



The  
Episcopal Diocese  
of New York

March 27, 2020

*Letters to the clergy and church wardens from the bishops of the diocese*

My Dear Brothers and Sisters,

Services of public worship have been suspended across the Diocese of New York for the past two Sundays, which is also a time when we have received instruction from our civic leaders to remain sheltered in our homes, with trips away from home only for the most urgent of circumstances. Parish offices are closed, programs are held in abeyance, and it has no longer been possible for our communities to gather on Sundays. The loss of worship in our churches has been one of our greatest challenges, and it has been among our greatest losses. We have as Americans and Christians weathered together many a national crisis, but it has been our coming together before the altar, and our life of common prayer, which has strengthened us through hard seasons, and provided us the lived experience of God's love and favor when we most needed it.

I have watched as you and your parishes have shaped and offered a variety of forms of corporate worship, all of which have needed to be done remotely and mediated through electronic media. You have told me about Zoom bible studies and Zoom coffee hour, about live-streamed Morning Prayer services and significant powerful preaching. And you have told me of the ways in which your people have responded and lived into this new season with grace and gratitude. But you have also told me of the losses. The loss of the community gathered at your altars in your own churches, in prayer and fellowship. The limitations on common prayer, and above all else the loss of the Holy Eucharist.

Ours is a eucharistically-centered church. Holy Communion is what we do on Sunday, and in some parishes every day. It is the center of our lives as Anglican Christians. So, a number of questions have come to me positing alternative ways in which the consecrated host might still reach the members of your congregation. Communion by mail. Drive-by communion. While well meant, these and like ideas are not possible. They fall too far outside the practices set forth in the Episcopal Church for the eucharist, and I think may also have the unintended effect of trivializing the sacrament. And they will necessarily fail in their purpose. The more we try to make things feel normal, the more isolated and lonelier we are likely to feel.

The question has also been asked, by many, about the possibility of Virtual Communion, by which a priest might celebrate the eucharist remotely, while people at home gather before their computer screens with bread and wine. I have given this a lot of thought. I have had good well-articulated cases made to me for these services, and I am not 100% certain that this could not be done within some reasonable stretching of the canons and the rubrics of the Book of Common Prayer. However, I am not at this time going to allow these services of virtual communion. The celebration of the Holy Eucharist presupposes the coming together of the people of God, and the receiving of the sacrament together; eating from the one loaf, drinking from the one cup. We sing "let us break bread together on our knees," and the key word in that verse is "together." We have many ways to pray within our tradition, and practices within and without our prayer book which may be done by an individual person alone. But holy communion requires the gathering of the people. Right now, for reasons which have been imposed on us from without, we must be apart. One of the costs of that is that we cannot make our communion. You have heard me say

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that the theme, language and poetry of biblical Exile have been my companion, and my succor, in these early days of our forced separation from one another and from the altar. These losses and these costs are what exile means.

In Holy Week, one of the most striking periods for me occurs in that period between the end of the Maundy Thursday service with the stripping of the altar and the darkness, and the first eucharist of Easter, usually at the Easter Vigil on Saturday night. During this period the eucharist is denied us, as we wait and watch through Jesus' passion and death on the cross and his burial in the tomb. That period of the absence of Christ has always spoken as profoundly to me as the great celebrations and liturgies of Holy Week and Easter. The silent, empty vigil, speaking to us of sorrow and of longing. Of cross and death and tomb. These days feel like that too, and perhaps we should not be too quick to want to look away from the silence or the emptiness which proceed the glory to come.

I told you in my last letter that the three bishops of this diocese have resolved that as long as the eucharist is not available to the people of our churches, we also will refrain from receiving it. We will share the fast with you as well. Together we will wait in vigil, accepting the self-denial it requires of us. Allowing the space to be filled with our sorrow, our desiring, and our prayers.

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We do commend, however, and we ask the clergy of the diocese to make these resources available, and give instruction to your people, for the use, throughout this imposed season, but especially in the holy days just ahead, of the forms for the Agapé for Maundy Thursday and the Blessings Over Food at Easter, both of which are found in the Book of Occasional Services. These are already available to all of the people in the church and can be done by lay persons at their own tables or live-streamed by clergy or lay leaders from the church. They are not the eucharist. They are not holy communion. But they can give a way for all of us to gather with our families, or alone, around food and with prayer, and to come before the God of our blessing.

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Quite a few years ago a book called "Visions of a World Hungry" came into my hands. It was written by a Methodist minister, Thomas Pettepiece. He spent some sort of time as a political prisoner, and wrote of the experience of taking communion secretly in a place where they had no capacity to do regular church:

*Today is Resurrection Sunday. My first Easter in prison. Surely the regime can't continue to keep almost 10,000 political prisoners in its gaols! In here, it is much easier to understand how the men in the Bible felt, stripping themselves of everything that was superfluous.*

*"This meal in which we take part," I said, "reminds us of the prison, the torture, the death and final victory of the resurrection of Jesus Christ. The bread is the body which he gave for humanity. The fact that we have none represents very well the lack of bread in the hunger of so many millions of human beings. The wine, which we don't have today, is his blood and represents our dream of a united humanity, of a just society, without difference of race or class."*

*I held out my empty hand to the first person on my right, and placed it over his open hand, and the same with the others: "Take, eat, this is my body which is given for you, do this in remembrance of me."*

*Afterward, all of us raised our hands to our mouths, receiving the body of Christ in silence. "Take, drink,*

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*this is the blood of Christ which was shed to seal the new covenant of God with men. Let us give thanks, sure that Christ is here with us, strengthening us.”*

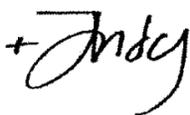
It was remembered afterwards, and even now, as the Communion of Empty Hands.

I want to say that I do not believe that these weeks of isolation are simply an inconvenience to be gotten around somehow, but represent in fact the very high calling we have been given as Christians and people of prayer for these strange days. Rather than try to find ways to replicate our customary practices or imitate normality, let us pay attention to what isolation and exile, and the denial of the eucharist, has to teach us. Exile is not simply the lack of home, the familiar, the customary. It is also a new space, a strange land, in which to discover God and listen to God in new ways. The psalms of the Exile have given us some of the most beautiful words of our scriptures - words of love for Jerusalem which could only have been uttered in Babylon. And the keening grief in Lamentations: “Is it nothing to you, all ye that pass by?” And the plumb bob of Amos. And Jeremiah and the potter’s wheel. Much of the richness of our tradition has come from the long years of Exile and separation.

In the last two weeks, the number of cases of COVID-19 in the state of New York has risen from 216 to 44,635, with 519 deaths. Dr. Fauci and Governor Cuomo are calling out for 30,000 ventilators which will be needed here in the next three weeks. No one can say with certainty what is coming, but it is likely that by Holy Week we will be approaching the cresting height of a public health crisis which will horrify and terrify us. Most of us are sheltering in our homes, by ourselves or with spouses or family, while the crisis rages around us, and I have come to think that our special calling in these days, when everything else has been taken away and when we are so powerless, may be that we are called to spend these days in prayerful vigil with the sick and the dying and to sit in mourning for the dead. The story of the Communion of Empty Hands speaks to me now in a new way. I accept and embrace the absence, and the loss, and the cost. To sit by the waters of Babylon and explore the deep currents and the low tones of fear and grief and to find out what Exile means. It feels to me like a way to make communion with those who are passing away. Pettepiece tells us that having no bread and wine is not an obstacle but an opportunity. The empty hands of the communion represent loss and lack and dream, and he comes to tell us how the empty hands brought the faithful even closer to the hope that we have in Christ. These are the virtues of grief, the currency of vigil, the empty hands of the powerless who have nothing upon which they can rely except the love of God.

And now, in these days, it is loss and grief which will shape us, and that love which will sustain us. Be blessed, my very dear friends,

Yours,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "+ Andy". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

The Right Reverend Andrew ML Dietsche  
Bishop of New York

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Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ:

This pandemic crisis is making me slow down and spend more time with my family, call my parents more frequently and make time to reflect upon life which I have taken for granted in my busy schedule. Above all I have realized how much I have taken Jesus for granted. During this crisis I find myself hungry for the Body of Christ and thirsty for the Blood of Christ. I am hungry for communion and for the community to which I belong. Moreover, the reality of not celebrating Triduum and Easter is devastating to me.

Some possibilities have been suggested for making the communion available to the faithful apart from the physically gathered community - by mail or drive-by or virtual communion. The pastoral bone in my body wants to allow communion apart from the physically gathered community during this crisis. But I am also called to guard the faith, unity and discipline of the Church. I feel that a clear line must be drawn for the centuries-old discipline of the Church. The Eucharist is rooted in and founded upon the Incarnation, the Word of God made flesh, the personal, therefore embodied, union of the divine and the human natures. The Eucharistic liturgy presumes and requires the presence of an embodied community of the faithful and its priest. So, I wait patiently with faith and hope for the day when we can come together again to worship Jesus and receive his Body and Blood. It feels more important in this painful moment of exile from communion that I be in solidarity with those who have died and are suffering from this virus in prayer. And I meditate upon these words of Paul as I patiently wait: “Therefore, since we are justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have obtained access to this grace in which we stand; and we boast in our hope of sharing the glory of God. And not only that, but we also boast in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, and hope does not disappoint us, because God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit that has been given to us” (Romans 5:1-5).



The Right Reverend Allen K. Shin  
Bishop Suffragan

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Dear Sisters and Brothers in Christ,

(Jesus said) *Abide in me as I abide in you.* John 15:4a

How do we abide in Christ? How does Christ abide in us? One of the biggest challenges to us as church as we respond to the crisis of a global pandemic is the appropriate prohibition of coming together for public worship for a time. In the sacred meantime, what do we do to maintain and nurture our communities of faith? How do we pray? How do we grieve and lament and care for those affected by this disease? What can we celebrate?

Much discussion and even theological debate has already been engaged regarding if and how we should celebrate the Holy Eucharist. Along with my brother bishops, I say no to “remote Eucharist” or “Eucharist via the internet” or “virtual communion.” I’ve read some arguments supporting such attempts, and I

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believe they are flawed. The very essence of the sacrament of the Holy Eucharist is that we gather as the Body of Christ to receive the Body of Christ – which we cannot do at this time. There is superstition and even idolatry involved in the notion that the only way in which we receive Christ is through that consecrated (or pre-consecrated) host.

Might not this be a time in our corporate life when we explore our baptismal spirituality? We are already abiding in Christ and Christ in us through our baptism. So, what might it mean for all of us, who are prevented from coming to church to celebrate the Eucharist, to *feed on Christ in our hearts by faith with thanksgiving*? What might it look like to celebrate at home our oneness in the Body of Christ? Can we imagine teaching our people and each other different and perhaps deeper ways of praying, even as we seek to maintain connections virtually?

I look forward to the time when the People of God can once again come together and celebrate the Holy Eucharist. When we do, we will need to grieve the people who have died, and the losses we have sustained, in addition to our return to celebrations of joy. In the sacred meantime, I hope we will find ways to grow and strengthen our baptismal spirituality by reading scripture, singing psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, praying with and for each other, serving God's people in whatever ways we can, and celebrating at home our oneness in Christ.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Mary D. Glasspool". The signature is stylized and cursive, with a large initial "M" and "D" and a long, sweeping underline.

The Right Reverend Mary D. Glasspool  
Bishop Assistant