

LITURGY OF THE CHURCH IN THE DIGITAL AGE

KINGSLEY NZE, PH.D

1. Introduction

The consideration of the Church as an online community has become very relevant following the challenges posed by the Covid-19 pandemic and the growing number of e-readers, tablet computers, and mobile device applications. The theological questions posed by these internet technologies¹ have called for a deeper reflection on the possibility and extent of liturgical participation and the practice of communion within a digital environment. In a bid to be flexible and “environmentally friendly,” some parishes, dioceses, and episcopal conferences have begun to make use of LCD projectors and screens to project texts and music in lieu of printed participation aids. Some priests have gone as far as using iPad, which would be later used to check e-mail, browse the Internet, play games, or watch streaming videos, in place of a printed Missal. One cannot deny the convenience created by using mobile apps to deliver prayers, daily Scripture readings, reflections, and the Liturgy of the Hours. But should these digital formats replace printed texts and ritual editions? While it is impossible to speculate the future, liturgiologists and liturgists are wisely cautioning the Church on the dangers of moving too quickly “towards digital liturgy” (*liturgia ad digitale*). How it may alter or affirm the Church’s ethos as well as practices and the actual ways they function as a liturgical community are some mindboggling questions still left unanswered. A digital Church, however, suggests that new media – such as augmented reality, podcasting, and cloud computing – have the potential to change the understanding and expressions of the Church². This very concept might lead to the reconsideration of the theological model of the Church as the mystical Body of Christ. Our task in this article is to explore the arguments in favour and against *liturgia ad digitale*, to understand the complexity of the

¹ Cf. H.A. CAMPBELL, «Introduction. Studying Digital Ecclesiology. How Churches are being informed by Digital Media and Cultures», *Ecclesial Practices* 7 (2020) 1-3; cf. W.A. DREYER, «Being Church in the era of “homo digitalis”», *Verbum et Ecclesia* 40 (2019) 1-7.

² Cf. CAMPBELL, «Introduction. Studying Digital Ecclesiology. How Churches are being informed by Digital Media and Cultures», 1-3.

work since liturgical norms do not specifically address many of the emerging questions. To understand the Church and *liturgia ad digitalem*, we would like to begin by understanding the background of the relationality between the Church and the liturgy.

2. Rapport between the Church and Liturgy

The Fathers of the Second Vatican Council defined “Liturgy” as the summit (*culmen*) towards which all the actions of the Church are oriented and at the same time, the source (*fons*) from which all its energies flow³. “Liturgy” “is the term which covers generally all that worship which is officially organized by the Church, and which is open to and offered by, or in the name of, all who are members of the Church”⁴. Nobody can claim a single definition that embraces all the aspects of liturgy. Liturgy can be defined in different ways depending on what one wishes to emphasize⁵. This background is important since it has come

to be particularly applied to the performance of that rite which was instituted by our Lord Jesus Christ Himself to the peculiar and distinctive worship of those who should be “His” own, and which has ever since been the heart and core of Christian worship and Christian living – the Eucharist or Breaking of bread⁶.

But the contextual use of the expression, “*liturgia*”, to describe the Mass, according to Anscar Chupungco, did not appear in the Latin West until the sixteenth century, thanks to renaissance writers like G. Cassander, J. Pamelius, and J. Bona⁷. The term, he added, appeared in the official Latin documents for the first time during the pontificate of Gregory XVI⁸. The development paved way for a better understanding of the link between the liturgy and the Church. The relationship is so vital that at every liturgical event, the Church tends to become more aware of what she is. The relationship is so intimate to an extent that to

³ Cf. *Sacrosanctum Concilium* (SC) 10.

⁴ G. DIX, *The Shape of the Liturgy*, Bloomsbury T&T Clark, London ³2005, 1.

⁵ Cf. A. CHUPUNGO, «A Definition of Liturgy», in *Handbook for Liturgical Studies*, vol. 1: *Introduction to the Liturgy*, ed. A.J. Chupungco, Liturgical Press, Collegeville (MN) 1999, 9.

⁶ DIX, *The Shape of the Liturgy*, 1.

⁷ CHUPUNGO, «A Definition of Liturgy», 4.

⁸ Cf. CHUPUNGO, «A Definition of Liturgy», 4.

reform the liturgy invariably is to reform the Church⁹. Any distortion in the view of the Church will have a negative impact on the reality of liturgy.

The deepening of the relationship between the liturgy and the Church could open up to four main perspectives: a) the interaction between the conception of the Church and the liturgy, between the way of realizing the Church and the way of understanding her cultic actions; b) the contribution, that the liturgical tradition – texts and rites – can give today to the understanding of the mystery of the Church; c) the significance of liturgical actions, especially the Eucharist, as a manifestation of the Church; d) suggestions that may come from contemporary ecclesiology for a more authentic realization of the liturgical experience and for an ever-renewed adaptation of the Church's cultic praxis¹⁰. Certainly, there seems to be no interchange between the Liturgy and the Church within a juridical-institutional model that continues to think of the Church as a society. The Liturgy and the Church are two dynamic realities, profoundly united, that an error in one can lead to an error in the other¹¹. Evangelos Theodorou agrees with this fact when he states:

The mystery, of the Church and the Liturgy, has a very antinomic structure, like the mystery of Christ: the implicit antinomy of the chalcedony dogma. Two realities, divine and human, without fusion, but in an indivisible and perfect unity. We must distinguish them carefully, but we never dare to separate them¹².

⁹ Cf. TRIACCA, «La perennità dell'assioma. "Ecclesia facit Liturgiam et Liturgiam facit Ecclesiam". Osmosi tra pensiero dei Padri e preghiera liturgica», 257.

¹⁰ Cf. D. SARTORE, «Ecclesiologia e liturgia. Principi metodologici e fondamenti teologici di un rapporto», in *Ecclesiologia e liturgia. Atti della X Settimana di studio dell'Associazione Professori di Liturgia Bologna. 28 agosto-1 settembre 1981*, edd. Associazione Professori di Liturgia (Studi di Liturgia 10), Marietti, Casale Monferrato 1982, 10; cf. C. MILITELLO, «Ecclesiologia e Liturgia», in *Liturgia. Itinerari di ricerca. Scienza liturgica e discipline teologiche in dialogo* (BEL.S 91), edd. A. Pistoia–A.M. Triacca, CLV- Edizioni Liturgiche, Roma 1997, 333.

¹¹ Cf. E. THEODOROU, «La Phénoménologie des relations entre l'Église et la Liturgie», in *L'Église dans la liturgie. Conférences Saint – Serge XXVI^e Semaine d'Études Liturgiques Paris 1979*, edd. A.M. Triacca–A. Pistoia, CLV – Edizioni Liturgiche, Roma 1980, 245.

¹² «Le mystère de l'Église et la liturgie ont une structure bien antinomique, comme le mystère du Christ: l'antinomie implicite du dogme de Chalcédoine. Deux réalités, divine et humaine, sans fusion, mais dans une unité indivisible et parfaite. On doit les distinguer avec soin, mais on n'ose jamais les séparer», THEODOROU, «La Phénoménologie des relations entre l'Église et la Liturgie», 275. The translation in english is ours.

If the liturgy is a vital element of the Church and *vice versa*, it would be unimaginable for the Church to survive without the liturgy, since liturgy is its vital principle. The liturgy is the constitutive principle of the Church as a worshipping Community. It is in the celebration that the Church is gathered, animated, converted, purified, renewed, nourished, and increased. The liturgy is the “gravitational force” of the Church’s activity. In other words, it is an act of the Church’s self-understanding and the most perfect expression of the Church in her relationship with God¹³. Hence, J.D. Crichton states: “Because it is God who always takes the initiative, Christian worship is best discussed in terms of response. In worship man is responding to God and this is true of the whole liturgy”¹⁴. The Church acts not only in virtue of the command given to her by Christ but in the closest union with Him her Head in all her liturgical acts¹⁵. The Church is mysteriously united with her head, Christ in this sacred action. It is the common action of Christ and the Church. Here, Christ retains his position as the head, while the Church remains his body. From this dual position derives a distinction between the role of the head (Christ) and the role of the body (the Church), which is concretized in the distinction between ministers and community within the liturgy¹⁶.

There is no doubt that the essence of the Church is rather made manifest in the liturgical celebration. The Church fulfils her role as the body of Christ when receiving the sanctifying action of Christ, she continues the prayer and the praise that Christ offered to the Father in the days of his earthly life (cf. Heb 5,7). This prayer offered by the Church is still the prayer of Christ, the one that today he presents to the Father in union with his body, which is the Church¹⁷. For this reason, Marsili states: “There is no liturgy celebrated in the name of the Church but only a liturgy of the Church”¹⁸. Thus, he continues, “in the liturgy, when for

¹³ Cf. K.W. IRWIN, *Context and Text. Method in Liturgical Theology*, The Liturgical Press, Collegeville (MN) 2017, 48.

¹⁴ J.D. CRICHTON, «A Theology of Worship», in *The Study of Liturgy*, edd. C. Jones–G. Wainwright–E. Yarnold, SPCK, London 1980, 7.

¹⁵ Cf. *Mediator Dei (MD)* 27; cf. IRWIN, *Context and Text*, 48.

¹⁶ Cf. S. MARSILI, «Liturgie», in *Dictionnaire encyclopédique de la liturgie*, edd. D. Sartore–A.M. Triacca, Brepols, Belgique 1992, 637.

¹⁷ Cf. MARSILI, «Liturgie», 637.

¹⁸ «Il n'existe donc pas une liturgie célébrée au nom de l'église mais seulement une liturgie de l'Église», MARSILI, «Liturgie», 637; «The liturgical leader acts and prays for the community and in its name. He has been entrusted with executing or directing the holy celebration of the liturgy, whose social objective character is essential to its very being. For that reason, the

example the minister acts as president, he is not “mediator” of his Church, but in his prayer, it is the Church that prays”¹⁹. What the Church celebrates in her liturgy is *actio Christi*²⁰. This is well articulated in the encyclical, *Mediator Dei*, where the liturgy was defined as the public worship, which Christ as head of the Church renders to God the Father, as well as the worship which the community of the faithful, renders to its founder, and through him to the heavenly Father²¹. The more comprehensive definition of liturgy captures the concept of Christ’s presence in the sacrifice of the Mass, the sacraments, the holy scriptures and the divine office²². No wonder, the liturgy is an exercise of the priestly office of Christ²³. In light of this assertion, Cyprian Vagaggini declared that “any worship rendered by the Church to God is always in Christ, that is, in union with Christ and through Christ as Head of the Church”²⁴. In his explanation, it is “the worship of Christ the Head rendered to God, and the priesthood of Christ, continued in the Church, by the Church, and with the Church, His body”²⁵. Christ operates inwardly in the Church when she performs her rites. It is in and with the Church that Christ realises his priestly office.

very idea that he might use that celebration to satisfy any kind of personal subjective need is antithetical to the liturgy’s very essence», A. BAUMSTARK, *On the Historical Development of the Liturgy*, Liturgical Press, Collegeville (MN) 2011, 217.

¹⁹ «Dans la liturgie, quand par exemple le ministre agit comme président, il n’est pas médiateur de son Église, mais, dans sa prière, c’est l’Église qui prie», MARSILI, «Liturgie», 637.

²⁰ It is this that places the rites over the authority of the celebrant since the liturgy is a gift received from Christ and the Church is Christ mystically present. The fathers of the second Vatican Council affirmed it when they declared that no other person, not even a priest, may add, remove, or change anything in the liturgy on his own authority, cf. SC 22.

²¹ Cf. MD 39.

²² Cf. SC 7.

²³ Cf. SC 7; «En ce sens, on peut justement dire de la liturgie, action sacerdotale du Christ, qu’elle est le culte de l’Église. La liturgie est donc telle, non parce qu’elle est célébrée au nom de l’Église, qui commande ou ordonne le culte, mais parce qu’elle l’est in persona Ecclesiae, et cela par ceux qui, soit en tant que communauté soit en tant qu’individu, personnifient l’Église», MARSILI, «Liturgie», 637.

²⁴ C. VAGAGGINI, *Theological Dimensions of the Liturgy. A General Treatise on the Theology of the Liturgy*, The Liturgical Press, Collegeville (MN) 1976, 24; «If they are “in Christ” they are “in the Spirit”. For, according to the general teaching of the New Testament, the action of Christ and the action of the Spirit are inseparable, and there is no union with Christ except in the presence and in the possession of His Spirit”. Not only is baptism “in the Spirit” and not only is the Spirit received in confirmation, in penance, in the Eucharist and in holy orders, but every Christian sacrifice and every Christian prayer is sacrifice and prayer in the Spirit», IBID.

²⁵ VAGAGGINI, *Theological Dimensions of the Liturgy*, 24.

From the foregoing, liturgy can be considered fundamentally as an anamnesis of the Paschal mystery in ritual actions through which Christ's high priesthood and intercession for the salvation of humanity are continually made manifest²⁶. Thus, the Church participates and continues the priestly office of Christ in the liturgy at the bidding of her founder²⁷. First of all, the Church does so at the altar, through the sacraments, the special channels through which men are made partakers in the supernatural life, and finally, by offering to God our daily tribute of praise²⁸. Since every liturgical celebration is an action of Christ, the priest, and of his body which is the Church, and a sacred action surpassing all others, the Fathers of the Second Vatican Council, therefore, states: "No other action of the Church can equal its efficacy by the same title and to the same degree"²⁹. This makes liturgy, the supreme and only indispensable activity of the Church. Hence, the Church participates in the redemptive act and obtains salvation by accomplishing this sacred rite³⁰. The communion between God and the Church can be achieved through a symbolic action where the priesthood (as mediator) takes both the divine and human dimensions expressed through words and gestures. The symbolic nature of Christian liturgy, expressed by posture, gesture, and orientation, further highlighted by the use of vestments, according to Robert Pesarchick, shows that a priest acts not in his own name, but as an instrument of Christ³¹. Through the symbolic action of the priest, the invisible action of God and the intentions of the community are outwardly expressed³². It is through the ministry of the priest that the Church carries out the mystery and so offers sacrifice to her bridegroom³³.

²⁶ Cf. IRWIN, *Context and Text*, 46-47.

²⁷ Cf. MD 3.

²⁸ Cf. MD 3.

²⁹ SC 7.

³⁰ Cf. O. CASEL, *The Mystery of Christian Worship and other writings*, ed. B. Neunheuser, New Man Press, Westminster 1962, 7.

³¹ Cf. R.A. PESARCHICK, «Worship in accord with the Logos. Incarnation, Liturgy and Inculturation», *Antiphon* 13 (2009) 46.

³² Cf. CASEL, *The Mystery of Christian Worship and other writings*, 23.

³³ For this reason, Benedict XVI exhorts: «*Necesse est hanc ob rem ut sacerdotes conscii sint numquam totum eorum ministerium se ipsos suosque opiniones primo in loco ponere, sed Iesum Christum. Contradicit sacerdotali idoneitati quisque conatus se ipsos ponendi veluti actionis liturgicae primos autores. Sacerdos est plus quam umquam servus et continuo debet causam recipere ut signum sit quod, veluti docile instrumentum in Christi manibus, ad Eum remittit.*

3. The Online and Offline Liturgical Experience

The new possibility for a community raised by internet technology has been welcomed as a potential substitute for familiar forms of community. According to Roberto Tagliaferri,

the advent of the internet, with the possibility of investigating three-dimensional (3D) environments has definitively freed virtual reality from the world of laboratories and niche applications to bring it into common life. You can sensorially stimulate the person with devices, called interface in virtual reality (VR Interface Devices)³⁴.

Today, apps, platforms, and networks, once constructed as a supplement to in-person gatherings, have become a crucial point of connectivity for millions of people. The Internet access devices have been assimilated into daily living such that it is quite hard to differentiate between the online and offline worlds. A theorist of online rituals, Christopher Helland agrees to this fact when he remarked: «Many people using the Internet no longer distinguish between life-online and life-offline – rather, being online has become part of their daily life and social existence»³⁵. The online liturgical practices, according to Teresa Berger, are material just like offline liturgies³⁶. Hence, she states: “In the case of online worship, this material practice is enabled, foundationally, by the interface of a human body with a computer or other internet accessing device. Digitally-mediated worship cannot be separated entirely either from a physical body or from

Quod peculiari modo in humilitate exprimitur quacum sacerdos actionem ducit liturgicam, in oboedientia erga ritum, cui corde et mente respondet, omnia vitans quae speciem praebere possunt alicuius propriae importunae actionis», BENEDICT XVI, «Adhortatio apostolica post-synodalis Sacramentum Caritatis (3 martii 2007) 23», AAS 99 (2007) 124.

³⁴ «L'avvento di internet, con la possibilità d'investigare ambienti tridimensionali (3D) ha definitivamente affrancato la realtà virtuale dal mondo dei laboratori e delle applicazioni di nicchia per portarla nella vita comune. Si può stimolare sensorialmente la persona con dispositivi, detti di interfacciamento in realtà virtuale (VR interface Devices)», cf. R. TAGLIAFERRI, «Virtualità. La pietà popolare del futuro?», RL 107 (2020) 82. The translation in english is ours.

³⁵ C. HELLAND, «Ritual», in *Digital Religion. Understanding Religious Practice in New Media Worlds*, ed. H.A. Campbell, Routledge, New York 2013, 26.

³⁶ Cf. T. BERGER, «Worship. Exploring Liturgical Practices in Cyberspace», QL 94 (2013) 278.

materiality”³⁷. It is obvious that people still gather for offline liturgies with the help of media technologies but in some cases, human bodies have been enhanced by various body technologies³⁸. The visual mediation could either facilitate or limit participation.

Facing *versus populum* is not too wonderful when there are no people in the pews. The presider (priest celebrant) needs, to look directly into the camera, at least occasionally, to connect with his online congregation. Eye contact fosters greater engagement. This is very important during the homily instead of speaking to an imaginary audience. The realities of videography must be highly considered for any Mass celebrated *ad digitalem*, especially lighting and sound. The camera angles are very critical because that is the lens through which the viewer is directed toward participation. The focus of the camera should be placed more on the actions rather than the actors, highlighting the elements of the rite. The spoken words or acclamations must lead to a visual appreciation of the ritual actions. The rising cloud of incense can create the consciousness of our prayers rising to God. Similarly, hearing the Word read or hymns sung while visualizing elements of the Church’s art and architecture, can be very uplifting than merely zooming in on the lector or cantor³⁹.

It has become so difficult to establish a stark separation between the natural and the artificial. No wonder, Berger has to insist that “there is no unmediated (pure) bodily presence at worship, be it offline or online”⁴⁰. Such presence, she claimed, is usually mediated through “particular clothes and the cultural codes they embody”⁴¹. Online worship requires bodily proprieties which are controlled by new communication technological possibilities and the bodily particulars of

³⁷ BERGER, «Worship. Exploring Liturgical Practices in Cyberspace», 270.

³⁸ BERGER, «Worship. Exploring Liturgical Practices in Cyberspace», 270; «Many of these body technologies have become naturalized in our experience, e.g., contact lenses and cochlear implants (“bionic”), artificial hips and arterial stents, and cosmetic or gender-reassignment surgery. These bodies technologies for the most part are an unquestioned element of contemporary Liturgical life, which has become technologically enhanced both offline and online. Worshippers may not be cyborgs receiving the sacraments, but most also do not attend offline liturgies with purely “natural”, non-enhanced bodies», *IBID*.

³⁹ Cf. P.J. WELSH–T.F. DAILEY, «Mass ad Digitalem», *Homiletic and Pastoral Review Magazine*, <http://www.hprweb.com/2020/04/mass-ad-digitalem>, [accessed: 29/03/2021].

⁴⁰ BERGER, «Worship. Exploring Liturgical Practices in Cyberspace», 271.

⁴¹ BERGER, «Worship. Exploring Liturgical Practices in Cyberspace», 271.

the worshipper in the cyber world⁴². It is good, therefore, to note that most online practices are shaped by the constituents of active participation in offline worship⁴³. As a consequence, Berger states:

Theologians have moved beyond earlier theorizing, which saw, for example, the watching of TV Masses as something passive and non-participatory, and therefore evaluated it negatively. In contradistinction, contemporary theorizing of how people “view” and “receive” has moved away from such a notion of passive reception to an appreciation of the active negotiation that happens in reception. A receiver is now seen as an active participant, with the range of active participation having been magnified in computer-based interactivity. As studies have shown, online multi-medial and multisensual environments are not only connected to but have physical effects on participants. Some worshippers experience strong bodily responses to online worship, such as being moved to tears⁴⁴.

As we can notice, liturgical anticipation is expanding with the emergence of new programmes, technological innovations, and ever more sophisticated networks. There is also the tendency of hyper-individuation in both online and offline worship⁴⁵. In the final analysis, there is “no general or abstract active participation, only concrete, particular and embodied participants”⁴⁶. Participation is relative to how each worshipper can respond to the various and unique ways in which every human can participate in the liturgy⁴⁷. Berger affirms this point when she observes that

an elderly man suffering from dementia participates in worship differently from a young woman just completing her doctorate in liturgical studies. An unborn child in the mother’s womb is present differently from an adult who happens to be blind. A

⁴² Cf. BERGER, «Worship. Exploring Liturgical Practices in Cyberspace», 271.

⁴³ Cf. BERGER, «Worship. Exploring Liturgical Practices in Cyberspace», 271.

⁴⁴ BERGER, «Worship. Exploring Liturgical Practices in Cyberspace», 273.

⁴⁵ Cf. BERGER, «Worship. Exploring Liturgical Practices in Cyberspace», 273.

⁴⁶ BERGER, «Worship. Exploring Liturgical Practices in Cyberspace», 274.

⁴⁷ Cf. BERGER, «Worship. Exploring Liturgical Practices in Cyberspace», 274.

mentally disabled or neuro-diverse teenager participates differently from a neuro-typical yet stressed mother of twins or triplets⁴⁸.

We cannot deny the fact that there are significant kinds of materiality involved in the two liturgies. The human body is the core materiality in both online and offline worship. The difference is that “the human body in online worship is interfacing with an internet-accessing device without necessarily being physically co-present to other worshippers”⁴⁹. Presence is enabled and mediated, as well as constrained digitally since one’s body is networked with other bodies around the world in a cyber community.

The physical co-presence of worshippers in offline worship is not a total guarantee for the liturgical community, since people can be bodily present while their minds are elsewhere⁵⁰. It means that there can be an ecclesial communion irrespective of physical co-presence, as observed in the time of Justin the martyr, where communion was taken to those physically absent⁵¹. The communion with the pope, the local bishop, and all the clergy clearly articulated in the Eucharistic Prayers I, II, III, IV, respectively, helps us to understand the implication of online liturgical participation⁵². Here the Church prays for the entire people of God,

⁴⁸ BERGER, «Worship. Exploring Liturgical Practices in Cyberspace», 274.

⁴⁹ BERGER, «Worship. Exploring Liturgical Practices in Cyberspace», 278.

⁵⁰ Cf. BERGER, «Worship. Exploring Liturgical Practices in Cyberspace», 275.

⁵¹ «In the second century, for example, Justin Martyr acknowledged that eucharistic communion extended beyond those who were able to attend a given liturgy; the eucharistic bread from the celebration was taken to those unable to attend (the text does not specify that they were sick). They belonged, even if they were prevented from being bodily present at a particular celebration. More than a millennium after Justin Martyr, Claire of Assisi, unable to attend Mass because of an illness, mystically joined and witnessed the celebration of a Mass in her cell (which in 1958 led to her designation as the patron saint of television). Other, less startling examples of ecclesial *communio* beyond physical co-presence could be mentioned, such as the communion of saints embodied in the eucharistic prayer. Here too, ecclesial communion is voiced and performed – with the saints, the Pope, the local bishop, etc.– with physical co-presence», BERGER, «Worship. Exploring Liturgical Practices in Cyberspace», 277.

⁵² «*Te igitur, clementissime Pater, per Iesum Christum, Filium tuum, Dóminum nostrum, supplices rogámus ac pétimus, uti accépta hábeas et benedícas hæc dona, hæc múnera, hæc sancta sacrificia illibáta, in primis, quæ tibi offérimus pro Ecclésia tua sancta cathólica: quam pacificáre, custodíre, adunáre et régere dignère toto orbe terrárum: una cum fámulo tuo Papa nostro N. et Antistite nostro N. et omnibus orthodoxis atque cathóxis atque cathóhicæ et apostólicæ fidei cultóribus*», *Prex Eucharistica I*, in *Missale Romanum* 2008, 572; «*Recordáre,*

from the Roman Pontiff to the last baptized person and all those looking for God with a sincere heart. So, every Eucharistic sacrifice is performed in union with the Pope, with the local ordinary, with the whole order of bishops, with all the clergy, with the entire people of God, and all true seekers of God. Our interest here is that the prayers include those who are not immediately present in the celebration. The Church's literal absence can function as a symbol of its trust in God's ability to meet us regardless of the location. Covid-19 has transformed our physical bodies and gatherings from a united congregation to socially distanced segregation.

Since virtual worship can foster meaningful interaction with others, one might ask, why should I come to Church and not worship from my home? Liturgies celebrated with the congregation physically present and participating actively remain the ideal. But, Chauvet responds to this question by stating:

True, to attend Mass on television is a good thing when one cannot do otherwise. However, even if "it's so much better on TV than at the parish" (no noisy children, no neighbours singing out of tune, no incompetent organist, no homily that seems vacuous or poorly prepared, and so on), the Church asks Christians to go to the assembly. For Mass is not meant to favour an intimate relation to God—in that case it might be better to follow Mass on television. It is Church action. It is lived as a Church, a Church made up of men, women and children who are sinners but who dare to acknowledge themselves as the "holy church" of God; a Church made up of different members, often divided among themselves but, however, given to the world as "body of Christ"; a church made up of persons reluctant to commit themselves to conver-

Dómine, Ecclesiae tuæ toto orbe diffusæ, ut eam in caritate perficias un acum Papa nostro N. et Episcopo nostro N. et universo clero», Prex Eucharistica II, in Missale Romanum 2008, 583; «Ecclesiam tuam, peregrināntem in terra, in fide et caritate firmare digneris cum famulo tuo Papa nostro N. et Episcopo nostro N., cum episcopali ordine et universo clero et omni populo acquisitionis tuæ. Votis huius familie, quam tibi astare vouluisti, adesto propitius. Omnes filios tuos ubique dispersos tibi, Clemens Pater, miseratus coniuge», Prex Eucharistica III, in Missale Romanum 2008, 588; «Nunc ergo, Dómine, omnium recordare, pro quibus tibi hanc oblationem offerimus: in primis famuli tui, Papæ nostri N., Episcopi nostri N., et Episcoporum ordinis universi, sed et totius cleri, et offerentium, et circumstantium, et cuncti populi tui, et omnium, qui te quærent corde sincero», Prex Eucharistica IV, in Missale Romanum 2008, 595.

sion or mission but which dates to recognize itself in faith as the “temple of the Holy Spirit,” the Spirit that renews all things, “It is great, the mystery of faith!”⁵³.

The Mass entails multiple actions and signs that have a physical nature. It involves physical material signs, whose meanings are derived from the communal and social context. The Eucharist is consecrated by a set of actions: prayer, fraction and the reception of communion in the presence of others. Mario Delpini, Archbishop of Milan, preaching during a Mass that was broadcast inside the Crypt of Milan’s empty cathedral during the Covid-19 pandemic, affirmed: “The difference between participating in the Mass in the Church and watching it on TV is like the difference between sitting next to a bonfire that warms up, illuminates, brings joy, and watching a picture of the fire”⁵⁴. To be the body of Christ on earth requires meeting together as physical bodies. Seeing one another within the gathered space is not only encouraging but a way to keep checks on each other’s well-being. It means that liturgy needs to be celebrated in each other’s presence to be what it is.

During his daily Mass on April 17, 2020 in the Casa Santa Marta, Pope Francis, warned of the risk of individualistic, and imaginary faith by emphasizing the importance of community and physical participation in the sacraments for progress in familiarity with the Lord:

This Christian familiarity with the Lord is always communal. Yes, it is intimate, it is personal, but in community. A familiarity without community, a familiarity without bread, a familiarity without the church, without the people, without the sacraments is dangerous. It can become a gnostic familiarity – so to say, a familiarity for me alone, detached from the people of God⁵⁵.

⁵³ L.-M. CHAUVET, *The Sacraments. The Word of God at the Mercy of the Body*, The Liturgical Press, Collegeville (MN) 2001, 38.

⁵⁴ This insightful statement from Archbishop Mario Delpini was culled from the article, «Fear of Coronavirus leaves the Faithful without Mass in Italy’s North» written by Jason Horowitz and published on March 1, 2020 in the New York Times.

⁵⁵ FRANCIS, «Pope at Mass prays for Expectant Women», <http://www.vaticannews.va/en/pope/news/2020-04/pope-franci-daily-mass-casa-santa-marta-prays-pregnant-women.html>, [accessed 29-03-2021].

He maintained that what we are living and experiencing liturgically in this corona age is not the standard of the Church and prays for an eventual return to Ecclesial traditional normalcy. And according to Grillo, the Mass is “symbolic because it reveals what is most important, and reunites the origin of oneself, with the world and with God, making one to experience and welcome such origin as a mystery”⁵⁶. Thus, he states:

Symbol is a condition of intersubjectivity, but it is conditioned by communion: man is a symbolic animal because he “has the floor” only in a community-communion: this second awareness manifests the “community substratum” of every authentic symbol. The symbol is, therefore, also the obligatory way to overcome every purely individual and interior meaning of Christianity⁵⁷.

The dynamic action of liturgy would be the experience of relinquishing of “I” «to become self-in-community-in-Christ to live as Christ»⁵⁸. Pietro Angelo Muroni puts it clearly “The celebration is the place in which, inevitably, the personal “I” comes into contact with the “you” of the other, with something or someone outside of me, and causing me to go out from myself”⁵⁹. Each of us is part of a whole, a cell of the mystical body. This is why we do not say “I” in the Mass generally but “we” as the people of God, a community of faith. As Louis Marie Chauvet underscored: “Every prayer is said in the first-person plural: ‘we pray to you’, ‘we give thanks to you’, ‘we offer you’, and so on”⁶⁰. We draw

⁵⁶ «La messa è simbolica perché rivela ciò che è più importante, e ricongiunge con l’origine di sé, del mondo e con Dio, facendo sperimentare ed accogliere tale origine come mistero», GRILLO, «La pubblicità e il rito», 53. The translation in english is ours.

⁵⁷ «Il simbolo è condizione di intersoggettività, ma è condizionato dalla comunione: l’uomo è animale “simbolico” perché “ha la parola” solo in una comunità-comunione. Questa seconda consapevolezza manifesta il “sostrato comunitario” di ogni simbolo autentico. Il simbolo è perciò anche la via obbligata per superare ogni accezione puramente individuale e interiore del cristianesimo», cf. A. GRILLO, «La pubblicità e il rito», in *La fede e il telecomando. Televisione, Pubblicità e Rito*, edd. G. Bonaccorso–A. Grillo, Cittadella, Assisi 2001, 84. The translation in english is ours.

⁵⁸ J.A. ZIMMERMAN, *Liturgy as Language of Faith. A Liturgical Methodology in the Mode of Paul Ricoeur’s Textual Hermeneutics*, University Press of America, London 1988, 183.

⁵⁹ P.A. MURONI, *The Mystery of Christ in Time and Space. The Christian Celebration* (Manuali Teologia. Strumenti di studio e ricerca 60), Urbaniana University Press, Roma 2020, 30.

⁶⁰ CHAUVET, *The Sacraments*, 32.

on the root of communion by celebrating the Eucharist: that which is born of the Holy Spirit (cf. 2Cor 13,13) and that which translates into having everything in common (cf. Acts 4,32).

4. Physicality of Liturgical and Sacramental Actions

The scope of the second phase of the liturgical movement was to reaffirm the physical and non-symbolic value of the assembly for the liturgical experience⁶¹. The general nature of the liturgy is communitarian. The communal encounter has remained the standard for understanding presence as Church⁶². This is because of the enduring presence of Christ in the community (cf. Mt 18,20). Even though Covid-19 impeded physical gatherings as a community and the steady regularity of sacramental life, it provided a new context for some liturgical questions and doctrinal reassessment. It generated a lot of doubts about the teachings of the Church, the efficacy of the sacraments, and the Church's credibility and her commitment to the flock. This enormous pastoral challenge posed has prompted a consideration of the ecclesiology of virtual liturgy, since the primary locus of the Church, according to Louis-Marie Chauvet, is the celebrating assembly⁶³. It means that a Church without an assembly is a contradiction in terms. There is an assumption that liturgical life in cyberspace can only be disembodied, virtual, and thus unreal⁶⁴. We are also well aware that no website or program can be accessed without a body.

Practically speaking, online worship is impossible without the actual bodies of worshippers. As Teresa Berger noted: "The online presence of these bodies, however, does not exactly follow traditional lines of bodily presence"⁶⁵. It is obvious that the rest of the body seems sedentary while both fingers and the eyes are busy online, but, the multi-sensory experience of cyberspace and its bodily effects, most of the time, might be greater than at a routine Sunday morning

⁶¹ Cf. A. GRILLO, «Comunità dal rito. I presupposti teorici e culturali di una teologia dell'assemblea celebrante», in *L'assemblea liturgica* (Caro salutis cardo 20), ed. G. Cavagnoli, Messaggero, Padova 2005, 184.

⁶² Cf. A. SPADARO, *Cybertheology. Thinking Christianity in the Era of the Internet*, Fordham University Press, New York 2014, 81.

⁶³ Cf. CHAUVET, *The Sacraments*, 34.

⁶⁴ Cf. T. BERGER, «Worship. Exploring Liturgical Practices in Cyberspace», 269.

⁶⁵ BERGER, «Worship. Exploring Liturgical Practices in Cyberspace», 270.

worship⁶⁶. One cannot enter into the online sacred space at least without some bodily engagement⁶⁷. It is for this reason that the headsets, data gloves, and stereophonic sound were technologically enhanced to intensify bodily involvement within a virtual environment. The claim that online worship happens without the requirement of a “physically present” is unfounded. Teresa Berger, therefore argues that, there has to be a “physically present” body to enter worship online always. The only difference she opined is that, the physical co-presence of worshippers may not be felt⁶⁸. Christian rituals require a physical presence. But when we cannot be physically present, technology can mediate to connect us virtually as one body for communion. We can be connected to other bodies gathered virtually for worship. It is important to underline that liturgy is specifically a communal activity, not merely defined by spiritual unity but by the place. As public worship, it implies a community physically present in one place. Our concern, nevertheless, is to envision what might make digitally mediated presence an authentic experience of true encounter leading to communion.

5. Digital Presence and Real Presence

The experience of what conveys presence is very complex in the digital culture. The presence of a person can be communicated powerfully through the digital broadcasting of his words, images, and activities. Here, presence is conveyed in substance but not in the real body whether we are web conferencing, sharing images, audio files, slideshows, or messages⁶⁹. In the liturgy, as Zsupan-Jerome established, “presence is both multimodal (physical, verbal, tangible, communal) and bound to the concrete event of the celebration animated by the action of the Holy Spirit, [whereas] the corporeal/physical is intimately bound with the spiritual, psychological, communal, and relational dimensions of the event, taking place at a certain time and location”⁷⁰. The Mass, as we know, is the ritual unfold-

⁶⁶ Cf. BERGER, «Worship. Exploring Liturgical Practices in Cyberspace», 270.

⁶⁷ Cf. BERGER, «Worship. Exploring Liturgical Practices in Cyberspace», 270.

⁶⁸ Cf. BERGER, «Worship. Exploring Liturgical Practices in Cyberspace», 270.

⁶⁹ Cf. T. BERGER, «*Participatio Actiosa* in Cyberspace? Vatican II’s Liturgical Vision in a Digital World», *Worship* 87 (2013) 536; cf. D. ZSUPAN-JEROME, «Virtual Presence as Real Presence? Sacramental Theology and Digital Culture in Dialogue», *Worship* 86 (2015) 527.

⁷⁰ D. ZSUPAN-JEROME, «Virtual Presence as Real Presence? Sacramental Theology and Digital Culture in Dialogue», *Worship* 86 (2015) 529.

ing of the presence of Christ in manifold ways – in the ministry, in the word and in the sacrament⁷¹. These manifestations are destined at the service of the ecclesial community⁷². The good news is that the sacrifice of the Mass has not ceased being offered in the Church. This means that the faithful are still being presented eucharistically on altars throughout the world, even when they are absent from the Eucharist. If we look at the world with eyes of faith, hope, and charity, we can see the presence of sacrificial love that may lead to a social renewal grounded in communion. The online broadcast of the Masses only offered us the possibility to feel connected to the prayers of the Church. In the document, *The Church and the Internet*, the Pontifical Council for Social Communications warned that

virtual reality is no substitute for the real presence of Christ in the Eucharist, the sacramental reality of the other sacraments, and shared worship in a flesh-and-blood human community. There are no sacraments on the Internet, and even the religious experiences possible there by the grace of God are insufficient apart from real-world interaction with other persons of faith⁷³.

This statement according to Teresa Berger, as a theological claim may stand, but it is no longer true as a description of actual practices online, hence she states: “Theologically, we will have to presume that God is able to be present online as well as offline. Given that God is not shackled – either to the sacraments or to the offline world – we also have to presume that God can mediate God’s saving grace both online as well as offline”⁷⁴. We must ascertain at this point that virtual presence differs from real presence in propinquity-time, place, and relationship – as well as witness and interactivity⁷⁵. It implies that “our presence is established by our situated body, being in a specific location and at a certain time”⁷⁶. According to Mark Edwards, “if the Eucharist is seen as a

⁷¹ Cf. SC 7.

⁷² Cf. SMITS, «A Congregational order of Worship», 286.

⁷³ PONTIFICAL COUNCIL FOR SOCIAL COMMUNICATIONS, «The Church and Internet (22 february 2002) 9», in *Enchiridion Vaticanum*, vol. 21: *Documenti ufficiali della Santa Sede* (2002), ed. E. Lora, Dehoniane, Bologna 2005, 66-68.

⁷⁴ BERGER, «Worship. Exploring Liturgical Practices in Cyberspace», 282.

⁷⁵ Cf. M.U. EDWARDS, «Virtual Worship. A Theological Challenge», *TCC* 117 (2000) 1262.

⁷⁶ ZSUPAN-JEROME, «Virtual Presence as Real Presence? Sacramental Theology and Digital Culture in Dialogue», 526.

memorial, a means to encourage recollection of Christ's sacrifice, then a virtual memorial may do. But for those who believe in the real presence in the Eucharist, no virtual experience can substitute, not even a simulation of the touch, taste and smell produced by virtual reality body suits⁷⁷. The Eucharistic presence, however, is fundamentally relational. Christ's relational presence in the Eucharist, Zsupan-Jerome remarked, is a "solid theological basis, source, and summit for the authentic culture of encounter possible in the digital age"⁷⁸. Certainly, digital information can carry the presence of a person through images, videos, web conferencing, tweeting, posting, sharing, liking, messaging so on. It is indisputable that "these bits of specific information as we experience them in real-time tell us that another person is there, even though the encounter may never become embodied face-to-face"⁷⁹. Thus, it reinforces that we can be substantial but not physically present to one another.

The mediated presence of the ecclesial community values face-to-face physical co-presence and creates room for a sense of Eucharistic communion beyond those physically present⁸⁰. Presence is a relational category seeking encounter and engagement in and through the worshipping community⁸¹. The relational category emphasized by Louis-Marie Chauvet and Jean-Luc Marion helps us to appreciate the relational character of digital communication in Christian theology and encourages an intentionally relational disposition when communicating with others online⁸². They draw our consciousness to the reality of the person behind the screen. The liturgical assembly is a fundamental locus where Christ's presence unfolds. Christ is revealed in his body through this multilay-

⁷⁷ EDWARDS, «Virtual Worship. A Theological Challenge», 1262.

⁷⁸ ZSUPAN-JEROME, «Virtual Presence as Real Presence? Sacramental Theology and Digital Culture in Dialogue», 530.

⁷⁹ ZSUPAN-JEROME, «Virtual Presence as Real Presence? Sacramental Theology and Digital Culture in Dialogue», 531.

⁸⁰ Cf. BERGER, «*Participatio Actiosa* in Cyberspace? Vatican II's Liturgical Vision in a Digital World», 540-541.

⁸¹ Cf. L.-M. CHAUVET, «The Broken Bread as Theological Figure of Eucharistic Presence», in *Sacramental Presence in a Postmodern Context*, edd. L. Boeve–L. Leijssen, Leuven University Press, Paris 2001, 239-251; cf. N. MITCHELL, «Present in the Sacraments», *Worship* 80 (2006) 350-35; cf. J.-L. MARION, *God without Being*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago 1991, 163-179; cf. ZSUPAN-JEROME, «Virtual Presence as Real Presence? Sacramental Theology and Digital Culture in Dialogue», 535.

⁸² Cf. CHAUVET, «The Broken Bread as Theological Figure of Eucharistic Presence», 239-251; cf. MARION, *God without Being*, 163-179.

ered understanding of presence for the transformation of the community⁸³. The idea of presence in *Sacrosanctum Concilium* offers us the possibility to think of true encounters online through the modality of a complex symbolic system. The complexity of the shift from metaphysical (which focuses on substance) to a phenomenological appreciation of Eucharistic presence creates the possibility of authentic mediated presence in digital communication⁸⁴.

6. Phenomenology of Sacramental Presence

Louis-Marie Chauvet uses the early Christian community's experiences to demonstrate his phenomenological approach to the sacramental presence⁸⁵. Significant among these experiences is the Emmaus account of Lk 24,13-35, which he adopts to indicate an essential pattern for understanding sacramental presence. In the episode, the two disciples were able to recognize the risen Christ through his ritual pattern of taking, blessing, breaking, and offering. What is so spectacular is that Christ disappeared at the moment of recognition. His absence left them with a transformative memory of his presence. It spurred them into action to go forth and proclaim the gospel. The Emmaus account explains the complexity of sacramental presence in significant ways: through word, fellowship, ritual, and community by juxtaposing sacramental presence with the physical absence of Christ which was filled by a living memory of his presence⁸⁶. This absence is very important for the presence of the risen Lord. Thus, he states: "It is precisely in the act of respecting his radical absence or otherness that the Risen one can be recognized symbolically. For this is the faith; this is Christian identity according to the faith. Those who kill this sense of the absence of Christ make Christ a

⁸³ Cf. ZSUPAN-JEROME, «Virtual Presence as Real Presence? Sacramental Theology and Digital Culture in Dialogue», 533.

⁸⁴ Cf. ZSUPAN-JEROME, «Virtual Presence as Real Presence? Sacramental Theology and Digital Culture in Dialogue», 534; In his critique of the metaphysical approach, Louis Chauvet advocates for a phenomenological appreciation of the whole liturgical context of the ecclesial assembly, cf. CHAUVET, «The Broken Bread as Theological Figure of Eucharistic Presence», 239-251; Similarly, Jean-Luc Marion proposes the concept of self-gift as the fundamental basis of divine presence rather than the substance of the metaphysical heritage, cf. MARION, *God without Being*, 163-179.

⁸⁵ Cf. CHAUVET, *The Sacraments*, 155-161.

⁸⁶ Cf. L.-M. CHAUVET, *Symbol and Sacrament. A Sacramental Reinterpretation of Christian Existence*, The Liturgical Press, Collegeville (MN) 1994, 177.

corpse again”⁸⁷. It, therefore, implies that his presence prevails in and through the Church as a living memory. Commenting on this Zsupan states: “The contextual unfolding of the encounter in the Emmaus story through word, fellowship, ritual and community recalls that the absent presence of the Risen Lord, mediated by his living memory in the worshipping community, is thoroughly infused with corporeality”⁸⁸.

The presence of Christ, according to Chauvet, is mediated by the Church through the Word, Sacraments, and Ethical action⁸⁹. The sacramental presence of Christ is an invitation to communion: to be broken, shared, and consumed in and for the community. Hence, he re-proposes presence, not merely being there (*esse*), but a being-there for the other (*adesse*)⁹⁰. Presence in the mode of openness (presence-for) leads us to an understanding of digital communication practices as a true encounter whereas presence as mere being-there is equivalent to absorbing the words or images on the screen as a static reality and reacting to their content without an interpersonal context of communication beneath them. The presence in the mode of openness seeks to reveal the person behind the screen whose presence is signified by words, sounds, or images. The discovery of the person veiled by the screen leads to life-giving communication. Hence, engaging with others in the mode of openness leads to growth toward community and communion.

7. Relational Presence

Jean-Luc Marion uses the concept of idol and icon to explain his idea of relational presence. An idol, he explains, is an end in itself and fills our gaze whenever we encounter it while an icon invites our gaze beyond itself toward the invisible⁹¹. The idol, he continues, captivates the gaze in a specific way since everything in it exposes itself to the gaze⁹². An idolatrous gaze on the digital screen limits our vision only to the visible, as what we are meant to know. The

⁸⁷ CHAUVET, *Symbol and Sacrament*, 178.

⁸⁸ ZSUPAN-JEROME, «Virtual Presence as Real Presence? Sacramental Theology and Digital Culture in Dialogue», 537.

⁸⁹ Cf. CHAUVET, *The Sacraments*, 43-66.

⁹⁰ Cf. CHAUVET, «The Broken Bread as Theological Figure of Eucharistic Presence», 255.

⁹¹ Cf. MARION, *God without Being*, 7-22.

⁹² Cf. MARION, *God without Being*, 10.

understanding of the digital screen as an idol fills our gaze without drawing our attention to the invisible reality beyond it – that is the other person whose presence is made manifest in form of text, image, video, and sound. It stops our gaze at the text, image, video, and sound without reference to the mysterious complexity of the other person as truly other. The difference is that the icon surpasses the visible to give rise to an infinite gaze⁹³. Presence, in this context, is not idolatrous but iconic because of its radical openness. Approaching the screen as an icon helps us to meet the other in its infinite complexity. This possibility is a complex one too. The sacramental encounter with the Lord in the liturgy is not face-to-face. It is beyond the physical modality. The Eucharistic encounter, nevertheless, is “a mediated encounter, primarily through the liturgical signifiers of word, presider, assembly, and sacrament”⁹⁴. The role of the body in this mediated encounter is fundamental. The body is integral to encountering Christ who is veiled by liturgical signifiers: “The physical body of the participating person, ecclesial body of worship, the socio-cultural body in which ethical action unfolds, the body of creation whose elements constitute the sacramental symbols”⁹⁵.

8. Conclusion

The worshipping community cannot be genuinely expressed as a vital sign of communion, with “*liturgia ad digitalem*”. The virtual community does not describe the sacramental nature of the Church and the particular unity which makes the faithful into members of the one body of Christ. A virtual Mass defiles physical participation and undermines interpersonal relationships with God and fellow humans. Here, the communion meant to flow from knowing each other as a person is lost. The “*liturgia ad digitalem*” is a discreet promotion of the relativistic cultures of individualism, passivism, and subjectivism through simulated electronic connections. It ends up devaluating the body, displacing the Church, and promoting the connective power of the individual. The way to participate in the celebration of the Eucharist, properly speaking, is communal. The Eucharistic celebration is a sacrifice of unity, and the work of the whole community

⁹³ Cf. MARION, *God without Being*, 18.

⁹⁴ ZSUPAN-JEROME, «Virtual Presence as Real Presence? Sacramental Theology and Digital Culture in Dialogue», 534.

⁹⁵ ZSUPAN-JEROME, «Virtual Presence as Real Presence? Sacramental Theology and Digital Culture in Dialogue», 535.

gathered around the priest who, on the one hand, represents Christ from whom he received the powers, and on the other hand, represents and presides over the assembly of the baptized. The sacrifice is the catabasis of God, his self-giving to man. A Church deprived of a gathered community will sooner or later cease to exist because to be the body of Christ on earth requires meeting together as physical bodies and seeing one another within the gathered space is not only encouraging but a way to keep checks on each other's well-being. It means that liturgy needs to be celebrated in each other's presence to be what it is.

Eucharistic celebrations are insufficient if separated from the interaction of the real world with other faithful. It is easier to watch a live-streamed liturgical service from the comfort of the home. True also is the fact that there are many aspects of the liturgy that can be done virtually, such as singing, praying, reading, and preaching. The virtual connection allows one to relate to the liturgical world without participating in its sacred and original medium. The most natural conclusion is that on the internet there is no liturgy but a mere scenic representation of the ritual programme. Properly speaking, the Eucharist is carried out in a sacred place and on a dedicated or blessed altar. We must also acknowledge that certain liturgical practices cannot be virtually reproduced since liturgy involves integrating the body. Since ritual actions do appear as a mediation of presence, they do not proceed primarily through concepts and abstractions but through the use of bodies and concrete actions of communities and subjects.

A Eucharistic celebration is a place of mediation of Christ to the world. It is designed to engage the whole human person by appealing to the bodily senses; for instance, the exchange of the sign of peace, especially by handshaking, the sensory experience created by the smell of incense, the smear of oil, the sprinkling of the Holy water, the reception of holy communion, hearing the word of God and so on. These encounters or contacts draw the people more deeply into the mystical work of Christ, who is present in the liturgy. In our understanding, the mystery celebrated in the liturgy is not the product of human imagination, nor a commodity to be packaged, but the reciprocity of a presence expressed in a significant manner: the incarnation of Christ. It is precisely the mystery of the substantial presence of Christ in the Eucharist that makes the "virtual Mass" incomplete and odd if it were to be used in a situation of normality. The reason is that the sharing in the body and blood of Christ requires the physical act of eating and drinking by those present. This is the reason why in some cases, the Holy Communion is taken to the sick in their homes and hospitals.

Community is a prerequisite for communion. The teachings of Christ exposed how communities ought to be, and the care and value for one's neighbour. The participants fulfil the vision of Christ whenever they gather for the celebration of the Eucharist. It is worth being physically present in the Mass and being together with the liturgical community during the celebration. By celebrating the Eucharist together, the faithful demonstrate their support and love for the community and each other. The core of Eucharistic celebration is the building of relationships with one another by coming together. The celebration does not single out individuals but places value on communal presence. Since the faithful are made one body with Christ, they cannot be separated from the Eucharist and the Church. They are incorporated into the Church through baptism, united more firmly to Christ through the sacrament of confirmation, and reinvigorated through the Eucharist. The faithful cannot effectively be the Church without the Eucharist. The presence of the faithful is very significant in every Eucharistic celebration.

The virtual community cannot capture effectively the true essence of being in a community bound together in the presence of God. The online liturgy cannot mediate the sacramental mystery. The "*liturgia ad digitalem*" does not provide the incarnational reality of the sacraments. It disembodies the essence of the Eucharistic celebration by alienating human beings from the physical, interpersonal community. Since some people may take what is more convenient as a norm, it is, therefore, necessary to be mindful that "*liturgia ad digitalem*", unknowingly and unintentionally, can take people away from active participation by promoting absence and separation from the Body of Christ.