

## **Virtually Present or Truly Present: On Deciding to Celebrate Holy Communion Online for Maundy Thursday and Easter Sunday**

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*Summary: Gloria Dei will celebrate Holy Communion on Maundy Thursday and Easter Sunday in its online worship services. This time of pandemic is an extraordinary situation that calls for the strengthening of our faith, not just for the sake of us as individuals or for our family but so that we can be strengthened to serve our neighbor who is suffering and in need. We gather. We hear the Word. We share the meal. And we are sent back out to be the church in a time of pandemic, our own service a sacrament for the world. While virtual community may not hold all the nuance, depth and power that an assembly of the faithful does on Sunday morning, it most certainly is the way that the body of Christ is being truly present to one another in this moment. For most of us, it is a genuine, faithful, Spirit-filled assembly. As always at Gloria Dei, we will celebrate the fullness of the rite: Word proclaimed, and sacrament administered within a Great Thanksgiving that blesses bread and wine as well as one another as recipients of God's unconditional grace. We have some instructions below that will help you prepare so that we can with reverence and with great care celebrate Christ's love in bread, wine, and the whole assembly. We encourage our community to gather in one of the live events so that we truly make an assembly across distance around the table, with open hands and eager hearts.*

### **On Online Assembly is an Authentic Assembly**

At Gloria Dei, we stopped calling our online worship “virtual” after the first week, because we realized immediately that the Holy Spirit was doing something **real** in our gathering across cyberspace. Many members wrote to say that worship on the computer or the phone gave them an experience of being genuinely part of the faith community. Certainly, the Word leapt from page to preacher to tablet/computer to heart. Many wept because worship was an interruption of the isolation so deeply experienced. We knew that Christ was with us, and that the promise of the gospel was bringing life.

Gloria Dei member Dr. Deanna Thompson, Director of the Lutheran Center for Faith, Values, and Community and Martin E. Marty Regents Chair in Religion and the Academy at St. Olaf College makes this point beautifully:

*Just as it's possible to be in close physical proximity with others while simultaneously being absent mentally or spiritually, it's also possible to be virtually present to one another in profound, meaningful, and real ways even when we're physically distant. The tears running down my cheeks as I participated in my church's virtual worship service this past Sunday illustrate the embodied impact that gathering together virtually with the body of Christ had on at least my physical body. Virtual gatherings for worship over the past few weeks, for many of us, have been real experiences of gathering, connection, and worship.*

She also makes a profound connection to our Lutheran heritage as she frames the discussion about online Holy Communion.

*In his theology of the cross, Martin Luther insisted that God is present precisely where we least expect God to be. Luther called on Christians to pay attention to God's hidden presence in the pain and suffering of the cross as well as in other situations where we least expect God to be. Rather than doubt that the Words of Institution are able to be effective when the elements of bread and wine are on the other side of a screen and encourage communities to fast from this vital aspect of worship, I encourage congregations to explore ways to meaningfully engage in virtual communion. If the sacrament of the Lord's Supper is a means of grace that "creates and strengthens faith for our daily work and ministry in the world," a rite that "draws us to long for the day of God's justice" and "provides sure and certain hope of the coming resurrection and eternal life" (from the ELCA's [Use of the Means of Grace](#)), it seems that at a time when physical contact is so limited, including physical elements of bread (or crackers) and wine (or juice), could provide much-needed tangible experience of the Word coming to us through the gifts of creation.<sup>1</sup>*

### **Some Suggest Fasting from Holy Communion**

Many in the ELCA, including Presiding Bishop Elizabeth Eaton and our own Saint Paul Area Synod Bishop Patricia Lull have recommended that the church fast from holy communion during this time when we can't be in the same room together. ([Read Bishop Lull's letter to the synod.](#)) We deeply respect their leadership and their freedom to take a different path. Lutherans have always encouraged one another to preach the gospel and administer the sacraments in local contexts, which may vary widely. We don't have one pattern that is enforced by a hierarchy. Rather, we trust local assembly to make theological and pastoral decisions in ways that are faithful to the Gospel.

We honor and respect those who have chosen to fast from the sacrament, including some of our own members who have chosen to wait until we return to the sanctuary. Lutherans have always been free to live the life of faith according to their conscience. We trust God's grace in all things.

It's probably also helpful to remember that gathering online is a privilege for those who have access to electronic media. Many in our community or among those who live on the street are not able to participate. We must acknowledge that there is a wealth gap often between those who are "connected" and those who are not. We pray for the people in Tanzania, in the Iringa Diocese, at Kalingapasi parish, our future partner. For them, gathering in large crowds, two times over the weekend, is crucial to their identity as the people of God. Almost everyone in

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<sup>1</sup> Deanna Thompson, Blog Post, *Christ is Really Present Virtually: A Proposal for Virtual Communion*.  
[https://wp.stolaf.edu/lutherancenter/2020/03/christ-is-really-present-virtually-a-proposal-for-virtual-communion/?fbclid=IwAR1vJ\\_ViaA-Tb\\_VqsHcs1xIdgYGrVCZ8gX7A2e4UDJxggcMWQEfSxNqwDy0](https://wp.stolaf.edu/lutherancenter/2020/03/christ-is-really-present-virtually-a-proposal-for-virtual-communion/?fbclid=IwAR1vJ_ViaA-Tb_VqsHcs1xIdgYGrVCZ8gX7A2e4UDJxggcMWQEfSxNqwDy0).

the parish shows up for worship at two different sites. As they stay apart, they will have no opportunities to share in worship, prayer, or support, much less the sacrament. We must be mindful that many in the world are fasting, not by choice, but by circumstance under the weight of unjust systems in this time of pandemic. The sacrament must not become, for us, a private devotion for the well-healed in America, but rightfully administered, it must empower us to feed the world and stand in solidarity with the starving. We must always draw a direct line from Eucharist to justice.

### **Holy Communion Should Always Include the Full Liturgy**

At Gloria Dei, we believe that an online assembly is a real gathering of God's people. We are gathering in the only way the body of Christ can gather in this extraordinary time of pandemic. For the good of the neighbor, we are sheltering in place. The worship team, while exempted from the governor's order for the purpose of recording worship services, chose not to go to church together to record the liturgy. They wanted to shelter in place and join the whole church in adapting to new circumstance. They chose to stream the service on Zoom and on Facebook Live at a specific time precisely because it provides an opportunity for us to assemble together rather than at separate times. The liturgy calls this the "Gathering" part of the rite. Jesus has promised that were two or three are gathered, he is present in the midst of them. We trust this promise extends beyond physical space.

Some have suggested that a Service of the Word is enough because it brings the fullness of Christ's promises through the reading of Scripture and the proclamation of the Word. Dr. Dirk Lange, Assistant General Secretary for Ecumenical Relations, Lutheran World Federation, who recommends fasting from communion during this time of pandemic, also makes the argument that the Eucharist should not be separated from the whole liturgy, making the words of institution into magic words that somehow turn the bread and wine into Christ's body and blood. He suggests, rightly, that the assembly should be part of the whole process: responding to the word, signing, praying, sharing the elements. He quotes Martin Luther:

*But this "blessing" or the recitation of the Words of Institution of Christ by itself does not make a valid sacrament if the entire action of the Supper, as Christ administered it, is not observed (...). On the contrary, Christ's command, "Do this," must be observed without division or confusion. For it includes the entire action or administration of this sacrament: that in a Christian assembly bread and wine are taken, consecrated, distributed, received, eaten, and drunk, and that thereby the Lord's death is proclaimed, as St. Paul presents the entire action of the breaking of the bread or its distribution and reception in 1 Corinthians 10[16].<sup>2</sup>*

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<sup>2</sup> *Book of Concord*, "Solid Declaration," Article 7, the Holy Supper. Kolb, Robert and Wengert, Timothy. J. "The Book of Concord: the confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church" (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2000) p. 607.

Gloria Dei has always held fast to these words, treasuring the whole rite every Sunday: Gathering, Word, Meal, Sending. Such liturgical fullness is part of our mission “to celebrate the love of Christ.” As we plan our weekly online worship services with Holy Communion, we intend to continue to provide ways for the people to sing, respond, pray, affirm, and share in the liturgy. We encourage our people to sing and to add their “Amens” out loud in their homes. We aren’t watching a few priests magically perform some mystery. We are full participants in the service, trusting that the pastor is speaking the words that we all trust and believe. She or he speaks on behalf of all of us. In a real way, we consecrate the elements together every Sunday, and we believe that we can do it online, too.

### **Some Instructions for Participation at Home**

We are, however, taking some special steps to make this participation even clearer. We invite everyone to “Set the Table.” Make a special place for holy communion in your home. Choose a special cup or plate. Light some candles. Set out a tablecloth. Make a space much as you would if you were hosting a special guest, which of course you are—Christ Jesus. Take a picture. Share it on social media. Send a copy to the church. We’ll make a “virtual” board of our shared Eucharist.

Of course, it doesn’t matter what kind of bread or wine or juice you use. However, if you want to have a sense of sharing the same loaf, try baking the bread we make at Gloria Dei ([click here for the recipe](#)). You can use it for communion, then eat the rest for lunch that day. If you don’t finish it all, feed it to the birds, as a gift for creation.

Lutherans have always been captured by the unconditional grace of God, trusting that the full benefits of Christ come to us unmerited in Word and Sacrament. We receive God’s grace, coming forward with open hands and open hearts to receive the bread and the wine. It’s important for us to receive the elements from another. If you live with other people, distribute it to one another. Say, “The Body of Christ, given for you,” and “The blood of Christ shed for you.” If you live by yourself, we will include words in the online service where one of the worship leaders says these same words **for you** while you eat and drink. This way, all of us receive this wonderful gift together.

And lastly, we believe this practice of sharing online communion is right for this time of emergency when we need faith for our hearts and strength for the work of serving our neighbor. We long for the day when we may gather again and celebrate this meal together. We do not believe this way of sharing communion should become a regular practice for Gloria Dei. It is for these times, and we yearn for our homecoming when it is safe to be together again. In the meantime, we trust that Christ is truly—virtually—present for us, in bread and in wine, and in one another.

Peace be with you.

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