

## Virtual assurance: Reflecting on the ‘confident prayer of the Church’ through online worship

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### **Abstract**

The author addresses two constant questions in Roman Catholic sacramental theology against the background of the broadcasting of online Mass, especially during the restrictions imposed on in-person attendance to inhibit the spread of the SARS-CoV-2 virus. These are: what constitutes sacramental communion in the Roman Catholic Church and what is the role of the priest in celebrating the Eucharist? Looking at the first of those questions, he briefly examines the recent work of Katherine G. Schmidt and her use of the sacramental theology of Louis-Marie Chauvet, which addresses both the idea and the experience of presence and absence in the celebration of the Eucharist. The author concludes that, while her work raises some important issues that need to be addressed, she does not entirely represent Chauvet’s thinking, and the fullest understanding of sacramental communion in the Roman Catholic tradition will always include the physical. It is in addressing the second question, that of the responsibility of the priest in celebrating the Mass with an online congregation, that the author believes a more satisfactory answer can be found as to the sacramental ‘value’ of virtual worship. Employing the ideas of authority, authenticity, and assurance, as they relate to the ordained ministry, he maintains that it is crucial the ‘confident prayer of the Church’ be visible and accessible.





## **Presence and absence**

When Sara Parvis wrote of her sense of loss and frustration at the closure of churches in March 2020, she no doubt articulated the views of thousands of Catholics throughout the country. She lamented at the feeling of loss, criticised the notion of ‘making a spiritual communion’<sup>1</sup> and, while appreciating the efforts of the clergy to reach out, suggested that the celebration of Mass by priests alone could reinforce clericalism.<sup>2</sup> Parvis raised two very important and related questions which form the background to this article: What constitutes sacramental communion in Catholic theology? And what is the role of the priest in celebrating the sacraments?

In what follows, I shall be reflecting on the practice of online worship, specifically the broadcasting of the Eucharist in a rural parish, St Fillan’s and St Margaret’s, covering most of Strathearn, Perthshire, through the various stages of two lockdowns and various levels of restriction.

The feelings of intimacy and remoteness, of intense presence and absence, experienced while connecting through the internet, were accompanied almost daily by questions about what it was that we were trying to achieve, and what the value was of the regular online broadcasting of Mass. Was it to keep the community together? Was it outreach? Did it emerge from a fear of people abandoning the Church? Would participation in online worship bring about a richer appreciation of and increasing devotion to the Eucharist? Was the making of a ‘spiritual communion’ simply bad theology, as suggested by Parvis in her article, or was it a ‘valid’ act, or at least an expression of longing that would lead people to a greater desire for the ‘real thing?’ What was the ‘real thing?’

I concluded that reflecting on the function of the priest in the parish was important in evaluating the worth of celebrating an online Eucharist. In assessing this role, I shall employ what for me are three key concepts in the ministry of the parish priest: authority, authenticity, and assurance. I shall present and explain these ideas later in the article. Firstly, I want to review one possible view of how online worship can not only be justified

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<sup>1</sup> An example can be found at <https://www.vaticannews.va/en/prayers/the-spiritual-communion.html>.

<sup>2</sup> Sarah Parvis, “Church Closure: Why We Must Mourn”, *The Tablet*, 30<sup>th</sup> April 2020.



but may lead to a deeper appreciation of sacramental communion in this world of mass digital communication.



### **Creating a space for encounter**

In a timely publication, Katherine G. Schmidt has developed a theology of the internet with specific attention paid to the two pillars of sacramental theology, Incarnation and ecclesiology.<sup>3</sup> I want to reflect on two key ideas in her work. The first comes from her examination of the interaction between a person's imagination and the means of engaging with the divine and the community, which creates a space for encounter. This space is created as much by an acknowledgement of absence as presence, and this is part of the embodiment that defines sacramentality in the Church, she would contend.<sup>4</sup> The second emerges from her use of a modern sacramental theology of communion which may go some way to validate the practice of online worship, not just as a 'stop gap', but as effecting communion through virtual interaction.<sup>5</sup>

Schmidt reminds us that through different forms of art and devotion, believers have always encountered the 'other' in virtual ways.<sup>6</sup> When a person's imagination engages with a devotional object, a space is created in which communion between God and the person, and the person with the Church, can take place. What she is referring to here is the deeper Christian meaning of symbol, that which brings the believer into the orbit of God, through a process of intentional action and performance, using a material object, which itself has a meaning and a history in the ecclesial context.

If we take the Incarnation seriously, then it is through the relationship between created realities and our graced consciousness that communion is achieved. While the internet is a new means of connecting people in a nonphysical way, it does mediate the presence of one to another, in a manner not entirely different from other more familiar means of religious engagement.

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<sup>3</sup> Katherine G. Schmidt, *Virtual Communion: Theology of the Internet and the Catholic Sacramental Imagination* (Lanham, MD; London: Lexington Books/Fortress Academic, 2020, Kindle Edition accessed through the Kindle App on a Samsung Galaxy S6 Lite).

<sup>4</sup> Schmidt, Chapter 2, paragraphs 20–25.

<sup>5</sup> Schmidt, Chapter 7.

<sup>6</sup> Schmidt, Chapter 4.



*Virtual assurance: Reflecting on the value of online worship*

While we may criticize the internet for being a place where division and hatred is sometimes given free rein, this is, Schmidt believes, to romanticise the physical meeting of people and the traditional ways in which parishes used to grow as communities. Certainly, one does not need the internet to start an argument! Schmidt also points out that more recently among church-goers, neither geography, nor social and cultural factors, have always dictated how we form relationships. Community is often chosen rather than given, and, in choosing to ‘buy into’ a particular platform or means of socialising online, the internet is a place where authentic encounter can take place, and, yes, even communion of life.<sup>7</sup>



### **Modern Catholic sacramental theology**

The second idea I wish to highlight in Schmidt’s work is the use she makes of the theology of Louis-Marie Chauvet.<sup>8</sup> Chauvet, along with other late twentieth- and early twenty-first-century Catholic theologians, wants to move away from the reification of the Eucharist and a ‘productionist’ schema which understands the relationship between God and humans as established in a false immediacy. This immediacy is brought about by an already achieved communion between the physical and divine in the consecrated host and wine, which is then ‘presented’ to the believer in order to elicit a faith response. Rather than enabling a divine-human interaction, the sacraments, especially the Eucharist, are thus understood as ‘deposits’ or ‘containers’ of grace.<sup>9</sup>

Since at least the time of Odo Casel and Edward Schillebeeckx, and through the theology of more recent theologians such as David Power and Edward Kilmartin, an attempt has been made to formulate a valid Catholic theology in the language of prayer and encounter. The sacraments are considered as real symbols. God, in Christ and the Spirit, enables humans to pass over into the realm of divine life, and brings the Church together through words and elements that mean something to both God and humanity. For the sacrament to be ‘real’, the human person must assent and participate in the ritual, and to the mediation of the Body of Christ, the

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<sup>7</sup> Schmidt, Chapter 6, paragraphs 18–29; 34–36.

<sup>8</sup> Schmidt, Chapter 7, paragraphs 40ff.

<sup>9</sup> Louis-Marie Chauvet, *Symbol and Sacrament: A Sacramental Reinterpretation of Christian Existence* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1995), 21–26.



*Virtual assurance: Reflecting on the value of online worship*

Church. Presence is not so much something contained in the sacraments as communicated by means of the sacraments where the Triune God brings people into communion with the persons of the Trinity. The effect of the sacrament is not seen as ancillary but as an indispensable part of its definition.<sup>10</sup>

Within this framework, the symbolic involves both a presence and an absence. There is a free communication of persons, which is really effected by and bound up with the matter, form, and history of the sacramental element. However, encounter with the divine also depends on a letting go, a desire not to possess but to give and to relate in new and life-giving ways. The performance of the sacraments leads to a transformation of the person who assents to the meaning of the ritual. Neither God, nor the person, nor the community are bound by some form of already established presence leading to an inescapable causality.

In fact, the celebration of the Eucharist in particular, reminds us that God is not a possession, and cannot be contained. God is present but absent. To 'jump the gap' between this world and the next, one needs a faith response, a rupture with an old way of thinking and relating.<sup>11</sup> Sacraments are prayers of Christ in the Spirit with and in the Church to God, the Father. God reveals God's self throughout salvation history, and gifts to the Church a language of words, materials, and gestures, which are full of meaning for humanity and mediate an exchange of life and communion. Communion is not contained in the material object, but in the graced encounter.<sup>12</sup>

If an emphasis is placed on personal encounter through recognisable and meaningful language, a language which encompasses not only words and gestures, but intention, engagement, and consciousness, then online engagement is an example of a symbolic rupture which at once cures us of a false immediacy and puts us in a place of genuine encounter.<sup>13</sup> It does this by removing us physically from one space and positioning us in a new

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<sup>10</sup> Edward J. Kilmartin, *Christian Liturgy: Theology and Practice* (Kansas City, MO: Sheed and Ward, 1988), 171; Edward J. Kilmartin, *The Eucharist in the West: History and Theology*, ed. Robert J. Daly (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1998), 357–90; David N. Power, *Sacrament: The Language of God's Giving* (New York: Crossroad Publishing Company, 2011), 144–46.

<sup>11</sup> Chauvet, *Symbol and Sacrament*, 99.

<sup>12</sup> Kilmartin, *Eucharist in the West*, 357.

<sup>13</sup> Chauvet, *Symbol and Sacrament*, 330–31.

one where we have to choose and ‘work at’ (perform) relationships.<sup>14</sup>



### **Virtual communion**

Schmidt thus examines a theological language that articulates the experience of many people, especially during lockdown when participation in worship was restricted to remote access. During these days, believers were forced to accept that ‘immediate’ and physical access to the Eucharist was impossible (even for the dying). Community wasn’t being ‘laid on’ but had to be worked at. There had to be a letting go to reconnect in another space, where there was the possibility of discovering or rediscovering a deeper meaning of ritual.

Chauvet himself describes the relationship established by ritual as digital, positioning the person in a potentially new relationship.<sup>15</sup> Taken together with Schmidt’s proposal of how we reconsider our relationships, both vertical and horizontal, in an internet age, we may have a framework for assessing the worth and purpose of online worship, not just as a ‘stopgap’ but as revealing of new perspectives on sacramental communion.



### **Justification for online Catholic worship**

It might be argued that the recommending of the ‘making of a spiritual communion’, combined with participation in online worship, was not bad theology. It could be a conscious repositioning of one’s appreciation of the Eucharist, engaging the imagination and the mental focus of a participant, and the losing of a sense of entitlement. With the right disposition (always a factor in discussing the sacraments), there could be, in these situations, real communication of sacramental grace and a transformation of the person, accomplished without the physical reception of communion.

Despite the stories of people following Mass on their tablet while having tea and toast in bed, there was also plenty of other anecdotal evidence that individuals and families participated in online Masses with great devotion. Some commented on there being fewer distractions and its being a more prayerful experience. Parishioners also commented on their experience of ‘surfing’ for Masses leading to their finding a spiritual home

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<sup>14</sup> Chauvet, *Symbol and Sacrament*, 132–35.

<sup>15</sup> Chauvet, *Symbol and Sacrament*, 347–48.



in another parish or tuning in regularly to a large parish or cathedral where there was a ‘fuller’ liturgy. Was there a real value in having an online experience of Mass, beyond simply keeping a connection? Were these moments of evangelisation and opportunities for catechism, when individuals were more open, having been forced to abandon old practices?

Before reaching a conclusion regarding the merits of online worship from a Catholic perspective, I wish firstly, to briefly examine the theological framework which Schmidt uses to partly found her notion of virtual communion, particularly the sacramental theology of Louis-Marie Chauvet. From there, I want to propose an alternative starting point and route towards the evaluation of online Catholic worship, focusing on the role of the presbyter in broadcasting online liturgy.



### **The institutional nature of the sacraments**

Schmidt opens up some interesting perspectives, and she at least tackles head-on the issue of communion in the virtual world. Modern Catholic theology provides a language with which to articulate the experience of online worship in a meaningful way. However, she has a rather partial view of Chauvet’s sacramental theology. She ignores, for example, the importance Chauvet places on the Eucharistic elements as a social and physical given in the world of meaning.<sup>16</sup> Also, Chauvet’s whole project is an attempt to emphasise the bodily aspect of the sacraments in the fullest sense, including the institutional aspect of the sacraments which is not at our disposal.<sup>17</sup>

The Eucharist in Catholic theology has always had a dense or, to employ Schmidt’s terminology, a ‘thick’ quality, with various layers, including the physical. Focusing on the ritual itself, without even going into the theology of transubstantiation, the standing, kneeling, gestures, and call and response, engage the participant not just at the intellectual or imaginative level. While it would be interesting to explore the theology of virtual participation using some sort of VR device, this was and still is not available to the vast majority of those accessing Mass through the various electronic and broadcast media.

While thinkers such as N. T. Wright provided a scriptural and theological

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<sup>16</sup> Chauvet, *Symbol and Sacrament*, 396–98.

<sup>17</sup> Chauvet, *Symbol and Sacrament*, 338.



## *Virtual assurance: Reflecting on the value of online worship*

framework which made some sense of the pandemic,<sup>18</sup> for a regularly attending Catholic, it is their sacramental life, and, above all, the Eucharist that preoccupies them. This involves more than imagination or acts of spiritual communion. In fact, for most people most of the time, while their mind may wander throughout the celebration of Mass on a Sunday, and their attention is taken up by their children, their aches and pains, or boredom at the sermon, the fact that they get there, and that they receive communion is what counts.

Recalling the critique of modernity offered by, for example, Charles Taylor, and his consideration of what he calls ‘disengaged reason’,<sup>19</sup> it is not difficult to conclude that, rather than providing an engaged grace-filled moment, online worship exemplifies the productionist schema critiqued by Chauvet and referred to by Schmidt. The very word ‘production’ is implied by a TV or internet broadcast, an already confected event, presented to the viewer. Recent Catholic sacramental theology, which provides a possible nest for the development of an internet theology, has not envisioned a liturgy in which the physical absence of participants is a norm. The bodily ritual and interaction are vital elements in the reality of the sacraments.



### **The role of the clergy**

What is the point of online worship in a Catholic context? To begin to answer this question, I turn to Parvis’ other observations about her feelings of being excluded from the Eucharist while priests were celebrating without a congregation. I consider the ministry of the priest in the parish under three aspects: authority, authenticity, and assurance.

#### ***Authority***

The sense of loss experienced by Catholics at the closure of churches was also accompanied by a certain amount of resentment both against the UK

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<sup>18</sup> N. T. Wright, *God and the Pandemic: A Christian Reflection on the Coronavirus and its Aftermath* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2020).

<sup>19</sup> Charles Taylor, *Sources of the Self: The Making of the Modern Identity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 111–207; Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2007), 136–37; 559–96.





## *Virtual assurance: Reflecting on the value of online worship*

governments and towards the clergy: authority figures. Cynically, this antipathy could be portrayed as the result of consumerism, with the clergy denying the customer what they want but for the most part this sense of frustration reflected the conviction that congregations were being denied something fundamental to their lives, at a time when their other supporting social networks were disintegrating.

The possibility of a priest celebrating Mass alone for a just reason is provided for in the *General Introduction to the Roman Missal*.<sup>20</sup> The theological foundation and explanation for this is precisely in the priest's relationship with Christ and the Church. Much is made of the priest as acting 'in the person of Christ' (*in persona Christi*), but it is often forgotten that the full phrase is in fact *in persona Christi capitis ecclesiae*, 'in the person of Christ, head of the Church'. For a full 'realisation' of this role, the presence of the congregation is assumed, but it also implies that the priest may act alone but in the name of the Church.<sup>21</sup> In other words, a Mass celebrated by a priest alone, acting in the power of Christ and in the name of the Church, is valid.

The authority conferred on a priest to act in this way is for others, since the priest celebrates every Mass for the good of the Church and the world. During lockdown, what was important was that the Eucharist was being celebrated, not to reinforce some exclusive clerical club, but to offer the sacrifice of the Mass especially with the suffering world (and parishioners) in mind (intention). The mission of the priest is beyond the capacity of any one person because the person of Christ acts in and through the ministry of the priest for others.<sup>22</sup>

### **Authenticity**

Faced with controversy, the Catholic Church has tended to do two things over the centuries: restate the importance of its roots in scripture, tradition, and magisterium; and call for a spiritual renewal. Thus, authenticity

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<sup>20</sup> Benedict XVI, *General Instruction of the Roman Missal* (London: Catholic Truth Society, 2011), number 254.

<sup>21</sup> John Paul II, *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (London: Chapman, 1994), paragraph 1548.

<sup>22</sup> Dermot Power, *A Spiritual Theology of the Priesthood: The Mystery of Christ and the Mission of the Priest* (Washington, D.C.: CUA Press, 1998), 73.



*Virtual assurance: Reflecting on the value of online worship*

expresses itself in terms of faithfulness to belief, and of the quality of relationship with God and others.

During the lockdowns and restrictions, the camera and microphone brought people ‘nearer’ to the celebration of the Eucharist. The congregation was no longer located some metres away on benches and seats, but up close and personal. Every flaw in intention and expression of the celebrant was magnified, and the inner self was more clearly on display. In other words, it was the priest’s relationship with the Eucharist rather than that of the peoples’ that was under scrutiny. In a way, the laity were ‘let off the hook’ by not having to be there! I, along with other priests throughout the world, had to refocus on the meaning of the Eucharist and pay more attention to what I was doing. I felt at times more consciously in touch with the tradition of the Church, and I was more aware of my own lack of personal holiness than at any other time in my priesthood.<sup>23</sup>

In his post-synodal exhortation, *Pastores dabo vobis*, John Paul II makes it clear that the dialogue between God and the priest has always to be about the people of God, the Church.<sup>24</sup> In one sense, this dialogue was made clearer in Mass celebrated online, as most of the clergy were anxious to include the people consciously and overtly. I was all too aware that people literally could not come to me, and I had to accentuate the symbolic exchange between God and the Church. I am convinced that these days changed the bond between parishioners and me, and certainly forged relationships with a new online community.

***The ritual expectation***

Before looking at how the word assurance could be applied to the role of the clergy and the evaluation of online worship, it is useful, I think, to take a step back and ask what it is people expect and have always expected from the Church at key moments in their lives.

Those who have no obvious contact with the Church, and who appear to have little (or no) knowledge of what the Church believes happens in

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<sup>23</sup> See John Paul II, Apostolic Letter, “*Dominicae Cena*”, official text *Acta Apostolicae Sedis* 72 (1980), sections 113–148. Here the late Pope makes the explicit connection between the Eucharist and the priest’s personal holiness.

<sup>24</sup> John Paul II, Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation, *Pastores dabo vobis*, official text *Acta Apostolicae Sedis* 84 (1992), paragraphs 5, 15.



*Virtual assurance: Reflecting on the value of online worship*

the sacramental encounter, still make requests for the celebration of the sacraments, particularly for baptism and First Holy Communion (less so, these days, for marriage). Chauvet, in his later shorter work on the sacraments, reflects on this and asks the question of how best to prepare for sacramental celebrations in these circumstances. He notes two factors governing the expectations of those who do not regularly ‘practise’ their faith and those who do. The first he calls social difference, and the second he denotes as the disparity between what the Church professes and what individuals and congregations actually believe.<sup>25</sup>

The social difference between the two groups mentioned above may be characterised, Chauvet believes, as that of ‘communion’, on the one hand, and ‘distinctiveness,’ on the other. Following the logic of communion, those who have little contact with the Church, yet still make requests for the celebration of the sacraments, may still believe that they are placing themselves within the tradition of the Church, their family, and indeed society. They see sacraments as rites of passage, and affirmations of their children and of themselves, reaffirming their sense of belonging or being part of a community in a more traditional worldview.

Regular attendees at Mass, on the other hand, perhaps see themselves as identifying over and against the social. The fact that they have made a religious commitment amid a largely secular society and have a more ‘purist’ approach to their religion underlines their individuality and ability to make a personal choice. This displays a more modern attitude.

Given the differing outlook of these two groups, Chauvet contends that ritual can take on a life of its own, independent of its origins, and from what the Magisterium of the Church teaches.<sup>26</sup> Social and psychological factors also play a part in the motivations of those who act as pastoral agents of the sacraments.

I sometimes came across differing attitudes to online worship between those who normally had little physical contact with the Church, but who were grateful for and made a connection with online worship during an existential crisis, and those of regular practice, and sometimes a more purist attitude (particularly among the clergy), who often disparaged online worship, even seeing it as dangerous.

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<sup>25</sup> Louis-Marie Chauvet, *The Sacraments: The Word of God at the Mercy of the Body* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2001), 173–200.

<sup>26</sup> Chauvet, *The Sacraments*, 178–83.





**Conclusion: *Virtual Assurance***

The priest in the parish must negotiate between differing expectations, on the one hand, and what the Church's official position is, on the other. Chauvet recommends a useful tool in the managing of expectations, and for creating the conditions for conversion of those who make requests for the celebration of the sacraments. He calls this the 'pastoral interview'. Neither simply saying 'yes' for the sake of an easy life, nor holding a dogmatic line, fearing the abuse of the sacraments, the pastoral interview introduces both dialogue and space in which God's gratuitous action has a chance to operate. During this process, no goals or demands are made by either party, no dates or conditions are set. The process offers the opportunity for God's grace to guide and to inspire, or to be rejected, almost, one might say, in 'good faith'.<sup>27</sup>

The offering of Mass online offered an opportunity to all to appreciate something freely offered during a particularly needy time. Once given, it was 'out there', yes, perhaps for convenient consumption, perhaps for a call to conversion. Either way, the sacrament was not under threat, because the ministry of the priest, given by God in, with, and to the Church, guaranteed that it was not abused. Perhaps, it was a type of pastoral interview.

Every day, the motivations and mental distractions of the worshippers who are physically present at the Eucharist are in play. Why would we make such a fuss just because an online broadcast brought the sacraments into peoples' homes while they were distracted by daily life?

The actions of the local priest represent the closeness of God. Sacraments must be visible. I am not just referring here to the words and elements, but to the sacramental event itself. While the authority of the priest to act in the person of Christ, head of the Church, was justifiably exercised in the celebration of Mass without a congregation during the different stages of restriction and lockdown, and the scrutiny of the camera often gave rise to a more personally authentic practice, so the visibility of the Mass gave assurance that the Eucharist, offered in union with Christ for the Church and the world, was not suspended. The 'confident prayer of the Church' (a phrase borrowed from Kilmartin and used throughout his works) persisted. How people responded was largely up to them, but there

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<sup>27</sup> Chauvet, *The Sacraments*, 183–200.



*Virtual assurance: Reflecting on the value of online worship*

was assurance, albeit virtual, that the central act of the Church's life continued, and for that alone, I consider the broadcasting of Mass online to be sacramental.

Cast your bread upon the water; at long last you will find it again.  
Share with seven, yes with eight, for you never know what disaster  
may occur on earth. (Ecclesiastes 11:1–2)