RITUALS REFLECTING VARIOUS FORMS OF HUMAN SOCIALITY AS MEANS OF COPING WITH THE COVID CRISIS

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ABSTRACT

The emergence and rapid global spread of the virus SARS-CoV-2 in 2019 triggered the severe COVID-19 pandemic. The pandemic affected almost every dimension of human life to such an extent that it can be viewed as a disaster. A defining feature of this period was the disruption of established forms of human sociality resulting from anti-pandemic measures. Drawing on Afifi's model of coping and Carrithers' concept of human sociality, this article examines the diversity of ritual repertoires through which individuals and institutions responded to the pandemic's impact on social life. It primarily addresses the dynamic transformations of aspects of the ritual environment during the COVID-19 pandemic, particularly shifts in the relationships between public and private, bodily and virtual, continuity and disruption, mimesis and fidelity, and breach and reintegration. It argues that the distinctiveness of Christian sociality lies in its anamnetic, epicletic, koinonic, and oikodomic dimensions, which provide key criteria for assessing the adequacy of adaptations of Christian rituals in times of crisis. The article advances a tentative hypothesis that communities with more internally diverse repertoires of lived ritual practices may exhibit greater resilience, as such diversity enhances the natural and cultural resources of human sociality.

Keywords

Ritual; Performance; COVID-19 pandemic; Human sociality; Christian sociality; Sign-practices; The eucharist; Coping model; Social distancing; Online ritual; Social drama

DOI: 10.14712/23363398.2026.16

The emergence and rapid global spread of the virus SARS-CoV-2 in 2019 caused the severe COVID-19 pandemic, which has affected almost every dimension of human life: personal, social, political,

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health, economic, cultural, and religious. Individuals, groups, communities, organisations, states, and international institutions developed various strategies to cope with the complex threat that the pandemic posed to societies and states internationally.

During the pandemic, various attempts appeared to reflect the rituals' role in those coping strategies.[1] The primary goal of this contribution is to map the main dimensions of ritual coping with the COVID crisis that researchers have observed. The map cannot be exhaustive, as ethnographic, anthropological, ritual, and theological research on the COVID-19 pandemic is still in progress. Moreover, I will focus mainly on the European situation and experiences. I will also propose an interdisciplinary framework for interpreting the variability in ritual coping that emerged during the pandemic. Finally, I will briefly outline directions for further research and practice that theologians and ecclesiastical representatives might follow to enhance Christian communities' resilience in dealing with severe stressors arising from events such as the COVID-19 pandemic.

The design of this contribution is as follows: First, I will identify the COVID-19 pandemic as a form of disaster, with social distancing as one of its characteristic features. Then, I will briefly sketch a coping model that integrates individual and communal dimensions of strategies developed and employed to cope with stressors, such as the impacts of a pandemic on human life. Third, I will briefly present relevant observations from cultural anthropology on human sociality, noting that human distancing represented a general and severe breach of ordinary and festive relations between humans, caused by anti-pandemic measures. Next, I will outline a map of the significant features of the repertoire of rituals used, transformed or invented to cope with the Covid crisis. Then, I will shortly discuss distinctive theological dimensions of Christian sociality and theological criteria for assessing ritual strategies for coping with the pandemic. In conclusion, I will mention some practical suggestions for churches as a contribution to enhancing Christian communities' resilience in times similar to the Corona time.

[1] Martin J. M. Hoondert, Paul Post, Mirella Klomp, and Marcel Barnard, eds., *Handbook of disaster ritual* (Leuven: Peeters, 2021); Barry Stephenson, *Ritualizing in the Time of Coronavirus*, in Ritualinmotion.org 30. 3. 2020, https://www.ritualinmotion.org/ritualizing-in-the-time-of-coronavirus (accessed 14 March 2025); George Washington University, *Rituals in the Making*, in Ritualsinthemaking.com, accessed: https://ritualsinthemaking.com (accessed 14 March 2025).

1. Disaster in the form of pandemic and behavioural immunity

The spread of the virus Sars-CoV-2 and the ensuing zoonotic coronavirus disease caused the most complex and severe global crisis. This crisis affected almost every aspect of human life, including its individual, social, political, cultural, and economic dimensions. This manifold dynamic phenomenon is generally referred to as the COVID-19 crisis and is usually classified as a disaster in the form of a pandemic.[2]

The socially focused tradition of disaster studies views disasters as 'sudden-onset occasions, which seriously disrupt routines or collective units, cause the adoption of unplanned courses or actions to adjust disruption, have unexpected life histories in social space and time, and pose a danger to valued social objects.'[3]

The international medical community called upon state officials and representatives globally to take adequate measures to counteract the transmission of the virus Sars-CoV-2 and address disease-related global health risks. Suggested defence strategies included behavioural immunity, namely sanitation, the selection/regulation of habitats, wearing health-protective equipment, quarantine, and active spatial social distancing.[4] The widespread introduction of behavioural immunity rules disrupted many elementary social institutions and relations in which humans lived and shared their individual, communal, and professional lives. Moreover, the social and personal consequences of the introduced behavioural immunity practices became a part of the COVID-19 crisis. Restrictions were imposed on human social activities, including religious ones, that involved close bodily contact among participants.[5] This resulted in the severe disruption of event-based relations, groups, and institutions – wider families, schools with their classrooms, workplaces, sports clubs with their teams, restaurants and cafés, cinemas and theatres, churches and so on. While the essential features of our complex Western societies (government, police, army,

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[2] Paul Post, 'Introduction: Some conceptual and historiographical explorations on ritual, disaster and disaster ritual,' in *Handbook of disaster ritual*, 1–48.

[3] Post, 'Introduction,' 8.

[4] Mark J. Butler and Donald C. Behringer, 'Behavioral Immunity and Social Distancing in the Wild: The Same as in Humans?,' *BioScience* 71, no. 6 (2021): 571–580. doi: 10.1093/biosci/biaa176.

[5] Monica Cornejo-Valle and Borja Martin-Andino, 'Elastic Rituals: A Multi-Religious Analysis of Adaptations to the COVID-19 Crisis,' *Religions* 14, no. 6 (2023). doi: 10.3390/rel14060773.

health care, social care) functioned more or less effectively, the miniature scenes of human relationships and mutual exchange in which people experience the meaningfulness of life were seriously damaged. Social distancing negatively impacted social cohesion and the value of social capital of many traditional institutions and communities, including churches. It led to a loss of the fundamental preconditions for effectively coping with the COVID-19 crisis.[6] On the other hand, it prompted various creative initiatives to mitigate, or even overcome, the negative consequences of social distancing.[7]

2. Individual and communal coping strategies with stressors

In an interpretative research study conducted among U.S. adults in the first months of the COVID-19 pandemic, researchers identified three main stressors related to the pandemic: isolation – a loss of physical and social connection due to restricted mobility and government-issued shelter-in-place mandates; uncertainty – the unpredictability of future events and a reduced sense of control over financial, social, and physical wellbeing; conflict – increased conflict in interpersonal relationships as a result of intensified interactions in closed spaces, as well as reduced autonomy and personal space.[8] Although many respondents shared these general stressors, they appraised them differently and acted diversely upon their assessments to cope with the crisis stressors.

Generally, coping is a response to a stressor. Communication scholars have proposed a coping model that focuses on the formal aspects

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[6] Adebola Adegboyega, Stephanie Boddie, Hope Dorvie, Bolanle Bolaji, Christson Adedoyin, and Sharon E. Moore, 'Social Distance Impact on Church Gatherings: Socio-Behavioral Implications,' *Journal of Human Behavior in the Social Environment* 31, no. 1–4 (2021): 221–234. doi: 10.1080/10911359.2020.1793869.

[7] Thomas Schlag, 'Digitalization of ecclesiastical practice in the pandemic,' (February 2022). doi: 10.5167/UZH-217091; Sylvia E. Badon, Lisa A. Croen, Assiamira Ferrara, Jennifer L. Ames, Monique M. Hedderson, Kelly C. Young-Wolff, Yeyi Zhu, and Lyndsay A. Avalos, 'Coping Strategies for COVID-19 Pandemic-Related Stress and Mental Health during Pregnancy,' *Journal of Affective Disorders* 309 (July 2022): 309–313. doi: 10.1016/j.jad.2022.04.146; Craig P. Polizzi, Charlie W. McDonald, Fiona G. Sleight, and Steven Jay Lynn, 'Resilience, Coping, and the COVID-19 Pandemic across the Globe – an Update: What Have We Learned?,' *Clinical Neuropsychiatry* 20, no. 4 (2023): 316–326. doi: 10.36131/cnfioritieditore20230411.

[8] Alaina C. Zanin, Brianna L. Avalos, Sophia Town, Sarah J. Tracy, and B. Liahnna Stanley, 'Discursive, Communal, and Individual Coping Strategies: How U.S. Adults Co-Constructed Coping During Preliminary COVID-19 Stressors,' *Health Communication* 38, no. 7 (2023): 1373–1387. doi: 10.1080/10410236.2021.2010347.

of dealing with a stressor, differentiates between individual and communal coping strategies and is based on three correlated dimensions: cognitive appraisal, action, and discourse. The cognitive appraisal of a stressor consists in the interpretation and determination of its 'ownership', i.e. to what extent the stressor is perceived as 'my/your problem' or 'our shared problem'. The action dimension involves variations in responsibility and behavioural efforts in relation to the degree to which coping is enacted alone or jointly with other people: 'my/your responsibility' or 'our shared responsibility'.[9] Finally, the discursive dimension encompasses cultural and personal variations in narratives and norms people employ to negotiate effective coping strategies.[10]

The qualitative research study identified three individual and two communal strategies that respondents used to cope with the stressors of the COVID-19 crisis.[11] As I am particularly interested in the ritual aspects of coping with this crisis, we will focus only on the two most relevant coping strategies. One of the identified individual coping strategies was 'seeking embodied comfort.' The respondents regularly engaged in increased bodily activities such as running, cycling, walking, or yoga. Some of them turned ordinary hands-on activities, such as cooking or baking, into activities for personal enjoyment. These activities of embodied comfort are examples of ritualisation, i.e., the process by which ordinary activities acquire ritual qualities. 'Bounded creativity' was a strategy chosen by those who preferred to cope with the COVID-19 crisis communally. It involved diverse performances of sociality within the constraints of behavioural immunity rules: planning drive-by birthday parades, organising family barbecues in front of houses (instead of in privacy behind them), or video-conference celebrations. Employing this bounded creativity, the study's communication partners faced a precarity of sociality emerging from the severe disruption of traditional forms and institutions of their communal and social lives. They tried to respond to this COVID-19 crisis by creating and performing alternative forms of sociality when the existing ones had disappeared or been severely damaged. To understand the indicated

[9] Tamara D. Afifi, Erin D. Basinger, and Jennifer A. Kam, 'The Extended Theoretical Model of Communal Coping: Understanding the Properties and Functionality of Communal Coping,' *Journal of Communication* 70, no. 3 (2020): 424–446. doi: 10.1093/joc/jqaa006.

[10] Zanin, 'Discursive'.

[11] Zanin, 'Discursive'.

relationship between creativity in coping with stressors and human sociality, we may turn to a concept of sociality recently developed by scholars in ethnographical and anthropological studies.

3. Human sociality

This ethnographical concept of human sociality was developed as a tool for exploring and interpreting societies with low social differentiation. It has also been successfully employed in the study of small-scale social scenes within highly differentiated and institutionalised societies. These social scenes are usually strictly limited and relatively egalitarian, consisting, for example, of people sharing a common interest via electronic interactions at a distance (*Second Life*) or townspeople gathering for a shared aesthetic experience during a happening.[12] Researchers employing this concept put aside 'such standard sociological categories as "society", "kinship", or "social structure", or standard oppositions such as individual vs. society, politics vs. domesticity, or female vs. male as biological or natural kinds, and looks instead to whatever happens between people to create their distinctive life and forms of personhood.'[13] They conceive human sociality as 'the relational matrix which constitutes the life of persons', who are apprehended as 'simultaneously containing the potential for relationships and being always embedded in a matrix of relationships with others'.[14] They also focus on human interactions as 'a site of constant fecund motility which routinely produces both the new and the routine in social life'.[15] This dynamic relational matrix is significantly shaped by 'humans' 'ethical imaginations', the contextually specific (but not contextually determined) 'forms and means … through which individuals imagine relationships to themselves and others'. Yet, such ethical imaginations are not limited to conscious thought and reflection but incorporate affect, performance, use of the body, unknowing, and incomprehensibility'.[16]

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[12] Michael Carrithers, 'Sociality, Socialities and Sociality as a Causal Force,' in *Human Nature and Social Life*, eds. Jon Henrik Ziegler Remme and Kenneth Sillander (Cambridge University Press, 2017): 124–140. doi: 10.1017/9781316831908.009; Nicholas J. Long and Henrietta L. Moore, eds., *Sociality: New Directions* (New York: Berghahn Books, 2013).

[13] Carrithers, 'Sociality,' 127.

[14] Long and Moore, *Sociality*, 4.

[15] Carrithers, 'Sociality,' 127.

[16] Long and Moore, *Sociality*, 114.

Moreover, this concept of human sociality as the dynamic relational matrix includes human relations with the material environment, plants and animals, dead ancestors, and imagined celestial or under-terrestrial beings.

The ethical imagination distinguishes human sociality from that of other social primates, which is conceived as 'a general inherited propensity of living beings to engage responsively and intensely with one another.' Due to the ethical imagination, humans continually create new social and cultural forms. Human sociality is not limited to or determined by one or a couple of specifiable forms of social arrangements, as is common among other social primates, but rather consists in the prolific potential for a wide range of social organisations and institutions. I may conclude with Carrithers that people 'may invent and cultivate new forms of organisation and new styles of relationship … or conduct ourselves within novel styles of behaviour, all so different from our natal styles and persons that we in effect move into a different world.'[17]

4. Mapping dimensions of ritual coping with the global disaster in the form of the COVID-19 pandemic

The activities of bounded creativity mentioned above, in which people engaged while communally coping with the COVID-19 pandemic, exemplify the creative character of human sociality and point to the role that rituals and cultural activities with a ritual dimension play in coping strategies emerging from human sociality. Post paid particular attention to the roles of these ritual or ritual-like activities in dealing with disaster and proposed collecting such rituals and cultural activities under the common designation disaster ritual repertoire.[18] To underline this vital place of rituality in coping with disasters, he offered a modified working definition of disaster, which I am slightly rephrasing as follows: A disaster in the form of a pandemic is an event, situation or longitudinal condition that causes a severe health risk and significant disruption of society, and that evokes various forms of individual and communal coping strategies originating in human sociality,

[17] Carrithers, 'Sociality,' 125.

[18] Post, 'Introduction,' 4. For a distinction between ritual and ritual-like activity see Paul Post, 'Ritual Studies,' in *International Handbook of Practical Theology*, eds. Birgit Weyel, Wilhelm Gräb, Emmanuel Lartey, and Cas Wepener (De Gruyter, 2022), 745–746. doi: 10.1515/9783110618150.

which includes a repertoire of rituals and cultural practices with ritual dimension, such as mourning, compassion, healing, indignation, protest, call for justice, recovery, reconciliation, and consolation.[19] His understanding of rituality, which also includes cultural performances with ritual qualities, enabled Post to observe the varieties of human ritual activity with particular scholarly sensitivity.[20]

Many natural (storm, tornado, deluge, volcanic eruption) or human-caused (war, public shooting, police violence) disasters elicited such ritual and cultural activities. Through them, people mourned disaster victims, protested against exhibited violence, expressed solidarity with the unjustly imprisoned, or shared compassion with the afflicted. During the COVID-19 pandemic, human sociality itself became a particular ritual topic. People frequently embodied their longing for human connectivity and the renewal of communal life through rituals and ritual-like activities, which they integrated into individual and communal strategies for coping with the pandemic. In his review of discernible tendencies in ritual coping with the pandemic, Post emphasises the ritual creativity of people, who reshaped traditional rituals and invented new kinds of practices with a ritual dimension.[21]

Given the importance of rituals in coping with disasters, it might not be surprising that the absence of traditional rituals significantly affected people's lives during the pandemic. Due to a series of lockdowns and health measures, many traditional religious rituals, public festivities or commemorations had to be cancelled, postponed or considerably reduced in scale and attendance. Churches and other religious buildings were closed for regular feasts and weekday gatherings and opened by appointment only for a few people.[22] Regular or special cultural performances (concerts, cinema, theatre, museum), sports events, festivals, carnivals, open-air festive markets (Christmas, New Year or Easter markets), national commemorations, school and

[19] Post, 'Introduction,' 10.
[20] Post, 'Ritual,' 757–758.
[21] Post, 'Ritual,' 757–758; Paul Post, 'E-rituals in the coronavirus context,' in *Handbook of disaster ritual*, 605–620.
[22] Tabita Landová, 'Bohoslužby a svátosti v čase pandemie: Ztráty, obohacení a výzvy do budoucna,' in *Církev v době pandemie*, eds. Michal Opatrný and Karel Šimr (Brno: Centrum pro studium demokracie a kultury, 2022), 153–181. For the South African context, see Hilton R. Scott, 'Worship in a Post-Lockdown Context: A Ritual-Liturgical Perspective,' *HTS Teologiese Studies / Theological Studies* 76, no. 1 (2020). doi: 10.4102/hts.v76i1.6112.

classmate celebrations, and other public festivities with ritual dimensions were cancelled or prevented.[23] Similarly, many traditional ritual-like forms of relaxation, such as wellness programmes and vacation tourism, were included in the anti-pandemic measures. Couples with their families were often postponing planned wedding ceremonies, and bereaved families were struggling with the strict rules set for organising funeral farewells. As these culturally diverse rituals and ritual-like public festivities shape a sense of society's as well as specific groups' belonging and identity, their lockdowns, postponements, or reductions during the pandemic substantially affected people's sense of individual and communal well-being.

4.1 Public and private places

The rules of behavioural immunity, above all, regulated active spatial social distancing and the body sensorium in face-to-face communication. They notably contributed to transforming diverse living places into a single sanitised space.[24] People attempted to cope with such a unified space by creatively adapting the established distinction between public and private spaces. They intuitively rediscovered rituals practised in Renaissance or Baroque European cities.[25] Windows, balconies and doors of private houses and apartments became porous *limmes* connecting public and private places in human life. Children and their parents posted homemade signs of hope, compassion, kindness, and gratefulness in windows, accompanying them with the hopeful image of a rainbow or a red heart. At the door, sick and elderly people living alone regularly met volunteers who brought them food, medicine or other living necessities, exchanging modified gestures of greeting with them. Standing on balconies or in windows, people applauded together to express support for caring professionals and appreciation for their service; a few even played instruments or banged pots and pans.[26] Some

[23] Sandro Cattacin, Fiorenza Gamba, and Nerea Viana Alzola, 'A Momentary Lack of Rituals: Urban Festivities Cancelations in Geneva, Turin, and Zurich during the COVID-19 Lockdowns,' *International Journal of Anthropology and Ethnology* 7, no. 16 (2023): 1–25. doi: 10.1186/s41257-023-00095-y.

[24] Carola E. Lorea, Neena Mahadev, Natalie Lang, and Ningning Chen, 'Religion and the COVID-19 Pandemic: Mediating Presence and Distance,' *Religion* 52, no. 2 (2022): 178. doi: 10.1080/0048721X.2022.2061701.

[25] Marco Faini, Maya Corry, and Alessia Meneghin, *Domestic Devotions in Early Modern Italy* (Leiden: Brill, 2018).

[26] David Clarke, 'Viral rituals in the United Kingdom: public responses to the covid-19 pandemic,' in *Handbook of disaster ritual*, 514–518.

Christian communities invited their members and the broader public to celebrate the Paschal mystery by singing antiphonally or solitarily the Easter hymns and songs, standing with lit candles at the doors and in the windows of their houses (Czechoslovak Hussite Church in the Czech Republic).

Similarly, city and village streets and roads, regularly used for transport from one place to another, were turned into communal paths, inviting people to pray, reflect, and express their feelings. Adopted funeral rites became an example of this change. As people could not gather in one place to say their farewell to the departed and console the bereaved family, they slowly walked (or drove cars) in a kind of street procession past a place sheltering the body of the deceased. Alternatively, they created a human tree line along a road to greet a passing hearse with flowers and farewell gestures.[27]

Cities' inhabitants also appropriated parks and city landscapes as scenes suitable for reflective and relaxing physical activities with emerging ritual dimension, namely walking and running. People similarly socialised natural landscapes through ritual activities. Landscape's various roads, paths, and tracks often led pandemic pilgrims to natural monuments or solitary cultural objects that provoked their re-enchantment with the world. Some of these cultural objects had a religious character: field crosses, chapels, stations of the cross, marked springs, and small memorials. As churches were practically closed and regular gatherings cancelled, some believers transferred their religious lives from indoor to outdoor, open-air religious practices. On the other hand, constraints put on religious and spiritual practices in shared public spaces, such as churches, synagogues, mosques, crematories, cemeteries or yoga centres, resulted in creating religious or spiritual niches within private houses or apartments in which their inhabitants started to realise the substantial part of their religious duties or spiritual practices until then practised publicly outside their private dwellings. The COVID-19 pandemic shaped the infra-secular environments where people dynamically blend and separate the sacred and the ordinary.[28]

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[27] Post, 'E-rituals,' 609.

[28] Veronica Della Dora, 'Infrasecular Geographies: Making, Unmaking and Remaking Sacred Space,' *Progress in Human Geography* 42, no. 1 (2018): 44–71. doi: 10.1177/0309132516666190.

4.2 Phygital forms of ritual participation

The widespread transfer of many rituals and ritual-like practices into the virtual world of online platforms during the pandemic accelerated changes in the infra-secular environments. Online rituality became the most rapidly expanding and developing religious and spiritual activity during the Corona pandemic. Although purely online rituals were performed on various social media and online platforms (ZOOM), most of the ritual activities were phygital.[29] Many ritual actors regularly blended a physical performance of a ritual with online streaming or shared a digital recording of the performance. Again, funeral rites were eloquent examples of this innovative phygital nature of the coronavirus ritual repertoire: a particular time and place are set for a funeral, with a minimal number of physically present participants. A few days before the funeral, the family creates an online memorial page featuring their beloved's photos, letters, or videos, which will also play a few weeks after the funeral. People who knew the deceased may add photos and memories, or leave a comment. At the appointed moment, the funeral takes place with the close family present and is simultaneously streamed on social media. Its recording will be published later on the memorial pages. People attending the streamed funeral via their smartphones or computers leave comments, emoji reactions, and photos of the deceased. Some will later return to the funeral recording as part of their bereavement process and will share that recording and personal reflections with their social media followers, creating and expressing one of their digital identities, an avatar. A few minutes after the online funeral streaming, some of them will participate in other online ritual activities, such as meditation, evening prayer or cooking, via the same digital devices, and maybe with a new avatar identity.[30]

For others, it was essential to participate in the online ritual activities of their religious or social groups while maintaining their incommutable phygital identity. Women, LGBTQ+ people and other persons who had been discriminated against in their religious and social communities found in the online world the opportunity to freely and openly

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[29] Lorea et al., 'Religion'. Cf. Lalitha Vasudevan, 'Education remix: New media, literacies, and the emerging digital geographies,' *Digital Culture & Education* 2, no. 1 (2010): 62–82, for a concept of digital geographies.

[30] Post, 'E-rituals'; Martin Hoondert and Suzanne Van Der Beek, ed., *Ritual in a Digital Society* (Groningen: Institute for Ritual and Liturgical Studies, Institute for Centre for Religion and Heritage, 2019).

express their right to equal belonging through virtual participation in their communities' online ritual activities.

As we have seen, various forms of digitalising ritual activities during the COVID-19 pandemic imbued rituals with some of the essential features of online behaviour.[31] The rituals became, above all, viral and memetic.[32] The virality of online performances means that rituals are spread throughout populations and across different cultural, religious, and individual contexts through their instant digital sharing. The memetic character resides in internet-based memes that enable online ritual participants to modify ritual performances to express their personalities' individuality and uniqueness. For example, I have already mentioned the roles that personal comments, reflections, emoji reactions, and photo sharing played in the phygital funeral. During the coronavirus pandemic, people also creatively modified the rainbow artworks that had already been shared virtually. Some of them even hosted rituals they performed themselves, using methods of bricolage to assemble diverse parts, original, copied, pasted, and remixed.[33] We may evoke the virtual choirs as a good example of this kind of bricolage. Audio-visual tracks with singers' performances, recorded separately in improvised home studios, were afterwards reconstituted and remixed into an evocative form of a church choir. Many memetic online ritual activities served to express people's identity and the collective significance of their coping endeavors. In these ritual performances, human sociality created varied fluid forms of networked individualism[34] that contributed to transforming communities with stable membership and stable identity into places of affinity with porous leadership and many different forms and routes to participation, in which people temporarily

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[31] Tommaso Trillò, Blake Hallinan, and Limor Shifman, 'A Typology of Social Media Rituals,' *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication* 27, no. 4 (2022). doi: 10.1093/jcmc/zmac011.

[32] Clarke, 'Viral rituals,' 516–518.

[33] Marcel Barnard, 'Bricolage/Particularity,' in *Worship in the network culture: liturgical ritual studies: fields and methods, concepts and metaphors*, ed. Marcel Barnard, Johan Cilliers, and Cas Wepener (Leuven: Peeters, 2014), 117–130.

[34] Lee Rainie and Barry Wellman, *Networked: The New Social Operating System* (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 2012). doi: 10.7551/mitpress/8358.001.0001; Kyle Matthew Oliver, 'Networked Religion Meets Digital Geographies: Pedagogical Principles for Exploring New Spaces and Roles in the Seminary Classroom,' *Teaching Theology & Religion* 22, no. 1 (2019): 3–15. doi: 10.1111/teth.12465; Deborah Ann Wong, 'Liturgy in Lockdown: Restricted Movement, Expanded Worship,' *Religions* 13, no. 1 (2021): 25. doi: 10.3390/rel13010025.

meet for one or more shared interests.[35] Similarly, in some cultural contexts, for example, in the Netherlands, the anti-pandemic restrictions also strengthened the process of dissolving traditional collective ceremonies into smaller ritual moments, in the case of funeral rites into more private and individual acts of saying goodbye and mourning at home, in the street, in the place loved by the deceased, or in the cemetery.[36]

4.3 Mimesis and fidelity

The phygital nature of most ritual practices performed during the COVID-19 pandemic pointed to a shared need to maintain embodied continuity in communal, as well as individual, religious and spiritual life. The anti-pandemic lockdowns and behavioural immunity rules revealed the extent to which many rituals are fused with and embodied in particular physical and social contexts, such as a particular church with its community, a street with close neighbours, a favourite theatre with beloved actors. Moreover, these particular ritual environments, integral to 'a dynamic relational matrix of human relations', significantly contribute to the internalisation of ritual patterns and their sedimentation into somatic memories. Whenever a particular ritual is performed, the associated somatic memories and internal spiritual resources tied to it are elicited to support actual ritual participation. Arguably, many emerging forms of human sociality at the time of the coronavirus incorporated mimesis and fidelity to the previous tradition of ritual bodily engagements. In various forms of phygital rituals, people remembered, replicated, and re-materialised traditional ritual bodily frameworks in new surroundings. These adjustments to new contexts preserved a sense of continuing practice but, at the same time, induced and intensified a sense of loss. We may remember empty churches with a few serving ministers and many scattered portraits of congregants lying on pews, which were meant to evoke in those watching a service the presence of the congregation; nevertheless, those photos also resembled an event commemorating those who had passed.

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[35] James Paul Gee, *Situated Language and Learning: A Critique of Traditional Schooling. Literacies* (Hoboken: Taylor and Francis, 2012), 70–81.

[36] Post, 'E-rituals,' 611.

Scholars have compared this complex experience to that of people living in the diaspora, who long for church gatherings as a lost homeland and feel estranged in their own homes. Interestingly, many global religious communities employed online strategies during the pandemic that had already been developed by their diasporic groups coping with embodied experiences of loss and a desire for reconnection.

Remarkably, many of the ritual designs employed as part of individual and communal coping strategies during the COVID-19 crisis were not entirely new. Their designers primarily drew on, recast, or adjusted ritual practices that had previously been created and developed by groups living at the edges of the mainline religious and social institutions, or by those dissenting from religious or cultural practices in which they had been only partially included or from which they had even been expelled. This alternative repertoire of ritual practices has already found its place within the archive of disaster rituals, which religious communities and other social institutions continuously create, store, reactivate, recast, and pass on in response to crises.[37]

4.4 Cultural performances of conflict

The traditional rituals, which were absent, postponed, transferred, replaced, evoked, and adapted, together with the new emerging rituals and ritual-like activities, constituted the ritual repertoire that individuals, groups, and communities affected by the consequences of social distancing employed to cope creatively with the disaster in the form of the COVID-19 pandemic.[38] This crisis also provoked another kind of public response to the measures taken by governments and municipalities – protest. Many protests remained private, expressed mainly through individual infringements of the anti-pandemic rules, such as social media lamenting, meeting secretly with other people, wearing a respirator half pulled down or burying relatives in a traditional way.[39] However, a lot of erupting protests became public. Studies refer to the widespread verbal and even physical collective violence against medical staff, namely nurses and other frontline health workers during the Covid crisis, who were viewed as representatives of the restrictive

[37] Post, 'E-rituals,' 606–610.

[38] Post, 'Introduction,' 48.

[39] Inayat Ali, 'Rituals of Containment: Many Pandemics, Body Politics, and Social Dramas During COVID-19 in Pakistan,' *Frontiers in Sociology* 6 (April 2021). doi: 10.3389/fsoc.2021.648149.

anti-pandemic measures and vaccination rules.[40] Similarly, the health workers publicly demonstrated their worries about the impacts of health care on workplace safety and about inequalities and racism, which made it difficult to access vaccination.[41] Most of these public protest events consisted of street blockades, property-damaging acts (such as throwing stones and setting fires), and street protest marches with various signs.[42] Protests were also expressed in marking public spaces with temporary signs, such as the white crosses painted on the cobbles of the Old Town Square in Prague, blaming the government for the excessive number of victims of the pandemic.[43]

These public protest events can be interpreted as cultural performances of social drama. Victor Turner developed and applied the concept of social drama to describe, analyse, and interpret the process of social change in various groups, tribes, communities, and even societies. He proposed four constitutive phases of social change: breach, crisis, redress, and either reintegration or recognition of schism.[44] While infractions of the social order, as represented in social rules and laws, manifest a breach, a crisis reveals opposing and contesting sides of social conflict, which develop framing narratives about the nature of conflict, its causes and its anticipated resolution. The narratives become a critical aspect of the redress phase, in which each side of the conflict implements adjustive and corrective mechanisms and seeks to convince the other side to accept them. Successful bargaining leads to a reintegration of the breached social order. In contrast, failed negotiation ends in persistent tension, even a schism. Moreover, Turner considered rituals an integral part of social drama. He claimed that rituals significantly contribute to the processes of social change, facilitating

[40] Davina Jacobi and Tobias Ide, 'Collective Violence against Health Workers in the Context of the COVID-19 Pandemic,' *Nursing Reports* 13, no. 2 (2023): 902–912. doi: 10.3390/nursrep13020079.

[41] Davina Jacobi and Tobias Ide, 'Nurses' Protests during the COVID-19 Pandemic: A Comparative International Analysis,' *Nursing Reports* 14, no. 3 (2024): 1961–1972. doi: 10.3390/nursrep14030146.

[42] Maia Booker, '"Everyone Was Screaming at Them." The Story Behind Those Photos of the Counter-Protesting Health Care Workers,' online, in Time.com, accessed April 20, 2020, https://time.com/5824465/healthcare-workers-protest.

[43] Pavel Kolář, 'Iconic Reconciliations in a Secular Setting: Recent Bohemian Examples,' *Religions* 13, no. 8 (2022): 723. doi: 10.3390/rel13080723.

[44] Victor W. Turner, *From Ritual to Theatre: The Human Seriousness of Play* (New York City: Performing Arts Journal Publications, 1982), 64–87; Victor Turner, 'Social Dramas and Stories about Them,' *Critical Inquiry* 7, no. 7 (1980): 141–168.

them and bringing both personal and social transformation. Additionally, McFarland subsumed various rituals constituting the breach and crisis under a ceremonial deconstruction phase of social drama, and those forming the redress and reintegration/schism under the ceremonial reconstruction phase of social drama.[45]

Undoubtedly, the COVID-19 pandemic caused and provoked various social breaches and crises, expressed in diverse forms of interpersonal performances of conflict. These cultural performances of conflict,[46] coupled with the corresponding narratives in the form of signs, social media commentaries, and public statements, belong to the ritual repertoire of symbolic acts and performances used by individuals and groups to cope with the pandemic and its impact at the micro, mezzo, and macro levels of society.

5. Theological reflections

The anti-pandemic restrictions significantly affected the religious life of many Christian churches, particularly their ritual practices. So far, my selective and interpretive overview of strategies employed by various communities to respond to these restrictions has largely drawn on ritual studies, anthropology, and sociology. While these approaches are valuable for identifying and interpreting the adaptive strategies developed by Christian communities in order to sustain their communal religious life, the social realities of these communities and their ritual practices cannot be exhaustively captured or adequately understood by the methods of the social sciences alone. Only theological reflection does full justice to Christian ecclesiastical self-understanding, as well as to Christian identity and sociality. Only theological reflection is capable of articulating criteria for evaluating the extent to which both the adaptation of existing Christian ritual practices and the creation of alternative ones correspond to Christian communities' self-understanding as the *ekklesia tou Theou*. I do not intend to propose

[45] Daniel A. McFarland, 'Resistance as a Social Drama: A Study of Change-Oriented Encounters,' *American Journal of Sociology* 109, no. 6 (2004): 1249–1318.

[46] For cultural anthropology concept of performance, which includes ritual as the performance related to the ultimate concerns of human beings, see John Lowell Lewis, *The Anthropology of Cultural Performance* (New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), 1–20.

these criteria in this part of the article, but only to outline a theological context in which they might be articulated.

Williams argues that the distinctive trait of human beings is their living through diverse symbolic forms, which are continually innovated.[47] In these symbolic forms, particularly in language and ritual practices, humans are looking for and creating meaning, patterns of order, and communication, through which they express, order, share, reorder, imagine and transform their human relations to the world they live in.[48] Apart from this rather general character of any genuine human sociality, there are 'particular "signs" in which the identity of the specific group is stated, reflected on and communicated, tacitly or explicitly.'[49] Christian identity and sociality are intrinsically connected with sign-practices traditionally called sacraments, namely the baptism and the eucharist. Although emerging from a particular religious history, these signs cannot be reduced to ritual practices devised by a group seeking to inaugurate a new religious movement. Rather, they are fundamentally rooted in Jesus Christ, whose life, acts and words are 'signs of a form of human life yet to be realized', 'the form of a new people of God,' the signs of the new creation, the signs of the kingdom of God.[50] In this sense, sacramental practices are Jesus' gift to the growing apostolic community, which builds it continuously as the body of Christ (1 Cor 12:27).[51] The uniqueness of these sacramental signs does not lie in any special qualities of ritual acts or of the things used in rituals, but is grounded in Jesus' radical self-gift, in his paschal dying and rising, of which the sacramental practices are *anamnesis*.[52]

Christian community as the living body of Christ crucified, resurrected, and coming in glory is an *epicletic* community.[53] In its prayers, it constantly turns to Jesus Christ as the living, sovereign, and free Lord, invoking his presence. The epicletic nature of Christian ritual practices confirms that the sacramental signs are not inventions of the community, which has them at its disposal. They are creative, effective and transformative signs of the active presence of the living Christ in

[47] Rowan Williams, *On Christian Theology* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2000), 201.
[48] Williams, *On Christian*, 198n.
[49] Williams, *On Christian*, 201.
[50] Williams, *On Christian*, 203–205.
[51] Williams, *On Christian*, 204.
[52] Williams, *On Christian*, 197 and 204.
[53] J.-J. von Allmen, *Worship: Its Theology and Practice* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1965), 29.

the corporate life of the church as *ekklesia tou Theou*.[54] They are not passed along in the Christian community as a kind of farewell memorial to Jesus or as social signs of a particular form of religious life. They are handed over as epicletic mediations of Christ's ever-new presence to and in his 'social body' living and witnessing in the unpredictably changing world.

The sacramental signs, being Christ's effective and transforming signs, form the Christian community as a *koinonia*. The *koinonia* points to the one spiritual reality that interrelates the trinitarian communion, the communion of the Spirit sanctifying human beings, and the communion between Christ and those who believe in him. It is the Spirit who is creating the Christian community as communion with God and between those who believe. This *koinonia* is primarily manifested and at the same time renewed in the eucharistic celebration that is grounded in the paschal event of Christ's dying, rising from the dead, and bestowing the Spirit (John 20:19-22). The faith in which the Christian community celebrates the eucharist is characterised by a tension between doctrinal continuity guarded by authority and the personal experience of the Spirit's inward presence.[55]

The sanctifying presence of the Spirit in the Christian community is *oikodomic*. It builds up the community as the body of Christ through various charismata, spiritual gifts or rather practices empowered by the Spirit.[56] Through these spiritual practices, the Spirit (re)connects the Christian community with the grounding paschal event in ever new and changing environments and life circumstances in which Christians are called to live faithfully, responding to their needs and drawing the community through its sanctification into the life of the kingdom of God (1Cor 14:3-5.26; Eph 4:11-12.16.29). In this sense, *oikodomé* is closely related to *oikonomia*, which designates God's plan of salvation (Eph 1:9-10) as well as a pastoral practice of imitating God's love for people through careful spiritual discernment of the uniqueness of human beings' personal situations.[57]

We have so far indicated that a distinctive Christian sociality consists – but not exclusively – in its anamnetic, epicletic, koinonic, and

54 Williams, *On Christian*, 205n.
55 John Meyendorff, *Byzantine Theology: Historical Trends and Doctrinal Themes* (New York: Fordham University Press, 1987), 170–175.
56 Oscar Cullmann, *Early Christian Worship* (SCM Press 1996).
57 Meyendorff, *Byzantine*, 88–90.

oikodomic character. These qualities are also significant for the Christian community's sign-practices, of which the most significant are sacramental practices. While these practices are traditionally identified with baptism and the eucharist, and additionally with confirmation, reconciliation, anointing of the sick, marriage, and ordination, Leo the Great and Augustine testify to a broader concept of sacramental practices employed in the early Christian churches.[58] In his letter to Ianuarius, Augustin considers not only baptism and the eucharist to be sacramental practices, but also qualifies other practices established by church authorities and observed by Christians (allegedly) universally, namely the solemn celebration of Christ's passion, resurrection, ascension, and his bestowal of the Spirit, as sacramental practices. Moreover, even practices of local Christian communities, unless they are contrary to faith and good morals, are to be observed as a visible sign of the bonds that keep the local community united.[59] Such observances evidently have a significant oikodomic function. The common ground of these practices and observances lies primarily in the paschal event of Christ and in its effective presence in them through the power of the Spirit, and additionally in their ability to bind together the society of the new people of God.[60] In this broader sense, the term 'sacramental practices' denotes practices that manifest, mediate and renew the communion of the new people of God with God and among themselves - the koinonia in the power of the Spirit.

The sacramental character of the celebration of Christian feasts might be a fruitful point of departure for theological reflection on the rules for adapting, inventing, and reinventing Christian rituals in times of crisis, taking into account the distinctive 'nature' of the Christian sociality we have so far outlined. Celebrations of feasts regularly include diverse sign practices and gatherings, large or small, in different environments and settings, from personal prayer to family celebrations to local festive ritual performances. Though the eucharistic (and baptismal) liturgies tend to be at the centre of the feasts' celebrations,

58 Bernard Green, *The soteriology of Leo the Great* (Oxford: Oxford University Press 2008): 143; Anne-Isabelle Bouton-Touboulic, 'Pouvoir des signes et liturgie dans l'Epistula 55 de saint Augustin,' in *Saint Augustin*, ed. Serge Lancel, Stéphanie Guédon, and Louis, Maurin Ausonius Éditions. doi: 10.4000/books.ausonius.8115.

59 Aurelius Augustinus, 'Letter 54,' in *The Works of Saint Augustin*, Part II – Letters, Vol. I: Letters 1–99, ed. John E. Rotelle, trans. Roland Teske (New York: New York Press, 2001), 210.

60 Aurelius Augustinus, 'Letter 54,' in *The Works of Saint Augustin*, 216.

other rituals likewise contribute to the overall sacramental character of the festive celebrations insofar as they mediate participation in the foundational salvific paschal event and render it present in the power of the Spirit. This ritual spectrum is complemented by varied modes of *participatio actuosa*, which can be meaningfully transferred from the eucharistic context to the wider context of sacramental practices. In times of such a crisis as the Covid-19 pandemic, when regular public, communal religious practices are abandoned, significantly restricted, or entirely prohibited, a concept of the feast's compound sacramentality might become a useful instrument for a temporary reordering of the Christian communities' traditional ritual praxis in a way that would do justice to the anamnetic, epicletic, koinonic, and oikodomic character of the distinctive Christian sociality rooted in the sanctifying and vivifying Spirit.[61]

From this point of view, a pastor's decision temporarily to delegate his eucharistic presidency to the fathers of individual families,[62] or the common singing of the Easter hymn with lit candles at an appointed time from windows,[63] may be more appropriate than broadcasting of an empty church with one minister or a few people celebrating the eucharist; suggesting four or more ways of delivering bread and wine to the mouths of a few communicants present without violating strict anti-pandemic measures; or replacing singing with silent recitation of song lyrics in a restricted gathering.[64] It may be argued that when the celebration of the Eucharist comes to dominate Christian ritual praxis rather than functioning as its centre – as appears to be the case, inter alia, in the Czechoslovak Hussite Church – the Christian community becomes inclined to adapt the form of the eucharistic celebration in ways that may even contradict the banquet character intrinsic to the eucharist. The practice of placing the Eucharistic bread into a believer's mouth with tweezers in an almost empty church during the period of the strictest anti-pandemic measures lacked a genuine anamnetic, koinonic, or oikodomic dimension. By contrast, the celebration of the

61 Korinna Zamfir, 'Ritual Reinvention and the Celebration of the Eucharist in Times of Crises,' in *Religious Responses to Pandemics and Crises*, eds. Sravana Borkataky-Varma, Christian A. Eberhart, and Marianne Bjelland Kartzow (London: Routledge, 2023). doi: 10.4324/b22930-9.

62 Církev bratrská, personal communication.

63 Církev československá husitská, author's initiative, author's personal archive.

64 Církev československá husitská, internal official guidelines, author's personal archive.

Eucharist within a small gathering, followed by the distribution of the Eucharistic gifts – together with other necessary provisions – to those who were absent, does constitute an anamnetic, koinonic, epicletic, and oikodomic practice, one that is also rooted in the ancient tradition, as attested by Justin Martyr. Similarly, the ancient tradition that conceives the Christian family and other intimate social relationships as *mikrobasileia tou Theou*[65] points to a theological, rather than merely devotional, significance of small-group religious life, a significance that may be particularly emphasised during periods of strict anti-pandemic measures prohibiting public interpersonal contact. On this basis, it may be argued that, in situations where ordinary forms of public liturgical assembly are severely restricted, priority should be given to the eucharistic and communal practices that preserve and manifest the anamnetic, koinonic, epicletic, and oikodomic dimensions intrinsic to the eucharist and to Christian sign-practices more broadly, rather than to minimal ritual substitutes that risk obscuring these constitutive dimensions.

6. Conclusion

French neuropsychiatrist Cyrulnik claims that humans share with many animal species the basic symbolic activities in which a present object represents another real object that is not sensorily present. On the other hand, people differ from their animal relatives in spirituality. To be a spiritual being means relating through complex symbolic units, such as mythic narratives or political ideologies, to non-sensorial imaginative realities.[66] The ethno-anthropological concept of human sociality also identifies joint attention, interpretation, and narrative imagination as the distinctive traits of humans, in which the human ability to invent and cultivate new social institutions and social practices is grounded.[67] Moreover, the new social worlds emerging from this creative ground of human sociality constitute a causal force that reshapes and further develops the natural grounds of distinctively human sociality.[68] We may

[65] Václav Ventura, 'Teologie kněžského manželství,' *Getsemany* 57, no. 12 (1995), https://www.getsemany.cz/node/1958.

[66] Boris Cyrulnik, *Psychothérapie de Dieu* (Paris: Odile Jacob, 2017); Boris Cyrulnik, *La nuit, j'écrirai des soleils* (Paris: Odile Jacob, 2019).

[67] Carrithers, 'Sociality,' 135.

[68] Michael Carrithers, 'Why Humans Have Cultures,' *Man* 25, no. 2 (1990): 189. doi: 10.2307/2804560.

extend this view to include ritual and other cultural performances as distinct human media, sensational forms that materialise human sociality in various contextualised symbolic practices.[69]

The absent, cancelled, postponed, transferred, replaced, evoked, provoked, adapted, and invented rituals and ritual-like activities[70] were experienced as stressors during the emerging COVID-19 pandemic, especially by those who regularly participated in their traditional forms. On the other hand, many constrained, transformed or innovated rituals were integrated into the various coping strategies people employed to manage the pandemic's impacts on their lives. In these cases, human sociality's potential for variability produced a variety of rituals and ritual-like activities congruent with particular personal, social, cultural, religious, and political contexts. This process of adapting and modifying ritual heritage, provoked by social distancing and other anti-pandemic measures, was part of the more extensive transformative process in which the traditional ritual environment was changed. Individuals, groups, and religious communities created new forms of infra-secular geographies, connected their diverse physical dwellings with online networks and merged in-person communication with online communication to continue practising ritual activities during the period significantly influenced by the pandemic. These new communication practices contributed to the dynamically changing distribution of responsibility for spiritual and religious life and to its continuity between individuals, groups and institutions. In addition, diverse cultural performances of protest and resistance accompanied these efforts to cope with the pandemic stressors.

It seems that individuals and communities that used to practice their spiritual and religious lives through a networked, internally diversified ritual practice were better equipped to creatively cope with the COVID-19 pandemic crisis than those stuck on one or a few fundamental rituals and with a strict idea of what ritual changes are permissible. Thus, building religious communities that cope well with various crises and disasters should primarily focus on cultivating a shared network of

[69] Birgit Meyer, *Religious sensations: Why media, aesthetics and power matter in the study of contemporary religion* (Amsterdam: Vrije Universiteit, 2006), 9; Birgit Meyer, 'Mediation and Immediacy: Sensational Forms, Semiotic Ideologies and the Question of the Medium,' *Social Anthropology* 19, no. 1 (2011): 23–39. doi: 10.1111/j.1469-8676.2010.00137.x.

[70] Post, 'Introduction,' 48.

diverse ritual practices that mediates the fullness of God's presence and experience of communal life, creating ritual plasticity analogous to the human brain's neuroplasticity.

Theologians should carefully discern and reflect on the process of growing differentiation and deinstitutionalisation of ritual practices during the COVID-19 pandemic. It is their task to prudently accompany Christians as they negotiate the effectiveness of various traditional and new ritual practices, as well as the role of rituals in mediating God's encounter with humans within the complexity of the contemporary world.

They may also pay closer attention to ritual practices developed by Christians desiring to sustain their religious and spiritual lives in diaspora, as well as by those who, despite marginalisation and discrimination within their churches and Christian communities, have sought to participate in shared religious practices. How have these Christians transferred, modified, altered or supplemented inherited Christian rituals, and what rituals have they invented to cope with their challenging situation?

The COVID-19 pandemic has demonstrated that human sociality empowers people to cope creatively with unexpected events, even with a disaster of global scope, in ways that may be both constructive and detrimental. Carrithers relates this human sociality to evolutionary processes. From a theological point of view, human sociality may be understood from the perspective of God's creative act, conceived as the establishment of dynamic and open ontological foundations of existence and life. How might a concept of human evolution, one that incorporates diverse historical experiences of various disasters into the evolutionary process, be integrated into the theological understanding of the creation of humans in God's likeness and image? Moreover, can the Holy Spirit be conceived as continually addressing human sociality – our 'being created in God's image' – in order to co-create with humans rituals as authentic media of God's presence in human life, above all in times of crises? Noble's interpretation of this 'being created in God's image' as a creative yet inherently risky realisation of the humanity bestowed in God's *arché* and called to fulfil itself in God's *telos* may offer a theological perspective from which such a synthesis could be pursued.[71]

[71] Ivana Noble, 'Obraz a podoba Boží,' in *Kdo Je člověk? Teologická Antropologie Ekumenicky*, eds. Ivana Noble et al. (Prague: Karolinum Press, 2021), 127–143.

However, Christian sociality and Christian rituals are not grounded exclusively in humanity 'created in God's image'. Both emerge from Christ's paschal self-giving, dying, rising from the dead, and bestowing of the Spirit. The paschal event constitutes a distinctive form of Christian sociality and shapes the sacramental character of the Christian community's sign-practices as anamnetic, apikletic, koinonic, and oikodomic. Therefore, this theological characterisation of the Christian community and its sign-practices may provide a fundamental point of reference for assessing the adequacy of diverse adaptations and innovations of traditional Christian rituals, as well as of newly created practices, in response to the pandemic and other crises.

Acknowledgements

This work has been supported by Charles University Research Centre program No. UNCE/24/SSH/019. This work was supported by the European Regional Development Fund project 'Beyond Security: Role of Conflict in Resilience-Building' (reg. no.: CZ.02.01.01/00/22_008/0004595).

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