

TEACHING ON “HOLY COMMUNION” IN COVID CONDITIONS

Introduction:

I would like to take a few moments to speak about Holy Communion for Anglicans in Singapore.

We are in the midst of a battle with the COVID-19 pandemic. The battle is far from over. We need to be prepared for the way it unfolds, with our eyes on God.

The pandemic has affected the way Christians gather for worship and discipleship. It has certainly affected our practice of Holy Communion. Under God, I was led as your Diocesan Bishop to suspend the practice of congregational Holy Communion since 4 April this year. I gave weight to the priority of safekeeping lives at a critical time when the whole society needed to join hands to flatten the curve of COVID transmission.

As the crisis evolved to be a longer-term one, I asked Bp-designate Canon Dr Titus Chung to form a Study Team to see how as a Church we can resume the sacrament of Holy Communion in COVID TIMES. Both he and I knew that the people of God need every means of grace, including Holy Communion, for the tough journey before us.

My message to you today is in 3 parts:

- i. Holy Communion as a provision of God.
- ii. The practice in our Diocese.
- iii. The preparation that is needed by God's people.

I. THE PROVISION OF GOD

Holy Communion is a gift of God, instituted by Christ Jesus on the night He was betrayed:
“Do this in remembrance of Me.” (Lk 22:19; 1 Cor 11:24)

- Through Holy Communion, we remember and renew the new Covenant we have with God, that has been established in Christ Jesus.
 - We remember how we, who were once far off in sin, have been brought into a new covenant through the finished work of Jesus Christ on the Cross.
“This cup is the new covenant in My blood.” (1 Cor 11:25, cf Lk 22:20)
 - Our sins are forgiven and we have new life through the gift of the Holy Spirit – new life that goes beyond the grave and spends eternity with God.
 - Through Holy Communion, we remember Jesus' broken body and His shed blood on the Cross for us, and we renew our Covenant to be under His Lordship.
- Through Holy Communion, we bind ourselves to each other as the body of CHRIST. We renew our commitment to Community, to one another-ness (as baptised believers) in the family of God.

Hence, 1 Cor 11:29 calls us “to discern the body” when we partake of Communion.

And we say in our Holy Communion service,

“Though we are many, we are one body because we all share in one bread.”

(derived from 1 Cor 10:16-17)

- And thirdly, through Holy Communion we proclaim to the world Christ's saving work on the Cross.

In 1 Cor 11:26, Paul reminds us:

“For as often as you eat this bread and drink this cup, you proclaim the Lord's death till He comes.”

The Cross is the centre out of which we live our lives. And Holy Communion proclaims that.

COVENANT, COMMUNITY and CHRISTIAN WITNESS

- These three elements we must keep together in our practice of Holy Communion, whatever the form.

Now, what are the spiritual benefits of Holy Communion?

- We can experience the spiritual presence of the risen Lord.
 - It is just like in Lk 24 when the disciples on the road to Emmaus recognised the presence of Jesus when He broke bread.
- We are strengthened by the life of Christ as we receive the bread and wine with faith and thanksgiving.
 - There is nothing magical about the bread and wine. It is your heart believing that through the elements you are receiving the power and grace of Christ's own life.
- We are encouraged because through Holy Communion we anticipate the second coming of Christ to complete the victory of God at the Cross.
 - "We proclaim the Lord's death till He comes." (1 Cor 11:26)
 - We long for the Marriage Feast of the Lamb, which will surely come!

II. THE PRACTICE IN OUR DIOCESE

There are two forms of administering Holy Communion that are sound and that we are accustomed to.

(A) Holy Communion Service in Church or in a Physically Gathered Congregation

- A Service of Thanksgiving led by a Priest, where the elements are consecrated by a Priest and duly distributed by authorised persons from a common table to the congregation that is physically present.

(B) Holy Communion by Extension from a Common Table

- This is where the consecrated elements of bread and wine are taken to people who belong to the congregation but who cannot be physically present at the service. For example, the hospitalised, the home-bound or the elderly who are advised during the COVID pandemic to take the added precaution of staying away from crowds.
- In such cases, the pre-consecrated elements are administered by an authorised pastoral leader of the church (a lay reader, a cell pastor, a member of the pastoral staff)¹ to the recipient(s) in a simple physical, worship setting.

Now, Bp-designate Titus and I, in consultation with a wider band of clergy and senior lay leaders, want to make a temporary, third option available during these COVID times.

You may ask, now that Phase II Resumption allows a congregation of 50 persons to physically assemble, do we need a third Form of administering Holy Communion?

I believe we do for two main reasons:

- First, the pandemic is not over. There can be future spikes and recurrent patterns of circuit-breakers or lockdowns. Access to the sacrament of Holy Communion is important to strengthen the people of God in a time of adversity and uncertainty.
- Second, in the grace of God, we do have in our Diocese large parishes with membership in the thousands. Even with multiple services, the restricted congregation size is going to pose a major challenge to ensure accessibility of Holy Communion to all and to ensure a healthy rhythm to the church's communal life that also matches its resources.

Hence, I want to share with you a needed temporary Provision for this time:
Holy Communion through an ONLINE Service with Good Controls.

(C) ONLINE COMMUNION SERVICE WITH GOOD CONTROLS

What are these 'good controls'?

¹ Such persons should have a licence by the Diocesan Bishop that allows them to administer pre-consecrated Holy Communion elements to the sick, home-bound etc.

Online Communion Service with good controls:

- First, the Online Service will be led by a Priest.
- Second, a congregation that is 'present & connected' by remote means. They are the ones who will partake of the breaking of bread.
- Third, this breaking of bread is a simultaneous breaking of bread by the Priest, different households and small groups.
- Fourth, a suitably designed liturgy.
- Fifth, there will be due preparation for reverent participation.

III. Preparation by God's People

- A Combined Online Communion Service on Sunday, 2 August 2020
 - I want to invite you to a Combined Online Communion Service for the Archdeaconry of Singapore on 2 August.
 - This third option will be new to many people, and understandably several will be guarded.
 - But I want, in addition to teaching about the controls which I believe are in harmony with Scripture, which are guided by good pastoral practice, for which even the Province of South East Asia has given its agreement throughout the Province, I want to show you by example how it can be done in a manner worthy of the Lord.
 - I will need your Vicars and Priest to help to prepare you for this Online Combined Service.
- Spiritual preparation
 - The Preparation entails spiritual preparation. I trust this video will reach you early. We want to anticipate that day.
 - First, we want to prepare ourselves through "Repentance". We are a people broken by the adversity, totally dependent on God. We ask God in times of judgement to remember mercy, and to bring us through. So there is a repentant heart we need to bring.
 - Second, we also need to bring "Longing" because it has been about 3 months since we partook of Holy Communion. The longing to experience that communion with God, that solidarity with one another. We are the people of the risen Lord.
 - Third, we want to be "Expectant". I want to ask you to prepare and to pray for the experience of Christ' spiritual presence as we break bread simultaneously. I want to ask you to pray that there will be renewed joy and strength and hope, as we have that online communion.
- Practical preparation
 - There is also practical preparation. How do you get ready so that it can be meaningful and it have the due reverence? It is the elevated presence of Christ in our midst that we are preparing for.
 - Households and small groups will need to prepare. Think about the elderly who will need help. So, we are gathering small groups to break bread together, including Christians who are alone in their household. Think of how they can be part of a small group. This is because there is a body aspect, a communal aspect of the breaking of bread.
- Evaluation by Vicar/PIC and Parish Leadership team
 - I am going to ask your Vicars and Priest-in-charge, together with your leaders to evaluate. Please give them feedback and they will evaluate the feedback as we introduce this provision for a limited time.

Bishop's Dispensation to address COVID conditions

Let me bring you now to the Bishop's Dispensation.

- It is provided for in the Constitution of our Church that the Bishop can grant a dispensation for practices which are time limited, never contrary to the Word of God, but perhaps not the norm. A dispensation that is needed because of specific situational needs.

- I am preparing myself to grant a dispensation that will allow this third option, and that, will together give you three forms of partaking Holy Communion, to meet the needs of this time.
- This Dispensation that I am proposing will be from 2 August when we have the Combined Online Service, right until the end of October, because in the middle of October, our Bishop-designate will be fully consecrated and installed on 18 October. And then, he can have some time to review.
- The Dispensation is for 3 forms of partaking of Holy Communion:
 - i. Holy Communion Service to a congregation that physically gathers (including mid-week services), and they are limited by measures MCCY and MOH require of us. The size is specified.
 - ii. Holy Communion by Extension from a common table.
 - iii. Holy Communion through an Online Service with good controls.

As I finish, there are a few things to emphasize:

- First, Online Holy Communion Service with good controls is not the new norm. It is an added provision. A temporary provision at this point in time.
- Second, every parish/congregation will need to decide under God how best to make the sacrament of Holy Communion available to her members.
- Third, I want to ask the leaders, and with the feedback from the members, seek the Holy Spirit's guidance on which form or combination of forms to use for administering Holy Communion during the Bishop's Dispensation which is from 2 August to 31 October 2020
- Let us move forward as one Diocese, recognising the different context of different parishes but practising Holy Communion with good understanding, due reverence and God-honouring love and faith.

Conclusion:

- May the LORD grant us that ONENESS in the Holy Spirit as we respond to a drastically changed context.
- We want to glorify God, build up each other and reach a world in need of CHRIST.
- The LORD will help us to do so.

I thank God for you. Together, let us worship the Lord and live and work and be a community together to His praise and glory! Amen.