pandemic has challenged but also brought out the best in our shared Ignatian Spirituality. Moreover, this spirituality has kept us alive in the storm more than we realized. It is a living tradition which our pandemic experience continues to shape, even as it stays true to its original roots. In *A Secular Age*, Charles Taylor explores the causes and consequences of secularization in society and proposes new ways of "re-enchanting" the world.[18] Perhaps it can be said that five centuries earlier, Ignatius was doing the same through Spex, helping ordinary people find their way back to God and thus live re-enchanted lives. The first UAP of the Society of Jesus is "to show the way to God through Ignatian Spirituality." With a newfound common human experience of vulnerability, solidarity, sacrifice, and hope in the pandemic, Ignatian Spirituality can certainly be shared more widely especially through universally-adapted concepts, methods, and terms. This not only helps people cope better with the crisis but also emerge stronger in fullness of life.

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[18] Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 2007).

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Online Pastoral Presence: Virtual or Real?

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The COVID-19 pandemic that spanned the years 2019, 2020 and 2021 thus far has impacted every aspect of human life, including religious and spiritual life. The essays in this volume, which come from pastoral workers living in over a dozen countries around the world, confirm and elaborate on how particular ministries were disrupted due to the impact of the crisis. Although the social, economic and religious contexts as well as the extent of the pandemic in each locality differ, most of the essays have highlighted an important method to address the challenges presented by the pandemic, which the Church's leaders and theologians cannot ignore – the use of digital technology, especially internet platforms to implement or transmit many essential pastoral activities of the Church. What in pre-pandemic time was often considered to be a valuable means to supplement and enhance pastoral work became *the* primary means to conduct pastoral work and sustain the life of the Church during the pandemic.

A matter worth noting from the essays is that digital technology was employed to continue pastoral work because it was seen as a practical and necessary alternative under the circumstances rather than it having some theological significance that would redefine our understanding of God and our relationship with God and with one another. Indeed, one could not blame pastoral workers for not reflecting extensively on the meaning and implications of the use of digital technology to sustain their work. Perhaps for many, it was enough under the dire circumstances that the Word was preached, souls were nourished, and catechism was

taught. It was certainly better than having a total religious blackout with pastoral workers and those whom they served completely cut off from one another due to the invisible coronavirus. The deeper short-term and long-term ramifications involving the permeating of digital technology in the spiritual life of the people in an unprecedented way will have to be left to theologians and church scholars to investigate and judge as to their appropriateness in the life of the Church and its members.

I am not a theologian by training so I do not dare to draw any theological conclusions based on the real-world experiences recounted in the essays. I, however, would like to react to a particular reference that appears a number of times in the writings – that of the online events and activities as something "virtual". Many of the essays point out how the pandemic forced church doors to be closed, activities cancelled, and liturgical services taken online either as pre-recorded videos or as live broadcasts. Some refer to these online activities as "virtual" celebrations because although they were actual celebrations, the primary purpose was to serve those unable to be physically present at the place of the liturgical action, and instead "participated" online. For Catholics, watching Mass online even in real time streaming would not satisfy the obligation of attending the Sunday Eucharist (even though the obligation was already widely dispensed due to the pandemic). The application of the term "virtual" to these online activities suggests an attempt to delineate between two realities – "Physical Presence" versus "Non-physical Presence," whereby the former is often judged to be more "genuine" and "authentic" while the latter is deemed as "less-than-real" or merely a "simulation" of what is real. Bishop Broderick Pabillo of Manila diocese in the Philippines certainly is of the view that online Masses are less-than-real when he commented in one of his homilies that "our celebration with God and our relationship with Him is something that is real, actual and cannot be reduced to virtual. We all long to go back to participate in the Mass in a church. Virtual is not enough, we want the real thing" (Macairan, 2020). This understanding holds import on the nature and value of online presence by the church and its leaders in the digital age. What on the surface appears to be a semantic issue holds significant ramifications for

how the church and its leaders perceive the need for and value of the engagement with the faithful in the online arena.

"Virtual" vs. "Real"

The usage of the term "virtual" to refer to online events can be confusing because there is a variety of usages attached to this term. For example, virtual or virtual reality can refer to the use of 3D real-time interactive graphics and technological devices to create an interactive, explorable and immersive simulation of physical reality. The use of virtual reality technology creates a "virtual presence," where the user perceptually feels that he/she is sharing the same experience with other people in a common location. This experience, however, is not identical to that of engaging in an online event where the individual continues to feel grounded in his/her physical reality instead of being transported to the location where the online event is taken place with the help of reality augmenting technological devices. Therefore, the experience of hosting or following programs online is not an experience of virtual reality in the strict, technological sense of the word.

Another understanding of the term "virtual" is provided by Merriam-Webster online dictionary. Here, it simply means "being on or simulated on a computer or computer network." This definition seems most closely related to how many of the authors employed the term in their essays, referring to various activities and programs conducted specifically for a physically removed online audience. Unfortunately, the inclusion of the term "simulated" in the above definition and another definition of virtual as "being such in essence or effect though not formally recognized or admitted" by the same dictionary creates the impression of something taking place virtually as being unreal, unsubstantial, and inauthentic.

How then should we perceive the online presence as depicted by the pastoral workers and authors of the essays in this book? The various activities mentioned by the authors – Mass, catechism classes, meditation

sessions, check-ins, and so on – could be generalized as communicative actions by the pastoral workers with the people with whom they serve. Communication as a process is an ongoing dialogic relation between two or more persons exchanging signs for a common meaning and understanding (Eilers, 1994, p. 24). This goal of communication is realized by employing physical gestures, verbal expressions, written words, or a combination of these things. Moreover, oftentimes these modes of communication are facilitated by technological devices such as the telephone, television, computer tablets, video chatting applications, and so on. If it were not for a speech synthesizer and a platform called SwiftKey, the physicist Stephen Hawking would not be able to "verbally" communicate with others.

In context of the church and pastoral work, communication not only aims at achieving interpersonal understanding and collaboration, but also aims to promote communion on multiple levels – between individuals, within the Church, among peoples and nations, and especially, between humanity and God. The basic criteria that the Church has always set forth to evaluate a particular communication instrument is its ability to contribute to this noble goal of communion. As the document *Communio et Progressio* affirms, technical inventions that foster communication among human beings "serve to build new relationships and to fashion a new language which permits men to know themselves better and to understand one another more easily. By this, men are led to a mutual understanding and shared ambition. And this, in turn, inclines them to justice and peace, to good will and active charity, to mutual help, to love and, in the end, to communion" (C&P, 12). Digital technology, therefore, must also be examined and evaluated within these aims stated by the Church.

The goal of achieving communion in the Church and beyond is not new and has been a priority from the Church's earliest days when the local churches were separated by vast distances and challenged by internal conflicts as well as persecution from the non-Christian majority. Church leaders such as Peter, Paul, John and James all wrote letters to communities under their care addressing pastoral, social and theological issues that threatened communion and perhaps the very existence of the church. John Paul Heil (2011) notes that Paul's letters were often read when the liturgical assembly gathered so that all the members of the church could benefit from his teachings. Heil claims that these oral readings of Paul's letters even served "as substitutes for his personal presence, the letters of Paul make him present to his various audiences in and through his words of worship considered as ritual 'speech acts,' that is, words that actually do what they say, words that communicate by not only informing but performing" (p.3). Thus, despite Paul's physical absence, he was able to lead the people, "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" (p.41).

Although letter writing has retained its importance as a form of communication in the history of the Church, other forms of communication were employed as technology advanced. The invention of Gutenberg's printing press in the 15th century resulted in books and periodicals being one of the most consequential forms of communication in the last 500 years. It has led to the establishment and spread of new religions and inspired major revolutions. In the digital era which was ushered in during the last years of the previous century, digital technology has become an indispensable tool in human communication in general and the Church's social communication in particular. All three Popes of the Church who have witnessed the ever increasing incorporation of digital technology into human society, pointed out that this instrument of communication contains both risks and benefits. Nonetheless, in terms of its ability to contribute to the goal of communion, Pope John Paul II (2002) recognized that the "internet can offer magnificent opportunities for evangelization," while Pope Benedict XVI (2010) acknowledged the ability digital technology to "create deeper forms of relationship across greater distances." Pope Benedict XVI called on priests to "respond pastorally by putting the media ever more effectively at the service of the Word" and to be "present in the world of digital communications as faithful witnesses to the Gospel, exercising their proper role as leaders

of communities which increasingly express themselves with the different 'voices' provided by the digital marketplace." Pope Francis not only demonstrates his acceptance of digital technology in words, but also in his own employment of various social media platforms in multiple languages in order to communicate with the worldwide flock.

Although employing digital technology as a tool of communication has become commonplace in the Church, the COVID-19 pandemic exposed the fact that many church leaders and pastoral workers were in fact quite inexperienced when it came to making their presence and communicating in cyberspace. One should note the difference between being broadcasted online while communicating to people sitting physically in front of you and communicating directly to an online audience which one may or may not see on the platform. In the former setting, the online audience is essentially eavesdropping or observing a communicative event, while in the latter, the online audience is *the* target receiver of the communicative act. The COVID-19 pandemic required pastoral leaders and workers in a very short time to adjust themselves to face a solitary camera and talk to people across gender, social, cultural, and geographical contexts in real-time, which they cannot physically see but know exist. For some pastoral workers, this was a particularly disconcerting experience.

The COVID-19 pandemic reminded pastoral workers making their presence online to take note that in the digital space that is sometimes labeled as "virtual", there *is* embodiment in the sense that there are actual, physical, living and breathing *bodies* engaging in the dynamic act of communicating. In reality, not only are there real people populating cyberspace, they are doing real human things in this environment—sharing and arguing, buying and selling, causing conflicts and facilitating reconciliation, cursing and worshiping, sinning and searching for forgiveness. The things done in these digital spaces have real effects on their physical, spiritual and emotional well-being, and are not simply isolated to when they are online. Indeed, Pope Benedict XVI (2013) observed that "The digital environment is not a parallel or purely virtual world, but is part of the daily experience of many people, especially the young." But it surely is not just the young

because as we can see in the COVID-19 pandemic, grandmas and grandpas in the rural countryside also learned how to use smartphones and access the internet. The experience of elderly Hindi speaking Catholics in the Diocese of Lucknow as recounted by Fr. Joshy Xavier SJ and Fr. Lawrence Devin Noronha confirms this new reality.

"Pastoral Creativity" during the Pandemic

On May 22, 2020 former President Donald Trump called on US state governors to open churches shuttered during the pandemic because they were deemed by the President to be essential. Despite the fact that pandemic at that time was still raging in many states, Trump said, "The governors need to do the right thing and allow these very important essential places of faith to open right now, this weekend. If they don't do it, I will override the governors." In response to President Trump's comments, Father Edward Beck, a priest in the Passionist Congregation expressed in a CNN Op-ed that throughout the pandemic, he and other religious organizations never stopped providing "essential" services to the faithful. "During this pandemic I have buried the dead at cemeteries — with limited family members present. I have prayed with people via FaceTime and Zoom. I even heard a confession in a supermarket parking lot," Fr. Beck writes (2020). Indeed, Church and pastoral leaders adapted to the situation and provided emotional and spiritual support for the people under their care by their presence online and, whenever possible, offline. Pastoral leaders did not disappear from sight simply because church doors were forced to close.

Similar to Fr. Beck, pastoral workers at various levels and in various ministries never "closed church." The essays in this volume testify to the fact that pastoral workers continued to be present to those people with whom they serve through various means, most notably, through the use of digital technology. Indeed, from the perspective of the church and pastoral workers, there is no denial that the church is essential to people's lives. However, caring for the people never ceased during the pandemic despite the closing of physical church buildings in numerous countries. Church continued to be church—pandemic or no pandemic. The present

understanding of church as a communion of the People of God emphasizes ways of being that promote relationship building and collegiality rather than physical grandeur and institutional prowess. The closing of church doors would not negatively impact communion if church leadership and presence continued to be demonstrated in creative ways both online and offline. The digital space where this presence is seen, heard and felt does not negate the fact that every action and word communicated was truly embodied by those on either end of the communicative act. It is not a "virtual" Mass when bread and wine were indeed turned into the Body and Blood of Christ. It cannot be a "virtual" Holy Hour when hearts were poured out in prayer and worship, and souls were spiritually nourished. In the dynamic and increasingly inextricable relationship between the digital and analog spaces, any presence that promotes communion and worship is valuable, authentic and real.

To affirm the communicative value and authenticity of the online communicative experience should not be interpreted as an argument for qualitative equivalence between the online and offline encounters, be it a liturgical event or some other activities. To return once again to the early church, one should not forget that despite Paul's passionate letters to the Corinthians addressing the myriad problems in the community, not all of them were quickly resolved. Part of the problem solving and reconciliation process required that Paul make an in-person visit to the Corinthians "so that you might benefit twice" (NIV, 2 Cor. 1:15). In fact, before Paul made his visit to the community, he wrote letters paving the way so that once he arrived, the Corinthians would be more receptive of Paul and the things he had to say (2:1-3). Paul also demonstrated his desire for and recognition of the necessity to make personal visits to Christian churches and not to only communicate through letters in his letter to the Romans. Although at the time Paul wrote to the Romans, he had never been to Rome and was not responsible for establishing the church there, Paul expressed that "I long to see you so that I may impart to you some spiritual gift to make you strong—that is, that you and I may be mutually encouraged by each other's faith" (Rom. 1:11-12).

The desire by Church leaders to establish strong ecclesial bonds through in-person visits was not exclusive to Paul. In the churches of John, the Elder who wrote the letter to the "Elect Lady" and her children also expressed his firm desire to discuss with her in person regarding various matters concerning the church. In the conclusion of the letter, the Elder writes, "I have much to write to you, but I do not want to use paper and ink. Instead, I hope to visit you and talk with you face to face, so that our joy may be complete" (2 Jn. 12). Both Paul and the Elder in the Johannine church demonstrate that the in-person physical encounters not only are of greater grace to the faithful, but also fulfill the emotional and spiritual needs of the church leaders themselves. Ultimately, their experiences reflect the dynamics seen in the metaphorical presence of God among the Israelites in various forms as well as God's use of generations of prophets to communicate with Israel prior to the Incarnation of God's very Self in the person of Jesus Christ. The communicative value and effectiveness of the presence of God in the physical person of Christ far exceeded any other mediated forms of communication and accomplished infinitely more for God's plan of redemption than if the Incarnation had not taken place.

In the present context of the COVID-19 pandemic, the qualitative difference between physical and online presence is being empirically proven by the fact that in Belgium, Catholics have been trying to gather 25,000 signatures to petition the government to not treat churches like restaurants and bars that must be shut down (see Nepolean James). It can also be seen in the tears of the people looking out from their homes as the Eucharist is processed down the city streets for them to adore and worship (see Patrick Gunnacao). It can be felt in the longing gaze that a person with developmental disabilities has looking out the window at the teacher who comes to visit but cannot come inside due to COVID-19 restrictions (see Joseph Quane). Indeed even presence mediated by digital technology can be authentic and real. However, that does not mean every mode of presence is equivalent to one another; and certainly church theologians and thoughtful pastoral workers are often eager to make this distinction for the benefit of those whom they serve.

Conclusion

As Church leaders and pastoral workers responded to the COVID-19 pandemic and attempted to implement "pastoral creativity" by making their presence online, they must be reminded that they cannot both employ digital technology to communicate with the faithful, at the same time, dismissing the experience as "virtual," "less-than-real" or "not fully genuine," and therefore, not a priority. This attitude not only discredits and ignores the potential power of the medium being employed for the work of evangelization, but also devalues the very act of communication being carried out for the purpose of fostering ecclesial communion. It is also my hope that once the world has returned to some semblance of normalcy that pastoral workers who experimented with online platforms do not suddenly disappear from cyberspace, going away as abruptly as they appeared. If digital technology and cyberspace are recognized as the Popes have done to be "fruit of human ingenuity" that "must be placed at the service of the integral good of the individual and of the whole of humanity" (Pope Benedict XVI, 2011), then digital leadership and presence cannot simply be a temporary solution to sustain ministry while the pandemic was happening, but it must be incorporated thoughtfully into the church's long-term pastoral agenda – post-pandemic. The pastoral experience from the COVID-19 pandemic informs us that building and improving communion within the church and beyond requires every means at our disposal, and church presence and leadership is needed in every context, may it be digital or analog.

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