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The Online Parish Community

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The Covid-19 pandemic has resulted in the formation of a virtual dimension of the parish community. The lifting of health restrictions does not guarantee the automatic return of the faithful to the Church.

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Friday March 13th 2020 was one of those ‘do you remember where you were?’ events. Do you remember where you were, or what you were doing when public worship ceased at the beginning of the first Covid 19 lockdown? I clearly recall standing at the gate of St. Mary’s Church in Navan, explaining to would be congregants that they could not attend the 7.30 am Lenten Mass. On the previous day, the government had made the unprecedented announcement heralding the first pandemic lockdown. This precipitated a chain of events leading to the diocesan decision that Mass would take place without a congregation. Parishes had less than a day to put plans in place for the new reality of parochial life. Even though the clergy were determined to be available, parish worship was going to change radically. There was a painful and uncomfortable irony telling people that the doors of the church were bolted *because* Mass was being celebrated: they would open when the liturgy was over. Only the priest and a reader would be present, even the reader in time would not be permitted to attend. This went on for months, and with some brief respite, the process was repeated twice more. Where available, webcams and live streams became in some cases, the only way parishes were able to communicate with parishioners. The online parish community came into being.

CHANGING REALITY.

In the contemporary setting the fixed and stable style of a traditional parish community stands in sharp contrast with the transience of the society in which it exists. In Canon Law “a parish

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is a certain community of the Christian faithful stably constituted in a particular church, whose pastoral care is entrusted to a pastor ... under the authority of the diocesan bishop.”¹ Fragmentation and individualism has inevitably seeped into parish communities. Immediacy, connectedness and a sense of belonging, though not completely gone, has been replaced by a type of consumerism where one can conveniently find the *type* of parish and worship that suits the individual. The boundaries of the geographical canonical parish is no longer defined by a postcode. While there has always been an element of shopping around in parish life, rivalry between diocesan parishes and religious houses in the same area being a prime example, the establishment of personal parishes defined by rite and culture have become part of the ecclesiastical landscape in recent church history. Pope Francis clearly had this in mind in the *motu proprio Traditionis custodes* where he observes the emergence of parallel communities in many areas. The last eighteen months however has brought to the fore another variety of selectivity in parish life. Covid 19 has expedited the growth of the *virtual* dimension of parish. With the swipe of a finger any Catholic can join any parish in any part of the world. As restrictions are eased and churches refill many things will have changed. One such change is the existence of this virtual aspect of our communities; a part of the parish that requires tending.

COMMUNITY ONLINE

Computer mediated communication (CMC) is pervasive.² This CMC has the potential to create virtual communities defined as sets of individuals who are bound around a common idea or identity, with the potential to establish its own unique culture and understanding. The pervasiveness of such mediation means that for a large section of the population part of their lives is inextricably linked to an online reality. It is rare to have sporting or social club, residents’ association or family that does not have an internet-based group of some form or another. Being part of a ‘group’ means much more than simply receiving details about up-and-coming events; membership brings with it insights and nuanced information that can either bind members closer or exclude, effecting the cohesion of the group in general. This of course can be treated in greater detail; it suffices to say that on line virtual community is part and parcel of everyday life.³ Parishes have used the internet since its early days, the parish website, social media platforms and webcams

1 Code of Canon Law, 515

2 McQuail, D. and Deuze, M., *McQuail’s Media and Mass Communication Theory*, (Los Angeles, Sage, 2020) p. 18

3 *Ibid.*, 191-192

have been used for many years. In pushing public worship online internet engagement became a central experience of parish activity.

In contrast to the familiar or normative, this experience has a distinctive nature. Apart from its organisational nature, the primary reason a parish exists is to provide a place where priest and people can join together to meet God and meet one another. A sense of communion is an essential part of the Church's identity. With the Church doors closed and with the prohibition of the act of gathering can a parish actually exist? Hurley observes that when the public worship was suspended, public authorities arbitrarily used the phrase 'worship will go on line.'⁴ He observes that there was an automatic and simple synchronisation with other types of meetings and gatherings and liturgical worship. The liturgy celebrates the presence of the Lord in Word, Sacrament, priest and people. The centrality of human *presence* for celebration of the Eucharist seemed to have been overlooked and not understood by officialdom. Now that the people were absent from the liturgy, the other presences, though not diminished seem incomplete. For an extended period, the faithful were not able to participate in and receive the Eucharist. The initial shock morphed into reluctant acceptance.

Yet there was a natural move online for those who had the possibility and the facility to do so. If a parish had a streaming service there was a trend to gravitate locally. During the initial lockdown, analysis of viewership in Navan revealed most online engagement came from the town and the immediate hinterland. There was, however, considerable traffic from outside the area, from the UK, Europe and further afield. From feedback received a number of factors emerged as to *why* people joined this community. The first, and major reason, was personal connection; either due to residency or previous attendance. It was not uncommon for emigrants to choose their home parish to log into simply because they could. Other reasons included scheduling, variety due to the larger size of the parish team, personal taste and identification with the presiders. The online experience opened up the parish to a wider congregation that would have been impossible previously.

For many online parish life was a positive experience. A religious blogger highlights the attractiveness of this style of worship:

There's a real sense of intimacy about the Mass, and I like how everyone is sort of equal on the zoom screen, if you look with the Gallery View. There's also a wide participation in the different elements of the Mass, be it readings or music. The psalm is

4 Hurley, D., *By the Rivers of Babylon: A Reflection on the Loss of Public Mass During the Covid-19 Pandemic*, (Dunshaughlin, A+J, 2021), p.15

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always read by a young boy Aarav, whose even younger brother often tries to steal a bit of the action! There's some lovely flute music played after communion by Franzi in Munich. And the list of countries represented, besides England, Wales, Scotland and Germany, includes Ireland, France, Belgium and occasionally Canada.⁵

An ongoing challenge is *how* to provide spiritual nourishment to an online community, in tandem with those now present in Church effectively and naturally. The first thing that needs to be acknowledged is that for many people an online service provision is a wonderful gift. During the long months of lockdown daily Mass and other devotions may have been the only point of live contact many had, apart from the news (which at the best of times was sombre.) A valuable human connection has been forged which to this point had been an optional extra, a fringe provision. There is a potential communication channel to every home which needs to be valued and given due recognition. An initiative of the Irish Chaplaincy in London was commended in this regard. Smart phones and internet were provided to service users. Many who had no access to the internet were able to connect with their local parishes and parishes of origin providing contact in time of great isolation.⁶ Online worship was not without its challenges and no more was this experienced than by the clergy.

PRESIDING ON LINE – A NEW EXPERIENCE

Liturgy is a live event. While directed transcendently it is also an earthly experience where people of faith gather as the Church to encounter God, and to encounter one another. For the most part we conduct liturgy in public and that public event gives expression to the words and signs of the sacramental life. Until March 2020 this could be assumed as the norm and all aspects of the church's liturgy was geared towards this. The clergy now found themselves in empty public spaces; surreal, unnatural, unnerving all describe the experience. Hurley further observes that on line reality has shifted priests' identity from presider to performer.⁷ According to Childers "the very word performance in relation to worship and preaching tends to make some people shiver with anxiety."⁸ She defines performance as "the critical execution of things."⁸ Performance in a liturgical context is not 'putting on an act' but

5 <https://www.irishchaplaincy.org.uk/9364>

6 <https://www.irishinbritain.org/news/tablets-keep-people-connected>

7 Hurley, p.16

8 Childers, J. and Schmit, C. J., *Performance in Preaching: Bringing the Sermon to Life*, (Grand Rapids, Baker Academic, 2008) p. 14

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making real for those who participate and bringing to life the very thing which the practitioner of any art holds dearest. The absence of a physical congregation, and the focus being directed to the camera puts the presider in a focus that in ordinary times is diffused in the regularity of a familiar setting. The Church had left the building to gather in spirit: there is now the requirement to reach to the people who have ‘gathered’ beyond the camera.

‘REAL PARISH’ VERSUS ‘ONLINE PARISH.’

In spite of the challenges parishes have attempted to find equilibrium and people found their preferred place of worship, or list of bookmarked places. For many months this became the *new normal*. With the resumption of public worship, a duality has emerged. There exists in the practicing community; those who attend church following health guidelines, and those who still tune in online. While the Sunday obligation still dispensed the online reality will continue. A segment of parishioners who would have been faithful attenders seem content to maintain their new online practice. Health concerns, convenience and comfort combined with the array of choice available are among the reasons offered. The fact that faithful Catholics are content to watch Mass at a distance and do not feel the need to receive the Blessed Eucharist raises big questions about the standard of religious understanding. Regardless, it is a reality; we have a new street, a new townland, a new section of our parishes that requires the same attention and pastoral care as any other part of our traditional structures.

A HYBRID FUTURE

New words have entered our vocabulary. Online, virtual, live stream, webcam, Zoom, are no longer the preserve of fintech and computer science; they are part of who we are and what we are as a society. Another such term is hybrid; the merger of the real and virtual worlds spanning and including both. The duality of the physically present and virtually present may become one of the biggest challenges we have to face. I recall the lifting of restriction on June 2020. It was almost novel to have (masked) faces in the pews. Social distancing meant that a limited number of people could attend Mass in person. Still there was a large cohort attending ‘their Mass’ remotely. Naturally the people in front of you will take immediate attention. While there not two parishes the needs of the two dimensions of the hybrid need to be balanced.

It is essential to acknowledge the continued presence of those who for whatever reason stay online, and to also value their spiritual

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needs. The online part of the community needs to be made feel as if they are part of the celebration. There are moments such as the welcome before or at the beginning of the liturgy, the homily, the sign of peace, the praying of the Spiritual Communion where this can be done. In a former time this may have been done to welcome people to special events such as funeral rites; it is now applicable to every celebration. This however can be developed further.

For any organisation feedback is important. In person worship offers an opportunity for face-to-face contact between clergy and people. Even if this is at a distance not involving conversation or interpersonal interaction the act of seeing the other, being at the same event together forges cohesion. Effective feedback loops offer the faithful of online community a facility to contribute to the life of the parish. A simple invitation to make contact can open potential channels of communication. Proactive engagement by parishes with the online faith community will bring a depth of understanding for further developments in pastoral planning. To create a genuine sense of solidarity and community in our parish communities the inclusion of the online community would be of great benefit. The needs of the hybrid parish are still being discerned and the nature of this parish environment is still in formation. It is incumbent on pastors and communities not to squander a new vehicle of community building that has literally landed in our lap(top).

CONCLUSION

The last year to eighteen months did not create the virtual parish, rather it moved the concept from the fringe to the centre. It is too early to tell how the prolonged restrictions of public worship is going to affect how our parishes function in the future. What we can say for certain is the virtual element of church life is going to remain. We long for physical presence, we may acknowledge how we are doing things is far from ideal, and explain to ourselves and others that this is not the way it is supposed to be, and as soon as possible we will need to get off the sofa and back in the pews. In the meantime, there now exists a new sector in nearly every parish that deserves active ministry.