

# The Communion of The Saints and The Virtual Space; The Impact of The Pandemic on Ecclesial Communion in The Roman Catholic Church.<sup>1</sup>

Shane CROMBIE  
LCC International University, Klaipeda, Lithuania  
scrombie@lcc.lt

**Abstract:** The liturgical nature of the Roman Catholic Church emphasises the gathering of God's people for public worship. Covid-19 restrictions on public events resulted in a shift to online worship. The effect of moving to the virtual space has challenged the Church to embrace a new type of gathering online. The move from physical to virtual worship has consequences for both participation and identity. The pandemic's long-term impact is still unknown. Already it has changed both membership prayer and practices.

**Keywords:** Covid-19. Liturgy/Worship, Participation, Roman Catholic Church, Computer Mediated Communication.

## Introduction

The scale of Covid19's impact is almost unprecedented. The epidemiological, societal, or psychological effects of the Covid 19 pandemic are still not determined; undoubtedly the trauma of fear and the curtailment of freedoms for the common good have left their mark in all sections of society, including the Christian Church. In the twelve month period March 2020 to March 2021 – spanning two Lents, two Easters and a Christmas – depending on jurisdiction, in person gathering for worship was either severely curtailed or in some cases totally suppressed. What resulted was a whole scale shift of prayer, liturgy, and devotion from the 'physical space' to the 'virtual space.'

Though not the Church's first experience of pandemic and health related disturbance, the Covid pandemic accelerated the digitalization of faith; a by-product of wider societal change in the computer mediated age. While each branch of the Christian family addressed this rupture in its own way, varying from community to community, this article will look at the experience Roman Catholic Church. As a strongly liturgical community, the migration from in person to online worship had a significant impact, the act of

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<sup>1</sup> As many documents and cited materials use the terms 'Church' or 'the Church' to specifically refer to the Roman Catholic Church this paper will use this convention in cases where pertinent.

communal gathering being a core tenet of identity and theology. The paper will explore the Catholic importance physical presence. It will argue that while the sacred convocation is necessary for the Roman Catholic Church to exist, there needs to be a realisation that with changing communication patterns the response to its evangelical mandate needs to adapt and grow. Taking examples from history this study will argue that Roman Catholicism, and Christianity in general needs to respond, rather than react to the crisis, taking the opportunity to reach out to places formally seen as tangential to proclamation of the Good News.

### Testimony to belonging

The Church exists to experience and proclaim the Word given by God. The classical term for this is *koinonia*, *communio*, communion.<sup>2</sup> From a Roman Catholic perspective this communion finds its expression in the liturgy; God united with humanity, and as a result humanity united with each other. The traditional theological maxim *Lex orandi, lex credendi* - approximately translated as ‘the law of prayer (is) the law of what is believed’ – indicates that the way the church observes and conducts its public prayer (liturgy) is a reflection of and an interpretation of the faith of the community. Rites and rituals, a fixed liturgical calendar with defined seasons of faith and specific days of observation punctuate the life of the church reminding the faithful of the ‘mysteries of faith.’ According to the Second Vatican Council’s constitution on liturgical matters *Sacrosanctum Concilium*: “In the earthly liturgy we take part in a foretaste of that heavenly liturgy which is celebrated in the holy city of Jerusalem toward which we journey as pilgrims, where Christ is sitting at the right hand of God.”<sup>3</sup>

The liturgy, as an act of worship has a two-fold aspect. Firstly, it has a divine orientation. Considered as an exercise of the priestly office of Jesus Christ.<sup>4</sup> The communitarian aspect of the Trinity is reflected in the prayerful process of gathering in the name of Jesus to offer prayer and thanksgiving to the Father, through the Holy Spirit. The use of the phrase *sursum corda/ habemus ad Dominum* (Lift up your hearts/we have, to the Lord) in the pre-Eucharistic dialogue is a symbolic reminder that in Catholic tradition what is taking place in time and space has a supernatural and transcendent nature. The second aspect of liturgical worship is the gathering of the people of God on earth. Phrases such ‘a pilgrim people’ have become synonymous with the Church’s identity as God’s people journey through life towards the new and heavenly Jerusalem. When the International Eucharistic Congress took place in Dublin in 2012 the theme adopted for the gathering

<sup>2</sup> Dalzell, Thomas.(2013) Eucharist, Communion, and Orthopraxis in the Theology of Joseph Ratzinger. Irish Theological Quarterly, 78(2):103-122 2013) DOI: 10.1177/0021140012472627.

<sup>3</sup> The Second Vatican Council met in Rome from 1963-1965. It produced sixteen official documents concerning various aspects of RC Church life. *Sacrosanctum Concilium* the Constitution on the Liturgy was the first of these to be promulgated. In papal tradition magisterial publications are named after the first words of the Latin edition of the document. The referencing monograph as laid down in Acta Apostolicae Sedis (the official register for publications by the Holy See) is the capitalised first letters of the document title and the paragraph number. All publications from the Holy See cited in this article are published on the Vatican website.

Paul VI, “Sacrosanctum Concilium – The Constitution on the Liturgy,” – SC, 8, accessed Nov 22<sup>nd</sup> 2021, [https://www.vatican.va/archive/hist\\_councils/ii\\_vatican\\_council/documents/vat-ii\\_const\\_19631204\\_sacrosanctum-concilium\\_en.html](https://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_const_19631204_sacrosanctum-concilium_en.html)

<sup>4</sup> SC, 8.

was ‘The Eucharist: communion with Christ and with one another,’ highlighting the fact that the transcendental has implications for the here and now. The Church worships with an eye to the heavens, but with its feet on the ground, as symbolised in architecture, music, and the drama of liturgical practice.

According to the Catechism of the Catholic Church: “Participation in the communal celebration of the Sunday Eucharist is a testimony of belonging and of being faithful to Christ and to his Church. The faithful give witness by this to their communion in faith and charity. Together they testify to God’s holiness and their hope of salvation. They strengthen one another under the guidance of the Holy Spirit.”<sup>5</sup> The communal celebration of worship at a given time in a specific place, most especially the eucharistic liturgy, is not simply for convenience. Two significant phrases unpack the true intent of the gathering – ‘testimony of belonging’ and ‘communion in faith and charity. Public liturgy witnesses to the reality of the community of the saints. While made up of individuals the community is forged by a common baptismal covenant: incorporated in the Body of Christ through baptism, the faithful are destined by the baptismal character for the worship of the Christian religion.’<sup>6</sup>

If the *lex orandi* is of the Church so too is the *lex credendi* of a common life. Though not as obvious as may be seen in the Acts of the Apostles, the community of believers give ‘testimony to belonging’ by the communality of liturgical practice. This is underpinned by ‘communion of faith and charity’ – faith first, followed by a tangible expression of Christian love. Liturgical gestures such as the kiss or sign of peace are outward signs of an inner disposition to make all things new and one in Christ.

Therefore, it seems clear as to why the gathering of the Church is of importance in Roman Catholic ecclesiological and sacramental thought. In liturgical action there is almost always a physical interaction between the celebrant and faithful. The dialogic nature of the Mass and the physical reception of the Eucharistic elements, the anointing with oil in the Sacrament of Sick and Confirmation and laying on of hands, which plays a central role in Reconciliation and Holy Orders, indicates that liturgy is not a private devotion but an expression of the living faith.

## The Physical Reality of Worship

Worship differs greatly from Christian tradition to Christian tradition. From the rich expression of Orthodoxy to the simplest form of Calvinist inspired denominations, depending on theology and tradition, the Churches have wide and varied interpretations of the *lex orandi*. Contemporary Latin Catholicism finds itself somewhere in the middle. The ‘noble simplicity of the Roman rite’ does not employ in worship the intricacies of eastern rites, nor is it shorn of ritual as is often the case in evangelicalism. There is a deeply tangible nature to this type of worship.

<sup>5</sup> John Paul II, “The Catechism of the Catholic Church,” – CCC 2182, accessed Nov 22<sup>nd</sup> 2021, [https://www.vatican.va/archive/ENG0015/\\_INDEX.HTM](https://www.vatican.va/archive/ENG0015/_INDEX.HTM)

<sup>6</sup> Paul VI, “Lumen Gentium – The Dogmatic Constitution on the Church,” – LG, 11, accessed November 22<sup>nd</sup> 2021, [https://www.vatican.va/archive/hist\\_councils/ii\\_vatican\\_council/documents/vat-ii\\_const\\_19641121\\_lumen-gentium\\_en.html](https://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_const_19641121_lumen-gentium_en.html)

Since the 1969 adoption of the *Novos Ordo Missae* (the New Order of Mass) of Pope Paul VI, the eucharistic liturgy is concentrated on ‘two tables’ – the table of the Word and the table of the Sacrament – both combining as the Table of the Lord. In the Latin rite of worship, the presence of Christ is highlighted in four loci: the Scripture, the sacramental elements, the minister (ordained bishop or priest) and in the gathered community. This is further highlighted by the dignity and reverence shown to all four. For example, in the more solemn expression of the *Ordo Missae* frankincense is used in veneration. Used in reference to the presence of God, or offering to God, the celebrant incenses the Book of the Gospels or the lectionary containing the sacred text. At the time of the offertory of the gifts the altar and the offering placed thereon are also ceremoniously blessed. Following this the presider is incensed. Lastly the gathered faithful stand in turn to be blessed. This action underscores the importance of presence in the liturgy. While the sacraments do not need to have the faithful present for validity, the sole purpose of liturgical gathering is to unite priest and people in the worship of God.

### Worship in spirit and truth

Having seen the significance of presence as belonging and understanding the centrality of the senses in the overall scheme of worship, it should be clear that a virtual expression of Church life, especially in the context of the liturgy, can never adequately fulfil the intended function of liturgical gathering. According to Brunk “the bodiliness of liturgy... requires a measure of physical proximity to others in an assembly of believers. Experience of liturgy is meant to be informed by this proximity. To a certain extent, proximity is constitutive of liturgy.”<sup>7</sup> The question can be asked; if there is such an importance given to presence and gathering, is it possible for the Church to function, at least sacramentally?

An essential aspect of liturgical practice is the active participation of the laity in the liturgical rites. As the so called ‘Liturgical Movement’ of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century developed a new understanding of Catholic liturgical practice there was a strong emphasis on the role of the non-ordained. The 1963 Constitution on the Liturgy observes: “[The] Church earnestly desires that all the faithful should be led to that fully conscious, and active participation in liturgical celebrations which is demanded by the very nature of the liturgy. Such participation by the Christian people as “a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a redeemed people (1 Pet. 2:9; cf. 2:4-5), is their right and duty by reason of their baptism.”<sup>8</sup> The faithful who attends religious rites, particularly the Eucharist, are not passive spectators but full members of the Church, are called to exercise their baptismal priesthood. On a surface level this means answering the liturgical dialogue with the presider and singing. At a deeper level active participation concerns a spiritual union with God and being of one mind and heart with fellow believers (cf. Acts 4:32) The best expression of this is the *ecclesia*, the gathering.

The document further states, “full and active participation by all the people is the aim to be considered before all else.”<sup>9</sup> The Eucharistic celebration is the “source and summit

<sup>7</sup> Timothy Brunk, “The Liturgical Sensorium and COVID-19”, updated May 11<sup>th</sup> 2021, <https://www.praytellig.com/index.php/2020/05/11/the-liturgical-sensorium-and-covid-19/>

<sup>8</sup> SC, 14.

<sup>9</sup> SC, 14.

of the life of the Church”<sup>10</sup> – everything flows from the Eucharist (the source) and all actions should be directed towards it (the summit). The actual reception of Holy Communion is an expression of faith. The assent of mind and heart is vocalised as the recipient says ‘amen’ as testimony to event that is taking place. Physical reception of the Eucharist depends on the physical presence of the individual. The pandemic ‘lockdowns’ challenged all this. With a migration to worship online is it possible to actively participate in the liturgical life. The question therefore is, how does a community with such an emphasis on gathering exist and function when gathering cannot take place?

## The Impact of the Pandemic

### *A rupture*

Before addressing this it is important to appreciate the pandemic impact on the faith experience of believers. According to Allen Furr “lockdown not only impacts everyday life, but it poses challenges to our existential existence; that is, how we understand what social life should be.”<sup>11</sup> While not the prevue of this essay to examine these existential questions it suffices to say that an event such as the Covid19 pandemic has had much more of an effect than *typical disruptions* of regular patterns of living. While a natural disaster, inclement weather, social or political disturbance can disrupt these patterns, causing inconvenience or on rare occasions potential harm, these effects are both temporally and spatially confined. A global and seemingly interminable pandemic that has radically impacted on the functioning of society is not just inconvenience; it is a paradigm shift in the making. Political slogans such as ‘the great reset’ or ‘the new normal’ indicate that there was a perceived time before and after Covid. The world that is to emerge after the event it seems is still being formed.

The impact of the pandemic on public worship was swift, uncompromising, and almost universal. When reflecting on the church life in a theological scholarly way there is a risk of removing the human or emotional element from the experience. For many there was a genuine sense of loss and grief. Personally speaking, I will never forget Friday, March 13<sup>th</sup>, 2020. It was a cold, early spring morning. As it was Lent many people in the community made the journey to the local parish church for the 7.30 am Eucharist. On this morning, however, instead of being inside the building the parish priest was outside. The gates were open, but the doors were closed. We were informed that the local bishop had ordered all Masses in the presence of the community to be suspended due to the rising case numbers of Covid – 19 in the region. Mass would be celebrated without the people. The best we could do, according to the parish priest – who was as lost as the rest of us – was to go home, go online and join the liturgy in that way. Suddenly worship moved entirely to virtual space. This would continue for months.

Moving from the physical to the virtual was a traumatic event in the life of the faithful. NT Wright points out that rationalists, including Christian rationalists, want explanations. In the face of tragedy, where answers are not forthcoming, the only thing left to do

<sup>10</sup> CCC, 1324.

<sup>11</sup> Allen Furr, “The Impact of the Pandemic on Society,” Auburn University, accessed November 13<sup>th</sup> 2021, <http://www.ocm.auburn.edu/experts/2020/05/051452-effects-pandemic-society.php>

is ask the biblical ‘why Lord?’ Proposing a recovery of the biblical tradition of the lament Wright states, “the point of lament, woven thus into the fabric of the biblical tradition, is not just that it’s(sic) an outlet for frustration, sorrow, loneliness, and sheer inability to understand what is happening and why.”<sup>12</sup> The ‘why?’ is a good place to start.

### *Why?*

“Lament is what happens when people ask “Why?” and do not get an answer.”<sup>13</sup> In an op-ed piece in Time Magazine Wright addresses a recurring question; why does God allow such to happen? Why would God deprive his people of the gathering that is so much part of Christian identity? It should be pointed out that a differentiation must be made between the suspension of public worship as a result of the pandemic and the phenomenon of rationalisation of liturgical provision. In recent decades, a decline in the number of clergy, population movements and increasing secular identity has resulted in church closure and parochial adjustment in many parts of the Western world. The emotional response to the closure of a worship space or the inconvenience of traveling further to attend services can indeed be traumatic. Suppression of worship in a locality due labor shortage or the inability to operate parish facilities in a viable way can at least be justifiably explained. In this case what is being looked at is the almost unprecedented global interruption of public worship resulting from health protection injunctions.

According to Hurley the closure of parish facilities to public worship is akin to the Babylonian Exile.<sup>14</sup> It may appear as an aggrandisement to compare the Covid-19 pandemic to the Exile, there are, however, some similarities in effect, if not exactly replicated historically. For one, the exile of God’s people from the land eternally promised was a “deeply traumatic national experience” for Israel<sup>15</sup>. In an analysis of Psalm 136 Hurley points out the depth of feeling and hurt that such a tragedy has been allowed to happen. The central question asked by the psalmist is ‘how can we sing the song of the Lord in a foreign land?’ Removed from Temple worship and mourning for its destruction Israel has to reinvent its national identity without the dramaturgy of Mount Sion. The denial of access to public worship made both lay and clerical reimagine how public prayer could continue.

This experience is both social and sensual. From a social point of view there is a loss of community, a loss of friendship and of the common journey. Parish observes that migration to online breaks a sense of connection that comes from being part of an embodied worshipping community.<sup>16</sup> The physicality of the worship experience is also lost. Deprived of the smells and sounds, and the collective memory embedded in the metaphysical fabric of church buildings gives way to a sense of grief and suffering. Robert Sarah, former Pre-

<sup>12</sup> NT Wright, “Christianity Offers No Answers About the Coronavirus. It’s Not Supposed To,” updated March 29<sup>th</sup> 2020, <https://time.com/5808495/coronavirus-christianity/>

<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

<sup>14</sup> Declan Hurley, *By the Rivers of Babylon: A Reflection on the Loss of Public Mass During the Covid 19 Pandemic*, (Dunshaughlin, A+J, 2021), p.15

<sup>15</sup> Hurley, p. 22

<sup>16</sup> Parish, Helen. 2020. “The Absence of Presence and the Presence of Absence: Social Distancing, Sacraments, and the Virtual Religious Community during the COVID-19 Pandemic.” *Religions* 11 (6): 276, 7. doi:10.3390/rel11060276.

fect for the Roman Congregation for Divine Worship observes: “aware that God never abandons the humanity He has created, and that even the hardest trials can bear fruits of grace, we have accepted our distance from the Lord’s altar as a time of Eucharistic fasting, useful for us to rediscover its vital importance, beauty and immeasurable preciousness.”<sup>17</sup>

### *The Common Good*

There is also another dimension to this ‘why?’ question. Why should a church close? Framed as a Christ versus Caesar confrontation it can be asked, should the Church comply with the orders of the state? While a facile dichotomy may pit one influence against another there is major factor that needs to be taken into consideration. In Roman Catholic thought the institutional Church plays a societal role in promoting the *common good*. Defined in the 2004 Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church “the common good does not consist in the simple sum of the particular goods of each subject of a social entity. Belonging to everyone and to each person, it is and remains “common,” because it is indivisible and because only together is it possible to attain it, increase it and safeguard its effectiveness, with regard also to the future.”<sup>18</sup>

The Catholic Bishops of Queensland, Australia put it succinctly; “as the COVID-19 pandemic has shown, the common good is critically important because it obliges us to look beyond our own needs and our own desires to consider the interests of the broader community. It’s at the heart of what we mean by solidarity. (...)”<sup>19</sup>As part of a wider society the Church, by its own teaching, was bound to act in such a way as to promote the welfare of the population at large. While lamentable and while disruptive, the communion of the saints on earth are called to share the suffering of all people looking forward to the day when exile is over and the Temple is rebuilt. Until that time all and new ways must be employed to advance on the journey to the Kingdom of God. The Covid-19 pandemic is not the first experience in the Church’s journey in having to deal with rupture due to pandemic conditions.

### *The Church and Pandemics*

Even though the Covid-19 pandemic looms large in contemporary society, with the effects still being felt, humanity has had repeatedly to contend with health crises. These events have also impacted the way church and society functioned. As a point of departure the experience of the Milanese Plague of the late 16<sup>th</sup> century is a well-documented case study. Ironically, the epicentre of the first European wave of Covid – 19 was also Northern Italy.

<sup>17</sup> Robert Sarah, “Let us return to the Eucharist with joy!” Congregation for Divine Worship and Discipline of the Sacraments, accessed November 27<sup>th</sup> 2021, <http://www.cultodivino.va/content/cultodivino/it/documenti/lettere-circolari/torniamo-con-gioia-all-eucaristia--15-agosto-2020-.html>

<sup>18</sup> Renato Raffaele Martino, “The Compendium of the Social Teaching of the Church,” -CSTC, 165, accessed November 27<sup>th</sup> 2021, [https://www.vatican.va/roman\\_curia/pontifical\\_councils/justpeace/documents/rc\\_pc\\_justpeace\\_doc\\_20060526\\_compendio-dott-soc\\_en.html#PRESENTATION](https://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/pontifical_councils/justpeace/documents/rc_pc_justpeace_doc_20060526_compendio-dott-soc_en.html#PRESENTATION)

<sup>19</sup> Catholic Bishops of Queensland, Australia, “The Common Good in a Covid World. A Statement by the Catholic Bishops of Queensland for the 2020 State Election,” accessed November 27<sup>th</sup> 2021, [https://brisbanecatholic.org.au/assets/uploads/Bishops\\_of-Qld\\_State-Election\\_A4-brochure.pdf](https://brisbanecatholic.org.au/assets/uploads/Bishops_of-Qld_State-Election_A4-brochure.pdf)

In the 1570s plague ravaged Lombardy and surrounding regions causing the deaths of many thousands.<sup>20</sup> While outbreaks of infectious disease were not uncommon, excellent historical records remain as to how the outbreak was dealt with. St. Charles Borromeo (1538-1584) as Roman Catholic archbishop of Milan, played a significant role in both the public and spiritual response to the events of the two-year pestilence. Between 1576 and 1578, Borromeo as the head of the Milanese church played a pivotal role in social services. For Borromeo, and the people of his time, the plague was interpreted as divine retribution. As a supernatural event it had to be contended supernaturally, yet there were also natural ways the pestilence could be challenged. While little was known of the epidemiological nature of the disease it was accepted that it was virulent and contagious, consequently, public gatherings were prohibited.

In order to meet the spiritual needs of the faithful, as people could not leave their homes, religious practice was brought to the streets. Borromeo had a series of structures erected at street intersections at the base of which Mass was celebrated.<sup>21</sup> Penitential processions - though without the faithful - took place, the archbishop taking a lead role, wearing a rope around his neck as a symbol of expiation. In addition to public worship a significant contribution made by Borromeo was his personal care for the sick and dying. Hagiographical accounts maintain that in the absence of temporal authority, civil leaders “fled in fear.”<sup>22</sup> Pastorally administering the sacraments, an account noted: “He [Borromeo] often goes to the lazer [leper] house to console the sick . . . into huts and private houses to speak to the sick and comfort them, as well as providing for all their needs. He fears nothing. It is useless to try to frighten him. It is true that he exposes himself much to danger but so far, he has been preserved by the special grace of God, he says he cannot do otherwise. Indeed, the city has no other help and consolation.”<sup>23</sup> These events are represented in many art works of the period.<sup>24</sup> Borromeo’s role in the plague was one of the major reasons for the call for his canonization, which took place in 1610.

Prayer in the time of pandemic, of course, predates the early modern period. In 590, the first year of the papacy of Gregory the Great, a plague swept through Rome. As bishop of Rome he ordered processions to take place, and as Georgina Mason, in her seminal guide to the city comments, “people fell out of the ranks, dying by the wayside.”<sup>25</sup>

<sup>20</sup> Cf. Chiu, Remi. 2018. “Singing on the Street and in the Home in Times of Pestilence: Lessons from the 1576–78 Plague of Milan.” In *Domestic Devotions in Early Modern Italy*. Edited by Maya Corry, Marco Faini and Alessia Meneghin. Leiden: Brill, pp. 27–44.

<sup>21</sup> “Today, some “plague crosses” are still in place in towns like Brugherio, located 12 miles north-east from Milan. One is kept in Piazza Roma, near the parish church. Built in white stone and topped with a copper cross, they are engraved with Latin inscriptions that attribute the end of the plague to Jesus’ compassion.” Cf. V.M Traverso, “When plague hit Milan in the 16th century, they closed the churches and built outdoor altars,” accessed Nov 15<sup>th</sup> 2021, <https://aleteia.org/2020/04/24/when-plague-hit-milan-in-the-16th-century-they-closed-the-churches-and-built-outdoor-altars/#>

<sup>22</sup> Domenick Galatolo, “Saint Charles Borromeo’s Courageous Response to the Plague,” updated April 21<sup>st</sup> 2020, <https://www.americanneedsfatima.org/blog/st-charles-borromeos-courageous-response-to-the-plague>

<sup>23</sup> Margaret Yeo, *Reformer: St. Charles Borromeo* by Margaret Yeo (Milwaukee: The Bruce Publishing Company, 1938), 47.

<sup>24</sup> This is replicated in art works of the period such as Sambach’s ‘St. Charles Borromeo Consoling the Plague-Stricken’ in the Moravian Gallery in Brno, Czech Republic.

[https://baroqueart.museumwnf.org/database\\_item.php?id=object;BAR;cz;Mus11;14;en&cp](https://baroqueart.museumwnf.org/database_item.php?id=object;BAR;cz;Mus11;14;en&cp)

<sup>25</sup> Georgina Mason, Rome. (Woodridge: Companion Guides, 2003), 598.



According to legend at the height of the plague, St. Michael the Archangel appeared at the top of the circular tomb built for the emperor Hadrian. The plague miraculously finished and in thanksgiving Gregory had a statue of St. Michael placed atop the castle. To this day the monument bears the name Castel San't Angelo – the fort of St. Michael.

By the time of the Black Death in the 1340s, a new devotional practice had entered popular use. The *Missa Recordare Domine* was a specific order of Mass, with relevant prayers and readings in response to the devastation of the bubonic plague.<sup>26</sup> The title comes from the first words of the introit (a line from the scripture chanted as the service begins) and is adapted from 1 Corinthians 21 and 2 Samuel 24, and reads, “remember your covenant, O Lord, and say to the destroying angel, stay now your hand, that the land be not laid desolate, destroying every living soul.” This liturgical text was inserted into the Roman Missal as ‘the Votive Mass for the Deliverance from Death in time of Plague’ and remained so until substantial liturgical changes following the Second Vatican Council.<sup>27</sup> It was replaced by a subdued Mass for the Sick.

The use of such prayers in communal worship highlights the fact that as part of a wider society the Church faced the uncertainty of the natural world with a view both to divine judgement and divine assistance. Such a spiritually led response would have been the world in which Charles Borromeo would have ministered and is apparent in official texts used in public worship. The prayer after Communion reads; “Graciously hear us, O God our Saviour: deliver Your people from the terrors of Your wrath and assure them of that safety which is the gift of Your mercy. Through our Lord Jesus Christ, Your Son etc. Amen.”<sup>28</sup>

All of this was regular part of human experience until relatively recently. Strides in epidemiology and health care provision have at least subdued the fear of imminent pestilential disaster. The last major global health crisis, the 1918-1919 Spanish Flu, is an historical event from by a bygone era<sup>29</sup>. It is no wonder therefore that when the Covid-19 pandemic literally brought the world to a halt, that society – both inside and outside the Church – was caught by surprise. Not wishing to equate the current situation to the Black Death it is fair to say that Covid-19’s social and psycho- sociological impact has been extraordinary.

## Connectivity

While the believing community has had to contend with pandemics over time contemporary society is vastly different to the that of previous generations. The world has a vastly different spiritually view of human events. Believers and unbelievers alike benefit from scientific development, and access to information means what would have been considered ‘acts of God’ in the past can be understood in a different way. This is bolstered by the rapid (and in most cases free) flow of online data. The internet, of course, is not just a

<sup>26</sup> Christopher Macklin, “Stability and change in the composition of a ‘Plague Mass’ in the wake of the Black Death.” *Plainsong and Medieval Music*, 25(2), 167-189. doi:10.1017/S0961137116000024

<sup>27</sup> Votive Mass for the Deliverance from Death in time of Plague, accessed Nov 16<sup>th</sup> 2021, <https://ususantiquior.files.wordpress.com/2020/03/propers-for-votive-mass-for-deliverance-from-death-in-time-of-pestilence.pdf>

<sup>28</sup> Latin text: Exáudi nos, Deus salutáris noster: et pópulum tuum ab iracúndiæ tuæ terróribus líberum, et misericórdiæ tuæ fac largitáte secúrum. Per Dóminum nostrum Jesum Christum Fílium tuum etc ... Amen.

<sup>29</sup> There were of course other health crises in the 20<sup>th</sup> century – outbreaks of flu variants, Ebola in the 1970s, 90s and 2000s, HIV/AIDS etc. While not minimising these, this paper is looking at global events that suddenly and significantly impacted on course of human events, rather than regionally and chronically.

tool of information transmission, it has a societal function and it is a means of worldview creation. Humanity is connected as never before.

According to Helen Parish “Christianity has been reinventing itself and redefining its relationship with its faithful for two millennia.”<sup>30</sup> The Covid-19 pandemic has exerted a tangible influence on contemporary society. Mortality rates, while relatively high in some places, have not reached levels to parallel the social upheaval of the 1340s. This is not to say however, that there have not been major consequences to how society will function. At this stage it is too early to tell what the lasting impact will be. What can be said, both anecdotally and in scholarship, is that Covid has changed how social interplay is conducted and this has clearly been seen in the life of the Church. This in itself is not new. What is new is the means at the Church’s disposal.

Parish rightly points out that “social -information sharing networks have sat at the heart of the transformation of the traditional structures of organised religion.”<sup>31</sup> Computer mediated communication (CMC) is pervasive.<sup>32</sup> CMC has the potential to create virtual communities defined as sets of individuals who are bound around a common idea or identity, with the potential to establish its own unique culture and understanding. The pervasiveness of such mediation means that for a large section of the population parts of their lives are inextricably linked to an online reality. Being part of an internet-based group means much more than simply receiving details about up-and-coming events; membership brings with it insights and nuanced information that can either bind closer or exclude members, effecting the cohesion of the group in general.

Worshipping communities have used the internet since its early days, the parish website, social media platforms and webcams have been used for many years. Health restrictions made this channel of communication all the more important. Pushing public worship online, internet engagement became a central experience of faith community activity. In contrast to the familiar or normative experience of a local church, this experience has a distinctive nature. In Roman Catholic ecclesiology the primary reason a parish exists is to provide a place where priest and people can join together to meet God and one another. A sense of communion is an essential part of the Church’s identity. With the Church doors closed and with the prohibition of the act of gathering, can a parish actually exist? Hurley concludes that when public worship was suspended, public authorities arbitrarily used the phrase ‘worship will go online.’<sup>33</sup> He notes that there was an automatic and simple synchronisation with other types of meetings and gatherings and liturgical worship. This is echoed by Sara, when he advised Church leaders to be aware that “the participation of the faithful in the celebration of the Eucharist is not reduced by public authorities to a ‘gathering’ and is not considered comparable or even subordinate to forms of recreational activities.”<sup>34</sup>

The centrality of human presence for the celebration of the Eucharist seemed to have been overlooked and not understood by officialdom. The liturgy celebrates the presence of

<sup>30</sup> Parish, 3.

<sup>31</sup> Parish, 3.

<sup>32</sup> McQuail, Denis and Deuze, Mark, *McQuail’s Media, and Mass Communication Theory*, (Los Angeles, Sage, 2020), 18.

<sup>33</sup> Declan Hurley, 15

<sup>34</sup> Robert Sarah, “With Joy let us return to the Eucharist,” *ibid.*

the Lord in Word, Sacrament, priest, and people. Now that the people were absent from the liturgy, the other presences, though not diminished seem incomplete. For an extended period, the faithful were not able to participate in and receive the Eucharist. The initial shock morphed into reluctant acceptance. There is, of course, a disparity of experience. As a result, this paper would like to look at two cases of how the Church embraced the challenge of existing in the virtual space – one global in nature and one local.

*Pope Francis' 'extra ordinary Urbi et Orbi' blessing March 2020*

On Friday, March 27<sup>th</sup>, 2020, Pope Francis presided at a public prayer event at the Vatican. Officially entitled ‘an extraordinary moment of prayer in time of pandemic presided over by the Holy Father Francis,’<sup>35</sup> the liturgy was broadcast throughout the world. Consisting of scriptural and eucharistic devotions, the liturgy took place at a particularly frightening time in the initial outbreak. Two things are worth noting about this event. First, at the end of this prayer the Pope imparted the *Urbi et Orbi* blessing. The significance of this needs explanation. The phrase *Urbi et Orbi* translates as ‘to the city and to the world’ – the city being Rome. It is an apostolic blessing imparted at the most solemn moments in church life. Ordinarily it is given at Christmas and Easter and at some other limited events, such as after a papal election. Francis’ intention noted a general audience two days previously was “to respond with the universality of prayer, compassion and tenderness” in the face of the pandemic.<sup>36</sup> This pastoral outreach was global in nature. The second-dimension worth noting was the physical context. The visuals were impressive; on a dark, wet, and windy evening Francis stood alone (with the exception of one attendant) on the steps of St. Peter’s Basilica. Frequently broadcasts from this location would show crowds of up to two hundred thousand people, the emptiness of the Square on this occasion a stark reminder of the circumstances that prevailed. One could draw comparisons to the previously mentioned example of Gregory the Great. The spiritual connectivity of the event was augmented by a technological connectivity. Imparting a blessing not only to the local church in Rome, but to the global faith community “and all people of good will” the event legitimised the new experience of the church online. The communion of the saints was united with the Bishop of Rome in prayer; they in their homes, he at the symbolic centre of the Roman Church. The virtual space had become very real.

*The Local experience*

While a liturgy served by the Bishop of Rome and broadcast to the world is a unique event, it was certainly not unique as a communicative act. When parishes were closed there was a simple choice to be made; close and remain silent or do what has always been done in the church – make the best of what is available to ensure the Gospel is preached. For many, online parish life was thought to be a positive experience. A religious blogger highlights the attractiveness of this style of worship:

<sup>35</sup> In Italian “Momento straordinario di preghiera in tempo di epidemia presieduto dal Santo Padre Francesco.” [https://www.vatican.va/news\\_services/liturgy/2020/documents/ns\\_lit\\_doc\\_20200327\\_preghiera\\_it.html](https://www.vatican.va/news_services/liturgy/2020/documents/ns_lit_doc_20200327_preghiera_it.html)

<sup>36</sup> cf. [https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/audiences/2020/documents/papa-francesco\\_20200325\\_udienza-generale.html](https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/audiences/2020/documents/papa-francesco_20200325_udienza-generale.html)

There's a real sense of intimacy about the Mass, and I like how everyone is sort of equal on the zoom screen, if you look with the Gallery View. There's also a wide participation in the different elements of the Mass, be it readings or music. The psalm is always read by a young boy Aarav, whose even younger brother often tries to steal a bit of the action! There's some lovely flute music played after communion by Franzi in Munich. And the list of countries represented, besides England, Wales, Scotland, and Germany, includes Ireland, France, Belgium and occasionally Canada.<sup>37</sup>

Liturgy is a live event. While directed transcendently it is also an earthly experience where people of faith gather as the Church to encounter God, and one another. For the most part we conduct liturgy in public and that public event gives expression to the words and signs of the sacramental life. Until March 2020 this could be assumed as the norm and all aspects of the church's liturgy was geared towards this. The clergy now found themselves in empty public spaces; surreal, unnatural, unnerving all of which describe the experience. Since participants no longer attended services bodily the online reality has shifted priests' identity from presider at an in-person event at to broadcast performer.<sup>38</sup> According to Childers, "the very word performance in relation to worship and preaching tends to make some people shiver with anxiety." She defines performance as "the critical execution of things."<sup>39</sup> Performance in a liturgical context is not 'putting on an act' but *making it real* for participants and bringing to life the very thing which the practitioner of any art holds dearest. The absence of a physical congregation, and the emphasis being directed to the camera puts the presider in a focus that in ordinary times is diffused in the regularity of a familiar setting. The Church had left the building to gather in spirit: there is now the requirement to reach to the people who have 'gathered' beyond the camera.

#### *Lex orandi* online

There are similarities between what Marshall McLuhan and Neil Postman describe as *media ecology* and the classical interpretation of *lex orandi, lex credendi*. Media ecology maintains that the 'how' of the communication method has a direct impact on the culture that uses it. When formulated in the 1960s the concept of McLuhan's 'global village' was indeed vastly different to what we understand it has now become. The connectivity offered by internet communication and instant access to information makes the world an incredibly interconnected system. Not only does this impact the quantity of information that is available, but it also offers receivers an equally incredible amount of choice in what information they choose to consume. The global village is not so much as a communally designed area where different architectures blend to create a shared home, this hyper abundant choice has resulted in the ghettoization of the village. One's home is one's castle with a mote and drawbridge to filter what gets in. The same holds true for the 'global parish.' With the migration online the *lex orandi* has radically changed. Pandemic restrictions have not abolished the physical requirements of worship and the valid reception of the sacraments; the eucharistic elements cannot be taken, broken, given, and consumed

<sup>37</sup> Eddie Gilmore, "Digital Community," updated March 30<sup>th</sup> 2020, <https://www.irishchaplaincy.org.uk/9364>

<sup>38</sup> Hurley, 16

<sup>39</sup> Jana Childers and Clayton Schmit, *Performance in Preaching: Bringing the Sermon to Life*, (Grand Rapids, Baker Academic, 2008), 14

virtually. In the Catholic tradition the devotion of ‘spiritual communion’ allowed the faithful to unite themselves to the Eucharist spiritually when it was an uncommon practice to receive the Holy Communion regularly. The faithful were encouraged to make this spiritual connection from where they now tuned in. Many months of worship online, has undoubtedly affected the church members *lex credendi*. Is it sufficient to fulfil one’s duty in religion without being physically present? Why come back to a physical space when the virtual space sufficed for so long?

For some people significant factors still hinder attendance at Sunday Mass. The pandemic is clearly not over. The risk of infection is still present and there may be legitimate fear in gathering together. The Bishops in England and Wales for example recognise prevailing circumstances and have lifted the canonical obligation to attend Mass in person indefinitely.<sup>40</sup> Knowing that the Mass is being celebrated; joining in spiritually in that celebration; watching the live streaming of the Mass; following its prayers at home; making an act of spiritual communion: this how many of the faithful live their corporate Catholicism. As Kass observes, however, “the words are the same, the feelings they evoke are the same, but it is not the same<sup>41</sup>.”

### *Going forward*

“All is changed, changed utterly.” These words of the Irish poet W. B. Yeats ring true in our current social experience. Novel words have entered our vocabulary: online, virtual, live stream, webcam, Zoom, these are no longer the preserve of fintech and computer science; they are part of the function of and participating in society. There has been merger of the ‘real’ and ‘virtual’ worlds, spanning and including both. The duality of the physically present and virtually present may become one of the biggest challenges the Church has to face. The lifting of legal restrictions does not guarantee a return to what was hitherto described as normal. The wearing of masks and social distancing means the experience of pre-pandemic worship is not immolated. A large cohort continue to attend church remotely “due attention to hygiene and safety regulations cannot lead to the sterilisation of gestures and rites, to the instilling, even unconsciously, of fear and insecurity in the faithful.”<sup>42</sup> There is an ongoing concern that when pandemic loses its potency that there will be a reluctance for many to return to the old way. As Sara further observes “once the concrete measures that can be taken to reduce the spread of the virus to a minimum have been identified and adopted, it is necessary that all resume their place in the assembly of brothers and sisters.... invite and encourage again those who have been discouraged, frightened, absent, or uninvolved for too long.” What of those who do not desire or intend to physically return to the assembly, yet still desire to be connected?

This both a challenge and an opportunity, not just for Roman Catholicism, but for the whole Church. The challenge is how best to address the needs of the faithful physi-

<sup>40</sup> Catholic Bishops of England and Wales, “Honouring Sunday,” updated November 21st, 2020, <https://www.cbcew.org.uk/bishops-statement-honouring-sunday/>

<sup>41</sup> John Kass, “A Lamentation for Churches Closed at Easter by the Coronavirus Pandemic,” updated April 8<sup>th</sup> 2020, [https://www.realclearpolitics.com/articles/2020/04/08/a\\_lamentation\\_for\\_churches\\_closed\\_at\\_easter\\_by\\_the\\_coronavirus\\_pandemic\\_142892.html#!](https://www.realclearpolitics.com/articles/2020/04/08/a_lamentation_for_churches_closed_at_easter_by_the_coronavirus_pandemic_142892.html#!)

<sup>42</sup> Robert Sarah, “Let us return to the Eucharist with joy!” *ibid*.

cally present and the faithful virtually present. While there are not two communities there are two dimensions. It is essential to acknowledge the continued presence of the hybrid parish – the place of those who for whatever reason stay online, and to also value their spiritual needs. The online part of the community needs to be made to feel as if they are part of the celebration. In a former time, this may have been done to welcome people to special events such as funeral rites; it is now applicable to every celebration. This however can be developed further to create a genuine sense of solidarity and inclusion that an online community would be of great benefit.

There also is an opportunity. From the beginning of his pontificate Pope Francis has pushed Roman Catholicism from a safe centre to what he called ‘the peripheries,’ to the places where the Church is not demonstrably present. It is simplistic to say that a good online presence is enough to compete with the cacophony of voices that occupy the online place. It is however necessary to be where people are. In the words of Pope John Paul II, the online communication offers “unique opportunities for proclaiming the saving truth of Christ to the whole human family: such a wide audience would have been beyond the wildest imaginings of those who preached the Gospel before us. Catholics should not be afraid to throw open the doors of social communications to Christ, so that his Good News may be heard from the housetops of the world.<sup>43</sup>” The needs of the hybrid parish are still being discerned and the nature of this parish environment is still in formation. It is incumbent on pastors and communities not to squander a new vehicle of community building that has emerged from the pandemic.

## Conclusion

The Covid -19 pandemic is far from over. At the time of writing there remains considerable discussion in Europe concerning the best way to deal with the present and continuing health threats posed by the virus. While vaccination programmes have taken precedent over lockdowns, many nations still maintain some systems of control. As part of society the Christian Church will be asked to play its part in promoting the common good, consequently the reality of the online experience has not receded into the past; it is a fact of life, and one that each community will address in its own way.

The Roman Catholic Church as a corporate, liturgical, and sacramental entity depends on gathering for its mission, and for its very identity. Coming together as ‘the family of God’ to enter into communion with Christ and with one another is not an optional extra; it is intrinsic to the very nature of the Body of Christ on earth. The pandemic has required Church leadership and membership to face the challenge of gathering in the virtual space. The traditional parish has had to adjust itself to the reality of the computer mediated community, which though imperfect at least ensures some kind of connection to the wider church. This imperfection is most clearly experienced in the inability to consume the sacraments, reducing the experience to a spiritual rather than an actual participation. The imperfection is further experienced by the lack of sensory and social engagement,

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<sup>43</sup> John Paul II, Message for the 35<sup>th</sup> World Day of Communications (2001) “*Preach from the housetops*”: *The Gospel in the Age of Global Communication*. Accessed May 6<sup>th</sup> 2022. [https://www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/messages/communications/documents/hf\\_jp-ii\\_mes\\_20010124\\_world-communications-day.html](https://www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/messages/communications/documents/hf_jp-ii_mes_20010124_world-communications-day.html)

depriving the believer with the second essential nature of communion – the bond with one another.

The question remains open; how can the Christian Church profess the reality of God to a people whose existence is at least in part virtual? While the community of the saints continues to exist, whether it gathers or not, the social nature of the Church – the call to communion – requires corporate experience. The physical spaces of church and cathedral have fulfilled this function for centuries. There will always be nave and chancel for worship – the virtual space also needs to be filled with the praises of the people of God. Every Christian age has its challenges; the evangelisation of the virtual space is today's remembering God's people are not virtual – even if the 'darkened glass' (1 Cor 13:12) is a computer or phone screen.

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## Спільність святих і віртуальний простір; Вплив пандемії на церковну спільність в римо-католицькій церкві

Шейн КРОМБІ

Міжнародний університет ЛСС, Клайпеда, Литва

scrombie@lcc.lt

Анотація: Літургійний характер Римо-Католицької Церкви акцентує на зібранні Божого народу для публічного богослужіння. Обмеження публічних заходів через Covid-19 призвели до переходу на онлайн-богослужіння. Ефект переміщення у віртуальний простір змусив Церкву прийняти новий тип зібрань – онлайн. Перехід від фізичного богослужіння до віртуального має наслідки як для участі, так і для ідентичності. Довгострокові наслідки пандемії поки невідомі.

Це вже вплинуло як на спільну молитву, так і практику.

Ключові слова: Covid-19, літургія/богослужіння, участь, Римо-католицька церква, комп'ютерно-опосередковане спілкування.

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