Real Presence?
Foundations for a Virtually Gathered Assembly

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Surveying recent literature regarding the question of sacramental communion for those participating in online worship reveals a diversity of opinion. Within my own Roman Catholic tradition, there appears to have been widespread preference for recovering the practice of spiritual communion.[1] I counted myself among one of those "schooled in Vatican II liturgical theology who," as Teresa Berger wrote:

> were quick to worry that these practices would undo the gains of post-conciliar liturgical reforms, which had moved Catholics away from purely spiritual communion and instead encouraged them to receive the Eucharistic elements of bread and wine at each Mass. This post-conciliar gain was now feared undone through the sudden shift to a primarily ocular engagement with the Eucharist through digital mediation.[2]

As I have been thinking through and living alongside my experience of digitally mediated worship in a Lutheran seminary community, the question as to if a virtual assembly is really present at worship seems central.

Thus, within the context of my work as Cantor at a seminary of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA), I found myself being quite sympathetic with the official guidance from the ELCA: "We recommend that we do not urge people to employ virtual communion, that deacons, pastors, and bishops use this time as a teaching moment about the Lutheran understanding of the Word of God, and that we make use of the Service of the Word and Morning Prayer, Evening Prayer, Night Prayer, and Responsive Prayer."[3] I was particularly struck how, despite the similarities within the two traditions,[4] the differing approaches

1. See Katherine G. Schmidt, "The Pain of the Uncommuned," *Daily Theology*, https://dailytheology.org/2020/03/29/the-pain-of-the-uncommuned/. See also Edward Foley, "Spiritual Communion in a Digital Age: A Roman Catholic Dilemma and Tradition" in *Religions* 12, 245 (2021). https://doi.org/10.3390/rel12040245.

This possibility was also raised within Episcopal and Anglican circles. See, for example, Ruth A. Meyers, "Spiritual Communion as a Response to Hunger for Christ" in *Anglican Theological Review* 104 (2022): 83-91. See also Grant Rodgers, "Can God Spread a Table in the Wilderness" in *Eucharistic Practice and Sacramental Theology in Pandemic Times: Reflections By Canadian Anglicans* (Toronto: General Synod of the Anglican Church of Canada, 2021), 169-177, and Phillip Tovey, "One Body" in *Eucharistic Practice and Sacramental Theology*, 215-219.

2. Teresa Berger, "@Worship in the Epicenter of a Pandemic," in Hans-Jürgen Feulner and Elias Haslwanter, eds., *Gottesdienst auf eigene Gefahr? Worship At Your Own Risk?: Die Feier der Liturgie in der Zeit von Covid-19* (Münster: Aschendorff Verlag, 2020), 119. She has summarized the debate within Roman Catholicism well: "With Mass suddenly widely available online (e.g., live-streamed, pre-recorded videos, Zoom), and with Eucharistic consecration not deemed possible across physical distance by current Catholic convictions, the age-old practice of spiritual communion flourished again. … In a similar vein, concerns arose that live-streamed Masses seemed to accord renewed importance—through the visual focus on the altar area rather than the (empty) pews—to a lone priestly presider. This was seen as weakening the post-conciliar emphasis on the gathering of the whole community around the Eucharistic table. In some other quarters, outdated arguments against the supposedly dis-embodied nature of online worship were revived; in other quarters, concerns emerged about reducing worship 'to an experience of convenience and efficiency'."

3. Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, "Worship in Times of Public Health Concerns: COVID-19/Coronavirus," (March 2020), https://download.elca.org/ELCA%20Resource%20Repository/Worship_in_Times_of_Public_Health_Concerns.pdf. For an assessment of this approach see especially Maxwell E. Johnson, "Is Fasting from the Reception of Holy Communion the Same as Fasting from the Eucharistic Liturgy? A Lutheran Liturgical-Sacramental Reflection on Eucharistic Praxis during COVID-19," *Let's Talk*, Metropolitan Chicago Synod, https://mcsletstalk.org/discussion-liturgical-norms/is-fasting-from-the-reception-of-holy-communion-the-same-as-fasting-from-the-eucharistic-liturgy-a-lutheran-liturgical-sacramental-reflection-on-eucharistic-praxis-during-covid-19/.

4. See, for example, Thomas H. Schattauer, "From Sacrifice to Supper: Eucharistic Practice in the Lutheran Reformation," in *A Companion to the Eucharist in the Reformation*, Lee Palmer Wandel, ed. (Leiden: Brill, 2014), 228. He continues: "The new Mass for Roman Catholics (1969) provided much that Luther had sought: a vernacular, participatory, and communally celebrated Mass with regular preaching, and encouragement to congregational song. The meal character of the Mass was especially highlighted, including the communion of the people (in both kinds). For Lutheran churches, the renewal of the Mass

to liturgical crisis management seemed to align rather neatly with Reformation-era priorities and responses.[5]

As the pandemic and its subsequent lockdown continued, eucharistic hunger intensified and pastoral responses abounded. Some responses prioritized the consecration of elements that were present to the liturgical presider sometimes leading to asynchronous distribution whether through the distribution of pre-sanctified eucharist prior to online worship or the sending the eucharist out following worship.[6] Other responses advanced the preservation of synchronous distribution through the presider's consecration of elements proximate to the communicants.[7] It seems to me, however, that these responses rest upon a pre-supposition as to whether or not online congregants were present at worship, and are therefore able to participate in it. At one end, Nicholas Denysenko has argued that "Certainly, a Zoom liturgy is extraordinary, but a Zoom gathering is still a gathering, the participants constitute a community, and they are gathered in a real space, virtual, but no less legitimate than the normal embodied gathering."[8] At the other end, Gordon Lathrop argued that "a 'virtual assembly' is not the assembly, nor are bread and wine that I set out in front of the computer screen the holy supper of the body and blood of Christ" since "the body cannot be there, and the assembly is made up of bodies and the body, breathing together, praying and singing together, side-by-side."[9] If they are, indeed, "present" at worship, if they are, indeed, "in communion," then sacramental reception may well present itself a reasonable expectation. If they are not "present," then the pastoral question shifts to how the Church might minister to these individuals—which may, indeed, involve communion (whether by extending the distribution of communion to those at home or by providing presanctified ele-

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liturgy among Roman Catholics in conjunction with the ecumenical liturgical movement has stimulated efforts of reform and renewal in their own eucharistic practice, including movement toward a regular celebration of the Eucharist on Sunday and feast days, more frequent participation in communion, and the use of a full eucharistic prayer, encompassing the words of institution."

5. Summarizing the approach used within the Roman Catholic diocese of La Crosse, Wisconsin, but clearly applicable well beyond those confines, Christopher Carstens, wrote that "the pandemic forced us to look intently at [the Mass'] contents—its words and actions, its signs and symbols, its rubrics and rules—to determine what was essential, what was negotiable, what could be omitted for the sake of safety." In "The Sacramental Encounter Between God and Man during Covid-19 in the United States of America," in Hans-Jürgen Feulner and Elias Haslwanter, eds., *Gottesdienst auf eigene Gefahr? Worship At Your Own Risk?: Die Feier der Liturgie in der Zeit von Covid-19* (Münster: Aschendorff Verlag, 2020), 413.

As decreed at the Council of Trent in 1562, "If anyone says that masses in which the priest alone communicates sacramentally are illicit and are therefore to be abrogated, let him be anathema." Canon 8, Council of Trent, Twenty-Second Session, September 17, 1562, in H. J. Schroeder, tr., *Canons and Decrees of the Council of Trent* (St. Louis: B. Herder Book Company, 1950), 149. The corresponding decree indicates that the faithful present at mass should communicate, both spiritually and sacramentally, but that they need not communicate sacramentally. Further, private masses in which only the priest communicates are approved and commended, "since these masses also ought to be considered as truly common, partly because at them the people communicate spiritually and partly also because they are celebrated by a public minister of the Church, not for himself only but for all the faithful who belong to the body of Christ" (147).

However, the Formula of Concord insists that "the recitation of the Words of Institution of Christ by itself does not make a valid sacrament if the entire action of the Supper, as Christ administered it, is not observed." "The Smalcald Articles," III:4 in *The Book of Concord*, Robert Kolb and Timothy J. Wengert, eds. (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2000), 319. This is entirely consistent with Martin Luther's observation that "all masses without communicants should be completely abolished." Martin Luther to Lazarus Spengler, Wittenberg, August 15, 1528, in *Luther's Works* 49 (American Edition). _____ (204-210).

6. See Frank C. Senn, "As I See It: Public Health and Public Worship During COVID-19," *Let's Talk* (May 14, 2020), https://mcsletstalk.org/communion-and-community/as-i-see-it-public-health-and-public-worship-during-covid-19/. Senn approaches this pastoral question from within the context of liturgical history, and he marshals evidence from the Christian tradition for both "the extended distribution of communion" *and* for "self-communion at home with bread consecrated at the church's Eucharist." Regarding the latter, he notes that it was "a practice of the ancient church for communion at the end of fasting periods and during times of persecution… the church order known as *The Apostolic Tradition* indicated that the faithful self-communing at home could dip the consecrated bread into a glass of wine, thus consecrating the wine by contagion, as it were. (We may not want to teach that, but it's what the ancient Roman Church practiced in *Ordo Romanus Primus*.) Communion devotions could include the Lord's Prayer, a prayer for communion, and a post-communion thanksgiving taken from our worship book. There's a lot of precedent to draw on from the liturgical tradition. The church didn't always do things in the way we are used to doing."

7. See, for example, Nicholas Denysenko, "COVID-19 and Orthodox Liturgical Reform: What's Possible?," *PrayTell: Worship, Wit, and Wisdom* (May 1, 2020), https://www.praytellblog.com/index.php/2020/05/01/covid-19-and-orthodox-liturgical-reform-whats-possible/. Denysenko writes that "There is… no objection that can be raised to the power and love of God to consecrate any gift offered by his holy people … The problem … is neither technological nor legal. The problem is one of trust. The laity can take communion home and partake of it responsibly and with faith and awe of God—if the clergy trust the laity to see it through. God will send his Spirit upon the loaves and cups offered by the people through a Zoom liturgy, if the clergy trust the laity to handle those holy gifts responsibly and in conformance to good order."

8. Denysenko, "COVID-19 and Orthodox Liturgical Reform."

9. Gordon W. Lathrop, "Thinking Again about Assembly in a Time of Pandemic," *CrossAccent: Journal of the Association of Lutheran Church Musicians* 28 (Summer 2020): 14-15.

ments in advance for self-communion). No doubt, both of these alternatives constitute some degree of loss.[10] Nevertheless, at least as I have been thinking through and living alongside my experience of digitally mediated worship in a Lutheran seminary community, the question as to if a virtual assembly is really present at worship seems central.

Even before the pandemic compelled the community online, the seminary (with its substantial number of distance learning students) had been live-streaming worship services for its far-flung membership. By doing so, we had inadvertently reinforced a binary between communicators and recipients. These categories, writes Katherine Schmidt, "are particularly illustrative of a view of media that understands them as the conduits of products (news pieces, programs, texts, etc.) by one group of people (communicators) to be consumed or received by others (recipients)."[11] This seems consistent with one of the issues that Luther addressed early in the Reformation, insofar as he sought to underscore, through language and music, "the public and corporate character of the Eucharist against notions of the Mass primarily as a priestly action."[12] Mass, occurring within a sanctuary remote from those observing it through a screen (whether a medieval rood screen or a contemporary YouTube screen) frustrates the transformative function of the liturgy. Then, as now, those watching unquestionably felt some connections to the action that was occurring.[13] But the critique raised by Luther, the critique echoed at the Second Vatican Council, is that by receiving the worship done by priests located elsewhere, the priestly vocation of all the baptized was being suppressed.[14]

This approach to viewing worship distantly is rightly critiqued by Lathrop. Part of the problem, he argues, is not merely ecclesiological, but geographic. From the perspective of the remote viewer, their "*here* is connected to the powerful, world-making *there*. It is an important, localized *here*, too; it is a home. The trouble is that all the power is there, away from here. Any viewer knows that speech and action addressed to the television set have no effect on the events represented by those dots of light on the tube. And all viewers sense that their own place, this local reality, is constantly placed on the margin, away from the center where things are happening."[15] At the heart of this critique is the issue of participation that matters.

During pandemic lockdown, we were prevented from gathering together in a single physical space. We therefore transitioned from livestreaming chapel worship to worship in an entirely online forum (Zoom). Presiding, reading, preaching, and leading intercessions were all done from the varied locations in which those ministers found themselves: offices, residences, etc. The only ministry that occurred in a fixed location was music-making. Two socially distanced people (a keyboardist and a singer) were located in the chapel. They voiced congregational responses, not to replace the voice of the congregation but to bring the highlighted camera view of the chapel back on-screen while avoiding technical problems of time-delay from multiple locations. The chapel camera was focused on the liturgical appointments: font, ambo, table, and empty congregational chairs. The ministers in the space, themselves, were not visible, as they were functioning as members of the assembly, rather than individuals exercising particular ministry.[16] Congregants were asked to unmute during the Lord's

10. Maxwell Johnson has applied the observations of Jesuit Robert Taft to the Lutheran *usus et actio* of the Eucharistic meal: "It is clear that there has to be a better way of narrowing the gap between theory and execution. When one can still now, already generations after Benedict XIV (*Certiores effecti* §3) and Pius XII (*Mediator Dei* §118), go to Sunday Mass in a Roman Catholic parish church almost anywhere—even one whose pastor has an advanced degree in liturgical studies, pastoral theology, or some allied area—and be subjected to Communion from the tabernacle, that monstrous travesty of any true eucharistic symbolism whereby in a single moment common gifts are offered, blessed, distributed, shared—then there must indeed be a better way." In "Eucharistic Reservation and Lutheranism," *Worship: Rites, Feasts, and Reflections* (Portland: Pastoral Press, 2004), 160.

11. Katherine G. Schmidt, *Virtual Communion: Theology of the Internet and the Catholic Sacramental Imagination* (Lanham, Maryland: Lexington Books/Fortress Academic, 2020), 34. It is indicative of what Teresa Berger names as Web 1.0—"web-as-information." See Teresa Berger, *@Worship: Liturgical Practices in Digital Worlds* (London/New York: Routledge, 2018), 17.

There are connections to be drawn here to the Catholic practice of televising Mass. Frequently named "Mass for Shut-Ins," these locally produced liturgies were regularly broadcast over local television stations beginning in the mid-1950s through the present day. I recall once having been an altar server for these in my hometown. The other server and I responded to the priest. Four masses were recorded that evening to be broadcast later, one for each Sunday of the month to come.

12. Schattauer, "From Sacrifice to Supper," 212.

13. The significance of medieval worship forms for the lay faithful of that time is clearly revealed in Eamon Duffy, *The Stripping of the Altars: Traditional Religion in England, 1400-1580* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1992, 2005, 2022).

14. Vatican II, *Sacrosanctum concilium* (December 4, 1963), 14: "Mother Church earnestly desires that all the faithful should be led to that full, conscious, and active participation in liturgical celebrations which is demanded by the very nature of the liturgy, and to which the Christian people, 'a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a redeemed people' (1 Peter 2:9, 4-5) have a right and obligation by reason of their baptism. In the restoration and promotion of the sacred liturgy the full and active participation by all the people is the aim to be considered before all else, for it is the primary and indispensable source form which the faithful are to derive the true Christian spirit." English translation Austin Flannery OP, *Vatican Council II: The Conciliar and Postconciliar Documents*, Volume 1 (Northport, New York: Costello Books, 1996).

15. Gordon W. Lathrop, *Holy Things: A Liturgical Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1993), 106. Lathrop references this same understanding of communication in *The Assembly: A Spirituality* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2022), ix-x.

16. This principle is found, to great degree, in Lathrop, *The Assembly*, 9: "Many people help lead us—readers, singers, communion ministers, doorkeepers, leaders of prayer—many of them laypeople and all of them standing for the whole assembly, assisting the whole assembly. Choirs seek to understand themselves primarily not as a concert group to whom the rest of us then simply listen but as the rehearsed voices of the assembly, helping us all to sing. The principal musician of the assembly thus is not simply the 'organist' or 'choirmaster' but the *cantor*, the leader of assembly song."

Practical directives emphasizing this very point can be found in the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops' document on liturgical

Prayer. Even though the resulting sound was greatly affected by time-delay, the visual result was that congregants could both see and hear each other's participation.

Zoom worship addressed challenges raised both by Schmidt and Lathrop. In the first place, Schmidt's identification of the binary between communicators and recipients was, largely, overcome. Participants were interactively functioning in both roles in live time. This happened officially every time a minister finished exercising their particular ministry and observed another minister performing theirs. In this sense, Lathrop's concerns about words and actions affecting what occurred on the other side of the screen were overcome. And even those participating without specific ministries to exercise could find themselves becoming unique communicators of a sort when another member of their family (especially small children) or pets entered the camera feed.

More substantially, however, disparity between Lathrop's *here* and *there* was displaced. While it is true that individual participants remained in their own *here*, the fact that multiple *theres* of leadership came into play diffused the authority that Lathrop assigned to it. Simply put, unlike what had happened prior to the COVID inspired reconfiguration of online worship, there was no longer a single geographic center where "things were happening." And from service to service, "things were happening" in a variety of different locations. The recurring *there*, the previous *there*, the chapel space, remained the closest thing to a fixed "center" that might be claimed.[17] But, seen on screen without congregants and only empty chairs, it was stripped of its authority. There was no pretending that it was the "center where things are happening." Instead, and precisely because that space was empty,[18] the chapel could be revealed for what it truly is: a house for the assembly,[19] the *domus ecclesiae*.[20] The "center where things are happening" is located in the worshiping individuals, the living stones. Moreover, these living stones are not disembodied avatars in a digital space.[21] They could see the familiar space on screen where they ought to have been as they were making liturgical responses. In so doing, they were afforded the opportunity to re-member themselves together in the space known to each of them,[22] neither in a strictly material way nor in a purely imagined way, but in a way that was substantially real—genuinely sacramental.[23] The digital chapel space was thus able to function as icon, rather than idol.[24]

The history of Eucharistic theology itself bears witness to the middle ground between that which is physical and that which is spiritual. Particularly telling is the case of Berengarius of Tours. He readily acknowledged that Christ was spiritually present in the Eucharist, but on logical grounds he rejected that Christ was physically present. If Christ were physically present in the Eucharist, he reasoned, then Christ's flesh would, at best, be eaten and then digested, at worst, it would suffer desecration should an animal eat it or it be destroyed. Berengarius was compelled to take an oath in 1059 in which he admitted that the consecrated bread and wine are "not only a sacrament but also the true body and blood of our Lord Jesus Christ, and with the senses not only

music, *Sing to the Lord: Music in Divine Worship* (Washington: United States Catholic Conference, 2007). Presiders, choirs, and cantors are specifically directed to avoid the use of microphones in congregational song so that their voices not be heard above or supplant the primary voice of the congregation (see paragraphs 21, 28, 31, and 38).

Even more related to the absence of music ministers within the camera is *Sing to the Lord* 39: "When… a congregation is singing very familiar responses, acclamations, or songs that do not include verses for the cantor alone, the cantor need not be visible."

17. This is emblematic of what Nathan D. Mitchell identifies as "Applied Rhizomatics": "Traditionally centralized social, political, economic, moral, and religious power begins to move *away from the center and toward the margins*… In the postmodern world of the Web… authority is 'rhizomally' dispersed, and access to power operates on many plateaus simultaneously, thanks to multiple crabgrass connections that cannot easily be controlled 'from the top down.' The Internet is blissfully 'nonhierarchical' and 'horizontal'; its nodes 'intersect in random, unregulared networks in which any node can interconnect with any other node'." *Meeting Mystery: Liturgy, Worship, and Sacraments* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 2006), 26.

18. *Sunday Celebrations in the Absence of a Priest Approved for Use in the Dioceses of the United States of America by the National Conference of Catholic Bishops* (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 1997), 424: "A layperson [who leads these celebrations in the absence of both a priest and deacon] does not use the presidential chair." This indicates that the ordinary leader of the assembly, an ordained minister, is absent. Liturgical prayer can, of course, continue—but under extraordinary leadership.

19. Lathrop, *The Assembly*, 25.

20. National Conference of Catholic Bishops/United States Catholic Conference, *Built of Living Stones: Art, Architecture, and Worship* (Washington: United States Catholic Conference, 2000), 16.

21. Berger highlights the important fact that, even in such an instance, "digitally mediated practices are material practices, as are all offline liturgies. In the case of digitally mediated worship, this material practice is enabled, foundationally, by the interface of a human body with a computer or other internet-assessing device. Digitally mediated practices of prayer and worship thus cannot be separated either from a physical body or from materiality." *@ Worship*, 19.

22. This was particularly true for the residential population, for whom it had been possible to join together daily throughout each week of each semester. But even students who mostly studied online had some physical relationship with the chapel space. The first week of every semester, Prolog Week, is conducted on campus. In-person attendance is ordinarily required of every student (the sole exception having been during the 2020-2021 academic year). Those students have since been on campus for Prolog Week and have, in all likelihood, been present at worship in the chapel space.

23. On the necessary relationship between that which is tangible and that which is symbolic, see, for example, Louis-Marie Chauvet, *The Sacraments: The Word of God at the Mercy of the Body* (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 2001), xiii-xxv, 69-96. See also Mitchell, *Meeting Mystery*, "Part 1: The Hyper-Reality of Worship," 3-146, especially 48-70.

24. Daniella Zsupan-Jerome utilizes the work of Jean-Luc Marion in *God without Being*. She writes that "true encounter cannot emerge through the screen as idol, because it lacks openness to the other; the screen is in fact a mirror that simply reflects the beholder's own gaze… [while] Iconic presence flips the dynamic of idolatrous presence: instead of the idol filling our gaze, the icon leads us to an infinite horizon; it is an experience of being beheld by mystery. For digital communication, approaching the screen as icon likewise offers a radical openness and an invitation into true encounter by meeting the other in their infinite complexity." In "Virtual Presence as Real Presence?" *Worship* 89 (2015): 539.

sacramentally but in truth are taken and broken by the hands of the priests and crushed by the teeth of the faithful."[25] Twenty years later he was required to take a more nuanced oath that moved far beyond mere materiality.[26] He then pledged that the consecrated bread and wine were "substantially changed into the true and proper and life-giving flesh and blood of Jesus Christ our Lord… not only through the sign and power of the sacrament but in his proper nature and true substance."[27] The addition of the term "substance" was drawn from the recent recovery of Aristotelian philosophy.[28] Unlike Plato's "form," which was separable from, copied, and distorted by matter, Aristotle's "substance" required both form and matter. For Aristotle, matter was distinguishable from a thing's physical properties (accidents) which could be taken in through the senses.[29] The point here is not to insist that one *must* rely upon Aristotelian metaphysics in order to explain real presence. Rather, the term "substance" offers a helpful mechanism for thinking about presence in between the purely physical and the purely spiritual.[30]

Beyond the eucharistic presence of Christ—and, indeed, the multiple presences of Christ within the liturgy—we find evidence of other "virtual" presences of people within the liturgy. We sing the "Holy, holy," for example, not merely *echoing* but *with* the heavenly choir.

Edward Foley related the experience of teaching students the difference between substantial reality and physical reality with reference to telephone conversations. "In the discussion students can distinguish between someone being physically present to them, and yet that same person being really present to them in a technological way, even if they are at a distance. Further reflection concerns how this digital presence does not reproduce physical presence but an electronic symbol of that presence through electronically translated voice production."[31] Foley's description of substance is profitably consistent with the Lutheran-Roman Catholic Statement on the Eucharist in its mutual "rejection of a spatial or natural manner of presence, and a rejection of an understanding of the sacrament as only commemorative or figurative."[32] Further, it is easily extended to include not just phone conversations but also video conferencing platforms.

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25. Berengarius, "Recantation (1059)," translation in Paul F. Bradshaw and Maxwell E. Johnson, *The Eucharistic Liturgies: Their Evolution and Interpretation* (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 2012), 224.

26. See Gary Macy, "The Theological Fate of Berengar's Oath of 1059: Interpreting a Blunder Become Tradition," *Interpreting Tradition: The Art of Theological Reflection*, Jane Kopas, ed. Proceedings of the Annual Convention of the College Theology Society, 1983 (Chico, California: Scholars' Press, 1984), 1-17.

27. Berengarius, "Recantation (1079)," translation in Bradshaw and Johnson, *The Eucharistic Liturgies*, 225.

28. While the term "transubstantiation" has come to be associated with the particular version of eucharistic change advocated by theologians such as Thomas Aquinas (i.e., that the substance of bread and wine is transmuted into the substance of Christ), the term did not, in its origins, necessitate such specificity. When "transubstantiation" was utilized at the Fourth Lateran Council (1215), it could refer either to transmutation, substitution, or coexistence. Even though Luther would not rely upon Aristotelian categories to explain Christ's presence in the Eucharist, the latter version aptly describes Luther's preference—that after consecration the substance of Christ coexists with the substance of bread and wine. Importantly, of course, Luther is willing to permit "every man to hold either of these opinions, as he chooses" ("The Babylonian Captivity of the Church, in *Luther's Works* 36, American Edition, 30). See James F. McCue, "The Doctrine of Transubstantiation from Berengar Through the Council of Trent," *Harvard Theological Review* 61 (1968): 385-430. See also Gary Macy, "The 'Dogma of Transubstantiation' in the Middle Ages," *Journal of Ecclesiastical History* 45 (1994): 11-41.

Bradshaw and Johnson clarify that "Luther's own theology, however, is not called 'consubstantiation' since he would have repudiated the use of the Aristotelian categories undergirding this as much as he denied transubstantiation for the same reason. It is *not* that transubstantiation incorrectly describes the change of bread and wine into the real presence of Christ, his body and blood truly present and distributed in the Eucharist, but that the concept depends on the philosophy of Aristotle and *not* on the words of Jesus alone to explain that presence." *The Eucharistic Liturgies*, 240.

29. See Howard Robinson, "Substance," *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Fall 2021 Edition), Edward N. Zalta, ed., https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/fall2021/entries/substance.

30. At the Council of Trent, the Roman Catholic Church implicitly acknowledged Luther's critique regarding reliance upon the word of Aristotle over the word of Christ, even while affirming the appropriateness of the methodology. "While transubstantiation is certainly defended against the Reformers, the language used suggests that there could be other proper, convenient, and apt possibilities for interpreting eucharistic conversion." Bradshaw and Johnson, *The Eucharistic Liturgies*, 284.

31. Edward Foley, "Theological Reflection, Theology and Technology: When Baby Boomer Theologians Teach Generations X and Y," *Theological Education* 41 (2005): 53.

32. "The Eucharist: A Lutheran-Roman Catholic Statement" in Paul C. Empie and T Austin Murphy, eds., *The Eucharist as Sacrifice,* Lutherans and Catholics in Dialogue III (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1965), 192. The document cites *Augsburg Confession* X; *Apology of the Augsburg Confession* X, 1; *Formula of Concord* Epitome VII, 6 f, 26 ff, 34; *Solid Declaration* VII, 2-11, 38, 48, 48 f.

33. "The Eucharist: A Lutheran-Roman Catholic Statement," 192: "We confess a manifold presence of Christ, the Word of God and Lord of the world. The crucified and risen Lord is present in his body, the people of God, for he is present where two or three are gathered in his name (Matt 18:20). He is present in baptism, for it is Christ himself who baptizes. He is present in the reading of the scriptures and the proclamation of the gospel. He is present in the Lord's supper." To this list the Roman Catholic position would add that Christ is present in the ordained leader of prayer. See *Sacrosanctum concilium*, 7.

the heavenly choir. Whether *here* on earth or *there* in heaven, we are together. Vitally important are the presence of letters within the Scriptural canon. Schmidt argues persuasively that "Paul's letters create and maintain a virtual space for the early church… the Pauline corpus functions as a substitution for Paul himself. It is significant that Paul relies on texts to sustain the local communities with whom he has relationships, belying a long-standing confidence in the persistence of personal presence over the absence engendered by both space and time."[34] She argues, first, that Paul's letters afforded him not only the opportunity to maintain connections between himself and those communities, but also to foster connections between the communities themselves.

Second, as "pastoral supervision… these letters functioned as mediations of Paul himself. In lieu of his persistent absence, the epistolary corpus of St. Paul functioned for early Christians as a virtual space in which they could encounter an apostle. This encounter was the basis for their existence as a Christian community, and it speaks as well to the inclusion of Paul's letters into the canon of scripture itself."[35] These letters were not simply about the conveyance of information—they were about the maintenance of relationship. As Paul describes it, for example, the Corinthians were urged to participate in a relationship between rabbi and disciples: "be imitators of me, as I am of Christ" (1 Cor 11:1). But as Schmidt notes, "one does not 'imitate' text; one imitates a certain person. There had to be a way in which, at least for Paul's part, his letters were understood as making Paul *really* present to others. We would not say that the letters are the same as Paul standing in the midst of the community, but they do *real* work in the community."[36]

Most important for our concern, however, is her third point—concerning the liturgical usage of Paul's letters. Citing the work of John Paul Heil and specifically, his analysis of First Corinthians, she emphasizes how through the reading of the tangible letter, "Paul *leads* the Corinthians, gathered as a liturgical assembly, in an act of worship that celebrates the significance of what God has done in raising Jesus from the dead,"[37] and that Paul did so not in consideration of individual communities, but in relationship to other churches (1 Cor 4:12, 7:17, 10:32). "Whenever Paul was textually present to a given community, they are drawn into an imaginative space beyond local confines to the whole of the burgeoning church."[38] This leadership, she argues, is made possible because Paul was writing for oral, not literary cultures. Citing the work of Walter Ong, Schmidt highlights that "oral culture has no visual imagination for language… [thus] for the hearers of Paul's letters—that is, for the majority of the early Christians who encountered Paul's letters—Paul is re-presented with each reading. If

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these communities retained, as Ong argues, a 'high oral residue,' they would not imagine the content of Paul's letters as existing outside of the context of worship and communal recitation."[39] It is telling, therefore, that in Justin Martyr's First Apology, one of the earliest descriptions of the eucharistic celebration, we find immediate juxtaposition of the community's gathering with texts such as Paul's letters:[40] "On the day called 'of the Sun' an assembly is held in one place of all living in town or country, and the memoirs of the apostles or the writings of the prophets are read for as long as time allows."[41] If Schmidt is correct, then, for as long as the letters of the apostles have been read within liturgical assemblies, all assembled in one place seems to have included the locally gathered community *and* equally—though differently—the "virtually present" letter-writing apostles, such as Paul.

Virtual logic, it would seem, has been active within the Church long before the invention of the internet and virtual conferencing software. Whether through Christ in the Eucharist, or whether through apostles such as Paul through letters, the Church has been identifying presences that, in their reality, transcend that which is strictly physical. Insofar as the gathered Church offers a foretaste of the heavenly liturgy,[42] it pushes the boundaries of reifying the physically gathered people. It instead highlights how the Church functions as sign of our unity with God and with one another, and helps to bring about that unity. Might such considerations of real presence be extended to include individuals engaged in virtual worship? At least in cases like the seminary community's transition to online worship, it appears that it might be possible. This seems a necessary first step before sorting out liturgical and pastoral implications.

34. Schmidt, *Virtual Communion*, 77.

35. Schmidt, *Virtual Communion*, 79.

36. Schmidt, *Virtual Communion* 81-82.

37. John Paul Heil, *The Letters of Paul as Rituals of Worship* (Eugene, Oregon: Cascade Books, 2011), 41. Cited in Schmidt, *Virtual Communion*, 81.

38. Schmidt, *Virtual Communion,* 81.

39. Schmidt, *Virtual Communion,* 82-83.

40. Lathrop, *Holy Things*, 31.

41. Justin Martyr, First Apology, 67. English translation in R.C.D. Jasper and G.J. Cuming, *Prayers of the Eucharist: Early and Reformed*, 4th edition, Paul F. Bradshaw and Maxwell E. Johnson, eds. (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 2019), 26.

42. *Sacrosanctum concilium* 8: "In the earthly liturgy we take part in a foretaste of that heavenly liturgy which is celebrated in the Holy City of Jerusalem toward which we journey as pilgrims, where Christ is sitting at the right hand of God, Minister of the holies and of the true tabernacle. With all the warriors of the heavenly army we sing a hymn of glory to the Lord; venerating the memory of the saints, we hope for some part and fellowship with them; we eagerly await the Saviour, Our Lord Jesus Christ, until he, our life, shall appear and we too will appear with him in glory."