

Homily for Maundy Thursday, April 9, 2020

The Holy Eucharist

By the Reverend Stephen Gerth

Year A: Exodus 12:1–14; Psalm 78:14–20, 23–25; 1 Corinthians 11:23–26; John 13:1–20; Psalm 22*

I want to begin by thanking the Presiding Bishop for recording a sermon for us tonight. I'm sorry that we don't have the equipment to screen it for you at this point in the liturgy. It's a deeply pastoral sermon. I hope many will have the opportunity to hear his words and feel his presence and care for us. I know I am not the only person who has a hard time thinking of Holy Week and Easter Day without churches being open.

What I would like to do, briefly, is to say something about the rubric that has encouraged my colleagues and our friars here, and those in many other congregations, to live-stream or make video recordings of our Eucharists. It's found in the Prayer Book in the order for Ministration to the Sick, at the end of the section on the Holy Communion. It says:

If a person desires to receive the Sacrament, but, by reason of extreme sickness or physical disability, is unable to eat and drink the Bread and Wine, the Celebrant is to assure that person that all the benefits

*of Communion are received, even though the Sacrament is not received with the mouth.*¹

Marion Hatchett traced the origin of this rubric to the medieval rite of Salisbury Cathedral in England:

*If the probability of . . . irreverence is feared, the priest shall say to the sick, “Brother, in this case true faith and good will suffices, only believe and you have eaten.”*²

The first Book of Common Prayer—1549—permitted the reservation of the Sacrament for the sick. With 1552 book, the Sacrament could no longer be reserved. A special communion service could be celebrated in the home of a sick person but the rite would largely fall into disuse as time moved on.

Saint Mary’s parish was among the American parishes founded in the wake of the Oxford Movement. One chief goal of the movement was the renewal of congregational worship, to renew a sense of the beauty of holiness, and to center its worship on the Eucharist.

¹ *The Book of Common Prayer* (1979), 457.

² Marion J. Hatchett, *Commentary on the American Prayer Book* (New York: Seabury Press, 1980), 467.

We know that the marble high altar was given in 1872, the silver Eucharistic lantern in 1875. I would not be surprised to discover that the reservation of the Sacrament started with the first daily Mass on December 8, 1870.

A very few times I have been at the bedside of someone gravely ill, probably awake, who could not receive Communion. I have blessed the sick and the dying at different times with oil, with the sign of the cross, sometimes by touching the person with a gloved hand, sometimes by making the sign of the cross with the Bread in my hand. God's gifts and graces are not limited by our physical limitations. The origins of the Eucharist, the Mass, lie in the meals, in the food, that Jesus shared with sinners and saints, and men and women who believed in his resurrection, his word, and the life of the world to come. I look forward more than I can express to the reopening of this church for public worship.

✠ In the Name of the Father, and of the Son,
and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.