

Church Union Anglo-Catholic Theology Lecture 2022

I am very grateful for the opportunity to speak tonight on the topic of what we might say from a Catholic point of view about online worship.

My intention is not to give an exhaustive systematic account of everything the Catholic tradition asserts about worship and the internet. I hope rather to offer a few ideas that might start orienting our thinking about this topic.

We have all been buffeted by a range of suggested changes to how we celebrate the liturgy both during COVID and after it. I sense that during all that, a lot of Anglo-Catholics had an instinctual feeling there was a lot they wanted to challenge in those changes, but perhaps didn't have the theological language to explain where that gut feeling came from.

I also sensed many Anglo-Catholics perceived there was much to be gained by certain online possibilities, but again perhaps found it difficult to be convincing in their parish contexts about embracing positive changes.

It might be that you are a lone voice in a church that encompasses many traditions, or perhaps a member of deanery or diocesan synod, and have wanted to explain why you feel the way you do. Or it could be on the other hand you feel your PCC could be doing more and should be more open to making contact with new people online.

Whatever the case, I hope tonight's lecture will give you the resources to start discussing and thinking these issues at slightly greater depth.

What do we mean by online worship?

A first point I want to make is that there is an incredibly wide range of things that one could reasonably call online worship.

I've been very frustrated indeed by the way in which this phrase has been oversimplified and used very unsophisticatedly as political ammunition in a range of arguments.

I have been in meetings of clergy where some really quite senior priests have uncomplicatedly said live streaming anything is a waste of time and people just need to get off their arses and start coming back to church.

By the same token, I've heard diocesan comms flunkies go on about online worship as if it is the silver bullet that will solve the Church of England's every problem.

We need get beyond these unhelpful dichotomies and say something a bit more nuanced and useful about this new phenomenon.

I would include in online worship anything that involves someone connecting with an act of worship with the intention of participating in that act at distance somehow – usually by online means such as live streaming or video recording.

But, there is a world of difference between connecting live with a service you know is taking place in real time and watching something after the event. There's also a wide gulf between the various sorts of service of the Word that can take place by livestream and suggestions that the sacraments can be celebrated online.

One of the things I want to share tonight as evidence is the experience we have had of expanding online worship at All Saints' Margaret Street. I don't mean to claim in any way that we are some paragon of perfection that everyone should copy in this respect, but I do hope some of the evidence we have amassed can be of use to Catholics who want to think more about this subject.

Our experience at All Saints'

From the very beginning of the various lockdowns, All Saints' committed itself to broadcasting a daily celebration of the Mass. All Saints' and this parish share a unique canonical status. They are the only two parishes in the diocese where the vicarage falls under the faculty jurisdiction by virtue of being built onto and being part of the church building.

We are lucky at All Saints' that the sacristy of our church officially forms part of the vicarage – it was originally the clergy house oratory. This offered a terrific way of circumventing the tyrannous and illegal insistence of the House of Bishops that churches could not be entered by clergy for fear of death by door nob.

Through the lockdowns and the illegal exile from our churches, our assistant priest, Fr Michael Bowie livestreamed a Mass every single day from the sacristy.

All Saints' suddenly discovered an enormous following online as people in this country and abroad who felt completely abandoned by their churches tuned in.

Since the easing of restrictions we continue to live-stream the 12 noon Mass each day and the High Mass on Sundays. Many of the people who originally followed us have gone back to their parish churches, but many have remained and continue to participate in our worship to such a degree that we now have a permanent and reasonably sustainable online congregation of worshippers.

I am very aware that the experience we have had at All Saints' is different from that which others have had or could have. We have a very particular musical tradition which attracts lots of people online, we have a long history of being quite well known as an Anglo-Catholic parish, we have substantial financial resources. That said, I hope we have shown that extensive connection with people is possible online for parishes in the Catholic tradition, and that it's something worth thinking about.

Live-streaming

Live-streaming is where an act of worship taking place in real time and in an actual place is broadcast live through the internet. Different levels of interaction for the online participants are possible, but this experience essentially involves watching a live service.

We have found at All Saints' that a relatively stable and sustainable online congregation of people watching our broadcasts live has developed. If you only count those who watch the whole liturgy from beginning to end, we think we have around 10-15 people participating in the Mass each day, and around 50 people participating live on Sundays.

So who are these people? We've put quite a bit of energy into connecting with our online followers and hearing their stories.

I'll give you an example. We have a home communicant at All Saints', to whom we take communion regularly, who tunes in every day without fail to the Mass

online. If for some reason he can't see the live-stream because of a doctor's appointment or if his carer is late, he tells me he categorically refuses to watch the Mass after the event. For him, the point of online worship is clearly a strong sense of immediate connection with the group of people worshipping together at All Saints, communicated through live witnessing of the event online. What he doesn't want is simply to watch an act of worship after the event.

Others who have been in touch with us are people who feel very isolated and are miles from any church in the Catholic tradition – both in this country but also in America. They frequently combine physical worship elsewhere in a local church with online participation in our liturgy for a “Catholic top up.”

Other people again found the time of lockdown very alienating and are still very angry and smarting about the way in which they were treated by the church in lockdowns. I have heard stories from our online worshippers of feeling completely abandoned in churches where bishops, clergy and PCCs were gripped by COVID panic and wouldn't open up for worship even when permitted. Many of these parishes seem to have experienced complete collapse and terminal decline as a result of a paranoid and feeble response to the pandemic.

Many of these live streamers are also in substantially younger age ranges. During the pandemic, they shopped around online looking for interesting worship and somehow found us. Many of them still regularly connect live with us, in a hybrid of physically coming to worship with us when they can, and worshipping online when they can't.

In certain ways, live-streaming is not a new thing. We have had the phenomenon of the live broadcasting of worship for nearly 70 years. Just think of the Coronation broadcast in 1953 to millions of people watching all over the globe.

I think the live-streaming of worship is the simplest to make some theological sense of. It communicates a sense of emotional and intellectual connection to an act of worship that is taking place at distance from the viewer. At that distance, the viewer participates in the presence of God's word as it is declared and expounded, and is able to feel a sense of communion and fellowship with those gathered physically.

In many ways, I think the home communicant I spoke of earlier exemplifies perfectly how live-streaming works at its best. Here is a person whose communion with the church is extended and preserved and cherished by two means – first by receiving holy communion by extension regularly; but each day by joining with us online for worship.

The very ancient practice of spiritual communion is an important idea here. This is the notion that if one is unable to receive communion physically in the Mass, it is possible to open one's heart to God's presence and receive those same graces spiritually. Richard Burrige's latest book *Holy Communion in Contagious Times* is very useful on this topic. He has a short section on the history of this idea and reveals it to be far more universally rooted in many Christian traditions than I had realised.

The idea of a spiritual communion is one of the key theological building blocks that makes live-streaming possible as a useful way of gathering together in one celebration people who for whatever reason are distanced from each other, but who worship together live.

To sum up, from a theological point of view, I'd say there are three clear benefits to live-streaming. First, much is gained from the real sense of fellowship and communion which is created; second, there is an experience of the breaking open of God's word, which it strikes me is no less beneficial than experiencing it in person; third in the context of a sacramental celebration, there is the possibility of spiritual communion.

One thing I just want to say very directly – I've heard lots of clergy moaning about a much imagined category of person who since the pandemic stay at home, can't be bothered to come to church, and watch the liturgy on the sofa whilst drinking coffee and eating donuts. I have to say I just don't think they exist and we need to stop perpetuating this trope. All the people I've spoken to who connect with us at All Saints' online do so for a specific genuine reason, or combine their online worship with us with some sort of in person worship elsewhere. It's important not to belittle the reasons why people want to worship online and why so many are reaching out to Anglo-Catholic parishes. Its crucial to listen to what people have to say about why they want to worship online.

Watching after the event

Watching a recorded event after it has happened is very different from live-streaming. This involves watching an event after it is broadcast, or a service which has been deliberately constructed in a video studio for repeated broadcast such as one experiences with certain BBC programmes.

We've noticed in our experience at All Saints' that watching liturgies after the event is also very popular indeed. Most Sundays we find we get around 50 people watching the liturgy live from beginning to end. But we frequently see a further 20-30 watch the same Mass in its entirety after the event over the following 24 hours.

Part of this phenomenon is to do with the time zones in which people watch. We have quite a few people tuning in from America, from places where it simply would not be possible to watch live. But there does seem to be interest even in the UK from people wanting to watch parts of our liturgy after the event, particularly to hear the sermon.

One of the things we've started doing in response to this is isolating the sermon from the High Mass and publishing it as a separate video. This has proven to be very popular indeed, with very high uptake and watching levels.

There seems to be considerable thirst out there for good teaching and substantial preaching. Another statistical trend we've noticed is that amongst people who access material in our youtube channel for the first time, if it's one of these sermons that they watch rather than the liturgy, they are more likely to come back to look at other material. In other words, there is something very potent about recorded homiletic material in short, 10 minute chunks that makes people want to come back for more.

But there is another level on which I think watching after the event liturgical videos are valuable and that is quite simply in the realm of what people used to call before COVID, "Church Shopping."

Before the pandemic it was entirely acceptable to assume that visitors who come to your church for the first time might be shopping around for a new church, or might be new to church. It was held to be normal good practice to have sidesmen at the door to make newcomers feel welcome and explain things.

Indeed, there are a number of liturgies in the church's year where it is assumed people might not understand everything that was going on, but where it was felt if they got a good impression they might come back – Christmas carol services, harvest festival, remembrance day.

It strikes me that exactly the same sort of church shopping or toe dipping goes on now, but almost entirely online. It is surely a perfectly logical thing to assume that if you want to know what a particular parish is like or you want to know more about Christian worship, you might start looking online.

I cannot think of a single new Christian or new parishioner at All Saints' under the age of 40 who hasn't said to me that before coming to our church they experienced some element of our liturgy online.

It strikes me from a Catholic perspective that we should be open to the fact that God can use that interaction with the viewer of a recorded homily or liturgy for his purposes - to whet an appetite for in person worship and prompt interest in learning more about the Christian faith.

In addition to watching previously recorded liturgies, there is also a completely different phenomenon which is creating a worship video that never actually happened but which is intended to be experienced as worship by those who watch it. I have a very different view on the worth of these productions.

A good example of this would be Songs of Praise which often used to be recorded over several sessions. It's never actually experienced as a real liturgy by any human person until its broadcast and is simply a spliced series of video recordings.

This sort of compilation video is produced by the Church of England each week and released through facebook and other social media as a Sunday service. Recordings of different people are spliced together to produce a sort of televisual liturgy. In my view, these Church of England productions are almost entirely without exception excruciatingly bad. I am frankly horrified that anyone watches these appalling productions and feels they have in any way worshiped anything or anyone. More people watched on YouTube the Palm Sunday High Mass at All Saints' that watched the Church of England's official Sunday service in the entire country.

For me personally, this sort of video often feels wooden and artificial.

The most effective and professional version of this sort of worship that I have come across, however, is All Souls', Langham Place. Rather than broadcasting an actual liturgy that has taken place, they construct a video liturgy each week of excellent quality at the heart of which is a very substantial sermon – identical to the one to be preached on Sunday.

The theological logic of what is being offered is pretty clear – a Christian community which highly prizes in a pretty unashamed way a Calvinist understanding of the worth of preaching sees this as a further way in which homiletic teaching can be shared with a wider group of people.

It's not my kind of thing, but they do it incredibly well, and much better than the rubbish churned out by the comms department at Church House. It's pretty clear the key thing at the heart of it being better is the worth placed on the sermon, which takes up a very large proportion of the recorded video.

It strikes me therefore, there is much benefit that from a Catholic theological perspective we can attribute to leaving videos on the internet of previously celebrated liturgies.

The principal advantage is the interest in homiletic and teaching material that seems to be around. It is also evident that people often find exploring what our churches are like much less intimidating by doing it online before they ever physically enter a church.

I remain much less convinced of the worth of creating video acts of worship. They feel a bit artificial to me personally and I don't like them, but I do admit that some people produce them well – particularly if they have nothing whatsoever to do with the Comms department at Church House.

Online celebrations of the Eucharist

Up to this point, I have very much been arguing in favour of the usefulness of online worship. I want now, however, to express some thoughts in the area of online celebrations of the Eucharist where I think a Catholic perspective might prompt us to ask significant questions and challenge certain assumptions.

One thing which has very much fed and prompted my thinking about this of late is Richard Burridge's latest book about online worship, *Holy Communion in*

Contagious Times. Now, for the avoidance of doubt, let me state I don't agree with his conclusions, but I think it is a very useful and thoroughly researched book which is well worth reading.

Broadly speaking, the book is a very detailed exploration of all the questions which have arisen over the past two years to do with online worship. Burrige aims to persuade people that it is perfectly legitimate to celebrate the Eucharist online. By that we mean a celebration of the Mass by a group of people in distant locations all tuning in to a Mass online with bread and wine in front of their computer, which they then all individually receive.

As a historic record of how our bishops dealt with the months of lockdown, the book is very good account of just how chaotic, incoherent, illegal and theologically ill-informed their actions were at nearly every single stage of the pandemic.

Burrige's argument on Zoom Masses is cogent. If online ways of gathering replicate physical gathering, and as long as an appropriate rite is celebrated by an authorised minister, we can surely use Zoom as a way of gathering a Eucharistic community. Because it is physically dispersed it cannot share one bread and one cup, but can come close to that by sharing individually elements in each location that people join from.

Why might we from a Catholic perspective want to be sceptical about the idea of celebrating the Mass online via Zoom?

Two really big arguments present themselves to me as the most persuasive. The first is quite simply this. At its most basic level, every celebration of the Mass is a meal. It is the communal sharing of bread and wine. If it ceases to be a meal, then it ceases to be a celebration of the Eucharist. I'm afraid I am quite simply unconvinced that lots of people sitting in front of a screen is a meal.

A catholic objection to Zoom Masses revolves I think not so much around what your definition of the Eucharist is, so much as it revolves around what your basic definition of a meal is. A meal is a physical gathering of people at which all share of the same food and drink.

At their heart, all the sacraments are encounters in which God uses the physical to communicate his grace.

A baptism at its most basic must be a washing. Once a rite ceases to involve in some sense a washing with water, it ceases to be a baptism.

Once an anointing ceases to involve the healing touch of oil on human skin, it ceases to be the sacrament of holy unction.

When a Mass ceases to be sharing of the elements of bread or wine by a gathered community it ceases to be a celebration of the Eucharist because it has ceased to be a meal.

I think it is quite important to emphasise that there are some things which cannot be done or communicated or transacted online. Part of what it means to be human is to be in physical real time relationship with others. The Mass, amongst other things, is the Christian expression of that par excellence. It is the corporate offering of the sacrifice of praise and thanksgiving by the gathered Christian community. It is not a series of individual receptions of holy communion.

To emphasise the need for physical gathering is also amongst other things to make the Eucharist truly inclusive. For there are many people who suffer from digital poverty or isolation of one sort or another - either because they have no access to the internet, or just don't inhabit a culture or generation that is at ease with it.

Online worship opens up means of connection with large numbers of new people, which I'm all in favour of. However, making that the only way in which one interacts with the world also cuts you off from other groups who aren't as present online – frequently the old, the disadvantaged, the less educated, and sometimes those with disabilities.

A second point I would make about the need to celebrate Zoom Eucharists is quite simply this – it is not a need. There's something quite revealing about our church culture that when presented with a crisis, it simply aped and echoed the capitalist consumerist culture of the secular world in which it is found. Much obsession with Zoom Eucharists stemmed from a consumerist outlook that can't cope with not getting what we want when we want it.

The church's history is full of great saints and communities who went through long periods of not being able to celebrate the Eucharist either because of persecution or geography or deliberate decision. For heaven's sake, until the

Tractarian revival, most Anglicans only communicated two or three times a year.

In times of crisis or pandemic, I think we need to learn to be a little more at ease with the idea of a Eucharistic fast. I certainly think the bishops of the Church of England need a better understanding of church history in order to realise what Eucharistic practice in the past has been.

I have a lot of sympathy with some words of Thomas O'Loughlin, commenting on the commodification of the Eucharist, when he urges us to resist the temptation to think as if "the Eucharist is something 'out there' which we watch or somehow obtain and make our own as if we were theatregoers or consumers." We are not theatregoers who by virtue of having bought a ticket have a right to watch a performance of the Eucharist come what may.

Learning to be patient and waiting for an occasion when we could properly celebrate the Eucharist fully, richly, physically and meaningfully may be the call that came out of the COVID pandemic - rather than a need to take everything online and instantly provide an experience which was thinner, less human, and less substantial.

Conclusion

I hope to have offered a few thoughts on what there is of worth in the recent explosion of online worship. There are many things that are positive and worth grasping through livestreaming and the recording of liturgies. Equally, there are some things which quite simply can't be communicated or expressed or embodied online and I think the Eucharist can only ever be celebrated in person.

The most significant thing this crisis has taught us, I think is that there is no one solution that fits all sizes. It behoves us all to examine, experiment and reflect on what might work in our context and what might not. I don't think it need be the case that every parish livestreams their liturgy, and it might be that devoting endless energy to it could be counter productive if there are other more important ways of connecting with people available in your parish. By the same token, I think some parishes, particularly our major churches and cathedrals could be encouraged to up their ante on this and embrace the possibilities of online worship more.

Whatever the case, our worship needs to be about one thing and one thing only – and that is encountering the living God and giving him the thanks and praise that is his due. However you choose to do it, if you're managing to do that, I don't think you're far from the Kingdom of God at all.

Fr Peter Anthony