

A GLOBAL CONVERSATION

DIGITAL ECCLESIOLOGY

What if the Future of the Church is Digital...

EDITED BY HEIDI A CAMPBELL

Digital Ecclesiology: A Global Conversation

Edited by Heidi A Campbell

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An Introduction to *Digital Ecclesiology*: What Does a Conversation on Digital Ecclesiology Look Like?

Heidi A Campbell

A Pandemic Pushes the Church Online

In March 2020, I found myself in Germany just as COVID-19 was declared a global pandemic. As a scholar who has studied the impact of the internet on religious communities for nearly 25 years, I was interested to watch how churches responded. I found it novel how religious leaders, who just a few weeks earlier could have been described as technologically resistant, quickly embraced the internet for religious worship. The same internet that was once viewed with suspicion became the answer to social-distancing policies and community lockdowns that resulted in bans on most church gatherings.

Due to my expertise, I was quickly drawn into conversations with ministers and church leaders, online and offline, asking my advice on the best practices for using technology for worship and the potential implications of their media choices on their members. As more and more online worship services filled my Facebook feed each Sunday, I began to wonder what the shift from face-to-face to online services might mean for the future of the church. Could churches return to just offline forms of gathering after the pandemic? What would church look like if social distancing became the long-term new normal? Would expressions of faith increasingly become mediated as part of these shifts?

It was in the midst of these circumstances and questions that this project emerged. The online innovations and experimentations that happened around the word in March and April 2020 constituted a unique moment. As a media scholar with training in theology, I felt it was vital to capture the questions being asked and technological responses emerging and to provoke a conversation on the theological implications emerging around the decisions being made. Online, I saw many of my colleagues also working in the area of digital theology, which explores multiple ethical and ecclesiological questions around the use of technology for the church, also thinking out loud on similar issues on blogs and social media. I felt a strong urge to try to gather these insights and this wisdom together in a central space in order to identify the common areas of concern, dominant tech strategies used, and the missional justifications behind them. It also became clear that most pastors and church leaders were primarily focused on the pragmatic aspects of implementing technology for worship and creating mediated gatherings, and there was little reflection happening on the implication of how these uses can shape a church's religious identity. These are the areas that *Digital Ecclesiology: A Global Conversation on Church & Technology in a Post-Pandemic World* seeks to address.

Digital Theology and Ecclesiology as Emerging Conversations “Digital theology” and even “digital ecclesiology” have become increasingly common areas of conversation within theological contexts like the Society of Biblical Literature, and in academic journals like the *Journal of Practical Theology*. Yet to date, there are no books that focus solely on either of these

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topics. There are also currently no published works that focus primarily on theological issues that are raised or challenged by facets of the global coronavirus pandemic. The only exception to this is an e-book I recently self-published through my university library, *The Distanced Church: Reflections on Doing Church Online* (2020). *The Distanced Church* offers essays by 15 pastors and 15 media scholars on issues relating to challenges churches and their leaders encountered in moving their worship services online during the pandemic. In one month, this free e-book has received over 10,000 downloads by people around the world, demonstrating the importance of this conversation in the current moment. Yet essays in *The Distanced Church* focus more on issues of technological change, religious groups' media negotiations, and the complexity of churches using the internet for religious worship. It does not offer any deep reflection on the theological issues raised by churches' technology integration and how these choices might shape and inform church liturgy, conceptual models of church, and theological meaning making

Since March 2020, online conversation about trends and practices in doing church online have become popular amongst church leaders and theological educators online. Yet from my observations, most of these discussions have focused on the best practices of using digital platforms, rather than the important theological questions they generate, such as how technology use may alter the ethos of the church. Doing church online brings into question issues such as the authenticity of virtual communion and the understanding of communities promoted by digitally mediated gatherings. For the past decade, I have strongly asserted that technology

decision making by religious groups cultivates distinctive theological models, which can inform or change the way people conceive of the church. But a detailed discussion of how this happens and what core theological issues are in need of investigation is still missing.

Digital ecclesiology, the study of the theology related to the structure and practices of the online church, has received even less theological attention. The only exception to this is a special issue on the theme of digital ecclesiology of the journal *Ecclesial Practices* that appeared in print in April 2020. This special issue showcased six ethnographic studies conducted by theologians and media scholars from the USA, Germany, and UK about the ways churches use of the internet and identified some broader questions about church denominational and theological identities that need to be explored in relation to this. As the guest editor for this special issue, I raised the point again that most theological ethnographies on church use of digital media have primarily focused on documenting core digital practices of churches and raising the potential ethical challenges these create for religious groups, rather than offering a true ecclesiological investigation of digital church.

Book Thesis

The purpose of *Digital Ecclesiology* is to identify and concretely address these deeper ecclesiological issues emerging from churches' current digital experimentation with technologically mediated worship, especially experimentation motivated by the COVID-19 global pandemic. Together, the essays in this collection represent the thinking of a diverse set

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of scholars. Here, 22 theologians and religious media scholars from around the world—from Asia, Africa, Europe, South America, and the United States—share theological investigations on these matters.

The aim is to present church leaders and organizations with a range of examples from different theological traditions on the digital church and offer concrete resources that can help prepare churches to reflect on the theological implications of digital media use. The “new normal” that we are seemingly moving into promises to be increasingly dependent on mediated space and technologies. This book seeks to highlight important insights and research on the theological and ecclesiological issues surrounding church use of and response to digital technology and culture. It will highlight the theological implications of churches becoming digitally shaped enterprises for five years or more.

Each contributor was asked to write an essay that addresses one or more of the following questions:

- *What theological resources are there that can help people respond to current church struggles (i.e., social distancing, churches closed, non-contact community reality)?*
- *What theological issues are raised for institutional churches as they move to an online and/or technologically mediated house church model at this time?*
- *How might current experiments with doing church*

during this pandemic, and the predicted social conditions post-pandemic, shape future ecclesiology?

The goal of this work is to make these theological reflections and research insights available to church leaders and members in a timely manner so they can benefit churches immediately as they are thinking through the complex issues raised by social distancing and technologically mediated forms of meeting. The hope is that by being in an e-book format, this can immediately benefit church leaders considering the implications of doing church online and prepare churches to think through the long-term impact of the pandemic on their communities.

Overview of Book

Digital Ecclesiology presents essays from theological voices from around the world, engaging both Protestant and Catholic thinking and traditions. Conscious efforts have been made to incorporate a variety of theological voices, including a mix of established theologians and emerging scholars, a balance of female and male authors, and making sure half of the contributors represent the global South and/or minority voices from the West that are often excluded or overlooked in contemporary theological discourses. The result is a diverse collection of essays where scholars draw on their research on digital culture, ethics, and theology and bring it into conversation with ecclesial developments and trends emerging due to the COVID-19 global pandemic.

This collection of essays brings together a group of theologians and media scholars from around the world to

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explore key ecclesiological challenges and opportunities raised by technology in light of the current global health crisis. These essays consider how churches and Christian institutions are using technology during the pandemic to rethink church worship and mission, and the theological implications of these emerging technological responses. The aim is to provide insights from key voices in the new area of theological reflection known as digital theology to help churches adapt to the “new normal” where online and offline ministry strategies will become part of a “new normal” for these institutions.

These essays will combine theological thinking with a reflective writing style, so they are written in a manner accessible to a broad church audience. The overall aim is for authors to consider what the future of religion might look like in light of the social, cultural, and religious changes brought on by the current pandemic. Essays will also address the potential challenges current trends may raise for church groups, in how they live out their mission and community focus in the days and years ahead.

Overall, *Digital Ecclesiology* aims to offer critical and concrete assessment of the new social conditions and technological strategies the church is being faced with and will continue to have to deal with post-quarantine. It seeks to offer talking points that challenge traditional ecclesiological models and theological modes of thinking about the nature of churches and how we might need to begin to think differently about Christian community in the future.

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The Diverse Ways of Being Church in the Digital Society and in Times of Pandemic

Aline Amaro da Silva

The essay's purpose is to highlight the main ecclesial models we currently find in the plural society, especially on the internet, which ranges from traditional to digital. We also point out changes in the Catholic Church because of the pandemic.

Introduction

In this year of 2020, we live an Easter unprecedented in history, marked by the fight against the coronavirus pandemic through social isolation and the consequent measure of celebrations without the physical presence of the faithful. It made me think about the importance of preparing us to these days marked by a mandatory change of personal, social, and ecclesial habits.

The process of digitizing services reaches its ultimatum in this quarantine. Network Society is no longer just a sociological theory by Manuel Castells (2008), but a reality shared across the planet. The digital communication that was complementary, becomes the main and sometimes the only form of communication between people in the middle of the pandemic. This brings up other issues such as the need for digital inclusion, training the elderly about electronic devices,

making internet access free and making digital devices available to needy families.

From a Catholic point of view, the ecclesiological scenario has also been transformed by this phenomenon. Before this, participation in masses through the media was not stimulated, only in cases of impossibility. Today that all the People of God are unable to go to the temple, the participation in the mediatized Eucharistic celebration becomes the standard of the Church. To keep the community alive, meetings in the digital environment are encouraged. But we need to be aware that the ecclesial use of digital media is not just an opportunity for communication, but changes the identity of the Church (Campbell, 2020).

The thoughts of theologians who, like me, study the effects of digital culture in the faith become evident in COVID19 times. God inhabits cyberspace through each person who is present on the network living and witnessing his communion with God. The connective nature of the worldwide network of people, through each believer, can become a Eucharistic network. To demonstrate this, the essay identifies some Church models that are born from social experience marked by digital culture and the Coronavirus pandemic.

Traditional Modes of Being Church

The way the Church communicates changes what it is. We saw this in the early days of Christianity, with the shift from primarily oral to written communication. Now with the global contagion of the coronavirus, we have moved from face-to-face communication to digital communication and we are

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evaluating what the post-pandemic people's experience will be like. In each period of history, a type of ecclesial vision prevailed, and it is related with the characteristic communication of the society. These paradigms do not encompass the whole reality of the Church, these are analogies that highlight certain aspects of the Church. In historical moments such as now, several models of the Church can coexist.

Avery Dulles (1978) sets out five basic ecclesial models from which the many others are derived. They are institutional, communal, sacramental, herald and servant. In the first four models, the Church places itself in a superior position to the world, presenting itself as an active subject, while the world is its passive object of action.

The institutional model represents the hierarchical Church with its magisterial function of teaching the faith and managing the People of God with the authority of Christ. The model of communion highlights the aspect of the Church being the Mystical Body of Christ. The sacramental Church, on the other hand, is a visible sign of grace to the humanity that is invited to participate in the sacraments that give it access to God. In herald mode, the Church assumes the role of transmitting the good news of the Gospel to all human beings who are just recipients of the message. Dulles also shows the Church as a mediator between God and human beings, a reciprocal communicative channel of divine grace and human response (Dulles, 1978, p. 98).

Ecclesial attitudes towards modern society have been renewed since the Second Vatican Council with the publication of the *Gaudium et Spes* (1965). In it, the Church positions itself as the servant of humanity, legitimizing the autonomy of culture and science, seeking dialogue and doctrinal and institutional updating. Dulles (1978, p.101) calls this ecclesiological method as secular-dialogical: secular, since the Church assumes the world as a theological place; and dialogical, because it seeks dialogue between the contemporary world and Christianity.

This method comes close to the cybertheological method (Silva, 2015, p. 46), whose objective is to dialogue with the human being and the contemporary world, realizing what theology can learn from the signs of the times and what the Christian faith has to contribute to the good living of humanity in the digital age. From this dialogue, new Church analogies arise.

The new ecclesial metaphors

The emergence of a new culture brings new symbolic images for the Church. Thinking about the Church in the digital age, is not only reflecting on the Church's form of communication and presence on the internet, but how it can contribute and be part of the network society from now on. It is not just about its action in the digital environment, but its role in the whole human context (Silva, 2018, p. 68-70).

The Church also shapes itself according to the thought of its leader. The Church in times of Francis has its roots in the model of the Church as a servant, but it is also a Church on a

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missionary journey and a home with its doors always open for all. Contrary to what the Pope wants, in this time of pandemic, we were forced to close our churches and retire at home. Although solicitous to the care suggested by health organizations, Francis stressed that we should not get used to an individualistic and virtual faith, he urges us not to let the coronavirus steal our hope.

In the Mass on April 17, 2020, Pope Francis warns of the risk of an imaginary, but not real faith. He emphasizes the importance of the physicality of the sacraments, the Eucharist and the community: Francis (2020) cautions that the Christian familiarity with the Lord is always communal. It is intimate, personal, but in community. A familiarity without community, without bread, without the Church, without the people, without the sacraments is dangerous because it can become a “gnostic” familiarity. The pope adds that we are living today is not the standard Church, but it is the Church in a difficult situation, so, eventually, we must get out of the tunnel.

It is true that what we are experiencing is not the totality of being Church, but the good and creative initiatives that we are living should not be left aside after the pandemic has passed, forgotten as something that we no longer need. We must not go back, we must go ahead, add efforts to reach people, not only those who go to church, but those who are outside the fold.

Pope Francis points to other ecclesial metaphors for the present time. He observes that the Church must always be a light to the world, sometimes as a lighthouse, sometimes as a

torch (AL, n. 291). The lighthouse represents the traditional Church with a fixed structure and visible light that guides, leads and gives security to people. Today the light from the lighthouse is not enough, the Church must also be a torch that accompanies women and men wherever they are. People today expect a Church to walk with them offering active listening and their testimony like Jesus did with the Emmaus disciples.

The Liquid Church is based on the characterization of “Liquid Modernity” by Zigmunt Bauman. The Liquid Church could have the sense of fragmentary, volatile, fleeting, ephemeral. However, Antonio Spadaro (2012, p. 67-72) sees it as a positive ecclesial model for the digital natives. For Spadaro, in a liquid society, the proclamation of the Gospel should become liquid, in the form of testimony, so that it can mix, because we communicate the message not by transmission, but by sharing (SILVA, 2015, p. 104).

We can think of the Church as a city, especially at night, that sees the light that emanates from every place where there are people. Theologian Dwight Friesen (2009, p. 47) explains that the Church can be understood as a city that emits light not as an end in itself, but because it is a living network of relationships between people. With this, Friesen wants to show that simply because Christians live the Gospel, they naturally become luminous signs for others during the obscurity of the present time.

The Open Source Church model brings the idea of a collaborative and decentralized Church like Wikipedia, based

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on the call of every human being to be co-creator and creative. It is inspired by the open source concept, which consists of software developers giving access to the source code of the device so that others can modify, customize and improve the initial creation. So, an Open Source Church would be a Church in which the basic functions of the mission and the ministry are open to those who feel called to do so, free of so many bureaucracies for their realization. (Whitsitt, 2011, p. 1-3).

Although they are not perfect images of the essence of the Church, all these paradigms are based on the personal testimony of each member of the community. Behind these models, a logic develops that values lay activity in society as the leaven that makes the dough grow. The network itself becomes a great metaphor for a Public Church, a Church that is everyone's home. In a similar perspective, Friesen (2009, p. 55-56) develops the concept of God's Networked Kingdom as an "open We". He explains that the People of God are not a closed group of elect holy men and women separated from society. Rather, our networked identity is to be a blessing to others. As we help life prosper, we embody the "open We" of God".

Then, we think of a Church 4.0 that integrates online and offline actions, seeks harmony between Church models, such as the joined beacon to the city scenery, that is, the traditional physical parish in tune with the digital community forming a single identity and mission of the Church. The network and the Church must meet, walk together, without merging. Therefore, we are going to elucidate the Church situation in the digital age and in the time of COVID-19.

The Church in times of pandemic

From one day to the next, churches and religions around the world needed to reinvent themselves because of measures against the pandemic. Thus, at first, there is the migration of traditional faith practices to the digital environment, adapting to the limitations and possibilities that the network offers for religious experience and human coexistence. We can cite as an example the countless "Lives" that are proliferating on social networks, Eucharistic celebrations and training on topics relevant to the current reality. In a second stage, initiatives of religious praxis that are characteristic of the network are beginning to emerge, these are still few.

In the same way, the Catholic Church was driven by the current situation to a "new missionary exit" on the "digital roads" (Francis, 2014), to keep the flame of God's love burning in the hearts. In announcing the Gospel with innovation and creativity, the Church often have "accidents" along the way with wrong initiatives that turn into memes, but we prefer this Church that takes risks, leaves itself and walks with its people wherever it is, than a closed church and "sick of self-referentiality".

This time of closing the temples that many countries have lived or are living is marked by paradoxes in the ecclesial field. On the one hand, there is a movement for the renewal of the domestic Church and the revaluation of the family in which bishops all over the world encourage laypeople to rediscover the home mystique experienced by the first Christians who met in homes.

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It is also an experience of revaluing *abscondita ecclesia*, of the private and hidden experience of faith, that is, of praying to the Father in secret in the privacy of our room (Mt 6, 6). On the other hand, with the situation of Mass without the faithful or the restriction of the faithful in the celebrations, we run the risk of returning to a more hierarchical and clerical church. On the other hand, masses and other types of online broadcasts open to all people to participate and make their spiritual communion with God, Catholic or not, show the face of a public Church, for everyone and with everyone.

Regarding celebrations broadcast over the internet or other media, we must take care not to trivialize celebrations as if we were watching a movie while drinking coffee, our entire being must be in tune with what we celebrate. Thus, it is necessary to prepare, to schedule the time to meet to celebrate and live spiritual communion. For example, the National Conference of Bishops of Brazil (CNBB, 2020) developed liturgical guidelines for family celebrations to help the faithful to maintain the mystagogy of Christian spirituality in this situation.

The Holy Mass transmitted by the networks still retains a corporeality, since the sacrament is celebrated by the priests individually or with a few faithful who assist in the transmission or in the liturgy, the bread is broken and the wine consecrated with all its physical materiality. The faithful physically accompany their homes, place themselves as if they were in the Church, kneel, sit, stand, listen, watch, pray with their bodies and souls, they cannot physically receive the Eucharist, but their mouth salivates when they see the priest

communing, and in your heart's desire they share in spirit and in truth.

This experience of faith amid pandemic reminds me of Teilhard de Chardin's famous poem "Mass on the World", inspired by a real difficulty that Teilhard faced during his expeditions as a paleontologist in Asia. At different times he had neither bread nor wine to celebrate, but he never failed to give thanks to God wherever he was and in whatever circumstances he found himself, living in practice a cosmic ecclesiology:

Since once again, Lord — [...] in the steppes of Asia — I have neither bread, nor wine, nor altar, I will raise myself beyond these symbols, up to the pure majesty of the real itself; I, your priest, will make the whole earth my altar and on it will offer you all the labours and sufferings of the world (Teilhard de Chardin, 1961).

In line with Teilhard's experience, Pope Francis (2014) expressed on several occasions the desire for an ecclesiology of the global home and "home of all". When Francis calls the planet "our common home", he not only demonstrates the Catholicity of the Church, but the need for a cosmic ecclesiology. The experience of a networked church also expresses the same objective of Francis and Teilhard, that is to connect everyone to Christ, forming one body and one spirit.

Conclusion

Relevant issues to the present and future of Christianity arise from this new experience of Church and society. Staying at home can bring us great opportunities to reconnect with the family and with ourselves through silence, introspection and sharing. But badly lived, it can bring us dispersion and procrastination. Social isolation is not a vacation, just watching movies and series. It is a time to reconnect with our essence and identity, focus on our goals and on who really matters to us. Pastoral conversion requires a review of personal and social life, especially of our experience of the faith and the consequent works that we carry out.

A digital metanoia in the post pandemic church should change the way we think about ecclesiology. In a way of digital pastoral conversion, we should pass from maintenance to revival mentality. It means building a mentality of innovation, not seeing the current circumstances as barriers that leave us stagnant but expanding the horizon with the challenges that reality presents us. From this new perspective, we see difficulties as opportunities for growth, strengthening and maturation.

In these emergency times of digital participation in Eucharistic celebrations, we are compelled to rethink the physicality of liturgical and sacramental actions. This does not mean that spiritual communion through digital means replaces physical communion in person. However, it makes us think in the sense of Jesus' words to the Samaritan woman that it will be neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem that they will worship the Father, but in Spirit and in Truth (Jn 4: 21b-23). What this

biblical passage reveals to us is that the main temple in which we are to worship God is our own body. Not alone, but as part of the Connected Body of Christ. We realize that there are several ways to pray to the Father in our home, over the internet, connected with the People of God, and that God's grace exceeds the space-time limit.

We are also learning what it means and how to be a digital Church. The members of the People of God, especially the priests, in the midst of the pandemic received the urgent mission of digital literacy, that is, to strive to learn the digital tools for pastoral service and to develop a consistent reflection on new technologies. We are all in this great global research laboratory and we are called the task of Cybertheology, that is, thinking about the Christian faith in times when network communication becomes the main form of communication and human relationship.

The post-pandemic Church may see digital culture as an ally in cultivating people's daily faith and strengthening personal and family spirituality. When we are unable to physically go to church for normal reasons like work, study, family care, it will be refreshing to be able to meditate on the Word or say my personal prayer through the digital content that my community shared on the networks, to access my Digital Church.

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@ Worship Goes Viral: Catholic Liturgy Online in a COVID-19 World

Teresa Berger

My essay focuses on the diversity of Catholic liturgical practices and their uneven migrations into digital social space under the conditions of the COVID-19 pandemic, and it traces the specific theological commitments at the roots of this unevenness.

It is commonplace by now that the COVID-19 pandemic has produced a parallel viral phenomenon, this one in the world of Christian practices of worship. Having published a book in 2018 that was titled *@ Worship*, I hope I might be forgiven if I think of this coronavirus-induced phenomenon of 2020 as @ worship going viral. The sharp rise in digitally mediated liturgical practices has been widely noted, most prominently so during the height of the Christian liturgical calendar, namely the 2020 Holy Week and Easter celebrations. In addition, questions about virtual or online communion have received heightened attention since the beginning of the COVID-19 lockdown. What is often missed in this increased interest in digitally mediated practices of Christian worship are the specifics and varieties of worship traditions that have migrated online—or remained offline, in some cases. I am not thinking here of different ecclesial traditions and their distinct

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worship styles, although these do lead to very different engagements with digitally mediated practices. There is, for example, a marked divergence between the ease of online communion practices in some evangelical and nondenominational communities and the stark “no” to digitally mediated eucharistic sharing in Roman Catholic and Eastern Orthodox churches. But what is just as interesting and noteworthy as differences in digitally mediated worship practices between denominations are the different rites within one and the same community of faith and *their* uneven migrations into digital social space. In what follows, I focus on this diversity within the Roman Catholic Church and among its liturgical practices, particularly in their North American and European contexts.

Before turning to the surge of online practices following the closing of Catholic brick-and-mortar sanctuaries in response to the COVID-19 pandemic, it is important to acknowledge what was already in place. Over the years before the virus emerged, a good number of Catholic practices of prayer, worship, and devotion had begun to migrate into digital social space, often developing online expressions in parallel with traditional offline forms and practices. Prime examples are various forms of daily prayer, from the official Liturgy of the Hours to personal scripture reading, spiritual reflection, and meditation. Further examples include Marian devotions such as the rosary, specific popular devotions such as online shrines to St. Joseph, digital prayer chapels, sites for Eucharistic Adoration online, virtual pilgrimages, and digital memorial sites. Most of the devotional practices mentioned here, whether offline or online, do not require a priest to be present

and/or in charge; they are expressions of a broad, popular piety. Yet swiftly concluding that Catholic liturgical practices in digital mediation are mostly in the hands of laity (as has long been the case with much of popular piety) would be mistaken. Boundaries between liturgical practices in the hands of ecclesially authorized ministers wedded to scripted, officially sanctioned texts on the one hand and those devotional practices considered “popular” and in the hands of laity on the other hand have long been porous in Catholic life. This porousness, too, has migrated into digital social space. For example, practices of Eucharistic Adoration—that is, of venerating a eucharistic host in a monstrance—do not need a priest, but they do require a consecrated eucharistic host, which usually means a sanctuary and a priest. In addition, major official rites of significance for the 1.33 billion Roman Catholics worldwide had moved into digital mediation long before the COVID-19 pandemic. This is true especially of papal liturgies, from the large masses during apostolic journeys to masses of canonization. Such liturgies have for years now been available to Catholics (and non-Catholics) around the globe, first on TV and then through livestreams and online videos. Pope Francis especially has made extensive use of digital media in his ministry, and this has included some unique digital-liturgical initiatives. The first-ever synchronized, worldwide Eucharistic Adoration of 2013 was such an initiative. So was Pope Francis’ extraordinary *Urbi et Orbi* blessing in response to the COVID-19 pandemic on March 27, 2020. A solitary pontiff in an empty St. Peter’s Square holding high a eucharistic monstrance was joined in prayer and watched around the world that day by many Catholics who were deeply moved by this somber, digitally mediated rite.

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The experience was no doubt strengthened by the fact that digital mediation here rendered visible what Roman Catholic ecclesiology has long foregrounded, namely the trans-local, more-than-congregational, global, and indeed catholic (in the sense of “universal”) character of this church. As Matthew John Paul Tan recently put it, “the digitized presence of the Eucharistic Christ becomes a focal point of unity for a million gazes” (Tan, 2020, p. 82).

In a sense, then, nothing so far about the pandemic-driven migration of Catholic liturgical practices into online territory seems particularly surprising. Surprises await, however, when one steps back to consider different Catholic rites in their own right. Included in this consideration are rites that are not in migration into digital worlds. Baptism provides an example of the latter.

Baptism

The sacrament of baptism has never been practiced via digital mediation in a Roman Catholic context, as far as I know. In claiming this, I am only referring to the key elements of this rite, namely the moment of water baptism. There have, of course, been many baptisms in Catholic communities that have included digital media, be it smartphones raised to snap pictures during the liturgy to post on Facebook or recordings made of the service for family members unable to attend. But beyond these digital accompaniments (or interferences?), the rite as such is not practiced in digital mediation. So-called internet baptisms—as they might be performed in a multisite nondenominational community—do not exist in the Catholic ritual repertoire, as broad and varied as this repertoire is.

Importantly, there is also no discussion about a possible digital mediation of this key sacrament. The main reason, in all likelihood, lies in theological convictions and pastoral provisions already in place, particularly those concerning baptism in cases of emergency. Roman Catholic understandings of emergency baptism require a bare minimum of elements. The person who baptizes does not even have to be a Christian, as long as they are willing to honor and intend to do what the Church does in baptism. Beyond that, all that is needed is water, and the pronouncement of the Trinitarian formula as traditionally used in baptism. Given these minimal requirements, it is hard to see how baptism could not be practiced in almost any situation of need; digital mediation is simply not necessary for wide-open access to this sacrament, even under the conditions of a global pandemic.

Rites around Dying, Death, Burial, and Remembering

If baptism is mostly received by infants in Roman Catholic communities and has seen little if no migration into digital mediation, the same cannot be said for rituals at the other end of life. The Catholic ritual process around dying, death, burial, and remembering was deeply affected by the COVID-19 lockdown, as ministers struggled with identifying adequate digitally mediated forms. Once again, specific theological understandings and liturgical traditions were at the heart of this struggle. To begin with, traditional Catholic rites, including the sacraments around dying and death, could no longer be performed due to requirements for social distancing and physical isolation during the pandemic. Granted, these requirements affected all faith communities’ practices of care

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at the end of life. Catholics simply experienced ritual constraints in ways particular to their own theological-liturgical tradition. For example, the presence of a priest or a lay ecclesial minister with a dying person basically became impossible. This also meant that the sacraments of reconciliation (“confession”) and of anointing of the sick (“extreme unction,” in older parlance) were not available to a Catholic at death’s door. Neither could the most ancient sacrament for the end of one’s earthly life—the Eucharist in the form of *viaticum*, food for the journey—be shared. And this, although it does not require a priest to bring the Eucharist to the dying. Rather, the requirements of social distancing and physical isolation in hospitals and nursing homes made this age-old practice impossible. While some priests in other ecclesial traditions responded by seeking to accompany dying parishioners with prayers via a smartphone or Skype, the particular sacramental needs of Catholics at the end of life were harder to meet. Some Roman Catholic dioceses, among them the Archdioceses of Chicago, IL, and Munich, Germany, quickly trained priests to minister to people dying from COVID-19. If a hospital or nursing home allowed for “compassionate exceptions” to the rules for isolation, these priests had to wear full personal protective equipment, limit the time spent with a dying person, use gloves as well as an applicator for the anointing of the sick with oil, and bring *viaticum* in one-way containers. But such a COVID-19-specific ritual process of accompanying a dying person would have been the exception. Most Catholics who died with a diagnosis of COVID-19 will sadly have died without the traditional ecclesial accompaniment. And any possible digital mediation, e.g., prayers for the dying via Skype, would

not have come close to what is traditionally a deeply physical and complexly embodied, symbolically rich and multi-coded super-sign, semiotically speaking. On the other hand, post-mortem Catholic rites including funeral liturgies and ways of remembering the dead migrated into digital mediation more easily during the COVID-19 lockdown. Some masses of Christian burial were livestreamed and the use of online memorial sites spiked.

Communion/s

The most debated sacrament during the COVID-19 lockdown was, of course, one related neither to the beginning of life nor its end. Especially in Christian communities along the Protestant/free church/evangelical/nondenominational/Pentecostal spectrum, online communion was the topic most discussed and practiced in a number of different ways. Catholic communities, too, discussed communion practices, but this discussion was not about the possibility of digitally mediated eucharistic sharing. The consensus on that point principally remains what Katherine Schmidt described as the “hard truth” at the beginning of the COVID-19 lockdown: “our technology cannot (yet) support the fullness of sacramental life when it comes to the Eucharist.” (Schmidt, 2020). This consensus, however, did not preclude lively discussions about digitally mediated eucharistic celebrations in Roman Catholic circles. These discussions simply followed a specific Catholic theological and liturgical logic.

Several issues came to the fore. With mass suddenly widely available in forms of digital mediation (livestream, videos,

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Zoom) due to the closure of brick-and-mortar sanctuaries, and with eucharistic consecration not deemed possible across distances by current Catholic convictions, the age-old practice of “spiritual communion” suddenly flourished. Behind this particular practice stands a medieval scholastic distinction between the sacramental sign (*sacramentum tantum*), its immediate effect (*res et sacramentum*), and its ultimate effect (*res tantum*). Under this scholastic distinction, a believer can be understood to be able to receive the ultimate effect of the Eucharist, namely union with Christ, even if unable to receive the sacramental sign, i.e., the eucharistic elements, and its immediate effect, which is the sacramental presence of Christ. Clearly, this scholastic interpretation provides substantial theological support for the practice of spiritual or “ocular” communion. However, Catholics schooled in Vatican II liturgical theology were quick to worry that these medieval scholastic interpretations and practices would undo the gains of post-conciliar liturgical reforms. These reforms had moved Catholics away from spiritual communion and instead encouraged them to receive the eucharistic elements of bread and wine at each mass. This post-conciliar gain was now feared undone through the sudden shift to a primarily visual, ocular engagement with the Eucharist through digital mediation. In a similar vein, concerns arose that livestreamed masses seemed to accord renewed importance (through the visual focus on the altar area rather than the empty pews) to a lone priestly presider. This was seen as weakening the post-conciliar emphasis on the gathering of the whole community around the eucharistic table. In some other quarters, arguments against the disembodied, non-participatory nature of online worship were revived; and some raised concerns

about reducing worship “to an experience of convenience and efficiency” (Zsupan-Jerome, 2020, p. 92). At the same time, some priests delighted in finding that they suddenly had a much larger online congregation than they ever saw offline. Lay-led liturgies too blossomed online during the COVID-19 lockdown. Some Catholic communities also experimented with new liturgical forms offline, for example distributing a “Eucharist to-go,” or bringing the consecrated host in a monstrance to the streets where their parishioners lived. One Irish priest enabled the celebration of First Communion for children of his parish by distributing consecrated hosts in advance to the parents, then celebrating mass via Zoom with the families; the parents gave their children the Eucharist at the moment of Communion in the mass. Catholic belief in the real presence of Christ in the eucharistic elements—a presence that remains—enabled these elements to become highly “mobile” after the mass in which they were consecrated. Meanwhile, some Catholics normally in the pews of their local church discovered a whole new world of Catholic liturgy in the availability of livestreamed masses, and not a few delighted in participating in eucharistic celebrations from around the globe. Here, the fact that the Catholic Church continues to maintain an authorized liturgical tradition in the texts of the Roman Missal (at least for the Western, “Latin” part of the church), helped the Catholic faithful navigate liturgical celebrations in other places and languages with relative ease.

Catholic Liturgy Online in a COVID-19 World—Beyond Diminishment

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All this goes to say that the liturgical experiences of Catholics under the conditions of COVID-19 have by no means been ones of diminishment only. Along the way, Catholic communities have also witnessed a plethora of liturgical adaptations and ritual inventions, from drive-through confessions to an Easter blessing with a squirt gun. The latter gimmick sadly went viral too, with people generally unaware that the Catholic tradition already has a liturgical instrument for dispensing holy water across distances (called an *aspergillum*). Liturgical oddities springing up under the conditions of COVID-19 bring up one last Catholic rite to mention here. It is a rite the Catholic Church counts among its seven sacraments, the sacrament of marriage. This ritual too has been much affected by the COVID-19-pandemic, mostly by weddings being canceled. But in a curious twist, an extraordinary albeit long-standing practice in the Catholic Church's collection of ritual oddities has also been revived and found its way into digital mediation. At least one Catholic wedding I am aware of was performed "by proxy," that is to say, with the bride in one place together with a priest and a proxy bridegroom, and the bridegroom in another place, all digitally joined via ZOOM. Truth be told, the digital mediation was not essential for this rite; marriages by proxy have for centuries been performed without the help of digital media. One of the partners to be joined in marriage would simply have been absent in person and represented by a proxy.

From extraordinary back to the ordinary (or not?): as brick-and-mortar sanctuaries gradually reopen, a whole new world of worship practices is seeing the light of day. A host of liturgical changes and accommodations are being enacted

across the varied ritual repertoire that is the Catholic liturgical tradition. For the global Roman Catholic Church, as a worldwide communion of churches, the changes—different not only according to rite but also according to region and diocese, race and ethnicity, class, and other markers of difference—will be interesting to watch indeed.

Conclusion

As I hope to have shown, the diversity of liturgical practices of the Roman Catholic Church forbids generalizations about the migration of "Catholic worship" into digital social space. This migration, especially under the accelerated pace due to the COVID-19-pandemic, has been uneven. The reasons for the unevenness are largely to be found in the specific theological and liturgical understandings of each rite as it became affected in distinct ways by the norms of social distancing and physical isolation in response to a virus. This virus will continue to affect worship life in manifold ways even as brick-and-mortar churches open their doors again.

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Life Together, Apart: An Ecclesiology for a Time of Pandemic

Roland Chia

The disruptions that the coronavirus pandemic have brought about in the life and ministry of the Christian community will not diminish its identity as the Body of Christ, its worship of God, and the communion (koinonia) of its members with God and one another, because the church is instituted by Christ and constituted by the Holy Spirit.

The title of this brief essay is an adaptation of that of a penetrating book on the Christian community by the German Lutheran theologian, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, written almost a century ago while he was teaching at Finkenwalde, an underground seminary. *Life Together* (Bonhoeffer, 1954) is arguably one of Bonhoeffer's most influential works, whose insights continue to be relevant today. In the wake of the Nazi suppression of the Confessing Church, Bonhoeffer felt the urgent need to reflect on what it means to be the church, the community of believers gathered in the name of Jesus Christ. In *Life Together*, he urges us to return to the essence of ecclesiology.

The coronavirus pandemic has brought about unprecedented disruption to the life and ministry of the church. With

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stringent lockdown and social-distancing measures, churches have no choice but to move their Sunday services (often radically truncated) to online platforms. In addition, all physical gatherings, including small group meetings, have been suspended, and many churches have even stopped practicing holy communion. Some Christians doubt if participating in online Sunday services can really be regarded as authentic worship (Banks, 2020). Others are concerned that the digitalisation of the church may result in the erosion of the communion (*koinonia*) among members. The list of concerns can easily be expanded.

Such extraordinary times should compel Christians to ask fundamental questions about what it means to be a community gathered in the name of Christ. In other words, in the wake of these extenuating circumstances, Christians should look behind the concrete forms and practices tied to different ecclesial traditions and reflect more penetratingly about the true nature and essence of the church. For only when we have achieved sufficient clarity on the church's ontology, its being, can we evaluate the provisional and often radical arrangements that many churches have been forced to make due to the pandemic.

I begin with a discussion of the nature of the church and reflect on what it means to say that it is instituted by Christ and constituted by the Spirit. I then turn my attention to Christian worship and fellowship (*koinonia*). I argue that although the disruptions to the life of the Christian community due to the coronavirus pandemic are indeed great, they do not diminish the church's being and identity as the Body of

Christ, the integrity of her worship of God, and the communion of her members.

Christ and the Spirit

As we reflect on the question “What is the church?” I would like to state at the outset that the nature of the church cannot be understood apart from its relationship with the triune God. Put differently, the church is the work of the two hands of God—to borrow the expression from Irenaeus—such that there can be no proper understanding of ecclesiology without Christology and pneumatology. Thus, the Greek Orthodox theologian John Zizioulas, echoing the teachings of the patristic writers, could speak of the church as instituted by Christ and constituted by the Spirit (Zizioulas, 1997, p. 132). This means that Christology and pneumatology are not only important because of the light they might shed on our understanding of the church, they must be properly understood as ontological categories in ecclesiology.

In *Life Together*, Bonhoeffer grounds everything he has to say about the Christian community in Christology. “Christianity,” he writes, “means community through Jesus Christ. No Christian community is more or less than this” (Bonhoeffer, 1954, p. 23). Although the New Testament uses a number of analogies to refer to the church, the most deeply Christological of them all is surely that of the Body of Christ (Ephesians 5, Colossians 1:18, Romans 12:5, 1 Corinthians 12). This analogy, T. F. Torrance rightly points out, “refers us directly to Christ Himself, the Head and Saviour of the Body” (Torrance, 1958, p. 8). To say that the church is the Body of Christ, Torrance explains, is to recognise that the incarnate

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Son “identified Himself with us, and assumes us into union and communion with Him, so that as church we find our essential being and life not in ourselves but in Him alone” (Torrance, 1958, p. 9).

Because Christians are members of the one Body of Christ, their relationship with one another is always mediated by their Lord, who is the Head the Body (Colossians 1:18). Bonhoeffer tirelessly stresses this point, insisting that *koinonia* is made possible by and guaranteed only in Christ: “The more genuine and deeper our community becomes, the more will everything else between us recede, the more clearly and purely will Jesus Christ and his work become the one and only thing that is vital between us” (Bonhoeffer, 1954, p. 26). Thus, understood Christologically, the church must not be regarded as a human creation or confused with “some wishful idea of religious fellowship.” The church is not a “psychic reality” but a “divine reality” whose essence is profoundly “spiritual” (Bonhoeffer, 1954, p. 26). A Christological understanding of the church, therefore, disabuses us from thinking of it in fundamentally sociological and anthropological terms as a human institution or a society of like-minded individuals.

Just as the church is the Body of Christ, so it is also the Temple of the Holy Spirit (1 Corinthians 3:16-17). The church came into being when the Holy Spirit descended upon the disciples of Christ at Pentecost (Acts 2), empowering them so that they might become his bold witnesses (Acts 1:8). The relationship between Christology, pneumatology, and ecclesiology is brought out in 1 Peter 2:5, where we find the image of Christ as the cornerstone of the temple and where believers are

described as “a spiritual house.” The Spirit who has brought the church into being now indwells it—both in the individual and in the community—and acts as its principle of animation. This has led some theologians to describe the Spirit as the “soul of the Church” (Pope Leo XIII, 1897, Article 6). However, it must be pointed out that the Spirit who indwells the church and makes it its temple is always sovereign and free. Just as we cannot identify the church with Christ, so we cannot imprison the Spirit in the church. Thus, although the church is indeed the church of the Spirit, the Spirit cannot be said to be the Spirit of the church, but the Spirit of God and of Christ (Küng, 1976, p. 229).

In thus grounding ecclesiology in Christology and pneumatology, the church can remain confident about its identity and the authenticity of its ministries in the wake of the challenging circumstances due to the pandemic. The church, to be sure, is no stranger to disruptions. In the course of her long history, it has encountered turmoil and upheavals brought about by plagues, persecution, war, population displacements, etc., and has always emerged undefeated. Whether their worship services are held in Europe’s gothic cathedrals or in makeshift sheds in refugee camps, and whether they are conducted openly or clandestinely (due to persecution), Christians believe that God is always amongst them. Their identity as God’s people and the spiritual reality of their communion with God and each other are not dependent on the circumstances, but on their faith in Christ, and in the power of the Spirit who has made them members of Christ’s Body. The same holds true as Christians all over the world weather the current crisis.

Worship

The central activity of the church is, without doubt, worship. The great Swiss-German theologian, Karl Barth, is surely right to assert that “Christian worship is the most momentous, the most urgent, the most glorious action that can take place in human life” (Barth quoted in Martin, 1982, p. 1). The COVID-19 pandemic has disrupted the worship experience of many Christians as churches were forced to suspend physical Sunday services when countries went into lockdown. The situation was made more acute by the fact that churches were unable to resume services during Holy Week and Easter, the most important period in the Christian year. Churches in many countries have made creative use of technology to ensure that worship services are made available either through livestreaming or some other arrangements. But many are of the view that online services pale in comparison with physical services and wonder if the worship of the church is in some important ways deficient when services are conducted in this way.

To address this concern, we must first clarify what is Christian worship. The distinguished scholar of the history of Christianity, Horton Davies, defines worship quite simply as “the glad response of Christians to the holy, redemptive love of God made known in Jesus Christ” (Horton, 1957, p. 105). What is exceptionally salutary about Davies’s definition is that it underscores the idea that Christian worship is always a response to the overtures of God in Christ. In light of the ecclesiology that I have been sketching, Christian worship may be described as the church’s doxological response to the God

revealed in Christ, made possible by the power of the Spirit. This means that while Christian worship is a human activity, it is always more than just this. Worship is a graced activity that is made possible and energised by God himself. Apart from the grace of God—which is at once active, salvific, and enabling—true worship is impossible.

Here, special attention must be given to the role of the Holy Spirit in Christian worship. It is the Spirit that gathers the church, the Body of Christ, for corporate worship. In so doing, the Spirit knits the stories of its individual members together so that they form the tapestry of the story of the doxological community. The story of this community is in turn shaped and directed by the narrative of scripture, which tells of God’s saving and covenantal relationship with his people. Using a different imagery, William Dyrness describes this spiritual reality thus:

One might argue that God’s purpose is to see the melodies of these stories blend together in a kind of polyphony, where the Gospel promise, and the Trinitarian life of God provide the basic melody line. Here God is not seen as the lover who seeks us out, or the teacher who instructs us, but as the composer who crafts a larger symphony out of the various thematic elements that comprise our human communities (Dyrness, 2009, p. 117).

Through the agency of the Spirit, Christians participate in this spiritual reality whenever they gather for worship, regardless

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whether it takes place in St. Peter's Basilica or in their living rooms.

The reading and exposition of scripture always have an important place in the worship service. This is true across the different ecclesiastical traditions. As the Bible is read during worship, Christ himself is "presented to the community of believers" (Van Dyk, 2005, p. 67). But scripture also "draws us into Christ's presence and invites us to be transformed into his image. It opens the possibility of a relationship between the divine and the human" (Burgess, 1998, p. 46). And as the sacred text is expounded in the sermon, the Spirit of Truth (John 16:13) brings God's transforming word to the members of the congregation so that their lives may conform to the pattern of Christ.

The administration of the sacrament of holy communion is also an important aspect of Christian worship. For if the ministry of the word makes God "audible," the sacrament makes him "visible." There is, however, much debate as to whether it is appropriate for holy communion to be conducted when worship services are livestreamed or pre-recorded. In Singapore, many churches have elected to temporarily suspend the practice of holy communion. Even the Roman Catholic Church, whose liturgical theology is profoundly eucharistic, has taken this approach and chosen to practice "spiritual communion" instead, following the teachings of Aquinas. The judgements that churches make concerning the validity of practicing holy communion remotely are guided by their different eucharistic theologies. However, if the Spirit of God could bring God's word to believers as they participate in

online services such that it may be truly heard and received, surely the same Spirit could ensure the reality and efficacy of the sacrament even though the scattered members of the community participate in it remotely.

Be that as it may, when we understand Christian worship as a graced human activity, made possible by divine presence and agency, the disruptions introduced by the restrictions imposed due to COVID-19 should not rob Christians of their ability to worship God "in spirit and in truth" (John 4:24), even though their (psychological) experience of it may be somewhat diminished.

Koinonia

We turn finally, and very briefly, to reflect on the Christian community. Many Christians feel that their ability to engage with one another in fellowship has been seriously hampered because of the stringent lockdown measures. Although these Christians are generally quite savvy when it comes to the use of digital media to stay in touch with one another, many feel that this mode of communication is unable to take the place of actual physical interactions. While it is no doubt true that meeting via Zoom (for example) to study the Bible cannot be as engaging as meeting physically, many scholars have shown that it is not necessarily the case that virtual meetings would lead to the total loss of community (Campbell, 2005, pp. 176-177).

In regard to the ecclesiology that I am sketching, it would be helpful to recall that the Christian community is ultimately established in Christ through the Holy Spirit. As Bonhoeffer

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has reminded us, Christian fellowship is possible because of the mediation of Christ, its unshakable foundation: “[W]ithout Christ we ... would not know our brother, nor could we come to him ... Christ opened up the way to God and to our brother” (Bonhoeffer, 1954, p. 23). Just as Christian fellowship is established in Christ, so it is sustained by him. Having become one through Christ, Bonhoeffer argues, Christians “can continue to do so only by way of Jesus Christ. Only in Jesus Christ are we one, only through him are we bound together” (Bonhoeffer, 1954, p. 24). Thus, it is through Christ alone that true *koinonia* is possible, and it is by him alone that this communion is sustained. This is surely true even when Christians are kept apart by the imposed restrictions and can only “meet” virtually through the use of technology.

God has ordained the church in such a way that its members are profoundly dependent on one another. They are to encourage one another (1 Thessalonians 5:11), pray for each other (Ephesians 6:18), and carry the burdens of their brothers and sisters in the Lord (Galatians 6:2). Most crucially, Christians must speak the word of God to one another. “[T]he Christian needs another Christian who speaks God’s word to him,” writes Bonhoeffer. “He needs his brother as a bearer and proclaimer of the divine word of salvation” (Bonhoeffer, 1954, p. 23). Of course, this is best done in person, face to face. But it can also be accomplished through communications technology such as WhatsApp, email, Facebook or Zoom. The apostle Paul used the media of his day—he was an avid letter-writer—to exhort, instruct, rebuke and encourage the churches in different cities while he was in prison. Paul knew that distance and separation could not threaten the deep

koinonia he had with these churches, and that his letters could and would—by God’s grace—have an impact on their recipients. Surely, we can trust God to do the same through technology.

Conclusion

In this brief essay, I have argued that in the wake of this pandemic with all its attendant disruptions to the life of the church, Christians must rediscover the essence of ecclesiology. Following Zizioulas and the early fathers of the church, I maintain that a robust ecclesiology must be grounded in Christology and pneumatology—the church is instituted by Christ and constituted by the Spirit. The church is sustained by the grace of God and is therefore not ultimately dependent or bound by historically contingent forms. Thus, even with the strictest lockdown measures as a result of which the regular activities of the church are suspended or disrupted, the identity of the church as Christ’s Body is not diminished. Neither is the reality of her worship and the authenticity of her communion (*koinonia*) with God and with one another. (Christians should thank God for technology, since its creative use has mitigated some of the disruptions brought about by the pandemic).

However, it is important that I clarify that the current arrangements should be seen as provisional and temporary measures, necessitated by the extraordinary circumstances in which we find ourselves. Once the pandemic has blown over and the restrictions lifted or eased, the church should resume as many of her offline activities and ministries as possible. The church should, of course, continue to use technology

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imaginatively for its various ministries, but it must always do so in a theologically prudent and principled manner. Online religious activities and networks can still continue, but they should be seen only as supplementing the church's offline activities, and not as their alternatives or substitutes. In other words, Christians should resume physical gatherings—Sunday services, Bible study meetings, etc.—wherever possible. Like the Apostle Paul, Christians must yearn to see each other again in the flesh (Romans 1:11; 2 Timothy 1:4). This is because in creating us as bodied beings, God has made the physical presence and interaction of its members an important aspect of the community of faith. As Bonhoeffer has perceptively put it,

Man was created a body, the Son of God appeared on earth in the body, he was raised in the body, in the sacrament the believer receives the Lord Christ in the body, and the resurrection of the dead will bring about the perfected fellowship of God's spiritual-physical creatures. The believer therefore lauds the Creator, the Redeemer, God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, for the bodily presence of a brother (Bonhoeffer, 1954, pp. 19-20).

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The Church is Moving On(line)

Anita Cloete

This essay reflects on how the church is moving on during social distancing due to COVID-19, specifically from my experience in a South African context. Whilst online church seems to be a viable option for many, the essay warns against understanding the mediums used as simple tools to take offline practices online.

When Distancing Becomes the Way of Staying Alive in a Connected World

The Coronavirus, also referred to as COVID-19, has shaken the world for mainly two reasons, namely the quick spread geographically and the deadly nature thereof. Although many have recovered worldwide, the total number of deaths is unfortunately also increasing daily. Social distancing has become the main response to COVID-19 as the human body is the main carrier of the virus. Lockdown, a word that many of us never really knew or thought about before, has become the primary way in which governments around the world respond to the global epidemic.

This implies that the movement of people in all spheres of life is restricted, as economic activity has also been put on hold except for what are considered essential services. In a world

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characterized by mobility, a lockdown may sound like and be experienced as a death sentence, because literally everything people used to do comes to a standstill. The words *cancelled* and *postponed till further notice* have become standard ways of responding to events planned for this year. Important for this reflection, however, is the fact that religious gatherings and practices like marriages are also prohibited under lockdown. In South Africa, several original cases of contamination were traced back to religious gatherings, making such gatherings hotspots for spreading the virus. Also in South Africa, a couple who went ahead with their wedding were arrested, along with the pastor who officiated at the wedding and attendees, for violating the regulation regarding religious gatherings.

The prohibition of religious gatherings and practices may be viewed as minor compared to the economic damage caused to already weak and fragile economies, especially in South Africa. This may be a valid view however, religion still plays a significant role in people's lives, especially in times of crisis. A functional perspective on religion indicates that one of the main functions of religion is helping people to make sense and find meaning in life, clearly even more so in times of crisis. For many church members in South Africa, gatherings once or twice a week are one of the main ways of expressing their faith and exercising belonging to a faith community. Therefore, the prohibition of these gatherings left many religious leaders with a real challenge in a time when people need encouragement and hope.

Give Me that Online Religion because It Is Good Enough for Me

Since the start of the lockdown in South Africa, many religious leaders found it necessary to provide comfort to their flocks by broadcasting their sermons on Facebook and sending messages to church members using WhatsApp. As Cas Wepener (2020) states in the newspaper article "Religions Get Tech Savvy", as social distancing due to COVID-19 is speeding up, so is the use of technology by religious leaders.

I recall how, on the first Sunday during lockdown, I felt overwhelmed by the many live recordings that were available to listen to. Some people noted that they love the idea that they can listen to as many sermons as possible and do *church hopping*. I interpret this to mean changing from platform to platform to figure out which online service/sermon is more interesting and entertaining. This brings me to a few comments regarding utilizing these media forms during this time and going forward. Many seem to view these media platforms as merely tools that can be used to replicate what used to be done offline, online. This is a misleading view of media in general and media platforms like Facebook specifically. Campbell (2020, p. 53) describes the strategy where offline services are simply transferred online as "transferring."

Keeping the Nature of Mediums in Mind when Moving Online

Different forms of mediums have a certain kind of logic or way of operating. For instance, if you use Twitter, you must make a short statement with impact. Similarly, Facebook and

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WhatsApp are platforms that are associated with short, compact messages; therefore, it is not possible or wise to try to replicate normal Sunday services/sermons via these platforms. These media platforms are normally also associated with entertainment and images that stimulate audiences on different levels. Therefore, how content is presented online is of importance—it should be well prepared, focused, and combined with other elements like a beautiful background or music.

As I followed some of these online services, I could see how some presenters have improved their presentations. One pastor's services are recorded outside in his garden, which I found touching; that background image could draw audiences to follow this congregation's services. Additionally, this pastor dresses semi-formally, creating a more relaxed atmosphere. His sermons have a clear focus and relate to the challenges we are encountering now. Other people may be more attracted to a more formal approach where services are recorded in the church and the pastor's dress according to the dress code of the denomination.

Beware of Unintended Outcomes when Holding Church Services Online

When using online mediums for church gatherings, the authority is no longer seated with the pastor but is primarily, or at least partially, in the hands of the audience. When audiences are confronted with choices of which services to follow, that choice may be influenced by several factors including those mentioned earlier, like the aesthetic qualities of the presentation. Competition, probably unintended, also

comes into play as some pastors advertise their services with promises of introducing a special speaker or something that will be announced during the service. This implies that some congregations may gain online members who could leave again at any time, while others may lose members. These trends could also impact membership and participation once social distancing ends.

Another interesting element is that there seems to be intergenerational cooperation as churches are moving on(line) because pastors often rely on their children or younger church members to assist them in their recordings and the improvement thereof. This could be important and a positive development, and this cooperation which acknowledges the contextual knowledge of younger members should continue in the future.

Rethinking Community: Being Alone Together

Congregations are the local and most concrete expression of being church that most people know. Therefore, for many members, congregational gatherings are the expression of communion with other believers. There is something special about physical togetherness, but the perception that online community is not real is surely challenged at this point when it becomes not a default option but the only viable one—to be alone together as the body of Christ.

As mentioned earlier, audiences now have different options to choose from; some will not engage with these services provided at all. However, those who do can make their choices according to their personal taste and preferences and the popularity of the post—in other words how many likes

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and what kind of feedback it receives from others. Popularity, therefore, constitutes a form of authority that is ascribed freely by audiences to people they like, find interesting, and respect (Hjarvard, 2015, p. 7). The interactive nature of online platforms like Facebook makes this response or behavior possible. Online platforms are centered around the individual, and the communities created differ from offline communities where the choices of individuals are limited by time and space. Moving online may enforce this scattered and more individualistic shape of communities, which could impact offline communities that are regulated and determined by different factors. Communities built through social media platforms like Facebook create and reinforce “networked individualism” that is associated with freedom of choice and increased mobility (Campbell, 2012, p. 683). The choice and mobility that are available to audiences also imply mobility between different denominations and religious traditions, constructing a more individualized custom-made kind of spirituality. Cloete (2015) explains that “Relationships that are formed through online communities are therefore more person-centred and need-centred than place-centred” (p. 3). This contrasts with offline communities where choice is limited due to restrictions in terms of time and place.

Preaching and/as Timing

In many religious traditions like the reformed tradition of which I am part, preaching is a central aspect of being church. Therefore, the pulpit, which is normally occupied by one person, is important, and especially what is said from the pulpit. Johan Cilliers (2019) wrote a very timely book on the connection between time and preaching. What should inform

the process of preaching in a time such as this? It could safely be argued that this time, the present with COVID-19, does not present a period that can be labelled as *normal*. This time is characterized by enormous challenges on many levels, including economic, spiritual, physical, and psychological challenges, therefore, addressing it calls for cooperation between different institutions. In a time like this, it becomes even more important to discern what message this specific time requires from the pulpit. Cilliers (2019) describes the connection between God’s grace that could/should be fulfilled in a specific time with the word *Kairos*: “Timely preachers know and acknowledge the *Kairos* when it comes... these preachers help kindle the *Kairos*. Herein lies the brilliance of the wisdom of preaching” (p. 24). This is a time filled with fear due to the uncertainty of the future, as many do not earn an income and others are losing their jobs. A timely word is indeed needed to bring God’s graceful word to people. To be a timely preacher, discernment is prerequisite and so are hermeneutical skills to time the text, connecting the text and the homiletical situation (Cilliers, 2019, p. 189).

What Is Essential about Being Church in Time of Crisis?

Churches should, however, not only deliver sermons in a time such as this. This is a time when the church should have a message but also becomes the message. Therefore, this time also provides an opportunity to ask what is essential for being church, besides bringing a timely word. Columnist Mzukisi Faleni (2020) wrote an insightful article on the role of the church in crisis, arguing that the church is too focused on visible things like gatherings and other practices. Who is the church when these visible things cannot happen anymore?

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Faleni (2020) formulates the challenge the church is facing now as the vital part of being church, namely, the relationship with God that comes from the heart and has little to do with the performance-driven aspect of being church. I do not understand his view as a call for inaction by the churches during this time, but rather as a look in the mirror for all who belong to the church but now have to be church under different circumstances. It seems that when the option of holding church (gatherings) is not available, being church is challenged. Therefore, this crisis presents the church in all its forms with a creative and unique opportunity to rethink and revisit her identity and expression thereof under different circumstances. It is especially an opportunity for members to cooperate with other institutions like government and faith-based organizations to serve the world in every way that is allowed under current restrictions.

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Digital Ecclesiology: Setting the Parameters for a Post-Pandemic Era Church

Justine John Dyikuk

Against all misgivings, this essay argues that with the right parameters such as systematic planning and excellent execution put in place by media scholars and legitimate church authorities, digital ecclesiology is a sine qua non for a post-pandemic era church which sails on the sea of digital realities

Introduction

In recent times, conversations among academics and church authorities on the implications of the lockdown due to the outbreak of the novel coronavirus disease, also known as COVID-19, which started in Wuhan, China, on 31st December 2019, are rife. Since the advent of the deadly disease which has infected **2,319,066** and killed **157,970** people globally as of **2:00am CST, 20 April 2020** (WHO, 2020), there are fears about the implications of the isolation on the future of the church. With the suspension of religious activities across the world, there are concerns that doing church online might replace traditional church formats. The church is now forced into making unscheduled transitions from traditional forms of gathering to a technologically driven community which “worships” virtually. Pope Francis recently decried that the

situation presents a danger for people living the faith only for themselves, detached from the sacraments, the church and each other (Catholic News Service, 2020).

This qualitative essay, which employs the narrative approach, has the following objectives: it attempts a theological thinking on how the COVID-19 pandemic is impacting churches now and it will after the pandemic, it aspires to ascertain how increased anxiety about the deadly disease would likely affect ecclesiology now and in the future, and it hopes to investigate how the current forced social isolation and distancing between people is impacting the way groups do church and understand it. It attempts to answer the following questions: Would the virtual church replace or compliment real church attendance? Are the faithful ready for a digital church? Has the hierarchy (leadership) fully developed the parameters for digital ecclesiology, bearing in mind its pros and cons? This essay aspires to assist theologians in seeking consensus between *digital narratives* and *digital immigrants* (Prensky, 2001; Dyikuk, 2019a), bearing in mind the fact that the digital environment is not a parallel world but part of the daily experiences of many people, especially the young (Benedict XVI, 2013).

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Digital ecclesiology references the church in the 21st century, which utilizes developments in information and communications technology (ICT) for efficient communication of the Gospel. It is a branch of *cyber-theology* which systematically impacts the digital age in the different dimensions of people’s lives in an ever-changing milieu (Le Duc, cited in Salles, 2015). It presents the church as a

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community which operates both in reality and virtually through traditional broadcast media platforms like digital television and social media tools such as WhatsApp, Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter.

Here, digital ecclesiology is considered in light of the post-pandemic era of the church. This will be the time of church after the COVID-19 pandemic. It is a conceptualization of how the lockdown would impact the church when people resume their normal lives. It also refers to the aggregate behavior of Christians towards church attendance when normalcy is restored after fatalities are reduced, vaccines are found, and life continues as usual.

Theoretical Framework

This study adopts new media communication theory as a theoretical framework. The theory holds that the capacity of a medium to carry information is based on multiple cues which communicate signals such as body language, verbal sounds, and social-emotional cues. It argues that the internet allows elements such as verbal, paralinguistic, intonation, proxemic, and kinetic cues to convey the actual content of ideas with rich meaning. Visual media tools such as video conferences create room for the use of a high variety of language and face-to-face communication in virtual space. They allow communicators to infuse personal feelings into communication while embracing a frame of reference, the needs, and current situation of the receiver. This engenders interaction and feedback which distinguish these media from other traditional media. This is because they attract users and maintain them in active communication (Shodhganga, 2020).

This theoretical framework is in tandem with digital ecclesiology because the internet is democratic by its nature and anyone can produce content online. There is no physical scarcity in broadcasting; it is cheaper than other traditional media, as anybody can launch a website with less expense if he or she knows the language of the web. It also provides different modes of communication such as pull, push, and two-way communication (Shodhganga, 2020).

Ecclesiology in the Early Church

From 33 AD, we are told that “All the believers were united in heart and mind. And they felt that what they owned was not their own, so they shared everything they had” (Acts 4:32). Within the period under review, the church was the visible community of believers who came together for worship, prayer, communal sharing, instruction, reflection, and mission (Mudge, 2005). Theologically, what we now refer to as ecclesiology was based on a socialization that was family-based and stratified in terms of roles and functions.

For example, the diaconate ministry emerged as a necessity to make room for the apostles to concentrate on the administration of the Word and sacraments (breaking of the bread). With development of doctrine, what started as a family church would soon blossom due to fierce preaching by the apostles, conversion to the faith, and early Christian persecution. It is crucial to note that the Greek word *ekklesia* (assembly) was used by early writers to distinguish between the early Christians and their Jewish counterparts (Mudge,

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2005). Here, ecclesiology was based on face-to-face human communication.

Ecclesiology after the Reformation and Vatican II

In the centuries before the Reformation, the church moved away from a domestic church to a clergy-centered church with a high sense of clericalism. After Martin Luther broke away from the Catholic Church on 31st October 1517, there was a shift in ecclesiology from a clergy-centered church to a laity-centered community. While the post-Reformation ecclesiology saw the church as a community of believers equal in terms of role and function within the church which relies on faith and scripture, the Catholic Church insisted that the clergy and laity are called to serve the Lord around the sacraments in fidelity to the living tradition and teaching of the magisterium.

With Luther's exit, the Vatican Council II (1962-1965) opened the windows of the Church for fresh air to come in. This renewed the understanding of the Church as "The Family of God." Highlighting the element of the Church's identity, experts have opined that the church points beyond itself to a community which preaches, serves, and witnesses to the reign of God through the Holy Spirit (Bevans & Schroeder, 2004). Within this time, the Church's teachings on the media—especially in both conciliar and post-conciliar documents—include *Inter Mirifica*, *Vigilanti Cura*, *Miranda Prorsus*, *Communio et Progressio*, and *Aetatis Novae*, among others.

Ecclesiology in the 21st Century: In Search of a Digital Church in a Post-pandemic Era

The 21st century has brought changes in ICT which affect everything, including religion. The Church believes that the internet has brought about revolutionary changes not just in how people communicate but in how they understand their lives (Pontifical Council for Social Communications, 2002). The Church needs to engage the lived reality of the world so as to advance its divine mission on earth (Colberg, 2018). Based on the works of Marshall McLuhan, Peter Levy, and Teilhard de Chardin, Spadaro (2014) argues that the digital environment is a new "anthropological space" which is reshaping the way we think, know, and express ourselves by connecting us in a digital society.

Rice (2011) agrees that the ability of digital media to collapse time and space into real-time global connections offers the twenty-first century church a useful model. After a careful study of the writings of contemporary Protestant and Catholic ecclesiologists, Dulles initially developed five models which illuminate different aspects of the church: institution, mystical communion, sacrament, herald, servant, and community of disciples (a recent addition). Based on Dulles's work, Rice (2011) drew three implications for church in a digital age, namely that it:

a) Collapses time and space: By offering a new model that may supplement older paradigms for understanding the church in our time, the explosion of digital media collapses time and space in order to create real-time global connections between people.

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b) Promotes universal bonds in Christ: A seeming vivid example of the “universal body of Christ” which may not have existed before has dawned upon us as instantaneous global interactions are now made possible through new media, which points to the transcendence and imminence of God. This leads to profound insights and understandings about God’s very nature and His reign on earth.

c) Fosters genuine empathy: Because digital media connect individuals, they are able to help people who are far away offer genuine empathy to those who are suffering in other climes, towards establishing a sense of fellow-feeling.

Post-pandemic Ecclesiology: Issues and Challenges

Challenging ecclesial authority

While some churches have bishops, others have a more congregational polity in which congregants nurture leaders from within their midst (Rice, 2012). The challenge is, the possibility of entrenching a digital ecclesiology, especially through social or digital media, may challenge ecclesiastical authority. The virtual nature of digital media creates this possibility.

Questioning ecclesiological doctrines

Social media can give room for questioning church doctrines. For instance, where a certain church views its primary ecclesial model as “herald,” which proclaims the Word, how can that be reflected in its use of new media? (Rice, 2012).

Digital technology also raises important questions about identity, authenticity (Chia, 2019), and how ecclesiastical leaders would prepare their members to contend with those who attack their faith.

Distinguishing between church as “community” and virtual community

The post-pandemic era would present a challenge of navigating between three communities—the real physical community, the family community, and the virtual community (Rice, 2012). It is also difficult to distinguish between the private and the public (Chia, 2019). Pope Francis warned that faith via media consumption is not the Church, because it is without the Eucharist, without the people of God assembled together, and without the sacraments, describing the trend as dangerous, detached from the people of God (Catholic News Service, 2020).

Diverse theological understandings and commitments

Given the Catholic, Protestant, and Pentecostal divide, it might be difficult to find a way around theological trends virtually as a common front. Issues around the corporate electronic practices of a religious body might not reflect its theological understandings and commitments. It might be tough for an organization to act in ways that reflect a more conscious awareness of these secular assumptions (Rice, 2012), like feeding the poor and doing charity amidst economic recession.

Conclusion

It was established that the church initially grew from a household community to a full-fledged Christian community. In the centuries that followed, particularly before the Reformation, it moved from a family community to a clergy-centered church. The Vatican Council II saw a renewed ecclesiology of the church as a family of God, which made way for a budding ecclesiology of a digital church in a post-pandemic era. Indeed, this era of digital communication collapses time and space and promotes universal bonds of charity in Christ (Dulles, cited in Rice, 2011). Since there are only few steps in the theology of cyberspace (Le Duc, cited in Salles, 2015), the church needs to make greater efforts in that direction. Meanwhile, Christians ought to utilize social media responsibly, for the common good, while enhancing apostolic ministry (Mirus, 2010).

In light of the new media-communication theoretical framework, there are lofty opportunities which digital formats create for religion to blossom in our time. Therefore, it is essential to concentrate on the obstacles that stare the new process in the face—e.g., challenging ecclesial authority, questioning ecclesiological doctrines, distinguishing between church as “community” and “virtual community,” and diverse theological understandings and commitments. It behooves pastors of souls and media experts to take advantage of the new media of communication to engage the faithful by not just creating an online church but by sustaining it (Dyikuk, 2017, p. 43). Unless clerics and theologians interrogate these issues and set new parameters (in content and structure) for a post-pandemic era church, the sustainability of digital

ecclesiology will be a far cry. This leads me to make the following recommendations.

Harness digital theological resources

It is crucial to increase the content and quality of digital resources such as computers, television sets, projectors, transmitters, and the like worldwide. Institutions in the mold of Centre for Digital Theology (Durham University, 2020) and Institute for Digital Ecclesiology (TIDE, 2020) should be established so as to give more prominence to an enhanced digital ecclesiology. This would boost the online presence of the church in activities such as seminars, congresses, counseling sessions, doctrinal teachings, biblical reflections, and sermons/homilies.

Align to a new-media world

New media broadcasts are a rich resource for religious issues. This is because they shape information according to the demands of popular genres while offering spiritual direction, catechesis, and moral guidance to people (Hjavarð, 2011). Pastoral communicators and pastors need to align their theological content with the changing times through engaging with new media (Rice, 2012; Dyikuk, 2019b). There is need to rejig the structure of communication offices and ministries which are often divided according to media—like press, radio/TV (broadcasting), and film—into interpersonal/cultural, media, and social network communication (Eilers, 2016).

Change metaphors

Contemporary Christians should develop new metaphors in light of the COVID-19 or other pandemics. This is because our

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very metaphors are changing—therefore, there is need for deeper insights which draw us closer to God and one another (Rice, 2011). The digital world provides a metaphor for God’s presence and “ways of imagining things in a new sense of time and space where digits inform our situation” (Singh, 2014). These metaphors require online feedback systems (Dyikuk, 2019b) based on changing trends.

Renew ecclesiology

Experts need to develop a renewed ecclesiology which educates the faithful, trains experts, and utilizes modern devices for evangelization purposes to cushion the effects of pandemics on faith. This would help the church know itself more deeply relative to advancing its divine mission on earth in the present context (Colberg, 2018). This requires moving from mass media to social communication, analog to digital, consumer to producer, media education to communication competence, institution to community, “psychology” to a holistic theological approach, and local to global (Eilers, 2016).

Go back to the drawing board

Church leaders need to go back to the drawing board in order to revamp small Christian communities (SCCs) as the basic cell of the church. Creating a people-centered church which survives on the breath of the Word and breaking the bread and spirit-filled charity is key. Given the current economic challenges due to the lockdown, the church needs to reinvent an ecclesiology which provides a beneficial alternative for members who are prevented from going to church or who cannot attend because of other serious reasons, allowing

them to follow the liturgy online while assisting one another practically.

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“Beyond the Binary?” How Digital is “the Digital Church” in the Corona Age? Analytical, Theological, and Philosophical Considerations

Charles Melvin Ess

Current debates regarding the theological legitimacy of “online,” “virtual,” or “digital” communion are resolved via conceptual and theological analyses of the “digital-analogue” and related binaries, grounding a turn towards Scandinavian creation theology as endorsing a non-dualistic metaphysics that overcomes dualisms denigrating the material and copies for the sake of elevating an original sacredness.

Introduction

As Heidi Campbell (2020) observes, “[T]he church [is] a concept built on the ideas of a people gathered, the Body of Christ, and embodied incarnation” (p. 4). As the church has been forced to move much of its presence and expression into “the digital”—i.e., online—contexts because of the COVID-19 crisis, what Tim Hutchings (2020) calls the “very old argument” regarding the theological and ecclesiological legitimacy of communion has been reopened (p. 62). Some traditions are perfectly comfortable with offering a “virtual Lord’s Supper” via online venues; others, including Lutherans, Roman Catholics, and Anglicans, resist. These traditions emphasize the *real* presence of the Body and Blood of Christ

in the elements of the sanctified bread and wine. A copy or analogue of these elements in the believer’s home cannot be equivalent to partaking in the *real* Lord’s Supper. Some middle grounds are possible in these debates, but despite the urgency of these issues during the corona crisis, they remain largely unresolved.

I pursue an alternative approach to these debates, one that challenges their metaphysical and theological assumptions—most especially as these are *dualistic* in not only questionable but suspect and dangerous ways. To do so, I begin with an anecdote—a set of religious and metaphysical *koans*, but from Hinduism, whose resolutions foreground our prevailing Western metaphysical and theological assumptions as dualistic. I then examine these assumptions more carefully as they undergird our primary concepts of “digital” vs. “analogue,” virtual vs. real, and so on. These assumptions are both conceptually fraught and suspect in theological terms, if not deeply dangerous. Representative comments in current debates over virtual or digital communions further illustrate, however, that the fraught and contested digital-analogue binary remains solidly in place—as do the deeper metaphysical and theological dualisms that I seek to overcome. Finally, I turn to Scandinavian creation theology as moving us closer to *non-dualistic* metaphysics and theology that move us beyond the current debates, serving us far better, now as well as in the looming climate crisis.

Puja Online? A Metaphysical and Theological Koan

Sometime in the late 1990s, I was enlightened by a colleague regarding the *puja* ritual as practiced in Hinduism, e.g.,

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surrounding the worship of the goddess Ganesha. As I was already familiar with the ritual, a clay statue representing the goddess is carefully built, painted, and adorned. For believers, the goddess herself comes to inhabit the statue for a few days as she is worshipped with offerings of food, sweets, and so on. At the end of the ritual period, the goddess departs, and the statue is taken out and dumped rather unceremoniously (e.g., Stedell, 1977). My colleague then explained to me how the ritual had been taken up, especially in the Indian diaspora community, via the internet. First *koan*: If I take a picture of the statue while inhabited by the goddess, digitize it, and then display it on my computer screen at home, is the picture likewise holy or sacred, i.e., inhabited by the goddess? *Contra* my Western assumptions, the answer is yes. That is, my Western view would have assumed that the digital copy is by no means physically identical with the statue and so no longer capable of hosting the goddess. Wrong. The goddess is believed to inhabit the digital image as fully as she inhabits the statue. Second *koan*: If I send a copy of the picture to a sister or fellow worshipper anywhere in the world via the internet, so that they now display the picture on their computer screen, is the copy of the picture still sacred or holy, inhabited by the goddess? Again, yes. The presence of the goddess is not somehow barred or diluted by spatial distance or the difference between an original and its digital copy (cf. Jacobs, 2007, pp. 1107ff., 1110-14).

If, like me, you are surprised by these responses, I suggest it is because we hold to characteristically Western metaphysical and, perhaps, theological assumptions. Most briefly, these assumptions are *dualistic* as they sharply divide and oppose—

e.g., the spirit of the goddess vs. the material statue she temporarily inhabits, as well as the sharp difference between an original and a copy.

To be sure, we in the West can think differently. On close analogy with notions of quantum entanglement and “non-local reality,” we can understand the spirit of Ganesha as fully present in these diverse digital copies of the original statue. That is, we generally assume a “local” reality, one in which one bit of matter is physically distant from another, whether microscopically or across light years. But as experiments empirically demonstrated in the 1960s, at the quantum level, two “twin” particles, whether separated by meters or light years, are “entangled:” changing one correlates instantaneously with the same change in the other. One helpful image is that of putting a dot of paint on a tightly wound ball of string: unrolling the string separates the dot into two pieces—perhaps very far from one another on the stretched-out string. For us, these now two dots are separated as “local realities.” But at the quantum level, the two dots remain connected in the “non-local reality” of the tightly wound string. By analogy, the local realities of the statue and its multiple digital copies hold them far apart from one another for us, but the presence of the goddess is entangled across the statue and its many digital copies in the same non-local reality, and so fully present in each. But these quantum notions are just as puzzling to us on first encounter, in part because they likewise challenge our prevailing metaphysical dualisms.

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What has this to do with the church going “digital” during the corona crisis? I will show that the arguments surrounding the theology and ecclesiology of communion as offered “virtually” turn on questionable assumptions regarding “digital” vs. “analogue” and thereby, especially suspect theological assumptions that too sharply divorce the spiritual from the material. To do so, I first explore the philosophical and theological critiques of these dualisms, and then show how they underlie these contemporary arguments. I will then turn to Scandinavian creation theology to resolve these arguments via non-dualistic assumptions.

Beyond the Binary: What Do We Mean by “Digital?”

The terms “digital” vis-à-vis “analogue” and their parallels, such as “virtual” vis-à-vis “real,” online vis-à-vis offline, etc., have evoked a long debate. Certainly, we can sometimes usefully distinguish between the digital and the analogue in the context of digital media ethics (Ess, 2020, pp. 11-23). At the same time, however, these distinctions are problematic in several ways.

To begin with, these distinctions emerged in the context of early 1990s *dualisms* defining much of the initial discourse surrounding the emerging internet and world wide web in the Anglophone world. Briefly, William Gibson’s (1984) celebration of “the bodiless exultation of cyberspace” (p. 6) set a foundational philosophical and ontological framework that mapped the Cartesian radical divorce between mind and body onto “virtual” vs. “real” and its parallels, such as digital vs. analogue. Still more deeply, Gibson’s novel explicitly invoked Augustine’s doctrine of Original Sin, i.e., the Fall, and

thereby injected this ancient dualism and theology into Anglophone discourse. Nietzsche famously criticizes these dualisms in Western philosophy and Christianity, especially as they issue in a *contemptus mundi*, a contempt for the material world in favor of a putatively higher, purer spiritual reality. Augustine’s consequent demonization of women, body, and sexuality—in Gibson’s words, “contempt for the flesh” (1984, p. 6)—is a particularly destructive, pernicious, but inevitable consequence of these fundamental dualisms (Ess, 2011, pp. 6ff.). Given this heritage, we must be wary of inadvertently importing these dualistic assumptions and views, most especially in theological analyses and debates concerning “the digital.”

Moreover, such dualisms have also been largely rejected on both empirical and theoretical grounds. As early as 1995, empirical research began to show that our offline identities, beliefs, practices, norms, etc., were in fact inextricably interwoven with our online engagements, e.g., in so-called virtual communities (Baym, 1995). Similarly, in the article “Digital Religion” (2011), authors Heidi Campbell and Mia Lövheim observed that “No longer are the online and offline seen as completely distinct fields of practice, as for many they are integrated spheres of interaction” (p. 1083). Contemporary focus is thus on “religious actors’ negotiations between their online and offline lives, and how this informs a broader understanding of the religious in the contemporary society” (Campbell, 2017, p. 17). Lastly, careful philosophical analysis demonstrates that these early hard distinctions quickly blur and diffuse upon closer inspection (e.g., Floridi, 2009; Søraker, 2011). Indeed, many of us argue for “post-

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digital” as a more accurate characterization of our contemporary engagements with technologies, signaling in part that “analogue” and “digital” are far more often interwoven with one another than somehow radically distinct (Ess, 2017).

In short, any simple binary or dualistic understanding of these terms is conceptually problematic and, indeed, theologically perilous.

Online Communion: What’s the Problem?

Despite the difficulties surrounding a simple “digital-analogue” binary and its affiliated metaphysics, such dualisms are in full display in contemporary debates over the legitimacy of online communion.

The outlines of the debate are clear. As Stephen Garner (2020) observes, the traditions that have difficulty with an “online” or “digital” communion are those that attach a “*physicality* ... to the administration of sacraments” (p. 56, emphasis added). Specifically, an online communion is difficult or simply impossible “[f]or those for whom the *physical* consecration of Eucharistic elements requires a priest ... or [that] those elements are *physically* altered in the administration of the sacrament” (Garner, 2020, p. 56, emphasis added). As we have seen, these traditions include Roman Catholic, Orthodox, Anglican, and Lutherans, among others. In the face of the COVID-19 closings, however, some German Lutheran churches revived the practice of “spiritual communion,” but this is seen as a temporary stop-gap, an alternative that is by no means fully equivalent. Peter Philips (2020) notes that some Lutheran

churches began “...recommending Spiritual Communion (the spiritual reception of the blessing of the sacrament despite not *physically* eating/drinking the bread and wine)” (p. 73, emphasis added). In Norway, by contrast, the Lutheran Church has explicitly avoided such practices.

These emphases on the *physicality* of the communion elements, as thoroughly blocked from digital transmission and virtual reproduction, thus reflect the old dualisms between the physical and the spiritual, and between a local reality and its digital copies somewhere else in the world. The Spiritual Communion is explicitly not a physical consumption of physically altered elements.

Interestingly, in rethinking “the ecclesiology of embodied communion,” Matthew John Paul Tan (2020) suggests a partial move beyond these dualisms. Tan worries that in going online, “...we face the risk of abstracting the church with a thinned-out conception of itself. I argued instead for an anchoring in embodied communion and for the sacramental life of the parish as the touchstone of ecclesial life” (p. 81). Tan sees the danger of thinning out “the Body of Christ’s capacity for enacting communion by other means when embodied communion is not possible” (p. 81). Tan then invokes St. Bonaventure’s understanding that

...the creation of all things through the Divine Word has left an indelible mark of God’s presence in the structure of the created order, such that both the heavens and the firmament can not only declare the

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glory of God, but herald the presence of God’s word (Tan, 2020, p. 81).

Tan speculates that we can thus “stretch the presence of the Body of Christ” from “the sacramental presence of the Incarnate Word” in the bread and the wine, as its “most intense form of sacramental presence” across diverse digital channels, as themselves embodying “the presence of the Divine Word in the textures and sinews of creation;” in this way, the presence of “the Body of Christ is not disabled but redeployed” (Tan, 2020, p. 82).

This stretching and redeployment go at least partly beyond the starker dualisms otherwise divorcing the spiritual and the physical, dualisms that underlie other objections to online communion. But Tan’s metaphysics here apparently continue to privilege the sanctified communion elements as “the most intense form of sacramental presence,” vis-à-vis their digital copies as locally distinct and thereby somehow thinned out or paler counterparts.

Perhaps this is enough for most Christians. For my part, however, this remains too closely allied with the old dualisms that I find questionable, if not dangerous.

As an alternative, I propose instead a turn towards Scandinavian creation theology for a more fully non-dualistic metaphysics and theology.

Contra Dualism: Scandinavian Creation Theology

The opening example of the above-mentioned *puja* ritual shows that we can think and feel non-dualistically about the

spiritual vis-à-vis the material, the close original vis-à-vis the distant copies, and so on. But despite the advent of quantum mechanics, dualism remains deeply rooted in Western metaphysics and theology, as we have seen. Is it possible to move towards more non-dualistic assumptions within Western Christian traditions?

In my view, the answer is “yes,” specifically by way of Scandinavian creation theology (SCT). First of all, SCT emphasizes the goodness of not only the body (i.e., in resonance with emphases on the importance of the Incarnation) but of the created order more broadly. It thereby directly counters an especially Augustinian *contemptus mundi* and correlative demonization of body, women, and sexuality. At the same time, *contra* Tan’s ongoing distinction between the “thick” presence of the Divine in the Eucharist vs. a thin or stretched out presence in distant analogues, SCT approaches a form of pan-en-theism, an affirmation of the Divine as fully present throughout the “material” creation. Like Ganesha’s full habitation in both a specific statue and any number of distant digital copies, SCT metaphysics and theology soften, if they do not simply erase, the otherwise sharp divide between a sanctified Host portrayed only digitally and its analogue counterparts in a worshipper’s home.

Scandinavian creation theology draws on the Lutheran heritage as interpreted and expanded by the 19th-century Danish theologian N .F. S. Grundtvig. The primary figures here are Knud Eiler Løgstrup (Gregersen, 2017), Regin Prenter (Pöder, 2017), and Gustaf Wingren (Uggla, 2017). Broadly, as the phrase “creation theology” signals, these traditions move

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in important ways beyond prevailing dualisms that instead denigrate the natural or created orders. Specifically, SCT endorses a “non-binary view of the secular-sacred distinction” (Gregersen et al., 2017, p. 17). This non-dualism draws in part on Luther’s theology of creation, in which “a Christian is also one called to live an everyday life in God’s grand world of creation” (Gregersen et al., 2017, p. 25). In contrast, however, with Luther’s adherence to Original Sin, N. F. S. Grundtvig insists that “human beings never lost the positive traces of being created in the image and likeness of God” (p. 25). The Creation itself “has an independent value and meaning, and is more than a mere foil for human redemption” (Gregersen et al., 2017, p. 28). *Contra* their dualistic understandings and oppositions elsewhere, Grundtvig affirms the inextricable entanglement of God, creation, and humankind:

Humankind [...] is a unique, wonderful creation in whom divine powers make themselves known, shall develop and clarify themselves through a thousand generations as a divine experiment, which reveals how spirit and dust can interpenetrate and be clarified in a common divine consciousness (Grundtvig, 1907, p. 408, cited in Gregersen et al., 2017, p. 27).

This inextricable entanglement between spirit, dust, and divine consciousness thus promises to overcome the dualisms I object to. Again, while Lutheran approaches endorse the goodness of everyday life, Luther retains a commitment to the doctrine of Original Sin. Grundtvig revises this doctrine with a more optimistic understanding of human beings as retaining the basic goodness intrinsic to their status as the image of

God. Stated differently, SCT thus endorses an anthropology somewhere between the Lutheran conception of human fallenness and a Hindu or Buddhist non-dualism. The upshot is both a more optimistic understanding of human beings and, thereby, their relationship to a nature/creation where the latter is also more wholeheartedly endorsed. In these ways, SCT thus resonates even further with the underlying assumptions we saw in the opening example of the digital, but still fully sacred replicas of Ganesha, thereby pointing towards a still more positive set of attitudes regarding all elements of the material order, whether “secular” or religious. In particular, as spirit, dust, and divine consciousness are entangled with one another across a sacred-material creation, an “embodied communion” arises both within the elements consecrated by a priest and in its copies or analogues on digital screens and in believers’ homes; the Divine is present as fully in one element and place as another.

Concluding Remarks

In 2007 my colleagues Akira Kawabata and Hiroyuki Kurosaki and I suggested that “The shift from a *puja* ritual already carried out in the home to one taking place through an internet-connected PC in the home may thus be an easier step than for Western Christians who tend to affiliate the sacred with the sanctuary as separate from the home” (p. 943). Here, I extend this suggestion. I emphasize the importance of sustaining deep theological commitments to incarnation and embodiment as part of a larger emphasis on non-dualism. As Nietzsche makes clear, especially Christian dualisms have led to the demonization of body, and thereby women, sexuality, and the very creation itself, with well-known and catastrophic

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consequences for all of these. Hence, I am deeply wary of allowing new media—more precisely, our casual ways of characterizing these as digital vs. analogue—to nudge, much less coerce us in the direction of new versions of these ancient dualisms. For beyond COVID-19 there looms a still greater crisis for humanity and the creation—namely, the climate crisis. In my view, if we are to adequately address the latter, we must come out of the former all the more convinced of the goodness and sacredness of a fully material creation and our place therein as embodied beings.

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The Vision After. Impulses for a Theological Agenda for the Church After the Corona Crisis

Florian Höhne

This essay will argue in favor of a diverse and humbly dogmatic discourse on the vision and purpose of the church to face the upcoming social and digital challenges of the corona crisis.

Filmmakers and writers have done a very good job in making worst-case scenarios imaginable. Many even provide a vision for the world after the worst case. In 1983 Nicholas Meyer's and Edward Hume's *The Day After* showed cinema audiences what a world, specifically Kansas, would look like after a nuclear war. It is a dark, gloomy, and desperate vision of a future, which might have helped people to see a nuclear strike not as a possible option anymore. A little more recently, in 2011, Steven Soderbergh's *Contagion* outlined the story of global pandemic of a highly contagious virus—with gooseflesh-inducing parallels to what is happening right now. All these narratives entail a vision for a world to come after a worst case, a more or less desirable vision. *Contagion's* "day after" is a long vaccination program that allows people gradually to leave the lockdown.

While the present coronavirus has been very bad for many people all over the world, its comparability to *The Day After*

and *Contagion* is limited and debatable. Keeping this in mind, I want to argue in this essay that these movies and books do something that is missing in many theological and ecclesial discussions and in Christian sermons and meditations right now: they provide a vision of the nearer future, a "promise" about what is to come. Of course, those movies do so in a highly debatable way, one that's either too gloomy or too naively optimistic and thus theologically misinformed. What would a theologically informed vision of the nearer future look like? What can we hope for? To put it in strong dogmatic terms: What is God's promise for Her church in the COVID-19 crisis? Or to put it in terms of liberal theology: What can a meaningful religious interpretation of the future look like? How can Christians and particularly preachers talk about this promise in a meaningful way? That is what we need to talk about.

To prevent the reader from being disappointed at the end of this essay, I am not going to answer these questions here because I think that answering them should be a collaborative project. I am going to give reasons for asking them and suggest ideas for how to debate them. I am doing so as an academic theologian in Germany, as a White protestant in a rich country, hence, from a contextual and very specific perspective.

Let me start with a personal observation from Germany. During the partial lockdown, congregations were not allowed to gather for worship services in their church buildings. This did not mean that there were no public services, as the practical theologian Kerstin Menzel (2020) has emphasized. It

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meant that parishioners and preachers turned to the digital public sphere. A side effect of this is that sermons and devotions have become available for further scrutiny. What religious answers do they offer to the present coronavirus crisis? Many of those I have seen offer helpful advice and “life-hacks” for life under lockdown conditions, many others assure their listeners of God’s presence: “No matter what, God will be with you.” That’s clearly a promise for the near future of this world (and not a promise for a different world to come). And it is a promise that involves God.

Taken for itself, it remains a vague promise. What difference does the divine presence make in the near future? Is it a feeling of not being alone, a feeling of energy? Is it somehow related to the social and material reality? Old Testament texts are very bold in connecting God’s promise and the promise of divine presence with a concrete vision of a social and material reality. Take the calling of Abram as example, where God is said to have promised Abram, “I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you, and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing.” (Gen. 12:2, NRSV) That is a very concrete promise of a worldly, social, and material reality: “I will make of you a great nation.”

Jürgen Moltmann’s *Theology of Hope*—to whose work I owe more than footnotes could tell—is an attempt to remind theology of this issue: “There is therefore only one real problem in Christian theology, which its own object forces upon it and which it in turn forces on mankind and on human thought: the problem of the future” (Moltmann, 1967, p. 16). Moltmann narrates the story of Israel and the early Christians

as stories of divine promise. He emphasizes the idea that this promise was and is a promise for this world, a promise for “the very earth on which his [Christ’s] cross stands” (Moltmann, 1967, p. 21). But what is the content of the promise right now? To put it more concretely: What do Christians have reasons to hope for when unemployment rates are rising due to the corona lockdown? How can Christians envision a material and social reality after the corona pandemic? What kind of divine presence can Christians expect during a pandemic that costs lives and causes mourning? And what is Christian communities’ task in the horizon of the envisioned future?

These are tough questions and they are not easy to deal with theologically, ecclesologically, and societally. But these questions need to be on the theological and ecclesial agenda, because they make a practical difference. Take the debate on worship services in Germany as example: Some theologians justified the abstinence from physical religious gatherings such as Sunday services in churches in order to “flatten the curve” and save lives. Others criticized church leaders for too willingly accepting the state limiting religious freedom. It is plausible to presume that each answer already implies a different vision about the worldly future. If the supposed afterlife were more important for the vision than survival and social wellbeing in this world, it would make sense to celebrate the Eucharist even where it is violating state law and endangering lives by increasing the risk of contagion. If the future vision entailed the good life in this world and an effort towards the survival of so-called “risk groups,” it would make more sense to refrain from gathering physically for worship for a while and find

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other ways of worshipping together. While I would argue the latter vision is more theologically adequate than the former, my point here is, a discourse is needed in which those visions are made explicit and are debated.

A vision of God's future with us is so important because it is the horizon in which our present actions make sense. Moltmann (1967, pp. 190f.) has emphasized this with reference to Gadamer's work. People make sense of their course of actions in a specific and situational horizon. This also pertains to Christian communities and ecclesial institutions, which makes a theologically informed discourse on this-worldly visions all the more important. The horizon of the future determines what to do and what to spend money on. For a Christian community that finds faith-based reasons to hope for more social justice in this world, it will make sense to spend money on fostering social justice. It is already evident that the coronavirus crisis has led to an economic recession, which also effects the amount of resources communities and ecclesial institutions have available to do their work. Being clear about a vision would help to determine on what to spend these limited resources.

What helps in clarifying and debating such a vision? I want to suggest two systematic-theological distinctions and two criteria, which are theologically decisive.

Distinction #1: Talking about a Christian vision of the future does not mean talking about the kingdom of God. While the future is subject to human planning, to human action, and human responsibility, the shape and coming of the kingdom of

God is in God's hands only and beyond human control. Torsten Meireis's (2008, pp. 259–263) helpful distinction between the realized, the intended, and the intangible good serves as reminder of this distinction. According to him, the notion of the kingdom of God refers to the greatest good, the *summum bonum*, Bonhoeffer's ultimate, that lies beyond human control and knowledge (p. 261). Believing in and hoping for this kingdom, Christians sketch visions of intended goods which are possible to strive for and worth striving for in the penultimate (p. 261). These visions might be inspired by biblical stories of the kingdom but acting in the horizon of these visions is not intended to realize the kingdom of God (p. 261). A vision of the future that is subject to human planning and responsibility—that is what we need to talk about.

Distinction #2: All human visions, as well as all human plans and projects, are fallible. That is precisely what distinguishes them from God's perfect realization of peace, justice, and freedom in Her kingdom. We sketch visions of how a future during and after the coronavirus pandemic might look like, what role the Christian communities are to play, and how God is present in this very reality. These visions are fallible not only because they concern the future and might not come true, but particularly in their goodness, they might not be as good as intended. Our visions are always human and must be considered as ethically fallible visions—they never come with divine authority or perfection. The consciousness of this fallibility could be called dogmatic humility. That is one reason why a discourse is needed to clarify these visions and to find common visions. Conscious of my own fallibility, I need other people's critique and perspective even more.

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Criterion #1: In Protestant theological ethics, a reappearing criterion is the preferential option of the least advantaged. A common biblical reference point for this criterion is the “judgment of the nations” in Matthew 25: “And the king will answer them, ‘Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me’” (Mt. 25:40, NRSV). According to this criterion, the theological adequacy of a future vision depends on how far it does justice to the least advantaged. Of course, it will always be contestable, who exactly the worst off are—but this does not devalue the heuristic criterion. In the current situation, this means a theologically adequate vision of the future during and after the corona pandemic must include the needs and rights of the least advantaged. Of those for instance, who lost their job, their income, the basis for their material existence in the crisis; of those who lost their mental health in the crisis; of those who lost loved ones in the crisis. A theologically adequate vision of the near future will have to do justice particularly to them—of course, in a fallible and imperfect way.

Criterion #2: Secondly, and closely related to criterion #1, the theological adequacy of a certain vision depends on how diverse and inclusive the discourse was that produced the vision. The perspective of the worst off should not only be acknowledged, they should be empowered to raise their own voice in the discourse—and it should be heard and acted upon. One good way to ensure that a vision of the future acknowledges the least advantaged is to sit down with them to discuss this very vision. This thought parallels basic

Christian teachings on the common priesthood of all believers. If the Holy Spirit gives spiritual gifts to each and every Christian, each and every Christian’s perspective on the common vision matters. This rules out the authoritative production of a vision by few ordained church leaders, which then is to be communicated from the top down. The fabrication of a vision itself needs a networked and diverse process.

What does all this mean concretely? Let’s look at the example of the ecumenical movement that has engaged in such a participatory, globally diverse, and discursive process of clarifying a Christian vision. One outcome was the program “Towards a Just, Participatory and Sustainable Society” (JPSS) (Mudge, 2004, pp. 290–291). If social justice is a key feature in the Christian vision for societies as well as the whole world, this vision also provides the horizon for thought and action during and after the coronavirus crisis. Such a horizon also widens the scope for how Christian communities and churches are involved in digital networks. To be sure, it is still important to talk and think about digital worship, digital devotion, or digitalized ways of celebrating the Eucharist. But it is equally important to have the social and political engagement of Christian communities and churches on the agenda. Social engagement includes all the important caritative help Christians offer online as well as offline—from (pastoral) counseling to digital network groups for mutual support, from homeless shelters to the distribution of food. Political commitment includes, for example, ecclesial statements for more just policies and the political fight against poverty as well as the organization of a political discourse, on church

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conventions for instance. Churches do not only have responsibility in civil society. It is also their political responsibility to hold the state responsible (Bonhoeffer) by calling it to social justice and welfare provision for the worst off.

All of this makes sense in the horizon of a vision of more justice in the future. In the very horizon of such a vision, all of this belongs together: the sermon on justice and the church's political fight for justice are dependent on each other. The former only has "street credibility" if the latter takes place. That is why the quest for a common vision is so important. That is why a "vision after" is needed, hopefully one that is a little more hope-inspired than the vision of *The Day After*.

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**Reimagining Place and Presence in the Virtual Church:
Community and Spiritual Connection in the Digital Era**

Bala A. Musa

Worshipping in the “electronic temple” can be both centering and decentering of God’s presence, as we reimagine space, presence, and performance in the virtual church.

Keep a Christian from entering the church sanctuary and you have not in the least bit hindered his worship. We carry our sanctuary with us. We never leave it. [...] If you are not worshipping God on Monday morning, as you worshipped him the day before, perhaps you are not worshipping Him at all” (Tozer, 2013, p. 27).

The church has not been immune to the social and cultural changes occurring around the world. Ordinarily, we’d want to believe the church is “In the world, but not of the world” (John 15:19, New International Version). As such, changes in place and time should not impact how the church functions. Unfortunately, that is not the case. In the wake of the coronavirus pandemic, the church, along with schools, businesses, the entertainment industry, and, indeed, all aspects of society, has been disrupted.

Here, we examine the implications for such disruption on the church’s mission and existence. In what way is the transition to worshipping at a distance a blessing in disguise, if at all? Just like in business, the COVID-19 lockdown has spelled the decline, even demise, of some while becoming the best of times for others. As worshippers, what theological insights inform our understanding of changes in place and presence in how we relate to God and to one another?

The term “church” is used here in multiple connotations. So, it helps to clarify some of its constitutive forms in this discourse:

1. *The church as a spiritual entity* that exists as one in time and eternity. The Apostle Paul speaks of this as the whole family of God, in heaven and on earth (Eph. 3:15, New International Version). The writer of Hebrews likewise refers to the spiritual assembly that consists of believers who are alive today and those who have gone before (Heb. 12:1, 22, New International Version).
2. *The church as a global and universal entity* that consists of all believers around the world, regardless of denomination, liturgical tradition, nationality, and cultural norms. By this we mean the unity and oneness of present-day believers worldwide.
3. *The church as a spiritual community*, yet physically organized, often local, as an identifiable interactive community, existing in a given place and time.
4. *The electronic or virtual church*, as an extension of the last, but interacting through and being significantly

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influenced by communication technology and cybermedia.

Here, we examine the nature of place and presence in the essence and existence of the church across these manifestations. While the focus is on the virtual church, attention will also be given to ways in which all the forms are interwoven and interactive.

Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, many local congregations have shut down real-time physical gathering for weeks now. Church attendance has taken different forms and has come to connote many things. In some ways, it has become more inclusive, while in some instances, less so. Shut-ins and others who could not experience church services in the same location with everybody are now able to enjoy a similar experience. On the other hand, individuals lacking the tools and means to participate in virtual worship may find themselves excluded in this new environment. The whole body of Christ has not had to collectively re-examine its theology of worshipping together, but in isolation, until now. This discourse examines the theological understandings of the church's identity, essence, and mission in today's context.

The *ecclesia* is, above all, a community. Members of the church are the called-out ones. God knew that as long as Israel was in Egypt, it could not have its identity as a "nation." He wanted Israel, and now the church, to see itself as a "holy nation, a chosen generation, a peculiar people, a royal priesthood" (Exodus 19:5-6; I Peter 2:9, New International Version). In Egypt, the Israelites did not have liberty to live as

they chose or worship God as they wanted. They were not their own masters. God said to Pharaoh, "Let my people go, so that they may worship me" (Exodus 8:20b, New International Version). Worship of Yahweh is the essential characteristic of God's people. It is what marks the church as a community distinct from others. Beyond that, believers experience the same things as nonbelievers, be it climate change, inflation, traffic, the pandemic, etc. It is for this reason that where, when, and how we worship matters in the pre- and post-COVID-19 pandemic era.

It's been observed that the virtual church, the local and universal gathering of believers, where new and social media technology plays a significant role in their worship, is not an entirely new phenomenon. As new media technology has permeated culture, the church has been quick to adopt, integrate, and incorporate it into worship. Throughout history, the church has been an early adopter of new technology as a means of propagating the gospel, communicating among believers, and passing on its tradition (Musa, 2014; Musa & Ahmadu, 2012). Technology, in general, has served to complement, extend, and enrich the worship experience. It can be said that its adoption and integration into worship is often intentional, strategic, and voluntary. The scope of its impact, positive and negative, is outside the purview of this discussion.

The pandemic and its restrictions on large gatherings have forced churches to go virtual more quickly than expected. For many congregations, it was not intentional or voluntary. Nevertheless, it has resulted in the instantaneous and rapid

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proliferation of the virtual church. Churches were left with little or no choice when it came to social distancing and meeting in a virtual environment. Some were more prepared for the change than others. Some mega-churches, particularly in the technologically advanced and industrialized West, already had satellite congregations that were often linked during worship through broadcast, narrowcast, or web streaming technology. Such congregations had the system in place for an easier, faster, and smoother transition to worshipping at a distance. Congregations with fewer technological resources faced greater challenges adapting to the new reality. Whatever their experiences, the church as a whole found itself in a new place, having to reimagine what it means to be a community, remain connected, and “worship together.”

The Virtual Church as Place

Believers often acknowledge that “the church” is the body of Christ, rather than the physical place where we gather in worship. It is against this background that Jesus’s statement that “God is spirit, and his worshippers must worship in spirit and in truth” (John 4:24, New International Version) is central. That notwithstanding, place has always mattered in the context of worship. God commanded the Israelites to build a tent for worship and He would meet with them there. He went to great lengths to specify the details of the design of the temple, both the temple in the wilderness and the temple in Jerusalem. That suggests that place of worship mattered (Inge, 2016). God is Spirit, but His worshippers are human beings, made of flesh and blood and operating with natural senses. Thus, the concrete elements of place, symbols, and

rituals gives them specific reference, direction, and anchors when it comes to worshipping Him.

While God expects His people to “meet” with Him at the place of worship, that place is not restricted to only one location. That is why scripture says, “For where two or three come together in my name, there am I with them” (Matt. 18:20, New International Version). The place of worship is, then, the presence of God.

The Jerusalem temple was the gathering place, where God had placed His name and where the people came to meet with God. In time, the temple served spiritual, social, economic, and cultural functions as well. Social media is fast becoming the electronic tent, tabernacle, piazza, and city square, where all transactions take place. It is the arena for all social activities. Therefore, it was only a matter time before people who met online for business, education, entertainment, dating, etc., would find the virtual medium and “electronic temple” a natural place to gather for worship.

Using the Gaia principle, it can be said that Jesus foresaw this day when He said worship is to be in the spirit, rather than in a physical place (Krüger, 2007). The question is, how do worshippers conceive of this place? Is a move away from the House of God as a physical location a threat to true worship, or is it an opportunity for the real House of God, the believer in whom He dwells, to fully realize His presence? Spiritual space and distance, if such exist, are different from physical and social space and distance. Thus, the need to rethink the

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conceptions of worship space and experience in the new context.

The Virtual Church as People

Even from the call of Abraham, God's intention had been to have a people of His own. The purpose of having a place of worship is to bring the people together. God could have chosen to relate with everyone individually. He instead chose to live among His people. He lives in us and among us. Worship is expected to be both individual and also collective. Collective worship was important to the early believers. It is noted that "they were all together in one place" (Acts 2:1b, New International Version). Likewise, the writer of Hebrews commands believers to "not give up meeting together" (Heb. 10:25a, New International Version). How do virtual churches maintain a sense of community and *koinonia* in the age of social distances? One way is to strengthen emotional and relational connection. Some churches, particularly those in developing and less technologically advanced countries, are rediscovering true community by promoting small groups and house churches. This was also a model adopted by the early church. It was said that the believers met from house to house. If the new normal is to avoid large gatherings for the time being, churches will have to reimagine what it means to be a congregation. Church growth will need to be measured not by the size of the cathedral or the number of people that attend a specific worship service. It will have to be measured by the number of souls being reached and discipled.

The structure of the brick-and-mortar organization is centripetal. The leader is the focus and the organization is

hierarchical. The virtual church makes for reorienting the focus toward the people. It is designed to be centrifugal. It is a networked church, with emphasis on multiple nodes of connection. Discipleship multiplication occurs when members make disciples, rather than the leader alone being the center of attention and the driving engine of church ministry.

The Virtual Church as Presence

God intends that the earth be filled with the knowledge of His glory as the waters cover the sea (Isa. 11:9, New International Version). As long as the physical space remains the focus of worship, or believers conceive of worship as what takes place in church on Sundays, Saturdays, and during weekday services, God is restricted. God is omnipresent. We may wonder, without an actual place of worship, how do we "come before the Lord?" Tozer (2013) answers the question well when he says, "We carry our sanctuary with us" (p. 27). In the digital church, what does it mean to "Enter his courts with thanksgiving; and to enter His courts with praise?" If God is everywhere, is He nowhere? Tillich (1973) raised this specter when he saw God as not existing "there" but as the ground of being. In other words, God cannot be pinned down to a thing or place. In the virtual, God can truly be God by being omnipresent, or He can be dead (a contradiction) by becoming amorphous (Hegel, 1807, 2018; Ellul, 1967).

Part of the need for a tabernacle in the wilderness and a temple in the city, as well the elaborate rituals of the temple, was to help Israelites distinguish between the sacred and the profane. The presence of God is meant to turn our hearts toward Him, to increase our awe of Him, and to feel closer to

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Him. If God consciousness is everywhere, it would mean His people can maintain a continued awareness of His presence at all times in all places. It also means all things, places, and times are sacred. One of the challenges to Christianity's role in culture has been the emphasis on the secular/sacred dichotomy. The virtual church has an opportunity to bridge that gap if it recognizes that we always in the presence of God, and that God is always with us. While believers acknowledge and confess God's promise to never leave us nor forsake us, it is more a cognitive awareness than a lived consciousness. If God's presence is released from the "church" as a place to the church as people, then His presence can be everywhere. In God asking people to build memorial alters at sites divine of encounters, He was emphasizing the value of place in worship (Inge, 2016; Warren, 2018).

The presence of God is wherever His people are. If cyberspace is the new public square, the church online is taking the gospel to where the people are. It is creating opportunity to reach more people. Knowing that technology is not entirely neutral, the challenge is how to keep God at the center of worship. The resistance of some toward adopting new technology in worship is that it has the potential to become the object (idol) of worship, rather than a means of drawing closer to God. Though the change has been thrust upon the church, worshippers can be intentional and harness the benefits of worshipping at a distance while keeping God at the center and strengthening the sense of community. This can be done by reimagining the means without sacrificing the purpose of worship.

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-10-

Online Church, Common Good, and Sacramental Praxis

Matthew John Paul Tan

This essay focuses on identifying the support points for this stretched Body, and I submit that Catholic social teaching's conception of the common good can be a useful vantage point from which to consider both social distancing and the online church as properly ecclesial acts.

Introduction

One of the casualties of COVID-19 was gathered worship, with churches closed or heavily restricted in an attempt to cooperate with civic authorities. The question we ask in this chapter concerns the degree to which this cooperation can be an ecclesial act. Put another way, we seek to mine the church's self-understanding to examine the extent to which this act of cooperation can be considered an act of the church rather than imposition from the state onto the church. The reason for this investigation is the risk that, without its own ecclesial vocabulary to position itself, the church may end up becoming positioned by some extrinsic force and dragooned into becoming a sub-department of state machinations.

I submit that an entry point for this interrogation is the hallmark practice of the church in this pandemic, the pivoting to online worship to enable social distancing and maintain a modicum of ecclesial life. In another essay, I argued that this

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pivot constituted an important occasion for the Body of Christ to be stretched into the digital continent. This essay would focus on identifying the support points for this stretched Body, and I submit that Catholic social teaching's conception of the common good can be a useful vantage point from which to consider both social distancing and the online church as properly ecclesial acts.

The first part of this essay will focus on how the common good addresses the problematic created by social distancing by forging a communal space that bridges the boundary, not only between the sacred and the secular, but also the real and the virtual. The second part will outline how the common good has to be underwritten by liturgical and sacramental practice, such that the online practice of the church can still be a public act that works for the common good by making the Body of Christ present in digital space.

The Common Good in Moral Theology

The *Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church* (2005) formally defines the common good as “the sum total of social conditions which allow people, either as groups or as individuals, to reach their fulfilment more fully” (Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace, 2005). It goes further to say that this fulfilment is not a mere “greatest good for greatest number,” but expresses the “social and community dimension of the moral good.” In conventional uses of the phrase, “the common good” usually denotes the material conditions for a person's (and community's) economic flourishing. However, in the specific tradition of Catholic social teaching, flourishing also denotes what Jacques Maritain (2007) would regard as

the perfection, a “rectitude of life” that befits the “specific character of the human being.” This goes beyond the material to incorporate the social, cultural, religious, moral, and spiritual. It is the moral dimension that is of interest here, especially when approaching this from the Roman Catholic standpoint. To bring this into focus, the common good is the end state of a moral life which, within the Roman Catholic tradition, is the fruit of a life of virtue.

At its base, the life of virtue is the process of developing the good habits that pivot a person towards perfecting the excellent characteristics of the human person. Several things flow from the life of virtue. The first is that such a life does not presume an atomistic and self-serving individual. As Maritain says, “the person, by virtue of his dignity, as well as of his needs, requires to be a member of society” (Maritain, 2007, p. 173). A self-made man cannot be a virtuous man, and his life and achievement are not the result of individual achievement alone. Rather, both his flourishing and the steps by which to get there are a collaborative state, which in turn are the fruit of actively participating in a common project. Maritain puts this more radically, in that not just his needs, but the fulfilment of his nature requires this common and generous outward trajectory towards communion. The third, and this is the theological point, is that this common participation is an outworking of the participation of the common divine source. The common good is thus the fruit of a collaborative enterprise to create the conditions of human flourishing. It is a good that is common to the community and working for the development of everyone in the community. Contrary to the liberal standpoint, it is not the accidental fruit of a stalemate

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between competitors, nor is it a strategic compromise between countervailing factions which only serves one's own advantage defined by oneself. Put another way, even though we may all participate in it differently, the common good is not the sum of our individual goods. Rather, it transcends our own good to encompass the welfare of our neighbors.

The question on which the common good turns is: and who is my neighbor? To this, Augustine provides a subtle and useful insight.

Neighbors, Everybody

In his *City of God* (1998), Augustine makes a distinction between the City of God, marked by the love of God over self, and the City of Man, which is marked by the love of self over all. What is instructive for our purposes is the way in which Augustine bursts our complacent bubbles concerning which city we belong to. While Christians might conceive of themselves to be firm citizens of the heavenly city, Augustine provides the reassurance that all have their feet squarely planted in both cities. For Augustine, it is only at the eschaton and the accompanying division between the sheep and the goats by the Lord, that can we finally see who truly belongs in which city.

Before that time, however, the lack of clear distinction between citizens and foreigners and the resultant ambiguity as to who my neighbor is have an impact on how we define that which is common in "the common good." It cannot be confined to simply one specific, Christian community, since my neighbor is not simply confined to the immediate ecclesial

community. To put it more constructively, that which is common is common to both the residents of both the City of God and the City of Man. Christians, in their work for the common good, act for the weal of both their believing and nonbelieving neighbors.

Going the Distance

Closely associated with the principle of the common good is the virtue of solidarity, which the *Compendium* defines as "a firm and persevering determination to commit oneself to the *common good*," born out of the realization that "we are all really responsible for all" (Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace, 2005, §193). As a virtue oriented to the common good, it has to be put into action in order to be realized. More specifically, precisely because it is oriented to the common good, it has to be made manifest to one's neighbor.

What is interesting is that this manifestation can occur in what we *refrain* from doing as much as for what we *actively* do. In an interview with the *Mars Hill Audio Journal* (2020), David C. Schindler noted how the current pandemic and its primary directive of social distancing opened up a paradox pertaining to the common good. Whilst traditional conceptions of the common good required collaborative action, a mode which implies proximity to each other, Schindler saw in social distancing a form of action that involved the active creation of *absence from* each other. Paradoxically, it was this absence that constituted a working for the common good.

To build on Schindler's comments, I believe the action goes further than simply refraining from taking action to create the

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distance. The commitment to the common good requires that active work be done for my neighbor to underwrite any virtuous action that serves the common good, including from within the confines of lockdown. In the context of the distanced church, the character of this action turns on the creation of a presence that works from within yet also cuts through the absence.

At the center of this presence is the online church, where services, homilies, online meetings, and even motivational memes are relayed through a series of digital platforms, especially social media. On the one hand, some churches have reported higher numbers of engagement than would otherwise be the case, with more people attending services that were delivered online than if they were conducted onsite, indicating the online church is opening up an avenue of engagement with a demographic that might not otherwise engage the church. At the same time, however, a number of those who were in regular attendance at church have expressed frustration, even anger, at being confined to the online formats. The quantitative indications that the church might be increasing the scope of its presence might be a source of encouragement to those in ecclesial authority. However, the qualitative signs of apparent marginalization of those who might regularly participate in the life of the church might indicate in turn a need to interrogate the status of the presence created via these online platforms. This interrogation must also be oriented towards pivoting the online church as a site that works for the common good.

Put more precisely, I argue that the pandemic and the practice of church online has opened the field for a recontextualization of the church, one in which the presence of the Body of Christ is made present to those on the margins of participation in the church, but also puts these into a real communion with those that are already regular participants in its life. Such a re-contextualization turns on a fresh look into the liturgical and sacramental life of the church.

Liturgy & Sacrament

From the Catholic standpoint, worship has two interlocking dimensions that are informative for our consideration of the common good. The first and more apparently relevant is that it is liturgical, in that it is a *leitourgia* or a public work. The second is that it is sacramental, in that there is a real spiritual dynamic operating within and beyond the material signs that express that dynamic. I submit that understanding the public nature of the church's worship can inform our understanding of the common good and underwrite the practice of the online church, such that the online church can be a properly liturgical action. Be that as it may, I also submit that this more robust notion of the common good outlined above requires a further underwriting by the sacramental understanding of the church's public worship—we are saying that this only occurs when the pixels are sacramentally connected to the material elements lifted up in worship in such a way that this connection endures in the transition from the material to the virtual.

Leitourgia

First to the liturgical. In the more impassioned calls for the reopening of churches, one often unexpressed argument backing this call is the assertion that one has a “right to the sacraments.” What is often forgotten is that in liturgical worship, prayer is not primarily the act of an isolated individual. As Ruth Burrows (1999, p. 29) reminds us, it is first and foremost the act of the Triune God, that is, a communion of persons. Flowing from that, liturgical worship is an act of becoming gathered by this communion of divine persons into a *leit*, a people.

We also have to ask: where are the borders to these people being constituted? In *For the Life of the World*, Alexander Schmemmann (1973) argues compellingly that worship presents the church as a “sacrament for the world.” We will turn to the concept of sacramentality shortly, but for now we want to focus on the suffix “for the world.” While on a material level, the worship of the church is that of a particular gathered communion, it also transcends that communion insofar as it is a real participation in the work of Christ, who is the initiator of the act of gathering. Schmemmann observes that Christ broke the long-standing tie between religion and the concern for any sacred geography, temple, and cult, because Christ transposed the temple onto himself. Thus, though worship—and the constitution of the people—takes place in a particular locale, the worship of Christ breaks down those barriers to encompass the whole church across time and space, meaning that the whole church across time and space is gathered at every Eucharist. A couple of important implications flow from this.

The first is that the church is not simply a “community of faith,” not even a global community. The kind of public constituted by the liturgical worship outlined above is nothing less than the entirety of creation gathered at each altar. Even if it is true that the most immediate public is constituted by the community gathered round the altar, it is also true that the outer borders of this gathered public encompass the entirety of the cosmos. These borders cut across those that divide the sacred and secular spheres, and this smudging of the borders is accentuated further by Augustine’s observation above that even those gathered at the altar are themselves residents of the sacred and secular spheres. Secondly, and more relevant for our purposes, this public constituted in worship frames the “common” in the common good. Put another way, if you apply Catholic social teaching’s conception of the common good to the practice of social distancing and online liturgies, then the “common” should encompass both my believing and unbelieving neighbor. More relevantly, it should also encompass my terrestrial and digital neighbor. My distancing from my neighbor therefore, does not negate the public space constituted by the liturgy, just as the online church is a properly liturgical work.

Sacramentum

We must now consider the golden thread that endures during the transposition from the terrestrial to the virtual. This is vital because this golden thread is what undergirds the common space, and thus the common good that inevitably gets reformatted by this transposition. It is here that our attention must turn to the sacramental logic that underwrites the

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Catholic conception of liturgical worship. As indicated earlier, the conception of the public and the common is possible because it is a divine work. Yet, as Schmemmann reminds us, it is a divine work that extends into the material structure of the cosmos.

In the Catholic tradition, the center of this divine work is Christ's kenotic act of making the Word flesh and becoming present in the texture of the material world. In the Catholic tradition, this incarnational presence is an ongoing one, and the most intense iteration of this presence are the eucharistic elements of bread and wine that are brought to the altar and become the body and blood of Christ. These eucharistic elements that make Christ materially present form the living core of a network of material acts that in turn channel the presence of the incarnate word. These material acts include those that bring about the digital presence of the church, manifesting the body of Christ in a million screens.

As we affirm the sacramental presence in the digital presence of the church, I argue that this very same sacramental logic also exposes the limits to which that digital presence can be the equivalent to the terrestrial gathering. To reiterate, the sacramental logic of the presence of the incarnate word underwrites an essentially transtemporal common public space, from which we can derive a similarly trans-spatial conception of the common good. Nevertheless, that same sacramental logic highlights the embodied gathering as the most comprehensive iteration of the sacramental presence of Christ. In other words, the sacramental presence of the Incarnate Word remains the high point of God's presence in

the world, and that most intense form of sacramental presence abides in the many altars on which the mass is celebrated in the (albeit cordoned off) heart of churches around the world. The implications of this are that, although a proper sacramental public is constituted in the practice of the online church, that space is nonetheless a reduction, verging on a dissolution, of the embodied gathering. I say "verging" because, as a work of Christ, the sacramental underwriting of the online church can never be undone. Our connection may be limited (and I am arguing that it *is* a limitation) to the livestream edition of those masses on a thousand YouTube channels, but that does not void the presence of Christ, nor our indwelling in that presence.

Conclusion

In the preceding sections, I sought to establish an ecclesiological basis for the distanced church. I argued that, while the situation of lockdown and the resultant practice of social distancing and the online church are indeed a disruption, they are not a negation of the work of the Body of Christ. I sought to find this new iteration of the church on two traditional principles in the Catholic tradition. I argued that the common good can undergird a new site of the public such that, even when actions visibly indicate the opposite of gathering, the site of the common good presumed by the church nonetheless cuts through the separation and holds together the polarity of isolation and sociality.

What gives this first principle of the common good its efficacy, however, is the second principle of sacramental presence. If we take the real presence of Christ seriously, and the

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mediation of that real presence in the vast canvas of the universe, then the distance, though disruptive, is still not *destructive* of the Body of Christ. I suggest that this applies not just in the situation of online churches, but any situation in which the physical sinews of the church have to be replaced by simulations. The eucharistic presence is what anchors the presence of the Divine Word in the textures and sinews of creation. All creation, and this must include our digital creations.

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Moving Towards a Digital Ecclesiology: Key Themes and Considerations

This essay highlights the dominant questions and themes highlighted by essay authors in this collection. It also maps out an agenda of conversational topics in need of further serious discussion by church leaders, congregations, and theological voices as we look to the impact of this season of pandemic on the future of the church.

Heidi A Campbell & Sophia Osteen

This collection of essays focused on “Digital Ecclesiology,” has sought to discuss the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on churches. The aim has been to investigate potential theological implications of various response to technology elicited and required by ecclesial structures during this time. The rise of forced social, or more accurately stated physical, distancing by church as a whole has created a unique moment for deeper reflection on what the church is in contemporary society. Churches have been presented with an opportunity to not only consider what it means to be a gathered community in a digital age, but what constitutes the essence of the church in the absence of a physical meeting and space.

These essays also ponder the ecclesial and liturgical implications of the choices made by churches during their migration online. They do this by evaluating the new

expressions of church and Christian worship born out of their integration of digital media during this unprecedented period. Together, these essays offer a variety of perspectives, from Catholics reflecting on how church doctrines are made manifest in new ways through digital worship to how Protestants in different cultural contexts understand how ecclesial models are being altered through new church practices online. Many different theological questions have inevitably been raised by the creation of different forms of “online church.” Authors have picked up on key debates around issues of how church liturgy, religious ritual like communion and core theological conception of Christian community/koinonia are raised and complicated by the move of churches online. Here, they seek to offer meaningful reflection not just on how online church differs from offline expressions but also to consider the ways the offline to online move potentially re-shape different denominations and groups understanding of what it means to be the church in a digitally-driven and technologically-mediated society.

Many essays highlight that while many churches and religious groups had to quickly move online in Spring 2020 in order to maintain membership and church structures, other churches had gradually moved online creating complementary online and offline form of service years ago. Berger describes how the “online church” reality is not necessarily novel to the COVID-19 pandemic for the Catholic community. She explains that “Before turning to the surge of online practices following the closing of Catholic brick-and-mortar sanctuaries in response to the COVID-19 pandemic, it is important to acknowledge what was already in place. Over the years,

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before the virus emerged, a good number of Catholic practices of prayer, worship, and devotion had begun to migrate into digital social space, often developing online expressions in parallel with traditional offline forms and practices” (15). Digital communication, as Amaro da Silva explains, was once complementary but in this current public health crisis became “...the main and sometimes the only form of communication between people” (7). For many, the shift online was not necessarily new but rather the purpose and priority of moving online was.

An important observation made by many of the authors is that much of the change and struggle experienced within Christian groups is not new or novel to the COVID-19 crisis. Authors noted other examples of how religion and the church has had to adapt to a variety of situations and emerging cultural trends historically. For example, Amaro da Silva’s explanation of digital religion within the Catholic Church asserted that moving online has many unseen or acknowledged implications for the Church, besides just turning to and integrating digital technology into worship rituals and practices. Importantly, for Catholics, moving online changes the identity of the Church. As the Church and most religious groups have done in history, through wars, civil unrest, and famines, religion changes and morphs. Amaro da Silva explains that often these changes reflect the current leader, as the Catholic Church’s current identity resembles the remarks of Pope Francis, but that this has happened for the Catholic Church throughout history and different papacies.

Chia approaches churches’ relationship to technology and forced innovation differently by explaining how “...the church, to be sure, is no stranger to disruptions,” and encourages people not to be too concerned over the church’s ability to withstand the current crisis we face. The Christian church, as Chia states, “...has encountered turmoil and upheavals brought about by plagues, persecution, war, population displacements, etc., and has emerged undefeated” (23). In the COVID-19 crisis, churches and religious groups have been forced to move online, while historically, churches have had to be held in “makeshift sheds in refugee camps,” had to be conducted “openly or clandestinely (due to persecution),” and through it all, have an ability to “weather the current crisis” that they may face (Chia, 23). Many of the other essays emphasize how even the liturgical innovations among churches right now is not novel. Musa explains that as “...new media technology has permeated culture, the church has been quick to adopt, integrate, and incorporate it into worship” (55). The authors emphasize that despite the current crisis forcing many people online, being forced to adapt due to environmental, political, or social circumstances is not new for the global church.

Another prominent theme amongst the essays is the discussion of what it means to be “The Church” during a time of a global pandemic. This involved authors defining and explaining how they understand the essence of “The Church” both in the historical sense and the current sense. This also required them to pose difficult questions to church leaders and pastors about where their response might lead them. Hohne explains that these questions may not be easy to deal

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with “...theologically, ecclesiologicaly, and societally” but they “...need to be on the [...] agenda, because they make a practical difference” (50). As the author explains, during the COVID-19 crisis, leaders have had to make the difficult decisions regarding remaining open during a time of national and for many, global, quarantining. Hohne states that “Some theologians justified the abstinence of physical religious gatherings in order to ‘flatten the curve’” while others “criticized church leaders for too willingly accepting the state limiting religious freedom” (50). Ess describes that the tendency to view the Church from a binary perspective of “digital-analogue,” or virtual versus real, can be problematic. He encourages leaders to consider re-thinking this potentially “conceptually fraught” or dangerous outlook (41). He goes on to explain that as a Church, often we have separated, quite distinctly, the dualistic nature of the physical and the spiritual. For example, Ess explains the virtual act of communication during the COVID-19 crisis, puts an emphasis on the “*physicality* of the Communion elements, as thoroughly blocked from digital transmission and virtual reproduction” (44). As far as the church as a whole, this pandemic should lead church and religious leaders to re-think their view on this dualism of the “virtual versus the real.” As Ess goes on to explain, they might go on to discover the “inextricable entanglement between spirit, dust, and divine consciousness” and how they “promise to overcome the dualisms I [Ess] object to” (45).

One of the central theological debate raised during the pandemic regarded the Eucharist. Hohne explains that “...if the supposed after-life were more important for the vision

than survival and social well-being in this world, it would make sense to celebrate the Eucharist even when it is violating state law.” Similarly, Tan questions the degree to which “cooperation can be an ecclesial act,” furthermore, in which ways cooperation “...can be considered an act of the church rather than imposition from the state onto the church” (58). Besides challenging traditional ecclesial laws and protocols, it forces the question of how flexible religious ritual are or can be in their adaption to new, especially technological contexts. For example, Amaro da Silva explains that a migration of traditional practices into a digital environment forces leaders to simultaneously consider and address church practices and theological teachings that impacted by the new context and offer both limitations and possibilities for innovation. She explains that whether or not this is desired, the “Church” right now must function as a networked church, on that is able “...is to connect everyone to Christ, forming one body and spirit” (12).

The authors’ discussion of the rethinking of sacred celebrations, such as the Eucharist, put a spotlight on how churches interpret and apply biblical mandates to create their liturgical trajectory. This raises a wide range of questions. How do you authentically perform communion in a period of banned social gatherings? While the move online solves the problem of gathering as church, what are the larger implications the required modification to sacred practices? Many authors responded to these questions from different denominational contexts. Evangelical churches’ openness to online communion is challenged by the Roman Catholic and Eastern Orthodox churches’ stark resistance to the Eucharist

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as a digitally mediated practices. For instance, Berger discusses communion online as the “most debated sacrament during the COVID-19 lockdown” amongst the Catholic churches” (18). This shows the ways that denominations respond to Eucharistic celebrations so drastically different, largely depending on their theological perspectives.

In one essay, Amaro da Silva reminds church members that during this time of mediated worship it is still important for members to prepare and schedule a time for live communion or other sacred acts. She explains that while the individuals within their home may not take part in communion, watching live as the priests share the bread and wine, the members “place themselves as if they were in the Church, kneel, sit, stand, listen, watch, and pray with their bodies and souls,”. Although they do not take the bread or drink the wine, “their mouth[s] salivates when they see the priest communing, and in your heart’s desire they share in spirit and truth.” In this way, the Eucharist remains sacred even in a digital realm. Practicing communion spiritually through online church does not replace the physical communion, but through it “we realize that there are several ways to pray to the Father in our home, over the Internet, connected with the People of God, and that God’s grace exceeds the space-time limit” (Amaro da Silva, 13). Ess, on the other hand, describes how the act of virtual communion is especially difficult for certain denominations because of some leaders’ emphasis on the separation of physicality and spirituality, making any form of sacred acts performed online difficult. Such discussion and varying opinions amongst authors demonstrate that there is

no “one size fits all” digital ecclesiology for the global church in a digital age.

Another prominent theme discussed by authors was what characteristics make a digital church a digital community during this time of the global pandemic. Musa explains that the virtual church “makes for reorienting the focus toward the people,” on “multiples nodes of connection,” and “members making disciples, rather than the leader alone being the center of attention and the driving engine of church ministry” (57). Musa describes how the Bible tells us that God “...expects His people to ‘meet’ with Him at the place of worship, that place is not restricted to only one location,” and so, the “...place of worship is, then, the presence of God” (56). More so, how can we be a community in a period of social distancing? Cloete explains that we might have to rethinking community and that it may mean “being alone together” (30). Chia encourages religious leaders to ask fundamental questions about “what it means to be a community gathered in the name of Christ” and “...reflect more penetratingly about the true nature and essence of the church” (22). Chia explains that the Christian Community is only established through Christ and members are deeply dependent on one another, but,

As Apostle Paul used the media of his day – he was an avid letter-writer – [...] Paul knew that distance and separation cannot threaten the deep *koinonia* he had with these churches, [...] surely we can trust God to do the same through technology (24).

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Koinonia referring to the deep Christian fellowship and communion. The authors seemingly all point to the ways that the “Church” is truly just a community of believers who are not restricted to a time and place but instead are bonded together through their attentiveness and commitment to Christ. This outlook may require leaders to re-consider what they had previously emphasized in their church services as COVID-19 has demonstrated what characteristics truly make up a church and most of them relate to God’s people.

Many of the essays ask seriously how long many of the changes made by churches during the COVID-19 outbreak will or should last. Some of the authors assert that while what this pandemic has brought is not the “totality of being church,” the “good and creative initiatives that we are living should not be left aside after the pandemic has passed” (Amaro da Silva, 9). By contrast, Chia asserts that the “...current arrangements [...] be seen as provisional and temporary measures, necessitated by the extraordinary circumstances in which we find ourselves” (26). The author believes that once and when the COVID-19 pandemic has ended, churches and religious groups should resume church life back to usual. She does include that “The church should, of course, continue to use technology imaginatively for its various ministries, but it must always do so in a theologically prudent and principled manner. Online religious activities and networks can still continue, but they should be seen only as supplementing the church’s offline activities, and not as their alternatives or substitutes” (Chia, 26). While there is no general consensus among the authors in how *much* of the technology used during the COVID-19 crisis should continue post-pandemic, there is a

general agreement that definitely *some* of the technological advances made for ministries should be utilized post-quarantine.

Overall, the authors seem to agree that many of the changes necessitated by the COVID-19 pandemic demonstrate an age-old truth: the Church can adapt to new cultures and phenomenon and are influenced by both their perceived theological mission and the external pressure of the world. The authors are hopeful that when the church is able to return back to normal once the pandemic has lessened, or finds its footing in the “new normal” that arises, it will be stronger and more equipped to deal with the next global disaster that heads the its way. Ultimately, the authors remain steadfast that the church is strong and resilient. Yet, it also now sits in a space that necessitates church leaders and scholars to ask difficult ecclesial and liturgical questions, of how this moment will shape the online and offline church into a digital online-offline church.

In conclusion, drawing from the themes and key takeaways from the Digital Ecclesiology essays, church and ministry staff should head into the “Digital Church” era with more confidence than before. The essays acknowledge the ways that the global church adapted quickly and innovatively to the challenges presented by the COVID-19 pandemic. Readers can feel secure that the Church can survive anything now. The challenge will be for church leaders to ask difficult ecclesiological questions and determine where their congregation stands on the theological decisions that will inevitably come with the digital era of churches. The essays

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encourage church leaders that these questions are necessary and pertinent to growth. More encouragingly, often these decisions are unique to each denomination and congregation, and if the pastors and leaders know their flock, they can be confident in their decision-making skills. Acknowledging the themes presented in the book will lead church leaders to more confidently enter into the new, unprecedented period in the Church's history by asking difficult questions and further identifying both their beliefs, and their place, in the wide array of digital churches.

Key Themes an Emerging Digital Ecclesiology Must Consider:

- 1. Most churches have used the online as a compliment to offline worship; COVID-19 has changed that.**
While many churches, including Catholic churches, are not completely new to online streaming and digital outreach, it was previously viewed as a complementary addition to the traditional worship service. The current pandemic has demonstrated to churches that the digital church might be more necessary than previously thought.
- 2. The Church has always adapted to cultural changes, and this pandemic is no different.**
While this is the first experience for many pastors to have to adapt to intense changes, cultural adaptation and response is not new to the Church as a whole. The church has survived, and even thrived, for thousands of years amidst other periods of environmental, political, and social changes
- 3. Defining the nature of the "Church" in a global pandemic requires leaders to ask difficult questions.**
Church decision-making during pandemic reveals what they truly believe about religious community, respect for the state and individual verses communal care and responsibility. Currently Liturgical practices and priorities of the church need to be re-examined, to consider what motivation and understanding lies behind them. Do pastors and leaders believe a "church" can exist in a digital format?

4. For many, “spiritual communion” can be as meaningful as physical communion. However, mediated rituals do not, and cannot, replace traditional forms of communion for many.

While many evangelical and non-denominational churches moved communion online with little theological debate, other denominations do not believe in the efficacy of an online form of where members take their own communion elements at home. For these some denominations, the alternative of a “spiritual communion”, where members watch the priests online partake in communion symbolically on their behalf as a meaningful substitute. However, this mediated practice does not fully fulfill the act for them, like it does when communion can be shared with others within the church.

5. The COVID-19 crisis has called for a re-examination and defining of what makes an online gathering a “Digital Church” or “Digital Community.”

When there are no “place” designations, church leaders are tasked with determining what aspects of Christian worship are essential to import or important to modify within a digital church service. Additionally, it is recognized that using digital interactive media does not immediately give rise to and experience of community. In a period of social isolation re-examination of theological and practical definitions of church and community are required.

6. The digital innovations made during this time of forced experimentation should not be seen as a temporary fix. It is important for church to continue some practices and integrate lessons learned past the current crisis.

While some authors strongly believed that digital innovations should undoubtedly continue post-COVID-19, others asserted most churches will or should return to previous worship norms. Yet all of the authors agreed that certain elements of the digital church are important and should continue past the crisis, but in a more complementary way.