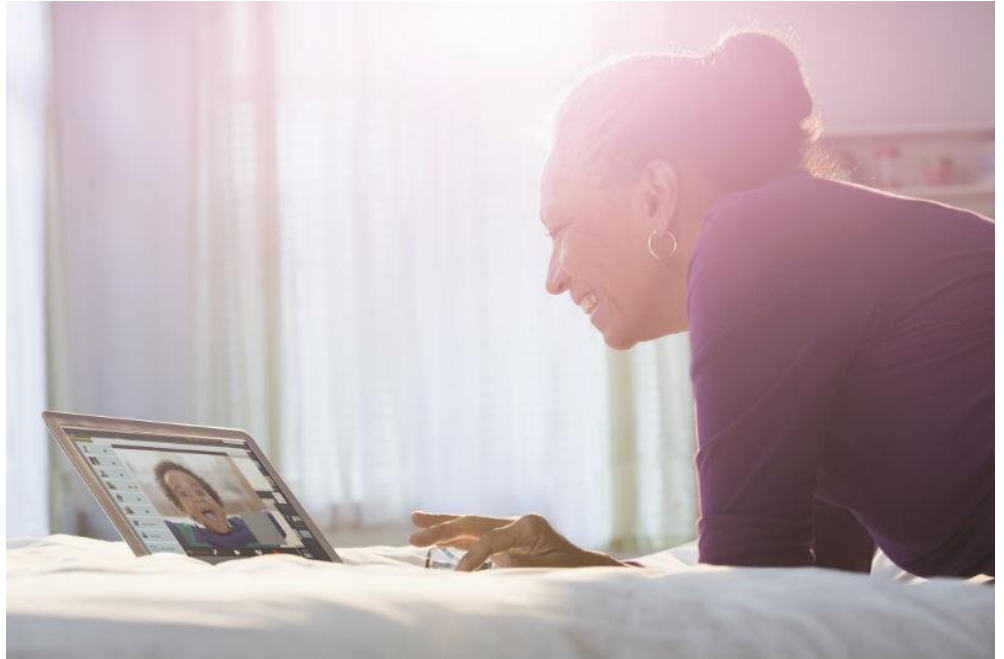


Present from afar

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One of the challenges posed by social distancing is how to reconcile personal presence with distance. Presence is tactile and up close. Measuring out the prescribed separation as people walk around the park in the early morning tends to turn familiars into strangers and greetings into distancings.



Main image: Woman videochatting with grandson (Getty images/Jose Luis Pelaez)

On the other hand, to overcome distance we happily draw on Zoom and other technology that allow us to be see one another's faces. How to reconcile this interplay between distance and presence merits reflection.

My own reflection is coloured by my Catholic faith, and was prompted by the necessary closing of churches. In the Catholic tradition faith is tactile. At its heart is a God who in Jesus Christ joined our world, walked among us and had skin in our game. God is understood to be present in thingy, face to face ways — in gatherings of friends and strangers, rich and poor; in eating bread and drinking wine, teaching and listening, joking and being serious, in the pouring of water and anointing with oil, in shaking hands and hugs.

The central symbol and ritual of this understanding is the Sunday Eucharist where people gather to pray, eat and drink in the belief that Christ is really active in what they do and really present in what they eat and drink.

Seen from this perspective the closing of churches and consequent gatherings to celebrate the Eucharist is a serious business. The privileged ways in which God is present that cannot fully be replaced by other forms of presence. The expected outcome of closing churches might be the distancing of God from people's lives.

Yet for many people this does not seem to happen. They find that the televising of Mass and other rituals and engagement with other electronic expression of faith overcomes the barriers of distance. To

explore why this is so may illuminate larger questions about presence and distance in our lockdown society.

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Questions about presence, distance, reality and appearance have been central to Christian reflection on the Eucharist for a millennium. It centred on the relationship between what Christ did in his time and what Catholics do at the Eucharist. Catholics argued that Christ is present at each Eucharist both in the action which he recalled and in the bread and wine. In ultimate reality the distance between what Christ did then and now is illusory. When seen empirically, of course, the distance is great: the bread and wine remain bread and wine; Jesus lived 2,000 years ago and we meet now. But for the participants the apparent distance falls away.

This crude summary of a complex debate may illuminate the way in which distance and presence are reconciled in electronic media. When people come together on Zoom they remain empirically distant. They are not on the screen, but only images of their faces and projections of their voices. But they would be right to describe their presence to one another as a real presence, not as a distance. In human terms people really do meet one another face to face, even though an empirical account of the transmission of images might describe their relationship as one of real distance.

The quality and reality of people's electronic presence to one another depend on the richness of their imagination. By imagination I mean the way in which we see the detailed qualities and connections of our lives and world. Our imagination can represent things and people in a blurred or homogenised way, or can catch the tactile detail and the multiplicity of facets present in our face to face contact.

The inherent risk of relying on presence at a distance is that the imagination becomes blurred by lack of refreshment, so that we see people in a stereotypical or blurred way. The lack of tangible contact can lead to our imagination not being freshened and the sense of tactile presence being weakened. Distance wins over presence.

To maintain the intensity of presence we need to enrich the imagination by a habit of attention to the tactile details of our world. We need to attend to the infinite complexity of the people to whom we are physically present, to the feeling of bare feet on carpet and brick, to the pockets of cool air under shaded trees on a hot day, to the quality of the red flowers and the green leaves of the geranium outside our window. This habitual attention and wonder will also feed sharp memories of people and events into our imagination, so strengthening the reality of presence in distance.

I leave it to others in another conversation to decide whether this line of thinking has any relevance to the Eucharist. It may suggest, however, that in a time of forced distancing for Catholics they might profitably cultivate the awareness of God's presence in the tangible details of the world around them.



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