Opinion
Spirituality
News
Guest Voices



Residents listen to Easter Mass through a local radio station in Ouro Preto, Brazil, April 12, during the COVID-19 pandemic. (CNS/Reuters/Washington Alves)

by Xavier M. Montecel

View Author Profile

Join the Conversation

Send your thoughts to *Letters to the Editor*. Learn more

April 18, 2020

Share on BlueskyShare on FacebookShare on TwitterEmail to a friendPrint

Christians around the world this year experienced the unthinkable: Easter season without Eucharist. The most sacred of celebrations in the Christian calendar occurred right at the peak of the coronavirus pandemic in the United States, and so our "Easter duty" this year was to stay at home.

What optimism there might have been that perhaps we would be done with all of this by now was quickly swallowed up by the facts of the situation. The difficult fast to which this particular season of Lent has called us must continue through Sunday and beyond.

Whether Catholic, Protestant or Orthodox, people will be mourning. As they have grieved over loved ones lost during the pandemic, over the loss of physical closeness to friends and family, and over the absence of so many social goods once taken for granted, so also will many grieve over the loss of the sacramental body and blood of Christ. And they are right to do so.

For Catholics in particular, the Eucharist is our deepest means of encounter with the Risen One: the crucified Son of God whose final victory over death is the heart of the Easter message. The Eucharist is the food of our souls as well as our bodies. It is the source and summit of everything we are and hope to be as baptized Christians. And this Easter we must go without it.

How is this possible? How can we go on being a eucharistic people, indeed an Easter people, without the Lord's Supper?

Perhaps one way of answering this question is to take our grief and search for the grace that resides within it. Let us mourn what we have lost, of course, and let us even sing an angry lament to God. But let us also remember, as St. Paul tell us, "that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor present things, nor future things, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor any other creature will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord" (Romans 8:38-39).

Our God is not the sort of God who abandons us to isolation, or who shrugs and gives up when circumstances throw up an obstacle to our usual means of grace. As a Catholic who draws my life and my faith from the sacraments, I have to believe there is grace here because, in the end, there is grace everywhere.

The Eucharist itself is not confined to the tabernacle or to the time we set aside for liturgy. How could it be? In the sacrament of Christ's body and blood, God is

reaching out to all of us, to all of history, and bringing it to share in his life. At the altar of Communion, we give the whole world to God and receive it back as a new world: as the promise of eternal life.

The threat of disease may keep us from that altar and prevent us from embodying our side of this wonderful exchange in the usual liturgical way. But it can hardly keep God from bestowing his gifts on us. No obstacle can ever keep Christ from being present to us and among us. Indeed, so long as the memory of Jesus, who gave himself entirely to God and entirely to us, lives among us by the power of the Holy Spirit, so too does the grace of the Eucharist.

Advertisement

Naturally, there has been a lot of talk lately about the idea of "spiritual Communion," a term that normally refers to prayers and practices that provide a connection to the Eucharist for those who for certain reasons cannot receive the sacrament in person.

Spiritual Communion has now become the only option for most of us, and so we may be tempted to think of it as a sort of half-measure or consolation prize. As modern people, we usually think of what is spiritual as less real than what is physical. If we cannot receive the Eucharist in a physical way, then we are forced by circumstances to accept a means of Communion that seems less real.

We watch Mass on television, we pray special prayers, and we try to live our faith through acts of mercy. These practices are meant, somehow, to "hold us over" until we can return to the feast of the Lord's table.

However, I believe this kind of attitude misses something essential. Spiritual Communion is not, in fact, some kind of lesser substitute for the real thing. To the contrary, the Catholic tradition teaches us that spiritual Communion is precisely the purpose of the Eucharist and its deepest reality.

In answer to certain controversies started in the 11th century, medieval theologians eventually articulated a Catholic theological view of the Eucharist in three dimensions. We can understand the Eucharist, they said, as consisting in what is only a sign (*sacramentum tantum*), what is both a sign and a reality signified (*sacramentum et res*), and what is only a reality signified (*res tantum*).

The *sacramentum tantum*, or the first level, consists in the matter and form of the sacrament, and every visible element that makes up our embodied experience of Communion. Bread and wine are taken, blessed, broken and given.

These things serve as signs of what is there invisibly, a deeper reality apprehended by the eyes of faith: the personal presence of Jesus Christ in his body, blood, soul and divinity. That is the second level, or the *sacramentum et res*, so called because it is a reality signified but also serves as a sign of something else, something even deeper.

That final reality, the *res tantum*, is the goal and purpose of the sacrament itself: the spiritual Communion of the faithful as one body in Christ, gathered by the Holy Spirit and sharing eschatologically in the heavenly banquet of God's life.



A couple watches Pope Francis from their home in Belfast, Northern Ireland, as he celebrates Easter Mass April 12 in St. Peter's Basilica at the Vatican. (CNS/Reuters/Jason Cairnduff)

Spiritual Communion, therefore, is what the Eucharist is all about. And it is not taken away from us because we have been prevented this Easter from receiving the sacrament in person.

This does not mean, of course, that we have not lost something important. We have indeed lost our usual bodily encounter with the mystery of salvation, and we are right to be sad and right to be angry. Still, it may provide some consolation to remember that in the physical absence of the Eucharist, we are no less loved and saved by God as whole and embodied persons, united in communion with one another.

After all, what deeper encounter can we have with our bodiliness and the bodiliness of our salvation than to realize that our bodies are in each other's hands, that we are one flesh not abstractly but in a real, physical sense? We are woven together as embodied creatures: Our well-being rises and falls as one body. It is our greatest vulnerability and also our greatest gift.

Moreover, our physical separation from the Eucharist does not take away our ability to participate in the sacrifice of the Lord's Supper. What deeper sacrifice can we now make than to give up those forms of bodily intimacy that nourish us?

Perhaps in the days to come, when we are feeling keenly the pain of separation from the Eucharist and from one another, we can offer this pain as a sacrifice to God. Not because God demands it of us, but rather because we know that in God's hands, pain is transformed into life.

The Eucharist is the source of our life, and our difficult calling now is to let it go so that we might receive it in another way. "Whoever loses his life for my sake will find it" (Matthew 16:25). We can only truly inherit the gifts of God by letting them go.

This is what Easter celebrates: that suffering and death, no matter how ubiquitous, will not have the last word. On Holy Saturday, we dwell in a time before that final victory. Pained by the absence of Christ, we know nonetheless that he is coming and

that he brings with him the glory of God for us to share.

This year, we are challenged to linger at Holy Saturday, in the darkness of that wonderful ritual of Tenebrae. And on Easter itself, we are challenged to gaze into the empty tomb without the consolation of the breaking of the bread in the upper room. My prayer is that we remember, nonetheless, that Christ is risen indeed, and that we are his body.

Even as we lament our distance from the Eucharist, may God give us the strength to be the body of Christ for one another as the current pandemic requires: to love our neighbors by staying away, to demand justice for the most vulnerable, to practice mercy through acts of care, to speak and share only the truth, to serve the common good even when it inconveniences us, and to be for one another sacraments of the kingdom of God.

[Xavier M. Montecel is a doctoral candidate in theological ethics and a teaching fellow at Boston College. His theological studies have taken him also through Fordham University and Harvard Divinity School. His research focuses on the relationship between liturgical theology and moral theology.]

This story appears in the **Coronavirus** feature series. View the full series.