

Orienting reflections on the Lord's Supper and its celebration in the Corona crisis

by Volker Jung, Church President of the Protestant Church in Hesse and Nassau (EKHN), April 8, 2020



We believe and trust that Jesus Christ is fully present in the Word. It is therefore important that the gospel is proclaimed and celebrated even when worship meetings are not possible. This is currently done in many different forms in worship transmissions on radio, television and on the net as well as in other forms of media mediation.

During Holy Week and Easter, participation in a communion celebration is very important for many Protestant Christians in their practice of faith. The presence of Christ in the Word also fills the Lord's Supper. The Lord's Supper is not an increase of this presence. But the Lord's Supper has a special reassuring power in that Christ's presence and closeness in bread and wine are experienced "bodily" - personally and in the celebrating congregation. The Lord's Supper is a sacrament according to Protestant understanding. This includes the words of initiation being spoken and the offering of bread and cup. According to confession (Confessio Augustana 14) and order of life of EKHN (Lebensordnung EKHN Section II No. 121), the celebration of Holy Communion is led by a person called to administer the sacraments. Leadership by church members requires - according to the order of life of the EKHN - a corresponding commissioning.

How can the Lord's Supper be celebrated in a time when no worship meetings are possible? This is currently being asked out of a deep spiritual need. The main question here is about the possibility of celebrating Holy Communion at home or also the possibility of participating in a Communion celebration through the media. The latter question arises once again especially in view of quarantine situations in old people's homes and nursing homes as well as hospitals, because people there are sometimes completely alone.

There are many debates about this in these days. They show that there are different positions and assessments and also open questions. Special situations always lead to limits. It is important that we allow ourselves this and see this situation as a challenge, in which many things are bound to happen that need to be looked at and reflected upon again in retrospect. But this also offers opportunities to discover new possibilities.

Here is a brief outline of what can now be considered in order to make responsible decisions. And at the same time, the possibility should be pointed out of organizing Communion celebrations in a domestic setting, which are not Lord's Supper celebrations itself, but celebrate the memory of the Lord's Supper.

1. communion at home

A central question is whether a domestic communion celebration can be conducted by a person who is not called to administer the sacraments. That this is possible in emergency situations on the basis of the understanding of the general priesthood of all believers is provided for in the order of life of the EKHN (LO Section II, No. 125). Other regional churches also have this regulation and with the recommendation of domestic communion celebrations implicitly or explicitly declare the present situation to be such an emergency situation. This is done, for example, by the Protestant Church in the Rhineland, which also

developed the proposal for the Lord's Supper, which is published in the Chrismon Easter supplement. We in the EKHN have not taken this step, but we do think it is possible that a pastor in individual situations may issue a commission "for time and place" (pro tempore et loco). In both cases, well-founded decisions are also very important with regard to ecumenism, because in the Roman Catholic Church's understanding of the Eucharist the leadership of the celebration has a special meaning.

2. communion medial

A celebration of Holy Communion in medial fellowship would take place in such a way that in one place the institution of Holy Communion would be performed by a person called to do so. This is transmitted - usually on the Internet. Of course, television and radio are also conceivable. Those who take part in the celebration medially and usually at the same time have provided bread and chalice and then take it themselves or, if possible, have it handed to them by a second person. The latter would be the important dimension of receiving, of course, much better. However, even this may not always be possible in quarantine.

One problem is that in the media celebration, physicality is not directly experienced, in terms of the concrete elements about which the words of institution are spoken and the physical encounter of those who take part in the Lord's Supper. On the other hand, it can be emphasized that the presence of Christ, which is believed, also includes all those who celebrate worship together through the media.

However, it would be important in the celebration of Holy Communion in media fellowship that the gifts of the meal are handled with care before and after the celebration. The celebration of Holy Communion in medial fellowship deserves new attention, especially in view of the special pastoral challenges in quarantine situations. Nevertheless, it is also necessary to critically examine the new experiences arising here and to consider them theologically in a comprehensive way.

3. commemorating communion

Many, however, would only celebrate Holy Communion as part of a worship service. Nevertheless, for the domestic setting there is a liturgic form of not celebrating Holy Communion but of commemorating the meals that Jesus celebrated with his disciples and others. This liturgic form called "agape meal" or "agape feast" has been widely practiced in a few of our parishes as well as in other churches worldwide as a good way of spiritual strengthening. It actually dates back to the early days of Christianity. The "Zentrum Verkündigung" of EKHN has developed suggestions for celebrating agape meals on Holy Thursday, Good Friday and Easter. They are available at www.zentrum-verkuendigung.de.