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Active Participation in the Liturgy in a Digital World. A proposal of criteria for discernment

Aktywne uczestnictwo w liturgii w cyfrowym świecie. Propozycja kryteriów rozeznawania

ABSTRACT

This article aims to shed new biblical and patristic light on the question of active participation in the liturgy in the context of new technologies. Beginning with the nature of God's revelation, the text presents its bodily form as manifested in Jesus Christ. The nature of the liturgical act, the body of which is an indispensable element, is also presented in this light. Following this criterion of the bodily form of revelation and celebration, the author presents an ancient struggle with docetism, which did not recognize the reality of the incarnation and presupposed the apparent appearance of the Son of God. Following this train of thought, the author asks whether the recognition of the virtual form of participation in the liturgy does not lead to virtual salvation, and thus are we not dealing with a hidden form of neo-docetism?

KEYWORDS:

Jesus Christ, Liturgy, celebration, participation, Internet, media, body, docetism

ABSTRAKT

Niniejszy artykuł ma za cel rzucić nowe, biblijne i patrystyczne światło, na kwestię aktywnego uczestnictwa w liturgii w kontekście nowych technologii. Wychodząc od natury Bożego objawienia tekst przedstawia jego cielesną formę ukazaną w Jezusie Chrystusie. W takim świetle przedstawiona jest także natura aktu liturgicznego, którego ciało jest nieodzownym elementem. Podążając za tym kryterium cielesnej formy objawienia i celebracji, autor przedstawia starożytne zmagania z doketyzmem, który nie uznawał prawdziwości wcielenia i zakładał pozorne ukazanie się Syna Bożego. Idąc tym tokiem myślenia, autor stawia pytanie, czy uznawanie wirtualnej formy uczestnictwa w liturgii nie prowadzi do wirtualnego zbawienia i tym samym czy nie mamy do czynienia z ukrytą formą neo-doketyzmu?

SŁOWA KLUCZOWE:

Jezus Chrystus, liturgia, celebracja, uczestnictwo, Internet, media, ciało, doketyzm

INTRODUCTION

Different events of recent times, such as the Covid pandemic, have accelerated already well-developed technological progress. Its influence on the daily life of

people cannot exclude the field of faith and, as a consequence, the liturgical practice of the Church. Scientific debates concerning the matter have been taking place in different contexts, and the various proposals on its behalf have been presented in many publications. Thus, the argument gradually has become relevant. The question of using new technology nowadays is not only a theoretical discourse but rather it can be seen as a kind of pastoral service. It is because, as T. Berger asserts about digital worship, these practices are already shaping the live of faith of many believers and ignoring them is no longer an option[1]. The last significant expression of this research was the XII International Congress of Liturgy in Rome[2].

Without pretending to be exhaustive, this paper is an attempt to contribute to the scientific debate in the field. It aims to offer some criteria to discern the limits and opportunities of using the internet in the worship of the Church. Taking into account the last congress, the starting point is a kind of defining the field. Then, to accomplish the mentioned aim, the nature of divine revelation will be described. It allows drawing some theological conclusions about the nature of the liturgy. On that basis, some criteria for discernment will be presented.

DELIMITATION OF THE FIELD OF RESEARCH

The question in the exam can be described in the light of different aspects. Anthropology, history, and theology are the only examples that emerged in the aforementioned congress. Of course, undertaken arguments can be developed in much more different ways and it should be done. But looking for a criterion of discernment in the volume of information and perspectives, an insightful thought was offered by M. Tymister. In the presentation of the acts of the Congress he deemed: "Ultimately, the question must be answered as to how such different forms of online presence relate to the principles set out in the SC 48"[3]. The aforesaid number of the *Sacrosanctum Concilium* speaks about active participation in the Eucharist specifying its nature and qualities. Thus, the criterion for the active participation

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[1] T. Berger, @*Worship. Liturgical Practices in Digital Worlds*, London-New York, 2018, p. XI.
[2] Cf.D. Jurczak – O.-M. Sarr, M. Tymister (ed.), „*Virtual" Liturgy? Proceedings of the XII International Congress of Liturgy. Rome, Pontifical Athenaeum S. Anselmo – Pontifical Liturgical Institute 20–22 October 2021*, Roma 2022.
[3] M. Tymister, *Presentation* in: D. Jurczak – O.-M. Sarr, M. Tymister (ed), „*Virtual" Liturgy? Proceedings of the XII International Congress of Liturgy*, p. 27.

of the People of God in the mystery of Christ, realised through the rites and prayers, has been chosen as a keynote of this research.

Calling into question the matter of active participation in the liturgy further clarification must be done. Undertaking this issue I will not focus on abstract questions such as the necessity of the sacraments, mediation of grace or validity of celebrations. Following that train of thought, one would risk putting new technology in the centre with theoretical considerations of whether or not it can transmit God's grace. Consequently, while new technologies are appearing, one should always analyse their nature to evaluate them. It is not my intention to undermine this way of thinking. In certain situations, it can be suitable and useful. However, a more incisive point of view has been offered by J. R. Báracena, as he wrote: "The fallacy of the argument lies in asking whether God can or cannot give his grace through a digital medium, forgetting that a more sensible question would be to ask whether these celebrations are coherent or not with the logic of revelation, that is, with that historical modality with which God freely decided to save us. In other words, the problem is not a problem of grace but of form"[4]. The Christian faith asserts that God can bestow his grace as He wants and He is not tied to any conditions but it is also true that He has always chosen, and continues to choose a privileged way to meet and save his people. Thus, the question of the form seems to be more accurate in the matter of active participation in the liturgy in the digital context.

THE NATURE OF DIVINE REVELATION

Taking into consideration the form in which God wanted to reveal himself, without neglecting the whole history of salvation, one should focus on Jesus Christ in whom all this history finds his climax. According to the II Vatican Council, "the deepest truth about God and the salvation of man shines out for our sake in Christ, who is both the mediator and the fullness of all revelation" (*Dei Verbum* 2). Thus, his incarnation, death, and resurrection are the most meaningful deeds through which we can recognise the mystery of God. However, the incarnated Son of God

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[4] J.R Báracena, *Celebrare i sacramenti e sacramentali: tra materlialità e virtualità?* in: D. Jurczak – O.-M. Sarr, M. Tymister (ed), „*Virtual" Liturgy? Proceedings of the XII International Congress of Liturgy*, p. 61.

not only manifested the mystery of God but through his life he gave the most perfect worship to the Father. Again, the teaching of the last council asserts, quoting an ancient prayer, that "in Christ «the perfect achievement of our reconciliation came forth, and the fullness of divine worship was given to us»" (*Sacrosanctum Concilium* 5).

Thus, in the person of Jesus Christ, Word made flesh, true God and true man, whom "humanity, united with the person of the Word, was the instrument of our salvation" (*Sacrosanctum Concilium* 5), the Church finds not only the summit of divine revelation but also the pattern of her worship. If the bodily form of revelation connects the mystery of salvation with Christian worship, we should research its meaning more profoundly.

> Christian faith is not only a question of mind, as it would be a matter of some information or transmission of pure doctrine. Christian revelation, from the beginning, has consisted of a personal experience in which God wants to meet people humanly and offers them concrete, tangible love. The finest proof of this love was expressed in the sacrifice of the cross.

In order to understand more precisely the true core of salvation, expressed in corporal form, an excellent explanation was offered by G. Bonaccorso. This Italian scientist wrote: "God could very well have informed our mind of his message without resorting to any corporal support and, therefore, without taking on a body and senses. The issue is that the message consists precisely in the fact that God has taken on a body and senses. In other words, God does not save us because by being with us he tells us good news, but he saves us because he is with us"[5].

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[5] G. Bonaccorso, *L'uomo che celebra: il rito e i «sensi»*, "Rivista di Pastorale Liturgica" 2011 / 284 p. 5.

The insight of Bonaccorso touches on a very subtle theological conclusion regarding the nature of revelation that results from the way of divine acting. Christian faith is not only a question of mind, as it would be a matter of some information or transmission of pure doctrine. Christian revelation, from the beginning, has consisted of a personal experience in which God wants to meet people humanly and offers them concrete, tangible love. The finest proof of this love was expressed in the sacrifice of the cross. At the same time, Jesus accomplished the fullness of worship by offering himself to the Father and giving us the command to do the same in remembrance of him.

Thus, the mystery of saving revelation was accomplished not only with the use of the body but in the body, considered not only as a tool but rather the space and the object of salvation. One can reassume that Christ participated in the paschal mystery actively because he engaged the totality of his being, including his human body. Consequently, He died in the body, but He was raised from the dead in the body, too, transforming it.

CHRISTOLOGICAL FOUNDATION OF LITURGICAL WORSHIP

As it has been shown, the form in which God manifested himself is not an excessive and unnecessary cover but it constitutes the true content of revelation. That is why, to pass on to the liturgy, we cannot evade the form, but we must follow the same logic of incarnation. Since the liturgy, being an exercise of the priestly office of Jesus Christ, is performed by his Mystical Body (cf. *Sacrosanctum Concilium* 7), the matter of the body cannot be secondary. Even more, it is a matter of the body acting ritually "by signs perceptible to the senses" (*Sacrosanctum Concilium* 7) to accomplish the great work of our salvation.

What should not be underrated is that the work of our salvation is not merely meant to have an external effect. People do not celebrate the liturgy in order to produce something. Its goal consists in an individual transformation of each and every participant of the Liturgy in their body like Jesus was transformed in his body through the paschal mystery. It is no matter of a kind of tool used to transmit the grace of salvation or a kind of channel bestowing divine power. Talking about liturgy, it is, first of all, a spatio-temporal event in which one can take part to experience in a corporal way the dynamic of the paschal mystery of Christ. Following that, the salvation of people does not occur in the mind but rather in the

entire people acting ritually in their bodies. Of course, it does not mean that the mind is irrelevant. On the contrary, the integrity of a person consists of body and mind but as C.A. Doyle wrote: "if God is going to transform our minds (conversion) he must do so through the body. This is the role and the impact of the sacraments on the body."[6] In that light it can be well accepted what N. Mitchell claims in his remarkable book dedicated to the liturgy in the recent culture: "the body is the inescapable "site" of liturgical celebration, more primary and more essential than churches, sanctuaries, books, and furniture"[7]. Furthermore, being this "site" of liturgical celebration, at the same time, is the object that underwent the transforming grace of Christ.

Underlining the corporal dimension of the liturgy, I do not intend to limit it to a pure ritual, but rather to put in evidence its role in living the paschal faith[8]. In other words, the Church needs not only to believe but also to celebrate her faith and to promote Christians to take part in it. So, we are now led to the concept of participation.

When the *Sacrosanctum Concilium* talks about active participation in the mystery of Christ it portrays the integrated vision in which neither mind nor body is excluded. The Church desires that worshipers understand the mystery of faith through the rites and prayers and take part in it (cf. *Sacrosanctum Concilium* 48). Hence, ritual language is not considered as a curtain that should be disclosed or even changed to another one, without any impact on the mystery of God. The ritual form of celebration is indispensable, given that the *ritus et preces* are the mediation with which one accesses the mystery of faith. Consequently, the involvement in the liturgy "is not placed on the level of conceptual cognition, but on that of seeing, hearing, tasting, moving, touching, etc."[9].

Following the concept of understanding in the context of participation in the mystery of faith one should not stray into abstract ideas. The Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy lists concrete actions to which every member of the liturgical assembly is called to take part in the mystery of salvation. The first two of them are presented in passive voice giving place to God who offers his Word and the Bread

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[6] A. C. Doyle, *Embodied Liturgy: Virtual Reality and Liturgical Theology in Conversation*, New York 2021, p. 8.

[7] N.D. Mitchel, *Meeting Mystery*, New York 2006, p. 149.

[8] Cf. J.P. Silva, *Celebrare per entrare in dinamica pasquale della fede*, Credere Oggi 2015/208, p. 7–16.

[9] J.P. Silva, *Celebrare per entrare in dinamica pasquale della fede*, p. 9.

of life. Even in these two first divine actions people have to engage their body, given that neither being formed by the Word of God nor being nourished at the table of the Lord's body are impossible without bodily presence. Moreover, people are called to give thanks that, again, is expressed by bodily activity of offering the Immaculate Victim and themselves in the view of the final fruit of celebration that is the perfect union with God and with each other (cf. *Sacrosanctum Concilium* 48).

As one can see the magisterial text translates the mystery of salvation into the concreteness of human deeds. Because there are profoundly physical deeds, "a liturgical event's reality is never reducible to the information that we have. This is, in essence, the same logic of incarnation that requires a precarious and

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transient context, a spatio-temporal situation, a corporal tangibility"[10]. In the light of the text, understanding is an experience that engages the whole person. One could compare it to a dance. One cannot understand the joy of it only by intellective agreement but by full immersion in the experience, listening to the music, following the rhythm and performing prescribed steps.

PATRISTIC INSPIRATION FOR THE RECENT DEBATE

In the first two paragraphs, we try to draw some conclusions about the nature of revelation and its consequences for the understanding of the liturgical act and

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[10] A. Spadaro, *Cybertheology. Thinking Christianity in the era of the Internet*, New York 2014, p. 80.

active participation in it. The physical engagement of the entire person with their own body and mind was shown as a crucial feature of active participation.

The current discussion about the possibilities of participation in the liturgy through the digital media tries to extend the understanding of its bodily character. Of course, as M. Hayes claims "we cannot afford to not be immersed in the technology as a Church. The first point of reference is that Google has become the first place people search for anything"[11], but, given that "liturgical life in cyberspace is multifaceted, effervescent, perplexing, constantly shifting, and ceaselessly expanding"[12], there is not a matter of an easy approval of dismissal. The phenomenon of celebration in the digital world triggers the task of discernment which criterion should be the concept of the body.

The discussed question is not quite new in theology. The matter of bodily character of the revelation was challenged since the first centuries of Christianity and defended by the Father of the Church. The controversy, usually known as the dispute against docetism, formed a part of better-known struggles with gnostic heresy.

The first traces of the controversy can be found in the Bible, as St. John in his first letter affirmed: "Every spirit that acknowledges that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is from God" (1John 4,2). For the Apostle, the acceptance of the bodily presence of Christ is understood as the sign of orthodoxy[13]. A deeper understanding of John's claim has been offered by M.C. De Boer who underlined that Jesus' coming in flesh expresses not only the physical state but also the concreteness and tangibility of divine love expressed in a bodily way[14]. Moreover, he has shown a connection between Jesus' act of love with the ethical duty of a Christian, as he wrote: "this love - this life - gives the community its cohesion and identity in distinction from the world and is the perceptible mark of "true" spiritual fellowship

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[11] M. Hayes, *Googling God: The Religious Landscape of People in their 20s and 30s*, New York/Mahwah 2007, p. 144.

[12] T. Berger, *Participatio Actuosa in Cyberspace? Vatican II's Liturgical Vision in a Digital World*, "Worship" 2013 / 83, p. 534.

[13] Cf. A. Kubiś, *Walka o integralną wiarę chrystologiczną w Pierwszym Liście św. Jana w kontekście historii wspólnoty Janowej* in: M. Kowalski (ed.) *Od wiary Abrahama do wiary Kościoła*, Lublin 2014, p. 96–97.

[14] M.C. De Boer, *The death of Jesus Christ and his coming in the flesh*, "Novum Testamentum" 1991 / 33, p. 345.

with God, with his Son Jesus Christ, and with each other"[15]. In this way, the biblical dimension of the importance of the body has been presented.

Another trace regarding this thought can be found in the ancient dispute with gnostic heresy. It is well-reflected in the writings of St. Irenaeus. In his main work, *Adversus Haereses*[16] he offered some claims from the borderline of gnosis and docetism[17]. St. Irenaeus defends the reality of Jesus' body by using the proof of his ability to suffer. As he wrote: "the Word, who existed in the beginning with God, by whom all things were made (…) He became a man liable to suffering"[18]. This reality is not only a theological question but it brings existential conclusions regarding believers themselves. He wrote: "Those, therefore, who assert that He appeared putatively and was neither born in the flesh nor truly made man, are as yet under the old condemnation, holding out patronage to sin; for, by their showing, death has not been vanquished"[19]. Following the ancient theology, an example of which we have St. Irenaeus, one can reassume that the real body is the axis of the real salvation. In other words, while the apparent body can cause only apparent salvation, only the real body can bring real salvation. According to St. Irenaeus, the proof of the real body is its ability to suffer but, as noticed above by De Boer, it means the ability of love ready to offer himself in the real sacrifice. This is the fullness of the worship that Christ has given to his Church.

A PROPOSAL FOR CRITERIA FOR DISCERNMENT

Following these conclusions, a trigger question can be considered. If only the real body of Christ, proven by his ability to suffer, guaranteed the real salvation and its lack was considered the docetism heresy, would the lack of real participation through physical activities in the virtual worship not encourage neo-docetism?

If, as it has been shown, the participation reaches the summit into the offering of oneself in the act of love to build the communion with other brothers and sisters, is it realisable in a virtual way? Can one be fed with God's love virtually?

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[15] M.C. De Boer, *The death of Jesus Christ and his coming in the flesh*, 346.

[16] Irenaeus of Lyons, *Against Heresies, Book III* http://www.earlychristianwritings.com/text/irenaeus-book3.html

[17] Cf. Irenaeus of Lyons, *Against Heresies*, III,18,1–8.

[18] Irenaeus of Lyons, *Against Heresies*, III,18,1.

[19] Irenaeus of Lyons, *Against Heresies*, III,18,7.

Can one express love virtually? Can one offer one's own life being in front of one's screen or speaker? Finally, can one die virtually? The answer is not an easy approval or refusal, but it should not be ignored either. However, in search of an answer, one has to take into account the criteria coming from the Tradition. If St. Irenaeus affirmed that the real body of Christ guarantees real salvation, would not the virtual representation of the liturgical celebration bring virtual salvation? Of course, we cannot exclude all personal engagement through digital media, but some limits appear to be evident. If etymology of the ancient heresy indicates the verb δοκέω could be translated into English as *to appear*, *to seem*, looking at something that appears on the screen seems too far away from true participation.

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> is transformed".

In other words, active participation in the mystery of faith "is absolutely not reducible to its psychological components or to the stimulation into which the sense of participating in a video game is transformed"[20]. While real life is not a game that one can quit without physical consequences, real salvation cannot skip the corporal dimension mediated by the ritual acting. The same General Instruction of the Roman Missal pins this indicator down: "They [i.e. participants] should endeavour to make this clear by their deep religious sense and their charity toward brothers and sisters who participate with them in the same celebration" (GIMR 95). There is the first moment in which one can not only receive divine love but also express it to both brothers or sisters in the liturgical congregation.

In this way, one can better understand the claim of the Pontifical Council for Social Communication that in the document "The Church and Internet" asserted: "Virtual reality is no substitute for the Real Presence of Christ in the Eucharist,

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[20] A. Spadaro, *Cybertheology. Thinking Christianity in the era of the Internet*, New York 2014, p. 76.

the sacramental reality of the other sacraments, and shared worship in a flesh-and-blood human community. There are no sacraments on the internet"[21]. Even if the context for twenty years has changed and technology has been highly developed, pope Francis maintains this statement in a homily. He referenced the word of a bishop and said: "Be careful not to make the Church "viral," not to make the sacraments "viral," not to make the people of God "viral." The Church, the sacraments, and the people of God are concrete. It is true that at this moment we must relate with the Lord in this way, but we need to get out of the tunnel, not stay there. And this is the familiarity of the apostles: not Gnostic, not "viral," not selfish for each of them, but a concrete familiarity in the people"[22].

This statement does not nullify the usefulness of the media. On the one hand, the internet cannot be considered a medium of true participation in the liturgy, on the other hand, "The sacred liturgy does not exhaust the entire activity of the Church" (*Sacrosanctum Concilium* 9). Here a wide horizon opens which limits only within the creativity of men. I do not intend to explore this area but only claim that starting from the nature of revelation a theological discernment and distinction of different ways of participation is possible.

CONCLUSION

This paper has intended an attempt to research possible criteria of discernment in the area of active participation in the liturgy. The basic statement consisted of the intuition that the more adequate question is that which focuses on the form of revelation and, consequently, of the liturgical act. Thus, this matter was undertaken. It allowed us to draw conclusions that bodily character is a crucial feature to maintain. In light of that claim, the research reached for some ancient disputes to draw from their experience a criterion of discernment. Eventually, it was the concreteness of love. It can protect the Church against the subtle enemy of gnosticism

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[21] Pontifical Council For Social Communications The Church And Internet, 9. https://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/pontifical_councils/pccs/documents/rc_pc_pccs_doc_20020228_church-internet_en.html [access: 15.05.2022]

[22] Francis, Homily" Familiarity with the Lord" https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/cotidie/2020/documents/papa-francesco-cotidie_20200417_lafamiliarita-conil-signore.html [access: 15.05.2022]

or, precisely, a kind of docetism. In this way, the ancient struggles for the faith can contribute to the recent debates on the matter of faith in the digital world.

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Biogram

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