CAN THE CHURCH TRULY ASSEMBLE FOR LITURGY IN VIRTUAL SPACE? AN APPRAISAL IN THE NIGERIAN CONTEXT

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Abstract

The Covid-19 brought a phenomenon that has always been in the schemes of the Church—at least since the 80s—to the fore. This is the possibility of participation in liturgical ceremonies in virtual space. Apart from the technical complications that may arise from such arrangements there is the more important liturgical and mystagogical implications. This paper seeks to explore these implications. In order to do this, the historical, theological and liturgical-exegetical methods are employed to get to the root of what the Church as a liturgical assembly is and entails in relation to the virtual space as is defined in modern terms. Then using library research and some other relevant tools, the paper interprets the possibility of virtual liturgical worship on the backdrop of the Nigerian worldview and worship patterns. It concludes that worship in virtual space is not only against liturgical principles but is even less appealing to Nigerians because of the affinity to experiential worship.

Keywords: Liturgy, Worship, Liturgical Assembly, Virtual Liturgy

1. Introduction

Worship has always been dependent on the assembly of people and this is so, not only in Christianity or other Abrahamic religions but also in the nature religions, pagan religions and the African Traditional Religions. With the birth of technology, however, what constitutes assembly, at least in secular terms, has continued to change to the extent that in the last four years, dues to the Covid-19 pandemic, virtual worship and 'virtual liturgies' have multiplied. Despite the frequency of this, the question still remains as to whether the 'virtual liturgies' are emergency alternatives or legitimate substitutes. This paper delves into this issue. It seeks to establish that assembling in liturgical terms is not the same as in secular terms and that this is even more pronounced where the Nigerian worldview is concerned. In order to do this, the nature of the word 'assembly' is first investigated in biblical-liturgical terms, then related to the nature of the liturgy and how it functions. The study goes on to examine the nature of virtual space and its insufficiency for 'assembling' in liturgical terms, while highlighting the Church's

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teaching on this even during and after Covid-19. It concludes that liturgy in virtual space can only be an emergency alternative and not a substitute, especially for Nigerians, given the worldview.

2. The Nature of the Liturgical Assembly

Like most of the terminologies and concepts used in the Christian liturgy, *assembly* as a noun, comes from the Hebrew word קָהָל (*qahal*), and is used through the Old Testament (Hereafter OT) to designate the constitution or convocation of an assembly. Usually, the physical place of constitution or convocation is specified, so that *qahal* signifies both the call that convokes the gathering and those who respond to the call and constitute the assembly in a particular place.[2] This is the case in Ex 19 where Moses and the people assemble 'on the mount of Sinai'. In fact, the Lord instructs Moses to set limits for the people where they could be and not be. (19:12-15). As such, the *qahal Yahweh* (assembly of God) was the privileged place and time for the people of God to gather and to celebrate their identity as God's chosen people.[3] This term, *qahal Yahweh* was to be translated in the Septuagint as *ekklesia Kuriou*. Interpreting the relationship between *qahal Yahweh* and *ekklesia Kuriou*, A. G. Martimort is of the opinion that the day at Sinai (Ex 19) had been 'the day of the assembly.'[4] This sense of 'assembly' is scattered throughout the OT.[5]

Liturgical Assembly in the New Testament

In the New Testament (Hereafter NT), this sense of the *qahal Yahweh* and *ekklesia Kuriou* is taken up and further developed. We see this in the fact that despite the availability and use of several other words associated with assemblies like *synagogue* and *plaetos*, the preferred term for the gathered Christian assembly or community is *ekklesia*. (Cf. Matt 16:18; 18:18; Acts 8:1; 9:11; 15). Paul who is the first to use the term *ekklesia* in the NT uses it 65 times, mainly in reference to the local communities to which he was writing.[6] Particularly interesting for our causes here is his use of the term in 1 Cor 11:18 where he uses *ekklesia* to refer to the action of forming the assembly; of 'coming together': 'when you assemble as a church…' (RSV)- συνερχομένων ὑμῶν ἐν ἐκκλησίᾳ. Here both the KJV and the NAS translate, 'When you come together'. 'Coming together' here denotes an

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[2] Mark Francis, 'The Liturgical Assembly' in, Anscar Chupungco (ed), *Handbook for Liturgical Studies*, vol II. (Collegeville Minnesota: Liturgical Press 2000), 129-143. Here131. Hereafter, Francis, Liturgical Assembly.

[3] Ibid.

[4] A. G. Martimort, 'Structure and Law of the Liturgical Celebration' in, *The Church at Prayer*, vol I (Collegeville Minnesota: Liturgical Press 1983), 87-225. Here, 92. Hereafter, Martimort, Liturgical Celebration.

[5] Cf. Ex. 24: 6-8; Deut 4:10, 12-13; 9:10; 18:16; 1 Kgs 8; 2 Kg 23; 2 Chron 6-7, 28-30, and Neh 8-10.

[6] Francis, Liturgical Assembly, 133.

assembly! A further use of the term sheds even more light. In these cases, Paul uses *ekklesia* in reference of a house, designating a particular place of assembly; hence, οἶκον αὐτῶν ἐκκλησίαν—Church in their house (Rom 16:5; 1 Cor 16:19); οἶκον αὐτῆς ἐκκλησίαν—Church in her house (Col. 4:15); and οἶκόν σου ἐκκλησίᾳ (Phlm. 1:2), meaning, 'Church in your house.'

In the NT, according to the new form of worship instituted by Christ himself, things were not to remain the same as in the OT. In the NT, Christ proclaimed the end of the era where the physical temple or Ark of the Covenant as God's dwelling place is replaced by 'The temple of his body' (Jn 2:21; 4:23).[7] In the NT, therefore, the emphasis on the assembling of the people of God now takes precedence over the temple as a dwelling place of God. The center of the new religion and worship is no longer the temple but the human person beginning with Christ down to the people; as Christ himself says, 'Where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there in their midst.' (Mt 18:20) This is the basis also of the Pauline theology of the human person as 'the temple of God' (Cf. 1 Cor 3:16), and the body as spiritual offering. (Cf. Rom 12:1) So, Christian worship and liturgy is people-based and assembly based. According to Jungmann,

> The new worship …was worship 'in spirit and in truth.' For it was worship paid God by men who were moved by the Holy Spirit. Yet in its inwardness was not to debar all outward expression. This worship was not to consist exclusively in the individual's private prayer; it was not to be inimical to liturgy. For our Lord did not only reveal doctrine, He founded a Church, a visible Church… a Church whose members would gather together visibly in a communal meal, whose members were to honour God in common.[8]

The implication of this is that, while the temples of other religions were built as a dwelling place for the 'godhead' with little space for the people; Christian worship spaces were built to accommodate the assembly. The church building, as such, was the symbol of the People of God gathered in assembly. This is why, when the so called 'house churches' (domus ecclesiae)[9] disappeared in the early 3rd century for larger spaces when Christianity grew bigger, it was the basilica that was chosen

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[7] Jer 31:33; Ez 36:26. Cf. Heb 8:10.

[8] Cf. Josef Andreas Jungmann, *The Early Liturgy to the Time of Gregory XIII*, 4th Edition. (London: Darton, Longman and Todd 1976), 11-12.

[9] Specific buildings in the early Christian centuries specifically adapted for Christian worship. Cf. Alan Diog, *Liturgy and Architecture: From the Early Church to the Middle Ages* (England: Ashgate 2008), 4.

among the myriads of religious-building models available because of its adaptability to the Christian assembly as a gathering place.[10]

Liturgical Assembly according to the Fathers of the Church
This sense of the liturgical assembly established in scripture and reflected in Church architecture is concretized by several of the Fathers of the Church. In this sense, Ignatius of Antioch is said to have especially encouraged the Ephesians to come together in common, one and all so that people might break bread together, the one bread and the food of immortality with their Bishop and the presbyterium.[11] In this sense Ignatius goes on to talk of the local church being organized around the Bishop,[12] and the oneness or singleness of the Eucharistic assembly as a visible expression of the local church which shuns divisions,

> Take care therefore, to participate in one Eucharist (for there is one flesh of our Lord Jesus Christ, and one cup that leads to unity through his blood; there is one altar, just as there is one bishop, together with the council of presbyters and the deacons, my fellow servants)[13]

The importance of the liturgical assembly is, perhaps, nowhere else as expounded as in the Syrian *Didascalia Apostolorum* when it teaches that the failure of Christians to assemble diminishes the Body of Christ,

> Now when thou teachest, command and warn the people to be constant in assembling in the Church, and not to withdraw themselves but always to assemble, lest any man diminish the Church by not assembling, and cause the body of Christ to be short of a member. For let not a man take thought of others only, but of himself as well, hearkening to that which our Lord said: *Everyone that gathereth not with me, scattereth* [Mt 12.30]. Since therefore you are the members of Christ, do not scatter yourselves from the Church by not assembling. Seeing that you have Christ for your head, as He promised for you are partakers with us.[14]

Function of the Liturgical Assembly
The essence of the liturgical assembly is to be found in its function. When a liturgical assembly no longer functions in this way, it seizes to exist. This is so

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[10] Richard Krauthemier, *Early Christian and Byzantine Architecture* (Great Britain 1964), 19. Hereafter, Krauthemier, Architecture

[11] Ignatius of Antioch, Letter to the Ephesians, 20, 2 in, Michael W. Holmes, *The Apostolic Fathers: Greek Texts and English Translation*, 3rd edition (Grand Rapids Michigan: Baker Academics 2007), 182-201. Here, 199.

[12] Ignatius of Antioch, *Letter to the Smyrneans* 8, 1-2, in Ibid., 248-261. Here, 255.

[13] Ignatius of Antioch, *Letter to the Philadelphians*, 4, in Ibid., 236-247. Here, 239.

[14] *Didascalia Apostolorum* 13. Cf. Hugh, R. Connolly, *The Didascalia Apostolorum: The Teaching of the Twelve Apostles*. (Oxford: Clanderon Press 1929), 124-125.

because the very fact of the assembly should mean that it is performing the function for which it is established. There are two basic and twin functions of the liturgical assembly that has been established since antiquity, namely, that the liturgical assembly constitutes and expresses the Church. By this we mean that the Church can hardly ever really be constituted or expressed; it could hardly ever be able to say, 'This is what I am,' or, even exist, if there were no liturgy! It is in the assembling of the people of God for the liturgy in a particular place at a particular time under the headship of the visible Chief-Shepherd, that the Church is shown to be a living organism. The liturgical assembly is, therefore, the most expressive manifestation of the Church, its true 'epiphany,' since it shows and reveals what the Church is.[15] As has been demonstrated by Meßner,[16] the present *Epiclesis* in the prayer of Consecration of bishops, which goes back to the Apostolic Tradition,[17] ties the founding of the local churches (per singular loca) by the apostles (bishops) to the 'unceasing glory and praise of God's name' in the liturgical assembly. In other words, it is in the assembling of the people of God (their coming together) that the Church is established, expressed and constituted, and God glorified.

Elements that typify a Liturgical Assembly

Social and Relational Dimension
The liturgy has ingrained social and relational dimensions because it is a socially structured gathering, in which the whole human person is taken up, especially the senses since the human person experiences the world through his senses. Through the senses the human person becomes aware of what and how others express themselves while bringing himself and his experiences also to expression. Not only the use of the senses of hearing and sight are necessary for liturgical participation, the sense of smell, touch, and taste are also necessary and help to give meaning to liturgical gestures. It is in this sense that SC 7 states, 'In the liturgy the sanctification of the man is signified by signs perceptible to the senses, and is effected in a way which corresponds with each of these signs.' The more liturgical signs are perceptible to the senses, the more mystagogical impact the liturgy makes. The 'usus', for example of the Eucharistic celebration is 'Take and eat' such that seeing the host but not eating of it (taste), does not amount to full participation. The impact of communing from one cup and one bread is not the

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[15] I. H. Dalmais 'Theology of Liturgical Celebration' in, A.G. Martimort et al, Ed., *The Church at Prayer,* vol I: Principles of Liturgy. (Collegeville Minnesota: Liturgical Press 1983), 230-280. Here, 94. Hereafter, Dalmais, Theology of Liturgical Celebration.

[16] Reinhard Meßner, *Einführung in die Liturgiewissenschaft*, 2nd edition, (Paderborn etal: Ferdinand Schöning 2009), 377

[17] *Trad Apo* 3, 1-6. Cf. Paul F. Bradshaw, Maxwell E. Johnson, L. Edward Phillips, *The Apostolic Tradition: A Commentary*, ed. Harold W. Attridge. (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2002), 30-31.

same as consuming separate ones. Hence the gesture of the communal meal (meal essentially means physically eating!) as is the case in the Eucharist is indicative of the communion attainable by a human group and which can unite the group to the divine.[18]

Physical and Person-to-Person Dimension

Let us begin with the sacraments of Baptism which cannot be performed without physical touch and person-to-person interaction. Baptism starts with the candidate being signed with the sign of the cross. Then there is the blessing of the water which requires that the priest touches the water. The washing with water, the anointing with Chrism and the rite of the white garment all also require touch. Moreover, the Introduction to the Rite of Baptism is clear that the community has a part to play in in this rite.[19] With the celebration of the Eucharist, this is even more telling. The celebration begins with the procession at the beginning which signifies the coming together of the people of God for the celebration, and should normally not be ignored because of its significance. Then there is the administration of Holy Communion requiring touch, one way or the other. And what of the smell of incense, the use of Holy Water for Asperges and many more. Although Spiritual Communion has often been encouraged by the saints,[20] it is still to be noted that sacramental as well as spiritual communion joined together is regarded as the aim to be pursued by all communicants.

Person-to-person and relational tenets are also to be found in the rest of the sacraments and liturgical celebrations, all of which belong to their nature as rites: the value of touch during the Anointing of the Sick and well as during Penance, the significance of the Laying on of Hands and the anointings during the Ordination Rites and the significance of joining the Hands at the sacrament of Matrimony; all these are areas where the sacraments, in consonance with the principle that 'Signs be perceptible to the senses' serve to impress themselves on the participants and recipients. This person-to-person dimension of liturgy, portends, therefore, that it is a celebration, a feast and that it is experiential. This is the essence of the words *festivitas, solemnitas, conventus, coetus, frequential*, action and *effectio*,[21] as they relate to liturgy: Liturgy should be experienced not merely seen or heard.[22]

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[18] Dalmais, Theology of Liturgical Celebration, 234.

[19] ICEL, *Rite of Baptism for Children* (New Jersey: Catholic Book Publishing Corp. 2004), 20.

[20] St. Thomas Aquinas (Summa q. 80 a. 1, I-III), St. Theresa of Avila, St. Alphonsus Liguori and more recently St. John Paul II in *Ecclesia de Eucharistia* 34, and others.

[21] Cf. Dalmais, Theology of Liturgical Celebration, 239-240.

[22] Cf. Patrick Regan, 'Liturgy and the Experience of Celebration' in, *Worship* 47:10 (1973), 592-600.

3. The Virtual Space

What is Virtual Space?
Virtual space (virtual world) are environments in which individuals, groups, and even organizations interact in virtual, nonphysical spaces.[23] While Carol Sanders et al go on to relate virtual space to virtual place and as such virtual world—a genre of online community that often takes the form of a computer-based simulated environment, through which users can interact with one another and use and create objects, our use of 'virtual space' here is restrictive and simple to mean the internet. According to Waseem Afzal, Virtual space (internet) is an environment in which individuals and organizations are continuously producing, packaging, re-packaging, recording, discarding, modifying, transferring, disseminating, accessing, and using information.[24] A very salient medium of the virtual space is the possibility of creating meeting and interaction forums on platforms like Facebook, Myspace, WhatsApp, YouTube and Zoom.[25] It is in this sense that Helena Parish talks of 'virtual community', 'virtual congregation', 'virtual worshippers', 'online virtual community', 'online networks', etc.[26]

Nature and Character of Virtual Space
The enormous statistics about what goes on in virtual space would allure anyone to thinking of the vast advantages this may have for religion and the spread of the Gospel. It has been said that there are over three billion (3,000,000,000) active users of Facebook in a month, and that when we add the uses on the other platforms of META, there is a core product user data base of 3.59 billion.[27] This would make live streaming on META platforms have the possibility of reaching the population of the first four to five largest countries in the world just by a click, and almost half the world population. In Nigeria as at May 2023, there were 41.6 million Facebook users, 18.5 percent of the total population[28] and 92 million users of internet in

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[23] Cf. Carol Sanders et al, 'Virtual Space and Place' in, *MIS Quarterly* 35:4 (2011), 1079-1098. Here 1079.

[24] Waseem Afzal, *Management Information Organizations* (Oxford, Cambridge, New Delhi: Chandos Publishing 2012), 116.

[25] Ibid, 117-118.

[26] Helen Parish, 'The Absence of Presence and the Presence of Absence: Social Distancing, Sacraments, and the Virtual Religious Community during the COVID-19 Pandemic', in *Religions* 2020, *11*(6), 276; https://doi.org/10.3390/rel11060276

[27] Stacy Jo Dixon, 'Facebook: quarterly number of MAU (monthly active users) worldwide 2008-2023',https://www.statista.com/statistics/264810/number-of-monthly-active-facebook-users-worldwide/#statisticContainer. Published 9 Feb 2024.

[28] Doris Dokua Sasu, 'Nigeria: Facebook users 2023, by age group', https://www.statista.com/statistics/1028428/facebook-user-share-in-nigeria-by-age/

general as at 2015.[29] YouTube visitors are said to watch over two billion videos every day and every minute, 24 hours of new video are uploaded to the site.[30] Virtual space belongs to the large group of what has been termed 'new media,' and it has been identified that the features of dialogue and 'interactive community' are typical of new media.[31] Six characteristics are thus identifiable in virtual spaces:

Connectivity: allows the connection between different devices and people, enabling real -time communication.

Interactivity: provides interaction between users.

Accessibility: is available for access anytime and anywhere, as long as there is internet connection.

Scalability: allows the growth and expansion of virtual space according to the demand and needs of users.

Impersonality/Fluidity: People could decide to use just voice to communicate and even dilate the voice; they could also watch others without being seen; or even participate in the group appearing as anonymous or as avatars.

Fluid Definition of Space: The definition of the concept of space in virtual terms is fluid and intangible, contradicting the original meaning of *locus* which is fixed and specific.

There is also the acceleration or condensing of time where cultural perceptions of time are changing from time as something ordered and following its own duration, to time as something immediate, fluid, and fast.[32]

4. The Nigerian Perception of Worship space

Background: Nigerian Worldview

The Nigerian (African) perception of worship space is tied to their perception of the world and how things function therein. By worldview, we refer to something like the 'mind-world'; the unconscious patterning of behaviour in society; the way a people characteristically look outward on the universe; the patterns of thought, attitude toward life, concept of time, a mental picture of what ought to be, and the general order of things.[33]Aylward Shorter calls this a particular way of

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[29] Cf, Jacob Zenom Dankasa, *Technology for Ministry: Best Practices for Evangelization on Social Media and the Internet in Africa*. (Abuja: Paulines Publications Africa 2017), 35. Hereafter, Dankasa, Technology for Ministry.

[30] Brandon Vogt, *Church and New Media: Blogging Converts, Online Activists and Bishops who Tweet* (Indiana: Our Sunday Visitor Publishing 2011), 14.

[31] Ibid, 13.

[32] Peter Horsfield, *From Jesus to Internet: A History of Christianity and Media*. (United Kingdom: Wiley Blackwell 2015), 265.

[33]Ogbu Kalu, 'Preserving a Worldview: Pentecostalism in the African Maps of the Universe' in, *PNEUMA: The Journal of the Society for Pentecostal Studies* 24:2 (2002), 110-137. Here, 117. Hereafter, Kalu, 'Preserving a Worldview'.

understanding and acting towards the world, and places worldview at the deepest level of culture which is the most resistant to change.[34] In this worldview, Nigerians generally view the world as a physical place and in material terms, even though they believe heavily in the interplay between the spiritual forces and human act. Nigerians generally perceive life as one reality-as a unity with two aspects or planes of existence-the visible and the invisible. The visible is thought to be influenced by the invisible so much that there is no differentiation between what has material causes and what has spiritual causes. Because of such perceptions, nothing is believed to happen by chance or as a result of error; in fact, all happenings, whether spiritual or physical, are given spiritual interpretations.[35] In the Nigerian worldview, the spiritual—God, the divinities and the spirits—are the ones which order everything. The entire universe participates in the one life of God and there exists a network of relations among God, divinities and human beings and the cosmos with human beings at the centre.

It is in this sense that Afe Adogame has dealt with the saying among the Yoruba that 'Aiye loja, Orun Nile', meaning that 'the world is a market place and the heavens/skies is home.'[36] As simple as this saying is, it demonstrates the worldview of the people about the constant interaction between the spiritual and material where the 'aye' (world) as a market place, serves as a centre for the dramatization of *ebora* (spirit beings), the *orisa* (four hundred supernatural powers of the right) and *ajogun* (two hundred supernatural forces of the left), engaged in a timeless and sustained competition for the domination of the world with human beings caught up in this 'cross-fire' between the benevolent and malevolent spiritual forces.[37]This same concept is found among the Kadara of Niger State represented in the concept of *Ohwu*;[38] as well as among the Igbo with the interplay between God (Chukwu) and the spirits (ndi mmuo, alusi or agbara) to the extent that, *Alusi juputalu obodo nine di n'ani Igbo*, 'the spirits fill all the towns in Igboland.'[39]

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[34] Aylward Shorter, *Toward a Theology of Inculturation* (Eugene Oregon: Wipf and Stock Publishers 1999), 35. Hereafter: Shorter, Inculturation.

[35] Cf. Fidelis Egbunu, *'Be not Afraid, only believe:' Christian Remedy to Fear of Spirits—The Igala Case*. (Enugu: Snapp Press 2001), 14.

[36] Afe Adogame, ''*Aiye Loja, Orun nile:*' The Appropriation of Ritual Space-time in the Cosmology of the Celestial Church of Christ' in *Journal of Religion in Africa*, 30:1 (2000), 3-29. Hereafter, Adogame, Ritual Space.

[37]Afe Adogame, 'Engaging the Rhetoric of Spiritual Warfare: The Public Face of Aladura in Diaspora.' *Journal of Religion in Africa*, 34:4 (2004), 493-522. Here, 503. Hereafter, Adogame, Spiritual Warfare.

[38] [38] Cf. Victor Usman Jamahh, *A New Look at Liturgy and Active Participation* Vol. 2 (Abuja: Paulines Publications Africa 2017), 58-60. Hereafter, Jamahh, A New Look.

[39] Cf. Francis Arinze, *Sacrifice in Ibo Religion* (Ibadan: University of Ibadan Press 1970), 13.

Nigerian Perception of Worship Space

Now, one would have thought that a people for whom everything is somewhat 'spiritualized' would have no serious binding to physical space or place when it comes to worship. This is, however, not the case. Evidence shows rather, that the tenets of worship begin with the summoning of the assembly to a particular space. As Arinze has shown among the Igbo, in order to celebrate festivals or offer certain sacrificial worships, the village or town is summoned to a particular place and space, usually the village square, or in the 'compound of the spirit.'[40]In this regard, Ikenga Metuh describes a sacrifice to God called *Ime Chukwu* or *Igba Mkpu Chukwu* (festival of God), which usually took place at *Ihembosi* at *Aje* in Nsukka division at a particular shrine.[41] There is even a report of a certain Chief Oduah who had an *Iru Chukwu* altar in his compound and performed rituals there which were exactly the same as that described in the *Iruma Chukwu*.[42] There are some villages in Igbo land, where up to today, the final marriage rite and prayers, is done at the village square; for example, the Achala people of Anambra state. Furthermore, the preference of the *Aladura Churches* for choice places like mountain-tops (ori-oke), beside rivers, and their choice of what they call *agbala itura* (vineyard of mercy), *agbala iyanu* (vineyard of miracles), *agbala iwosan* (vineyard of healing) *and agbala idande* (vineyard of deliverance) have been shown, not be unconnected with the Yoruba worldview of attachment to sacred spaces.[43] We know also that the worship of the *Odooje* river in Ogbomoso had to be stopped by the King when he built a Church on the site of the river which had been the place of worship.[44] And among the Kadara, depending on the situation, worship-communion with the *Ohwu*, apart from the spontaneous invocations of the people-takes place at or in the *Ogow*, the *Ogahwu* or at the *Ohywo* which are two as shrines, while the former-the *Ogow*-is referred to as 'something like a Temple' with a clear-cut edge over the others in order of importance such that only the 'highest Priest,' who is called *Akpahwu* is allowed access to this Temple.[45] This, therefore, mirrors the description of Mbiti when he talks of the usefulness of

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[40] Ibid, 28.

[41] Emefie Ikenga Metuh, *God and Man in African Religion*. (London: G Chapman 1981), 129.

[42] 131-132.

[43] Cf. Deji Isaac Ayegboyin, 'Aladura Spirituality: Authentic African Initiative in Christian Missions', in *Ogbomoso Journal of Theology* 16:1 (2011), 165-177. Here, 172. See also, Adogame, Ritual Space, 13-16.

[44] Raphael O. Oparinde, 'Fostering the Impact of Christianity on Yoruba Indigenous Worship Practices' in, *Ogbomoso Journal of Theology* 24:1 (2019), 73-86. Here, 79.

[45] Jamahh, A New Look, 60.

shrines, temples, altars, grooves and caves within the worship scheme of Africans.[46]

Elements that typify Nigerian Worship Space

The first of the elements that typify the Nigerian worship space is the community-based character of Nigerian/African worship patterns. Arinze, again, describes this among the Igbo when he observes that worship is a thing of the family alone, or of the village or of the town; of the community but never a private affair to the extent that an *ogilisi* leaf is sent to the eldest person in a family when a sacrifice has been offered in his absence as a sign of his participation.[47]What is more, most of the rites of passage among the Igbo, have been shown to have communal significance.[48]This is not different among the Yoruba whether it is in the worship of the *orisa*, of *Olodumare* or in the various rites of passage.[49] The second of these elements is the personal/physical and bodily dimension of assemblies and worship. Nigerian worship and worship assemblies are characterised by a lot of physicality, despite the somewhat over spiritualized nature of her worldview. The point here is that physical actions, physical objects, the palpable and material are seen as means of getting in touch with the spiritual. Water, for example, has been proved to be so important to Nigerian/African spiritual sensibilities such that across the plurality of cultures it is demonstrated as such.[50]It has been identified, for example among the Yoruba, that there is no ritual that takes place without water.[51]It is, therefore, not surprising that the AICs[52] lay such preference to water and that the healing ministries among the Charismatics in the Catholic Church do the same. Dance and

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[46] John Mbiti, African Traditional Religion and Philosophy, (New York: Anchor Books 1970), 94-95.

[47] Arinze, Sacrifice in Ibo Religion, 23.

[48] Mary-Blosom Chinyelum Okafor, *Theatre of Life: Rituals, Transition and Progression among the Igbo.* Unpublished Thesis submitted to the University of Plymouth in Partial Fulfilment for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy. (University of Plymouth: 1998). Okafor talks here of Maternity/Childhood rituals, Adolescent rituals like the *ima mmuo*, the *iso ebe*, the *inu nwanyi*, Status Enhancement rituals like, *ichi ozo* and *ichi lolo*.

[49] E. Dada Adelowo, 'Rituals, Symbolism and Symbols in Yoruba Traditional Religious Thought in, *AJT* 4:1 (1990), 162-179.

[50]See J. O. Awolalu and P.A. Dopamu, *West African Traditional Religion*, (Ibadan: Onibonoje Press and Books 1979); E.B. Idowu, *African Traditional Religion: A Definition* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books 1973) ; and J.S. Mbiti, African religions and Philosophy.

[51] S.A. Adewale, 'The Cultic Use of Water Among the Yoruba', Onta: *Ibadan Journal of Religious Studies*, Vol. 18, No. 1, June 1986, p. 28

[52] Samson Adetunji Fatokun, 'Water and Its Cultic Use in African Initiated Churches in Yoruba-land of South western Nigeria: An Issue in African Development Discourse' in *Swedish Missiological Themes* 96:4 (2008), 349-376. Here 359-364. Also, Afe Adogame, Doing Things with Water: Water as a Symbol of 'Life' and 'Power' in the Celestial Church of Christ (CCC) in, *Studies in World Christianity* 6:1 (2000), 59-77.

bodily movements also form a basic foundation of African assemblies. Dance, contrary to what it is in the West, is a form of religious expression. And above all, the sharing of religious meals or eating together as a sign of community bond is pivotal, like the breaking of Kolanut among the Igbo as well as its uses among the Yoruba and others. These are not just points which could be overlooked in the worship assemblies, they are fundamental to worship patterns.

5. The Teaching of the Church on Liturgy in Virtual Space

Teaching prior to COVID

Despite the immense impact made by such figures like Archbishop Fulton Sheen in the use of the radio and television between 1931 and the 1950s,[53] the position of the Church on the use of New Media had always been one of forward steps made with caution. As such, the Vatican II document *Inter Mirifica* on Social Communications issued on the 4th of December 1963, viewed televising and using the radio in the service of the liturgy as something to be supported and encouraged since they invite viewers to share in the life of the Church,[54] but with caution as they are to be used in consonance with the provisions of SC 20 which states that, 'Radio and television broadcasts of sacred rites must be marked by discretion and dignity, under the leadership and direction of a competent person appointed for this office by the bishops… especially …when the service to be broadcast is the Mass.'[55] This idea of forward steps with caution continued to be developed in further documents like *Communio et Progressio* (1971), *Evangelii Nuntiandi* (1975) both of Saint Paul VI, and *Redemptoris Missio* (1990) of Saint John Paul II. Nowhere, however, has it been concretized most as in the Pastoral Instruction, *Church and Internet* (2002) given by the Pontifical Council on Social Communication. There, despite the praise of the internet as something very beneficial to the Church, it, still cautions that,

> Virtual reality of cyberspace has some worrisome implications for religion as well as for other areas of life. 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.[56]

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[53] Vogt, Church and New Media, 11-12.
[54] *Inter Mirifica* 14.
[55] Cf. DOL
[56] http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/pontifical_councils/pccs/documents/rc_pc_pccs_doc_20020228_church-internet_en.html

The implication of this for virtual assemblies according to this document is clear: live stream or television are not substitutes for participation in the actual celebration of the Church's liturgy. Their uses had, therefore, been limited to only certain situations; typically, and strictly, only in situations where people are inhibited and incapacitated from being physically present at these ceremonies; like being hospitalized, home-bound, or imprisoned. Real world interactions are not only necessary but fundamental to the liturgical assembly.

Teaching during COVID

The Covid-19 pandemic that lasted until May 5 2023, when it was declared no longer a global health emergency probably shook the hitherto 'forward steps with caution' approach of the Church towards virtual liturgical assemblies. This was largely because of the novelty of the SARS-Cov-2 virus at the time, which was essentially different from its predecessor, the SARS-Cov-1 because of its highly contagious nature.[57] As a result of this, within the first few months, virtual Masses became prominent and even promoted. As early as late February, 2020, according to a report by the Catholic News Agency (CNA), the Archdioceses of Milan and Venice had cancelled public Masses, a move which was extended to the rest of the Italian peninsula by the 8th of March.[58] On the 9th of March, Pope Francis began livestreaming daily Masses from his residence at *Domus Sanctae Marthae*. All over the world, many churches suspended the presence of the faithful in their Masses, and resorted to virtual services for broadcasting the celebrations, such as live streaming or other modern media communication modes, like television and radio. Dioceses cancelled the public celebrations of the Easter celebrations for 2020 and the Vatican in the decree 'In time of Covid-19,'[59] issued pointed directives on the way that the Easter celebrations were to take place. With live-streaming becoming very popular having millions of viewers, the Pope's Easter Sunday Mass was watched by more than 8.1 million households, close to 50 percent of the television audience in Italy. Online access to major papal Masses, liturgies, and services is not new, but Easter 2020 was the first occasion on which all major Holy Week and Easter events were broadcast worldwide.[60]

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[57] For more on this see, Peiris, J. S. et al. 'Clinical Progression and Viral load in a Community Outbreak of Coronavirus-Associated SARS Pneumonia: A Prospective Study'. *Lancet* 361 (2003), 1767–1772 ; Ruiyun Li, et al. 'Substantial Undocumented Infection Facilitates the Rapid Dissemination of Novel Coronavirus (SARS-CoV-2)'. *Science* 368 (2020), 489–493; Neeltje van Doremalen, et al., 'Aerosol and Surface Stability of SARS-CoV-2 as Compared with SARS-CoV-1. *NEJM* 382 (2020), 1564–1567, and Matthew Meselson. 'Droplets and aerosols in the transmission of SARS-CoV-2. *NEJM* 382, (2020) 2063.

[58] https://www.catholicnewsagency.com/news/diocese-of-rome-cancels-all-public-masses-announces. Retrieved 17.03.2021.

[59] https://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/ccdds/documents/rc_con_ccdds_doc_20200325_decreto-intempodicovid_en.html. Retrieved 31.03.24.

[60] Helen Parish, The Absence of Presence and the Presence of Absence, 276.

In Nigeria, on March 21, the CBCN, like most of its counterparts in the rest of the world, issued a statement on the pandemic situation titled, 'Corona Virus, Time for Caution, not Panic.' Worthy of note in the 'Pastoral Directives' contained in the statement is the fact that while trying to reduce contact as it pertains the administration of the sacraments and celebration of the liturgy, precautionary measures were moderate. For example, the directive was that 'Reception of Holy Communion should be done in such a way as to prevent touching of the recipient,' and 'pastoral care and the sacraments are to be administered with utmost precautions.' Rather than ban the participation of the faithful at Mass completely, the directive recommended 'celebration in smaller units.' This was to change later, as public health regulations changed so that the social and electronic media were directed to be used: livestreams on YouTube and other broadcasting channels.[61]

Despite all these, it is interesting to note that when several people started touting virtual Masses and virtual assemblies as somewhat 'the new normal,' several push-backs were made. Pope Francis, for example, had to reiterate it severally, in a series of homilies in April of 2020, that virtual communities 'is not Church' and that online Masses and spiritual communion do not represent the Church![62] Moreover, televised or virtual Masses could never become substitutes for the Church's pastoral care for the sick in the form of visits by parish ministers who share the Scriptures and bring Communion. Televised or virtual ceremonies is a ministry by which the Church uses modern technology to bring the Lord's healing and comfort to those who cannot physically participate in the liturgical life of the local Church.

Teaching after COVID
The teaching of the Church on virtual assemblies after Covid is probably most demonstrated in the document, 'Towards Full Presence,' issued by the Dicastery for Communication on the 28th of May 2023. While the document advocates that the use of modern media like virtual streaming and the like are to be regarded as of great advantage to the Church, she also recognizes the problems with virtual streaming and the danger it poses to the formation of real communities of Christian sharing.

> During the most severe moments of lockdown during the pandemic, the broadcasting of liturgical celebrations via social media and other means of communication offered some comfort to those who could not participate in person. However, there is still much to reflect on in our faith communities about how to take advantage of the digital

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[61] CBCN, Pastoral Letter: 'Finding Peace of Conscience in the Suspension Public Liturgical Celebrations'. 29th March, 2020. No 10.
[62] https://www.catholicvoice.org.au/pope-warns-online-masses-and-spiritual-communion-do-not-represent-the-church/ Retrieved 31.03.24.

environment in a way that complements sacramental life….The ecclesial community is formed where two or three gather in the name of Jesus (cf. *Mt* 18:20) regardless of one's origin, residence or geographical affiliation. While we can recognize that through the transmission of the Mass the Church has entered into people's homes, it is necessary to reflect on what 'participation' in the Eucharist means… One cannot share a meal through a screen. All our senses are engaged when we share a meal: taste and smell, glances that contemplate the faces of the diners, listening to the conversations at table. Sharing a meal at table is our first education in attention to others, a fostering of relationships among family members, neighbours, friends, and colleagues. Likewise, we participate with the whole person at the altar: mind, spirit, and body are involved. The liturgy is a sensory experience; we enter into the Eucharistic mystery through the doors of the senses that are awakened and fed in their need for beauty, meaning, harmony, vision, interaction and emotion. Above all, the Eucharist is not something that we can just 'watch'; it is something that truly nourishes us.[63]

6. Evaluation and Conclusion

Televised or virtual liturgical ceremonies is a ministry by which the Church uses modern technology to bring the Lord's healing and comfort *to those who cannot physically participate in the liturgical life of the local Church* and who often experience a sense of isolation from the parish and its regular forms of prayer and worship. It is not, and can never be the norm. What this means is that those who are not genuinely impeded by their state of life, work or condition, fail in their obligation to attend the liturgy when they use such channels meant for the sick and incapacitated. As the Catechism of the Catholic Church states quoting CIC 1983 can 1245 in paragraph 2181, the Sunday Eucharist is the foundation and confirmation of all Christian practice. 'The faithful are obliged to participate in the Eucharist on days of obligation, unless excused for a serious reason (for example, illness, the care of infants) or dispensed by their own pastor. Those who deliberately fail in this obligation commit a grave sin.' The foundation of this is not far-fetched. It is the physical basis of what constitutes an assembly-what constitutes Church! Church is not virtual but founded on stable physical communities which meet together from time to time at particular places, celebrate the Eucharist together and participate physically in the reception of the Eucharistic Species. The participation in this by virtually or on TV can only be an extension of a physical community into the homes of those who are incapacitated from

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[63] Towards Full Presence - A Pastoral Reflection on Engagement with Social Media (28 May 2023), Dicastery for Communication (vatican.va)

participating. As St. John Chrysostom has stated succinctly, 'You cannot pray at home as at church, where there is a great multitude, where exclamations are cried out to God as from one great heart, and where there is something more: the union of minds, the accord of souls, the bond of charity, the prayers of the priests.[64]

Furthermore, 'a parish is a definite community of the Christian faithful established on a stable basis within a particular church.'[65]Virtual assemblies, thus, prevent the public nature of the liturgy that requires physical presence from happening. It allows participants the opportunity of worshipping from their comfort zones. When we leave our home and proceed to the Church, it is a symbol of making a journey of faith to seek out Christ…Through bodily movement and procession, one joins in the redemptive work.[66] This is even more impossible in the Nigerian/African context where the bodily nature of assembly and worship is most emphasized. Could there be a virtual sprinkling of Holy Water, virtual offertory processions, virtual touching of the people, virtual dances and bodily expression or virtual participation in the Eucharistic banquet? The worst that could happen in this case, therefore is to have a liturgical assembly where the priest celebrates alone, with all others in the 'congregation' elsewhere participating through zoom or by any other means. Add to this the challenges of stable electricity and internet infrastructure and it becomes clear that virtual liturgy is not only untenable in the liturgical sense but unpracticable for Nigeria.

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[64] St. John Chrysostom, *De incomprehensibili* 3, 6: PG 48, 725.
[65] CCC 1279.
[66] Cf. Emmanuel Chinedu Anagwo, *The Nexus Between ICT and Liturgy: Towards Consolidating Digital Worship on the African Context*. (Münster: LIT Verlag 2023), 70.