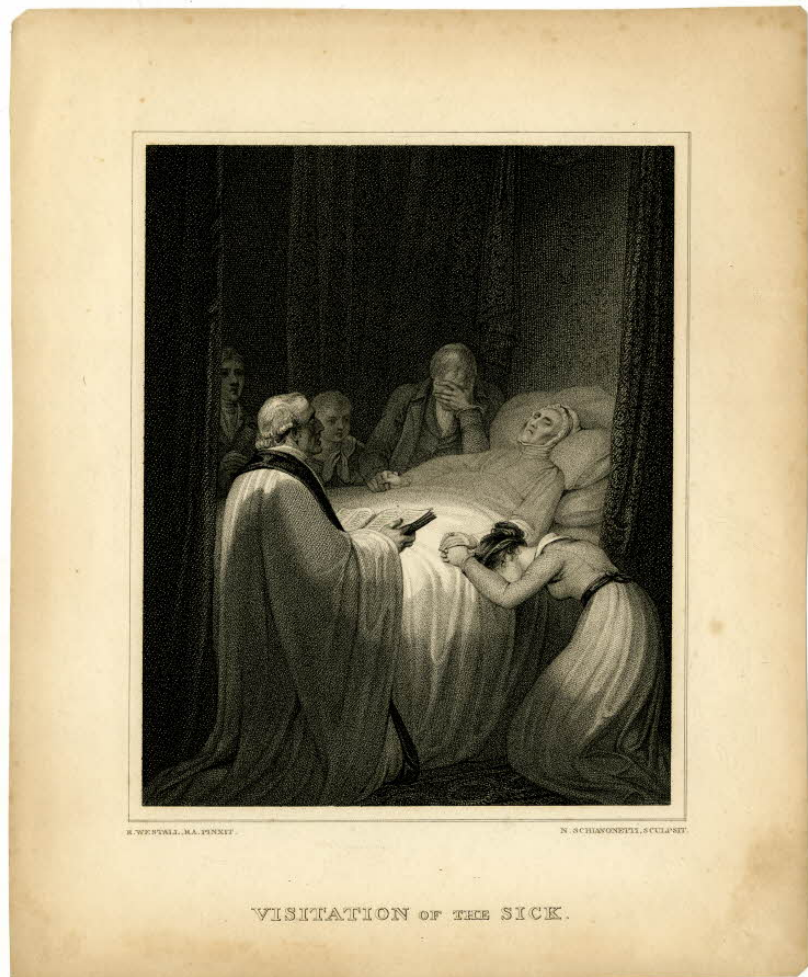




Church of Ireland

**United Dioceses of
Cork, Cloyne & Ross**

Some thoughts from the Bishop on Spiritual Communion



Westall's Illustration of the Book of Common Prayer in the British Museum
'The Visitation of the Sick'

Introduction:

The difficult times in which we now find ourselves are not unique in human history. That does not make them any less trying, challenging or anxious. Throughout history the Church has ministered in many crises and emergencies.

This time the prohibitions (qualified in certain situations) on gatherings and on going out make being the Church and Christian pastoral care and proclamation of the Gospel especially challenging.

Holy Communion

The 'General Directions for Public Worship' in the *Book of Common Prayer* (page 75) state that the '... Holy Communion is the central act of worship of the Church.'

Also, 'Holy Communion is to be celebrated on the principal holy days as set out in the Calendar and regularly on Sundays and festivals for which provision is made in this book.'

Canon 13 provides that in '... every church or chapel where the sacraments are to be administered, the Holy Communion shall be ministered at least once a month, unless the ordinary shall otherwise order, and also on such of the days for which proper prefaces are provided in the communion service, as the ordinary shall direct.'

The days for which proper prefaces are provided are found on pages 224 to 236 of the *Book of Common Prayer*.

In Practice

Within the practice and spiritual discipline of the members of the Church of Ireland, within the parameters already set out above, there is a huge diversity of practice.

Many people are regular, even weekly, communicants. Many more receive the Holy Communion either intermittently or when it is being celebrated at a Service they are attending.

Easter

In Anglicanism globally, it is regarded as a mark of communicant status that someone receives on Principal Feasts, including Christmas and Easter.

This time presents a particular dilemma, however, as parishioners cannot gather and priests cannot go out (other than within the terms of the regulations enacted by the State (see separate communication)).

Many people are confined to their homes, cocooned even, and they will not be able to receive the sacrament at this time.

Situations:

This, of course, is not the only instance when this scenario has occurred. Many other instances and contexts come to mind. Some examples are:

- In extreme sickness when someone cannot physically receive the sacrament;
- Where there is no priest to celebrate the sacrament;
- In places of persecution or where the practice of Christianity is prohibited;
- Where, ordinarily, there are too few people to join with the priest in the celebration, as required by the rubrics.

In his *Form of Spiritual Communion* in 1916, the Bishop of Melanesia, Bishop Cecil John Wood, said that it ' ... frequently happens to missionaries and others that they are far removed from the ministrations of a Priest, and are unable to receive the Blessed Sacrament for weeks or months at a time.'

No doubt you yourselves can envisage other analogous situations.

A Common Practice

Spiritual Communion, although we may lose sight of it in the ordinary run of things in more normal times is a practice adopted by Christians in the Anglican, Lutheran, Roman Catholic, and in some Methodist traditions.

What it is

In a Spiritual Communion, with a contrite heart, we ask Jesus to come to us in the same way He would if we were able to receive the Sacrament.

Sources and Background

The practice is best set out over the years in the Orders for the Visitation of the Sick.

In the Books of Common Prayer over the centuries, these orders are based on three Services from the Use of Sarum, dating from the 11th Century:

1. The Order for the Visitation of the Sick
2. Extreme Unction
3. Commendation of the Soul

In the 13th Century, St Thomas Aquinas referred to the ancient and valuable tradition of making an act of Spiritual Communion, an act which expresses what was described by him as:

*'an ardent desire to receive Jesus in the Most Holy Sacrament
and in lovingly embracing Him.'*

The Book of Common Prayer of 1549 articulated the same approach in the rubrics at the end of the *Visitation to the Sick*:

¶ But yf any man eyther by reason of extremitie of sicknesse, or for lacke of warnyng geven in due tyme, to the curate, or by any other just impedimente, doe not receyne the sacramente of Christes bodye and bloud then the curate shall instruct hym, that yf he doe truely repent hym of his synnes and stedfastly beleve that Jesus Christ hath suffered death upon the cosse for hym, and shed his bloud for his redempcion, earnestly remembring the benefites he hath therby, and geving hym hertie thanks therefore; he doeth eate and drynke spiritually the bodye and bloud of our savioure Christe, profitably to his soules helth, although he doe not receyve the sacrament with his mouth.

¶ When the sicke persone is visited and receiveth the holy communion, all at one tyme: then the priest for more expedicion shall use this ordre at the visitacion.

It is there in 1559 too:

¶ But if any man, either by reason of extremitie of sickenes, or for lacke of warnyng in due time to the Curate, or for lacke of company to receive with hym, or by any other just impediment, do not receive the Sacrament of Christes body and bloud, then the Curate shall instruct hym, that if he do truely repent hym of his synnes, and stedfastly beleve that Jesus Christe hath sufred death upon the crosse for him, and shed his bloud for his redempcion, earnestly remembryng the benefites he hath therby, and geving him hartie thanks therefore, he doth eate and dryncke the body and blonde of our saviour Christe, profitably to his soules health, although he doe not receive the Sacrament with his mouthe.

¶ When the sicke person is visited, and receiveth the holy Communion al at one time, then the Priest, for more expedicion, shal cut of the fourme of the visitacion at the Psaime, In the, O Lorde have I put my trust, and go streight to the Communion.

¶ In the time of plague, Swette, or such other like contagious tymes of sickeneses or diseases, when none of the Paroshe or neighbours can be gotten to communicate with the sicke in their houses, for feare of the infection, upon speciall request of the diseased, the minister may alonly communicate with hym.

What we note, therefore, is that the concept and practice of Spiritual Communion pre-dates the Reformation, and was carried forward into the doctrine and formularies after the Reformation.

Our *Book of Common Prayer (1926)* has these rubrics at the end of *The Visitation of the Sick*:

‘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 our Saviour Christ profitably to his soul’s health, although he do not receive the Sacrament with his mouth.’

In the times of contagious sickness or disease, or when, from some other urgent cause, none of the Parish or neighbours can be gotten to communicate with the sick, upon special request of the sick person, the Minister may communicate with him alone.’

Today

Our current Book of Common Prayer (page 440) expresses this in more contemporary language:

‘SPIRITUAL COMMUNION. Those who are incapable of receiving the sacrament are to be assured that, although not receiving the elements in the mouth, they are by faith partakers of the body and blood of Christ and of the benefits he conveys to us by them,..’

This is consonant also with the rest of Anglicanism. For example, the Church of England in *Ministry to the Sick* states:

Believers who cannot physically receive the sacrament are to be assured that they are partakers by faith of the body and blood of Christ and of the benefits he conveys to us by them.

Concluding Remarks

I have hastily assembled these thoughts to support you and in order that, should the occasion arise, you can offer teaching and assurance to enquirers in your parishes.

I am grateful to our Diocesan Liturgical Officer, the Reverend John Ardis, who has adapted the current Church of England document and liturgical materials on this subject for our context. He has also provided liturgies for Maundy Thursday and Easter Day which are on the Diocesan website.

+Paul

Maundy Thursday, 2020