

A Reflection on Communion by Internet

by Iain Torrance

When I was asked in 2013 to convene the General Assembly's Theological Forum and reflect on the issues surrounding the ordination and marriage of same-sex people, we deliberately adopted a 'constrained difference' approach rather than a polarizing 'either / or' one. Our object was to try to build on what we hold in common, rather than to divide the Church. Rather than coalescing them, our argument separated the different strands of analogy, secular rights, and theological principles. I am trying to do something basically similar here. The point of entry is to use the argument over individual cups at communion in the Church of England as an analogy, and then point to different emphases in sacramental theology. I don't expect everyone to agree, but it may open windows.

To put my conclusion up front: I am not persuaded that partaking in an act of communion mediated by the internet is intrinsically different from partaking in one while out of sight in a corner of a cathedral and following the liturgy through a loudspeaker.

Such an internet communion would still be presided over by an agent other than oneself and would still be constrained within an envelope of time and a liturgy. It is already common practice for there to be multiple cups and, in Scotland, often diced pieces of bread which as regards their separated nature are not intrinsically different from the multiple individual wafers used in the Church of England. It seems to me that partaking in a live online communion may be argued to be more fully a 'sharing' than subsequently following a communion recorded on YouTube, though I do not at all dismiss that as a further point on an understandable trajectory.

How is this proposal justified? Here I turn to a similar kind of case, which provides an analogy.

When COVID-19 struck, the bishops of the Scottish Episcopal Church quickly announced that communion would be in one kind (ie bread) only. The scholarly priest at Rosslyn Chapel correctly told us that according to St Thomas Aquinas,

the *entire* Christ is encountered in *both* elements. His announcement was based on a ruling of the Church of England's Legal Advisory Commission (LAC) in September 2011, that when there is a *necessity* that the common cup may not be used, then the people should revert to receiving communion only in one kind (the bread), and that a situation of necessity preventing the common cup does not authorise use of individual cups.

This ruling against use of individual cups during a time of plague was challenged on the 11th of July 2020 by Mrs Mary Durlacher (from Chelmsford) who enlisted 6 barristers to provide comment. Their argument is incisive (<https://www.thinkinganglicans.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2020/08/Holy-Communion-Opinion-on-individual-cups-12.8.2020.pdf?x52285>). It is that where there is some *force majeure* which interrupts normal administration by the normal means of communion in both kinds, it *does not follow* that the default answer should be to jettison the wine altogether and communicate only with the bread (Thomas Aquinas notwithstanding). The *driver* in the post-Reformation understanding of the Church of England was to deliver communion in both kinds, and this driver is to do with delivery methods, not with an all or nothing fixation on the common cup. Historically, flexibility in delivery has negotiated things like difficulty in swallowing or the medical situation of persons with addiction (obviously, a different kind of wine). So called 'necessity' (a plague, some *force majeure* or whatever) issues a challenge to delivery methods but need not necessarily totally block delivery of the wine.

This argument is useful because it clarifies broader issues and it provides an analogy for different issues. We learn that there should be flexibility and creativity as we adapt delivery methods.

Turning back to the possibility of internet communion in the Church of Scotland, are we talking (merely) about a *more stretched* mode of delivery at a time when we have to be particularly flexible and which might well be acceptable or are we denying this extent of elasticity because we believe that the absence of community empties the occasion of sacramental reference? That, because of remoteness, somehow, the Spirit does not descend on the elements in such cases.

We have precedents for this kind of discussion in the Church of Scotland. In

the 17th century there was debate between John Forbes of Corse (the great leader of the Aberdeen Doctors) and the supporters of the National Covenant. Among other things, they debated the legitimacy of baptism if administered privately for reasons of necessity (ie not for frivolous or social reasons). This was a kind of ‘remote baptism’ where the ‘remoteness’ was not because of the internet but because of the detachment of the event from a congregation.

In an earlier book, *The Perth Assembly* (1619), David Calderwood had written about private (or we might say ‘remote’) usage of the sacraments.

On the administration of the sacraments in private places (pages 96-101), Calderwood began by referring to the *First Book of Discipline*, §9, that baptism was to be administered *on the ordinary days of preaching*. He continued: ‘Not that it is *unlawfull* to baptise whensoever the Word is preached’, but the restriction was intended to remove a gross error, namely the belief that children will be damned if they die without baptism, and to ensure that the people hold the administration of the sacraments in greater reverence (page 96). Sacraments were not to be used ‘in private corners, as charms or sorceries’ (page 96).

Calderwood noted that the General Assembly of October 1581 (in Edinburgh) ordered that sacraments should not be administered in private houses, under pain of deposition.

Yet the Perth Assembly (of 1618) allowed baptism in private houses *when necessity required*, and communion in private houses to the sick and infirm.

Calderwood responded: ‘A sacrament is a publick action, to be performed publickly, by publick ministers: neither can any necessity or sufficient cause be alledged, wherefore any sacred and publick action, should passe in private (page 96)’. One cannot fail to note Calderwood’s rhetoric and the repetition of the word ‘public’.

Calderwood continued, ‘The sacraments were appointed not onely to be signs and seals of invisible graces, but also to be testimonies before the world of *our piety* and thankfulness towards God, and *badges of our profession*’ (page 96).

All other actions which concerned the whole Kirk, were done with consent, and in presence of the Kirke as elections, ordinations and excommunications.... By

the same reason ought the sacraments to be ministered with consent, and in presence of the Kirk, seeing they are works of publick nature, and publick fruit belonging to all....(page 97).

Is such an objection tinted by an overriding notion that it is *congregational* humility, repentance and faith which ultimately allow the sacramental gift to be fully operative? It is hard to support this on a classic Calvinist perspective.

Or, is this an expression more of anxiety than doctrine over private celebrations of the sacraments (private baptisms or eucharists)? Can a distinction be drawn between *private* (in the sense of remote) and *domesticated*? I remember vividly once hearing a PhD student tell my father (Thomas F. Torrance) that he was accustomed to celebrate communion at the kitchen table with his family. My father's response was that this risked making reception of the sacrament as ordinary 'as eating a piece of cheese'. He meant that this risked domesticating the sacrament.

I recognize that fear, and that there is an anxiety that 'remote' celebrations may fall into misuse. But does that necessarily rule out their permissibility, given that we have to trust people to be conscientious in many areas and not just this?

When I was a philosophy student at Edinburgh in 1967 blended or distance learning was unthinkable. We understand better now that what is being delivered is increased understanding and physical presence in a lecture theatre is not necessarily an intrinsic ingredient for that to take place. The mechanism for the delivery of learning has become more flexible as we adjust to the constraints and *forces majeure* of a different time. Communion by internet may not be preferable but I would argue that it should be considered.

If we adopt a 'constrained difference' approach rather than a polarising one, let us together acknowledge with Mrs Mary Durlacher that the issue is more a mechanical one of delivery methods than a theological one of sacramental validity. Some people will then allow a maximal use of elasticity, others a lesser one. But there is elasticity because we all believe in the agency of the Holy Spirit.