Send Your Holy Spirit: Reflections on the Theology of Virtual Eucharist in Times of COVID-19

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Reflections on the Theology of Virtual Eucharist in Times of COVID-19

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Resumen
Este artículo explora las cuestiones relativas a la intersección entre espiritualidad, sacramentalidad, proximidad y seguridad sanitaria a la luz de circunstancias extremas como la actual pandemia de COVID-19. Comenzamos rastreando los orígenes del sacramento de la Eucaristía, incluida la agencia eucarística en la vida de la comunidad. La segunda parte del análisis aborda la naturaleza de la comunidad y su relación con la fracción del pan y el compartir el vino. La última parte del artículo se centra en la práctica comunitaria en el contexto de la queerificación de la eclesiología y los ritos a través de dos ejemplos, uno en América Latina y otro en Asia.

Palabras clave: Sacramentalidad, Eucaristía Virtual, Pandemia COVID-19, Comunidades Inclusivas, Liturgia, Sacramentos.

Resumo
Este artigo explora as questões relativas à intersecção da espiritualidade, sacramentalidade, proximidade e segurança sanitária à luz de circunstâncias extremas como a atual pandemia da COVID-19. Começamos traçando as origens do sacramento da Eucaristia, incluindo a agência eucarística na vida da comunidade. A segunda parte da análise discute a natureza da comunidade e como ela se relaciona a partir o pão e compartilhar o vinho. A última parte do artigo centra-se na prática comunitária dentro do contexto da queerificação da eclesiologia e dos ritos através de dois exemplos, um na América Latina e o outro na Ásia.

Abstract
This article explores the issues concerning the intersection of spirituality, sacramentality, proximity, and health safety in light of extreme circumstances such as the current COVID-19 pandemic. We begin by tracing the origins of the sacrament of the Eucharist, including the Eucharistic agency in the lives of the community. The second part of the analysis discusses the nature of community and how it relates to breaking bread and sharing wine. The last part of the article centers on community practice within the context of queering ecclesiology and rites through two examples, one in Latin America and the other in Asia.

Keywords: Sacramentality, Virtual Eucharist, COVID-19 Pandemic, Inclusive Communities, Liturgy, Sacraments.

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Introduction

«Come Holy Spirit, our hearts inspire, liven us with celestial fire.» These are the words used in most of the prayers in ordination services. They charge us to brighten with the fire of Jesus, warm the hearts of those near, and beckon to those far away. The critical element is the action of the Holy Spirit acting upon the ordinate in the community with the longings, desires, and corporeality of those who seek God’s embrace.

Traditional in Christianity, the community of faith —the Christian Church— exists by and through the work of the Holy Spirit. Most often, this happens in local communities as they live in the comfort of the gathering and venture into the world to proclaim the liberating message of Jesus. That also implies that the Holy Spirit infuses and inspires all the practices of faith, especially the sacraments.

Regarding the Eucharist, the celebration of giving and receiving communion is a re-membering in terms of memory and bringing people together as the body of Christ. Traditionally, that has happened with all the community members gathering in the same place. However, what about communities whose members are in fellowship but live at great distances? The realities of the economy, technology, and —in the present— pandemics challenge us to explore if that traditional praxis is the only way of receiving the Eucharist.

In her book *The Eucharist and the Hunger of the World* (1992), Monika K. Hellwig states that the Eucharist is, first and foremost, a food-sharing. Traditionally, this occurs near and far when deacons and others take daily-life food and sanctified elements to those unable to attend the principal celebration. Yet, what about those who can be present in real-time, just not in person, as technology allows us nowadays? Does the central agency of confecting the sacrament rely on the celebrant touching the
elements, observing the people or the Holy Spirit moving through apostolic hands to bless the elements? We contend that it is the entirety of the actions of all involved, regardless of temporal distance.

Our concerns in this article began around the question and potential issues regarding «virtual sacramentality.» How do we continue doing what we do as a faith community in a virtual world? This remains a pressing issue even after more than 2000 years of Christianity. We have always been able to «touch» each other through signs of peace, greetings, and sharing bread and wine. However, can these spiritual practices still be done in virtual space, especially in light of COVID-19? A concurrent issue is whether face-to-face church may become more and more a question of privilege in the future due to the economy and particularities of the daily lives of believers.

While novel for most of the world, online worship did not arise with the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic. It started in the last decades with the evangelical churches broadcasting their regular services. Later, it extended to smaller congregations whose members needed more money to afford the economic means to attend weekly services. Furthermore, the elderly, those facing a terminal illness, or those imprisoned have always been part of the pastoral outreach using various broadcast technologies. However, most of the time, these did not allow real-time interaction.

In an increasingly globalized world, economic limitations have become notorious. Therefore, many churches see fewer and fewer families, couples, friends, or other believers attending the service in person each week. Some communities have resorted to holding monthly gatherings or developing hybrid systems of home churches and regular massive events throughout the year. Yet, the resources available to these communities must include contemplating online services with real-time eucharistic participation.
Economic needs, geographical distance, and social inequalities have trumped everything we assumed normal for the last 2000 years. With the emergence and continuation of the COVID-19 pandemic, churches looked for viable alternatives in the long term to guarantee their pastoral presence to the believers. That included a vast array of resources ranging from the traditional mailed messages and reflections to phone counseling, ministers parading in cars or bicycles through a neighborhood to blessed parishioners from a distance, drive-through communion and blessings, and real-time online worship, which in some cases, included eucharist in both species, bread, and wine. Notably, all these resources were available before the COVID-19 pandemic and yet many times disregarded as «lesser» ways of spiritual practices.

Nevertheless, in the current world where we live out our faith, the disparaging realities of communities add elements to the discussion. To varying degrees, communities worldwide were impacted by the pandemic regarding in-person, real-time worship. While some communities could not gather in person, others could do so with limited numbers. In the latter, the question that emerged related to issues of proximity to prevent disease passing. In light of that situation, most of the communities attempted to enact some protocols for the first stages of the pandemic. Sadly, some communities later completely disregarded the prevention protocols, thus endangering their parishioners and several incidents where those communities experienced high contagion and death. What underlined these different situations was the profound challenge for faith communities to continue expressing their usual spiritual practices.

Given this situation, this article explores the issues concerning the intersection of spirituality, sacramentality, proximity, and health safety in light of extreme circumstances such as the current COVID-19 pandemic. We begin by tracing the origins of the sacrament of the Eucharist, including the Eucharistic agency in the
lives of the community. The second part of the analysis discusses the nature of community and how it relates to breaking bread and sharing wine. The last part of the article centers on community practice within the context of queering ecclesiology and rites through two examples, one in Latin America and the other in Asia.

**A Brief Archeology of the Development of the Eucharist**

From the beginning of human history, food has served as a vehicle for humanity's connection to the divine and among human beings. Religious imagery and iconography preeminently display images of food. For example, whether we take Genesis 3 as a myth or as an interpretation of human errors, food is crucial. Our popular imagery has related the «forbidden fruit» to an apple. This is not a minor aspect. It reveals the connection between humanity and a means of sustenance represented by food.

The history of Christianity includes several moments in which the understanding of the Eucharist became complexified. Given the brevity of this article, we aim to summarize critical moments of that history. That brief archeology does not intend to be paradigmatic or exhaustive. On the contrary, it seeks to highlight pivotal elements to consider when discussing the realization of a sacrament virtually.

**Interpretations of the Hebrew Bible**

Genesis 37 narrates that Joseph went to Egypt to prepare the way for his family to escape the famine that would soon come. Centuries later, the Hebrew people would consume their first Passover meal as they prepared to begin their journey toward freedom. The image of the bread is continued in the desert with the act of God of feeding God’s people with Manna (Exodus 16),
which sustained them along with two other caring elements: the cloud during the day to stop the effects of the sun and the fire at night to light their path. In recalling this situation, Bernhard Blankenhorn (2021) expresses:

[…] we can see that the manna is food for god’s people. This food provides essential sustenance, for without it, the people would die in the desert. This gift is wholly supernatural: it manifests God’s extraordinary power over creation. It is bodily nourishment as well as a sign of spiritual nourishment. Both kinds of food are linked: the word that nourishes spiritually is also at work in creation, as it makes the manna descend. We thus find a manifestation of God’s sovereignty over creation, of his immanence, and his radical transcendence. All of these teachings are essential if one is to contemplate the Eucharist (p. 13).

Both Blankenhorn and Pawel Rytel-Andrianik (2017) coincide in that Christianity has read the Hebrew Bible recount of the Manna as an anticipation of Jesus’ word in the Gospel of John 6.22-59.

On the other hand, the history of the Hebrew people testifies to various ritual meals, either to seal covenants or alliances (Gen 31.54; Ex. 24.3; Tob 7.11-15) or to entertain visitors (Gen 18.3-5; 19.3). However, the Passover Seder is the most important sacred ritual meal (Ex 5.1-3; 10.8-9; 12-13). The book of Leviticus is an elaborate prescriptive source to understand the relationship between Israel and its food in the context of religion and society.

Christians saw in those accounts—the Manna and the Passover Seder—a pre-enunciation of the Eucharist.

**Apostolic times**

For Christians, the Lord’s Supper was instituted in the context of the Passover Seder by Jesus himself. The Easter celebration concentrated on the great moments in which Israel renewed the
covenant (Num 9.1-14; Jos 4.19-5.12; 2° Kings 23.33; 2° Ch 30, 35), reinterpreted by Christians as the formation of the Christian Church. The Christian Scriptures preserve four accounts of the institution of the Eucharist (Mt 26.26-29; Mk 14.22-25; Lk 22.19-20; 1 Cor 11.23-25). While the passage of 1 Corinthians 11.23-25 was written more than twenty years after the Paschal event, the Gospels registered this episode forty to sixty years later, as the first Gospel written was the Gospel of Mark around the year 70 E.C.

The early Christian writings also include elements of the Eucharist in a veiled tone. This is the case in the narration of the disciples walking to Emmaus (Lk 24.30-32). the community that wrote the Gospel of Luke speaks that the disciples. However, they saw Jesus, «something prevented them from realizing who he was» (Lk 24.16), which led to the revelation of Jesus after the instruction. Here we see the development of the catechumenate in the Early Church, where the «mystery» of the Eucharist —bread and wine— could only be accessed after having gone through the catechetical formation —instruction— and the waters of baptism. Remember that the term «mystery» was borrowed from the Hellenistic mystery religions (Nock, 1964). In the pericope, Jesus quotes the Scriptures of the Hebrew Bible because up to that time, there were almost no Christian writings as we know them today.

The pericope of Emmaus is reminiscent of the first Christian liturgies where the Hebrew Bible’s Scriptures were read, bread was broken —Eucharist—and prayers were said. This celebration was held on the first day of the week —Sunday— and generally took place in the early morning before the enslaved people began their household chores. It reminds us of the last supper and the multiplication of the loaves and fishes (Lk 9.16). It is believed that the Acts of the Apostles continue Luke’s gospel, that is, the same community that wrote them. In the Acts of the Apostles, the Eucharist is a characteristic of the Christian community that gathered «to break bread» (Acts 2.42).
For traditional Christian theology, these accounts incorporate three essential or necessary theological aspects drawn both from the Hebrew Scriptures and the emerging Christian doctrine: a) the vicarious atonement (Is 52.13-53.12), b) the covenant (Ex 12-13; Jr 31.31; Is 42.6; 49.8), and c) the messianic blessings (Mt 26.28, Lk 4.17-21; 1 Co 10.16). Nevertheless, for less traditional sectors of Christianity, those accounts reflected foremost the sharing of food and the siblinghood of the community (Hellwig, 1992).

It has been a historical process. There were multiple ways of being a Christian community, from early Christianity and the presiding of bishops, presbyters, or pastors. That was reflected in two aspects. On the one hand, some communities followed the teachings of John, Mary Magdalene, Peter, and Paul, among others. That diversity implied a vast array of practices to reenact the Paschal events. However, Paul’s communities eventually survived and dominated ecclesial structures and doctrine until today. Others were subdued through persecution, death, and the burning of their Scriptures, such as the case of the Gnostic communities and their writings. Today, we have the privileged place of Pauline, Roman, and Neoplatonic Christianity, which differs from other types of Christianity that populated the first-century C.E. (Bainton, 1950).

On the other hand, there were unequal dynamics to access the Supper. In 1 Corinthians 11.21, Paul alerts the Christian community of the excess food and drink while others go home hungry. One of the oldest non-Scriptural Christian writings is the Didache—or Teachings of the Apostles—dating from the beginning of the second century C.E. In chapter 9, it follows Pauline’s instructions by also adding that everyone should eat sufficiently, yet gives priority to the spiritual meaning of the ritual: «And no one shall eat or drink from your eucharist except those who are baptized in the Lord’s name, for the Lord has also spoken about this: “Do not give what is holy to dogs” (Jefferd, 2013: 36).
Patristic Period

It was in the third century C.E. that the word *Sacramentum* entered Christianity (James, 2022). The word neither exists in the gospels nor is Christian in origin. It is neither Greek nor Aramaic; it is Latin. The word *Sacramentum* has roots in the Roman Legal Code. It speaks of an oath pledge either to the gods (religious), the judge (legal), the emperor or consul (political-military), or one’s neighbor (social). It was created by Emperor Augustus initially for the military (Le Bohec, 2004). That speaks of the daily life of social relations. When Christianity became the religion of the state, Roman vocabulary permeated Christian theological discourse, e.g., basileia/basilica, Mitra, among others. Then, *Sacramentum* —«to make something sacred»— entered Christianity, not without challenges for Christians serving in the military, as noted by Pliny (Kraemer, 1934; Nock, 1952).

During this time —together with Baptism and Confirmation—the Eucharist integrated into what is known as «the sacraments of Christian initiation.» In other words, they introduced the newly converted to the life and beliefs of Christianity. Initially, the catechumen would initiate the formal belonging to the community by accessing baptism and the «sealing of the Holy Spirit,» which later became a separate rite known as Confirmation. That led them to access the Eucharist (Bainton, 1950).

On the one hand, we find a pastoral emphasis in patristic writings, especially in the works of Ambrose, bishop of Milan. He wrote two treatises *De Sacramentis* —written in 861 C.E.— and *De Mysteriis* —written in 387 C.E.— in which he laid his thought and teaching on the topic, especially the vocabulary of sacramentality (Mazza, 1989: 14). In both treatises Ambrose prefigures what in Medieval times would become «transubstantiation» through the hand of scholasticism.
In *De Sacramentis* 4:V.21-23, Ambrose is evident that the «mystery» of the «sacrament» is only possible through the word of Christ and the action of the Holy Spirit when the presider invokes the consecration:

Wilt thou know that it is consecrated by heavenly words? Hear what the words are. The priest speaks. “Make for us,” he says, “this oblation approved, ratified, reasonable, acceptable, seeing that it is the figure of the body and blood of our Lord Jesus Christ, who the day before he suffered *took bread* in his holy hands, and *looked up to heaven* to thee, holy Father, almighty, everlasting God, and *giving thanks, he blessed, brake, and* having broken, delivered it to his apostles and *to his disciples, saying, Take, and eat ye all of this; for this is my body, which shall be broken for many*. Likewise also *after supper*, the day before he suffered, he *took the cup, looked up to heaven* to thee, holy Father, almighty, everlasting God, and *giving thanks*, blessed it and delivered it to his apostles and to his disciples, *saying, Take, and drink ye all of this; for this is my blood.*” Observe all those expressions. Those words are the Evangelists’ up to *Take*, whether the body or the blood. After that they are the words of Christ; *Take, and drink ye all of this; for this is my blood.* And observe them in detail. *Who the day before he suffered*, he says, *in his holy hands took bread*. Before it is consecrated, it is bread, but when the words of Christ have been added, it is the body of Christ (pp. 113-114, emphasis in the original).

In *De Mysteriis* IX.58, Ambrose (1919) states:

[…] Christ is in that sacrament, because it is the body of Christ; therefore, it is not bodily food, but spiritual. Whence also the Apostle says of the type of it that *our fathers ate spiritual meat, and drank spiritual drink*. For the body of God is a spiritual body; the body of Christ is the body of a divine Spirit, because Christ is Spirit […] (p. 72).
That work resembles Cyril of Jerusalem’s *Catecheses Mystagogicae* (Beck, 2017: 10).

**Three Paradigms for Understanding the Eucharist**

**Scholastic Theology and Transubstantiation**

From scholastic theology —supported by the exegetical and dogmatic reflections formulated by Augustine, Bishop of Hippo, against the Pelagians and Donatists in the fourth century— the entire doctrinal content on the sacraments begins to be exposed in the form of theological treatises. The scholastic authors who contributed most to elaborating a theology on the sacraments were Berengarius of Tours, Peter Abelard, Hugo of St. Victor, the *Summa Sententiarum*, Peter Lombard, and Thomas Aquinas in the period between 1080 to 1220 C.E. (Macy, 1984).

All these authors based their work on the early eucharistic thought of Abbot Paschasius Radbertus, as Gary Macy (1984) affirms: «The theology of the Eucharist developed by Paschasius and handed on by the theologians of the tenth and eleventh centuries found its fullest development among the writers of the late eleventh and early twelfth centuries» (p. 44).

It is noteworthy that the position of Paschasius won over the standpoint of his counterpart Ratramnus, Abbot of Corbie, thus dominating the eucharistic theology in the Medieval Age. On this exchange, Edward J. Kilmartin (2004) states:

The protagonists of this ninth-century exchange were the Abbot Paschasius Radbertus (d. 851 or 860), who wrote *De corpora et sanguine Domini*, and Ratrarmnus (d. 868), who wrote a tract with the same title on the basis of some questions addressed to him by the Emperor Charles the Bald and occasioned by the treatise of Paschasius. In general,
Paschiasius represents the more “realistic” line of thinking that eventually dominated in medieval theology, and Ratramnus the more symbolic or spiritualistic line of thinking which eventually suffered a great setback with the eleventh-century condemnations of Berenguer of Tours (p. 82).

Scholastic thought has significantly impacted Christian theology, and the doctrine of the «real presence» of Christ in the Eucharist is one such example. This theological concept goes beyond a mere symbolic or metaphorical interpretation of the sacrament, emphasizing the authentic, genuine, and substantial presence of Christ in the elements of the Eucharist instead. This understanding gained greater prominence in the thirteenth century with the acceptance of Aristotelian metaphysics, which offered a framework for understanding the mechanics of this presence. The doctrine of real presence remains an essential aspect of Catholic theology and is a subject of ongoing discussion and debate among Christian scholars and theologians.

Consequently, a philosophical elaboration in line with that metaphysics was developed, founding its classic formulation in the teaching of Thomas Aquinas. The doctrine of «transubstantiation» was, in fact, finally developed by Thomas Aquinas in the thirteenth century. In his Summa Theologiae III.73.5, Aquinas (1914) states: «[F]or Christ is Himself contained in the Eucharist sacramentally. Consequently, when Christ was going to leave His disciples in His proper species, He left Himself with them under the sacramental species» (p. 241).

Therefore, the doctrine of transubstantiation became the theological teaching in the West in the Medieval Age. Based on John 6, that doctrine understands that during the Mass —at the consecration— the elements of the Eucharist —bread and wine— are transformed into the actual body and blood of Jesus.
Therefore, they are no longer bread and wine but only retain their appearance of bread and wine.

That doctrine was confirmed in the Roman Catholic Church’s Council of Trent as the only interpretation for that church (Ives, 1989b). The Roman Magisterium defines in the Council of Trent the royal presence (canon 1), the memorial and announcement of his death (canon 2), the presence of the body, blood, soul, and divinity of Christ after the consecration under the guise of bread and wine (canon 3). The other sacraments have the virtue of sanctifying, but the Eucharist is the basis of all holiness. Through the consecration, the conversion of all the substance of bread into the one of the body and all the substance of wine into the substance one of the blood of Christ takes place (canon 4) (Waterworth, 1848; Schroeder, 1941).

**Orthodox Churches**

On the other hand, «real presence» is also the teaching of the Orthodox Churches, although the term «transubstantiation» may be problematic. Based on the work of Kallistos (Timothy) Ware (1963: 290-291), Brad Harper and Paul Louis Metzger (2009) state that:

> While the Orthodox Church has often employed the term *transubstantiation*, Kallistos Ware claims the term “enjoys no unique or decisive authority” in the Orthodox Church. Nor does its use in the Orthodox Church “commit theologians to the acceptance of Aristotelian philosophical concepts” (as it has in the Roman Catholic Church). Ware also notes that while the Orthodox have always “insisted on the *reality* of the change” from bread and wine into the body and the blood of Christ at the consecration of the elements, the Orthodox have “never attempted to explain the *manner* of the change” (p. 312, note 32; emphasis in the original).
The Roman Catholic Church holds that the change of substance occurs «in a way surpassing understanding» [CCC #1333] during the words of the institution of consecration in the *Epiklesis* or invocation of the Holy Spirit [CCC #1413] (RCC, 1994: 300, 318). The Orthodox Churches believe that the transformation occurs between the *Proskomedia* —or the Liturgy of Preparation before the Divine Liturgy— and the *Epiklesis* (Ware, 1963: 290-291).

**Martin Luther and Consubstantiation**

The Protestant Reformation in the sixteenth century brought forth two other different understandings of the mystery of the Eucharist that challenged the doctrine of transubstantiation. Martin Luther and other reformers produced the first doctrine in the sixteenth century. They presented different interpretations and disagreements with the doctrine of transubstantiation.

Accordingly, Martin Luther spoke of «consubstantiation,» that Christ is present in, with, and under the elements. Luther’s position was not new, as William of Ockham had affirmed the idea of consubstantiation before him (Ives, 1989a). His position was not a denial of the real presence of Christ in the Eucharist, but he questioned the miraculous transformation. In this regard, Baiton (1958) summarizes the position of Luther:

Luther denied that human’s word could bring about any such miracle, though he did not deny the real and even physical presence of Dios in the sacrament. His conviction was that matter and spirit are not antithetical. God created the matter, is permeated by God, and is a suitable vehicle for communicating the divine. God is omnipresent throughout the physical world, and Christ, as God, is also omnipresent; if we do not perceive his presence, this is because our eyes are made insensible. God is an occult God, who has been pleased to make himself known in three places: in the flesh.
of Christ, in the word contained in the Bible, and in the elements of the sacrament (pp. 56-57).

On the other hand, the two verses usually cited to justify both the transubstantiation and consubstantiation position are the same. On the one hand, we read in 1 Corinthians 10.16: «The cup of blessing that we bless, is it not a sharing in the blood of Christ? The bread that we break, is it not a sharing in the body of Christ?» (NRSV). On the other hand, Paul in 1 Corinthians 11.27-29 states:

> Whoever, therefore, eats the bread or drinks the cup of the Lord in an unworthy manner will be answerable for the body and blood of the Lord. Examine yourselves, and only then eat of the bread and drink of the cup. For all who eat and drink without discerning the body eat and drink judgment against themselves (NRSV).

Unsurprisingly, they can be interpreted either way. There was no philosophical, doctrinal position regarding the Eucharist when Paul wrote. In this regard, Nock (1964) states:

> When considering the early development and interpretation of baptism and the Eucharist we have to put aside certain concepts which are so familiar that we take them for granted and assume that they have always been current; we have also to recapture one concept which is for us remote. On the one hand we have all grown up with the category of sacraments as things of a specific kind; we are all aware of the centuries of controversy about their meaning and number. There was no such category in the first century of our era and even in the fifth century what we call sacraments were not set sharply apart from other aspects of the Christian revelation (p. 126).

Thus, we must remember that Luther’s proposal for understanding the Eucharist is a perspective that one can choose
either to ascribe or not. Still, in any way, it should cloud the sacrament’s effectiveness in the lives of the believers.

Finally, it is noteworthy that —according to Blankenhorn (2021: 180)—, the position of Luther is similar to that of Sergius Nikolaevich Bulgakov (1997), a Russian Orthodox theologian who died in Paris in 1944. The importance of this is how dynamic and permeable the understanding of the mystery of the sacraments is in Christianity.

**Ulrich Zwingli and Dynamic Presence**

Ulrich Zwingli brought forth the second doctrine from the Reformation. If for the Medieval Scholastics —especially Aquinas— and Luther, the issue was how the presence of Christ manifests in the sacrament, for Zwingli, there is no such consideration.

According to his doctrine, he denied any real connection between the bread and wine and the body and blood of Christ, stating that in the celebration of the Eucharist —which reminds the faithful of the words and work of the Lord— Christ is with them by the power of the Holy Spirit. He considered that the bread and the wine remember the Last Supper, but both elements have no substance change. Traditionally, this is known in Christianity as «dynamic presence,» which brings forth a symbolic tone. In other words, the Eucharist is not a «sacrifice» but a «memorial» by highlighting Jesus’ words: «Do this in remembrance of me» (Luke 22.19).

Zwingli wrote a treatise called «On the Lord’s Supper» in 1526, in which he clearly expressed his understanding of the words of Jesus as per the witness of the Gospels:

> In the words: “This is my body,” the word “this” means the bread, and the word “body” the body which is put to death for us. Therefore the word “is” cannot be taken literally, for the bread is not the body and cannot be . . . “This is my
body,” means, “The bread signifies my body,” or “is a figure of my body” (Bromiley, 1953: 225).

The position of Zwingli is not without logic. For him, the fact that Medieval Christianity would affirm that the bread and the wine transform was against Jesus’ command. Therefore, in the treatise, he establishes the base for his understanding of the Lord’s Supper:

There can be no doubt that only the spirit can give life to the soul. For how could the physical flesh either nourish or give life to the soul? . . . with his own words Christ teaches us that everything which he says concerning the eating of flesh or bread has to be understood in terms of believing […]. This passage tells us that the carnal eating of Christ’s flesh and blood profiteth nothing, and you have introduced such a carnal eating into the sacrament […] (Bromiley, 1953: 206-207, 210-211).

Zwingli’s doctrine was not well-received by Luther and other reformers. Luther wrote a treatise called Confession Concerning Christ’s Supper in 1528, where he refutes Zwingli’s position:

[S]ince we are confronted by God’s words, “This is my body” – distinct, clear, common, definite words, which certainly are no trope, either in Scripture or in any language – we must embrace them with faith […] not as hairsplitting sophistry dictates but as God says them for us, we must repeat these words after him and hold to them (cited in Althaus, 1966: 390).

Despite the refutation of Luther, other reformers and their congregations upheld Zwingli’s interpretation, and it constitutes the bases for the modern understanding of the Lord’s supper among the churches that adhere to the Reformed tradition —as
per the teachings of John Calvin—and, later, evangelical and pentecostal churches.

The Sacrament of the Eucharist

What Constitutes the Sacrament of the Eucharist?

Given the development of 2000 years, there is no single understanding regarding what constitutes the sacrament of the Eucharist. As aforementioned, we have three positions according to different Christian traditions: transubstantiation, consubstantiation, and dynamic presence. Thus, the Eucharist involves laying hands, bread, wine, invoking the Holy Spirit, and consecrating words.

However, is the confection of the sacrament and the celebration of communion of the Eucharist an action done exclusively by the priest? The answer is «no.» Whoever ministers this sacrament could be a bishop, a priest or presbyter, a pastor, or a minister designated to administer the sacrament extraordinarily, exercising the universal priesthood of all believers. The universal priesthood through baptism belongs to all the people of God (Col 2.12; 3.1) to offer spiritual sacrifices (1 Pe 2.5; cf. Rom 12.1, 15.16; 1 Cor 6.15,19; Phil 2.17, 4.18; Heb 13.15-16; Rev 14.4). It is natural since our High Priest, Jesus Christ, has given us access to grace and the divine presence (Heb 10.19-22). Therefore, the universal priesthood of all believers is a function of our quality as daughters and sons of God.

The ecclesiastical leadership has the task of detecting and organizing these gifts to benefit the Christian Church and society. Because of this, a Bishop, as «administrator» and «overseer» of the gifts of individuals within the Communities of faith, recognizes
and institutes both ordained and lay persons to exercise these ministries.

Given the context of the universal priesthood, specific words would only make the rite valid if one were included. Instead, a Eucharistic celebration is the totality of the service, the gathering, the remembering, the consumption, and the going forth that are all necessary for the actions of the Eucharistic celebration to be realized in the life of the people and of the Christian Church.

Do people similarly understand «sacramentality» or the «mystery of the sacraments»? The answer to this question is also a «no.» For most people, the «bread and wine» remain essentially the same after the consecration. While at various times, there is pause regarding the «mystery» tied to the dogmatics of the Eucharist in that community, the simple fact that they can participate in the pastoral benefit. They do not need one matter's magical, alchemical transformation into another to secure the «holy.»

While recognizing and understanding the Roman Catholic position on the sacraments, we must also state that its conception of the Eucharist is not the normative statement for all Christianity. To claim this would be a lie saying that one person’s perspective should be applied to all. We have to question the Roman Catholic Church’s (RCC) definition, especially over those who are not or may never want to be Roman Catholic. Thousands of Christians do not uphold the principle of transubstantiation. We are discussing multiple ways of engaging the entire breadth of the faith tradition, which should not be under Roman Catholicism’s purview as exclusive property (Córdova Quero, 2018).

Anyone can preside at communion within more «horizontal denominations,» such as Quakers, Brethren, or Pentecostal churches. One need not be ordained. Recalling the recent events of the COVID pandemic, the individuals and families belonging to
these Christian traditions, which were sheltering in place, could celebrate communion without the need for a minister.

On the contrary, more hierarchical churches such as the Roman Catholic Church, the Orthodox Churches, or the Anglican/Episcopal churches kept their parishioners without the sacraments because one needs an ordained priest to do that. This situation has been resolved among horizontal churches for more than 500 years! Anyone can preside because to do so upholds the Memorial of the body and blood of Jesus. Contextual necessity gives birth to theological creativity. We need to acknowledge the wisdom of these congregations. There are so many dynamics in Christianity that separate «valid» from «invalid,» the «sacramental» from the «non-sacramental.» Doing so exposes the arrogance of denominations claiming only one way of doing sacramental theology or living out faith practices.

**What are community and sacramentality?**

Amid the pandemic —but not exclusively— many people felt both desolate and cut off because of their inability to participate in Eucharistic celebrations. After the in-shelter periods, many believers were unsure whether to return to the in-site church services. We have to address this new reality of our world. The issue will remain for a long time, perhaps even beyond the prolonged effects of the pandemic. Concurrently, the long-term effects of economic concerns on social relationships also define how we relate, socialize, and even have fun. Christian churches are not exceptions to that situation. Therefore, the question of how to be a community and to share sacramentality beyond all the roadblocks that our current times challenge us is vital.

During the peak of the COVID-19 pandemic, several churches used the prayer of Saint Alphonsus Liguori —who lived between 1696 and 1787— to hold what they have labeled as «Spiritual...
Communion.» That prayer was shared via internet broadcasts of services, and it reads as:

My Jesus, I believe You are present in the Most Holy Sacrament.
I love You above all things,
and I desire to receive You into my soul.
Since I cannot at this moment receive You sacramentally,
come at least spiritually into my heart.
I embrace You as if You were already there,
and I unite myself wholly to You.
Never permit me to be separated from You (Vatican News, 2017-2022)

While this spiritual communion prayer is Roman Catholic in its origin, many Episcopal and Lutheran churches used it during the pandemic. The question for this sector of Christianity at the time of the pandemic was whether it was a pastoral response to broadcast from a central place or to empower believers to participate in the stewardship of sacred symbols actively.

Furthermore, «Spiritual Communion» is compelling and makes us wonder about the difference between that and a virtual Eucharist. It leads us to question: How do we «do» church and theology in a way that reflects the realities of these times? What is community? Do we need to encounter each other face-to-face? Do we need to be in the same place? Do we need to touch? These questions are central to our current semeia —the signs of the times — and kept churches wondering if we can worship «without» bodies physically present. Institutional churches are always behind when it comes to lived realities. Queer folks solved that problem at least two decades ago with online sex and dating!

Starting in 2020, closeness and distance have been the key topics confronting Christian churches amidst this pandemic for the last three years. However, it is not the only time that distance is faced. There are communities of believers who are widely dispersed in terms of geographic location. Yet, we believe that the temporal boundaries are broken through the incarnation of Jesus
and revelation as Christ. In that case, distance, as well as time, are not barriers to the celebration. Traditionally, we see this through the reserved sacrament, for example.

**Queering Sacraments and the Eucharist**

Jesus never instituted the sacrament of the Eucharist. He held a dinner. The Last Supper was, indeed, a ceremonial meal. However, over the centuries, that meal became theologized and highly contested while weaponized for the exclusion and censoring of some believers, especially queer believers. The sacramentalization of the Eucharist came with a negative side.

Given that context, several questions come to mind: How do we understand it from a queer perspective when discussing Sacramentum? What would Jesus say about this? Or would he even worry about it? The COVID-19 pandemic has also provoked questions about naturalized ways of being a church. In this time of the pandemic, we faced the grave challenge of discerning how a community receives communion and in what ways the so-called «traditional» practices of the church are helpful. First, Who can say that «consecrating» bread and wine over the internet is not a sacrament? Questioning authority is part of queering — to imagine how to be followers of Jesus in the twenty-first century. New contexts demand new structures.

For many queer theologians and ministers in the Global South, the dilemma is presented in the following question: Do we need to support the same bricks piled atop over the centuries to exclude us? Many have felt the need to return to the first century, to the very mortar by which early Christians built the church(es). Currently, the internet grounds synchronicity in a way that questions our perception and how we conceive our relationality. In our current time, we experience this insight through technology. When we Zoom or Facetime, we honor shared time, our well-
being, the health of families, and our beloved ones; we celebrate the larger communities we are part of (Córdova Quero and Campos, 2020).

This section presents one example for each region: Asia and Latin America.

**Inclusive Churches in Latin America: Virtual Sacramentality**

If faith communities influence the values and ideologies of those who join them (Yancey, 1999), many inclusive churches in the Global South enhance their role as a bridging organization because there are different visions of how to apply the Christian ethic found in Christian churches — especially as it relates to gender-diverse people—many of them go beyond socially confined boundaries to promote unity.

To this end, these churches work for the understanding of people because they deliberately adopt an integrative rather than a divisive role, perhaps as a lesson learned from the social ostracism to which people of gender diversity are condemned in many societies (Córdova Quero, Serna Segura, and Aquino, 2021). Many inclusive churches in Latin America construct a sense of integration from Christian social-ethical codes that shape ways of thinking about the experience with «other people» but do not control the encounters that occur in everyday life or impose a way of thinking.

As religious organizations, the principles of many inclusive churches are based on an approach that encourages inclusiveness and provides a symbolic language that embodies what it means to be a family. As such, they tend to be more inclusive of dialogue that meets the challenges of new ideas and viewpoints than their conservative counterparts. They are not a monolithic construct,
but they acknowledge their disagreements and find commonalities to foster unity.

Faith communities influence how people experience identity, friendship, social networks, racial and ethnic attitudes, and even social inequality (Edwards et al., 213: 212). Inclusive churches may even be unconventional multi-ethnic faith communities or communities where social class or spiritual background differences are dissimilar and often contradictory. However, they all experience dynamic behavioral changes due to their role in supporting people outside the Christian mainstream, including refugees, unemployed people, single mothers, foreigners, and other subaltern groups beyond sexual orientation or gender. As we have previously stated, it is a mistake to view an inclusive church as synonymous with a «gay ghetto.»

Reviewing the characteristics of inclusive churches as diverse faith communities helps to strengthen joint actions and collaborative efforts. It demonstrates the viability of existing spaces with self-informed people who resist following externally imposed meanings. Each inclusive church built in the last decades predicts the possibility of other types of organizations in which its members will bring their previous experiences of diversity to create new understanding and reach interconnectedness to transform traditional courses of action.

Given that situation, inclusive churches moved to be one of the first to respond positively and creatively to the realities of the pastoral needs of the believers amidst the COVID-19 pandemic. Reverends Hugo Córdova Quero, Alan Robert Young, David de Jesús de Pascual, and Keilor López Rodríguez (2020) composed Eucharistic and post-communion prayers to address the virtual consecration of wine and bread specifically. Several churches benefited from that resource.
To write those Eucharistic prayers, they looked back to the different traditions of Christianity. They honored and acknowledged the various elements commonly present in traditional Eucharistic prayers. However, they intentionally added the features of virtuality and the internet. They follow the same trend as other churches in other parts of the world.

Acknowledging that there are other sacramental ways than the traditional —including the Sunday Eucharist— this church responded to their parishioners with pastoral care and virtual presence. Even without the physical sharing of bread and wine, parishioners in different parts of Latin America enjoyed the Liturgy of the Word and the Liturgy of the Eucharist together. Everyone attending had a small cup of wine or juice and a piece of bread or cookie. At the time of the consecration, the presiding asked all those gathered virtually to lift the elements, and then they would share them simultaneously. The shared time enfleshed the experience of being as close as they could in this situation.

Those Sunday moments made the clergy in that denomination reflect on theology and respond to the needs of the people. It is for those people on the other side of the screen who would sit alone at home, with a piece of bread and a cup of wine, that this church acted quickly to remain as close as possible to parishioners and provide a virtual space for them also to encounter the sacrament. That is also *eucharistos* — a thanksgiving for our life and our ability to connect even across distance limits.

In the church tradition, *epiklesis* —the invocation for descending the Holy Spirit— sacramentalizes the matter. Córdova Quero et al. (2020) wrote new consecration prayers, explicitly naming the «internet» as the framework through which they (re)encountered the sacred. Probably, that is the first time that Eucharistic prayers in the world mention this technology.
Following is the prayer of consecration of bread as it appears in the liturgy written by Córdova Quero et al. (2020):

Eucharist

Communion of Bread

M[inister]: God of the universe, this bread that we present to you is the fruit of the labor of many of your children. Our brothers and sisters in the fields cultivated the earth, and with their hard work, the wheat grew. Other brothers and sisters in the city transformed it into bread. On the night before his death, Jesus took bread and, after giving thanks, shared it with his friends, saying that it was his body given for our salvation. We, too, have received bread through your generosity, and now we bring it to you as our bread of life. Bless it wherever this community of yours that praises you on earth is scattered in the diaspora during this time of crisis. Send your Holy Spirit across the distance upon each piece of bread that, together in your presence, may be the spiritual nourishment that nourishes our lives at all times and in all places.

C[ommunity]: Amen

M: The bread of blessing we share is the communion in the Body of Jesus.

C: Blessed are you forever, O God.

Communal sharing of the bread (emphasis on the original).

The background of this prayer is the Eucharistic prayers found in the ancient document of Didache or The Teaching of the Twelve Apostles (Jefford, 2013). However, the theology in this prayer points to the diaspora of believers, thus recognizing the crucial moment lived by churches in the face of the COVID-19 pandemic. The prayer of consecration of Wine follows a similar conception:

Communion of Wine

M: God of the universe, this wine that we present to you is the fruit of the vine and the work of your children, who season after season cultivate the earth in the fields. Our
brothers and sisters also transformed the grapes into wine for our joy. We remember when, after supper, Jesus took the cup of wine and, after giving thanks, passed it to his friends, saying that it was the cup of the new covenant; his blood poured out for them and us for our forgiveness. We, who have received the wine through your generosity, now bring it to you as our drink of salvation. Bless it wherever this praising community of yours on earth is scattered in the diaspora during this time of crisis. Send across the distance your Holy Spirit upon each cup that the wine in all of them gathered in your presence may be, at all times and in all places, the heavenly drink that satiates our lives.

C: Amen
M: The cup of blessing we share is the communion in the Blood of Christ.
C: Blessed are you forever, O God.

Communal sharing of the wine (Córdova Quero et al., 2020; emphasis on the original).

Sharing bread and wine in the virtual space also indicates the believers’ need to uphold their faith in times of need. While we use the word virtual, virtuality as a description is incomplete. For them, «breaking bread» and «sharing the wine» was as much the act of learning as it is a gesture of thanksgiving, which is also expressed in the post-communion prayer:

Post-communion Prayer
M: Just as the seeds scattered over the fields and hills bore fruit and yielded harvests of wheat and grapes, human labor brought them together again in the elements of bread and wine. Today in times of diaspora and dispersion, your children have gathered at their tables with bread and wine so that we may be in your presence one community under your name. We long and pray that, despite the distance, your company may be with us always. Give us now your blessing so that gathered at a distance through this internet technology, we may be one community gathered under your
love through the work of your Holy Spirit. In this communion, we denounce the unjust death of Jesus on the cross, proclaim the victory of his resurrection, and await his return to be one body and one spirit in his name.

**C:** Through your Holy Spirit, may we be on earth, even at a distance from one another, one body where you dwell forever, O God! Amen (Córdova Quero et al., 2020; emphasis on the original).

Now that so much of the world has access to real-time conversation through technology, Christianity faces a challenge. One of the issues that the COVID-19 pandemic brought forth was the reality and the need to celebrate the Eucharist from a distance, with the convergence being not in a church, chapel, or home exactly, but online. Churches can no longer engage their ministry as a monolithic community with uniform rituals, a particular time and space for gathering, and one worldview. If we take context seriously, dismissing the pastoral care that inclusive churches did during the pandemic is unjust.

Mainstream denominations imposed boundaries and limitations to establish a clear church identity. They failed. Often they left their parishioners with limitations and unresolved pastoral needs. They did not uphold serving the believers but asked them to serve tradition and customs. That statement also reinforces an ecclesiological insight proposed by protestant liberation theologian José Míguez Bonino (2003), who always said that the Christian Church exists to be the «salt of the earth.» The purpose of gathering to pray one day a week —Sunday— is not to honor «Sunday» itself but to be a church for the rest of the week. Marginalized and disenfranchised communities —as those served by inclusive churches— soon revealed their creativity to respond pastorally to the needs of the believers, and they brilliantly did over the internet!
On the other hand, a Brazilian scholar and minister, Ana Ester Pádua Freire (2021), narrated in «Dirty Martini: Toasting with Marcella Althaus-Reid,» another example. Seeking to understand how Althaus-Readian theology continues to live not only in theory, Pádua Freire also finds practical spaces of decolonial resistance in Latin America. She centers on the example of MCC Belo Horizonte to demonstrate how the theory of Althaus-Reid can be captured in liturgical rites and have a transforming impact on those engaged in the practice:

Informally, the liturgy began with the reading of a text while the members and visitors ate and drank. A ministry leader explained that the idea of the bar was because, for them, the first “MCC Queer” had happened outside the church, at a meeting in a bar. [...] A church member identified as a non-binary person led the sermon and stood out at the time as leader of the queer ministry. [...] After this moment of reflection, everyone present was invited to dance. After the dance, the leaders explained that there would be no Holy Supper, since it had already happened there, at the tables—with peanuts and beer—while the service was taking place (pp. 14, 15).

Pádua Freire offers this example as a way to bring the church to the people rather than asking the people to go to the church. Queering ecclesiology and rites means creatively caring for the pastoral needs of believers where they are. Conservative sectors of Christianity would interpret that as a distorting of their power as institutions. However, Pádua Freire concludes that within an environment rich in sense and full of tensions, the proposal of an innovative queer worship service fostered in that community the emergence of a queer ministry—the «MCC Queer»—and created a new liturgical and symbolic dynamic. Rather than destroying the church, that creativity saved it!
Furthermore, during the COVID-19 pandemic, Pádua Freire (2022) narrates how she was asked to pay attention to the needs of queer believers who have no other means of reaching out except through the Internet:

The church’s move to the virtual environment created fissures in the liturgies now populated by individuals generally ignored by churches, no matter how inclusive and progressive they claim to be. Many churches that had inclusive discourses avoided placing sex-gender-divergent people in their pulpits. Still, it seemed that virtuality created a sense of awareness of the immateriality of bodies. That allowed people —until then, strangers to those environments — to get closer. I believe that connectivity platforms started to give a sense of protection to those who wanted to get closer but were afraid of our dissident bodies. The opportunity was there, and I could not miss it (p. 85).

Pádua Freire’s response in his ministry to provide spiritual and emotional care to people was a logical consequence of his commitment to all people for whom God also cares. That pastoral care is given within the concert of actions and decisions of forces of power that tend to promote a daily life often disconnected from what we need for our everyday life to be dignified. The cura pastoralis, the pastoral care of all people and our environment, is the visible commitment form. In doing this, that is, in acting beyond individualism, there is an openness to new ways of living the faith. Pádua Freire (2022) concludes: «My proposal in this series is to join art with biblical verses. I use images considered indecent together with biblical verses creating a hermeneutic game of destabilization» (p. 86).

Within Christianity, to be a believer is to recognize Jesus as God and to act the way Jesus did. That implies sharing bread with those who have none or breaking religious or legal precepts that result in injustice to people. All contextual and liberationist
theologies try to change traditional theology to recover the theological spirit closer to everyday life. In this sense, the examples of the Eucharistic prayers by Córdova Quero et al. (2020) and the Pádua Freire (2022), reimagining the Eucharist, liturgy, and spiritual care, promote a new spirituality. This leads to questioning supposedly immovable traditions that distort people from God’s love. Inclusive communities in Latin America have taken the pastoral needs of the people seriously rather than the rigid precepts of tradition.

**Queer Ministries in Asia: Innovative Sacramentality**

The colonial effects of cis-heteronormative Christianity in Asia are still present. It is a pervasive feature, damaging the lives of countless queer individuals and communities. Furthermore, cis-heteronormative religious leaders and right-wing politicians from the West use this as a «discursive weapon» to advance their discriminatory agendas beyond the confines of the Western world. That is one of the most dangerous situations and constitutes a powerful ideological device to continue the oppression of queer individuals and communities in the continent.

As in the case of Latin America, Africa, and Oceania, the hand of the colonizer in Asia was firm in destroying as much of the local cultures as possible to «civilize» them, a damage that now is almost impossible to undo. Now it is the same West that makes the oppressed the «guilty one» of the oppression that the West has produced by labeling the non-West as a backlash, conservative, or cis-heteronormative. Slavoj Žižek (1998) talks about the discursive transferring of guilt from oppressor to oppressed to further justify its oppression of the oppressed. The same dynamic is happening with the dicta of cis-heteronormativity in Asia. A regrettable situation.
Unfortunately, mainstream protestant denominations—although progressive in the West—may not be so in Asia. The same happens with the Roman Catholic Church or the Anglican Church. In light of that situation, many religious leaders have taken the cudgel in crafting rituals that are attuned to the needs and sensibilities of the community of queer believers, planting small churches and growing spiritual communities. Ultimately, they challenge mainstream Christianity regarding how it expresses religious values. These religious leaders do so in the face of often extreme opposition, rejection, and even hatred. At this point, we would like to recall the work of two of those religious leaders. During the COVID-19 pandemic, they resorted to different means of interaction and innovated new ways to understand sacramentality.

On the one hand, Hongkonese queer theologian Lai-Shan Yip founded Compassion, a Roman Catholic lay queer ministry. Compassion is a small group; comprising around ten members from their late twenties to early forties. Yip points out mainly the difficulty of Roman Catholicism in dealing with queer issues or with gender, sexuality, bodies, and desire in general. Although the Roman Catholic catechism welcomes «homosexual» people [CCC #2358](RCC, 1994: 505), the reality is that the «homosexual» people that this church wants to admit are almost «invisible.» Although Yip is fearless in doing this work, she struggles terribly with the Roman Catholic Diocese in Hong Kong.

It is noteworthy that female «homosexuality» has indeed been more «invisibilized» than male «homosexuality» because women were traditionally confined to specific spaces. In contrast, males have «public» duties such as work, military service, marriage to continue the family, and the like. Although fictitious, that cis-heterosexual division of labor has been crucial in visualizing male same-sex relations. In a cis-hetero-patriarchal system, diminishing the «power» of men—by not fulfilling the gender-role expectations of society—has been one of the reasons why male homoeroticism
became the target of so much oppression. That seems not to be the case for female homoeroticism. Hong Kong Roman Catholicism is no exception to this protracted situation. All that context begs—as a deep-seated background—the question about the bodies. It is vital to bring this into theological reflection and pastoral praxis.

Without abandoning their pertinence to the Roman Catholic tradition, Yip focuses on engaging with church members as friends in liberating relations with each other (Stuart, 1995). Inspired by the liberation movements, she embarks on queering the church space by having members practice mindful listening like praying with the Divine, form dialogue on taboo topics, and opening the bounds of what it means to «love our neighbor» and move beyond a welcome. In terms of liturgy and the sacraments, she narrates the mass celebrated for the first anniversary of her ministry:

While the official mass has to be celebrated by a priest, we did not ask any priest to be the celebrant for our first-anniversary celebration. We did not intend to have a regular mass as well. We have only selected some parts from the mass to devise our first-anniversary celebration. Each of us led an act, a song, or a biblical verse for Thanksgiving. The literal meaning of the mass is Thanksgiving. Hence, we broadened the way of Thanksgiving without using the regular mass proceeding. One crucial element is that, in the end, we broke bread and shared it. In the Roman Catholic Church, only priests can consecrate the bread to become the Eucharist, the Body of Christ. Yet, on the contrary, we trace it back to the act of bread-breaking as developed among the apostolic house churches in the first century C.E. Therefore, when we served the bread to one another, we greeted, “You are the Body of Christ.” […] Thus, we broaden and queer the meaning and essence of the Body of Christ. (Yip, 2022: 22).
After that anniversary, the ministry continued to have Mass in the presence of a guest priest. Yip (2022) states:

We also experimented with co-celebration under the facilitation of our guests so that we can imagine and envision a meal in Heaven when we no longer hide in the closet but meet God and our brothers and sisters face to face. Hence, the Hong Kong Roman Catholic Diocese regarded this celebration as “illegal” and “illicit.” Despite that, our members have thought they have never experienced an inclusive and queer-affirming liturgy in Hong Kong. They have insisted on experimenting with this kind of celebration for another time. That experimentation is truly a glimpse of Heavenly love, a glance of the all-embracing kindness of God.

Sometimes, the absence of a priest may make us profoundly aware of the Christ among us. Occasionally, we end our gatherings by sharing a piece of bread or a cup of grape juice while greeting each other as the Body of Christ. There are other occasions, such as Christmas, when we join the regular services to experience the fellowship of the broader Roman Catholic Church as a big family like everyone else. (pp. 23).

Yip notes that rituals help the Compassion members feel like they are part of the broader church family, despite experiences of exclusion from the Roman Catholic Church. She designs ceremonies in continuity with Roman Catholic practice but with «a critical difference» (Stuart, 2003) in weight and meaning to facilitate queer Roman Catholics in recovering their voice, dignity, and equality, such as breaking bread together without a priest. Her ministry was central to the faith and hopes of the members amid the COVID-19 pandemic as, during that time, they gathered online.

Compassion is a radically restorative and healing Ministry. By simply greeting queer Roman Catholics with «you are the body of Christ,» Yip’s ministry queers communion by affirming queer
Roman Catholics’ fundamental equality, membership, and belonging in the Christian Church and celebrating the image of God in each of them. This is reminiscent of Jesus’ interaction with those whose lives were transformed and who followed him.

On the other hand, Malaysian theologian and priest Joseph N. Goh contribute to a queering of sacramentality through pastoral care and theological reflection. In his article «Sacred Sexual Touch: Illness, Sexual Bodies and Sacramental Anointing in Rural Bidayúh Villages,» Goh (2014) deconstructs from the perspective of queer theologies the sacrament of anointing among believing Christians of Bidayúh ethnicity who live in rural Malaysia. Goh is well-versed in classical systematic theologies and is a leading queer theologian in Malaysia. Through his pastoral calling, he has learned several languages of the indigenous peoples of Malaysia.

Goh’s contribution is essential in bringing together spirituality, sexuality, health, and corporeality. In exploring this intersection, his work breaks the narrow dictates not only of Roman Catholicism with its rejection of the body but also of medicalized compartmentalizations that have dismembered bodies into parts that rarely connect. The idea of the hospital —with its many wards and specialties— clearly evidences that bodies are dismembered into pieces that do not possess a coherent and holistic healing process. The lung problem can be cured, but lumbago requires a different treatment. This is different from how other non-Western cultures perceive healing processes. Western hegemony has permeated all everyday life outside its borders, including how we understand bodies, health, illness, healing, and bodily wellness.

Goh attempts to bring this holistic healing process into the theological conversation and uncover the sexual aspects of bodily contacts beyond genital acts, which classical Christian theologies have denied and condemned for centuries. This resulted in beliefs that erase humanity from the divine, sexuality from holiness, and bodily affection from everyday interrelationships. All of this comes
Send Your Holy Spirit

under the condemnation of any aspect or practice remotely related to sexuality. Queering these theo(ideo)logies involves (re)valuing and (re)vitalizing notions of religious practices, especially those considered as «sacraments» in Roman Catholicism and other Christian Churches. To this end, Goh’s work offers essential avenues for reflection and considerations toward a liberating praxis.

However, it is in his piece «Transgressive Table Talk: A Malaysian Imagines a Queer Rojak Liturgy» in Goh (2022) shows creativity in alternative sacramentality for religious communities that primarily serve queer believers or that offer the inclusion of everyone, including members of the LGBTQ community. Goh is one of the Asian leaders crafting rituals that resonate culturally regarding the experience of being queer and Asian. The Table Talk communion service designed by Goh tremendously contributes to these communities.

Goh redefines the communion table through the metaphor of Rojak, which celebrates the differences among God’s people in a way that unites and brings them together. The table accommodates the company it serves, whose diversity embodies God’s image. This reminds us not only of the Eucharist but its nourishment to the Body of Christ, as expressed in 1 Corinthians 12. The diversity and unity in the Christian Church as the Body of Christ redefine family, tribe, and belonging while celebrating the body and blood of Christ present in the last meal he shared with his disciples.

The Eucharist gives individuals a new identity, empowering them as part of a collective through baptism into the Body of Christ. Being part of the Body of Christ binds our identities and stories together and reconstitutes who our family is. However, our differences are not erased in this collective identity but celebrated and affirmed because we are all image-bearers of our uniqueness. This is radical for traditional Christianity because it breaks down
the overwhelmingly individualistic paradigm, so often focused on personal salvation taught and dominated by White leaders in the West.

In the context of Malaysia, Goh (2022) points out how traditional Christianity —misreading and omitting the Holy Scriptures— leaves queer Christians out of the communion table and the family of God. That situation sets cis-heterosexist standards for queer Christians on gender, sexuality, and relationships while institutionalizing homophobic and transphobic paradigms of membership and leadership. Thus, the result is that queer Christians are not seen as equal parts of the Body of Christ. Therefore, the communion table becomes the visible element of spiritual outcasting and segregation, a key symbol of ultimate discrimination.

In light of the often situation in which queer believers are left without acknowledgment as part of the Body of Christ, Goh (2022) responds with pastoral care, liturgical freedom, and new sacramentality. He highlights how queer people are part of the diversity and unity in the Body of Christ. By reimagining the table, he states:

My liturgical imagination through the Rojak Liturgy encourages participants to take turns in facilitating the event without the obligatory presence of a cis-heterosexual male and celibate ordained minister. This position erases the hierarchical and other constraining boundaries. It emphasizes the reality that every liturgy is an invitation from God, the Host, and that human involvement is a participatory response from guests who can take turns sharing the leadership role at liturgies. It accentuates and privileges the common priesthood of the believers by virtue of baptism (Goh, 2022: 54).

The creativity that Goh displays in his Rojak liturgy parallels the Gospels. We must remember that when Jesus broke the bread and
gave it to the disciples in the last supper, he probably used bread, similar to modern Judaism. In other words, the Eucharist is a Jewish rite in its origin. His work questions the tone through which the conservative sector of Christianity became so adamant in legalism and rubrics to follow in front of an act that, for Jesus, was not a set of rules but a natural way of sharing what he had with his friends. Dogmatism and fundamentalism may need to understand that logic.

Humans are social creatures, and relationships mark our time on Earth. Initially, the Christian Church was a primary way to remember God’s love and grace by bringing us together at the table to share a meal. The lifting up of relationships across lines of class, gender, age, and the like served to strengthen ties and build understanding between people. The Eucharist symbolizes sharing and exchanging intimate thoughts and feelings between believers. Bringing people from all backgrounds together to commune looks pretty different than the institutionalized ritual of the Eucharist in many mainstream denominations. In light of this, Goh (2022) affirms that the Rojak liturgy,

[…] addresses and removes the monopoly of a select few by unconditionally welcoming to table men, women and non-binary people, Christians, non-Christians and the in-between, the ordained and the non-ordained, the professedly LGBTQIA+, the non-LGBTQIA+ and the questioning. It removes bread and wine as the sine qua non of valid liturgical celebration without dismissing the communal sentiments of the Eucharist (p. 54).

He offers a ritual that touches directly on the need to face a dilemma: the gap between the meaningful connection that is craved by the people and the act of the Eucharist, on one side, and what has become a symbol of disconnection with each other and with Christ through exclusion, on the other. In acknowledging the desire to commune with God through connecting with others,
Goh (2022) seems to bring the Eucharist closer to the message of Jesus’ own and the original meaning of the Holy Supper.

**Conclusion**

Many queer theologians seek to disrupt and question cis-heteronormative Christianity. For them, the image of «the table» represents a space of privilege, discrimination, and outcasting that denies the fundamental truth of the Gospel: that in Jesus’ body, the divine and the creatureliness were made one; not only humans but the whole of creation. The Incarnation of Christ is the locus, the place where God seeks to make the whole creation its indwelling place. The Eucharist reveals that desire and motivation to the community of believers, the Christian Church as the Body of Christ.

Religion —as any other human experience— can be liberative but also can be manipulated to oppress individuals and communities. This is a feature of every religion worldwide across the human experience. However, conservative Christians and their institutions have negated all this by allowing their capricious understandings to cloud the message of the Gospel shown in the ultimate symbol of Jesus’ body as the locus in which God revealed God’s desire to be one with the whole of creation. That is why the active role of queer individuals and their communities of accountabilities have the blessing and the mandate to continue challenging oppressive structures. I am confident that the Spirit will continue providing spaces for showing a distinctive and liberating Gospel.

It does not help to see further the power dynamics and the already culturally ingrained understanding naturalized within Western cultures. By broadening the perspective, one can put one’s experience in context. The ritual should be contextual. Unfortunately, many churches may not be willing to do this, so
they are not accused of breaking away with «tradition,» reading that word as the hegemony of Western worship. That is a colonial discourse that we need to dismantle. We are in a process in which we have to begin to work emphatically on pastoral care, ecclesial organization, and the development of our rites and talks from a queer perspective that is not a mimic of how heterosexual people have traditionally determined those situations. It is a challenge we must assume, and we can only press for the clergy of inclusive churches to become professional. We cannot continue alone with what the Spirit says. That also implies queering our spiritual life.

Seventy years of homosexual, LGBT, and queer theologies (Córdova Quero, 2015, 2018) is not time enough to completely dismantle the stance of many sectors of Christianity on issues of gender and sexuality, especially after Western colonialism. This is an ongoing task, and we must train the new generations of religious leaders to continue the changes until cis-heteropatriarchalism is dismantled. While keeping the hopes and using ministry to accompany people in the stage that they are, queer ministers have envisioned ways of liberating the Christian Church. The Eucharist is one example of that, done face-to-face or virtually. It makes sense to start with the «small» aspects of discourse to engage the «broader» realities of the world.

The corners of the world indeed proclaim the diversity of God’s vision and creation. So sad that Western Christianity has been unable to understand that. We need to continue queering. We need to continue pushing the boundaries. Our prophetic role is to continue «queering the world.» Even without the COVID-19 pandemic, queer ministers, believers, and communities will continue doing this. The reason and motivation —as has already been done in the examples of the Eucharist— lies in the fact that it is the pastoral care we need to provide for people whose only possibility for a liberating liturgical experience includes different spaces, either in person or the virtual.
References


