West Ohio Conference

In Extremis

In this season in which we find ourselves, many have asked about the administration of the Sacrament via various forms of social media and other digital outlets. It is the position of Bishop Palmer and the Cabinet that, yes, you can administer the Sacrament of Communion, as long as you and your congregation understand the notion of In Extremis.

In Extremis is a Latin term that came out of the European black death plague. It means in an extremely difficult situation and came into being around the year 1530. “In Extremis, arising out of contexts marked by extreme suffering and/or injustice … is marked by a willingness to respond to the invitation to go beyond one’s own situation and capacities, to accept overwhelming and powerlessness, (and) to adopt the undefended posture of Christian hospitality ….”

In Extremis has some more modern examples. For example, on the other side of the 9/11 attacks on The United States in September 2001, the Roman Catholic church in the New York City area approved allowing the full Requiem Mass versus a Memorial Mass. The difference is the presence of a physical body, and in a Requiem Mass, Communion is served. While no body was present for most of these services, a Requiem Mass was allowed. This policy change was In Extremis and was deeply meaningful to thousands of people in the affected dioceses.

My first baptism occurred when I was a clinical pastoral education student in seminary. I baptized a dying child in the hospital where I was serving. Because the child’s family was Roman Catholic and I was not ordained at the time, the rite was conducted In Extremis.

Later, as an ordained pastor in the West Ohio Annual Conference of The United Methodist Church, I served Communion to a member who was a patient on a respirator. I held up the Bread and the Cup. No one in the room received the elements, but everyone knew we had received the body and the blood of Christ. It was Communion In Extremis.

This, however, is not a license to continue this practice when life returns to normal. Within our Wesleyan heritage, we must remember the place of the Elder in regard to the Sacrament; these are licensed for sacerdotal (priestly) ministries. “Wesley’s original assumption is that his Methodists would commune as he did – at the local Anglican Church. He firmly believed that the Lord’s Supper should be officiated by an Ordained Elder.”

It is the position of Bishop Palmer and the Cabinet, that this privilege is for a season and must be ended in accordance to our polity and Discipline.

1Merriam-Webster Dictionary, Online publication, 2020, Incorporated.
2Slee, Nicola, Theological reflection in extremis: remembering Srebrenica* Pages 30-43, Published online: 01 Apr 2019
3Rev. Dr. Todd D. Anderson, Conference Superintendent, The West Ohio Annual Conference, The Ohio River Valley District, The United Methodist Church.
5West Ohio Cabinet vote In Session, March 19, 2020.