The Public Communication's Actions and the Religious Practice in the Christian Churches during the Pandemic

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Abstract
The COVID-19 pandemic represented an unprecedented event in the modern world, and its effects are still visible in the society. In this tremendously challenged context, the religious organizations and the cults had to deal with complex scenarios, and to quickly adapt themselves to the new reality, in order to ensure the continuity of the religious practice and services. The churches tried to find quick and effective solutions for countering the negative effects of this crisis on their activity. Despite the efforts made, at least on the first period of the pandemic, it was particularly difficult to identify solutions aiming at creating a good environment for the religious practice. Hence, public communication became vital and priests or other religious representatives had to stay in touch by all means with the people and to continue to offer them religious assistance, even if this assistance was provided using the digital tools which, for a significant number of churches, were unknown. Apart from this, a very big challenge for the Christian Churches was represented by the administration of the Eucharist. In Romania, as well as in almost all the Orthodox countries, receiving the Holy Eucharist by using the same spoon divided the public opinion, most of the people considering this practice as being extremely dangerous in the pandemic context. Thus, the Church had to find solutions for people not to consider the religious practices as a danger to their health. A completely new term emerged in the new context – the "virtual Eucharist". At the same time, during this

period, the Churches developed unprecedented means of communication and the new experience opened a lot of opportunities which, for sure, could be the basis for future practice after the pandemic and which defines the Church as a stable actor of the modern world. During these difficult times, the Church proved to be a place of solidarity and worship, and due to its actions, a lot of social actions were organized in order to help people cope with this period. The purpose of this article is to emphasise the actions initiated by the Churches, as well as the many challenges faced during this unprecedented crisis.

Keywords
COVID-19 pandemic, Christian Churches, public communication, virtual Eucharist, worship, solidarity

I. Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic crisis generated a tremendous struggle for the whole society and its components. Consequently, the cults and the religious organizations were forced to deal with the new context – lockdowns, interdictions, uncertainty regarding the rituals – just to name the few. In the case of the Orthodox Church, the anti-covid measures varied "from incorporating these regulations into the internal church guidelines and their strict application […] to ignoring the state recommendations by offering church services and attracting large groups of worshippers"[1].

The unexpected arrival of the pandemic was unavoidably the catalyst for the adoption of dedicated legislation covering this emergency situation. Governments were forced to take actions to preserve the public health, by curtailing other constitutionally established, fundamental and legitimate principles, such as religious freedom, notably the freedom of worship. These stringent laws were enacted by Governments based on the findings and recommendations of the specialists, whose conclusions could not be evaluated using lessons learned from prior experiences, and who were so required to formulate unprecedented recommendations. True, the measures taken, particularly those which were also applicable to the Orthodox Church, had a significant impact on Christians' collective religious liberty, as people were unable to receive the Sacraments or participate in several

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[1] Nedim Begovic, "Restrictions on Religions due to the COVID-19 Pandemic," in: *Journal of Law, Religion and State* 8 (2020), p. 243.

ceremonies, since the churches were closed the majority of the time due to the restrictions applied[2].

II. The Pandemic and the Orthodox Churches

Unfortunately, the Orthodox Church in Romania, both clerics and laics, did not manage to handle well the pandemic context. Of course, one could argue that the whole society was unprepared for dealing with such a terrifying disease. However, when talking about the Romanian Orthodox Church's attitude, more serious and in-depth arguments need to be considered. Despite the official statements and recommendations, in some instances the clergy did not obey, in an act of humbleness, to their bishops. Moreover, even the believers have disregarded on a regular basis the appeals made by the authorities and the Church, choosing to trust only those clerics who confirmed their belief in conspiracy theories.

For instance, one notorious debate regarded the spoon used for offering the Holy Communion to faithful[3]. This topic created great tension within the Church. Some clerics have used different alternative methods, without utilizing the spoon. Others were clearly preaching against the vaccination and the safety measures. Some clerics were promoting such absurd point of views, identifying the act of vaccination with a renunciation to Christ. The boundary between the created and uncreated is so blurred that it generates a mixture of opinions and interpretations which are not in accordance with the Church's Tradition. To put it straight, the Church's actions were overwhelmed and did not face the reality in order to be able to adapt to this one. Also, the fact that many clerics are overemphasising fundamentalists or nationalist movements, acted in contradiction with the Church essence.

Despite the fact that "the Romanian state acknowledges the spiritual, educational, socially charitable, cultural and social partnership role of the denominations, as well as their status as factors of social peace", the Romanian Orthodox Church is not totally separated from the State,

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[2] George ANDROUTSOPOULOS, "The Right of Religious Freedom in Light of the Coronavirus Pandemic: The Greek Case," in: *Laws* 10:14, 2021, p. 7.

[3] To be seen: Vasile CREȚU, "Linguriţa de împărtăşanie în vreme de pandemie: presiune mediatică, angoase sanitare şi redescoperirea catehezei liturgice", in: *Teologie şi educaţie la Dunărea de Jos*, fascicula XVIII, Editura Arhiepiscopiei Dunării de Jos, Galaţi, 2020, pp. 124-145.

and it recognises its authority. Thus, the Church organizes its autonomy and formulates its decisions according to the State laws[4]. Nevertheless, "according to its centuries-old liturgical tradition, the Romanian Orthodox Church cannot accept, even in times of pandemic, the use of the single-use chalice and spoon for common sacramental communion of the faithful during the Holy Mass"[5].

On the other hand, the Church has always been able to adapt itself to different times and cultures and to different political situations and context. Thus, online conferences and speaking engagements involving monks or abbots and other believers have generally been very successful during the COVID-19 pandemic. For instance, the abbot of one of the largest monasteries of Mount Athos was meeting weekly thousands of orthodox believers from all over the world through online gatherings[6]. Furthermore, recently, there has been a growing academic interest in exploring the relationship between religion and new media instruments, as "new mediations based on older communication practices serve as a vital element for the evolutionary nature of religious authority and the forms of spiritual organization"[7].

Those challenges were encountered as well in other Orthodox Churches. For example, the Greek Orthodox Church faced a similar situation when dealing with the restrictions. Thus,

> "the potential transmission of coronavirus by partaking Holy Communion has divided the Greek society, politics and medical experts. From the scientists' point of view, the common communion cup may serve as a potential vehicle for transmission of the virus. However, the risk is considerably lower compared to other social gatherings with a large number of people.

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[4] Emilian Iustinian ROMAN, "Legislative and Canonical Challenges during the Covid-19 Pandemic", in: *Romanian Journal of Artistic Creativity* 4, pp. 111-112.

[5] Emilian Iustinian ROMAN, "Legislative and Canonical Challenges...", p. 114.

[6] Andreas S. PAPAZOGLOU, Dimitrios V. MOYSIDIS, Christos TSAGKARIS, Marko DOROSH, Efstratios KARAGIANNIDIS, Rafael MAZIN, "Spiritual Health and the COVID-19 Pandemic: Impacts on Orthodox Christianity Devotion Practices, Rituals, and Religious Pilgrimages", in: *Journal of Religion and Health* (2021) 60, p. 3225.

[7] Antonio BARAYBAR-FERNÁNDEZ, Sandro ARRUFAT-MARTÍN and Rainer RUBIRA-GARCÍA, "Religion and Social Media: Communication Strategies by the Spanish Episcopal Conference", in: *Religions* 2020, 11, 239, p. 10.

Furthermore, the transmission of any infectious disease through common Communion instruments has never been documented"[8].

On the other hand, "the Orthodox diaspora has been more open to alternative solutions for offering the Holy Communion than the Greek Orthodox Church"[9]. In the United States of America,

> "one-fifth of the parishes require communicants to tilt their heads back so that the priest can drop communion into their mouths without physical contact with the spoon. The study finds that 13 percent of the parishes use either one or several spoons by rotation, which are sanitized afterwards; 12 percent use multiple reusable spoons (one per communicant). There are also parishes offering different other options. […] Clergy in the OCA [Orthodox Church in America] are on average most open to accept new methods for administering communion"[10].

The COVID-19 pandemic taught us that solidarity is the structure that binds a community together, despite the difficulties. This is why "as Body of Christ and as members of His Church we should realize that we won't achieve salvation in this world. We are not fighting to win this world, but we are fighting to redeem this world"[11]. Compassion between the community members is required for solidarity to emerge. In other terms, their location, position, and life narrative should all be shared with the community. This does not entail just talking about one other's lives, but it does suggest that community members must engage in speaking activities. It implies that members of the religious community participate willingly in actions in order to bring to light the community's language event[12]. Hence, "we

[8] Dimitrios ANYFANTAKIS, "Holy Communion and Infection Transmission: A Literature Review", in: *Cureus* 12 (6), p. 4.

[9] Andreas Andreas S. PAPAZOGLOU, Dimitrios V. MOYSIDIS, Christos TSAGKARIS, Marko DOROSH, Efstratios KARAGIANNIDIS, Rafael MAZIN, "Spiritual Health and the COVID-19 Pandemic...", p. 3225.

[10] Anonymous, "How shifts in communion practices during pandemic play into worship wars", in: *Religion Watch* 35, 10 (2020), p. 1.

[11] Paul Cezar HÂRLĂOANU, "The Church during Pandemic Times", in: *Romanian Journal of Artistic Creativity,* Volume 8, Issue 4, 2020, p. 34.

[12] Anna CHO, "For the church community after COVID-19", in: *Dialog* 2021; 60, p. 19.

have to be rooted in the teachings of the Church, in the works of Church's Fathers and also we should have a very deep knowledge of the Scripture. Knowing the tradition of the Church and the teachings of the Bible we could realize that nothing happens without a reason"[13].

In the current context, conducting pastoral counselling and assistance online and over the phone becomes vital. These are the day-to-day and minute-to-minute actions that represent the clergy-to-place connections. For some priests, this entails establishing new telephone and WhatsApp networks to provide assistance to their congregations, as well as ensuring that their most vulnerable members are cared for[14]. Thus, it is crucial to acknowledge that "by assuming a responsible stance in the coronavirus pandemic, Orthodox believers attest to their faith in Christ with love and care for others"[15].

III. The Pandemic and other Christian Churches

Although the churches and the spiritual support became unreachable during the pandemic, an opportunity has yet emerged. Hence, "the digital age realities showed that technology is a powerful tool at our disposal" and the pandemic social context should be turned into an opportunity for the Church to better integrate an online system of communication and interaction in its activities[16]. Some would argue that the COVID-19 pandemic "provides the church of God with a unique opportunity to rethink how to continue ministry without physical contact"[17].

Even before the strike of the pandemic, the Catholic Church was already facing the intrigue regarding the possibility of receiving online communion. Even practical "experiments" were conducted for almost

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[13] Paul Cezar Hârlăoanu, "The Church during Pandemic Times", p. 32.

[14] John R. Bryson, Lauren Andres, Andrew Davies, "COVID-19, Virtual Church Services and a New Temporary Geography of Home", in: *Tijdschrift voor Economische en Sociale Geografie,* Volume 111, Issue 3, p. 366-367.

[15] Nedim Begovic, "Restrictions on religions due to the COVID-19 Pandemic", p. 249.

[16] Thandiwe Nonkululeko Ngema, Zanele Gladness Buthelez, Dumisani Wilfred Mncube, "Understanding the impact of COVID-19 in the spiritual life of the Church community", in: *Pharos Journal of Theology,* Special Edition 2 (2021), p. 12.

[17] Naidoo GM, Connie Israel, Magdalene Kevisha Naidoo, "The COVID-19 Pandemic: How Pastors Communicate Faith and Hope to Virtual Congregations", in: *Pharos Journal of Theology*, Volume 102 Special Edition 2 (2021), p. 1.

twenty years in this sense[18]. Of course, the main theological argument against such a practice has been the non-existence of physical gathering which makes a remote communion invalid[19]. However, the perspective that "God's power to mediate grace is boundless" made some to argue in favour of such a practice when there is a real necessity[20].

Some researchers argued "that the coronavirus has brought new ways of understanding religious community belonging and participation" and in "Christianity's digital space incarnation, traditional parameters have continued to be central to the assessment of faith in a religion, being translated into fidelity and monitoring the activity of a community"[21]. In the view of the Pontifical Council, participating in online worship is not an acceptable alternative to participating in mass ceremonial celebrations. The pastoral constitution Gaudium et Spes (1965) made it clear that, although digital technology may provide opportunities for alternative interaction, such interaction is artificial and may destroy the bonds of human social relations[22]. Furthermore, "close personal relationships range widely and are not usually restricted to particular interests or conversations but rather grow out of shared experiences and a sense of mutual trust. Online relationships, however, tend to be less well integrated into everyday life, which exacerbates the sense of distance"[23]. Though, the relations between technology, society and culture are compound, and the relationship between the physical and virtual worlds of religion and belief is identical. The origins and effects of these interactions are not unidirectional. When participation to online religious activities emerged in the first few weeks of the COVID-19 pandemic, mutual influence, opposition, acceptance, and some uncertainty could have been observed[24].

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[18] Teresa BERGER, @ Worship: Liturgical Practices in Digital Worlds, Routledge, New York, p. 84.

[19] Teresa BERGER, @ Worship: Liturgical Practices in Digital Worlds, pp. 84-85.

[20] Teresa BERGER, @ Worship: Liturgical Practices in Digital Worlds, pp. 86-87.

[21] Alba SABATÉ GAUXACHS, José María Albalad AIGUABELLA, and Miriam Diez BOSCH, "Coronavirus-Driven Digitalization of In-Person Communities. Analysis of the Catholic Church Online Response in Spain during the Pandemic", in: Religions 12 (2021), p. 4.

[22] Helen PARISH, "The Absence of Presence and the Presence of Absence: Social Distancing, Sacraments, and the Virtual Religious Community during the COVID-19 Pandemic", in: Religions 2020, 11, 276, p. 5.

[23] Helen PARISH, "The Absence of Presence...", p. 4.

[24] Helen PARISH, "The Absence of Presence...", p. 5.

As an example, the Catholic dioceses from Bosnia and Herzegovina were in a situation of individual discernment. For those communities, the Holy Mass took place accordingly to the safety measures: "[…] Eucharistic celebrations were not suspended, but they were expected to be performed in compliance with the requirements for public gatherings, and where possible, outdoors"[25]. Following the lockdown, Catholic believers were exempted of the Mass attendance. Also, the Mass was held only by the priests and the worshippers could attend it via social media[26]. In Slovakia on the other hand, the churches were considered dangerous places where someone would easy get infected. Thus, such charges regarding the safety measures were "more controversial and more emotionally" ones[27].

A study conducted in South African Christian churches explored how the COVID-19 pandemic affected the population from a spiritual point of view. Some conclusions of the study refer to the necessity of the church leaders to integrate the change, including the means of communication. The focus shifted exclusively on the online interaction. Another discovered aspect refers to the need of the Church to develop catechetical programmes in order to exchange views on the pandemic and how the believers should behave in such situations. The clergy should adapt itself to the contemporary technologies and could even receive assistance from professional staff. Lastly, "since the COVID–19 period proved that homes can be turned into churches, more emphasis should be placed on cell groups where people can worship more intimately"[28]. Also, for the African Christian churches, some researchers concluded that in order

> "to assist in combating the virus, it is recommended that the government partner with faith-based organisations in various ways: the distribution of food packages, the screening of community members for the coronavirus, the conversion of worship sites to accommodate the influx of infected persons

[25] Nedim Begovic, "Restrictions on religions due to the COVID-19 Pandemic", p.240.

[26] Nedim Begovic, "Restrictions on religions due to the COVID-19 Pandemic", pp. 240-241.

[27] Terézia Roncáková, "Closed Churches during the Pandemic: Liberal versus Conservative and Christian versus Atheist Argumentation in Media", in: *Journalism and Media* 2, p. 14

[28] Thandiwe Nonkululeko Ngema, Zanele Gladness Buthelez, Dumisani Wilfred Mncube, "Understanding the impact of COVID-19 in the spiritual life of the Church community", in: *Pharos Journal of Theology,* Volume 102- Special Edition 2 (2021), pp. 13-14.

needing care and also to be used as vaccination centres if the need arises".[29]

In Spain, the Catholic Church "has reinvented its activity" and "as one of the most consolidated offline communities, reworked its communication, going online in a matter of days"[30]. Such an action had its own downfall, one deficiency consisting in administrative challenges. Thus, "despite the opportunity that digitalization has presented us within this context, the lack of coordination when implementing it also threatens the communicative sphere of the Catholic community in Spain"[31]. According to a study, five challenges were identified with respect to the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the Spanish dioceses. Those referred mainly to the religious needs of the believers; the necessity of solidarity towards everyone, despite his/her religious faith; the development of an informational media system; the need of the clergy to be interconnected, and the need for providing pastoral care for those in need via social networks[32]. However, "in the Spanish dioceses, the lack of equipment and human resources seem to be the most prominent factor limiting a fully digital response; this is also negatively affected by the lack of training and follow-through by some members of the community"[33].

For the Lutheran congregations, the prohibition of the religious gatherings was even more sensitive. Since the "preaching could happen remotely through digital means", the possibility of someone to "to deliver the sacrament to households, like permitted for food delivery" was considered[34]. Being able to do a speech online entails maintaining and growing a church community. Thus, an online speech calls for a different

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[29] Naidoo GM, Connie Israel, Magdalene Kevisha Naidoo, "The COVID-19 Pandemic...", p. 16.

[30] Alba Sabaté Gauxachs, José María Albalad Aiguabella, and Miriam Diez Bosch, "Coronavirus-Driven Digitalization ...", p. 1.

[31] Alba Sabaté Gauxachs, José María Albalad Aiguabella, and Miriam Diez Bosch, "Coronavirus-Driven Digitalization ...", p. 10.

[32] Alba Sabaté Gauxachs, José María Albalad Aiguabella, and Miriam Diez Bosch, "Coronavirus-Driven Digitalization ...", p. 11.

[33] Alba Sabaté Gauxachs, José María Albalad Aiguabella, and Miriam Diez Bosch, "Coronavirus-Driven Digitalization ...", p. 12.

[34] Kyle Kenneth Schiefelbein-Guerrero, "Whether one may Flee from digital worship: Reflections on sacramental ministry in a public health crisis", in: *Dialog* 2020; 59, p. 52.

involvement in terms of communication. As a result, when a face-to-face gathering of the church community is difficult due to the coronavirus, the congregations had to actively make use of online community[35]. As a result,

> "the number of diocesan subscribers on YouTube has increased and, in a few days, the number of new profiles exceeded the thousand subscribers required for the platform in order to being able to broadcast live. Traffic also increased on institutional web pages (in some cases, the number of unique users skyrocketed by more than 200%), as well as on social networks (Facebook, Twitter and Instagram, in that order, with more gradual rises in both followers and interaction). This confirms that, in practice, the digital environment was conducive to engagement in Catholic communities"[36].

In the new context, there are even debates regarding the possibility of an "online Communion" which entails "having worshippers' gatherings in community through web conferencing with their own bread and cup as originating from their pantries". However, such a practice would rise some theological concerns. In the Lutheran Church, "two main objections" are raised: "the Lord's Supper requires contact, and it is akin to self-communion"[37]. Others consider this procedure as an "exception that proves the rule" and it would be "an interim measure that in and by the Holy Spirit's power will console and move from inside-out God's people further in the way of trust and loving service to this diseased world"[38]. One issue is how to keep the church community of meetings, sharing, and fellowship alive. Another example is how internet and family worship may be used to create public worship events. In other words, is the activity of the Holy Spirit present in public worship the same for us if it is substituted by online and family worship in the church community?[39]

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[35] Anna Cho, "For the church community after COVID-19", p. 18.

[36] Alba Sabaté Gauxachs, José María Albalad Aiguabella, and Miriam Diez Bosch, "Coronavirus-Driven Digitalization ...", p.9.

[37] Kyle Kenneth Schiefelbein-Guerrero, "Whether one may Flee from digital worship...", p. 53.

[38] Duane Howard Larson, "Should Christians practice «Virtual Communion» in time of a plague?", in: *Dialog* 2020; 59, p. 58.

[39] Anna Cho, "For the church community after COVID-19", p. 15.

In the case of the Church of England, The Archbishop of Canterbury presided an online sacrament of community from his kitchen.[40] The main concern upon the shift in the Eucharistic celebration was about the nature of the sacrament. The result of the studies showed the diversity of perspectives within different churches in England regarding different eucharistic practices, for instance "clergy using virtual technology to concelebrate communion together in their various homes" or "people at home receiving communion from their own bread and wine as part of an online communion service"[41]. One of the conclusions is the lack of consensus between the clergy or laity, disregarding the religious commitment.

The appearance of virtual church administrations changes the relationship between the person and the more extensive cooperation of the assembly. There is an adjustment within the believer's involvement. Moreover, there is the brief creation of worship spaces inside homes driving to the generation of modern and transitory geographies of domestic spaces. Versatile and a-spatial worship practices have risen built upon an unused part of the residential space, as emerged spaces for worship or as spaces covering devices to get to virtual administrations[42]. Despite this, it is worth mentioning that some researchers consider that "most English places of worship, their clergy and congregations had no experience in live streaming, or recording services". Thus, they had to explore their ability to respond rapidly to closure of church buildings[43].COVID-19 pandemic is definitely a turning point in the evolution of civilizations and organisations. Clergy have been asked to come up with new ways to worship in order to keep their congregations alive while also providing pastoral care for the worried, sick, and grieving. This has posed a challenge to traditional religious rituals, which typically pride themselves on not being culturally contextualised or responding to societal change[44].

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[40] Leslie J. Francis, Andrew Village, "This Blessed Sacrament of Unity? Holy Communion, the Pandemic, and the Church of England" in: *Journal of Empirical Theology* 34 (2021), p. 1.

[41] Leslie J. Francis, Andrew Village, "This Blessed Sacrament of Unity? …",p. 2.

[42] John R. Bryson, Lauren Andres, Andrew Davies, "COVID-19, Virtual Church Services and a New Temporary Geography of Home", in: *Tijdschrift voor Economische en Sociale Geografie,* Volume 111, Issue 3, p. 365.

[43] John R. Bryson, Lauren Andres, Andrew Davies, "COVID-19, Virtual Church ...", p. 360.

[44] John R. Bryson, Lauren Andres, Andrew Davies, "COVID-19, Virtual Church ...", p. 370.

Where live-streaming was not possible, recordings of services, including scripture readings and speeches, have been made available online. Many individuals have found this to be a source of consolation and spiritual food during times when they were unable to physically gather in churches. Prayer can be spoken, the Bible can be read and explained, music can be played, and Christians can be supported and spiritually nourished. Some have recommended that the Communion be live-streamed, and some parishes have made the Liturgy available for live-stream or recorded viewing. Others have chosen to live-stream or film a so-called "virtual" Eucharist, in which a priest in one location consecrates bread and wine while individuals in another location enjoy their own bread and wine while listening to the online priest's prayers for blessing[45]. Hence,

> "modern liturgical practice suggests that it is the entire Eucharistic action that effects consecration as a unity and not just words said by a priest. It is the action of the priest and people gathered around the same table that are mutually involved in the consecration of the elements and not the words and actions of the priest alone"[46].

It is worth noting that "whether as an embodied community or a virtual community, religion and church invoke a language of gathering and fellowship that projects the imagery of the kingdom of God into the hearts and minds of the faithful and facilitates the expression of a lived faith." Religions are among the oldest forms of organisation, but the extensiveness and depth of COVID-19's influence on their communities has required drastic reform when facing this rising catastrophe[47].

IV. A Virtual Eucharist?

A sacrament/ religious ceremony brings individuals together to engage in shared worship, for the most part counting the shared singing of psalms or

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[45] Brian Douglas, "«Virtual» Eucharists in a Time of COVID-19 Pandemic: Biblical, Theological and Constitutional Perspectives", in: *Journal of Anglican Studies* (2020), 18, p. 130.
[46] Brian Douglas, "«Virtual» Eucharists ...", p. 136.
[47] Helen Parish, "The Absence of Presence ...", p. 11.

hymns, the reading of sacred text or of certain parts during sermons, shared and personal supplication and, more frequently, interest in the Eucharist or Sacred Communion[48]. This re-connects individuals and it should be placed at the centre of a continuing conversation between theology and human geography. This role became even more obvious during the pandemic.

Moreover, during the pandemic, churches played an essential role in caring for the most vulnerable, offering food, and distributing medication to people who were isolated and out of reach of church members. In times of crisis, it is critical to grasp the sacred, people, and governmentality nexus[49]. Thus, "the emphasis is placed on everyday experiences. There are two challenges to consider here: first, to distinguish between formally consecrated places (churches or chapels) and their congregants; second, to differentiate between such consecrated places and other sites where religious and spiritual activities occur"[50].

However, the use of virtual communities and social media during the pandemic to bridge the gap between the demands of social distancing and the longstanding prioritization of proximity in Christian worship has reinvigorated this dialogue and redefined its parameters. This is particularly evident in the debate over the validity of "virtual" sacraments, particularly the Eucharistic consecration, synchronous and asynchronous participation in liturgy and worship, the interaction between local pastoral responses to lay concerns, and a universal theology viewed through the lens of a global virtual community. The transfer of the sacraments into the online carries with it the potential to contradict the essence of Christianity so that it becomes a chaotic jumble of information and observation and it ceases to be a religion that is lived out within the human, physical community[51]. Moreover,

> "virtual services raise many important questions for human and theological geographers. For the theologians, publicly accessible online services challenge the relationship between parish structure and people; the virtual service destroys geography by

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[48] John R. Bryson, Lauren Andres, Andrew Davies, "COVID-19, Virtual Church ...", p. 363.

[49] John R. Bryson, Lauren Andres, Andrew Davies, "COVID-19, Virtual Church ...", p. 371.

[50] John R. Bryson, Lauren Andres, Andrew Davies, "COVID-19, Virtual Church ...", p. 362.

[51] Helen Parish, "The Absence of Presence ...", p. 6.

extending the geographic reach of the parish beyond physical boundaries and existing communities"[52].

One could argue that attendance does not automatically mean participation and that it is not a sign of commitment to Christianity as a whole. Different Christian traditions have different expectations. There are some forms of worship that require the active participation and engagement of all individuals, but there are others that are simply focused on ritual performance. People who join online services often are not participants, but churches hope they can become worshipers somehow[53].

Virtual services can be livestreamed or filmed in real time, yet they are digitally saved and accessible to everyone. One deficiency of such a practice is that it de-temporalizes the service and makes it more physically and socially inclusive by extending its purpose beyond a certain time and date. The COVID-19 pandemic triggered quick modifications in practise, demonstrating church leaders' ability to innovate and embrace alternative procedures[54]. "While it is possible to observe, and to some extent participate, in the celebration of Mass as an online virtual congregant, the physical participation in the Eucharist by receiving the elements is not feasible outside the embodied setting"[55]. In online, Christian community membership is based upon access to a computer rather than to the sacrament of baptism, with the sacerdotal and sacramental function of the priesthood giving way to the proliferation of unlicensed and unsupervised Christian ministries. The destruction of the personalistic community identity coincides with the collapse of individual identity, removing mankind from the narrative of salvation history and turning God into a creation of an online humanity that remodels religion in a space provided by virtual reality[56].

The availability of online liturgical events has the potential to build a global virtual Christian church and community. However, a worldwide Christian church with a mission and sacramental ministry that extends virtually into the homes of its people cannot fully replicate some of the

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[52] John R. Bryson, Lauren Andres, Andrew Davies, "COVID-19, Virtual Church ...", p. 370.

[53] John R. Bryson, Lauren Andres, Andrew Davies, "COVID-19, Virtual Church ...", p. 366.

[54] John R. Bryson, Lauren Andres, Andrew Davies, "COVID-19, Virtual Church ...", p. 361

[55] Helen Parish, "The Absence of Presence ...", p. 8.

[56] Helen Parish, "The Absence of Presence ...", p. 6.

institutions and boundaries of organised religion. The change to online religious participation in reaction to COVID-19 was swift and, in many respects, beneficial. While church leaders have recognised the significance and promise of this new link between religion and social media, their enthusiasm has not been accompanied by a feeling that this is a long-term partnership:[57]

> "It assumes that since live-streaming is available, the option of a «virtual» Eucharist is automatically possible with adequate theological reflection. It also assumes that bread and wine in homes is the equivalent of bread and wine in a Eucharist somewhere else and that such sharing of bread and wine is no less spiritual or real than the bread and wine consecrated somewhere else. It also assumes that consecration does not require the physical presence of the priest who is giving the blessing, nor does a Eucharist require the use of the same set of bread and wine"[58].

While the consecration takes place in one location with one set of bread and wine and the allocation takes place in another location with a different set of bread and wine, this breaks the unity of the single celebration in a gathered congregation. The notion of "virtual" trades on the notion of similarity; because priesthood is not operative directly in the homes of people accessing a service via electronic means, bread and wine in one place are not equivalent to bread and wine in another. The presider of the Holy Communion does not know who the virtual congregation is, nor does he know if any of them need reconciliation or even excommunication. This relieves the leading pastor of his or her pastoral responsibilities. The priest has no information about what the virtual congregation considers to be «consecrated» bread and wine, and so has no idea how the "remains" will be handled or who will be responsible for them, presuming that the Sacrament is successful.

This new reality is not without challenges for the future. The use of the «virtual» Eucharist during this pandemic has the potential, when this period is overpassed, to determine people to stay in their homes on

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[57] Helen PARISH, "The Absence of Presence ...", p. 6.
[58] Brian DOUGLAS, "«Virtual» Eucharists ...", p. 132.

Sundays, uncommitted to an actual fellowship. If sacramental actions are delivered via internet, the question arises whether people need to come for a face-to-face celebration of the Eucharist or would the attendance of the TV broadcast be enough? Is it possible to make use of previous videos and not celebrate the Eucharist each time? Is it really necessary to have Presidents/Priests when we have digital means of communication?[59]

As a result, a "virtual" Eucharist provides a faulty, inadequate, and damaged theology of consecration. It produces an individualist sacramental theology, which leads to the dismantling of the broader notion of sacramental action and usefulness of the Church and the establishment of a congregationalist ecclesiology, in which an exaggerated focus is placed on the local, both in the priest's sacerdotal actions and in the breaking and distributing in homes, at the expense of the universal church[60].

Consequently, from such a perspective, some other questions emerge. Hence, we can ask ourselves why not a "virtual" baptism, a "virtual" confirmation, or a "virtual" ordination if we already have a "virtual" Eucharist? Can the laying on of hands be done through the internet in a virtual confirmation or ordination? This has something to do with the sacrament. The water and the signature are important in baptism, while the laying on of hands is important in confirmation and ordination. The bread and wine, and what the priest does with them, are central elements of the Eucharist. An imprint of the bishop's hands might be mailed and put on the person's head as he or her are confirmed or ordained. It would be the same reasoning that extends to a "virtual" Eucharist, in which different elements which do not participate in the sacramental activity are used[61].

V. Conclusions

Despite the pandemic situation, Christians must not neglect that

> "it is also ancient habit of the Church to practise what is called spiritual communion. […] This suggests that the benefits of communion can be obtained by spiritual eating and drinking on the basis of faith. It would therefore be possible for people to

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[59] Brian Douglas, "«Virtual» Eucharists ...", p. 135.
[60] Brian Douglas, "«Virtual» Eucharists ...", pp. 136-137.
[61] Brian Douglas, "«Virtual» Eucharists ...", pp. 138.

watch a Eucharist celebrated by a priest without the eating and drinking of bread and wine in their own homes and to receive the benefits of communion by spiritual means"[62].

Accordingly, "the sharing of an online communion and consecration via Zoom, Facebook, or other social media does not enable the church and its members to participate in the sharing of one bread and one cup"[63].

"Visual communion prioritises the observed momentum of consecration over the physical consumption of the elements". The first one has some clear advantages in the COVID-19 era, but it is still difficult to translate this model from the physical context of the church into the virtual world of live-streamed liturgy. A faith that is embodied and effectively lived differs from a virtual faith. Certainly, the future will tell if this sacramental separation could work as a remedy or has only limited, contextual positive effects[64].

[62] Brian Douglas, "«Virtual» Eucharists ...", p. 141.
[63] Helen Parish, "The Absence of Presence ...", p. 10.
[64] Helen Parish, "The Absence of Presence ...", p. 9.