



FAITH SHORT TAKE

Online church helped me as a Catholic convert in the pandemic. But I need an in-person faith.

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April 18, 2022

After a few years of slowly becoming absorbed in theology, I began the Rite of Christian Initiation for Adults at London's Westminster Cathedral in the fall of 2019. It took until the end of the following summer, after the United Kingdom's first wave of Covid-19 restrictions had waxed and waned, for me to receive baptism at the age of 32.

The spring and summer of 2020 were some of the hardest months of my life. It was not only a time of tribulation for me, of course, for acute suffering was everywhere. But I needed spiritual succor more than ever, and the new relationships I was trying to build in my adopted community already felt fractured by forces beyond my control.

That is when I began a dependence on "eCatholicism." Living in an entirely online world became tantalizing as well as practical as I tried to distract myself from the pain of two nonstarter relationships within 12 months, being isolated from my friends and family, and increasing job insecurity. But as many of us came to realize, virtual Mass pales in comparison to the real thing. I wish the church had fought harder against the insistence by the United Kingdom and other governments that [religious gatherings were non-essential](#).

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Switching off the live feed of a Mass and immediately resuming the movie you were watching, or going to make lunch straight away, undermines so much of the celebration of the liturgy. You want to make small talk with your fellow parishioners (and small talk leads to talk of bigger matters). You need the 20-minute walk home from church, when you can contemplate the homily. You need the actual sacraments.

For some, the biggest problem with the online world is a lack of accessibility. My 67-year-old uncle struggles to operate Zoom even after these two long years, and it has been worse for my 89-year-old grandmother, whose social life for the past 20 years has revolved around the church within walking distance of her home. She still does not even own a laptop.

But for a tech-savvy journalist like myself, the bigger concern is that the digital revolution is all-encompassing, encroaching on aspects of our lives that had previously been left alone.

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Last year I found myself voraciously consuming YouTube videos, podcasts, apps, audiobooks and websites that do everything from advising you on Scripture to sending you email reminders to pray novenas—all this while I tried to prevent everything I had learned in R.C.I.A. instruction from falling out of my brain.

When Covid restrictions were lifted, I was still tempted to use livestreaming as an excuse not to leave the house, but I came to realize how little I was enjoying the convenience. Don't get me wrong, I see the virtue in making Catholic teaching available through short podcasts and videos. Many people with the best of intentions have put time, money and thought into online explorations of prayer, Scripture and the Catechism, and some are excellent. I have particularly enjoyed [praying the rosary with Bishop Robert Barron](#), listening to ["The Bible in a Year" with Father Mike Schmitz](#) and taking in commentary on current events through podcasts like [America's "Inside the Vatican."](#)

I have also found that content produced by laypeople for other laypeople can be especially relevant to my life. Caitlin West's podcast, ["Crash Course Catholicism"](#) stands out in this regard. Ms. West is of a similar age and educational background to myself, and her fresh approach to working through the *Catechism* just clicked with me. I have no intention of ever studying theology as an academic subject, but I want to know enough to never feel left out. "Crash Course Catholicism" makes me feel like I am having a discussion with someone like me.

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But eCatholicism can also include content so unsubstantial that it does not scratch any spiritual itch. At the other extreme, there are dry homilies and video lectures on inaccessible topics that last for hours. And while there are sometimes online question-and-answer sessions, or exchanges on social media sites like Twitter, I have always found this kind of dialogue to be less satisfactory than speaking directly with instructors or fellow parishioners. In online forums, you can't always get the answers you need.

A more insidious side effect of consuming the church's teachings through social media is that "e-priests" are subject to the same algorithms all content creators are, which means inflammatory or polarizing content can be amplified while less sensational topics languish. For example, one of [Bishop Barron's](#) most watched videos, with 800,000 views as of this writing, [is called "Gay Marriage and the Breakdown of Moral Argument."](#) Meanwhile, a valuable but less controversial video on ["The Sacrament of Marriage"](#) has a relatively paltry 140,000 views.

As a recent convert, I am especially aware of the tension between making Catholicism available at the click of a button, and conveying the importance of a parish community and in-person encounters. There is a temptation to move our entire existences, including our spiritual lives, online, but this should be a last resort. With Covid-19 restrictions easing (at least for now), our priority should be reopening churches and resuming in-person spiritual activities like retreats.

I remember the first Mass after lockdown ended more vividly than I remember the first Mass I ever attended. I can recall exactly how the air smelled and see the light coming in through the stained-glass windows. The experience brought home the realization that faith should not be about comfort and convenience. Spirituality is not a TV show you fit into your free time. It has to be an experience for the mind, soul and all the senses.



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