

A Pastoral Instruction on Holy Communion

The Rev. Dr. Christopher King

Periodically, widespread concerns about the threat of infectious disease raise questions about some of our customs in worship, especially drinking from the common cup and exchanging the Peace. Are they safe? Can they ever be suspended? Are they really all that important anyway? These questions abounded during the worst years of the AIDS epidemic, as one might well imagine, and more recently with other outbreaks like SARS, tuberculosis and now the H1N1 (swine flu) virus.

Recently, the Archbishop of Canterbury, in response to the anticipated H1N1 epidemic, recommended that parishes of the Church of England suspend sharing the chalice at the Eucharist. The directive was well intentioned but not based on actual research. In a 1998 study, for example, the Center for Disease Control reached the conclusion that "... no documented transmission of any infectious disease has ever been traced to the use of the common cup." In fact, sipping from the chalice is a significantly *less* risky transmission vector than any number of daily social interactions, such as shaking hands. You might also be interested to know that in most churches, the priest drinks any wine remaining in the chalice after everyone else has received. If the common cup were not safe, the clergy would be the first to know it and show it!

I realize that some of this might appear to defy common sense. Yet, there are frequently times when common sense is wrong and acting on it sets a bad precedent that is hard to undo. The Church certainly does not want to expose anyone to risk. However, I am fully convinced that our traditional Eucharistic worship is safe when conducted intelligently.

As your priest, I am accountable for our collective wellbeing, but we all have to make an effort to be conscientious. This pastoral instruction is intended to help. I will first briefly explain why the Episcopal Church thinks that the common cup is so important. Then, I will set forth some guidelines for making our own communion practices at St. James safer for everyone.

The Common Cup

First of all, what is the "common cup"? You might have visited churches where they use individual cups at communion. Well, it isn't that! The common cup is a single, real, ample cup that everyone shares. The Episcopal Church teaches that the common cup is an essential and non-negotiable symbol of our Christian life and identity. But why do we believe that it's so important?

First, the common cup – or chalice – is the unique Cup of Blessing, symbolically identical to the cup that Jesus shared with his disciples in the Upper Room. The

consecrated wine that the chalice bears is truly the Blood of Christ, of unequalled holiness. Yet the chalice itself is a powerful symbol of our communion with one another, in and through Christ Jesus. Just as there is "one bread", so too there is "one cup of blessing which we bless." In partaking of the "one bread", we show that we are organically one body. In partaking of "one cup", we express our share in one spirit of solidarity in times of joy and times of sorrow. We're all in this thing together, for real.

This symbolism is potent even if we don't use one physical loaf of bread (as we will someday do here) and even if large parishes and cathedrals often have more than one chalice when communion is distributed. *The Book of Common Prayer* requires us to use "only one chalice on the Altar" because this symbolism is so central to who we are and how we worship. References to this "cup" permeate the language of both worship and prayer, because the iconography of the cup is so powerful.

The common cup has also been a primary focal symbol throughout history. You might have seen portrayals of an angel collecting the blood and water streaming from the wound in Christ's side at the Crucifixion. This is an ancient image, one that emerges again in the stories of the Holy Grail. Perhaps we shouldn't be surprised, therefore, that during the Middle Ages the Western Church took the chalice away from the laity, thinking that it was too holy for the hoi polloi. For centuries, only priests and bishops could ever drink from the Cup of Blessing. This was wrong. Its return to common usage was a hard-won victory for the Protestant Reformers. We must not underestimate the privilege of having access to it.

The sacramental nature of the common cup is perhaps more vividly plain to us precisely because we do not ordinarily drink from shared vessels. This makes it an even more robust reminder that this is no ordinary meal, but is, in fact, an anticipation of the Heavenly Supper of the Lamb. This Church will not surrender the sacrificial quality of this tradition. Drinking from a common cup is simply too powerful a sign of trust, fellowship and commitment.

Some Guidelines for Holy Communion

There is very little risk in drinking from the common cup. We use a fortified wine that is naturally antiseptic and cleanse the cup repeatedly during communion with a special napkin called a *purificator*. The chalice bearer wipes both the *outside* and the *inside* of the lip of the cup, with a clean part of the purificator, each time the cup is administered..

Many of us prefer to receive by *intinction* (dipping the Sacred Host into the cup). This is an acceptable practice, but it is unsanitary for communicants to put their fingers into the chalice. Not only do fingertips often end up in the wine, but the bread itself can also spread germs from the recipient's hand to the cup. If

communicants have a personal preference for receiving the Sacrament this way, it is *only* the priest – having cleansed his hands in the lavabo – who intincts the host.

To increase our safety as a worshipping community, we will observe the following guidelines when taking Holy Communion:

- If the Celebrant or any of those assisting in the service feel ill, they should excuse themselves from worship that Sunday. The same holds true for members of the congregation who do not feel well. They should excuse themselves from attending Church that Sunday.
- The Celebrant will always cleanse his hands before Mass and immediately before the Eucharistic Prayer, in the lavabo. Worshipers are urged to wash their hands before the service.
- If you wish to drink from the chalice, you may receive the bread in your hands. Please do not try to take the bread with your fingers. Instead, open your right hand and place it palm up over your left hand. The priest will put the bread in your palm. When the chalice comes to you, guide it to your lips by taking hold of the base, not the bowl, of the cup. The chalice will be cleansed between communicants.
- If you wish to receive by intinction, please signal this to the priest by holding your hands together in a prayer position. The priest will dip the Host in the chalice and place it on your tongue. If you intend to intinct but mistakenly receive the bread in your hand, please consume it and ask the priest to communicate you by intinction. *No one will be allowed to intinct the bread for themselves. This is unsanitary.*
- Although it is preferable to receive the fullness of the sacramental sign, you may also receive it “in one kind”; that is, you may take the bread alone. Christ is entirely present in the consecrated bread as well as in the consecrated wine. Every sacramental grace will be appropriated to you.
- If you wish only to receive a blessing, indicate this to the priest by crossing your hands over your chest; or simply tell him. The priest will pronounce a blessing, making the Sign of the Cross over you.
- *About the Peace:* at St. James, worshipers usually greet each other with a handshake, or even an embrace. This is a wonderful and appropriate expression of our fellowship and affectionate regard for one another. It is also a prime opportunity for the spread of germs, so please use common sense. Don't be offended if someone stands back at the Peace. They're probably protecting your health!

If you have any other questions or concerns, please contact Father Chris at FrChris@stjameslongbeach.org or call him at 516-432-1080.