

A virtual Kingdom?

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The pastoral zeal of many members of the clergy as they explore virtual liturgy during the COVID-19 pandemic is impressive. Clearly they feel that they should make the eucharist available to those who cannot be present. In this sense they are in continuity with the tradition of the Church—as early as 150 AD—of including the absent in the reception of communion. Only, of course, that until now this inclusion consisted of sending the consecrated species to those who could not be present. Our recent attempts to make use of the internet to include those absent, however, provide fresh questions and concerns.

One of the aspects of eucharistic celebration that shines by its absence in our discussions of virtual liturgy is the eschatological aspect of the Holy Eucharist. To explore it here, I will first describe eschatology as it relates to ritual—specifically the eucharist—as the ritual enactment of the coming Reign of God, already showing evidence of it although it is not fully here yet. In contrast to this, I will name some challenges presented by virtual liturgy and what it may be saying about how we understand the eucharist, concluding with a brief summary.

Eschatology and ritual

By “eschatology” I refer not to the end of the world, but its transformation into God’s Kingdom/Reign of truth, justice, peace and love. For as N.T. Wright has clarified,

*“The phrase kingdom of heaven is not about a place called heaven, which is somewhere else, ... It is about the establishment of the rule of heaven, in other words, the rule of God here on earth”.*¹

¹ N.T. Wright. “Being in the Kingdom Today”, <https://ntwrightonline.org/being-in-the-kingdom-today>, accessed December 2019.

Thus “the Kingdom” is our shorthand for God’s the transformation of the world—a process already begun in the life, death, and ongoing life of Jesus. This eschatological hope has something in common with religious ritual across cultures and epochs, for religious ritual, as anthropologists remind us, make present to their participants a vision of how things “ought to be”—the ideal world. By presenting this experience, ritual forms us with a worldview and ethos. In our case as Christians this worldview (our vision of how the world is) and ethos (our way of living in it), flow from the ministry and witness of Jesus Christ and his earliest followers, presented both in the New Testament but also in our eucharistic *practice*, originating as a shared full meal, “...the central act around or within which others—reading and preaching and prophecy were arranged.”²

The first eucharists

It is important, however, when looking at the genesis of the eucharist, not to project our own experience back into the first century. The Christians in Corinth to whom Paul addressed his letters in c. 52 AD were not in a “church”, nor sitting in pews watching, nor hearing canonical texts—other, perhaps than the Hebrew scriptures. The gospel would not be written for at least another twenty years. They assembled in homes or businesses—usually a small group of 20-30 persons, to eat together. Indeed, “church” in Greek (*ekklesia*), means *assembly*. Assembled for what? To remember Jesus over a shared meal and discuss his life and teachings and what they meant for them in their own context.

This shared meal was quickly identified by Paul with the Lord. It is “the Supper of the Lord”—a term he brings into his letter to the Corinthians to support his claim that they are the risen Body of Christ—an insight to be elaborated on by the evangelists over a generation later. The synoptic gospels, besides pointing to the presence of Christ in the shared meals, as in Luke, further elaborated the meaning of our eating assemblies: they are a *sign* of the coming Kingdom of God. Here, on earth. Two aspects of the shared meals gave this away: they were radically *egalitarian*—rich and poor, slaves and free, citizens and foreigners, women and men—together without separation. And they were about *love* (agape). As Tertullian later wrote,

*Our feast explains itself by its name. The Greeks call it, agape, i.e., affection. Whatever it costs, ...with the good things of the feast we benefit the needy; ...[and] as it is with God himself, a peculiar respect is shown to the lowly.*³

² Andrew McGowan, *Ancient Christian Worship: Early Church Practices in Social, Historical and Theological Perspective*. (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic., 2014), 20.

³ Tertullian *Apology*, 39:16-18.

The rehearsal of the Kingdom

Roman Catholic liturgical theologian Mark Searle used the phrase “rehearsal of the Kingdom” to describe the Holy Eucharist in this eschatological dimension. Accordingly, the eucharist is, “An actual rehearsal of the way of life foretold in the prophets and realized in Christ. Not talking about justice and peace, but a doing of justice and peace.”⁴ And, “It shapes and forms Christians who grow to take responsibility for the implementation of the kingdom vision in the world today.”⁵ About the same time, the relationship between eucharist and Eschatology was being articulated by Geoffrey Wainwright.⁶

This rehearsal of the Kingdom that is the Eucharist is not simply the communication of words and ideas *about* the Kingdom. Rather, it is the physical embodiment of it by a concrete community made up of human bodies. In the happy phrase of most liturgical theologians, in the eucharist we experience the Kingdom of God *already here* although it has not arrived fully *yet*.⁷ Medieval theologians like Aquinas called this the “pledge” or down-payment of the life of the Kingdom, or as it is often translated, eternal life.

The challenges of digitized worship

It is against all this historical and theological background that the issues emerging from our zeal to provide *something* during the pandemic need to be understood and evaluated. Often supporters of virtual liturgy refer to it as if it were the same as being physically present in our assembly. *It is not*. Even if those watching avail themselves of the tradition of “spiritual communion” (an interior act of faith and desire to receive Jesus), *it is still not the same* anymore than watching a soccer game is the same as playing it.⁸ What is lost in the process is the very nature of the church as an assembly or mini society, gathered physically as a community. Moreover the digital distance established by streamed liturgies displays and reinforces aspects of liturgical participation that Church leaders have been trying to address for at least the last sixty years.

⁴ Mark Searle, “Grant us Peace... Do we Hear What we are Saying? In *Rehearsing God’s Just Kingdom: The Eucharistic vision of Mark Searle*, ed. Stephen S. Wilbricht. Collegeville, Minnesota: Liturgical Press, 2013, 22.

⁵ _____, “The Pedagogical Function of the Liturgy,” *Worship* 55 no.4, July 1981, 333 and 345.

⁶ Geoffrey Wainwright. *Eucharist and Eschatology*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1981.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 41. See Also John Zizioulas, “The Eucharist and the Kingdom of God (Part III),” *Sourozh* 60 (May 1995): 43.

⁸ Aquinas, in his defense of “spiritual communion,” nevertheless points out that it is *not the same* as the physical reception of the eucharistized bread and wine: “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”. *Summa Theologiae*, III:80,1, ad.3.

Performance, commodification, individualism and privatization

Among the many things that the rush to virtual eucharists has shown is that consciously or not, we still conceive of the Holy Eucharist as something of a performance acted out to be watched by lay spectators.

Though certainly a performance, however, the liturgy is *enacted by the whole Church with God*—clergy and laity together—and not by the clergy for the benefit of a lay clientele. Watching and hearing are easily done through digital media, and so it is understandable that clergy who thought they were performing something on a stage for a client laity would rush to transmit the enactment on line. But as we saw above, the active, physical involvement of the whole assembly is lost.

Furthermore, a liturgy understood as a performance by only a priest and deacon may easily be transmitted, and furthermore commodified into a “thing” or “service” to be acquired through eyes and ears by passive *individuals*. This alone points to one of the great flaws of modernity: the denial of community as a constitutive aspect of the individual person. Briefly put, our rehearsal of the Kingdom on line becomes a thing to be consumed as an interior, “spiritual” experience of an individual soul. The popularity of “spiritual communion” makes the point.

What to do?

Instead of virtually packaging the clerical elements of our usual eucharist, hoping for the best, we may consider the challenges brought by the pandemic from an altogether different starting point: If we must “gather” virtually, what are the *means* of gathering? If the answer is, for example, Zoom, what does this platform do *well*? For what purpose do people usually “gather” through Zoom? To exchange news, ideas, opinions, decisions. They cannot gather to eat any more than to play soccer. So do not try to force the embodied eucharistic practice into a medium that dispenses with bodies—a very dangerous thing for ritual, which as we saw above, actually *forms us in the worldview and dispositions to live in the Kingdom*. Do we seriously envision a Kingdom made up of individual selves connected virtually?

Let us think instead of what the medium does well, and build the liturgy on that foundation. Zoom is a great way to hear the Word, share its meaning, and pray together. That is, virtual liturgy works well with liturgies of the Word (Daily Office or the first half of the Eucharist). In fact *lectio divina* or other Bible reflection methods may be good examples of what virtual liturgy can do best. With these, we also have the advantage of communicating a simpler, more participatory experience which will in

fact, build and support a community of active, participating members growing in the knowledge of the Word and each other.

Conclusion

A *great* deal is lost when the liturgy is streamed online. Some may have thought that the eucharist is a message or an interior event, but is in fact a physical gathering of a community carrying a message, yes, but affecting both bodies and souls) in which we are rehearsed in the worldview and ethos of the Kingdom of God, already present in our gathering to eat together. Thus a practice that abridges the nature of the eucharist as the physical gathering of the assembly of the Kingdom does serious violence to what the eucharist *is* and how it *takes place*. It also reaffirms the passivity of the laity as mere spectators of clerical doings, and supports individualism and the commodification of the means of grace in the service of an incorporeal, “spiritual” individual experience. Instead of trying the impossible, then, it may be better to think afresh about what it is that virtual media do well and build from there. As in all liturgical thinking, a key question for all involved—clergy and laity alike, is: What will the Kingdom of God look like when it arrives in your town, neighborhood, or home? How might *that* be presented virtually?