

# PRESENCE AND ABSTRACTION. INTERPRETING THE PRACTICE OF EUCHARISTIC ADORATION ONLINE

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**Abstract:** This paper takes as its point of departure the rise of online Adoration of the Reserved Sacrament during the widespread suspension of worship in response to COVID-19. Taking the phenomenon seriously as an instance of the *sensus fidelium* exposes limitations in the Tridentine formulation of the mode of sacramental presence. Alternative approaches may be developed with reference to the thinking of two post-Heideggerian philosophers, Marion and Nancy, who in different ways explore the subject's encounter with the divine in the phenomenal world as a double kenosis, without reference to an abstract concept of Being. These accounts together suggest an account of adoration as a kenotic response to divine kenosis and so suggest understandings of Eucharistic Adoration that are not bounded by the constraints of physical materiality. The paper concludes by considering the wider applicability of this approach in a world that is, increasingly, a hybrid of physical and 'virtual' phenomena and at a time when US Catholics are believed to be losing their faith in the real presence of Christ in the eucharistic elements.

## I. INTRODUCTION

During 2020, the majority of the industrialised world embraced some form of lockdown and normal church activities were modified or suspended to protect against the spread of COVID-19. These events changed the pattern and practice of Catholic devotion in many ways, some of which may prove to be permanent. Among these changes, the most visible was perhaps the way in which Catholic devotional life moved online, in its individual and collective forms.

Under these conditions, the main act of Catholic worship was, of course, the online Mass, and a glance at churchservices.tv shows how widely this response to the closure of churches was adopted just in Great Britain and Ireland. Although the online Mass was a new phenomenon for many, it represents a fairly straightforward amalgam of two established devotions: the act of attendance at Mass without receiving communion, and the practice of receiving communion at home. A more puzzling phenomenon was the emergence of Adoration<sup>1</sup> of the Blessed

<sup>1</sup>Here and throughout, Adoration is capitalised when referring to the specific devotion of Adoration of the Blessed Sacrament, to distinguish it from the practice of adoration in general.

Sacrament in its online form, which enjoyed a significant increase in popularity.<sup>2</sup> This raises an intriguing question: why, if our longing is for participation, may we choose a devotion that has the participatory element removed?

The argument that I will develop in this essay is that this apparently simple question takes us to the heart of some fundamental contemporary issues concerning our conception of Christ's presence and our response to it, and the articulation of these in doctrine: while the issues are not particularly new, they are being encountered in new ways and may require some flexible rethinking. I will then explore the work of two French thinkers, Jean-Luc Marion and Jean-Luc Nancy, who, in different ways, may deepen our understanding of Adoration as a devotional practice, concluding by considering their insights in the light of contemporary concerns about Catholic acceptance of eucharistic doctrine in the USA.

A number of working assumptions underpin this exploration. First, the emergence of online Adoration should not be automatically discarded as a corruption because it does not fit neatly into existing eucharistic theology, but treated in the first instance as an expression of the *sensus fidelium* that has the potential to deepen insight into the presence of Christ in the sacrament.<sup>3</sup> Secondly, somebody engaging in online Adoration is not simply using the video image as a devotional aid to stir up sentiment, but (to the extent that they reflect on their practice at all) considers that it is giving them access to the sacramental presence of Christ. These are large assumptions and ask a lot of the reader, but open a promising line of enquiry, namely that by consulting the *sensus fidelium* as it has evolved over the period of the COVID-19 pandemic, something may be learned about how sacramental grace is apprehended in new and somewhat challenging circumstances.

The parameters of the exploration are set by two lines of thought that converge to focus the question. On the one hand, there is at first glance something intuitively appropriate about Adoration during lockdown: something to do with longing for participation in something out of our grasp, for graces that appear to be unavailable to us. On the other, alongside the history of official encouragement for eucharistic Adoration, there is a parallel history within the Church of critical suspicion of the practice, with the charge (emerging in the Middle Ages but particularly current in the period following Vatican II) that it is a perversion of devotion by a process of 'reification', turning a participatory shared act into the alienated adoration of an object.<sup>4</sup> From this point of view, those of the faithful who are joining an online act of Adoration are misled into a *triple* alienation from the life of the Church as the Body of Christ. First, they mistake the eucharistic bread and wine for the entire work of sacramental grace in the whole life of discipleship and participation expressed in the Mass; secondly, they substitute the act of gazing upon the Sacrament for physical, bodily participation in it; finally, they substitute *online*

<sup>2</sup>A YouTube search conducted by the author at 16:26 on 7 July 2021 (in the period of suspension of worship for the Catholic Church in England and Wales) found 87 videos live-streaming Adoration of the Sacrament from English-speaking countries, of which almost all had started streaming in the preceding twelve months. In addition, there were some channels playing recordings of the Blessed Sacrament exposed for Adoration, presumably so that one may practice Adoration without being at all restrained by time.

<sup>3</sup>Dorian Llywelyn, 'Devotion, Theology and the Sensus Fidelium', *New Blackfriars* 98, no. 1074 (2017): 171–187, <https://doi.org/10.1111/nbfr.12268>.

<sup>4</sup>Notably levied by Terry Eagleton and those associated with the journal *Slant*, who popularised the use of the Marxist term 'commodity fetishism' in respect to Adoration. See Brian Wicker, 'Justice, Peace and Dominicans 1216-1999: VIII—*Slant*, Marxism and the English Dominicans', *New Blackfriars* 80, no. 944 (1999): 436–43, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1741-2005.1999.tb01698.x>. See also Andrew Cole, 'The Eucharist and the Commodity', in *The Birth of Theory* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2014), 86–106.

devotion for geographical proximity and physical gazing upon the Sacrament.<sup>5</sup> This concern has recently been revived with particular reference to worship during lockdown.<sup>6</sup>

Perhaps because of this sensitivity, recent Catholic treatments of Adoration have tended to shy away from its positive theological content<sup>7</sup> and develop in one of two ways. Some stress its emergence as an historical accident, a devotion developed at a time when actual consumption of the host was much rarer, that has somehow spilled over into our present age of sacramental abundance.<sup>8</sup> Others, including Vatican documents defending and promoting Adoration as a pious practice, typically stress its psychological or devotional benefits as a *reminder* of the gift of Christ in the Eucharist.<sup>9</sup> Both of these responses miss an opportunity to think more deeply about the ways in which Christ may be sacramentally encountered in Adoration, and so indirectly help to focus attention on where the issues may lie.

For the purposes of this paper we are treating online Adoration as an encounter with the sacramental presence of Christ and so more than just an historical accident or psychological tool. This generates three questions:

- Why should online Adoration ever be preferred to online participation in a Mass, given that these are accessible live, almost on demand, at any time of the day or night?
- How might online Adoration be understood as an occasion for an encounter with the presence of Christ, when by definition one is remote from the physical instantiation of that presence?
- Can any sense be made of *asynchronous* online Adoration (watching a recorded version) when the dimension of time as well as space has been elided from the encounter?

<sup>5</sup>In the case of *asynchronous* online Adoration of a recorded event, there is of course the further removal of the practitioner in time.

<sup>6</sup>See e.g. the critical comments of the Episcopalian liturgist James Farwell (reproduced by the Episcopal Diocese of Virginia) regarding the risk of ‘fetishization of the sacrament’ during the pandemic lockdown: James Farwell, ‘Liturgical Guidance’, accessed 3 July 2022, [http://www.thediocese.net/Customer-Content/www/CMS/files/Covid\\_resources/Liturgical\\_Guidance\\_-\\_Farwell.pdf](http://www.thediocese.net/Customer-Content/www/CMS/files/Covid_resources/Liturgical_Guidance_-_Farwell.pdf).

<sup>7</sup>E.g. ‘If anyone says that Christ, the only begotten Son of God, is not to be adored in the holy sacrament of the Eucharist with the worship of *latria*, including external worship, and that the Sacrament therefore is not to be honored with special festive celebrations or solemnly carried in processions according to the praiseworthy universal rite and custom of the holy Church; or that it is not to be publicly exposed for the people’s adoration and that those who adore it are idolators, let him be anathema.’ Council of Trent, *Decree on the Sacrament of the Eucharist*, 11 October 1551, in Heinrich Denzinger, *Compendium of Creeds, Definitions and Declarations on Matters of Faith and Morals*, ed. Peter Hünermann, Robert Fastiggi, and Anne Englund Nash, 43rd ed. (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2012), DH 1656 (hereafter DH).

For a perspective contemporary with Vatican II, see *Mysterium Fidei* (1965): ‘... For it is not just while the Sacrifice is being offered and the Sacrament is being confectioned, but also after the Sacrifice has been offered and the Sacrament confectioned—while the Eucharist is reserved in churches or oratories—that Christ is truly Emmanuel, which means “God with us.” For He is in the midst of us day and night; He dwells in us with the fullness of grace and of truth. He raises the level of morals, fosters virtue, comforts the sorrowful, strengthens the weak...’ Paul VI, *Mysterium Fidei*, 3 September 1965, 6, [https://www.vatican.va/content/paul-vi/en/encyclicals/documents/hf\\_p-vi\\_enc\\_03091965\\_mysterium.html](https://www.vatican.va/content/paul-vi/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_p-vi_enc_03091965_mysterium.html).

<sup>8</sup>John A. Hardon, *The History of Eucharistic Adoration: Development of Doctrine in the Catholic Church* (Oak Lawn, IL: CMJ Publishers, 1997).

<sup>9</sup>E.g. ‘The exposition of the Blessed Sacrament... stimulates the faithful to an awareness of the marvelous presence of Christ and is an invitation to spiritual communion with Him. It is therefore an excellent encouragement...’ Sacred Congregation of Rites, *Eucharisticum Mysterium*, 25 May 1967, <https://adoremus.org/1967/05/eucharisticum-mysterium>.

Each of these questions presses on some underlying issues to do with Being and presence. In what sense is it possible to say that Christ is present to us in Adoration, if all our understandings of presence (participation, physical proximity, synchronicity) are being negated by the activity that claims to mediate it? In order to address this underlying question, it is necessary to think about the sacramental presence of Christ as, on the one hand, specific and material rather than a generic ‘ground’ to the phenomenal world; and on the other, unconstrained by the physical dimension of the eucharistic elements even though identified with them. The main body of this essay will pursue the problem through three stages. First it will draw briefly on Heidegger’s critique of ‘ontotheology’ in relation to the Tridentine formulation of sacramental presence in order to refine what is at stake in this exploration. It will then turn to two post-Heideggerian philosophers, Marion and Nancy, to sketch out some alternatives or supplements to the Tridentine formula and, finally, seek to apply some of the insights gained to the original question of how sacramental presence may be understood in a contemporary context increasingly reliant on online expressions of faith.

## II. BEING AND PRESENCE – TRENT AND HEIDEGGER

Although the practice of Adoration is considered to be ancient, the doctrinal basis for it is developed at the Council of Trent, and in particular in the *Decree on the Sacrament of the Eucharist* arising from the thirteenth session. Three key theological moves are made or reiterated here which together provide the classical case for Adoration. First, it is affirmed that ‘the whole Christ is truly, really and substantially contained’ in the sacrament of the Eucharist:<sup>10</sup> despite appearances, to be in the presence of the consecrated eucharistic elements is to be in the real presence of Christ. As developed in a scholastic theology influenced by Aristotelian metaphysics, the mechanism is that the substance of the elements has been changed to the substance of Christ while leaving the species of bread intact.<sup>11</sup> This establishes the principle that *latria* directed to the eucharistic elements is directed to Christ.

Secondly, however, if Christ is thus present in the sacrament, he is so in a unique way that transcends the physical constraints of creatures. Although he remains sitting at the right hand of the Father, simultaneously ‘he is sacramentally present to us in many other places.’<sup>12</sup> Furthermore, he is wholly if separately present in both the bread and the wine and indivisibly present in each part.<sup>13</sup> This establishes that the worshipper may consider herself to be in the sacramental presence of Christ wherever the consecrated elements are physically present.

Finally, the sacramental presence of Christ in the consecrated elements may be traced from the point of consecration and persists until such a time as the elements are consumed or destroyed, irrespective of whether or when they are consumed.<sup>14</sup> This establishes that Christ is present in the consecrated elements outside the act of collective worship and so worthy of individual devotion.

<sup>10</sup>Council of Trent, *Decree on the Sacrament of the Eucharist*, DH 1651.

<sup>11</sup>Council of Trent, *Decree on the Sacrament of the Eucharist*, DH 1642.

<sup>12</sup>Council of Trent, *Decree on the Sacrament of the Eucharist*, DH 1636.

<sup>13</sup>Council of Trent, *Decree on the Sacrament of the Eucharist*, DH 1641.

<sup>14</sup>Council of Trent, *Decree on the Sacrament of the Eucharist*, DH 1639.

The Council thus makes three related moves to construct a dogmatic account that explains why it is proper to venerate the presence of Christ under the form of the consecrated elements, using the conceptual materials available to it. The Council asserts that the Creator is present under the particular species; that the eternal is present within a window of time; and that the universal is fully present in the local instance. On this basis, the Council concludes, ‘all the faithful of Christ ... must venerate this most holy Sacrament with the worship of *latria* that is due to the true God.’<sup>15</sup>

Foundational though this account of sacramental presence undoubtedly is, it does not provide a sufficient basis to account for the phenomenon of online Adoration. An account of the universal Christ as the true reality underlying a multiplicity of particular instances of substances present in space and time is a sufficient basis for the physical act of Adoration in individual churches and on individual occasions, but cannot provide an account of *sacramental* presence in the experience of online Adoration, when the elements are neither physically present nor necessarily existent in that particular time. If there is an account to be had of Christ’s sacramental presence at the act of online Adoration, it will need to be one that detaches the conditions of a sacramental encounter from the constraints of physical substances. In other words, the Tridentine formulation of sacramental presence as the substance of Christ in the form of bread and wine will not be stretched to account for online Adoration and a supplementary account may be required.

This move requires a ‘step back’ from dependence on what Heidegger famously characterised as an ontotheological metaphysics, in which God is confused with a metaphysical abstract notion of Being, as the one universal *causa sui* that reduces all particular events of being to instances and derivatives of the absolute. According to Heidegger, this move diminished both theology and experience, as every object became an instance of a generalised Being and, in turn, God became identified as the founding Being divorced from actual instances of presence in the world.<sup>16</sup>

Space does not permit a detailed discussion of Heidegger’s critique of ontotheology, but his mature understanding is neatly summarised in a lecture from 1957, reproduced as a chapter in *Identity and Difference*.<sup>17</sup> In ‘The Onto-Theological Constitution of Metaphysics’<sup>18</sup> he describes the problem thus:

Ontology, however and theology are ‘Logies’ inasmuch as they provide the ground of beings as such and account for them within the whole. They account for Being as the ground of beings.<sup>19</sup>

With the following consequences for our understanding of God:

The original matter of thinking presents itself as the first cause ... The Being of beings is represented fundamentally, in the sense of the ground, only as *causa sui*. This is the metaphysical concept of God.<sup>20</sup>

<sup>15</sup>Council of Trent, *Decree on the Sacrament of the Eucharist*, DH 1643.

<sup>16</sup>I am indebted to one of the reviewers of an earlier version of this paper for helping to clarify my description here.

<sup>17</sup>Martin Heidegger, *Identity and Difference*, trans. Joan Stambaugh (New York: Harper & Row, 1974).

<sup>18</sup>Heidegger, *Identity and Difference*, 42–74.

<sup>19</sup>Heidegger, *Identity and Difference*, 59.

<sup>20</sup>Heidegger, *Identity and Difference*, 60.

And for objects:

Because Being appears as ground, beings are what is grounded; the highest being, however, is what accounts in the sense of giving the first cause.<sup>21</sup>

God thus becomes the underlying structure of Being that accounts for the totality of beings: individual beings are of interest mainly as derivative expressions of and conduits to the thought of Being, and God retreats from the world of beings as an abstract and eternal principle. Heidegger's answer is to begin elsewhere: rather than starting from 'first principles', he starts from individual beings as they present themselves to us and seeks to arrive at an understanding of Being by a phenomenological analysis.

The account of God's sacramental presence in the world according to Trent cannot be mapped precisely onto the distinction between Being and beings identified in Heidegger's account of ontotheology. Indeed, in demurring from simple appropriation of Aristotelian categories,<sup>22</sup> it may be seen as resisting this temptation; and in asserting the complete presence of Christ in each particular instance of sacramental presence it may be seen as explicitly refuting it. Nevertheless, it is possible to discern the same underlying structure in this framing of doctrine, and as we have discussed, the structure of the sacramental dogma makes it difficult to understand online Adoration as anything more than a very diluted and attenuated form of 'true' eucharistic participation. If we are to take it seriously, we need to set aside for the present any construction that sees the temporal and particular event of encounter with Christ as a derivative instance of the universal and general, and proceed by a sort of phenomenological analysis of divine encounter in our world, as exemplified by online Adoration.

Two post-Heideggerian thinkers, Marion and Nancy, have attempted in different ways to build on Heidegger's critique of ontotheology and develop an account of the encounter with the divine in the phenomenal world along lines that open up the questions in new ways, and each will be discussed in turn in what follows.

### III. GIFT AND RESPONSE – MARION

Jean-Luc Marion is perhaps the thinker who has grappled with the problem posed by Heidegger in the most consistently 'theological' way, seeking to find an approach to the God of Christianity as a 'God-beyond-Being' by developing a phenomenology of God as encountered in the world.<sup>23</sup> His angle of approach is not through conceptions but through adoration, and this makes him a particularly suitable dialogue partner here.

As he puts it,

The discovery of the prayer of eucharistic adoration was a fundamental thing... The whole work of contemplation consists in ... putting into focus what will make presence speak, what will give to the words their referent. It is a labour of attention, of concentration, but one that is

<sup>21</sup>Heidegger, *Identity and Difference*, 70.

<sup>22</sup>Jose Sayes points out that, in choosing the words *species* rather than *accidents*, the Council maintains a slight distance from a classical Aristotelian substance/accidents metaphysics. Jose A. Sayes, 'The Eucharist in the Council of Trent', *L'Osservatore Romano*, 23 February 2005, <https://www.ewtn.com/catholicism/library/eucharist-in-the-council-of-trent-3090>.

<sup>23</sup>Piotr Karpiński, 'Theology of Jean-Luc Marion as Hermeneutics of the Eucharist', *Revista Portuguesa de Filosofia* 76, no. 2–3 (2020): 789–806, [https://doi.org/10.17990/RPF/2020\\_76\\_2\\_0789](https://doi.org/10.17990/RPF/2020_76_2_0789).

essentially de-subjectivizing, where the *I* is erased before the one whom it observes speaking... [W]ith eucharistic adoration, a fundamental psychological change takes place, since it is a matter of putting words into the mouth of a reality, if I can put it like this, or of causing the words [of the biblical texts] spoken to be really those said by Someone who is here now, before me, infinitely more than me.<sup>24</sup>

This is a rich passage that deserves to be unpacked in some detail as it summarises some key elements in Marion's position. First, and by way of background, Marion couches his articulation of sacramental presence in the language of the gift, and the receiving subject (*l'adonné*) as herself defined by the arrival of the gift.<sup>25</sup> The invisibility of Christ's presence in the sacramental element is itself the communication of God's presence: Christ is encountered as the one who completely and kenotically surrenders to the conditions of materiality to the point of loss of all identifiers. This construction negotiates 'real presence' without entering into questions of Being/substance.<sup>26</sup>

Eucharistic presence must be understood starting most certainly from the present, but the present must be understood first as a gift that is given. One must measure the dimensions of eucharistic presence against the fullness of this gift.<sup>27</sup>

He presents this gift as present to our experience as a 'saturated phenomenon',<sup>28</sup> resisting comprehension by sense or analysis. The saturated phenomenon 'overwhelms us with its givenness, startles and bedazzles us, presents as infinitely more than we can grasp, and yet at the same time gives itself so wholly that it withholds nothing, that the entire divine abundance is offered within it'.<sup>29</sup> The encounter with Christ in the sacrament is therefore incapable of ontological reduction to a 'thought of Being' because it resists thought itself.

It follows that the appropriate response cannot be thought or reflection. 'Like the saturated phenomenon, we are blinded by the appearance, must recognize it obliquely (e.g., in the breaking of the bread).'<sup>30</sup> At the moment at which we recognise the Christ as a saturated event in the world, he becomes invisible to us as he did to the apostles on the Emmaus road, and we can only respond in kenotic abandon.<sup>31</sup>

<sup>24</sup>Jean-Luc Marion, *La rigueur des choses: entretiens avec Dan Arbib* (Paris: Flammarion, 2012), 52-53, quoted in Christina M. Gschwandtner, *Marion and Theology* (London: Bloomsbury T&T Clark, 2016), 4-5.

<sup>25</sup>Peter Joseph Fritz, 'Jean-Luc Marion and the Catholic Sublime', *The Heythrop Journal* 59, no. 2 (2018): 192, <https://doi.org/10.1111/heyj.12934>.

<sup>26</sup>See Christina M. Gschwandtner, 'Mystery Manifested: Toward a Phenomenology of the Eucharist in Its Liturgical Context', *Religions* 10, no. 5 (2019): 319, <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel10050315>.

<sup>27</sup>Jean-Luc Marion, *God Without Being: Hors Texte*, trans. Thomas A. Carlson, 2nd ed. (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 2012), 171.

<sup>28</sup>Jean-Luc Marion, 'The Saturated Phenomenon', *Philosophy Today* 40, no. 1 (1996): 103-24, <https://doi.org/10.5840/philtoday199640137>.

<sup>29</sup>Gschwandtner, 'Mystery Manifested', 319.

<sup>30</sup>Gschwandtner, 'Mystery Manifested', 318.

<sup>31</sup>Jean-Luc Marion, 'They recognized him; and he became invisible to them', *Modern Theology* 18, no. 2 (2002): 145-52, <https://doi.org/10.1111/1468-0025.00181>.

This approach re-frames faith, not as a faith *in* a determinate Christ-being who constitutes us as experiencing subjects<sup>32</sup> and is the object of our gaze, but as an abandonment to the saturated phenomenon, the ungraspable, in an act of adoration. The sacrament thus ‘reorients us, makes us devoted or given over to it (*adonné*), as we receive its abandon as far as we are able without exercising control over it, imposing concepts upon it, or determining it in some fashion’.<sup>33</sup>

Despite the talk of ‘bedazzlement’ in the face of the saturated phenomenon, Marion does not portray the encounter as one of passive contemplation. He develops an understanding of adoration as an event of engaged and active theology, in which the being that we are encounters the presence of the God-beyond-Being; our interior prayer meets an external reality in which God is present but not yet knowable. As Christina Gschwandtner explains, ‘the spiritual life, then, can be examined objectively as a kind of labor or effort that brings together the internal and external and makes Christ present in prayer’,<sup>34</sup> a hermeneutics that weaves the imagery and narratives of the biblical material around the encounter with the Christ of the sacrament. This is the labour which Marion describes as ‘putting words into the mouth of a reality’.

For Marion, then, adoration is an *active* process rather than a passive or interiorised one, and this lifts it out of the ‘merely’ psychological into a process of active participation in the one present in the sacrament. More than this, ‘putting words into the mouth of a reality’ is to make that reality incarnate in the human world, to give it a presence in language that nevertheless leaves the ‘saturated phenomenon’ intact.

To summarise, Marion’s understanding of adoration is as a mutually-kenotic encounter. It begins with the Gift, phenomenologically saturated, which overwhelms the senses and so can only be approached through the kenotic act of adoration—the presence of God is known as an overwhelming of sense. This Gift draws forth a response: the God who pours Godself utterly and kenotically into the Gift meets us as we abandon ourselves, kenotically, to the saturated phenomenon. Christ’s self-emptying is answered by the self-abandonment of adoration.<sup>35</sup> This is a paradox Marion has explored elsewhere in relation to the story of Christ’s appearance on the road to Emmaus: at the point at which we have a concept of what we encounter, its presence is departed from us.<sup>36</sup> Adoration is followed, however (structurally and causally if not chronologically) by a work of labour, of active sense-making, of ‘putting words in the mouth of a reality’. Thus he defines adoration as on the boundary between kenosis and meaning-making, and speaks of it as a shared endeavour. Christ’s presence is in the overwhelming of sense; and also in the response of sense-making. The God-beyond-Being is made present in this faithful activity as one who is, paradoxically, utterly distant from our world of sense. In the words of Victor Kal,

<sup>32</sup>Fritz, ‘Jean-Luc Marion and the Catholic Sublime’, 193.

<sup>33</sup>Gschwandtner, ‘Mystery Manifested’, 319.

<sup>34</sup>Christina M. Gschwandtner, ‘Marion’s Spirituality of Adoration and Its Implications for a Phenomenology of Religion’, in *Breached Horizons: The Philosophy of Jean-Luc Marion*, ed. Rachel Bath et al. (New York: Rowman & Littlefield International, 2018), 189.

<sup>35</sup>Gschwandtner, ‘Marion’s Spirituality of Adoration’, 189.

<sup>36</sup>Marion, ‘They recognized him’, 145–152.



Perhaps we should seek ‘intimacy with God’ ... less in *having walked through* the distance, than in the act of walking through it, and especially in the accompanying *awareness of distance*.<sup>37</sup>

This gives some sense to the interpretation of online Adoration as an encounter structured by a double kenotic movement in which the self-emptying presence of Christ as ‘saturated phenomenon’ is met with a responsive abandonment. Therein, the absence of the elements (in space and potentially in time) is a paradoxical assurance of Christ’s presence-as-distance and a spur to active meaning-making in our own context.

#### IV. PRESENCE IN CHAOS, PRESENCE AS CHAOS – NANCY

A contrasting approach is taken by Jean-Luc Nancy, who seeks a way of understanding ‘the divine’ while stepping away from the apparatus of religion. This concern is a recurrent theme throughout much of his career, but most explicitly in his two-volume work, *The Deconstruction of Christianity*.<sup>38</sup>

In the first volume, *Dis-Enclosure*, he depicts monotheism in general as carrying within itself the seeds of atheism.<sup>39</sup> His underlying argument (following Heidegger) is that a monotheistic God is by definition absent from the phenomenal world: with the end of polytheism, God retreats from the world into a transcendental realm and, as such, is incommunicable and unknowable in any immanent, humanly-significant way. In the second volume, *Adoration*, he summarises his position thus:

In a word, the Christian ‘god’ is atheist. In fact, ‘atheist’ signifies the nonpositing of ‘God’, the deposing [*déposition*] of any god that can be posed as such – that is to say, as a ‘being’ or ‘subject’ to which one property or another is given.<sup>40</sup>

Conversely, the immanence of God represented by the Christian doctrine of the incarnation is attained by a *kenosis* of divinity itself from the incarnate *logos*. The incarnation is the movement by which God is voided of divinity through an act of *kenosis*: in becoming material, God is alienated from Godself and the body is ‘the material presentation of this alienation... “god” made himself “body” in emptying himself of himself’<sup>41</sup> and so declares his own absence. God is completely emptied into the (now absent) Jesus: there is no transcendent God on which our world may be founded.

<sup>37</sup>Victor Kal, ‘Being Unable to Speak, Seen As a Period: Difference and Distance in Jean-Luc Marion’, in *Flight of the Gods*, ed. Ilse Bulhof and Laurens ten Kate (New York: Fordham University Press, 2000), 165.

<sup>38</sup>Jean-Luc Nancy, *The Deconstruction of Christianity*, 2 vols (New York: Fordham University Press, 2008-2013).

<sup>39</sup>Fundamentally, what interests Nancy is how Christianity “understands itself in a way that is less and less religious in the sense in which religion implies a mythology (a narrative, a representation of divine actions and persons).”... In this vein, he suggests that Christianity not only “invented” but also ‘decomposes what we have agreed to call, in our culture, “religions”.’ Tenzan Eaghll, ‘Jean-Luc Nancy and the “Exit from Religion”’, *Religion Compass* 11, no. 1–2 (2017): e12228, <https://doi.org/10.1111/rec3.12228>.

<sup>40</sup>Jean-Luc Nancy, *Adoration: The Deconstruction of Christianity II*, trans. John McKeane (New York: Fordham University Press, 2013), 31. See also Jean-Luc Nancy, ‘Preamble: In the Midst of the World; or, Why Deconstruct Christianity?’, in *Re-Treating Religion: Deconstructing Christianity with Jean-Luc Nancy*, ed. Alena Alexandrova et al. (New York: Fordham University Press, 2012), 10.

<sup>41</sup>Jean-Luc Nancy, *Dis-Enclosure: The Deconstruction of Christianity I*, trans. Bettina Bergo, Gabriel Malenfant, and Michael B. Smith (New York: Fordham University Press, 2008), 81, 83.

Clearly, this account is innocent of the subtlety and nuance of an orthodox doctrine of the incarnation, which is centrally concerned precisely with the ‘good news’ of the reconciliation of transcendent God with immanent creation,<sup>42</sup> but this deconstructive move is more functional than theological: Nancy is setting out an understanding of the phenomenal world as ‘a/theist’, resting on no foundations and informed by no *telos*. In short, ‘faith is ... neither theistic nor atheistic, but is rather what Nancy refers to as an “atheology”, a refusal of the belief/unbelief binary.’<sup>43</sup>

It is not enough to say that God takes leave, withdraws, or is incommensurable. It is even less a question of placing another principle in his throne – Mankind, Reason, Society. It is instead a question of coming to grips with this: the world rests on nothing – and this is its keenest sense.<sup>44</sup>

Without a transcendent God or a foundation to meaning, there is only the immanence of the phenomenal world. This in turn leads to a ‘dis-enclosure’ of reason: freed from the need to map the notion of divinity onto a prepared monotheist framework, new possibilities emerge.<sup>45</sup> The ‘divine’ may now be identified with the ‘opening’ of dis-enclosure itself, the appearance of a gap where, before, all meanings were grounded by an appeal to a transcendent god.<sup>46</sup> What is left for Nancy is the primacy of the world of ‘sense’ (*sens*) as somehow autochthonous, ‘coming into presence’ in the relationship between beings:<sup>47</sup>

Sense is therefore not primordially given but something that emerges *between* beings ... The retreat of the Christian God implies the absence of an absolute sense lying beyond the world and leads to a world in which sense exists in a relational rather than a transcendent manner.<sup>48</sup>

This rearticulation of the nature of *sens* means that Nancy can deploy it to do some of the heavy lifting that had hitherto been the role of a transcendent god. It has a phenomenological priority over the objects of our experience: sense ‘preexists signification and exceeds it’,<sup>49</sup> being ‘the element in which there can be significations, interpretations, representations’.<sup>50</sup> It

<sup>42</sup>As Kevin Hart pointedly comments, ‘to perform a deconstruction of Christianity, one must have a detailed knowledge of Christian doctrine and its development, though neither is in evidence here.’ Kevin Hart, ‘Of Love and How’, *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 77, no. 3 (2009): 727, <https://doi.org/10.1093/jaarel/lfp040>.

<sup>43</sup>Ashok Collins, ‘Towards a Saturated Faith: Jean-Luc Marion and Jean-Luc Nancy on the Possibility of Belief after Deconstruction’, *Sophia* 54, no. 3 (2015): 330, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11841-015-0473-1>.

<sup>44</sup>Nancy, ‘Preamble: In the Midst of the World’, 11.

<sup>45</sup>Nancy, *Adoration*, 13.

<sup>46</sup>Nancy, ‘Preamble: In the Midst of the World’, 12, 19.

<sup>47</sup>Jean-Luc Nancy, *The Sense of the World*, trans. Jeffrey S. Librett (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997), 12.

<sup>48</sup>Aukje van Rooden, ‘Intermezzo’, in Alexandrova et al., *Re-Treating Religion*, 186.

<sup>49</sup>Jean-Luc Nancy, *The Gravity of Thought*, trans. François Raffoul and Gregory Recco (New Jersey: Humanities Press, 1997), 59.

<sup>50</sup>Nancy, *The Gravity of Thought*, 59.

follows that the world ‘no longer *has a* sense, but it *is* sense’<sup>51</sup> which, in effect, creates the phenomenal world.

If we encounter *sens* immanently and objects derivatively, we know the world only as immersed in it. Nevertheless, there is a ‘higher truth’, insofar as there is a limit to sense: the world of *sens* is dis-enclosed, ruptured, and excessive, and the dis-enclosure of thought brought about by the end of religion brings that into our awareness:

What is revealed is not content-based principles, articles of faith ... Truth revealed is truth that contains no doctrine or preaching. It is not the truth of any adequation or unveiling. It is the simple, infinite truth or the suspension of sense: an interruption, for sense cannot be completed, and an overflowing, for it does not cease.<sup>52</sup>

The appropriate response to this world of *sens* that exceeds knowledge is a kenotic recognition of its priority over the self and a giving of ‘self’ to it: indeed, ‘it is adoration that carries and holds the adorent [*adorant*], and not the other way around.’<sup>53</sup> This leads to adoration as a faithful response to the suspension of sense, refusing the desire for a fixed content and accepting the indeterminacy and uncertainty of an ‘openness to possibility’:

Adoration is addressed to what exceeds address. Or rather: it is addressed without seeking to reach, without any intention at all... Open to nothing other than to itself. Transcendent in its own immanence.<sup>54</sup>

Adoration thus opens a gap in our world of sense-making, which he proclaims as the infinite play of sense within the world.<sup>55</sup> This is not a transcendence of the world, but a ‘transimmanence’, an immanence that ‘does not go outside itself in transcending’.<sup>56</sup>

Somewhat surprisingly, there are strong similarities between this construction of adoration and Marion’s. In both cases, adoration arises from and rests upon a double movement of *kenosis*—the emptying-out of God (as an ontotheological foundation for Being) in an immanent encounter in the world, and the corresponding emptying-out of the notional subject in an act of adoration. However, there is nothing apparently Christocentric in Marion’s account: in what sense can this account of adoration be understood as related to the figure of Christ in general, and Adoration in particular?

Nancy’s short work *Noli Me Tangere: On the Raising of the Body*<sup>57</sup> gives some insights into this question through a meditation on the story of the post-resurrection Christ’s appearance to Mary Magdalene in the garden and its representation in western art. In a move that anticipates his account of the ‘dis-enclosure’ of Christianity, Nancy argues that because ‘he that hath seen me hath seen the Father’ there is no more to be revealed: there is in Christ the complete identity

<sup>51</sup>Nancy, *The Gravity of Thought*, 8.

<sup>52</sup>Nancy, *Adoration*, 41.

<sup>53</sup>Nancy, *Adoration*, 63-64.

<sup>54</sup>Nancy, *Adoration*, 20.

<sup>55</sup>Peter Joseph Fritz, ‘Keeping Sense Open: Jean-Luc Nancy, Karl Rahner, and Bodies’, *Horizons* 43, no. 2 (2016): 258, <https://doi.org/10.1017/hor.2016.62>.

<sup>56</sup>Jean-Luc Nancy, *The Muses*, trans. Peggy Kamuf (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1996), 35.

<sup>57</sup>Jean-Luc Nancy, *Noli Me Tangere: On the Raising of the Body*, trans. Sarah Clift, Michael Naas, and Pascale-Anne Brault (New York: Fordham University Press, 2008).

of the divine and the worldly, the visible and the invisible, truth and the multitude of its interpretations.<sup>58</sup>

But in the command—‘do not touch me’—at the centre of this account, there is, for Nancy, a paradox: it is the only time in the gospels in which Jesus refuses to be touched, and it is at the same time a stage in the inauguration of the religion of touch *par excellence*, in which the body of God is handled and consumed.

To touch him or to hold him back would be to adhere to immediate presence, and just as this would be to believe in touching (to believe in the presence of the present) it would be to miss the departing according to which touch and presence come to us.<sup>59</sup>

He is departing for the absent, for the distant; ... he is withdrawing into this dimension form which alone comes *glory*, that is, the brilliance of more than presence, the radiance of what is in excess of the given, the available, the disposed.<sup>60</sup>

Hence, for those who seek to encounter Christ, the presence of Christ is not the presence that fills a gap; it *is* the gap, the disruption, that opens up in our world.<sup>61</sup> Truth is encountered ‘as an interruption of sense ... Sense is a dissatisfaction, a permanent desire for sense’.<sup>62</sup> Therefore (and in accordance with his a/theological contention that the world is without discernible purpose or abstract meaning), the meaning of adoration is in adoration itself.

Transposing this account of adoration into a consideration of the practice of online (and potentially asynchronous) Adoration, some new potential aspects of the practice come to light. If, as Nancy says, the space for God is to be found in non-sense, in the interruption of sense, in the absence of the God who can be claimed to found meaning, then adoration emerges as the appropriate mode of approach. Online Adoration can, in the light of *Noli Me Tangere*, be understood as a self-giving that does not attempt to grasp its object, a giving without intention. The gesture of Adoration is released from the limits of a physical object bounded in space and time and comes into its own in the play between presence and absence, sense and non-sense, encountered in the phenomenon of online Adoration. Furthermore, online Adoration may particularly neatly embody the spirituality of Christians experiencing, in conditions of lockdown, the absence of the tangible elements of their faith, encountering the presence of Christ in the *Noli Me Tangere* of a reserved Sacrament separated from them in both space and time.

## V. APPLICATION AND CONCLUSIONS

Marion and Nancy share an approach to adoration through the interplay between sense and senselessness, in a world without an Ultimate Being that can ground sense. Although they approach the problem from different starting points, they arrive at some common themes. Both

<sup>58</sup>Nancy, *Noli Me Tangere*, 4–5.

<sup>59</sup>Nancy, *Noli Me Tangere*, 15.

<sup>60</sup>Nancy, *Noli Me Tangere*, 17.

<sup>61</sup>‘Adoration... is not the presence of anything in particular, but that of the opening, the dehiscence, the breach or breaking out of the “here” itself.’ Nancy, *Adoration*, 62.

<sup>62</sup>Nancy, ‘Preamble: In the Midst of the World’, 2.

see the key to an encounter with the divine (differently understood) outside Being as grounded in the practice of *kenosis* and understand this as in some sense rooted (culturally, at least) in the *kenosis* of the God of monotheism. For Marion, who remains committed to the Catholic tradition, God is to be found without being, in the saturated phenomenon, the *kenosis* of adoration and the labour in response.<sup>63</sup> For Nancy, who has taken leave of theism and with it the sense of *telos* or fixed values, the emphasis is on a disciplined lingering between sense and senselessness in the immanent world, on an opening to chaos and attention to the divinity springing up in the interstices between people and meanings. In both, the role of adoration is as a gesture or response to the divine ‘beyond being’, a realisation of the divine. In the work of both thinkers, the presence of divinity is encountered paradoxically in the absence of the ontotheological God.

The purpose of this discussion is not to attempt to displace the articulation of the real presence of Christ in terms of species and accidents dogmatically elaborated at Trent, but to point to some additional and supplementary ways of stretching ‘presence’ to include the encounter with Christ in online Adoration. Within the limits of dogma, it is difficult to make sense of online Adoration in any terms other than as a multiple abstraction from or dilution of an ontotheological God who is present in mundane ways in the sacrament. Recasting the presence of Christ as the kenotic Gift calling forth a kenotic response, or as the divine springing up in the interstices of sense that can appear to us only as a nothingness, enables us to think differently about the practice of online Adoration and to appreciate it as an expression of the *sensus fidelium*. By rearticulating the presence of Christ as a *kenosis* in which his identity is hidden and as the paradoxical meaning of the point where meaning breaks down<sup>64</sup> this approach mirrors the fundamental features of the practice of online Adoration itself and casts some light on why this practice may have specific appeal in the midst of the apparent abandonment and meaninglessness characterising the pandemic for many. The act of adoration is, as Nancy says, ‘deciding on existence, turning aside from non-existence, from the closure of the world on itself’.<sup>65</sup>

In a wider context, by invoking these alternative approaches we may gain a deeper appreciation of God’s presence and our response without either domesticating God within our frame of reference or projecting our concept of God as an ‘ontotheological’ abstraction. Thinking differently in this way about Christ’s presence in our encounter with the sacrament may thus lead us to a richer appreciation of our stake in this fundamental of the Catholic faith.

At the time of writing, the US Conference of Catholic Bishops has just (on Corpus Christi 2022) initiated the ‘National Eucharistic Revival’, a three-year programme to ‘renew the Church by enkindling a living relationship with the Lord Jesus Christ in the Holy Eucharist’.<sup>66</sup> The revival is a response to a survey published by the Pew Research Center which claimed to have

<sup>63</sup>Faith does not manage the deficit of evidence—it alone renders the gaze apt to see the excess of the pre-eminent saturated phenomenon, the Revelation.’ Marion, ‘They recognized him’, 150.

<sup>64</sup>The attentive reader will see here clear parallels to the apophatic mystical tradition, and indeed there are close parallels between the work of the two post-Heideggerians discussed here and the tradition of negative theology. However, these fall outside the scope of the present paper. See Denys Turner, *The Darkness of God: Negativity in Christian Mysticism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002).

<sup>65</sup>Nancy, *Adoration*, 70.

<sup>66</sup>‘National Eucharistic Revival: Here’s what you need to know’, Catholic World Report, published June 17, 2022, <https://www.catholicworldreport.com/2022/06/17/national-eucharistic-revival-heres-what-you-need-to-know>. Jonah McKeown, “Eucharistic Revival” to begin in 2022: “We want to start a fire, not a program”, Catholic News Agency, published 18 June 2021, <https://www.catholicnewsagency.com/news/248068/eucharistic-revival-to-begin-in-2022-we-want-to-start-a-fire-not-a-program>.

found that 69% of US Catholics do not believe in the real presence of Christ in the consecrated elements,<sup>67</sup> from which the Bishops concluded that there was a worrying lack of understanding of the doctrine of the Real Presence.<sup>68</sup>

The results of the survey may indeed have revealed a deep issue concerning a loss of reverence for the Eucharist, but it has been criticised as likely to have yielded overly pessimistic results because it framed the question in a doctrinally-imprecise way and structured the responses with limited options.<sup>69</sup> The evidence from the spread of online sacramental devotion (both in participation in Mass and as devotion to the Blessed Sacrament) in the English-speaking world through the pandemic, and its continuing popularity, suggests that Catholics continue to encounter the presence of Christ in sacramental worship, even if they struggle to assent to the statement that the elements ‘actually become the Body and Blood of Jesus Christ’. The problem is not that US Catholics have ceased to believe in the presence of Christ in the Sacrament, but that ‘presence’ has come to mean something different in popular piety. The experience of lockdown has forced many of us to seek out sacramental presence in the midst of a physical absence of sacraments, and to find it in ways that resemble more the accounts of adoration in the two French philosophers I have briefly surveyed.

If this is the case, we may conclude that the US Conference of Bishops may be misunderstanding the problem. Rather than simply restating the Tridentine formula as dogma, the revival may be better directed to enriching the ways in which Catholics can talk about their encounter with Christ in the sacraments and accepting that the language of substance and species is more liable to create difficulties for devoted Catholics than to resolve them.<sup>70</sup> Before rushing to this response, it would be appropriate to pay attention to the *sensus fidelium* as articulated in the words and devotional practices of the lay faithful, seeking the ways in which this may be brought into harmony with the doctrine and formulae of the Real Presence as currently defined in dogma. This may yield a deeper insight into the experience of the faithful and provide us with new ways to think about the shape of Catholic sacramentality at a time where our world of social transactions is, increasingly, a hybrid of physical and online spaces.

<sup>67</sup>Gregory A. Smith, ‘Just one-third of U.S. Catholics agree with their church that Eucharist is body, blood of Christ’, Pew Research Center, published 5 August 2019, <https://www.pewresearch.org/short-reads/2019/08/05/transubstantiation-eucharist-u-s-catholics>.

<sup>68</sup>Dennis Sadowski, ‘U.S. Bishops overwhelmingly vote to draft a document on the Eucharist after lengthy debate about politicization’, *America*, published 18 June 2021, <https://www.americamagazine.org/faith/2021/06/18/bishops-biden-vote-eucharist-communion-document-240891>.

<sup>69</sup>The choices were: ‘actually become the body and blood of Jesus Christ’, ‘are symbols of the body and blood of Jesus Christ’, and ‘not sure’. See Heidi Schlumpf, ‘Do Catholics “actually” believe in the Real Presence?’, *National Catholic Reporter*, published 14 August 2019, <https://www.ncronline.org/spirituality/do-catholics-actually-believe-real-presence>.

<sup>70</sup>See *e.g.* the comments of Bishop Michael F. Burbidge reproduced in ‘Eucharistic revival could deepen understanding of Real Presence’, Franciscan Media, published 27 October 2021, <https://www.franciscanmedia.org/news-commentary/eucharistic-revival-could-deepen-understanding-of-real-presence>.