

PASTOR'S CORNER

Plague Journal

From week to week, as the Spirit moves me, I will share with you certain theological reflections concerning the liturgy and its relation to the times we're in.

Please see below a recent blog-article posted to the [First Things](#) website. It is written on the topic of my immediately prior Plague Journal which dealt with the connection between the celebration of the liturgy and the reception of Holy Communion. Please note that this week during his Zoom conference with his Priests Archbishop Sample made it clear that reception of Holy Communion in the parking lot or even a "parking lot" Mass are not allowable. Thank God!

A Wafer-Thin Practice
by Hans Boersma 5 . 12 . 20

Who would have thought that a virus would make us reflect deeply on what it means to be the church? Yet COVID-19 has brought into sharp relief the basic divide in North American Christianity between those who think of the church as a voluntary association of like-minded individuals and those who believe it is the real body of Christ, into which we are incorporated. The emphasis on the individual in large swaths of contemporary culture results in an anemic ecclesiology, as the recent crisis makes clear.

John Williamson Nevin, one of the key representatives of German Reformed Mercersburg theology, sharply attacked the revivalism of his day, commenting in his 1849 article on "The Sect System": "The sect mind . . . in proportion as it has come to be unchurchly and simply private and individual is always necessarily to the same extent unsacramental."

Abraham Kuyper, the great Dutch Reformed theologian and statesman, observed in his 1898 *Lectures on Calvinism* that "Calvinism, by praising aloud liberty of conscience, has in principle abandoned every absolute characteristic of the visible Church." He described it as "a liberty of conscience, which enables every man to serve God according to his own conviction and the dictates of his own heart."

Baptist theologian Curtis Freeman, in his 2014 book *Contesting Catholicity*, similarly laments "soul competency"—the radical emphasis on individual conscience—which, beginning in the nineteenth century, has come to dominate Baptist theology.

Nevin, Kuyper, and Freeman all share the same concern about the inversion of the relationship between the church and the believer.

The Internet has been abuzz lately about virtual communion: Why not have the priest do his thing in front of the camera, while we partake by ourselves looking into the screen—with social distance serving as one of the few remaining ritual demands? Why forgo the heavenly manna now that we have the technological know-how to make it rain down virtually into the privacy of our homes?

The Jesuit patristic scholar Henri de Lubac has a few things to teach us about virtual communion in his 1947 book *Catholicism*. It is a lengthy broadside against individualism in the Catholic tradition. It may seem odd for a Catholic—especially a pre-Vatican II Catholic—to worry about people prioritizing the individual over the church. But he did, and his worries are eerily relevant to the rush toward virtual communion among today’s tech-savvy evangelicals.

De Lubac was troubled by a Eucharistic individualism that he believed had shaped the mindset of many of his Catholic contemporaries. Convinced as they were that the body of Christ in the Eucharist was the true body (*corpus verum*), all that seemed to matter was to partake. Once the miraculous medicine of immortality had been ingested, one might as well turn back down the aisle and walk out of church, for the one and only reason for going to Mass had now been performed. De Lubac was agitated, rightly I think, with the individualism—yes, the selfish consumerism and greed—in this Eucharistic spirituality.

The underlying premise of the embrace of virtual communion is that form and matter, media and message can (and perhaps ought to) be disentangled from each other. Our technological age makes its own, unique demands, and so, for many, to insist on eating the body (the Eucharist) *as* a body (the church) betrays unhealthy Luddite technophobia.

De Lubac countered the gnostic demon at work. He asked his readers to think about what it means to eat the body (the Eucharist) as a body (the church), pointing out the close link between embodiment and community. Turning to 1 Corinthians 10:16–17 (“The bread that we break, is it not a participation 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”), de Lubac pointed out that for Saint Paul, participation (*koinōnia*, communion) of the body of Christ (the Eucharist) turns *us* into the body of Christ (the church).

All this talk of the “body of Christ” is no mere metaphor. Saint Augustine, in his famous Sermon 227, writes about the Eucharist: “If you have received worthily, you are what you have received, for the Apostle says: ‘The bread is one; we though many, are one body.’” The African bishop seems to suggest that believers, by partaking of communion, are transubstantiated (well, changed) into the body of Christ. When we eat Christ, we become Christ.

The Christian tradition has typically treated body and body (Eucharist and church) as mutually dependent. On the one hand, the Eucharist makes the church. This seems to be the Pauline logic of 1 Corinthians 10 and of Augustine in Sermon 227. On the other hand, the church makes the

Eucharist: We offer up our gifts—our entire lives—in Christ on the altar. Body and body depend on each other. Neither can go it alone. The reason is simple: The two are one flesh (Eph. 5:31).

Eating and drinking in front of the screen usually indicates a theology of real absence: Neither consecrated bread nor epicletic invocation of the Spirit is required if communion is a mere mental exercise. Indeed, a memorialist communion celebration is virtual by definition, even if it takes place in a church.

Which raises an interesting question: Could we do virtual *consecration*? True, the priest would not be able to put his hand on the bread and the wine on my coffee table at home, but hey, such pesky “manual acts” predate YouTube and Zoom by quite a few centuries, and surely by now they’ve become obstacles that stand in our way? How central could the sense of touch really be?

Come to think of it, why did it take us so long to get with the times? Why limit YouTube to the COVID-19 pandemic? If consecration “works” regardless of place, why set physical foot in the church ever again? Here’s a modest proposal: Let’s have one cleric—we could ask the archbishop of Canterbury or the bishop of Rome—do his consecrating thing, while the rest of us chill in our TV rooms, giving thanks for the great sacrifice. Actually, is it even necessary to turn to the screen for Francis’s latest clip? Surely, watching him elevate the host isn’t of the essence of things, as long as I *know* that he has consecrated also the bread on my plate.

I agree. It’s a gnostic argument *ad absurdum*. But the reason it works is that every step—including the very first one—is an exercise in spirituality that treats the Eucharist as a consumer service satisfying my individual religious demands rather than as the chief act of divine worship through which we’re transfigured so as to become the body of Christ that we eat.

The individualism of pre-Vatican II Catholics is different from that of contemporary evangelicals. The former stems from an over-reliance on real presence: As long as I myself have partaken of the true, Eucharistic body of Christ, I might as well discount the mystical body of the church. The latter is (most of the time) connected to a belief in real absence: If Christ is not bodily present, then our communal, bodily presence can hardly be of significance.

In truth, the bodily presence of Christ in the wafer and the bodily presence of the believers in church are two sides of the same coin. Eucharist via Zoom evacuates the (ecclesial) body even while confecting the (Eucharistic) body. It’s a practice that puts asunder what God has joined together.

Catholic and evangelical expressions of consumerist individualism may be located on opposite sides of the theological spectrum, but both fail to recognize that body and body, Christ and the church, are one and the same. When it comes to prioritizing the individual over the church, the difference is, well, wafer-thin.

Hans Boersma is the Saint Benedict Servants of Christ Professor in Ascetical Theology at Nashotah House