

**‘Virtual’ Eucharists in a time of COVID-19 Pandemic:  
Biblical, Theological and Constitutional Perspectives**

**Brian Douglas**

**Research Fellow**

**Centre for Public and Contextual Theology**

**Australian Centre for Christianity and Culture**

**Charles Sturt University, Canberra. Australia.**

*Abstract*

*This article examines the possible use of ‘virtual’ Eucharists in the Anglican Church of Australia in a time of a global pandemic such as exists in the world in 2020 with the spread of corona virus or covid-19. The changing nature of modern communication is considered in the context of the possibility of the use of a ‘virtual’ Eucharist, where a priest in one place with a set of bread and wine, consecrates the bread and wine, while at the same time a person in their own home consumes another set of bread and wine with the assumption that second set of bread and wine is also consecrated. Suggestions for and discussion of the use of a ‘virtual’ Eucharist in two dioceses of the Anglican Church of Australia are discussed with a consideration of published material by episcopal leaders. Biblical, theological and constitutional perspectives are then considered in relation to a ‘virtual’ Eucharist before the recommendation is made that ‘virtual’ Eucharist are not considered as appropriate at any time, including during a global COVID-19 pandemic, in the Anglican Church of Australia. Several alternatives to a ‘virtual’ Eucharist are considered which would allow people to obtain spiritual nourishment by other means.*

*Key Words*

Eucharist, Virtual, Anglican, COVID-19 Pandemic, Biblical, Theological,  
Constitutional

*A changing world in a global COVID-19 pandemic*

In a time of global pandemic, corona virus or COVID-19 has changed the way that many people live and work in the world. People have begun to attend meetings in virtual mode using various technologies which allow people to see and hear one another but be in separate places at the same time without any physical connection or danger of contamination due to disease. Families are no longer able to meet in person and so the use of the telephone, social media and live-streaming have become a substitute for physical family gatherings, to protect family members and prevent the spread of disease. This new form of meeting connects people by virtual means without them being in the same place at the same time while ensuring appropriate physical distancing.

In such a time of global pandemic the church has made excellent use of live-streaming and recordings to provide spiritual nourishment and to connect people of faith with one another, without the possibility of contamination and by the use of appropriate physical distancing. Groups have continued to meet by virtual means and services have been conducted in one place and live-streamed to another place without people being physically together. Recordings of services, including scriptural readings and addresses have been placed online so that people can access them if live-streaming is not an option. This has provided a source of comfort and spiritual nourishment for many in times when people cannot meet in a physical manner in churches. Prayer can be prayed, the Scriptures can be read and expounded, music can be used and

people can be encouraged and spiritually nourished. Some have suggested that the Eucharist or Holy Communion or the Lord's Supper can also be live-streamed and some parishes have provided a Eucharist as a live-stream or as a recording for people to watch. Others have decided to live-stream or record what could be called a 'virtual' Eucharist where a priest in one place consecrates bread and wine and people in another place consume their own bread and wine following the words of consecration over the internet by the priest.

*The Anglican Diocese of Sydney*

In the Anglican Diocese of Sydney for example, Archbishop Glenn Davies has written to clergy allowing them to practise a 'virtual' Eucharist.<sup>1</sup> In his letter the Archbishop refers to participation in the Lord's Supper, noting that it is a significant matter since our Lord has commanded us to 'Do this in remembrance of me'. He admits that this is a sensitive matter of doctrine and ecclesiology and so he has decided to consult the other bishops in the Province of New South Wales. He acknowledges 'that they each agreed that given these times of extremity, there was justification for issuing this invitation, even if they would not necessarily follow suit.'<sup>2</sup> Some of the other bishops have suggested that their practice will be to record a service of Holy Communion which people could watch and then invite the viewers 'to feed on him in their hearts by faith' without physical eating of any bread or drinking of any wine. The Archbishop seems to see some of the danger in the practice of a 'virtual' Eucharist since he says: 'I stress that these are measures for the current crisis,'<sup>3</sup> thereby limiting any continuing use of this practice into the future. The Archbishop states that the 'connection with the ordained minister

---

<sup>1</sup> Glenn Davies, 'Letter to Clergy', 31 March, 2020, pp. 1-2.

<sup>2</sup> Davies, 'Letter to Clergy', p. 2.

<sup>3</sup> Davies, 'Letter to Clergy', p. 2.

administering the Communion, visually though remotely, is essential, and this is not a means of authorising lay administration.’<sup>4</sup> It seems that the Archbishop’s permission is for a period of crisis only, even though he stresses the importance of a connection with an ordained minister. While it is acknowledged that the Archbishop is attempting to respond to the spiritual needs of people in a pastoral manner in a time of global pandemic and crisis, the question emerges about whether or not a Eucharist can be celebrated across the internet where there is an assumed equivalence of matter, that is, bread and wine in two different places and where there is an assumed efficacy of consecration by a priest using electronic means.

The Archbishop has also issued what he calls a ‘theological reflection’<sup>5</sup> on the matter of ‘virtual’ Eucharists. In this reflection he points to the sacred nature of the Eucharist for Christians and the way it expresses the fellowship people have with one another as the body of Christ and with the risen Lord. He cites, uncontroversially the following three elements of the Lord’s Supper as important:

- (1) Communion: a participation in Christ’s body and his blood (1 Cor. 10:16)
- (2) Remembrance: ‘Do this in remembrance of me’ (1 Cor. 11:24)
- (3) Proclamation: we proclaim the Lord’s death until he comes (1 Cor. 11:26).<sup>6</sup>

He also points to the need to recognise the corporate nature of the meal and the fact that some who did not see this contributed to divisions in the Corinthian community, but at the same time states that a ‘virtual’ Eucharist is permitted the Diocese of Sydney. The recognition of ‘corporate’ here as important is a vital matter in considering any ‘virtual’ Eucharist, since such a Eucharist cannot be corporate in the strict sense when people are not co-located at the time the Eucharist is celebrated and only together by electronic means. Can

---

<sup>4</sup> Davies, ‘Letter to Clergy’, p. 2.

<sup>5</sup> Glenn Davies, ‘Holy Communion in a Coronavirus World’, 31 March, 2020, pp. 1-2.

<sup>6</sup> Davies, ‘Holy Communion in a Coronavirus World’, p. 1.

such a means represent a ‘gathered’ community and participation in a ‘corporate activity’<sup>7</sup> in the way the Archbishop sees as essential for the celebration of the Eucharist? This question is central to this paper and will be explored in greater detail below. It is contended here that a ‘virtual’ Eucharist cannot fulfil the requirements the Archbishop sets, since the ‘virtual’ Eucharist is not equivalent to, but decidedly different from, any Eucharist celebrated by a Christian community meeting in the one place at the same time.

The Archbishop’s motivation for suggesting a ‘virtual’ Eucharist are clearly pastoral, in order to allow people to continue to share in the Lord’s Supper in times when this is not physically possible. The question that needs to be raised however is can a ‘virtual’ Eucharist be considered to be a sharing together? It will be argued below that it cannot. This is not the Archbishop’s view since he suggests that:

Since we are now live-streaming our services, I see no reason why we could not broadcast a minister celebrating the Lord’s Supper with the customary bread and wine. Members of the parish could participate in their own homes via the internet consuming their own bread and wine, in accordance with our Lord’s command. Following the service on the screen, as led by the minister, members of a household could actively share in communion, the remembrance and the proclamation of our Lord’s death. Their fellowship with the body of Christ would be no less spiritual and no less real. We must not fall into the erroneous mindset of thinking that consecration of the elements is only valid for us if we are physically present to consume them, as if there were magic in the hands of the minister.<sup>8</sup>

This statement raises many concerns. It assumes that since live-streaming is available, the option of a ‘virtual’ Eucharist is automatically possible with adequate theological reflection. It also assumes that bread and wine in homes

---

<sup>7</sup> Davies, ‘Holy Communion in a Coronavirus World’, p. 1.

<sup>8</sup> Davies, ‘Holy Communion in a Coronavirus World’, pp. 1-2.

is the equivalent of bread and wine in a Eucharist somewhere else and that such sharing of bread and wine is no less spiritual or real than the bread and wine consecrated somewhere else. It also assumes that consecration does not require the physical presence of the priest who is doing the consecrating, nor does a Eucharist require the use of the same set of bread and wine. This question will be addressed below in a consideration of biblical, theological and constitutional perspectives. The issue of magic is an interesting addition in the Archbishop's paper since it fails to recognise that some may see consecration via the internet as magic in itself without making any reference to the supposed magic of a priest's hands. In fact the so-called manual acts<sup>9</sup> of the 1662 *Book of Common Prayer* clearly state that the actions of the priest's hands are a vital aspect of the consecration without any suggestion of magic being involved. The manual acts cannot be carried out by the priest in people's homes in a situation of a 'virtual' Eucharist. The Archbishop seems to assume that the pastoral need in a time of global pandemic obviates the need to follow the rubrics of the *Book of Common Prayer*.

#### *The Anglican Diocese of Canberra and Goulburn*

In the Anglican Diocese of Canberra and Goulburn (another diocese in the Province of New South Wales) Bishop Mark Short addressed the issue of 'virtual' Eucharists in an *Ad Clerum*.<sup>10</sup> Here he acknowledges that some clergy in the Diocese have made 'enquiries about ministering and participating in the Lord's Supper/Eucharist by remote means such as the use of video-conferencing software.'<sup>11</sup> Bishop Short chooses not to make a hard and fast

---

<sup>9</sup> The rubric defining the manual acts was added to the *Book of Common Prayer* in 1662 and clearly directs that 'the priest is take the Paten into his hands'; that the priest is 'to break the bread; that the priest is 'to lay his hands upon the Bread'; and that the priest is 'to lay his hand upon every vessel (be it Chalice or Flagon) in which there is any Wine to be consecrated'.

<sup>10</sup> Mark Short, *Ad Clerum*, April, 2020, pp. 1-2.

<sup>11</sup> Short, *Ad Clerum*, April, 2020, p. 1.

ruling on this matter but rather encourages clergy to discuss matters related to the celebration of the Eucharist by video-conferencing software in times of global pandemic, with him before acting, recognising that clergy need to take into account their circumstances and the circumstances of the people they are called to serve.<sup>12</sup> At the same time he reflects that he has decided not to celebrate or receive the Lord's Supper while congregations are unable to do this in the normal manner. He states that there may be exceptions to this rule but also argues that current circumstances do not allow for a consensus on the matter. He also argues, presumably on equity grounds,<sup>13</sup> that households that do not have access to the internet would be disadvantaged if a 'virtual' Eucharist was implemented by some. He cites 1 Cor. 11:27-34 to support his view, since Paul rebukes the Corinthians 'for sharing the Lord's Supper in a way that reinforces rather than transcends economic and social divisions.' Bishop Short is therefore 'cautious about adopting a practice that may do the same in our day.'<sup>14</sup> This is an admirable suggestion, but it does not either allow or disallow the practice of 'virtual' Eucharists and instead presents a personal opinion and set of actions, based as it is on scriptural warrant. Bishop Short admits on the basis of 1 Cor. 12:26 that 'when one part of the body of Christ suffers, all suffer together with it.'<sup>15</sup> His concern is clearly pastoral and he offers the alternative of a liturgy for a fellowship meal/agape to be used in homes on Easter Sunday evening.<sup>16</sup> This is not of course a Eucharist but rather a way he 'may offer another way of expressing our unity as we long for a return to gathering once again,'<sup>17</sup> but the danger exists of people confusing such a

---

<sup>12</sup> Short, *Ad Clerum*, April, 2020, p. 2.

<sup>13</sup> Note that Archbishop Davies makes similar comments in his theological reflection pointing to the difficulties for isolated people who may have no access to the internet for live-streaming. See Davies, 'Holy Communion in a Coronavirus World', p. 2.

<sup>14</sup> Short, *Ad Clerum*, April, 2020, p. 2.

<sup>15</sup> Short, *Ad Clerum*, April, 2020, p. 2.

<sup>16</sup> Such a liturgy was sent out to the clergy of the Diocese of Canberra and Goulburn for possible use on Easter Sunday evening. The liturgy includes a section where bread is passed from one person to another and each person consumes a piece of bread.

<sup>17</sup> Short, *Ad Clerum*, April, 2020, p. 2.

fellowship or agape meal with a Eucharist. Bishop Short's concern to affirm the presence of Jesus with people is made in an edition of *Anglican News*<sup>18</sup> published at the same time he writes to the clergy. Here he affirms that 'presence matters' especially 'when we are no longer able to be present bodily with those we love.'<sup>19</sup> This relates, argues Short, to the incarnation of Jesus and the way people hunger for his presence, as revealed in the Gospels. The very resurrection of Jesus suggests that bodily presence is vital and not a mere distraction. As such the presence of Jesus is with people wherever they are. This is a deep and pastoral reflection which will undoubtedly encourage many and it looks positively forward to a time after pandemic. This could suggest, along with Short's decision to abstain from celebrating and receiving, that extraordinary means, such 'virtual' Eucharists, are not really necessary to know that Jesus is present with people. As such Bishop Short makes a vital and helpful contribution in troubled times. It may be that in such times a spiritual communing with our Lord is the best way for the faithful to proceed. The issue of spiritual communion will be considered as an alternative to 'virtual' Eucharists later in this article.

### *Context and Practical Concerns*

In light of the above world-wide situation of pandemic and the actions and reflections of church leaders, this paper considers the biblical, theological and constitutional perspectives of the proposal to implement 'virtual' Eucharists in the Anglican Church of Australia. Comments are made here in a spirit of seeking biblical, theological and constitutional perspectives on the proposal that clergy and people share the Eucharist, Holy Communion or Lord's Supper together using electronic means to create what might be called a 'virtual'

---

<sup>18</sup> Anglican Diocese of Canberra and Goulburn, *Anglican News*, 37 (2020), 3, April, 2020, pp. 1-5.

<sup>19</sup> Anglican Diocese of Canberra and Goulburn, *Anglican News*, p. 1.

Eucharist in times of global pandemic where gathering together is not allowed or possible.

A ‘virtual’ Eucharist in the Anglican Church of Australia would involve a clergy person with bread and wine in one place, saying the Thanksgiving or consecration prayer over the bread and wine in that place, at the same time that people are physically separated from the priest and in their homes but also having and consuming another set of bread and wine physically present in their particular place. People in their own homes would break, distribute and consume their bread and wine after the priest has said the words of thanksgiving or consecration over bread and wine in another place on the understanding that the effect of the Thanksgiving or consecration in one place is operative and effective in another place at the same time. A number of immediate practical concerns with important theological consequences arise:<sup>20</sup>

(1) While the consecration is in one place and with one set of bread and wine, the breaking and distribution is in another place with another set of bread and wine, thus breaking the unity of the one celebration in a gathered community; (2) The concept of ‘virtual’ trades on the notion of equivalence where none really exists. Bread and wine in one place are not equivalent to bread and wine in another place, since priestly consecration is not operative in any real way in the homes of people accessing a service via electronic means; (3) The President of the Eucharist has no idea who his/her virtual congregation is, nor does the President know if any of them need reconciling or even excommunicating. This takes away the pastoral responsibility in presiding; (4) The President of the Eucharist has no idea what bread and wine are to be viewed by the virtual congregation as ‘consecrated’ and therefore no idea of the treatment of or responsibility for the ‘remains’, assuming of course that this consecration is

---

<sup>20</sup> I am grateful to the English liturgist, Bishop Colin Buchanan who shared these four practical and yet theological consequences with me in personal correspondence, 6 April, 2020.

effective; (5) Any use of a ‘virtual’ Eucharist during time of global pandemic has the potential, when times are better, to leave people on Sunday, atomized in their homes, uncommitted to an actual fellowship; and (6) If Presidential actions come over the internet into a home, the question could be asked do they need to come from an absolutely contemporary celebration of the Eucharist, or would a repeat on the television do? Could a video from the past be used? Do we need present-day Presidents at all if we have electronic Presidents?<sup>21</sup>

Underlying the above concerns are some weighty matters of a biblical, theological and constitutional kind. These are considered below in the hope that the inquiry may be of assistance at the time a ‘virtual’ Eucharist is requested or practised.

### *A Biblical Perspective*

The biblical witness in the three synoptic accounts of the Last Supper in Mt. 26:20-29, Mk. 14:17-25 and Lk. 22:14-20 as well as in the Pauline account in 1 Cor. 11:23-26 all agree that it was Jesus who took the bread and wine, gave thanks over it, broke the bread and then distributed it to the disciples. It is clear in the synoptic accounts that it is Jesus who does the taking, giving thanks, breaking and distributing. Any theology of consecration must take into account Jesus’ actions of taking, thanking, breaking and giving in imitation of him in any subsequent celebrations of the Eucharist. A ‘virtual’ Eucharist does not imitate the actions of Jesus in that it does not allow the breaking or the giving or distribution of the elements in homes by the priest in imitation of Jesus but only the taking and thanking by the priest in another place. The elements in the people’s house and which they consume are clearly different from the elements that the priest takes, over which he or she gives thanks,

---

<sup>21</sup> I acknowledge the contribution of the distinguished liturgist and long-time member of the Church of England Liturgical Commission, Bishop Colin Buchanan, in these six points.

breaks and distributes and it is also clear that the actions over the two sets of bread and wine are also different. It is the total action as a unity that is important and not merely some parts of that unity. To leave out the breaking and distributing of the one eucharistic action suggests that a set of words said by a priest in another place is the important aspect of consecration and gives undue importance to the actions of the priest compared to the ecclesial notion of priest and people celebrating the Eucharist together. A 'virtual' Eucharist does not coincide with the biblical witness nor does it follow the example of Jesus in its completeness.

Thomas Cranmer in the English Reformation could see this point clearly. He says in his *Answer to Gardiner*, for example, in discussing the difference between a priest and a layperson that the: 'Difference that is between the priest and the layman in this matter is only in the ministration; that the priest, as a common minister of the church, doth minister and distribute the Lord's Supper unto other, and other receive it at his hand.'<sup>22</sup> By 'ministration' Cranmer means 'distribution' which is then received by people. Further Cranmer says that: 'Wherefore the ordinance of Christ ought to be followed: the priest to minister the sacrament to the people.'<sup>23</sup> Cranmer had clearly studied the biblical evidence and was keen to assert that the priest should imitate the actions of Jesus, not only taking, giving thanks and breaking but also ministering 'at his [that is the priest's] hand' to the people. Cranmer saw the actions of the Eucharist as inclusive of all the dominical actions and would seemingly have not been prepared to separate the breaking or the distribution or the ministration from the other actions. A 'virtual' Eucharist separates the actions and therefore destroys the unity of the eucharistic action. It goes against the biblical evidence of the synoptic gospels and the writings of

---

<sup>22</sup> Thomas Cranmer, *An Answer unto a Crafty and Sophistical Cavillation Devised by Stephen Gardiner* (ed. J.E. Cox) (Cambridge: Parker Society, 1844), pp. 1-367 (350).

<sup>23</sup> Cranmer, *An Answer*, pp. 1-367 (352).

Thomas Cranmer as he interpreted those gospels. It is difficult to understand why anyone who values the biblical and Reformation evidence would wish to use a form of ‘virtual’ Eucharist that so clearly goes against the biblical witness and the Reformation writings of Thomas Cranmer.

*A Theological Perspective*

By separating the breaking and distribution from the taking and giving thanks, a ‘virtual’ Eucharist suggests that there is a set of words that effects the consecration, via the internet, and that breaking and distribution is not part of the consecration. To argue in this way dismantles any coherent notion of eucharistic symbolism and suggests a form of sacerdotalism that is reminiscent of the worst abuses of the Medieval church and against which the Reformers of the sixteenth century so rightly objected. The power of the symbol and the unity of the symbolic act of breaking and distributing is replaced by priestly words alone, separated in two or more locations. Archbishop Davies in his theological reflection makes this point as well, arguing that ‘the benefits of the Lord’s Supper are not dependent upon any priest.’<sup>24</sup> This is undoubtedly true since the benefits gained in the Lord’s Supper are the actions of Jesus represented in the context of the shared Eucharist. The problem with the Archbishop’s argument however, is that by separating the breaking and the distribution of the bread and wine from the place where the people share their own bread and wine, the power of the priest’s words is in fact heightened, inflating their power inherent in a ‘virtual’ Eucharist to effect a consecration in another place and therefore suggestive of magic. Archbishop Davies’ words work against the very argument he is making.

---

<sup>24</sup> Davies, ‘Holy Communion in a Coronavirus World’, p. 2.

Modern liturgical practice suggests that it is the whole of the eucharistic action that effects consecration as a unity and not just words said by a priest. It is the action of the priest and people gathered around the same table that are mutually involved in the consecration of the elements and not the words and actions of the priest alone. This is recognised by the Anglo-Catholic liturgist Dom Gregory Dix in his famous book *The Shape of the Liturgy*,<sup>25</sup> where he emphasises the four-fold shape of the eucharistic action: taking, thanking, breaking and giving as a unity of action in imitation of the action of our Lord. In a virtual Eucharist this unity of action cannot be the case because of the separation and the multiple sets of elements without the breaking and distributing carried out by the priest in people homes in imitation of the actions of our Lord, thus destroying the unity of the eucharistic action.

The question of what is consecration is central here to any understanding of sacramental theology. Is consecration about taking, thanking, breaking and distributing any set of bread and wine or is it taking, thanking and distributing a particular set of bread and wine as a unified action, that is, of the bread and wine over which the priest says the words of thanksgiving or consecration? Is consecration about only taking and thanking or does it involve all four actions of taking, thanking, breaking and distributing? It is suggested that in answer to both questions it is the latter and not the former since a unity of eucharistic action is essential to ensure proper ecclesial participation in any Eucharist. A 'virtual' Eucharist therefore presents an impaired, defective and incomplete theology of consecration. What it creates is a propositional or individualist sacramental theology which leads to the dismantling of the wider notion of sacramental action and efficacy in the church and the establishment of a congregationalist ecclesiology where the focus is centred on the local, both in

---

<sup>25</sup> Gregory Dix, *The Shape of the Liturgy* (London: A&C Black, 1945).

the sacerdotal actions of the priest and in the breaking and distributing in homes, at the expense of the universal church.

Cranmer addresses this central question of consecration in his *Defence* of 1550. Here he says: ‘Consecration is the separation of any thing from a profane and worldly use unto a spiritual and godly use. ... When common bread and wine be taken and severed from other bread and wine, to the use of the holy communion, that portion of bread and wine, although it be of the same substance that the other is from the which is severed, yet is now called consecrated or holy bread and wine.’<sup>26</sup> Archbishop Davies recognises this fact, arguing that ‘Cranmer’s prayer of consecration was a prayer offered to God, that the elements of bread and wine would become *for us*, the body and blood of our Lord. That is, their signification was no longer *mere* bread and wine.’<sup>27</sup> The Archbishop has chosen his words carefully since he modifies ‘become’, therefore suggesting some sort of change in the elements, by the words ‘*for us*’ (in italics for emphasis), suggesting that presence of the body and blood of Christ is not an objective matter following consecration but rather one that is dependent on the faith response of the recipient. This is not surprising considering Davies’ Evangelical background, but it nonetheless makes the point that Cranmer’s prayer of consecration, said by the priest, in the presence of the bread and wine, and with the appropriate manual acts by the priest, leads to situation where the bread and wine in front of the priest is no longer common bread and wine. The same cannot be said for the bread and wine that is before the people in their homes, unless one assumes the power of the priestly words can somehow magically traverse the internet. Such an assumption remains to be verified and seemingly differs markedly from the biblical and theological perspectives reviewed above.

---

<sup>26</sup> Thomas Cranmer, ‘Defence of the True and Catholic Doctrine of the Sacrament’, in *The Work of Thomas Cranmer* (G.E. Duffield, ed.) (Appleford, Berkshire, England: The Sutton Courtenay Press, 1964), pp. 45-231 (181).

<sup>27</sup> Davies, ‘Holy Communion in a Coronavirus World’, p. 2.

For Cranmer there is a clear distinction between the bread and wine that is consecrated by the priest and other bread and wine, such as might be found in people's homes in a 'virtual' Eucharist. While, according to Cranmer, the substance of the bread and wine is not changed by consecration, it is nonetheless by consecration 'severed from other bread and wine', which is of the same substance, but not of the same use or ministration. In a 'virtual' Eucharist there are two classes of bread and wine: (a) that which is consecrated by the priest in one place and thus severed from other bread and wine and then broken and ministered and (b) bread and wine which is common bread and wine in another place for which the unity of the eucharistic action does not apply as an equivalence and for which there is no severing from common use. In essence the bread and wine in people's homes remains ordinary bread and wine and is not severed from common use. In a 'virtual' Eucharist people are being asked to believe that the bread and wine in their homes are also severed from common use although it has not been taken by the priest, the direct thanking by the priest, the breaking by the priest nor the ministration by the priest to the people as the 1662 *Book of Common Prayer* directs. Such a process breaks the unity of the eucharistic action, fails to follow Anglican tradition and destroys the sacramental theology, creating a situation in which the words of consecration, institution and thanksgiving become 'magical' in and of themselves, emphasising the role of the priest at the expense of the ecclesial nature of the Eucharist. This creates a deception in the eucharistic action which destroys the ecclesial aspect of sacramental theology at the expense of the Christological. The very issue of ecclesial sharing is therefore impaired by the emphasis on priestly words, thus destroying the fellowship a 'virtual' Eucharist was attempting to create. The result is that the deception has scant regard for right teaching of the faithful and fits well with the notion of rationalised magic in a postmodern culture. The 'virtual' Eucharist works against the systematisation of sacramental theology within the wider ecclesial

structure and suggests that the validity of the sacramental action can be diffused to the local level alone without reference to the wider ecclesial fellowship and structure.

The use of a 'virtual' Eucharist raises the theological question of why not a 'virtual' baptism, or a 'virtual' confirmation or a 'virtual' ordination. In a virtual confirmation or ordination the question could be asked: Can the laying on of hands be effected across the internet or by another set of hands present in the place where the confirmer or ordinand is, by being placed on the head of the person? This relates to the matter of the sacrament. In baptism the matter is the water and the signing, while in confirmation and ordination the matter is the laying on of hands. In the Eucharist the matter is the bread and wine and what the priest does with them. The ridiculous could apply here and an outline of the bishop's hands could be sent in the mail and placed on the person's head as they are confirmed or ordained. This is the same magical logic that applies to a 'virtual' Eucharist where an alternative matter is used which does not participate in the sacramental action. It is doubtful that any bishop would want to confirm or ordain by 'virtual' means, so why implement a 'virtual' Eucharist? Such a situation has significant political and ecclesial consequences which permit a *de facto* sacrament which is really *adiaphora* (that is, neither commanded nor forbidden) and which in turn creates conditions for future 'virtual' communion to accompany the current realignments of the Anglican Church in any situation of cross border ecclesial networks. The fluidity of a 'virtual' church polity has no limits of order and creates difficulties for existing structures within the Anglican Communion.

All of the above really depends on the nature of consecration. Does consecration change the nature or the use of the bread and wine? Cranmer considered that consecration severs ordinary bread and wine from common use. Other theologians over the ages have argued that consecration changes

the nature of the bread and wine so that the bread and wine following consecration has a heightened efficacy. Nicholas Ridley argued ‘the bread to be converted and turned into the flesh of Christ; but not by transubstantiation, but by sacramental converting and turning.’<sup>28</sup> Lancelot Andrewes speaks of ‘a kind of hypostatical union of the sign and the thing signified, so united together as are the two natures of Christ ... but each nature remaineth still full and whole in its own kind.’<sup>29</sup> Jeremy Taylor argues that: ‘The doctrine of the church of England, and generally of the protestants, ... is, - that after the minister of the holy mysteries hath rightly prayed, and blessed or consecrated the bread and the wine, the symbols become changed into the body and blood of Christ, after a sacramental, that is, in a spiritual real manner: so that all that worthily communicate, do by faith receive Christ, really, effectually, to all the purposes of his passion.’<sup>30</sup> In modern times Rowan Williams speaks of presenting the death of Jesus in new solidarities (such as bread and wine) where ‘the material elements of bread and wine are to be made holy by the prayer that associates them with the flesh and blood of Jesus’ which is ‘not simply a natural or obvious unity.’<sup>31</sup> For Williams this unity:

Is effected or uncovered by a particular act, a particular word in the history of revelation. Jesus “passes over” in the symbolic forms of his own word and gestures, a transition into the vulnerable and inactive forms of the inanimate world. By resigning himself into the signs of food and drink, putting himself into the hands of other agents, he signifies his forthcoming helplessness and death. He announces his death by “signing” himself as a thing, to be handled and consumed.<sup>32</sup>

---

<sup>28</sup> Nicholas Ridley, ‘Disputation at Oxford’, *Works* (H. Christmas, ed.) (Cambridge: The Parker Society, 1841), pp. 186-252 (229).

<sup>29</sup> Lancelot Andrewes, ‘Sermon on the Nativity. Preached on Christmas Day 1607’, *Works*, (J. Wilson and J. Bliss, eds.) (Oxford: Parker, 1841-1854), I, pp. 23-44 (35).

<sup>30</sup> Jeremy Taylor, *The Real Presence and Spiritual of Christ in the Blessed Sacrament, proved against the Doctrine of Transubstantiation* (London: Bohn, 1867), II, pp. 681-760 (686).

<sup>31</sup> Rowan Williams, ‘Sacraments and the New Society’, in *On Christian Theology* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2000), pp. 209-221 (215).

<sup>32</sup> Williams, ‘Sacraments and the New Society’, pp. 209-221 (215-216).

If this idea of a change is accepted then a specific consecration is needed for that ‘change’ to occur as it cannot be merely a subjective decision by faithful recipients which determines what the bread and wine is on the table and which determines whether it is consecrated or not.

If the idea of change in the bread and wine is denied and the emphasis is on the faith of the recipient alone then there appears to be, in the case of bread and wine in homes as opposed to that in the place where the priest is, a significant departure from the theology presented by Archbishop Cranmer and in the 1662 *Book of Common Prayer*, as well as other modern prayer books such *An Australian Prayer Book* of 1978 and *A Prayer Book for Australia* of 1995. All these prayer books envisage a specific consecration by a priest in one place which involves the physical taking, thanking, breaking and distributing of the bread and wine in one place by the priest and people in that one place. It is the faith of the recipients, expressed in the one physical place that is important in relation to the bread and wine. To allow people in a separate place from the actual consecration to consider any bread and wine to be consecrated on the basis of their faith is a significant departure from Anglican polity and one which obviates the need for Presidents, ordered sacraments and indeed the gathered church.

#### *A Constitutional Perspective*

The Anglican Church of Australia is constituted by the 1962 Constitution. In that Constitution the 1662 *Book of Common Prayer*, together with the 39 Articles, is set as ‘the standard of doctrine and worship’ for the Anglican Church of Australia. Any deviation, according to the Constitution, from that standard needs to be in harmony with the 1662 *Book of Common Prayer*. This

is a point which Archbishop Donald Robinson of Sydney made many times.<sup>33</sup> The publication of *An Australian Prayer Book* in 1978 and *A Prayer Book for Australia* in 1995 were made possible because they were seen as conforming to the standard of worship and doctrine in the 1662 *Book of Common Prayer*. The 1662 *Book of Common Prayer* in the Prayer of Consecration follows the pattern set out by Thomas Cranmer in the 1549 and 1552 and the subsequent 1603 edition of the *Book of Common Prayer*, where the priest takes the bread and wine in his/her hands, gives thanks over them, breaks the bread and then distributes them to the people. In 1662 this was made even clearer by the revisers through the addition of the rubrics called ‘the manual acts’, that is, rubrics directing the priest to do certain things with and in the presence of the bread and wine. It is clear in the rubrics set out in the Prayer of Consecration known as the manual acts, that the intention of the revisers in 1662 was that it is the bread and wine which the priest takes and for which he/she gives thanks and breaks, which is subsequently distributed or ministered to the people. The rubric which follows the Prayer of Consecration states: ‘Then shall the Minister first receive the Communion in both kinds himself, and then proceed to deliver the same to the Bishops, Priests, and Deacons, in like manner, (if any be present,) and after that to the people also in order, into their hands, all meekly kneeling.’<sup>34</sup> A ‘virtual’ Eucharist does not follow the rubrics since the priest does not take the bread and wine in the houses of people in his/her hands, nor does the priest give thanks over it directly, except by virtual means, nor does the priest break it or distribute it. Clearly this bread and wine which the priest consecrates is not that bread and wine distributed to the people, nor is it distributed ‘into their hands’ as the administration rubric

---

<sup>33</sup> See Donald Robinson, ‘The Principles of Doctrine and Worship in the Book of Common Prayer and the Thirty-Nine Articles’, in *Donald Robinson: Selected Works. Volume 3 Biblical and Liturgical Studies* (E Loane, ed.) (Sydney: Australian Church Record/Moore College, 2018), pp. 330-342 (330).

<sup>34</sup> 1662 *Book of Common Prayer*, rubric following the Prayer of Consecration at the time of administration.

directs. In a ‘virtual’ Eucharist the procedure does not conform with the rubrics of the 1662 *Book of Common Prayer* and so it could be argued that such a procedure does not conform to that prayer book as the standard of doctrine and worship for the Anglican Church of Australia under the terms which the Constitution requires.

### *Possible Alternatives*

The taking of consecrated bread and wine to those who cannot attend the Eucharist in person is an ancient act of the Church, attested by Justin Martyr around the year 150 CE in his *First Apology* where the direction is given that deacons should take the consecrated bread and wine to those who are not present for reasons such as sickness.<sup>35</sup> This practice is followed by some within the Anglican Communion and is suggested in some prayer books (e.g. The Episcopal Church of the United States of America) and in the failed 1928 *Book of Common Prayer*. There are others in the Anglican Communion who object to this practice on theological grounds related to the notion of a lasting presence of Christ in the elements and that the 39 Articles direct that Christ did not specifically allow the carrying around of the consecrated elements. It is strange therefore that a ‘virtual’ Eucharist is advocated by those who deny the possibility of extended communion, considering the theological objections to that ‘virtual’ practice which at least extends the eucharistic gathering. The logistical difficulties of supplying consecrated bread and wine to people isolated in their homes because of a global pandemic and the subsequent distancing requirements is recognised, but this does not deny that the possibility exists for some who do not have theological objections to the practice of reserved sacrament and extended communion. There may be a closer imitation in this method to the actions of Jesus than is found in a ‘virtual’

---

<sup>35</sup> See *First Apology* of Justin Martyr, in R.C.D. Jasper and G.J. Cuming (eds.), *Prayers of the Eucharist: Early and Reformed* (New York: Pueblo, 1987), pp. 25-30 (30)

Eucharist since it is the bread and wine that was consecrated in one place that is taken to another place and administered as an extension of the eucharistic action.

It is also ancient habit of the Church to practise what is called spiritual communion. Augustine comments: ‘Why make ready your teeth and your belly? Believe, and you have eaten’ (*Tractates on the Gospel of St John*, 27.5).<sup>36</sup> This suggests that the benefits of communion can be had by spiritual eating and drinking on the basis of faith. It would therefore be possible for people to watch a Eucharist celebrated by a priest without the eating and drinking of bread and wine in their own homes and to receive the benefits of communion by spiritual means. In times of pandemic such spiritual communion has a vital place for Anglicans. This was recognised in the 1662 *Book of Common Prayer* in the service called The Communion of the Sick. Here a rubric declares:

But if a man, either by reason of extremity of sickness, or for want of warning in due time to the Curate, or for lack of company to receive with him, or by any other just impediment, do not receive the Sacrament of Christ’s Body and Blood: the Curate shall instruct him that if he do truly repent him of his sins, and steadfastly believe that Jesus Christ hath suffered death upon the Cross for him, and shed his Blood for his redemption, earnestly remembering the benefits he hath thereby, and giving him hearty thanks therefore; he doth eat and drink the Body and Blood of Saviour Christ profitably to his soul’s health, although he do not receive the Sacrament with his mouth.<sup>37</sup>

---

<sup>36</sup> Archbishop Davies also uses part of this quote from Augustine in his theological reflection, adding further weight to the idea that a spiritual communion is an effective means of knowing the presence of the Lord. See Davies, ‘Holy Communion in a Coronavirus World’, p. 2.

<sup>37</sup> Rubric in the service ‘The Communion of the Sick’, 1662 *Book of Common Prayer*.

In modern times this practice of spiritual communion has been recognised and recommended by some church leaders.<sup>38</sup> Archbishop Davies makes similar comments, quoting the form of the words above from the Communion of the Sick in the 1662 *BCP*, thereby suggesting he also agrees with a spiritual strategy, advising people ‘to feed on God’s word. Keep reading, meditating and praying over God’s word that he may bring refreshment to you soul.’<sup>39</sup>

The *Book of Common Prayer* specifically makes provision for private communion and this would still be possible for those in need or ill. In extreme circumstances, even in the time of disease, this practice could be followed with the appropriate and necessary caution of protection for both priest and communicant and with physical distancing. Archbishop Davies suggests this as an alternative in his reflection while at the same time acknowledging the need for careful precautions and distancing.<sup>40</sup>

Others in the present situation of disease advocate that we are in a period of sacramental fasting and that such a situation should persist so that we do not offend biblical, theological and constitutional principles established in the Anglican Church of Australia, if the use of a ‘virtual’ Eucharist is permitted. It is recognised that for many, sacramental fasting is a difficult decision to make since it deprives them of the spiritual nourishment they need and receive from the Eucharist, but such people see this as preferable to the problems created by the practice of a ‘virtual’ Eucharist and look to sacramental fasting as a spiritual discipline.

---

<sup>38</sup> See the form of spiritual communion recommended by Bishop Stephen Cottrell at the following link: <https://www.chelmsford.anglican.org/spiritual-communion> Accessed April 8 2020.

<sup>39</sup> Davies, ‘Holy Communion in a Coronavirus World’, p. 2.

<sup>40</sup> Davies, ‘Holy Communion in a Coronavirus World’, p. 2.

Some like the Archbishop Davies of Sydney and Bishop Short of Canberra and Goulburn suggest that another alternative may be the provision of a liturgy for the celebration of a fellowship meal or agape. Such a practice was part of the life of the early Church, but fell out of use as the Eucharist assumed greater importance and as some choose to eat and drink too much at the meal before the Eucharist was celebrated and as some limited what was available to others.<sup>41</sup> Archbishop Davies suggests that on the basis of 1 Cor. 11 people could gather with close friends or relatives to share ‘your own bread and wine in times of extremity’ noting that ‘it would not be an Anglican service, which requires the presence of an ordained minister, but it would be a Christian service, in accordance with Jesus’ invitation to “do this in remembrance of me”.’<sup>42</sup> Archbishop Davies’ and Bishop Short’s suggestions concerning fellowship meals have merit, but it needs to be clearly established that such fellowship meals or agapes are not Eucharists and that in the Anglican Church of Australia, Eucharists are subject to the order of the approved liturgical forms and the leadership of ordained clergy as eucharistic presidents. The possibility of confusing one with the other remains a danger for congregations, which leaders need to address.

### *Conclusion*

While the pastoral needs of a time of global pandemic are recognised, this paper concludes that on the balance of evidence, the practice of implementing ‘virtual’ Eucharists cannot be sustained in the Anglican Church of Australia. This conclusion is made on the basis of practical implications as well as perspectives related to biblical, theological and constitutional matters as these impact the Anglican Church of Australia. It is recognised that the suggestion to implement a ‘virtual’ Eucharist may well be made on the important pastoral

---

<sup>41</sup> Paul addresses this problem in 1 Cor. 11:17-22.

<sup>42</sup> Davies, ‘Holy Communion in a Coronavirus World’, p. 2.

grounds of allowing people who would normally be receiving the spiritual nourishment of the Eucharist to continue to do so in a time of global pandemic. Alternatives to a 'virtual' Eucharist are suggested as ways of proceeding that do not involve the discussed difficulties noted above in the perspectives on biblical, theological and constitutional grounds. It is considered that any introduction of a 'virtual' Eucharist presents significant difficulties that the Anglican Church of Australia may continue to experience when the time of global pandemic ends. The price to be paid in surrendering biblical, theological and constitutional principles is judged to be too high and so the practice of using a 'virtual' Eucharist is not recommended as a viable option for the Anglican Church of Australia at any time, including a time of global COVID-19 pandemic.