

## **Rethinking Sacramentology in the post-Covid 19 era: Contestations around the virtual Eucharist.**

By Blazio M. Manobo<sup>1</sup>

### **Abstract**

*Never in the history of the Christian faith, has there been a universal occurrence in the form of a pandemic capable of preventing all Christians throughout the world from celebrating the Easter mystery in the traditional way as has been experienced with the COVID-19 pandemic. Over the years, the Easter festivities have been used to celebrate the epitome of hope under the most desperate situations signifying the triumph of life over death. The abolishment of the 2020 Easter gatherings all over the world by the respective governments and churches, including Sunday/sabbath services and the Eucharistic celebration put to question the traditional personal contact characteristic of sacramental celebrations especially the sacrament of the Eucharist. This article interrogates the call by all Churches to suspend 2020 communal Easter celebrations in preference for live-streaming broadcastings. It interprets the April 2020 Easter experience as an invitation to reflect on new ways of theologizing sacraments in the post-COVID-19 eras without substituting the fundamental tenets that characterize the sacrament of the Eucharist. The article seeks to demonstrate that live streaming of the Eucharist celebration cannot be equated to the real-time community celebration of the eucharist.*

**Keywords:** sacraments, live streaming, COVID 19, Virtual Eucharist.

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## **1.0 Introduction**

Theological debates on Eucharistic contestations have preoccupied theologians since the beginning of the Christian faith. Classical theology of the early to middle age centuries is awash with discussions on the Eucharistic real presence, symbolism, and ministerial efficacy, among others. The 21<sup>st</sup>-century new theological challenge has emerged in the form of a 'virtual Eucharist' necessitated by the emergence of COVID-19, a Corona Virus that began in China's Wuhan province in December 2019. Never in the history of the Christian faith, has there been a universal hazard in the form of a pandemic capable of preventing congregants from celebrating the Easter mystery at a global level as has been experienced with COVID-19 that forced all religious gatherings and churches to close doors for an extended period of time. Traditional face-to-face interaction between the ministers and their congregants during the Eucharistic celebrations was suspended due to the infectious nature of the pandemic. Among the innovative alternative means of participating in the Eucharist celebrations, was the recourse to the use of technology by way of videoconferencing, live streaming, pre-recorded videos, and several other methods.

As the adage goes, necessity is the mother of inventions, disasters often present themselves as opportunities for renewal through the deepening and clarification of religious perceptions. Like the People of Israel during Babylonian deportation, the Church in 2020 found itself quarantined into the Babylon of COVID 19 where access to the 'temple' was no longer possible. For the people of Israel, the exile was interpreted to signify both a punishment and a blessing. That the Chosen nation was forced to leave the promised land with its Temple significance was seen as a demonstration of God's displeasure for Israel's disobedience (Farisani, 2008). However, it was during this period that the Hebrew alphabet was adopted replacing the Paleo-Hebrew alphabet. It emerged as the last climax of biblical prophecy in the person of Ezekiel. The vital role of the Torah in Jewish life arose as the authoritative text for the Jews. It was during the exile that Israel was transformed into an ethnoreligious group that could continue to exist and worship without a central Temple (Augustyn 2019). The same period saw the emergence of scribes and sages as Jewish leaders and the birth of the Jewish diaspora (Barton 1911). Today's Christians are like the people of Israel in Babylon calling for what Tilby (2020) calls

“discerning the body” (1 Cor 11:29) through a reflection on ‘what’ and ‘how’ it means to be the body of Christ.

This article revisits the theology of the Eucharist in light of the coronavirus-induced quarantine precedence. The purpose of the article is to interrogate the theology of the virtual Eucharist. It seeks to answer the question: What reflections can the churches make from the experience of COVID-19 virtual participatory live-streaming church services? The article responds to the call by Mickens (2020) for the churches to do some serious soul-searching about the theology of the Eucharist. It is not within the scope of this article to revisit in detail the theology of the Eucharistic ‘real presence’ despite its significance in defining the virtual Eucharist. However, reference to this theology will be alluded to. The focus of this article shall be limited to reflections on the innovative alternate liturgical practices of the Eucharistic celebrations which were initiated by the churches because of the pandemic.

Of significance in this discussion is the observation that the lockdown measures coincided with the traditional Easter celebrations which in 2020 were celebrated virtually. COVID 19 came not as a single event, a but process which shocked the whole world. However, reflections on the significance of virtual sacrament cannot be limited to the COVID 19 alone. Disasters like wars, civil and religious conflicts, and floods throughout the world have had similar impacts on the celebration of Eucharist where physical access to a minister or priest was compromised. Historically, the sacrament of Eucharist has undergone several transformations from its New Testament beginning prompting the call for further reflections to the liturgical practice.

### **1.1 Background to the problem**

According to the World Health Organization (2020), COVID-19 is an infectious disease caused by the coronavirus that was declared a pandemic in January 2020. This disease was unknown before the outbreak began in Wuhan, China, in December 2019. It was declared a Public Health Emergency of international concern on 30 January 2020. On the 11<sup>th</sup> of February 2020, the World Health Organization named the pandemic COVID-19. The disease affects people of all ages though old people have a higher risk of severe infection. The most common symptoms of COVID-19 are fever, dry cough, and tiredness (Kumar et al, 2020). This highly infectious disease spreads primarily from person to person through small droplets

from the nose or mouth, which are expelled when a person with COVID-19 coughs, sneezes, or speaks. During its peak, the disease had an estimated fatality rate of 1.4% (Ioannidis, 2020). By the end of June, the disease had infected about 7.5 million with half a million deaths in all the countries of the world except Antarctica. (Worldometer 2020). No vaccine for the pandemic had been found by the end of June.

Guided by the World Health Organization, countries adopted some mitigation measures most of which revolved around social distancing, physical distancing, lockdown to flatten the curve, and adoption of strict hygiene practices. National responses on social distancing incorporated instructions that individuals maintain social distance when in public, school closures, limitations on gatherings and business operations, and instructions to remain at home (Mohler et al. 2020). Limitation of gatherings included closing of schools, bars, gyms, football matches, religious gatherings, weddings, and funerals. Religious leaders supported national protocols on lockdown by advising their followers to follow official call by suspending all religious services and the Eucharist during the lockdown period. Pastors, priests, and other church leaders were asked to live-stream their services and to use innovative methods that adheres to social distancing call.

In the Vatican, the head of the Catholic Church, Pope Francis invited the Church all over the world to find innovative ways to celebrate 2020 Easter liturgy. Faced with the challenge of the ban of church gatherings due to the COVID 19 pandemic, the Catholic Pontiff presided over Ester liturgy without the physical presence of the faithful and called on the congregants to be present spiritually through radio, television or the internet (Vatican News 2020). The Vatican reported a surge in online visitors' views, followings, and comments during the Easter Triduum (14.5 million versus 1.5 million the previous year). As Gisotti, the vice editorial director of the Vatican media reported, "We have been struck by the many emails we have received, comments and posts on our social media from people, even agnostics and nonbelievers, who say they have been moved by the words and gestures of the Holy Father during this very difficult period" (Gisotti 2020).

In some churches, Christians were asked to send their pictures as substitutes for their physical presence. The Evangelical priest Waldemar Pytel celebrated the Easter

mystery in an empty church but with names and pictures of his congregants placed on seats and benches replacing their physical presence at the Evangelical Church of Peace in Swidnica, Poland. In some areas, drive-in services were held with congregants participating from the seclusion of their cars (Dickerman 2020). In the UK, the archbishop of Canterbury, Justin Welby, led a service on Sunday broadcast from an iPad in his kitchen, while his wife, Caroline, read a lesson joined online by Rose Hudson-Wilkin, the bishop of Dover, in a service that was broadcasted live on BBC Radio 4 and streamed on the Church of England's Facebook page and website (The Guardian 2020). In Zimbabwe, a pastor was interviewed during national television news on how he celebrated the 2020 Eucharistic amid COVID-19 lockdown. The pastor responded by saying, "I invited my congregants to tune to my Facebook live streaming service with their bread and wine before their computers or phones, where I consecrated them online" (ZBC-TV News 2020). To the pastor, this online consecration had the same effect as the physical celebrations.

These unique experiences have ignited the debate on whether the COVID 19 induced virtual celebration of the Eucharist has the same sacramental efficacy as the physical participation in the Eucharistic celebration. Christians who believe in physical participation have denied the efficacy of virtual celebrations. Others have embraced the virtual celebrations and hope that such practices would remain as it sometimes appears more convenient to attend Sunday services at home than going to the parish. It is the contention of this article that the COVID 19 experience challenges the efficacy and necessity of the physical participation that characterized the traditional understanding of the theology of the sacrament of the Eucharistic. This study problematizes the virtual celebration of the Eucharist and seeks to theologically analyze the several perceptions associated with the new challenge.

### **2.1 The Eucharist in historical perspective**

There are various debates on the theology of the innovative practices of celebrating the Eucharist in the post COVID-19 eras. Such debates are not new to the Christian tradition. There existed various contestations around the foundational liturgical practices of the sacrament of the Eucharist from the apostolic period (Page, 2010). Johnson *et al.* (2002) proposed that there must have been a multitude of contradictory Eucharistic practices among the early Church. The current form of celebrating the

Eucharist in its various forms but with a common shape is the result of a 'legitimate growth' that took place over a period (O'Donoghue 2011:81).

In the Old Testament, the Eucharist was prefigured in the narrative of the Passover lamb where God instructed Moses to sprinkle the blood of the lamb on the doorsteps of the Israelites, to spare them from death by an angel of God, "When I see the blood, I will pass over you, and no plague will befall you to destroy you when I strike the land of Egypt" (Exodus 12:13). The Israelites were saved by the blood of the lamb at *household* level. While salvation was meant for the Israelites as a nation, the saving ritual was undertaken as the local level of the household. In other words, the sacrifice of the Passover Lamb was efficacious, that is, it produced an effect on the lives of the Israelites (Heschmeyer 2011). Eating of the flesh of the lamb was part of the saving ritual commanded by God (Exodus 12:8-11). The ritual of Passover was effected at household level during the Exodus. This cannot undermine the ecclesial significance of the saving event as communal. It saves to identify the implications of personal faith within the community of the faithful.

There are no contestations that Jesus was the initiator of the sacrament of the Eucharist and that he gave the instruction to his disciples to 'eat his body and drink his blood' (Mathew 26:26) in order to gain everlasting live. It is worth noting that the Eucharistic accounts of the New Testament were shaped by challenges that each writer was facing. Paul declares to the Corinthians that Christ is 'our Passover lamb' (1 Corinthians 5:7). Faced with the challenge of the Corinthian church who had begun to use the Supper as means of displaying the disparity between social classes, Paul confirmed that the Eucharist was a meal of loving sacrifice and that the Church is the body of Christ. Thus, Paul confirms that the communion rite is a proclamation of Christ's death and true participation in his life. Participation is efficacious only if the participants had the same attitude that Christ had concerning the meal. Paul's emphasis on designating the Eucharistic elements as a "remembrance" of Christ and as a means to "proclaim the death of the Lord" drew his audience into a much deeper understanding of the rite. Paul's treatment of the Eucharist celebration gave credence to the idea that it is a meal of loving sacrifice that militates against the spirit of elitism, ethnicity, and economic differences (Mitchell 1998).

Mark's Eucharistic account is concerned about the contemporary abuses of the Eucharist especially the growing exclusion of gentiles from the Christian fellowship. This is why Jesus in Mark described the crowds as "sheep without a shepherd," as a way to illustrate that Jesus' mission is to the whole world; that the Eucharist is one bread for all people (Hyde 2014). The feeding stories in Mark and the Last Supper served to teach Mark's audience that Jews and gentiles alike are invited to participate in the Eucharist together in Christ, and to share in his sacrificial ministry. Matthew's accounts, unlike Mark's, did not take place among the gentiles suggesting his Christian bias that Christ was for the Jewish community. For Matthew, the Eucharist feeding is linked with inner healing and forgiveness. Luke speaks of forgiveness as well while at the same time insisting that Jesus is eager to eat with the sinner.

According to Hyde (2014), the significance of these accounts on the institution of the sacrament of the Eucharist is to highlight how each author in the New Testament was influenced by the liturgical traditions of his community without attempting to present the Eucharist in its 'pure form'. Central to all these narratives is the symbiotic unity between the Eucharist as a sacrament and the Institution of the Church. In his letter to Timothy, Paul says, the "Church is the pillar and ground of the truth" (1Tim 3:15). This has serious implications on innovative Eucharistic celebrations in the wake of COVID 19. The question that arises out of this dilemma is: To what extent can innovative Eucharistic celebrations be meaningfully adopted in situations where access to ministers of religion is physically impossible? What happens in situations where there is a positive correlation between lack of physical access to a minister or priest and lack of modern technological connectivity like during times of war, disasters, pandemics, conflicts, or those hindered by physical challenges or diseases? Can the consecrated species of Bread and Wine through a virtual celebration be deemed sufficient to confer the divine grace of the Body and Blood of Christ?

## **2.2 Conceptualizing the ‘Virtual’ Eucharist**

The online Oxford Dictionary of English define virtual as, “not physically existing as such but made by software to appear to do so.” Virtual Eucharist connotes a situation where a person can receive the body and blood of Christ (bread and wine) within the logic of the virtual world, over a network, and by use of a computerized electronic gadget. Several churches adopted live streaming the Eucharistic celebration during the COVID 19 shutdown as a participation in the Eucharistic celebrations. The significance of this change in traditional liturgical practices is found in the assessment of whether such practices can be theologically justified as sacramental or consider it as a mere spiritual participation. Several interpretations were given to the efficacy of this new phenomenon. One such interpretation can be found in the comment by the Catholic Pontifical Council of Social Communications. In the document *The Church and Internet*, the Council stated that, “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” (Foley 2002:6).

Other theologians are of the opinion that a virtual Eucharist can provide the faithful with the desired presence of Christ in the transubstantiated species and the symbolised community (Peters, 2020). Quoting Kathryn Reklis, who insisted that our theology must move beyond “seeing the real versus virtual divide in terms of embodied versus disembodied,” and that people must think more creatively about “the new permutations of digital and virtual technology informing our lives as particular ways we are embodied,” Thompson recommend that the church must “consider the potential power of real presence in virtual spaces to nourish and heal” (Thompson 2020). Two diverse perspectives will be reflected in the light of three major characteristics of the sacrament of Eucharist namely: communion, community, and collegiality herein designated as the 3Cs.

## **2.3 Community**

The Eucharist celebration is an act of the community. It is not a private devotion, but a gathering together of the people of God as a community of believers (Breen, 2012). Christ is present in the Eucharist in four modes of: the community celebrating, the



word being proclaimed, the priest presiding, and in the bread and wine (Pope Paul VI, 1963, no. 7). During the Eucharist celebration, Christians are united together as a body of Christ. Therefore, Slattery (2015) pointed out that in the Eucharist, we discover that, “we are not single individuals, struggling along in a vast sea of humanity. We are a community, a collection of people, sharing minds and hearts and desires. We share the struggles of a life of faith in God, faith for the sake of those who are lost, faith in humanity’s turn to God”.

## **2.4 Communion**

The Eucharist is a Holy Communion, a sacrament of unity (Archbishops’ Council, 2001). It is a gathering of the people of God around one bread and one cup as a sign of Christian unity. As a memorial of Jesus’ death and resurrection, the Eucharist is, “a sacrament of love, a sign of unity, a bond of charity, a Paschal banquet 'in which Christ is consumed, the mind is filled with grace, and a pledge of future glory is given to us” (Pope Paul VI, 1963, no. 47). It effects communion with God through Christ and with one another. As the Lutheran World Federation (2015:20) declared, “We do not become Christ in our participation in the meal; we become the body of Christ at the meal.”

## **2.5 Collegiality**

In the Eucharistic celebration, it is the Bishop who is mandated to officiate at the celebration the Eucharist (Moore, 2011). In most churches, the priest or presbyter celebrates with delegated authority from Bishop. The Bishops share in Christ’s teaching, governing and sanctifying office (John 2001). He is the pastor to the Pastor who is responsible for discerning and promoting unity among Christians (Anglican Admin 2015). For this reason, a priest or presbyter celebrating the Eucharist for the people does so on behalf of his bishop. This suggests that a Eucharistic celebration by a non-delegated minister outside the express mandate of the bishop invalidates the ceremony as a ‘Holy communion’.

## **3.0 Methodology**

This study used a qualitative approach. The research aimed to gather descriptive data on the theological practice of adopting the virtual Eucharistic celebration during the COVID 19 lockdown pandemic that many churches adopted since January 2020. The research tools used in the study were a combination of live observations of

online celebrations, interviews with key informants selected through a purposive sampling technique, and assessment of internet articles and videos. The target population were ministers of religion in mainline churches, academics, and the faithful. A total of 12 interviews were carried out with key informants. Data was analysed using a thematic approach. This was done concurrently with a literature review to compare the findings with another research. This research was carried out during the peak periods of the COVID-19 pandemic. Limitations of the research included; limited literature on electronic-sacramentology since this is a new phenomenon, inadequate face-to-face time with respondents as most of the interviews were online conversations and inadequate guidelines among most churches on how and what to do under such situations.

#### **4.0 Findings and discussions**

When COVID 19 pandemic struck the world forcing churches to close doors as a way of promoting social distancing measures, several strategies were implemented by Churches. Among these, the three most common strategies adopted included (1) to permit individual lay faithful to celebrate the Eucharist with their families, (2) to allow priests or ministers of religion to celebrate the Eucharist on behalf of the absent faithful, and (3) to allow priests or ministers of religion to celebrate the Eucharist virtually through live streaming, video conferencing and recorded the Eucharist celebration. These options will be assessed using the 3Cs of community, communion, and collegiality discussed above.

The proposal to authorize lay faithful as extra-ordinary ministers of the Eucharistic celebration during a time of crisis like the COVID 19 lockdown is based on the logic of the common priesthood of all the baptized. While not in competition but in cooperation with ordained priesthood, the common priesthood of the faithful is understood as the vocation of all baptised Christians, who are called to follow in Jesus's footsteps (SOURCE). Ministerial priesthood on the other hand is not appropriated by anyone on merit but conferred to some individuals as a ministry at the service of the common priesthood (CCC 1994:1547).

The proposal to authorize the lay faithful to celebrate the Eucharist can be theologically qualified under the elements of community and communion but fail the test of collegiality. The lay faithful can celebrate the Eucharist in the presence of the

local members of their community. They can celebrate as a family. Under such circumstances, their celebration qualifies and can be validated as a community celebration in accordance with the demands of Eucharistic celebration. The family members can represent the wider community as in the early Christian communities' practice of breaking of bread. For validity, their celebration must adopt and conform to the church's liturgical forms and rubrics as a demonstration of communion with their Church. The challenge posed by this proposal is how to theologially validate collegiality with the Church. The common priesthood of the faithful cannot substitute the rite of ordination (Coffey 1997). The ecclesial communion will be lost when all the faithful assume the role of ministers of the Eucharist. Following this argument, all Eucharistic celebrations administered by the faithful in the absence of the minister of religion during the COVID 19 pandemic lock down may not be validated as sacraments.

The second alternative commonly adopted during the pandemic was authorizing priests or ministers of religion to celebrate the Eucharist on behalf of the faithful. It is not the norm for priests or ministers of religion to celebrate the Eucharist alone. In some traditions and for a special reason, the priest or minister of religion can be permitted to celebrate the Eucharist on behalf of the faithful only with the permission of their bishop (Moore 2011). Some writers would prefer to call this an incomplete Eucharistic celebration (Reynon 2015). The community is said to be present in the sacrifice when the celebration is performed on their behalf. Communion with the body of Christ is present since the Eucharist by its very nature is a sacrifice of the church. Collegiality is present since as an ordained minister, he represents the Bishop and has the permission to celebrate the Eucharist from the bishop. While such celebrations could be theologially judged as valid for use during the COVID 19 pandemic lockdown, they are to some degree an imperfect means that can never substitute the real presence of the faithful (Davies 1983). The validity of the celebration cannot substitute the faithful's access to participating in the Eucharistic celebration and receiving the species in person.

The third common practice used during the COVID-19 lockdown was the adoption of virtual celebrations using live broadcasting, video conferencing and pre-recorded videos. This was by far the most common method of used in celebrating the

Eucharist during the COVID 19 pandemic. Under this option, two most common practices were observed; some churches allowed their congregants to bring their bread and wine before the computer or television so that as the priest or minister of religion consecrates virtually, their bread and wine is consecrated as well just as in physical Eucharistic celebration presence. In this way, they faithful are understood to have participated in the reception of the Eucharist. The second option that most churches adopted involved the Bishop, priest, or minister of religion asking the faithful to be spiritually present during the celebration and receive spiritual holy communion.

Theologically, a virtual Eucharistic celebration can be assumed to satisfy the qualification of the *community* since families could gather during the live celebrations in their homes. Live streaming Eucharistic celebrations can be likened to the liturgical practices of the first early Christian communities. Virtual celebration allows the faithful to celebrate in small communities gathered around a computer or a television. The community actively participates virtually despite the physical distance. Second, virtual Eucharist qualifies for *collegiality* as the celebrant is an ordained priest/presbyter celebrating on behalf of the bishop. What raises theological questions is whether there is real *communion* of one body, one cup during the virtual celebration.

First, as the faithful gather on the table of the lord, they partake of the one body, one cup of Christ (O'Loughlin, 2005). The bread is broken and shared as a sign of communion. Communion comes from sharing together on the table of the Lord which is lost when each family brings their own bread and wine (Labenek 2014). The unity of the body of Christ is reflected in the sharing of the same bread that is broken symbolising partaking in the unity of the body of Christ (The Bishop's Council, 2001). Communities have different elements they call bread and wine, and this has implications on the nature of the Eucharistic species that will be brought to the table of the Lord for consecration. During a virtual Eucharistic celebration, the faithful will not be eating from the same table of the Lord. The unity that comes from sharing in the one body of Christ may be lost when each family presents its own bread and wine which will not be shared by others (Labenek 2014). It then becomes an essentially private act as the bread is not truly broken because it was never truly united, and so the sacrifice of the cross is not set forth in their midst (Tilby 2020). As

the Didache teaches, the Eucharist is the grains scattered in the field which are turned into a single loaf of bread (Jefford 2015).

Secondly, there is the question of physicality. There is a physical character inherent in sacraments (Robinson-Neal 2008). Virtual gatherings through zoom or teleconferencing may not qualify as a real gathering of the people of God. As people gather in their homes to receive bread and wine consecrated virtually, they do so in the absence of physical reception of the Eucharist from the consecrating minister. Sacraments are qualified by form and matter. The form being the words of consecration while the matter being the Eucharistic species of bread and wine. Physicality refers to matter which in the virtual Eucharist cannot be shared between the priest and the faithful. In physicality, the “breaking the bread, smelling the wine, and tasting each is both a physiological and typological experience of God’s gracious provision; just as the bread and the wine brings nourishment and refreshment, so also Christ Jesus enters our lives to nourish and refresh us” (Neal 2006). In this context, Barnard et al. (2014:139) argued in support of physicality in sacraments by noting that “to participate in liturgical ritual is to participate bodily”. Virtual Eucharist has limited active liturgical participation.

Third, the virtual Eucharist has an element of exclusivity. Virtual Eucharist is a preserve of the middle and upper class with access to modern technology and the resources to sustain their functioning (Brittain 2020). In the African continent, most of the faithful reside in rural areas where communication technology is scarce while those privileged enough to possess the gadgets face the challenge of limited and unstable network access. Freedom and access to the virtual Eucharist celebration belongs to those individuals who own such gadgets (Reid 1999). What it means is that live streaming benefits the societal elites while depriving the poor faithful access to the sacrament. Virtual Eucharist creates a structural problem that discriminates the people based on their status. This is different from people who fail to access Eucharistic celebration because of distance or physical challenges since with assistance, they are free to participate. Eucharistic celebrations should be open to anyone willing to participate which may not be possible when using teleconferencing and live streaming.

Fourth, the priest/presbyter as the representative of the bishop should be able to exercise some form of custodianship of the sacrament (Peter 2020). Sacraments are sacred signs that confer grace (Davison, 2013). Virtual Eucharist does not provide opportunity for the priest to control what happens after the consecration. Nobody knows what the congregants will do with the consecrated bread and wine after The Eucharist. In normal circumstances, the body and blood of Christ are consumed during the Eucharistic celebration. Virtual Eucharist provides opportunities for the abuse of the sacraments. The priest/presbyter as the custodian of the sacrament has no control on what is in front of the computer and what else is going on inside the same computer that is being used for Eucharistic celebration. For example, the priest cannot monitor the ingredients used in the homemade bread and wine. While liberal theologians (Dalzel 2013) may dismiss this as immaterial, there is need for some uniformity in what can be considered acceptable standards for bread and wine to be used for Eucharistic celebration.

Fifth, there is a question of whether live streaming is real-time 'live' event. While this is a scientific question, there seem to be an element of the *past* in every live streaming. According to Peter (2020), the words of consecration beamed from the central church must move through a medium to reach the congregant. That fraction of a second, has an element of being historical. Hence, every live streaming is an historical event no better than recorded celebration. According to a decree by the *Catholic Congregation for Divine Worship and the Discipline of the Sacraments* of 25 March 2020 (Roman Curia 2020), the episcopal conferences were advised that the use of live telematic broadcasts and not recorded can be of help. However, the letter did not specify whether such live telematic broadcasts have the same sacramental effect as the Eucharist with the community. It is the contention of this study that there is need for further investigations on whether live broadcasting Eucharistic celebrations should not be evaluated in the context of recorded celebrations.

Sixth, virtual sacraments militate against the communal nature of the body of Christ. While it can be argued that the lock downs were a product of a pandemic where churches had no options, virtual celebrations have the potential to promote individualism. While the church has encouraged the use of digital media in social communications, human communication through interpersonal and group

communication is crucial to human existence (Dyikuk 2017). The same concern is raised by Nilles (2012) where he asserts that advocating for a sacred space on the internet threaten basic human communication and interaction. By its nature, social media communication is often a private affair, the sense of real face to face communication appears endangered in the Virtual Eucharist. Such practices can fuel heterodoxy ideologies such as subjectivity and relativism (Garza 2010).

## **5.0 Conclusion**

This research has noted that the theology of the Common Priesthood of the faithful cannot be used to address the challenges posed by virtual Eucharist as ordination is essential to the breaking of bread. Appointment as minister of sacraments has biblical and historical foundation. In the book of Acts of the Apostle, the apostles had to replace Judas as the 12<sup>th</sup> apostle through a ritual of 'ordination' (Acts 1:21-26). The research has demonstrated the grey areas under which the virtual Eucharist cannot be considered a proper Eucharistic ritual even though it has some important spiritual significance. The research acknowledges that several Churches have been using virtual celebrations prior to COVID-19 pandemic lockdown as efficacious and gracious. It is the observation of this study that other churches have remained sceptical and traditional in their approach to the virtual celebration of the sacrament of the Eucharist. This scepticism does not signify a denial of the significance of virtual celebration as they all adopted it during the COVID 19 pandemic Lockdown.

Official communications from most churches on the theology of the virtual communion suggest that a virtual Eucharistic celebration can never replace the physical participation in the real community (Robinson-Neal, 2008). Under the circumstance like the COVID 19 pandemic lockdown, a virtual Eucharist provides the best alternative for the spiritual nourishment of the faithful and helps to raise their spiritual commitment to Christ in communion with the Church (Labuschagne 2014). By stating this fact of faith, the Churches are not overlooking the fact that God's grace is unlimited, and no ritual has a monopoly of its impartation. However, when it comes to the grace of the sacrament of Eucharist, virtual celebration of Eucharist falls short of the theological qualifications of the Eucharist ritual as handed down to us from the Apostles. However, the study acknowledges that the Virtual Eucharist in the 21<sup>st</sup> digital world remains the best alternative to address the communion desire of

those who cannot access physical participation in the Eucharist due to circumstance beyond their means like the COVID-19 pandemic lockdown.

Drawing from the experience of the first century Christians who had to forgo the Eucharistic due to persecutions (Ekeke 2012), the faithful are invited to take future lockdown as a fasting period for the Eucharist while waiting for the return to normalcy (Peters, 2020). During the first centuries, the Desert Fathers spend several years or their entire lives in caves or deserts in the absence of Eucharist to attain union with God (Ekeke 2012). Today, the Churches continue to celebrate the courageous lives of these saints whose love for God went beyond ritual celebrations. While this historical fact does not seek to encourage solitary lives, it helps to buttress the reality that holiness is not only a product of a ritual but love and commitment to God through Jesus Christ. Faced with the situation like the COVID 19 pandemic lockdown, the virtual Eucharist despite its limitations remains one important way to remain in communion with God and the Church but not the only way.

The COVID 19 pandemic has interrogated our long-held perceptions of the liturgical space and time. It has raised an awareness of the potential challenges that future disasters can pose to our Christian beliefs as a body of Christ. The world has woken up to the reality that the celebration of sacraments in general and the Eucharist in particular as the source and summit of Christian nourishment can be threatened by a pandemic. It demonstrated that faith in Jesus Christ is not limited to a single ritual alone. It brought to the surface the various theological perceptions that the Church has been taking for granted. Pandemics whether natural or man-made are a reality and the faithful are invited to steward over the environmental around us. COVID-19 pandemic has confirmed that Christian communion can be disrupted by natural hazards. It demonstrated to the world that as individual, all persons are potential betrayers of one another's well-being. However, the pandemic has helped the faithful to understand that human beings are all under the care of a loving God whose power is beyond a single pandemic.



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