

Bread of Life: Bishops' teaching series

9: Personal Devotion - Bishop Michael Ipgrave

In this *Bread of Life* series, we have covered several themes about Holy Communion, touching on different dimensions of the meaning of the sacrament, the way its liturgy is shaped, and the way it is understood. Our final episode today is a little different, in two ways: it is not about practices and ideas so much as feelings; and it primarily concerns the individual rather than the community. I am looking at the theme of devotion: with what attitudes, in what frame of mind and spirit do individual Christians approach and share in Holy Communion? Put the question like that, and you will immediately see that the answers we could give are huge in number and varied in character – not only between different people, but we know also that we ourselves may be in very different states of devotion, or lack of devotion, at different times. So anything I say will necessarily be very selective, and also very subjective; you might well come up with a very different set of descriptions.

It is the individual that I want to talk about today, rather than the community. It has rightly been said that liturgy is always in the first place performed by a 'we' rather than an 'I'. Nevertheless, there comes a point at which it is indeed an individual who is the one who is invited to the table, the one who says, 'Lord, I am not worthy to receive you, but speak the word only ...', and it is of that self that I want to speak, the self whom the Lord addresses personally. The invitation to Communion given to each of us is a word of loving grace spoken into our heart; as James Bonnell wrote memorably:

What is the food thou wilt give me from this thy table? It is immortal love, wrapt up in bread.

James Bonnell was a devout lay member of the Church of Ireland in the seventeenth century, and in fact all the examples I shall give today of living devotion in Holy Communion will be from laypeople, of various churches. It has been the priestly role to gather the people of God for the Eucharist, to preside at the table and to proclaim its story to the community, but it has been individual lay women and men who have freely explored its meaning in the particular circumstances of their own lives. How have they expressed the love with which they respond to the love which draws them? I want to pick out three important dimensions of love to answer that: longing, looking, and living.

Longing

In the first place, there is a strong sense of longing to join in Communion, a heartfelt anticipation of the celebration. Here is just one example from hundreds of thousands that

could be given – on 1st August 1858, William Jardine, a farmer on Cape Breton Island in Canada, wrote in his journal:

A few Sabbaths more has to pass away, before the sacrament of the Lord's Supper is to be dispensed at Sydney Mines, and let it be the Lord's will for me to see it that day, and to take my seat at his table.

William Jardine was a Presbyterian of the Scottish tradition, so the pattern of Communion to which he was used was one of a great gathering, which would be held only infrequently, but which was attended with the utmost seriousness when it happened. That meant that the weeks leading up to the 'Holy Fair', when the sacrament would be celebrated in the open air, were times of mounting excitement, but also rigorous self-examination, as only those who were judged worthy would be allowed to partake. Who would not be excited at the prospect of meeting their beloved, and who would not want to prepare thoroughly for that encounter? These 'sacrament seasons' of the Presbyterians became times of great spiritual renewal which led to successive waves of 'awakening' or revival across North America, as they had done in Scotland.

Perhaps it is sometimes harder for us to awaken within ourselves that same sense of anticipation, both longing and preparation, because we have become used to a much more frequent pattern of celebration – in most churches, weekly, and in many more frequently than that. Now, receiving the sacrament on a regular basis certainly is a spiritual good for our Christian lives, and withholding oneself from communion on the grounds of unworthiness can perversely be a form of spiritual pride. Even on Cape Breton Island, there was sometimes seen 'a strange form of inverted snobbery, employing non-participation as a public statement of piety'.

However, there is a danger for us that the ready availability of Holy Communion in the life of our churches can mean that we take this great means of grace for granted, that we do not prepare ourselves for reception with the thoroughness that we should, and that the note of eager anticipation, the longing to receive Christ, is muted within us. In fact, one of the paradoxical effects of the pandemic, when for weeks on end most people were unable to receive the consecrated bread and wine of the Eucharist in physical reality, has been to reawaken within us a sense of the privilege that we are given in this gift. It is just that sense of grateful longing which lies behind the 'Act of Spiritual Communion' which has been practised in so many of our Eucharists for those unable to be present physically, particularly those who are participating online. The prayer includes these words:

Thanks be to you, Lord Jesus Christ... Since I cannot now receive you sacramentally, I ask you to come spiritually into my heart.

More and more of us are now returning to in-person participation in Holy Communion (though many will continue to join online for a long period, and some permanently). As we receive the bread and wine physically with renewed gratitude, it would be good to reawaken in

our hearts that spirit of longing anticipation for the beloved presence of Christ. For me personally, the sense of travelling in hope towards an encounter with the giver of new life is one of the strongest themes in my eucharistic devotion:

Just as I am, without one plea
But that thy blood was shed for me,
And that thou bid'st me come to thee,
O lamb of God, I come.

And our anticipation should reach further ahead too, beyond the sacramental to the eschatological. Not only are we preparing for the Eucharist on earth, but in doing that we are relishing a foretaste of the Messianic banquet at the end of time:

When we eat this bread and drink this cup,
we proclaim your death, Lord Jesus,
until you come in glory.

Looking

If Holy Communion is indeed an encounter with Our Lord, then we will naturally want to use the language of looking with love on the beloved to describe that encounter. Gazing in adoration became a strong theme in the later Middle Ages as people focused on the elevation of the consecrated host at the mass, and it has continued in catholic Christianity ever since, particularly in relation to the sacramental bread reserved outside the celebration of the Eucharist. Many in the Reformed tradition of the Church of England will understandably want to raise sharp questions about this kind of devotion. But still, it is hard to doubt the profound spirituality in this famous anecdote, for example, told by Fr Jean-Baptiste-Marie Vianney, the saintly Curé d'Ars in nineteenth century France:

Listen well to this, my children. When I first came to Ars, there was a man who never passed the church without going in. In the morning on his way to work, and in the evening on his way home, he left his spade and pickaxe in the porch, and he spent a long time in adoration before the Blessed Sacrament. Oh! how I loved to see that! I asked him once what he said to Our Lord during the long visits he made Him. Do you know what he told me? "Eh. Monsieur le Curé, I say nothing to Him, I look at Him and He looks at me." How beautiful, my children, how beautiful!

That French peasant had, you could say, a very deep but a very localised sense of seeing the Lord in his sacramental presence. Here, by contrast, is a vision which expands symbolically to see the whole cosmos as the locus of the Eucharistic Christ – Elizabeth Jennings' poem A Full Moon (1998):

Tonight the full moon is the Host held up
For everybody's eyes

To see and understand the high and deep
Salvation in the skies.

In usual Masses we withdraw our stares
When we bow down. How wise

The Godhead is to make all Masses small,
All Consecrations set
Where the most simple, the most sceptical
Know of mankind's regret
That we brought Christ himself to such a pass.
That overflowing grace

Gave us another chance when we refused
To leave one Tree alone.
God-became-Man because of this and used
A cruel cross to atone
For us. It seems we cannot bear for long
A simple goodness but must choose the wrong

Because it looks so sweet. But look again
That Host-like moon shines where
All can see him. Christ took on all pain
Beyond time's arbiter.

The Bread is offered us, the wine also
For Christ and every saint, his Mother too.
That moon in silence can
Elevate us till we long to know
The Trinity's whole plan.

Nature was fashioned for this purpose. See
A moon remind us of God's ministry.

The words 'look' and 'see' are repeated in Elizabeth Jennings' poem, as she dwells on the mutually mirroring signs of the moon and the eucharistic host to narrate in brief the whole story of the love of God which has reached down to us in Jesus, and which raises up us and the whole world to a new hope. Whatever view we hold of the sacramental presence of Christ in or through bread and wine, the invitation to pause, to look and to reflect on the beloved can surely be part of our devotion.

Living

In the act of looking, we are necessarily at a distance from the one whom we love. But devotion in the eucharist cannot leave us at this remove; when we eat the bread and drink the

wine, in some sense we eat and drink the body and blood of Christ, so that our life is united with his – as the 'Prayer of Humble Access' from the Book of Common Prayer puts it:

Grant us therefore, gracious Lord, so to eat the flesh of thy dear Son Jesus Christ, and to drink his blood, that our sinful bodies may be made clean by his body, and our souls washed through his most precious blood, and that we may evermore dwell in him, and he in us.

This overcoming of distance from the beloved is vividly expressed in the words which St Thérèse of Lisieux recorded on the day of her First Communion. Her language charts the move from vision to union in her relationship with Jesus:

Jesus asked for nothing, He claimed no sacrifice. Long before that, He and little Thérèse had seen and understood one another well, but on that day it was more than a meeting — it was a complete fusion. We were no longer two, for Thérèse had disappeared like a drop of water lost in the mighty ocean. Jesus alone remained — the Master and the King.

St Thérèse here is speaking enthusiastically in poetical mode, and we should not push too far the image of fusion or absorption; this was not a loss of personality, but a complete orientation of her will and her life to that of Jesus. This further stage in the encounter of love may not come as dramatically or suddenly for most of us as it did for her, but there can grow within us the sense that through the sacrament the life of Christ the beloved is being gradually formed within us. If there is any truth in the adage that 'we are what we eat', then we become truly part of the Body of Christ.

The devotion of a new way of living is expressed in the Prayer Book in the 'Prayer of Oblation' which Cranmer placed after the people had received Communion, to indicate how the sacrament should transform our relationship to God:

And here we offer and present unto thee, O Lord, ourselves, our souls and bodies, to be a reasonable, holy, and lively sacrifice unto thee...

As our personal situations and challenges are very different, so the way in which our devotion shows forth the new life in Christ will be different too. I finish with two examples of this.

In the America of the 1950s, riven by racial injustice, segregation and discrimination, a black woman convert to Roman Catholicism, Mary Dolores Gadpaille, found in the mass an uplifting affirmation of her dignity. She wrote to a priest to explain something of what this meant for her:

[You are] restoring to us by just being Catholic a vanished dignity that all the interracial organisations together have not achieved by conference of legislation ... In the place of second class citizenship that America allots, you have given us a passport to citizenship in Heaven, for this earth is 'no abiding city'.

So the eucharistic life brings dignity and hope to the downtrodden through assuring them that they belong to Christ the universal king. And to those experiencing the most debilitating sufferings, it brings comfort and strength through their union with the Christ who has been through every depth of human desolation. I conclude this brief presentation of the devotion of longing, looking and living in the Eucharist with a poem written very recently by a Reader in this diocese, Peter Phillips. Peter has Motor Neurone Disease, and he is right now experiencing the inexorable and successive degeneration of his physical faculties which that terrible condition brings. But listen to his reflection on what Holy Communion means to him, and you will hear the note of a triumphant devotion to the risen life of Christ. This is 'The Body of Christ, broken for me' by Peter Phillips.

I stand at the Altar,
The Altar of God, my Creator.
The Altar of Jesus, my Lord and my Saviour.
There are others all around me...
... friends and acquaintances.
A cacophony of silent whispers. !!
Though I stand here - Alone.
I have stood here, since I was a child,
Altars, in hamlets, villages, towns and cities,

In Malawi, Israel, Scotland, France and many more.
For the Altar of God is the same - the World over.
Why am I standing here in my own silence
- all alone ?
Suddenly, there is a rush to my head...
My misdemeanours, cheats, lies and false claims.
My disregard for God's creation, my piety, my boastfulness,
My contempt for the rich
My forgetfulness of the poor, the lost and the hungry.
My personal loss.
All these and more, weigh on my shoulders...
... like the Yoke of Life itself.
Is this why I am here. ?
I kneel before the Altar, in humility,
To receive the Body and Blood of Christ.
I bow my head,
And in that moment an image circles my brain.
An image of Christ... crucified.
The agony -
the humiliation of seeing in my mind's eye,
His naked body,

The sweat, the blood, the tears.
This is why I am here.
I cup my hands.
"The Body of Christ - broken for you"
Christ's broken body. My broken life, Come together - as One...
...there, in the palm of my hand.
I consume, that which is given to me...I
...in the form of a staple diet for millions, Bread.
"The Bread of Life."

"The Blood of Christ"
A Chalice
touches my lips and I automatically sip...
...the fruit of the vine.

There is a moment of waiting,
Time to take-in what has happened,
Time to realise,
Time to understand...
... that the Resurrected Christ is with me,
Before me, behind me,
Above me, below me.
I leave the Altar,

I know Jesus Christ comes with me...
... for, within His sight, I am cleansed.
My heart jumps for joy - for...
... this is the first day, of the rest of my life.
GOD BE PRAISED...

And all I can say is: 'Amen to that'.