

Eucharist and Technology

A Heideggerian Critique of Virtual Communion

John Olson

Oriel College, University of Oxford

john.olson@theology.ox.ac.uk

Abstract

Responding to debates within Christianity during the COVID-19 pandemic about the merits of virtual communion—the practice of individuals receiving the Eucharist alone while a priest enacts the liturgy via video conference call—this piece argues against online practice of the sacrament in times of separation and isolation. Against the case made by theologian Deanna Thompson, whose work focuses on the virtual quality of Christ’s presence in the church, I use Martin Heidegger’s reflections on technology to examine how practices of virtual communion commodify the Eucharist and thus seek to domesticate and control Christ’s presence therein. After giving an overview of Thompson’s case for the virtual presence of Christ in the church, I turn to Heidegger’s examination of the technological worldview and evaluate how Thompson’s treatment of Christ’s real presence falls into the trap which Heidegger sees therein: namely, treating otherwise free and dynamic beings as static standing-reserve. I then conclude with a section evaluating how Heidegger’s examination of human Being-in-the-world opens up a possible alternative understanding of the Eucharist as a dynamic world rather than as a static thing. In such an examination, Christ’s presence is disclosed not in the things of bread and wine but in the dynamics which they perform and the patterns of movement they establish, so that one’s proximity and understanding of Christ comes from a shared attunement as opened up in the character of the eucharistic world which he is. As a result, the Eucharist can be understood as both free from human determination on the one hand while on the other hand still bearing fruits in the Christian life even where the sacrament cannot be practiced.



I. Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic of 2020 has presented a series of challenges to the life and practices of religions across the globe. Within Christianity, a particular debate has sprung up as to whether and how to practice the sacraments in a time of social distancing and online communication. Within that debate, theologian Deanna Thompson has recently endorsed a model of virtual communion, wherein she argues that quarantined individuals may reliably encounter the real presence of Christ in their partaking of bread and wine while a socially distanced priest or minister enacts the eucharistic liturgy over a video conference call.¹ In response to Thompson's position, this paper will argue against the practice of virtual communion. However, rather than arguing for the inherent inferiority of virtual connectivity to embodied presence—a tack which Thompson sees as the primary challenge to her argument—I will instead argue that Thompson's treatment of the Eucharist itself constitutes an objectifying—and thus, for the Christian, idolatrous—enframing of the sacrament along the lines of Martin Heidegger's interpretation of technology. After giving an overview of Thompson's case for the virtual presence of Christ in the church, I will thus turn to Heidegger's examination of the technological worldview and evaluate how Thompson's treatment of Christ's real presence falls into the trap which Heidegger sees in that worldview: namely, treating otherwise free and dynamic beings as static standing-reserve. I will then conclude with a brief counter-proposal: continuing our conversation with Heidegger, I propose that the Eucharist is better thought of as a world of dynamic involvements than as a static thing, so that the freedom and mystery of Christ's presence in the sacrament are preserved at the same time that Christians can intimately engage with that presence in an embodied, unconscious manner. The result, I hope, is a non-objectifying picture of the Eucharist as a pedagogical tool for Christian formation and attunement, so that separation from eucharistic practice during times of social distance and isolation need not encumber the fruits of the sacrament from manifesting themselves outside the sanctuary.

At this point, however, it might be asked whether my introduction of phenomenology to Thompson's theological project of largely pastoral concern is appropriate. One might suggest that Thompson's writing style and ecclesial focus indicate a different kind of project from that of more philosophical theology. But it is not *despite* but in fact *because* Deanna Thompson focuses her well-written and well-researched work toward lay as well as academic audiences that I think it is worth taking up in this way. I think that I am in agreement with Thompson in my belief that the religious life of the church is the ultimate end of good theology, and so I do not introduce a phenomenological insight here for the sake of extracting Thompson's work from its pastoral

¹ See Deanna A. Thompson, "Christ is Really Present Virtually: A Proposal for Virtual Communion," Lutheran Center for Faith, Values, and Community, St. Olaf College, March 26, 2020, <https://wp.stolaf.edu/lutherancenter/2020/03/christ-is-really-present-virtually-a-proposal-for-virtual-communion/>.

audience. On the contrary, it is precisely because I believe that systematic theological concerns are put to best use when directed toward pastoral ends that I find her wholly legitimate concerns worth taking up as a starting point for such a philosophical conversation. Moreover, I think I am in further agreement with Thompson when I say that such ostensibly academic concerns are best assessed in light of crises such as the current pandemic. Where I ultimately disagree with her findings, then, my aim is as much to promote the importance of the topic she brings to the fore as it is to try to improve the Christian church's ability to hone in on a fruitful solution.

In bringing to light the technological treatment of the Eucharist inherent in an endorsement of virtual communion, my hope is to highlight the ways in which our contemporary technological attitude already affects eucharistic theologies in problematic ways. Far from denouncing what is ultimately a plea for compassion and connection in Thompson's work, then, I hope to demonstrate how Thompson's advocacy of virtual communion merely typifies temptations already present in Christian theology. Insofar as moments of crisis provide an opportunity to expose and revise theological defects in any religion, then, the current pandemic offers a window in which to assess where previous eucharistic theologies may have fallen short or retained unnoticed infelicities. My caution against practices of virtual communion, therefore, will hopefully not be taken as a cold-hearted attempt to rob a church in crisis of its most sacred ritual but rather as a gesture toward opening up the mysterious otherness of Christ's real presence therein. While the world in which this piece is read will invariably be quite different from the one in which it was written—such is the speed of change in this pandemic—my intention is to use the current public health crisis as an occasion for necessary reflection on eucharistic practice more generally. My gesture towards a constructive alternative in the final section, then, is meant as a hopeful contribution to a church scrambling for answers. Rather than accommodating our religious practice to uncertain times, I recommend a theology of the Eucharist which takes seriously the mysterious otherness of Christ's presence while simultaneously endowing the Christian with trust in their intimate relationship with that presence which then prepares them to encounter Christ at work beyond the sacramental table, even in worlds of loneliness, fasting, and uncertainty.

II. The Virtual Body of Christ

Let us begin with Deanna Thompson's argument on behalf of virtual communion. In order to evaluate her belief in Christ's real presence in an online setting, we need to first understand her interpretation of the body of Christ as a virtual body. Thompson makes her case against the backdrop of her own experience as a cancer patient, wherein her one-time skepticism of virtual connectivity was challenged by her experience of intimate connection through a personal website and online communication.² Whereas Thompson once saw modern digital technology as a force

² Deanna A. Thompson, *The Virtual Body of Christ in a Suffering World* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2016), 3-5.

of isolation, herding human participants into silos of self-absorption and short attention spans, her experience of sickness enlightened her to the ways in which human connection has always been mediated through virtual—that is, *immaterial*—means.³

Thompson thus makes her case that the virtual world is continuous with the “real” world by insisting that the real world has always been constituted through virtual means. While admitting a qualitative difference between in-person and written communication, Thompson argues that written communication has always brought with it the inclination to virtual interaction. Drawing on the work of digital culture scholar T.V. Reed, she suggests that so long as novels, myths, and other manifestations of culture have existed, humans have been engaged in virtual worlds.⁴ That which is not physically present is made present to mind through the means of language. Language is thus opened up as the primal virtual reality, transmitting meaning across space and time in ways of which bodies are simply not capable. Language provides the building blocks of virtual reality by endowing one physical space with the effects of causes remote to it. Thompson thus argues that virtual worlds, far from being deviations from “actual” reality, constitute continuations of that reality beyond the physical sphere.⁵

The importance of this point for Thompson is that the reality of the virtual makes it possible to conceive of virtual relations as real relations. She employs the sociological language of *strong-tie networks*—“networks of people we trust who can help us weather change and the uncertainty that comes with it”—in order to evaluate the efficacy of online relationships.⁶ Opposing those who suggest that online relationships are essentially *weak-tie networks*—that is, networks of low personal investment and therefore minimal social efficacy—Thompson argues from her research and her own experience as a cancer patient that there is in fact significant evidence for strong-tie relationships in a virtual sphere. “Just as it’s possible to be in close physical proximity with others while simultaneously being absent mentally or spiritually,” she writes, “it’s also possible to be virtually present to one another in profound, meaningful and real ways even when we’re physically distant.”⁷ The strength of human relations, then, is not dependent upon the means of

³ Thompson is somewhat vague in her use of the term “virtual,” for which I criticize her below. In my own usage, however, I will define the “virtual” as “immaterial.” I make this definition as much for the sake of casting a wide interpretive net—“immaterial” embraces more of what counts as virtual than, say, “mental” or “imaginary”—because it highlights the distinction of the virtual from the intrinsic physicality of worldly existence I will later examine in Heidegger’s *Being and Time*.

⁴ Thompson, *Virtual Body of Christ*, 25. Cf. T.V. Reed, *Digitized Lives: Culture, Power and Social Change in the Internet Era*, Second Edition (New York: Routledge, 2019), 21.

⁵ Thompson, *Virtual Body of Christ*, 24.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 18. Cf. David Krackhardt, “The Strength of Strong Ties: The Importance of Philos in Organizations,” in *Networks and Organizations: Structure, Form, and Action*, ed. N. Nohria, et al. (Boston: Harvard Business School Press, 1992), 216-239.

⁷ Thompson, “Christ is Really Present Virtually.”

communication but the intention and attunement of the communicants to one another. Summing up her argument, she writes,

First, strong and weak ties are not opposing forces but instead work in complementary ways within social networks; second, the ties that bind are often fluid, with strong ties sometimes growing weaker and weak ties sometimes growing stronger; and third, weak ties play vital roles in social networks, expanding and making room for new insights, new opportunities, and new ways of interacting.⁸

That an online community might be composed of weak ties, then, does not, therefore, render it incapable of becoming a strong-tie network. Likewise, not all in-person communities constitute strong-tie networks, so that associating one level of relationship exclusively with a particular degree of physical proximity overlooks the myriad ways humans relate to one another.

It is on this basis that Thompson suggests that the body of Christ is a primarily virtual community. As a strong-tie community constituted across space and time, the church is constituted as a single entity through the connective tissue of the written word. Thompson takes her cue from the apostle Paul, whose physical absence from the many churches he serves provides the occasion for his relationship with each of them through virtual means. That Paul is able to have strong-tie relationships with churches to which he is almost never physically present indicates the strength of the virtual means by which those relationships are sustained. As Thompson believes, "This point highlights... the inadequacy of thinking about the term *virtual* as *almost*. Paul is decidedly more than *almost* a part of these communities; he is founder, leader, guide, and inspiration to multiple church communities simultaneously."⁹ Moreover, "Paul's connections with all other members of local incarnations of the body of Christ are nurtured and maintained mostly through a virtual form of communication."¹⁰ Paul's centrality to the communities he serves through the medium of his letter-writing testifies to the strong-tie potential of virtual presence. The otherwise disparate communities which together constellate the body of Christ are thusly arranged primarily through the virtual communication of an absent leader. Insofar as the various churches together make up one body, then, their configuration as such is a virtual one.

Consequently, Thompson argues that the Christian's encounter with the risen Christ within the church is also a necessarily virtual one. Just as Paul makes his presence felt in the community through means other than bodily presence, so he identifies Christ as active in those same communities through the mediation of the Christians therein. Thompson writes,

Indeed, if we return to the vision that confronted Paul on the road to Damascus, we find a Paul who heard a voice (a virtual encounter?) saying, 'Saul, Saul, why are you harassing me?' (Acts 9:4).

⁸ Thompson, *Virtual Body of Christ*, 19-20.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 40.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 41.

It is important to note that Paul was persecuting the followers of Jesus rather than the person Jesus who lived, died, and rose before Paul took up his role as a persecutor of those who followed Jesus. In other words, from the very beginning of his relationship with Jesus and his followers, Paul's connection to Christ was a virtual one, mediated primarily through his followers.¹¹

Because the Christ who speaks to Saul identifies himself with the people Saul is persecuting, Saul/Paul's relationship to Christ is from the outset mediated through the community of the church. These individuals, though not Jesus of Nazareth himself, nevertheless collectively constitute Christ's presence, so that Paul's encounter with that presence is always a mediated one. Even when Paul does have material relations with members of Christ's body, the presence of Christ remains decidedly *immaterial* and therefore virtual in nature. That Paul has a real, efficacious encounter with the risen Christ even as that very encounter is meted out virtually thus grounds his later description of the church as Christ's body so that this moniker is able to denote reality without referring to biological matter.

Thompson's argument on behalf of virtual communion, then, rests on the efficacy of Christ's virtual presence. Drawing on Luther, Thompson writes, "the Word is a gift from God that comes to the congregation through public reading of Scripture and proclamation of the gospel; ... the liturgy and hymns are means for the community to proclaim and respond to God's Word."¹² Because Christ is present through the words and actions of Christian participants in his body, that same presence can now be mediated through the virtual communication of those words and actions. Thompson goes on, "And if God is *really present* through the Word in all these ways—even through virtual forms of worship—it is worth reflecting on the theological possibility of the real presence of the Word incarnate in, with and through the experience of virtual communion."¹³ Insofar as the church gathers and performs itself online in a time of pandemic, then, it makes the risen Christ present through that same online medium. Anything the church can do materially it can do immaterially. And because Christ's presence to the embodied assembly of a congregation is already a virtual presence, it is not only possible but entirely natural for that same presence to be meted out online without deficiency.

However, Thompson's advocacy of a virtual body of Christ is not without its ambiguities. Chief among these is the vagueness of the term "virtual" in her description of the presence of the risen Christ. Thompson is adamant about rejecting any definition of "virtual reality" as "almost reality," thereby bifurcating the virtual from the real.¹⁴ Indeed, her whole argument hinges on the claim

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 41.

¹² Thompson, "Christ is Really Present Virtually."

¹³ *Ibid.*

¹⁴ Thompson, *Virtual Body of Christ*, 24-25.

that the virtual *is* the real and that what we call "real life" has in fact had a virtual quality all along. But insofar as this is the case, it raises the question of what usefulness the term "virtual" has at all.

If by "virtual" Thompson means "metaphorical," then we face an immediate contradiction. To say that something is a metaphor for something else is to say that it is semantically representative, that it stands in as a sign for something the metaphor itself is not. To say that Christ is really present virtually, where "virtual" means "metaphorical," is thus a contradiction in terms. To be fair, Thompson nowhere suggests that she understands "virtual" to mean "metaphorical." But so far as this is the case, her treatment of the term "body of Christ" needs assessing. Exploring the ways Paul uses Greco-Roman imagery to articulate a Christian theology to a Gentile audience, Thompson acknowledges that the body imagery Paul employs is a metaphor for the church as a diverse collection of myriad parts.¹⁵ So far as Thompson wishes to undermine any prioritization of the body over the virtual, this is not a problem. But insofar as Christ's presence to the Christian community is a *real* (i.e., *non-metaphorical*) presence, the strictly metaphorical interpretation of Paul's language of the body leaves Thompson wanting for a more substantial ontology of Christ's real presence. Giving a meaningful epithet to an institution or community does not then endow it with a new ontological status. If the term "body of Christ" is merely a metaphor for the community that is the church, then we have no problem. But if Christ is really present as a risen agent in and through that body, then a further account of real presence is necessary beyond simply giving Christ's name to his followers.

If by "virtual" Thompson means "invisible," then we are faced with a contradiction between how virtual worlds operate online and how Christ presences in communities. On the one hand, online virtual worlds cannot be considered invisible because it is precisely upon visibility that they depend. Whether through written type or animated virtual reality or video streaming, the online world operates through predominantly visual media. And while much of this is augmented by aural stimuli, the two-dimensionality of bodily encounter with the online world limits the types of connection available. So, for instance, a blind person who can read another's writing through an embodied encounter with braille is bracketed from that same possibility with, say, the words on a Facebook page. Contrast this, then, with the universality accredited to Christ's presence in the church. Across the visual differences of geography, race, gender, culture, liturgical performance, and so on, the unity of the church universal is maintained on the grounds of a common belonging to Christ, whose risen presence is not particularized according to space or time. The simultaneous presence of Christ in churches across the world is contingent upon an *invisibility* that is not sustained in virtual worlds that rely on the predominance of the visual.

¹⁵ Ibid., 35: "So Paul turns to salient images and metaphors to help communicate his vision for what it means to be this new community that sees itself as unified in Christ despite the many differences that threaten to separate members of the community from one another."

I therefore think that Thompson's most likely meaning of the term "virtual" is simply "mediated." So far as her argument that all reality is virtual reality relies on the premise that all reality is mediated reality, she has a legitimate point to make (and a considerable amount of philosophical, sociological, and psychological research to back her up as well). However, Thompson's argument for the mediatory nature of the church's connective tissue comes down to *communication*. It is by exchanging *information* that the church universal sustains its ties. Thompson substantiates this claim in her examination of Paul's virtual presence to the churches to whom he writes, where Paul's presence is manifested through the mediatory means of language. But to say that Paul is present without diminishment through the virtual medium of his letters is to limit the whole of Paul's being to his thinking, thereby bracketing the myriad habits, tones, attitudes, ticks, moods, and so forth which oriented him within the worlds in which he was the unique person that he was. Paul may indeed be communicating something very real about himself and his experience, and he may even be able to elicit a similar experience in his readers. But the communication of thoughts *about* a person seems quite different than communicating that person *themselves*.

This is not such a problem for our consideration of Paul, though, since we are not so concerned with the reality of his presence to his readers. But Thompson's insistence upon the real presence of Christ conveyed through virtual means seems to reduce Christ's presence (and the Eucharist as a whole) to a thought-event on par with Paul's written communication. But to condense Christ's sacramental presence into communicable mental content is to reduce Christ's presence to information, which seems entirely different from the dynamic person whom he is. To receive the interpreted meaning of Christ is quite different than receiving the thing itself. Moreover, meanings and information can be wrong, so that any communication of information about Christ in the sacrament that is not accountable to some more substantive criterion is subject to criticism as a subjective whim rather than any reflection of reality.

It is because Thompson and I both wish to advocate for a real presence of Christ in the Eucharist, then, that I find this association of presence with communicable mental content such a threat to her account of Christ's virtual presence. A theology which wishes to take real presence seriously must also take seriously the great atheist Ludwig Feuerbach's critique of projection: "Faith is the power of the imagination, which makes the real unreal, and the unreal real: in direct contradiction with the truth of the senses, with the truth of reason."¹⁶ Mental, informational presence comes fearfully close to imagined presence, so that a self-aware Christian who associates the presence of Christ in the Eucharist with the communication of speech should be wary of where the two might overlap.

¹⁶ Ludwig Feuerbach, *The Essence of Christianity*, trans. George Elliot (Amherst, NY: Prometheus Books, 1989), 242.

It is thus this conveyance of Christ's personal presence into the communication of mental categories—its package-ability, as it were—that I find so disconcerting about Thompson's model of communion. And it is for this reason that I now turn to the work of Martin Heidegger, whose critique of technology centers not so much on the psychological effects of technology to which Thompson responds but more on the contemporary worldview of objectification and domestication of beings that I think typifies her treatment of the sacrament.

III. Technology and Idolatry

Deanna Thompson's advocacy for virtual communion stems largely from her rejection of the belief that the physical world is somehow superior to the virtual, that is, the non-physical. While acknowledging the social and psychological risks posed by digital technology—social isolation, immersion in ideological echo chambers, unequal access to online resources, etc.—Thompson makes the case that the positive potential of online connectivity outweighs the potential costs.¹⁷ So long as we proceed with the critical caution she recommends, I am in complete agreement with her on this point. Digital technologies are here to stay, so it is best to make use of the opportunities they provide while striving to mitigate the risks they pose. My concern with her recommendation for virtual communion, however, stems less from her wholesale embrace of online communication and more from the way she shoehorns Christ's real presence into readily conveyable mental content. Such a move typifies what Martin Heidegger identified as the underlying worldview of our technological epoch: namely, the inclination to objectify, domesticate, and thereby colonize the world under our conceptual mastery, what Christians would call *idolatry* and which Heidegger calls *enframing* [*Gestell*]. Shown in this light, technology is not so much the sum of technological artifacts—the phone in my pocket or the computer on which I am writing—as it is a worldview. And as a worldview, technology poses a risk to true understanding which I think Thompson overlooks. I will therefore argue in this section that Heidegger's treatment of technology as *enframing* poses a serious challenge to the case for virtual communion. That Heidegger articulated this phenomenon well before the onset of personal computers, smartphones, and the internet, though, further indicates that the threat of technology to an authentic human encounter with the world is not limited to the digital sphere. I will thus further suggest that the threat of a technological view of the Eucharist is not unique to the world of online connectivity but constitutes a challenge to eucharistic theologies in general, which the virtual context only exacerbates and brings to greater light.

When Heidegger speaks of technology, he is speaking not primarily of technological entities but of the contemporary world as it has been oriented by scientific, calculative thinking. Whereas earlier human epochs understood their worlds and the beings that populated them through myth, art, and religion, the modern perspective is largely shaped by the scientific method and the

¹⁷ Thompson, *Virtual Body of Christ*, 13-21.

industrial attitude of production. So far as modern technology is a world-revealing perspective, then, we might say that Heidegger is more interested in the *technologism* of modern life or, to parse out the Greek origins of the word “technology,” he is interested in the *logos* of *techne*. In its original meaning, the Greek word *techne* refers to craftsmanship and thus entails a bringing-forth or revealing along the lines of art. In his landmark 1953 essay, “The Question Concerning Technology,” Heidegger writes, “*Techne* belongs to bringing-forth, to *poiesis*.”¹⁸ In this bringing-forth capacity, *techne* also belongs to *episteme*, knowing.¹⁹ All making is a showing. Every employment of a tool or material in my hands showcases it as a certain kind of something. For instance, a potter makes a jug and opens up a world of *pouring*, with all its associations of wine and dancing, of washing and bathing, or even of baptism.²⁰ Likewise, it is in response to such worlds that call for pouring that one makes a jug in the first place. The craftsmanship of *techne* thus belongs to the activity of *logos*, which Heidegger defines in terms of gathering and showing.²¹ As disclosive in this way, *techne* is therefore revelatory.

What, then, does modern technology reveal? According to Heidegger, “The revealing that rules in modern technology is a challenging [*Herausfordern*], which puts to nature the unreasonable demand that it supply energy which can be extracted and stored as such.”²² The way that modern technology showcases beings within a world is by showing them as resources. The *challenging* of modern technology is the process of domesticating beings, shoehorning them into preconceived conceptual silos, framing their existence according to functionality. Beings become resources from which energy, nutrients, and even information can be extracted at will.

This much is as true for the premodern potter as it is for us today, though. All *techne* is a showing, a disclosing of a world, and an opening up of possibilities therein. But what distinguishes modern, post-industrial technology from its predecessors, says Heidegger, is its seeking to store the resources derived from beings. The purpose of domesticating beings is to make them readily available, pliable in human hands and obedient to human manipulation. Whereas a premodern windmill’s sails “do indeed turn in the wind; they are left entirely to the wind’s blowing. But the windmill does not unlock energy from the air currents in order to store it.”²³ The defining trait of modern technology, as opposed to earlier human tool-usage, is thus the captivity of beings under

¹⁸ Martin Heidegger, “The Question Concerning Technology,” in *Basic Writings*, ed. David Farrell Krell (New York: Harper Collins, 2008), 318.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 318.

²⁰ See Martin Heidegger, “The Thing” in *Poetry, Language, Thought*, trans. Albert Hofstadter (New York: Harper Perennial Classics, 2001): 164-168.

²¹ See Martin Heidegger, *Introduction to Metaphysics*, trans. Gregory Fried and Richard Polt (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2000), 132-142.

²² Heidegger, “The Question Concerning Technology,” 320.

²³ *Ibid.*, 320.

human mastery, what Heidegger calls *standing-reserve* [*Bestand*].²⁴ Challenging, then, is the human provocation of nature under the specific intent of mastery. As master of beings, the technological human both extracts resources from beings and hems them into storage units (everything from animal cages to electric batteries) from which they can be summoned at will. Beings are no longer available for discovery so much as to be controlled. As *standing-reserve*, beings are always on call, so to speak, always available for the purposes humans assign them. Think, for instance, of the contemporary meat industry. Whereas premodern humans hunted and gathered for their food, and later humans learned farming by tending animals in open pastures, the rise of modern market capitalism incentivizes large, corporate farms to pen in animals, maximizing the number of creatures that can be fit into a minimal container-space, and controlling everything from their reproductive activity to their genetic makeup so as to keep up with demand. As a type of disclosure, then, technology reveals beings as fundamentally storable, manipulable, and thus as existing solely for human purposes.

The abiding characteristic of this technological worldview is *measurement*. Beings disclosed according human measure are what Heidegger calls *ta mathemata* in his 1962 essay “Modern Science, Metaphysics, and Mathematics.” In contrast to *ta physica*—“the things insofar as they originate and come forth from themselves”²⁵—*ta mathemata* “are the things insofar as we take cognizance of them as what we already know them to be in advance.”²⁶ Measuring, Heidegger goes on, “is therefore an extremely peculiar taking, a taking where one who takes only takes what one basically already has.”²⁷ To interpret a thing in terms of concepts already possessed is to subject it to measurement.²⁸ Measurement does not so much reflect that we have names for things—dogs and cats, knives and forks, and so on—but that we rather submit all these beings to our expectations of standardization. Such standardization, then, discloses beings as existing for ease of human use rather than for their own, individual sake. The result is that, in our belonging to a technological world, we automatically interpret beings according to our expectations of what they ought to be rather than what they may show of themselves.

The measuring, mathematical gaze typifies what Heidegger calls technology’s *enframing* [*Gestell*]. Enframing is “that challenging claim which gathers man thither to order the self-revealing as *standing-reserve*.”²⁹ Technology frames the world as stable and domesticated to human purposes. The measure of human concepts thus becomes the colonizing grasp we exert on beings in making

²⁴ Ibid., 322.

²⁵ Martin Heidegger, “Modern Science, Metaphysics, and Mathematics,” in *Basic Writings*, ed. David Farrell Krell (New York: Harper Collins, 2008), 274.

²⁶ Ibid., 275.

²⁷ Ibid., 275.

²⁸ Ibid., 276.

²⁹ Heidegger, “The Question Concerning Technology,” 324.

them conform to our own intentions. The technological worldview demands stability out of beings so that they can all the more readily be put to use for our predetermined purposes. In this way, technology suffocates the freedom of beings.

Digital technology is particularly adept at this measuring treatment of beings as standing-reserve. The internet allows me to summon up other humans, their thoughts, and their experiences at my discretion in the form of photographs, videos, audio files, news articles, and community forums. Moreover, digital technology as a storage device allows me to hold all this data as available to my every need. If I need to find a picture of something, I can Google it and then review the results generated according to the measure of what I typed in my search bar. I can watch the same YouTube video over and over again. I can stop it at my convenience and come back to it at the moment where I left off. I can skip what I do not want and return again and again to the same content with confidence it will remain unchanged. As a result, the person in this photo or behind that tweet ceases to be real because they are instead domesticated to my whim. They may have elected to speak and act of their own accord, but they are only now heard because I say so. The digital world thus takes what Heidegger observes as the essence of the technological epoch to an extreme level. The threat of standing-reserve is that it makes beings—even our fellow human beings—into static things obedient to the measurement of our desire. With the world of beings condensed into visual frames and text and sorted into a network of easily navigable sites, I maintain the interpretive order of my world and affirm my place at its center. The content available to me may alter with time, but it will always be reliably packaged in such a way that is stable, static, and subject to my direction.

The peak of technological thinking, then, is its commodification of human beings themselves. As curator of my online world, I not only filter and control the data at my fingertips, but I further control what of myself is disclosed to others. Those parts of myself I wish to accentuate as part of my “true self” can be highlighted through photos on Instagram and pithy comments on Twitter, while those bits I deem less worthy of my ideal self can be bracketed as unimportant embarrassments. My person is thus something to be made, refined, and published, so that the inconsistencies, idiosyncrasies, and flaws that invariably contribute a great deal to the person I am in reality are easily disposed of as lesser truths and little concern. Moreover, this crafted persona reduces my being into the limited sensory scope of the visual, either by condensing my person into descriptive information or displaying select moments through photography or video. Thompson herself admits as much, reflecting on her experience as a cancer patient,

It is almost always the case that it is less difficult for me to explain how I'm doing in an online post than in a face-to-face conversation. In virtual reality, tears do not make my explanations of my condition unintelligible. When I draft a post about how I'm doing, I can go back and edit out

something that sounds more bitter or more optimistic than I intend it to be. In cyberspace, my vulnerabilities often can be better managed than they can be in face-to-face interactions.³⁰

Thompson is certainly right in recognizing that written, virtual communication makes conveying oneself according to one's wishes easier. But Heidegger's examination of technology as a measuring and constricting force in the name of efficiency should give us pause. As inconvenient as they may be, emotions and physical limitations are significant parts of our persons, often disclosing what words can only imperfectly describe. That we would wish to bracket some of these elements is only natural and sometimes necessary. But Heidegger's point is that the technological worldview invites us to *always* see ourselves in terms of communicability and efficiency. The ability—and, in some cases, the obligation—to broadcast myself imposes on me the expectation to filter and refine myself. Our persons thus become editable, so that our online presence is a product of choice and measurement and not of our totality, personal infelicities and all. As Hubert Dreyfus and Charles Spinosa observe, "Heidegger came finally to see that technicity could treat people and things as resources to be enhanced."³¹ Online, I am incited to distinguish my best self—defined according to human measurements largely inherited from others—from the rest of myself. And such broadcasting takes place through a conglomeration of media which makes that fabricated, efficient self into a reliable standing-reserve of me-on-display.

Similarly, this self-curation of online personas fosters increased categorization of others. If all I know of a person is some data about them translated into the standing-reserve of online news articles, photos, and maybe some audiovisual files, I can better shoehorn that person into my own conceptual containers and the labels made readily available to me through the online marketplace of ideas. Online, one quickly ceases to be an individual, shaped by the inconsistencies and strangeness which make a whole person difficult if not impossible to categorize. One is now black, male, Christian, rural, conservative, college-educated, gay, etc., that these may render the individual stable and identifiable, algorithmically packaged for targeted advertisements and available to our moral judgments.

Such curation of persons is precisely the threat I see not only in Thompson's advocacy for virtual communion but in overly intellectual treatments of the Eucharist in general. To conflate Christ's presence with information about him or a conceptual predetermination of his character is to define his person according to our measurement. Certain words or actions of Jesus are prioritized over others in order to frame the meaning of his existence in a particular way. Insofar as this is to convey the Gospel message, this is entirely consistent with the purpose of language itself. We are not wrong to want to know *about* Jesus and what he means to us. But this does not yet give us

³⁰ Thompson, *Virtual Body of Christ*, 8.

³¹ Hubert Dreyfus and Charles Spinosa, "Further Reflections on Heidegger, Technology, and the Everyday," *Bulletin of Science, Technology & Society* 23.5 (October 2003): 341.

Christ's risen, personal presence unless we insist on distilling that presence into the stability of premeasured mental categories and dogmatically agreed-upon meanings. Just as there are countless aspects of my person which do not exist online—many of which can never be put into words—so there are aspects of Christ's person that exist beneath what the church says or conveys about him and which give further content and context to those aspects which we do put into speech. To condense Christ's presence into the utterable or into some repeatable recipe of words and signs thus seems to fit the vastness of his person within the measure of our own determination of his meaning. In other words, it is to treat Christ's presence as standing-reserve.

Contrast this attitude, then, with what Heidegger suggests is a truer form of interaction with beings: *letting-be* [*Gelassenheit*]. "The essence of truth is freedom," he writes in his 1943 essay, "On the Essence of Truth."³² This freedom is not simply human freedom, however. That would reduce truth to human measurement, which is precisely what technology does. As theologian and Heidegger scholar Judith Wolfe writes:

This [mindfulness of beings] requires not so much deliberate *action*—since a proactive 'framing' of the world is precisely what has distorted it—as an attentive letting-be, a spiritual discipline that allows the self to become a 'clearing' on which the light of Being may fall and show forth beings as they are. It is important for the later Heidegger that it is never in one's own power whether this coming-into-view will occur: revelation and communion must always come from without. The human calling is merely to hold oneself in readiness for them.³³

The truth of beings always comes over and against our determinative intentions. The reality of any particular being—from the pen on my desk to the bird outside my window—consists in that being's freedom to stand forth as it is in itself and not as it is defined by human measurement. The essence of truth as freedom "now reveals itself as letting beings be."³⁴ This letting-be occurs wherever we allow the strange and foreign aspects of a being to hold sway over us. Heidegger thus writes, "where beings are not very familiar to man and are scarcely and only roughly known by science, the openedness of beings as a whole can prevail more essentially than it can where the familiar and well-known has become boundless, and nothing is any longer able to withstand the business of knowing, since technical mastery over things bears itself without limit."³⁵ Within our technological world, saturated as it is by the attitude of enframing, the beings which most resiliently resist the captivity of standing-reserve are those beings that are foreign to us, which arrest our gaze precisely because they do not fit into our preexisting worldview. If the attitude of letting-be is to be the antidote to the commodification of beings in technology, then it must adopt just this

³² Martin Heidegger, "On the Essence of Truth," in *Basic Writings*, ed. David Farrell Krell (New York: Harper Collins, 2008), 123.

³³ Judith Wolfe, *Heidegger and Theology* (London: Bloomsbury, 2014), 138.

³⁴ Heidegger, "On the Essence of Truth," 125.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 129.

posture of wonder, allowing the strangeness of beings to wash over us rather than closing them down with immediate interpretive mastery.

My chief concern about Deanna Thompson's advocacy of virtual communion, then, is that it takes an insufficiently available posture toward Christ's presence in the Eucharist. In presuming that Christ's presence is automatic within the church and that the sacraments may therefore be practiced with equal efficacy through whatever media in which the church operates, the underlying assumption is that Christ's presence is subject to the measure of the church's action. That Thompson sees no qualitative difference between Christ's presence within the sacramental community and Christ's presence in online communication further indicates her willingness to distill that presence into the mental categories of the community of faith. Recall from above that Thompson's argument for virtual communion rests on the premise that, because Christ is already virtually present to the church through the mediation of its people, and because the church is already a virtual body via the connective tissue of language, the church can reliably undertake the sacrament of Christ's real presence through virtual media even when separated by social distance. Drawing on Luther's notion of the priesthood of all believers, she writes, "Lutheran claims of the priesthood of all can empower us to commune in our living rooms while we're virtually connected to the larger church at this time of physical separation."³⁶ If by "commune in our living rooms," Thompson means that Christians can meaningfully relate to each other as a community of faith during their time of separation, then I take no issue with her claim. But within the context of her argument for virtual communion, and furthermore against the backdrop of her belief in the virtual presence of Christ in the church, she clearly intends something more by this statement. This being the case, it is telling how her description of the priesthood of all believers lends itself to Heidegger's concept of measuring: because the measure of a Christian entails priesthood, and because the measure of priesthood entails celebration of the sacrament, the efficacy of the Eucharist is guaranteed wherever these conditions are met. Thompson's treatment of the real presence of Christ in the church as something stable and available on-demand establishes the conditions for her to treat the sacrament as standing-reserve. Christ's promise to be present in the meal is thereby easily converted into Christ's on-call status, available at our fingertips and contained in our ritual, which is neatly packaged for easy transportation. We are thus forced to ask: Does the church really receive the strange and wondrous presence of Christ in the sacrament, or is that presence actually something made by the church? And if it is the latter, if the Eucharist has become a technology and Christ's presence a standardized product, has the church not then committed idolatry?

³⁶ Deanna A. Thompson, "Being the Body of Christ in a Time of Pandemic and Beyond," Lutheran Center for Faith, Values, and Community, St. Olaf College, April 2, 2020, <https://wp.stolaf.edu/lutherancenter/2020/04/being-the-body-of-christ-in-a-time-of-pandemic-and-beyond/>.

Consider Thompson's cursory outline of virtual communion:

What might it look like to do virtual communion well? We could start with preparing members beforehand, encouraging them to prepare the table in their own homes. Send along the recipe for the bread regularly used in communion; invite people to consider what cup and plate might be meaningful to hold the elements; remind them of the confidence we have that God is the one who acts in the sacrament; affirm what so many already know, that Christ comes to us even when we gather virtually.³⁷

Thompson's description here in many ways typifies what we have just seen in Heidegger's treatment of technology's standing-reserve. Parishioners are invited to prepare their own table, bake their own bread, determine which tableware is most suitable according to their own measure of meaning, and, above all, to believe with pre-determined assurance that Christ is present therein. It is true that Thompson also wishes to "remind them of the confidence we have that God is the one who acts in the sacrament," though, short of any fuller explanation, this perhaps reads more like lip service in a paragraph where all other actions are undertaken by people in their homes. Christ's agency in his real presence in the church and sacrament has been left rather vague in Thompson's account to this point, and it is no different here. The point of the preparations undertaken by parishioners is to "get it right," as it were: to bake the right recipe, to set up the sacred space, and so to create the necessary preconditions for the magic to occur. The result is an objectification of the Eucharist as something made by human intention, and insofar as Christ's real presence is attested therein, the implication to a Christian could all too easily become that said presence is produced—*conjured*, even—by human action.

Far from the availability of letting-be, the treatment of the Eucharist as some object, something made or produced, indicates a posture of control and determinism on the part of the Christian church. The treatment of Christ's presence as portable in the Eucharist both suffocates the freedom of Christ's dynamic agency in the sacrament and covers over the posture of wonder that might alert us to the strange new ways Christ presences in our fasting. As theologian Serene Jones points out, in a quote that Thompson herself admires,

This community, therefore, does not possess itself but always receives itself from God. This community does not own the terms by which it is collected, named, and defined; these too it receives. This community's core identity cannot therefore be defined by kinship ties, geographic region, and ethnicity... Thus, at the most fundamental level, this church knows itself to be constituted by its intrinsic openness to God.³⁸

³⁷ Thompson, "Christ is Really Present Virtually."

³⁸ Serene Jones, *Feminist Theory and Christian Theology: Cartographies of Grace* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2000), 172. Cf. Thompson, *Virtual Body of Christ*, 93.

The church is made the church from without. As such, the church's posture of receptivity positions it fundamentally against the impulse of domestication that typifies the technological worldview. One does not give themselves the sacrament. One does not *make* anything happen. The Eucharist is instead something a Christian goes to, something to which one gradually and through repetition comes to belong, something in which one is swept away. The idea that such an event could be condensed into a sequence of ritual actions aimed at producing a reliable and predetermined outcome discloses an attitude of arrogance and mastery that is in fact a sharp departure from the posture of waiting and wonder that characterizes sacramental practice.

Note, then, that my argument against Thompson's case for virtual communion is not based on some ontology of ordination or a metaphysic of transubstantiation or consubstantiation. So far as each of these are liable to domesticate the presence of Christ into reliable, measured standing-reserve, these too deserve examination in the light of Heidegger's technological critique. And with that in mind, it is worth acknowledging that virtual communion is not a uniquely flawed distortion of the Eucharist but in fact reflects a whole history of Christian sacramental tensions. For example, it became common practice prior to the Fourth Lateran Council in 1215 for many Christians to not receive communion more than once or twice a year because it was so strongly believed that the consecrated elements would cause physical ailments or death to any unworthy person.³⁹ Similarly, "even when the term 'transubstantiation' (*transsubstantiatio*) entered the theological vocabulary to denote the change of the bread and wine into the body and blood of Christ in the first half of the twelfth century..., a more crass materialistic view of the nature of that presence still tended to dominate people's thinking."⁴⁰ Christians have always been liable to objectify the Eucharist in a technological mindset. But as Heidegger has helped us see, as this enframing worldview has increasingly encroached on our collective consciousness, we must also be increasingly aware of the limits and dangers of that mindset and so attune ourselves more fervently to the posture of letting-be. It is thus not enough to simply critique the practice of virtual communion (and the technological attitude toward the Eucharist in general) without providing some way forward. I will therefore now turn to a final section in which I will briefly sketch how an understanding of the Eucharist might be achieved within the framework of Martin Heidegger's philosophy of involved understanding.

IV. An Alternative Proposal: The Eucharist as a World

How does Martin Heidegger expect us to adopt the posture of letting beings be? And how do Christians understand the real presence of Christ in the sacrament of Holy Communion without squashing that presence under the categories and measures of our technological gaze? The early

³⁹ See Paul Bradshaw and Maxwell Johnson, *The Eucharistic Liturgies: Their Evolution and Interpretation* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, Pueblo, 2012), 211.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 225.

Heidegger gives us a means of addressing these questions in his magnum opus *Being and Time* with his analysis of human Being-in-the-world. I will here briefly explore how Heidegger's notion of human understanding in terms of worldly involvement lays a theoretical foundation for both fleshing out the later Heidegger's ideal of letting-be while also providing a non-technological interpretation of Christ's real presence in the Eucharist.

Heidegger famously defines human Dasein⁴¹ as "Being-in-the-world" [*In-der-Welt-sein*]. That is, the human way of existence is principally not that of a thinking subject but one of dynamic involvement. Heidegger writes, "In directing itself toward and grasping something, Dasein does not go beyond its inner sphere, in which it is first encapsulated, but its primary way of Being is to be always already 'outside,' alongside encountered beings in the already discovered world."⁴² Being-in-the-world should therefore not be considered a procedure whereby Dasein reaches out of some closed self toward an external world.⁴³ Rather, Being-in-the-world is a way of existing that begins with that very externalization. We are "outside" long before we are ever "inside" ourselves. As Hubert Dreyfus succinctly puts it, "Heidegger holds that all relations of mental states to their objects presuppose a more basic form of being-with-things which does not involve mental activity."⁴⁴ Our everyday interactions with things—from the pages I turn in a book to my typing the keys on my computer as I write—are not thought-relations but a deeper bodily involvement. We mostly interact with the beings in our worlds unthinkingly, which allows us to then have a familiarity with them beneath objectifying thought.

Heidegger calls this the *readiness-to-hand* [*Zuhandenheit*] of beings.⁴⁵ We know beings principally through our pre-reflective enmeshment with their dynamic activity within a world already in motion. In his famous example of the hammer, Heidegger writes, "The less the hammer-thing is simply ogled at, the more accessible it becomes, the more primordial is one's relationship to it, the more unconcealed [*unverhüllter*] it is as what it is, a thing."⁴⁶ The readiness-to-hand of beings, then, denotes the way in which we and the objects that surround us are mutually available to be what we are in, with, and through each other. When we hold an object before our gaze for conscious

⁴¹ Heidegger famously refers to Dasein as the object of his analysis in *Being and Time*, though it is generally agreed that he does not mean this term as a simple synonym for "human being." For a helpful definition of Dasein and its difference from the human being itself, see John Haugeland, *Dasein Disclosed: John Haugeland's Heidegger*, ed. Joseph Rouse (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2013), 81-82, where Haugeland defines Dasein as "a way of living that embodies an understanding of being." That is, according to Haugeland, Dasein denotes the mode of being particular to humans, a mode which entails a pre-apprehension of the Being of beings through worldly familiarity and the importance of that Being to oneself.

⁴² Heidegger, *Sein und Zeit*, §13:62. All translations of *Sein und Zeit* used here are my own.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, §13:62.

⁴⁴ Hubert Dreyfus, *Being-in-the-World: A Commentary on Heidegger's Being and Time, Division I* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1991), 52.

⁴⁵ Heidegger, *Sein und Zeit*, §15:69.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, §15:69.

consideration—what Heidegger calls beings' *presence-to-hand* [*Vorhandenheit*]⁴⁷—we distinguish ourselves from it as a static, thinking subject and a quite separate but equally static object.⁴⁷ But this is not how we primarily operate in our interactions with beings. We know things by *doing* alongside them. We become *involved* [*Bewenden*] with beings in their doings in the world.⁴⁸ As such, both we ourselves and the beings we encounter are revealed most basically as fluid, dynamic, and relational. So, when Heidegger says the hammer is more truly unconcealed the less it is ogled at and the more it is used in actively hammering, he is highlighting the nature of our involved understanding as enmeshed activity before it ever becomes conscious reflection. What is really real of a being is not what meaning we assign to it but how it unveils itself within the dynamic play of a world. To know a being in its truth, then, is to resist the temptation to objectify it and instead become caught up in its own activity and the worldly trajectory it opens up.

One thus comes to understand their world most basically not through an intellectual grasp of each component part but rather like a surfer riding a wave, finding an intuitive feel for the flow under one's feet and maintaining the necessary balance to navigate the ever-changing dynamics at play, what Heidegger calls "the emerging-abiding sway" of Being.⁴⁹ Like an athlete dribbling a ball or a maestro at the piano, we do not make our way by consciously thinking (in fact, were they to think, such figures would likely trip themselves up!) but rather through involved understanding of worlds in motion. As Heidegger helpfully sums up in his 1929 essay "On the Essence of Ground," "World refers to a 'how' of being of beings, rather than to these beings themselves."⁵⁰ The character of a world is its dynamism, its particular thrust in this or that direction. Like planets and stars caught up in the nebulous drift of a galaxy's spin, beings are opened up to be what they are within the gravitational pull of a world that exists before and yet through them. To understand such worlds—and the beings that populate them—the human need only learn to ride the wave of these involvements, becoming attuned to the myriad and changing dynamics therein.

We thus have some basis in the early Heidegger's analysis of our Being-in-the-world for how to interpret the later Heidegger's emphasis on letting-be. Were letting-be simply an inverted objectification—a kind of apophatic passivity before beings—it would likely not yield us either any true or particularly helpful understanding of beings. Such a posture would exemplify Heidegger's notion of presence-to-hand and thus create mental distance between ourselves and the world. In the context of the Eucharist, focusing at the consecrated bread and wine while desperately trying not to project a technologizing constraint on them would be both mentally exhausting and unhelpfully distracting. But against the backdrop of the early Heidegger's work on Dasein's Being-

⁴⁷ Ibid., §9:42.

⁴⁸ Ibid., §18:84.

⁴⁹ Heidegger, *Introduction to Metaphysics*, 15.

⁵⁰ Heidegger, "On the Essence of Ground," trans. William McNeill, in *Pathmarks*, ed. William McNeill (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 112.

in-the-world, we get a clearer picture of what a true letting-be looks like. Letting beings be means setting them free within their dynamic worlds to act out—to be—theirself. Such beings are thus disclosive of themselves not by providing a stable set of data for our analysis but by drawing us into shared involvement with their own dynamic doings. In fact, as Andrew Mitchell argues, because beings are intrinsically relational, they can never become established things that we possess, and so they can never be strictly called “things” at all. Rather, beings must always be seen as they are in reality, as always coming-to-be, and so there are no things that remain neatly within the grasp of our words or concepts.⁵¹ To understand a being in this way—to let it stand forth as what it is in reality—is to undermine our objectifying gaze essentially by forgetting to think. We relate to such beings by entering into flow with their doings, when our unconscious activity becomes flush with their own, when we are swept up in a synchrony we ourselves do not establish, what Dreyfus sums up succinctly as “know-how.”⁵² To know, in this case, is to do, and to further do in, with, and through the beings that are the media of our understanding.

If we think of the Eucharist as a world in these terms, then we may begin to uncover an antidote to the technological closing down of reality I found so troublesome in Deanna Thompson’s advocacy for virtual communion. Recall that my concern with her treatment of the real presence of Christ was that it was effectively rendered as standing-reserve, as a presence which is assumed to be automatic and therefore portable. But if the Eucharist is instead viewed as a world rather than an object, then our attention is removed from the things of the sacrament—consecrated bread and wine, for instance—to what those things *do* and the presence they thereby disclose.

This is the move the Anglican monk and liturgical scholar Gregory Dix makes in his famous characterization of the four-action shape of the Eucharist. Since the earliest Christians, argues Dix, the Eucharist has been most fundamentally an action.⁵³ While most moderns consider the Eucharist to be something *said*, so that what is most important in the rite is the meaning conveyed through spoken words and material signs, prior to the Fourth Century the case was exactly the opposite.⁵⁴ As something *done*, rather, and moreover done by the congregation as a whole, the Eucharist was an act of obedience and response to God, wherein one’s sanctification was effected and one’s moral compass shaped through repeated patterns and habits.⁵⁵ The four basic actions which Dix then suggests constitute this active, dynamic Eucharist are: (1) *Offertory*, in which the bread and wine are offered together with the gifts of the congregation, (2) *Prayer*, in which the president gives thanks to God over the elements, (3) *Fraction*, in which the bread is broken, and

⁵¹ Andrew Mitchell, *The Fourfold: Reading the Late Heidegger* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2015), 310.

⁵² Dreyfus, *Being-in-the-World*, 184.

⁵³ Gregory Dix, *The Shape of the Liturgy* (London: Continuum, 2005), 15.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 12-13.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 13.

(4) *Communion*, in which the bread and wine are distributed and consumed.⁵⁶ These actions, along with the myriad details that qualify them and situate them within the liturgy, give shape to the worldly dynamism of the Eucharist. Bodily movements such as kneeling, passing peace, crossing oneself, opening hands to receive, and so forth situate the Christian within a particular world in motion. Far from a world of *things*, the Eucharist is a world of breaking, pouring, giving, sharing, lifting, bowing, praying, confessing, etc. Moreover, all of these actions are performed in relation and response to one another, so that the character of the sacramental world is disclosed through the habituating force of familiarity and repetition. I do not merely receive the sacramental bread, for example, but I further receive it after its breaking, alongside those with whom I have shared peace and made confession, and under the prayerful anamnesis of Jesus' passion. What one discovers in such a world of involvement, then, is an orienting paradigm established through a lifetime of sacramental belonging.

This is what Heidegger calls a *mood* [*Stimmung*]. For Heidegger, mood is more basic than emotion. It is rather the existential coloring and orientation of our situatedness in a given world. He writes, "A mood makes manifest 'how one is and becomes.' In this 'how one is' attunement brings Being into its 'there.'"⁵⁷ Moods disclose just how we are located within a given world. They are our feel for our surroundings. They are the hue of our responses to external stimuli and the point of departure for our every interpretation. And because we are never outside a world of some kind, we are never without a mood. As Heidegger scholar Katherine Witherly suggests, moods are the foundation of our finding ourselves to be this or that Being-in-the-world at all: "Like soundtracks or climates, they set the stage for our immersion in our lives."⁵⁸ Moods indicate just how I am always *from* some situation and *toward* another.⁵⁹ Without a mood, I could not truly inhabit any world, for to be without a mood would render me unaffected and thus uninvolved.

But the Eucharist is not simply a world of mooded, involved understanding. For Christians also confess that Christ is really present in the sacrament. In fact, they name the actions of the eucharistic world as Christ's own actions, confessing Jesus' words, "This is *my* body," though always with the active addendum, "*given* for you" (Lk 22:19). To participate in this world, then, is to be swept up in its motion as credited to Christ; to find oneself immersed in and involved with the Christ whose personal world this is. The character disclosed in the habituating rhythms of these particular actions in this particular orientation opens up a way of Being-in-the-world under the

⁵⁶ Ibid., 48. The historical accuracy of Dix's ascribing this fourfold shape universally to ancient liturgies is widely challenged, as in Bradshaw and Johnson, *Eucharistic Liturgies*, 20-21. However, for the purposes of contemporary reflection on the liturgy, this historical dispute is less important than the insights gleaned from an analysis of the dynamics of the sacrament itself.

⁵⁷ Heidegger, *Sein und Zeit*, §29:134.

⁵⁸ Katherine Witherly, *Heidegger on Being Uncanny* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2015), 52.

⁵⁹ Cf. Katherine Witherly, "Situation and Limitation: Making Sense of Heidegger on Thrownness," *European Journal of Philosophy* 22, no. 1 (March 2014): 66-71.

name of Jesus Christ, a way that becomes embodied and enacted in the sacramental doings of the church. When Christians “do this in remembrance” of Jesus, then, their active, embodied doing is the medium of Christ’s re-membering, the coming-to-presence of Christ’s particular attunement and orientation within the contemporary world. When the Christian develops a mood of existential orientation and response to the sacramental world, then, she can say that such a mooded understanding is one founded upon and oriented toward Christ, with whose dynamic activity she has become familiar through habituating involvement.

But is this not precisely the kind of thing Thompson describes in her recommendation for how churches can undertake virtual communion? Far from treating the Eucharist as a plastic-wrapped microwavable dinner to be had while watching the nightly news, Thompson actually takes seriously the world-character of the sacrament. In a quote we visited earlier, she writes,

What might it look like to do virtual communion well? We could start with preparing members beforehand, encouraging them to prepare the table in their own homes. Send along the recipe for the bread regularly used in communion; invite people to consider what cup and plate might be meaningful to hold the elements; remind them of the confidence we have that God is the one who acts in the sacrament; affirm what so many already know, that Christ comes to us even when we gather virtually.⁶⁰

Indeed, this recommended procedure for virtual communion indicates an appreciation for the mooded world-character of the Eucharist. But two problems still emerge in this scenario. Firstly, the world is in this case produced by the Christian. If it is indeed God who acts in the sacrament, then it is imperative that Christians be drawn into the world of that action, not constitute it for themselves. To do the latter is to treat God as a tool to be called into service, as standing-reserve. Secondly, the predetermined assumption of Christ’s presence regardless of circumstance further treats his presence as stable and guaranteed under the gaze of measuring. Of course, even in more conventional settings, Christians confess Christ’s real presence in the sacrament. But insofar as the Eucharist is a world that predates and supersedes the Christian, their entrance into it constitutes an entrance into that which gives from without. That is, because the Christian who enters the eucharistic world does not give that world to themselves, the precise character of that world—and the risen Christ whose person is that world—is open for new and unforeseen disclosure. Where the sacrament is a work of personal creation, by contrast, it should not be surprising when its character reflects that of its creator.

The key distinction between the technological model and the Being-in-the-world model of Eucharist, then, is the role of the human mind in defining the truth of the situation. Any sacrament which treats the presence of Christ as package-able, as it were, does so as a result of human

⁶⁰ Thompson, “Christ is Really Present Virtually.”

interpretive assignments: The bread and wine are the body and blood of Christ because certain determinable conditions are met. As a world of involvements, by contrast, the presence of Christ is disclosed in a distinctly uncategorizable encounter. Christ is effectively *transparent* in the sacrament: invisible to the objectifying gaze at the same time that he is immanent to our dynamic doing. Like a ballroom dancer, the Christian does not know her partner in Christ by thinking about his actions but by acquiring a feel for the character of his particular dynamism, reading his movements, and coordinating her being with his own. So, when I meet Christ in the Eucharist, I may well be thinking about my shopping list or worrying about what I have to do after the service, but by belonging to the world of Christ's dynamic person, my own person comes into greater, habituated proximity to his. Christ is not in the Eucharist *because* we think or say he is; we think and say he is present because we are drawn into the ineffable pattern of his Being before we ever come to conscious recognition of it.

It is thus worth pointing out that the same criticism Heidegger's take on technology exercises upon virtual communion can also be applied to more conventional Eucharists. Does not someone have to set the table and bake the bread and say the words even when Holy Communion is held in a "traditional" context like a church sanctuary? Of course. Do we not expect Christ to be present with rather alarming regularity—say, every Sunday at 10:30? Indeed. But it is worth pointing out how agency is dislocated within the ecclesial setting. The vestments and decoration are not there out of the priest's personal preference. The acts of preparation—from baking the bread to saying the eucharistic prayers—belong to a diverse collection of people. The words and actions undertaken are inherited from a living and dynamic tradition that predates everyone's existence. And, most crucially, the communion to which one belongs through the sacrament is not selected by anyone in particular. Just as no one hosts a private Eucharist for only their close friends, so we do not choose those people who occupy our sacramental space. In communion, Christians are rather thrown into a cloud of witnesses that is as often annoying and inconvenient as it is expedient to our spiritual life, and this provides an essential quality to the world disclosed therein. One may have to pass the peace to an unsavory rival or receive the elements from a priest whose theology is a little milquetoast or be seated next to someone who consistently sings out of tune. One's location within the communion of saints is thus more akin to being sucked under the water by a powerful wave than it is a matter of choice and control. The reality of the church is thus uncovered through the awe of letting-be, by becoming enmeshed within a communion already in motion, not through the determination of enframing.

So does this account leave us without a Eucharist in time of physical separation, then? Yes and no. On the one hand, in describing the Eucharist as a world in terms laid out by the phenomenology of Martin Heidegger, I have cautioned against the technologizing interpretation of the sacrament implicit in practices of virtual communion. On the other hand, in setting out the Eucharist as not a thing but a dynamic world of personal possibilities and existential orientation, I have hopefully

brought to light the pedagogical function of the eucharistic enterprise. That is, as a habituating force of personal formation, the eucharistic world can still spring up where the sacrament itself is not practiced. Because Christians inhabit the sacramental world as mooded creatures, and because their attunement to that world is further shaped and coalesced through years of practice and discovery under its sway, the orientation which characterizes one's involved encounter with the dynamic Christ of the Eucharist may also become the orientation with which one lives life beyond the sanctuary. Embodied behaviors of openness, receptivity, blessing, prayer, confession, forgiveness, and so on build up a posture of existential attunement akin to muscle memory. A Christian coming from a lifetime of belonging to this world may be more easily able to slide into patterns of participation in Christ's worldly orientation and so not have to consciously seek out a mentally palatable presence. Though we may be without the Eucharist, then, we are not without its fruits, as the habits of Being which are inculcated through the sacrament shape our orientation to worlds beyond the sanctuary, giving us eyes to recognize Christ where we least expect him to be. In this way, beneath the level of conscious reflection, the effects of the Eucharist may yet sprout even where the ritual itself leaves off.⁶¹

Thompson adopts something like this posture herself, emphasizing the pedagogical role of eucharistic practice. She writes, "Union with Christ is also judgment for the ways we participate in the suffering of others each and every day. The Eucharist—indeed the full scope of the liturgy—makes it possible for the community of sinners to be remade by a grace that permits us to forever start anew."⁶² I agree. But what Thompson appears to miss in her endorsement of virtual sacramental practice is the way that the Eucharist engenders this pedagogical function precisely

⁶¹ It is for this reason that, perhaps counter-intuitively, I believe this model of the Eucharist as a world actually has something meaningful to say in discussions around disability and equal access. Whereas eucharistic theologies that focus on the meaning or substance of the sacramental elements are inevitably exclusionary—either to those who are physically unable to be present or participate in a traditional Eucharist or who lack sufficient internet access to partake in a virtual one—the Eucharist as a dynamic world has its character in shaping the possibilities and attunements of one who belongs to it. Just as the priest and the laity occupy different positions within the same sacramental world, so there is no privileged vantage or point of access. So long as one belongs to the world broadly characterized by the dynamics of the Eucharist, one can come under the sway of Christ's person at work therein. Even where participation in a formal Eucharist is impossible, then, wherever one recognizes the patterns of Christ's behavior as learned in the sacrament to occur outside of the sanctuary, the "muscle memory" kicks in and one can recognize and name what otherwise goes unnamed as Christ's presence in the world. And just as the world of a football match can spring up as easily in a backyard as it can on a regulation pitch, so too can the world of the Eucharist emerge in, say, hospital rooms or around a family's kitchen table, where those with a lifetime of world-participation may be trained to see the same dynamics of Christ at play where they would otherwise go unnoticed. Where the Eucharist is seen as a world, then, Christ's real presence is allowed the freedom to spring up as an unexpected grace rather than a scarce commodity to which we have unequal access.

⁶² Thompson, *Virtual Body of Christ*, 92.

through the habituating orientation of bodies in motion. Her assumption that what is most vital about the sacrament can be conveyed through the words of a pastor through online communication overlooks the way that speech is always mooded, and mood is always involved in worlds beneath the plane of the mental. Technology reifies the mental as though it were something that existed in itself, as though thought and language were not themselves practices of embodied involvement in fluid and dynamic worlds. So, to then technologize the Eucharist is to thereby limit its reality to the reality of what is conjured in human words, overlooking how such words are in fact only meaningful as embedded.

By contrast, the Eucharist as a world instills its participants with a taste for Christ's character through the building up of habits and reflexes, so that one's eyes are primed to witness the unpredictable irruption of Christ's presence in foreign worlds. It is thus because Christians are already embedded in such a eucharistic world that there is still hope. In a time of crisis and confusion, when we long for each other's touch and find ourselves starved of the worlds that set our lives in motion, the Christian's attunement to the real presence of Christ may become the lens of her attunement to isolation. Like lovers who have learned to unconsciously read each other's facial expressions and nervous ticks, the Christian whose bodily orientation has been shaped by a lifetime of eucharistic involvement has an eye primed to pick up the dynamics of Christ wherever they emerge. The Christ-in-motion with whom we become pre-consciously familiar in our weekly immersion in the sacrament can, therefore, be reliably recognized in the experiences of fasting, loneliness, wandering in the wilderness, and even despair and abandonment that also constitute Jesus' way of Being-in-the-world. We need not condense Christ's real and ineffable person into the stable things of bread and wine to uncover his presence. Rather, his person may show itself in a new light as the church attunes itself to the world of this particular crisis. Such is the attunement attested in the story of the road to Emmaus, where it is through familiarity with Jesus' particular way of speaking and behaving that the disciples eventually recognize him as who he is and so say "Were not our hearts burning within us?" precisely at the moment when his visible presence evaporates (Lk 24:32). Knowing Christ with such understanding, then, Christians have the familiarity by which to recognize his presence under alternative circumstances and precisely where we do not expect him to be.

V. Conclusion

Times of crisis often (and should) give pause to both the Christian church and its theologians. It is in such moments of confusion, when the strange and absurd rears its head and dissipates the often illusory comforts of our daily lives, that theology is put to the test. In advocating for practices of virtual communion, Deanna Thompson endorses a compassionate response to Christians suffering from fear and loneliness during the COVID-19 pandemic. So far as her case for the virtuality of the body of Christ is an endorsement for the church's use of online media to communicate and sustain a community of faith, I wholeheartedly agree with her goals. But insofar as her operative

assumption that Christ's presence in the church—and more specifically, the Eucharist—is communicable through speech places an outsized weight on the disembodied mental and our human meaning-making capacity, I find her call for virtual communion to fall into the trap of idolatry.

I have argued along the lines of Martin Heidegger's interpretation of technology in order to show how virtual communion commodifies the Eucharist by capturing Christ's presence within the measuring gaze of human mastery, thereby suffocating the freedom of the risen Christ's true being in the sacrament. As a counter-proposal, I have suggested that, rather than a thing under the objectifying measure of our technological worldview, the Eucharist is better considered as a dynamic world, wherein Christians are shaped according to pre-reflective patterns of involvement that open up the character of the Christ whose risen person is that world. Through such an approach to the sacrament, the once commodified (and therefore idolatrous) "Christ" given by Christians to themselves in a technological communion is cast off to reveal a Christ transparent in his ready-to-hand directing of our actions and so invisible to our objectifying gaze. The goal of my argument has been to de-technologize the Eucharist and so to set out a description of Christian letting-be in the face of the Christ who comes to us mysteriously even as he is eagerly awaited in the meal of bread and wine. Ultimately, my hope is that such a treatment, far from denying the presence of Christ to a church in need, will in fact increase the church's awareness of its unconscious familiarity with the person of Christ already in motion and so help refocus the church's attention well beyond its current challenges.

It is because crises such as the COVID-19 pandemic highlight the flaws of earlier eucharistic theologies and shape the adjustments we must make for the future that I find Thompson's discussion of virtual communion worth engaging. If the church is to have an adequate eucharistic theology, it should be a theology that takes times of crisis into account instead of needing to be adapted or accommodated when normal life is interrupted. The world in which this piece is read will invariably look different to the one in which it was written. And yet it is precisely because we live in a world of such rapid change, technologically as well as socially, that theology must address practices of religious life in the context of crisis. It is in the hope of contributing to a more robust eucharistic theology for just such a future that I have here sought to engage with Deanna Thompson's endorsement of virtual communion as a worthwhile conversation for the church, not merely in the time of pandemic but for years to come.

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