

# Communion online is valid, says Burridge

Theologian offers checklist of criteria in his new book

Madeleine Davies

HOLY communion via webinar platforms such as Zoom can meet all the criteria required for a "valid and effective eucharistic celebration", the theologian Canon Professor Richard Burridge says, in a new book that suggests that such services have become the norm for "thousands of people in hundreds of churches".

In *Holy Communion in Contagious Times: Celebrating the eucharist in the everyday and online worlds*, published this week by Wipf & Stock, Canon Burridge, a visiting professor in biblical interpretation at King's College, London, says that, without participating in such services during the pandemic, "my faith and spiritual life would have withered and died."

His checklist of "criteria required for a valid and effective eucharistic celebration" include the provision of "real spiritual nourishment from physical elements of consecrated bread and wine", celebration by a "properly authorised minister", full participation of the laity (as opposed to "solo" communion), and the receiving of communion as "the climax of a full liturgical service".

A rite celebrated on webinar platforms such as Zoom, "which allows us to be present to one another and to the Triune God at the same chronological moment in time... and in the same digital and physical space", satisfy all the criteria for holy communion, he says. Central to his argument is his contention that the "zone of intention", whereby a priest consecrates the bread and wine, can be extended through virtual space.

After quoting a South African friend's question about this, he writes: "I cannot understand why her bread and wine, which I can see and touch and pray over on my laptop screen, cannot be open to the real presence of Christ just as much as my own bread and wine... As celebrant, I intend to be a channel whereby God can bless her with his grace in bread and wine; similarly, it is her intention and heartfelt desire as a lay person to 'feed on him with thanksgiving'. Are these not valid and effective sacramental intentions? And if not, why not?"

Canon Burridge first conducted such a Zoom service for the Annunciation in 2020, and continued to hold services of this kind each week until the time of writing. In the opening of his book, he notes that there was no mention of communion in the press releases, announcements, and letters from the Archbishops issued in the early days of the pandemic, which included instructions to close all churches, even for the purposes of live-streaming. It became, he suggests, the "elephant in the room, which concerned everyone, but which was not being discussed openly in the national communications", giving rise to "a wide range of interpretations across various dioceses".

A week after his first Zoom service, on 1 April, guidance put out by the national communications team stated: "Participants in a streamed

service of Holy Communion should not be encouraged to place bread and wine before their screens.

"Joining together to share in the one bread and the one cup as those physically present to one another is integral to the service of Holy Communion; this is not possible under the current restrictions, and it is not helpful to suggest otherwise. Any idea of the 'remote consecration' of the bread and wine should be avoided."

Three options were suggested: a

eucharistic fast (Comment, 17 April 2020), solo celebrations by clergy, and the practice of "spiritual communion" for everyone else.

Canon Burridge considers these and other options before exploring digital solutions. Spiritual communion has "a limited place in the Anglican tradition", he argues, and solo celebrations are "at best ritually problematic and perhaps even theologically unintelligible".

Despite the official position, thousands of people have taken part in

remote consecrations, he suggests. Among the examples given is St Luke's, West Holloway, in north London.

Canon Burridge's own practice includes stretching his hands out, not only over the elements, "but also to encompass the screen with all the people I can see, upon whom I wish the Holy Spirit to fall in blessing as well as upon their breads and cups".

In his conclusion, he writes that, while his checklist will be "sufficient for many to affirm that everything

humanly possible is being done... ultimately it must be the divine responsibility of the Holy Trinity to make any such service a 'valid and effective celebration' in which God the Father pours out his grace and the Lord Jesus Christ makes his presence real in bread and wine through the descent of the Holy Spirit upon both the eucharistic elements and also the people of God."

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## Individual cups allowed, argue Evangelical clerics

INDIVIDUAL cups are the best way to obey Jesus's commands for holy communion when the communal cup is restricted or not safe for all, a church historian and a tutor in ethics, associated with two Evangelical theological colleges, argue in a new Grove booklet, writes Madeleine Davies.

Grove Books' *"Drink this, all of you": Individual cups at holy communion* is by the Revd Dr Andrew Atherstone, tutor in church history and Latimer research fellow at Wycliffe Hall, Oxford, who is also a self-supporting minister of Eynsham and Cassington, in Oxford diocese; and Canon Andrew Goddard, a tutor in ethics at Ridley Hall, Cambridge, and honorary assistant curate of St James the Less, Pimlico, in London.

It follows recent restrictions on the communal cup during the pandemic. The Archbishops advised clergy to suspend administration of the chalice early in March 2020 (News, 13 March 2020), before advising, in December 2020, that holy communion could once again be administered in both kinds, provided that the celebrant undertook a form of intinction (News, 4 December 2020).

The latest guidance, issued last month, states that the common cup may now be shared, "but the Bishops wish to make clear that, given continued potential risks to health, it

remains permissible for the president to be the only person who receives Holy Communion in the form of wine."

Dr Atherstone and Canon Goddard emphasise that "communal cups are the ideal and it is good to return to them as soon as possible for as many of the congregation as possible". But, they observe, "even after the pandemic has subsided, there may be a few communicants who still choose not to receive from a communal cup, because of risks to their own health..."

"When the communal cup is restricted, or not safe for all communicants, the best way to obey the dominical command is distribution of wine in individual cups."

In a historical survey, the authors argue that "Jesus's institution of the sacrament gives churches wide liberty to decide almost all the practicalities for themselves." Noting that the Book of Common Prayer "speaks everywhere of 'the cup' in the singular", they list five historic developments that have, in their view, "diluted the ideal, though all are now widely accepted as compatible with Anglican practice".

These are: gatherings where only one or two communicants join the minister; fixed tables and communion queues; multiple cups; wafers; and responses to allergies and addictions, including alcohol-free wine.

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