Symposium on Transforming Culture

Eucharist:
The "Actual" Presence of Jesus in a Digital World

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      The Eucharistic Revival now being celebrated does not beckon us to return to bygone days of supposed liturgical glory, though some may wish for that. Instead of a "backwardism," as Pope Francis calls it (in an address to liturgists on 9/1/22), efforts at a Eucharistic transformation of culture should focus on the here and now. Rooted in our sacramental tradition, we seek to understand it anew by looking again to the Lord without turning our backs on the world.

      This paper offers one suggestion – a thought experiment, if you will – for doing just that. It takes into account the digital ecology of the contemporary world and proposes that our proclamation of the Body of Christ in a technocratic culture may have greater impact if we were to speak not only of "real" presence but also, perhaps more so, of "actual" presence. Without diminishing or disregarding the Church's doctrine, this linguistic shift could foster a more relevant way to understand, and a more relational way to engage, the Lord's presence in the Eucharist.

(1) on the "Real" Presence of Jesus before us in the Eucharist

      To state the obvious: the teaching of the Church about the presence of Jesus in the Eucharist is philosophically and theologically complex! In his recent book, *Real Presence: What Does It Mean and Why Does It Matter?*, Timothy O'Malley provides a clear and concise treatment of this doctrine based on its biblical, patristic, and scholastic roots. For the purpose of contextualizing what we propose, a short summary of the basic ideas should suffice.

The perennial question that this teaching seeks to answer is: how can people claim, understand, and appreciate that in the Eucharist Jesus is here, when he is not? (For we also believe He is now at the Father's right hand in heaven.)

The classical approach to answering this question adopts metaphysical concepts to defend Jesus's "real" presence in its fullest sense, over and against the notion that the Eucharist is merely a symbol of it or that His presence there is just of a (lesser) "spiritual" kind.

In this respect, to speak of Jesus's presence as "real" is to claim it as being wholly true. That presence is not fake or un-real. It is neither partial or one-dimensional. In and through this sacrament, Jesus, Himself, is really here (which, by the way, is why believers used to make the sign of cross when passing by a Catholic church).

Rooted in the whole of Tradition, the exposition of that claim is built on metaphysics – that is, the study of that which is "real" beyond what is physically sensible.

The explanation borrows from philosophy the distinction between "substance" and "accidents" to posit the reality of Jesus's unseen presence in the material reality that once was bread and wine. Focusing on the thingness of the sacrament – the "substance" of it in terms of that which makes something what it really is – the doctrine holds that what was bread is changed, at the moment of consecration, into the very substance of who Jesus is, or the reality that is Jesus (hence, "trans-substantiation"). The sensibleness of bread and wine remains, but this is "accidental"– that is, not essential– to the reality of Jesus now present.

Moreover, this changed presence inheres in the sacrament itself; that is, the substantive reality of Jesus's presence is not separated from the accidental materiality of the sacrament. It (He) does not exist simply in the realm of the meaning we intend for it in virtue of our faith (what is meant by "trans-signification"). Nor does it (He) be present only through and for the sake of our worship of him, as if the sacrament only encourages faith in Jesus or reminds us of it through the liturgy (what is meant by "trans-finalization"). Instead, the classical teaching affirms an objectively true presence of the very One in whom we believe, made real for us, here and now, in and through this sacramental means.

To explain the "causality" of this *mysterion*, the classical approach rightly posits a supernatural power at work, that of the Holy Spirit in the Church and her sacraments. In this case, the causing of Jesus to be present "happens" by way of the performative language handed on in the sacred liturgy. The words spoken at the consecration do as they say, in the same way that the divine Word was at work in creation, was made flesh in the Incarnation, and was revealed as effective in numerous narratives in Sacred Scripture.

All of this intends to set forth what is "true" about the Eucharist, in objective terms, with a focus on the sacrament itself. Jesus's presence in the Eucharist is true, not false, and real, not merely symbolic. This *is* His body, given up for us; this *is* His blood, poured out for us.

And because that presence is objectively true, it is effective, and God's grace is made available to us through our reception of Holy Communion. Because that presence is objectively real, it is enduring, and we are able to worship Him through our Adoration of the Blessed Sacrament.

That, in a nutshell, is the Eucharistic doctrine. That represents what the Catholic faith has perennially believed. The classical explanation of this fundamental tenet of our faith remains accurate.

But now we might fairly wonder whether reiterating that classical approach holds the pedagogical key to bringing about a renewal of Eucharistic faith. Does this sacramental theology effectively engage people in the contemporary world, where thinking and living have been radically altered by science and technology?

For we now dwell in a digital ecology, one that profoundly affects Church communications. There, as Fr. John Culkin, S.J. once put it, "we shape our tools and, thereafter, our tools shape us." For people immersed in this new world, metaphysical notions of substance and causality remain true but lack relevance for deepening our faith.

Nowadays people think differently – not always correctly, but differently! Where scientism limits what is true to what is empirically evident, any consideration of supernatural mysteries is often dismissed. Where technology produces artificial intelligence, philosophical knowledge gives way to algorithmic perception and, now, creative composition (e.g., ChatGPT). Where computers create personal avatars to roam the virtual metaverse, what is real is whatever users generate.

Hence, this proposal to ponder: *In such a world, our Eucharistic revival would benefit from building on the features of the digital culture to promote the "actual" presence of Jesus, mediated to us in the Eucharist, as a way of connecting with Him in and for communion.*

(2) on the "Actual" Presence of Jesus for us in the Eucharist

To explore this linguistic shift, we can re-consider the truth about the Eucharistic presence of Jesus in light of three important features of our digital age: the possibility of "present absence," the power of technological "mediation," and the penchant for "interactivity."

First, in the digital ecology, our very notion of "**presence**" has changed, for we now enjoy the possibility of being both present and absent at the same time. On the one hand, we can be physically present with others, yet practically absent to them thanks to the devices that distract us. On the other hand, and more helpfully, we can be physically absent from others yet practically present to them by way of audio-video technologies (e.g., ZOOM).

In both cases, inter-personal presence is "real." It may appear more obvious when persons are gathered together in the same room, but it is true also of so-called "virtual" presence. To deny that is to succumb to the misleading dichotomy between real and virtual

worlds. That distinction has no difference; it fails to grasp the truth that the people connected to each other through digital means are very much real, their online connection very much a true experience of each being present to each other (an any grandparent who engages faraway family knows). Reflecting on this new reality, the Secretary of the Vatican's Dicastery for Communications, Msgr. Lucio Ruiz, explains it in practical terms:

> The digital is different from the virtual, which does not exist; it is a construction of the system, like video games. The digital, on the other hand, is the real, but through computer instruments. I used to tell the computer missionaries that our time, our affection, our conversation and our faith are all real. The only thing that is digital is the medium through which we connect, but there is nothing virtual in the link.[1]

The increasingly common digital experience of being actually present while physically absent points us more appreciatively to the truth that the physically absent Jesus is nevertheless able to be present in the sacrament. In this phenomenology, Jesus's absence is the condition for Eucharistic faith. Having ascended to heaven, Jesus is physically absent from this world, but we believe He remains very much alive and present to it. His presence transcends all earthly constraints, including that of our human senses. Yet, because of the Church and her sacraments, His eternally living presence is *actualized* among us, able to extend in space and endure through time. As a result, our faith in Jesus has room to emerge and grow.[2]

Second, our ability to be connected digitally has made us more conscious of the truth that presence is something always **mediated**. In ages past, that meant physically occupying the same space at the same time in order for us to share something of ourselves with each other. In that case, however, we are not usually conscious of mediation happening by way of our bodies.

Nowadays we know how technology mediates that personal exchange; in fact, it does so faster and farther than ever before. We express our thoughts in electronic posts. We share our images through social networks. We reveal our preferences by way of online purchases. Thanks to digital conferencing, we see and hear one another, as we conduct business, simply chat, or even worship online. Yet, in all of this social mediating we should keep in mind, as Pope Emeritus Benedict XVI wrote in his Message for the 2013 World Communications Day, that even "in these spaces, it is not only ideas and information that are shared, but ultimately our very selves."

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[1] In an interview a decade ago, FR. ANTONIO SPADARO, S.J. explained the erroneous dichotomy in broader terms of anthropology: "This dimension of falsity, which we conveniently attribute to the web, in reality resides already in the falsity that is lived ordinarily in life and that if anything is amplified on the web thanks to the lack of physical contact. There is not a time for digital relations and a time for physical relations: there is life, which is one and is expressed in diverse modes."

[2] See DANIELLA ZSUPAN-JEROME, "Virtual Presence as Real Presence? Sacramental Theology and Digital Culture in Dialogue," *Worship* 89:6 (November 2015): 534-538, adopting the thought of Louis-Marie Chauvet.

Actually sharing a self is likewise at the heart of the sacramental phenomenon.[3] Through the Holy Spirit whose power enlivens the Church, sacraments mediate grace, that is, the reality of mercy and love that is God's very self. Made sensible through the "matter" of the sacraments, the experience of that grace *actually* happens, and it does so with greater effect the more we intentionally respond to that experience.

That experiential responsiveness points us to the third feature of the digital age. In this new ecology, mediated presence is meant not only for participation but even more so for **interaction**. Thanks to our new social operating system, we have non-stop mobile access to a world wide web of networks beyond the groups into which our physical existence has embedded us.

But to thrive in that world requires more than simply being there by going online. Interactivity is the intended function of social networks and the means toward the connectedness that people naturally desire and seek. As Pope Benedict XVI noted in his Message for the 2009 World Communications Day, our new digital technologies

> respond to a fundamental desire of people to communicate and to relate to each other. This desire for communication and friendship is rooted in our very nature as human beings and cannot be adequately understood as a response to technical innovations. In the light of the biblical message, it should be seen primarily as a reflection of our participation in the communicative and unifying Love of God, who desires to make of all humanity one family.

Thus do personal encounters, both physical and digital, make human engagement possible; in turn, engaged communications make us capable of social communion.

Actually communing with Jesus is made possible through His sacramental presence. In the Eucharist we encounter not just a substance but a gift – the sacrificial self-gift of Jesus. This gift is not just static, his presence not merely a matter of truly being there. Through the liturgical action, we approach the Eucharist in an interactive sense; the sacrament as celebrated fosters a supernatural connection, by which Jesus becomes present there *for* us, in relation *to* us, and received *within* us that we might know the depth of his redeeming love. His presence *actualizes* our encounter with God – in the dynamism of being broken, shared, and consumed.[4] In this way, as Pope St. John Paul II describes it in his apostolic letter on

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[3] Building on the thought of DAVID C. SCHINDLER, who says that the "mediation" of God in Jesus "is now definitive and normative since it is divinely willed and is the very form and substance of Revelation as such," LARRY CHAPP points out that "God comes to us, paradoxically, most immediately and directly, in and through various mediations, with the Incarnation of God in a particular human being as the preeminent example and the ground for all other mediations. The words of Scripture mediate this Incarnation in a privileged way. And the Church, as the body of Christ, through sacrament, magisterial office, and the witness of her saints, provides the only proper mediation for the Incarnation and the scriptural witness to it."

[4] See ZSUPAN-JEROME, "Virtual Presence as Real Presence," 538-541, adopting the thought of Jean-Luc Marion.

"The Rapid Development" (2005), we experience in and through the Eucharist "the culminating moment in which communication becomes full communion."

Conclusion

The many new features of the digital ecology, of which we have highlighted just three, envelop our awareness and experience of the world today. Consequently, they also contribute to how we understand what we believe.

To speak of Jesus's "real" presence in the Eucharist is, as we believe, a truthful claim. Nevertheless, the claim no longer seems to have much traction, as so many have failed to embrace it. This apparent lack of affirmation may be a result of catechetical ignorance owing to a failure of religious education, as Bishop Robert Barron has claimed.[5] But it may also reflect a state of affairs in which people are now culturally indifferent to classical presentations of doctrine. That way of thinking about and explaining the Eucharist does not speak to them in the world in which they (we) now live.

Perhaps, then, a change in pedagogical emphasis that speaks of the "actual" presence of Jesus will resonate with those who can be present without physically being there, those who work extensively via technological mediation, and those who seek and find personal interaction through online means.

Perhaps, too, this shift in synonyms will help facilitate our connectedness toward communion[6] and thereby lead to the real Eucharistic revival that we, as the Body of Christ, actually hope for in this age and from which we will eternally benefit.

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[5] O'Malley, *Real Presence*, 14-16, provides a summary analysis of this argument.

[6] In *Connected toward Communion: The Church and Social Communication in the Digital Age* (Liturgical Press, 2014), DANIELLA ZSUPAN-JEROME uses this trajectory to map the Church's official teachings about social communications from Vatican II to the present.