

THE POST-COVID THEOLOGY PROJECT

Being Human
(Theological Anthropology)



Real Presence

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The doctrine of the Real presence is familiar to Christians of the Catholic and Orthodox traditions and features in polemical debates with the Reformed traditions around the specific nature of Christ's presence within the Eucharist. It is clear from the early patristic writings of such authors as Cyril of Jerusalem, Irenaeus, Cyprian and Augustine of Hippo that this was already a matter of some controversy, especially in the face of those who denied that Jesus Christ could be fully, materially human at the same time as being divine.

Many might be forgiven for thinking that this is a matter for heavy duty theologians, remote from the concerns and understanding of everyday Christian worshippers, but the Covid crisis has opened up new questions around issues of worship and presence that it would be good to reflect upon briefly.

At the beginning of the pandemic lockdown, worship in church was one of many victims of government imposed restrictions. The fear of contagion brought about by human proximity meant that churches, like bingo halls, discos, classrooms and gyms became no-go areas. Different faith communities reacted in contrasting ways, with the Church of England following directives from the Archbishop of Canterbury that churches should remain closed, even to the individual priest. The Roman Catholic Church followed government discipline with regard to common worship, but priests continued to celebrate the Eucharist within their church buildings, live streaming the Mass to worshippers at home.

The live streaming of liturgy and sacramental worship raises many issues and questions. For some, the sight of their priest celebrating the Eucharist in a kitchen or sitting room was a helpful and homely reminder of the domesticity of the church itself. A happy and necessary disconnection of sacramental celebration from the stateliness and otherworldliness of sacred buildings which offer little connection with the rest of human and societal life. For others, it opened up yawning chasms of interpretation with regard to the unique nature of the sacraments, diminishing the ultimate holiness of the sacred into everyday banality in a way that bordered on the blasphemous.

All of this raises questions that are doctrinal and liturgical but also profoundly pastoral. It holds up a mirror to the way in which we have understood the nature of worship and community and the impact on

Christian pastoral practice in the wider world. What does it mean for us to be really present, not only to God but to one another, in response to God's presence to us? If Jesus is truly present in the bread and wine transformed into his body and blood at the Eucharist, what difference does it make when we are no longer able to participate physically in this holiest and most transformative of rituals? What is the nature of Christian community and how does it operate when we can no longer physically come together to share in word and sacrament?

Presence as community:

Live streaming of worship has not only made it possible for people to have a lifeline to their faith communities during the lockdown, but it has highlighted the fact that many parishioners have previously been absent from worship for personal or professional reasons. It has revealed and underlined the absence of many who would and should be present, were it not for their circumstances. Sometimes their absence has barely been noted and has certainly not featured as an urgent pastoral question, needing a response from their pastor and faith community. The recent accessibility of online worship has greatly expanded some congregations and a hybrid type of worship in the future is seen as a positive step forward. But this would be to ignore the full implications of the absence of some sectors of the community. We need to ask ourselves whose habitual absence in physically present worship has emerged. What pastoral responses does their absence elicit from the worshipping community and whose responsibility it is to foster and enable physical presence where it is possible? If physical worship has become the preserve of a liturgical elite, to what extent does this call for a greater concentration either on making physical presence possible, or on strengthening bonds of community among those desiring to engage in active worship? What is it that is preventing people who might want to worship in common from coming in person? Some very basic pastoral questions need to be asked, some of which are practical, others more systemic. The reasons for which people feel themselves to be in some way excluded from the community of faith are legion, but an honest dialogue about this is long overdue.

Presence in a virtual world:

The emergence of virtual attendance at worship can be seen both as an opportunity and a threat. It certainly opens up possibilities for participation of those who have felt themselves to be excluded either by the pandemic or by other personal and professional circumstances. In some instances, it has hugely expanded liturgical attendance. But it has also led to a certain consumer attitude, in which worshippers 'channel hop' from one congregation to another, seeking the most congenial preaching and style of liturgy. The perceived threat is of a weakening of loyalty to the local parish and the development of an attitude whereby liturgical attendance is driven by consumer preference. But perhaps within this there is a salutary call for a higher standard of preaching that connects more effectively with the reality of people's situations and has a greater impact on their spiritual life? A sacrament is defined as a 'sign which makes real what it signifies'. If the way in which we pray and celebrate sacramental signs does not engage worshippers at a deep and transformative level, then perhaps there is something amiss with the way in which we celebrate them.

Virtual worship raises the issue of sacred space and the huge gulf that can arise between the spaces we dedicate to worship and the spaces in which we live our everyday lives, both domestic and professional. Efforts by the Roman Catholic bishops of Ireland to engage their congregations in domestic worship during the lockdown enabled many to reflect on and experience sacred space in the unexpected context of their home. There are lessons begging to be learned here about the embedding of prayer and a sense of the sacred in daily life. If there has been some justification to the critique of online worship as a relationship between purveyors and consumers of liturgical goods, then that also raises the question of how such a transactional attitude persists in the ordinary practice of prayer and sacramental celebration within a parish setting.

Presence as transformative relationship:

The experience of lockdown has brought into sharp relief our dependence on key workers whose often unrecognised and unappreciated labour makes ordinary life possible for the general population. Suddenly we realised how reliant we actually are on lorry drivers, street cleaners, health professionals, shelf stackers and all those who ensure the smooth functioning of public services. Jesus told us that wherever two or three were gathered in his name, he would be in the midst of them. We pay lip service to this in church, but it tends to have little impact on the nature of our human and societal relationships, any more than his other reminder that whatsoever we do to the least of our sisters and brothers we do it to him. The lockdown and its impact on the normal rhythm of worship and presence within our faith communities raises powerful questions about the way in which our habitual worship patterns have or have not transformed the way in which we are present to one another.

In modern Greek, the word for thank you is *ευχαριστώ*. Transliterated, this is *eucharisto*. If we were, if only for one day, to replace our normal use of the term 'thank you' with the term 'Eucharist', it might change both our understanding of what a Eucharistic or sacramental experience is, and of how Christ is really present to us in the ordinary human transactions of everyday life. St. Paul reminds us that for those born again into the body of the crucified and risen Christ, the habitual distinctions and categorisations of human beings which we unthinkingly adopt from prevailing culture can no longer exist. There is neither Jew nor Greek, nor slave nor free, non-male nor female, since we are all one in Christ. Yet with in our worshipping communities, there remain firmly embedded distinctions and categorisations of class, colour, gender, sexual orientation and the like which prevent us from experiencing and accepting Jesus as truly present in the other. In this respect, it is not only Zoom that has made our worship virtual, but an inveterate resistance to the transformation of social relationships by our understanding of the transformative power of the sacraments. In this area again, the pandemic is challenging us to change our thinking and our enacting of our faith.

There are numerous opportunities open to us here to create a 'new normal'. At the beginning of the pandemic a poster was circulating which featured the globe wearing a Covid mask. It read: 'Don't let's try to go back to normal. Normal was the problem in the first place'. This can be read in many ways depending on our context, but it contains a challenge to the faith communities that we would be wise to heed and to which we are being urgently invited to respond.

