

Coronavirus and the Celebration of Holy Communion

We are in difficult times. COVID-19 has changed our very way of life. We pray that this change will be short, but ultimately, we entrust ourselves to God knowing that his good and perfect will shall be done for our eternal good (Romans 8:28). One of the ways our lives are now changed touches upon one of the most precious ways we receive Christ Himself, the forgiveness of sins, and the ongoing encouragement and strengthening of our faith, namely, Holy Communion.

Due to government restrictions regarding COVID-19 which are put in place to preserve life and because of our love for God to both honor life (5th Commandment) and those he has put in authority over us (4th Commandment), we already have had to suspend our practice of celebrating Holy Communion. Now, due to more stringent measures of an indefinite timeframe - for the sake of life and honoring the government - we are reaching out to you to share that we are suspending the celebration of Holy Communion until further notice. To be sure, this is both temporary and an allowance from our Lord and Savior as he has not commanded how often we partake of the Supper but only that we do partake of it and do so in remembrance of him (1 Corinthians 11:25).

We find utmost comfort, however, in knowing these vital truths of Scripture still stand: Jesus promised, "Never will I leave you and never will I forsake you" (Hebrews 13:5). Furthermore, Jesus swore to us that he would be with us to the very end of the age (Matthew 28:20b). Even more, our Lord and Savior promises to meet with us through the Holy Scriptures with all the grace and forgiveness we need, the very same grace and forgiveness which is wrapped up in tangible forms in both water (Holy Baptism) and bread and wine (Holy Communion). John the apostle wrote, "These words (Holy Scripture) are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name" (John 20:31). The Apostle Paul also reminds us that "faith comes from hearing the message and the message is heard through the word of Christ" (Romans 10:17). St. Peter was right when he confessed of Christ and the sufficiency of his word, "You alone have the words of eternal life" (John 6:68), and that will never be suspended as our Lord himself says: "The heavens and earth will pass away but my words will never pass away" (Matthew 24:35). Truly, we have all we need in the word which is ours, even as we look forward to the day, God-willing, when we shall receive that very word in bread and wine, the very body and blood of Christ for our forgiveness.

The temporary suspension of this practice for God-pleasing reasons is also not uncommon in church history. The temporary suspension of Holy Communion is also something our forefathers in the faith have experienced over the ages as we find referenced in a couple of Martin Luther's many writings:

Tell your dear sir and friend that he is not in duty bound to go ahead in this matter and commune himself and his household. Nor is this necessary, since he has neither call nor command to do so... He can still be saved by his faith through the Word. It would also give great offense to administer the Sacrament here and there in the homes, and in the end no good would come of it, for there will be factions and sects... The first Christians, mentioned in Acts, did not administer the Sacrament individually in the houses, but they came together... But if a father wishes to teach the Word of God to his family, that is right and should be done, for it is God's mandate that we should teach and bring up our children and household; that is commanded to everyone. But the Sacrament is a public confession and should have public ministers, because, as Christ says, we should do it in remembrance of Him; that is, as St. Paul explains it, we should show forth or preach the Lord's death till He comes (1 Corinthians 11:26). And here [Paul] also says that we should come together, and he severely rebukes those who, each in his own way, use the Lord's Supper

individually. On the other hand, it is not forbidden but rather commanded that everyone individually should instruct his household in God's Word, as well as himself, though no one should baptize himself, for there is a great difference between a public office in the church and the office of a father in his household. Hence the two must neither be mingled into each other nor be separated from each other. Since there is neither an emergency nor a call here, we must do nothing out of our own devotion without God's definite mandate, for no good will come from it. (*Letter to Wolfgang Brauer, 1536; Halle 10:2736-39; quoted in C. F. W. Walther, The Church & the Office of the Ministry [translated by John Theodore Mueller; edited by Matthew C. Harrison] [Saint Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2012], pp. 163-64).*

With reference to your question concerning the communication of the sick, ...the people should be told in sermons to receive Communion three or four times a year in order that, strengthened by the Word, they may afterward fall asleep, no matter what the cause of death may be. For private Communion will increasingly impose an intolerable and impossible burden, especially in time of pestilence. (*Letter to Anthony Lauterbach [November 26, 1539], Luther: Letters of Spiritual Counsel [translated and edited by Theodore G. Tappert] [Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1960], p. 305)*

To be sure, your pastors and leaders continue to evaluate the suspension of this practice and all that we are facing spiritually. We will keep you informed of when this suspension ends.

Keep praying for God's mercy on all who are affected by COVID-19 – those who are sick and all who care for them, our healthcare workers, our leaders in government, your church leaders, and all of us who serve. Keep reflecting on the blessings we have had to this point in time so as not to take anything for granted. And join us in hearts full of repentance and faith as we look forward to coming together again one day soon, God-willing, celebrating Holy Communion. Until then, we continue to proclaim the Lord's death until he comes through the endless proclamation of the word which is everything we need.

Please don't hesitate to reach out to any of our pastors with any questions, concerns, or needs you may have concerning this new development or anything else of a spiritual, emotional, or physical nature.