

## Digital Celebrations



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With the advent of Covid-19, Facebook and similar digital platforms seem to have become liturgical spaces. Every kind of celebration is transmitted through them: “home-made” liturgies are held, retreat houses offer online activities, spiritual assistance is offered through a computer screen and so on. The coronavirus crisis is reinforcing a trend that has been going on for years. In the lives of many Christians, the digital environment has become a stable presence. More and more people are praying while listening to podcasts such as *Pray as you go* on their smartphones or preparing for Christmas and Easter using digital retreats. This development is welcomed with enthusiasm, but at the same time it arouses objections and resistance.

Every day, together with a large group of professionals and volunteers, I produce digital religious material. During the coronavirus crisis we have been offering themed audio retreats on life in isolation, community prayers for Holy Week and Easter, and a series of videos on how to live your spirituality in times like these.

We reach people of all generations and from different Christian Churches and communities. Among our most faithful visitors we count many lonely, sick and elderly Christians. Often they are people who, through no fault of their own, no longer have physical access to a community of faith. There are also young people in north-western Europe who can no longer find a community of reference. Then there is the special phenomenon of monastic communities that are reduced in number and are often elderly. They struggle to find a pastor and for this reason use digital audio and video material for their retreats. In short, today many people have no other choice.

Sometimes people label everything “digital” as “virtual,” or they contrast the real world with the digital environment. But in people’s lives what is digital is real, even in terms of religious experience. Benedict XVI made this clear: “The digital environment is not a parallel or purely virtual world, but part of the daily reality of many people” (*Message for the 47th World Communications Day, May 12, 2013*). Those who surf the web can take advantage of the offer of “digital” faith, so to speak, wherever and whenever they wish. In addition, this offer is usually free of charge. This combination contributes to the fact that many people are deeply touched by it: this includes practicing Christians, but also people who do not have a defined religious affiliation.

Does this mean that physical churches as places of worship are destined to disappear? No. For Christians, the digital environment will not take the place of the physical environment. It is not desirable and it is not possible. In the digital offering it is necessary to build bridges with the physical environment and to seek to build local

communities. But, at the same time, the ecclesial community is called on to fully come to terms with the place that the digital environment occupies today in our societies and cultures. More specifically, we should consider the digital environment above all as an opportunity that encourages us to think of and experience traditional practices in a different way.<sup>[1]</sup>

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In this regard, the exponential increase in streaming Eucharistic celebrations during the coronavirus crisis is an interesting case. It attracts both enthusiasm and criticism. In their home churches, the faithful are happy to see their priests celebrating the Eucharist. At the same time, the sight of a church reduced to a largely deserted building can increase the feeling of loneliness and isolation. The prescriptions of social distancing mean that in many celebrations streamed on Facebook or YouTube only the priest is seen. This brings a clerical dominance to a liturgy whose community character is essential.

You can choose different ways: I have presided over celebrations through Zoom. It is a software that allows the community to be audible and visible and makes it possible to carry out readings, songs and prayers in a practical and interactive way, which is impossible with the usual radio and television celebrations. Participating and celebrating together on a digital platform, rather than watching as strangers while the priest “says” the Mass broadcast alone, is certainly a better solution.

But even in the best of circumstances, streaming celebrations make many people uncomfortable. As a priest, I find the moment of communion in such celebrations unreal. We sing together, listen to the Word, engage from our different houses; we see and hear each other while we pray, bow and kneel before the consecration, and wish each other peace. At the moment of communion we say a prayer of spiritual

communion. With it the faithful express their desire to receive the Lord, but at the same time they are invited to realize that they cannot receive Him sacramentally. It is clear that there is a limitation here.

Pope Francis, on April 17 last, in his homily at Mass in Santa Marta, recalled this deficiency and the fact that only spiritual communion can be achieved. He continued: “And this is not the Church: this is the Church in a difficult situation, which the Lord permits, but the ideal of the Church is always with the people and with the Sacraments. Always. The Church, the Sacraments, the People of God are concrete. It is true that in this moment we must provide this familiarity with God in this way, but so as to come out of the tunnel, not to stay inside it. And this is the familiarity of the apostles: not gnostic, not virtual, not selfish, for each one of us, but a concrete familiarity, amongst the people.”

The document *The Church and the Internet* (2002) issued by the Pontifical Council for Social Communications was very clear: “Virtual reality is no substitute for the Real Presence of Christ in the Eucharist, the sacramental reality of the other sacraments, and shared worship in a flesh-and-blood human community. There are no sacraments on the Internet.”

But it also affirmed that “religious experiences” on the web “are possible by the grace of God” (No. 9). The question that this coronavirus crisis is posing remains open: what does inculturation of the liturgy and the sacraments in the digital experience mean at a time when internet mediation is becoming increasingly important?

[1] 1. See A. Spadaro, *Cyberteologia: Pensare il cristianesimo al tempo della rete*, Milan, Vita e Pensiero, 2012