

Do This In Remembrance of Me

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Sunday arrives, and we prepare for the celebration that calls us to participate in the encounter with the life of the church. This gathering provides a unique and extraordinary sense of being the people of God or a community of faith. It is an encounter that makes us reflect on our existence and leads us to review the daily chores during which, perhaps many times, we are unaware of our relationship with God. It is also an opportunity to share with our neighbors in an atmosphere of mutuality with prayers and expressions of our Christian spirituality in gratitude to God. What a great treasure we could invest in more often and keep ever before us. This and much more is included in the sacramental meeting par excellence that brings us together in the same encounter weekly. The Eucharist!

The Greek word “*εὐχαριστία*” (Eucharist) has the etymological meaning “thanksgiving.” But what does thanksgiving represent for us believers today? It may be that the answer varies according to our beliefs, customs, or our cultural background. It may also be that it shares meaning across differences. But definitely, the significance of thanksgiving moves beyond any one mere concept. Starting from this premise, I elucidate what thanksgiving means based on the experiences lived among the people of Advent Lutheran Church in Arlington, Texas, during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Along with the online Sunday Eucharist, we had Bible study every Wednesday afternoon. We also found this to be a moment to reflect on the different circumstances around the world, social and personal problems, the sense of life, and our Christian compromise and mission during the pandemic. In one of the many reflections, we spoke precisely about the church’s adornment. We used Article 24 of the Apology of the Augsburg Confession as a reference, where, when referring to the subject of the mass, Melanchthon states that “the true adornment of the churches is a pious, helpful, and clear teaching, the respectful use of the sacraments, fervent prayer, and the like. The lights, the gold vessels, and other similar decorations are excellent, but they do not constitute the proper ornament of the church.” Indeed, the Spirit of God was making us realize—as in centuries past with the Church Reformers—that what is essential is not only what we perceive with our senses or what fills us with pleasure. What is truly important is what renews

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us and fills us with life. This is God’s grace, which is always present, although not necessarily related to our sensory system. In other words, there is nothing more telling for God than the vision of our hearts, the sincerity with which we celebrate the mysteries, the joy, and enthusiasm that summons us to share the Eucharist as Christians (Eph 2:18), that is, the significant and invaluable conditions of faith.

I consider that, paradoxically, the pandemic has become an excellent time to strengthen our spirituality as believers. We begin a transition toward a more conscious understanding of what it means to gather for the Eucharist and meet a Christ who speaks not of his material belongings but his wealth of love and dedication to others—a full thanksgiving (John 6:55-57). Whether we accept it or not, the Spirit has given us the light to understand that it is useless for believers to have majestic and adorned temples if there is only hatred, resentment, sadness, deceit, and pain in their hearts. Specifically, adorned sanctuaries are useless if we continue with a self-righteous attitude (Matt 23:27).

Adoration and the Eucharist online have taught us the richness of the gathering for sharing the Lord’s Supper as thanksgiving beyond the mere physical presence in the sanctuary. Through this, we could experience a new reform of thought and attitude toward this sacrament. Something like reinterpreting that receiving the body and blood of Christ is to transcend—to build ourselves up

and continue to grow in love for our neighbor, strengthening our commitment to accept the will of God for our well-being. We grasp that every time we worship God in any way, God's glory results in well-being for our existence.

We find ourselves before a historical moment: beyond innovating, this is a time to deepen the meaning and understanding of our considerations around the Eucharist with the feelings, desires, reasons, or thoughts embedded in this unique and transcendental event. Given this, it would be suitable to review how primitive Christianity understood Eucharist. I will cite in this regard the document of the "Didache," or teaching of the twelve apostles—a document referred to by characters such as Origen, Athanasius, and Eusebius in the first centuries of the Church. There we find:

Concerning thanksgiving, you shall give thanks in this way: First, over the cup: We give you thanks, our Father, for the holy vineyard of David, your servant, who you made known to us through Jesus, your servant. To you be the glory forever. Then, on the fragment (bread): We thank you, our Father, for the life and knowledge you manifested to us through Jesus, your servant. To you be the glory forever. As this fragment (bread) was scattered on the mountains and gathered together became one, so may your Church be gathered from the ends of the earth in your kingdom. Because yours is the glory and the power through Jesus Christ forever. Let none, however, eat or drink of your thanksgiving, except those baptized in the name of the Lord, for the Lord said, "Do not give what is holy to dogs (Didache 9,1-4).

It is enriching and satisfying what the Eucharist confers on us, "knowledge of God and life" through Jesus Christ. It has always been that, and perhaps we have not correctly analyzed, this unique and incomparable benefit. The Eucharist is, therefore, not established to earn or deserve God's favor, but rather it is sincere gratitude for what is already ours by pure grace, a transformation of life. Going a little further in this reflection, and in a complementary mode, we can summarize how Luther conceives the Lord's Supper and what he says about what makes us worthy to participate in it. In the Larger Catechism, Luther says that the Holy Supper is par excellence, the Sacrament in which we find consolation through repentance, dying to our old self so that a new one emerges in God's image. That Sacrament also sustains the soul that feeds and comforts the new person, allowing faith to remain solid in what God has promised us. Thus, this sacrament "is not founded on our dignity" but is offered to us as poor and unfortunate people precisely because we are unworthy. What we find through this is the grace that faith in Christ Jesus gives us. That is, since this is a gift from God given to us without deserving it, we should not think it is offered to perfect people.

And now let's see, since the Sacrament is for sinners and not for the perfect, the more sin there is in us, the more we need the body and blood of Christ Jesus, who strengthens us in God's infinite love. However, the necessary preparation to take communion or

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share the Lord's Supper is beyond the mere will to be fed spiritually. It claims repentance and faith in God's promises. In such a way, it is not thanks to our works or holiness that we become worthy of receiving the Eucharistic Sacrament, but by recognizing our faults and moving toward complete trust in God. Thus, Eucharist acts as a medicine that gives well-being and comfort to the soul and body.

We can conclude that the online Eucharistic celebration has put us in a "capable or competent" mode; that is, it is a way of learning not to remain in the mentality of fulfillment by mere physical presence before the Sacrament but to appreciate and value living in need. It must be recognized that this task is not easy and that people must continue to be instructed on the subject of Holy Communion. Also, it is essential to emphasize worship and preaching because simply offering the Sacrament repeatedly is not enough. In this exact order of ideas, we must be aware that the current circumstances show us an imperative need to attend to the essence of the dialogue on the Eucharist, both in the institutional Church and in congregational life. It is unnecessary to pretend to maintain an authoritarian position to submit others to some scheme and unique thought. Instead, we should invite others to present arguments that entail a healthy intention to have a life in Christ, grateful, reconciled, and spiritually nourished from the Eucharist. Therefore, openness in listening to opinions, no matter how contrary they may seem, is not contradictory to the truth; they are a requirement for today's world, especially for Christian believers of different denominations. I believe this truly manifests the background of the scriptural teachings of loving each other (Rom 12:10).

I must add that interculturality, diversity, and inclusion are some realities to consider in terms of critically understanding our liturgical celebrations, especially the Eucharist. In addition, for authentic dialogue, we must be willing to say what we think, listen to others, seek the truth together, and be open to change, which we understand not everyone is ready to do. I hope the Holy Spirit will guide us in this discernment so we can vividly proclaim: "Teach me to do your will, for you are my God; may your good Spirit lead me on level ground" (Psalm 143:10-NIV).

It is important to discern that we should not get caught up in frustration. As competent Christians, we need to solve problems. Circumstances are constantly changing, and as long as we are citizens in the world, we must be prepared to face disruptions, deal

with them, and adapt or overcome them to move forward, as long as God's will allows it. That is how we understood it in the Advent congregation. So, we prayed and trusted to be guided by the Holy Spirit in making decisions to face the adversity of the pandemic.

As the congregation council, we looked at strategies from other congregations and denominations. Finally, we established a liturgy for the online Eucharistic gathering that would allow us to continue meeting as a faith community. Although there was some fear of knowing the congregation's reaction, as it turned out, ideas and comments ebbed and flowed as we perdured the pandemic together. The Spirit of God was acting and doing spirited work despite this. We realized that the important thing was to know and see ourselves gathered in the name of the Lord, even if it was to share online the Sacrament of communion—Eucharist (1 Cor 11:26). I can affirm that this was the feeling perceived in both the Spanish-speaking congregation and the English-speaking one.

Undoubtedly, beyond the challenge of meeting weekly with the assembly to celebrate the Lord's Day, there were other things that, as a pastor, would not leave me alone. During the week, I often meditated on a persistent concern: it is one thing to see ourselves gathered to celebrate, and another is to feel part of the Eucharist. I could not specify to what extent the congregation felt genuinely involved online in the Eucharist or how worshippers assembled through Facebook Live or the YouTube channel encountered God. So much uncertainty remained despite the abundant likes and chat messages.

I understood that the celebration should not be only according to my opinion as a pastor, so I communicated with some congregants and asked them for their views and ideas. We began to notice that, for many people, the physical space of the church

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was necessary for people to feel more connected. For this reason, we gradually improved visual resources making the celebrant's participation more interactive. For example, we included karaoke for several liturgical songs; we projected prayers such as the Creed, the Our Father, and some images and liturgical responses. In short, we made a reasonable effort to have an interactive worship time.

As I have mentioned, circumstances are changing, and perhaps we are only focused on thinking that we resort to the online Eucharist to fulfill the weekly adoration moment. But, what if, paradoxically, God is showing us through the circumstances that we have means and new alternatives to worship and that there are no excuses to stop receiving God's blessings? I think it is time to ask the Holy Spirit to guide us so as not to deviate from the essence of Eucharistic sharing. But primarily, it is time to have more confidence in Christ's promise: "I am the bread of life. He who comes to me will never hunger, and he who believes in me will never thirst" (John 6:35-NIV).