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‘Sacrament of (Be)longing’: Analysis of Finnish Lutheran and Orthodox Christian Eucharistic Practices amid Absence and Estrangement

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Abstract

This article addresses eucharistic and communal transformations of two local Finnish churches, the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Finland (ELCF) and the Orthodox Church of Finland (OCF), amid the COVID-19 pandemic and precautions. We analyze how eucharistic practices have transformed in the ELCF and the OCF and the ways these transformations are reflected in the experiences of both parishioners and pastors. The data consist of four questionnaires (N = 739) collected from Lutheran and Orthodox believers and Lutheran vicars during the pandemic. Our results indicate that the significance of belonging was emphasized during the time of social distancing.

While among those in the ELCF, experiences of belonging were manifested in terms of Eucharist, among those in the OCF, belonging was most often reflected in relation to liturgical community. The differences in eucharistic theologies of the OCF and the ELCF have perhaps become more visible in exceptional circumstances.

Keywords

Evangelical Lutheran Church of Finland – Orthodox Church of Finland – COVID-19 – Eucharist – ecclesiology – community – communion

1 Introduction

The most painful thing was the lack of access to communion. (L62)

The need to participate [in the Eucharist] is constitutive in life. The most concrete thing I have realized lately is that it should not be taken for granted. Participation in the service has also highlighted the meaning of gathering [as a parish]. It is a fundamental matter and an essence of liturgical life. (O8f)

These accounts by two Finnish Christians, one Lutheran and one Orthodox, reflect the importance of Eucharistic and congregational communion in the life of a Christian and the agony caused when being involuntarily separated from them. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, most Finns were shut out from sacramental and congregational communion for long periods of time when churches and religious communities were forced to close doors and change their activities, including the means and restrictions of attending services since March 2020. Not only have COVID-19 measures affected day-to-day life, but the crisis itself has challenged people's experience of meaning in life,¹ and it has triggered an increased need for religious traditions. Hence, spiritual needs have encountered new restrictions regarding physical distance.

In Christian churches, the question of the celebration of the Holy Communion during the COVID-19 pandemic has been one of the most widely discussed issues globally.² In this article, we investigate and analyze eucharistic practices within the two national churches in Finland: the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Finland (ELCF) and the Orthodox Church of Finland

1 See Anthony et al., "Models of Cosmotheandric Life-Experience in the Face of Coronavirus Pandemic: Empirical Research in the European Context," *Salesianum* 83, 551–579.

2 See Hans-Jürgen Feulner & Elias Haslwanter (eds.), *Gottesdienst auf eigene Gefahr? Die Feier der Liturgie in der Zeit von COVID-19* (Münster: Aschendorff Verlag, 2020).

(OCF). Neither church accepts the idea or practice of online communion, which has been discussed in multiple churches during the pandemic.³

In this article, we address the following question: How have eucharistic practices in the ELCF and the OCF transformed during the first waves of the pandemic, and in what way are these transformations reflected in the experiences of the faithful? In discussing how modern technologies have been received at the congregational level, we shall also sketch the possible impact these transformations and experiences will have on eucharistic communities in post-pandemic everyday life. Our data consist of four questionnaires collected from the ELCF and OCF in 2020.

The ELCF is the largest church in Finland, followed by the OCF, which is the second-largest church. By the end of 2020, 67.6% of all Finns belonged to the ELCF,⁴ while 1.1% belonged to the OCF, an autonomous church within the Ecumenical Patriarchate of Constantinople.⁵ Even though the total number of members differs greatly between the ELCF and the OCF, both churches have prominent roles as religious actors in Finnish society due to their legal and social statuses. For example, they have equal and special status under public law. Therefore, questionnaires were sent to people participating in the activities of these two churches. The ELCF and OCF have close ecumenical relations, and the majority of Orthodox faithful live in ecumenical families with Lutheran spouses and children.⁶ This background creates a fertile basis for an analytical comparison between these two churches.

Both the ELCF and the OCF reacted quickly to the guidelines of public authorities. Pastoral counselling, for instance, was offered at a new intensity by the ELCF. The ELCF stressed its desire to help all citizens, not only its own members, during unexpected times. Its role was also acknowledged by

3 See Teresa Berger, “@ Worship in the Epicenter of a Pandemic: Catholic Liturgical Life in the United States in 2020,” in *Gottesdienst auf eigene Gefahr? Die Feier der Liturgie in der Zeit von COVID-19*, eds. Hans-Jürgen Feulner & Elias Haslwanter (Münster: Aschendorff Verlag, 2020), 118–119.

4 “Membership statistics of the ELCF,” <https://www.kirkontilastot.fi/viz?id=181>, accessed 11 August, 2021.

5 “Membership statistics of the OCF,” https://www.ort.fi/sites/default/files/2021-01/2020_1.pdf, accessed 11 August, 2021. The number of non-registered Orthodox believers is approximately 30,000–40,000, with most of them being of Russian descent and some of them having Romanian, Estonian, Greek and Serbian backgrounds. Hence the Orthodox population in Finland is around 90,000–100,000 (i.e., 1.6–1.8% of the total population).

6 Huub Vogelaar, “An Intriguing Ecumenical Dialogue: Lutheran-Orthodox Encounters in Finland,” *Exchange* 42/3 (2013), 292.

the central government.⁷ At first, the OCF launched a crisis and preparation team that worked on guidelines and coordination in March 2020. Since May, decision-making has been routed to each individual diocese of the OCF.⁸ In August 2020, both the ELCF and the OCF received funding from the Ministry of Education and Culture to strengthen their diaconal work.

Previous studies have shown that COVID-19 has influenced the activities of religious communities in multiple ways. In countries worldwide, religious communities have played a prominent role in times of crisis.⁹ As Baker et al. have emphasized, however, one key characteristic of almost all religious practices and traditions is the centrality of face-to-face gatherings,¹⁰ which has caused inevitable challenges for religious communities in organizing their activities.

In Finland, several parishes – both Lutheran and Orthodox – had already started streaming their services before the pandemic.¹¹ However, the new situation has challenged congregations to adopt new technologies quicker and more widely than before. In the ELCF, for example, of all the streamed church activities, the streaming of Sunday services was enhanced the most during the first wave of COVID-19.¹² Both in the OCF and the ELCF, increased attendance was noticed in the streamed services compared to traditional physical services held in churches. Extensive and nationwide streaming of the services has enhanced accessibility to the services and has even highlighted the different obstacles that hinder people from participating in worship in normal

7 Meri Toivanen, "Ministeri Annika Saarikko kirkolliskokoukselle: Kirkon toiminta on tärkeä osa henkistä kriisinkestävyyttä," *Kotimaa* 12/8 (2020).

8 Suomen ortodoksinen kirkko, 2020.

9 E.g., Bjørn Hallstein Holte, "COVID-19 and the Islamic Council of Norway: The Social Role of Religious Organizations, *Diaconia*," *Journal for the Study of Christian Social Practice* (2021); Eylem Kanol & Ines Michalowski, *Impact of the COVID-19 Pandemic on Religiosity in Germany*, SSSR + RRA Conference 2021 (2021); Francesco Molteni et al., "Searching for Comfort in Religion: Insecurity and Religious Behaviour During the COVID-19 Pandemic in Italy," *European Societies* 23 (2021); Veli-Matti Salminen, *Seurakuntatyö pitkittyneessä poikkeustilassa: Raportti kirkon työntekijöiden ja luottamushenkilöiden koronakyselystä 2021*, (Tampere: Kirkon tutkimuskeskus, 2021); Hanna Salomäki, *Suomalaisten jaksamisen koronakriisissä* (Tampere: Kirkon tutkimuskeskus, 2021); Tore Witsø Rafoss & Olaf Aagedaal, *KoronaJul: En dokumentasjonsrapport om julefeiring 2020*, (KIFO, 2020).

10 Joseph Baker et al., "Religion in the Age of Social Distancing: How COVID-19 Presents New Directions for Research," *Sociology of Religion* 81/4 (2020), 357–370.

11 For the international context before the pandemic, see, e.g., Stefan Böntert, "Liturgical Migrations into Cyberspace: Theological Reflections," in *Liturgy in Migration: From the Upper Room to Cyberspace*, ed. Teresa Berger (Minnesota: Liturgical Press, 2012), 200–202, 206; Teresa Berger, *@ Worship. Liturgical Practices in Digital Worlds* (London and New York: Routledge, 2018), 6.

12 Veli-Matti Salminen, *Seurakuntatyö pitkittyneessä poikkeustilassa* (Tampere: Kirkon tutkimuskeskus, 2021), 3.

circumstances.¹³ While participation in most of the liturgical life was prohibited, the streaming of the services created new ways of participation and even new insights into the question of what it is to be a church. Hence, as we claim in this article, the pandemic has affected not only liturgical life and experiences, but also the ecclesiastical understanding of Liturgy.

2 Eucharistic Theology of the ELCF and OCF

The service, and consequently the sacrament of the Eucharist, is governed in the ELCF by the Church Law and Order, worship manuals approved by the Bishops' Conference, and the Church Manual, which is approved by a qualified majority of the Church Assembly. According to the teachings of the Lutheran Church, the sacrament consists of three elements: the word of the promise of grace, a concrete material element, and Jesus' order in the Bible. On this basis, the ELCF recognizes two sacraments: baptism and the Eucharist. The visible signs of the Eucharist are bread and wine, in which, according to Lutheran teachings, Christ Himself is present (*real presence*). According to the Lutheran understanding, in the Eucharist, a person becomes a partaker of Christ's atoning work, the forgiveness of sins and eternal life.¹⁴

In the theology of the ELCF, communion is a meal of thanksgiving, remembrance, and fellowship, with an emphasis on its nature as a gift. The Eucharist is a testament – an instrument of grace from God to human beings. Therefore, the essential basis of the Eucharist is Christ and his work, not the distributor or recipient. The essential aspect of the recognition of the real presence of Christ is recollection or remembrance. Jesus' words 'in remembrance of me' (Luke 22:19) signify, according to the Lutheran conception of the Eucharist, not only a reminiscence but also a deeper communion with Christ through remembrance. Communion as a meal of remembrance or reminiscence surpasses the boundaries of time and place.¹⁵

13 Hanna Salomäki, Jumalanpalvelukset, kirkolliset toimitukset ja kristilliset juhlapyhät, in *Uskonto arjessa ja juhlassa: Suomen evankelis-luterilainen kirkko vuosina 2016–2019*, ed. Hanna Salomäki et al. (Tampere: Kirkon tutkimuskeskus 2020), 100; Laura Kallatsa & Sini Mikkola, "Olimme kaikki osallisia 'kaipuun sakramentista.' Ehtoollinen ja kirkkoherrojen kokemukset Suomen evankelis-luterilaisessa kirkossa koronakeväänä 2020," *Uskonmontutkija*, 9/2 (2020), 3.

14 Catechism (Helsinki: Edita, 1999), §37; Worship Manual "Palvelkaa Herraa iloiten" (Helsinki: Kirkkohallitus, 2009), 21; Tomi Karttunen, *Mitä on luterilaisuus? Kirkko, teologia ja yhteiskunta* (Tampere: Kirkon tutkimuskeskus, 2020), 90–93.

15 Catechism, §39; Worship Manual "Palvelkaa Herraa iloiten," 21; Karttunen, "Mitä on luterilaisuus?," 93.

The minister of the Eucharist is the priest. Although the priest is the leader of the service, and their role is also central to the administration of the Eucharist, the perspective of community is essential to the service: the whole congregation as a community performs the service. From the viewpoint of communality, the Eucharist is one of the most essential parts of the service. The communal character of the Eucharist is particular in its orientation across time and space, towards the other person, God, and past generations. Previous research on worship in the ELCF has shown that the Eucharist is both an expression of the unity of the whole congregation and a means of strengthening that unity, especially from the perspective of parishioners.¹⁶

Eucharistic practices in the OCF are governed by the Priest's Manual, Liturgy handbook, Church Order, and the canonical tradition of the Orthodox Church. Throughout the church year, the Liturgy of Saint John Chrysostom is celebrated on most Sundays and feast days as the main Liturgy of the OCF. The Liturgy of Saint Basil the Great is celebrated during Great Lent and on a few other occasions, and the Liturgy of presanctified gifts on weekdays of Great Lent. In each parish, the Liturgy is celebrated at least in the main church on Sundays and feast days (i.e., 'according to the cycle of the church year and in addition, as instructed or as is the habit on specific ceremonies').¹⁷

The weekly cycle, the established days for divine Liturgy (Saturday and Sunday), and the cycle of the feasts during the church year define the other times of liturgical celebration. The main service of Sundays and feasts is always eucharistic Liturgy. Unlike in some other local Orthodox traditions, in Finland, most of the faithful in the church take part in the Eucharist. In contemporary Finnish practice, Liturgy and personal participation in the Eucharist are deeply intertwined.

Before the Orthodox Liturgy, the clergy celebrate the Liturgy of preparation (*Proskomedía*), in which leavened bread and wine are prepared for the Eucharist. The Liturgy itself is divided into two parts: the Liturgy of the Catechumens and the Liturgy of Believers. During anaphora (eucharistic prayer), the bread and wine are consecrated and are believed to transform into the true blood and body of Christ. In this, epiclesis (invocation of the Holy Spirit) is stressed alongside the biblical words of institution. There is a strong emphasis on sacramental realism in the Orthodox Church. In addition, the

16 See Ann-Maarit Joenperä, *Jumalan lapset isän sylissä. Narratiivinen tutkimus jumalanpalveluksen merkityksellisyyden rakentumisesta kirkossakävijöille Tuusulan seurakunnassa*. (PhD diss., University of Helsinki, 2013), 99; Anneli Vartiainen, *Messu, yhteisö ja muistaminen. Suomen evankelis-luterilaisen kirkon messu yhteisöllisen muistamisen tilana* (Tampere: Kirkon tutkimuskeskus, 2015), 135.

17 Ortodoksisen kirkon kirkkojärjestys 2006, §4.

Eucharist is linked with ministry; a priest always celebrates the sacrament. Eucharist is considered one of the seven sacraments (or mysteries) of the Eastern Orthodox Church; however, as the sacraments are beyond human comprehension, their number cannot be fixed according to the Orthodox Church.

3 Data and Methods

The data of this article consist of sets of responses to four questionnaires: experiences of eucharistic practices during the first wave of the COVID-19 pandemic among parishioners¹⁸ of the OCF (N = 330) and its follow-up questionnaire (N = 43),¹⁹ parishioners of the ELCF (N = 225), and vicars of the ELCF (N = 141). Thus, the data consist of 739 responses.²⁰

The invitation to participate in the questionnaire for OCF parishioners was released on the official website of the OCF, and it was further advertised on social media. Invitations to the ELCF questionnaire for parishioners were published on the website of the University of Eastern Finland and on social media (e.g., Facebook and Twitter). The questionnaire to the vicars was sent via email by the church employees' trade union *Pappisliitto* and by diocesan cathedral chapters. Only the vicars were invited to participate in the study, since they were responsible for the decisions made in the congregations during the pandemic. The data were gathered during the first wave of COVID-19, in spring and summer 2020, except for the follow-up data among OCF, which was gathered in December 2020. Since all the data were collected online, the informants represent only those who actively use the internet.

The questionnaires consisted of both closed- and open-ended questions grouped into thematic clusters. Differences in the eucharistic lives and ordos of the respective churches were considered in the data collection, and the questionnaires were consequently somewhat different. The questionnaire for the vicars of the ELCF consisted of questions concerning the Eucharist. The

18 A few of the informants among the OCF were priests, cantors, and other employees of the church. We did not explicitly ask the informants about their role in the parish, but the informants brought these up in their accounts.

19 Informants of the initial OCF questionnaire were asked to give their contact information for further research. Follow-up questionnaire informants were those OCF members who had left their contact information and who replied to our second questionnaire via email.

20 The number of responses to the questionnaire to OCF parishioners was higher than the number to the ELCF parishioners, despite the fact that the number of members of the OCF is only 2% of that of the ELCF. A possible explanation for the difference may be the different modes of invitation. OCF used its website to share links to ongoing streamed services, which may have resulted in a greater number of visitors.

questionnaires directed at the parishioners of the ELCF and OCF were similar in structure, but there were some differences in the formulation of the questions between denominations. The themes in these two questionnaires were participation in liturgical life and the Eucharist, experiences with streamed services, and the impact of the pandemic on prayer life.²¹

As backgrounds varied, informants were asked to state their diocese, age group, and whether they were members of the church in question. In the questionnaires targeted at ELCF, the gender of the informant was also asked. The questionnaire for OCF did not contain a question concerning gender, as the Orthodox population is small, and we strived to ensure the anonymity of those informants who did not leave their contact information for the follow-up study.

Most of the informants were members of either the OCF or the ELCF: 49% of them belonged to the OCF and 45% to the ELCF. Thus, 6% of the informants were not members of these churches, even though they took part in either Orthodox or Lutheran online worship. Regarding the age of informants, 23% were forty or under, and 77% were over forty. The informants represent all dioceses of both churches.

We have marked the quotes from the data with ‘O’ when referring to the responses of those from the OCF, ‘L’ when referring to Lutheran parishioners’ responses, and ‘V’ when referring to Lutheran vicars’ responses. Quotes from the follow-up inquiry are marked with the letter ‘f’ at the end. The analysis methods are critical close reading and data-driven inductive content analysis.²² In the following two chapters, we report our findings. First, we focus on changes in Eucharistic practices in the ELCF and OCF. Second, we analyze the experiences of Eucharistic practices among the Lutheran and Orthodox informants.

4 Eucharistic Practices in Flux

Despite the globality of the COVID-19 pandemic, both its effects and the responses to it are local by nature.²³ This chapter focuses on the changes in

21 The questionnaires were originally conducted for two separate studies, one Lutheran and one Orthodox. This affects the comparability of the ELCF and OCF data but does not make comparative analysis impossible, however.

22 For critical close reading, see Annette Federico, *Engagements with Close Reading* (London: Routledge, 2015). For content analysis, see Klaus Krippendorff & Mary Angela Bock, *The Content Analysis Reader* (Thousand Oaks: Sage, 2009).

23 Olav Hammer & Karen Swartz, “Religious Responses to the COVID-19 Pandemic,” *Approaching Religion* 11/2 (2021), 3.

Eucharistic practices in the two churches brought about by the reactions and adjustments to restrictions and health directives caused by COVID-19.

In the OCF, health restrictions prohibited physical congregational participation in churches, with the services being celebrated merely by the clergy, cantors, a few selected singers, and an altar servant. Local parishes of the OCF responded to the pandemic in various ways according to the changing instructions and commands of Finnish administrative agencies. The possibility of partaking in the Eucharist was offered to the Orthodox faithful in private timeslots after the Liturgy or as separately scheduled events outside the Liturgy, for example, in connection to the sacrament of confession of sins. This kind of disjunction between Liturgy and Eucharist is, as a rule, unprecedented in the Orthodox liturgical tradition. However, the Liturgy of Presanctified Gifts does not contain the consecration of the Eucharist, but the sacrament is distributed from the reserve of already sanctified bread and wine from the previous Sunday. Surprisingly, there were no signs in the OCF of any theological, liturgical, or practical reflections on whether the practice of the Liturgy of Presanctified Gifts could be applied creatively during COVID-19 restrictions. Instead of excluding the faithful from all communal forms of Eucharist, it may have provided a liturgical model during harsh COVID-19 measures.

In the Orthodox Christian tradition, the Eucharist is dispensed from one (or several) chalice(s) with a shared spoon. Amidst the insecurity caused by the, at the time, unknown coronavirus, this practice and its risks for the Orthodox faithful created uncertainty and criticism. In spring 2020, a shared spoon of the Eucharist was replaced with separate wooden spoons that were burned after the service. No kissing of the chalice, which was customary in normal times, was allowed, and the eucharistic cloth was changed into a disposable napkin. Also, the practice of enjoying shared antidoron (i.e., a small piece of bread) and warm sweet wine after the Eucharist, a custom drawing from Russian Orthodox tradition, was abolished in Finnish Orthodox churches. In the big picture, the emanating abundance and dignified Eucharistic symbolism with a gilded spoon and hand-embroidered fabrics were suddenly transformed into a mundane and isolated act with cheap disposable objects and a trash bag for used spoons. This change in the manner in which the Eucharist was distributed, while understandable from the perspective of health care and pandemic control, dramatically affected the atmosphere around the sacrament.

In the ELCF, the pandemic also had a major impact on the Sunday service. Part of the congregation began to use disposable chalices, while others adopted intinction. The discussion on the celebration of the Eucharist that emerged was emphasized in the run-up to Easter. According to the Worship Manual of the ELCF, the celebration of the Eucharist is – under normal

circumstances – part of Paschal Thursday, Easter Vigil, Easter Day, and the second day of Easter.²⁴ A week and a half after the Finnish Council of State had, together with the President, declared a state of emergency, the bishops of the ELCF jointly agreed that parishes could celebrate communion services during Easter, although with some restrictions. This recommendation was distributed to the local parishes via diocesan letters, which every bishop sent to their diocese. The bishops stated that mass could be celebrated by one pastor and attended by parish employees and parishioners, up to a maximum of ten people in total. Three out of ten bishops of the ELCF recommended the celebration of the Eucharist, at least on Paschal Thursday. Most bishops did not make recommendations on the celebration of the Eucharist but left the decision primarily to the parishes and their vicars.²⁵

All the bishops, however, stressed in their diocesan letters the importance of spiritual communion in times of exception. Spiritual communion has been used especially in the Catholic Church but has also become more common in Protestant churches in the wake of the pandemic.²⁶ It literally means ‘full participation in the Eucharist without physical participation’,²⁷ that is, one enjoys the Eucharist spiritually in a situation where physical participation is impossible. To support the celebration of spiritual communion, the bishops offered congregations a special prayer to use during it.²⁸ In comparison, Orthodox churches have not applied the idea of spiritual communion in times of social distancing.

In general, discussing practical matters exceeded that of theological issues, notably at the local parish level.²⁹ This was particularly true in the first phase of the pandemic. In a situation that demands rapid decision-making, theological reflection is not, indeed, often the main priority.³⁰ Questions of equality were often raised when discussing the restricted celebration of Mass. Some of the vicars (e.g., V38, V79, V88, V99) heavily criticized the bishops’ recommendation

24 Worship Manual “Palvelkaa Herraä iloiten,” 45–47.

25 Kallatsa & Mikkola, “Olimme kaikki osallisia,” 2–3.

26 For the practice of spiritual communion and its history in the Catholic Church, see Edward Foley, “Spiritual Communion in a Digital Age: A Roman Catholic Dilemma and Tradition,” *Religions* 12/245 (2021).

27 Sarah Johnson, “Online Communion, Christian Community, and Receptive Ecumenism: A Holy Week Ethnography During COVID-19,” *Studia Liturgica* 50/2 (2020), 202.

28 Sini Mikkola & Laura Kallatsa, “Elettyä teologiaa: Suomen evankelis-luterilaisen kirkon kirkkoherrojen ja seurakuntalaisten suhtautuminen etäehtoolliseen,” *Teologinen aika-kauskirja* 4 (2021), 331.

29 Kallatsa & Mikkola, “Olimme kaikki osallisia,” 7–8.

30 Stephanie Perdue, “Reflections on a Year of Eucharistic Fasting,” *Liturgy* 36/3 (2021), 30–31.

to celebrate communion with a limited number of people. As V88 asked, 'How would I have chosen whom to ask along? [...] Others [parishioners] would then have watched as a few received communion'. V79 noted: '[...] I didn't want to send a message of the sacrament for one's eyes [only]'. Thus, most Lutheran parishes replaced communion services with services of the Word, which were celebrated without the presence of the congregation.³¹

The fear among the vicars of producing feelings of inequality among parishioners seems to have materialized only to a limited amount. Some vicars reported having indignant feedback; however, as V140, for example, described, '[...] a few parishioners have given feedback and asked, for instance, which of and on what grounds particular parishioners were selected for the closed-door masses.' The opportunity for private communion was offered during restrictions, as in normal circumstances, but our data indicate that the request for it did not increase much. By summer 2020, partaking in the Eucharist was also possible in private timeslots in several parishes.

5 Experiences of Eucharistic Practices

As we have previously described, changes in Eucharistic practices were significant during the pandemic in Finland, especially in the OCF. In this chapter, we analyze how the changes affected the informants and how they experienced them.

First, it seems that the streamed services, as well as limited access to the Eucharist, have served as media for everyday ecumenism. Streamed services have lowered the threshold for participation in the liturgical life of other Christian traditions. In the OCF, the streamed services and limited access to the Eucharist paved the way for more equal participation for Orthodox and non-Orthodox participants in Orthodox Liturgy. One of the Lutheran participants who responded to the Orthodox survey recalled, 'As a Lutheran, I have participated in the Orthodox services even more than services of my own church. Now, the lack of eucharistic unity does not affect my participation.' (O112) However, only 12% of the Orthodox informants had followed streamed services of other denominations, mainly Lutheran services. Significantly more Lutheran informants (32%) had attended services of non-Lutheran churches via the internet. Of these, Orthodox, Pentecostal, and Free Churches, as well as Taizé communities, were the most frequently mentioned.

³¹ Kallatsa & Mikkola, "Olimme kaikki osallisia," 2, 7.

Thus, regarding the question of equal opportunities for participation, our data would seem to support the view of former research on the pandemic as a ‘uniquely power-levelling opportunity, which should be explored [...]’.³² The data from the Lutheran parishioners indicate that more than half (56%) of them had not taken communion at all during the first wave of the pandemic. Among those parishioners who had participated in streamed services and described their experiences (N = 173), the lack of communion was particularly mentioned in one-fourth of the answers. While some informants described lacking communion as sad or ‘a minus’ (L72) or merely noted that it was a factor that made the experience of service different, others strongly highlighted the difficulty of the situation. For example, as L62 noted, ‘The most painful thing was the lack of access to communion’.

About one-third (36%) of the ELCF parishioners reported having participated in communion in church service, and 12% of the informants had celebrated communion elsewhere or at a service other than a church communion service. A total of 82 informants verbally described their participation in communion. Three out of four wrote about the practical arrangements involved in the celebration, particularly about safety distances in church, and almost half of them (46%) described their emotional experiences. Thirty-five percent reported positive emotional experiences, while 11% described negative ones. Informants who reported positive emotions used the following to describe the situation: ‘great’, ‘happy’, ‘wonderful’, ‘restful’, ‘communal’, and ‘holy’. Emotions that were rated as negative were most often related to feelings of unease and insecurity, mainly due to the informants’ perception that hygiene-related activities were either too poorly arranged or taken too far. For instance, as L45 explained, ‘The Eucharist caused concern because a lot of people were packed together’. Of the vicars of the ELCF, on the other hand, only four (V8, V51, V99, V140) referred to hygiene-related issues, and only one of them (V51) showed concern about the spread of the virus.

Of the Orthodox informants in the first survey, nearly half (44%) had received communion since the beginning of the COVID-19 restrictions. Hence, 56% of the informants had not participated in the Eucharist or left a blank response. Liturgical variations in different parishes emerged from the open answers of the informants. The most widespread practice seemed to include following a streamed Liturgy in a car or at home, after which the participants received communion in church.

32 Buhle Mpofu, “Rethinking the Eucharist in the Aftermath of COVID-19 Disruptions: A Comparative Study of Reformed and Pentecostal Theology of Sacraments.” *Hervormde Teologiese Studies* 77/4 (2021), e7.

Out of 145 informants in the first survey among the OCF who had participated in the Eucharist, 54 described their experiences. Twenty-six of these informants expressed their experience in positive terms, such as the following: pleasant, full of feeling, strength-giving, impressive, lovely, relieving, OK, touching, holy, comforting, beautiful, and festive. Fifteen informants deemed their experience negatively by using adjectives such as strange, hollow, empty, mundane, isolated, detached, and awkward. As in the open answers of the ELCF informants, negative emotions among the OCF manifested in response to the new Eucharistic practices and COVID-19 precautions. The informant O26f described how the practices pervasively affected their experience of the sacrament:

[...] The whole arrangement, where I encounter the priest through plexiglass with masks on, where I, instead of hearing my name, hear strict instructions on how to place the napkin or how to dispose of the wooden spoon. It has turned the whole Eucharist into something other than what it means to me. (O26f)

Some informants considered the safety measures repulsive. In extreme cases, informants noted that they had, for example, moved to participate in services of the Moscow Patriarchate where the use of facemasks is not so common (O21f). Orthodox informants also recalled negative experiences from situations in which they had not taken part in the Liturgy – or had watched a streamed service – and subsequently received communion. They reported that it was strange to watch a streamed service and then visit the church to receive communion in haste. While the informants rationally understood the precautions, they felt ambivalent about them: 'I had mixed feelings about it. Waiting outside the church, separate from other people, made me feel somehow contaminated. [...] I felt like I should not have participated in the first place.' (O267) Another informant stated that the social isolation and avoidance of social contact made them feel as if they were "leprotic" (O199). These experiences mirror the nature of the Eucharist as a sacrament that is expected to create and strengthen the feeling of unity.³³

Emotional ambivalence is a feature that is expressed in all datasets. Of the OCF informants, 13 reported ambivalent feelings regarding their eucharistic experiences by describing them, for example, as 'positive yet confusing', 'lovely, but also wistful', and 'nice yet plain'. Responses to the follow-up inquiry were lengthier and more vivid than the responses to the initial questionnaire;

33 See also Perdew, "Reflections," 32.

hence, they could not be easily clustered into categories of negative or positive experiences. From the responses of the informants of the follow-up inquiry, the most expressed single experiences were the increased understanding of the Eucharist as something not to be taken for granted anymore (O_{9f}, O_{27f}, O_{41f}, O_{311f}) and the realization that the personal meaning of the Eucharist had not changed (O_{101f}, O_{197f}).

The Lutheran parishioners also brought forward their emotional ambivalence in multiple responses, although these did not necessarily concern hygiene or other practical issues. This is most evident in the answer of L₃₉:

I was happy to be able to participate in communion, but it was also a sad experience because it reminded me that we are not yet in a normal situation. Moreover, the thought of probably being without communion again soon felt heavy. Last Sunday, I cried when I went to communion, which I don't remember ever having done before.

About one-third of the Lutheran vicars expressed ambivalence, regardless of whether they had celebrated the Eucharist. Many of the vicars' responses revealed an experience of joy in taking part in communion or in making the rational decision of not celebrating it, but they simultaneously felt sadness, guilt, or a longing for connection due to the lack of parishioners (e.g., V₃₇; V₆₅; V₈₆; V₁₀₃). As V₃₁ noted, 'The solution [of not celebrating the Eucharist] felt strange, as we are used to celebrating the Mass. At the same time, it seemed to bring us closer to the parishioners, as we put ourselves in the same position as them.' Positive experiences of the celebration of the Eucharist were described with rather homogeneous conceptualization, with the use of terms such as 'evocative', 'wonderful', 'communal', 'touching', 'meaningful', 'precious', and 'important'. On the other hand, many of those who deemed the experience (both of celebrating and of not celebrating the Eucharist) as negative used similar concepts, using descriptions such as 'odd', 'sad', and 'strange'. Strangeness was also linked to the very concrete external dimensions of the Eucharist. Specifically, several informants who had participated in the Orthodox Eucharist described this kind of experience. For example, many informants mentioned the wooden spoon for individual use in their accounts. They claimed that their experience was 'odd, not normal' (O₂₁₁) and 'confusing' (O₁₇₅), further elaborating that the spoon was 'not working', 'sucking all the wine' (O₂₃₁), and 'sticking to the tongue' (O₁₂₄).

Several Orthodox informants also commented on the changes in eucharistic practices, deeming them as valuable and worth keeping even in post-pandemic

situations. O15, for example, pondered, 'I hope that this will change the distribution of the communion for good. Communion is sacred, but we humans are not. [...] For me, this [experience of lack of hygiene measures] is even an obstacle for taking part in the communion' (O15). In contrast, none of the Lutheran vicars or parishioners commented on continuing practices of the time of exception after the pandemic. This stresses the differences in Eucharistic theology, and thus practices, of the churches and the more massive changes that occurred in OCF practices during the pandemic.

Despite these differences, one of the most often used concepts in describing one's experiences in all the data sets was longing. Out of 330 Orthodox informants, 62 wrote about longing in their responses. It was also used by 26 Lutheran parishioners, and 15 of them connected longing to the lack of communion in a very similar way: 'I longed for the Eucharist very much' (L201; similarly, L161; L170). One of the informants pondered, 'In a streamed service, one does not experience connection and engagement in the same way [as through physical participation in the church]. [...] What I missed the most was the communion' (L155). Quite similarly, another noted, 'I have realized the importance of the Eucharist for my relationship with God, and [I have also noted that] I have grown apart from my own congregation' (L100). Some of the informants did, however, experience spiritual connectedness, as L218 said, 'I missed the Eucharist much, but the presence of the Holy could still be experienced through the stream'.³⁴

While the majority of the informants of the ELCF expressed feelings of longing in connection to the lack of the Eucharist, only five of the Orthodox informants expressed longing towards the Eucharist. Instead, objects of longing were more commonly the services and the church community, along with the diversity they entailed. This may reflect the eucharistic ecclesiology of the Orthodox Church.³⁵ Corporeality and the sensory nature of the services were often mentioned, as O103 expressed, 'I miss very much physical being in the services, I miss all other parishioners, all feelings the church can provide, beautiful icons, the smell of candles and incense, beautiful singing of the choir, priests who I know and feel safe, I miss everything.' Just as the community was

34 For theological discussion on real and sacramental participation (in a Catholic context), see, e.g., Mattjis Ploeger, "A New Sacramental Theology for e-Eucharist?" *Yearbook for Ritual and Liturgical Studies* 36 (2020), 54–70. Ploeger's stand and argumentation differ rather greatly from, for example, that of Teresa Berger, who also studies the Catholic Church.

35 John Zizioulas, *Being as Communion: Studies in Personhood and the Church* (New York: svcs Press, 1997).

often mentioned, so were communal activities and voluntary work. Authentic connection and presence could not be conveyed via streamed services, as O128 described, ‘I have longed for alive and present participation in the services more than I would have thought. A streamed service is not a proper substitute’.

With regard to the expressions of longing among the parishioners, it seems that they had a sense of ‘principles of incarnation and embodiment’,³⁶ which becomes evident in their longing for in-person participation and the physical ritual of the Eucharist, as well as in their feeling of the lack of connectedness. As Stephanie Perdew has noted, the longing among parishioners deepens with time, as the feeling of something missing from one’s religious life grows stronger.³⁷ In our data, the lack of physicality and the consequent feeling of longing were evident, even during the first wave of the pandemic.

Interestingly, multiple Lutheran vicars also wrote about longing, but in a rather different vein compared to the ELCF and OCF parishioners. Out of 141 vicars, 28 mentioned longing in their descriptions, and 14 connected the emotion explicitly to the lack of the Eucharist. The longing for communion was explicated, for instance, in the following quotes: ‘Paschal Thursday without communion was the strangest. The service was tinged with a longing for a communal table’ (K9) and ‘Longing was emphasized, a shared longing with parishioners. A sense of solidarity’ (K87). One of the vicars even spoke about longing for the Eucharist as a sacrament itself: ‘We were all participants in the “sacrament of longing”’ (K80).

Whereas the parishioners felt the lack of communion particularly as a negative thing or as something breaking the connection between people, the vicars wrote in several answers about connectedness with the congregation, not only when the celebration of the Eucharist was possible, but also when it was not. Thus, it seems that the vicars widely thought that, with regard to communion, the connection between them and their parishioners was strengthened in two ways: first, by the absence of communion and longing for it, which united them all; and second, by the imagined presence of parishioners who were in fact absent from communion but present in spirit. In the latter case, the unifying element was either livestreaming or remembrance by the vicars. These experiences reflect well the findings of Teresa Berger, who argues that ‘non-local sacred spaces’, such as in livestreams where co-presence is perceived rather than physical, allow for new means of feeling connectedness.³⁸

36 See Perdew, “Reflections,” 36.

37 Ibid.

38 Berger, “@ Worship”, 105–106. See also Böntert, “Liturgical Migrations,” 201, 204.

While our data does not contain a separate questionnaire targeted at clergy of the OCF, a number of Orthodox members mentioned their role in the church as church singers, altar servants, or other liturgical roles. Most of these informants expressed their experience of liturgical life and Eucharist by describing how they felt privileged and yearned for community, as O7of mentioned, 'Presence of each parishioner increases the spiritual significance of the service. [...] Obviously, people yearn to serve like before, and it is the same for me'. In summary, while those who were not able to physically participate in the services were longing for physical services, Eucharist, and community, those who were able to participate also longed for a non-present congregation.

Participation in the Eucharist during the pandemic is colored by many emotions that are not normally part of one's experience of communion. Divergence from customary experiences was vocalized with adjectives such as 'weird', 'not normal', and 'odd' in informants' accounts. Also, basic emotions, such as sadness and fear, were expressed in many responses. Perhaps because of the practice of the Eucharist undergoing smaller changes or adjustments in the ELCF compared to the OCF, the responses from the parishioners of the ELCF were not as negatively charged as those of the OCF informants.

6 Conclusion

In this article, we have analyzed how Eucharistic practices have transformed due to COVID-19 in the ELCF and OCF, and how these transformations are reflected in the experiences of the parishioners and clergy. According to our analysis, in exceptional circumstances, the differences in sacramental theologies between the ELCF and the OCF have become evident. However, the everyday experiences of both the Lutheran and Orthodox informants seem to be somewhat similar, even though some differences also occur.

Perhaps the most common and noticeable feature in our data, voiced by Orthodox and Lutheran parishioners and Lutheran vicars alike, was the experience of yearning or longing. Lutheran informants connected the feeling of longing to the Eucharist itself, while Orthodox informants stressed the Eucharistic community and the corporeality of the Liturgy more often. Despite their different roles in the church – and the consequent unequal access to the sacrament – the experiences of laypeople and clergy were somewhat similar during the pandemic. There seems to have been a shared longing for the Eucharistic communion in its sacramental, communal, and social aspects. The way the feeling of longing was linked to the sense of connectedness somewhat

differed between the parishioners and the Lutheran vicars, however. The vicars experienced a strengthened connection with parishioners when no communion services were provided. The experience of connection arose from a shared longing for the sacrament of the Eucharist among the vicars, whereas in the responses of the parishioners, the sense of connectedness was more often lost.

Therefore, longing did not refer only to a lack of Eucharists for an unusually long period of time in the abnormal status quo of the pandemic. It also pointed out the importance of the communal aspect of the Eucharist and the experience of belonging in times of reduced communal life. The acknowledgment of the deep and fundamental importance of the communal and liturgical character of being a Christian was exemplified in repeated accounts by our informants through grown awareness and appreciation of collective liturgical and eucharistic parish life. This suggests that the COVID-19 pandemic contributed to an increased awareness of communality among Finnish Orthodox and Lutheran Christians. In addition, increased attendance was noticed in the streamed services during the pandemic, which may indicate the importance of belonging to the religious community.

Additionally, in the liturgical context of our study, longing for the Eucharist and communality underline the relevance of rituals and their importance in building up an individual's feeling of security in insecure times. This finding is in line with past research that has pointed out that (religious) rituals strengthen groups and, as embodied experiences, create a sense of meaning in chaotic circumstances and periods of crisis.³⁹ Thus, religious rituals maintain people's well-being in difficult situations. By participating in a religious ritual, people become aware of the significance of the situation and can contextualize it more positively.⁴⁰ The Eucharist, therefore, seems to have an important ritual dimension that, in the absence of a physical congregation, cannot be replaced in the same way as other parts of the service. The importance of the ritual dimension of the Eucharist also becomes evident in the informants' various emotional responses, especially in their resistance to change in the face of

39 Elaine Ramshaw, "The Personalization of Postmodern Post-Mortem Rituals," *Pastoral Psychology* 59/2 (2010), 171–178; Lars Danbolt & Hans Stifoss-Hanssen, "Public Disaster Ritual in the Local Community: A Study of Norwegian Cases," *Journal of Ritual Studies* 25/2 (2011), 25–36.

40 Bryan Goodman, "Faith in a Time of Crises," *American Psychological Association*, 11 May, 2020, <https://www.apa.org/topics/covid-19/faith-crisis>; Kenneth Pargament, *Spiritually Integrated Psychotherapy: Understanding and Addressing the Sacred* (New York: The Guilford Press, 2007), 100.

external modifications in Eucharist practices, such as wearing facemasks or using disposable spoons.

Orthodox and Lutheran informants have experienced COVID-19 pandemic restrictions and their effects on ecclesiastical, liturgical, and sacramental life in their respective church bodies in a rather similar manner. Even though we can detect an underlying and jointly worded spiritual experience of the pandemic, our data and analyses cannot be extended to confirming the existence of a consciously shared, overarching ecumenical experience between Orthodox and Lutheran Finns and their churches.

Nevertheless, services during the pandemic seem to have offered new means for grassroots ecumenism. The lack of inclusion and of the sense of connectedness have led people to forge new kinds of connections via technological tools. From an ecumenical perspective, the possibility of participating in services of other denominations with a lower threshold than before is one of the significant changes. This kind of grassroots ecumenism would perhaps be a fruitful aspect worth taking into account in the future, as well as in the ecumenical discussions between the churches.

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