

Online Masses from a Post-Pandemic Perspective

*Leo-Martin Angelo R. Ocampo**

Center for Theology, Religious Studies and Ethics
University of Santo Tomas, Manila, Philippines

Abstract: At the height of the Covid-19 pandemic, online Masses served as an important pastoral tool that enabled the Catholic Church to provide spiritual sustenance to many of the faithful in the face of the lockdowns and restrictions imposed by the health crisis. At the same time, important questions surfaced regarding its validity as a form of liturgical participation and whether it provides actual spiritual benefit. With the continuing improvement in the global health situation and the transition from online Masses to in-person attendance, this study attempts to evaluate the experience of online Masses from a post-pandemic perspective and assess whether they ought to have a place in the liturgical new normal.

Keywords: online Masses, online religion, religious broadcast, Covid-19, new normal

* Leo-Martin Angelo R. Ocampo can be contacted at lrocampo@ust.edu.ph.

On the part of the Catholic Church, one of the areas where many dioceses, parishes, and faith communities have made significant investment and built considerable capacity during the pandemic is the transmission of liturgical celebrations, particularly the Eucharist, or the so-called “online Masses.” From amateur broadcasts using ordinary gadgets, many congregations have now acquired and installed professional equipment while at the same time capacitating their personnel and organizing a particular ministry for this purpose.

Aside from the vital role online Masses played as a means of sustaining the spiritual needs of believers during the pandemic, they have also become an important part of the spiritual life of many people who continue to patronize them even after the health restrictions have been eased. For instance, some are now able to hear Mass daily, albeit online, which was not possible prior to the pandemic when Masses were just televised on Sundays and major feast days like Christmas and regular livestreamed Masses were still a rarity. In addition, online Masses have enabled people to attend live celebrations broadcast from their own parish, as opposed to canned recordings from a studio, giving a greater sense of community.

Nevertheless, the Catholic Church appears to be ambivalent if not negative regarding its position on these online Masses.¹ On the one hand, it has acknowledged the positive contribution of these broadcasts, particularly in the context of the pandemic. This appreciation was explicit in the two successive Decrees issued by the then Congregation for Divine Worship and the Discipline of the Sacraments at the height of the lockdown.² The first, in time of Covid-19, that “in this occasion, the means of live (not recorded) televisual or internet broadcasts are helpful.”³ This was reiterated in another Decree six days later where it affirmed that the “Means of live (not recorded) telematic broadcasts can be of help.”⁴ Here in the Philippines, the Bishops Conference even enjoined dioceses to “provide for the celebration of the

¹ You may also want to refer to two earlier discussions by the same author: first, from a communication perspective, “Catholic Liturgical Teleparticipation Before and During the Pandemic, and Questions for the New Normal” *Religion and Social Communication* 19:1 (2021): 35-72; and second, from a theological perspective: “Cybergrace in Cyberspace: An Argument for Online Liturgies in Light of Covid-19” in *Landas* 33:2 (2019): 1-36.

² Referred to hereon with its updated name as the Dicastery for Divine Worship and the Discipline of the Sacraments.

³ Congregation for Divine Worship and the Discipline of the Sacraments, Decree *In time of Covid-19*, 19 March 2020, Vatican Archive, <http://www.cultodivino.va/content/cultodivino/it/documenti/decreti-general/decreti-general/2020/decreto-triduo-pasquale-2020.html> (accessed 2 May 2020).

⁴ Congregation for Divine Worship and the Discipline of the Sacraments, Decree *In time of Covid-19 (II)*, 25 March 2020, Vatican Archive, http://press.vatican.va/content/salastampa/it/bollettino/pubblico/2020/03/25/01_81/00409.html#en (accessed 2 May 2020).

Eucharist, other liturgical services and spiritual activities, transmitted live through the Internet, Television, or Radio” and to take advantage of the opportunity afforded by the crisis “to unite ourselves with one another in the bond of spiritual communion through the digital technology.”⁵ Thus, at the time when mass gatherings were prohibited, the people were still able to hear the Mass through the Internet.

On the other hand, even before the health crisis, Pope Francis himself has consistently refused to stream his daily Masses at the Domus Sanctae Marthae in order to protect the simplicity and spontaneity of the liturgy from cameras, which he considered an intrusion. It was only during the lockdown that he agreed to have them broadcast, but he had the transmissions stopped as soon as the health situation began to improve.⁶ On this occasion, the Pope, through his spokesperson, expressed his hope “that the People of God will thus be able to return to communal familiarity with the Lord in the sacraments, participating in the Sunday liturgy and resuming, also in churches, the daily attendance of the Lord and his word.” We can infer from this statement his implicit view of online liturgies as non-sacramental and non-liturgical; thus, the explicit call for a “return” to real sacrament and real liturgy.⁷

In a similar vein, then Prefect of the Dicastery, Cardinal Robert Sarah, with a mandate from Pope Francis, issued a document titled, *Let us return to the Eucharist with joy!* From the title itself, we likewise find the implication that despite their participation in online Masses, the faithful have been away from the Eucharist. Hence, this echo of the Pope’s earlier call to “return” to it as soon as possible. Underlining the communal dimension of liturgical celebration, he also warned against the danger of liturgical broadcasts when they are made to replace the liturgy, instead of remaining a mere stopgap or temporary solution. Opposing the terms “virtual” and “real” and associating “real” with “physical,” he said that:

As much as the means of communication perform a valued service to the sick and those who are unable to go to church and have performed a great service in the broadcast of Holy Mass at a time when there was no possibility of community celebrations, no broadcast is comparable to personal participation or can replace it.

⁵ Catholic Bishops Conference of the Philippines, *Circular on Public Health Emergency, Code Red Sub-level two* (Circular No. 20-14), March 13, 2020, <https://cbcponline.net/circular-20-14/> (accessed 2 May 2020).

⁶ Federico Lombardi, “Piazza Piena e Piazza vuota” in *Vatican News* 15 April 2020: <https://www.vaticannews.va/it/vaticano/news/2020-04/diario-crisi-piazza-piena-vuota-coronavirus-padre-lombardi-covid.html> (accessed 4 May 2020).

⁷ Elise Ann Allen, “Pope to stop livestreaming daily Mass amid Italy’s coronavirus recovery,” *CruX*, May 12, 2020, https://cruXnow.com/vatican/2020/05/pope-to-stop-livestreaming-daily-mass-amid-italys-coronavirus-recovery/?fbclid=IwAR1shhFiaW5AAP0reSVnJmCie_C5sJXGsPSoYakfIRVDe-P8jdVsDbeCR7M (accessed 20 May 2020).

On the contrary, these broadcasts alone risk distancing us from a personal and intimate encounter with the incarnate God who gave himself to us not in a virtual way, but really, saying: “He who eats my flesh and drinks my blood remains in me and I in him” (Jn 6:56). This physical contact with the Lord is vital, indispensable, irreplaceable.⁸

The Catholic Bishops’ Conference of the Philippines would also echo this call to “return” to onsite participation, particularly in Sunday Masses, in their letter addressed to the bishops and diocesan administrators on 14 October 2022. It directly quotes the Dicastery, pointing out that the present circumstances now allow the faithful “to return to the normality of Christian life, which has the Church building as its home and the celebration of the liturgy, especially the Eucharist, as ‘the summit toward which the activity of the Church is directed, at the same time it is the font from which all her power flows’ (SC, 10).”⁹ It would even narrate how “the painful and sad experience of the deprivation of our faithful of the sacramental experience has enabled us to discover anew the necessity of the liturgical life of the Church” Thus, it would “strongly encourage” the resumption of in-person participation in Sunday Masses and call for a reassessment of the need for and frequency of online livestreaming of Eucharistic celebrations, quoting the same document. Additionally, it called for catechesis in homilies and other avenues “on the necessity of our faithful to return to our churches for the Sunday Eucharist.”

In the Archdiocese of Manila, Cardinal Jose Advincula reiterated the salient points of the Dicastery and CBCP Documents in a circular issued on 16 March 2023, joining the call for a “return” to onsite participation and reevaluation of the frequency of livestreaming the Eucharist.¹⁰ Other local bishops followed, including Imus bishop, Reynaldo Evangelista¹¹ and Cubao bishop, Honesto Ongtioco, who lifted the dispensation of the faithful from the Sunday precept and ordered the regulation of livestreamed Masses, which, according to him, “must serve as an aid only for those

⁸ Congregation for Divine Worship and the Discipline of the Sacraments, Letter on the celebration of the liturgy during and after the COVID 19 pandemic to the Presidents of the Episcopal Conferences of the Catholic Church, *Let Us Return to the Eucharist With Joy*, 15 August 2020, <https://www.catholicnewsagency.com/news/full-text-cardinal-robert-sarah---let-us-return-to-the-eucharist-with-joy-58368> (accessed 20 September 2020).

⁹ Catholic Bishops’ Conference of the Philippines, *Circular Encouraging Faithful to Return to Sunday Masses in Churches* (Circular No. 22-36), October 14, 2022, <https://cbcpnews.net/cbcpnews/cbcp-circular-encouraging-the-faithful-to-return-to-sunday-masses-in-churches/> (accessed 2 May 2023).

¹⁰ Jose Advincula, *Circular on the Obligation of the Faithful to Participate in the Sunday Eucharist* (Circular No. 2023-29), March 16, 2023, <https://rcam.org/on-the-obligation-of-the-faithful-to-participate-in-the-sunday-eucharist/> (accessed 2 May 2023).

¹¹ Reynaldo Evangelista, *Circular on the Return to Active Participation in Eucharistic Celebrations* (Circular No. 8-2023), March 20, 2023.

whose physical participation in the celebration of the liturgy is impeded due to serious medical conditions.”¹² The same is true of bishops in other parts of the world, with some lifting the dispensation as early as 2021.

Noticeably, however, the bishops did not lift the dispensation all at the same time, nor have all bishops already done so. In an April 3, 2023 interview, the Diocese of Novaliches expressed its hesitation to do so, as “it is still thinking if it should lift the dispensation at the risk of discriminating those still affected by the pandemic.”¹³ As of the time of writing, the most recent lifting of the dispensation was issued by Malolos bishop, Dennis Villarojo, due to take effect on June 11, 2023 when “except for those sick and have serious reasons, all Catholics are expected to perform their obligations to physically attend Masses in churches.”¹⁴ Nonetheless, even in the dioceses where the dispensation has been lifted, such as those mentioned above, many of the parishes continue to livestream their Masses, albeit some with reduced frequency.

In response to the call of the bishops to reexamine the need for and frequency of doing online transmissions of Eucharistic celebrations, we ask, do we want online Masses to continue as a “meaningful and lasting change” even after the pandemic, or is it something that should cease together with the lockdowns? And if it is something that we want to continue, what kind of place should it occupy in our “new normal”?

Objections to Liturgical Transmissions

Interestingly, the objection if not aversion to transmitting liturgical celebrations can be traced as far back as the beginnings of television technology. In 1963, Karl Rahner wrote an article titled “The Mass and Television” where he objects to televising the Eucharist on certain grounds. He posits that the Mass, in its utmost sacrality, rightfully belongs to what he terms as the “zone of personal intimacy” which then requires a corresponding modesty that should prohibit its being exposed to others who do not belong to the circle of the Church. In support of this, he invokes the Church’s ancient tradition of “*disciplina arcani*” where the sacred is carefully reserved and guarded from outsiders. He also quotes Saint Thomas Aquinas who said that an unbaptized person is not allowed to see the Eucharist; a danger incurred by broadcasts which, by their “broad” nature, are available to a wide and indiscriminate audience. Therefore, Rahner says, “a television transmission offends

¹² Honesto Ongtioco, *Circular on the Lifting of the Suspension of Sunday Obligation* (Circular No. 002-2023), March 31, 2023.

¹³ Gerard Naval, “In-church Masses resume in Cubao diocese,” *Malaya*, 3 April 2023, https://malaya.com.ph/news_news/in-church-masses-resume-in-cubao-diocese/ (accessed 2 May 2023).

¹⁴ Dennis Villarojo, *Circular on the Lifting of the Suspension of Sunday Obligation* (Circular No. 002-2023), March 31, 2023.

against the commandment that our most intimate acts, and that which is holy, are to be made accessible to another only in the measure to which he is able and willing to participate in them with a personal response; while he who is showing these acts and this holy thing must retain throughout free control over the showing of them.”¹⁵

As for televising liturgies for the benefit of believers like those who would like to partake in large and special liturgical celebrations but could not physically do so, or of the sick who cannot go to Mass, Rahner suggests a limited coverage “without the television camera’s being allowed access to what is only permitted to the adoring gaze of the faithful” i.e., the Eucharist itself, even adding that “television has to be proved legitimate first before any use can be made of this particular advantage.”¹⁶ Despite such objections, however, televised Masses - at least on Sundays and major feast days - would eventually become common, particularly for the benefit of those who could not attend the Eucharist on these days of precept. Other important liturgical celebrations such as major papal liturgies would also be broadcast to allow the participation of those who could not be present at the physical venue.

Compared with television, current livestreaming technology has amplified the availability and accessibility of liturgical celebrations, aside from improving their sacral and communal aspect. Whereas before, Masses had to be filmed in studios and canned in advance, online Masses can now be done almost in real time - with only a few seconds lag - and from a real church or chapel more worthy of the dignity of the liturgical celebration. Many communities are also able to do their own livestreams, even though with varying levels of quality, enabling people to participate in “online Masses” with a priest and people from their own community, as opposed to joining in a telecast celebrated in a studio with a priest they do not know and people they have never met.

At the same time, online Masses have also magnified the risks pointed out by Rahner in his concern regarding televised Masses. Due to their availability and accessibility, online Masses can be viewed by practically anybody, including those who do not necessarily have any reverence for the sacred rites. In fact, even believers need to be reminded to observe “online Mass etiquette” and avoid disrespecting or trivializing the liturgy. For instance, a Pastoral Instruction issued by the Archdiocese of Manila during the pandemic even mentioned, perhaps in jest, that the faithful should not view these online Masses with a cup of coffee in hand.¹⁷ With television,

¹⁵ Karl Rahner, “The Mass and Television” in *The Christian Commitment: Essays in Pastoral Theology* (New York: Sheed and Ward, 1963), 215.

¹⁶ Rahner, “The Mass and Television,” 216.

¹⁷ Interestingly, this Pastoral Instruction was released, also on video format and uploaded to YouTube: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=N9AmPcflJg4>. A few other examples include “Going

viewers are only able to view one channel at a given time, while the “picture-in-picture” feature of most gadgets allow people to browse other materials while watching the Mass. Even from the presiders’ end, there were also notable abuses such as livestreaming the Mass from their rooms, at times even with the bed visible in the background.

We also have the phenomenon, now dubbed as “mass-hopping,” where believers shift from one online Mass channel to the other, or even from one online Mass to the next, with some going as far as subjecting the online Masses to reviews and even bashing.¹⁸ Thomas O’Loughlin likened this phenomenon to a kind of online shopping that promotes individualism, transactionalism, and even consumerism, as people look around the web for the kind of liturgy that suits them.¹⁹ In this manner, the Mass can be treated just like any other online content, without the respect demanded by its sacred nature.

Aside from the need to respect and protect the sanctity of the liturgy, there is the concern to uphold and maintain its communal nature. The word “liturgy,” from the Greek “λειτουργία” literally means “public service.” The Vatican II Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy discourages the celebration of Masses without the faithful and instructs that “rites, which are meant to be celebrated in common with the faithful present and actively participating, should as far as possible be celebrated in that way rather than by an individual and quasi-privately.”²⁰ Certainly chief among these rites “meant to be celebrated in common” is the Eucharist, which John Paul II described as “the sacrament and source of the Church’s unity.”²¹ When treated similarly to

to Mass Online: 6 Tips” from the Opus Dei website, <https://opusdei.org/en/article/advice-follow-mass-online/> and “Prayerful Participation in an Online Mass” from the McGrath Institute for Church Life, <https://mcgrathblog.nd.edu/prayerful-participation-in-an-online-mass> (accessed 31 May 2023).

¹⁸ See for instance Rory Carroll, “Mass hoppers’ giving us anxiety, say Irish priests” in *The Guardian*, 10 November 2020, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/nov/10/ireland-catholic-priests-online-mass-reviews-causing-performance-anxiety> (accessed 31 May 2023) and Michelle McGlyn, “Priests upset by virtual ‘mass-hopping’ and reviews of online masses” in *The Irish Examiner*, 10 November 2020, <https://www.irishexaminer.com/news/arid-40079282.html> (accessed 31 May 2023).

¹⁹ Thomas O’Loughlin, “We are celebrants, not consumers: COVID-19 and the reappearance of transactionalism in Catholic liturgy,” Association of Catholic Priests, 19 May 2020, <https://associationofcatholicpriests.ie/we-are-celebrants-not-consumers/> (accessed 31 May 2023).

²⁰ Second Vatican Council, Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy *Sacrosanctum Concilium* (SC), 4 December 1963, Vatican Archive, https://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_const_19631204_sacrosanctum-concilium_en.html (accessed 31 May 2023), 27. Emphasis added.

²¹ John Paul II, General Audience, 8 November 2000, Vatican Archive, https://www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/audiences/2000/documents/hf_jp-ii_aud_20001108.html (accessed 31 May 2023).

other web content that one avails on one's personal gadget, online Masses can end up compromising the public nature of the liturgy, which is then reduced to a mere commodity for private consumption. Furthermore, when online Masses are made to substitute for in-person participation, it will end up cutting off believers from the liturgical assembly instead of connecting them. As the Dicastery document said, "We cannot be without the Christian community, the family of the Lord: we need to meet our brothers and sisters..."²²

Indeed, the present objection of the Church may be said to include not only online Masses but all liturgical broadcasts in general, including those transmitted through television and radio, for the same reasons. Illustrative of this is the suggestion in Canon Law that "if participation in the eucharistic celebration becomes impossible because of the absence of a sacred minister or for another grave cause, it is strongly recommended that the faithful take part in a liturgy of the word if such a liturgy is celebrated in a parish church or other sacred place according to the prescripts of the diocesan bishop or that they devote themselves to prayer for a suitable time alone, as a family, or, as the occasion permits, in groups of families."²³ As such, even the TV Masses that were being aired prior to the pandemic were never endorsed by the Church as substitutes for liturgical participation. In the Catholic tradition, there are many forms of prayer but the celebration of the Eucharist is considered the highest of them all, the "source and summit" of Christian life.²⁴ To equate any other form of prayer with the Mass and receiving Holy Communion is dangerous, as seen for instance in this kind of statement that seems to ignore all differences:

I believe that Jesus cannot be confined in a structure or any place. God is present everywhere, especially in the heart of a believer. We can experience God anywhere, including the place we least expect God to be — like the virtual space! And we can experience God any time, if we focus our hearts and minds and listen to God's words, and receive Jesus — conscious of His loving presence wherever we are. It is how we value our relationship with God through the sacrament that matters most, whether we participate virtually or are physically present at Mass.

When we love, we give time, we make an effort, and we focus on the one we love. We can be in our own homes but still feel the connection

²² Congregation for Divine Worship and the Discipline of the Sacraments, *Let Us Return to the Eucharist With Joy*.

²³ Canon 1248, §2.

²⁴ *Sacrosanctum Concilium*, 10.

with God and our fellow believers through virtual worship. Likewise, we can be physically present at the Mass — but our mind and heart may be in a different place.

Whatever means we have to worship and celebrate the Mass, we must recognize that Christ is always making himself present to us, his real presence.²⁵

We find a similar statement in O’Hanlon who also makes light use of the technical term “real presence” to refer to the presence of the Divine in cyberspace, saying that “the presence of God-in-Jesus is as real in these new online chapels as in any sacrament, as in any church, as in any tabernacle.”²⁶ Such an extreme and unnuanced position is what the Church is precisely trying to avoid in case online Masses continue to become widespread and common after the pandemic. These kinds of statements are clearly unacceptable and incompatible with the faith of the Church, which maintains that Jesus Christ is uniquely present in the Eucharist. As the Catechism says: “This presence is called ‘real’ - by which is not intended to exclude the other types of presence as if they could not be ‘real’ too, but because it is presence in the fullest sense: that is to say, it is a substantial presence by which Christ, God and man, makes himself wholly and entirely present.”²⁷ However, while there is clearly no question of equating online Masses with onsite Masses or substituting the latter with the former, is it possible for people to encounter the Lord and the community of the Church in online Masses in a way that is “real’ too,” even if not “as real”?

Some Openings for Liturgical Transmissions?

With the rapid development of digital technology, the Church’s view of the Internet has also been evolving, even if not as regards the specific question of liturgical celebrations. The Pope himself said in his preface to the book, *La Chiesa nel Digitale*: “We know that virtual reality will never replace the beauty of face-to-face encounters. But the digital world is inhabited and must be inhabited by Christians.”²⁸ If Christians are called to inhabit the digital world, and Christians cannot be without the Eucharist, should they not bring the Eucharist with them to this new space? Is it possible to have *La Chiesa nel Digitale* without *La Messa nel Digitale*?

²⁵ Jennibeth Sabay, “Virtual Mass as the real presence of Christ amid pandemic,” *Global Sisters Report*, 13 January 2021, <https://www.globalsistersreport.org/spirituality/virtual-mass-real-presence-christ-amid-pandemic> (accessed 18 May 2023).

²⁶ O’Hanlon, “A Chapel of the Mind and Spirit,” p. 16. Emphasis added.

²⁷ CCC 1374.

²⁸ Fabio Bolzetta, ed., *La Chiesa nel Digitale* (Umbria: Tau Editrice, 2022), 13-14.

With Web 4.0 already upon us, we are now witnessing an ever-increasing compenetration of virtual and physical reality. According to the Digital 2022 Report, global internet penetration has now reached 62.5% while global social media penetration is already at 58.4%. Meanwhile, the average internet use worldwide is already at 6 hours and 58 mins. The report notes: “for context, if we assume that the average person sleeps for roughly 7 to 8 hours per day, the typical internet user now spends more than 40 percent of their waking life online.”²⁹ In countries with heavy Internet usage such as the Philippines, which ranks second in the world in terms of Internet use, this figure even goes up to more than ten hours a day, which translates to more than half of an average person’s waking time.

As early as 2015, Gould already pointed out a growing fusion of online and offline in the religious sphere and suggested avoiding a sharp distinction between the two.³⁰ Pope Francis himself said in 2019 that “today’s media environment is so pervasive as to be indistinguishable from the sphere of everyday life.”³¹ Less than a decade after his statement, we now have the Internet of Things (IoT), Artificial Intelligence, and other fast emerging digital technologies that are quickly becoming a normal part of day-to-day life. In fact, some have coined the term POPC or “permanently online, permanently connected” to describe the experience of most people today. This fusion of online and offline was even more acutely felt during and after the pandemic, when many ordinary activities such as education, shopping, banking, transport, etc. had to shift online and still continue to operate online today, long after the lockdowns have been eased.

A recent Vatican document issued by the Dicastery on Communication adopts a very open stance towards the digital world. The title itself, *Towards Full Presence*, appears to acknowledge the reality of “online presence,” even if in a limited way, asserting that today “the question is no longer whether to engage with the digital world, but how.”³² It even acknowledged the reality of online presence in the context of a liturgical transmission in reference to the *Statio Orbis* celebrated by Pope Francis at the height of the pandemic. Describing Saint Peter’s Square during the event as

²⁹ Hootsuite and WeAreSocial, *Digital 2022 Report*, <https://wearesocial.com/uk/blog/2022/01/digital-2022-another-year-of-bumper-growth-2/> (accessed 31 May 2023).

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

³¹ Francis, *Message for the 53rd World Communications Day*, 24 January 2019, Vatican Archive, https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/messages/communications/documents/papa-francesco_20190124_messaggio-comunicazioni-sociali.html (accessed 1 June 2023).

³² Dicastery for Communication, *Towards Full Presence: A Pastoral Reflection on Engagement with Social Media*, 28 May 2023, Vatican Archive, https://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/dpc/documents/20230528_dpc-verso-piena-presenza_en.html?fbclid=IwAR2Wt1bqu5xKQE3uVfKpq6eoNB0l7j3ZGUQqTIV224hkz4aOHShcbJC4ySc (accessed 1 June 2023), 1.

“empty but full of presence,”³³ it went on to note that “though physically distant from each other, those who joined the Pope in that hour were present to one another and could experience a moment of unity and communion.”³⁴ In support of this, it recalled that the broadcast was followed live by more than sixteen million viewers in the official channels of Vatican News in YouTube and Facebook - excluding other channels and later views of the recording - and even generated 200,000 new followers for the Pope’s Instagram, @Franciscus, on the same night.³⁵

Moreover, the document asserts that “digital media allows people to meet beyond the boundaries of space and cultures. Even though these digital encounters may not necessarily bring physical closeness, they can be nonetheless meaningful, impactful, and real.”³⁶ This explicit acknowledgement of a real albeit non-physical mode of digital encounter opens the way for reevaluating previous statements written years ago when our experience as well as understanding of the digital world was much different from what we have now. For instance, the 2002 document, *The Church and Internet*, said that “There are no sacraments on the Internet; and even the religious experiences possible there by the grace of God are insufficient apart from real-world interaction with other persons of faith.”³⁷ Realizing now that real albeit non-physical personal encounter is also possible in the Internet may likewise lead to revisiting the first part of the statement, with its hardline stance on online religious experiences and even on sacraments in the Internet.

Considering the Internet or not as a real, even if non-physical, space is crucial in this issue. The same is true in other areas like law, where acknowledging the Internet as space is necessary to enable the legal acknowledgement of any acts that take place there. In some of its paragraphs, the document, *Towards Full Presence*, makes this kind of affirmation, as when it says that “these platforms can evolve to become co-created spaces, not just something that we passively use. Young people – as well as older generations – are asking to be met where they are, including on social media, because the digital world is ‘a significant part of young people’s identity and way of life.’”³⁸ Here it recognizes the reality of the Internet not merely as tool but as space

³³ Dicastery for Communication, *Towards Full Presence*, 4. Prior to the document, Vatican spokesperson, Fr. Federico Lombardi already made the same description of the event. Cf. Federico Lombardi, “Piazza Piena e Piazza vuota” in *Vatican News* 15 April 2020: <https://www.vaticannews.va/it/vaticano/news/2020-04/diario-crisi-piazza-piena-vuota-coronavirus-padre-lombardi-covid.html> (accessed 4 May 2020).

³⁴ Dicastery for Communication, *Towards Full Presence*, 4.

³⁵ Dicastery for Communication, *Towards Full Presence*, Footnote 6.

³⁶ Dicastery for Communication, *Towards Full Presence*, 48. Emphasis added.

³⁷ Pontifical Council for Social Communication, *The Church and Internet*, 22 February 2002, Vatican Archive, http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/pontifical_councils/pccs/documents/rc_pc_pccs_doc_20020228_church-internet_en.html (accessed 4 May 2020), no. 9. Emphasis added.

³⁸ Dicastery for Communication, *Towards Full Presence*, 1.

which allows real human presence, encounter and connection to take place - perhaps including divine presence, encounter and connection. It even goes on to describe the web as “a space not only for connections but ultimately for relationships.”³⁹ Even more radically, the document uses the neologism “onlife,” a term that refers to the reality of people today, marked by the compenetration of online and offline:

In the increasingly onlife reality of today’s world, it is necessary to overcome an “either-or” logic, which thinks of human relationships within a dichotomous logic (digital vs. real-physical-in person), and assume a “both-and” logic, based on the complementarity and wholeness of human and social life. Community relations on social media networks should strengthen local communities and vice versa. “The use of the social web is complementary to an encounter in the flesh that comes alive through the body, heart, eyes, gaze, and breath of the other. If the Net is used as an extension or expectation of such an encounter, then the network concept is not betrayed and remains a resource for communion.” “The digital world can be an environment rich in humanity; a network not of wires but of people,” if we remember that on the other side of the screen there are no “numbers” or mere “aggregates of individuals”, but people who have stories, dreams, expectations, sufferings. There is a name and a face.⁴⁰

Surprisingly, however, the document takes on a very different tone when it comes to the discussion of liturgical broadcasts. For instance, while it advocates complementarity in the above paragraph between community relations and human encounter online and offline, it appears to be rather hesitant in imagining a corresponding complementarity when it comes to sacramental life, saying that: “During the most severe moments of lockdown during the pandemic, the broadcasting of liturgical celebrations via social media and other means of communication offered some comfort to those who could not participate in person. However, there is still much to reflect on in our faith communities about how to take advantage of the digital environment in a way that complements sacramental life.”⁴¹

This is in contrast with the testimony of some believers who say that they have experienced more than just “some comfort” from online Masses during the pandemic. A Catholic from England describes her experience: “‘Participating’ is the remarkable word here, for this is precisely how it felt, despite the real spiritual and

³⁹ Dicastery for Communication, *Towards Full Presence*, 44.

⁴⁰ Dicastery for Communication, *Towards Full Presence*, 47.

⁴¹ Dicastery for Communication, *Towards Full Presence*, 59.

sensory deprivation of not being physically present.”⁴² There are in fact some who argue that participation in online Masses can be considered as a real even if distinct form of participation. For context, White recalls that “in the 14th century ... few would receive the Eucharist weekly but would ‘receive’ the Eucharist through ocular communion,” meaning, “they would gaze upon the host, often with accompanying prayers. This was understood as a ‘real’ albeit spiritual communion.”⁴³

While going back to such practice despite the subsequent development of Eucharistic, sacramental and liturgical theology, especially in light of Vatican II’s call for active participation, would be very anachronistic, it may still be good to highlight that participation in the liturgy occurs in different levels and cannot be confined to being physically present or involved. This is reflected in the latitude provided for in ecclesiastical law for the administration of the sacraments under certain conditions where participation is limited or even impossible. For example, Canon Law provides for other means to obtain reconciliation with God in cases where there is physical or moral impossibility of going to confession.⁴⁴ We see this, for example, in cases where it is impossible to have auricular confession due to the physical condition of the penitent, e.g., when the penitent is already unconscious, where the Sacrament of Anointing at the same time obtains the forgiveness of sins.⁴⁵ Canon 1005 even stipulates that the Sacrament of the Sick “is to be administered in a case of doubt whether the sick person has attained the use of reason, is dangerously ill, or is dead.” As such, although a person may be unconscious, for as long as there can be reasonable doubt that the person is still alive, even though unconscious and obviously unable to participate, the sacrament is still to be administered. Even more radically, Canon Law allows the celebration of marriage by proxy, in cases of necessity.⁴⁶ It also acknowledges the validity of baptism by desire even without its actual celebration.⁴⁷ Interestingly, even Aquinas entertains the possibility of receiving the effects of holy communion by desire, although he makes a clear distinction between actual communion (“sacramental eating”) and spiritual communion (“eat[ing] this sacrament spiritually”):

the effect of the sacrament can be secured by every [person] if [he or she] receive it in desire, though not in reality. Consequently, just as some are baptized with the Baptism of desire, through their

⁴² Hilary Davies, “Masses in Mind,” *The Tablet*, 6 June 2020, p. 6. Emphasis added.

⁴³ Christopher White, “The Validity of Virtual Mass is Questioned,” *The Tablet*, 6 May 2020, <https://thetablet.org/the-validity-of-virtual-mass-is-questioned/> (accessed 31 May 2023).

⁴⁴ See Canon 960.

⁴⁵ See CCC 1532.

⁴⁶ See Canon 1105 §1.

⁴⁷ See Canon 849.

desire of baptism, before being baptized in the Baptism of water; so likewise some eat this sacrament spiritually ere they receive it sacramentally.... Nevertheless sacramental eating is not without avail, because the actual receiving of the sacrament produces more fully the effect of the sacrament than does the desire thereof, as stated above of Baptism.⁴⁸

Teresa Berger, a professor of Liturgical Studies at Yale Divinity School, argues that “being present in a brick-and-mortar sanctuary for Mass also does not guarantee active participation... one might, after all, merely be breathing the same air as the congregation, while one’s heart and mind are somewhere totally different.”⁴⁹ Physical presence does not always translate to quality presence. Conversely, we wonder whether one can prayerfully unite oneself with a Eucharist, being celebrated in another physical location, but to which one is virtually connected through a live transmission? We experience this possibility already in other aspects of life nowadays, such as in online classes or conferences, which we consider real also even if limited in comparison to their onsite equivalent. After all, is not Holy Spirit himself believed to have initiated something very similar to this a few centuries ago for Saint Clare of Assisi, which enabled her to join remotely in a Christmas Mass, “as if she was present in person”?⁵⁰

Berger further opines that, “people entering into an online Mass in faith and devotion participate in that Mass, even if the specifics of their bodily participation differ from offline liturgical participation in a brick-and-mortar sanctuary.” In an online Mass, the participants also take part in their bodies, allowing themselves to be engaged through their senses by the liturgy even if in a relatively much limited way compared to onsite. In fact, the term “in-person” that is sometimes used today to refer to onsite is philosophically questionable since those engaged online are undeniably persons and always engage there as such, and not necessarily less so than when they are onsite. Can this kind of participation be disregarded? After all, the Catechism of the Catholic Church itself clearly declares that “it is the whole community, the Body of Christ united with its Head, that celebrates”⁵¹ in every liturgical act. In other words, the whole Catholic Church - including all her individual members - is present at every liturgy and partakes in it, even with neither physical nor virtual participation

⁴⁸ Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, trans. Fathers of the English Dominican Province, Pars III, Q. 80, A. 1, ad. 3.

⁴⁹ White, “The Validity of Virtual Mass is Questioned.”

⁵⁰ “comme si elle était présente en personne” See Pius XII, *Lettre Apostolique Proclamant Ste. Claire Patronne Céleste de la Télévision*, 14 February 1957, Vatican Archive, https://w2.vatican.va/content/pius-xii/fr/apost_letters/documents/hf_p-xii_apl_21081958_st-claire.html (accessed 4 May 2020).

⁵¹ CCC 1140.

for that matter. In this regard, what we mean exactly by liturgical participation, both in its theological and practical sense, has to be elucidated and elaborated more clearly and in an official capacity by the Church in the future.

Online Masses in the New Normal?

Notwithstanding the positive experience of online Masses during the Covid-19 pandemic, the Church today remains firm in her stand about online liturgies. Even the recent document, *Towards Full Presence*, which is otherwise mostly positive about the digital world, states with words that seem even stronger than the 2002 document, *Church and Internet*: “our relationship with God must also be nourished through prayer and the sacramental life of the Church, which because of their essence can never be reduced simply to the ‘digital’ realm.”⁵² Invoking the philosophical category of essence, it thus implies that the reason why prayer and the sacraments cannot be brought to the digital realm is something that touches upon their very nature, and thus unlikely to change even in the remote future. Elsewhere in the document, it expounds:

One cannot share a meal through a screen. All our senses are engaged when we share a meal: taste and smell, glances that contemplate the faces of the diners, listening to the conversations at table. Sharing a meal at table is our first education in attention to others, a fostering of relationships among family members, neighbours, friends, and colleagues. Likewise, we participate with the whole person at the altar: mind, spirit, and body are involved. The liturgy is a sensory experience; we enter into the Eucharistic mystery through the doors of the senses that are awakened and fed in their need for beauty, meaning, harmony, vision, interaction and emotion. Above all, the Eucharist is not something that we can just “watch”; it is something that truly nourishes us.⁵³

In his Preface to the book, *La Chiesa Nel Digitale*, the Pope expresses the same sentiment, describing the experience of online Masses during the pandemic as an “exceptional phase” in the life of the Church and thereby something which is not to be eventually normalized. He likewise emphasizes the importance of physical encounter, which according to him cannot be replaced by technology or digital networks:

⁵² Dicastery for Communication, *Towards Full Presence*, 24.

⁵³ Dicastery for Communication, *Towards Full Presence*, 61.

This phase was certainly exceptional especially as regards the experience of online broadcasting of the celebrations. The virtual encounter does not and can never replace the one in person. Being physically present at the breaking of the Eucharistic bread and the bread of charity, looking into each other's eyes, embracing, being next to each other in serving Jesus in the poor, shaking hands with the sick, are experiences that belong to our daily life and no technology or social network can ever replace them.⁵⁴

This notwithstanding, many parishes and communities still continue with the livestreaming of Masses which have spontaneously replaced televised Masses in many places, as television itself has been replaced by livestreaming. At the same time, many of the faithful continue to patronize these online Masses after the pandemic. This current situation may be a cause of alarm especially if the faithful are having recourse to the online Masses as regular replacements for Sunday Mass, the onsite attendance of which is a matter of precept. In this regard, there is a need to conduct a quantitative study to determine and establish if there are such abuses so that corresponding steps may be taken in order to address them.

Clearly, Online Masses cannot be equated to Onsite Masses where participation is fuller, especially with the reception of Holy Communion. Hence, the Church is very firm in this regard and rightly insists on a return to onsite participation in the liturgy where this is already possible. Nonetheless, attending online Masses does not necessarily equate to substituting them altogether for onsite Masses. One may, for instance, attend them only on weekdays or on Sundays when attending Mass onsite is impossible due to illness or duty. In fact, a 2023 survey conducted in the Philippines sees an actual rise, even if only by 1%, in current Mass attendance compared to 2013.⁵⁵ Hence, we should not be paralyzed by our apprehension or hindered by the possibility of abuse as regards online Masses. If we want to “maximize investments made and capacities built,” we cannot disregard the pastoral and spiritual value of online Masses, even outside of the pandemic.

⁵⁴ *Questa fase è stata certo eccezionale specialmente per quanto riguarda l'esperienza della trasmissione online delle celebrazioni. L'incontro virtuale non sostituisce e non potrà mai sostituire quello in presenza. L'essere fisicamente presenti allo spezzare del pane eucaristico e del pane della carità, il guardarsi negli occhi, l'abbracciarsi, l'essere uni fianco, all'altro nel servire Gesù nei poveri, lo stringere la mano dei malati, sono esperienze che appartengono al nostro vissuto quotidiano e nessuna tecnologia o rete sociale potrà mai sostituirle.* Francis in Bolzetta, ed., *La Chiesa Nel Digitale*, 12-13.

⁵⁵ Paterno Esmaguel II, “Dwindling churchgoers in PH? Not on Ash Wednesday,” *Rappler*, 22 February 2023, <https://www.rappler.com/nation/dwindling-church-mass-attendance-not-ash-wednesday-philippines/> (accessed 25 May 2023).

For instance, online Masses, especially on weekdays, can be strengthened for the spiritual benefit of the faithful. With the present reduction of the frequency of online Masses, not only Sunday Masses have been limited but, in some places, weekday Masses have been totally removed. Given that there is no precept of obligation on weekdays, the devotional value of online Masses celebrated on weekdays can be emphasized as a good way of anticipating full participation in the Sunday Eucharist. In this way, not only will the faithful be nourished by the Word of God daily, but they will also benefit from frequent spiritual communion: a beautiful form of prayer which has long been recommended by the Church, even before the pandemic. To this end, the catechesis must be correspondingly geared not only at emphasizing the importance of full participation, especially the reception of holy Communion, but also at the participation of all the faithful in every Eucharist, whether they are physically present or not, as part of the Communion of Saints.

In this regard, we may use as a paradigm what Francis said in 2019 about digital networks: “the use of the social web is complementary to an encounter in the flesh that comes alive through the body, heart, eyes, gaze, breath of the other. If the Net is used as an extension or expectation of such an encounter, then the network concept is not betrayed and remains a resource for communion.”⁵⁶ Similarly, with sound catechesis and proper orientation, online Masses need not be a competition of onsite Masses but another valuable resource for the Church’s pastoral and evangelizing activity. For instance, a pastoral application which is already happening is to replace televised Masses with online Masses, which are clearly better not only in the technical but also in the liturgical and communal aspects. Also, given that many people today, especially the young, are spending more time online, the availability of Masses in the Internet also allows the Church to reach those who would not otherwise attend Mass onsite, potentially opening the path for their return to being practicing Catholics, or to becoming believers in the case of the non-baptized.**PS**

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⁵⁶ Francis, *Message for the 53rd World Communications Day*. Emphasis added.

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