MEDIATED PRESENCE—SELECTED SESSION

Topic: Unity and Fragmentation in Digital Communion
Convener: Stephen Okey, Saint Leo University
Moderator: Kevin M. Vander Schel, Villanova University
Presenters: Jana Bennett, University of Dayton
                Stephen Okey, Saint Leo University

Presentations in the session focused on the viability of online forms of religious community and participation in the sacraments, and on discerning adequate practices for flourishing in a digital age. Jana Bennett's essay, "Unity and Fragmentation in Digital Communion: Three Sacramental Theologians' Uses of Language and Technology for Consideration," introduced the discussion by exploring the potential online use of sacraments and sacramentals. Bennett acknowledges the frequent suggestion that the church engage the younger generation by reaching out through online platforms, yet she raises the question of whether the use of social and digital media would indeed promote unity or only foster increased fragmentation.

Bennett notes that one difficulty in critically engaging conversations of online technology and religious practice lies in the one-dimensional descriptions of the internet as a kind of tool. Following more recent developments in the philosophy of technology, she suggests that discussions of sacramental life and online communities would benefit from greater attention to language and linguistic theory. Bennett thus considers the work of three theologians who examine issues of sacrament, language, and technology. First, she discusses David Power's description of the sacraments not simply as instruments of grace but as the embodied communication of God's self-gift, which communities interpret and appropriate in a plurality of linguistic forms, symbols, and stories. Next, she turns to Louis-Marie Chauvet, whose understanding of symbolic distance moves beyond technological instrumentalization or tool-oriented views of language to recover the mystagogical dimension of sacramental life. Finally, she considers Herbert McCabe's insistence on the inseparability of sign and symbol and on the sacraments as revealing God's timeful presence amidst our own alienation and the enduring inadequacy of our language.

Drawing from the insights of these thinkers, Bennett finds grounds both for taking seriously these conversations of digital technology and religious practice and for retaining significant reservations about the possibility for genuine online sacramental participation. She proposes, however, that such discussions of online engagement might play an important role in spurring on constructive thinking about sacramental life offline and in so doing may inspire greater care with language and further measured contemplation about Christian identity and practice in a digital age.

In "Wherever Two or Three are Networked: The Dialectic of Presence and Absence in Online Encounters," Stephen Okey broadened the discussion to include the possibility of digitally mediated forms of presence. While recognizing the valid concern that digital technologies might increase isolation and anxiety, Okey also notes the potential for such technologies under certain conditions to mediate genuine communication, and he explores whether and how the category of presence might open up further constructive avenues for discussing the changing landscape of digital communication and interaction.

To draw out this expanded notion of presence, Okey brings together Brian Robinette's work on the dialectic of presence and absence in the resurrection and Heidi Campbell's study of online religious and spiritual communities. Robinette describes the resurrection as a saturated phenomenon, in which the historical absence of Christ grounds a new mode of Christ's bodily presence in the church. In her study of online religious communities through religiously oriented email listserv groups, Heidi Campbell concludes that such online groups were largely supplemental in nature and reflected a desire for further intentional personal interactions and connections between those sharing common goals, values, and spiritual beliefs.

Okey proposes that these considerations may help to illuminate an analogous understanding of digitally mediated presence, in which the absence or lack of physical proximity makes possible a distinct albeit less adequate form of intentional presence through digital media. While insisting that such digital interaction cannot supplant religious communities, Okey concludes that digital technologies may yet mediate meaningful and supplemental modes of personal presence, and that reflection upon these modes may help us to understand the differing ways in which presence to one another might be embodied in religious communions.

The lively and interactive discussion that followed the presentations centered on the four related topics: the merits of understanding the internet and digital technology as an encompassing environment or system of formation rather than a tool; practices for cultivating virtuous habits of internet use and personal mindfulness in an advanced digital age; the tendency towards commercialization in online interactions; and the abiding heterogeneity of face-to-face and online forms of human communication.

KEVIN M. VANDER SCHEL
Villanova University
Villanova, Pennsylvania