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The Promise and Problematic of the Virtual Eucharist Mass According To The Roman Catholic Church's Position in "The Church and the Internet"

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Graduate Program in Theology
A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree in Master of Arts
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THE PROMISE AND PROBLEMATIC OF THE VIRTUAL EUCHARISTIC MASS
ACCORDING TO THE ROMAN CATHOLIC CHURCH'S POSITION IN "THE CHURCH
AND THE INTERNET"

by

Andrew William Labenek

Graduate Program in Theology

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of
Master of Arts

The School of Graduate and Postdoctoral Studies
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London, Ontario, Canada

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Abstract

This study is concerned with articulating a valid community-building role that the virtual Eucharistic Mass could play within the Roman Catholic Church. I undertake this task in view of those unable to attend a real world Mass because of physical and geographical impediments or for fear of violence. According to the Pontifical Council of Social Communications' document, "The Church and the Internet," Eucharistic Mass celebrated through the internet is invalid. The first chapter of this study contextualizes and explains the Church's stance in this document. The remaining two chapters are framed by the Pontifical study's two main objections to virtual Mass, namely, the absence of (1) Christ's presence and (2) interpersonal community. Ultimately, I suggest that it is doctrinally possible to promote participation in the virtual Mass as a sign of solidarity with marginalized Christians as long as it is in view of making real the fully embodied communal Eucharist.

Keywords

Virtual Eucharist, virtual Mass, The Church and the Internet, virtual transubstantiation, virtual interpersonal Christian community, Eucharist, embodiment and the Eucharist.

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“The Internet is relevant to many activities and programs of the Church— evangelization, including both re-evangelization and new evangelization and the traditional missionary work *ad*

gentes, catechesis and other kinds of education, news and information, apologetics, governance and administration, and some forms of pastoral counseling and spiritual direction. Although the virtual reality of cyberspace cannot substitute for real interpersonal community, the incarnational reality of the sacraments and the liturgy, or the immediate and direct proclamation of the gospel, it can complement them, attract people to a fuller experience of the life of faith, and enrich the religious lives of users. It also provides the Church with a means for communicating with particular groups—young people and young adults, the elderly and home-bound, persons living in remote areas, the members of other religious bodies—who otherwise may be difficult to reach.”

Pontifical Council of Social Communications
“The Church and the Internet,” p. 7

Introduction

This thesis is concerned with the possibility of the Roman Catholic Church holding Eucharistic Mass via the internet. Over the last three decades, the internet has changed the landscape of Western culture affecting the way that we interact with our families, friends, society and the Church.¹ Whether the prevalence of virtual space is here to stay, there is a whole generation of people that have grown up relying on the possibility that what they are looking for is online. One can find a Roman Catholic Eucharistic Mass. But, what does it mean to participate in a Mass brought about in virtual space? Specifically, does participation in a virtual Mass constitute the fulfillment of celebrating the Eucharist? According to the Pontifical Council of Social Communication, the answer to this question is a firm no. A virtual Mass cannot provide the participant with the needed presence of Christ in the transubstantiated bread and wine nor the embodied community.²

¹ Thomas J. Misa, Philip Brey, and Andrew Feenberg, *Modernity and Technology* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2003), 66-68.

² Charles Ess et al., *Digital Religion, Social Media and Culture: Perspectives, Practices and Futures* (Peter Lang, 2012), 89.

Although the state of this question is closed, I believe questioning and understanding the Roman Catholic Church's position is essential for two significant reasons. The first has to do with the accessibility of the Eucharistic Mass to the faithful and others, especially those who do not have access because of geographical location or fear of violence. The other reason is educational in nature. The paper surveys authors that take issue with the idea that a virtual Mass is equivalent to a real world Mass. However, many of these authors assert that the Church ought to consider or actually use the internet as a means of education and communication.³ This positive view of the internet is also shared by Cardinal Thomas Collins who sits on the Pontifical Council of Social Communications. My ultimate position takes this positive view a step further. That is, it is reasonable for a Roman Catholic to assert that participation in the virtual Mass serves educational and community-building purposes as long as these Christians strive to heed the call to make real the full participation in the embodied and communal celebration of the Eucharist.⁴

This study is divided into three chapters. The first chapter, "The Promise and Problematic of a Virtual Mass Alternative in the Modern World," sets the stage for the rest of the study. It introduces key features of the Roman Catholic Church's position on technology and in particular, information technology as a means of accessing Eucharistic Mass. Key features of the Church's position are taken from two Vatican sanctioned documents, *Gaudium et Spes* (The Church in the Modern World) and "The Church and the Internet."⁵ The Church is open to the appropriate use of technology and even extols the virtues of information technology for communicating the faith. Still, the Church rejects the possibility of celebrating a valid virtual Eucharistic Mass. On my

³ Ibid., 91-92.

⁴ F. LeRon Shults, *Reforming Theological Anthropology : After the Philosophical Turn to Relationality* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: W.B. Eerdmans Pub., 2003), 187.

⁵ Pontifical Council for Social Communications. Ethics in Internet (2002, February 22). *Origins*, 31(40; March 21, 2002), 672-676

view, there are significant reasons to evaluate and discover the underlying reasons as to why this is the case. I discuss these reasons in chapter one's section, "The Promise of the Virtual Church." This section puts forth my motivations for undertaking this study: to understand why there are no sanctioned Eucharistic masses despite the need of those who have no access to the sacrament or who are put in real danger if they do have access and participate.

The document "The Church and the Internet" is especially pertinent to my purposes and to opening up this study. It presents a succinct three-pronged position against wholesale acceptance of participation in online Eucharistic Mass as a feasible alternative to participation in "real world" Mass. The document states that "the virtual reality of cyberspace cannot substitute for [1] real interpersonal community, [2] the incarnational reality of the sacraments and the liturgy, or [3] the immediate and direct proclamation of the gospel."⁶ This third point is not as essential to this study as the first two, which are analyzed in-depth in chapter two and three. The reception of the Gospel could be both simultaneous and direct if the Mass is "live-streamed" on the internet and the participant accesses this stream with a device capable of receiving the audio and visual of the Mass.

Reception of the Gospel is a crucial part of the real world Mass and this is possible for a participant who joins a Mass that occurs in "cyberspace." However, the first and second objections to the virtual Mass cannot be dismissed so easily.

Whereas chapter one introduces the Church's position on the virtual Mass, chapters two and three elaborates on objections one and two. Thus, in chapter two, "Doctrine of Transubstantiation and Significant Liturgical Reform for the Laity: The Possibility of Transubstantiation in a Virtual Mass," analyzes the second argument against a virtual Mass

⁶ John P Foley, "The Church and the Internet: Pontifical Council for Social Communications" http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/pontifical_councils/pccs/documents/rc_pc_pccs_doc_20020228_church-internet_en.html (accessed June 5 2013).

alternative. We explore the position that a virtual Mass cannot provide “the incarnational reality of the sacraments and the liturgy.”⁷ In the first section, I explain the doctrine of transubstantiation as the Catholic explanation of the presence of Christ in the bread and wine of the Eucharist. Also, briefly described, are Lutheran and Anglican views on Christ’s presence in the Eucharist. Although Lutheran and Anglican explanations of the real presence of Christ⁸ differ from the Catholic Church’s explanations, both viewpoints make it clear that the Eucharist must be received in the physical presence of the priest and the community.⁹ This has considerable implications for this study because the real presence of Christ in the Eucharist is a stumbling block for a virtual Mass from the perspective of two other mainstream Christian ecclesial communities. Although there are some critiques of the doctrine of transubstantiation, there are also plausible defenses against such critiques. I outline these critiques and defenses made by Catholic theologians, but, no argument can dismiss the importance or the mystery of Christ’s real presence in the Eucharist. It is foundational to the tenets of Christianity. We come together in celebration of the Last Supper of Christ and take part in this meal with Christ and each other.

In the second section of chapter two, “An Historical Account of Significant Liturgical Reforms for the Accessibility of the Laity and the Possibility of a Virtual Church,” I refer to the historical evolution of liturgical reform based on the changing needs of the lay members of the Church. Considering these evolutions, I explore the possibility of the virtual Eucharist as an extension of the Church’s willingness to accommodate the needs of the people to access the faith with other believers. While it is possible that members of the Catholic faith can access Mass

⁷ John P. Foley, “The Church and Internet,” The Pontifical Council for Social Communications, 2002, http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/pontifical_councils/pccs/documents/rc_pc_pccs_doc_20020228_church-internet_en.html. (accessed October 15 2013).

⁸ Joseph Martos, *Doors to the Sacred: A Historical Introduction to Sacraments in the Catholic Church* (Image Books, 1982), 52-54.

⁹ William H. Marreeve, *The Popular Guide to the Mass* (Washington, DC: Pastoral Press, 1992), 8-12.

online, live and with varying degrees of interactive capability, there is still the lack of ability to receive the Eucharist virtually. The reception of the particular transubstantiated bread and wine of the ecclesial gathering is impossible. Although the doctrine of transubstantiation might not be an adequate explanation of the material transformation of the bread and wine, embodied reception of the Eucharist is essential to Christian teaching and fellowship.¹⁰ Even if it were somehow technologically possible to receive the Eucharist virtually, it would still undermine the Christian emphasis on the body as a site for transformation and holiness. The embodied nature of human beings cannot be cast aside. To do so would undermine the significance of the incarnation of Jesus the Christ and the embodiedness of our being. Human beings cannot bypass their created nature, their embodied souls or their need for embodied closeness with one another.

Since the virtual bread and wine cannot substitute for the embodied reception of the Eucharist in community, I move onto chapter three with the more modest project of articulating how a virtual Mass can foster Christian community.¹¹ Certainly, this virtual community would not be the necessarily embodied community required for the reception of the Eucharist. However, the virtual community celebrating Mass together could be viewed as a sign of solidarity with those who cannot attend such an embodied Eucharistic service. Thus, chapter three refers to the Vatican's position that the virtual Mass cannot substitute for "[1] real interpersonal community." Although I would agree that the virtual Mass cannot substitute for a physically gathered Christian community, this does not mean that the virtual Mass ought to be dismissed as completely devoid of community value.

The third chapter, "Theological and Philosophical Viewpoints on the Role of Information Technology in Communal Organization," is divided into three parts. I begin with Cardinal

¹⁰ David Noel Power, *The Eucharistic Mystery : Revitalizing the Tradition* (New York: Crossroad, 1992), 73.

¹¹ Morten T. Højsgaard and Margit Warburg, *Religion and Cyberspace* (London ; New York: Routledge, 2005), 31.

Thomas Collins' reflections on the role of information technology in the Church.¹² While he utilizes information and communication technology to teach and to broadcast his own celebrations of Mass, he expresses reticence about the virtual Mass as a means for fostering Christian community. Collins' cautions about technology as an impediment to embodied community are shared by three other theologians who have reflected on the role of communication technology. For these theologians, there are two main risks, namely, the increase in the privatization of faith and the growth of the sense of alienation that arises from isolation from Christian community.

In the second section of chapter three, I situate the possibility of virtual Mass as a sign of solidarity within the context of James Beckford's historical and social constructionist view of religion.¹³ Like most other institutions, the Church's process of decision-making about the direction of the beliefs and practices of its membership is not done by any single person, but, the final arbiters of such decisions are those given the most authority. The pope, along with all his bishop advisors, decides what beliefs and practices to teach the Church's membership about how to live out the faith in the contemporary world. One could argue that a hierarchical model of the Church is not the best framework to view the Church. But, I am not trying to critique models of the Church or offer alternative ways that the leadership could be structured. Rather, I explore the possibility of lay men and women influencing the way practices and beliefs of the faith are lived out.

For Beckford, the practices and the material structure of society influence religious practices and the way that religion is viewed in social living. Beckford's historical and social constructionist view of religion opens up the conversation to the consideration of the way that

¹² Personal communication with Cardinal Thomas Collins. July 29, 2013.

¹³ James A Beckford, *Social Theory and Religion* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 11-29.

information and communication technology has already affected religious beliefs and practices.¹⁴ I discuss the influence of internet technology using mainly the reflections of Morten T. Hojsgaard, a religious studies scholar. Through the internet people can communicate about religion, inform others about religion and even create a religion. Next, I turn to Graham Ward's analysis on this kind of influence of the internet on the Christian religion.¹⁵ For Ward, the internet and its technology threaten to divest the social world of important aspects that Christianity brings to the table of culture. These include Christianity's emphasis on embodied community and the participatory narrative structure that the tradition gives to human life; overall, the cost of losing these aspects of Christianity's message is high. Yet, the internet does not have to be a place where individuals come to sacrifice their Christian community or community in general. For this reason, I argue that there are ways that the virtual Mass can provide at least some semblance of community. This community will not be the same as the embodied Christian community and therefore, should not be perceived as an end goal but rather a new medium to show the message

In the last section of this chapter, I utilize the philosophical framework of Carl Mitcham to explore the possible relationships that one could have with technology such as communication technology.¹⁶ Mitcham's categories make it clear that there is a way of relating to the technology of the virtual Mass as an end in itself. But, technology is always a tool for the purposes of some higher human meaning or value. Such a higher purpose that the virtual Mass could provide is as a sign of solidarity with those who cannot attend a physical Mass. This viewpoint does not acquiesce to the facts of isolation experienced by Christians not able to join together in

¹⁴ Ibid., 43.

¹⁵ Graham Ward, *Cultural Transformation and Religious Practice* (Cambridge, UK ; New York: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 110.

¹⁶ Carl Mitcham, *Thinking through Technology: The Path between Engineering and Philosophy* (University of Chicago Press, 1994), 194.

community. Instead, participating in a virtual Mass could be seen as an act of protest as well as solidarity with those in need of community. If fully addressed and articulated by the Catholic Church, this view of the virtual Mass could become a considerable benefit to those without access to the nourishment of the Christian community via Eucharistic celebrations.

Chapter 1

1 The Promise and Problematic of a Virtual Mass Alternative in the Modern World

1.1 The Church in the Modern World

In 1965, Vatican Council II promulgated the document *The Church in the Modern World*. The document is a “pastoral constitution” that outlines a set of guiding principles for the Church and this includes thinking about the influence of technology.¹⁷ The constitution argues a central theme about technology: technology is becoming an increasingly important actor in society and culture and its influence cannot be denied. In the preface, the document expresses its intent on sharing the hopes and sorrows of the contemporary world in and outside of the Church’s membership. Indeed, the goal of the council is to express a spirit of openness and to fully engage in dialogue with the world to better understand rapid theoretical and technological advancements and their influence.¹⁸ Covering a wide range of topics, such as the arts and economics, the council seeks to explore the advantages and the dangers of contemporary human achievements in view of Christ’s teachings.

The whole constitution is written in light of the Church’s belief in the Holy Spirit operative in all human history. And this Spirit is no less operative in the history and achievements of technology. As such, the Church recognizes the need to take technology seriously because:

¹⁷ It is important to note that this document was published prior to the explosive force of the internet.

¹⁸ Pope VI Paul, “*Gaudium Et Spes: Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World Gaudium Et Spes, Promulgated by His Holiness Pope Paul Vi on December 7, 1965*” http://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_cons_19651207_gaudium-et-spes_en.html (accessed June 1 2013).

Through his labors and his native endowments man has ceaselessly striven to better his life. Today, however, especially with the help of science and technology, he has extended his mastery over nearly the whole of nature and continues to do so. Thanks to increased opportunities for many kinds of social contact among nations, the human family is gradually recognizing that it comprises a single world community and is making itself so. Hence many benefits once looked for, especially from heavenly powers, man has now enterprisingly procured for himself.¹⁹

In the passage, it is evident that there are clear advantages and benefits of technology when it comes to increasing humankind's ability to communicate and gain knowledge. Technology has the potential to be a creative actor by offering solutions to human problems. On the other hand, technology also has the potential to be a destructive actor. As such, even though technology opens up new horizons of thinking, the council argues that it is still an artificial mode of interaction via the radio, television and film in 1965.

The council therefore raises the concern that technology weakens the nature of social affection and turns humanity away from God's will onto a path of darkness that alienates human beings from each other. In a word, the council cautions against using technology for domination:

In the face of these immense efforts which already preoccupy the whole human race, men agitate numerous questions among themselves. What is the meaning and value of this feverish activity? How should all these things be used? To the achievement of what goal are the strivings of individuals and societies heading? The Church guards the heritage of God's word and draws from it moral and religious principles without always having at hand the solution to particular problems. As such she desires to add the light of revealed truth to mankind's store of experience, so that the path which humanity has taken in recent times will not be a dark one.²⁰

This passage, even though it was written in 1965, still resonates and is relevant to the use of technology today including the internet. The council concludes that technology is important but it must be questioned on the basis of what it removes from the human interpersonal experience and cautions against using it for domination.

¹⁹ Ibid., 33.

²⁰ Ibid, section 33.

In many ways, this thesis examines the interconnection of the Church and technology, but, the study is situated within the specific context of a world connected through the internet. It can be summed up as answering the question of whether the internet could be used as an alternative means of presence to the kind of Eucharistic service Catholics attend on Sunday at her local church. Would not the human community be enriched by being able to partake in the Eucharist at any time, at any place?

1.2 Introducing the Pontifical Document “The Church and the Internet”

In this section, I introduce the position of the Vatican on virtual church sacramental services. Specifically, this position is spelled out in the document, “The Church and the Internet.” This position, referenced in the introduction, applies to all sacramental services, including the Mass. It states:

...the virtual reality of cyberspace cannot substitute for real interpersonal community, the incarnational reality of the sacraments and the liturgy, or the immediate and direct proclamation of the gospel...²¹

The document immediately goes on to say that the role of virtual reality, at its best, is complementary to liturgical services in the real world. The service of the Eucharistic liturgy is such a real world gathering involving (1) Christ’s presence, (2) interpersonal community, and (3) the direct proclamation of the gospel. These three objections to the acceptability of virtual Church services are taken as starting points to understand the current position of the Catholic Church on virtual Eucharistic celebrations.

According to the document, the Church respects the internet as a means for furthering the message and proper distribution of information. However, substituting a virtual Mass for a real

²¹ John P. Foley, “The Church and Internet,” 7-8.

world Mass is not an option. Sacramental liturgy is a community based experience that is founded on both physical and spiritual participation. As such, physical presence is a condition of experiencing what could be considered the greater achievement of spiritual communion with God:

Virtual reality is no substitute for the Real Presence of Christ in the Eucharist, the sacramental reality of the other sacraments, and shared worship in a flesh-and-blood human community. There are no sacraments on the Internet; and even the religious experiences possible there by the grace of God are insufficient apart from real-world interaction with other persons of faith.²²

The Vatican therefore argues that virtual communities cannot adequately capture the true essence of being in a community bound together in the presence of God. Since 2002, when “The Church and the Internet” was published, communication technology has advanced and these advancements have altered society both in terms of the ideas and the materials of social organization.²³ Furthermore, since 2003 virtual worlds as we now know them have blossomed. While the Church’s stance in the document is still relevant today, the integration of communication technology in society has increased. In other words, the context of the Church’s stance has changed in such a way that the stance needs further clarification.

The new context of society’s rapid adoption and integration of communication technology is due to the astonishing rate of innovations and the demand for these innovations by consumers. Technological growth is ubiquitous and it touches nearly all aspects of daily human life, from driving to work in the morning to engaging in global instantaneous dialogue with family or friends. The internet, particularly in the context of the World Wide Web become prominent in 1990s as a highly accessible source of information, has branched out to being a

²² John P. Foley, “The Church and Internet,” 10-12.

²³ Sulan Wong, Eitan Altman, and Julio Rojas-Mora, "Internet Access: Where Law, Economy, Culture and Technology Meet," *Computer Networks* 55, no. 2 (2011): 471.

medium for communication and global interaction.²⁴ For example, the social networking site, Facebook, has over a billion users around the world. The site allows its users to communicate anything, including personal information, to any other user from around the globe. Moreover, cellular phone technology has advanced to the point of providing users with smart phones that have the capability to access the internet from anywhere and at any time.

Some would argue that these technological changes have given way to a culture, especially among the youth, that is focused on instantaneous gratification.²⁵ For Gustavo Mesch, this kind of culture does not see the need for physical presence in order to satisfy social needs. There are online chat rooms, message boards, and blogs where people can express themselves to others without necessarily being in the same room. Video-conferencing has even made it possible for people to be able to see and to hear one another instantaneously and from remote locations.

Whatever one's attitudes toward the culture, information and communication technologies have opened up new worlds of social interaction that are referred to as virtual worlds. For the purpose of this thesis, I would like to name a non-virtual world as the real world. Leaving questions of reality aside, there are many ways one can differentiate between the virtual and the non-virtual. These differentiations include the actual versus the virtual or carbon versus virtual. Although the term "real world" begs a lot of questions, I simply use it to distinguish a virtual world from the world that does not require the internet to function. That is, virtual worlds are spaces of interaction made possible and undergirded by information and communication technology. A real world interaction does not necessitate information or communication technology. Despite the extra tools and the lack of physical presence, virtual

²⁴ Ibid., 476.

²⁵ Gustavo S Mesch, "The Internet and Youth Culture," *The Hedgehog Review* 11, (2009): 55.

worlds have become acceptable platforms where people can study, play, and interact with one another and engage in religious activities.

1.3 The Promise of a Virtual Church

Given the prevalence of virtual worlds, the extent and the acceptability of the Church's virtual presence are important points of continued reflection within a Church that endeavors to engage in the modern world. The concept of virtual church is discussed in a number of recent works.²⁶ Stephen Jacobs explains that a virtual church is any online platform where people perform asynchronous religious rituals.²⁷ His definition encompasses a broad spectrum of other online communal activities such as message boards and blogs, where people can post their prayers and profess and write about their faith. For Tim Hutchings, virtual churches are online constructs which enable Catholics to benefit from religious services without needing to physically go to church.²⁸ There are also virtual churches that have a synchronous persistence. One example provided by Hutchings is a virtual world called Second Life. In Second Life, people can enter the game as avatars of themselves and attend masses that are held inside the world.²⁹ This kind of online participation in church ceremonies brings with it a number of questions that are worth considering. The most significant and fruitful question is whether or not a Mass in the virtual world is an acceptable alternative to a real world Mass.

The value of questioning the virtual Mass' validity is brought out when one considers the advantages it could have over a real world Mass for particular groups of Catholics. The lack of physical presence in a virtual Mass could benefit those who live in regions where the practice of

²⁶ Stephen Jacobs, "Virtually Sacred: The Performance of Asynchronous Cyber-Rituals in Online Spaces," *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication* 12, no. 3 (2007).

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 1109.

²⁸ Heidi Campbell, *Digital Religion : Understanding Religious Practice in New Media Worlds* (Abingdon, Oxon ; New York: Routledge, 2013), 164-168.

²⁹ Ronald L. Grimes, *Ritual, Media, and Conflict* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), 179-183.

Christianity is dangerous and even life-threatening. In recent months, a church congregation in Pakistan was bombed leaving “126 dead and 166 injured.”³⁰ A virtual Mass could provide a safe alternative given the rise of terrorist organizations and religious persecution. But this is not all. There are regions around the world where there are no clergy to perform the Eucharistic celebration. In this case participating in a virtual Mass could be a way for Catholics to participate in the Eucharist every week instead of intermittently.

Besides those who cannot practice the Mass in safety or at all, there is also a whole generation of Catholics who have grown up going in and out of virtual worlds. For this generation, a virtual Mass could be more accessible both psychologically and physically. Online worlds such as Second Life attract a youthful following as well as an aging demographic. And increasingly video games with profound messages that encourage humanizing growth are developing and becoming popular. With marginalized and younger Catholics in mind, this study is intended to address certain critical questions raised by the idea of a virtual Mass.

Moreover, there are Catholics who are simply physically incapable of attending Mass. This is true of people who are away in a foreign land where Christianity is not practiced and there are simply no Churches in the vicinity. But, I am more concerned with those people who have been physically incapacitated and can no longer travel to church. This includes those with illness or who have physical limitations such as inability to walk. Surely, communication and information technology could be empowering and liberating to these persons and could give them a chance to explore beyond their limitations. With the consideration of the sick and the differently abled persons who are willing to attend church but cannot, the question of the fairness of the Church’s stance on virtual Mass is brought to the fore.

³⁰ Catholic World News, "Death Toll from Pakistani Church Bombing Rises to 126" http://www.catholicculture.org/about/catholic_world_news/ (accessed October 20 2013).

Yet, the virtual Mass is not a service that would only have consequences for the young and the marginalized. While Catholics are generally aware that attending Mass is one of their responsibilities, many are unable to do so. According to a recent study conducted by Georgetown University, 25% of American's attend Mass on a weekly basis, while the other 75% miss it according to a valid reason.³¹ These reasons include: busy schedule, work conflict, family responsibility, health and disability problems. The author of the study, Gray and Perl, do not condone the act of not attending a real world Mass simply because there are other matters that a person deems as more important. Still, the scope of this thesis concerns the validity of the virtual Mass for those who cannot attend real world masses.

It is important to note here that the study assumes that attending a real world Mass is the ideal for any celebration of the Eucharist. In my view, individuals should always strive to attend real world masses except in extreme circumstances as mentioned above.

Of course there are solutions other than virtual masses that can be done in restricting circumstances. For example, the Church could send priests to hold Mass in places where there are no established churches. Moreover, priests could bless the Eucharist and send it to Northern communities that do not have access to churches or priests so that people can still participate in Mass. Yet, such solutions are complicated and require considerable resources. The virtual church would be accessible to anyone with an internet connection, regardless of where they are. People could hear Mass even when they are in the middle of the desert, or out at sea, and they can do so with other Catholics located in different parts of the world.

The primary motivation of this study is to address the possibility of whether a virtual Mass could serve as a theologically viable update of the Catholic Church's presence in society.

³¹ MM Gray and PM Perl, "Sacraments Today: Belief and Practice among Us Catholics. Washington Dc: Center for Applied Research in the Apostolate at Georgetown University," (2008), 48.

As with all social institutions, the Church needs to adapt or contend with new technologies. If the Church does not appropriately address new technologies, then a widening of the gap between contemporary culture and Catholic tradition will result. For example, the millennium generation, aged 18-26 years-old, who have been immersed in communication technology, attend Mass in lesser numbers than previous generations.³² The internet is a medium that has grown exponentially in popularity within the past decade, and can be expected to become society's primary means of communication and information sharing in the years to come. As such, it is imperative for the church to examine how the internet can be utilized in order to further its own goals and continue to be a relevant institution in society for years to come.

The virtual church could be seen as a potential solution to problems that particular groups of Catholics face in attending Mass. Still, the fact remains that the Vatican has strong objections to celebrating the Eucharistic Mass online. These objections are grounded in vital aspects of the Christian tradition. In the following three sub-sections, I briefly describe the significance and the role played by these vital aspects in the Catholic Church's tradition. These sub-sections are also intended to set-up the rationale for the topics of the next two chapters on the doctrine of transubstantiation and the Christian community, respectively. In other words, the rest of this chapter is devoted to justifying the relevance and selection of the two starting points for the rest of this study.

1.4 Christ's Presence and the Doctrine of Transubstantiation

Christ's presence in the Mass is traditionally tied to the bread and the wine of the Eucharist, such that the elements "become" his body and blood. The incarnational context within which Christian sacramental theology is developed and interpreted tends, furthermore, to

³² Ibid., 16.

privileged the here and now character of the Eucharistic celebration. In the Roman Catholic tradition, this conviction concerning Christ's real presence in the mass has historically been expressed in the doctrine of transubstantiation. Charles Davis provides an extensive discussion on the background of the doctrine of transubstantiation (*metaousiosis* in ancient Greek).³³ As a concept, transubstantiation or the process of transforming matter from one form to another is first brought up by the pre-Socratic philosophers. However, the medieval Latin Christian theologians develop the concept in a fuller and more logically consistent manner. Specifically, Hildebert of Tours (1055 –1133) first used the concept of transubstantiation to explain Christ's meaning in the Last Supper when he offers bread and wine as his body and blood to his disciples.³⁴ This was followed by a host of other theologians who also espoused transubstantiation as a way of understanding the Eucharist as the body and blood of Christ. The efforts of such theologians, including Stephen of Autun, Gaufred, and Peter of Blois, led to the adoption of the concept by ecumenical councils.³⁵ During the Council of Trent (1545-1563), transubstantiation is officially re-affirmed as a doctrine of the Catholic Church. When Christ offers bread and wine to his disciples during the Last Supper, he is not being metaphorical, but, he actually performs a miracle that turns the bread and wine into his body and blood.³⁶

The justification for the doctrine of transubstantiation is built on the idea that any piece of matter has species and substance.³⁷ The species refers to the empirical appearance of an object. The way that a thing looks, smells, tastes, or feels to the human senses are the species of that object. Substance refers to the fundamental nature of the object, its essence or what it is to the

³³ Charles Davis, "The Theology of Transubstantiation," *Sophia* 3, no. 1 (1964): 12-24.

³⁴ *Ibid.* 13

³⁵ *Ibid.* 15

³⁶ *Ibid.* 17

³⁷ P. J. FitzPatrick, *In Breaking of Bread : The Eucharist and Ritual* (Cambridge ; New York, NY, USA: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 127-134.

spirit.³⁸ Transubstantiation performed by Christ occurs during the conduct of the Eucharistic liturgy when bread and wine is offered by the priest. The offering and blessing changes the substance of the bread and wine while maintaining their species. As such, while they are still bread and wine to the naked eye, they have become the body and blood of Christ in truth.

Davis goes on to explain transubstantiation further by contrasting it with other forms of conversion. Physical conversion implies the cessation of an object from being one thing as soon as it assumes the identity of another thing. The body of Christ is not substituted for the bread and his blood for the wine. Rather, the bread and wine acquire a new substance of being body and blood of Jesus Christ.³⁹ They appear as bread and wine, but, transubstantiation is a conversion of the very nature of the bread and wine. In this regard, transubstantiation differs from other conversions, in biblical, philosophical, and scientific texts, in that the material is transformed but not perceptibly by human senses. It excludes the idea that after the conversion of the Eucharist the primary matter of the bread and wine is retained. According to the doctrine of transubstantiation, the bread and wine are by their nature body and blood. The doctrine also differs from the Lutheran idea that the substance of the bread and wine coexist with the body and blood of Christ. Christ says, "This is my body" and not, as Davis puts it, "this bread contains my body."⁴⁰ Under the doctrine of transubstantiation, the bread and wine are mere appearances existing only through the human senses and mind.

³⁸ Davis, "The Theology of Transubstantiation," 19.

³⁹ Ibid. 18

⁴⁰ Ibid. 20

1.5 Transubstantiation and Interpersonal Community in Christ

The work of Davis on the doctrine of transubstantiation is consistent with the more recent work of Pat Selwood, *The Catholic Doctrine of Transubstantiation: An Exposition and Defense*.⁴¹ Selwood acknowledges the relevance of physically receiving the Eucharist and the spiritual meaning that receiving the Holy Host is supposed to have upon an individual Catholic. In addition to this, Steven Clark echoes this theme and explores the relevance of the Eucharist as a medium through which Catholics come in communion with Christ and with one another.⁴² At the core of Selwood's argument is the idea that in receiving the body of Christ, Christians become the body of Christ, and so communally value the sacrifice that Christ has given for the salvation of mankind.

Selwood clarifies that it is not necessary in Catholic doctrine to physically receive the Eucharist every time at Mass, but, Catholics are encouraged to do so to share with one another in the community that Christ has made possible for them.⁴³ He argues that this dimension of community bonding with one another and Christ in the Eucharist is more significant than any other, even the dimension of the forgiveness of sins. Selwood gives three major reasons for this. The first argument is historical in nature. For Christianity to flourish when it first began there was a need for Christians to be able to develop a community that would be able to withstand the harsh external environment in which they lived their faith. The concept of salvation through the Eucharist may have brought the early Christians hope, but, it was the community through Christ that enabled them to persevere. It was this community that gave them strength to organize and attend the early versions of the Eucharistic celebration and stay true to the teachings of Christ.

⁴¹ Pat Selwood, "The Catholic Doctrine of Transubstantiation: An Exposition and Defense," (2010): 4.

⁴² Ibid., 5., See also Stephen B. Clark, *Catholics and the Eucharist : A Scriptural Introduction* (Ann Arbor, MI: Servant Publications, 2000), 111-115.

⁴³ Selwood, "The Catholic Doctrine of Transubstantiation: An Exposition and Defense," 7.

This understanding of community contained a notion of future generations. The Christian community is something that remains intact even after one's generation is gone and would be continued by their children and their children's children. According to Selwood, it is this perseverance that contributed significantly to enabling the Church to survive in its early years.⁴⁴

Selwood also points to the biblical teachings of Jesus as another support to the idea that the Eucharist's main significance is communion with and in Christ. The teachings of Christ are never focused on the human person in isolation, but on humanity as a community that can rise or fall only from the collective efforts of its people.⁴⁵ Christ's teachings sought to show how communities ought to be, how neighbor is supposed to care for neighbor and value that neighbor at the same level as one values oneself. As such, when people come together in communion with Christ through the celebration of the Eucharist, he is actually fulfilling the vision of Christ through his presence. There is value not just in the person being there in the Mass, but in her being with other people who are all celebrating the Eucharist together. In attending the Mass together, people are able to show their support not just to the Church, but to each other as a community. Thus, even in the contemporary the Eucharist serves as one critical factor in keeping the institution of the Church strong.

Finally, there is a theological view of anthropology that Selwood draws on to assert the importance of community.⁴⁶ The doctrine of transubstantiation is deeply intertwined with the Catholic perception of what the human being is, what human being desires, and how God works through the course of human history. As discussed by Selwood and Clark, the Catholic perception of the human being is that the natural environment for him or her is not in isolation,

⁴⁴ Ibid., 9.

⁴⁵ Clark, 109-112.

⁴⁶ Selwood, "The Catholic Doctrine of Transubstantiation: An Exposition and Defense," 14

but in community with other human beings.⁴⁷ That is, people need one another and are able to be the best that they can be only with the support of the people around them. As such, at the heart of every community is the need to be able to come together and build relationships with one another, and this is at the core of the celebration of the Eucharist. The celebration does not differentiate among those who attend, it does not seek to identify or single out individuals from the crowd, but places value in the crowd itself as a community that is united in faith towards Christ and the Word of God. In this sense, accepting the Body of Christ through partaking of the Holy Host can be considered more symbolically as coming together with others in celebration as one community united in Christ. The Church and the process of communion unite Catholics and identifies them as a separate entity from other Christians, whether Protestant or Orthodox.

1.6 The Direct Reception of the Gospel

The document, “The Church and the Internet,” states that the direct reception of the Gospel is something that a virtual Mass could not reproduce. It is the case that, for Catholics, the reception of the Gospel within the community of the Church is an important condition for the Word of God to spiritually and psychologically reach the inner nature of its audience. The audience members or community experience Christ through the Gospel by coming to the Mass with a prepared heart and mind to praise God in worship. The priest clarifies passages from the Gospel so that he can instruct the audience and bring further meaning and clarification of God’s word. Therefore, the Gospel not only enlightens and connects the audience with God in a personal way but also strengthens the unity of the Church and association with Christ’s death and resurrection. This is more clearly stated by David Power:

⁴⁷ Ibid., 21, See also Clark. 169.

What is important is the presence and action of God in human lives, in virtue of the gift of the active presence of the Spirit and the memorial of Jesus Christ as conveyed by tradition. In this case, sacramental liturgy belongs within revelation, since it is the communication of the Word and the Spirit to those who live by the memorial of Jesus Christ.⁴⁸

Of note here is that the attentiveness to the Gospel is not only to worship God but to experience God's real presence. More specifically, the audience reflects inwardly when the priest reads different selections from the Gospel every week. The audience members apply Christ's teachings to personal situations and struggles. The entrance of God's word is meant to bring messages of salvation, everlasting life, and rejuvenate the audience. This jolt of life reaffirms the presence of God in the Mass through direct reception of the Gospel.

Still, Cardinal Thomas Collins, member of the Pontifical Council on Social Communications, suggests that the Gospel is something that the congregants can participate in through communication technology. He believes that the first part of the Mass, The Liturgy of the Word, "is very accessible to technology of communication."⁴⁹ However, Collins also states that the "second part of the Mass involves an incarnate encounter with Christ and that simply is a different world from what is accessible or possible through technology."⁵⁰ The reception of the Eucharist is the key to the celebration of the Mass. The Cardinal suggests that the reception of the Gospel is less of a stumbling block for the acceptance of a virtual Mass than either the reception of the Eucharist or the physical presence of the community gathered together. Although the reception of the Gospel is possible through the internet, Collins urges people to meet with a priest or a bishop and with a Christian community to receive further council and guidance about scripture.

⁴⁸ David Noel Power, *Sacrament: The Language of God's Giving* (New York: The Crossroad Publishing Company, 1998), 40.

⁴⁹ Collins.

⁵⁰ Ibid.

Conclusion to Chapter 1

The Catholic Church is open to the use of technology and is even ready to discuss the way that one could follow Christ using communication technology. However, the Vatican document, “The Church and the Internet,” makes it clear that a virtual Mass could never be sanctioned as a legitimate way to receive the Eucharist. Despite the vital reasons for such a position, it is argued that the position of the Catholic Church deserves further analysis. This is in part because of the contemporary context of a culture informed by communication technology. Closer to the motivation of this study, the position needs further analysis because of those Catholics who cannot attend a real world Mass because of serious impediments.

In the last three sub-sections of this chapter, it is made clear that there are two objections to the virtual Eucharistic Mass that require closer inspection. The first is the lack of the physical community celebrating together and embodying the Body of Christ on Earth. This objection is explored in-depth in the third and last chapter of this study. The second objection is treated in chapter two. That is, the virtual Mass does not facilitate the presence of Christ through the commemoration of the Last Supper in the blessing and distribution of bread and wine to a community of the faithful. As a Church, we share the body and blood of Christ and we commune through the reception of the bread and wine. In a virtual church, this reception of the same bread and wine is not physically possible. The doctrine of transubstantiation is the Church’s teaching of how Christ is present in the celebration and reception of the Eucharist. It is a useful doctrine to unpack as it helps our investigation into the Church’s stance regarding the presence of Christ in the virtual Mass.

Chapter 2

2 Doctrine of Transubstantiation, Significant Liturgical Reform for the Laity and the Possibility of Transubstantiation in a Virtual Mass

This chapter is concerned with the examination of the major Roman Catholic theological concept known as the doctrine of transubstantiation. Specifically, the first section explains the role the doctrine plays in explaining the celebration of the Eucharist. Although it will be shown that Anglican and Lutheran thought rejects the doctrine, these ecclesial communities do hold that the Eucharist enables the real presence of Christ.⁵¹ There are some in the Roman Catholic tradition who have taken issue with the doctrine of transubstantiation as well.⁵² These issues will be explored in the last part of this section. What these critiques illustrate is that the fundamental difficulty theologians have with the doctrine of transubstantiation is with the transformation of bread and wine into body and blood. The real presence of Christ in the Eucharist is not at issue, but rather, the controversy erupts when it comes to the explanation as to how Christ is present.

Since the real difficulty with the transubstantiated bread and wine arises from its explanation of the material transformation, one has the space to inquire into the possibility of not needing the physical bread and wine for the reception of the Eucharist. Moreover, liturgical reform over the last two millennia illustrates the Christian tradition's willingness to accommodate the needs of the faithful.⁵³ Thus, one of the tasks of the second section is to reinforce this point with varying examples. The other task is to account for the history of the presence of the Eucharistic Mass via information and communication technology. It has become

⁵¹ Peter J. Leithhart, "What's Wrong with Transubstantiation? An Evaluation of Theological Models," *The Westminster Theological Journal* 53, no. 2 (1991): 295-297.

⁵² FitzPatrick, 2-9.

⁵³ Hans Küng, *Theology for the Third Millennium : An Ecumenical View*, 1st ed. (New York ; Toronto: Doubleday, 1988), 170-174.

more and more possible to witness the Mass on radio and television. Yet, this technology is far less interactive than the services that are presented online. It is possible to have the actual congregation both see and hear the persons who are “attending” via communications technology.

In the last section of the chapter, I assess the possibility of the virtual Mass providing the same elements to the Christian community as the real world Mass. However, the fact remains that the doctrine of transubstantiation is a basic tenet of the Roman Catholic view of the Eucharistic Mass. I explore the possibility of the virtual representations of the bread and wine becoming an alternative means of communion. Yet, the physicality of the bread and wine is not the only aspect of the doctrine of transubstantiation that creates a problem for a virtual Eucharistic celebration. It is the human being’s physicality as well. Suggesting that human physicality is a problem is misleading. For this author, the most compelling argument against rejecting the doctrine of transubstantiation and the physicality of the Mass is the fact of the embodied nature of the human being. To diminish the necessity of bodily presence and nourishment is to diminish the importance of God’s creation and the significance of the incarnation. Ultimately, I conclude that the Eucharist must be received in the flesh and blood presence of the community. However, this does not mean that the virtual Mass is incapable of fostering Christian community.

2.1 The Doctrine of Transubstantiation and the Role of Transubstantiation in the Celebration of the Eucharist

The doctrine of transubstantiation plays a critical role in the celebration of the Eucharist, particularly with regard to the idea of the real presence of Christ in the Eucharist.⁵⁴ As explained

⁵⁴ Patrick Toner, "Transubstantiation, Essentialism, and Substance," *Religious Studies* 47, no. 02 (2011): 217-224.

by Patrick Toner, the celebration of Mass is not simply a Catholic exercise to worship God. Rather, it is a medium in which Catholics may experience the real presence of Christ in their midst especially when encountering the Eucharist. For Roman Catholics, the bread and wine offered to the congregation is the body and blood of Christ. It is the doctrine of transubstantiation that is drawn on to explain this real presence in the consecrated bread and wine of the Eucharist.⁵⁵ The teaching of transubstantiation is not an explanation in the sense that it provides a recipe for the priest. Priests are not capable of turning the bread and wine into the body and blood of Jesus Christ. As a human being, the priest does not have the power to perform such a miracle. The priest is the messenger not the author – he delivers the message from God. Rather, it is Christ that turns the bread and wine into his body and blood and thus, reveals to his people that he is there with them. In this way, the miraculous gesture of transubstantiation is an act of offering people communion with the salvific presence of Christ.

This view of transubstantiation's role in the Eucharistic Mass is consistent with Jean-Pierre Albert and John McKenna's studies that present individual Catholic perspectives on the doctrine.⁵⁶ According to Albert's reading of case studies, Catholics perceive the experience of communion, where they partake of the transubstantiated bread and wine, as an essential process in obtaining salvation in Christ. Catholics perceive accepting the bread and wine as a step they need to do in order to show Christ that they accept Him and that they want to be forgiven for their sins.⁵⁷ The importance of partaking of the Eucharist is further emphasized by respondents' perceptions that such an act carries with it a pacifying effect that makes them feel at peace with themselves and with their community.⁵⁸ McKenna examines the importance of the act of

⁵⁵ Ibid., 218-219.

⁵⁶ JP Albert, "Who Believes in Transubstantiation?," *L'Homme*, no. 175-76 (2005): 369–373.

⁵⁷ Ibid., 385-386.

⁵⁸ Ibid., 388-391.

communion in Eucharistic celebrations and finds that Catholics have held on to this act as one of the highlights of the Mass, which is next only to the final blessing given at the end of the service.⁵⁹ Albert and McKenna's studies reveal that the act of communion is not just a learned and applied gesture to Catholics. By accepting the Eucharist, Catholics perceive that Christ's presence has true consequence in their lives and this is critical to their belief in salvation in Christ.

2.1.1 Anglican and Lutheran Perspectives on Transubstantiation

Transubstantiation is the prevailing Catholic theology of Christ's presence in the Eucharist, but this teaching is not typically shared by Anglicans and Lutherans. Early modern Anglicanism and Roman Catholicism in the medieval period consider that transubstantiation could not itself be accepted as doctrine in their Christian faith.⁶⁰ Anglicans, as represented by the Thirty-Nine Articles as any rate, considered the act of eating the physical flesh and blood of Christ or of any man as barbarous acts which should not be believed in.⁶¹ However, Anglicans accept the reality of Christ's presence in the Eucharist. When people are gathered to celebrate the Eucharist, Christ is truly present and not just figuratively present. In accepting the Eucharist, a Christian acknowledges this presence and becomes filled by it.⁶²

Lutherans reject transubstantiation entirely and believe that the bread and wine that is shared by Christ with his apostles during the Last Supper remains bread and wine while also being truly the body and blood of Christ.⁶³ That is, they consider there to have been no change to

⁵⁹ John McKenna, "Eucharistic Presence: An Invitation to Dialogue," *Theological Studies* 60, (1999): 294–297.

⁶⁰ Miri Rubin, *Corpus Christi: The Eucharist in Late Medieval Culture* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 369–399.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 372.

⁶² *Ibid.*, 375.

⁶³ Matt Stefon, *Christianity: History, Belief, and Practice* (New York: The Rosen Publishing Group, 2011), 77. See also Alister E McGrath, *Historical Theology: An Introduction to the History of Christian Thought* (Malden, MA: John Wiley & Sons, 2012), 198.

the elements of the bread and wine. Jesus Christ imbues the bread and wine with his presence and offers them to his apostles. As such, Christ himself is present in the celebration of the Eucharist, despite there being no transformation occurring in the bread and wine that are the instruments of his presence in the celebration.

This brief description of Anglican and Lutheran views on transubstantiation is meant to illustrate that while it is not accepted in the tenets of their faith, the real presence of Christ in the celebration of Mass is. Therefore, real presence in the Eucharist remains a critical concern in the celebration of Mass whether one is a Catholic, Anglican or Lutheran. In this way, the real presence of Christ in the Eucharist is a stumbling block for the virtual Mass for all three Christian denominations.

2.1.2 Roman Catholic Critiques and Defenses of the Doctrine of Transubstantiation

Although the doctrine of transubstantiation is taught by the Roman Catholic Church, there is considerable theological literature that questions its validity. Peter Leithart, for example, asks, "What's wrong with transubstantiation?" and examines different theological models in order to identify the faults of the doctrine.⁶⁴ For Leithart, each of the theological models sought to establish a balance between having the Eucharist be simply a figurative commemoration and making it so literal as to make the act of communion ludicrous. It is in finding this balance that the doctrine of transubstantiation becomes problematic for Catholics to understand. The physical change from bread and wine to body and blood is beyond the bounds of scientific understanding and verification. The change is not empirically evident. Yet, the models strive to provide justification as to why physical change must be believed, but, only up to a certain point. According to these models, the bread and wine have not completely changed all of their aspects

⁶⁴ Leithart, "What's Wrong with Transubstantiation? An Evaluation of Theological Models," 300-310.

so that it appears as though they have become body and blood. Flying in the face of contemporary scientific understanding, the model fails to provide universally acceptable justification that transubstantiation does indeed take place.

Duke Cassidy does not simply ask what is wrong with the doctrine, but, rather he critiques the notion of transubstantiation and offers arguments against and for the notion.⁶⁵ First, there is the argument that the doctrine took Christ too literally. In the biblical witness, Christ uses metaphorical language extensively in his teachings and describes himself as other things such as a door or the vine. Yet, the Catholic Church conveniently selects when to take Christ's words literally.⁶⁶ In defense against this critique, Cassidy argues that there are stark differences between the way that Christ made use of metaphors to describe himself in his teachings and the way that Christ declares himself as bread and wine during the Last Supper.⁶⁷ During the Last Supper, Christ's declarations of the bread being his body and the wine being his blood are not used as instruments for a lecture. They are simply declared. Also, if they are meant to be used as instruments, Christ makes no attempt to explain himself, which is unlike all the other times when he makes use of metaphors.

Cassidy also tries to offer explanations to the critique that the Last Supper, the event where transubstantiation is supposed to have taken place, is completely absent in the Gospel of John.⁶⁸ This is odd because the Gospel of John is regarded to be the most important gospel for instructing about achieving communion with God and being granted eternal life. If transubstantiation of bread to body and wine to blood was so important for salvation, why would this be left out by this gospel? While the Gospel of John does not include such events in the Last

⁶⁵ Duke Cassidy, "Is Transubstantiation without Substance?," *Religious Studies* 30, (1994): 193.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 194.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 194-195.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 195-196.

Supper, there is support for the teaching of transubstantiation elsewhere in the gospel. One of the most profound supports is found in Jesus Christ's declaration that he is the "living bread" and that those who eat of this bread will live forever.⁶⁹ As such, there is still considerable support for the doctrine in the Gospel of John even though it is expressed in a different manner than it is in the other three gospels.

Terence Nichols explores another two problems with transubstantiation.⁷⁰ The first problem is the relevance of the original Last Supper, where Christ first declares the bread to be his body and the wine his blood. If it is accepted that Christ in this state is a true man, and that he is not actually been given up to be crucified yet, then what value would his body and blood have served to the disciples during that time?⁷¹ According to Nichols, one explanation to this seeming discrepancy is that the Last Supper is actually a Eucharistic participation forward in time. That is, Christ was talking about the future transubstantiation of the bread and wine into his glorified body and blood and brought those future substances to replace the substances of the bread and wine at the present.⁷²

Nichols also presents a question regarding the ontology of Christ's glorified body. If Catholics accept that they ingest the real body and blood of Christ at communion, then how can it be explained as acceptable that these same materials are broken down by the body and are eventually excreted? For Nichols, any physical body depends on the constituency of its parts without which the whole cannot be. However, the same cannot be said for the body and blood of Christ at Mass. The glorified body of Christ is present as substance and is independent of the species of the bread. That is, the bread can be broken down to its chemical constituents by

⁶⁹ Ibid., 197.

⁷⁰ Terence Nichols, "Transubstantiation and Eucharistic Presence," *Pro Ecclesia* 11, no. 1 (2002): 57-60.

⁷¹ Ibid., 73.

⁷² Ibid., 74.

enzymes in our body and excreted, but those processes do nothing to the substance of the bread which is the body of Christ. Despite his explanations, Nichols would agree with Leithart's assertion that the doctrine of transubstantiation is one of the most difficult ideas in the Catholic tradition for human comprehension.⁷³ Still, Nichols believes that it is better to "attempt some explanation, however halting, than to simply declare as doctrine an unintelligible surd, which must be simply accepted in faith."⁷⁴

In another study, John Switzer questions why there is no mention of belief in transubstantiation in the Apostle's Creed.⁷⁵ As explained by Switzer, since the doctrine of transubstantiation is such a critical aspect of Christian faith, it should have been included in the creed that is supposed to affirm everything that Catholics are supposed to believe in. However, this critique could be countered by the fact that not all Catholic doctrines are included in the creed and that it would be impractical to include all of it. Furthermore, belief in Jesus Christ, which is included in the creed, already implies belief in Jesus' miracles, one of which is the transubstantiation of bread and wine into his body and blood.

This section of the review shows that while there are various critiques to the doctrine of transubstantiation, it remains a strong idea in the Catholic faith defended by various theological thinkers using a diverse array of arguments and models. As such, there is clearly a value in the doctrine of transubstantiation that must be preserved in the different incarnations of the Church. That is, even if the Church is to change in some way, such as moving from a physical to a virtual medium, it must ensure that the doctrine of transubstantiation can still be maintained in this new medium. Furthermore, this section shows that most of the critiques against the doctrine of transubstantiation are focused on the transformation of bread and wine into body and blood and

⁷³ Ibid., 75.

⁷⁴ Ibid.

⁷⁵ John Switzer, "Why Is There No Mention of Transubstantiation in the Creed?," *U.S. Catholic* 76, no. 8 (2011): 46.

not on the real presence of Christ. That is, although there are considerable arguments against the material transformation in the doctrine of transubstantiation, there is general acceptance of the real presence of Christ in the Eucharist, even among other denominations of the Christian faith. This general acceptance, despite the difficulties involved in accepting the material aspect of the presence of Christ, gives credence to the possibility of a virtual Mass alternative.

2.2 An Historical Account of Significant Liturgical Reform for the Accessibility of the Laity and the Possibility of a Virtual Church

2.2.1 Accessibility to Worship and Church Reforms

It is not beyond the realm of imagination or even possibility to conceive of a Eucharistic celebration of the Mass online as gaining popularity and influencing liturgical reform. The Roman Mass has undergone various levels of evolution across the centuries and often for the sake of accessibility to the Mass for lay men and women. According to Michael Davies, the earliest account of the celebration of Mass can be found in the First Epistle of Paul to the Corinthians, where Saint Paul provides the formula for the offering of bread and wine that continues to be used to this day.⁷⁶ As early as the second century, the Last Supper is already being celebrated regularly on a certain day of the week, before daybreak, when early Christians would sing hymns of worship and proclaim their oath against committing crimes.⁷⁷ Following the celebration, these early Christians would disperse, but meet again to eat together in commemoration of the Last Supper. It is important to note that the concept of transubstantiation has not been developed at this point, but, there are formulae for the blessing of the bread and wine in the second century.

⁷⁶ Michael Davies, *A Short History of the Roman Mass* (Kansas City, MO: T A N Books & Publishers, 1997), 5.

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, 6.

Unlike the Mass of today, second century celebrations of the Last Supper are often not held in a fixed “church” locales, but rather, the celebration takes place in whatever convenient locations the early Christians could find. This is because, as persecuted minorities by the Roman authorities, the early Christians are not allowed to build structures of worship.⁷⁸ As such, during the years of persecution, it becomes important that Christians celebrate this central meal in a way that is both simple and brief. This changes between the time of Roman Emperors Constantine I (306-337) and Theodosius I (379-395), when Christianity became more tolerated and eventually adopted as the religion of the Roman Empire.⁷⁹ Due to the increase in tolerance and acceptability, dramatic changes to the celebration are made. There is a considerable increase in the number of worshippers and benefactors who are willing to provide resources for the development of the religion. This leads to the building of the first fixed churches that are larger and more out in the open than previous locations for the celebration of the Last Supper. During this time, vessels and vestments used by priests become more costly and elaborate while the processes of the ritual are lengthened and become more complex.

By the fourth century, official documentation of liturgical matters has become more widely available and this includes complete liturgical texts.⁸⁰ There are variations in these texts because the Last Supper is celebrated differently in different parts of the Roman Empire. During the fourth century, there is movement toward a more institutionalized celebration of the Mass. This movement toward uniformity out of differences shows considerable development in the celebration of the Holy Eucharist. It also indicates that the celebration of the Last Supper has become a permanent and central part of the Christianity’s membership. The Eucharistic

⁷⁸ Ibid.

⁷⁹ Martos, 415.

⁸⁰ George Dunbar Kilpatrick, *The Eucharist in Bible and Liturgy* (Cambridge; New York: Cambridge University Press, 1983), 10.

celebration is not merely an instrument of community among Christians. That is, the theological purpose of the celebration is developed. To a certain extent, this development weakened the understanding of the practical purpose of Christians coming together through sharing a meal. Eventually, Christians have to go to Mass not because it is the only place where they could congregate and hear the Word of Christ, but because they are expected and required to do so by Catholic doctrine.

The Eucharistic celebration undergoes further reforms during the medieval period. Saint Gregory the Great institutes various reforms from 590AD to 604AD which focus on ensuring the fidelity of the aspects of the ritual.⁸¹ This includes simplifying, organizing and reducing parts of the Mass. For example, reducing and organizing the variable prayers. The intent of these simplifying reforms is to foster the original purpose of the Mass and that is, community under faith in Christ. Saint Gregory's reforms are successful insofar as his structure of the Eucharistic celebration suited the needs of Christian communities. This is evidenced in the fact that this structure is similar to the form of the Mass as it is celebrated today. Moreover, the simplification of the liturgy during the Early Middle Ages is necessary to enable the celebration of more than one Holy Mass a day.⁸² Previously, the number of activities in the ritual is so great that the Mass could only be reasonably celebrated once a day. The removal of different activities enabled priests to celebrate Mass more than once a day and increased the ability of the Catholic lay men and women to attend Mass.⁸³

Another major change that aided Roman Catholic lay women and men to access the Eucharistic liturgy is allowing and even encouraging the use of the vernacular for celebrating

⁸¹ Joseph Visconti, *The Waldensian Way to God : Following the Light through Eight Centuries of Darkness and Discord* (Longwood, Fl.: Xulon Press, 2003), 62-63.

⁸² Davies, 23.

⁸³ *Ibid.*, 24.

Mass.⁸⁴ This reform is carried out after the convocation of the Vatican Council II (1962-1965) and occurs during the time of Pope Paul VI (1963-1978).⁸⁵ Pope Paul VI approves the New Order for Roman Catholic Mass where celebrants do not have to use Latin.⁸⁶ The point of this reform is to allow the laity to celebrate the centerpiece of their faith in whatever language they call their own. Hence, the vernacular reform illustrates that the twentieth century Roman Catholic Church is interested in making the Eucharist more accessible to people of different cultures from all over the world.⁸⁷

This brief survey of the evolution of the Holy Mass shows that the Catholic Church has consistently made various efforts to make the celebration of the Eucharist more accessible to Catholics from every walk of life. During the first three centuries of Christianity, the celebration of the Last Supper is held in whatever structure could be found that is safe from detection. The Roman authorities persecuted those who openly practiced Christianity.⁸⁸ During the fourth and fifth centuries, Christianity evolved into the religion of the Roman Empire. The increase in participants and wealthy donors made it possible for the Church to build fixed structures for celebrating Mass to accommodate the membership who could now practice Christianity openly. During the middle ages, the Mass is simplified so that the Eucharist could be celebrated more than once a day and this meant the inclusion of more participants.⁸⁹ Vatican Council II made it

⁸⁴ Ibid., 37.

⁸⁵ Thomas H. Lewis Gavin Greer, *A Brief History of the Western World* (Belmont, CA: Wadsworth Thomson, 2005), 652-654.

⁸⁶ Francis Randolph, *Know Him in the Breaking of the Bread: A Guide to the Mass* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1998), 206-207.

⁸⁷ Frank C. Senn, *New Creation : A Liturgical Worldview* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2000), 85-87.

⁸⁸ Ralph Martin Novak, *Christianity and the Roman Empire Background Texts* (Harrisburg, Pa: Trinity Press International, 2001), 30-32.

⁸⁹ Susan Reilly Diane J. Boynton, *The Practice of the Bible in the Middle Ages : Production, Reception & Performance in Western Christianity* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2011), 11-13.

possible for participants to celebrate Mass in their native tongue instead of requiring all Catholics to learn Latin to be able to understand and appreciate the celebration of Holy Mass.⁹⁰

2.2.2 The Possibility of Expanding Accessibility through Information Technology

In the twentieth century, Catholic masses are widely available through new media such as the radio and television, where the Mass could even be broadcasted live. However, throughout the decades following Vatican II, the Catholic Church has maintained that a Catholic's duty to attend Mass during Sundays and other Days of Obligation require such person's physical presence in the church.⁹¹ People who are unable to attend this responsibility because of physical ailment or some other grave limitation may be excused from doing so. Such people could watch Mass from television or hear it from the radio. However, this does not mean that doing so enables such people to fulfill their obligation. They are in fact excused from such obligation but such obligations technically go unfulfilled even if they watched or listened to Mass on radio or television.⁹² This prevents others from considering doing the same as fulfilling their obligation. The need for presence is established in *The Catechism of the Catholic Church* where it asserts that a person can only become part of the celebration of Mass if he or she is able to participate with the entire community in its celebration.⁹³ This obviously cannot be applied to people who just watch the Mass from television or just listen to it on the radio. Those who do so have no way of communicating with the congregation who are actually counted as attending Mass.

In the 1980s and 1990s, the personal computer and the internet were introduced into the mainstream social world and became a source for Catholics to disseminate knowledge and

⁹⁰ Davies, 37.

⁹¹ Church Catholic, *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (Liguori, MO: Liguori Publications, 1994), 210.

⁹² Ibid.

⁹³ Ibid.

teachings.⁹⁴ In a survey conducted during the mid-90s, it is found that people regard the internet as a desirable resource for finding answers to questions about Christianity that are uncomfortable to ask a local clergy personally.⁹⁵ In addition to this, churchgoers view internet websites as having greater potential for spreading important information about specific churches, such as Mass schedules. The study also found that the internet is considered to be a good resource for building networks that can broaden the knowledge of faith for people. Finally, participants of the study view the internet as having considerable potential for greater communication that could allow the church to reach out to more people.⁹⁶

Since the mid-90s, the internet has increasingly become a medium that facilitates communal interaction because of developments in visual and audio technology and because of its widening availability. In this way, the internet has become a reasonable medium through which Catholic celebrations could be presented. Celebrating the Eucharist within virtual space could be considered as a realization of the internet's potential to aid the Catholic Church in reaching out to more people and allowing the Mass to be more accessible. The earliest mention of virtual church found in literature is in an article by Leanne Larmondin where it is explained that virtual churches are becoming easier to attend because of development in information and communications technology.⁹⁷ The virtual church functions much like the television Mass that provides access to Catholic services to people who would otherwise be unable to attend Holy Mass. However, as explained by Andréé Robinson-Neal, the critical difference between virtual masses and television masses is that in the former people are not just mere spectators that view

⁹⁴ Ess et al., 11.

⁹⁵ Andréé Robinson-Neal, "Enhancing the Spiritual Relationship: The Impact of Virtual Worship on the Real World Church Experience," *Online-Heidelberg Journal of Religions on the Internet: Vol. 03.1 Being Virtually Real? Virtual Worlds from a Cultural Studies' Perspective*, (2008): 229.

⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, 230.

⁹⁷ Leanne Larmondin, "Attending a Virtual Church Becoming Easier," (2000).

<http://www.anglicanjournal.com/articles/attending-a-virtual-church-becoming-easier-795> (accessed March 11, 2013).

the proceedings of the Mass.⁹⁸ In the virtual church, people can actually participate in the Mass with their audio and visual presence.

Furthermore, as shown in various sources that describe virtual masses held in different online platforms, a virtual Mass itself occurs on the same media in which its attendants are present.⁹⁹ The whole point of this media is to facilitate the interaction that is required in such activities as speaking, viewing and listening to one another. In television or radio media this level of interaction is impossible. A radio or television Mass simply presents a “real” Mass held somewhere in the world so that those who have television sets and radios can tune in to the celebration. The non-interactive nature of this setup prevents the radio and television audience from participating in the Mass. The people celebrating the real world Mass being represented cannot participate with the audience as well. So, for example, those in the real world Mass cannot hear, watch, feel, or recite the Psalms with those persons on the other side of the television screen. Nobody in the real world celebrating community is aware of the viewers or listeners of television and radio masses. The sense of the viewers and listeners is simply not present for the real world celebrants in any other way than a vague image based on the idea that the Mass will be broadcast.

The medium of the internet, however, provides virtual settings that offer people from different parts of the world representation. For example, a person could be represented by a digital avatar and attend a Mass celebrated by a priest who is likewise digitally represented in the online platform. In this setting, it could be argued that the concept of community in the Holy Eucharist is actually preserved. People are not just able to hear Mass, but are able to interact with the proceedings of the Mass through their avatar. They can make their avatars stand, sit, or kneel

⁹⁸ Robinson-Neal, "Enhancing the Spiritual Relationship: The Impact of Virtual Worship on the Real World Church Experience," 229.

⁹⁹ Campbell, 164-168.

in accordance with the rituals of the celebration. They can respond to the Psalms by typing responses or speaking them out through digital microphones. The virtual Mass gives a person an experience that is closer to the real world Mass experience than can be given by the radio or television.

According to Robinson-Neal, virtual masses have actually been found to strengthen the church-goer's sense of faith insofar as she is enabled to attend Mass regularly and to pay more attention to the service.¹⁰⁰ This view of virtual space as a vehicle for participation in Christian practices is supported by Chris Norton and Greg Kandra's arguments in favour of the virtual church's ability to offer a new source of vitality for the faith.¹⁰¹ For Norton, the virtual church provides a platform for participation by those who are interested in the faith, but, who do not know or feel comfortable with the rules and obligations of worship yet. Similarly, there are Catholic individuals who find participation in the liturgy too restrictive because of conflicts of time or lifestyle. Furthermore, Kandra explains that homilies delivered online are perceived to be received more intensely by some individuals than those that are delivered in physical settings.¹⁰² This is mainly because people who took the effort in connecting to a virtual celebration are intent on listening to the Word of God, and looked at the Holy Mass as much more than just a ritual that they needed to attend. That is, virtual masses were able to add more meaning to the Eucharist which is in line with the intentions of the church.

However, not everything about virtual churches is found to be positive. As explained by Bazin and Cottin, virtual Christianity possesses both considerable potential and challenges for

¹⁰⁰ Robinson-Neal, "Enhancing the Spiritual Relationship: The Impact of Virtual Worship on the Real World Church Experience," 223.

¹⁰¹ Chris. Norton, "Virtual Vitality: Bobby Gruenewald Links Technology and the Church," *Christianity Today* 55, no. 11 (2011). <http://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2011/november/whos-next-bobby-gruenewald.html> (accessed November 15, 2013). See also Greg Kandra, "A Virtual Church: Give Us This Day Our Daily Blog," (2009). <http://americamagazine.org/issue/684/faith-focus/virtual-church> (accessed June 9, 2013).

¹⁰² Kandra.

the church.¹⁰³ While the virtual world offers a fresh new environment where people can commune with one another and with God, it is important for the Church to be able to protect its doctrine and traditions from being corrupted by the environment.¹⁰⁴ Wong provides further critique of virtual churches, discussing how the practice and prevalence of online masses may lead to a decrease in people's perception of the value of the Holy Eucharist, since people would not be able to accept Holy Communion in such virtual settings.¹⁰⁵ In another critique, Goa criticized those who put forward the idea of virtual churches as people who miss out on the meaning of the mission of the Church.¹⁰⁶ As explained by Goa, the church calls upon its people to be present more than anything else, which is embodied by the communion of people that come together to celebrate the Eucharist.

For Goa, spreading the faith while diluting its teachings and messages would not do the church any good.¹⁰⁷ Following the trends brought about by new technologies may eventually lead the church to a virtual nowhere if church teachings are not actually represented in the new media.¹⁰⁸ The very nature of a virtual mass seems to undermine the doctrine of transubstantiation because the physical bread and wine cannot be consumed by the participants. If the doctrine of transubstantiation cannot be translated into the virtual medium, then the virtual setting will always be rejected by the Catholic Church as an incomplete celebration of the Eucharist. It is possible that a critical Mass of people will begin participating in virtual masses. In this case, one could ask if the doctrine of transubstantiation is holding the Church back. It has been established

¹⁰³ Jean-Nicolas Bazin and Jérôme Cottin, *Virtual Christianity: Potential and Challenge for the Churches*, vol. 107 (Geneva: World Council of Churches, 2004), 123.

¹⁰⁴ *Ibid.*, 125. See also Ess et al., 4.

¹⁰⁵ Kam Ming Wong, "Christians Outside the Church: An Ecclesiological Critique of Virtual Church," *The Heythrop Journal* 49, no. 5 (2008): 822-840.

¹⁰⁶ David Goa, "New Technologies and the Churches: Incarnation or the Virtual Nowhere?," *Catholic New Times* 26, no. 6 (2002): 14.

¹⁰⁷ *Ibid.*, 16.

¹⁰⁸ *Ibid.*

that the doctrine of transubstantiation is fundamentally essential to the Catholic faith and thus, dismissing the value of the doctrine is unacceptable. As such, one of the necessary requirements for virtual masses to be considered as acceptable celebrations of the Eucharist is for it to be determined that transubstantiation still occurs within a virtual setting.

2.3 Assessing the Possibility of Transubstantiation in a Virtual Church

2.3.1 Virtual and Physical Bread and Wine

Let us begin with the possible argument that the virtual Mass' digital bread and wine are viable substitutes for the physical bread and wine in a real world Mass. It has been noted that catholic doctrine affirms that when the priest of the Holy Mass consecrates the bread and wine during the ceremony, the bread and wine are transubstantiated to the body and blood of Christ respectively.¹⁰⁹ While remaining bread and wine to the senses, they do not merely represent the body and blood of Christ but actually become the body and blood. Nothing is done to the bread and wine physically apart from offering it to God. In many virtual settings, such as those in Second Life, there are objects that can be generated by the software and used by avatars in the game.¹¹⁰ Included among these are objects that act as foodstuffs, which the avatars can consume. It is technologically possible to create bread and wine in a virtual setting. During a virtual Mass, bread and wine could be handed to the avatars by priests and lay ministers. The people gathered in the virtual church during communion could share the same bread. This suggests that it is materially feasible to at least represent the consumption of bread and wine in the virtual setting.

¹⁰⁹ Toner, "Transubstantiation, Essentialism, and Substance," 223-224.

¹¹⁰ Ess et al., 13.

Moreover, one could assert that there is nothing materially significant about the bread and wine in the real world Mass. Today, there exist considerable guidelines on the proper production of bread and wine offered during Eucharistic Mass. Based on the work of Davies, however, the earliest celebrations of the Last Supper are shared with whatever food is available to the early Christians.¹¹¹ That is, one could say that there is nothing special about the bread and wine offered during Mass prior to their transubstantiation. Catholics accept that, after consecration, ordinary bread and wine has become the body and blood of Christ. This process of transubstantiation replaces the essence while maintaining its physical appearance.¹¹² The ordinariness of bread and wine prior to this change justifies the idea that it could have been any bread or wine. The virtual bread and wine, generated through computer graphics technology, could be considered just as suitable for transubstantiation as the ordinary bread and wine that are used in the physical Mass. The virtual bread and wine also have species and substance, just as physical bread and wine does. The species of virtual bread and wine consist of a collection of computer algorithms that define their appearance, the space in the virtual world that they occupy, and their functionality. Upon transubstantiation, the species of these items could be retained, but would have been transformed into the body and blood of Christ just as ordinary bread and wine are.

There are a couple of counterarguments that can be raised against the claim that virtual bread and wine can act as instruments of Holy Communion. First among these is that the Catholic Church has long instituted guidelines for the making of bread and wine that are fit for use in the celebration of the Eucharist, and has deemed bread and wine made without following these guidelines as unfit. However, considerable debates have been raised with regard to this

¹¹¹ Davies, 10-15.

¹¹² Nichols, "Transubstantiation and Eucharistic Presence," 60.

issue in itself.¹¹³ Some people are unable to take communion because of having extreme allergic reaction to gluten in bread or alcohol in wine. This led the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops to revise guidelines to include alternatives for the use of these materials in Holy Mass. This Conference shows that the Catholic Church has the willingness to change in response to issues of health and safety that concern the congregation. However, the Conference still concluded this issue with an insistence that the specific matter of the bread and wine must contain certain elements. The bread must still contain an amount of gluten. The drink used must at least be mustum, which is freshly pressed wine that has not yet undergone fermentation.

Another counterargument is that even if the virtual bread and wine can be considered to have become the transubstantiated body and blood of Christ, only the person's avatar, not the person himself or herself would be able to consume these materials. As such, no actual communion can be considered to have occurred. The avatar's consumption of the bread and wine cannot be attributed to the actual person. As such, a virtual Eucharist cannot take place since there is no physical contact between the actual person and the bread and wine. The claim to the impossibility of the virtual Eucharist stands unless it can be reasonably argued that the person in the real world is consuming the bread and wine via the avatar.

2.3.2 Virtual Eucharist and the Embodied Human Being

It stands to reason that an avatar in the virtual world cannot consume bread and wine for a human being. Despite this, it is possible that the person can accept the meaning of the bread and wine via his avatar and this could potentially quell the need for physical consumption. Consider what happens to bread and wine when they are consumed by the person. These materials undergo chemical processes where they are broken down to basic nutrients that are

¹¹³ United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, "National Conference of Catholic Bishops on the Use of Low Gluten Hosts at Mass" <http://www.catholicceliacs.org/Bishops.html> (accessed June 18 2013).

absorbed by the body. Extrapolating from the doctrine of transubstantiation, one could argue that what the person's body experiences is the matter of the bread and wine being broken down into nutritional components, but, the Body and Blood of Christ is not consumed in the same way. A person can meaningfully accept the Body and Blood of Christ as well as the Spirit into her person. This acceptance can affect her life in a real way. Yet, it cannot be shown that she is digesting the Body and Blood of Christ. The essence has changed not the species.

One could argue that it is not the act of digesting that is relevant to participating in the Eucharist, but rather, it is the act of accepting the Eucharist, which is signified by putting it in one's mouth and swallowing. This act is done by a person's physical mouth and throat in the physical Mass setting. In the virtual setting, the avatar does not have a virtual mouth or throat that connects to the person controlling the avatar. There is physical contact between the person's fingers and the computer. Jørgen Straarup states this more clearly when he writes:

These representations [Avatars] are often shaped like humans, probably because they mostly represent humans. Somewhere, a non-visible agent, a puppeteer, is pulling the strings or tapping the keyboard, commanding the avatar to move, dance, talk, fall in love, and-go to church.¹¹⁴

In this way, there is some physical contact experienced by the person and through her avatar she can signify that she has accepted the bread and wine. If Christ's Body and Blood are accepted and not digested, then it is plausible that Christ can be accepted in both physical and virtual settings.

Still, one might not be convinced that the avatar's acceptance of virtual bread and wine is equivalent to real world consumption, but, what if there is acceptance of the Eucharist by a representation of the actual person via information technology such as Skype? Rather than

¹¹⁴ Morten T. Højsgaard, "Cyber-Religion: On the Cutting Edge between the Virtual and the Real," in *Religion and Cyberspace*(London ; New York: Routledge, 2005), 98.

creating virtual bread and wine to be used for the offering, people attending virtual masses can simply have appropriately produced bread and wine in their own locations which they can use during the ceremony. They may bring this with them at the start of the virtual Mass, and during the consecration of the bread and wine, the priest in the virtual setting would consecrate all of the pieces of bread and wine before all of the members of the congregation. In this sense, the issue becomes whether or not the priest, acting through Christ, is capable of enabling the process of transubstantiation even from a distance.

According to Joy Blaklok, it is here that the concept of “baptism by desire” becomes relevant in the discourse about the viability of the Eucharist in the virtual setting.¹¹⁵ That is, one may formally be considered baptized into the fellowship of Saints if there is sufficient desire for baptism in such instances where the matter (water) and specific words (form) “I baptize thee...” are performed.¹¹⁶ Moreover, in the Gospel of Matthew, Jesus heals a centurion’s servant without being physically present to the servant. In this narrative, Jesus enters Capernaum and he is met by a centurion whose servant is paralyzed.¹¹⁷ The centurion does not accept Jesus’ offer to go to the centurion’s house to heal the man. This is because the centurion believes Jesus has authority over his servant’s wellbeing in such a way that Jesus needs only to say the word and the servant would be healed.¹¹⁸ Jesus affirms this and, at that moment, the servant is healed.¹¹⁹ This narrative assumes that Christ need not be physically present in order for healing to take place. Based on this narrative and “baptism by desire,” it seems that it is both Christ’s actions and the will of the people that is essential for graced interaction. What does not seem essential is the physical location of the persons involved in the interaction.

¹¹⁵ Personal communication with Joy Blaylock. July 20, 2013.

¹¹⁶ Ibid.

¹¹⁷ Matt. 8:5-13 (American Standard Version).

¹¹⁸ Ibid.

¹¹⁹ Ibid.

So far, it would seem that there is a pretty good case to argue that certain premises of the doctrine of transubstantiation need to be revisited considering the advancements of information technology. The doctrine of transubstantiation should be considered as one tool for understanding the presence of Christ and his interaction with the congregants during the Eucharistic service. In fairness, the doctrine of transubstantiation was not originally intended to be used as an argument for or against a virtual Eucharist. But, given these advancements in information technology, such as Skype where you can actually be represented in real time, the doctrine may come off as too restrictive. It could even seem as though the necessity for the same bread and wine of the Eucharist to be shared and received by all the participants is arbitrary.

However, the lack of physical presence of the same bread and wine to the congregants is not the only issue involved in the investigation of the viability of a virtual Eucharist alternative. The fact is that Christianity emphasizes the embodied nature of human beings and of the Body of Christ, the Church. The former Archbishop of Canterbury, Dr. Rowan Williams, maintains that the entire question of a virtual Mass depends on what Christians believe about the human being and what is essential to our identity.¹²⁰ If it is thought that we are inextricably connected to our bodies or even “enslaved” by the body, then all the limitations of physicality should exist in our Christian celebrations. Christian tradition tends to suppress beliefs that diminish the body in favour of extolling the spiritual side of the human being. For Williams, the virtual reception of the Eucharist is impossible because there is “no sacrament that can bypass the body.”¹²¹ In this way, the problem with a virtual Eucharist is not just the lack of shared transubstantiated bread and wine. It is also the lack of presence of embodied persons standing beside each other and receiving the bread and wine together.

¹²⁰ Personal communication with Rowan Williams. July 27, 2013.

¹²¹ Ibid.

Williams' misgivings about the acceptance of a virtual Eucharist revolve around the infeasibility of accepting equivalence between the carbon material and virtual for the Christian religion. It is through a human body that God walked and spoke among us. It is through our bodies that we receive the words and teachings of God. Likewise, it is through the act of eating, the very source of the body's strength and vitality, that we receive the body and blood of Christ. The Eucharist is not just any bread and wine. For Williams, the Eucharist's bread and wine:

connects us with the risen life of Christ, this piece of matter and this act of eating; likewise, the Spirit is invoked over the actualities of the world not the contents of a mind or imagination alone; and the contact with the risen life is inseparable from the actual presence of other material subjects in a congregation.¹²²

Hence, the bread and wine that we receive in the Mass is that which connects the whole of ourselves, mind and body, with the risen Christ. This connection cannot be fully made if one is absent from the congregation and the bread and wine that they share. To suggest that the virtual bread and wine are received via the mind or imagination is to contradict the Christian understanding of the essential nature of the body to human identity. Williams puts the option starkly when he states, "a virtual sacrament makes no sense unless you think that virtual identities are as fundamental as material ones."¹²³ In this way, the virtual Eucharist undermines the importance of the body within the Christian tradition's understanding of how we encounter God. That is, we cannot accept the validity of the virtual Eucharist without diminishing an essential aspect of human identity and Christ's life, death and resurrection: the body.

Conclusion to Chapter 2

One can say that the doctrine of transubstantiation is an essential and well-defended tenet of the Catholic faith and one that is demonstrated in the celebration of the Eucharist. While there

¹²² Ibid.

¹²³ Ibid.

are critiques of the doctrine of transubstantiation, the value of this doctrine in establishing the presence of Jesus Christ and materializing the promise of salvation through the sharing of Christ's body and blood is inextricably linked to the Eucharist in the Catholic Mass.

Still, throughout the centuries, the Mass has developed tremendously for the purpose of accommodating more and more believers to commune together and celebrate their faith in Jesus Christ. For example, the Mass during the time of the Roman Empire is very simple in order to be kept as secret from the non-Christian public. When the Romans accepted and even adopted Christianity as the religion of the Empire, the celebrations of the Mass became more public and elaborate. Churches as they are known today had not always been. In the beginnings of the Church, the Eucharist is celebrated in people's homes or wherever conveniently hidden away from the persecution of the Romans. The celebration of the Eucharist changes to allow for more participation in greater numbers.

This same fundamental idea of development for accessibility is what the virtual church could be based upon. While believers of Christ in some societies no longer face the same challenges of persecution, the pressure and trials brought about by living in the information age have affected the ability of modern day Catholics to be able to fulfill their responsibilities in attending Mass on every day of obligation. In other societies, persecution of Christians still exists and even martyrdom still occurs. However, theologians maintain that participating in Mass via media, such as the television, is technically not considered as fulfilling the obligation. This was primarily due to the inability of viewers to be physically present and participate in the actual celebration of the Mass. The virtual Mass could overcome this limitation by having the entire proceedings of the Eucharistic celebration occur in such a way that attendees can actually see

and hear as well as be seen and heard. However, the virtual Mass cannot provide the Eucharist or the embodied presence of the attendee. Thus, the virtual Mass cannot replace the physical Mass.

The fundamental premise of the arguments against receiving the Eucharist in a virtual setting is that identity is irreducibly bound to the material or the bodily. There is no sacrament that can bypass the body. People are embodied selves; they are tied to that embodiment. They may only interact through the use of this embodiment. Therefore, the problem with a virtual Eucharist is that it is not clear how the body is involved. The significance of doctrines about the transformation of the elements in the Eucharist is that it is this piece of matter which makes up the consecrated bread and wine that connects the believer with the risen life of Christ. Furthermore, it is the act of eating this piece of matter that actualizes the ritual and lets the Spirit in, not just the mind or the imagination. Contact with the material is therefore prerequisite to contact with the risen life.

Still, there are several Christian theologians who would extol some of the virtues of the virtual presence of the Church while objecting to the wholesale acceptance of a virtual Eucharistic Mass. For example, Dr. Williams states that “the Church should certainly engage with the technological world and use its vehicles of communication.”¹²⁴ But, in what way should Christian churches use such technology? In the following chapter, I will survey Christian theologians who have answered this question in order to provide a general picture of the potential benefits and pitfalls of using the internet to spread the Christian message. In particular, I will explore the potential benefits of a Mass outside of the possible benefit of the reception of the Eucharist.

¹²⁴ Ibid.

Chapter 3

3 Theological and Philosophical Viewpoints on the Role of Information Technology in Communal Organization

In the previous chapter, I examined the possibility of the reception of the Eucharist within a virtual Mass. It was suggested that the doctrine of transubstantiation as well as the embodiment of the human person made the reception of the Eucharist through the internet impossible. Despite the unviability of the reception of the Eucharist for the Roman Catholic tradition, this chapter aims to outline the potential benefits and drawbacks of celebrating the Mass online for fostering Christian community. To begin with, I will examine the reservations that theologians have regarding the use of the internet to celebrate Mass. The first sub-section is devoted to the thought of Cardinal Thomas Collins and the second draws together the views of three theologians from three different traditions, namely, the aforementioned Rowan Williams, Joy Blaylock and Julies Gittoes. For all four theologians, Christian participation in virtual Eucharistic Mass can encourage the privatization of faith as well as isolation and alienation.

Although the Catholic Church cannot recommend the participation in the virtual Mass as a substitute for interpersonal community, it is not clear how this position could be maintained in an increasingly virtualizing world. Using James Beckford's social constructionist view of religion, I posit that it is possible that social changes occurring because of the integration of internet technology will influence the Christian religion's practices and beliefs.¹²⁵ I do not suggest that the virtual Mass is a direct alternative to embodied, interpersonal community or that it could become one in the future. I do refer, however, to the fact that the virtualization of society is already influencing the way that religion is expressed and related to within society. Following

¹²⁵ Beckford, 12-18.

this, I refer to Graham Ward's theological reflections on the rapidly changing structures of social organization.¹²⁶ For Ward, internet technology could undermine values of the Christian tradition for society. These values include the need for interpersonal and embodied community as well as the importance of a larger narrative in which persons can participate. Although Ward's reservations are warranted, I argue that the virtual Mass does provide aspects of community, however unembodied.

In the final section, I use Carl Mitcham's philosophical framework to understand the nature of the internet as a technology like any other. Using Mitcham's framework, it can be established that the way we relate to the technology of the internet will condition the way that we relate to the online Mass. As an information tool and a way to engage in Church community, the virtual Mass could be considered a benefit to the Catholic mission to make God's kingdom accessible to all people everywhere. This is possible as long as we relate to the virtual Mass as a tool for expressing our solidarity with those in need of embodied, interpersonal Christian community.

3.1 Cardinal Thomas Collins on the Role of Information Technology for Christian Community

Currently, one of the most influential Roman Catholic theological voices on the issue of the internet and the Church is Cardinal Thomas Collins. He is a member of the Pontifical Council of Social Communications, which, among other responsibilities, produced the document analyzed in the first chapter, "The Church and the Internet." For Collins, the Pontifical Council for Social Communications "is totally committed to helping the Church evolve along with

¹²⁶ Ward, 251-254.

technology.”¹²⁷ For example, Pope Francis communicates through Twitter and there are a plethora of blogs available such as “New Advent” and “Big Pulpit.” The Council is a very active department of the Vatican and it is continuously expanding its presence in online platforms such as Twitter and Facebook. Collins even uses an internet application called Magnificat to access the breviary or the Liturgy of the Hours in order to prepare for celebrating the Mass on his iPad and iPhone.¹²⁸ It is clear that Collins believes that the internet is an important medium through which the Catholic Church can communicate with its membership.

For Collins, the Church has continuously adapted with changing technologies and will continue this trend in the future. To argue this point, he points out certain examples of the Church’s development along with technology over the last 2,000 years. In the twelfth century, the Church developed with and made its presence known within the newly created educational institutions resembling modern day universities. Within the Mass and Church buildings there was added new and beautiful music and art. One could also say that preservation of culture during the Middle Ages is, in large part, attributable to the Church’s use of technology for writing and maintaining structures of higher learning. In the fifteenth century, one of the very first books to be printed by Gutenberg’s mechanized printing press is a Bible.¹²⁹ Collins also cites a more recent example of the Church’s use of technology. In the 1950s, Bishop Fulton Sheen used radio and television to instruct, communicate and, to a certain extent, foster community. The Cardinal Collins’ own use of the radio and television can also be seen as an example of the Church’s development along with technology. Collins celebrates a televised version of the Mass at St. Basil’s Church every month. He explains that what radio and television casts offer “is an opportunity for prayer for a person who cannot get to Mass to hear a homily, to

¹²⁷ Collins.

¹²⁸ Ibid.

¹²⁹ Ibid.

meditate upon the prayers of the Mass, to meditate personally upon the scriptures.” In this way, Collins uses radio and television media to communicate and instruct the Church’s membership.

Still, Collins would reject the claim that television, radio or even internet masses could replace the real world Church celebrations. He states:

the TV Mass is not a form of the Mass; it is simply something else. It is meditation upon the scriptures, listening to the homily and an opportunity for prayer, but it is not an experience of the Mass itself, except in a very limited way.¹³⁰

Collins equates the television Mass with another form of worship called *Lectio Divina*. It uses scripture, meditation and prayer to encourage communion with God. There are four stages: read, meditate, pray and contemplate.¹³¹ Collins actually records his “meditations upon the word of God in the Cathedral” to perform the function of a *Lectio Divina*. He broadcasts his reflections over the Salt and Light television network as well as through DVDs and YouTube.¹³² Even so, for Collins, the “*Lectio Divina* is not exactly worship, certainly not the communal form of worship which we find in the Mass.” It is a medium of prayer and contemplation, but this is not worship because there is no communal aspect. Still, Collins’ celebrations of Mass and other broadcasted reflections are directed towards the general public as well as Catholics and monastics. This illustrates that the Catholic Church is ready to adapt to new technologies in order to reach the maximum number of people.

In this study it was determined that radio and television could not be a form of communal worship because even if a Mass is broadcast live it does not bring individuals together in an embodied way nor does it facilitate community dialogue. However, this study also dealt with the difference between a TV Mass and a virtual Mass. Masses celebrated over the internet have the potential to be vastly more interactive than a TV Mass. Still, according to Cardinal Collins:

¹³⁰ Ibid.

¹³¹ Ibid.

¹³² Ibid.

the Mass requires the physical presence of a person, face to face with others joined together around the table of the Lord to hear the word of God to be united with one another and with Christ and to experience the presence of Christ as he speaks to us in the scriptures and as we are present at the Eucharistic prayer which is the making present to us now of the sacrifice of Christ on Calvary.¹³³

Collins reasons that the physical, face to face presence of the community in the Mass is the only way that members can commune intimately with Christ and with one another in Christ. Online communication tools are great for teaching the faith just like mystery dramas, processions, stained glass windows, drawings, and music that were used in the Middle Ages in the Church. But, communication tools such as avatars cannot “develop a personal relationship with Christ and a life together as the Church.”¹³⁴ In this way, Collins expresses strong reservations about the viability of the virtual Mass to create Christian community.

3.1.1 Theological Critiques of Information Technology as Limiting Christian Community

There are other theologians outside of the Roman Catholic tradition who echo Collins’ reservations about technology’s potential for the building up of Christian community. In this section I will refer to three theologians and their viewpoints. These are Dr. Rowan Williams, former Archbishop of Canterbury, Dr. Joy Blaylock, a pastor of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, and Julie Gittoes, a Residential Canon at Guildford Cathedral and Ph.D. in Anglican Eucharistic Theology at Cambridge University. All three unanimously agree that there was no way a virtual Mass would replace a physical one and they all are cautious about extolling the virtues of the internet to create Christian community.

Blaylock, Gittoes and Williams argue that community is a prerequisite for entering into communion with Christ. In the previous chapter, I explained Williams’ view of the human

¹³³ Ibid.

¹³⁴ Ibid.

person as an unequivocally embodied being. A person requires physical contact if she is going to be engaged with as a whole being. This view extends to a community of persons. A Christian community is a group gathered together to celebrate the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ as the embodied divine presence. Ignoring the need for each other's physical presence diminishes an essential part of the human being and what it means to be a Christian. Moreover, without physical contact, a Christian community cannot fully engage in the sharing of the Eucharist or gestures of love and forgiveness, such as the sign of peace. Blaylock also believes in the necessity of physical presence for Christian community and adds that "when you are a member of a physical church, you maintain relationships with people who may encourage or challenge you at any time."¹³⁵ Growth and development in faith requires such challenge and encouragement from others. Without other people's input, the individual can easily descend into an isolated and privatized faith life, which is contrary to the Gospel message of helping others in need and to build up the Kingdom of God.

For Gittoes, the fellowship involved in the physical Mass is not only necessary but also stands as an example to a culture that is rapidly becoming virtualized. Gittoes states:

the incarnation...implies a commitment to geographical place as well as face to face human encounter. I cannot think of any examples of flourishing virtual churches. Social media/technology might enhance/sit alongside meeting for worship/fellowship, rather than being a replacement. The church has the opportunity to offer something distinctive and counter-cultural – real human contact.¹³⁶

Real human contact is certainly a Christian value and could become a value that is in need of defending against the cultural tide. The need for human contact within community is not arbitrary, but an essential component of the human being's social nature, providing, among other

¹³⁵ Blaylock.

¹³⁶ Personal communication with Julie Gittoes. September 9, 2013.

things, comfort and encouragement. Without said contact, the virtual celebrations could become a means to increase isolation and alienation of the individual.

Isolation and privatization of faith within the seemingly communal celebration of a virtual Mass are what Blaylock is most concerned about. The necessity of physically uniting as a community seems to be at the heart of these issues. One of the dangers of using information technology to encourage Christian outreach stems from the tendency for internet devices to be used by a single individual. Therefore, isolation could undermine the very purpose of Christian outreach, welcoming others in community. Another danger is distorting the view of the faith as a personal one that is not necessarily shared by everyone in the Christian community. Blaylock summarizes these dangers:

The obstacles faced in using technology is emphasizing the individualistic notion of faith and personal piety rather than the communal affirmation essential to the priesthood of all believers. With that sense of individuality, people lose their connectedness to community and become more inwardly focused. The church loses its place as the arena for social engagement and connection to technology and social media.¹³⁷

Here Blaylock is pointing out that the community built up by social media technology could very well be one that does not connect people at all. If the church uses online platforms to encourage community, then it has to be careful to emphasize that the fullness of community is to be found in gatherings where people can interact with one another in the same geographical location.

Williams, Gittoes and Blaylock are onboard with Collins' view that technology can be a helpful tool for Christian education. However, all four are hesitant to assert that the virtual church could be helpful for community building. For these theologians, Christian community is foremost about fostering face to face interaction with one another and with God. In so far as technology gets in the way of this interaction and genuine encounter, it cannot be a tool for building up community. For Collins, our focus should be on:

¹³⁷ Blaylock.

more profound realities than the constantly changing technological world and in [focusing on the more profound realities] we help that technology to be of great benefit but we do not become slaves to it.¹³⁸

This study must take seriously the potential danger that online platforms can distract the Christian individual from engaging with community. Collins' point about the dangers of becoming enslaved by technology is tremendously important. Concentrating on the operation and the medium of the technology itself can become serious obstacles to full participation in any church celebration.

3.2 Religious Social Organization and Information Technology

For Collins, Blaylock, Gittoes and Williams, virtual community cannot replace physical church communities. To accept virtual over physical community is to undermine the significance and necessity of the body and to obfuscate what should be the ultimate goal of any Mass: embodied Christian community in Christ. Even if it is the case that the Eucharist within a virtual Mass is invalid and the Mass itself is not a full manifestation of Christian community, however, could the virtual Mass become a means of fostering solidarity with those who are not able to openly and freely receive the Eucharist? There appears to be no opposition to this way of viewing the virtual Mass from the Vatican. Moreover, it appears that the Catholic Church's membership is already influenced by information and communication technology when it comes to relating to religious beliefs and practices.

What follows seeks to answer whether the Catholic Church's membership requires top-down consensus for it to be acceptable to promote participation in Eucharistic virtual Mass. This statement requires some qualifications. Regarding the phrase, "requires top-down consensus," I am speaking to the fact that authorities at the top of any institutions do not necessarily determine

¹³⁸ Collins.

the practices and beliefs of those at the bottom. Using James Beckford's historical and social constructionist views on religious development in society, I suggest that the way society views religion is shaped by practices and the material reality of social organization apart from the teachings of religious leaders. The facts of the influence of internet technology are then discussed, but, this influence does not have to be outside the realm of theological reflection or control. Graham Ward's articulations of the significant aspects of the Christian tradition that could be lost in an increasingly virtualized society are discussed. While respecting Ward's reservations, in the final section, I put forth arguments for how a virtual Mass could provide some semblance of Christian community. This section refers to the phrase I used above: "acceptable to promote participation in Eucharistic virtual Mass." By "participation," I mean what Cardinal Collins advocates as an acceptable way of viewing the Mass which is as a kind of *Lectio Divina*. A virtual Mass can facilitate prayer, meditation, instruction and hearing the Word of God. Yet, we must be careful not to equate participation in the virtual Mass with the full, embodied reality of Christian community.

3.2.1 The Influence of Dynamic Social Structures on Religion

The relationship between social structure and religion is examined in-depth from the historical and social constructionist framework in Beckford's book, *Social Theory and Religion*. He argues that the meaning and practice of "what counts as religion" changes over time.¹³⁹ More specifically, ideas concerning religion are social constructs. Beckford adopts a conflict-based approach to clarify what this means. Changes in the social structuring of religion are conditioned and influenced by contemporary debates in society. Beckford does not address debates centering on internet technologies. Still, considering his position, one could say that the

¹³⁹ Beckford, 12-16.

use of information technology to foster Christian community is a debate that may influence the way that the Christian religion is made socially manifest.

For Beckford, approaching the social structures of religion from a historical and social constructionist perspective requires accepting two positions. To begin with, one must suppose that religion is a social construct that does not exist independent of the individuals that make it up.¹⁴⁰ The second position is that the meaning and role of religion is not decided through theoretical reflection, but rather, discovered in the practice, discourse and institutions of a society. Regarding the first position, Beckford contends that ongoing reflective interactions between individuals in society determine and develop what society understands religion to be. There are a number of different factors that lead individuals to determine what religion means to them such as lifestyle, personal needs, and interests. Combinations of such individuals form communities and these communities embody religious practices that are determined by such things as moods, desires and previous activities, but, this is not all.

The defining of religion and what it means for communities within society is always done in dialogue with a tradition. The Catholic Church's tradition is sustained and built upon via Scriptures, commended theological commentary and persons engaged in the hierarchy of the Church. For Beckford, unlike other social constructs, religious institutions are "a particularly interesting 'site' where boundary disputes are endemic and where well-entrenched interest groups are prepared to defend their definition of religion against opponents."¹⁴¹ What this implies is that religion from a social constructionist perspective is both dynamic and competitive. The role and practices of religion within society are determined by the interactions of individuals who are more or less entrenched in tradition and interest groups. Moreover, there are numerous

¹⁴⁰ Ibid., 13.

¹⁴¹ Ibid.

cultures with numerous social structures and communities that have come up with creative and imaginative ideas about the relationship between religion and society. Each society creates and re-creates the world in which we live and in which religion plays a role. As such, any issue concerning religion would be best treated in the light of the discussions and debates involved the perspectives of different individuals and communities. Open and congenial dialogue between different communities regarding the Catholic Christian religion and its practices could establish a more organized and peaceful way of coexisting within the membership and society.

Regarding the second position of a historical and social constructionist perspective, Beckford argues that understanding religion cannot be grasped from a generic and theoretical point of view. Understanding the role of religion in society can only really be done by investigating the practices, discourses and institutions of society.¹⁴² From this analytical standpoint, it is more prudent to disregard the search for generic qualities of religion and instead focus on analyzing actual situations wherein people construct, attribute, or challenge religious meaning.¹⁴³ Here, it is important to note that Beckford rejects the idea that this approach is completely subjective or that it makes the definition of religion entirely arbitrary. Rather, this framework brings down the discussion about religion and its practices to a realistic and socially relevant arena.¹⁴⁴ More directly put, “instead of assuming that all members of faith communities think or act alike and that they do so because their religion somehow predisposes or programs them in deterministic ways,”¹⁴⁵ Beckford advocates an approach that assumes humanity is capable of developing their perceptions about the world and attributing meaning to it. In a word, Beckford’s positions assume that religion is something that is concurrent with human social

¹⁴² Ibid., 16.

¹⁴³ Ibid.

¹⁴⁴ Ibid., 23.

¹⁴⁵ Ibid., 24.

evolution as opposed to being caused by it. Instead of asking how religion is impacting people's lives, the more appropriate question to ask is: How do people's activities in a society shape their perspective about religion?

3.2.2 Social Impact of Internet Technology on Religious Beliefs and Practices

Religion has entered the virtual world in many ways. As discussed, people from all over the world can profess their respective faiths and contribute to discussions of religious importance. Virtual reality has also been a means for people to bring new religions into existence.¹⁴⁶ Religions such as Kibology, Technosophy, and even one called Virtual Church of Blind Chihuahua, have all become popular and gathered numerous followers around the world.¹⁴⁷ As explained by Højsgaard, the internet has made it possible to have “religion without religion.”¹⁴⁸ That is, the internet has made it more feasible for persons to view formal institutions with hierarchies and rules of engagement as unnecessary for participation in religious beliefs. A person can become aware of the teachings of thousands of faiths and select one or even a combination of some that suit his or her personal perspectives best. If none of these possibilities suit the person, she can create a religion online and cast a wide, global net for gathering members. The internet allows for the perusing and learning of religious practices and beliefs without actually having to become officially affiliated with the formal institutions of such religions.

Graham Ward's *Cities of God* gives an account of the possible ways theology could respond to the social structure of the postmodern city and that includes the ubiquity of

¹⁴⁶ Højsgaard, 50.

¹⁴⁷ Ibid.

¹⁴⁸ Højsgaard and Warburg, 62.

information technology for communication. Just as writing gave way to print and print gave way to broadcasting, broadcasting gives way to the internet and its virtual reality.¹⁴⁹ With each stage, there is a reconfiguration of how people perceive religion and contemplate God.¹⁵⁰ As people are exposed to the extensive information available on the web about religion, people begin to view religion as less a matter of organized membership. The religious presence in virtual reality is one of a plethora of information such that religion appears to be a matter of personal conviction and fitting within the right sphere of beliefs. This kind of reconfiguration of religious beliefs has some interesting effects on theology. To begin with, it pushes local theologies to relate and respond to global virtual communities so as to be able to defend their respective identities.¹⁵¹ The internet has opened people to a world wherein they could see how the rest of the world challenges the order that their religion imposes upon them. Local beliefs are exposed and put under international scrutiny, leading those who abide by such beliefs to either defend or abandon them.

Ward considers various dangers to the Christian religion that are brought about by the continued digitalization or virtualization of it. First, the internet threatens to divest Christianity of embodiment and reduce it to an exchange of signs.¹⁵² Traditionally, Christianity has relied on narratives in order to communicate meaning.¹⁵³ These narratives are not static because, with every new generation, there are modifications to older narratives or more narratives are added. The dynamism of narrative seeks to refine and reinforce the faith among followers as well as make the faith more appealing to potential entrants.¹⁵⁴ That is, Christianity as a religion depends

¹⁴⁹ Graham Ward, *Cities of God, Radical Orthodoxy* (London ; New York: Routledge, 2000), 248.

¹⁵⁰ *Ibid.*

¹⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 248.

¹⁵² *Ibid.*, 250.

¹⁵³ *Ibid.*, 247.

¹⁵⁴ *Ibid.*

on the spreading of the message of God in order for it to sustain itself and develop. These narratives are embodied by members when they are baptized like Jesus is or when they celebrate the Last Supper like the apostles do. The problem that arises with the internet is that it easily constructs a space where persons engage in religious narratives as pieces of information. Christianity is a religion where the narratives of the faith must be lived out, practiced, embodied within a community. For Ward, treating Christian narratives as information effectively removes the aspect of embodiment.¹⁵⁵

Ward worries that the kind of disembodied relationship with religion created in virtual space renders the Church obsolete in terms of its function of spreading meaningful and life-orienting narratives. The internet connects an individual “to everyone everywhere who owns a computer,”¹⁵⁶ and allows one to be free to share and absorb narratives of faith without needing to participate in the formal embodiment of those narratives. For example, the internet makes it much more possible for people to learn about the Christian faith, to abide by the teachings of Christ, and to build communities of believers without actually being baptized by the existing Church. It is not beyond reasonable expectation to envision a time when services such as online baptisms are established. It is also likely that these services will not be sanctioned by the Roman Catholic Church or the majority of Christian ecclesial communities. This kind of religious practice without approval could create more rifts in the Christian family just as other conflicts over the viability of good practice have done in the past. Moreover, it is not difficult to imagine a range of people attending virtual Mass rather than participating in the established physical embodiment of faith in the Church. Over time, it is possible that some people would no longer have the motivation to go to a physically held Mass or any Church service. They would use the

¹⁵⁵ Ibid., 250.

¹⁵⁶ Ibid.

internet to share and develop their Christian beliefs with communities of believers independent of the traditional Catholic Church. Currently, the advent of the internet and the proliferation of cyberspace have made it possible for people to learn about religious belief and practices without engaging in a formal institution. And the upswing of such an informal setting to deliver religious beliefs is that they are accessible for everyone to view, reflect upon, and scrutinize.

Still, Ward cautions that one cannot leave behind the ecological, political or social structures or troubles of this world and jump into a parallel digital world to start over again. One must not imagine a future “as becoming one with the machines we have created, cyborgs, entering the domain of ultimate plasticity” and where heaven is no longer our final destination.¹⁵⁷ Jumping into the virtual space completely has the potentiality of causing identity blindness. On the internet, there is a homogeneous aspect in that one cannot detect age, gender, or ethnicity. This poses a problem to Ward because it is a unilingual dimension of information exchange that cannot fully integrate the anthropological or political dimensions. To combat this, Ward proposes a theological critique. The internet allows for a bogus sense of reality as created by us and that promotes a “rethinking of creation in terms of its creator: a creator who maintains and validates its reality and its standing.”¹⁵⁸ He thinks that it is the job of theologians and theology to reveal our destiny in relation to the Godhead. According to Ward, “theology reflects upon the relationship between the uncreated creator and creation on the basis of what the Godhead has revealed about both itself and its desires and designs with respect to creation.”¹⁵⁹ The internet has a tendency to extol the human being as creator and promote an outlook that there is nothing beyond the world of sense or imagination. It should be theology’s task to situate the virtual with respect to the living God and the communities of the faithful.

¹⁵⁷ Ibid., 256.

¹⁵⁸ Ibid., 254.

¹⁵⁹ Ibid.

Ward is requesting that we put a theological foundation to the culture of virtual reality via a theological response to the changes in our contemporary world. Ward is concerned that virtual reality will overtake our earthly reality by detaching meanings from signs, scriptures and tradition. The state to be avoided is one where a “digital world replaces actual communities, and telecommunication networks erase the significance of social networks.”¹⁶⁰ The ability to change people’s minds lies in the power of dissemination of information. Yet, where one goes to acquire such information cannot be predetermined. Virtual reality has made it possible for people to learn and think about the Christian faith without ever having to speak with a priest or a fellow Christian. The internet has created a slice of billions of person’s worldviews. One can depend on the internet to provide answers and to help them stay in touch with others. For this reason, theology needs to construct an analogical world-view in which “the materiality of bodies is maintained and sustained by a theological construal of creation.”¹⁶¹ Here, I believe Ward is correct and I would suggest that this worldview be seen as complementary to the virtual world. Such a complementary perspective would view technology as a tool that could advance the message of community building and loving concern through the teachings of Christ.

3.2.3 Promoting the Virtual Church without Undermining the Christian Community

Ward omits the fact that the internet could be seen as a link to the Divine order of things if used correctly. Since “the divine remains invisible and the person will only be able to think and perceive masses and space, little or great,”¹⁶² the internet could actually bring about a new understanding of ourselves in linking us the “to the image” of the Trinity. Because of the nature of the human body and its dependency on senses to decode the external world, there is no way to

¹⁶⁰ Ibid., 256.

¹⁶¹ Ibid.

¹⁶² Ibid., 245.

perceive this world except through experiences, masses or spaces. People now have the luxury of using technology to transcend boundaries by transforming the global realm into something that is accessible by all. A correct use of the internet will enable individuals to live out their earthly existence as social beings and bring a “good ordering of the social that therefore stands in relation to the image and the glory of God.”¹⁶³ The key here is that the internet itself is not procuring contact with God but rather that it is a medium that could be used to love our neighbors. Even if our participation in virtual reality is not an embodied participation, this does not mean that the use of the internet entails a willingness to escape reality or to avoid formal institutions.

As discussed by various scholars, including Collins, Goa, Williams, Gittoes and Blaylock, one of the most important issues in considering the virtual church is the extent to which people attending virtual masses are actually able to enter into communion with one another.¹⁶⁴ That is, the question is whether or not people in virtual masses are actually able to come together as a community in celebration of the Eucharist. In order to address this issue, it is important to ask, what are the communion’s components? There are two categories of components I will consider and they are the structural and the connective components.¹⁶⁵ The structural component considers it necessary for members of the congregation to participate in the varying elements of the Mass. As we saw with the work of Davies, the Mass has developed into an intricate set of activities and many of these activities require the participation of the congregation.¹⁶⁶ There are various parts of the Mass that one can participate in when participating in virtual Mass besides the reception of the Eucharist and other parts that require

¹⁶³ Ibid., 234.

¹⁶⁴ Kandra; Bazin and Cottin, 123; Goa, "New Technologies and the Churches: Incarnation or the Virtual Nowhere?," 14; Collins; Blaylock; Gittoes; Williams.

¹⁶⁵ Kevin W. Irwin, *Models of the Eucharist* (New York: Paulist Press, 2005), 24-36.

¹⁶⁶ Davies, 7-12.

physical contact. During a virtual Mass, persons can, for example, respond to the readings and to the priest, join in singing songs, and reciting creeds.

Virtual settings can be set up in such a way that a person can participate in song and prayer with the rest of the congregation. For example, members of the congregation could be represented by avatars or by a video representation of themselves via information technology such as Skype. Their computer's sound cards can be used in order to transmit their voice over the internet and to one another's computers, effectively enabling them to hear everyone else. This means that when the priest or lector utters words that require response, each member of the congregation can respond and this response will be digitally transmitted to everyone in attendance.

From the point of view of ensuring that everyone in the Mass participates, it could be argued that the virtual setting can be even better at encouraging participation than the physical setting. That is, each prayer and moment where the participant responds is directly sent in equal intensity to each member of the virtual congregation. In physical masses, it can be difficult to hear what the lector or priest is saying, especially when the Mass is very large and the persons are seated very far away from the altar. In the virtual setting, each person would be able to hear the priest or lector and respond accordingly. In previous remote settings, such as when Mass is broadcasted through television, people would not be able to respond to the priest in a way that would be heard by the congregation. In the virtual setting, the response of each person can be heard by everyone else. If the use of sound is not possible, each member of the congregation can even respond by typing the response. This shows that the virtual setting enables some degree of structural communion that is at least on par with that which is afforded by the physical setting.

The second component of communion is the connective component and it is focused on ensuring that people in the congregation recognize one another's presence and feel togetherness with one another in their celebration of Christ. In the physical setting, people are aware of others who are celebrating Mass with them. They can gauge how many people are in the church with them. They can talk to the people that are there and they can share their faith with one another throughout the different parts of the Eucharistic celebration. One part of the Mass where this component is critical is when the priest asks members of the congregation to give a sign of peace to those who are with them. This prompts members of the congregation to shake hands with people in the Mass, despite not knowing those people personally. It is through this and other exercises during the Mass that people come into physical community under Christ.

Again, to a certain degree, the virtual Mass provides some elements of the connective component of communion. In a virtual Mass, the platform can keep track of how many people are attending the Mass. People, represented by their avatars, can be seated next to one another in the virtual Mass despite being miles apart physically. They can interact with one another directly and openly through their avatars, or they can send private messages to one another, just as people in a physical Mass can interact with one another. It could be argued that the virtual setting is more conducive for interaction in community for those who require surpassing the boundaries of physical distance. Yet, even in physical churches there are distances that congregants do not cross. Most often, in a physical setting, a person would not go around the entire congregation giving everyone the sign of peace. In a virtual setting, the sign of peace can be represented and so one can give the sign of peace to everyone. The boundaries of the physical setting are transcended by the virtual setting, enabling people to connect at a level that may not be possible in a physical community.

Moreover, the virtual setting offers opportunities for the development of the community that is often not present in the physical setting. In the typical Mass, it is unlikely for people who are seated next to one another to actually recognize each other beyond those instances when the priest asks them to do so. In the virtual setting, each member of the congregation is aware that every other member has taken the time and effort to attend Mass. It is just as likely for a person in a virtual Mass to talk to her neighbor than it is for her to do so in a physical Mass. For those who cannot attend physical Mass, communication with other practicing Christians is made possible and is better than absolutely no communication at all. Even through technological media, communication can still be life-giving and encouraging to one's faith. Moreover, the virtual setting allows the greater chance for people to connect with members of the Church that they otherwise would never meet. It is possible for persons to come together from different locations with the purpose of sharing in the Good News of Christ. For those who are persecuted or afraid to go to a physical Mass, they can experience some aspects of community with other sincere and active Christians. In this way, people in a virtual Mass can be as genuine and sincere in their communal intentions as those who participate in a physical Mass however limited their communal interactions are considered.

One could argue that when a person is a member of a physical church, that person is able to maintain relationships with people who may encourage or challenge him or her at any time. Within a virtual church, there is no reciprocity or growth in communal relationships. This argument assumes that reciprocity and growth cannot exist when a member of a congregation is unable to see or physically touch other members of the congregation face-to-face. Also, it considers the virtual church as something that is spontaneous and irregular or a place where people can just come in and join Mass and then never return again. While this is true, it is true

for physical churches as well. As with physical churches, virtual churches are capable of developing a community where there are people who regularly attend Mass and who help one another grow in their faith in Christ. There can be reciprocity in relationships within a virtual church because people in the church can interact with one another verbally and visually.

Another counterargument that can be launched against the existence of communion in a virtual setting is the prevalence of anonymity in this setting, which can prevent the development of a true community. This argument is based on the idea that in order for a community to develop, there must be trust among the members of that community. Without trust, then people in the community would just be there for their own interests and would not care about the other members of the community. In the virtual setting, people do not have to introduce themselves using their real names. They can go online and attend Mass and then go offline without interacting with anyone from the congregation. However, this is also true in a physical Mass. In a physical Mass, there are many people who attend and then leave without knowing anyone in the congregation and without being known to anyone in the congregation.

However, it can be argued that some people who attend online Mass also want to become part of a Christian community. By its very nature, the internet provides people with access to each other. It is not a place that necessitates a one-way exchange of information such as the medium of the television or the radio. If persons just want to attend Mass on their own without connecting with others in the community, then they could just watch the celebration of the Mass through television. But, also one could go to the nearest church, go through the proceedings and return home. It could be argued that, by going online to a virtual church, individuals show a willingness to be part of the community and these participants can be just as sincerely or not sincerely interested in communal interaction as a physical church.

Finally, one more counterargument to the presence of community in a virtual Mass is that it is not possible to keep track of what people are doing in order to ensure that they are meaningfully gathered together in Christ. That is, it is very possible that there are people who may go to a virtual Mass, log on to the platform and do other things during the Mass. As such, those people do not actually contribute to the community. It is possible that if virtual Mass was utterly accepted by the Catholic Church, then persons would make use of a virtual platform just to be seen as fulfilling their obligations. However, this negative possibility is not limited to the virtual setting and actually does occur in the physical setting. There are people in any Mass who do not pay attention, or even fall asleep during the celebration. Certainly, these people do not contribute optimally to the connective aspect of communion with other people who gather in the name of Christ.

Nonetheless, one could still argue that the lack of participation and connection is more likely in a virtual setting. In the virtual setting, people are simply not be able to see what other people are doing. Hence, in a virtual Mass, one cannot even see if a member of the congregation is actually asleep while his avatar appears awake. However, it is not entirely true that there is no evidence of lack of participation in the connective component of communion in Mass. Everyone in Mass can see whenever a member participates in the different points of interaction during the Mass. Leaving an avatar on its own while doing something else is very likely to lead to that avatar being singled out in the crowd as not participating during the Mass. When people in the congregation attempt to talk to these people and they do not respond, then it would become clearer that these people are not there listening to and viewing Mass. Since it is very possible for non-participatory members of a virtual congregation to be singled out, it is not beyond the realm

of possibility for other members to encourage the non-participant to pay more attention and contribute to the virtual community.

All of these counterarguments aim to suggest that the virtual Mass does not have to be a space where Christians come to be unembodied, free from hierarchical institutions or anonymous. There are certain aspects of a virtual Mass that do provide community interaction and as such, it performs an actual connective function for those who cannot be part of a fully embodied community. Still, a virtual Mass could be a kind of eschatological sign of a world where marginalized groups can enter into embodied participation in the greater institutionalized Catholic Church. The virtual church could be a place where people come together in solidarity with those who cannot attend physical Mass for various reasons. A virtual Mass could be considered as a sign of hope for a world where physical communion is possible and where embodied participation and the reception of the bread and wine in community are possible.

This study is done with the view to suggesting the potential benefits of the virtual Mass for those who cannot participate in real world masses. In particular, this study considers those who are physically incapable, persecuted, shut-in or afraid of participating in real world masses. If a virtual Mass is to foster a constructive interaction with each other and the Lord, then how do we as Christians relate to this technology? This is the question I aim to address in the next section of this chapter where I will refer to a philosophical framework for understanding how human beings relate to technology in general. This framework will allow us to understand the inherent pitfalls, benefits and necessities of technology in social living. The goal is to articulate the ways that Christians could relate to technology without becoming so wrapped up in online platforms that the communal aspect of the Mass is lost.

3.3 A Philosophical Framework for Understanding the Roles of Technology in Human Life

In this section, I aim to provide a philosophical framework for understanding the roles of technology in social life and the possible ways that human beings could relate to technology. According to Carl Mitcham, there are four ways that human beings tend to use and relate to technology. We use and relate to technology: (1) as object, (2) as knowledge, (3) as activity, and (4) as volition. Taken in turn, each way of viewing technology will be elaborated with the intent to articulate the different ways human beings relate to technology in human life. In the end, these possible relationships with technology will be evaluated in order to suggest the kind of viewpoint on technology that could foster community. In particular, I will suggest how one could relate to virtual churches in order to address the issue of isolation and privatization through the medium and thereby, contribute to a relationship that could cultivate Christian community.

3.3.1 Technology as Object

At the most basic level, technology consists of human made objects that are useful to achieve specific goals. For Mitcham, one can relate to technology as object in two ways, namely, through its “instrumental” and “anthropological” aspects.¹⁶⁷ The instrumental aspect pertains to the material reality of artifacts. This aspect is focused on technology as a collection of physical objects that are constructed to complete specific tasks. In contrast, the anthropological view considers artifacts as tools that extend, replace, or augment biological human hardware. The instrumental and anthropological aspects of technology are not mutually exclusive, but, their distinction is important. This is because the instrumental perspective views technology as more of a collection of consumer goods. As consumer products, technology ought to save time and

¹⁶⁷ Mitcham, 50.

offer more convenience to society. From the anthropological viewpoint of technology as extending human function, technology is viewed more as a means to save lives or enhance human flourishing.¹⁶⁸

Taken together or separately, the anthropological and instrumental aspects of technology still amount to viewing technology as an object that is useful for a certain end. Viewing technology as object permits one to relate to artifacts as having no other value outside of that which is derived from the jobs that they perform. Technology is not a good in itself, but the means to an end. Still, the use of technology can quickly transform into a seemingly necessary aspect of human living. That is, the artifacts created by human hands tend to be considered not only valuable, but, essential to living daily life whether one is a farmer or a software engineer.

One could say that technology is not a necessity and merely improves on the already existent capacities of human beings to live in the world. For example, the hammer functions with and extends the physical power of the human arm. It furthers the ability of the arm and serves a practical purpose. However, it would be impossible for someone to hammer a nail with her arms and hands without injuring herself. Consider the telescope. It is an object that is valued because it makes the task of seeing easier. Still, the very use of telescopes illustrates the limitations of the human eye. The telescope extends human sight beyond the boundaries of the human condition while also being constrained by it. Without sight, there would be no need of a telescope, but, an individual's complete lack of sight could be addressed by new technological devices. It would seem that human capacity and technology go hand in hand when we perform our daily and extraordinary tasks.

Moreover, there is an increasing trend of human capacities working, and even binding, with their mechanical counterparts. These developments are clearly observable in modern

¹⁶⁸ Ibid., 53.

medical practice. Prosthetic technology can restore vision and replace damaged or lost human anatomy. These kinds of artificial equipment include “eyeglasses, hearing aids, cochlear implants, hair implants, skin grafts, tooth implants, pacemakers, transplants...”¹⁶⁹ In short, modern medical practice has no trouble holding the position that “technology serves as direct extensions of human functioning by engaging in a symbiotic relationship with human limbs, senses, or other body parts.”¹⁷⁰ In this way, we relate to technological objects in our lives not just by relying on devices to save us time, energy, and effort in order to accomplish an activity. Rather, technological objects are part of our contemporary outlook on maintaining and fostering human health and flourishing.

3.3.2 Technology as Knowledge

Mitcham contends that another general perspective on technology conceptualizes it in epistemic terms. Technology as knowledge centers on practical and concrete know-how derived and expanded through scientific research. In this perspective, scientific research toward technological advancement aims to elevate and refine human understanding to its consummate form. That form is scientific knowledge. Scientific knowledge is more accepted as the arbiter of truth than any other kind of knowledge.¹⁷¹ It is respected for its attempts to solve vital questions about the universe, the origins of life, and the human being’s place in the cosmos.

Science develops in the form of theoretical explanations that attempt to rationally explain the nature of cause and effect relationships. Scientific investigation attempts to utilize universally sound methods of human inquiry into empirical data. Still, science is a dynamic process. New possibilities of inquiry into experience surface through its own process of inquiry. This means

¹⁶⁹ John Weckert, "Lilliputian Computer Ethics," *Metaphilosophy* 33, no. 3 (2002): 366-370.

¹⁷⁰ Philip Brey, "Prosthetics," in *Encyclopedia of Science, Technology, and Ethics*, ed. Carl Mitcham (Detroit, MI: MacMillan Press, 2005), 1527.

¹⁷¹ Mitcham, 249.

that scientific methods can be improved, changed, or altered in light of verifiable experimentation. Science advances human knowledge by identifying what can be verified through empirical observation. The process can unfold in a linear way producing new explanations based on what is logically entailed by older explanations. However, the scientific process of gaining knowledge can be far messier utilizing a more trial and error based approach. Whatever its process, scientific fields have grown exponentially over the past centuries by striving to follow or produce a methodologically sound way to reproduce observable truths.

Technology acquires data vis-à-vis scientific methods and creates new products from that knowledge. In the main, it is through technology that scientific ingenuity is considered a dominant actor in everyday life. Scientists use ever more sophisticated technology to further scientific knowledge and in doing so encourage the development of tools as both vehicles and end products of scientific research. Some of the same tools that are developed in order to facilitate more precise research methods and measurements become household products. Consider the personal computer or the calculator. The origins of these products can be found in the endeavors of scientists and engineers working to increase the chances of solving complicated mathematical problems. The domain of science generates knowledge concerning reality and technology applies this knowledge to produce things in reality.

Another way of viewing technology as knowledge is considering it as an applied science. Technology relies on scientific findings reproduced as technical maxims or rules of operations. Mitcham explains this idea with the example of the knowledge that informs the rice cooker. The rules of rice cooking could be stated as follows, "To cook rice, bring water to a boil, add one-half volume of rice, and simmer for twenty minutes."¹⁷² Such a recipe has become a fundamental law for cooking rice and because of this finding it has become possible to automate the process. The

¹⁷² Ibid., 193.

electronic rice cooker has reproduced the law-like conditions of cooking rice. Yet, the use of the electronic rice cooker does not require the knowledge of the process it uses. One need only know how to pour out a measure of water and rice and then push a button. This could allow the individual to focus on other things, such as her stir-fry or her book report. Technological development captures knowledge accumulated by human beings into a constructed device that the whole of society could potentially use.

3.3.3 Technology as Activity and Volition

There are two other aspects of technology that can be explained together to guide our view of technology as a manifestation of human will and activity. Mitcham explains that technology turns the activities of human life into a commodity. Making a meal can be made easier, faster, and more economically proficient. The same could be said for a lot of human activities and this includes travelling and communicating. For Mitcham, technological advancement is prefaced on the increase in one or more of the following aspects of human activity: speed, productivity, efficiency and interconnectedness. Technological production and development is a very utility based human activity and is guided by pragmatic reasoning toward getting specific jobs done.

Although technology is meant to reproduce human activity for the sake of human goals, technology does not always remain a tool to be controlled. Technological advancements and systems change the nature of human behavior. That is, human thought and action are reordered to utilize tools to perform tasks. At times these tools are so sophisticated that individuals need to take university degrees to learn how to use them. It is a very human tendency to change one's actions to suit new tools. In the contemporary world, it is essential to expect and evolve with the

changing technological tides. Consequently, technology reproduces human activity, but it also alters human behavior.

Mitcham identifies crafting, inventing, designing, manufacturing, working, operating, and maintaining as basic types of “behavioral engagements” in technology that invariably call us to alter our activities. Relating to technology as activity leads to questions about the role of human volition in this activity. Do we control technology or does technology control us? This question is integrally bound up in the very use of technology. According to Mitcham, technological activity “is that pivotal event in which knowledge and volition unite to bring artifacts into existence or to use them; it is likewise the occasion for artifacts themselves to influence the mind and will.”¹⁷³ Here, Mitcham’s words shed some light on Cardinal Collins’ reticence about information technology as having the potential to “enslave” us. Certainly, technology can and does alter the will and activities of people. But, Mitcham is portraying a very neutral view of technology as a site of negotiation between human volition and technological environment. It is possible for the person to use technology without losing his sense of purpose or his understanding of his obligations to community. Online virtual communities fit these definitions of technology as activity and volition. In other words, the knowledge of the internet combined with the will to use it to engage in an online community is an activity that helps connect people. As such, online virtual communities can be defined as a form of activity that unites with our knowledge and volition.

¹⁷³ Ibid., 209.

3.3.4 Technology as Altering Human Community

The picture of technology's role in human life presented thus far could be construed as neutral, if not beneficial, for human life in community. However, with the introduction of human will, we can no longer ignore the fact that technology can be used to cause harm and even devastation to communities. For each use of technology there is an individual or group's intention behind it. For example, if the fundamental motivation of a person is to gain profit, then advancements in computer applications can be used toward cost-benefit and statistical-technical analyses. In any case, technology can serve the will of the individual as long as the person understands how it works or can be used. And the use of that technology does not necessitate that the person will use it for the common good, personal benefit or even oppression. Moreover, technological advancement does not ensure that human beings will use these advancements for any one goal and this includes the original intention of the researcher(s) and/or inventor(s). A researcher, for example, can figure out how to split the atom and an engineer could create the conditions for its possibility. This does not mean such technology has to be used in any one way or at all. It was human intention that ultimately allowed the devastation of Hiroshima with the use of the atom bomb.

Technology can also produce effects well beyond any individual or group's intent. Lewis Mumford gives the example of the mechanical clock to show how simple artifacts can universally alter the behavior of human beings.¹⁷⁵ The mechanical clock was traditionally used in 16th century monasteries to ensure periodic worship. Once the clock was integrated into non-monastic community it shook the foundations of social life. The more precise and mechanized clock required human beings to adapt to its time. Specifically, the independent standard account

¹⁷⁵ Mitcham, 183.

of time enabled people to keep the same track of time and this led to the emergence of greater order in scheduling activities in society. The technology of the mechanized clock led to a new reconfiguration of reality by superimposing a temporal grid on top of human life and cultural activity. It is difficult to imagine how society would function without this technology today given the schedules of universities, corporations, the stock market and seemingly every other institution in which one could participate.

The internet and the devices that enable us to communicate online may very well be technology that alters our experience of reality. Just as the mechanized clock changed the way we organized ourselves, information technology has altered the way we communicate. These new communication devices have already altered the way we experience togetherness despite geographical distance. Online communities have sprouted everywhere on the internet. One's interests or passions are likely to have a group of people online participating in discussing them and organizing real world community events around them. The possibilities of information technology changing the way we communicate and come together as community seem endless. In the face of these possibilities, one can be filled with optimism or dread. The internet has already caused a radical shift in how we acquire news or even books. With such a shift in how we attain knowledge, there are pros and cons. Some would extol the virtues of the internet's speed and paperless presence and others would lament at the decay of the print medium. But, no matter one's attitudes to the possibilities of the internet, the fact is that it remains a technological achievement. The internet is capable of being used in whatever way persons with the know-how will it to be used, which includes using it to build sites of Christian community.

Conclusion to Chapter 3: Technology as Medium for Christian Community

The intention of the above section and of chapter three of this thesis is to arrive at educated guesses of ways virtual church-goers can relate to technology. In particular, I want to suggest ways of viewing internet technology so as to mitigate virtual church participants' responses of isolation and privatization of faith. These were the dangers of the virtual Church brought up by the Cardinal Collins and three other theologians at the beginning of this chapter. The virtual church can be viewed as a tool that allows participants to engage in Christian fellowship. If members of the Catholic Church come together in community online, then the way the members of the community relate to internet technology could be clearly spelled out to foster healthy community. Depending on the will of persons, the internet is a tool that can be used as an object, as a site of knowledge and as an activity. In what follows, I will suggest ways that the virtual church goer could relate to technology as object, knowledge and activity in a way that could promote Christian community rather than isolation or privatization.

As has been stated, technology is the production of tools to be used to achieve certain goals. If the goal of a virtual church is to foster Christian community, then the technology that makes a virtual church possible is a tool for community. For example, a person using a personal computer can access a virtual Mass from her desk in her home. If the church celebrating the Mass clearly defines the technology that makes it possible as a tool for Christian community then the church goer is more likely to actively engage toward this end. That is, the personal computer at her desk is not a means to just fulfill her Sunday obligation or even her curiosity. The point of the virtual Mass is community. Every aspect of the technology used, including speakers and microphones, allows the person to extend her human capacities to participate in the virtual Mass. The virtual Mass makes it possible for people to be in a church community that would otherwise

not be able to participate at all. Still, the computer and any other technology used to participate in a virtual church service does not make the Mass possible, people make the Mass possible.

The virtual church goer can also relate to the online platform as a site of knowledge toward understanding Christian community. As we saw with the rice cooker, technology can encapsulate human knowing so that the user does not necessarily have to know the processes by which the technology is made possible. This knowledge capture is not necessarily positive or negative. Technology such as the ruler is used without the engineer having known how the measurements were created and organized. This does not stop the engineer from constructing a functional building or device. However, the danger of knowledge capture through technology is that one may never discover that which the device is meant to replicate. In the case of the virtual Mass, it is possible that the participants might not learn for themselves all of the bodily gestures and behaviors that go into communal worship and togetherness. One might not experience for herself the reception of the bread and wine or shaking another person's hand through the sign of peace. Both of these activities can be replicated via graphics and video, but, this representation is not the same as participating in the activity. Hence, a virtual church service could become a place where people could attend a Mass without ever learning the significance of the processes that go into the physical Mass.

A virtual Mass cannot replace the physical activity of attending a real world Mass in terms of fostering community. Yet, a virtual Mass can be viewed as a substitute activity for those who want to engage in Christian community, but, who cannot because the activity of a physical Mass is impossible for them. In this case, the activity of attending a virtual Mass is a way of substituting for the physical. Of course, one ought to be careful not to confuse the activities of the virtual world as fulfilling the same function in the physical world. For example, the physical

reception of the bread can be simulated in online platforms, but, this is not the same as the act of receiving the bread from the priest celebrating the Mass. To confuse the representation with the real reception would be doctrinally inaccurate and even an affront to Christian communion. The activities of the virtual Mass can only be appropriately viewed as representations of what is possible if one were to participate in a real world Mass.

I would suggest that viewing the virtual Mass as a tool for fostering community without physical presence is possible without encouraging isolation or the privatization of faith. This is because the end goal is not the virtual Mass, but rather, it is the real world Mass. As a tool, the virtual Mass constrains Christian community to representations of fellowship. As representations, the activities performed in the virtual service can teach the users about Christian services and what it could be like to participate with all of oneself. Depending on the will of the participant, these representations can be viewed as a way to orient oneself to the Christian community in a more public way than individual prayer. As a substitute for communal participation, the virtual Mass cannot be seen as a replacement, but, a virtual church celebration should not be seen as a valueless or arbitrary activity. Rather, participation of the user could be seen as a representation or sign of his commitment to Christian community when this is not possible. In other words, participation in a virtual Mass could become a sign of solidarity with those who cannot attend physical masses as well as a sign of hope for a future when we all can join together as an embodied community.

Conclusion

The goal of this study was to illustrate the feasibility of a position on virtual Mass that is both in line with the Vatican's position and asserts the real educational and community-building value of the virtual service. In chapter one, I introduced the general position of the Roman Catholic Church on the role of technology in the documents *Gaudium et Spes*. Although this document expresses concern about the use of technology for domination and avoiding interpersonal contact, it also views advancements in technology as beneficial to the human community and the Church. The second Vatican document introduced was "The Church and the Internet" produced under the auspices of the Pontifical Council of Social Communications. This document was interpreted as providing the objections the Church has regarding the possibility of a virtual Mass.

The first objection was explored in chapter two where we discussed the role of transubstantiation in explaining the presence of Christ in the Eucharist. We noted many objections to the adequacy of the doctrine of transubstantiation's explanation of the material transformation of the bread and wine into body and blood. Despite these objections, we observed that theologians tend not to object to the idea that there is the real presence of Christ in the celebration of the Eucharist. The doctrine of transubstantiation might be flawed as an explanation of material transformation of the bread and wine. Thus, we inquired into the possibility that the bread and wine in the virtual Mass did not necessarily have to be the same bread and wine blessed at the physical altar or shared among the congregants. We saw that there were changes to the Mass that were informed by the accessibility needs of lay men and women. Celebrating the Eucharist online would serve to aid those persons who cannot attend a real world Mass. Even so, it was concluded, the Church must maintain that the embodied reception of the bread and wine is

a necessary component of the Eucharistic Mass. Without such a stance on embodied reception we are undermining the tradition of the Last Supper and more drastically, we denigrate our bodily nature and the significance of the incarnation.

The second objection to the virtual Mass relates to the possibility of fostering interpersonal community and this was treated in the third chapter. Here, we assumed that the reception of the Eucharist is impossible online, but, we questioned whether it is the case that virtual reality and communication technology necessarily leads to isolation and the privatization of faith. According to Cardinal Collins and other theologians from various denominations, alienation and privatization are the two biggest risks of virtual Mass for the fostering of interpersonal community. Despite the positions of the Church and theological reflection, Christians are influenced by social change brought about by new technology. We saw that this was the case using examples from Morten T. Hojsgaard. Persons are already using the internet to gain information and communicate about religion as well as to create new religions. For Graham Ward, the virtualization of society and religion is cause for alarm to theology. Theologians must be willing to contend with the diminishing sense that interpersonal community is important. Theologians also must provide witness that there is a larger narrative in which all persons are called to participate. I argued that the virtual Mass could be viewed as a tool that does allow people to enter into a community even if it is not embodied.

My position at the end of this study is that the virtual Mass can be seen as a public prayer for future transformation of the conditions that make participating in the real world Mass impossible or extremely difficult. This position is also in line with liberation theology's notion of the preferential option for the poor. According to Gustavo Gutierrez, Christians should seek to be

in solidarity with those in need.¹⁷⁶ The sharing of the Eucharist could be seen as a sign of this solidarity with the one who suffered to bring about the news of the Kingdom of God. This Kingdom is one that, while not existing in time, can be worked toward when those who are filled with God's love act out of that love to stand with others who are in need of dignity, community and help.

The point of Eucharistic fellowship is indeterminable in its multiplicity of meanings and gifts. Yet, at least one way of understanding Eucharistic fellowship is the entrance in a community that loves and appreciates the actions of God as a liberator and as a giver of life.

Gutierrez states:

This life we celebrate in the Eucharist, the first duty of the ecclesial community. In sharing bread, we remember the love and trust of Jesus who was taken to His death, and the confirmation of His mission towards the poor through the resurrection. The breaking of bread is both the point of departure and the destination of the Christian community. This act represents the profound communion with human suffering caused in many cases by the lack of bread, and it is the recognition, in joy, of the Resurrected Jesus who gives life and lifts the hopes of the people brought together by his acts and his word.¹⁷⁷

From this perspective, the Eucharist is the bread of life that is offered to all. At times and at different locations, one cannot accept the bread within an embodied community. However, the God of hope and life is what each Christian tries to emulate. If we do follow this example, it is suitable for one to accept those who can only access the community through an online platform. These persons can be considered poor in an embodied community. In so far as we view these persons as the poor that God so wants us to love and help, then we can in good conscience accept their gesture of communal participation. We can view them each week and they can become a sign for us of the work that still needs to be done for the Kingdom of God.

¹⁷⁶ Gustavo Gutiérrez, "The Task and Content of Liberation Theology," in *The Cambridge Companion to Liberation Theology*, ed. Christopher Rowland (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 25-26.

¹⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, 37.

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Curriculum Vitae

Andrew Labenek

Education and Training

Title	Institution	Description	Start—End
<i>M.A.</i>	Western University	Major in Ethics and Theology	09/2011- 06/2014
<i>D.F.</i>	Université du Québec à Trois-Rivières	Diplôme de Français	05/2010- 07/2010
<i>B.A.</i>	Université Saint-Paul	Baccalauréat ès arts avec majeure en éthique (Minor in Computer Science & Economics)	09/2008 - 05/2011

Work Experience

Title	Dept./Office, Organization/Company (Location)	Description	Start—End
Workplace Equity Program Business Intelligence Technologies Specialist	Programme du travail, Gouvernement du Canada (Gatineau, QC)	Addressed client's questions and inquiries concerning the workplace equity program. Ensured that companies and organizations strive to meet labor standards for hiring minorities. Checked and verified the integrity of client submissions and reported data back to the labor program administrator.	09/2013- 01/2014
Intranet Policy Administrator	Programme du travail, Gouvernement du Canada (Gatineau, QC)	Optimized policies and intranet changes for the Occupational, Health and Safety division. Upgraded entire intranet database and responsible for backups.	12/2010- 09/2011
Internet Security Specialist	Albatross Computer Security (Gatineau, QC)	Performed Ethical Hacking using in-depth knowledge of tools & techniques to ensure that systems were properly secured from malicious threats cyber threats.	09/2007- 09/2008
Ultraplay Program Manager and Instructor	City Wide Sports, City of Ottawa (Ottawa, ON)	Educated unprivileged and disabled youth about sports, health and well-being throughout Ottawa and surrounding areas in low-income communities.	04/2009- 02/2011

Research, Publications and other Scholarly Activities

Title/Header	Dept./Office, Org./Co. or Lead Authors	Description or Article Title	Start—End
Academic Researcher for theology and	Department of Theology (London, Ontario)	Organized, Presented and Coordinated two conferences between professors, students, and institutes surrounding issues relating theology, philosophy, ageism and economics.	09/2011- 09/2012

philosophy conferences			
Biochemical and Hematologic Manifestations of Gastric Intrinsic Factor (GIF) Deficiency	Ferrand A., Napier, M., Rugar, C.A., Al-Dirbashi., O.Y., Chakraborty, P., Siu, V.M., Prasad, C. & Labenek, A.W.	Congenital intrinsic factor deficiency (IFD) is a rare disorder of B12 metabolism. Gastric intrinsic factor (GIF) is produced by the parietal cells of the stomach and transports vitamin B12 into the terminal ileum IFD is different from adulthood acquired cobalamin deficiencies associated with atrophic gastritis and antibodies against GIF. - Provided statistical, technical and data verification for this publication	Presented in Sherbrooke, QC. Published at the Stevens Health Science Library (2013)
Thinking through Bitcoin in the Information Age Revolution: Piracy, Security, and e-Business	Labenek, A.A & Labenek, A.W.	Bitcoin is a revolutionary technical advancement that bridges economics, business, theology and philosophy. What does this new form or 'money' mean for piracy, security and business? - Research and submitted a presentation on Bitcoin and the information age.	Accepted and Presented in San Jose, California (2013)

Service to Community

Title	Organization (Location)	Description	Start—End
Volunteer	Ronald McDonald House (London, Ontario)	Organized meals, activities and social events for families staying the Ronald McDonald House. Assisted in cleaning and cooking.	09/2012-12/2012
Volunteer	Almonte General Hospital & Centre de Santé et de Services Sociaux du Pontiac (Almonte, ON & Shawville, QC)	Assisted and Volunteered for Dr. John King at his private clinic, at General Hospital in the small rural town of Almonte, ON and the Centre hospitalier du Pontiac in Shawville, QC	09/2000-09/2011
Earthquake Relief Volunteer	Red Crescent Society of the Islamic Republic of Iran (Ahar, Iran)	Assembled temporary clinics & shelters. Assisted in the search and rescue efforts. Distributed basic survival necessities to victims.	08/2012-08/2012
Spiritual Counselor Volunteer	Université Saint-Paul (Ottawa)	Aided Counselors. Listened to and helped individuals in distress. Advised and guided individuals through important life decisions.	09/2008-09/2009

Awards and Honours

Title	Organization (Location)	Date(s)	Description
Scholarship UWO	Ontario Graduate Scholarship (London, ON)	August 2011	Scholarship is funded by the OGS.
Volunteering Award	Red Crescent Society (Iran)	August 2012	Outstanding Volunteer Award

Skills and Languages

Title	Description	Years of experience
French	Fluent in both oral and written	20 years
English	Fluent in both oral and written	20 years
Polish	Fluent in both oral and written	27 years

Other Extracurricular Activities

Title	Description	Quantification
Environmental Sustainability Project	Environmental educator in Gatineau, QC and other rural areas in QC. Implemented recycling programs, tree planting, and stream cleanup.	09/2005- 05/2010
Founder, Player and Head Coach of Varsity Tennis Team	Started Carleton's first varsity tennis team in over 30 years. Coached against Harvard and Princeton and at the international level.	09/2003- 04/2007
Université Saint-Paul	Provided computer and technological support to patrons of the Jean- Léon Allie Library in Ottawa, ON.	09/2008- 09/2009
Health Educator	Individual teaching activity: Health educator and trainer for youths in distress at the YMCA.	2008/09- 2009/09