

# Liturgy has been annexed to the empire of the robots without anyone noticing



R.S. Thomas – poet and Anglican priest – was known to preach to his congregation on the evils of fridges, washing machines and technology in general. After months of lectures on Zoom, livestreamed Mass and e-commuting, I'm beginning to see his point.

I didn't expect to feel such a strong animus towards being forced to live online. I am, after all, a "digital native". I'm used to my social life relying on a smooth wifi connection to function. But I suspect that's exactly why I'm instinctively hostile to livestreamed Mass. In a world where everything from friendships to shopping is relentlessly disembodied, the insistent physicality of the Mass is a relief.

Christians have had misgivings about technology for a long time. Vincent McNabb OP, priest and agrarian utopian, refused to take the bus or use a typewriter. Wendell Berry, a still-living poet and thinker, makes a similar point in refusing to use a computer – although he does use a typewriter (no doubt McNabb is raising an eyebrow at such modernism from the hereafter). Pope Gregory XVI banned gas lighting from the papal states as an insult to the natural order of day and night. And R.S. Thomas, peering down at modernity from his home in the Welsh mountains, saw what he called "The Machine" enchanting humanity – as it ate the world.

One of the key influences on the present Pope – the theologian Romano Guardini – also had a dark view of the mechanisation of society. As early as the 1940s, he speculated that a culture dependent on technology would end up subjugating human beings to technology. Human history began with the creation of tools. Now, Guardini warns, our tools create us. And rather than seeing ourselves as limited creations, dependent on God, on nature and on each other, we (mis)understand ourselves as self-created beings, reliant only on our own strength.

I think livestreaming liturgy runs the risk of a similar inversion: presenting the Mass as a monument to human ingenuity, rather than divine love. That's no one's intention, of course. But – as Marshall McLuhan famously said – the medium is the message. Ironically the internet itself is an illustration of the limits of human ingenuity. We have digitised relationships: it's made relationships statistically less common.

We have digitised friendship: loneliness is becoming endemic. Apps dedicated to enhancing wellbeing proliferate ceaselessly – and mental ill health hits record highs every successive year.

All this seems a frank vindication of St Augustine. Man, by himself, in all his terrific cleverness, inevitably turns towards his own ruin and misery. We might be, on the whole, a Pelagian species, convinced of our own essential goodness. But we live in an Augustinian world.

Another Augustinian theme – the unity of the body and soul – is challenged by the cyber-inculturation of the Mass. The disembodiment of the liturgy – which we attend as participants, and not as spectators – presents a real issue here. *Lex orandi, lex credendi*: as we pray, we believe. Praying the Mass as a collection of bodiless intelligences might be suited to the angels, but not to human beings. Disincarnated religion – the "Fleshless Word", as Edwin Muir called it – might be suited to a technologically mediated society. But it isn't Christianity.

The problem with addressing any of these questions is that the liturgy has been annexed to the empire of the robots in the same way they've already taken over swathes of our lives: without anyone noticing. Visiting Iona on a pilgrimage, I looked up at the sky one night. The stars above were strikingly bright and numerous. For the first time in my life, I fully understood the Bible's many references to the stars as heralds of God's presence. And I was unnerved by the realisation that we very rarely register their absence: in the space of a few generations, the abnormal has become normal.

When my lunch was interrupted the next day by two cows enthusiastically performing the marital act, I conceded that urban life has certain advantages. Technology has provided incontestable benefits. And livestreaming Mass was unavoidable given the circumstances. But it strikes me that – as more and more of human life is absorbed into the black glass of our computer screens – we aren't thinking about it anywhere near hard enough. We don't need to preach on the evils of fridges to ask difficult questions about where our love affair with machines is taking us.



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