

A THEOLOGICAL REFLECTION ON THE TWO PULPITS: VIRTUAL AND PHYSICAL

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Abstract

The mission to proclaim the Good News is the responsibility of all Christians as commanded by Christ. By virtue of our baptism which is the foundation of our journey toward God, we are privileged to continue the work of Christ in proclaiming the Good News on earth. The content of faith has been the same in every generation. It is never in flux but the way through which the Gospel message of salvation is transmitted from one generation to another often changes. It always responds to the signs of the time to meet people from where they are. Each generation uses what is obtainable to augment the traditional mode of face-to-face communication of the Gospel message. In this present digital age, the virtual pulpit is employed as an extension of the physical pulpit in communicating the Word of God to all people on a massive scale, while maintaining the integrity of the Gospel. This new digital mode of communication brings about an integral change in the mentality and attitudes of people, especially in the Catholic Church in Africa.

Keywords: *evangelization, pulpit, virtual, physical, and media of social communication.*

1. Introduction

Evangelization is at the heart of the Church's mission right from its conception. According to the teachings of the Catholic Church, "Evangelizing means bringing the Good News into all the strata of humanity, and through its influence transforming humanity from within and making it new."¹ It simply means bringing Christ to people and bringing people to Christ. In the history of the

¹ PAUL VI, Apostolic Exhortation *Evangelii Nuntiandi* on the New Evangelization [hereafter EN], December 8, 1975: no. 18.

Church, “Christianity reveals a God who uses all sorts of media to get His message across, from pillars of fire to bringing stars, from burning bushes to a talking donkey. He delivered the Ten Commandments on chiselled rock, painted rainbows to signal his covenant, and used a cross to display his love.”² This quotation expresses different ways through which God communicated His Word to His people in the Old Testament. In the New Testament, Christ, the Incarnate Word, reveals His mission to proclaim the Word of God. Thus, He said, “I was sent to bring the Good News to the poor ...” (Lk 4:2) and “I must proclaim the Good News of the kingdom of God ... because that is why I was sent” (Lk 4:43). Pope Paul VI, affirms that Christ is “the nucleus and centre of the Good News.”³ Jesus proclaimed the Good News using different means to draw people to Himself, such as through words, signs, miracles, His death, resurrection, and the descent of the Holy Spirit.⁴ Shortly before the ascension of Christ, He commissioned His Apostles to “go into all the world and preach the Gospel to all creation” (Mk 16:15). The Apostles bore witness to Christ by spreading the Good News to many parts of the earth moving from one house to another, in the Churches, in the cities and market places.

The Church acknowledges the proclamation of the Word of God as her deepest identity in following the footsteps of Christ, the perfect communicator. This identity of the church is manifested through her vocation “to preach and teach, to be a channel of the gift of grace, to reconcile sinners with God, to perpetuate the sacrifice of Christ in the Holy Mass which is the memorial of His death and His glorious resurrection.”⁵ The Church considers the interior conversion of the heart that seeks God who is Love as central to the mission of evangelization. The “salvation history recounts and documents the communication of God with man, a communication which uses all forms and ways of communicating.”⁶ Now, the question is, how can this mission of Christ’s revelation of God’s love be accomplished through virtual and physical pulpits in the African continent?

Today, the Church in Africa, in response to the signs of the time, employs new forms of media in the proclamation of the Good News. At each moment, the

2 BRANDON VOGT, *The Church and New Media* (Indiana: Our Sunday Visitor, Inc, 2011), 15.

3 PAUL VI, EN, no. 9.

4 PAUL VI, EN, no. 12.

5 PAUL VI, EN, no. 14.

6 JOHN PAUL II, Apostolic Letter, *The Rapid Development* [hereafter RD], January 24, 2005, no. 4.

Church is renewed and adapts new means of evangelization as in the case of the virtual pulpit which is an internet-mediated medium. The potentials of the new world of cyberspace are maximized in proclaiming the Good News to the farthest part of the earth.⁷ In contemporary society, the Church engages in the mission of evangelization not only with the physical pulpit but also with the virtual pulpit to make Christ known to all. The Second Vatican Council Fathers affirm that the Church has an inherent right “to have at its disposal and to employ any of these media insofar as they are necessary or useful for the instruction of Christians and all its efforts for the welfare of souls.”⁸ Thus, the virtual pulpit has become the new means of spreading the Gospel. One might be confronted with a lot of questions about the meaning of virtual and physical pulpit. Are the two pulpits opposite or complementary to each other in the Church’s mission of evangelization? What could be the Church’s precautions in the use of virtual pulpit for evangelization? How could the virtual and physical pulpits be fully integrated into the Church in Africa for effective evangelization? Thus, this article theologically reflects on how the proclamation of the Good News could be carried out through the two pulpits: virtual and physical in the African Church.

2. Physical Pulpit

The term pulpit is derived from the Latin word, *Pulpitum* which means “a raised structure consisting of an enclosed platform, usually in a Church or chapel, from which a preacher delivers a sermon.”⁹ It is a physical platform for preaching the Word of God to a large audience. The elevation of the pulpit indicates its great significance in the Church. Thus, the pulpit signifies the proclamation of the Good News which is central to the Christian life of the Church. From the pulpit, the Word of God is made alive and active in the lives of the people who gathered to listen to it, through the inspiration of the Holy Spirit. Thus, the use of the pulpit in preaching the Word of God to the people has a biblical background.

7 JOHN PAUL II, *Message of the Holy Father John Paul II for the 36th World Communication Day*, accessed 30/8/22, https://www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/messages/communications/documents/hf_jp-ii_mes_20020122_world-communications-day.html#top.

8 SECOND VATICAN COUNCIL, *Inter Mirifica* Decree on the Media of Social Communication, December 4, 1963, no. 3.

9 LESLEY BROWN, *The New Shorter Oxford English Dictionary on Historical Principles*, ed. (New York: Clarendon Press, 1993), 2411.

In the Old Testament, Ezra, the priest, mounted on a wooden pulpit made for reading the Book of the Law to read the Law to the tribes of Israel who gathered to hear the Word of God (Neh 8:1-8).¹⁰ Ezra did not just mount on the pulpit and started to teach the audience, rather, he prepared himself very well to speak the Word of God (Ezra 7:10). The Law of God was read, and made clearer and more understandable. In the New Testament, St. Luke presented us with an account that “On the Sabbath day he [Christ] went into the synagogue, as was his custom. He stood up to read, and the scroll of the prophet Isaiah was handed to Him ...” (Luke 4:16-19). The gospel said that Jesus stood up to read the Word of God and after reading, He sat down. St. Luke further said, “the eyes of everyone in the synagogue were fastened on Him. He began by saying to them, today this Scripture is fulfilled in your hearing” (Lk 4:20-21). Jesus drew people’s attention by standing up and thus, became the focus of the people, and then proclaims the Word of Word. The Scriptures affirm that all in the Synagogue were amazed at the gracious words that came from His lips. Christ, in some way, affirms the use of the physical pulpit by standing up to read and preach the Gospel.

The physical pulpit is recognized by the Catholic Church as something sacred because of its relation to the Word of God.¹¹ The salvific mission of Christ is re-enacted on the pulpit. The sacredness of the physical pulpit in the sanctuary manifests the power and authority of the Word of God. St. Paul in his second letter to Timothy said to him, “Preach the word; be prepared in season and out of season; correct, rebuke, and encourage – with great patience and careful instruction” (2Tim 4:2). Thus, the pulpit should not be used for any other thing, other than a sermon, the preaching of God’s Word.

The growth in technology in the digital world brings about the idea of a virtual pulpit that augments the physical pulpit. In other words, the virtual pulpit emerged as another source through which the physical pulpit could take place. The situation the Church found herself in during the COVID-19 pandemic, by closing down all Churches with the intervention of the government, pushed the African Church, to more use of virtual pulpit unlike before. The urgent need to

¹⁰ MATTHEW C. McMAHON, “The Pastor and the Pulpit, Parts 1 and 2,” *A Puritans Mind*, accessed 5/10/22, <https://www.apuritansmind.com/pastors-study/the-pastor-and-the-pulpit-parts-1-and-2-by-dr-c-matthew-mcmahon/>.

¹¹ MICHAEL COOPER, “The Sacredness of the Pulpit,” accessed 5/10/22, <https://preachingsource.com/blog/the-sacredness-of-the-pulpit/>.

feed the flock during this period of COVID-19 was a big challenge to African Church, especially, Nigeria as a developing country.

3. Virtual Pulpit

According to *Webster's New World Telecom Dictionary*, the term virtual means "being in essence or effect, although not in reality."¹² In other words, it is not something physical but made by software to behave as if it were in some respect physical.¹³ It exists through technology as affirmed by Sherman and Craig.¹⁴ It is a kind of environmental space that can reflect the realities of actual physical activities. In effect, virtual is something real but not actual reality. The word virtual could also be said to be a kind of interactive medium that mediates the actual reality through another source. Principally, "every medium has a stage, a platform, where the work must be performed."¹⁵ The virtual medium could be Blog, Facebook page, YouTube videos, Twitter, and interactive website. The use of the word virtual is "an indication that an entity mimics the characteristics of another; in the context of a virtual world, any object in that world can be said to be virtual."¹⁶ In other words, the term virtual can be said of many things such as virtual world, virtual image, virtual reality, virtual memory, virtual environment, and virtual light. We can as well talk about the virtual pulpit as another source through which the proclamation of the Word of God could take place in the digital world to imitate and complement the physical pulpit.

Virtual pulpit as an internet-mediated medium could be used to convey the content of the Good News to a massive audience at the same time. The use of a virtual pulpit as a source of evangelization makes it easier to be connected and to form a faith community where the Word of God is to be communicated and shared with all humanity. The communications media such as virtual pulpit, "provide a providential to reach people everywhere, overcoming barriers of time,

¹² RAY HORAK, *Webster's New World Telecom Dictionary* (Indianapolis: Wiley Publishing Inc., 2008), 522.

¹³ PEARSALL, *The New Oxford Dictionary of English*, 2065.

¹⁴ WILLIAM R. SHERMAN AND ALAN B. CRAIG, *Understanding Virtual Reality: Interface, Application, and Design* (The Morgan Kaufmann Series in Computer Graphics: Morgan Kaufmann Publishers, 2019), 20.

¹⁵ SHERMAN AND CRAIG, *Understanding Virtual Reality*, 67.

¹⁶ SHERMAN AND CRAIG, *Understanding Virtual Reality*, 21.

of space, and language, presenting the content of faith in the most varied ways imaginable; and offering to all who search the possibility of entering into dialogue with the mystery of God, revealed fully in Christ Jesus.”¹⁷ It creates easy access from anywhere and saves time and space. The Gospel message delivered could be replayed at any time. What is interesting about the virtual pulpit is its capacity to get people engaged as if it were in physical reality.

The Church recognizes the greater need for the virtual pulpit in its mission of evangelization, to transmit the truth of the Gospel message to millions of people. Fundamentally, the Gospel of Christ preached by the Church is “addressed not only to the faithful but has universal dimensions.”¹⁸ Thus, the Church has the responsibility to preach the Gospel to all people of every race and religion. The media of social communication would be the fastest tool to reach many people without limits of time and space. Virtual pulpit makes it easier to engage the people who would not like to come to the Church or unbelievers, on matters concerning biblical, doctrinal, and theological discourses. It offers many people “new ways of encountering the Gospel truth, allowing Christians, living in very distant regions, to participate in the same solemn religious rites by which the whole Christian community feels united and through which all are invited to participate in the intimate life of the Church.”¹⁹ It transmits the Good News of salvation through connection and interaction. People can easily share and comment on the information received.

John Paul II, in his Apostolic Letter, *The Rapid Development*, affirms that if the opportunities provided by the internet-mediated media like virtual pulpit could be used with “the genius of faith and in docility to the light of the Holy Spirit, can facilitate the communication of the Gospel and render the bonds of communion among ecclesial communities more effectively.”²⁰ Furthermore, Pope Benedict XVI recognizes the virtual world as a fertile ground for the Church’s mission of evangelization. The Holy Father confirms that the “young people, in particular, have grasped the enormous capacity of the new media to foster connectedness, communication, and understanding between individuals and communities, and

¹⁷ JOHN PAUL II, RD, no. 5.

¹⁸ PONTIFICAL COMMISSION FOR SOCIAL COMMUNICATIONS, *Communio et Progressio* [hereafter CP], On the Instruments of Social Communication, May 23, 1971, no. 122.

¹⁹ PONTIFICAL COMMISSION FOR SOCIAL COMMUNICATIONS, CP, no. 128.

²⁰ JOHN PAUL II, RD, no. 6.

they are turning to them as means of communicating with existing friends, of meeting new friends, of forming communities and networks, of seeking information and news, and of sharing their ideas and opinions.”²¹ The quest for connection and communication is something natural to human beings, but the connection toward communion with God is beyond humans. Thus, the virtual pulpit becomes a medium to present God who is communicating and communion in the “digital continent” as described by Pope Benedict XVI. The fact that many of the youths are often found in cyberspace, means that “the proclamation of Christ in the world of new technologies requires a profound knowledge of this world if the technologies are to serve our mission adequately.”²²

The Church emphasizes much on the proper use of the media of social communication in the spreading of the Gospel message and warns against watering down the contents of the faith. The virtual pulpit is almost like the physical pulpit. Prudence needs to be applied to discern when best each can be used in the Church’s mission of evangelization in consideration of the developed areas like Europe and America and developing areas like Africa. In any case, the virtual pulpit should not in any way replace the physical pulpit because of its sacredness and purpose. It is rather creatively made to complement the physical pulpit in carrying out the salvific mission, to draw all humankind to Christ and bring Christ to all. Despite the odds of the virtual pulpit when used improperly, it is a powerful tool for proclaiming the Good News to the whole human family.²³

4. The Theological Evaluation of Virtual and Physical Pulpits

This section considers the theological signification of the two pulpits: virtual and physical and how these two sources communicate effectively the Word of God in such a way that we can participate fully in the divine communication, community, and communion of the Triune God. The idea of keeping in mind the

²¹ BENEDICT XVI, “New Technologies, New Relationships, Promoting a Culture of Respect, Dialogue and Friendship,” *The 43rd World Communication Day*, 24 May 2009, accessed 2/10/22, https://www.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/messages/communications/documents/hf_ben-xvi_mes_20090124_43rd-world-communications-day.html.

²² BENEDICT XVI, “New Technologies, New Relationships, Promoting a Culture of Respect, Dialogue and Friendship”

²³ PONTIFICAL COUNCIL FOR SOCIAL COMMUNICATION, *Ethics in Internet*, February 22, 2002, no. 1.

content of faith in the use of the two pulpits is very important because “the venue in which we experience the creation affects how we perceive it. We perceive a play very differently when viewed live within a group than when viewed alone in a small room. We have a very different experience when viewing an original painting in a gallery than when viewing it as a digital copy on a desktop workstation or a tiny screen on a smartphone.”²⁴ It would be a fundamental mistake to make a comparison between virtual and physical pulpits or even to consider the two pulpits as opposites. Both are two different sources of evangelization and should be used as such, putting into consideration the mission area.

The virtual pulpit is an extension of the physical pulpit, which means, it is embedded within it and not independent of itself. Thus, the physical and virtual pulpits are complementary means of evangelization. The immediate and direct proclamation of the Good News, which is through the physical pulpit cannot be replaced by the virtual pulpit, nor can it replace the real interpersonal faith community.²⁵ Although, the virtual pulpit attracts many people and provides the Church with a new means of communicating the Word of God to the online community.

The analogy of computer memory presented by William R. Shermann and Alan B. Craig will help us to understand the relationship between virtual and physical pulpits. Shermann and Craig state, “When a computer system requires more RAM (primary storage) than is available, memory is expanded virtually by the use of disk storage (secondary storage). The resultant, seemingly enlarged RAM capacity is referred to as virtual memory.”²⁶ In this sense, the Church sees the need to avail herself of the opportunities provided by the media of social communication through the use of virtual pulpit in spreading the Word of God to a larger audience in cyberspace. The question now is, how do these two pulpits achieve their purpose of communicating the Word of God to the faith community and moving them toward communion with God? These three key theological connections – communication, community, and communion²⁷ are attributes of the Holy Trinity that the two pulpits aim to accomplish.

²⁴ SHERMAN AND CRAIG, *Understanding Virtual Reality*, 68.

²⁵ PONTIFICAL COUNCIL FOR SOCIAL COMMUNICATION, *Church and Internet*, February 28, 2002, no. 5.

²⁶ SHERMAN AND CRAIG, *Understanding Virtual Reality: Interface, Application, and Design*, 6.

²⁷ ZSUPAN-JEROME, *Connected toward Communion: The Church and Social Communication in the Digital Age*, 47.

Christ the Word Incarnate, “shared with everyone the truth and the life of God.”²⁸ He reconciles man and God and laid the foundation of unity among humanity. In other words, the Trinitarian community of love expands to humanity through the Incarnate Word. In the prayer of Jesus, He says, “I pray not only for them but also for those who will believe in me through their word, so that they may all be one, as you, Father, are in me and I in you, that they also may be in us, that the world may believe that you sent me” (Jn 17:20-21). In this prayer, Christ expresses the theological signification of the gathering of the believers as a sign of the Trinitarian community of love. In effect the Word of God preached through virtual and physical pulpits should bring the people of God together as one family to share and experience the love of God communicated through Christ’s Incarnation.

The Pontifical Commission for Social Communication further explains that “Communication among men found its highest ideal and supreme example in God who had become Man and Brother. He ordered his disciples, always and everywhere, to spread the Good tiding.”²⁹ Christ made Himself a perfect communicator through His incarnation, life, passion, death, resurrection, and the sending of the Holy Spirit. Thus, the mission of Christ to communicate the Good News becomes a “Spirit-led task of the Church”³⁰ and integral in the life of the Church.

Theologically, communication is “a concept that invites us into the very mystery of God who is Father, Son, and Spirit in mutual and self-giving communication, and who communicates with humankind through the movement of revelation throughout history.”³¹ Christ, the Incarnate Word of God is being proclaimed at the pulpits. The Word that became flesh expresses the “invaluable mystery to our physicality, such that God chose to enter this physicality to invite us into an everlasting human-divine relationship that ultimately transcends it. Therefore, we cannot dismiss the body and what it means to be fully present to someone in the light of the body as a portal or icon to the divine.”³² This quotation recalls the purpose of the physical pulpit, that is, to proclaim the Good

²⁸ PONTIFICAL COMMISSION FOR SOCIAL COMMUNICATION, CP, no. 10.

²⁹ PONTIFICAL COMMISSION FOR SOCIAL COMMUNICATION, CP, no. 10.

³⁰ DANIELLA ZSUPAN-JEROME, *Connected toward Communion: The Church and Social Communication in the Digital Age* (Minnesota: Liturgical Press, 2014), 2.

³¹ ZSUPAN-JEROME, *Connected toward Communion: The Church and Social Communication in the Digital Age*, 2.

³² ZSUPAN-JEROME, *Connected toward Communion: The Church and Social Communication in the Digital Age*, 103.

News of Christ and its sacredness as that from which the Gospel message is proclaimed. In other words, physical pulpits remind us of the Word of God that became flesh and enters into communion with humankind for the nourishment of the soul. Therefore, in proclaiming the Good News in the digital continent, all are encouraged to keep alive the eternal perspective of heaven which no communications medium can ever directly communicate without the Holy Spirit.³³ At the same time, the Church recognizes the virtual pulpit as a gift of God, through which the ministers proclaim the Good News to the faith community in response to the signs of the time.

The theological reflection on the virtual pulpit is much more illustrated in *Communio et Progressio* which is the completion of *Inter Mirifica*. Thus, the theological vision of the virtual pulpit expresses the idea of human participation in the creative power of God. In other words, every human creativity is a gift from God, meaning that, it is something received from God. Everything we receive from God as a gift serves as a means to draw us back to God, the creator of all things. Therefore, the virtual pulpit is an act of human creativity which is “the human person’s capacity to be inventive and generative.”³⁴ Creativity is a natural gift of God to man as a rational being made in the image and likeness of God. This gift of God to humankind is for the service of God and humanity. In view of this, “technological innovation as an expression of God-given creativity frames social communication within the divine plan and invites humankind into it as coparticipants through our generativity.”³⁵ In response to the invitation of the Second Vatican Council Fathers, to use for apostolic purposes the opportunities availed by the media of social communication,³⁶ the Church adopts the virtual pulpit as a new means to proclaim the Good News in the digital world. Although not the same as the Church pulpit, it can confront people with the Good News and invites people to intimate communion with God.³⁷

According to Pope Paul VI, the question of “How to evangelize always remains current because the ways vary according to the circumstances of time,

³³ JOHN PAUL II, RD, no. 14.

³⁴ ZSUPAN-JEROME, *Connected toward Communion: The Church and Social Communication in the Digital Age*, 48.

³⁵ ZSUPAN-JEROME, *Connected toward Communion: The Church and Social Communication in the Digital Age*, 48.

³⁶ PONTIFICAL COMMISSION FOR SOCIAL COMMUNICATION, CP, no. 126.

³⁷ PONTIFICAL COMMISSION FOR SOCIAL COMMUNICATION, CP, no. 128.

place, culture, and therefore pose a certain challenge to our capacity for discovery and adaptation.”³⁸ It is always necessary to consider an integrated means that can provide community, communication, and communion. Considering the signs of the time in today’s digital world, the Church “finds a modern and effective version of the pulpit.”³⁹ The virtual pulpit makes it possible to spread the Good News to millions of people. Undoubtedly, the virtual pulpit is crucial in providing communication and building a larger community, but the challenge lies in the personal responsibility and commitment to communion with Christ. Therefore, the physical pulpit through which the Word of God and faith experience is transmitted should not be forgotten.⁴⁰ People are still needed to gather, and not only to share the Word of God but also to participate in the communion of love which is Christ’s offer of Himself in the Blessed Sacrament which cannot be virtually mediated. Thus, it is not enough to reach multitudes of people with the virtual pulpit. Both sources are essential to the mission of evangelization in the contemporary digital world where the majority are found both Christians and non-Christians since salvation is offered to all people.

In Africa, specifically Nigeria many Churches have availed themselves of the opportunity provided by Information Communication Technology (ICT) in the proclamation of the Good News. Before the advent of ICT, the “Church ministry was well managed with a strategy of Pastor-Member relationship. Church leaders used the pulpit, accurately in effectively relating with, managing, and leading their congregation. But today, there have been radical changes in the above strategy due to the unprecedented impact of ICT.”⁴¹ The real interpersonal relationship of African culture makes internet-mediated media difficult to be effectively adopted. Despite the huge opportunities provided by the media of social communication and its transformation, the use of the virtual pulpit has not yet been fully integrated as another source of evangelization. The adequate response to the call of the universal Church to adopt new ways in the proclamation of the Good News has been challenged by a lot of factors in the African Church, especially in Nigeria.

³⁸ PAUL VI, EN, no. 40.

³⁹ PAUL VI, EN, no. 45.

⁴⁰ PAUL VI, EN, no.46.

⁴¹ FRANCIS CHUKWUEBUKA OKOYE, “The Advantages, Challenges and Prospects of (ICT) in the Catholic Church in Nigeria,” *HubPages*, accessed 12/10/22, <https://discover.hubpages.com/education/the-advantages-challenges-and-prospects-of-ict-in-the-catholic-church-in-nigeria>.

5. The Challenges of the Virtual Pulpit in the African/Nigerian Church

The African Church in union with the universal Church is open to the needs of the Church to use the new media in the proclamation of the Good News. This openness to the signs of the time, in the use of virtual pulpit, has not been effectively integrated into the African Church, because of certain challenges, which this article limits to cultural, technological, and theological challenges.

5.1 Cultural Challenges

Africa is communal-oriented, as the African people like to gather together and fellowship together. Community life is one of the great values of Africa. Christopher Agulanna in expressing the views of Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle said that “community life is a sine qua non for human flourishing and individual wellbeing.”⁴² Every African person needs the warmth of the other. The community spirit of the Africans ensures their mutual survival, sense of caring, and ability to express compassion. The traditional African culture in some way understands the human person as a social being, meant to be with others. Africans have a philosophical concept called *Ubuntu* that demonstrates the African sense of communal life. According to Khoza, *Ubuntu* is “an African value system that means humanness.”⁴³ A human person in Africa is understood in relation to others. There is a strong relationship between an individual and the community. In effect, the common good becomes a priority in African culture. The good of the community is the concern of everybody – old and young. All join hands together to build a human community bonded in love and caring. In Africa, “Human achievement is possible only in the human environment or social setting.”⁴⁴ Agulanna further explains what it means to be in a community as people who are in personal contact, have concern for one another, are committed to the common good, share responsibility for joint actions, and value membership in the community as an end worth pursuing.⁴⁵ The system of communal living in Africa makes it easier

⁴² CHRISTOPHER AGULANNA, “Community and Human Well-Being in an African Culture,” *Trames*, Vol. 14, No. 3 (2010), 283, accessed 17/10/22, DOI: 10.3176/tr.2010.3.05.

⁴³ See NONCEBA NOLUNDI MABOVULA, “The Erosion of African Communal Values: A Reappraisal of the African Ubuntu Philosophy,” *Journal of Humanity & Social Sciences*, Vol. 3, No. 1 (2011), 40, accessed 18/10/22, DOI: 10.4314/jhss.v3i1.69506.

⁴⁴ AGULANNA, “Community and Human Well-Being in an African Culture,” 286.

⁴⁵ AGULANNA, “Community and Human Well-Being in an African Culture,” 287.

to form a sense of security and respect. In quoting the thoughts of J. S. Mbiti, Agulanna says that “In Africa, the individual does not and cannot exist alone except corporately (Mbiti 1969:108).”⁴⁶ This togetherness, solidarity, brotherhood, and mutual well-being is fundamentally expressed in the family, the domestic Church. The African Synod Fathers affirm that “The New Evangelization will thus aim in building up the Church as Family.”⁴⁷

The Church in Africa as a community of faith is not an exception to this life in common and solidarity. In other words, the faith community in Africa traditionally gathers for worship and the Word of God is proclaimed to them. This sense of communion with one another builds interpersonal relationships and strengthens the Christian community. “When missionaries approached African communities with Good News, their understanding and adaptation to those definitions and values affected how their message was received – or rejected.”⁴⁸ Adam Hailes, in narrating their missionary experience in Africa affirms that “In a culture where the community is essential, we can’t go out seeking random places to introduce the Gospel. We can’t show up on a doorstep and announce our arrival. We must intentionally develop relationships and seek invitations before we enter new communities. We must be special guests who offer something to strengthen the community. Following these efforts from the beginning, we have seen whole communities believe in Christ Jesus.”⁴⁹ The African missionary’s understanding of African traditional communal life and building of an interpersonal relationship with the community makes it easier for them to communicate the Gospel message. This approach gives us an insight into how best the virtual pulpit could be integrated into African Church to proclaim the Good News.

The virtual pulpit is embraced with caution in African Church since such could give room for an individualistic attitude which is contrary to the African communal life. Therefore, the use of a virtual pulpit as a new way of proclaiming the Gospel message should be guided by the Catholic Church in Africa, because

⁴⁶ AGULANNA, “Community and Human Well-Being in an African Culture,” 289.

⁴⁷ JOHN PAUL II, Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation, *Ecclesia in Africa* on the Church in Africa and its Evangelizing Mission towards the Year 2000, September 14, 1995, no. 63.

⁴⁸ ADAM HAILES, “3 Aspects of African Community that Shape Missionary Engagement,” published on March 31, 2017, accessed 17/10/22, <https://www.imb.org/2017/03/31/3-aspects-african-community/>.

⁴⁹ HAILES, “3 Aspects of African Community that Shape Missionary Engagement.”

of its negative influence on conscience and morality. It could render the faith community to lose their sense of commitment and responsibility in building up the Church.

5.2 Technological Challenges

Communication is part of human life. Every culture and religion have a specific means of communication. Africans have a traditional means of communication such as “various talking drums, the folk songs, drama, festivals, town criers, traditional wears, the artefacts, artworks, paintings, stories, and among others cultural architecture that reflects in the palaces, shrines, and African cities, towns, and villages.”⁵⁰ These different media systems enable the African people to organize and enhance African society, in such a way as to preserve cultural values and norms. Africans did not have a problem with the acceptance of mass communication media such as radio, television, printing books, cinema, and so on, because these media did not interrupt the traditional physical space or communal life of the Africans.

However, there are a lot of challenges in the face of an internet-mediated presence, which challenges the physical presence and endangers the African’s communal life. These challenges make it difficult for churches in Africa to respond effectively to the urgent need for virtual pulpit as a new way to the mission of evangelization. The adoption of a virtual pulpit in the proclamation of the Good News was challenging especially in Nigeria as a developing country. The use of virtual pulpit as an internet-mediated media involves huge financial resources in the training of personnel, purchasing of technological equipment, and maintenance of these expensive technological devices. Some of the devices require a constant power supply which we cannot boast particularly in Nigeria and Africa at large.

The outburst of the COVID-19 pandemic has had “a profound impact on how to organize the life of the Church at a time when traditional physical spaces are not available and social distancing rules the daily life.”⁵¹ During the time of

⁵⁰ SULAIMAN A. OSHO, “Oramedia – African Means of Communication in a Contemporary World,” *African Perspective*, accessed 18/10/22, <https://africanperspectivesblog.wordpress.com/2011/08/11/oramedia/>.

⁵¹ COOPER ET AL., “The reconfiguration of social, digital and physical presence: From online church to church online”, *HTS Teologiese Studies/ Theological Studies*, Vol. 77, No. 3 (2021), 1 of 9, accessed 18/10/22, <https://doi.org/10.4102/hts.v77i3.6286>.

the COVID-19 pandemic, some of the African Churches in the urban areas were able to use the virtual pulpit as a fruitful medium to proclaim the Good News since all Churches were locked down by the intervention of the government. But many Churches in rural areas were unable to use virtual pulpits because of a lack of personnel, poor interconnectivity, poor maintenance culture, insufficient communication infrastructure leading to congestion, and unreliable network.⁵²

5.3 Theological Challenges

The question of physical and mediated presence calls for theological rethinking on the meaning of the two pulpits: virtual and physical in the Church's mission to proclaim the Good News to all nations. The "Church is a space that creates meaningful places for individuals, communities, and societies engaged in diverse activities."⁵³ People feel a sense of humanness when they gather together to listen to the Word of God and worship in African Church. The faith community is more in touch with their life experiences. Christian theology affirms "face-to-face as a standard of ultimate communion with God."⁵⁴ This real presence refers to the beatific vision which is the end of human beings. It recalls the theological purpose of communication which is intimate communion with God. Jesus as a perfect communicator of the Word of God expressed the need for both face-to-face and mediated presence. Christ through His Incarnation "recalls the face-to-face dimension of ultimate communion with God."⁵⁵ On the other hand, after His resurrection, "the Risen Lord continues to be present in mediated ways, such as through the communal sacramental celebration of the Church."⁵⁶ In other words, Christ has demonstrated different ways of being present in the world. This presence of Christ among His people affirms the teaching of the Church on the media of social communication – concerning the use of different means to make the presence of Christ known and experienced in the world.

⁵² See FRANCIS CHUKWUEBUKA OKOYE, "The Advantages, Challenges and Prospects of (ICT) in the Catholic Church in Nigeria."

⁵³ COOPER ET AL, "The reconfiguration of social, digital and physical presence: From online church to church online", 1 of 9.

⁵⁴ ZSUPAN-JEROME, *Connected toward Communion*, 60.

⁵⁵ ZSUPAN-JEROME, *Connected toward Communion*, 60.

⁵⁶ ZSUPAN-JEROME, *Connected toward Communion*, 60.

The African culture is endowed with real human-to-human communication, for the sense of humanness. In African culture, the eye contact metaphor of communication expresses the heart-to-heart communication which permeates the mind. African people are more attentive when listening to the Word of God in face-to-face presence. The real presence “involves a high-fidelity connection that is not achieved by video or virtual reality avatars.”⁵⁷ The people are more present with the minister and the Gospel message permeates more. Unlike the mediated presence like a virtual pulpit, where one can easily be distracted, especially when one sits at home where other activities might be going on.

Theologically, connection moves communication toward communion. Now, the challenges lie, the first is the capacity of the virtual pulpit to move the faith community towards an intimate communion with God. Human beings are gifted with a natural desire to be united with God, a desire that moves the whole being. Such natural attraction towards God cannot be easily mediated by the virtual pulpit in the African Church, where African people are familiar with what it means to be in communion with the other.

The second theological challenge of the virtual pulpit is the capacity to sustain a reasonable concentration and attentive listening to the Word of God. The Catechism of the Catholic Church affirms that attentiveness in hearing the Word of God is “the obedience of faith, the unconditional acceptance of a servant, and the loving commitment of a child.”⁵⁸ Africans being very much at home with non-verbal communication understands the power of eye contact. Focusing eyes on the minister of the Word of God at the physical pulpit sustains the attentive capacity of the audience. It is easier for the minister of the Word of God to engage people through eye contact while proclaiming the Good News. Thus, the minister could easily read from the faces of the audience, when the people are losing concentration. The demand for certain responses from them could be a way to sustain their attentive capacity. In African Church, there is silence in every part of the Church during the readings and homily. Such a moment is regarded as a solemn and sacred moment to listen to the voice of God; thus, every movement is restricted except for a serious need. This sense of sacredness and

⁵⁷ COOPER ET AL., “The reconfiguration of social, digital and physical presence: From online church to church online”, 4 of 9.

⁵⁸ CATHOLIC CHURCH, *Catechism of the Catholic Church* [hereafter CCC], (Ireland: Veritas, 1994), no. 2716.

respect for the Word of God will be difficult to be mediated through the virtual pulpit in African Church.

The third challenge is the difficulty in contemplating the Word of God through a mediated presence. According to the Catechism of the Catholic Church, “Contemplation is a gaze of faith fixed on Jesus. ‘I look at him and he looks at me.’ This focus on Jesus is a renunciation of self.”⁵⁹ Thus, contemplation involves direct contact with the Word of God and it requires both physical and mental alertness.

6. Recommendations

The advent of internet-mediated media has had a great influence on the family, society, and Church. In other words, in employing the virtual pulpit in the evangelization mission of the Church, the Church in Africa need to do so with precautions. The provision of awareness programs and workshops for adequate training on the necessity of using the virtual pulpit in spreading the Gospel message and the right use of social media is essential. There is a greater need for a deep-rooted catechesis on the Scriptures and the Tradition of the Catholic Church, to help the faith community to discern the truth of the gospel. In a virtual world, anyone can be a minister of the Word of God, and it is open for all to listen both Catholics and non-Catholics. The theological signification of the physical pulpit as to the proclamation of the word of God, the re-enactment of the salvific mission of Christ, and the manifestation of the power and authority of God’s Word, should be strongly upheld. Notwithstanding, for the benefits of the virtual pulpit in the communication of the gospel message to a massive audience at the same time, easy connection, formation of a faith community, and saving time and space, the African Church should be open to the proper use of virtual pulpit.

The article, therefore, recommends the integration of the virtual in the African Church to augment the physical pulpit and not replace it. The physical and virtual pulpits should not be considered opposites, but rather, different sources of preaching the Good News. In effect, both pulpits should aim at communicating the Trinitarian communion of love to the faith community gathered as one family of God. Both means should communicate the gospel message in such a way that the integrity of the Gospel is maintained and the content of faith preserved.

⁵⁹ CCC, 2715.

7. Conclusion

The universal Church has the task of proclaiming the Good News of Christ to all nations and disposes herself of any fruitful opportunity the gift of human creativity offers. Today, the virtual world provides us with the virtual pulpit as another source of evangelization to a massive audience. Amid the digital world in flux, the fundamental mission of the Church to proclaim the Good News to the ends of the world remains the same Gospel of Christ. In other words, what varies is the means through which the Gospel message is carried out. Today, the Church engages in Christ's command to proclaim the Good News, not only with the physical pulpit but also with the virtual pulpit. Thus, the two pulpits: virtual and physical complement each other in the Church's mission of evangelization. The ontological foundation of the physical pulpit can help to make creative use of the virtual pulpit. In other words, it is not enough to gather a massive audience and preach the Word of God to them through a virtual pulpit without evoking the emotional desire for communion with God.