

Communing beyond Communion

I read this the other day: “‘Communion’ is indeed the normal permanent condition of ‘live’ Christians, whose duty it is to cherish it. All their lives are lived in a spirit of communion, and it bursts into flame every time the sacrifice is completed with the reception of the ‘body and blood’” (J. A. Jungmann, *The Place of Christ in Liturgical Prayer*, ET 1965, p.258). We can say the same in another way: ‘Holy Communion’ leads to communing. It is given us for that. The Eucharist is celebrated so as to be lived. At this time, when Communion has gone ‘virtual’, I’d like to explore these wider dimensions, these echoes and repercussions in daily life and focus on that “normal permanent” communion / communing Holy Communion makes possible for us. The Eucharist beyond church walls, if you like.

Three forms of this communing come to my mind.

But let me lay a foundation first. We are in the Easter season. There is a tradition that, when he rose from the dead, Jesus appeared first, privately as it were, to his mother. The Gospels don’t say he did, but they don’t say he didn’t. We can accept this, or not, as we wish. However, an Austrian who died almost a century ago, Rainer Maria Rilke, dedicated a memorable to an imagined Easter meeting of Jesus and Mary. It is called the Quietening of Mary. Jesus comes to his mother and, in a gesture of reassurance, puts his hand on her shoulder. Then, writes the poet:

“They began,
quiet as trees in spring,
infinitely and at once,
their season
of utmost communing”.

It’s hard to catch the beauty of the original, but the point lies in the last two lines. This mother and son always had a unique relationship, but after the shared horror of Calvary and its reversal in the Resurrection, this relationship must have gone still further. It must have moved into an ultimate intimacy, the beginning of their relationship in heaven. It’s worth pausing on the post-Resurrection union of Jesus and Mary. It stands, as it were, at the beginning of our Easter season. It underpins it. It symbolises the relationship between Christ and the Church opened for us by Easter and Pentecost. It evokes that “normal permanent condition” I began with. The whole New Testament is a song to the new “communion” the New Covenant has made possible. Take St Paul, for example: “now that we have been justified by faith, we are at peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ; it is through him, by faith, that we have been admitted

into God's favour in which we are living, and look forward exultantly to God's glory" (Rom 5:1-2).

Eastertide – and lockdown – are an opportunity for appreciating a little more “the breadth and length and height and depth” (Eph 3:18) of what Christ and the Holy Spirit have made possible. Imagine you have been given the very best and latest PC, but have hardly begun to explore all it enables you to do. Or your great aunt has died and left you a chateau in the Loire Valley. You have the title deeds, you have the key, but you've only so far spent a single night there. You have yet to discover the treasures it holds. As Jesus said to the Samaritan woman, “If you but knew the gift of God!” (Jn 4:10).

So, how in lockdown, can “ultimate communing” be begun? How can our daily life be a “holy communion”? Where's the “sacramental matter”, as it were?

I'd just mention three things – all close at hand, all for cherishing, all simple.

1. St Benedict wrote a rule for households – of monks. You could say he wrote for households in lockdown; he expected monks to be at home. And one of the many striking things his 6th c. Rule insists on is respect for things, material things, the objects around us, the objects we use on a daily basis. St Benedict's monastery has two focal points: the oratory and the kitchen. It has two tables: the altar and the table in the refectory. They are both holy. The bread of both is holy. They both involve service, of the Lord and of the brethren. They are as connected as the two great commandments. There's a flow between the two. So, he tells the monk in charge of the domestic economy: “Let him look upon the utensils of the monastery as upon the sacred vessels of the altar”. The pots and pans, the cutlery and crockery, the cupboards and chairs are sacred. So, “if anyone treat the things of the monastery in a slovenly or careless manner, let him be corrected”. Everything is to be kept clean and in good condition. If someone working in the kitchen or storeroom or bakery or garden breaks or loses something, he must go before the abbot and whole community and disclose it. He wants the cooking to be done well. “God walks among the pots and pans”, said St Teresa. St Benedict would have warmed to that. He expects respect for the paten and chalice, as it were, and the “sacramental matter”, of our daily life. He rather likes lists and inventories. He seems to enjoy mentioning things: items of clothing and socks and shoes and beds and bedding, needles and writing materials, belts and knives. We would have to add tablets, phones, cars. For St Benedict, daily household life is a kind of Eucharist. Christ is present there as well as in the church. The whole of life turns sacramental. Cherishing things is a way of cherishing the Lord and sensing his presence. What's made can connect us with our Maker. We don't have to turn our lives into a perpetual Japanese tea-party, certainly, but it is good to remember that things are not simply “ours”. “The Lord's is the earth and its fullness”, says a Psalm. Our world tries to recycle, but it's a battle. We live in a world of plastic wrapping and a throw-away culture,

where everything can be replaced, where the only value of things is their price. Things are not respected for being what they are: works of nature, works of art, works of God. St Benedict was an ecologist, really, but look at the litter during lockdown, when waste collections are reduced. By contrast St Benedict, like the prophet Zechariah, would have us anticipate the day when “every pot in Jerusalem and Judah shall be sacred to the Lord of hosts” (Zech 14:21). Lockdown slows us down and slowing down can help us sense things we normally don’t.

2) Closer still is the “now”, the present moment. The “sacrament of the present moment” is a fine phrase attributed to a 17th / 18th c. French Jesuit, Jean Pierre de Caussade. He was an apostle, as it were, of a simple theme. We are called to commune with God, to live lives united to his will. This is holiness, this is grace. “Thy will be done.” But where do we find this will? “The word is very close to you”, de Caussade would say. God’s will comes to us in the ordinary events of daily life. It’s in front of our nose. It’s in our ordinary responsibilities. It’s in the ups and downs of every day. We do God’s will by doing what we have to do and undergoing what we undergo, the sorrows and joys. God is at work everywhere: “everything that takes place within us, around us or through us contains and conceals the divine action”, he wrote. He often wrote to nuns, whose lives in those days were indeed in permanent lockdown. And his message was: cherish the present moment: leave the past to God’s mercy and the future to his providence; don’t live in bitterness about the past or in fantasy about the future. Live in the now. That’s where Christ comes to us and we meet him. Life is simple. There is something very beautiful, sacramental, just in the shape of a day, with its sunrise and sunset, its phases, its rise and fall. Perhaps our current stillness can give us more sense of this: every day is a host we can offer to God on the basis of our baptismal priesthood. Unsurprisingly, de Caussade draws a comparison with the Eucharist. “How many people understand that every cross, every action, every attraction according to the designs of God, gives God to us in a way that nothing can better explain than a comparison with [the holy Eucharist]?...Don’t we know that by all things and people, and by every event the divine love desires to unite us to himself, that he has ordained, arranged or allows everything about us, everything that happens to us with a view to this union? ...He uses the worst things and the best things for this, the most distressing events and the pleasantest ones...If this is true, every moment of our lives may be a kind of communion with the divine love, and this communion of every moment may do as much as that which we receive in the Communion of the Body and Blood of the Son of God. This latter, certainly, is effective sacramentally which the former isn’t, but on the other hand how much more frequently cannot it not be renewed?...O great feast! O perpetual festival?” (Abandonment to Divine Providence, Ch. 2, §VII). “All you who thirst”, he says, learn that you have not far to go to find the fountain of living waters; it flows very close to you in the present moment; therefore hasten to find it” (Ch 2, §IX). It’s through

the sacrament of ordinary life, the here and now, in the furnace of each day, that we really learn – heart-knowledge – of God.

3) Lastly, very close again, another occasion for “communing beyond Communion” is simply one another. If we’re not alone, it’s those we are locked-down with. We all know the challenging side of that; we’re good at being part of the challenge ourselves. But there’s an old monastic saying, “Your brother is your salvation”. We can say, your brother is your Easter, your cross and your resurrection. And for “brother” you can substitute wife, husband, child, parent, friend. “Whoever does not love his brother whom he can see cannot love God whom he cannot see” (1 Jn 4:20). My brother is my Easter.

There’s a good story from the life of St Benedict written by St Gregory the Great. As a young man, he became a hermit in some wild country away from Rome. He lived in a cave with minimal human contact. It was Easter, and the local parish priest, some miles away, was sitting down to a good meal to mark the end of Lent. Then the Voice spoke: here are you sitting down to your Easter meal while my servant [Benedict] is going hungry.” The priest was a good man. Up he got, put together a doggy bag and went off into the wilds to find our man. He had to climb cliffs, navigate valleys, cross ditches. Finally he found St Benedict. They sat down and had a chat about spiritual things. Then the priest said, “Let’s eat. It’s Easter.” So cut off, so locked-down, had the young Benedict been that he didn’t even know it was Easter. But he made a beautiful reply to the priest: “I have the grace of seeing you; so it must be Easter.” Well, it will be good when we can see each other again, won’t it? But even now, those I do see are an Easter, and Easter, like the meeting of Jesus and Mary, can begin our “season of ultimate communing”.

So, let’s cherish the things around us, cherish each day and its happenings, cherish one another.