may be, its specialness is derived only from its capacity to help us approach God.
15. But the canons of the Church of England and the BCP presuppose that the Eucharist will be celebrated in a church, and their provisions require it to be so. Canon B14 1 begins "The Holy Communion shall be celebrated in every parish church at least on all Sundays...".
16. A consequence of moving to online worship, live streamed across Facebook and our website, has been a renewed sense of mission and engagement across a wide section of the community, and we don't want to lose this.
17. We have also worked hard to build a community around our online worship, encouraging engagement, hearing and seeing different people in our worship, and sharing Zoom coffee afterwards. This has been well received.
18. For a number of weeks alongside our actively streamed online worship there was a second feed: a 24/7 live stream from the chancel, as an aid for private devotion under the tag line *You can't come to your church, but your church can come to you*. This was focussed on the altar and the tabernacle. It was taken down for purely operational reasons of not wishing to leave the equipment running when no one could enter the building.
19. There has been no eucharistic element to our worship since Mothering Sunday, and this has been very painful to many, particularly over the Easter season.
20. Now one person (and people from their household) is allowed in the church for prayer and to worship, including streaming worship. Over time we expect this to include more people, but there is no timescale and we

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<sup>4</sup> John 4.23

must be prepared for the lockdown to continue in some form for the foreseeable future.

21. What is the best balance that we can achieve to meet the different strengths and weaknesses we have identified?

### **Exposition and Benediction**

22. There is another tradition of Eucharistic worship that can offer us a different way to participate together at a distance and through the internet.
23. In Anglican tradition where the bread and wine is *reserved*, that is held over after communion, it is usually in order to provide communion for the sick and housebound.<sup>5</sup>
24. *Exposition* is the practice of praying before the consecrated communion bread that has been reserved. *Benediction* follows exposition and is the practice of being blessed, typically by the priest holding the consecrated bread in a suitable receptacle (often called a monstrance). It is a particularly Roman Catholic practice, but it has a history in the Church of England, and at Holy Trinity, Prestwood was a regular feature of our worship up until the 1980s.
25. It is not a novelty. It has a long history as a way of strengthening the bond between Christ and his people through the sacramental presence. There is a body of theology underpinning it.<sup>6</sup>
26. In the past it became a rite that sometimes clouded rather than revealed its central purpose. It became associated with particular prayers and doctrines (such as the Assumption of the Blessed Virgin Mary) that were contentious, and the danger is that it loses focus and slips towards superstition, where the thing venerated, the sacred bread, captured in a large and ornate housing, replaces the true object of our devotion, Christ made present and real to us through his body and blood, shared with us as bread and wine in the Eucharistic presence.

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<sup>5</sup> In time this may become the way in which many if not most of our worshipping community first come to receive communion directly again. But we are not there yet and it is unclear when or if we ever will be.

<sup>6</sup> Here's an example: "Prayer before the Lord present in the sacramental food reserved from Mass extends the union which we have reached with him in Holy Communion. It renews the covenant which in turn moves to seek to maintain in our lives what we have received by faith and the sacraments. We are encouraged to try to lead our whole lives with the strength derived from the heavenly food, as we share in the death and resurrection of the Lord." *Exposition of the Holy Eucharist: A guide for celebration*, <https://www.liturgyoffice.org.uk/Resources/HCW/Exposition-Guide.pdf> p.2

27. However, this need not be the case, and prayer before the sacrament is a recognised part of devotional life in many places and times. Monasteries and religious houses often encourage it, either silently or liturgically. It is the focus of our three hour vigil on Maundy Thursday.<sup>7</sup>
28. Holy Trinity reserves the sacrament in a tabernacle (central to the chancel and behind the altar) rather than an aumbry (on the side of the chancel or chapel) as a consequence of this history of Eucharistic devotion.
29. So we have this tradition of Eucharistic devotion derived from our shared Eucharistic life. “Liturgies of the Holy Eucharist outside Mass (*Communion*) must carefully express the prime importance of the Mass, and not obscure the principal feature of the Eucharist, that it is food for the Christian faithful. ‘Exposition invites us to the spiritual union with him that culminates in sacramental communion.’ Thus it fosters very well the worship which is due to Christ in spirit and in truth.”<sup>8</sup>
30. Where the Christian faithful cannot directly receive communion, might we not be better off admitting that that the full benefit of our shared sacramental meal is not available to us? That we cannot do as Jesus asked and eat this bread and drink this wine in remembrance of him? And then do our best to provide a way to share in the sacramental life of the church that is participatory and equitable rather than observational and hierarchical?
31. Incorporating exposition into our current pattern of worship once the celebration of the Eucharist is resumed might be a good way for all of us—priest and people alike—to share equally in the sacrament of the Eucharist in our main Sunday act of Online Worship until we really can do again as Jesus intended.

### **A way to Feed us**

32. The issuance of the government’s plan “Our plan to rebuild: The UK Government’s COVID-19 recovery strategy”<sup>9</sup> gives us a sense of where

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<sup>7</sup> 1. for the last few years we have routinely live-streamed the vigil, with the camera focussed on the ciborium containing the sacrament).

<sup>8</sup> Ibid, p.3

<sup>9</sup> <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/our-plan-to-rebuild-the-uk-governments-covid-19-recovery-strategy>

we are headed, and seems a good moment to change our approach from *respond to the crisis* to *plan for the future*, at least in the medium term. We have had some time to think.

33. We should reinstate the celebration of the Eucharist in the benefice as soon as we can, in whatever form we can, albeit imperfect by reduced participation and maybe even by the priest presiding alone, but an observed rite will not, in itself, nurture the people of God.
34. We should seek to retain what is good about what we have discovered over the last few weeks. There has been a real sense of the Spirit moving within our church community—in social action, care of the vulnerable and each other, and not least in our online worship. We have noticed what God is doing and have tried our best to join in.
35. How do we build a sustainable pattern of worship that gives as many of us as possible the fullest expression of Christian life that we are able, holding on to what is good and encouraging equal participation?
36. A way forward might be:
  - a. Reinstate the 24/7 live feed from the chancel.
  - b. Reinstate a weekly Eucharist from the church, at 8am on a Sunday. (*Note location is largely for practical reasons, though the significance of the space is not to be undervalued*).
  - c. This Eucharist would be available on the 24/7 live stream. Anyone could join in the liturgy and join in the prayers, and it would be a comfort and a benefit as an act of worship. But we would not stream it on Facebook as an act of corporate Online Worship, it would not be done 'to camera', i.e. the priest would not attempt to interact with anyone watching on the stream, and it would not replace or compete with our main Sunday act of Online Worship.
  - d. At the end of the Eucharist, and following the guidance in *Exposition of the Holy Eucharist: A guide for celebration*, the altar would be left as for the communion with the candles lit. The reserved sacrament would be left exposed on the altar.
  - e. The Sunday morning Online Worship would follow at 9.30am as usual, and would culminate in a short time of exposition, where the scene cuts to the live stream of the chancel and the altar



with the sacrament on it. Worshippers would be invited to make that their 'spiritual communion', and maybe a piece of music is played (such as a modern setting of the Tantum Ergo), and appropriate prayer is offered.

- f. Immediately following this the blessing is given, and the service formally ends with the dismissal, followed as usual by Zoom coffee.
- g. Following that, the altar is cleared and the sacrament is placed in the tabernacle.<sup>10</sup>

37. Some practical points:

- a. Current [Oxford Diocesan Guidance](#) requires us to appoint one person for each church in the benefice to enter that church building. This would most likely have been the Rector, in any case, and will better facilitate this programme of worship.
- b. We would incorporate this without extending the overall length of our Sunday morning Online Worship (see the [Everybody Welcome Online report](#) for why this is important.)
- c. From a Health and Safety perspective we would mitigate the risk of leaving unattended candles in church by detailing someone to monitor the live stream whilst the church is unattended who would alert the Rector to any incident.

38. This provides us with a sustainable and flexible way to provide the fullest form of Eucharistic participation in our worship whilst maintaining the good model we have developed over the course of the crisis so far.

39. It provides us with a truly shared experience between clergy and laity in our Online Worship that unites us in our experience of the Risen Christ.

40. It gives us all a sense of participation in the Eucharist even though we cannot do that which Jesus instructed us, eat and drink together in remembrance of him.

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<sup>10</sup> This fits in with and we would follow this guidance from *Exposition of the Holy Eucharist: A guide for celebration*, p.3 "The connection between Mass and Exposition can be demonstrated by sometimes beginning the time of exposition directly after the Mass. In this case the Host for exposition should be consecrated in the Mass which immediately precedes the Exposition and after Communion should be placed in the monstrance on the altar. The Mass ends with the Prayer after Communion, and the Concluding Rites are omitted. Even where this practice is not adopted it is important to ensure that the host used for Exposition is regularly replaced by a host newly consecrated. The 'old' host should be broken and placed in the ciborium for the distribution of Holy Communion to the sick, or on other occasions outside Mass."

41. As he prepared to leave his disciples Jesus said, "If you love me, you will keep my commandments. And I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Advocate, to be with you for ever. This is the Spirit of truth." In everything we do during this crisis we are doing our best to keep his commandments, as are all church communities. In all of this we rely on the guidance of the Spirit of truth, the Holy Spirit, who is with us always.