

What even is online worship?

A Story of Videography in a Local Parish

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My name is Arto Vallivirta. I work as an Advisor in Liturgy and Spirituality for the Finnish Church Council. But right now I want to talk about something earlier, about the years I spent working as a priest in a local parish.

I want to start with a fairly specific memory.

It is spring 2020. The church is almost empty. There are candles on the altar, and there is something you could call a liturgy, but there is no congregation present. There is a camera on a tripod, a computer, all sorts of equipment, and somewhere out there, people are watching. We assume so, anyway. We can see a number on the screen. But we cannot see them. They do not respond. We cannot hear them sing.

We did more or less what we always do. We said the words. We made the gestures. But the attention was different. Normally, in a gathered service, the room gives you some of your attention for free. The presence of other people, the sounds they make, the small movements at the edge of your vision. You are held inside a shared field of attention, and you do not have to build it yourself. That day, none of that was there. The room was the same room. The liturgy was still the liturgy, though performed in a more camera friendly way. But being in it felt strangely weightless. The actions that normally carry a certain gravity, a certain density, had lost that density. We were trying to be in people's living rooms, because they could not come to church.

Week after week. Better lighting, better cameras, and so on. But near the end of the lockdown, at the last lockdown service, I symbolically smashed a lens cover on the camera as the service ended. Standing there afterwards, I honestly did not know what had happened. Was it worship? I think it was, but I am not sure what kind. And what had actually taken place? Was the absence of the congregation just a practical detail, or was it something more fundamental?

That is where my question begins. What even is online worship? I know the covid years are long behind us. But my journey as a videographer, as a digital media worker, started right there.

The question of taking part from a distance is not new, of course. Churches have been broadcasting worship since the early days of radio. The format is familiar. A church space, a priest or a minister, a liturgy that more or less follows the usual order of service. The camera is basically a window. You watch from home what you would otherwise attend in person.

This form rests on a clear assumption. What matters is the content, the word, the prayer, the proclamation. The medium is taken to be neutral, or at least transparent enough that it does not change things in any deep way. The person at home is a viewer,

but they are receiving something real. And there is a congregation in the building. We receive something together with them. Not everything, and not in the same way, but we are still together.

There are good theological reasons for this, and a long pastoral tradition behind it. Homebound elderly people, people in hospital, people in remote areas. Broadcasting has always served those at the edges of the gathered assembly.

But the pandemic forced something different. Suddenly it was not a small minority watching from home. It was everyone. The broadcast was no longer a supplement to the gathered community. It was the only thing there was.

And that changes the question quite a bit.

When congregations came back, many parishes kept streaming. That created a new and genuinely strange situation. A hybrid service, where some people are physically present and others are watching on a screen somewhere.

I spent a fair amount of time trying to design those services, trying to make them work for both groups at once. I am not sure it can really be done well. The two situations are so different that improving one tends to spoil the other.

The person in the pew shares a space, a time, and a room full of other bodies. The air, the acoustics, the temperature, the smell of old wood and candle wax. All of that is part of the experience, mostly below the level of conscious attention. The person at home is alone, or with their family, in a completely different setting, with completely different options. They can pause, they can rewind, and usually they will glance at their phone.

These are not the same experience with different seating. They are fundamentally different kinds of encounter. Treating them as the same, which the hybrid format quietly does, takes a certain amount of pretending.

But let us go a step further, to where the service is not for the congregation present, and is not a supplement to it either, but something else altogether. Over several years I made different series of video devotions for the Espoo parishes. These were not broadcast services. They were short, standalone pieces. And within that there is a wide spectrum.

At one end, a pastor, a camera, a church space. Scripture, reflection, prayer. Clean and recognisable. You know what you are watching within the first five seconds.

This works. It works because it carries the weight of a familiar tradition, the same grammar as radio devotions, the same reassuring signals. There is a threshold here, a register that says this is different from ordinary content. You can settle into it.

But it has a built in limit. The camera here is trying very hard to disappear. It wants to be a window, not a presence. And a window can only show you what is right in front of it. The editing stays subtle, the way you would be in a church.

The second kind of material was more fragmented. The same elements, light, a cross, a text, a voice, but rearranged. Not in the expected order. Broken down into a more primal form. The familiar pieces of liturgical life were still there, but taken apart and put back together differently. Here I treated video as a medium in its own right, rather than trying to reproduce physical reality.

While editing this kind of piece, I kept hitting a question I could not quite settle. At what point does this stop being a devotion?

Liturgy is about order. It takes the raw material of human experience and gives it shape, a beginning, a middle, an end, a direction. When you fragment that order, you are not only making an aesthetic choice. You are doing something to the structure itself.

I do not think that is necessarily wrong. The discomfort is often theologically fruitful. Sometimes I borrowed familiar tropes from television documentaries, sometimes I moved towards video art and distorted reality. This kind of video asks more of the viewer. You are no longer handing them a form to inhabit. You are handing them pieces and asking them to do some of the assembling themselves.

Whether that is a gift or a burden probably depends on the person.

The third kind is where it gets genuinely strange. The visual language is borrowed entirely from another genre. In this example case, from outdoor and trail running videos. Wide landscapes, movement, natural light, a certain physical energy. Nothing about it looks or feels like church. We play with the familiar storytelling of YouTube. This is not liturgy anymore. Not in the slightest.

And yet there is a voice speaking about faith. There is a text. There is something being offered.

What interests me here is exactly that dissonance. The body is present in this kind of video, visibly and physically present, moving through a landscape. There is sweat, effort, breath. And that bodily presence does something. It makes a claim about where God might be met. Not only in the dedicated sacred space, not only in the order of the liturgy, but here, in motion, outdoors.

That is a genuinely old theological instinct. The Psalms are full of it. God met in the wilderness, on the mountain, in the storm. The idea that the created world is itself a place of revelation is not marginal to the tradition.

But here is the problem. The visual language of outdoor content does not arrive empty. It brings its own associations. Freedom, self improvement, personal achievement, a certain aesthetic of conquering the terrain. Those associations do not vanish just because you lay a prayer over them. Images mean things before we intend them to mean something else. Every visual genre is also a kind of ideology, a set of assumptions about what matters and who the subject is. When you borrow a genre for theological purposes, you borrow its ideology along with it, whether you mean to or not.

So the question is not only whether the content is theological. It is whether the form is working with the content or against it. Whether the outdoor language genuinely opens a

theological space, or whether it tames the gospel into something that looks a lot like an advertisement for a better version of yourself.

I do believe that trying out different ways of visual storytelling is a powerful way to do theology. Sometimes experimentally, but always testing it against the fullness of the Christian tradition. Whether it counts as form of worship, I still do not know.

Finally, I want to name three tensions that run through everything I have described.

The first is about community and solitude. Christian worship is gathering, the assembly of the body. But the person watching a video devotion is alone, in a private space, with no other bodies present. And bodily co presence is not a small thing. When we are in the same room, we breathe the same air, we hear each other's voices land in the same acoustic space, we affect one another in ways that are mostly below thought. A congregation is not just a collection of individuals who happen to be in one place. It is a shared field of perception and attention. That field does not exist on a screen.

The ancient desert tradition has a great deal to say about solitude as a real way of meeting God. But even the desert fathers and mothers understood their solitude as held within a community. They wrote letters, they received visitors, they belonged to a wider web of practice. The person alone with a phone is something different. Not worse, necessarily. But different.

The second tension is about presence and recording. About time. Liturgy is an event. It happens in time, and in its own self understanding it is always now. The Eucharist, as my church understands it, is not only a remembrance of something that happened once. It is a sharing in something that is happening now. That claim about time is not a side issue. It is central.

Our experience of time is never just a string of separate moments. We live the present already shaped by what has just passed and leaning towards what is about to come. The opening of a familiar hymn already carries the whole hymn within it. The final blessing gathers up all that came before. The liturgy works by shaping that flow, moving through gathering, proclamation, response, and sending. Each moment is full of what surrounds it.

A recording breaks that. It keeps the content but not the place in time. When you watch a recorded service, you are not inside the flow the liturgy was built to create. You are outside it, looking at a document of it. The now of the recording and the now of your watching are different nows, and they do not merge just because the screen is on.

It gets stranger when you remember that most people do not watch at the moment it was made. They watch later, in pieces, pausing, skipping and rewinding. The careful order of the liturgy dissolves into an on demand object you can enter and leave whenever you like. What happens to the liturgy when it becomes something you can scroll?

The third tension is the one closest to this conference. It is about authenticity and production. The more carefully you edit a video, the more deliberate and crafted it

becomes, and the further it moves from the raw encounter happening in liturgy. An encounter between persons, in time, in a shared space, where something unrepeatable happens. And what happens if you let an AI enhanced algorithm do the editing?

Every editorial decision is a decision about what to show and what to hide. The camera always has a frame, and whatever is outside it does not exist for the viewer. The person at home sees a curated version of a space, a curated version of a face. This is not dishonest. All communication involves selection and shaping. But it is a different thing from presence. And it matters that we know which one we are offering.

The incarnation is the claim that God enters matter. Particular matter, a particular body, a particular time and place. Not human nature in the abstract, but this specific weight, this voice, this vulnerability. That particularity is not incidental to the gospel. The whole thing turns on it.

Every mediated form of worship has to negotiate with that particularity. Radio, television, digital video. Each one puts a different kind of distance between us and the body, the room, the shared moment of gathering. AI introduces a new kind of distance. Not from the body of the viewer, but from the body of the maker. A voice that was never spoken. A prayer that was never prayed by anyone.

I do not yet know what to make of that. But working through the questions that working with video raised, about presence, about time, about what the body does in worship, has at least given me a way to ask it.

I stood in an empty church in 2020 and did not know what had just happened. I still do not have a tidy answer. But the question keeps doing useful work. It keeps me honest about what I am actually making, and who it is for.

That is what I wanted to share. Thank you.