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Joseph Torti

Loyola Marymount University

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Say Something Theological: The Student Journal of Loyola Marymount University Theological Studies

The Diminished Experience of Liturgy in a Pandemic

By Joseph Torti

Abstract: Vatican II taught that the “Eucharistic sacrifice is the source and summit of the Christian life” (*Lumen Gentium*, 11). For many, this Holy Eucharist is spiritual food to nourish the soul that has been worn down by the challenges of daily life. Participation in the communion ritual where we all share of this holy sacrifice allows the faithful to be truly one with Jesus Christ. We are more than one year into the global Coronavirus (Covid-19) pandemic. Our lives have been significantly altered by this new reality. At the outset of the pandemic, most of the world went into lockdown through “stay at home” orders. These mandated guidelines halted large public gatherings, closed all non-essential businesses, and restricted movement in public to the bare minimum necessary for essential needs. Until recently, when widespread vaccinations and the corresponding reduction in cases, we had been limited in what we could do, including gathering for mass in our churches. The initial response to the Covid-19 pandemic within my archdiocese of Los Angeles was limiting the number of individuals who can participate in indoor worship, moving mass outdoors, expanding the use of online liturgy and Archbishop José Gomez dispensing Catholics from the obligation to attend mass. From these overarching guidelines, each parish tailored an approach to suit their unique parish community. While these creative solutions had enabled us to continue to gather as a community, the reality was that a significant number of our parish faithful were not experiencing the full experience of the Eucharist liturgy. While the expanded practice of online liturgy had helped maintain some sense of community during the pandemic, the diminished physical participation of the Eucharist poses a challenge to pastoral leaders. As the months rolled on and more parishioners got accustomed to online liturgy without the physical Eucharist, did the ongoing and persistent practice of this form of liturgical worship become the "new normal" practice and if so, does this modified practice alter the believer’s understanding of Eucharist and correspondingly his/her faith? To help answer this pastoral challenge, I will begin by describing our parish’s journey into online liturgy and later into an adapted in-person liturgy when less restrictive public health regulations allowed us to do so. I will then consider how a ubiquitous digital realm and an equally ubiquitous culture of consumerism, both of which were active and present before the pandemic, influences our experience of liturgy. Following this, I will reflect on the problem through the theological lens of Scripture focusing on exile and community. A brief review of sacramental theology will be considered as well. Next, I will review what the Second Vatican Council taught about liturgy and community in its constitution of sacred liturgy - *Sacrosanctum Concilium*. The new context of liturgy we find ourselves requires us to

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consider the relationship between belief and praxis (liturgical theology). A theological reflection will conclude by considering how the concepts of worship space, community and presence can be re-imagined in a digital realm. Finally, a pastoral plan to address the questions and concerns raised will be proposed.

Keywords: COVID-19, Pandemic, Eucharist, Digital Liturgy, Consumerism

Introduction

The Second Vatican Council taught that the “Eucharistic sacrifice is the source and summit of the Christian life” (*Lumen Gentium* 11). The profound reverence associated with the Eucharist is grounded in the belief that when the priest prays the words of consecration, the bread and wine become the real body and blood of Jesus Christ through transubstantiation. For many, this Holy Eucharist is spiritual food to nourish the soul that has been worn down by the challenges of daily life. Participation in the communion ritual, where we all share of this holy sacrifice, allows the faithful to be truly one with Jesus Christ.

As of this writing, we are nine months into the global Coronavirus (Covid-19) pandemic. Our lives have been significantly altered by this new reality. At the outset of the pandemic in March 2020, most of the world went into lockdown through “stay at home” orders. These mandated guidelines halted large public gatherings, closed all non-essential businesses and restricted movement in public to the bare minimum necessary for essential needs (food, healthcare, etc.). Until a safe and effective vaccine is administered to a significant portion of our population, we will continue to be limited in what we can do. Most schools and universities are closed for in-person instruction and large indoor gatherings are either halted or significantly curtailed, including gathering for mass in our Catholic churches.

The response to the Covid-19 pandemic within my archdiocese of Los Angeles has been to limit the number of individuals who can participate in indoor worship (as allowed by governmental rules), to move mass outdoors, to expand the use of online liturgy and for Archbishop José Gomez to dispense Catholics from the obligation to attend mass. From these overarching guidelines, each parish tailored an approach to suit their unique parish community. In my parish, we have implemented outdoor liturgies for one weekday mass and three weekend masses. We also have one online liturgy per weekend broadcast from inside our church space where the number of ministers is limited to ten or fewer people. Shortly after the online liturgy, Holy Eucharist is distributed outside the front of the Church to those able to drive up. While these creative solutions have enabled us to continue to gather as a community, the

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reality is that a significant number of our parish faithful are not experiencing the full experience of the Eucharist liturgy.

Just as it did for the early Church, the ritual communal celebration of Eucharist helps hold our faith community together and strengthens individual members during times of distress. While the expanded practice of online liturgy has helped maintain some sense of community during the pandemic, the diminished physical participation of the Eucharist poses a challenge to pastoral leaders. As the months roll on and more parishioners get accustomed to online liturgy without the physical Eucharist, does the ongoing and persistent practice of this form of liturgical worship become the "new normal" practice and, if so, does this modified practice alter the believer's understanding of Eucharist and correspondingly his/her faith?

To help answer this pastoral challenge, I will begin by describing our parish's journey into online liturgy and later into an adapted in-person liturgy when less restrictive public health regulations allowed us to do so. I will then consider how a ubiquitous digital realm and an equally ubiquitous culture of consumerism, both of which were active and present before the pandemic, influences our experience of liturgy. Following this, I will reflect on the problem through the theological lens of Scripture focusing on exile and community. A brief review of sacramental theology will be considered as well. Next, I will review what the Second Vatican Council taught about liturgy and community in its constitution of sacred liturgy, *Sacrosanctum Concilium*. The new context of liturgy we find ourselves requires us to consider the relationship between belief and praxis (liturgical theology). A theological reflection will conclude by considering how the concepts of worship space, community and presence can be re-imagined in a digital realm. Finally, a pastoral plan to address the questions and concerns raised will be proposed.

Transitioning to Modified Liturgical Experience

When the pandemic reached the stage of compulsory "stay at home" orders, everything associated with the public life of the Church topped, including the public celebration of the Eucharistic liturgy, as well as the celebration of marriages, baptisms, First Communion and Confirmations. We were all coming to terms with our new reality, and not being able to attend liturgy was but one of many things we could not do. Within weeks, our parish and others began to livestream Sunday liturgy, which included a limited team consisting of our pastor, a sacristan, a lector, a cantor and an accompanist. While it was a foreign experience with no one receiving Eucharist apart from those serving the liturgy, it was nonetheless a communal experience. We were all in it together. When it came time for communion, those of us watching were invited to recite a "spiritual communion." When talking about this new

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liturgical experience with other parishioners, the word “surreal” came up regularly. Others described this as part of “being in the desert,” referring to the wider experience of forced isolation.

When conditions improved, public health officials amended the guidelines for places of worship to re-open, albeit under several restrictions. The most significant of these restrictions was limiting the number of total attendees in church to no more than one-quarter of the space capacity or one hundred, whichever was lower. Those who were most vulnerable to the virus – the elderly and those with compromised immune systems – were strongly advised not to attend in person and to instead continue to watch the weekly livestream liturgy. For a small number of senior citizens who insisted on attending despite the guidance, the hunger for Eucharist was evident. Most who were able to attend chose not to, citing the severe limitation of how many could attend.

A few weeks later, as the number of new cases declined, the restriction were modified to allow for worship outdoors provided the social distancing and requirement for masks were observed. Our parish is blessed to have the space on our campus to set up outdoor liturgy and the numbers at each of our weekend liturgies have risen to nearly three hundred. With this new arrangement, we were finally able to celebrate long overdue sacraments, such as First Communion and Confirmations that had been previously postponed. More recently, we have expanded the livestream liturgy by distributing communion outside the church immediately following the livestream event. When we had only two outdoor liturgies, we estimated that 260 to 280 people came to the church to receive communion. After we added a third liturgy, that number declined to between 210 and 250.

Presently, we have settled into this new normal and those who do choose to attend in-person liturgies have become the new usual crowd. However, while we do have senior citizens attending in-person (including one centenarian), their numbers as a percent of the attendees are noticeably smaller than when we worshipped indoors. At the outset of the pandemic, the ability to gather and worship online clearly created a sense of community when it was impossible to do so physically. However, with our parish and others able to offer services outdoors on our parish properties, a significant number of parishioners are choosing to continue to participate online instead of attending in person. Analytics of our livestream viewership (see next chart) indicate that we have slightly more online viewers than we do in-person participants.¹ Additionally, a significant number are watching the saved recording of the liturgy and are viewing portions of the liturgy, with the most popular portion being the homily.

¹ The average is 569 live whole mass viewers. Assuming 1.5 persons are watching, this translates to 853 online participants. Similar details about outdoor services were not available. However, we have a known capacity of 900 people per weekend and my personal visual assessment indicates that we are 90% of that capacity. Visually one can detect a slight decline from September through December 2020. With the prospect of adverse weather cancelling some outdoor weekend services, we can expect to see livestream attendance to tick back up.

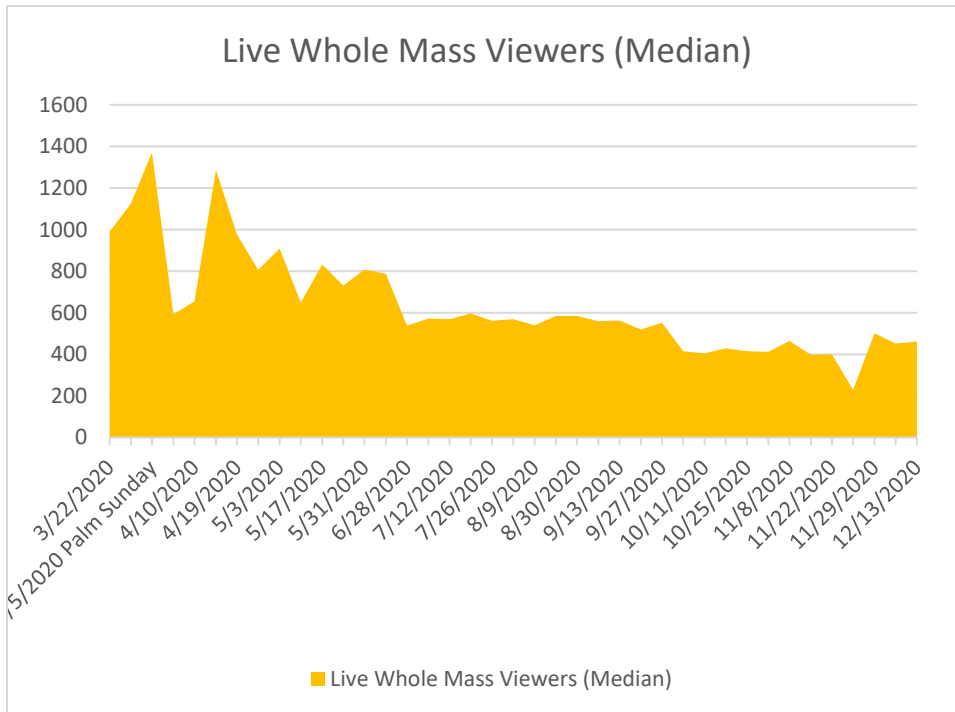
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The Digital Realm

To say that the information technology advances of the past half-century has transformed the world would be an understatement. The Internet, which was created in the 1960s under the auspices of the U.S. Department of Defense, has expanded to such ubiquity that it might best be described as a digital realm. Virtually every sector within our society has leveraged technology to have some presence within this realm. This includes religious groups like the Catholic Church. While the quality of this presence varies, most every parish has a website and many ministries and their leaders are accessible via social media (Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, et al.). Restrictions imposed by the pandemic have brought about the expansion of the digital realm into aspects of Catholic life that, not too long ago, had been thought of as something that could not be digitized – namely, liturgy and worship.

In response to the “stay at home” public health orders that forced the closure of non-essential businesses and prohibited any public gatherings, many parishes including our own started livestreaming

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the Sunday liturgy. In the early weeks of the pandemic, the same technology that we use to watch television, movies, and play video games had become the only way we could gather and worship. My initial approach to the online liturgy livestreamed via YouTube was to incorporate as much of my normal Sunday liturgy routine into the home experience, including getting dressed in the clothes I would usually wear so as to create an environment similar to in-person attendance and yet distinct from my leisurely activities. While it worked for a few weeks, eventually I found myself doing what I suspect most others were doing: wearing casual clothes and having a coffee within arm's reach.

The content presented on our video screens, computers, and mobile devices allows the viewer to experience worlds both real and imagined. News media outlets provide the means for us to see what is going on within our local communities and within our world at large. Streaming content gives the viewer countless options and genres to entertain us. All of this is available by simply pressing a remote, clicking a mouse on our computer or a swipe on our smartphone. After the initial novelty of the livestreamed liturgy wears off, does it simply become another option among many in the vast sea of digital content? Moreover, like the nightly news and the streaming video content, does online worship become a passive activity?

The digital realm and its near-universal reach in our community has made it possible for the liturgy to be available under challenging circumstances. It also has the potential to expand the definition of faith community beyond the physical confines of a parish church and local community. At the same time, however, the online experience of liturgy can also become one experience option among many others competing for our attention.

Culture of Consumerism

Within the ethnic, racial and religious diversity that is the United States of America, there is one culture thread that is common to all: consumerism. The free-market, capitalist structure of our economy depends on consumers to fuel prosperity and financial security for our country. People are employed by organizations who market and sell physical goods and/or services. They, in turn, spend some of their earnings on goods and services. The digital realm previously described has made it possible and more convenient for us to consume these goods and services at any hour of the day and from anywhere in world.

The persistent culture of consumerism has affected how we understand ourselves individually and in relationship with others. We are bombarded regularly by messages that suggest we will be happier or better if we buy a specific product or use a service. These messages are in direct conflict with the Gospel message that true happiness can only happen when we prioritize the needs of others over our

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desire for material goods. With respect to our liturgical worship, a consumerist mentality can distort our understanding of our role as participants. Unchecked, a consumerist mindset increasingly sees liturgy as something we take in (consume) instead of act of worship that requires an investment of mind, body and soul.

A consumerist mindset in the secular setting can affect how an individual perceives the value of the goods and services he/she acquires. If someone is dissatisfied with a specific possession, the typical response is to replace it with something else. Within the context of a liturgical experience, this may not necessarily be a bad situation. Accepting that valuing the liturgical experience is largely a subjective enterprise, when a parishioner does not feel his/her spiritual needs are being met within his/her faith community, going to another parish may be a reasonable course of action. On the other hand, when the reason for the change is a parishioner's unwillingness to be challenged toward conversion of heart, a culture of consumerism creates an environment where the change of community is considered a normal option. Having the option to view liturgy online makes "parish hopping" easier to do.

The persistent and pervasive consumer culture we live in has always been at odds with the purpose and the mission of the Catholic Church. Vincent Miller provides some insights about how we view the relationship between consumer culture and religious traditions. Miller critiques those who characterize consumerist culture as if it were an ideology in competition with religion; among these critics is the Magisterium. He believes that for the most part, we who participate in the consumerist culture are not actively or intentionally casting aside our baptismal promises to be disciples of Christ. Instead, he proposes that until we get at the "deeper workings of consumerism," we stand to miss what is really going on, which is the commodification of religious belief systems and values.²

Our parishes fight a seemingly uphill battle against the tide of individualism and freedom of choice that undergirds the consumerist culture. The inevitable and unavoidable economic reality of parishes relying on parishioner donations to stay open often leads to parishes employing marketing and communications tactics used by for-profit businesses to attract and retain parishioners. Livestreamed liturgies make it possible for parish leaders to reach a wider audience. Those charged with planning liturgies need to ensure that the spiritual needs of this online community are met. Otherwise, it this form of liturgical experience is in danger of being perceived as a service subject to the whims of a discriminating consumer.

Scripture: Exile and Community

² Vincent J. Miller, *Consuming Religion: Christian Faith and Practice in a Consumer Culture* (New York: Continuum, 2004), 19.

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Psalm 137

The present restrictions on indoor worship within our churches harkens back to the plight of the Jewish people exiled to Babylon in 586 BCE. The Babylonian exile was the result of a defeat at the hands of a much stronger adversary. The reality of having the Jerusalem temple, their central place of worship, destroyed, coupled with the forced removal from their homes, must have been devastating to that faith community who believed God was present in that temple in that city. Psalm 137 poignantly describes the lament of the displaced Jewish community. Reflecting on this psalm within our present situation may provide useful insights into our collective psyche and the centrality of communal worship.

The first verse sets the emotional tone and conveys the exiles' sense of longing: "By the rivers of Babylon there we sat weeping when we remembered Zion" (Ps 137:1). The image of a river indicates that the physical locale of the exiles was not harsh. Though held captive, the community was able to live in relative peace with the means to take care of themselves, presumably, in a manner like the way they lived in Jerusalem. We too long for a return to full community within our physical churches.

The psalm goes on to describe the real source of the exiles' angst: their concern that they will forget their former home and place of worship:

If I forget you, Jerusalem,
may my right hand forget.
May my tongue stick to my palate
if I do not remember you,
If I do not exalt Jerusalem
beyond all my delights. (Ps 137:5-6)

Forgetting their home and place of worship is likened to forgetting about God and breaking their covenant with God. Their concerns over religious practices resonate with many today who believe what Vatican II taught regarding the primacy of the liturgy as the preeminent prayer form. Not being able to worship in the way we had been accustomed can be disorienting or distressing, especially for those for whom the liturgy is their only regular prayer.

Acts 2:42-47

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Praying and worshipping as a community looks very different today than it did two thousand years, when the first followers of Jesus, energized by the Holy Spirit set about to proclaim Jesus' message to "all the nations" (cf. Matt 28:19). While that may be, we can draw some insights from what was written about the early Christian community in the Acts of the Apostles. Acts 2:42-47 provides a glimpse of that community and serves as a point of reflection for us today.

Verse 42 describes the early Christian disciples as a community that thought of themselves as a distinct community incorporating catechesis ("teaching of the apostles"), prayers and "breaking of the bread" into a lifestyle where those that had shared with those that lacked. Commentaries on this passage point out that the willingness to share material goods may have been borne from a belief that the end times were near in addition to the early followers' practice of the Christian virtue of charity taught by the apostles.³ I point out the eschatological aspect not to presume that the current pandemic is anything like the end times imagined by the early Christian community. Rather, I want to suggest that the early faith community bonded in response to a shared experience. The present pandemic experience is our shared experience that invites us to a similar response.

Verse 46 provides a glimpse of how our present liturgy came to be: "Every day they devoted themselves to meeting together in the temple area and to breaking bread in their homes." In this early stage, disciples of Jesus understood themselves religiously as Jews. Jewish temple services were focused on hearing the word of God proclaimed, which could be interpreted as a forerunner of our Liturgy of the Word. The ritual of breaking bread then is our Liturgy of the Eucharist today.

The breaking of bread in their homes elicits a new meaning considering our present limitations to worship in church and the corresponding increased reliance on online forms of liturgy. Preserving the centrality of the consecration of the bread and wine into the Body and Blood of Christ as a ritual that should be done in the church space by the priest who sacramentally represents Christ, the early community's home-based Eucharistic practice serves as a reminder of the sacredness of the home as an extension of the consecrated worship space of our churches. Perhaps something as routine as grace before meals can help us to experience the presence of Christ in the same way the disciples of Emmaus did when Jesus broke bread with them (cf. Luke 24:30-32).

Sacramental Theology

The Catechism of the Catholic Church describe sacraments as "efficacious signs of grace, instituted by Christ and entrusted to the Church, by which divine life is dispensed to us" (CCC #1131).

³ Raymond E. Brown, *An Introduction to the New Testament* (New York: Doubleday, 1997), 287.

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This definition encompasses two important dynamics of sacraments that inform our discussion: sacraments are signs of God's presence in the world, and the Church mediates God's grace to humankind.

The relationship and the dynamics between God's grace and the sacramental sign/symbol have been the source of extensive theological reflection over the centuries. As it pertains to our discussion about liturgy, Kenan Osborne's reflection on this, influenced by Karl Rahner's understanding of grace as relational in nature, is helpful for our focus on the liturgy. For Osborne, "[i]n the sacrament action, what one sees, hears, touches, feels or perceives is only the sign; beneath the perceptible is the reality."⁴ He uses the example of human love to illustrate this dynamic. The love between humans (husband-wife, parent-child) is always present. However, it becomes more real and experienced repeatedly through the outward signs (embracing, kissing, selflessness, etc.). In the same way, God's love for all of humanity has always been there. The incarnation of Jesus through his life, death and resurrection and the Church Jesus commissioned are the outward signs of that love. From the sacramentality of Jesus, the Eucharistic liturgy is the tangible way we come to experience the love Christ has for us.

Continuing with Osborne's analogy of human love, the perception of the reality of love through the outward sign implies an intentional action by the one who perceives/receives the love. The extent to which the recipient is open to the sign dictates the depth of the reality experienced. For example, the love a distracted child experiences through a parent's embrace is less than that of an attentive child. It follows that our own experience of Christ through the liturgy is heightened to the extent we can be attentive and present in the experience.

Second Vatican Council: *Sacrosanctum Concilium*

The Second Vatican Council (1962-1965) helped to refine and articulate the theology and vision of the Catholic Church and its liturgy as we know it today. In the document *Lumen Gentium*, the gathered clergy expanded the understanding of "Church" that had, up to that point, been mostly understood as the clerical hierarchy. Today, the Church is understood as a mystical entity that transcends the institutional Church and includes all the faithful. In terms of the ritual liturgy, *Sacrosanctum Concilium* (SC) was promulgated as the Constitution of the Sacred Liturgy, which was the culmination of decades of discourse and scholarship under the heading of the Liturgical Movement.⁵

⁴ Kenan Osborne, *Sacramental Theology: A General Introduction* (New York: Paulist Press, 1988), 62.

⁵ John F Baldwin. "Worship: Ninety Years of Early Liturgical History," *Worship* 90, no. 5 (2016): 420.

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In the years following the Council, the Roman Catholic Church undertook a dramatic reform of liturgy in direct response to the promulgation of *Sacrosanctum Concilium*. The most immediate and tangible result of the document was the movement away from Latin as the language of the liturgy toward the use of the vernacular, which enabled the faithful to more actively participate. For the purposes of our reflection on liturgy in a pandemic, another important development from SC was the formal framework to enable the adaptation of the liturgy, in effect, sanctioning and legitimizing the process of reform already underway.

The liturgical celebration embodies the unification of the Church as the sacrament of Christ. It is within this public worship that the presence of Christ is manifested through the priest/presider, the proclaimed Word, the consecrated Eucharist, and in the gathered faithful. “[E]very liturgical celebration, because it is an action of Christ the priest and of his body, which is the church, is a preeminently sacred action. No other action of the church equals its effectiveness by the same title nor to the same degree.” (SC 7). This statement highlights the liturgy’s place as the most revered way we can worship God.

Considering the Church’s reluctance to change anything about the liturgy during the nearly five centuries after the Protestant Reformation, putting its stamp of approval on the means to adapt the liturgy was a significant development. The document teaches that “[t]he rite of the Mass is to be revised in such a way that the intrinsic nature and purpose of its several parts, as well as the connection between them, may be more clearly shown, and that devout and active participation by the faithful may be more easily achieved.” (SC 50). Edward Hahnenberg, in his commentary on SC, states that the Council fathers granted local bishops’ conferences permission to adapt the liturgy while still setting norms that ensured “substantial unity of the liturgy is preserved.”⁶ SC goes on to set the framework for the liturgical commissions charged with overseeing the process of adaptation at every level in the Church hierarchy.

Faith Shaped by Liturgical Praxis

Aidan Kavanagh describes the liturgy of the Church as “faith in motion” and that the experience of the assembly in liturgy is the “living God present to the Church.”⁷ Further, he argues that during this experience, the assembly is transformed and that this transformation is *theologia prima*, that is, that the liturgy is a primary source for theological reflection. While I agree with Kavanagh about this

⁶ Edward P. Hahnenberg, *A Concise Guide to the Documents of Vatican II* (Cincinnati: St. Anthony Messenger Press, 2007), 19.

⁷ Aidan Kavanagh, *On Liturgical Theology* (Collegeville: Liturgical Press Pueblo, 1984), 8.

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transformative aspect, giving liturgy a place as primary theology above all other theological disciplines would seem to diminish the role these other theological disciplines have had in shaping the liturgy.

Additionally, theological disciplines Kavanaugh considers as secondary to liturgy have shaped our liturgy by helping assess the congruence of liturgical practices with our understanding of faith. Liturgy also must respond to changing historical and cultural contexts where a community's understanding of its faith may not align with its public expression of faith. Other theological disciplines are required in these discourses.⁸

In addition to liturgical events, there are other ways in which the people of God can come to know God's revealing presence. Michael Aune cites Paul Marshall, who points out that primary theological moments occur outside of participation in liturgy and that theology happens when an individual or group confront the claims of the Gospel. One example comes from Edward Schillebeeckx, who noted that some people (Jews and Gentiles) encountered Jesus and stayed with him.⁹ If there is a singular primary Christian theological event, this encounter with Jesus would be it. Everything that followed this would become elements of what we know as the Church today. These elements include the New Testament, liturgical practices, the hierarchical Church, doctrine, among others. From this perspective, reflection of all these elements can be thought of as secondary theologies from the primary Jesus event.

The debate over which between faith or liturgy takes precedence in terms of theological reflection should not diminish the ability of liturgy to transform the human participant as Kavanaugh states. As a multi-faceted expression of praise that moves the mind, heart and soul, the liturgy has the potential to elevate the experience of faith. At the same time, we must acknowledge that it has the potential to diminish the faith experience negatively. Edward J. Kilmartin points out that throughout Christian history, "forms of liturgical prayer and ritual, however orthodox, often had to be dropped or changed to avoid heretical misunderstanding." He goes on to stress that changing historical and cultural circumstances requires regular assessment of how the faithful understand their faith while keeping to the traditional teachings of the Church.¹⁰

The length and breadth of the ongoing pandemic certainly has introduced new liturgical practices within the Catholic Church across the globe, the most notable being the widespread use of online/livestream liturgy. The liturgical theological views of both Kavanaugh and Kilmartin

⁸ Maxwell Johnson, *Praying and Believing in Early Christianity: The Interplay between Christian Worship and Doctrine* (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 2013), 16-17.

⁹ Michael B. Aune, "Liturgy and Theology: Rethinking the Relationship, Part II," *Worship* 81, no. 1 (Jan 2007): 53.

¹⁰ Edward J. Kilmartin, "Theology as Theology of the Liturgy," in *Primary Sources of Liturgical Theology: A Reader*, ed. Dwight W. Vogel (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 2000), 108.

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acknowledge the primary role liturgy within a Christian faith tradition. Against this backdrop, we now consider in detail liturgy within the digital realm.

Liturgy in the Digital Realm

Before the pandemic, liturgical worship in a physical church was assumed. The Church's teachings on the sacredness of consecrated churches and chapels, and the Magisterium's insistence that these places are the proper and exclusive places for liturgical worship and the administration of the sacraments¹¹, have largely held. The pandemic and subsequent proliferation of online worship, while considered a temporary solution, does give us pause to consider how this new form of worship specifically impacts our experience of liturgy. Of particular interest is how online liturgy informs and or affects our experience of the worship space, community, presence and participation.

Redefining the Worship Space

The present situation of restricted or limited access to our churches, chapels and cathedrals, as disorienting it is to all the faithful, does reveal much about our contemporary theology and understanding of how we experience the grace of God in our world. The consternation and collective angst over how to be faithful without a physical worship space suggests an understanding that confines the experience of God to a specific physical place. Further, the Catholic understanding of Eucharist as the real presence of the Body and Blood of Jesus Christ in the consecrated bread and wine reinforces this emphasis on the physical.

It is tempting to associate the global pandemic and the corresponding restrictions on worship as we have been accustomed as an entirely new experience. While the pandemic is new for us, the disruption to the ways we worship is not. This is not the first time a faith community has had to overcome significant adversity to worship. In a recent article in *America* magazine, Michael Bayer reflects on how we can look back at our salvation history for guidance to help interpret our current experience. Bayer cites the experience of God's chosen people during the Babylonian exile (6th century

¹¹ United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, *Built of Living Stones: Art, Architecture, and Worship*, No. 5-408 (Washington, DC: United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, 2000), §17.

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BCE) and the early Christian community during the time of Justin Martyr (2nd century CE) as two examples where communities of believers had to adapt its worship to challenging circumstances.¹²

After their defeat at the hands of the Babylonians, the Jewish people saw their temple destroyed and many of them living in a foreign land. The lack of a physical place of worship did not diminish their faith and belief in God. They continued to worship as a community focusing on God's word in the Torah to sustain their faith. In so doing, they came to understand and experience God's presence away from their traditional place of worship (Jerusalem temple).

During Justin Martyr's time, not all attended the Eucharistic celebration in the designated physical place. As part of their ministry and service, deacons would distribute the Eucharist to these "remote" worshippers.¹³ This forerunner to the current practice of taking Eucharist to the homebound and sick illustrates that the early Church imagined Eucharistic celebrations extending beyond the physical worship space.

Virtual Community

The digital realm within which we interact has made the world feel much smaller and accessible. To say that the ubiquity of the technologies that undergird the digital realm is redefining how we understand community would be an understatement. The various ways we can interact with friends, relatives and others who live thousands of miles away effectively has rendered the vision of virtual communities a de-facto reality. Social media services such as Facebook, Twitter and Instagram have enabled all levels of the Church to extend their reach beyond the physical parish and church buildings. As these technologies continue to be developed and embraced by parishes and dioceses, how we understand and describe the community of believers will continue to change as well.

As it pertains to the Eucharistic liturgy, the concept of the liturgical community of worship is still largely tethered to the physical realm given the tradition and teaching of the Church that claims authentic Eucharist is celebrated in a physical place. That is, until the Covid-19 pandemic. Forced to severely restrict physical celebration of the Eucharist to a handful of clergy and ministers, the Church has embraced the tools of the digital realm to hold liturgies online. Given the protracted duration of the

¹² Michael Bayer, "What the Early Christians Can Teach Us about Missing the Sacraments and Still Growing in Faith," *America*, April 23, 2020, <https://www.americamagazine.org/faith/2020/04/23/what-first-christians-can-teach-us-about-missing-sacraments-and-still-growing>, 3.

¹³ Paul Gavriluk, "The Participation of the Deacons in the Distribution of Communion in the Early Church," *St Vladimir's Theological Quarterly* 51 (2007): 257.

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physical restrictions, the liturgical community can no longer be defined as those believers who are within spatial proximity of each other.

Again, we can look to our Church's distant past to provide some insights on how we might understand Eucharistic community. For several decades, under persecution from local religious and civic authorities, the nascent Christian Church had no designated spaces to celebrate the Eucharist. Celebrations were done in large homes where several families could gather. We now find ourselves in similar circumstances for entirely different reasons. Instead of persecution by antagonistic forces, we are being driven "underground" by a lethal virus. We are now worshiping in our homes, which have become extensions of the physical church space.

Teresa Berger challenges the notion that liturgical celebrations are legitimized only when associated with the faithful who are in physical proximity of each other. She cites two examples where liturgical rituals stretch the domain of the worship space. The first is in the invocation of the "communion of saints" during the Eucharistic Prayer. By invoking the saints in heaven along with the assembly in the praise of God, the worship space no longer seems confined to the church building. The other example is the celebration of the Good Friday Stations of the Cross at the Coliseum by Pope Francis in 2016. At the same time, a papal representative was visiting the homeless in another part of Rome as a sign of spiritual solidarity. She writes "one might argue that the whole notion of the catholicity of the Church is predicated on spatial proximity not being an ultimate arbiter of ecclesial *communio*."¹⁴

Presence and Participation

An aspect of the Eucharistic liturgy that needs to be explored is the presence of the participant. If asked what presence means, most of us would quickly respond in terms indicating the physical, bodily dimension. Pressed further, we would also include presence of mind as another dimension. Others would include presence of heart. Jesus himself directs us to express our love for God through all dimensions of our being (mind, body, mind, heart and soul) (c.f. Mt 22:37, Mk 12:30, Lk 10:27). By extension, our attendance at liturgy requires us to be present in all these dimensions. Of course, being human, we are not able to accomplish this in a consistent manner regardless of how we attend liturgy (physical or online).

A broader appreciation of what it means to be present should not diminish the importance of the physical church space to heighten our ability to offer worship to God. We have been socially trained to

¹⁴ Teresa Berger, @ *Worship: Liturgical Practices in Digital Worlds* (New York: Routledge, 2018), 38-39.

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associate physical places with expected attitudes and behaviors. For example, if you were physically watching a film at the movie theater, phoning a friend and having a full conversation would be frowned upon, and if you persisted, you might find yourself thrown out of the theater. Similarly, for many of us, sitting in a physical church sets an expectation that our thoughts and attitudes are to be directed toward the liturgical worship of God.

While our physical presence in the church space can heighten our ability to engage in the liturgy, it should not be the exclusive place where this happens. Those who are physically unable to be at church in person would be equally present by their attendance of an online liturgy. Groups that come to mind are those who are hospitalized, the homebound and those who fear religious persecution (e.g. Christians in some Middle East countries).

Theological Review

The pandemic and its effect on our traditional means of liturgical worship has introduced a collective angst and anxiety that persists to this day. Psalm 137 and its context of Jews in Babylonian exile resonates with our experience. Prayer and reflection of this psalm and other Hebrew Scripture passages on the theme of exile can help the faithful get their spiritual bearings. The summary of the early Christian life in Acts 2:42-47 describes life in the early Christian community which, through their common faith in the risen Christ, was able to strengthen the bond among themselves and found ritual expression in what would be the earliest experience of communal Christian liturgy.

Catholic sacramental theology helps us to understand our liturgy as a tangible sign of God's grace through Christ's presence. Our active and attentive participation in the liturgy deepens the encounter of the risen Christ. The Second Vatican Council taught that the sacramental presence of Christ is preeminently in the consecrated Eucharist, but it is also expressed and experienced through the proclaimed Word, the priest/presider, and the gathered assembly. The Council also taught that the liturgy is a living entity subject to adaption for the spiritual wellbeing of the faithful.

Liturgical theology provides the means to reflect on how our faith informs our liturgy and how our liturgical praxis affects our faith. The use of the digital realm for liturgy invites us to reconsider our understanding of the worship space, what it means to be community and how we are present and how we participate.

Pastoral Plan

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The Jews who were exiled into Babylon yearned to return home, even though they did not know if or when they would be allowed to return home. Away from their spiritual home, they adapted to their new home. It would be nearly fifty years before Cyrus of Persia decreed their return home. Unlike the exiled Jewish community, we do have a sense that we will return to life before the pandemic. Our challenge is that we do not know exactly when that will be.

The Jewish return from exile serves as a backdrop against which we can chart a pastoral path and helpful strategies that can help maintain the sacramental character of our liturgical worship and mitigate the impact of the persistent consumerist culture. These strategies include caring for the faithful while in exile, preparing for the return home, coming home, and life in the new Jerusalem.

Care for the Flock While We are in Exile

All of us to one degree or another have experienced some challenges during this pandemic. Most of us have been able to respond to these challenges by adopting new ways of doing things. However, it is vital that we do not lose sight of the reality that we have lost some members of our community and many others are suffering hardships because of the coronavirus pandemic. From the onset of the pandemic parish and ministry leaders have mobilized to provide help and assistance to those in need within their parishes and local communities.

While parish leaders tend to the physical needs within their communities, they also need to attend to the spiritual needs of the faith community in this new setting, where lack of or reduced physical contact impedes pastoral leaders' ability to assess the spiritual health of a community split between those that can attend liturgy in person, those who attend exclusively online and those who stopped attending when the pandemic started.

Pastoral leaders should enlist helping ministers who can reach out to the parish community to assess their spiritual as well as their physical and emotional wellbeing. These assessments need to be done by well-formed ministers who possess the requisite gifts of compassion and attentive listening. This outreach can be done through a creative mix of technical and non-technical means to accommodate all members of the community.

It will also be important to foster a strong sense of community among the faithful across the various modes of liturgical celebrations. Care must be taken to ensure that the pastoral message for any weekend is consistent across all liturgies. Equally important is to mitigate against any sentiment that those who attend in-person liturgies are in any way better than those who cannot. Fundamental to this is the acceptance on the part of the pastoral leadership that their understanding of worship space, presence and participation transcends the physical.

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Coming Home

In 538 BCE, the Jews were released from their Babylonian captivity and allowed to return home to Jerusalem. When the Jews returned home, Jerusalem was a very different place. After the exile to Babylon, while some Jews were left behind, eventually other groups settled in. From a religious perspective, the Jews returning from Babylon became yet another religious group among the mix of Jews and Gentiles.

A similar dynamic awaits us when we return to in-person worship in our churches with no restrictions. While not as drastic as the exilic community separated by 50 years and several hundred miles, the community that gathers in our parishes will be different. Without question, the first weeks of unrestricted worship in our churches will be cause for celebration. Yet, the extended time away from a “normal” worship experience combined with the blend of online and in-person liturgies while we were “away” will almost certainly feel different. Pastoral leaders need to embrace and honor this new community setting. The work to maintain a tight sense of community suggested earlier needs to continue.

When King Cyrus decreed the return of the Jewish people to Jerusalem, not all Jews returned home; some remained in Babylon. It seems reasonable to assume that some of those who have grown accustomed to the online-only liturgical experience may not feel compelled to return to church right away. It is worth remembering that the community of online worshippers includes many who live well outside the physical geography of the home parish.

Pastors and liturgical leaders should continue to livestream the liturgy even after the return to full in-person liturgies. Doing so will honor the importance of the whole community who will have worshipped and prayed together throughout the pandemic.

Life in the New Jerusalem

The Jewish community after the return from Babylon worshipped in a different way. The rituals that developed while they were in Babylon became part of a new tradition for the generations that would follow. In the same way, the lessons learned doing liturgy online during the pandemic can continue to evolve to become new traditions for the parish community.

The technologies that enabled online liturgies during the pandemic will continue to evolve such that the online liturgy experience can be enhanced and elevated to a level that enables the participant to be increasingly immersed in the liturgical experience. This will, of course, require incremental

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investment in additional audio and visual technologies along with the talent to leverage these investments. It is interesting to note that the exponentially expanding technological capabilities will eventually make these capabilities less expensive and easier to use.

Closing Thoughts

The Covid-19 pandemic has resulted in incalculable loss for so many around the world. Within our community, it would be difficult to find anyone who has not been directly or indirectly impacted by the virus. Until a vaccine is widely administered, the measures we have implemented to control and mitigate the spread of the virus will continue for months.

Within our parishes, the ability to worship and retain any cohesive sense of community has been challenged. The wonders of digital technology have helped to make liturgy possible in a manner that would not have been possible ten years ago. The adaptation of our liturgical experience into the digital realm may prove to be a watershed moment in the history of our Church as it relates to the way we imagine, implement and experience communal worship. Like the increased adoption of online commerce, the expanded practice of online liturgy is not likely to go away. As an extension to traditional worship in churches, it must and will continue to evolve.

The ongoing dialogue about how to shape this development through pastoral and liturgical strategies will necessarily place our understanding of worship community in the digital realm in tension with the primacy of the physical Eucharist as the source and summit of our liturgy and life of our Church. More reflection in the field of sacramental theology will be necessary to clarify the nature of the sacramental action of the liturgical assembly and how that action makes real the presence of Christ for the world.

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