A Primer on Spiritual Communion

I published the following material on spiritual communion as a series of three bulletin articles in April 2020 and adapted to be presented together below. I pray this primer on spiritual communion is valuable for your mind and heart during this pandemic and long after!

- Fr. Scott Goodfellow, Parochial Vicar, St. Mary Parish, Hudson

This time of pandemic has been heavy, hectic, and heartbreaking as our lives have been turned upside down by social distancing measures to slow the spread of the coronavirus. Understandably, one of the most painful moments for Catholics has been the suspension of public liturgies and reception of the Sacraments, especially the loss of daily or weekly communion. Having heard this pain of loss expressed in various ways by our parishioners, I would like to offer some guidance regarding spiritual communion.

Spiritual Communion and Desire

To begin with a definition, spiritual communion is a real union with our Lord born out of the desire to be united to Him. Just because we cannot receive communion at this time does not mean we cannot be in communion with God. Our Lord’s deepest desire is a personal union with each one of us. Since God respects our freedom, we also must desire this union with and in Christ for communion with Him to be effective.

While we can only receive communion physically at certain times, we can and should desire spiritual communion at every moment. This beautiful truth should help us see that every act of physical reception of the Eucharist, if it is to bear fruit, must include an interior act of spiritual communion: the desire to be united with the Lord. The greater our desire for union, the stronger we will experience the fulfillment of communion with Him.

When it comes to the relationship between desire and fulfillment regarding earthly things like eating, we are used to desire decreasing as it is satisfied (hunger decreases as we eat). However, with eternal things like spiritual communion, desire increases as it is satisfied (desire for union with Christ increases as actual union with Him is fulfilled).

In normal times, this relationship of desire and fulfillment regarding the Eucharist might be hidden from us because the Eucharist is readily available for our reception. But in this extraordinary time of pandemic when access to the Eucharist is restricted, we may notice our desire for Eucharist increasing. This increase of desire is not because we lack actual communion with our Lord (as physical hunger increases due to starvation)! On the contrary, our longing for the Eucharist increases because our union with the Lord is actually growing, even in this time of fasting from the Eucharist (our Eucharistic hunger is growing because our Lord is truly feeding us in this time)!

In brief, even in this time without reception of the Eucharist, our desire for communion may bring about an actual union with our Eucharistic Lord. This desire leading to union is nourishing Christ’s faithful in this time of spiritual communion.
A Primer on Spiritual Communion

Historical Setting

Although it may not have been called 'spiritual communion' until recent centuries, the reality of communing with our Lord spiritually goes back to the very origins of the Church. The practice of spiritual communion comes from Jesus Himself: "I have given them the glory you gave me, so that they may be one, as we are one, I in them and you in me, that they may be brought to perfection as one" (John 17:23). Christ invites every believer to live unceasingly within the union He has with His Father. The early Church grasped this co-inherence of Christ-in-me and I-in-Christ very vividly: "I have been crucified with Christ; yet I live, no longer I, but Christ lives in me" (Galations 2:19b-20).

Throughout the centuries, saints and theologians connected the graces of Eucharistic communion with the transformation of our desire to be united with Christ. Obstacles to Eucharistic communion with Christ include mortal sin, willful ignorance of the Real Presence of Christ in the Eucharist, or not publicly professing one’s faith consistently in word and example of life. The Church has always held that Christians in these states of sin, ignorance, or inconsistency of faith and life should work with the Church to rectify their situation, inflame their desire to be united and reconciled fully to the Lord, and enter back into Eucharistic communion. To live in Eucharistic communion with Christ requires that our desire for union overflow into and transform our whole life in Christ.

Sacramental Setting

This transformative power of Eucharistic communion helps us grasp what the Church means by sacrament. A Sacrament is a visible sign of an invisible reality. Receiving Eucharist is a visible sign of our invisible union with Christ. Yet this sign of the Eucharist doesn't just signify or imagine a union, it contains and fulfills the union. Sacraments are NOT signs pointing toward something they aren't, like a road sign indicating "30 miles to Cleveland" which only points to Cleveland as an upcoming but unseen landmark...we would be wrong to stop at the sign itself and believe we are actually in Cleveland! Rather, Sacraments are like a dozen roses a husband leaves on the table for his wife: even without a note or his physical presence, the visible sign of flowers actually makes his invisible love present to her as she lives from this love all day. The Sacraments of the Church visibly contain all the different ways God becomes invisibly present as He communicates "I love you” to us.

In the Sacraments, God uses words, gestures and matter to transform people’s relationships with Jesus. But what happens when the Sacraments are not available to us? Does this mean our growth and the transformation of our lives in Christ ceases? On the contrary, because it is God who makes the Sacraments effective in the first place, God is not limited to offering His grace only through the Sacraments, especially in circumstances like we are in where the Sacraments are not able to be received, although they are greatly desired. In these times, we do things like pray an Act of Contrition and make an Act of Spiritual Communion to receive the grace God longs to give us.

Christ is not visibly present to us in this life after His resurrection, but He left us Sacramental signs that communicate His Presence and grace to us. When the ordinary ways of communicating His grace through the Sacraments are unavailable, the Lord can nevertheless use extraordinary means of offering us the graces of communion. For the moment, we are deprived of the visible sign of the Sacraments, but we are never without the invisible grace of communion, forgiveness, and new life which God offers us in our desire to receive these sacred realities.
A Primer on Spiritual Communion

The Wound of Communion

While we are grateful for our spiritual communion with the Lord, we still experience a certain emptiness being without the Sacraments. **We experience this emptiness as an ache to fully possess what we love.** Mary Magdalene offers us a glimpse of what spiritual communion looks like as she experienced this ache of love at the empty tomb. While she is still grieving our Lord’s missing body, He appears to her and calls her by name. Recognizing the one whom she loves, she reaches out to cling to Him, but He tells her, "Stop holding on to me, for I have not yet ascended to the Father" (John 20:17). His seemingly harsh words are actually offering her something better than intermittent physical closeness with Him. He promises to be with her always after He ascends to the Father and has the Holy Spirit descend upon her. Although it was painful for her to experience at the time, her increased ache to be with Him actually opens her heart to receive Him in a truly unprecedented and abundantly personal way!

As Mary Magdalene sustained the ache of keeping her heart open to receiving Christ's Spirit, so do we experience the ache of love as a wound. A wound is an opening of the heart to give and receive love in new and greater ways. This wound of love is painful at times because love calls us to renounce everything that stands in the way of a greater communion and fellowship with God and others. The wound of love gives a necessary but good pain because love is sacrificial. Married couples exemplify this wound as they daily renounce many good, but secondary or personal desires for the sake of the greater spousal desire to sustain their union of matrimony.

**Above all exemplars of love, Christ shows us what this good and sacrificial wound of love looks like as He sustains His ache of love for us unto death on the cross.** His total commitment to reestablish communion with us left Him vulnerable (able-to-be-wounded) to the wounds of our sin. When He was raised from the dead, He appeared to those who wounded Him and reopened their path to communion by forgiving them for the very wounds they had inflicted. It is through the wounds of Christ that reconciliation is possible, as Isaiah writes, "By his wounds we have been healed" (Isaiah 53:5b).

Christ calls us also to be vulnerable (able-to-be-wounded) to His mercy so we may receive that same wound of reconciliation and communion with Him. Like Mary Magdalene deprived of the physical presence of the Lord, **we may experience spiritual communion as a painful wound, but this same wound can expand the capacity of our heart to love Christ and others in even greater ways!**

We benefit from being aware of how our heart aches in this time of separation from each other and the Sacraments. If we remain vulnerable to the ache of love, refusing to run from it or numb it, we can prayerfully invite Jesus to be with us in the apparent emptiness. Think of the painful emptiness of our heart as all the places God will fill! Do we trust God to fill the infinite aches of our heart for love? If so, we should **pray daily to receive the wound of spiritual communion with Him in whichever manner He wishes to give it and whichever way we need to receive it.**

To conclude these reflections, I believe that God is inviting us to use this time to appreciate the gift of the Sacraments and the blessing of spiritual communion. On earth, we greatly benefit from the Sacraments since they are God's privileged way of communicating His love to us. We should also note that in heaven there are no Sacraments since Christ is fully present without any need for sacramental mediation (see 1 John 3:2). **With our desire for the Sacraments increasing in this time, our prayer should focus on a grateful reception of what they offer here on earth, and a hopeful anticipation of the life of heaven to come.**