

Ministry in a Virtual World

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Modern Church Blog October 15th 2020

For those in public ministry, the business of how we are received is as important in the world of the virtual as it is in real time - real space, because we are still encountering real persons. When we encounter people on zoom, or in the 'real world' context that we are used to, we may or may not be wearing a clerical collar. So is there a point in which we either cease to be someone who ministers in an official capacity, because we are not wearing one, or else become something more than just an ordinary person, because we are wearing one? These questions pertain as much to the world of the virtual as they do to the 'real world' contexts we are used to.

So what kind of reality are we now all inhabiting and how does that affect our ministry? For me, the essence of what it means to be a priest is to be fully conscious of the presence of Christ, the Christ I already know in myself, who is reflected back to me in the face of the other whether I encounter them online or in the street. It is the in-depth nature of the encounter that makes it real in the fullest sense.

But how, you might ask, is it possible to have in depth encounters with as many as twenty or thirty faces on a screen? I would say that there is very little difference in the way we go about encountering others in Christ whether singly, in their hundreds, in real time, or on a screen, although there are inbuilt difficulties when it comes to the virtual.

For one thing, the word 'virtual' is itself misleading. It conveys the idea of 'almost', of a parallel universe, or of 'pretend'. The latter is particularly difficult for us who are in the business of bringing the good news of a gospel that is not at all about pretending, but about a lived reality. So the virtual challenges us more than ever to be real, as the people we are, and to look at the realities we are confronted with in the world and in the context of our particular ministries, with a deeper understanding of what the incarnate God looks like, of what the real presence of Christ means to each one of us. Zoom and the virtual are surprisingly easy contexts in which to do this. On zoom, people will often, unwittingly perhaps, let us in to places that are integral to their personal lives – their kitchen, living room or bedroom, and which allow us to sense quite a bit about them as persons, just from their context.

This places us in a rather ambiguous situation. We are acutely aware of a person's surroundings, and of what they tell us about that person, while at the same time never having seen their face before. They are both familiar and strange to us. In some cases, seeing a face where until now we've only known a name can be a great help in connecting with someone, or in making it possible for us to feel more confident in meetings, when names we know suddenly acquire faces, and become more than names. But on the whole, zoom provides little

else in the way of meaningful context, or a context that is likely to resonate with the deeper needs and hopes of the persons we are engaging with.

This is a problem we also face when we do virtual, or zoom services. They are fine up to a point, but they lack something essential, unless all of us, participants and celebrants alike, are willing to engage in what Coleridge called a ‘suspension of disbelief’. Put in general terms, it means that you make the viewer, or reader, perhaps, take for granted the reality or truth of what you are saying. This is not to say that as ministers working with the virtual world we are fooling people into believing in our delusions. We do not create virtual contexts in order to play on their emotions or insult their intelligence by providing them with ‘virtual’ experiences, but we do suggest something about the world that they and we inhabit, and about the reality with which we are dealing as people who minister in God’s Church. That reality is the Christ who is at the heart of all of our lives.

So the world of the virtual is a challenge but it also offers hitherto undreamed of possibilities for us as ministers in God’s church. We are, after all, *theotokoi*, people who, like Mary, have willingly accepted the invitation to be bearers of her Son into the world. In what used to pass for the normal course of things, we did this with the help of real life contexts and encounters; in our churches, in events that deepen our common life, in being there for others and for each other and, above all, in the celebrating of the Eucharist.

While the contexts in which all these happenings take place may have changed or disappeared altogether, *we* have not changed. We are still people who have been commissioned to be Christ bearers into the world. The big opportunity offered to us by the virtual is that we are now commissioned to serve the whole world, and we don’t even have to go out and seek it because it’s right there on our screens.

What doesn’t automatically follow is the presence of God’s Spirit leading us into all truth, because it is just as easy to get in the way of God’s Spirit when we move into the virtual world, as it is in the hitherto ordinary world. It’s easy to put on an act, to pretend. But the world of the virtual, the single screen, is unsparing when it comes to what is true and genuine about us, as distinct from what is not. So we need to be clear about what it is we bring of ourselves to those we serve, and what we bring as priests and ministers, as *theotokoi*, not only in the sense of what we believe, but in who and what we are. In other words, we must minister from a place of deep conviction, of knowing and being known by God.

We have to be able to hold steady in the Holy Spirit. This is not always easy when we’re faced with a screen full of people most of whom we don’t recognise and many of whom will be doing anything but listen to what we have to say. So we learn to develop, or live in, a kind of tension between reality and the virtual, what we know to be real in terms of the people we’re dealing with, what we’re saying or doing online, and the ability to penetrate the ‘unreal’, the ephemeral temporary nature of the screen world.

The screen world is of course not just one world. It’s a different world for each of the persons we see, or perhaps don’t see, before us, because each has a context. Each has a story, as each one of us has a context and a story. Each has a truth.

We sense this online and we sense it, perhaps more acutely, once the computer has been turned off, as we're left with an imprint or memory of the people on the screen. So what of the time that follows? Will that zoom meeting, or streamed service fade into the mist of virtual time? Or will we know how to hold its essentials in the Christ who abides in each one of us? Will we bear these people, or situations, deep into the heart of God as we might have done before the age of zoom? And what will they remember of us? The world of the virtual exposes us. People see us for what we are, rather than for the jobs we do, or the position we may hold in the Church.

All of this suggests the need for a deep reviewing of what we understand our own calling to be about, because every calling is different. It is different because we are not called to do a certain job, but, in the world of the virtual, to be a certain person for other persons from within our life in Christ.

So the virtual makes us more conscious of the fact that we are living in a state of creative tension in regard to calling, a tension between what we think we should be doing and what we are, a tension between intellect and spirit, a tension between the Church as a system with structures and mission agendas, and one that is often quite hard to describe or quantify in real terms, and a tension between the real and the virtual, with the last of these tensions now defining all the others, and yet is itself hard to define. So here there is paradox, because we also need to let go of that tension and of the need to define what we are doing, the need to somehow make things happen, to produce effects, to give or engender some kind of experience, to provide answers – to *be* the answer perhaps.

These are the things that have always compromised our calling and now, in the world of the virtual, we're being given the opportunity to let go of some of them, or at least to think of them differently. You could say that this is the direct result of the 'virtual' bringing about a brave new Church, except that the Church is not brave and new in the way Huxley or Orwell portray their dystopian societies. While it may be tempting to compare the many strictures placed on the Church's life by the pandemic, it is in a sense, freer than it has ever been. The long months of closure brought about by Covid have given us all the opportunity to re-connect with that inner freedom from which our calling came, and in which we respond to it.

This is the freedom that unlooses the habits that have perhaps been binding us, habits of thought, unquestioning adherence to prescribed ways of doing things, assumptions about who is allowed to do or say things in an official capacity, and who is not. The world of the virtual, the world of zoom, imposes no such restrictions. Anyone can start a zoom conversation. Neither does it have any kind of tradition that it must adhere to. So it is uncharted water, there for all of us to navigate.

So what are priests, and all who minister in God's name, called to be in such a context? And what are we not called to be? I think we find our answers to these questions in contemplating the person of Jesus. He was always fully himself in whatever context he ministered. He was always true to himself, and people identified with him because of this essential truthfulness. He didn't try to become something that would conform to

expectations. He didn't court popularity. He never wanted to be a celebrity. In fact that was the one thing he eschewed more than anything. Stardom was a temptation that constantly goaded him and at times threatened to overwhelm him, as it does all of us from time to time. The world of the virtual invites delusions of grandeur, but it also imposes a kind of anonymity, which is a blessing.

This being said, we must still be at our best when we *are* out there because we need to look good and sound good if we are not to discredit the Church we're here to serve. But to be really at our best, as opposed to presenting a public *figura* that secretly aspires to becoming an internet celebrity, we need to know our real selves well. We need to allow Christ to know us, how fragile and vulnerable we are in the face of the temptation to be something other, or greater, than what we are in the eyes of God.

All of this requires a combination of vulnerability and strength. We must be vulnerable before God, if we are to be truly there for the people we serve online. We must know our real selves, in our tendencies to either self-aggrandize or, on the other hand, to 'rubbish' ourselves to the point that there is nothing left for us to really be, or to give to God's people.

But we allow God to see all that, so that we can be emptied of our delusions, so that we can mirror the *kenotic* life and ministry of Jesus, and so embody the truth for the people we serve. We are strong in the knowledge of that truth - that we are known by a God who commissions each of us to navigate the still largely uncharted waters of the virtual. We hold to this knowledge, of the truth in ourselves, and of the truthfulness of our calling as priests or ministers in God's Church, but we are always mindful of the fact that every single person we minister to, out there in the virtual world, has a truth of their own waiting to be discovered, waiting to be forgiven, perhaps, but always waiting to be known by God.