



From Bishop Donald To the Clergy and Licensed Lay Ministers

*cc Bishop's Council, Diocesan and Cathedral Staff, Diocesan Registrar,
Diocesan and Deanery Lay Chairs, Yaxley Deanery Clergy and Lay Chair*

Dear friends

Apologies for writing again within a month of my last letter, but this is important and urgent. In view of its contents I am sending it to churchwardens and to all clergy with permission to officiate, as well as to the usual recipients listed above.

There is just one subject this time: Hygiene at Holy Communion. Obviously this is highly topical because of the Covid-19 Coronavirus, but the instructions and guidance which follow will remain in place indefinitely as they make sense whether or not there is a particular health concern.

Unusually, this letter includes two (rare for me) features: instructions for clergy and lay ministers, and guidance for all worshippers. Those instructions and guidance are to be displayed permanently, in the vestry and on a noticeboard visible to all worshippers. They are also to be read out, and if necessary explained, at all Communion Services this Sunday, on Ash Wednesday, on the First Sunday of Lent, and on Easter Sunday this year.

I know that I am requiring and advising changes of long-standing practice for some clergy and lay people. I know that this sort of culture change isn't always easy. Please do your best to implement these changes speedily, and encourage others to do the same.

Hygiene at Holy Communion

A number of newly-emerging diseases in recent decades have raised concerns about Holy Communion, particularly in relation to sharing the common cup. In some parishes new practices have been developed. In others little has changed. This letter is intended to bring about best practice in all our churches and chapels. In an extreme health emergency it is possible that stricter rules may be brought in temporarily, but the instructions and guidance which follow are intended to be permanent, and to cover most situations, including the current worries about the Covid-19 Coronavirus.

The Church of England has always taught that Holy Communion should be offered and received as both bread and wine, from a shared plate and a shared cup. This still remains our normal practice, and it should not change. Catching any illness through receiving Communion is extremely rare, and the antiseptic qualities of both silver and alcohol have frequently been noted. However, when someone is clearly infectious, or when there is a major health concern, it makes good sense to take sensible precautions.

Less well understood is that in our normal human contacts, including in church, the hands are a far more likely source of cross infection than the mouth or lips. We cough into our hands, we touch so many things with them, we eat from them, without always taking proper precautions. I wholeheartedly commend sharing the Peace in our worship, but I note that it is a more likely source of infection than receiving Communion. This letter addresses that issue.

The practice of intinction, dipping the bread into the wine, has spread widely in our churches in recent years, as an honest attempt to protect ourselves from others' germs, or them from ours. Intinction actually presents greater risks than drinking from the same cup. Unhygienic fingers and fingernails all too often dip into the wine. Small pieces of bread break off, creating a real hazard for those who are gluten intolerant.

Another practice, less widespread but still to be found, is of receiving the bread direct onto the tongue. People may have been taught that the consecrated bread is too holy to touch, or they may have learnt this habit for other reasons. The risk of the minister's fingers touching the recipient's lips or tongue, and passing germs to others, is very real.

In many churches, "lavabo" is practised: a ceremonial washing of the minister's hands immediately before the Communion. This clearly has symbolic significance, and I don't want to stop anyone doing it, but it is of no value as a hygiene precaution. To get hands clean enough to handle food, they should be washed with soap and water for twenty to thirty seconds, or an alcohol based hygiene gel or fluid should be used.

All this may seem negative, but I don't want to put anyone off receiving Holy Communion, one of our Lord's greatest gifts to us, a means of grace, our spiritual food and drink. In order that we can receive Communion, and share it, with confidence, I issue the following instructions and guidance.

For ease of printing for display, the letter continues on a separate page.

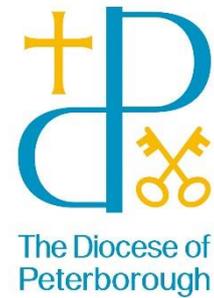
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HYGIENE AT HOLY COMMUNION

From Bishop Donald

20 February 2020



Instructions for those presiding at or distributing Holy Communion

1. The ministers are to welcome people to communion, when necessary assuring them that appropriate hygiene precautions are in place, and helping them to understand the Bishop's guidance for worshippers.
2. An alcohol based hygiene gel or fluid must always be kept with the communion vessels, and in the travelling kit of those who minister in different churches. This must be used to wash the hands of everyone who will touch, break, or distribute the communion bread. This washing will follow any sharing of the peace, receiving of the collection, and lavabo ceremony.
3. The ministers must put the communion bread into the recipient's hand, not into the mouth.
4. The ministers must ensure that no intinction takes place, advising worshippers of the appropriate alternatives as necessary.
5. After the service, the communion vessels must be washed in hot water.

Guidance for worshippers at Holy Communion

1. The Church of England encourages worshippers to receive Holy Communion faithfully and regularly, as taught by our Lord Jesus Christ. We use a shared plate and a shared cup.
2. The Church takes hygiene very seriously. The chances of catching an infection by receiving Holy Communion are very low indeed, but this guidance is issued to reassure, and to reduce the risk even further.
3. Intinction, dipping the bread into the wine, is unhygienic, poses a risk to those who are gluten intolerant, and is not to be practised.
4. Similarly, the practice of receiving the communion bread directly onto the tongue or into the mouth is unhygienic. The minister will place the bread into the worshipper's hand.
5. It is good practice for worshippers to use their right hand to shake hands during the Peace, then the left hand to receive the communion bread and pass it to the mouth.
6. There is a small risk of catching an infection by hand to hand contact at the Peace. Any worshipper concerned by that is encouraged to carry a hygiene gel and use it after the Peace or before the Communion. For your reassurance, the ministers of communion bread will have used a hygiene gel before serving you.
7. Those who are worried about receiving infection from the communion cup, or who have a mouth or throat infection themselves, should simply refrain from taking the wine. Although we practice communion "in both kinds" (bread and wine), we receive all the benefits of Holy Communion even if we are only able to receive in one kind.

With warm greetings, and all good wishes, as we worship and share Christ together.

+ Donald