EMBODIED LITURGY

VIRTUAL REALITY AND LITURGICAL THEOLOGY IN CONVERSATION

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INTRODUCTION

As "stay at home/work safe" orders went into effect amid the COVID-19 pandemic, many Episcopalians, like their ecumenical relations, faced difficulty participating in the Eucharist given government prohibitions on public gathering. Some wondered whether it would be possible to celebrate a "virtual Eucharist." In a virtual Eucharist a priest in one place consecrates bread and wine in another over an internet application. The possibility and permissibility of a "virtual Eucharist" has provoked significant interest from church leaders and theologians. The Episcopal House of Bishops hosted an online salon to consider different means of receiving the sacrament in view of the COVID-19 situation.

In response to concerns within my diocese, I offered a "Teaching on the Eucharist in a Time of COVID-19." Richard Burridge, retired dean of Kings College, London, prepared a book entitled *Holy Communion in "Contagious Times,"* seeking a way to align the virtual Eucharist with sacramental and liturgical history for the purpose of pastoral care. Teresa Berger wrote a book entitled: *@ Worship: Liturgical Practices in Digital Worlds (Liturgy, Worship and Society Series)*. Berger looks to the spiritual and beyond linear liturgy. She invites us to consider God's spirit as digit. She sees a host of digital universe possibilities for missiology. Katherine G. Schmidt wrote *Virtual Communion: Theology of the Internet and the Catholic Sacramental Imagination*. Her argument is that the Catholic imagination is inherently consonant with the idea of the "virtual." The virtual world is understood as the creative space between presence and absence. She considers the fields of media studies, internet studies, sociology, history, and theology together in order to give a theological account of the social realities of American Catholicism in light of digital culture. Considerably different, yet on the mark, Tara Isabella Burton investigates virtual reality in her book *Strange Rites: New Religions for a Godless World*. Burton's book brings into focus the groups and rites online. As a new generation writer in this field she is one to watch. None of these texts look at the nature of liturgy from a theological perspective. The texts take for granted the buffered self, immanent frame, assumptions regarding the nature of reality, language, and the internet. There is more and more inquiry into virtual liturgy without much academic consideration of Christian anthropology, for instance, or how this squares with ecclesiology—for surely how we gather says something about the kind of church we are.

For some denominations the question of a "virtual Lord's supper" or "online Eucharist" was settled long ago, feels like an uncomplicated choice, or is seen as purely a pastoral consideration. Still, for sacramental Christians the question appears of the essence. It is a deep question about who God is and who we

are. The conversation of virtual Eucharist has called into question the accepted notions about the sacramental life.

This is not the first time Anglicans and others have faced challenges with eucharistic reception. We might remember that Florence Li Tim Oi was ordained as the first woman priest in order to celebrate the Eucharist for her community amid the Imperial Japanese occupation of Hong Kong. Today there is a rise in ordaining bivocational and nonstipendiary priests to facilitate the celebration of Eucharists in congregations that cannot afford salaried clergy. These choices reveal a pattern of the church's desire to maintain a eucharistic presence for people even when economic viability is not present.

In the midst of the pandemic, people find themselves online and streaming services and doing everything they can to maintain their church community and many are attempting to use these platforms to provide Eucharist for those isolated in their homes. This approach has become normative in other denominations, including among Baptists at Saddleback Church in Lake Forest, California and nondenominational Christians at Lakewood Church. These narratives and realities suggest that sacramental Christians must consider the matter of the Eucharist and liturgy in this new missional age with an eye to both how we care for a eucharistically centered people and how we deal with the presenting complications of virtual life.

Amid the anxiety of the COVID-19 pandemic, the conversation about allowing virtual Eucharist among some has been passionate and at times hostile. Some in the Episcopal Church have even accused clergy and bishops of "eucharistic hoarding" and "liturgical classism." Conversely, there are concerns that a low-church evangelical movement will "take control" of the church's liturgical discipline while people are focused upon the crisis at hand. A few have suggested Title IV discipline (our Episcopal Church disciplinary canon) for priests who administer the sacrament improperly, for bishops who keep people from having the sacrament, and for those who will not celebrate the sacrament. This elevated tension should not bully us into quick decisions on a core theological keystone within our church. We must take on the conversation with dignity, with care for those within the conversation, and with an eye that this work occurs within a broader ecumenical community.

Two other major factors are at work in this debate over the nature of liturgy and virtual Eucharist. The first is that human beings are living a lot of their lives on social media across different platforms and using these platforms to build community and nurture relationships. Language and community are inextricably linked and we need to look at how we understand the role and function of language, even as we look at what constitutes community.[1] Though the virtual world is a relatively new and emerging force in the conversation, it is nonetheless becoming an instrument for ministry. For those not used to these platforms, including those of my generation, so-called "digital migrants," digital ministry is

approached (or avoided) as if the virtual world is not real. Meanwhile, for younger "digital natives," inhabiting virtual space comes second nature, but with a degree of suspicion as to how platforms are using this as another corporate strategy. The "extended reality" generation now emerging may not think much about the nature of the digital waters they swim in. For liturgists and theologians, the nature and qualities of the virtual world must now be factored into any conversation about the liturgy. This touches on the second matter of concern: the anthropological crisis that has come about with the advent of post-modernity and our inability to know what is real.

As much of human life and work have moved increasingly into the virtual sphere in the past two to three decades, we have become increasingly alienated from our embodied nature. This has exacerbated an Enlightenment tendency to identify the locus of our humanity in a conscious and independent mind. Reducing personhood to the conscious self raises serious concerns for the Christian as our faith revolves around the principle of the Incarnation, the Word of God made flesh and blood in Christ Jesus. We believe Jesus came among us, ate and drank, suffered, bled, died, and rose bodily from the dead. Christianity hallows the human body as the image of God and the temple of the Holy Spirit. We nourish the body with sacraments, material signs of inward and spiritual grace. The church is a communal body of persons at once a reflection of those gathered and a reflection of Christ's body. How can we reconcile the undeniable physicality of Christianity with the contemporary tendency to go virtual, to inhabit a seemingly disembodied online sphere?

This is not the first time Christianity has wrestled with a religious want by humanity to escape the body. Irenaeus of Lyons, the Chalcedonian creedal formula, Augustine of Hippo, John of Damascus, Thomas Aquinas, Martin Luther, and John Calvin each wrote of the inseparability of the spirit and the body and the inseparability of the divine and human nature of Christ. Irenaeus is the bedrock of these conversations. He argues that in the human and divine nature of Jesus we find our own understanding of the unified body and soul. Our Christian tradition rejects the dualistic notion whereby the soul or spirit is seen as primary with the material body understood as unimportant in the discourse of human nature. From the time of the Gnostics, philosophers and theologians have sought to disconnect the soul from the body. Yet Christians have realized, and rightly so, that to accept such a proposal is to undermine the whole theology of an embodied Christ who saves a very real physical world. To do so removes God and God's intentions of justice and mercy for the world in which we live and move and have our being and our becoming. These debates are not theological alone but find their way into liturgy. Liturgy is both a place of formation and a place of enacted bodily belief.

After all, the scriptures attest that God speaks and walks with humanity. God's narrative tells of a God who walks with us in a garden, in the wilderness,

by the sea of Galilee, and through the spirit on the road to Emmaus. God speaks to us in word, too. Our participation with God in God's narrative reminds us that God brings us together, that we are to be a blessing to each other, and that we are to live and work together, and in so doing make our pilgrim way towards God's prepared ingathering. Moreover, that this embodied relationship with God and each other is key to bringing about God's justice and mercy. We cannot remove theology, missiology, liberation theology, or liturgical theology from the human body. Liturgy itself is always an act of revealing whose we are and who we are. It is always an act deeply rooted in the revealed theology through God's narrative. Liturgy is also an act of embodied justice-making as it brings different bodies together. For sacramental Christians the liturgy and the Eucharist are both our place of unity and vulnerability with each other.

This text is an attempt to articulate my thoughts on the question of the relation of liturgy to the virtual sphere. In so doing I propose a natural theology as the starting point for liturgical considerations. I begin by taking a critical look at the philosophy of David Chalmers, who I think represents a "trending" approach to questions over the virtual. While I appreciate Chalmers's robust defense of the virtual realm as in some ways real, his approach, I argue, ultimately leads to a solipsistic understanding of the human person that Charles Taylor calls the "buffered self." In the second section I challenge the adequacy of virtual liturgy by looking at four thinkers' approach to the question of reality. Michael Arbib, Mary Hesse, Rowan Williams, and Charles Taylor argue that reality exists as the confluence of intersubjective experiences, which are, for the human being, always physically embodied and experienced in community. Just as language is the foundation of this community, in-person liturgy offers Christians a means of connecting with God and one another. Finally, I offer a brief analysis of the ethical challenges facing the present missional age, namely how the individualism of the buffered self threatens the integrity of the liturgical act. I also raise my concerns with the ethics of doing liturgy within platforms that commodify the interests, activities, and choices of their consumers. I conclude with suggestions about how an embodied liturgy might speak prophetically to the emerging virtual age.

Let me say a brief word about the term "virtual reality." David Chalmers, a philosopher, seeks the broadest definition for the purpose of the discourse. He writes, "'Virtual reality' as a noun is roughly synonymous with 'virtual reality environment,' while as a mass noun it covers both virtual reality environments and virtual reality technology."[2] We will do the same and use the terms "virtual reality" and "virtual Eucharist." I have noticed that in many discussions the term "virtual reality" (VR) is often used in looser ways than this—sometimes so loose as to include almost any nonstandard means of generating experiences as of an external environment. There are distinctions in both the popular language about VR and in what theologians describe. *Nonimmersive VR* includes computer-generated interactive environments displayed on desktop computer or television screens,

as with many familiar videogames. *Noninteractive VR* includes passive immersive simulations such as computer-generated movies presented on a VR headset. *Non-computer-generated VR* includes immersive and interactive camera-generated environments, such as the remote-controlled robotic VR sometimes used in medicine. The label of VR is also sometimes applied to environments satisfying just one of the three conditions: immersiveness (movies filmed with 360-degree cameras and displayed on a headset), interactiveness (remote control of a robot using a desktop display of its perspective), or computer generation (a computer-generated movie displayed on a desktop). The label is not typically applied to environments that satisfy none of the three conditions, such as ordinary (two-dimensional, passive, camera-based) movies and television shows. Chalmers speaks of intermediate cases. He writes, "So-called mixed reality involves immersive and interactive environments that are partly physical and partly computer-generated. The paradigm case of mixed reality is augmented reality where virtual objects are added to an ordinary physical environment. Mixed reality is typically contrasted with VR, but it can also be considered as VR in an extended sense. Ordinary un-augmented physical environments are also immersive and interactive, but they are not usually considered to be VR, except perhaps by people who think that the external world is computer-generated or that it is a mind-generated construction."[3]

I want to pause here because we are in our theological conversations tempted to assume that the term "virtual Eucharist" means the same thing in all places. Chalmers helps us to understand that there are indeed varieties of virtual Eucharists.

1. *Immersive virtual worship* is an interactive experience where and when individuals join by virtue of computer generation, as avatars (virtual bodies), manipulating virtual objects (altar, cup, paten, bread and wine), in a virtual world, setting, or building, and worship and/or celebrate Eucharist.
2. *Nonimmersive, noninteractive worship* service that is augmented reality where individuals participate in online worship by means of a prerecorded online platform like YouTube, Vimeo, or Facebook.
3. *Nonimmersive interactive live virtual worship*. This type is a worship service that is a nonimmersive, interactive streamed celebration of the worship where the celebrant and participants might hear each other like Zoom, Go ToMeeting, or Loopup.
4. *Nonimmersive interactive virtual worship*, which is an immersive, interactive streamed celebration of the worship and the Eucharist so that others may worship but not consume the elements blessed remotely. This has been done live and prerecorded on platforms like Facebook Live or Zoom Switch.

While this text is concerned with the particular nature of liturgy and sacrament in relationship to the broad topic of virtual worship and virtual Eucharist, it

is important to understand that such qualifications in conversation are very helpful. They may even clarify what we think is permissible or what is not permissible. We could imagine a conversation about qualitative considerations along the lines of these types of virtual Eucharist.

It is my hope that this text will provide a "starting point" for deeper conversations around the church's use of virtual platforms for mission and liturgy. As will become evident, I do not take a favorable position on the "virtual Eucharist," but I do not believe the church should disengage from the digital world. Our missional context demands robust engagement with the web platforms that are more and more a critical part of the church's members' lives. With this engagement should come deeper ethical formation around Christian attitudes to the virtual realm. Jesus did not call his apostles to retreat from the world, but to engage it. Jesus says, "I have set you to be a light for the Gentiles, so that you may bring salvation to the ends of the earth."[4] There can be no question that Jesus calls the church to minister to the virtual world, it is for us as thoughtful apostles (those who go in Christ's name) to consider *how*.[5]