

“Not There as Strangers or Silent Spectators”: Lay-led Virtual Liturgies in the Spirit of *Sacrosanctum Concilium*

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What is Holy Thursday with no Eucharist to break and share? What is the sign of peace with no physical embrace? What is a Catholic, Sunday service without a priest, deacon, or consecrated hosts? Six months ago, these were hypothetical questions reserved for academics, for sacramental and liturgical theologians. In March, these became the questions of every Catholic who could no longer inhabit the pews of their church. Many churches quickly adapted to the pandemic with the practice of live streaming or uploading videos of the Sunday Mass, with the only difference in the service being the lack of a congregation and choir. These churches sought to provide ‘the same’ Sunday services under unprecedented circumstances and with little previous experience with online worship. However, a streamed mass could not possibly be the same for the laity without physical participation, the call and response between the priest and the assembly, and the reception of the Eucharist. I intend to argue that virtual, interactive, lay-led Sunday services can more faithfully imitate the spirit of the Vatican II document *Sacrosanctum Concilium* in fostering the full and active participation of the assembly than streamed or pre-recorded masses.

I would be negligent in my discussion of this topic if I did not more clearly describe the virtual, interactive, lay-led community I pray with every Sunday that inspired this paper. My community has been gathering over Zoom since March, with a rotating schedule of lay presiders

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and preachers, praying a Sunday liturgy together. This liturgy consists of the entire Liturgy of the Word, as well as a shared Lord's Prayer, Prayers of the Faithful, and an Act of Spiritual Communion, all of this modified from the guidelines for *Sunday Celebrations in the Absence of a Priest*, as outlined by the USCCB in the ritual book of the same name.¹ We have now spent multiple liturgical seasons together and have committed to one another as a community of faith.

The Vatican II document *Sacrosanctum Concilium* invited the Church “to adapt more suitably to the needs of our own times those institutions which are subject to change,”² namely through adapting liturgical celebrations to be more suitable for the present and future. It points the Church towards something new, to liturgical celebrations that better respect and incorporate the rich diversity of the faithful and that invite the full participation of all those present.

Sacrosanctum Concilium states that:

Pastors of souls must therefore realize that, when the liturgy is celebrated, something more is required than the mere observation of the laws governing valid and licit celebration; it is their duty also to ensure that the faithful take part fully aware of what they are doing, actively engaged in the rite, and enriched by its effects.³

This document acknowledged that there is something more to common worship in the liturgy, something that goes beyond just following the script perfectly, doing all the steps of the Sunday mass properly. Liturgy is a prayer to be undertaken together by all the faithful present, and that is my guide in analyzing the pandemic liturgical practices. These questions are new and

¹ United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, *Sunday Celebration in the Absence of a Priest*, revised edition. Washington: USCCB, 2007.

² Vatican Council II. Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy *Sacrosanctum Concilium*, (4 December 1963) §1, at The Holy See.
https://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_const_19631204_sacrosanctum-concilium_en.html.

³ Vatican Council II, *Sacrosanctum Concilium*, § 11.

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non-sacramental, so questions of validity and liceity are not optimal or useful standards by which to evaluate these services. *Sacrosanctum Concilium* states that “even in the liturgy, the Church has no wish to impose a rigid uniformityso long as they harmonize with its true and authentic spirit.”⁴ If it is true and authentic, without leading the faithful astray, creativity and non-uniformity can be embraced and in a time of pandemic must be embraced for the good of the faithful.

Despite being a departure from what was previously considered acceptable Sunday worship, in the time of pandemic there are broad dispensations from the obligations of the faithful to attend a Sunday mass and to receive the Eucharist weekly. The simple viewing of a mass from one’s home, where one watches typically only the presider and a handful of the faithful receive the Eucharist, reinforces the distance between the ordained presider and lay congregation. For lay-led Sunday virtual liturgies, there is no Eucharist present, and the entire Eucharistic prayer is replaced with a prayer for spiritual communion prayed by both the presider and the congregation. The distance is removed, and the community is unified by the common prayer for what they all lack, which also functions as an invitation of solidarity to those in the global church.

The liturgy exists as a dialogue, both between God and the church and between the presider and congregation. *Sacrosanctum Concilium* states that the:

Church earnestly desires that all the faithful should be led to that fully conscious, and active participation in liturgical celebrations which is demanded by the very nature of the liturgy. In the restoration and promotion of the sacred liturgy, this full and active participation by all the people is the aim to be considered before all else.⁵

⁴ Vatican Council II, *Sacrosanctum Concilium*, § 37.

⁵ Vatican Council II, *Sacrosanctum Concilium*, §14.

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The practice of streaming or viewing a pre-recorded mass necessarily isolates the viewer from the presider. It is a one-way communication from presider to faithful, with no live interaction. The presider in this case merely pauses or has a response from a cantor or other limited audience.

In a virtual faith community, there is a call and response between the presider and the congregation. The practices of prayer over a live platform allow for those in the congregation to audibly respond to the presider, creating the dialogue that mirrors that between God and the church on earth. Both the presider and the congregation are allowed to be in authentic dialogue, mirroring an in-person liturgy that responds to the needs and words of one another.

Sacrosanctum Concilium demands that the faithful “should not be there as strangers or silent spectators; on the contrary, through a good understanding of the rites and prayers they should take part in the sacred action conscious of what they are doing, with devotion and full collaboration.”⁶ Those who stream a liturgy are, in some way, strangers to both the presider and the liturgy. There is no live conversation between a videotaped presider and a congregation only viewing a service. The practices of my faith community allow us to both see and speak to one another. Additionally, we go further to create dialogue in how we fill the space of the homily. We have one designated preacher, who prepares reflections in a traditional way, and then we open up the space for all to share reactions to the preaching or their own interpretations of the readings.

While not fully preserving the physicality of a traditional Sunday service, the practice of praying together on a platform that allows us to encounter one another maintains many embodied aspects of this physicality. We hear one another voice the responses, albeit in a mildly delayed way. We see the reactions of our fellow worshippers when they hear a particularly compelling or

⁶Vatican Council II, *Sacrosanctum Concilium*, §48.

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particularly challenging scripture passage in the readings, just as we would in a traditional Sunday mass. Unlike in viewing a virtual mass, when we offer the sign of peace to one another, we can see each other's joy even when we cannot embrace one another. *Sacrosanctum Concilium*, too, speaks of sacred music as elevating the worship service, making it nobler "with the assistance of sacred ministers and the active participation of the people."⁷ Music is such an integral part of how we pray together as a church, and listening to a solo cantor or recording is the primary encounter with sacred music in this present moment. However, the visual encounter of one another in a lay liturgy allows for us to at least see, if not hear, the responses of the community to the music, from singing along to dancing as the Spirit moves them.

In this time of pandemic, we are provided a window into the lives of each other and our sacred spaces. This means in virtual liturgy we have a window into the sacred spaces that we each create. We do not see just the videoed image of an altar, without the full church, and do not settle for just echoes of a sacred space where we are not. We create them through the use of our own sacramentals, those "sacred signs which bear a resemblance to the sacraments"⁸ in the time where we are not receiving the sacraments. We bring out our palms we blessed during Holy Week, made of whatever greenery we found outside, set our home altar with whatever fabric we have in the right color, and bring our treasured icons, rosaries, and crucifixes to prepare our own sacred spaces. We are able to share our spaces, our ways of setting the table for worship with one another because of the use of a shared virtual platform.

There are specific and unique fruits that this lay-led community can bring that are not possible in many traditional liturgical settings. Our community of faith began with a handful of classmate and friends but quickly grew to anyone we knew who was searching for a pandemic

⁷Vatican Council II, *Sacrosanctum Concilium*, §113.

⁸ Vatican Council II, *Sacrosanctum Concilium*, §60.

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faith community. Against the ideals of *Sacrosanctum Concilium*, that “liturgical services are not private functions, but are celebrations of the Church,”⁹ the service remains quasi-private, needing to know someone who attends with the community, as we exist outside of any parish directory and outside of any hierarchical supervision. Because the invitations are extended through the personal networks of the attendees, there exists a more homogenous community, particularly in age, than in many parishes. However, as a virtual community grows farther out from its initial members, those invited will resemble less and less the founding members alone. Like in many dioceses, the faithful are free to find a community they feel best reflects their values, and as a fully independent community with specific commitments and non-negotiables for ourselves, we will not be a community that is for everyone. Because of that same independence, we are freed from the obligation to be quite as universally catholic as a brick-and-mortar church. But in our relatively small community where everyone knows at least one other person, the benefit is our ability to do something different. We do not fear any risk to proclaiming from our virtual pulpit that black lives matter and praying that our actions might work for an end to white supremacy, and so our community can be pushed further in our commitment to living out the Gospel in the way that makes sense for us in particular.

So, too, can we challenge one another to a life of faith that is truly for all of us, in all our particularities. We can promote inclusive language by making horizontal changes to the readings we share, such as the simple shift from saying ‘all men’ to ‘all people,’ without waiting for approvals from any “competent territorial ecclesiastical authority.”¹⁰ We can shift and change quickly in responding to the needs and desires of our community. A bilingual presider can choose to share the liturgy in Spanish with our community. We can pray for our queer

⁹ Vatican Council II, *Sacrosanctum Concilium*, §26.

¹⁰ Vatican Council II, *Sacrosanctum Concilium*, §36.

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community members without fear or reservations. In a lay community, women preside and preach with a frequency rarely seen in the general liturgical life of the church. Those pushed to the margins can find liturgical community where they are known, loved, and invited into greater participation. This community can and has extended beyond just the Sunday service, into folks who would be strangers to one another praying the liturgy of the hours together every morning and folks who have never met in person easily calling one another friends.

The community I write of sprung up in the very unique setting of a theologate with highly educated lay theology students as its originators. However, I believe similar communities can be executed by traditional parishes when needed, with the aid of all the lay collaborators who lack the opportunity to use their ministerial skills. While preaching might be reserved for those with some degree of theological education or especially relevant ministerial experience, out of respect for the importance of strong and accurate preaching for the faithful, other parishioners such as choir members, year-of-service alums, or former college retreat leaders would jump at the chance to use skills that may have sat dormant for years, and take on roles of leadership in presiding, organizing and outreach, or putting together the service and worship aids. This does ask one thing of the parish priests and religious: for them to attend such services with great humility and relative silence. I know this to be possible, as I have seen men in formation attend virtual services, adding their intentions and the occasional brief note of reflection, but otherwise quietly respecting this sacred space and opportunity their lay colleagues and friends are so rarely granted.

The continuing pandemic invites us to do something new in shaping liturgical worship that encourages the full and active participation of all the faithful and does not merely replicate prior forms of worship that cannot be replicated at this time. Over fifty years ago, *Sacrosanctum*

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Concilium offered a way forward for the Church to transform the liturgy into a faithful celebration that was truly for all its members, and it can offer us guidance in making our pandemic worship similarly concerned with the full and active participation of the laity.

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