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CYBERGRACE IN CYBERSPACE?

An Argument for Online Liturgies in Light of COVID-19

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Many places around the world were placed under quarantine to mitigate the threat of the COVID-19 pandemic. Entire communities went into lockdown, big gatherings were prohibited, and, as a corollary effect, many of the faithful were unable to go to church and participate in the Eucharist—even on the days covered by the precept of obligation—as well as in other sacraments and liturgical celebrations.

In response to this concern, many bishops granted dispensation from the precept of obligation, thereby freeing the faithful from their religious duty to attend Mass on Sundays and holy days of obligation for the specified period. At the same time, dioceses and parishes, including the Holy See, no less, harnessed the power of the Internet as an avenue for people to continue to have virtual access to the Eucharist and many other forms of liturgical and common prayer, all without breaking quarantine or transgressing social distancing protocols.

The question, nevertheless, of how valid or efficacious these online liturgies are has been raised, and whether and in what way these can really nurture souls. It is not something that can be dismissed outright as "ridiculous" inasmuch as it involves the kind of spiritual

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nourishment being offered to the faithful.[1] As Ridgeway puts it, "can ministers bless the Lord's Table over Zoom? The worldwide pandemic provides all-new context for this theologically untested—and for some unthinkable—question."[2] This paper thus attempts to take another look into the question of online liturgies in light of the COVID-19 experience.

Sacraments Online?

From simple websites to social media accounts that keep the faithful not only informed but also connected, many religious organizations, including the Catholic Church, have been quite enterprising in their use of the Internet as a communicative and connective tool. Most of these use cases, however, are still confined to Web 1.0 (informative, read-only sites) and Web 2.0 (social networks). Many have yet to adopt Web 3.0 (intuitive, user-sensitive Web) and even 4.0 (integrative Web) modalities that are becoming more and more commonplace.[3]

This trend seems to be true particularly when it comes to the Catholic Church's use of the Internet for liturgy, which is limited for the most part to streaming videos of liturgical celebrations with little to no interactivity—very Web 1.0 or, at the most, 2.0. It is a far cry from the emerging Web 4.0 where we see an increasing fusion and interpenetration of the online and the offline. As a point of comparison,

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[1]See P. Esmaquel II, "Replays of Masses Not 'Invalid' Amid Pandemic, says Bishop David," *Rappler* (May 24, 2020).

[2]C. Ridgeway, "Online Communion Can Still Be Sacramental," *Christianity Today* (March 27, 2020).

[3]See my previous articles for a discussion of these stages in the development of the Internet, along with illustrative examples of religious uses of the Internet for each of the stages: "How to Communicate in the Age of Web 4.0?: Challenges and Possibilities for Religions in Asia," *Religion and Social Communication* 14:2 (2016): 106–121; "Digital Expressions, Experiences and Challenges of and for Religions in Asia," *Religion and Social Communication* 16:2 (2018): 105–123; "Internet and Social Media: Bridge or Barrier for a Culture of Communion?" *Landas* 32:2 (2018): 33–59. See also F.-J. Eilers, *Communicating in Ministry and Mission*, 4th ed. (Manila: Logos Publications, 2018), 210–212.

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I have cited in a previous article the practice of virtual *pujas* among some Hindus where devotees pray to and view the deity live online, give their offerings online, and receive the *prasad* or blessed object that is shipped to them afterwards. We are also even beginning to see the age of cybersanghas and online ummahs in Buddhist and Islamic circles.

The Catholic Church, meanwhile, is quite absolute in its official stance regarding the status of its liturgical celebrations being streamed online, especially when it comes to the sacraments. It is clear and unequivocal in declaring that "there are no sacraments on the Internet; and even the religious experiences possible there by the grace of God are insufficient apart from real-world interaction with other persons of faith."[4] Based on this teaching, and contrary to the belief of many Catholics during the pandemic, watching a Eucharist over the Internet (as well as doing so through television or radio), even in real time, does not actually count as liturgical participation in the strict sense.

Technically speaking, watching an online Mass is not the same as attending Mass and does not satisfy the obligation to do so, whether in the case of the pandemic or even that of the sick and other similar cases. In the case of the pandemic, there is no more obligation to fulfill not only where a dispensation from the precept of obligation has been granted but also because the pandemic itself and the imposed quarantine have rendered assistance in a Eucharistic celebration practically impossible, as is foreseen in Canon 1248 §2. With regard to the sick, the very same canon applies—they are deemed, as affirmed twice by the Catechism of the Catholic Church (CCC), "*excused* for a serious reason" because of their condition.[5] As Pope simply puts it, "It doesn't have to 'count' since you don't have an obligation to meet in the first place."[6]

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[4]Pontifical Council for Social Communications, *The Church and Internet* (February 22, 2002), no. 9.

[5]See *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 1993), nos. 2181 and 2183 (emphasis added). Hereafter referred to as CCC.

[6]C. Pope, "Does TV Mass 'count'?" *Our Sunday Visitor* (January 4, 2017).

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In fact, attending the remote broadcast of a Eucharistic celebration, whether through the radio, television, or Internet, is not even included in what Canon 1248 §2 and CCC 2183 suggest as compensatory substitutes in circumstances such as these, namely,

> that the faithful take part in a liturgy of the word if such a liturgy is celebrated in a parish church or other sacred place according to the prescripts of the diocesan bishop or that they devote themselves to prayer for a suitable time alone, as a family, or, as the occasion permits, in groups of families.[7]

In this light, meditating on the Gospel of the day or praying the Rosary might be better alternatives to watching an online Mass because of their live and dynamic nature. Nevertheless, some argue that watching online Masses, even replays, can have certain spiritual benefits. Diwa says:

> This is a great help to grow in prayer and desire for the Holy Eucharist. It's not a question of "blessing" but of participating in the Sacrifice of Jesus Christ vs. watching a recording of it some other time. Both are genuine sources of spiritual nourishments in this difficult time.[8]

The question of whether or not there can be sacraments online becomes even clearer with regard to the possibility of online absolution. The Archbishop of Jakarta, Ignatius Cardinal Suharyo Hardjoatmodjo, gave such an absolution on January 30, 2020 which was streamed live on the YouTube channel of Indonesia's Catholic TV station, HidupTV,[9] and which stirred an uproar among some Catholics who perceived the anomaly. At least two parishes here in the Philippines also posted a similar endeavor on their Facebook accounts to impart online absolution during the COVID-19 crisis; they eventually took

[7]See *Codex Iuris Canonici auctoritate Ioannis Pauli PP. II promulgatus* (Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 1983), Canon 1248 §2 and CCC 2183.

[8]As quoted in Esmaquel, "Replays of Masses Not 'Invalid' Amid Pandemic, says Bishop David."

[9]See the report of M. Hariyadi, "Absolusi Umum dari Uskup KAJ: Senin, 30 Maret 2020," *Sesawi.net* (March 30, 2020).

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their posts down and did not proceed as planned, presumably after being corrected.[10]

The *Note from the Apostolic Penitentiary on the Sacrament of Reconciliation in the Current Pandemic* underlines the necessity on the part of the penitent of physically hearing the words of absolution by explicitly urging the use of voice amplification to the fullest extent possible. The same document, moreover, recalls the longstanding doctrine, as an ultimate recourse in cases where absolution cannot be physically imparted, that

> perfect contrition, coming from the love of God, beloved above all things, expressed by a sincere request for forgiveness (that which the penitent is at present able to express) and accompanied by *votum confessionis*, that is, by the firm resolution to have recourse, as soon as possible, to sacramental confession, obtains forgiveness of sins, even mortal ones.[11]

Nowhere in the documents of the Church is online absolution foreseen as a possibility.

The Pope himself, who presided in what was perhaps the most iconic online liturgy of the entire pandemic in his Extraordinary *Urbi et Orbi* Blessing last March 27, 2020, warned afterwards of a fundamental deficiency in such online liturgies, which is the lack of community. He elaborates:

> I say this because someone made me reflect on the danger brought about by this moment that we are experiencing, this pandemic that has made all of us communicate, through the media, through the means of communication, even in matters of religion. Even in this Mass, we are all communicating, but we are not together, spiritually together. The people present here are very few. But there are many people attending: we are together, but not together. Even when it comes to the Sacrament that you are receiving today, the Eucharist; the people who are connected with us only have Spiritual Communion. And this isn't

[10]See "Philippines parish cancels planned 'online general absolution'," *Catholic News Agency* (April 2, 2020).

[11]*Note from the Apostolic Penitentiary on the Sacrament of Reconciliation in the Current Pandemic* (Rome: Holy See Press Office, March 19, 2020).

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> the Church: this is the Church in a difficult situation, which the Lord permits, but the ideal of the Church is always with the people and with the Sacraments—always.[12]

Here we see how the current Pontiff himself remains very much in line with the ambivalent if not negative stance of the Church toward online liturgies. His former spokesperson even remembers how he declined the request, made around the beginning of his papacy, to have his daily Masses streamed online in the interest of preserving the simplicity and spontaneity of the liturgical celebration, which he feared might be compromised by the intrusion of cameras. It was not until the lockdown during the pandemic that he agreed to have them livestreamed.[13] Indeed, at the end of the same homily, the Pope also picked up the words of another bishop who told him:

> Be careful not to make the Church "viral," not to make the sacraments "viral," not to make the people of God "viral." The Church, the sacraments, the people of God are concrete. It is true that at this moment we must relate with the Lord in this way, but we need to get out of the tunnel, not stay there. And this is the familiarity of the apostles: not Gnostic, not "viral," not selfish for each of them, but a concrete familiarity in the people.

There seems to be a dichotomy in this line of thinking between what is real, which is equated with what is concrete, and what is not, under which falls the virtual. The problem with this kind of view is that the Church and the Pope (which is so unlike him) seem to be out of touch

[12]Dico questo perché qualcuno mi ha fatto riflettere sul pericolo che questo momento che stiamo vivendo, questa pandemia che ha fatto che tutti ci comunicassimo anche religiosamente attraverso i media, attraverso i mezzi di comunicazione, anche questa Messa, siamo tutti comunicanti, ma non insieme, spiritualmente insieme. Il popolo è piccolo. C'è un grande popolo: stiamo insieme, ma non insieme. Anche il Sacramento: oggi ce l'avete, l'Eucaristia, ma la gente che è collegata con noi, soltanto la comunione spirituale. E questa non è la Chiesa: questa è la Chiesa di una situazione difficile, che il Signore permette, ma l'ideale della Chiesa è sempre con il popolo e con i sacramenti. Sempre. (Francesco, "La familiarità con il Signore" [homily] [April 17, 2020])

[13]F. Lombardi, "Piazza piena e Piazza vuota," *Vatican News* (April 15, 2020).

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with the experience of many ordinary people today, the findings of recent research, and the sense of some contemporary religious thinkers.

Our Context: An Emerging POPC World

It is no secret that many Filipinos nowadays spend most of their time online. In a 2019 survey conducted by We Are Social and Hootsuite, the Philippines continues to rank first among the world's countries with the heaviest Internet users, averaging ten hours and two minutes a day.[14] More and more people today do many if not most of their daily activities online, such as working, studying, shopping, playing, etc., a phenomenon aptly described by the newly-coined phrase "permanently online, permanently connected" (POPC). For people living in a POPC world, the virtual is real. Indeed, we may even go on to say that virtual—even more than face-to-face (FTF)—reality will soon be the new reality as digital natives overtake digital migrants and the gap between online and offline is gradually blurred with the advent of Web 4.0. What was once a matter of science fiction is fast becoming our day-to-day experience.

The reality of virtual reality is also affirmed by the findings of recent research. In terms of quality of human interaction, for instance, one study found that POPC not only allows individuals to connect with each other "on a disclosive, personal level that can be deeply satisfying and very meaningful" but also raises not only the quantity but also the quality of what is being shared since individuals are more likely to share content that they perceive as meaningful, moving, or awe-inspiring.[15]

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[14]See S. Kemp, *Digital 2019: Essential Insights into How People Around the World Use the Internet, Mobile Devices, Social Media, and E-commerce* (We are Social & Hootsuite, 2019).

[15]See S. Trepte & M. Oliver, "Getting the Best Out of POPC While Keeping the Risks in Mind: The Calculus of Meaningfulness and Privacy," in P. Vorderer, D. Hefner, L. Reinecke, & C. Klimmt, eds., *Permanently Online, Permanently Connected: Living and Communicating in a POPC World* (New York & London: Routledge, 2018), 110.

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Internet-mediated communication is not necessarily shallower; rather, and as is the case with any other media, its depth or lack thereof is not inherent but dependent on its user. In fact, it has been discovered that online relationships are not necessarily less deep or intimate than FTF ones, and that even the simplest "relationship maintenance behaviors" done through social media—such as liking posts or posting short updates about one's day—can build relationships in a very real way.[16] The Internet as such is capable of fostering intimacy not only among those who are miles apart and have no other means of connection but even among those who may see each other often and yet have become even more regularly and substantially connected because of it. During the pandemic, for instance, we saw how people were still able to express their concern for each other, show their solidarity in social issues, and share what they had with those in greater need through online means, all despite their inability to interact, assemble physically, or reach out in person.

In the religious domain, Lytle calls attention to how some faith communities, "unable to presume that a physically gathered community will remain the norm," have begun to explore the possibility, even prior to the situation created by the pandemic, of having virtual churches and "creating immersive worlds so that individuals will always have a space to gather." According to her, these churches regard this as "a natural evolution of ways to respond to Jesus' command to proclaim the gospel to all nations," extending it to the digital frontier.[17] For instance, I have mentioned *FunCity*[18] in a previous article, the German virtual city on the Internet where a Catholic parish named Saint Bonifatius has been shepherding souls online since 1998. In addition to a staff of nine pastoral workers who cater to online parishioners, it also has a functioning library, oratory, and virtual monastery where people can drop prayer requests for cloistered religious who will read and

[16]S. Utz, "POPC and Social Relationships," in Vorderer, Hefner, Reinecke, & Klimmt, eds., *Permanently Online, Permanently Connected*, 141–143.

[17]J. Lytle, *Faith Formation 4.0: Introducing an Ecology of Faith in a Digital Age* (New York: Morehouse Publishing, 2013), 76.

[18]One may visit the website of *FunCity* at http://funama.de/.

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respond to them. Nevertheless, they are able to render all of these but not the sacraments.

Hayes already cautioned faith communities as early as 2007 that "we cannot afford to *not* be immersed in technology as a church. A first point of reference is that Google has become the first place people search for *anything*."[19] If faith communities want people to find them and God through them, being truly present online has become indispensable. In light of this, we need to heed the counsel of Gould against maintaining too sharp a distinction between "real" and "virtual." According to her, we need to acknowledge the fact that "online communities of faith are *real* to members who have come to rely on them for inspiration and support.…"[20] She elaborates concerning these communities:

> Some communities are extensions of already existing physical communities. Others are entirely virtual—created, gathered, developed, and sustained exclusively online. Still others are communities where the boundaries between what is "real" (i.e. physical) and what is virtual (i.e. online) are permeable.
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> When social media was first developed and everyone got a glimmer about how it might be used, distinctions between real and virtual worlds were helpful. Not anymore. Turns out virtual community is real community. This is also true for the world of being and doing church online.

While the ubiquity of the Internet in human life and society has been criticized several times by the Church and especially by the present Pontiff,[21] it is a historical product that has become irreversible and inevitable nonetheless. Besides, it may not necessarily be evil in itself. The pandemic and the situation it has created have revealed

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[19]M. Hayes, *Googling God: The Religious Landscape of People in their 20s and 30s* (New York/Mahwah: Paulist Press, 2007), 144.

[20]M. Gould, *The Social Media Gospel: Sharing the Good News in New Ways*, 2nd ed. (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2015), 30.

[21]See, for instance, Francis, *Laudato Si'* [On Care for Our Common Home] (Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 2015), no. 47 and Francis, *Gaudete et Exsultate* [On the Call to Holiness in Today's World] (Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 2018), no. 167.

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even more possibilities for how we can use the Internet creatively for various endeavors and in ways that most of us have not previously imagined, or which were being accessed only by a few. Various aspects of our life and society had to shift to online modalities, including our worship, in a matter of days or weeks, and since the transition was very abrupt and took us out of what is familiar, it was not always easy or welcome. Yet the shift had already been happening—and has already happened—in many sectors of society even before the pandemic, and many of these changes are likely to become part of the "new normal" long after this crisis is over.

Our experience during the pandemic is already a glimpse of how even more pervasive digital technology is going to become in the coming years. Horsfield aptly describes what Murray calls the "spatial affordance"[22] of the Internet when he says that "mediated communication has taken on the characteristics of an enveloping technological and symbolic environment *within which life is lived*."[23] As virtual reality becomes the new reality, cyberspace also becomes the new space where people are. Campbell and Garner advise that

> the digital environment is not going away in the foreseeable future. Rather, with the proliferation of augmented reality, mobile media, and internet, it promises to grow and become interconnected with our physical environment and to give rise to *distinct digital places or neighborhoods for people*.[24]

With a similar sense of the Internet as a kind of space, John Paul II once called it the "New Areopagus"[25] or new marketplace where people

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[22]See J. Murray, *Inventing the Medium: Principles of Interaction Design as a Cultural Practice* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2012), 51–87.

[23]P. Horsfield, *From Jesus to the Internet: A History of Christianity and Media* (West Sussex, UK: John Wiley & Sons, 2015), 264–265 (emphasis added).

[24]H. Campbell & S. Garner, *Networked Theology: Negotiating Faith in Digital Culture* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2016), 93 (emphasis added).

[25]John Paul II, *Redemptoris Missio* [On the Permanent Validity of the Church's Missionary Mandate] (Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 1990), no. 37.

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today converge and the best and worst of the world can be found. Yet most people today do not simply congregate on the Internet; they practically live and do almost everything there. Benedict XVI appears to have sensed the future more accurately somehow when he described the World Wide Web as the "digital continent"[26] way back in 2010—merely a decade later, it is now the largest continent in the world with almost four billion citizens. The words of Paul VI to the members and *periti* of the Consilium for the execution of the Constitution on the Liturgy in 1970 now appear to be prophetic:

> The instruments of social communication are everywhere in today's society and their even wider use is foreseen in the coming years. The Church cannot forget this but instead must consider the fact that people are so affected by them that audiovisual education is more effective than education through oral or written communication. Therefore, these means must be dealt with not only because they can be of assistance in catechetics, especially in communities not having priests, but also because it is no longer possible to disregard them.[27]

Can the Church continue to insist that there are no sacraments in a POPC world and that the faith communities found therein are not real communities? Is God not online? Cannot God's grace flow online?

The Importance of the Community in Liturgy

Based on the Pontiff's comments, the first major objection to online liturgy stems from the apparent absence of the gathered community. This is one of the major tenets of the Vatican II reform which underlined the active participation of the assembly. However,

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[26]Benedict XVI, *The Priest and Pastoral Ministry in a Digital World: New Media at the Service of the Word* (44th World Communications Day message) (Rome: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 2010); see also his 43rd World Communications Day message, *New Technologies, New Relationships: Promoting a Culture of Respect, Dialogue and Friendship* (Rome: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 2009).

[27]Paul VI, Address to the members and periti of the Consilium on the occasion of its final plenary meeting (April 10, 1970), *AAS* 62 (1970): 272–274.

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what is at stake here is not only our liturgical theology but also our ecclesiology, our self-understanding as God's priestly people. In view of this, Mickens loathes that most clergy[28] hardly thought of other liturgical solutions during the lockdown period "outside of having Father continue to say Mass for the laypeople." He expounds:

> But, regrettably, a number of pre-Vatican II notions about the Eucharist have remained even after the reform. Some are based on the concepts of form and matter, which can end up making the celebration of the sacraments minimalistic and legalistic. For example, when a validly ordained presbyter licitly confects the elements of bread and wine by using the proper formula (words of institution and invocation of the Holy Spirit), and then consumes those elements, it is considered a valid Eucharist. The presence of the assembly may be desirable, but it's not necessary. The practice of priests celebrating "private" Masses by themselves or with the assistance of an altar boy is not a relic of the Middle Ages. It is something that continues to this very day. This is a reductive view of the sacrament. And it is clericalist.[29]

We recall that the Latin word for Church, *ecclesia*, comes from the Greek word *ekklesia*, which is formed out of two words—*ek* (out of) and *kaleo* (call)—and means "called out of" or "gathered." Prior to its Christian usage, it referred to citizen assemblies in Greece that were convoked to vote on matters affecting their welfare and loosely denoted any kind of gathering such as a crowd or mob. It was also used in the Septuagint to render the Hebrew theological term *qahal* or sacred assembly of the Lord.[30]

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[28]To be fair, some clergy were also very creative in their approach. The Archdiocese of Manila, for example, prepared and disseminated a guide to celebrating the Paschal Triduum as a family at home, highlighting beautifully the role of the family as domestic Church.

[29]R. Mickens, "Cardinal Sarah Set to Retire: What if a Layman Took His Place?" *La Croix* (May 8, 2020).

[30]For a more detailed discussion of *ekklesia* in its historical context, see R. Banks, *Paul's Idea of Community* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, Inc., 1994), 27–31.

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In this light, togetherness, gathering, and even physically "going out" to be with one another may be seen as intrinsically tied to the notion of constituting the Church as the Lord's assembly. For instance, M. Francis identifies gathering as the first of the four basic elements that constitute *qahal*[31] and considers "the restoration of the active assembly" to be "the single most important accomplishment of the liturgical reform promoted by the Second Vatican Council."[32] He further specifies that "as a kind of sacrament, the assembly 'as the epiphany of the Church' is never an abstraction but takes place at a particular time and in a particular place."[33] Similarly, Militello defines *ekklesia* as "the assembly actually gathered here and now, in the immediacy of a space and a time that are experiential and experienced."[34] The importance of this physical gathering of the assembly is reflected in the liturgy itself as, for instance, in the very first rubric of the Order of the Mass: "When the people are gathered…."[35] More than just giving the cue for beginning the celebration, this points to the indispensable role of the gathered community in the liturgy.

Nevertheless, unlike the Greek political *ekklesia*, which is only such when they are formally convened, or the informal Greek *ekklesia*, which becomes such de facto when they are together, the Christian notion of *ecclesia*, which is more akin to the Hebrew *qahal*, refers to a gathering that is first and foremost ontological and theological and not just formal or factual. Thus, whenever Paul uses the word *ekklesia* in a formal context, as when greeting the community in his epistles, it almost always appears

[31]M. Francis, "The Liturgical Assembly," in A. Chupungco, ed., *Handbook for Liturgical Studies* Vol. II: *Fundamental Liturgy* (Quezon City: Claretian Publications, 2004), 132.

[32]Francis, "The Liturgical Assembly," 129.

[33]Francis, "The Liturgical Assembly," 140.

[34]C. Militello, "A Theology of Liturgical Space," in A. Chupungco, ed., *Handbook for Liturgical Studies* Vol. V: *Liturgical Time and Space* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2000), 398.

[35]*The Roman Missal* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2011), 513.

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in the form *Ecclesia Dei*, a programmatic phrase that encapsulates his understanding of *ecclesia*. As Roloff says, "Here, the gen. 'of God' is not merely an addendum defining more precisely the term *church*, but is indeed an integral part of a fixed theological formulation."[36]

The gathering of the Church happens on a level that is much deeper than the physical. More properly, it pertains to the gathering of humanity called through, with, and in Jesus Christ, into his fellowship with the Father in the Holy Spirit.[37] In this way, the *ecclesia* continues to be gathered even when it is not in a physical gathering, assembled even when not in temporal assembly. As the Second Vatican Council describes, in this gathering "He planned to assemble in the Holy Church all those who would believe in Christ."[38] It is an assembly of the Church according to the plan of God that takes place not only in space and time but also in eternity.

In this light, the Church is able to affirm that every liturgical act is an act of the entire Church therein assembled, even if not physically. Chupungco reminds us that "as official worship, the liturgy is never exclusive and never private."[39] The example he invokes here is the mandate of the General Instruction of the Liturgy of the Hours, which entrusts to priests the duty of reciting the hours, the official prayer of the Church, even in the absence of the faithful "to ensure at least in their persons the regular carrying out of the duty of the entire community."[40] This is not being clericalist; rather, it simply affirms that the entire Church participates in the act of even just one person

[36]J. Roloff, "Ecclesia," in H. Balz & G. Schneider, eds., *Exegetical Dictionary of the New Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing, 1990), 411.

[37]Cf. 1 Cor. 1:9.

[38]Paul VI, *Lumen Gentium* [Dogmatic Constitution on the Church] (November 21, 1964), no. 2.

[39]A. Chupungco, *What, Then, is Liturgy?* (Quezon City: Claretian Publications, 2010), 67.

[40]Chupungco, *What, Then, is Liturgy?*, 67. Cf. *General Instruction on the Liturgy of the Hours* (Washington: United States Catholic Conference, 1971), no. 28.

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who is doing such in the name of the Church. As the Council affirms, every liturgical act is always and inherently an act of full public worship done by the whole Mystical Body of Christ, that is, by Christ the Head in union with his members.[41]

This view, which is very much in line with Paul's corporate or "Body of Christ" ecclesiology, does not disparage active participation; rather, it widens our understanding of the way by which we truly participate in the liturgy even when not actively doing so. Indeed, our faith in the communion of saints also leads us to believe that the whole Church is with us in every liturgy. All the saints in heaven and souls in purgatory are "tuned in" or connected with the entire Church on earth around the world and not just with the physical assembly. This means liturgy without community is theologically impossible. At the same time, this corporate or, we may even say, network vision of the Church can serve as one of the bases for understanding how an online liturgy can connect us in a real mystical way.

In view of this, it would be helpful perhaps to speak more about connection rather than congregation in the liturgy, whether it be online or offline. Being the gathered priestly people of God means more than just being together physically. Indeed, we can look at how people are able to connect in a real way despite the limitation of not being able to congregate physically.

Such may actually be the wisdom behind the Church's strong preference for broadcasting and viewing liturgies *dum peraguntur* or "while they are performed."[42] It is providential that the technology available today already enables the virtual gathering and interaction of people from different locations and across time zones through online

[41]See Paul VI, *Sacrosanctum Concilium* [Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy] (December 4, 1963), no. 7. Hereafter referred to as SC.

[42]See, for instance, United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, *Guidelines for Televising the Liturgy* (updated January 2014). See also the two decrees issued by the Vatican during the pandemic through the Congregation for Divine Worship and the Discipline of the Sacraments: *Decree: In Time of Covid-19* (March 19, 2020) and *Decree: In Time of Covid-19 (II)* (March 25, 2020).

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meeting apps like Zoom or Google Meet. And while the Ridgeway proposal of a "Zoom Mass" with each participant having bread and wine in front of the screen may be too far out,[43] distributing roles and encouraging people to sing and respond will surely make a celebration more dynamic, interactive, and participative as compared to mere broadcasts or livestreams that may accommodate more people and yet are more likely to reduce them to an audience. This is also far better than "canned" Masses and replays that are prone to be treated like products available for consumption at one's convenience.

The Importance of the Body in the Liturgy

The second major hurdle in this problematic concerns the essential place occupied by the human body in the liturgy, which cannot be overstated. Chupungco explains:

> Salvation history took place in the human body of the Incarnate Word. Obviously, the liturgy, which extends the presence of salvation history, takes place also in the human body. The human body is an essential component of the liturgy, just as the body of Christ was the instrument of his work of salvation.[44]

Presence is always required in the liturgy because of this incarnational principle. In the case of marriage by proxy, for instance, Canon 1104 §1 insists on the presence of both contracting parties, whether personally or by proxy. In effect, no sacrament is celebrated *in absentia*. As Chupungco expounds, "the Holy Spirit consecrates, forgives, and heals through the minister's contact with the human body. Tertullian's axiom is always worth remembering: *caro, salutis cardo*."[45] Indeed, even the Order of Christian Funerals always foresees the presence of the body or at least of the cremated remains in the various rites that accompany it on its final journey. Without the body

[43]See Ridgeway, "Online Communion Can Still Be Sacramental."

[44]Chupungco, *What, Then, is Liturgy?*, 49.

[45]Chupungco, *What, Then, is Liturgy?*, 49.

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present, the rite cannot be called a funeral liturgy, only a liturgy for the deceased.

However, beyond mere physical presence being a juridical requirement for the validity of a liturgical act, Chan avers that the liturgy as public worship of the Church "requires the active participation of the faithful."[46] In exploring the psychosociological dimension of the liturgy, Pinkus likewise underscores the importance of the body as indispensable to rite, asserting that

> only through the body does rite express and effect the transformation of the person.… It is in the body that rite inscribes the premonition of the victory over death; it is in the body that it inscribes the sign of a supernatural identity.[47]

Maggiani concurs by describing the body as the "arch-symbol"[48] through and by which symbols are understood and take effect.

The body, moreover, is also the subject of the liturgy and not just its object. Catella avers that "one celebrates with the 'live body,' that is, one celebrates with the totality of one's own being and one's own doing situated in time and space."[49] According to her, these "liturgical gestures are not some sort of instrumental extensions of the human; they are human bodiliness that approaches, sees, touches, perceives, expresses, 'does' the mystery of salvation."[50]

However, Chupungco himself does not limit being present to physical presence alone. He recognizes that

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[46]A. Chan, "Participation in the Liturgy," in Chupungco, ed., *Handbook for Liturgical Studies* Vol. II: *Fundamental Liturgy*, 151.

[47]L. Pinkus, "The Psychosociological Aspect of the Liturgy," in Chupungco, ed., *Handbook for Liturgical Studies* Vol. II: *Fundamental Liturgy*, 181–182.

[48]S. Maggiani, "The Language of Liturgy," in Chupungco, ed., *Handbook for Liturgical Studies* Vol. II: *Fundamental Liturgy*, 237.

[49]A. Catella, "Theology of the Liturgy," in Chupungco, ed., *Handbook for Liturgical Studies* Vol. II: *Fundamental Liturgy*, 24.

[50]Catella, "Theology of the Liturgy," 27.

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> there are several ways a person, event, or thing can be present besides being physically at hand. A loved one can be present in the heart of the lover; an event can be present in the memory of those who experienced it; and a thing can be present in the mind or intellect. Such presences, though not physical, are real, because they exist as a matter of fact in the heart, memory, or intellect. They are not tangible, but it does not mean that they are false and nonexistent.[51]

In a similar vein, Benedict XVI highlights the mediation of earthly signs during this time between redemption and the eschaton.[52] These signs include the gestures exerted by the human body as a form of active participation during the liturgy. Nevertheless, he qualifies that our external actions in the liturgy are "quite secondary" and that *doing* must actually stop when we come to the heart of the matter: *oratio*. For him, "it must be plainly evident that the *oratio* is the heart of the matter, but that it is important precisely because it provides a space for the *actio* of God."[53]

Here Benedict XVI is actually speaking of the Eucharistic Prayer, during which the impression may be had that the people are just "watching" the priest. He argues that in this part of the Eucharistic celebration, the people are engaged in the most essential *actio* of the liturgy, which is *oratio* or prayer, even in the apparent lack of words and actions. In fact, the active participation of the one receiving a sacrament, such as in the anointing of the sick, is not always possible and yet we celebrate it nonetheless. We see this beautifully, for instance, in the heart of the liturgy of Holy Orders, where the ordinandi simply submit to the actions of the celebrant as he prays and lays his hands over them.

As regards the role of the body in the liturgy, Benedict XVI explains, first of all, that it is passive before it can become active—to be "laid hold of by the Logos and for the Logos"[54] so as to be impelled

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[51]Chupungco, *What, Then, is Liturgy?*, 146.

[52]See Benedict XVI, *The Spirit of the Liturgy* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2000), 53–61.

[53]Benedict XVI, *The Spirit of the Liturgy*, 174.

[54]See Benedict XVI, *The Spirit of the Liturgy*, 174.

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to service—*leitourgia*—in everyday life while "the true liturgical action is the deed of God."[55] Yet according to him, liturgical gestures still provide a manner of training (*askesis*) for the body that allows a person "to be shaped and used by God."[56] In light of this, he views silence in the liturgy, which can be misconstrued by some as inaction, to be paramount: "something happens inwardly that corresponds to what is going on outwardly—we are disposing ourselves, preparing the way, placing ourselves before the Lord, asking him to make us ready for transformation."[57]

In a similar vein, Smolarski attaches great importance to liturgical gestures, objects, and words, which he describes as "foundational elements" or "building blocks" of the liturgy.[58] He also highlights the role of the senses,[59] of ritual,[60] and of the interaction between the minister and the assembly, saying that "this person-to-person interaction occurs at the center of the sacramental experience."[61] However, he also notes that "in this interactional model of the liturgy, the foremost role is *to be* a member of the assembly."[62] Presence, therefore, is the fundamental participation, if not being itself, over and above other ritual actions and interactions.

In view of this, it might be helpful to speak more about presence rather than proximity in the liturgy, whether online or offline. As Ridgeway suggests, this issue of online liturgies occasioned by the

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[55]Benedict XVI, *The Spirit of the Liturgy*, 174.

[56]Benedict XVI, *The Spirit of the Liturgy*, 176.

[57]Benedict XVI, *The Spirit of the Liturgy*, 211.

[58]See D. Smolarski, *Sacred Mysteries: Sacramental Principles and Liturgical Practice* (New York/Mahwah: Paulist Press, 1995), 17.

[59]See Smolarski, *Sacred Mysteries*, 28–29.

[60]See Smolarski, *Sacred Mysteries*, 30–32.

[61]Smolarski, *Sacred Mysteries*, 21.

[62]Smolarski, *Sacred Mysteries*, 22 (emphasis added).

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pandemic may be the time to reassess our understanding of presence and take it beyond the confines of physicality.[63] Unlike Ridgeway, however, the question will be framed here not in terms of presence vs. physicality but rather presence vs. proximity, particularly since online presence, as will be argued, can also have real physical elements. Indeed, just as one can be proximate or "physically present" while not actually so, it has become possible to be remote or "physically absent" while actually present through online means. It is important, moreover, to see that the human body is only one of the many elements that the liturgy involves and that active participation is not limited to the physical. As Chupungco says,

> The liturgy engages the entire person: mind, heart, soul, spirit and body. Worship in spirit and trust is a performative act that involves the participation of the mind that understands, the heart that ponders, the soul that is nourished, the spirit that soars and the body that performs the action. The liturgy is thus an activity that is spiritual and physical, intellectual and emotional, heavenly and earthly.[64]

All these can be important keys to a better understanding of what appears to be passivity during online participation in the sacraments, namely, that this is a manner of placing ourselves before the Lord—or "orienting" ourselves to Christ, in Benedictine parlance, allowing God to work in us which is the supreme liturgical action. When this is adequately explained, the faithful will have a deeper understanding of what it means to "watch" the online Mass—that it is a way of watching the Lord and with the Lord.

> I wait for the Lord, my soul waits,
> and in his word I hope;
> my soul waits for the Lord
> more than watchmen for the morning,
> more than watchmen for the morning. (Ps 130: 5–6)[65]

[63]Ridgeway, "Online Communion Can Still Be Sacramental."

[64]Chupungco, *What, Then, is Liturgy?*, 34.

[65]Scripture is replete with many passages where "watching" is considered to be a form of prayer, even a very intimate one. See, for instance, Ps. 5:3; 59:9; Mt. 26:38; and Mk. 14:34.

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At the same time, there are also ways to make remote liturgies more dynamic and participatory in line with the Vatican II principle of *participatio actuosa*. Many guidelines and suggestions, for instance, were issued to help people participate better online during the COVID-19 pandemic, such as the preparation of the physical space to help dispose participants to prayer or even the observance of proper attire as well as proper posture. This demonstrates that online participation also has physical and corporeal dimensions. People who may seem to be just "watching" online are using their eyes to see what is being shown onscreen, their ears to hear the sounds through the speaker, perhaps their vocal chords to respond and sing, their minds to understand and make meaning of what is happening, and their hearts to worship God, most especially in the silence. These may also be considered as legitimate forms of bodily contact and participation, even if relatively limited.

The Importance of the Cosmos in Liturgy

The third major obstacle in this issue is the indispensable role of the cosmos and of the cosmic elements involved in the celebration of liturgy, especially the sacraments. Even prior to the Incarnation and especially because of it, all liturgy has always had creation or what John Paul II calls "the altar of the world"[66] as its rightful setting. As Francis says in *Laudato Si'*, "the Sacraments are a privileged way in which nature is taken up by God to become a means of mediating supernatural life. Through our worship of God, we are invited to embrace the world on a different plane."[67]

The emphasis on the cosmic dimension of the liturgy seems to explain the bias of even the most progressive liturgists toward elements that are considered to be "natural" as opposed to those that are considered "artificial" or involve the use of technology. In *What, Then, is Liturgy?*, particularly in the section devoted to "Mass Media

[66]John Paul II, *Ecclesia de Eucharistia* [On the Eucharist in Its Relationship to the Church] (April 17, 2003), 438.

[67]Francis, *Laudato Si'*, 235.

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and the Liturgy" where he offers some practical points to consider when broadcasting liturgies, Chupungco quotes a 1967 *Consilium* editorial titled "Mécanique et Liturgie" in its unabashed disdain for "artificial devices":

> No electrical candle will ever have the value of the living flame of wax or oil being visibly consumed as an offering to the Lord. The illumination of the Church with the candles of the congregation at the Easter Vigil is a rite simple yet full of meaning, bringing to mind both the resurrection and the faith. How ridiculous it would become if candles were exchanged for flashlights.[68]

Following this line of thought, sacramental and liturgical celebrations can be properly facilitated only in the context of the created cosmos—which is offline—and not in an online virtual setting, which is obviously made by human hands. Paradigms seem to be evolving, however, no matter how slowly—earlier in the same book, Chupungco also asked: "But if we regard modern technology as one of God's greatest gifts to mankind, can we simply ignore or dismiss its entry into the domain of liturgical worship?"[69] Musing even further, such as on the possibility of digital devices eventually replacing printed liturgical books, he admits: "I still have to make up my mind whether information technology is so helplessly secular that it cannot have a place in liturgical action."[70] In fact, the Constitution on the Liturgy itself does not discriminate whether something is natural or artificial, saying that "the liturgy means that there is hardly any proper use of material things that cannot be directed towards human sanctification and the praise of God."[71]

In light of this, not only can digital devices be properly considered as part of the same cosmos and incorporated into liturgical worship but perhaps cyberspace can be recognized as a real space as well, and

[68]Chupungco, *What, Then, is Liturgy?*, 245.

[69]Chupungco, *What, Then, is Liturgy?*, 13.

[70]Chupungco, *What, Then, is Liturgy?*, 13.

[71]SC 61.

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be fittingly adopted as proper for the liturgy. We would thus find in the digital continent not just the new marketplace but also the new basilica by sacralizing an otherwise secular realm and harnessing the capability of digital technology to not only facilitate a true liturgical encounter but also become the locus for it.

As to whether cyberspace can be a new venue for the liturgy and especially the Eucharist, the entire history of the liturgy bears witness to its many migrations—from the Upper Room to the domestic churches, from the basilicas and baroque retables to the freestanding modern altars that we have today. What has remained constant, however, is the ability of the liturgy to change and adapt to various circumstances without losing the essence of the saving history that it commemorates and makes present. As Chupungco says, "the manner of holding the liturgical feast is subject to the circumstances of culture, history, and the theological climate in the Church."[72] This becomes increasingly urgent in an emerging Web 4.0 environment where we see not only the gradual compenetration of our online and offline worlds but also the growing predominance of online over offline, with more and more people spending more and more time on the Internet. Indeed, as Campbell and Garner warn us, we run the risk of living in a world devoid of God, "for if we see no place for God in our online activity and life, so too the online world loses its capacity as a site for the sacred and encounters with God."[73]

In view of this, it would be helpful, perhaps, to speak more of mediation rather than of medium in the liturgy, whether it be online or offline. Sacramentality, after all, has not always been limited to the liturgical signs involved in the celebration of the seven sacraments. In the famous Leonine formula "Quod itaque Redemptoris nostri conspicuum fuit, in sacramenta transivit,"[74] Leo the Great refers not

[72]Chupungco, *What, Then, is Liturgy?*, 166.

[73]Campbell & Garner, *Networked Theology*, 91.

[74]"What was visible in our Savior has passed on in the sacraments" (Leo the Great, *Sermo LXXIV. De Ascensione Domini II*, c. 2, in J.-P. Migne, ed., *Patrologia*

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only to the seven ritual sacraments but to all acts of goodness and holiness that Christians perform which manifest the presence of Christ in and through them. What appears to be integral in the word "sacrament," therefore, is mediation, or the fact that God is capable of making use of matter as God's instrument despite even the matter itself. As such, it is not so much a question of the matter itself but of God's mediation, which is wholly gratuitous and able to make use of even the lowliest things for its purpose. Chupungco says:

> A place is holy not because it has blessed walls, not because it has a sanctuary and an altar, not because it has a cross and sacred images. A place is holy because Christ dwells there. A school gymnasium, an open park, a space in a shopping mall or airport or prison compound can become holy when Christ finds a place there.… In a word, the presence of Christ in liturgical celebrations explains why there is no space that cannot be considered suitable for worship.[75]

Chupungco also explains that the Eucharist can be celebrated in a place not because the latter was previously made sacred; rather, "it is the presence of Christ in his body the Church that confers holiness to the space. It is the Eucharist celebrated there that sanctifies the place."[76] It is baseless therefore to distinguish between places as either sacred or profane, or as suitable or unsuitable for worship, because any place, even the most profane and seemingly unsuitable, is a potential locus for encountering God. Chupungco provides a compelling analogy:

> If the Incarnate Word was laid in a manger and made the manger a powerful symbol of his presence among us, there is no reason why we should put up an impregnable wall that separates the sacred from the profane. If the Savior celebrated the most sacred act of worship on the most profane instrument of execution on the abominable hill of Calvary, there is no reason why we should despise the poverty and secular character of a place as venue for our worship.[77]

Latina Vol. 54 [Paris], 398).

[75]Chupungco, *What, Then, is Liturgy?*, 155–156.

[76]Chupungco, *What, Then, is Liturgy?*, 159.

[77]Chupungco, *What, Then, is Liturgy?*, 161.

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Could this not be said of cyberspace as well, which, in effect, becomes sacralized by the very fact that the people of God pray and gather there, that the Eucharist is celebrated there, even in its apparent poverty and secularity?

Brantly Millegan, a well-known digital evangelizer himself and the founder of ChurchPOP, a very successful online Catholic evangelization initiative, believes nonetheless that everything in the world as well as in the Church can go online except for the sacraments. According to him, the sacraments will never go online precisely because of the need for contact with the cosmos, which does not have a virtual substitute:

> Think of everything that can be done online these days. You can make a living, pay your taxes, order just about anything you need (including food), keep up with friends and family, get an academic degree, etc. But there's one thing that we will never be able to do online: the sacraments. Even if the world became a voluntary matrix, where everyone only interacted in a virtual realm, the sacraments would still require us to be physically present to receive them. You must be actually baptized, physically, with real water.[78]

The sacramental effect, which is produced by grace but mediated by cosmic signs, is as real as it is symbolic. This is why sacramental symbols and direct contact with them are requisite for the validity and efficacy of a sacrament. There can be no baptism without water, no anointing without oil, no Eucharist without bread and wine, and so on; indeed, as Chupungco says, "through *bodily* contact with the sacramental bread, water, and oil recipients enter or deepen their relationship with the Divine Persons."[79] Even those sacraments that do not include tangible elements in their core ritual still involve palpable gestures: marriage necessitates that consent be exchanged, ordination calls for the laying on of hands, and reconciliation requires that the words of absolution be heard. Every full liturgical celebration, therefore, always takes the shape of a mediated encounter with the Lord by way of direct contact with these sacred signs. As Ambrose said in the fourth

[78]See D. Sockey, "There's One Thing That We Will Never Be Able to Do Online: The Sacraments," *National Catholic Register* (April 13, 2015).

[79]Chupungco, *What, Then, is Liturgy?*, 171 (emphasis added).

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century, "Christ, you have shown yourself to me face to face. In your sacraments, I encounter you."[80] The Constitution on the Liturgy affirms as well, in similar fashion, that "in the liturgy, human sanctification is signified by signs perceptible to the senses, and is effected in a way which corresponds with each of these signs."[81]

Here is where the poverty and deficiency of any remote liturgy compared to our traditional way of celebrating become most apparent and appear insurmountable. You just cannot pour water, anoint with oil, or consume bread and wine online. As such, the normative and full manner of celebrating the sacraments will likely and rightfully remain offline and in direct contact with these cosmic signs.

The Church, however, seems to allow for an exemption from this norm by admitting the possibility of baptism by blood and by desire, although she actually states that such a baptism "brings about the fruits of Baptism without being a sacrament."[82] Aquinas takes this further by floating the possibility of also receiving the effects of the Eucharist by desire. He says that

> the effect of the sacrament can be secured by every [person] if [he or she] receive it in desire, though not in reality. Consequently, just as some are baptized with the Baptism of desire, through their desire of baptism, before being baptized in the Baptism of water; so likewise some eat this sacrament spiritually ere they receive it sacramentally.… Nevertheless sacramental eating is not without avail, because the actual receiving of the sacrament produces more fully the effect of the sacrament than does the desire thereof, as stated above of Baptism.[83]

Aquinas, while making a very clear distinction between receiving the Eucharist "sacramentally" and receiving it "spiritually" ("though not in reality"), is convinced of the possibility of securing the effect of the

[80]Ambrose, *Apologia David* (Centre Traditio Litterarum Occidentalium, 2010), 12.

[81]SC 7.

[82]See CCC 1258.

[83]T. Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, trans. Fathers of the English Dominican Province, Pars III, Q. 80, A. 1, ad. 3.

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sacrament by way of spiritual reception. At the same time, however, he insists on the importance and even superiority of sacramental reception by asserting that the "actual receiving of the sacrament produces *more fully* the effect of the sacrament than does the desire thereof" (emphasis added), recalling once again the parallel with baptism by desire which is not the same as sacramental baptism. Nevertheless, he opens a way of obtaining at least the effect of the sacrament, even if not the sacrament itself, in the absence of physical reception.

Similarly, even while the Church maintains that there are no sacraments online, it is good to note that it does not totally discount the potential of religious broadcasts, nor does it ignore their importance. The Constitution on the Liturgy itself, for instance, directs that "radio and television broadcasts of sacred rites must be marked by discretion and dignity.… This is especially important when the service to be broadcast is the Mass."[84] This particular concern of the Council that broadcast liturgies, especially Masses, "should be marked with such care and dignity" was reiterated in the 1967 Instructions *Eucharisticum Mysterium* and *Musicam Sacram*.[85] We may thus regard such an emphasis on applying special care in the preparation of liturgical and Eucharistic broadcasts as the Council's tacit acknowledgement of the peculiar importance of these remote celebrations, especially given their reach. In fact, the Church requires that seminarians learn to use media and develop their communication skills as a matter "of high importance in the reformed liturgy."[86]

The 1971 pastoral instruction *Communio et Progressio* also underlines the value of religious broadcasts, including transmissions of liturgical celebrations. In addition to their educative and informative value,

[84]SC 20.

[85]See, from the Sacred Congregation of Rites, *Eucharisticum Mysterium* [Instruction on Eucharistic Worship], *AAS* 59 (1967): 539–573, no. 22 and *Musicam Sacram* [Instruction on Music in the Liturgy], *AAS* 59 (1967): 300–320, no. 8.

[86]Sacred Congregation for Catholic Education, *In Synodo Episcopali* [Basic Plan for Priestly Formation], *AAS* 62 (1970): 321–384.

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this document also mentions their capacity to maintain a connection especially with old and sick members who cannot go to church. It also acknowledges their potential for forging new relationships with the so-called "unchurched" seekers who engage and can be engaged through these modern technologies, as well as their ability to reach people even in places where the Church is not able to operate. In this way, the aforementioned text highlights not only the catechetical or devotional value of these broadcasts but also their ecclesial and missionary import:

> Religious programmes that utilize all the resources of radio and television enrich people's religious life and create new bonds between the faithful. They help in religious education and in the Church's active commitment in the world. They are bonds of union for those who cannot share physically in the life of the Church because of their sickness or old age. In addition they create new relationships between the faithful and those people—and today they are legion—who have no affiliation with any Church and yet subconsciously seek spiritual nourishment. They carry the message of the Gospel to countries where the Church is not. The Church cannot afford to ignore such opportunities. On the contrary, she will make the fullest use of any fresh opportunities that the improvement of those instruments may disclose.[87]

It is interesting to note that the original Latin text of the quotation above seems to say something more than what the English translation does. "Iis etiam prosunt, qui ita aegri sunt aetateve provecti ut *impediantur* quominus vitae ipsius Ecclesiae *sint directo participes*" (emphasis added)[88] is rendered, quite liberally, in English as "They are bonds of union for those who cannot share physically in the life of the Church because of their sickness or old age" but can also be rendered more literally as "These are also for (the benefit of) those who, being sick or advanced in years, are *prevented from direct participation* in the life of the Church" (emphasis added). Indeed, as the Italian version puts it, "Sono inoltre di aiuto agli ammalati e alle persone anziane che *non*

[87]See Pontifical Council for Social Communications, *Communio et Progressio* [On the Means of Social Communication] (May 23, 1971), no. 150.

[88]See the Latin version in *AAS* 63 (1971): 645.

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possono partecipare direttamente alla vita della Chiesa" (emphasis added).[89] Here the phrase "prevented from direct participation" seems to allow some latitude in interpretation—it can be seen, on the one hand, as implicitly derogating participation through broadcast to being merely "indirect," as opposed and subordinated to "direct" participation, while, on the other, as explicitly acknowledging that indirect participation is also truly participation, albeit relatively less direct.

The benefits of religious broadcasts as listed in this 1971 document have been exponentially magnified given the kind of technology available on the Internet today and its wider penetration. Such was the experience during this pandemic as reported by Gisotti, the vice-editorial director of Vatican media, who shared that papal liturgies broadcast online during the quarantine period effectively reached out not only to believers but "even [to] agnostics and non-believers," as gleaned from feedback sent by viewers themselves. Almost 5.5 million users registered more than 14.5 million views of these papal liturgies on the Vatican News website between April 5 and 13 (2020) alone. According to Gisotti, "many people, not just the Catholic faithful, were able to follow and '*encounter*' the Holy Father and, through him, the Word of God thanks to this technology and especially to streaming services and social media."[90]

On May 20, 2020, Vatican News shared a short video clip on its Facebook page which showed people from all over the world following the Pope's daily Mass online during the pandemic. The caption read: "Messages and videos have poured in from around the world to thank Pope Francis for accompanying the faithful with his live-streamed daily Masses during these difficult months of COVID-19 lockdown."[91]

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[89]See the Italian version at http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/pontifical_councils/pccs/documents/rc_pc_pccs_doc_23051971_communio_it.html.

[90]As quoted by C. Glatz, "Vatican registers huge growth, engagement online for Holy Week, Easter," *Crux* (April 14, 2020) (emphasis added).

[91]See "Catholics thank Pope for Live-streamed Masses," *Vatican News* Facebook page (May 20, 2020).

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The Pope's daily Mass, according to another report, has been able to attract a live Internet audience of as many as 6,000 people,[92] a figure that rises easily to about half a million for Italy alone if one includes television broadcasts. To provide some perspective, Lamb notes that "the 500,000 figure is high, given [that] the capacity for those attending an open-air Mass in the perimeter of St. Peter's Square is around 60,000 people. Exceptional events, such as the canonisation of John Paul II and John XXIII, attracted 500,000."[93] This kind of feedback and its corresponding figures give us a sense of ordinary people's "reception," or what is termed in theology as *sensus fidelium*, of these online liturgies.

We can see from this, then, that while contact with the cosmic elements of the liturgy is the ordinary route by which God communicates sacramental grace, God's action in our souls is not altogether impeded by the absence of this contact even in the sacramental context. The hierarchy itself recognizes the importance and efficacy of liturgical and sacramental broadcasts, and the faithful themselves experience them to be effective and helpful. This should lead us, therefore, to be more affirming rather than dismissive when considering online liturgies.

Rupture or Continuity?

It is obviously an impossible task to look into the Gospels or even the whole of the Scriptures for what these have to say about the modern reality of the Internet, which was born only fifty years ago in 1959. Nonetheless, we can perhaps consider some passages as paradigm cases, along with some analogues from tradition and official texts, and one final sample of what seems to be the *sensus fidelium* in order to gauge whether a more benign consideration of online liturgies is in harmony with what we believe.

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[92]See E. Allen, "As Coronavirus Spreads, So Does Pope's 'Virtual Parish'," *Crux* (March 17, 2020).

[93]See C. Lamb, "Half a Million Tune into Pope's Daily Mass," *The Tablet* (March 19, 2020).

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The main Biblical text proposed for consideration is the account of the healing of the centurion's servant (Mt. 8:5–13 and Lk. 7:1–10). What is rather unique about this narrative of Jesus performing a healing miracle is the fact that the sick person who needed healing was not physically present in front of Jesus. This becomes the occasion for the centurion's display of prodigious faith, he who believed that Jesus could still perform the healing despite the distance. As the centurion declared in his famous prayer, the one thing necessary was the word of Jesus expressing his will: "only say the word" (Mt. 8:8; Lk. 7:7).

This account appears to show that physical presence is not an indispensable requirement for God's power to operate, nor is distance an insuperable barrier to grace. In fact, it appears to be inconsequential, for as Matthew emphasized, there was no "lag" between the words of Jesus and the healing of the centurion's servant which took place "at that very moment" (Mt. 8:13). John, too, in a very similar account involving a royal official and his son (Jn. 4:46–54), emphasizes the synchronicity of Jesus's word and the actual healing, both of which occurred as if "in real time" despite physical distance. We also have another distance healing account in Mark (7:24–30), the story of the Syrophoenician mother who begged Jesus to heal her possessed daughter who was back at home (the story is also found in Mt. 15:21–25).

Jesus himself, moreover, seems to point to presence beyond physical proximity. In commissioning his disciples before his ascension into heaven, he assures them of his continual presence even as he was about to leave: "And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age" (Mt. 28:20). Paul also seems to refer to a similar kind of presence in 1 Cor. 5:3, where he describes himself as "absent in body" but "present in spirit," something he also does in Col. 2:5. One may also refer to the witness of the Psalmist who found the presence of God even in the most unlikely place, such as in darkness, to see that God can be present anywhere and is, in fact, present everywhere (Ps. 139:7–12).

As for tradition, we also have, in addition to our belief in the communion of saints that we experience especially in the liturgy, an account of remote participation in a Eucharistic celebration by St. Clare of Assisi, who was chosen by Pius XII to be the patroness of

television in 1957 in view of this particular event. As the story goes, Clare was too ill one Christmas night to attend the Midnight Mass as she so ardently desired, and so the Holy Spirit projected the liturgical celebration on the wall of her room such that she was able to see, hear, and participate in it from her bed "as if she was present in person."[94] Indeed, this miraculous event may be considered not only as the first radio or television broadcast but also as the first live stream in history, pioneered by no less than God.

It has also been the custom of the Church to extend the plenary indulgence attached to the *Urbi et Orbi* blessing imparted by the Pope to those who join remotely through radio and television. In fact, it was on the occasion of the first *Urbi et Orbi* of the then newly-elected Pope Francis that Cardinal Tauran added "the new means of social communication" as a way by which the faithful could obtain the indulgence by following the events in St. Peter's Square through the Internet. These "new means of social communication" have been used since on such occasions and some other events besides as another way to obtain indulgences. Such may be regarded, then, as tacit affirmations of the fact that grace can flow through cyberspace.

In terms of Church documents, it is also impossible to go very far back. Aside from the conciliar and post-conciliar texts already mentioned, which have a benign stance toward remote liturgies, two recent decrees from the Congregation for Divine Worship also appear to have an appreciative disposition. The first decree on the pandemic, "In Time of Covid-19," affirms that "in this occasion, the means of live (not recorded) televisual or internet broadcasts are helpful."[95] This

[94]"comme si elle était présente en personne" (see Pius XII, *Lettre Apostolique Proclamant Ste. Claire Patronne Céleste de la Télévision* [Rome: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, February 14, 1957]).

[95]Congregation for Divine Worship and the Discipline of the Sacraments, *Decree: In Time of Covid-19*. At the same time, however, it is important to note the deliberate inclusion of a limiting clause in the very same sentence: "in this occasion." Moreover, the document does not go on to elaborate as to what degree and in what manner these broadcasts are helpful.

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is repeated once again in the follow-up decree issued six days later, which instructs that

> the faithful should be informed of the beginning times of the celebrations so that they can prayerfully unite themselves in their homes. Means of live (not recorded) telematic broadcasts can be of help. In any event it remains important to dedicate an adequate time to prayer, giving importance above all to the *Liturgia Horarum*.[96]

Lastly, we turn to an articulation of what may represent the *sensus fidelium* regarding this issue. This is taken from the first of a series of articles titled "Diario della crisi" (Diary of the Crisis), which were edited by the Pope's former spokesman, Federico Lombardi, S.J., who describes how Francis's online congregations during the crisis represent the unity of believers around the Lord's table even when they are not together physically. In the article curiously titled "Piazza piena e Piazza vuota" (Full Square and Empty Square), he tells how the Pope, who loves to look at his audiences in the eye, has learned to look at them through the camera instead because of the quarantines that separated him from his flock during the pandemic. Lombardi says that the Pope's words, even though mediated by technology, "remain *equally* effective in reaching the heart."[97] Indeed, he takes this a step further by claiming that in the apparent vacuum of the massive square, with only Francis and a few assistants present, "the assembly is no longer physically present but *it is there and is truly united*, through the person of the celebrant, with the Lord who died and rose again."[98] Lombardi points as well to the source of this presence and unity:

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[96]Congregation for Divine Worship and the Discipline of the Sacraments, *Decree: In Time of Covid-19 (II)*. Note that the text expressly points out the need to supplement participation in online liturgies with other forms of offline prayer, especially the liturgy of the hours.

[97]"Ora lo sguardo e la voce sono mediati dalla tecnologia, ma riescono *ugualmente* a raggiungere il cuore" (Lombardi, "Piazza piena e Piazza vuota" [emphasis added]).

[98]"L'assemblea non è più presente fisicamente, ma c'è ed è realmente unita, attraverso la persona del celebrante, intorno al Signore che muore e risorge" (Lombardi, "Piazza piena e Piazza vuota").

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> Now we have seen the Piazza absolutely empty, but the largest assembly, the one not physically but spiritually present, was there, and perhaps even more numerous and intensely united than on other occasions. The Pope can only be in St. Peter's Square, as in the chapel of Santa Marta, but the Church, the universal assembly of the faithful, is *real and united in the strongest sense* (fortissimamente reale e unita) by very deep bonds rooted in faith and in the human heart.[99]

Aside from a bond "rooted in faith and in the human heart," Lombardi also points to the presence of the Spirit as the one who "holds together the 'Mystical body' of Christ" scattered at the moment but also mysteriously gathered, "a spiritual reality precisely, which manifests itself when the assembly is physically gathered and present, but which is not tied and limited to physical presence, and paradoxically experienced these days in a stronger and more evident way"[100] despite the apparent emptiness of the square. All this, indeed, by way of an online liturgy.

Conclusion

While we need to admit real limitations in the case of online liturgies in terms of their communal, physical, and cosmic dimensions, the matter need not be framed in rigid binary terms as to whether sacraments celebrated online are valid or invalid, effective or ineffective, existent or non-existent. It must be acknowledged that online liturgies, impoverished as they may be compared to offline celebrations which

[99]"Ora abbiamo visto la Piazza assolutamente vuota, ma l'assemblea più larga, quella non presente fisicamente ma spiritualmente c'è stata, e forse anche più numerosa e intensamente unita che in altre occasioni. Il Papa può essere solo in Piazza San Pietro, come nella Cappella di Santa Marta, ma la Chiesa, l'assemblea universale dei fedeli è fortissimamente reale e unita da vincoli profondissimi radicati nella fede e nel cuore umano." (Lombardi, "Piazza piena e Piazza vuota" [emphasis added])

[100]"Una realtà spirituale appunto, che si manifesta quando l'assemblea è fisicamente riunita e presente, ma che non è legata e limitata alla presenza fisica, e paradossalmente in questi giorni si può sperimentare in modo più forte ed evidente" (Lombardi, "Piazza piena e Piazza vuota").

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remain to be the norm, are still able to involve the community, engage the body, and impart a palpable experience of God whose presence transcends the cosmos itself.

This has real implications that go beyond the pandemic. For instance, will and should online Masses become more regular in the "new normal"? This would open the way for those who cannot participate physically in the Eucharist, including the sick and many others, to do so more confidently, especially if the available means to make such remote participation more dynamic and interactive are harnessed and the question of its efficacy is clarified. It may not be a bad idea, for example, to follow the online puja model, with participation in a live Mass through a conferencing application followed by communion from the same celebration brought to homebound participants afterwards whenever possible. Unfortunately, if we are simply to revert to the old practice here in the Philippines and in many other places, this would mean a return to "canned" or pre-recorded Masses usually broadcast only on television (and in the wee hours of morning or night!) and not available online.

Once again, while the proposal of a "Zoom Mass" where each participant has bread and wine in front of the screen to be consecrated remotely may be too extreme,[101] we can be more cognizant perhaps of the real—even if limited—efficacy and validity of online liturgies. For instance, if we begin to conceive of grace as more of a presence or relationship rather than as a thing, as Osborne suggests,[102] it would become easier to understand how online contact can actually "work" grace, that is, make presence felt and foster the relationship. This can also be a new key to understanding the efficacy of the sacraments not only in the traditional sense of their particular effects but as a holy and holy-making presence or relationship.[103] Another possible way is to consider an online Mass as a sacrament in Leo the Great's broader

[101]See Ridgeway, "Online Communion Can Still Be Sacramental."

[102]See K. Osborne, *Sacramental Theology: A General Introduction* (New York/Mahwah: Paulist Press, 1988), 63.

[103]See Osborne, *Sacramental Theology*, 132.

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sense whereby the shared prayer of Christians, animated by their faith, makes the presence of Christ felt online in an effective way.

This would also be a good time to revisit our understanding of the real presence of Christ in the liturgy and especially the Eucharist, which, as the Constitution on Liturgy tells us, is not limited to the sacramental species but also dwells in the Word, in the presider, and in the gathered assembly.[104] In this way, we may be able to affirm the real presence of Christ in an online Eucharist even though the sacred species are found in only one of the locations. To waste this very opportune moment might be just a tad short of doubting the omnipotence of God and stifling the creativity of the Holy Spirit, who may be showing this new path to us today.

Please allow me now to end on a very personal if not phenomenological note. Last May 17, 2020, we had an online Mass via Zoom with some contemporaries from the College Department of San Jose Seminary. The presider led us from Pampanga while the first reading was proclaimed from Makati, the psalm from Quezon City, the second reading from Muntinlupa, and the Gospel from Manila. A priest gave the homily from Makati, and a new deacon, ordained only during the pandemic, led the intercessions afterwards from Florida in the United States. When he prayed "for all of us gathered here today," I felt a real sense of communion with my brothers, along with the wives and children of some of them, from different parts of the country and the world. During the Eucharistic Prayer, when the presider said, "Listen graciously to the prayers of this family, whom you have summoned before you," I felt that the Lord willed and worked this online gathering, that He himself was the one who had gathered us. There was no bread or wine but there was communion, and although I knew in my mind that technically a Mass was being celebrated only in Pampanga and that the rest of us were all just watching, I could not help but believe deep within my heart: This is the Eucharist. This is the Church. Jesus was online. ❧

[104]See SC 7.

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