

# Dutch Responses to Lockdown Liturgies

## Analysis of the Public Debate on Sacraments During the COVID–19 Pandemic

*Samuel Goyvaerts and Fokke Wouda*

### Abstract

Analyzing the discourse around sacraments – most notably the Eucharist – in Dutch newspapers in the first months of restrictions issued to combat the coronavirus pandemic, this article categorizes the various manifestations of liturgical life encountered and presents the main theological interests at stake. The article is structured according to the four types of adaptations to liturgical life displayed in the sample of articles, readers' letters, and opinion pieces included in this study: abstinence, spectator liturgy, private domestic liturgy, and embedded domestic liturgy. This categorization helps to track the theological presuppositions involved, some of which have been explicitly articulated in the sample. These arguments are then collected and discussed. In doing so, this article lists significant responses to the liturgical practices that emerged during the first lockdown of 2020 in the Netherlands and analyses the most important themes involved, formulating some of the implications for the future of liturgical practice and thought.

### Keywords

Discourse analysis, Eucharist, liturgy, COVID-19, lockdown

### Introduction

As in many countries, the Dutch measures against the coronavirus pandemic have restricted public religious services dramatically.<sup>1</sup> On March 12, public events were limited to one hundred people. From March 23 onwards, the Dutch government issued a ban on public gatherings, causing the cancellation of all public religious celebrations. From June 1, thirty persons were again allowed to gather. One month later, on July 1, this limit was abandoned, and the maximum number of possible attendants was defined by the available space in combination with the social distancing measures. During this period between March and June, many churches made a digital turn in view of their liturgical repertoire, but

---

1) This article was finished in September 2020, immediately after the first wave of the pandemic in the Netherlands. Developments since have not been taken into account.

this was by no means self-evident, certainly not regarding the celebration of the sacraments. In response to the request of the editors of this special issue to conduct a discourse analysis of the current situation, we have collected responses to and opinions on digital liturgical celebrations in the public domain. Since initiatives, reactions, and opinions with regard to this extraordinary situation were quite massive, we have chosen to limit our investigation by using several parameters. First of all, we have limited ourselves geographically to the reactions in Dutch media.<sup>2</sup> Secondly, we have limited our research to two main sources. First, the daily newspaper *Trouw*, founded in 1943, during World War II, as an orthodox Protestant underground newspaper. Today, *Trouw* presents itself as independent media, which – due to its origins – devotes special attention to democracy, sustainability, and all forms of religion and philosophy in its reporting. It is the sixth largest newspaper in the Netherlands, according to recent figures.<sup>3</sup> Secondly, we have found many reactions and opinions in the daily newspaper *Nederlands Dagblad* (ND), which is a much smaller, more explicitly Christian newspaper. In the past, the ND had a strong connection with the Reformed Churches in the Netherlands. Roughly since the year 2000, it has presented itself as a general Christian newspaper not exclusively committed to one denomination, orientation, or institution. The discourse examined in this study includes thirty-four articles in total, of which the majority (twenty-eight) were sourced from the ND. Twenty-three of these articles were published in the months March and April, which was, also due to Holy Week and Easter (April 12), clearly a period in which many questions and problems regarding liturgical celebrations emerged. Finally, like most of the contributions to this issue, we focus on liturgies of Eucharist and Holy Supper, since they in particular sparked discussion.

The initial goal of this article was to collect and describe the discussions in media outlets. However, in order to do so, we felt the need to provide a categorization of the different liturgical formats we encountered. Therefore, after close reading and a first analysis of the material, we discerned four different ‘liturgical arrangements’ reflected upon or discussed in the studied material. This categorization helped us to understand the arguments posed by authors while addressing a certain theme or issue. In consequence, not only does this article provide an overview of the responses in media outlets but it proposes an analytical framework with which to understand the various expressions of lockdown liturgies. This framework forms the basic outline of the article as it explores the ways in which distinct themes recur. The final part of the article integrates the different approaches to the theological issues encountered.

As mentioned above, we have discerned four types of liturgy. Each of them addresses the limited possibilities for congregations to gather in different ways, resorting to online resources or deliberately

2) Similar debates can be found in an international context. See, for example, the online publication by Heidi Campbell, “The Distanced Church: Reflections on Doing Church Online,” (2020), <http://hdl.handle.net/1969.1/187891>.

3) “NOM Mediamerken 2020-II,” accessed September 7, 2020, [https://www.nommedia.nl/2311076/NOM\\_Mediamerken\\_2020-II\\_Ranking.pdf?v=0](https://www.nommedia.nl/2311076/NOM_Mediamerken_2020-II_Ranking.pdf?v=0).

refraining from doing so. First of all, a situation of sacramental abstinence, meaning not celebrating the Eucharist or the Holy Supper. Secondly, a practice we refer to as ‘spectator liturgy’, in which people participate mainly by watching a liturgy on a screen at home, with no or very few other specific ritual actions. Thirdly, we will discuss private domestic liturgies, in which faithful celebrate the Sunday at home without participation in the streamed public worship of a congregation or parish. The fourth arrangement involves online liturgies in which people participated by performing different ritual actions in their home, e.g., sharing bread and wine. We have called this ‘embedded domestic liturgy’, since there is a clear (mediated) connection with a community and most often a minister. Of course, while these different liturgical arrangements are distinguishable, they also tend to overlap on some points. Moreover, these are liturgical arrangements we discern based on the studied articles, not on empirical research into the actual liturgical situation during this period of lockdown. Most of the discussions and opinions we found focused on the Holy Supper or the Eucharist, which is also the focus of this special issue. Nevertheless, we also found some discussions of baptism, which we will include in this study. At the end of the article, we will present some concluding remarks, trying to discern different topics that – in our sample – emerged as the theological ‘hot issues’ in the public debate concerning sacramental celebration in times of coronavirus.

## 1 Liturgical abstinence

Already from the very beginning of the coronavirus crisis, it was clear that liturgical celebrations could become problematic. Even before the official lockdown measurements, some Sunday services were canceled, as an article on March 11 indicates.<sup>4</sup> After the first limitation to one hundred participants (March 12), official communication of different churches suggested that Sunday services be broadcasted, but cancellation was equally an option: “just have a free Sunday”, as one article phrased it.<sup>5</sup> Some commentators also noticed a shift in pastoral priorities. When public liturgy became prohibited, some churches turned to a more intense diaconal presence and new initiatives.<sup>6</sup> These initiatives were not only aimed at maintaining community life, but also at answering a rising need for solidarity and care, as Han Schenau, president of the Christian-Reformed Synod, explained.<sup>7</sup>

4) “Kerken schrappen zondagse diensten om coronavirus,” *Nederlands Dagblad*, March 11, 2020, <https://www.nd.nl/geloof/geloof/959291/kerken-schrappen-diensten-om-corona>.

5) Gerard ter Horst, Dick Schinkelshoek and Hilbert Meijer, “Online kerkdienst piekt in coronatijden,” *Nederlands Dagblad*, March 11, 2020, <https://www.nd.nl/geloof/geloof/959544/online-kerkdienst-piekt-in-coronatijden>.

6) Remco van Mulligen and Ilona de Lange, “Kerken gaan steeds meer bidden via Facebook en YouTube,” *Nederlands Dagblad*, March 19, 2020, <https://www.nd.nl/geloof/geloof/960927/kerken-gaan-bidden-via-facebook-en-youtube>.

7) Van Mulligen and De Lange.

For churches that have no tradition of weekly Holy Supper celebrations, but only celebrate the Supper four or six times a year, postponing the Holy Supper until after the crisis is a “very legitimate theological choice” according to practical theologian Theo Plezier.<sup>8</sup> Some churches object to domestic celebration of the Supper with bread and wine on the coffee table in front of the screen, which we will discuss further in this article. Different arguments have been used. Some churches employ a system of social and hierarchical control in order to decide which people can or cannot receive bread and wine at Holy Supper, so it is not up to the individual to decide whether he or she ‘can receive’.<sup>9</sup> In one reaction, it was stated that it is impossible to celebrate Holy Supper without ministerial supervision.<sup>10</sup>

Positively argued, not celebrating Holy Supper, neither online nor at home, expresses something of the brokenness of the community that is not able to gather physically. This view is also expressed by the professors of liturgy Marcel Barnard and Mirella Klomp in an article they published in *Trouw* at the beginning of the lockdown period.<sup>11</sup> Barnard and Klomp plea for a Eucharistic fasting. They very much stress the physical dimension of celebrating Holy Supper and the painfulness arising when this is not possible. They present voluntary abstinence of the sacrament as a symbolic sign of solidarity towards professional caretakers, who risk their lives through physical contact. For theologians Arnold Huijgen and Edward van ’t Slot, it is also a time to deepen the solidarity with all those not able to celebrate the Holy Supper due to very different circumstance, for example Christians in refugee camps.<sup>12</sup> According to them, an attitude of expectation and anticipation of the time when public celebration will be possible again is more appropriate during these liturgically and societally troubling times. For Huijgen and Van ’t Slot, too, Holy Supper cannot be celebrated virtually and without the reciprocity of the community. It is a time of “emptiness and deprivation”.<sup>13</sup> The aspect of unity, which is physically formed and

---

8) Remco van Mulligen, “Avondmaal vieren via de webcam: wat zijn eigenlijk de mogelijkheden?” *Nederlands Dagblad*, March 25, 2020, <https://www.nd.nl/geloof/geloof/962388/avondmaal-vieren-via-de-webcam-wat-zijn-eigenlijk-de-mogelijkheden>.

9) Van Mulligen.

10) “Wilt u thuis avondmaal vieren?” *Nederlands Dagblad*, April 4, 2020, <https://www.nd.nl/ opinie/964329/wilt-u-thuis-avondmaal-vieren->.

11) Marcel Barnard and Mirella Klomp, “Thuis klaarzitten met brood en wijn voor de digitale avondmaalviering? Daarmee slaat u de plank mis,” *Trouw*, March 26, 2020, <https://www.trouw.nl/nieuws/thuis-klaarzitten-met-brood-en-wijn-voor-de-digitale-avondmaalviering-daarmee-slaat-u-de-plank-mis-b67c9620/>. For more on this debate, see the article in this volume by Marcel Barnard, Mirella Klomp, and Maarten Wisse.

12) Arnold Huijgen and Edward van ’t Slot, “Wacht met het vieren van het avondmaal. Aanvaard de leegte en het gemis,” *Nederlands Dagblad*, March 31, 2020, <https://www.nd.nl/opinie/opinie/963483/wacht-met-het-vieren-van-het-avondmaal-aanvaard-de-leegte-en-het->.

13) The authors refer to a very well-known Dutch church song “Ik sta voor u in leegte en gemis” (I stand before you in emptiness and deprivation).

expressed by celebrating the Last Supper, is a recurring argument for those pleading for abstinence.<sup>14</sup>

Clearly, this view is not shared by all. For some, the community becomes even stronger and more present due to the situation.<sup>15</sup> In times like these, the need for connectedness is even greater, and being able to celebrate through digital media is an answer to this need. Despite the brokenness, and as an answer to it, digitally celebrating the Holy Supper – as will be described below – can provide healing, nourishment, and a sense of community.<sup>16</sup>

Lastly, some people also did not feel the need to celebrate Holy Supper or the Eucharist, or seemed not to have missed something while not being able to celebrate.<sup>17</sup> We found this reaction in articles from both Protestant and Roman Catholic perspectives. From several reactions, one could conclude that it is not so much the sacrament of bread and wine that was missed – at least for some – but rather the community and meeting each other after service.<sup>18</sup> In Catholic circles, there was no real discussion of abstinence. Many Catholics clearly felt it as a very awkward and painful situation, but, equally, voices could be heard claiming they did not really seem to miss Sunday communion; rather, the people and the ritual as such was missed.<sup>19</sup>

## 2 Spectator liturgy

A lot of so-called ‘online liturgy’ is not really an online celebration of the Holy Supper or the Eucharist. Most of the time it is a physically celebrated rite, streamed, recorded, or live broadcasted through

---

14) Apart from the above, also compare Nico de Fijter, “Het heilig avondmaal vieren achter je laptop?” *Trouw*, March 30, 2020, <https://www.trouw.nl/nieuws/het-heilig-avondmaal-vieren-achter-je-laptop~b32b55db/>.

15) E.g. Martine van der Herberg, “Laten we ervaren dat de Geest ook digitaal waait door brood en wijn,” *Trouw*, March 31, 2020, <https://www.trouw.nl/nieuws/laten-we-ervaren-dat-de-geest-ook-digitaal-waait-door-brood-en-wijn~bc51a207/>.

16) See also Jan Mudde, “Online avondmaal vieren is niet minder echt en hecht. Het wordt net zo sterk beleefd,” *Nederlands Dagblad*, April 3, 2020, <https://www.nd.nl/opinie/opinie/963899/online-avondmaal-vieren-is-niet-minder-echt-en-hecht>.

17) E.g. “Wilt u thuis”; De Fijter, “Het heilig avondmaal”.

18) Sjoerd Mulder, “Kan de christelijke gemeenschap ook online bestaan?,” *Trouw*, April 23, 2020, <https://www.trouw.nl/nieuws/kan-de-christelijke-gemeenschap-ook-online-bestaan~b7fb8799/>. See also Jan Groenleer, “Koffiedrinken wordt als gemis gevoeld. Dat het avondmaal ontbreekt, niet,” *Nederlands Dagblad*, September 14, 2020, <https://www.nd.nl/opinie/opinie/992098/missen-we-maaltijd-van-de-heer->.

19) Gregory Brenninkmeijer, “We hebben de eucharistie niet echt gemist de afgelopen periode,” *Nederlands Dagblad*, July 20, 2020, <https://www.nd.nl/opinie/opinie/983593/we-hebben-de-eucharistie-niet-echt-gemist-de-afgelopen-periode>. For a direct response to Brenninkmeijer, see Ton Verhoeven, “Eucharistie niet gemist,” *Nederlands Dagblad*, July 23, 2020, <https://www.nd.nl/opinie/opinie/983967/eucharistie-niet-gemist>.



television.<sup>20</sup> Existing Dutch online broadcasting services, such as *Kerkdienstgemist* or *Kerkomroep*, immediately updated their server capacity and noticed a large increase of visitors.<sup>21</sup>

In a Twitter discussion, quoted in the ND, this liturgical arrangement was referred to as a ‘*pars pro toto*’ celebration.<sup>22</sup> The vicar celebrates on behalf of the community. According to this article, several vicars considered streaming the Sunday service, celebrated with a small portion of the community – for example, some members of the consistory – to be a valuable option. This Protestant position was echoed in a Catholic point of view presented by André van Aarle.<sup>23</sup> While pleading for the rediscovery of spiritual communion, he stresses the fact that the priest celebrates the liturgy, and receives communion, on behalf of the church. He emphasizes the function of the Catholic priest or Protestant minister acting on behalf of the community and warns against using bread and wine at home. According to him, also from a Protestant perspective, “the preacher is the legitimate minister of Holy Supper”.<sup>24</sup> However, from both a Protestant and a Catholic perspective, this ‘*pars pro toto*’ option was strongly opposed. Young Theologian of the Nation (*Jonge Theoloog des Vaderlands*) Mark de Jager, a Protestant, is quite critical towards it, both on Twitter and in the ND, where he is quoted saying, “In my opinion it is not the pastor who represents Christ, but the congregation, as the body of Christ.”<sup>25</sup> Catholic theologian Erik Borgman and Jesuit father Nikolaas Sintobin also reacted against liturgical streaming organized by many priests and parishes. Sintobin warns against the danger of clericalism, centering too much on the priest. Borgman recalls the Second Vatican Council, which promoted active participation and the community as celebrating subject. According to Borgman, “television makes you in a way passive, the internet makes you into a spectator”.<sup>26</sup> Both opt for a different kind of online celebration, which we will describe below as ‘embedded domestic liturgy’.

In view of spiritual communion, the above-mentioned Van Aarle is convinced that both Catholics and Protestants should rediscover this tradition.<sup>27</sup> Having roots in the twelfth century, the idea of spiri-

20) We will mainly focus on the live-streamed celebrations, since this is also the focus of the sources we studied. These sources did not mention or problematize the practice of recorded celebrations. From a (Roman Catholic) liturgical perspective, simultaneity in view of liturgical celebrations seems evident. *Nederlands Dagblad* offered an overview of different types of streamed liturgies in Gerard ter Horst, “Er is een rijke schakering aan online kerkdiensten: ‘Zoals u ziet, ben ik vandaag de voorganger’,” *Nederlands Dagblad*, May 8, 2020, <https://www.nd.nl/geloof/geloof/970683/er-is-een-rijke-schakering-aan-online-kerkdiensten-zoals-u-ziet-b>.

21) Gerard ter Horst, Dick Schinkelshoek, and Hilbert Meijer, “Online kerkdienst”.

22) Gerrit Vreugdenhil (@gdvreugde) on Twitter, as quoted in Mulligen, “Avondmaal vieren”.

23) André van Aarle, “Val terug op de eeuwenoude traditie van ‘geestelijke communie’,” *Nederlands Dagblad*, April 6, 2020, <https://www.nd.nl/opinie/opinie/964659/val-terug-op-de-traditie-van-geestelijke-communie->.

24) Van Aarle.

25) Mulligen, “Avondmaal vieren”.

26) Mulligen.

27) Van Aarle, “Val terug”.

tual communion means that you can enter into communion with the body of Christ through prayer and a faithful desire for communion, without physically receiving the host.<sup>28</sup> Van Aarle presents not receiving communion as an act of faith, which fosters desire, which in its turn fosters faith. He encourages Protestants to consider this as a viable option in these troubling times. According to him, protestant theology has “spiritualized many visual and touchable elements of God’s presence”,<sup>29</sup> so why not deepen this and continue this road when it concerns communion? Van Aarle believes this could foster a sense of unity between the different churches. The Dutch bishops also held a plea for spiritual communion, not only for those at home, but also for those very few ‘necessary’ physical attendees, like the lector, the sacristan, or the cantor. However, the aforementioned practical theologian Plezier is clear: “I do not think a ‘watching’ participation fits well with a protestant conception of the presence of Christ in the Holy Supper. Christ is present in faithfully eating and drinking. For that you have to participate.”<sup>30</sup>

This last quote of Plezier is easily connected to the warning Pope Francis gave in view of digital liturgy, which was picked up by several Dutch commentators.<sup>31</sup> In his homily of April 17, the Pope warned against a virtualization of the Church, the sacraments, and the people of God.<sup>32</sup> He also warned against the danger of faith without the sacraments and stressed the physical aspect of the Church. He even referred to spiritual communion as “not being the Church”. Although spiritual communion is possible, he says, it is certainly not the ideal situation of what the Church is.<sup>33</sup> In a reaction on this, Borgman agrees with the danger of online liturgy in regard of the church community, although he also points out some positive aspects of digital liturgy. Both he, and Protestant theologian Janneke Steegman, argue in favor of rediscovering the importance of the physical dimension of liturgy and sacraments, following Pope Francis in this.<sup>34</sup>

---

28) See the article by Ineke Cornet in this volume.

29) Van Aarle.

30) Theo Plezier, as quoted in Mulligen, “Avondmaal vieren”.

31) Hendro Munsterman, “Paus waarschuwt tegen ‘virtualisering van het geloof’ door coronacrisis,” *Nederlands Dagblad*, April 17, 2020, <https://www.nd.nl/geloof/katholiekinside/966809/paus-waarschuwt-tegen-virtualisering-van-het-geloof-door-coronacr>; Mulder, “Kan de christelijke gemeenschap”.

32) A good summary can be found here: Carol Glatz, “Pope Francis: Living faith without sacraments is dangerous,” Accessed on September 7, 2020, <https://www.catholicregister.org/faith/homilies/item/31469-pope-francis-living-faith-without-sacraments-is-dangerous/>. For the text of the homily see: Pope Francis, “Il Papa prega per le mamme in attesa e mette in guardia dal rischio della fede ‘virtuale’.” Accessed on September 7, 2020, <https://www.vaticannews.va/it/papa-francesco/messa-santa-marta/2020-04/papa-francesco-messa-santa-marta-coronavirus8.html>.

33) “E questa non è la Chiesa: questa è la Chiesa di una situazione difficile, che il Signore permette, ma l’ideale della Chiesa è sempre con il popolo e con i sacramenti. Sempre.” Pope Francis, “Il Papa prega”.

34) Mulder, “Kan de christelijke gemeenschap”.

It is remarkable that few commentators are unreservedly positive about this liturgical situation during the crisis. Nevertheless, it seems that this is one of the most frequent forms of liturgical celebrations during the initial lockdown observed in the Netherlands, as well as after the slackening of the rules.<sup>35</sup> Broadcasted liturgy as described above is not difficult to organize and is also not a recent evolution, since it has existed almost as long as live television shows.

### 3 Private domestic liturgy

At the other end of the spectrum, the faithful have been celebrating makeshift liturgies at home. The responses to this practice show that such domestic liturgies often take place independent of church ministers and congregations. Reinier Sonneveld, addressing the initial hesitance people might feel concerning this practice, argues:

It may well feel like something inappropriate, as if it were not real. But we are all priests, which means that we all can break the bread. In the early church, no officially appointed priests would be present at such occasions. This is an extraordinary opportunity to act likewise in our times.<sup>36</sup>

On grounds of the concept of the priesthood of all believers, he feels domestic liturgies in which the lay faithful preside over Holy Supper are legitimate. Unsurprisingly, we did not encounter Catholic contributors seriously contemplating this option in our sample.

The fact that practitioners of private domestic liturgies do not regard the ministry of official ministers as a prerequisite for an effective or valid Eucharistic liturgy does not imply that they necessarily disregard them altogether. Ulbe van der Meer writes that

some tie the celebration to the priest or the elders of the church. I consider this very important. But in essence, the meal is connected to the testimony of the apostles and to the creed of the church. Therefore, being embedded in the Christian liturgy is what makes the meal valuable and salutary for participants.<sup>37</sup>

Ministry, in this view, is a valuable safeguard for faithfulness to the apostolic tradition, and as such the presence of ministers at domestic liturgies is desired. It is not a necessity, however. For Van der Meer,

35) Rimme Mastebroek, “Kerkelijke televisie blijft scoren op zondagochtend: ‘Beter geluid en beeld dan online diensten’,” August 11, 2020, <https://www.nd.nl/cultuur/media/986965/kerkelijke-televisie-blijft-scoren-op-zondagochtend-beter-geluid->.

36) Reinier Sonneveld in Hilbert Meijer, “Een huiskamerdienst op poten zetten is niet moeilijk. Hoe doe je dat?,” *Nederlands Dagblad*, March 13, 2020, <https://www.nd.nl/geloof/geloof/959795/een-huiskamerdienst-op-poten-zetten-is-niet-moeilijk-hoe-doe-je-d->.

37) Ulbe van der Meer, “Avondmaal thuis kan zonder digitale snelweg,” *Nederlands Dagblad*, April 9, 2020, <https://www.nd.nl/opinie/opinie/965216/avondmaal-thuis-kan-zonder-digitale-snelweg->.



ministry is only one way of being rooted in the apostolic tradition – and not even the most significant way at that. He therefore prefers a domestic liturgy without physical or virtual ministerial presence over the use of the internet to establish a presence that he considers ‘artificial’.<sup>38</sup>

Fundamental opposition to this practice is offered by Riemer Roukema, who quotes Ignatius of Antioch (“neither do anything without the bishop and presbyters. Neither endeavor that anything appear reasonable and proper to yourselves apart” and “Take heed, then, to have but one Eucharist”) to stress the importance of being connected to the ministers of one’s congregation during the celebration of the Holy Supper.<sup>39</sup> Ministry, then, is primarily acknowledged for its unifying function, transcending the individual, and therefore has a central place in the celebration of the Eucharist.

## 4 Embedded domestic liturgy

More than the ‘spectator liturgy’ described above, the virtually connected or embedded domestic liturgy includes the participation of the faithful connected through the internet. One could say that the internet extends the sacred space of the church building to the homes of the faithful. The connection enables real-time interaction between the presider and the faithful. At the same time, it avoids the risk of isolation in private domestic liturgies. The faithful use digital means to connect with their usual (or other) ecclesial communities while celebrating the faith. As such, the Sunday celebration retains its power to unite, heal, and nourish, albeit in new and, for some, questionable ways.

This category includes liturgies during which the faithful consume their own bread and wine at home. Monica van den Berg provides a lively description of her experience with this practice:

With the minister breaking the bread, on a screen, far away, [my children] witness closer than ever how God puts the bread in my mouth, the chalice to my lips. No, not in serenity and silence, a very devout moment, but in my ordinary, daily life, whilst the eyes of my children already stray towards the Lego-covered floor.<sup>40</sup>

Van den Berg’s discovery of the presence of God outside the usual liturgical setting resonates with other contributors. Ingrid Plantinga sees the liturgy as “a valuable bonus,” while the crisis reminds us that God is already present in our daily lives.<sup>41</sup> Others stress that the liturgy may be the central act of

---

38) Van der Meer.

39) Riemer Roukema, “Avondmaal aan huis is geen onderonsje,” *Nederlands Dagblad*, March 21, 2020, <https://www.nd.nl/opinie/opinie/961519/avondmaal-aan-huis-is-geen-onderonsje>.

40) Monica van den Berg, “God laat zich niet opsluiten in ons prachtige liturgische bouwwerk van wetten en regels,” *Nederlands Dagblad*, July 17, 2020, <https://www.nd.nl/opinie/opinie/982772/god-laet-zich-niet-opsluiten-in-ons-prachtige-liturgische-bouwwer>.

41) Ingrid Plantinga, “Kansen in de coronacrisis om thuis God te vinden,” *Nederlands Dagblad*, March 26, 2020, <https://www.nd.nl/opinie/opinie/962461/kansen-om-thuis-god-te-vinden#>.

Christian worship, but that there is so much more: community, *diaconia*,<sup>42</sup> and forms of popular piety.<sup>43</sup> Jesuit Gregory Brenninkmeijer even poses this probing question: “Have we, as church, dedicated the vast majority of our energy to a manifestation of our faith, which we, in response to the Reformation, declared the center of all, but which is not or only barely missed by the faithful?”<sup>44</sup> He continues: “Did we take seriously the real presence of Jesus ‘where two or three are gathered together in my name’ and did we think it through theologically, sacramentally and pastorally?”<sup>45</sup> Even though not all of these examples relate (explicitly) to the case of embedded domestic liturgy, it is clear that the current crisis inspires a shift from ecclesial-liturgical centeredness toward recognizing God’s presence elsewhere. For Catholics, too, rediscovering the domestic church as a place for liturgy and sacramental presence uses contemporary (digital) means to regain the personal and family devotion lost after the sixties.<sup>46</sup>

This shift, however, raises some serious questions regarding the sacrament and how it is celebrated. Reflecting on her experience with connected domestic liturgy, Monica van den Berg ponders, “Is this real and is this even possible?”<sup>47</sup> Her question can be read in two ways: as a question of technical possibility (e.g., is it possible to bless the elements of bread and wine over the internet) or as a question of desirability (e.g., ought it be done like this). Both questions are at stake in the responses to this practice. A positive answer to the former question is a precondition for the latter question.

Martine van den Herberg, minister of a ‘fresh expression’ in the Protestant Church in The Netherlands (PKN), suggests, “Let us trust that the Spirit also blows through bread and wine digitally. What a unique opportunity to experience that.”<sup>48</sup> Others just seem to assume that this practice is theologically plausible. De Jager, for example, only points at practical issues that may arise, such as the internet connection failing at the moment the minister utters the words of consecration.<sup>49</sup> One would expect this to be a typically Catholic concern. Surprisingly, however, Jesuit Nikolaas Sintobin, too, considers the option of online consecration. Explaining that he took part in embedded-domestic liturgies himself, he wondered if it would not be possible for the faithful to have their own bread and wine consecrated over the internet. Considering that the pope effectively broadcasts the *Urbi et Orbi* blessing, Sintobin wonders if it is possible to consecrate bread and wine in people’s homes through the internet: “Why would it be a priori unthinkable for us to go a little further as temporary solution

42) Janneke Stegemans in Mulder, “Kan de christelijke gemeenschap”.

43) Erik Borgman in Mulder, “Kan de christelijke gemeenschap”.

44) Brenninkmeijer, “We hebben de eucharistie”.

45) Brenninkmeijer.

46) Borgman in Mulder, “Kan de christelijke gemeenschap”.

47) She writes in Dutch: “*Is dit echt en kan dit wel?*” Berg, “God laat zich niet opsluiten”.

48) Herberg, “Laten we ervaren”.

49) Mulligen, “Avondmaal vieren”.

for certain circumstances?”<sup>50</sup> His question considers desirability, cautiously adopting the possibility of ‘virtual consecration’.

On the Protestant side, the question is more frequently posed in the context of the relationship between individual and community. Forms of connected domestic liturgy make it difficult for ministers to verify who partakes and to ensure that the sacrament is celebrated with dignity. The question of children participating in (connected) domestic liturgies is mentioned several times, often in the positive sense of the crisis enabling change in the status quo on this point.<sup>51</sup> Still, the function of the minister is a significant argument for people to prefer embedded over private domestic liturgies, as we have seen in the previous paragraph.

## 5 Excursion: discussions on baptism

Like most of this volume, we have limited ourselves mainly to the sacrament of the Eucharist. However, it is interesting to take the parallel discussions on baptism into account briefly. Similar debates on the significance and (ir)replicability of ministers as administrators of the sacrament have taken place in the context of baptism, as well as on the efficacy of an internet connection in mediating the sacrament. The different scenarios (abstinence, spectator liturgy, private domestic liturgy, and embedded domestic liturgy) are being discussed analogously in our sample.

For some it seems simple: if we can celebrate Holy Supper online, evidently we can also digitally administer baptism, with a minister saying the words on one side of the camera and parents performing the ritual gestures (e.g., pouring water or immersing the child) on the other side of the screen.<sup>52</sup> Baptism’s necessity and its digital celebration are linked to the discussion on Holy Supper: “if Holy Supper cannot be missed, neither can baptism.”<sup>53</sup> Others plead for the necessity of baptism, but are opposed to the parents executing the pouring and stress the importance of the minister, paralleling the discussion on consuming bread and wine at home. When celebrating in a very small, private setting, and keeping distance or even using a ‘baptism stick’, ministerial baptism could be organized

50) Nikolaas Sintobin in Hendro Munsterman, “Pasen vieren met je beeldscherm: onlinemis of juist thuisliturgie?” *Nederlands Dagblad*, April 7, 2020, <https://www.nd.nl/geloof/katholiekinside/964679/pasen-vieren-met-je-beeldscherm-onlinemis-of-juist-thuisliturgie->.

51) Mulligen, “Avondmaal vieren”; Mudde, “Online avondmaal vieren”. Ulbe van der Meer even remarks that “I think every church could benefit from a child reciting the words of consecration during Holy Supper.” Meer, “Avondmaal Thuis”.

52) Hilbert Meijer, Gerard ter Horst and Ilona de Lange, “Avondmaal kan online, waarom de doop dan niet?” *Nederlands Dagblad*, April 18, 2020, <https://www.nd.nl/geloof/geloof/966831/avondmaal-kan-online-waarom-de-doop-dan-niet->.

53) John van Eck, “Het water bepaalt, niet de hand van de dominee,” *Nederlands Dagblad*, April 29, 2020, <https://www.nd.nl/opinie/opinie/969109/water-bepaalt-niet-hand-dominee>.

to be ‘corona proof’.<sup>54</sup> In this way, both the words and gestures of the sacrament are kept together in the person of the minister, and digital baptism is not needed. Other authors note that the urgent necessity of baptism no longer plays a role in contemporary Dutch Christianity, which makes baptism (and confession) easier to postpone than Holy Supper. This also seems the case for Roman Catholics. Although the Roman Catholic Church knows and can still practice ‘emergency baptisms’, the limbo (a kind of purgatory for unbaptized children) was abolished by Pope Benedict XVI. For some Protestants however, baptism is “only a symbol of what already has happened” and even “not indispensable”. For these commentators, baptism should preferably take place in the midst of the assembled community, and not in a private service, whether online or not.<sup>55</sup>

Finally, there is the warning of Msgr. Van den Hout, Roman Catholic bishop of Groningen-Leeuwarden, who states that some voices and practices in the debate on baptism jeopardize the mutual recognition of baptism.<sup>56</sup> In this way the coronavirus crisis not only gives rise to deeper reflection on sacramentality and sacraments, but also painfully shows where ecumenical sensitivities lie and where ecumenical progress can be obstructed. In extreme cases, current developments can even mean a step backward on the ecumenical path. As such, the developments regarding Eucharistic liturgies and their theological justification may impact the debate on this hitherto unresolved and sensitive ecumenical topic in the near future.

## Concluding remarks

Clearly, in all five liturgical situations described above, there are recurring topics feeding the discussion on lockdown liturgy. A first question is that of the minister. For churches in which the focus is not so much on ordained ministry, the practice of consuming bread and wine at home during a digitally broadcasted service is easier to accept. Churches with a stronger theology of ordained ministry, on the other hand, tend to reject this practice and instead apply the idea of the minister – and sometimes a portion of the faithful – celebrating and communicating on behalf of the community. This results in a *pars pro toto* celebration, or spectator liturgy, as we have called it. For some Catholic commentators this recalls Tridentine ideas on ministry. Several Protestant commentators stress the unifying position of the minister. Clearly, in view of some liturgical situations, both Protestants and Catholics should be aware of clericalism. It is self-evident that in many broadcasted liturgies, whether highly participative or not, the role of the presider is stronger than during ‘normal’ liturgical circumstances. This situation can indeed foster clericalism or, maybe even worse, evolve into adoration of celebrity-priests. Never-

54) Bert van Veluw, “De doophandeling behoort toe aan de ambtsdrager,” *Nederlands Dagblad*, May 2, 2020, <https://www.nd.nl/opinie/opinie/969818/de-doophandeling-behoort-toe-aan-een-ambtsdrager>.

55) Meijer et al., “Avondmaal kan online”.

56) Ron van den Hout, “Online doop heeft oecumenische implicaties,” *Nederlands Dagblad*, May 8, 2020, <https://www.nd.nl/opinie/opinie/970788/online-doop-heeft-oecumenische-implicaties>.

theless, every liturgy, offline or online, has different roles and like many things, COVID-19 has problematized proper functioning of these liturgical roles: the role of the presider, but also of the community.

For some, the digital media and broadcasted Eucharist provided the means to foster church community in this time of crisis. For others, not celebrating Holy Supper or the Eucharist, out of solidarity and by way of abstinence, is the real communal challenge. Regardless, the community formed when celebrating the Eucharist or the Holy Supper is clearly missed by all parties. Some even miss the community more than receiving Holy Communion. Certainly, since the Liturgical Movement, the liturgy has known a ‘turn to the community’, which at least in the Roman Catholic Church has resulted in a post-conciliar reformed liturgy. Parallel to this development, in many Protestant churches the idea that it is principally the community that celebrates the liturgy, thanking and praising the triune God, led to an increased liturgical awareness and concrete reforms.<sup>57</sup> Because of COVID-19, the liturgy can no longer be celebrated as it used to be, exactly because of this communal gathering. As such, one could say that one of the essential dimensions of church liturgy, the very act of congregating, became liturgy’s greatest threat. Even today, when communal singing is not yet allowed in all churches, distance has to be maintained, physical contact avoided by all cost, and coffee and cake after services are being highly regulated (if allowed at all), these measures threaten the communal dimension of liturgy. As always, however, the coin has a flip side. Thanks to the digital turn caused by the virus, the possibilities of proclaiming the gospel and reaching out to people further away from church and faith have increased enormously.<sup>58</sup> During the period of lockdown, the digital realm has proven that it can provide real and fruitful possibilities for ecclesiology, even to those who – before COVID-19 – were very skeptical of digital applications in matters of faith and worship. From now on, the balance between forming both an online and an offline community will remain a continuous search between (physical) proximity and (digital) accessibility, which will continue to have an impact on the liturgical life of the churches.

A third theme is that of sacramentality. Although not always made explicit, the sacramental theology one holds clearly influences a certain preference for one of the liturgical situations described above.<sup>59</sup> For some, spiritual communion is the best and most satisfying answer. For others, consecrating words and divine mercy also work via the internet, or sacramentality and the sacramental presence of Christ is situated more in (digital) communal gathering rather than sharing from the same consecrated bread and cup. For many, the coronavirus crisis provided an opportunity to discover ways of sacramentality other than focusing on bread and wine, e.g., encountering Christ in Holy Scripture,

---

57) On the Liturgical Movement in the different churches of the Netherlands, see Louis van Tongeren et al., eds., *Patterns and Persons: A Historiography of Liturgical Studies in the Netherlands in the Twentieth Century*, Liturgia Condenda 25 (Leuven: Peeters, 2010).

58) See also Samuel Goyvaerts, “Van lockdown-liturgie naar nieuw liturgisch leven,” in *Kerk in tijden van corona. Diagnose – dilemma – duurzame toekomst*, eds. Leo Fijen et al. (Antwerpen/Baarn: Halewijn/Adveniat, 2020), 46–54.

59) See also Anton ten Klooster, “Sacramenten op afstand,” in *Kerk in tijden van corona*, 73–81.



or in a domestic liturgy with the entire family, including children. Moreover, COVID-19 explicitly made clear again that the question of how one understands sacramentality runs parallel with the tension between spiritualizing the liturgy on the one hand and the necessity of the bodily, physical dimension (of both people and signs) on the other. Whereas the communal dimension of the liturgy was already self-evident for many since the previous century, COVID-19 and the twenty-first century have made clear that its bodily dimension is equally constitutive. Sometimes people need to be deprived of something to notice how essential it is. Despite many creative digital solutions and possibilities of participating, for many it is clear that worshipping physically is still ‘something different’.

It is exactly this idea of participation that seems to be the common thread running through the entire story of liturgy during lockdown, as we have depicted above using a large sample of articles in popular media. For some, liturgical participation deepened, because the (digital) offer of different liturgies at hand increased enormously and it was easier to find ‘one’s pick’. But due to the difficult issues mentioned earlier, many of the faithful – however grateful for the digital opportunities – felt somehow alienated. On the one hand, those critiquing certain forms of digital worship are worried about the level of participation of the faithful. On the other hand, many of the more creative solutions for online liturgy were born out of an equal concern for participation. In a society in which people constantly switch between online and offline and many times combine both, the quest for participation – through virtual reality, transfer of smell, and other technological possibilities that are evolving at a tremendous pace – will remain a challenge for sacramental participation.

Every now and then, the necessity of liturgy and sacraments themselves is put into question due to the experience of more than three months ‘without ecclesial worship’. Of course, ‘being a church’ and trying to follow Christ is not exhausted in celebrating the liturgy. If there is anything the coronavirus crisis calls Christians to do, it is to care for the poor and the sick. On the one hand, some congregations may have focused so much on making the liturgy digitally available that they have forgotten Christian service (*diaconia*) in a time when this was most needed. On the other hand, others have (re)discovered new ways of proclaiming the Gospel (*kerygma*) or found, at least for them, a new way of ‘being a church’ and meeting Christ: in the suffering face of their fellow human beings.

Many, if not all of the topics described above were already debated, or even problematic, before the outbreak of COVID-19. One could argue that the pandemic has only made some positions more outspoken, turning a ‘what if’ situation into reality. It is now up to church officials and ministers, hopefully assisted by theological and liturgical scholars, to turn this crisis into chances and changes. Without doubt, this crisis urges Christians to face the opportunities and challenges of the virtual reality that will become ever more entangled with our offline existence. Coronavirus has confronted us with urgent and inevitable theological questions, to which the discussions cited in this article are only the very start of a response.

**Samuel (Sam) Goyvaerts** is Assistant Professor of Liturgy at the Tilburg School of Catholic Theology (Tilburg University). Apart from teaching liturgy and sacraments, he researches contemporary liturgical questions in dialogue with the Liturgical Movement and the teaching of the Second Vatican Council, applying a combination of liturgical theological and liturgical pastoral perspectives.

Email: [S.H.Goyvaerts@tilburguniversity.edu](mailto:S.H.Goyvaerts@tilburguniversity.edu)

**Fokke Wouda, MA** studied Reformed and Roman Catholic theology. He is currently finishing his practical theological dissertation about Eucharistic hospitality in ecumenical contexts at Tilburg University. In addition, he works as curriculum coordinator at the Netherlands School for Advanced Studies in Theology and Religion (NOSTER).

Email: [f.wouda@ftr.ru.nl](mailto:f.wouda@ftr.ru.nl)