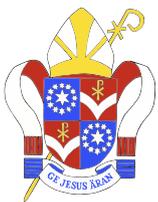




Joy through love shared

A letter from Bishop Åke Bonnier about the Communion



Svenska kyrkan 
SKARA STIFT



I am writing this letter to you who lives in the Diocese of Skara in order to tell you about the Holy communion which is often celebrated in our churches. I hope 2018 will be a year in which we can talk about communion together and celebrate communion more often.

Each congregation may have its own different way, but our shared goal is that we all do it in order to recognize even more of God's boundless grace. I dearly hope you will all be able to participate. Read this letter at home, or in the company of others, and feel free to discuss among yourselves the questions that follow at the end of this letter. God's rich blessing I wish you in everything.

+Åke Bonnier
Bishop of Skara

The first time I took the communion was in July 1973. I was a candidate for confirmation and had never received the communion before. I hardly knew what it was, or what to do, and really I just wanted to receive the blessing, which was the alternative to the wafer and the wine.

I knelt as per instruction at the communion rail. When the priest came and it was my turn I made a mistake: I made the wrong sign. So I was "forced" to receive the gifts of the communion. This was my first communion, but not the last.

Something stirred and when I told my mother I wanted to deepen my engagement in the church she told me that she basically thought the communion was something "unhygienic" in which it was not compulsory for me to participate. I recalled my own reaction: "*But I want to...I want to continue to receive Jesus himself in the communion.*" And so I continued doing it, and still do it very often because it concerns God's infinite love for each and every one, and even for me.



The Passover Meal

Jesus was a Jew and probably celebrated all the customary religious festivals. One of these was Passover, that is to say, Easter. It is a ceremony that honours the liberation of the Children of Israel from Slavery in Egypt.

It begins with everyone getting together to share a meal consisting of different symbolic dishes that serve as reminders of the various hardships experienced during the period of slavery and in connection with the Exodus. There is salt water on hand, to remind one of the tears that were shed; there are bitter herbs to provide a symbol for the suffering.

There is also the unleavened bread in gratitude that the Death Angel passed the houses of the children of Israel by, but slew the first-borns everywhere else (Exodus 12). There is wine on hand to symbolise the joy of liberation.

A new interpretation

Jesus gathered his disciples and celebrated his last Easter meal out of a sense of foreboding about what was going to happen – his imminent death (Mark 14:17-25). During the last supper, he surprised his disciples by giving one further interpretation for the wine and unleavened bread. (Mark 14:22-25). Since then, Jesus's disciples have always shared a meal of bread and wine in the context of a religious service. The first Christians gathered on the day of the Lord, Sunday, and dined together.

In the beginning, it was a real meal where the participants brought their food with them (1 Corinthians 11:20-26), but in time only unleavened bread and wine came to be used.

Today we celebrate the communion. It is called "Mass" in the context of a church service. The communion is one of the Swedish Church's two sacraments; the other

is baptism. That means it is a holy rite introduced by Jesus in which what is invisible, grace, is made tangible through the bread and the wine.

It is also called eukaristi. The word comes from Greek and means Thanksgiving. During mass we thank God for everything he has done for us in the course of Creation, for the life, death and resurrection of Jesus, and for God's forgiveness that arrives anew every morning.

Community with each other

When we come together in church to celebrate, we do so out of a sense of universal fellowship. We are there together in each other's company. But in the process, we also share the spirit of kinship with all those other people celebrating the communion around the world.

Every moment of the day, people are celebrating the communion together somewhere on our planet, and we feel a sense of belonging with them.

The church is made up not just of those of us alive and working today. The church is greater than that – it is a community stretching through time and space. Everyone who has gone before us into their encounter with God is present with us at the communion table.

But naturally, our meal is also an expression of kinship with the Lord Jesus Christ. He is present; we don't know how. There are different communion teachings that each tries to explain it in a different way.

Martin Luther says that the most important thing is that we receive Christ himself in the bread and the wine after his promise, as per the words in the Bible: "While they were eating, Jesus took bread, and when he had given thanks, he broke it and gave it to his disciples, say-

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As the grain once scattered in the fields and the grapes once dispersed on the hillside...

ing, 'Take it; this is my body.' Then he took a cup, and when he had given thanks, he gave it to them, and they all drank from it. 'This is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many,' he said to them. (Mark 14:22-24).

When we receive the communion bread and wine, either kneeling or standing at the altar rail or walking down the aisle, and we hear the words, "Body of Christ, sacrificed for you; blood of Christ, shed for you" it means more than just a piece of unleavened bread and a taste of wine. It is the body and blood of Christ. He is there, in the shape of the bread and the wine.

It is the real presence of Christ at the same time as it is unleavened bread (more often, wafers) and wine. What is taking place? It is a mystery, and therefore we can agree with the words often used in the church service: "Great is the mystery of faith."

Several dimensions

The celebration of the communion – the simple act of receiving the bread and the wine – symbolises several things.

One is sacrifice. It is not a repetition of what Jesus did for all of us on the cross. No, when we celebrate mass it is we ourselves who put ourselves up for the role of the sacrifice. We present our prayers, our songs of praise and surrender ourselves in the service of God. In that way, the communion becomes an answer to God's call. With everything that is mine – all my gifts and all my weaknesses – I come to Jesus himself and place everything, all of me, at his service.

Forgiveness is also important. I may come with all my failures, all my defeats, everything that the Church has traditionally termed sin, and hand it over to Jesus on the Cross. He meets me with the broken bread and gives me his forgiveness, his love, his peace. It becomes a blessed exchange.

In Psalm 73 of our hymnal songbook, we sing: "You take our sin, you give us peace."

And third, it symbolises justice. Communion psalm



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398 says: "We raise a sign, a sign of justice, a meal shared with all." When we put ourselves at the service of God, we are sent out to share the bread with the world. In the communion, we are reminded to share the resources of the world fairly.

Today, 20% of the world's population enjoys 80% of the world's resources. In the communion, everyone breaks the bread, and everyone gets what they need. It ought to be the same with all our global resources.

But that is unfortunately not the case – even though God calls on us to secure peace and bread for all (Swedish hymnal songbook, psalm 288).

Everyone may come

Who is allowed to participate in the communion? Anyone who has been baptised. Your baptism is the one condition – not faith or absence thereof. With our doubts, our uncertainties, our faith and yearning, everything that is ours, we are all welcome to God to receive his abundant forgiveness.

It not about being worthy. No one is worthy, and everyone is worthy at the same time. No preparation is needed. On the contrary. Come as you are!

Our communion is open to all. It does not matter which Christian congregation you belong to.

You are always welcome at the communion table of the Swedish church. You decide yourself, consistent with loyalty to your congregation, whether you want to participate in the communion celebration.

Celebrate often

Martin Luther often emphasizes in the Large Catechism the importance of taking the communion often. He says: "We have been given the communion as our daily nourishment so that our faith receives new strength and so that we do not abandon the fight, but become stronger."

Daily nourishment says Luther. We translate it into a weekly Sunday mass.

I believe we need to receive the gifts of God's grace often, as a sign of divine love, to deepen our sense of joy. We also need to be able to share thoughts, feelings and reflections with one another about what the communion, on different levels, can mean.

That is why I am writing this letter to you.

Discussion Points:

1. When did you last celebrate communion? How was the experience?
2. Which of the motives for communion mentioned above mean something for you?
3. What are your views about celebrating the communion every Sunday in your congregation?

Further reading:

The Swedish Church's Bishop's letter about the communion, to be published in 2018
Diary and Church Almanac, 2015-16, Verbum publishers