Crucible

Christian Theology in the midst of COVID-19

Virtual Communion, COVID-19, and the Nature of the Body of Christ

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Introduction

In his memoirs, Jürgen Moltmann (2009) describes two different Eucharists in which he participated in 1968. One was with Protestants and Catholics at the London offices of the publisher Sheed and Ward before an anti-Vietnam War protest. The second was at the historic St Giles Cathedral in Edinburgh, after a formal lecture, where the Lord's Supper was served on silver trays by uniformed servers. To Moltmann, the first celebration evoked Christ's presence; the second left him depressed. Of course, the first Eucharist challenged denominational boundaries and connected him to the 'streets of the poor who follow Jesus', but Moltmann also distinguishes the two Eucharists in physical language. At the first, 'Bread and wine passed from hand to hand in a small circle'; at the second, 'The participants sat separate from one another, scattered here and there in the great church' (Moltmann, 2009, p. 164).

How does physical presence matter? In this essay, we explore the possibility of a 'virtual Eucharist' using Moltmann's theology of God's suffering. We ask whether the sense of Christ's presence is bound up with a congregation and material signs that are not merely inclusive but physically present—like on the floor of a Catholic publisher in London—or whether the nature of the Eucharist derives from a sense of absence that reflects the absence of God to the crucified Jesus. This essay originated in a blog post by Hannah Bowman (Bowman, 2020). Neil Dhingra responded in the comments; correspondence began. We disagree about Moltmann's theology, and therefore about the possibility or indeed desirability of a 'virtual Eucharist', but we

agree that the question of the 'virtual Eucharist' should be less about technological ingenuity and more about the nature of God.

The debate over virtual communion

During this pandemic, C. Andrew Doyle (2020), Bishop of the Episcopal Diocese of Texas, issued a pastoral letter arguing against celebrations of virtual communion because of the necessity of a physical congregation. To Doyle, worship must be a self-consciously communal activity in 'one place' with 'physical material signs.' A virtual Eucharist risks being an 'abstraction' celebrated by a community that can only be a 'precursor' to those gathered 'shoulder to shoulder and hand in hand'. Uniquely, a physical gathering is the experience of a 'transcendent reality' that transforms as 'eyes, hearts, and minds are lifted up in a different way to hear and see differently'—an experience unavailable to individuals linked online (see McGowan, 2020).

Doyle's concern that virtual communion remains an expression of individual preferences, however deeply felt, echoes Graham Ward's concerns that cyberspace, with its fluid realities and infinite possibilities, is just individual desire writ large (Ward, 2000). On the other hand, supporters of virtual communion have argued that being online is neither lesser than nor different from physical presence, at least as far as internal states go. Virtual *and* physical reality seem capable of bearing 'an orientation of the heart and soul' (Stoddard, 2020). One can be mentally or spiritually absent in both settings, and sincere or insincere with and without a computer.

Others see the distinction itself as outdated. 'A young mother wrestles her toddler into a shopping cart with one hand and updates her Facebook status with her other' (Reklis, 2012), present seamlessly throughout. One might be physically there at a church service but listen through digital sound. Virtual environments may be fully immersive; physical environments can involve partial sensibility (Rundell, 2019). Our virtual world seems neither extraneous to nor a pale facsimile of brick-and-mortar 'real life'.

Virtual communion and remote distance education

Is there, then, a specific desire evoked by physical presence? Doyle's argument for 'transcendent reality' resembles the late philosopher Hubert Dreyfus' argument for in-person teaching. In Dreyfus'

phenomenological interpretation (2009), a classroom has a shared mood to which we become attuned with our body's movements. The shared context, equivalent to the 'depth of field' for a football player, lets students be more involved in the class (and the teacher to be more effective) (Dreyfus, 2009, p. 66). This mood is not confected by individual desires, but created by a focal practice that provides a background, a self-contained world in which gestures and movements allow for the sense of shared communion that makes for an exciting class, or, Dreyfus acknowledges, the sacredness in Seder or a (non-virtual) Eucharist. When Doyle (2020) says of the physical Eucharist, 'We are different when we are together', and speaks of an 'awakening' and something we 'come to understand', he implicitly refers to the sense of attunement: 'We cannot have a feast of friends alone.' This attunement shapes, as Graham Ward (2000) may say, the distinctive desire evoked by the communion of the church.

The pandemic has not only seen arguments for and against virtual communion but has required widespread remote distance education. Its shortcomings seem to confirm Dreyfus' arguments. As Mark Vernon (2020) has written, in online environments we cannot *feel* what others mean but must prioritize one of our senses and actively try to capture our conversation partners' meanings. Online meetings are also inhospitable to the subtleties of movement and gesture. Thus, some students feel fatigued and easily distracted; others feel heavily scrutinized. The philosopher Evan Selinger (2020) suggests these tendencies are exacerbated by our awareness that they come as the world has been 'shattered and can't be revived'. We are driven, in compensation, to be 'so damned present and empathetic it hurts'.

Besides the difficulties of online education, the history professor Elesha Coffman (2020) claims that the classroom is like live theatre with practical and visible effects. Dreyfus writes that theatre flourishes in a world of film as the direct interaction between performer and audience allows for the active involvement of the spectator, who interactively chooses where to focus. In the theatrical classroom, Coffman writes that students, who see the 'harnesses, wires, pulleys, and pendulums', are drawn into the practice of history and imagine themselves as fellow historians. Videoconferencing, she says, is like CGI, which does not invite participation.

Moltmann and virtual communion

The virtual Eucharist may resemble remote distance education: interpretively difficult, reminiscent of loss, lacking in active participation. This is not necessarily an argument against virtual communion but rather the argument that virtual communion, should it occur, be celebrated in self-conscious awareness of its insufficiency and difficulty. This, however, may be no more than an intensified awareness of absence in 'normal' Eucharists. As Katharine Schmidt (2016) has written, the eucharistic celebration is always suspended between presence and absence as it recalls our distance from God: we intercede for the presence of what cannot be immediate to us.

The 'virtuality' of the virtual Eucharist may intensify three absences that we find described in Moltmann's work. First, the Eucharist is always the celebration of the *entire* church, which can never be physically present. (As Teresa Berger [2018] recounts, Peter Damian allowed even a hermit praying in solitude to use the plural 'us' in the liturgical texts.) At present, our physical celebrations of the Eucharist exclude those who cannot attend, especially those imprisoned. Moltmann (1993a, p. 44) writes that a church that has resigned itself to a 'profane' existing alongside the 'sacred' 'constantly bears with it its own crisis' if it remembers God's identification with the ungodly. In the celebration of a virtual Eucharist, this preexisting 'crisis' becomes hauntingly clear.

Second, the Eucharist is the celebration of the church *in time*. As Moltmann writes, liturgy exists through 'the in-streaming powers of the future power', but with the reminder of the 'qualitative differentiation between past and future' (Moltmann, 2004, pp. 139, 138). We celebrate from a position of incompleteness as we grasp a 'margin' between even our most faithful practice and the coming kingdom (Blevins, 2005), trusting that Christ is present in both the 'form of the crucified Christ' who '"dwells" in this godless world' and 'the form of the Risen Christ' who 'anticipates through the presence of his Spirit' the new creation to come as our world passes away (Moltmann, 2004, p. 267).

A third absence derives from the eternal 'eucharistic sacrifice' within the divine life itself (Moltmann, 1993b). The pandemic reveals a presence-in-absence in congregations and communities, as even in the absence of the Eucharist, the ability to pray through virtually-mediated means allows communities to grow deeper in prayer and connection, while at the same time grieving their physical separation.

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Moltmann describes this unity-in-separation as the situation of Jesus on the cross: 'In the cross, Father and Son are most deeply separated in forsakenness and at the same time are most inwardly one in their surrender. What proceeds from this event between Father and Son is the Spirit which justifies the godless, fills the forsaken with love and even brings the dead alive, since even the fact that they are dead cannot exclude them from this event of the cross; the death in God also includes them' (Moltmann, 1993a, p. 244).

The separation in our virtual gatherings points the Church back to the Crucified One. Every Eucharist is a remembering and making present of Christ's sacrifice on the cross; it is Jesus on the cross whose body and blood we share. Thus, the forsaken Christ lends his character of forsakenness to his Eucharistic presence. The element of absence in a virtual Eucharist expresses not only the separation across time and space common to every Eucharist, but also the eschatological reality of the Son's forsakenness which persists eternally—in dialectical tension with the victorious reunion with the Father accomplished through the resurrection—in the divine Trinitarian life. As Moltmann writes, the early twentieth-century Anglican tradition particularly recognized this 'necessity of seeing the eucharistic sacrifice, the cross on Golgotha, and the heart of the triune God together, in a single perspective....The cross on Golgotha has revealed the eternal heart of the Trinity' (Moltmann, 1993b, loc. 552).

Questions

The question for the virtual Eucharist, then, is whether the emphasis on absence still allows for the emergence of what Bishop Doyle describes as 'transcendent reality'. If not, virtual practices may be useful, but as *sacramentals* — similar to interior pilgrimages or devotions before replicas, in which the distinction from the real Jerusalem or the physical grotto at Lourdes is still maintained and significant (Schmidt, 2016). Then, perhaps the distanced bread and wine act only as material signs to aid in making an act of 'spiritual communion' (cf. Anderson, 2020), which proceeds from the realization that the Body of Christ is always in excess of the otherwise inaccessible Eucharistic signs (McGowan, 2020).

However, if the element of absence allows for participation in the 'transcendent reality' of a Trinitarian life characterized by both love and forsakenness, then a virtual Eucharist is the reminder that God

is present with us amidst tragedy, existing in tension with the failure of a church perpetually facing the 'crisis' of those excluded and its distance from its eschatological fulfillment. Liturgy, in other words, has always been interpretively difficult, reminiscent of loss, lacking in active participation. The Eucharist, particularly, is itself inherently a making-present of the death of God and the body of Christ who comes to us only in the full scandal of Jesus' abandonment on the cross.

Thus, we suggest that the church's discussion of the virtual Eucharist should not be discernment of the adequacy or normality of virtual life. It is not the search for a Silicon Valley solution. Instead, we should ask whether presence and absence are to be balanced against one another, so that a sufficient level of presence (or acceptable level of absence) is required for the celebration of the Eucharist, or if presence and absence instead exist in a dialectical relationship that reflects an originating dialectic of cross and resurrection in God. The discussion of the virtual Eucharist should take the form of a larger discussion of Moltmann's theology, if in a newly (and urgently) pastoral form.

As we mentioned, we have participated in such a discussion and constructively disagree. Against Moltmann, one can argue that the absence in our time of COVID-19 may be a form of suffering that should lead us to confusion and silence—an acknowledgement of our inarticulacy and what Karen Kilby calls 'something-like-apophasis' (Kilby, 2020, p. 102), our ability to speak only in terms of what cannot be said. Here, our perplexity is dangerously preempted by automatically seeing God in its midst and imagining that our liturgical actions are always on the side of (unseen and likely abstract) victims (Kilby, 2003). For this view, which itself can problematically veer towards a fascination with God's incomprehensibility (Kilby, 2020), this is not a time for a virtual Eucharist amidst physical absence or even a voluntarily accepted spiritual discipline, such as a 'Eucharistic fast', but what Ephraim Radner (2020) has called the acknowledgement of 'famine' and a hope for unforeseeable growth from unimaginable loss.

Conclusion

The question becomes whether a virtual Eucharist is a preemption of the reality of loss, as Dhingra imagines, or if—following Moltmann's theology of the cross—it is the acknowledgement that God's presence only occurs amidst the loss that is always there, as Bowman holds. Did Moltmann's experience of the presence of Jesus in the pre-protest

Eucharist on the floor of a publisher's office derive from the physical gathering or from the reality of the upcoming practice of solidarity with victims of war—a practice that leaves them no longer simply unseen and abstract? Whatever answer, the question of a virtual Eucharist should point the church's Eucharistic theology, even in 'normal' times, to deeper engagement with the relationship between suffering and sacrament and the reality of God's presence and absence in both.

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Questions for Discussion

1. What is the theological significance of a sense of absence in our Eucharistic celebrations?

2. Does that absence echo Jesus' forsakenness on the Cross?

3. Would a virtual Eucharist manifest God's presence-in-absence in ways previously unrecognized by us?

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