

Eucharist or Product?

In a recent online meeting with our Bishop, he took pains to distinguish between celebrating the Eucharist together, and “the commoditization of the elements.” It’s an important point, but those are some big words. So I thought I might take a moment to explain what he means, and also why I think he’s right.

For background, we get the term “eucharist” from an ancient document called the Didache’, which dates from before the year 100AD. (The word *eucharistia* is Greek for “thanksgiving.”) The Didache’s opening line is something like, “When you are giving thanks,” or *eucharistia*, and then follows a description of what the priest is to do and say. (All of which looks pretty much like what a priest does and says today, when standing at the Altar.) For this reason, Holy Eucharist really means Holy Thanksgiving. The Eucharist is not the result (i.e. consecrated bread and wine) but rather the activity of giving thanks together.

Bishop Hollingsworth has been saying for years that he strongly prefers that our parishes not use pre-consecrated bread and wine on Sunday mornings, since the actual Eucharist (giving thanks together) happened some previous Sunday, and is therefore removed from the community gathered. In the same way, the preferred method of “home communion” is to take bread and wine *directly* from the Sunday morning service and visit homebound members, immediately on that same day. This has not been the tradition here at St. Timothy’s, at least in recent memory, but I would like to begin following this pattern, once we are able to safely visit folks in their homes again.

To return to the phrase I quoted above, the commoditization of the of the bread and wine simply means turning them into a product, which we deliver to people at our convenience. The more we make the bread and wine into a “product” we provide, the further we are removed from the community gathering to give thanks together. The Sacraments are *always* about community. (This is why private baptisms are frowned upon in the Episcopal Church.) And so, delivering bread and wine directly from the Altar into the hands of people who are home-bound makes them part of the community, rather than someone receiving a product that was produced at some point in the past . . . or, delivering goods but not services, you might say.

So, to sum up, the Eucharist is something we join together to do (give thanks). And when we join together in worship, we also join with the saints of every time and every place, those who have gone before, and those who are sitting at home. God gathers us into community to offer our thanks, and that is especially important to remember this year, when gathering together is fraught with danger and difficulties. For now, we put our trust in God, as we hope for a future when we can offer Eucharist together, and then go immediately into the world to share it with others.