



THE BISHOP OF GUILDFORD
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Ad Clerum

Swine Flu and the Common Cup

Bishop Ian and I attended the College of Bishops' meeting in Oxford on Monday 14th September. We are both very aware that many laity and some clergy have been disturbed by the apparent necessity, temporarily and *in extremis*, to withdraw the chalice from the laity. We are also acutely aware of the pressure many of you have been put under in implementing this policy.

The advice received by the Archbishops in July was that the pandemic had reached the stage at which 'it makes good sense to limit the spread of disease by not sharing common vessels for food and drink'. The Archbishops have kept regular contact nationally with the Department of Health. The Department of Health advice remains the same as it was then, but the Archbishops are to review the situation again towards the end of October as vaccination progresses and as school and university terms get underway. The Archbishops, in Oxford this week, have stressed that their advice remains however just that – advice. A number of Bishops have, or are, however, relaxing their instructions to suspend the administration of the chalice throughout their dioceses. I am among them and hereby no longer recommend the whole diocese to suspend the chalice.

With the Archbishops, however, I wish to:-

- a) encourage everyone to recognise that the Church has a responsibility to take public health considerations seriously, and
- b) to remember that responsible practice in this matter is not primarily about protecting ourselves, but about avoiding transmitting infection unwittingly to others.

The latter point has significantly been absent in the letters I have received from the laity, which have almost all been about their individual right to receive the chalice personally. None considered the possibility that they might unwittingly infect everybody else following them.

My recommendation now is that the matter is left to local judgement. As at this date, there are no known centres of infection in this diocese.

This is radically different from our case at the end of July, where one of our congregations had no less than five diagnosed cases, and an independent boarding school and a local authority school had to close because of the number of infections. These facts were material in the strength of my recommendation. We looked to be on the cusp of an intensified local outbreak in Surrey and North East Hampshire. This is now not the case.

There is one exception I would make to a local decision to resume administration of the chalice. When there are school celebrations of Holy Communion or children's Eucharists, I recommend you maintain the restriction. The local outbreaks here last July were predominantly in and through schools. Moreover, children appear to be more susceptible and to suffer more seriously from this virus. It may be that older people have more resistance.

Should the infection return locally, and should it mutate in a more virulent form, I will necessarily have to come back to you.

I have been surprised by some letters from the laity: one suggesting they are only receiving part of Christ. Few consider the plight of a nil-by-mouth patient under clinical care where of course, they receive the Lord by 'spiritual communion'. I would welcome views as to whether I should offer a 'non-churchmanship' teaching letter on sacramental theology but in 'lay-terms'. In any case, we can learn from the practical experience of churches which simply withdrew the common cup and others which tried 'intinction'. Here, some advice on how intinction should be given might have been helpful because, done in some ways, it risks greater infection than receiving the common cup. Other ways might include an optional chalice being available.

Cases are not now notifiable or clinically identified in the same way as they were at the beginning of August. If, however, you hear of or there appear to be localised outbreaks in your community, you ought to re-apply restrictions locally accordingly and please report them to me immediately. Bishop Ian or I will offer you advice on the practicalities of this, eg. if you feel intinction would be more acceptable.

Thank you for your loyalty to the difficult decisions bishops have had to make. This was a decision I disliked making. On holiday, I experienced the strangeness and the incompleteness of a similar instruction in the Diocese of Gloucester as an ordinary communicant.

A handwritten signature in black ink, reading "Christopher Guildford". The signature is written in a cursive style and is underlined with a thick black horizontal line.

18th September 2009