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The Eucharist During a Time of Pandemic Contemporary Practices, A Look into the Past, and Future Considerations

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Submitted in partial fulfillment of the Honors Requirements for the Religion Department
Dickinson College

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Abstract

In 2020, much of the world went into shutdown due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Along with the shutdown came many aspects of people's lives moving online, including religious practices. In the case of the Catholic Church, Masses that people used to attend in person could then only be attended online. This raised concerns about the best way to provide a semblance of receiving the Eucharist, even when church buildings were shut down. In this thesis, I look at the meaning of the Eucharist for Catholics, the history and meaning of current practices incorporated for providing the Eucharist during COVID-19, and the history and meaning of practices utilized to bring access to the Eucharist during prior pandemics. I use these contemporary and historical practices to form a possible solution of my own for providing access to the Eucharist during a time of pandemic and to hypothesize what the future of Eucharistic access may look like in case of another pandemic.

Introduction

Since 2019, the novel coronavirus, COVID-19, has spread around the world, killing millions of people and infecting millions more. The quick spread of the virus and its high mortality rate has resulted in many aspects of people's lives moving online. One such aspect that has had to move online are religious practices, such as meditations and prayer meetings, services, and Masses, to name a few.

While there are some religious practices that are personal and do not require a community, there are many that require physical items and the physical presence of people. Among these religious practices include the Catholic sacraments. The sacraments in the Catholic Church are defined as “efficacious signs of grace, instituted by Christ and entrusted to the Church by which divine life is dispensed to us” (*Catechism* 1131). These signs are “efficacious” insofar as there is a desired result, that is “divine life,” or union with God in heaven.

In the Catholic Church, there are seven of these signs or sacraments: Baptism, Penance & Reconciliation, Eucharist, Confirmation, Anointing of the Sick, Holy Orders, and Holy Matrimony. Of these seven sacraments, the Eucharist is the “source and summit of the Christian life” (*Catechism* 1324).¹ This is not to undermine the importance of the other six sacraments, but rather, to emphasize how central the Eucharist is to the Christian life. Given the importance of the Eucharist to the Christian life, there has been a desire to ensure access to it, yet COVID-19 has resulted in restricted access to all the sacraments, including the Eucharist.

In order to increase access to the sacrament of the Eucharist during COVID-19, many churches have resorted to virtual Eucharistic celebrations, often in the form of a Mass in the case

¹ cf. *Lumen Gentium* 11

of the Catholic Church, over media platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, YouTube, and Zoom. Despite the efforts to work with the given situation, there have been numerous questions raised about the value and validity of such celebrations. Answering these questions raises sociological, theological, and historical implications to what the sacraments have meant historically and what they will mean in the future. It is important to work through these questions because humans get sick and are impacted by pandemics. Furthermore, it is important to raise these questions as the way the sacraments are treated during a pandemic have the potential to redefine their theological and social meanings. Subsequently, this brings up further questions about what theological and social changes are appropriate and which changes are not appropriate.

The reality behind all these questions is that COVID-19 is far from being the first pandemic to impact humans and it will likely not be the last, which means that there are precedents for sacraments in a time of pandemic. This also means there must be considerations for the sacraments during future pandemics. In this paper, I will argue that there are precedents for allowing access to the Eucharist during times of pandemic that cater toward natural human phenomenological and sociological desires as well as religious history, particularly in the context of the Catholic Church. Between all the solutions offered, I synthesize them to form a solution to providing access to the Eucharist during a time of pandemic, arguing that the best of these alternatives is utilizing the ministries of the diaconate and extraordinary ministers of holy communion in order to more easily make the Eucharist accessible to Catholics while maintaining appropriate health and safety standards.

Chapter 1

The Catholic Understanding of the Eucharist

The Meaning of the Eucharist

Before diving into why it is important to provide access to the Eucharist during a time of pandemic, it is first important to understand what the Eucharist is. It is not something that has become important suddenly due to a pandemic; rather, it has long been central to the practice of numerous Christian traditions, including the Catholic Church. The word “Eucharist” comes from the Greek word *εὐχαριστία* (*eukharistía*), which means “thanksgiving.” Thus, at root, the Eucharist is an expression of thanksgiving. But for what is there thanksgiving?

In the New Testament accounts of the Last Supper, the verb form of *eukharistía*, *εὐχαριστήσας*, is used to describe what occurred. For example, in a description of the Last Supper from St. Paul, he says, “For I received from the Lord what I also handed on to you, that the Lord Jesus, on the night he was handed over, took bread, and, after he had given thanks (*εὐχαριστήσας*), broke it and said, ‘This is my body that is for you. Do this in remembrance of me’” (1 Cor. 11:23-24). Thus, the thanksgiving is the reenactment of what occurred at the Last Supper when Jesus took bread and wine, gave thanks, said “take and eat” and “take and drink,” and then said, “Do this in remembrance of me.” The reenactment is the obedience to the command to do this in remembrance of him (Jesus), and there are still Christian denominations that perform this reenactment to this day. As a reenactment of a command from Jesus, this means that the Eucharist is held in high esteem.

Even approximately 2000 years later, these actions described from the Last Supper are still carried through, word-for-word, where there is a priest, pastor, or minister, who takes bread and wine, repeating the words of Christ to take and eat, take and drink, and do this in

remembrance of him. In the case of the Catholic Church, this action is so fundamental that it is referred to as the source and summit of the Christian life, as mentioned in the introduction. The issue, though, is that when a pandemic strikes, it becomes harder to perform this reenactment. First and foremost, this reenactment of the Last Supper in any given denomination is a gathering; in the words of the Orthodox priest, Fr. Alexander Schmemmann, “its (the gathering’s) end and fulfillment lies in its being the setting wherein the Lord’s Supper is accomplished” (11). Furthermore, this gathering is an incarnational action as it is dependent on the physical presence of people (all of you) *taking, eating, and drinking* the Eucharistic elements, all of which are harder to carry through during a pandemic when those very actions are how the disease is spread. In fact, it reached a point where many churches around the world had to shut down to the public.

The Challenges to the Catholic Understanding of the Eucharist During COVID-19

Besides the fundamental actions of the Eucharist (taking, eating, and drinking), the shutdowns to the public seemingly showed little regard for the healing aspects of the Eucharist at a time when people were seeking both physical healing and spiritual healing. At a Catholic Mass, right before people receive the Eucharist, the priest lifts up the Body and Blood of Christ (the consecrated bread and wine), saying, “Behold the Lamb of God, behold him who takes away the sins of the world. Blessed are those called to the supper of the Lamb,” to which the congregation responds, “Lord, I am not worthy that you should enter under my roof, but only say the word and my soul shall be healed” (“Missal”). This response from the congregation, taken from Matthew 8:8, reflects a connection between the healing of the soul and the reception of the Eucharist. Yet, because churches were shut down, this interconnected experience of receiving the Eucharist and

experiencing the healing of the soul could not be experienced. The challenge becomes even more apparent as the Catechism says:

“Heal the sick!”² The Church has received this charge from the Lord and strives to carry it out by taking care of the sick as well as by accompanying them with her prayer of intercession. She believes in the life-giving presence of Christ, the physician of souls and bodies. This presence is particularly active through the sacraments, and in an altogether special way through the Eucharist, the bread that gives eternal life and that St. Paul suggests is connected with bodily health.³ (*Catechism* 1509)

The actions taken during the COVID pandemic seemingly went against all that the Eucharist has meant to Catholics.

There are several possible answers to the challenge of providing access to the Eucharist during COVID. One is to say that the value of the Eucharist, and by extension, the Catholic Church, is lessened by the actions taken during the COVID-19 pandemic. Alternatively, another possible response is that the Catholic Church had little control over its own situation in providing access to the Eucharist due to government mandates and the nature of the pandemic itself. However, what I propose in this paper, based on historical examples, as well as our human sociological and phenomenological nature, is that there is control the Catholic Church had over its situation in providing access to the sacraments, and that, looking back at the past and toward the future, there are better options for answering to the needs of Catholics during a time of pandemic than what was experienced by many during the COVID-19 pandemic.

² Cf. Mt. 10:8

³ Cf. Jn. 54, 58; 1 Cor. 11:30

Clarifying the Meanings of Sources

As highlighted, there are numerous examples that will be brought up about providing access to the Eucharist during a time of pandemic. These examples will be dependent on sociological, phenomenological, historical, and theological sources. Even among these sources, there will be times when I appear to give weight to one type of source over another, which will bring up the question of how I weigh sources. Throughout this paper, I will weigh sources that, at times, appear to propose contradictory options. Furthermore, there will be a balance of how I weigh sources from an academic sphere versus how I weigh sources from Catholic theological spheres, as I want to give due respect to both, but will sometimes need to express preference for one source over another. As a result, I hope this section will provide insight into how I will use sources that come up throughout this paper.

The first term to clarify is “Scripture and Tradition.” I put these two words, “Scripture” and “Tradition” together as they are the main sources for Catholic Church teachings and are considered by the Catholic Church to be closely tied together (Catholic Answers). Scripture refers to the Bible, both Old and New Testaments, while Tradition refers to the teachings of the Catholic Church that follow from Scripture. In fact, the Catholic Church has what is called the *magisterium*, which is the teaching authority of the Catholic Church, and it expresses much of what is in Sacred Tradition. The magisterium has the task of interpreting Scripture, and the magisterium is visibly expressed through the work “entrusted to the bishops in communion with the successor of Peter, the Bishop of Rome” (*Catechism* 85). The work of the magisterium is expressed on several different levels with varying levels of authority.

The first point of authority in the magisterium is the pope *ex cathedra*. The term *ex cathedra* is used to describe papal infallibility, “when, in the exercise of his office as shepherd

and teacher of all Christians, in virtue of his supreme apostolic authority, he defines a doctrine concerning faith or morals to be held by the whole Church” (“Vatican I’s”). Right below the pope in the magisterium’s exercise of authority are the bishops, who are considered to be the successors of Jesus’ apostles, when they are gathered together in an ecumenical council (*Code of Canon Law* 749.2). An example of an ecumenical council is Vatican II, which I will bring up later in this paper. Furthermore, bishops, even when they are not gathered together in an ecumenical council, are still “authentic teachers and instructors of the faith for the Christian faithful entrusted to their care” (*Code of Canon Law* 753). Finally, for all the other Catholics who are not bishops:

A person must believe with divine and Catholic faith all those things contained in the word of God, written or handed on, that is, in the one deposit of faith entrusted to the Church, and at the same time proposed as divinely revealed either by the solemn magisterium of the Church or by its ordinary and universal magisterium which is manifested by the common adherence of the Christian faithful under the leadership of the sacred magisterium; therefore all are bound to avoid any doctrines whatsoever contrary to them. (*Code of Canon Law* 750.1)

This paper, as much as it is an academic endeavor, is not meant to be separated from the personal faith endeavors of Catholics. As a result, this paper will give first preference to the work of the magisterium. This includes anything said or written by bishops, including the pope. Furthermore, this will include Catholic Church documents such as the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* and the *Code of Canon Law* which contain teachings from the magisterium. All these documents and proclamations from the Catholic Church, its popes, and its bishops are part of Tradition, and thus will be weighed heavily in my analysis.

The next level of preference will be given to the writings of saints. Throughout this paper, there will be a number of saints whose works will be cited, including but not limited to St. Thomas Aquinas, St. Teresa of Avila, St. Francis de Sales, and Pope St. John Paul II. A saint in the Catholic Church is someone previously deceased who is believed to be in heaven. Many of the saints gained their reputations for their writings, some of which will be cited in this paper. Furthermore, their declaration as saints places them in an elevated position in the Catholic Church and indicates that their lives are “worthy of imitation” (“Saints”). Once again, while this endeavor is academic, it is also not meant to be separated from the personal faith endeavors of Catholics. These saints are not placed above any aspects of Scripture and Tradition, though many of them are heavily influenced by Scripture and Tradition, and given their level of regard in the Catholic Church, their writings will also be weighed heavily.

Following from the writings and sayings of the saints, I will give the next level of preference to historical, social, and phenomenological traditions not already part of Sacred Scripture and Sacred Tradition. These writings are not necessarily part of Catholic Church teaching nor the writings of the saints, but they contain important insights into why practices are the way they are, whether it is because they have been practiced for several generations and it is what people are accustomed to or if a practice is meant to serve a purpose in relation to an aspect of human nature, such as a desire that arises from a physical sense.

Finally, below all these other types of sources will come academic and non-academic articles and books not already covered by the topics above. This is not to disregard these articles and books, but as mentioned earlier, this endeavor is meant to cover the practical needs of Catholics, Catholic theological teachings, historical, social, and phenomenological aspects integral to human nature, and academic research. Thus, this category is meant to cover all the

other types of sources not covered by the three aforementioned categories. These sources will still be given a place of prominence in the paper and will even be used to prompt further thought and questions.

My hope is to keep this prioritizing of sources consistent throughout the paper, though there will be points when certain sources will be identified as making more sense logically or being better when taken into account with another source. There will even be points when I attempt to synthesize sources in hopes of coming up with an even more satisfactory answer or solution to a question or problem. I believe such a synthesis is better as it covers more of the different types of desires that fit with the sources mentioned above. There is certainly a desire for any given Catholic to be faithful to Scripture and Traditions, while also intelligently understanding the writings of the saints and other theological articles and books and catering towards one's own personal desires that arise out of historical and social practice. Thus, this thesis will proceed with this weighing of sources in mind as different aspects of providing access to the Eucharist during a time of pandemic are mentioned.

The Incarnational Reality of the Catholic Church and the Eucharist

First and foremost, Christianity is an incarnational religion. This must be addressed as it is the most foundational aspect of Christianity that faces challenges during a time of pandemic. The very premise of Christianity is the belief in Jesus Christ, who is acclaimed to be the Son of God. As professed in the Nicene Creed, which was written in 325 at the Council of Nicaea, Jesus is “the only begotten Son of God. . .incarnate of the virgin Mary and became man.” This places Christianity in a unique context relative to many other religions insofar as one of the central beliefs of the religion is that God becomes a human, to the point that this is expressed in a creed.

However, the theological meaning of the Incarnation in Christianity is not limited to the time Jesus was on the earth. It is through the sacrament of the Eucharist in the Catholic Church that a theological emphasis on the Incarnation remains present.

The very nature of the Eucharist relies on a physical and embodied experience, going back to its institution where Jesus takes bread and says, “Take and eat; this is my body,” and then with the cup, “Drink from it, all of you” (Mt. 26:26-27). There is a physical taking and eating of the bread and the wine that, for Roman Catholics, becomes the body and blood of Christ. Furthermore, Jesus says in the “Bread of Life Discourse” in the Gospel of John, “Whoever eats my flesh and drinks my blood has eternal life, and I will raise him on the last day” (6:54). The Greek word used for “eats” is *τρῶγων*, which in the footnotes of the *New American Bible* used by many Roman Catholics in the United States is translated as “munch” or “gnaw.” For Catholics, this quote from John 6 is often used as one of the proofs that the Eucharist is the physical consumption of the body, blood, soul and divinity of Christ (Staples). Thus, it is not only the case that God became physically present in the historical person of Jesus Christ, but Jesus Christ in his body and blood becomes physically present to Catholics at Mass. Furthermore, this physical presence is not merely seen but it is also physically consumed. Then, through the physical consumption, people have the opportunity “to be raised on the last day,” a reference to the afterlife and the resurrection of the dead that results in eternity in heaven, which is the ultimate goal for Catholics.

The challenge posed by many pandemics is that in order to encourage health and safety, physical presence is limited. In the case of COVID-19, social distancing, quarantining, and crowd size regulations have been implemented, thus limiting the physical presence of people around each other, including in the church. In some pandemics, including COVID-19, churches

are even shut down for a time, which means that the commands of Jesus to take and eat and take and drink cannot be followed through as easily if people cannot gather to do those very actions. Furthermore, the very notion of what it means to be a *church* is challenged.

Whenever church is referred to in the New Testament, it is actually taken from a Greek word, *ἐκκλησία* (*ekklesia*), which also means “to gather.” Thus, to be a church is, in part, to gather, but as already mentioned, the very notion of gathering during pandemics is challenged, which results in the meaning of church being challenged. The *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, which is a centralized collection of Catholic Church teachings, states:

When the exercise of religious liberty is not thwarted, Christians construct buildings for divine worship. These visible churches are not simply gathering places but signify and make visible the Church living in this place, the dwelling of God with men reconciled and united in Christ (*Catechism of the Catholic Church* 1180).

Thus, pandemics do not merely prevent gathering, but they can divide that which is meant to be united. This highlights the distinction made between “church,” with a lower-case “c” and “Church,” with an upper-case “c.” To this point, I have written about church with a lower-case “c” as an ambiguous meaning for gathering, but now it becomes apparent that there are two different meanings for “church.” There is the “church,” the physical space and state of gathering, and then there is the “Church,” which is the visible manifestation of people entering into and praying in the same space. As seen from the quote from the *Catechism*, the meaning of the two, while different, are quite inseparable. Yet the COVID-19 pandemic resulted in the closure of churches from public worship, leading to the separation of that which was believed to be inseparable. Furthermore, and even more fundamentally, if the church, the building, is where the Church, the people, comes to be united with Christ, then it seems to indicate that the Church has

been divided because they cannot be united with each other nor can they be physically present as an expression of unity with Christ.

No church where people can gather and no Eucharist mean that the system of meaning—the *nomos*—is challenged and brought into question. I take this term, *nomos*, from sociology, in particular from Peter Berger, who defines it as the combination of our beliefs about the nature of the world (worldview) and morals, lifestyles, and customs (ethos). Both our worldview and ethos are heavily influenced by national and local cultures and customs, but they are also heavily influenced by religions, which in the case of this paper, is the worldview and ethos of the Catholic Church. Especially in the instance of the Catholic Church where there is a reliance on historical traditions, this idea of the Catholic *nomos* brings about theological and sociological questions about what it means to be a church or for the Eucharist to be the Eucharist during a pandemic. Due to pandemic, the community could not gather as an *ekklesia*, which also meant no access to the Eucharist. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the Eucharist, the church, and the Church have been brought into a state of *anomie*—another sociological term used to define a condition where the values and standards previously held are broken down. This leads to the important question: What does the Eucharist mean when its meaning is fundamentally changed by the lack of ability to gather due to pandemic?

Determining the answer to this question will, I hope, provide some answers for how to reclaim values and standards for the meaning of the Eucharist, the church, and the Church. Thus, it is important to analyze current practices concerning virtual Eucharistic celebrations to account for how Christianity, particularly Catholicism, has attempted to find the meaning of the Eucharist when there is no ability to gather as an *ekklesia*.

Chapter 2

The Eucharist During a Time of Pandemic: Contemporary Practices

The Practices of Virtual Eucharistic Celebrations

If virtual Eucharistic celebrations such as Masses are taking place despite theological concerns, then the ways they are taking place may give insights on how virtual Eucharistic celebrations take place in order to satisfy the sacramental desires of Christians in contemporary settings. The first point of interest is that the virtual Eucharistic celebrations occurring during COVID were nothing new. In fact, TV celebrations of the Eucharist have taken place for many years. TV stations such as Catholic TV and the Eternal Word Television Network (EWTN) have been around to televise Masses to Catholics in the United States going back to the 1970s and 1980s. Many Eucharistic celebrations were also uploaded to YouTube before the pandemic, so there were many ways to virtually participate in Eucharistic celebrations. However, many churches started streaming their own Masses as well. Due to COVID-19, churches could look to those who have already streamed Masses on YouTube and television while incorporating their own new and unique practices in order to accommodate practical and theological needs.

The second point of interest is that before Masses or any other church service were regularly broadcast on TV, the idea was controversial. On the one hand, Pope Pius XII approved of such technological outreach in his 1957 encyclical *Miranda Prorsus* saying, “so that our voice, passing in sure and safe flight over the expanse of sea and land and even over the troubled emotions of souls, may reach men’s minds with a healing influence.” On the other hand, the German Catholic priest and theologian Karl Rahner said about televised Masses, “the Mass is one of those things that is inconvenient to offer as a spectacle to anybody” (Rahner 189).² By calling the Mass “inconvenient to offer as a spectacle,” Rahner is highlighting that the Mass is

not something that is meant for personal entertainment like a baseball game, or even for providing information, such as a news broadcast. The Mass, for Rahner, transcends anything that can be contained within the confines of a television screen. Nevertheless, on a basis of hierarchy, as is evident in the Catholic Church, the pope's writings have taken precedence given his position of significance in the *magisterium*, as highlighted earlier.

The third point of interest regarding televised and other virtual presentations of the Mass is that despite the debate regarding the theologies of live-streamed Masses, guidelines have been developed as the Catholic Church has responded to the changing and developing technologies that have been offered to enhance the virtual Mass-going experience. For example, the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops (USCCB), which is comprised of all the Catholic bishops in the United States, released guidelines in 1996 (and revised in 2014) regarding televised Masses. These guidelines particularly were directed at the audience and the goals of televised Masses. The suggested audience for such Masses is very specific, which includes the “hospitalized, homebound, or imprisoned” (“Guidelines for Televising”). The suggested audience for televised Masses was people who had no ability to make it to in-person Mass otherwise. Furthermore, the opportunities that live-stream Masses are meant to provide include a worshipping community with which people identify, hearing the Word of God, and being moved to expressions of praise and thanksgiving (“Guidelines for Televising”). Obviously, the audience of such Masses has been much larger during a pandemic when that is the way for most people to participate in Mass. However, the circumstances faced are quite similar to those faced by the hospitalized, the homebound, and the imprisoned—the lack of ability to make it to in-person Mass. Thus, there are three outstanding points to these guidelines that have carried over to broadcasting Masses during the COVID-19 pandemic: forming community, making the

celebration in itself beautiful, and utilizing filming techniques to bring about a closer sense of reality.

All three of the outstanding points from the USCCB guidelines will be highlighted in different ways throughout this paper. In the case of forming community, this will be seen as social media platforms have helped form both actualized and imagined communities. In making the celebration beautiful and utilizing filming techniques to bring about a closer sense of reality, the virtual experience of watching the Mass taps into the history of Christianity where there has been an emphasis on visual devotions. Furthermore, these three points will be used to provide a closer semblance of the presence of the Eucharist, both in virtual and physical spheres.

A Difference Between Virtual Masses During COVID-19 and Other Virtual Eucharistic Celebrations

The most notable aspect of virtual Eucharistic celebrations is that there is one outstanding difference in televised and other virtual Masses during COVID in relation to virtual Masses pre-COVID—the insertion of the *Act of Spiritual Communion*. This prayer says:

My Jesus, I believe that You are present in the Most Holy Sacrament. I love You above all things, and I desire to receive You into my soul. Since I cannot at this moment receive You sacramentally, come at least spiritually into my heart. I embrace You as if You were already there and unite myself wholly to You. Never permit me to be separated from You. Amen.

This prayer, attributed to St. Alphonsus Liguori (1696–1787), recognizes the desire to receive sacramentally, but at the same time communicates that this prayer is no substitute for the sacramental reception of the Eucharist.

The Act of Spiritual Communion expresses a desire for spiritual communion because sacramental communion, communion that is received physically and in-person, is not possible. Even though sacramental communion was practiced a lot more immediately before the pandemic, the practice of spiritual communion has a rich history that makes its usage during the COVID-19 pandemic unique.

Chapter 3

An Analysis of the Act of Spiritual Communion: The Bridge from Contemporary to Historical Eucharistic Understanding During a Pandemic

The Early History of the Act of Spiritual Communion

The idea of spiritual communion goes back to St. Augustine of Hippo (354–430), who exhorts, “Seek ye then, brethren, that you eat the heavenly bread in a spiritual sense” (*Tractates* 26).

While St. Augustine does not refer to spiritual communion in the same way that we may think of it during the COVID pandemic, it lays the foundation for what spiritual communion is about—that communion is more than physically receiving something but that there is also a spiritual reception that takes place which is not brought about merely through physical reception. He distinguishes “between the sacrament (*sacramentum*) and that to which the sacrament points (the *res* or virtue of the sacrament), which is Christ (Cornet 36). This is what distinguishes the Last Supper and its re-enactment at each Mass more than just an ordinary meal that satisfies people physically but also something that satisfies people spiritually; echoing the words of the Mass and the Gospel of Matthew from earlier, it is that which is believed to heal the soul. This writing on spiritual communion from St. Augustine lays an important foundation for increased discussion of spiritual communion in the Middle Ages.

The next theologian to popularly write on spiritual communion was the mystic William of Saint-Thierry (ca. 1085–1148). Around 1127 or 1128, he wrote a theological treatise, *De sacramento altaris* (*On the Sacrament of the Altar*) in which he provides a bridge in the understanding of spiritual communion from St. Augustine to the famous Middle Ages philosopher and theologian, St. Thomas Aquinas. Citing St. Augustine’s writings on spiritual

communion, William of Saint-Thierry says, “What matters is a person who eats inwardly, not outwardly; a person who eats with his heart, and not a person who bites with his teeth” (Saint-Thierry 357).⁴ William of Saint-Thierry, along with Alger of Liège (d. 1131) and Hugh of St. Victor (c. 1096–1144), all wrote around the same time about two types of communion, one received physically and the other spiritually, which they also called “receiving in the heart.” It takes the Augustinian view of communion not just having meaning as food but also meaning for spiritual benefit, and these theologians particularly emphasize the spiritual benefit, for there is little meaning to communion, sacramental or spiritual, if it is just seen as food and not just as something with great spiritual benefits.

St. Thomas Aquinas (1225–1274), influenced by St. Augustine’s mention of spiritual communion and the increasing number of medieval theologians who were bringing back this Augustinian view, further distinguishes between sacramental reception and spiritual reception of the Eucharist. Aquinas says, “the sacramental use is distinguished from the spiritual use” and explains:

Before actual reception of this sacrament, a man can obtain salvation through the desire of receiving it. . .It sometimes happens that a man is hindered from receiving the effect of the sacrament. . .[but] the effect of the sacrament can be secured by every man if he receive it by desire. (*Summa Theologiae* Q.80, A. 1)

This quote from Aquinas comes to redefine the understanding of communion, particularly what it means to receive the effect of the sacrament, to be hindered from receiving that effect, and to receive it by desire. When someone is trying to piously live their faith and wants to ensure they

⁴ Translation provided in Ineke Cornet’s “Spiritual Communion in Mystical Texts from the Twelfth to the Sixteenth Centuries.” See the Works Cited page for more information.

are receiving communion in a way to bring about its full effects, spiritual communion seems like an easier way to bring about those effects in the way Aquinas presents it. Whereas prior theologians, including Aquinas himself, mention the two different ways of receiving communion, Aquinas appears to be the first major public theologian to emphasize the cause-and-effect connection of communion, where the cause is the motive someone brings, which can sometimes serve as a hindrance to properly receiving sacramental communion, and the effect is the way that communion is received.

On the surface, it leads to the question of why someone would need to go through all the efforts of living a holy, sin-free life to receive physical communion when they can attain the same spiritual benefits from making an act of spiritual communion—expressing a desire to receive Jesus into their soul—even though they are not able to receive Him sacramentally. Aquinas was quick to caution, “Sacramental eating is not without avail, because the actual receiving of the sacrament produces more fully the effect of the sacrament than does the desire thereof” (*Summa Theologiae*, Q. 80, A. 1). However, despite this, spiritual communion became the popular form of receiving the sacrament, primarily due to the emphasis on the cause-and-effect of spiritual hindrances (or put plainly, sinfulness) and the way someone receives communion. It is significant that Aquinas gave spiritual communion the attributes he did given the esteem in which he is held in the Roman Catholic Church. This shows the importance of what theologians like Aquinas have said, but along with theologians, there are also smaller social movements that gain influence over a wider group of people as time goes on that place emphasis on some of these spiritual theological movements concerning how to receive communion. Furthermore, as will be seen, Aquinas was only one of a number of important Christian

theologians who would write about the importance of spiritual communion during the Middle Ages, further driving social trends.

Sociological, Theological, and Phenomenological Factors Driving the Popularity of Spiritual Communion

The first social factor that resulted in the increasing popularity of spiritual communion was the demand for the sight of the Eucharistic host (the bread that was believed to become the Body of Christ during the Mass) expressed through its elevation. Around the 12th and 13th centuries, the elevation of the Eucharistic host—the raising of the host by a priest as he intoned the words of Christ—was incorporated into the Roman Rite of the Catholic Mass. According to the English Roman Catholic priest and liturgist Adrian Fortescue, the elevation of the host was “a late medieval devotion” of which there was no trace until the 11th century (338). The main purpose was to indicate the moment of its consecration. It was first mandated by Eudes de Sully, bishop of Paris from 1196 to 1208, and was subsequently adapted by the Cistercians in 1215, at a provincial synod in Trier, Germany in 1227, and by Walter of Cantilupe, bishop of Worcester, England, in 1245 (Fortescue 340–41).

This is an instance of a social practice that starts on a local level and then spreads. What was first practiced and mandated in Paris also becomes a practice in Germany and England by the middle of the 13th century. While there is something to be said for the power of how a social movement spreads, there is still the question of why this practice happened and what led to this desire to see the Eucharistic host elevated. The answer lies in the emphasis on sight as a sense during this time period as well as an increased perception of unworthiness among Christians.

There had been a long-standing phenomenological tradition that regarded some senses as being more noble than others. The idea of sight as a noble sense actually has its root in ancient Greek philosophy. For example, Aristotle refers to sight as the “sense yielding the most knowledge and excelling in differentiation” (*Metaphysics A*, 980, a 25).⁵ Aquinas was well-known for his synthesis of Aristotelian thought with Christian theology, something that was unique to Christianity during his lifetime. Hence, it is not surprising that Aquinas’s description of spiritual communion would involve vision. Aquinas may not have directly made this connection in his writings on a spiritual communion, but the development of spiritual communion during the Middle Ages along with the desire to see the Eucharistic host seems to be at least coincidence, if not a very direct synthesis, of ancient Greek philosophy and Christian theology in a more theological and academic sphere.

Besides the academic and theological spheres, there is a very practical aspect of our human nature that this phenomenology of sight seems to tap into as sight is the “presentation of simultaneity through simultaneity” (Jonas 512). The closeness between the occurrence of an action and the sight (perception) of it can generate a feeling of awe, where sight generates internal feeling which is in turn expressed through external devotion. Thus, the Act of Spiritual Communion, in its original form, is an expression of devotion through the simultaneous presence of the host and sight of the host. This sense of simultaneity through simultaneity is seen again in instances of the procession and the related practice of ocular communion which will be discussed later.

The desire for increased sight of the Eucharist led to an increasing appreciation of its beauty, both spiritual and aesthetic. And along with the increased perception of Eucharistic

⁵ Translation is used from Jonas’ “The Nobility of Sight.” See Works Cited page for more information.

beauty came an increase in belief in its mystical powers, even beyond any liturgical celebrations. The Eucharistic host became a type of reliquary that could be adored in any way possible. For instance, as travelers in the Early Middle Ages would take the consecrated host with them as they traveled and then it was buried with them to get what they thought was an ensured safe passage to heaven (Van Ausdall 393). Furthermore, the increased emphasis on sight meant led to more artistic representations of Christ's body, linking the Eucharist to Christ's passion on the cross. This meant that "the devout could contemplate a vision of the crucified Christ at will, aided by painted or sculpted images, which could serve as a visible reminder of the perpetual eucharistic presence" (Van Ausdall 551). The focus on the imagery of the Eucharist, and more broadly of Christ's body, meant that any such imagery could serve as meditative guides for the faithful, making the devotion of making an Act of Spiritual Communion much more accessible.

The inspiration of the Eucharist's beauty also led to more appreciation of its *mysterium tremendum*, or "tremendous mystery." I take this term from the theologian Rudolf Otto, who used it to describe that which is "inherently 'wholly other,' whose kind and character are incommensurable with our own, and before which we therefore recoil in a wonder that strikes us chill and numb" (111). This idea of the *mysterium tremendum* can be expressed through extreme devotion and reverence due to something's perceived power, which is "beyond our apprehension and comprehension" (Otto 111). Furthermore, this reverence to something that is powerful and beyond comprehension shows fascination—that there is something that "allures with a potent charm" (Otto 112).

Even though the term *mysterium tremendum* is not from a Catholic theological background (Otto was a Lutheran), I believe this is a useful term in accounting for a phenomenological understanding of the Eucharist, particularly during the Middle Ages. In

Catholic Masses, even today, the phrase *mysterium fidei* (“the mystery of faith”) is used around the time of consecration where the bread and wine are believed to become the Body and Blood of Christ. It becomes apparent that a significant aspect of the Eucharist—that which generates a sense of awe—is its mystery.

This sense of awe leads to worship and adoration but also leads to feelings of unworthiness and lowliness. The Eucharist is perceived as something that transcends human nature, particularly human sinfulness, which is “present in human history” (*Catechism of the Catholic Church* 386). It is this transcendence that leads to feelings of lowliness; it is that which “strikes us chill and numb” as Rudolph Otto phrases it. The Eucharist is that which prompts the response, “Lord, I am not worthy,” as is said in every Mass. In medieval Europe there was an understanding of the Eucharist that was developed both by popular theologians as well as on a smaller and more local level that emphasized the Eucharist as something that should be separate from the people in both physical distance and beauty. There was a sense that ordinary people were unworthy to receive communion sacramentally because they might profane it. It is documented that “there were religious and particularly religious women who wished to receive more frequently, even weekly. In general, spiritual directors discouraged such ‘familiarity’” (Macy 392). In many respects, this goes back to the notion from Aquinas that some people are hindered from receiving the sacrament. While it may seem like using a very specific part of Aquinas’ writing to justify a practice, it is also seen that this occurred in the context of broader social and artistic movements that also influenced the understanding of the Eucharist. In these, the Eucharist is something to be seen by the Church, not often touched or tasted, as ordinary people could not truly be worthy nor truly comprehend the meaning of receiving the Eucharist. This resulted in an increase in the popularity of spiritual communion while fewer people came up

to receive sacramental communion. Though there was required yearly reception of the Eucharist during Eastertime, as mandated by the Fourth Lateran Council in 1215, frequent reception of communion was discouraged. As a result, this all led to a sense among many Christians that they were not worthy to receive sacramental communion; as a result, receiving the same graces from spiritual communion was thought to be a more righteous and pious practice.

The idea that many Christians were unworthy of receiving sacramental communion goes back as far as the 4th century A.D. with the archbishop of Constantinople, St. John Chrysostom, saying:

You have sung the Hymn with the rest: you have declared yourself to be of the number of them that are Worthy, by not departing with them that are unworthy. Why stay, and yet not partake of the table? I am unworthy, you will say. Then are you also unworthy of that communion you have had in prayers (“Homily 3”)

The ways in which one might be unworthy to receive the Eucharist became greatly exaggerated in the Middle Ages. The Jesuit priest and liturgist Josef Jungman documents this, saying:

Various cases of exclusion from the Sacrament were established in the spirit of the Old Testament purification laws, especially for married people and women. And on the other hand, greater and greater requirements were set down for the preparation. A synod of Coventry in 1237 desired a previous fast of half a week for lay people. Elsewhere, six days' abstinence from flesh meat was required. (365–366)

This made sacramental reception of the Eucharist a near impossibility for many lay people, and thus, these developments concerning piety also contributed to the increased practice of spiritual communion along with the already existent theological practices on a larger level (i.e., Aquinas and Augustine) and a smaller level (i.e., local spiritual directors).

The fact that there was a foundation for being too unworthy to sacramentally receive the Eucharist is important as it gave a foundation for its understanding as *mysterium tremendum*. The danger of sacramentally receiving the *mysterium tremendum* was the “deadly” risk “to participate in a ritual that symbolized a life they were not living” (Macy 392). This notion of the unworthiness to sacramentally receive the Eucharist occurred similar to a domino effect where, over time, that which was endorsed on a smaller level by local clergy and on a larger level by well-known theologians in their writing and at Church councils was taken to a seemingly extreme effect. Thus, spiritual communion was a way to receive the effects of the Eucharist while not profaning it.

The Understanding of Spiritual Communion from the 16th Century to the 19th Century and the Development of the Act of Spiritual Communion as it is Known Today

The emphasis on unworthiness and the sense of sight along with the theological foundations laid by Augustine, Aquinas, and medieval mystics set the stage for many centuries in which mystics and theologians advocated spiritual rather than sacramental communion. For example, the 16th century Spanish saint and mystic, St. Teresa of Avila (1515–1582), wrote, “When you hear Mass but do not go to Holy Communion, you may make an act of Spiritual Communion, which is exceedingly profitable” (213). She does not indicate a specific text describing this act. The main purpose at this point in the development of spiritual communion is the expressed desire to receive sacramentally despite not being able to. Also important to this development is the continued theological thread from Aquinas about its profitability. In this sense, spiritual communion is used as a means to an end; there is an expected result from spiritual communion

whereby people receive graces on this earth that bring them closer to a sense of union with God, with the ultimate goal being union with God after death.

The Council of Trent (1545–1563), which occurred during the lifetime St. Teresa of Avila, placed more emphasis on the significance of spiritual communion, saying:

As to the use of this holy sacrament, our Fathers have rightly and wisely distinguished three ways of receiving it. They have taught that some receive it sacramentally only, as sinners; others spiritually only, namely, those who eating in desire the heavenly bread set before them, are by a lively faith which worketh by charity made sensible of its fruit and usefulness; while the third class receives it both sacramentally and spiritually.

(“Thirteenth Session”)

The council frowns upon only sacramental communion, saying that those who receive communion that way receive “as sinners.” The other two categories of receiving communion, spiritually only and spiritually and sacramentally, do not have the same discouragement. Despite that, Session Twenty-Two from the Council of Trent says, “The holy council wishes indeed that at each Mass, the faithful who are present should communicate, not only in spiritual desire but also by the sacramental partaking of the Eucharist, that thereby they may derive from this most holy sacrifice a more abundant fruit” (“Twenty-Second Session”). This does not mean that the Council of Trent contradicts itself. The frequent sacramental reception of communion is encouraged if someone is not in a state of sin, such as someone who had just taken part in the sacrament of Penance & Reconciliation through which sinners are “reconciled to God” (*Catechism of the Catholic Church* 1424).⁶ However, to receive communion frequently in a state of grace is much more difficult than simply receiving the graces of spiritual communion. Once

⁶ Cf. 2 Cor. 5:20

again, this is also keeping mind that clergy on the local level were emphasizing a special level of piety that made it difficult to attain the graces to worthily receive the Eucharist. Ultimately, no one wants to profane the sacrament of the Eucharist by receiving it as a sinner, so many would revert to praying an act of spiritual communion anyway.

A little later on, St. Francis DeSales (1567–1622) gives more of an indication of what an act of spiritual communion should look like, saying:

When you cannot have the advantage of communicating really at the holy Eucharist, communicate at least spiritually, uniting yourself by an ardent desire to this life-giving flesh of our Saviour. Your principal intention in communicating should be to advance, strengthen and comfort yourself in the love of God. (82)

While this does not give the specific words of a prayer, it indicates what such a prayer would look like—a personal prayer that expresses union with the love of God through the desire to receive communion. St. Francis DeSales differs from other authors in the way he contextualizes the act of spiritual communion in that he calls “communicating really” advantageous. This is in a context where physical reception of communion was not predominant, as it was not for several more centuries. However, DeSales’ writing taps more into the original Augustinian and Thomist intentions for spiritual communion—that spiritual and sacramental communion both exist and that they both provide advantages to the communicant. At this point, this understanding of spiritual and sacramental communion had been lost as a result of the domino effect mentioned earlier, where there was an ever-growing perception of unworthiness to receive sacramentally and spiritual communion was considered the ideal way to receive the Eucharist. In some respects, this balance between understanding the benefits of sacramental and spiritual

communion is not achieved in such a way until the COVID-19 pandemic when people who were accustomed to sacramental reception of the Eucharist had to embrace spiritual reception.

As mentioned earlier, the act of spiritual communion prayer that people have come to know during the COVID pandemic is the one authored by St. Alphonsus Liguori. His “Act of Spiritual Communion” takes the personal prayer of the act and makes it public. He is quick to also indicate the benefits of the “Act of Spiritual Communion”: “This devotion is far more profitable than some suppose, and at the same time, nothing can be easier in practice. . .an act of love does all” (16–17). Up to this point in history, it was hard to pin down what this act of love looked like other than being a personal expression, but he goes on to provide the Act of Spiritual Communion (shown earlier on page sixteen) that is prayed to this day. In it is an expression of this act of love. The prayer makes clear that Jesus is loved above all things, and it expresses the desire to receive Jesus into one’s soul, to embrace and be united with Jesus, and to never be separated from Him. This gives an indication of what such acts of spiritual communion may have looked like prior to his composition.

As the Church progresses into the 18th and 19th centuries, there is more of an emphasis on making an act of spiritual communion when someone is unable to make it to church to receive sacramental communion. St. John Vianney (1786–1859), a 19th century parish priest, says, “If we are deprived of sacramental communion, let us replace it, as far as we can, by spiritual communion, which we can make every moment” (Kosloski). St. John Vianney emphasizes the importance of spiritual communion but does not say directly whether spiritual communion should be practiced instead of sacramental communion at Mass. Rather, his words could seemingly be placed in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic when people around the world could not receive sacramental communion. For Vianney, it is not the case that people should

choose not to receive sacramental communion, but rather, when people are deprived of sacramental communion, they should replace it with spiritual communion. This shows a further shift in the understanding of spiritual communion where it is not depicted as a practice for those *unworthy* to receive sacramentally, but rather it is depicted as a practice for those who are *unable* to receive sacramentally.

The Development of the Modern Understanding of Spiritual Communion

When the 20th century came around, there were two events that resulted in significant shifts in the understanding of spiritual communion—Pope St. Pius X’s release of his “Decree on Frequent & Daily Reception of Holy Communion” (1905), and Vatican II (1962-1965). In Pope St. Pius X’s “Decree on Frequent & Daily Reception of Holy Communion,” he declares:

Frequent and daily Communion, as a practice most earnestly desired by Christ our Lord and by the Catholic Church, should be open to all the faithful, of whatever rank and condition of life; so that no one who is in the state of grace, and who approaches the Holy Table with a right and devout intention (*recta piaque mente*) can be prohibited therefrom.

(Pope Pius X)

Through this document, Pope St. Pius X made the most radical shift on the view on the sacramental reception of communion in years. Although there were indications of this shift coming for a few centuries beforehand, this is a completely different understanding of communion than what was touted by clergy in the Middle Ages, when reception of sacramental communion was discouraged. After centuries of promoting spiritual communion, Pope St. Pius X was the most prolific major theological figure in many centuries to come out in favor of regular sacramental reception of communion. In Pope St. Pius X’s decree, the focus is not so much on

the sin and sinner, but rather openness to those with right and devout attention. In many respects, the theological perspective had changed from a glass half-empty perspective to one of a glass half-full. There is even a noticeable shift in the language that was used by the Council of Trent. While the Council of Trent encouraged frequent sacramental reception of communion, it also frowned upon those who would receive frequent communion as “sinners.”

The changes from Vatican II, that resulted in even more frequent reception of communion that many Roman Catholics have known recently, are very symbolic. Firstly, there was a shift in the language of the Mass from Latin to the vernacular, the language of the people. Second, priests were instructed to face the people instead of having their backs toward the congregation. Along with these changes, many individual churches (though not mandated by the council) eliminated sanctuary rails and brought the altar out closer to the congregation. Thus, the Eucharist was brought physically closer to the people and made more visible while physical and social barriers were broken down between the priest and the rest of the people, making frequent reception of sacramental communion even more accessible. I call these changes “symbolic” insofar as they break down symbols that both represented piety where the clergy and the Eucharist were separate and distanced from everyone else, such as the sanctuary rails that separated the clergy from everyone else. It was these very symbols of piety that resulted in the raising of the Eucharistic host, so it could be more easily seen, and aided the increased devotion toward the sight of the Eucharist. All these changes reflected a change in the *nomos* of the Eucharist.

Vatican II changed the liturgy as it had been known for many years, which by extension changed the understanding of the central action of the liturgy—the Eucharist. There were no longer language or physical barriers to the Eucharist. Furthermore, there were fewer social

barriers, as the Catholic Church had shifted more toward encouraging frequent and even daily communion. Over fifty years on, this is the Catholic Church and the concept of reception of communion that many people had come to know of before the COVID-19 pandemic.

Despite this shift to increased sacramental communion, the Act of Spiritual Communion had remained present in the Catholic Church. St. Josemaría Escrivá (1902–1975) says, “What a source of grace there is in spiritual Communion! Practice it frequently and you'll have more presence of God and closer union with him in your life” (93). In Pope St. John Paul II’s 2003 encyclical *Ecclesia de Eucharistia*, he cites St. Teresa of Avila’s words on spiritual communion, promoting its benefits.

St. Josemaría Escrivá and Pope St. John Paul II show how the practice of spiritual communion remained present and beneficial in the Catholic Church, even if it had become less prevalent. However, at the point of their writings in the 20th and 21st centuries, the predominant socio-religious culture of the Church was of frequent sacramental communion instead of spiritual communion; spiritual communion had become a useful but unnecessary practice. Furthermore, unlike some of the pre-20th century writings already highlighted, there is no contrast between receiving communion sacramentally and making an act of spiritual communion. However, I believe the biggest factor, once again, is social, in relation to the *nomos* of the Eucharist. The very social factors that led to the desire for spiritual communion were no longer as prevalent and the narrative concerning communion was less centered around perception of self-unworthiness. Thus, while the writings of St. Josemaría Escrivá and Pope St. John Paul II are certainly important, the circumstances surrounding them are very different from those surrounding St. Thomas Aquinas and St. Teresa of Avila.

How the Act of Spiritual Communion Has Changed the Understanding of Communion During the COVID-19 Pandemic

COVID-19 has caused quarantine and social distancing orders that people have not seen in their lifetimes. One of the results of these orders has been the shutdown of churches to promote the safety and well-being of people. This meant that people could no longer have frequent sacramental communion. Despite this lack of sacramental communion, the Church was able to tap back into the history and theology of spiritual communion for usage during the COVID-19 pandemic. Suddenly, televised and online Masses started using the Act of Spiritual Communion attributed to St. Alphonsus Liguori during the Liturgy of the Eucharist at Mass. At his morning Masses, Pope Francis would encourage “the faithful who pray with him, without being physically present, to make a ‘spiritual Communion’” (Lombardi). Being deprived of sacramental communion has resulted in the increasing benefits and usage of acts of spiritual communion in a way very similar to what St. John Vianney suggested in the 19th century. Yet this practice would likely not have been found as useful if not for the constant thread of endorsing such an act of spiritual communion rooted in St. Augustine, developed by St. Thomas Aquinas, and endorsed by St. Teresa of Avila, the Council of Trent, St. Francis DeSales, St. John Vianney, St. Josemaria Escriva, and Pope St. John Paul II. Many Catholics are now able to find a thread of connection with the Catholics of many centuries past through making an act of spiritual communion. Furthermore, there is still some potential for Catholics to reclaim some of the social aspect of spiritual communion insofar as the closest way of receiving it during a pandemic is by seeing it, not consuming it, for many people who are unable to attend church.

While spiritual communion has satisfied quite a few Catholics during the pandemic, there is also a recognition that it does not satisfy the desires for sacramental reception of the Eucharist,

particularly for people who would receive sacramentally before COVID-19. As seen in the history of spiritual communion, COVID-19 is the first time when it has been intentionally used for a pandemic when there has been no way to sacramentally receive the Eucharist. The closest influence for such a use of the Act of Spiritual Communion comes from St. John Vianney who emphasized its use for those are unable to receive sacramentally. Similar to the guidelines from the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops for televised Masses, the act is for the sake of those who are unable to participate in the Mass in person; but during COVID, those for whom such circumstances have applied is much broader. Those unable to receive sacramentally are not hindered by their own sickness or impairment, but to protect themselves and others from getting sick. In bringing up the challenges with the application of the Act of Spiritual Communion, I break these down into three different areas: historical difference, theological and sociological difference, and phenomenological difference.

Historical, Theological & Sociological, and Phenomenological Challenges to Applying the Act of Spiritual Communion During COVID-19

Regarding the issue of historical difference, the original historical context of the Act of Spiritual Communion was a theological, phenomenological, and metaphysical movement that placed a devotional emphasis on sight and unworthiness. Now, however, the Act is used out of a need for spiritual connection when that cannot be otherwise accessed through the sacraments. It is seemingly a challenge to apply the same action to completely different historical circumstances, especially given the changes that have happened since the 20th century regarding the understanding of how to receive the Eucharist.

Regarding theological and sociological differences, when the Act of Spiritual Communion was most popular, prior to the 20th century, it emphasized the *mysterium tremendum* and *mysterium fidei* of the Eucharist. Although the mystical aspect of the Eucharist is still emphasized, it is understood differently so as not to overburden Catholics with a sense of unworthiness. Barriers, both architectural and linguistic, have been broken down, notably through Vatican II, to bring the Eucharist closer to the people. Whereas spiritual communion grew in popularity in a time when it was difficult to access the Eucharist in any other way, the challenges are now both similar and different. They are similar insofar as it is once again difficult to access to the Eucharist, but they are different because the issues with accessing the Eucharist in the Middle Ages came from theological and social emphases on piety rather than the circumstances of a pandemic. Changes to the structure of the liturgy also has brought about a change to the *nomos* of the Eucharist—it is no longer hidden nor exclusive. It is now something not just to be seen, but also to be tasted and consumed.

Finally, and most significantly, the phenomenological difference brings up the difference between perceiving in-person versus seeing through television. This is not to say it is reduced to a spectacle, as feared by Rahner, but the television or computer acts as a barrier to the simultaneity of the liturgical action insofar as the image comes from the television screen and signal, not the physical sight of the Eucharist. There are delays between satellite signals and occasional glitches that almost completely eliminate the simultaneity of sight, which had been part of the reason why the practice of spiritual communion had been so popular.

Phenomenologically, the current practice of the Act of Spiritual Communion is void and empty relative to its intent for many years before the current technological advances that have made live-streamed Masses possible, but have also eliminated the simultaneity of sight, keeping in

mind that what is seen on the television screen occurs several seconds after it occurs live, thus eliminating the phenomenological simultaneity present in spiritual communion that makes it an easier solution to resort to for personal and spiritual comfort.

There is no doubt that the present circumstances concerning the Act of Spiritual Communion are quite unusual, but given the importance of the sacraments, particularly the Eucharist in the Roman Catholic tradition, it is important to seek as many possible ways to make the sacraments accessible with an intent that is respectful to the history of the Eucharist and the Catholic Church as well as the sociological and phenomenological nature concerning the Eucharist present within people. As a result, there have also been some attempts to convert the sacramental reception of the Eucharist into online formats by tapping into historical and theological understandings of what communion means. These attempts are not exclusively Catholic, having been carried out across the Christian traditions; but there are lessons they can all learn to provide some more insight into how access to the Eucharist can be more easily provided during a pandemic.

Chapter 4

The Physical and Spiritual Boundaries of the Eucharist

Alternative Means of Providing the Sacrament of the Eucharist During COVID: Tapping into the Meaning of Communion as Sacrament, *Communio*, and *Koinonia*

At the root of many attempts, both physical and spiritual, to carry out the sacraments is the meaning of communion. In one definition of communion, the one that is interchangeable with most Christian (not just Catholic) conceptions of the Eucharist, it is the sacramental reception of physical elements that take the physical appearance of bread and wine (or grape juice) through the commemoration of the Lord's Supper. However, there is another meaning of communion—literally the “union with” one another, often expressed through the sacraments. This notion of communion takes its origins from the Latin word *communio* and from the Greek word *koinonia*, which emphasizes communion as an expression of maintaining Christian community (Sagovsky 1). This definition both gives more meaning to spiritual communion while bringing people closer to a sense of receiving physical communion. In this understanding of spiritual communion, it is not merely a substitute for sacramental communion, but it is an understanding of a community united in prayer, even if they are united in the same space.

A tweet sent by the Bishop Edward Scharfenberger of the Diocese of Albany on Holy Thursday encapsulated the idea of giving spiritual communion by saying, “Although we cannot celebrate together in local churches this evening, we are united by the great gift of the Eucharist that we commemorate at the Mass of the Last Supper. Our voices joined in prayer from our individual homes and via livestream will be a balm for a weary world” (@AlbBishopEd). There is an acknowledgement that there is no sacramental reception of communion that takes place

from viewing the livestream Mass, but Bishop Scharfenberger highlights that people are still united by the Eucharist through coming together at the same time in prayer in the same liturgies, even though they are in different locations. This coming together highlights the importance of communion as an expression of *koinonia*; there is a semblance of union with one another that is not bound by physical space but is created by spiritual union. While this expression of communion is not a sacramental reception, it brings people closer together as a community and brings them closer to the few people (clergy and any laity present) who can partake of the sacrament, all through the unity of praying at the same time.

Going even further with defining the sacramental reception of the Eucharist, Aidan Luke Stoddart from the Episcopal Chaplaincy at Harvard proposed a way that the physical sacramental absence and the absence of *koinonia* could be addressed. Even though this does not come from a specifically Roman Catholic example, the uniqueness of the proposal in relation to the nature of the social situation from COVID and the nature of the Eucharist deserves to be addressed, especially in considering carrying out the sacraments over virtual platforms during a pandemic. Stoddart proposed a “Eucharist via Zoom,” where his community would gather over Zoom and each congregant “will be invited to make ready some bread and wine in her own location. Our chaplain will serve as the celebrant, as usual, and her Eucharistic consecration will extend not only to the elements in her proximity, but to the bread and wine of all those gathered digitally to participate in the Eucharistic liturgy” (Stoddart). In this instance, the physical manifestation of communion as a sacrament is carried out through the actions of the priest, as it would be in person, but extra emphasis is placed on doing an action together, through communion as defined by *koinonia*, even if the way it is done is virtual. This action is a step further because it is no longer union created through common prayers that are said, but it is also union created through

common physical actions that are designed to reenact the taking and eating of bread and wine. This makes this reception of the Eucharist even more real than that which was defined by Bishop Scharfenberger as there is now physicality of Eucharistic elements involved.

Between the examples from Scharfenberger and Stoddart, there is a sense that there is a power greater for bringing people together than the power of physical presence. A virtual *ekklesia* is pushed through an understanding of community that can be carried out virtually. Moreover, there are ways that the sense of communion and community are built through platforms such as Zoom where people gather simultaneously, or Facebook where people can see their friends who are watching simultaneously. The sense of community (*ekklesia*) comes through being united in a shared action, and the sense of communion (*koinonia*) is a quasi-sacramental expression and/or feeling brought from the sense of community. It is sacramental in the sense that the sacraments are “efficacious signs of grace, instituted by Christ and entrusted to the Church, by which divine life is dispensed to us” (*Catechism* 1131). The signs are made present on a virtual platform, yet sacraments also “bear fruit in those who receive them” (*Catechism* 1131). This leads to the question of whether or not sacraments are somehow still received through virtual elements, and some issues are brought up in attempting to answer this question.

First, the statements from Scharfenberger and Stoddart are among the least formal types of statements theologically, as one is a statement from Twitter, and another is a proposal made on a website for the Harvard Episcopal Chaplaincy. This is not to say they are in complete error, but such statements are taken lightly in the theological sphere, both systematically and in practical application, when compared to documents and more formal writings from popes, Church councils, and saints. Furthermore, while the idea of *communio/koinonia* is not new,

carrying it out over a distance or virtually is a novel idea, particularly the idea of extending a blessing virtually. In this respect, the use of virtual platforms to build *communio* and *koinonia* to foster a quasi-sacramental community are what create biggest challenges for actually making it sacramental. Moreover, in applying this case back to the Catholic Church, there are very specific regulations for the bread and wine used at Mass, so expecting the laity to faithfully adhere to such regulations would be quite challenging.

All this being said, these understandings of *koinonia* and *communio* bring up some interesting sociological and theological points for further consideration. On the one hand, using *koinonia* and *ekklesia* in a virtual sense could have negative implications on the *nomos* of the Eucharist, but it could be a breakthrough in providing access to or a semblance of the Eucharist during a time when the *nomos* has already been disturbed. This issue becomes quasi-ethical as it weighs if the benefits outweigh the downfalls in relation to the understanding of the Eucharist. I call this quasi-ethical because it reflects the principle of double-effect type conundrums where the question is whether the goods of a matter outweigh its evils. In this case, the issue at hand is not considered an evil, but there is certainly a question of weighing the goods of an action or actions versus its downfalls in relation to forming a sense of a social community centered around the Eucharist.

Imagined Communities

Another point that *koinonia* and *communio* bring up is the notion of “imagined communities.” I take this idea from Benedict Anderson’s 1983 book, *Imagined Communities*. Though Anderson himself is a political scientist and historian who has applied this term to concepts of nationalism, I believe that this concept is also very useful for building a social understanding of how to form a

cohesive group, even when the group is not held together by space. According to Anderson, an “imagined community” is one where “a deep, horizontal comradeship” is developed through shared interests, even if place may be different for each member of the community (7). This can easily be applied back to the notion of a spiritual connection that is formed with the members of a given church congregation through sharing in prayer and even sharing in common actions when they are otherwise not in the same physical space. This connection is imagined insofar as it is not witnessed through presence in a shared physical space. However, the comradeship is clearly emphasized in the examples from Stoddart and Scharfenberger, and this comradeship is meant to bring about some sense of social cohesion in a time when people otherwise feel separated.

The analogy of forming a sense of spiritual communion through *koinonia* and *communio* to an imagined community can also be extended to current theological implications. The Eucharist, even how it was understood before the COVID-19 pandemic, is also an expression of imagined community, where there are not only people physically present, but in addition, “the Church Triumphant and Suffering are always present, and are actively participating and answering” (McNamara). This creates a sense that the community formed by the Eucharist is not even confined to those gathered in the church building, but rather that there is always an imagined community of those physically present united with those spiritually present. This understanding of the Eucharist extends the boundaries of how we understand church and Church. Through this sense, the Church can be expressed in the church, even when they are not physically present, because the Church is not just those who are alive and can be physically present, but it is also those who have passed away beforehand and form some other-worldly community in communion with what takes places in this world.

Questions About the Boundaries of the Eucharist

The concepts brought up so far in this chapter some interesting questions that should be considered, especially in trying to determine how best to understand the sacraments during a time of pandemic:

1. Is communion merely something physically received?
2. What sense of sacramental communion can be fostered through virtual platform? What graces are “transmissible” through virtual means?
3. What defines presence, especially in regard to the Mass?
4. Can *koinonia* and *ekklesia* be fostered on virtual platforms? Or are their definitions confined to physical communities and elements? If they are not confined to such boundaries, then how does that change the meaning of communion, particularly in a time of pandemic?

In the next section I hope to answer these questions in order to further investigate what communion and presence mean in relation to physical and virtual presences.

The Boundaries of Communion

On the surface level, it seems as if communion is quite boundless in its meaning, especially when extended to the spiritual realm. The prior sections on spiritual communion, *communio*, and *koinonia* show how these boundaries have been extended in an attempt to bring about the same benefits for people desiring communion. The understanding of spiritual communion, in particular, has changed over time, yet it is not void of meaning. In this sense, communion is not limited to physicality in its meaning. More specifically, communion can transcend physical boundaries, but as emphasized earlier, its most contemporary understanding before the

experience of COVID-19 was that its sacramental reception was the fullest experience of what communion is. The attempt to carry out a virtual Eucharist over Zoom from the Harvard Episcopal Chaplaincy is an attempt to have this full experience, albeit from a non-Catholic denomination. Nevertheless, it is worthy considering the transmissibility of sacramental communion through virtual platforms insofar as the technological developments made in recent years are one of the more unique social aspects of the COVID-19 pandemic.

The challenge with addressing sacramentality over a virtual platform is the lack of physical, embodied presence. As mentioned when defining the Eucharist, it is about a physical and incarnational action of gathering, taking, eating, and drinking in a shared communal space. The more specific a denomination gets about its Eucharistic understanding means the more challenges there are to presenting the Eucharist in any sort of virtual format. In the case of the Catholic Church, the parameters for the sacramental Eucharist are quite specific:

The bread for celebrating the Eucharist must be made only from wheat, must be recently baked, and, according to the ancient tradition of the Latin Church, must be unleavened. The meaning of the sign demands that the material for the Eucharistic celebration truly have the appearance of food. It is therefore expedient that the Eucharistic bread, even though unleavened and baked in the traditional shape, be made in such a way that the priest at Mass with a congregation is able in practice to break it into parts for distribution to at least some of the faithful...The action of the fraction or breaking of bread, which gave its name to the Eucharist in apostolic times, will bring out more clearly the force and importance of the sign of unity of all in the one bread, and of the sign of charity by the fact that the one bread is distributed among the brothers and sisters. (*General Instruction 320-321*)

Simply put, there is no way for the Eucharist to be carried out sacramentally over a virtual platform. First, the requirements for the bread used for the Eucharist are very specific, so there would need to be due diligence to ensure that the proper bread is used. Yet, the type of bread used is the least of the challenges to carrying the Eucharist over a virtual platform. The larger challenge comes from the breaking of the one bread to be distributed to the congregation.

The proposal from the Harvard Episcopal Chaplaincy emphasizes unity in the action carried out by each individual participant breaking the bread and sharing in the Eucharist whereas the emphasis in the Catholic Church is on each individual sharing in the common Eucharistic bread blessed and broken by the priest that is then distributed. There is still a unity of action, but the action is different. Instead of each participant breaking their bread, the participants share from the bread that has already been broken. The difference is quite subtle, but it highlights the underlying principles behind the Eucharist in the Catholic Church, particularly regarding the priest.

The priesthood in the Catholic Church is described as acting *in persona Christi*. This Latin phrase, meaning “in the person of Christ,” is used to describe the actions of the priest during the Eucharistic liturgy, where he repeats the words Christ said at the Last Supper as he consecrates the bread and the wine. The *Code of Canon Law* states, “Those who are constituted in the order of the episcopate or the presbyterate receive the mission and capacity to act in the person of Christ the Head” (1009.3). This mission and capacity is specific to only a few people, and thus, the related actions of acting in the person of Christ during Eucharistic celebrations are limited to a few people. As a result, sacramental communion cannot be created over a virtual platform in the Catholic Church in the way described by the Harvard Episcopal Chaplaincy.

As harsh as this may seem, particularly to anyone who is not Catholic, it fits in line with the prioritizing of sources outlined at the start of this paper, where Scripture and Tradition take precedence over everything else. In this case, it is Tradition expressed through the *Code of Canon Law* taking precedence over the theological speculation of someone in a university Episcopal chaplaincy. The goal is to find the balance between respecting the practices of the Catholic faith while also responding to the desire for access to the Eucharist during a time of pandemic. I believe there are still solutions that have not been explored yet that do a better job at striking this balance.

Regarding the transmissibility of graces over a virtual platform, the possibilities are certainly more open. The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* defines grace as “favor, the free and undeserved help that God gives us to respond to his call to become children of God, adoptive sons, partakers of the divine nature and of eternal life” (1996). Unlike the Eucharist, this definition is not bound by physical gatherings, actions, nor physical items. Thus, grace, in itself, is boundless. What is defined by boundaries, though, is grace received through the sacraments. The definition of sacraments in the Catholic Church indicates that they are, “visible rites by which the sacraments are celebrated signify and make present the graces proper to each sacrament” (*Catechism* 1131). Visibility of the signs of grace are certainly possible and transmissible over virtual platforms, but physical reception of those signs is not. In fact, the prayer of spiritual communion authored by St. Alphonsus Liguori specifically states, “I desire to receive you into my soul.” Reception does not actually take place, yet there is a desire to receive the sacramental grace that comes from the Eucharist. Nevertheless, grace in itself, apart from its physical signs, even by definition in the Catholic Church, is not limited and thus can even be transmissible, by definition, over virtual platforms.

Virtual platforms also bring up the challenge of presence and what presence means. As highlighted so far, there is a lot to be said for physical presence in a shared space, particularly in regard to the Catholic sacraments. Virtual platforms certainly bring about a sense of social cohesion and community, which are aspects of how the Eucharist is expressed. Insofar as an imagined community is created on virtual platforms, there is a nebulous form of presence apparent. It is already clear that there is no such thing as sacramental presence for the Catholic Church on a virtual platform, at least as currently expressed. However, with 8.1 million households viewing Pope Francis' 2020 Easter Sunday Mass (Lubov), it seems that there is presence—presence in the shared action of participating in the Mass. So, even if the Eucharist cannot transcend the physical boundaries created by virtual platforms, there is still presence on these platforms. This presence is not seen in the same space, but it is seen in a shared action from different spaces, thus indicating that there is such a thing as virtual presence. As the philosopher Alva Noë describes it, “virtual presence is a kind of presence, not a kind of non-presence or illusory presence” (216). Our senses can register and perceive the action at hand and even register that it is present with something really happening transmitted over a virtual platform. In some respects, non-television platforms such as Facebook and Zoom carry out this sense of presence better; while it has a similar phenomenological effect as the television does in regard to how virtual presence is expressed, it also creates the sense of imagined community earlier by seeing the number of people and even the faces of people who are joining in on the common action, which means there is an expression of both phenomenological and social presence.

In accounting for the phenomenological and social senses of presence yet the challenges in creating a sacramental sense of presence, it seems that *koinonia* and *ekklesia* can indeed be created on virtual platforms, but not to their fullest extents, particularly in the case of the

Catholic Church which is centered around the sacraments. Going back to the examples of Bishop Scharfenberger and Adrian Stoddart from the previous section, both create a sense of *koinonia* and *ekklesia* by creating a form of virtual presence; this sense is strengthened on platforms such as Zoom and Facebook where it is seen how many people join and even the faces of those who join in the common action of the community, thus creating the sense of imagined community. This all sounds nice, except there is seemingly little that distinguishes the *ekklesia* and *koinonia* from any other virtual community. At any given school, there are also student groups that meet that participate in a common action. What differentiates the virtual *ekklesia* and *koinonia* from a book club that meets online, for example? Part of it seems to be the ritual itself, yet when one of the fundamental aspects of the ritual for Catholics is the sacrament. Thus, it (the ritual) seemingly cannot be carried out to its fullest extent.

Therefore, in order to determine how to carry out the sacraments, particularly the Eucharist, to its fullest extent during a pandemic, it is best to next take a look at some of the historical practices and precedents for the Eucharist during a time of pandemic. As addressed at the start of the paper, COVID-19 is not the first impact to have made a major impact on humanity, and it will also likely not be the last.

Chapter 5

The Eucharist During a Pandemic: A Look into the Past

The Historical Practices and Precedents for the Eucharist During a Time of Pandemic

Though it is easy to get caught up in the new technologies and abilities made available in recent years, there have been practices during past pandemics that churches can use during the present and future times to bring the Eucharist closer to people. In some cases, historical practices utilized during prior times of pandemic have been utilized again during the COVID-19 pandemic. One such practice that has come into use during the COVID-19 pandemic and has been used for many centuries is the procession.

Processions have long been a form of rallying Christians during times of disease, going back to Pope St. Gregory the Great, who got people from different social groups led by clergy to chant litanies in the form of what we now know of as the procession, back in 590 (Chiu 29-30). In 1340, a “great eucharistic procession” was planned for Florence when a plague hit the city, and later on, when a plague hit Montpellier, France in 1407, “the eucharist was mounted and taken around the town, and even outside it” (Rubin 258-9). Such public exposure of the Eucharist has allowed numerous devotees to witness it. This also hearkens back to the importance of sight as a sense when it comes to receiving and perceiving the sacraments as described in the earlier section about spiritual communion. Devotees who were already accustomed to receiving some semblance of the Eucharist through the sight did not have to adjust much to a new form of encountering the Eucharist, which understandably would have made it a popular practice as it did not require much change to the *nomos* of the Eucharist at the time.

When the COVID-19 pandemic hit, the devotion of the Eucharistic procession was utilized by some churches, which one priest identified as a way to “bring the church to them (church members), when they’re not able to come to us” (Estrin). These Eucharistic devotions expressed through processions have not only served as an expression of theological piety, but also as a very practical means of making the Eucharistic sacrament accessible for people who could not otherwise access it easily. This is a very practical means of tapping into the history of the Church to bring people closer to the Eucharist, even if it is not a full sacramental reception of the Eucharist. This also hearkens to a practice very similar to spiritual communion called “ocular communion,” where the strongest access to Christ was not the Eucharistic host placed on the tongue of the communicant but rather, “the visual ray of the worshipper,” which was believed to bring about a “salvific effect” (Miles 96). For a time of pandemic, an increased understanding of ocular communion can be useful for the faithful who are not able to receive the Lord’s body from the same sacrifice. However, as recent understanding of spiritual communion has emphasized, ocular communion likewise has not recently been considered as a substitute for sacramental communion. It does raise an interesting point of tension, though, between tradition and the present system of meaning regarding the Eucharist, notably if the historical practice of ocular communion could come back into prevalence over the current understanding of physically receiving the Eucharist. It is not something to be counted out, as the increasing popularity of spiritual communion in the Middle Ages, and then Vatican II in the 20th century, show how the meaning of something taken to be a commonplace and even traditional practice can be changed.

Another practice that could come into use during a time of pandemic which has been considered before is the praying of the Liturgy of the Word. At a Catholic Mass, there are two parts—the Liturgy of the Word and the Liturgy of the Eucharist. The Liturgy of the Word is the

part with the readings from The Bible and does not require a priest because the part that the priest is required for, the consecration, takes place during the Liturgy of the Eucharist. One such circumstance where the praying of the Liturgy of the Word was considered was during the 2006 H5N1 flu, which caused a lot of concern in Europe, Africa, and Oceania. The concern came to a point where there were several documents from religious leaders on how to lead their respective congregations and dioceses through the pandemic, realizing “that the Church itself may see 25% of its ministers and faithful ill” (Donnelly et al. 658). A proposed plan if physical presence for the celebration of the Eucharist in person at church could not occur was for the distribution of “a Liturgy of the Word booklet to enable the faithful to worship at home” (Donnelly et al. 660). This is meant to be in accordance with the Code of Canon Law, which states:

If participation in the eucharistic celebration becomes impossible because of the absence of a sacred minister or for another grave cause, it is strongly recommended that the faithful take part in a liturgy of the word if such a liturgy is celebrated in a parish church or other sacred place according to the prescripts of the diocesan bishop or that they devote themselves to prayer for a suitable time alone, as a family, or, as the occasion permits, in groups of families (*Code of Canon Law* 1248.2)

There is one downside to this, though, which is that there is no way to partake in the sacrament of the Eucharist in this proposal, not even any form of spiritual communion. Nevertheless, the upshot for Catholic leaders and theologians is that it is a proposal that is in line with the *Code of Canon Law*. The most desirable response during any pandemic in the Catholic Church is one that remains in line with its traditions, which are made present in documents that have already been cited such as the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* and the *Code of Canon Law*. Thus, this is why anything presently or formerly proposed as a Eucharistic practice during a pandemic will

come under a certain level of scrutiny in light of the emphasis on traditions in the Catholic Church. The other practical advantage to Liturgy of the Word celebrations is that it accounts for situations when the clergy are also sick or are unable to be present. This is particularly useful in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic since many of the responses to the virus have been to quarantine and to have minimal contact with anyone outside of one's own home or apartment.

The historical precedents that bring the closest sense of sacramental reception of the Eucharist comes from the Black Plague (1346–1353 A.D.) and the 1576 Plague of Milan. Among the sacramental practices during the Black Plague included “hearing confession through a candle flame to purify the victim's breath, using a long spatula to distribute communion, or doing both from outside through a window” (Byrne 292). These solutions are very plausible ways of providing access to the sacraments, but there are actually a couple complications regarding practicality. First and most obviously, there are now other means through which the particles released from someone's breathing can be controlled besides a flame, most notably the face masks that have come into use during the COVID-19 pandemic. This is more a matter of basic health sciences than it is theological, phenomenological, and/or sociological. The other issue, whether it was during the Black Plague or during COVID-19, is having a spatula that is long enough to accommodate for the distance that would need to exist between the priest and the communicant.

The possible complications from this need not take much theological, sociological, or philosophical thought, but in trying to resolve certain complications, even in the field of religion, it becomes apparent that some answers are found through what many people have come to accept as practical understanding. Using the COVID-19 pandemic regulations as an example, the Black Plague model of distributing communion with a six-foot long spatula would increase the chances

of communion being dropped onto the ground, which is not a desirable way to distribute communion, especially if it is something to be revered and adored as the source and summit of one's faith. It would certainly create logistical headaches every time the host is dropped on account of the procedure outlined in the *General Instruction of the Roman Missal*: "If a host or any particle should fall, it is to be picked up reverently; and if any of the Precious Blood is spilled, the area where the spill occurred should be washed with water, and this water should then be poured into the sacrarium in the sacristy" (280). Nevertheless, this practice from the Middle Ages gets closer to a possible solution to providing the sacramental presence of the Eucharist to people. However, there was an even more practical version of the practice of distributing communion through the windows of homes which was used during the 1576 Plague of Milan.

St. Charles Borromeo was bishop of Milan, Italy when a plague struck the city in 1576. During this time, Borromeo expanded the scope of sacramental ministry in order to accommodate the needs of the people he served. The difficulties he faced were notably like the difficulties faced with COVID-19 such as churches being closed and people being quarantined to their homes during the peak of the pandemic (Bullivant 31). One of Borromeo's mandates was "that everyone should devoutly hear Mass every day; and to give effect to this order, he erected altars at the crossways and conspicuous places, where Mass could be said daily, so that all could assist from their windows" (Giussano 418-419). Subsequently, priests would go "round with the Blessed Sacrament on Sundays and gave holy communion on the doorsteps to all" (Giussano 419). This is very similar to the practice of the Black Plague where the priest would go up to the windows to distribute communion. Once again, it seems very practical, and even more practical than the example from the Black Plague since it does not mention distributing communion

through a spatula. The practical health issue at hand is once again a matter of distancing though, which is subsequently fixed by the health measures implemented such as requiring communicants (people receiving communion) to receive communion in the hand and then move at least six feet to the side to consume the Eucharist. Admittedly, though, that is what many Catholic Churches have resorted to since returning to in-person Mass, so it is not a perfect option, but it is certainly one that is feasible as it is already being applied. However, there is an even more glaring practical issue—many towns and cities are not set up for this proposal. Borromeo’s proposal came at a time well before streets were filled with cars. Furthermore, there are many churches that cover large land areas that are widely spread apart whereas Borromeo’s proposal was carried out in a more densely populated urban area, as seen in *Fig. 1*.



Fig. 1 Erasmus 89 Plague Cross in Viale Lombardia, 2005.

Though there are practices that have predominated among Catholics during pandemics throughout the history of the Church, there is still a sense in which the desire for safe sacramental reception of the Eucharist is not fully satisfied through any of the proposals above. While celebrations of the Liturgy of the Word are practical, they still exclude the Liturgy of the Eucharist. The practice of Eucharistic processions and the associated devotion of ocular communion, while having very historical roots and still being very central to Catholic practices today, still does not account for the fact that there is still no sacramental consumption of the Body and Blood of Christ. The practice of communion through windows on a spatula utilized during the Black Plague, while bringing the Eucharistic sacrament to the people, would be quite inconvenient with the required length in order to maintain a distance besides the fact that there is now a health advantage with the utilization of masks. This practice, as refined by St. Charles Borromeo during the 1576 Plague of Milan, while seemingly even more practical, still has its faults, especially in regard to the way that many towns and cities are set up today. Therefore, there must be some further consideration to account for the desire of Eucharistic consumption.

Chapter 6

Bringing Together the Past and Present: A Synthesis of Eucharistic Practices and Understanding for a Pandemic

A Synthesis of Proposals by Returning to the Roots and Tapping into the Contemporary: The Pragmatic Diaconate, Extraordinary Ministers of Holy Communion, and Eucharist in the Home During a Pandemic

At this point, quite a few different proposals for how to make the Eucharist more accessible during a pandemic have been brought up. A number of proposals have come from more present times such as the COVID-19 pandemic and the 2006 H5N1 Flu whereas some other proposals date further back such as St. Charles Borromeo's response to the 1576 Plague of Milan or the response for how to distribute communion during the Black Plague. Amidst all these examples, there have been strengths and weaknesses identified in hope of trying to synthesize all these examples into several possible original solutions for how to provide access to sacramental reception of the Eucharist. I refer to these as original solutions insofar as through the course of research, I have not seen these proposals brought up in any academic or religious sphere. The challenge with such novel proposals, especially in the case of the religious sphere, is that it is bound to face scrutiny against tradition, which I will address more later in this section. However, I only make these solutions because I see them as the best attempt to reconcile the very practical issues faced during pandemics with the systematic theological teachings proclaimed and taught by numerous theologians over the centuries.

When St. Charles Borromeo commanded that public altars be built around Milan during the 1576 plague that struck Milan and then had priests distribute communion to the doorways of various residences, it would have taken place in a more densely populated setting than the actual

settings that many churches are in. Furthermore, this took place before streets were occupied with cars and trucks, also posing a practical issue to finding central public space near houses where people could participate in such a Mass. However, this spurs some ideas for how people's homes can be used as churches where the Eucharist is received. Moreover, the usage of the home as a place where people can physically receive the Eucharist is a ministry that can both be expanded upon for a pandemic while also tapping into the roots of Christian history.

Christianity was originally centered around prayer from home. The Last Supper took place in a home; Jesus told his disciples on the first day of Passover to “go into the city (Jerusalem) to a certain man and tell him, ‘The teacher says, “My appointed time draws near; in your house I shall celebrate the Passover with my disciples””” (Mt. 26:17). Therefore, the origins of the Eucharist come from the home, and this theme of the Eucharist from the home continues into the first few centuries of Christianity. For the first few centuries of Christianity, worship, including partaking of the Eucharist, took place in house churches, which were often kept private because Christianity was illegal and a persecuted religion. However, with the legalization of Christianity, *basilicas* became the preferred worship sites, which were “an essentially secular form of assembly hall” (Cobb 529). Though the circumstances are different now insofar as the situation being addressed is that of pandemics and not persecutions, it gives Catholics, and even all forms of Christians desiring to worship in person, a more accessible and safer way of doing so. It is the home that can become a place of importance for the Eucharist again, especially during a time of pandemic. There is already a rite for the distribution of communion to the sick, so even for present times, bringing the Eucharist to homes is not unprecedented. However, what is unprecedented are the number of people that need communion, as it is not just bringing communion to the sick but instead bringing communion to everyone. However, this is where the

Catholic Church can use two other aspects of its ministries that are very pragmatic—the diaconate and extraordinary ministers of holy communion.

Deacons have played a fundamental role in serving the Christian Church since the Apostolic Age, immediately after Christ ascended into heaven. Acts 6 lays out the need for deacons; a number of Hellenists, Jews who had adopted Greek customs, were being neglected in the daily property distribution. In order to better serve their ministry, the twelve apostles proposed that they should chose seven men so that they would not “neglect the word of God to serve at table” (Acts 6:2). This was the root of the diaconate—seven men to serve the Word of God and serve at table. This ministry has remained to this day, now with men who dedicate the rest of their lives to the diaconate, also known as permanent deacons, and other men who are deacons on the path to priesthood. Nevertheless, the essential ministry of serving the Word of God and serving the table, or the Eucharistic table more specifically, is no different now. The Greek word from which we get “deacon,” *diakonia*, is translated as “ministry, relief, or support.” The diaconate carries out those purposes of ministry, relief, and support, making it pragmatic, and it is these purposes of the diaconate that can be utilized in order to more effectively carry out the sacramental ministry of the Church. Furthermore, it is a way of witnessing past and present come together, where the ancient ministry of the diaconate is made present through the contemporary restoration of the permanent diaconate.

The following quote from *Lumen Gentium*, one of the Vatican II documents, defines the roles of deacons in the Roman Catholic Church:

It is the duty of the deacon, according as it shall have been assigned to him by competent authority, to administer baptism solemnly, to be custodian and dispenser of the Eucharist, to assist at and bless marriages in the name of the Church, to bring Viaticum to the dying,

to read the Sacred Scripture to the faithful, to instruct and exhort the people, to preside over the worship and prayer of the faithful, to administer sacramentals, to officiate at funeral and burial services. (Pope Paul VI 29)

The role of the deacon is manifold, and considering the pragmatic role of the diaconate, the deacon could play an important role in carrying out these functions during a pandemic. A deacon could hold small baptisms with individual families present. A deacon could bless marriages that take place outside of a church, depending on whether a given area allows weddings outside a church building. For the main purpose of this paper, it is important to note that they are the “custodian and dispenser of the Eucharist.” This highlights the fundamental link between the diaconate and the Eucharist; they are not consecrators like the priests, but they protect and care for that which has been consecrated. While most Catholic Masses are a wholistic experience of consecration of the Eucharist and reception thereof, the utilization of the diaconate allows Catholics to bring together the importance of sight, in a semblance of spiritual communion, when they participate virtually and the importance of sacramental communion when those who have been entrusted as custodians and dispensers of the Eucharist, the deacons, bring to full expression their ordained ministry.

I bring up the role of the diaconate and its potential impact during a pandemic due to the nature of their historic and ordained ministry. However, I would be careless if I did not address another potential solution—extraordinary ministers of holy communion. The roles of extraordinary ministers of holy communion have only been more recently developed since Vatican II. This role entails non-clergy members distributing communion at Mass to individual people, and even at communion services. It was instituted by Pope St. Paul VI in 1973 in light of Vatican II’s emphasis “on the dignity of the laity and the right and duty of all to participate in the

eucharistic liturgy in accordance with their dignity” (Collinge 162). Just like deacons, extraordinary ministers of holy communion play a very pragmatic role in the Church in assisting the clergy. In fact, the part of the *Code of Canon Law* that lays out the basis for extraordinary ministers of holy communion defines the ministry as a pragmatic one:

When the need of the Church warrants it and ministers are lacking, lay persons, even if they are not lectors or acolytes, can also supply certain of their duties, namely, to exercise the ministry of the word, to preside offer liturgical prayers, to confer baptism, and to distribute Holy Communion, according to the prescripts of the law. (230.3)

The extraordinary minister of holy communion is a role that responds to the need of the Church, and particularly during a time of pandemic, the need for such a role can be utilized, similar to the diaconate, to bring the sacrament of the Eucharist closer to those who desire it. The other advantage to both the diaconate and extraordinary ministers of holy communion is that most people who serve in those roles live among families and not on church property as priests do. Therefore, one can imagine a set-up that restores some semblance of the house church where deacons and extraordinary ministers serve to very immediate local communities. Another way of looking at it is that it divides each church into smaller churches united by spiritual communion and nourished and comforted by sacramental communion.

Influenced by early Christian home churches, deacons and extraordinary ministers of holy communion could still serve as dispensers of the Eucharist using a scenario like the one that St. Charles Borromeo faced during the pandemic in Milan. During a pandemic, when virtual Masses are held, a significant number of hosts could be consecrated. Then, the consecrated hosts can be placed in pyxes, or small containers for holding the Eucharist, and taken to those who request to receive the Eucharist from the home, like what the priests did during the 1576 Milan

pandemic. Through a system like the one that Borromeo created that utilizes the diaconate and extraordinary ministers of holy communion, such ministries can become extremely localized to the point where each deacon and extraordinary minister of holy communion provides their immediate family and neighbors access to the Eucharist, where the Eucharist consecrated at Sunday Mass is brought to individuals and/or smaller family units in the format of a communion service in accordance with appropriate health recommendations.

Priests could still be utilized to assist in the distribution of communion to individuals immediately around where they live. However, priests often live on separate church property whereas, as previously mentioned, deacons and extraordinary ministers of holy communion often live with family members, share apartment buildings with other parishioners, and live in the same housing communities as other parishioners. Thus, deacons and extraordinary ministers do not need to go beyond the areas where they already live in order to provide access to the Eucharist. This is particularly helpful in areas where churches cover a lot of people or a large area of land; deacons and extraordinary ministers can divide the area their churches cover into smaller areas, meaning less contact with people while still providing both visual and physical access to the Eucharist. This is certainly not the same as the Mass, but it could still promote a sense of community, and more importantly, bring the physical Eucharistic presence to people longing for it while maintaining good health and safety standards during a pandemic. Thus, this brings together the social desire for *ekklesia* (community), *koinonia* (communion—both spiritual and sacramental), and allows for both the sight and sacramental consumption of the Eucharist.

Despite all the ways in which the proposal of utilizing the diaconate and extraordinary ministers of holy communion appears to answer all the aspects brought up in this paper regarding the desire for community, communion, sight, and physical consumption of the Eucharist, there

are a few issues, both practically and systematically. Practically, there will be logistical problems faced where there are few or no deacons. This is a problem that cannot be solved overnight as many Catholic dioceses require candidates for the diaconate to go through a formation program of several years. However, this should first and foremost be encouragement for priests and laity to encourage married men to become deacons. Second, it may open up debates for who to ordain to the diaconate such as men *virī probabati*, or “men of probable virtue” who have not gone through the full formation program) and even possibly women, though the debate on the female diaconate is another kettle of fish that has been written on extensively and has not been covered here nor, for sake of remaining on topic, will be covered extensively here. Third, the challenges faced in limiting this ministry of dispensing the Eucharist to the diaconate, due to a lack of deacons in a given area, is why a similar role should also be opened up for the extraordinary ministers of holy communion.

While a certain amount of formation is often required to become an extraordinary minister of holy communion, it is not nearly as lengthy a formation process as it is for priests and deacons, making it an easier ministry to encourage people to sign up for. Furthermore, it is more expansive insofar as it allows both men and women to serve in the role. Nevertheless, the diaconate is the first and foremost ministry that should be promoted since, in addition to being pragmatic, they are ordained ministers that the *Code of Canon Law* refers to as “ordinary ministers” along with priests and bishops (910.1). Pending further need, in accordance with *Code of Canon Law* 230.3, extraordinary (“extraordinary” meaning “beyond the ordinary”) ministers of holy communion can be utilized in order to bring the physical, sacramental presence of the Eucharist to people.

The systematic issues faced regarding this proposal pertain to phenomenological, sociological, and theological points about the Eucharist. First of all, as indicated at the start of this section, the idea is novel, which faces challenges in relation to tradition. There is something to be said for the Catholic Church, and even religion as a whole, placing emphasis on tradition. On the level of the Catholic Church, the two sources of teaching are Sacred Scripture and Sacred Tradition, where Sacred Tradition “transmits in its entirety the Word of God which has been entrusted to the apostles by Christ the Lord and the Holy Spirit” (*Catechism* 81). Without going too deep into the psychology and sociology of traditions, it does appear that there is something to be said for traditions being passed on from one generation or group to the next, which in the case of this paper, can be applied to the way the Mass has been celebrated and the Eucharist distributed over the years. Traditions are reflections of the stability of the *nomos*, where the system of belief and its associated practices remain consistent. However, with the idea I have proposed, while it does not overcome the challenge of novelty, it certainly uses aspects of tradition that go back several generations, and in the case of the diaconate, go back to the early Church. Therefore, I believe this proposal is made in the most respect to the traditions of the Catholic Church and more broadly, the principles of religion insofar as it changes the *nomos* of beliefs and practices the least in respect to traditions.

Chapter 7

The Eucharist During a Pandemic: Future Considerations

Imagining the Future of the Eucharist and Technologies

At this point in the paper, I have identified a number of past and present practices regarding the Eucharist during a time of pandemic. I certainly envision many of these practices being considered for future use. Part of the inspiration for this very topic was comparing and contrasting past and present situations and realizing that the experience of a pandemic and providing sacraments during such a time is not unique to the present time. However, in considering future practices, I want to also open the floor for new and emerging technologies. I am well aware of the present challenges faced with providing access to the sacraments with the current technology available, so this will be the most speculative section, but it is something worth considering.

The technological world has rapidly developed over the last thirty years; look no further than the development of the internet, social media sites such as Facebook and Instagram, and most recently, video calling through means such as Google Hangouts and Zoom. Possibilities that most people could not conceive of thirty years ago are now normal aspects of our lives. While there is no certainty of when another pandemic would come after COVID-19, it is certain that technological capabilities will further increase. One area that has rapidly developed recently and will likely further develop is virtual reality.

Virtual reality, as the name indicates, places people in a virtual setting, such as a video game, and makes it feel like it is not fictional but real. However, the idea of virtual reality has expanded beyond video games, which leads to the question of how this could apply to churches,

and by extension, the sacraments. In fact, there have already been attempts at virtual reality churches, such as the E-Church that emerged in the 1990s, where the services would take place at fixed times where there is a leader and congregants represented by avatars gathered around a virtual altar (Heather et al.). Even in the 1990s, the experience of virtual reality church strived to mimic the experience of real church. This certainly sounds intriguing to people who are not able to go to church due to a pandemic, but while it is possible to carry out a virtual reality church that is not specific to a denomination, it leads to the question of how possible it is to carry out a virtual reality church that is sacramental given the challenges already.

The first inclination, if one is to take a more legalistic view of this, is to refer to the 2002 document *The Church and the Internet*, which states, “virtual reality is no substitute for the Real Presence of Christ in the Eucharist, the sacramental reality of the other sacraments, and shared worship in a flesh-and-blood human community” (Pontifical Council for Social Communications). However, virtual reality has notably developed in the eighteen years since this document. Virtual reality has developed so that the avatars and surrounding world feel a lot more realistic. This type of virtual reality which has started to emerge with virtual reality headsets and will likely continue to develop where there is minimal distinction between the virtual and the real, where a person slips on a headset to see a world that is not real but feels as real as can be. It blurs the distinctions between incarnational and disembodied experiences, which potentially opens up doors, both positive and negative. The possibilities of attending church and receiving the sacraments in this type of virtual world is quite different in human perception from simply viewing a Mass on a computer or television screen.

There more glaring point besides the difference between participating in church through a computer screen and participating through virtual reality is the distinction between *pathos* and

logos. Sacraments that are carried out in a virtual reality setting are still virtual though they feel real. The sacramental reality that *The Church and the Internet* hints at exists not only in feel and emotion, but also in reality. *Pathos*, the appeal to emotion, tells us that virtual reality sacraments are actually the sacraments being made present to us in a world that feels real. However, *logos* reminds us that as real as the sacrament looks, it is still actually virtual. The current system of virtual reality, which places people in a world surrounded by avatars certainly does not satisfy the sacramental needs of a Church that does not just appeal to *pathos* but also to the *logos*. Nevertheless, as the future is taken into consideration, there is one possibility that is not out of the realm of possibility that could be quite complicating—what if Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, Zoom, or another media platform be carried out in a virtual reality world? Furthermore, is it good enough for the Eucharist to feel emotionally real, even if it is not actually real?

Firstly, in attempting to answer these questions, there is a sense in which the aforementioned media platforms create a world where the Eucharist starts to feel emotionally real, even if it is not actually real. For example, saying the Mass responses in a chat box on a virtual platform, or having a camera zoom in on the Eucharistic host and chalice at the consecration are ways in which virtual platforms attempt to create a sense of emotional reality, even if there is a recognition of the lack of physical reality. There is social connect and disconnect at the same time; connection is brought about through virtual means, yet the connection is an artificial one and not a physical one, thus reducing the perception of reality.

Second, there are basic phenomenological conundrums faced with the prospect of a virtual reality Eucharist. This issue hearkens back to the conundrum between *pathos* and *logos*, where there is a challenge faced in defining what is actually real. In the case of the Eucharist in relation to the parameters of our phenomenology of sight, we are faced with answering the

question in the case of virtual reality Eucharist of whether we see the same Eucharist present as that which we see when we are physically present in a church building. Our physical senses can help ground us in actuality right now, helping us distinguish between the virtual reality Eucharist and the actual Eucharist, yet a confused phenomenology of sight may easily develop in the same way that a confusion of pathos and logos may develop. It brings up the broader question, not limited to the Eucharist, but speaking to virtual reality in general—how will we distinguish between actuality and virtual reality?

Though the current experience of multi-user virtual reality is seemingly limited in characters represented as avatars, what if the experience of chatting with people through 2-D Zoom boxes became a 3-D experience through virtual reality? Then, the line between what is virtual and what is reality certainly becomes blurred, and as virtual reality develops, such a possibility must not be counted out. The closest thing to a response that currently exists that would go against the sacraments being carried out in this sort of setting indicates that “the priest who celebrates a liturgy in virtual reality thus does not celebrate it for a public but for a piece of technical apparatus that makes his action present to the public who participates in the liturgy” (Spadaro 90). The issue seemingly at hand is the technological boundary that exists no matter how real the world feels. No matter how much we want the *pathos* and *logos* to conform to each other in a virtual world, it seems as if there is no way to fully reconcile the two. That being said, the ability for technological development should not be underestimated, including the ability to potentially reconcile our emotional desire for the virtual to be real.

At the very least, the Catholic Church must further consider the roles of virtual reality in ministry as it develops because it is something that has become more utilized since the release of *The Church and the Internet*, and it will likely become more prevalent in society as technologies

advance. There is little doubt that by the time a subsequent pandemic came around after COVID-19 that virtual reality will be further developed, which could be utilized for creating a sense of connection. Nevertheless, the phenomenological and social consequences are concerning at this immediate time and will need to be addressed as technologies further develop in the area of virtual reality.

Novelty of Eucharistic Workarounds as a European-American Problem

In making these proposals, I will not deny my general bias to addressing to pandemic situations in a primarily European and North American context. The H5N1 flu mentioned earlier was the closest to mentioning any pandemic or epidemic and its proposed solutions outside of this European and North American context. It is important to note that the current COVID-19 pandemic is a global pandemic, leaving no countries untouched, which means that some of the solutions proposed from prior pandemics as applied in Europe may be more or less plausible in other parts of the world. In some respects, countries have faced issues accessing the Eucharist well before the COVID-19 pandemic.

In some parts of the world, North America included, there have been priest shortages. However, the part of the world that has faced the most attention for priest shortages relative to number of Catholics has been South America. All the way back in the 1960s, two Argentinian bishops, Albert Devoto and Jorge Kémérer⁷, intervened for this paragraph to be added to the Vatican II document *Sacrosanctum Concilium*:

Bible services should be encouraged, especially on the vigils of the more solemn feasts, on some weekdays in Advent and Lent, and on Sundays and feast days. They are

⁷ Source for this history comes from Michael Henchal's "Sunday Assemblies in the Absence of a Priest." See the Works Cited section for more info.

particularly to be commended in places where no priest is available; when this is so, a deacon or some other person authorized by the bishop should preside over the celebration. (35.4)

This proposal was made in light of a shortage of priests and not in light of a pandemic. Given that this was written almost sixty years ago during Vatican II, it seems as if the solutions are not new to the Catholic Church as a global entity, but it is new to certain regional practices.

Furthermore, the utilization of the diaconate is once again highlighted here, highlighting how it is a ministry that can be utilized to provide the sacraments such as the Eucharist when it cannot otherwise easily be provided.

The issue of technological abilities in relation to the Eucharist is not only uniquely North American and European, but it is even, I admit, uniquely privileged. It is privileged insofar as it depends on having the proper internet access and technological capabilities to participate in a Eucharistic community in a virtual sphere, nevertheless, to even think of a virtual reality Eucharist. One need not look at statistics to have known friends and family who have struggled to cope with the virtual world because of lack of technological access and/or ability.

Furthermore, when looking at statistics, it becomes apparent that the possibilities for virtual reality Eucharists are, unsurprisingly, most plausible in North America, Europe, and Central Asia, which have more internet access than other parts of the world (Ortiz-Ospina et al.). This is once again where the importance of resorting to a localized Christian community is important as brought up in my proposal for utilizing the diaconate and extraordinary ministers of holy communion. In some parts of the world, such as South America, such a practice has been utilized, and is a practice that seems to have benefits in areas not only experiencing priest shortages, but also areas that are affected by pandemics. Even if someone cannot access a virtual

Eucharistic celebration, there can at least be a Eucharistic celebration made available to anyone on a smaller and more local level. It is certainly not a Mass, but it appears to be a very plausible solution compared to other proposed solutions.

Conclusion

This research was heavily influenced by the COVID-19 pandemic that has spread around the world, particularly one group's religious experience during this pandemic. There is no doubt much to be researched in numerous fields regarding the impact of COVID-19. However, as research for this paper went along, it became clear that the situation faced with the present pandemic is not as novel as we often like to think it is. I found numerous historical precedents for present practices, particularly that of spiritual communion. Other historical practices, such as ocular communion, may not be commonplace at present, but there has certainly been a reclaiming and reimagining of such aspects and traditions. Then there are all the prior practices utilized during pandemics which spur the imagination to think of what could have been done during COVID-19, but also what can be done in the future.

Moving forward, the most plausible possibility is utilizing the ministry of the diaconate and extraordinary ministers of holy communion. Utilizing the diaconate gives witness to the past and present history of Christianity coming together as well as allowing the fullness of the ministry to be expressed. The extraordinary ministers of holy communion are newer in the history of the Catholic Church, but may also be utilized, especially in areas where the number of deacons is lacking. Through utilizing these ministries, a new sort of Christian ministry can be imagined which becomes very localized, resembling the early Christian house churches. Of course, there is certainly potential for other technologies to develop and supersede this proposal. There also may be aspects of other historical and contemporary examples of providing access the Eucharist during a pandemic mentioned here that have the potential to become more developed over time as more thought is given to them or as technological capabilities develop. None of these proposals will be the be-all and end-all of providing access to the Eucharist during

a pandemic, but they certainly have equipped and will continue to equip future generations of Christians who are driven to comprehend the meaning of the Eucharist and are curious about how to best provide access to it, especially during a pandemic.

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