

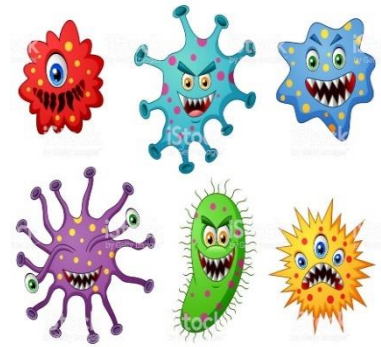


# The Corona Chronicles

Reviewing the Church through a time of crisis

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Bishop Michael



## The spiritual communion of the faithful

Communion with Jesus is the goal of our Eucharistic celebrations, the goal towards which the liturgy is moving. This is not understood to be the same as an ordinary meal and even in the New Testament writings, this difference was clearly identified.

What happens is that Jesus gives us a share *in himself in a concrete, living person with his whole life's destiny, and in the power of the Holy Spirit he accomplishes that being-in-one-another (he in us and we in him) that is the most intimate imaginable for of being together, the greatest possible closeness.* (Herbert Vorgrimler). This is what happens through eating his body.

This presence is sacramentally mediated in the act of communion. This is in no way any sort of corporal-material understanding. The New Testament from the very beginning understood this to be a sacramental mediation perceptible to the human senses. Communion is an internal process of union in which they hand over all sense of being in charge of what is happening. It is only possible for those who come, through the grace of God, to the altar in faith, in hope and in love.

When the grace of God is at work in the believer

- enabling them to possess the preconditions for union with Christ (faith, hope, love)
- and where the Spirit of God brings them to fulfillment,
- there the gracious effects of this communion are present.

Communion is also an avenue for an increase of grace. This grace is to be understood as *God own self*, a *self* communicated to us in and through Jesus Christ, through the Holy Spirit. It is an increase in the sense of the believer being given an opportunity to enter into an even deeper and more intense experience of God's real presence within them. But this is not just about the individual communicant. It includes: a more intensive union with Christ

- in seeking to do the will of God in the world
- in the practical unity of love of God and humanity
- in following Jesus by beginning to bring about the reign of God,
- in the service of peace and reconciliation

- in standing up against injustice,
- in attention to the weak, the ostracised and the strangers.

But there is more and that is the fulfilling of the promise given by Jesus in **John 6...** *For the bread of God is that which comes down from heaven and gives **life** to the world...*<sup>50</sup> *This is the bread that comes down from heaven, so that one may eat of it and not die.*<sup>51</sup> *I am the **living bread** that came down from heaven. Whoever eats of this bread **will live for ever**; and the bread that I will give for **the life of the world** is my flesh.*” Those partaking in this communion are taken into a kind of divine dimension. There

- the works of God,
- along with those who are perfected in God,
- exist in a *pure, enduring presence*,
- and into which believers hope someday to be accepted and to abide eternally.

This communion then becomes a foretaste of things yet to come in their fullness. But this is not a once forever reception. The human person struggles with weaknesses and sin and are in constant need of this divine presence. Without it they are so easily buried under the burdens of a sinful humanity. This communion needs therefore to be repeated constantly.

These graces, the effects of the sacrament can also be given by God outside of an actual communion. The one exception to this is the building up of the ecclesial community, the holding together the Body of Christ. This is achieved through the sharing of the common meal, the one bread and one cup.

It is from this teaching the whole understanding of a *spiritual communion* developed. Coming first of all from the theology of St Thomas, but then taken up by the Council of Trent, it is possible to acquire the fruits (Latin *res*) of the sacrament even without receiving it. This comes about through the *faith, hope and love* that is essential before someone comes to the altar rail for communion. These are also among the *fruits* of the sacrament.

The word *spiritual* is used here in the same way the word *spirit* is used of the Holy Spirit, the same Spirit who effects, brings about these sacramental effects. This spiritual can only exist when there is a full and sincere longing for the sacramental communion. This is where the theology comes into play when there are situations where the sacrament cannot be celebrated:

- in parishes where there is no priest.
- among those who are unable to attend the eucharistic celebration.
- in the present Corona virus situation

As document from the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith (1983) set out the theology of this in clear language:

*When, deeply moved by desire for the sacrament, and united in prayer with the whole Church, they call on the Lord and lift their hearts to him, they commune, through the power of the Holy Spirit, with the Church which is the living body of Christ, and with the Lord himself. United with the Church by their desire for the sacrament, they are, even though externally separated from it, internally and really united with the Church, and thus receive the fruits of the sacrament.*

**Conclusion:** This is the theological understanding behind the present use of having the Eucharist on video, or live streamed for people at home. According to this teaching, it is possible to receive all of the effects of the sacrament *extra-sacramentally*.

### **Further testimonies that are useful:**

According to St Thomas there are both sacramental and spiritual communions. **Sacramental communion** refers to the physical reception of the Eucharist. **Spiritual communion** involves “a real longing for union with Christ. One must always want to receive regular sacramental Communion. However, St. Thomas tells us that a *complete spiritual Communion can even take place when we are unable to receive sacramentally, because ‘the effect of a sacrament can be secured if it is received by desire.*

The great **St. Catherine of Siena** (1347-1380) wrote of the value of spiritual Communion. She had begun to question whether her spiritual Communion had any real value compared to sacramental Communion. Then one day she saw Christ holding two chalices and he spoke to her... *In this golden chalice I put your sacramental communions. In this silver chalice I put your spiritual communions. Both chalices are quite pleasing to me.*

In 2003, **Pope John Paul II** wrote in his encyclical *Ecclesia de Eucharistia*:

*In the Eucharist, unlike any other sacrament, the mystery [of communion] is so perfect that it brings us to the heights of every good thing: Here is the ultimate goal of every human desire, because here we attain God and God joins himself to us in the most perfect union...therefore it is good to cultivate in our hearts a constant desire for the sacrament of the Eucharist.*

This is not new to the Church. **St. Teresa of Jesus** (1515-1542) wrote: *When you do not receive communion and you do not attend Mass, you can make a spiritual communion, which is a most beneficial practice; by it the love of God will be greatly impressed on you.*

**St. Jean-Marie Vianney** (1786 – 1859) once said, *when we feel the love of God growing cold, let us instantly make a Spiritual Communion. When we cannot go to the church, let us turn towards the tabernacle; no wall can shut us out from the good God.*

The prayer for a spiritual communion by St. Alphonsus Liguori (1696–1787):

*My Jesus, I believe that you are present in the most Blessed Sacrament. I love You above all things and I desire to receive You into my soul. Since I cannot now receive You sacramentally, come at least spiritually into my heart. I embrace You as if You were already there, and unite myself wholly to You. Never permit me to be separated from You. Amen.*

**Pope Benedict XVI** on divorced couples receiving communion: *This is very important, so that they (the divorced and remarried persons) see that they are accompanied and guided. Then, it is also very important that they truly realize they are participating in the Eucharist if they enter into a real communion with the Body of Christ. Even without “corporal” reception of the sacrament, they can be spiritually united to Christ in His Body. Bringing them to understand this is important: so that they find a way to live the life of faith based upon the Word of God and the communion of the Church, and that they come to see their suffering as a gift to the Church, because it helps others by defending the stability of love and marriage.*

The Greek theologians, **Basil** (379) and **Gregory of Nazianzus** (+390), see in the blessing of the Spirit of God the effect of a spiritual communion. **John Chrysostom** (407) reminds us, according to the words of Paul, *to discern the Body of the Lord* (1 Cor 11:29), and concludes that the sacramental reality does not reveal itself to the senses; it must be received in faith by spiritual men. For all these Church Fathers, the sign value of the food of the Body of Christ does not stand alone; it is directed much more to inner fruits founded on grace.

**St Augustine** (354 430) *Why do you prepare your teeth and stomach? Believe, and you have eaten!*

**Cardinal Paul Cordes** (2016 ) **Tertullian** ( c. 220), **Cyprian** (258), and **Augustine** all point out the spiritual incorporation into the mystical Body of Christ; they show the limitations of understanding the Bread of the Lord’s Body as merely sacramental and symbolic, and they underscore the spiritual effect of Communion. The Cappadocian Fathers, **Basil** and **Gregory Nazianzen**, highlight the fact that the Eucharist directly imparts to us the Spirit of Christ. Other Church Fathers—such as **Ambrose** (397), **Gregory of Nyssa** (394), and **John Chrysostom** (407)—stress that the reality of this sacrament is such that it is not perceived by the senses; instead, the sacrament must be eaten by faith, that is, by the spiritual man. Truly, this appeal to understanding the spiritual nature of the reception of the Eucharist cannot be made stronger than it is.