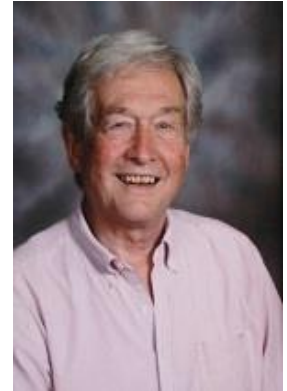


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## **NAMASTE AND CONCOMITANCE** **Holy Communion in Times of a World Pandemic**

- 1 Among more and more Christian denominations these days, the Holy Communion – Mass, Eucharist, Lord’s Supper, Service for the Lord’s Day – is again regaining its rightful pride of place as the Chief Service on a Sunday morning.
- 2 This can only be hailed as Good News. Across the boundaries of nations and languages and cultures, the Holy Communion is once again in our time becoming Standard Operating Procedure each Lord’s Day, in parish after Christian parish. Our own Christian Apostolic tradition is being reclaimed. I have been celebrating that unprecedented evolution for more than 25 years in these postings. See the World Council of Churches’ 1978 document Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry.
- 3 But weekly celebrations of the Holy Communion – I’ll use our distinctive Lutheran designation in these postings, but you can call it by many names; See 1 above – presents church leaders and worshipers with its own set of challenges. Two moments in our liturgies deserve special attention, especially in times like our recent days of world-wide health pandemic,
- 4 I am referring of course to understandable paranoias about the so-called coronavirus – covid 19. If we celebrate the Holy Communion more frequently, how do we handle A) the Passing of the Peace? And B) the use of a Common Cup of wine?
- 5 I’ll argue that both of these moments in Holy Communion deserve to be preserved and honoured. We must never give them up, even with new and understandable concerns for the unwelcome transmission of disease. Let’s consider each in turn. First, A) the Passing of the Peace And then B) the Common Cup at Communion.
- 6 The Passing of the Peace A) is an ancient gesture that can be traced to the earliest days of the Jesus Movement, the New Testament itself. The Apostle Paul ends both his Epistle to the Romans, and his Second Letter to the Corinthians with the injunction, “Greet one another with a holy kiss”. Romans 16:16 and 2 Corinthians 13:12.
- 7 In the earliest Christian liturgies, the Greeting of Peace began to appear as conclusion to the Intercessions, a kind of hinge between Word and Meal. It most likely was an actual embrace and kiss on the lips, in earliest days, men kissing men and women kissing women.

8 As a mentor of mine explains it, you have an opportunity to embrace what you have just prayed for!

9 Nice, eh? I would not want to abandon that opportunity in our worship. Over time, the actual kiss devolved into a simple embrace, and that embrace into an even less demonstrative handshake.

10 But health officials today are warning against close encounters such as these, in the days of a health pandemic “Social distancing.” An elegant solution? The namaste.

11 Namaste is a Hindi word (nah-MAH-stay) that means literally “I bow to you”. But in Hindu usage, it has an even deeper meaning: “The Spirit of God in me honours the Spirit of God in you.” It’s usually accompanied by the lovely gesture you’ve seen in movies like Gandhi, where Gandhi and Nehru greet each other by joining hands at the breast, fingers pointing up, and a slight bow of the head.

12 Could this expressive gesture be encouraged among Christian congregations at the exchange of the Peace? It need not involve touch of any kind – a loss, to be sure; See 8 above – but probably necessary today, during the interim of our pandemic. The namaste gesture is surely better than a fist bump, or an elbow bump, or the flashed Peace Sign: the first two fingers framing a V.

13 If Western Christians were to borrow this gesture, would it be an example of “cultural appropriation”? Probably. But I’d like to think that Hindus themselves would welcome the borrowing of their treasure by other non-Hindu populations, not as unseemly, but as an honour to Hindus!

14 I’d reserve the word “Namaste” for greetings apart from Christian worship. And I would retain as well that splendid gesture to use in “secular” greetings, especially in times of pandemic. There’s no physical touch involved, so it honours the advice of medical professionals to maintain “social distance” in time of pandemic.

15 But in worship, the Holy Communion? The ritual exchange at the Peace that is prescribed in Evangelical Lutheran Worship (ELW) is “The peace of Christ be with you always.” / “And also with you.”

16 To say “I bow to you” or even to say “The Spirit of God in me honours the Spirit of God in you” is not the same as to say, “The peace of Christ be with you”. I’d use the namaste GESTURE at the Passing of the Peace in worship. But I’d speak the ELW WORDS.

17 Christians in East Asia have used what I am calling here the namaste gesture at the Peace for generations. So we in the West can thank them, as well!

18 By such a concession we have maintained a healthy “social distance” at worship – just during this time of plague. A prudent compromise?

19 And after this time of plague has passed, Christian worshipers might still be encouraged to utilize the namaste gesture in social intercourse whenever they have a head cold, for example. A very useful and eloquent gesture indeed. Be sure to add it to your congregation's toolbox!

20 So much for A) the Peace. Now to B) the use of a Common Cup at Communion.

21 The earliest form for Holy Communion, at the very beginning of the Jesus Movement, was probably a type of Agape Meal: A full meal around a table, featuring the common bread of everyday sustenance and the wine of special celebration, along with other foods.

22 Over the years the meal became combined with synagogue worship, featuring the reading of scripture and its exposition in sermon, and prayer. The result? Today's Mass, condensed and ritualized into the shape we recognize today: Gathering, Word, Intercessions, Meal, Sending.

23 Holy Communion during those earliest years featured a common loaf and a common cup. Church structures were probably fiercely egalitarian, with women sharing roles of leadership.

24 As the Christian community experienced less persecution and became more established, particularly after the Emperor Constantine, the young and growing faith began to enjoy previously unknown power, prestige, and privilege. "Christianity" developed: highly hierarchical and male dominated. It lasted 1700 years, until its decline in the late Twentieth Century.

25 The so-called doctrine of Concomitance developed during those early Constantinian years, stipulating that the bread and the wine at Communion "inhere" in each other. To receive only one – the bread for example – is the same as to receive both bread and wine. The priest's job was easier: He – always a male in those dark days – could receive both bread and cup. The laity only the bread.

26 Perhaps Concomitance developed as what we would call today a "spin" – an after-the-fact rationale by entrenched hierarchies for withholding the cup from the people, making the priest's work less burdensome, and providing a strong signal of hierarchy. Perhaps other factors – a health pandemic? – were at work

27 In any case, for hundreds of years – almost one thousand years! – the Christian people received only the bread at Communion. And, presumably, they didn't feel cheated! Until Martin Luther and the Reformation, restoring the cup to the people once again. Since the Second Vatican Council of the 1960's, Roman Catholics may also receive the cup.

28 Concomitance – I'll admit it – is a crazy proposition. (Among other crazy propositions in the Church's long history!) But it does provide a precedence for contemporary Christians at a time of world-wide pandemic Or, in more settled times, for Christians who simply are harboring a head cold.

29 Don't linger at the Table for the Cup, once you have received the Bread. Return to your seat without receiving the Cup. You'll still have participated in a valid Communion!

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