

The Church on the Cusp of the Virtual Age: On Using and Being Used by Emerging Technology

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I. From Email to Metaverse

Thank you to the St. Augustine's House community, to all of you here today, and to Brother Richard for suggesting me as this year's speaker. I made my first visit to St. Augustine's House in 2006, after my second year of divinity school and my summer of clinical pastoral education and shortly before my wedding. I've returned periodically in the years since, each time finding some needed blessing in the place, the company, the library, the worship, or the time of solitude. Often I found that needed blessing despite not looking for it.

I recently remembered a conversation I had with Brother Richard on that first visit, about a debate in the Benedictine world over whether email violated Great Silence. The immediacy of communication, rather than the act of vocal speech, was at issue. At the median, the church tends to be behind the culture in facing these kinds of questions; when I remember my teaching parish's use of very crude email systems to reach our members in those days, I am shocked at how much effort it took for such negligible results. I imagine monasteries are, in general, behind parish churches and synodical or diocesan practice. Though here I mean no disparagement by saying "behind;" I mean simply that we are likely to be relatively late to adopt new practices. This may reflect the median age of our participants and leaders, an instinctive cultural conservatism when new things are under discussion, or theologically informed reflection on the impact of those new things.

At any rate, when Richard and I had this conversation, email was already widely used, though it had not become omnipresent through smart phones or clogged with bulk messages to the point of near uselessness as it is today. Instant messaging on platforms like AOL was well established in the lives of heavy technology users. Still, apart from those super-users, it was not easy for most of us to imagine how our lives could be shaped by omnipresent and instant modes of communication. The Benedictine debate over email seems quaint in retrospect, but it was asking a good question.

Fast forward sixteen years, and thanks to this invitation to speak here, and my decision to make a trip of it with one of my children, I had to miss a presentation from a company billing itself as a “first of its kind spiritual metaverse focusing exclusively on the needs of spiritual but not religious.” I’m going to ask everyone to set aside whatever reactions you have to the phrase “spiritual but not religious” for a moment. A major challenge to thinking clearly and theologically about digital and virtual technology is its entanglement with different cultural signaling. The possibility raised by this company is of a form of community that exists entirely in a virtual dimension; that is, you access it through a headset and a proprietary platform, navigate an immersive artificial reality and interact with other people who are accessing the same platform. You could meet up with friends from the real world who live far apart from you, people you know only online, or bots programmed to learn from and improvise with your interactions. If someone creates it, you could attend a virtual Mass at a virtual Sagrada Familia, or a recreated Old St. Peter’s, or a cathedral on Mars. You can spend cryptocurrency on transactions in these spaces, too (along with regular money, presumably).

I do not claim to understand the technology involved here in any detail. I don’t think I’ve ever worn a pair of virtual reality goggles and the two-dimensional mock-ups of metaverse environments that I’ve seen have not impressed me. But these technologies have a way of becoming better, smoother, more affordable and more omnipresent. It is already possible for many, and surely tempting to some, to spend as much of their lives as possible in virtual environments. And to the extent that commerce, work, and leisure activities move partially or entirely into these environments, more people are bound to follow.

I am a strong enough partisan of the real world to have no hesitation about spending some time traveling with one of my children and being here instead of watching a VR spirituality pitch. However, part of me wishes this pitch had come up a week earlier so I could have seen it, purely out of my own curiosity. We may not be interested in new technology, but new technology is interested in us.

Sixteen years have taken us from a debate about instant communications routed through a desktop computer to the cusp of a wholly virtual and immersive world strapped directly to our heads. In between, we have seen those instant communications become omnipresent, video emerge alongside and ahead of text as a mode of communicating, huge communities of users aggregate themselves in social media platforms, and, especially since the pandemic, churches and other organizations routinely using streaming video and videoconferencing technology to bring dispersed people together for everything from the rite of Confirmation to monthly business meetings.

Sixteen years ago we were thinking about changes to the ways we communicate. Today, we are thinking more about changes to the ways we assemble, experience social life, and pursue leisure. And these new technologies raise questions the church can't avoid forever: Is there a right or legitimate use of video and virtual technology in worship? Can participation in a community be all-virtual? Can virtual practices or events serve as a supplement to in-person Christian community or can it fully replace it? And do churches risk being shut out of virtual spaces that may come to dominate social life if we don't embrace these technologies now? Is there any alternative?

I want to consider these related questions under two headings: first, with regard to the *oikos* or household of the church, and second, with regard to the *polis* or the wider system of social organization in which we do our work.

II. Virtual Presence in the Economy of the Church

When the novel coronavirus outbreak reached pandemic status in March 2020, churches along with business, schools, and cultural organizations rushed to stand up video access for people who could not gather in person. Clergy and worship ministers celebrated liturgies in empty sanctuaries with cameras sending the video to Facebook or YouTube, where people could follow along live from their homes. Others pre-recorded services from their sanctuary or their own homes and set them to "premier" on Sunday morning. Still others shared Zoom links so that participants could join with their own video and audio turned on. Worshipers could thus see and hear each other in real time.

Perhaps inevitably, this quickly raised questions about whether and how Holy Communion could be celebrated in a dispersed community participating virtually. Some leaders proposed a sort of Eucharistic fast. Others, especially in the Anglican world, embraced a Roman Catholic understanding of the Sacrament as a rite administered on behalf of and for the benefit of absent, non-receiving people. The prayer for "spiritual communion" was revived in many places (I had it printed every week in our online bulletins). And of course, many churches practiced Communion in a dispersed way, with each viewer setting up the elements during the service, the prayers and Words of Institution being understood to extend through the screen to those watching from home, and then communing themselves or each other.

This was not a new idea or practice, but it was immensely controversial. Advocates for virtual communion pointed out that seeing and hearing are physical actions, every bit as "real" as touching or tasting. They pointed out saying Vespers or holding Bible study on

Zoom could be just as moving and powerful as doing those things in person. They pointed out that the universality and unity of the Church was poignantly represented by worshiping across continents and time zones. At the level of sacramental theology, they insisted that, for most of the traditions having these conversations, there is nothing magic about the hands of the officiant. Rather the validity and efficacy of the sacrament comes from the words and institution of Christ and the intention of the worshipers.

Opponents of virtual communion (among which I counted myself) may have had answers to these challenges but as often as not posed their own, different, questions. Instead of bringing the Sacrament to the sick and homebound all these years, could I have been just calling people up and saying the words of institution over the phone? Can you leave your elements out in front of the screen the night before, sleep in, and then commune yourself after church is over at a time convenient to you? If we can choose to share Communion with our sister in Philadelphia and our favorite seminary professor in South Africa and so on, what happens to the local church of people we don't especially know or like? And isn't part of the point that the sacred meal involved a single loaf and a single cup, something concretely shared by people in real time and common space, exposed intimately to each other's frailties, vulnerabilities, and yes, illnesses?

In my judgment and direct experience, this debate was not for the most part a healthy development for the church. In practical terms, it kept us from thinking harder about ways to safely administer the sacrament during the worst months of the pandemic, whether that meant gathering outdoors, improving the ventilation of our worship spaces, using better masks, or making individual visits with appropriate precautions. We did not think enough about the goal: is it to slow the spread of the virus so that health systems are not overwhelmed? Or to absolutely minimize the risk of transmission? Or to facilitate worship for people with chronic or severe health problems? "Is virtual Communion possible?" became impossible to separate from "is virtual Communion good?" with the answer to one implying the answer to the other.

But in this sense, the adaptations of the pandemic simply accelerated the arrival of questions we would eventually have to ask ourselves anyway. There is, after all, abundant precedent for dispersed worship and action in the Christian tradition. Apparitions and visions are recorded in Scripture and tradition (the story of Scholastica and Benedict may be relevant here). Aquinas did not recommend that priests consecrate the contents of an entire wine cellar but he acknowledged that it was possible. And of course a monk traveling away from the house was expected to keep the hours out of his breviary, joining his prayers to the brothers wherever he may be.

We may even ask about how we experience “presence” in light of these technological developments. Were the worshipers at a papal mass in Yankees’ Stadium really in the “presence” of Paul VI or Benedict XVI? When I went to see the Rolling Stones in a huge open-air stadium and watched them mostly on giant screens, in what sense was I sharing a space with Mick Jagger? If I’d spent the same amount of money on a “virtual reality” front-row ticket and watched the show from home, would that be categorically different from sitting a literal football field away and watching him on a tower of video monitors?

Leaving aside the deep theological questions of what constitutes sufficient conditions for the “real presence” of Christ to be manifested or made available in the Sacrament, I suggest that churches and leaders have to ask a different question: What does it mean for human beings to be really present to each other? And I suggest a criterion: our presence is real when we impose on each other in an unavoidable way.

If this talk were happening in a Zoom meeting, you might be able to turn off your camera and your microphone and do chores or watch a movie or message your friends about how awful the speaker is. If you were to interrupt me too much, someone would have the power to simply mute you or put you in a breakout room. Or if I became too upset at things people say to me, I could simply exit the meeting at the push of a button. A great gift of modern communications platforms is the frictionless exit.

Now if a similar restive disorder were to break out in this room, you or I would have to go to the trouble of standing up, leaving our place, and exiting. If someone here were to start weeping or sneezing or having a seizure, it could not be hidden behind a muted microphone and a turned-off camera. Presence is an imposition. Presence demands acknowledgment. Presence requires escape.

I do not believe that Christian worship or Christian community can really do without this kind of presence (indeed I doubt whether a town or a city or many other communities can do without it). As empowering and edifying as it can be to gather and talk and even worship when we are scattered in physical space, there is finally no substitute for the mutual imposition of being together.

But if real presence is still necessary, in what sense can we use virtual presence? Evangelism, and even discipleship, require going “where people are,” and people are increasingly in online and virtual spaces. Social media has been integral to ministry for over a decade. Churches were often late to adopt more basic communications tools like websites and email, and that left us badly equipped to talk even to our own devoted members. At no point in my lifetime has it been wise to bet against a new

communication technology taking off and shaping everything it touches. So the task for the household of the church will be learning to reach, talk to, and connect people in digital forums without thereby losing the truth of human presence. Just as a hundred years ago churches and preachers started to take to the radio and seventy years ago to television, the new forms of communicating and gathering will need to be used.

The challenge, as always, will be integrating or properly ordering these forms of presence. One imagines a Sunday service schedule in the near future: 8:30 a.m. in the Sanctuary, 9 a.m. Metachurch traditional (Mozarabic rite liturgy with gothic-style chasuble based on El Greco's "Burial of Count Orgaz," celebrated in the Ravenna Cathedral on Jupiter's moon Io), 11 a.m. Metachurch contemporary (Pastor as robot avatar and AI-generated music).

I am not able, at this point, to imagine or propose a legitimate synthesis. Like every other revolution in media from the codex to the laser printer to email, it will be worked out in practice with much error, some beautiful doomed experiments, and constant struggles over the core meaning of human community. But we cannot expect these new tools to leave the household culture of churches unchanged. They will be changed, probably dramatically, perhaps in ways we would not like or even recognize.

III. The Politics of Virtuality

Turning to the church within the larger polis, I will briefly outline some considerations that I believe have not been adequately discussed during debates on virtual gathering, virtual sacraments and the like. There are political implications to these technologies, not in the narrow partisan sense but in the wider sense of how we as Christians move in a society organized on its own principles and priorities.

First: modern communications technology, while drastically cheaper than it was not long ago, is still very far from free or universally accessible. High-speed internet does not reach every home in the U.S., and there are many people who either don't have access or the ability to use the devices needed for even basic online worship.

Second: Even free platforms and software exist by extracting data from users. An online worshiper is, probably without knowing it, consenting to have vast amounts of their computer or phone usage sucked up and used for all kinds of purposes, from ad targeting to law enforcement.

And third: online platforms, from basic email programs to metaverse creations, are not in any sense a common or public space. They are not the equivalent of a public road to

our church buildings or a public park. They are not even very closely equivalent to a rented banquet hall or school gym. They are, in a sense, forms of sovereignty. It is not just that these platforms monitor and regulate the content shared on them. Content moderation is inevitable, however one feels about a given moderating decision. More importantly, these platforms can alter their functioning to make some kinds or sources of content more visible (a YouTube video shared on Facebook will reach fewer people than content from Facebook's own company), aggregate and use participant data, and negotiate with governments, funders, and other platforms in ways the public may not ever be meant to find out about. The ownership structures of Meta, Alphabet, and Twitter, are either private or effectively private, so ordinary corporate governance processes don't necessarily apply. A scandal erupted when reports came out that Twitter had shared data on Saudi dissidents with the Saudi government. The Saudi government along with other sovereign wealth funds and institutional lenders may be part owners of these platforms. To require or even encourage church participation through these sorts of platforms is to expose our own mission and the people in our community to risks that are not visible or even knowable when we simply click to join.

If, and as, this technology moves toward more comprehensive virtual reality spaces and platforms, the political challenge of ownership will be even greater. Fictions like *Ready Player One*, the novel by Ernest Cline adapted to film by Steven Spielberg, and the television series *Black Mirror*, speculate on the use of these virtual spaces and platforms for control and domination.

To the extent that "the metaverse" continues to develop without regulation or external constraint, we can expect it to reflect and indeed amplify all the inequalities and exclusions of the wider polis. We will enter it not as citizens, nor even as consumers, but as subjects.

All of these considerations argue for the church simply opting out of virtual reality altogether, or at least restraining our use of it to the narrowest and most prudentially-required portion of our life and mission. I struggle to be optimistic about a future that is both heavily synthetic and organized as an oligopoly.

But I also doubt that opting out will prove to be a realistic option. Imagine for a moment the invisibility of the church in a world where much, or most entertainment in the home happens in these immersive environments, when people need to leave rarely and, when they do, travel in self-driving cars that are surrounded with still more immersive digital content. How will our websites or weekly emails or Facebook updates or even our nicely-preserved real estate speak for us? And when we are forced to give up and

chase the world into the metaverse, will all the good virtual real estate be bought up and tolled for entry?

Again, I have no answer or synthesis to propose for the political challenges of virtual media. “Use but do not abuse; use but do not be conformed to:” these are the guiding principles of any new tool or form, and they simply aren’t specific enough to make concrete choices in particular circumstances.

But as a preacher by trade, I don’t want to leave you with only warnings and ironic musings. So I have a few conclusions and admonitions for the church on the threshold of the metaverse:

1. We need to be partisans of the real world. That means prioritizing real presence, defending the safety and accessibility of physical spaces, and working to preserve the peace and sustainability of the world beyond and between our private doors.
2. At the same time, we cannot ignore or dismiss the virtual world. It will not be a fad, an aberration, or a manifestation of evil that people will want or need rescue from. It is here to stay, and the people who spend time, attention, and money in it matter.
3. Do not run from or ignore the real politics of virtual reality. An open, accessible, transparent, and decently governed virtual world is the only one in which churches will be able to survive. This does not mean having no content moderation or only content moderation that we like. It does not mean having no rules. But it does mean trying to prevent the emergence or domination of digital fiefdoms or company towns.

Behind this last point is a whole history of Christian use of the world’s tools: following the roads and trade routes of the Roman Empire, attaching ourselves to princes and dynasties, aggressively using each new technology of print as soon as it appeared, embracing and advancing the structures of the modern nation-state, fanning out before and behind the armies of European colonialism, homesteading on conquered land, following wagon trains, setting up a redoubt in newspaper columns and radio frequencies. At each point we have made choices about how best to serve what we understood the mission of the church to be, using and being used, resisting and legitimating the civil power, opting in or voicing dissent from systems of power and control. In this next turn of history’s wheel, our choices will only be as good as what we learn from that past and only as wise as our grasp of the reality, virtual and physical, in which we live. Thank you.