

CoronaVirus Emergency
Interim Guidelines from the Bishops of the Church of Ireland
relating to
The Administration of Holy Communion
HoB Protocol 2020/004

(This protocol comes into effect when in-church services are allowed to commence)

PREAMBLE

The production of the following guidelines concerning the administration of Holy Communion during the present pandemic reflects a great deal of painstaking discussion on the part of the bishops.

The bishops are extremely aware that the continuing absence of Communion in both kinds for lay people attending public worship will be a source of sadness and deprivation for very many. Receiving Communion in both kinds is part of our identity as Christian disciples who are also members of the Church of Ireland, and Article XXX is explicit about not denying the laity the opportunity to partake of the (customarily common) cup.

We recognise that this situation cannot continue indefinitely, but equally that a suitable solution cannot hastily be identified in the short period before public worship resumes. We therefore commend the following guidance for general use in our dioceses on the strict understanding that it applies until Sunday November 1 2020, All Saints' Day, at the latest. By then the bishops will have given further consideration to methods by which Holy Communion in both kinds might be restored where this is desired, should the ever - changing public health situation dictate that the absence of the common cup is likely to continue for some time to come. The bishops are committing themselves to determining how Holy Communion in both kinds may be experienced again by the whole people of God, in a manner that is safe as well as seemly, and consonant with the formularies of the Church .

GENERAL COMMENTS

As we prepare for the reopening of our churches and the resumption of public worship, the celebration of the Holy Communion presents obvious challenges. However, these must be faced with hope, as well as with care and realism. The Eucharist is the central act of Christian worship and reverent obedience to the Lord's command in the Upper Room is absolutely essential to all that we are. We accept that faithful people will return to the Lord's Table with a measure of apprehension as well as with joy ; we realise that there will be many who will be reluctant to return hastily to public worship and whose experience of communion will continue to be on a spiritual level and will be none the less authentic for that.

It is inevitable that for some time yet recipients of the sacrament will receive in one kind only, namely the bread. While Anglicans have always held that receiving in one kind only (for good reasons) is an entirely efficacious sacramental experience , it is recognised that the Eucharist without the common cup is undoubtedly experientially diminished. We affirm that it is of course our intention to restore communion for all recipients in both kinds when it becomes safe to do so, and we would not wish a degree of nervousness surrounding the common cup to develop to the extent that even after the Covid - 19 crisis passes, people are apprehensive about sharing it. It has to be remembered that the common cup has been used safely for many generations. However, for the present we have no choice but to avoid sharing it.

Similar hopes must be expressed concerning the return at some point of The Peace in its more physical manifestation. We have to live with a so - called new normal, but this should not transform what remains normative in the longer term.

We would stress therefore that this is no time for substantial innovations in our Eucharistic practice which are not the consequence of very careful consideration. For example, the use of individual glasses at Holy Communion is NOT recommended. They have not been a feature of the historic practice of the Church of Ireland, and there are

good reasons why our churches have never been equipped with them. Were individual communicants to bring their own glasses, issues would arise concerning seemliness, provision for visitors, and the appropriate cleansing of the glasses after communion in a manner that would be reverent as well as hygienic.

In some places it will now be necessary to have more frequent Eucharists, with smaller numbers at each, to ensure that the entire community is in a position to receive the sacrament. It may be necessary to strive to establish likely attendance in advance.

'Hybrid' worship may continue to be for some time part of the sacramental life of many parishes, with services being streamed live not least for the benefit of those who may be understandably reticent about returning to church too quickly. It will take quite some time, perhaps even until the coming of a vaccine or other effective treatment, for persons especially in the 'vulnerable' categories to feel confident about attending, and they should feel under no pressure to do so until they are ready, nor made to feel that their sacramental habits and disciplines are in any way inadequate because they are essentially experiences of spiritual communion - the Prayer Book clearly teaches that those not in a position to receive the sacrament physically can be assured that they are partakers by faith of the body and blood of Christ, and of the benefits conveyed thereby.

THE ACTUAL CELEBRATION

The following specific points concerning the actual celebration of Holy Communion may prove useful in the context of wider guidance concerning the reopening of churches generally

- instead of shaking hands with neighbours at the Peace, a sign of reconciliation can be conveyed in a different form, such as bringing together the palms of one's hands and bowing to the other with eye contact and a smile, as in the Indian Namaste greeting. This greeting should continue at a distance.

- As has been said, communion other than for the presiding priest (or bishop) should be in one kind only. Ordinary bread or wafer bread may be used - the latter is arguably more convenient in situations where hygiene is being scrupulously emphasised, and the fact that it is already permitted for the communion of the sick would seemingly permit its additional use in situations of potential contagion. However, choices should not be made at this time which might be insensitive in many congregations.

- Both elements, namely bread and wine, are of course consecrated, but only the presiding minister drinks from the chalice

- for the time being, it is preferable that only the presiding minister handles the vessels and administers the sacrament. Given that it will be in one kind only and numbers attending will be curtailed in many places, it is much easier to control hygiene if this is one person's responsibility. If it is really necessary for assistance to be sought with the administration of the sacrament, those involved must observe the most scrupulous hand hygiene

- those presiding at the Eucharist should cleanse their hands thoroughly with a recommended alcohol based sanitiser repeatedly during the liturgy, and always before the preparing of the Table and the saying of the Eucharistic prayer. The bread and wine should be placed on the Table by the priest alone, and should not for the present be brought forward by members of the congregation. (Similarly there should be no taking or bringing up of cash collections). It would be prudent for the priest to repeat the cleansing of his /her hands after the Thanksgiving and before the fraction / distribution, particularly if during the Eucharistic prayer there has been contact with books or other pieces of paper.

- during the administration of the sacrament, the priest should not touch anyone - the same applies if individual blessings are being offered. The distribution is best carried out with communicants approaching in a single line standing with an appropriate distance between them. People should not kneel together at the communion rail. There may be certain buildings where it is safer for the priest, rather than the people, to move about the church while the sacrament is being administered.

THREE areas require additional mention :

THE VESSELS

- The chalice and paten(s) (there may be more than one of the latter given the need to provide gluten - free bread) must not be handled by more people than is necessary. Consider the number of people normally involved in handling keys, opening safes, unpacking vessels, setting up the sanctuary and cleansing the vessels after the service. It may be wiser and safer for priests for the present to keep a chalice and paten(s) in their own custody, and to be personally responsible for bringing them, along with a cruet of water, to each service. Clergy must also ensure that vessels are meticulously cleaned with hot soapy water after use.

THE ISSUE OF FACE COVERINGS

- the wearing of masks and face coverings presents major issues. Public health advice recommends their use in gatherings in enclosed spaces, where there may be difficulties in maintaining social distancing - and some of our parishioners may reasonably feel that, despite our best efforts, this could apply to church services. Moreover, use of face coverings in prescribed circumstances may yet become mandatory. Certainly nothing should be done in church that appears to discourage their use by those who wish to wear them. However, one of the key aspects of effective mask use is that, once put on, the mask is not removed for eating. Contact between hands and face should be avoided until the mask is removed for disposal or laundering. So how can mask - wearers possibly receive communion in the midst of an act of worship? The presiding minister , who might seriously consider wearing a mask due to the risk of producing droplets in proximity to the communion vessels, might remove the mask to receive communion himself or herself, discard it (taking it home afterwards for safe disposal) and cleanse their hands before putting on a fresh mask prior to the distribution to the congregation. Members of the congregation wearing masks may need to be facilitated by the placing of the sacrament in their hands immediately before the Dismissal, and inviting them to pause and consume reverently what they have been given as soon as they are outside the church. Given that

there will be an absence of sociability outside the church post - service this may be a feasible solution, but the issue of mask wearing and the Eucharist remains a significant challenge.

MINISTRY TO THE SICK AND HOUSEBOUND

-Nothing that has been already said specifically addresses the issue of the communion of the housebound and sick in homes, hospitals and nursing homes. Indeed, there may be increased requests for such ministry once a measure of pastoral 'normality ' has been restored given the number of vulnerable people who may remain anxious about attending public worship. 'Private' communions, whether using Holy Communion by extension or having a short actual celebration, should also be in one kind only for the present. Those administering the sacrament should adhere fully to the public health guidelines related to the context which they are visiting. Lay ministers of the Eucharist will require special training to conform to those guidelines.

CONCLUSION

Concerning all that has been said in this document, please remember that scrupulous care in the implementation of these recommendations is not only important in itself. The very fact that it is SEEN to be done, week by week over the coming months, will increase the confidence of people that the church is a safe as well as a welcoming place, and make them more likely to return to public worship in growing numbers.

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