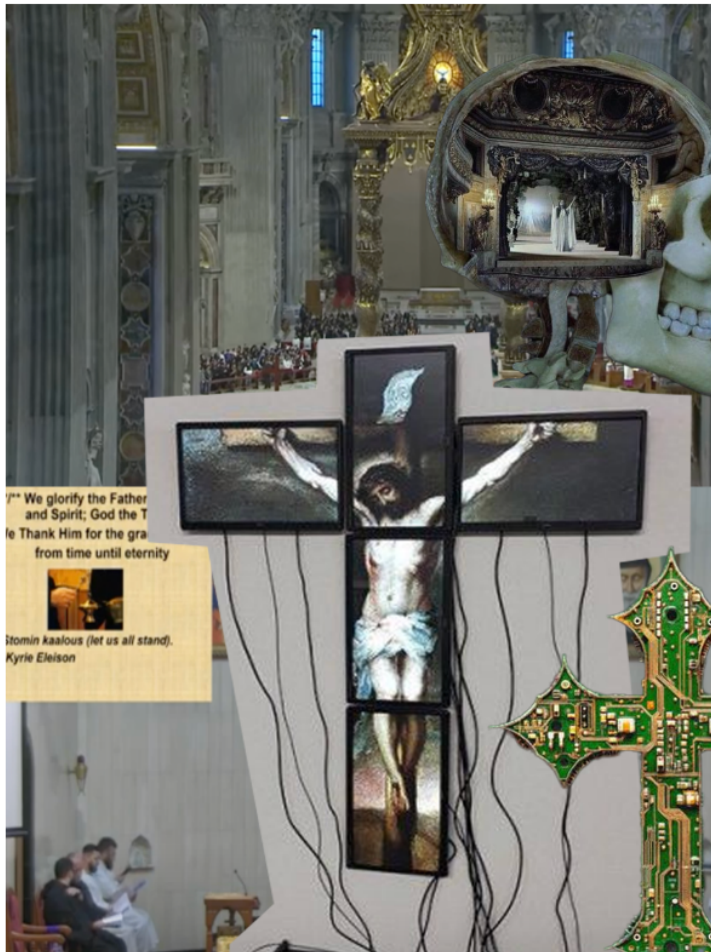


The Rise of Digital Worship: Can Online Spaces Function as Sacred Sites

Words: Isabella Greenwood



St. Clare of Assisi (b.1194), the patron saint of television, offers a fitting entry point into the peculiar sanctity of our screen-bound age. Bedridden and unable to attend Mass, Clare is said to have witnessed the entire liturgy projected onto her cell wall — a divine broadcast that collapsed physical distance through the sheer force of her spiritual meditation. This miraculous vision feels eerily prescient in an era where livestreamed monasteries, ASMR prayer sessions and digital shrines are becoming sites of



modern devotion. Like medieval pilgrims tracing hallowed routes to Santiago de Compostela or St. Peter's Basilica, today's seekers navigate algorithmic pathways, hyperlink labyrinths, and curated timelines in search of transcendence.

The rise of digital devotion includes Peter chapel in Lucerne, Switzerland, who recently installed an artificial intelligence-powered Jesus capable of dialoguing in 100 different languages. More than 1,000 people – including tourists from as far as China and Vietnam – took up the opportunity to interact with the avatar, where more than 230 users found it to be a “spiritual experience”.

The Vatican has been streaming Masses on YouTube, alongside other churches — from South Korean megachurches like Yoido Full Gospel Church to live streamed Orthodox liturgies from the Russian Orthodox Cathedral — all attracting millions of viewers seeking the contemplative austerity of monastic devotion from the intimacy of their homes. Outside of established religious institutions, emergent digital platforms like Churchome — a virtual church app — offer live streamed services, interactive prayer sessions, and digital confessionals.

Virtual reality experiences like The Holy Land Experience VR allow users to "walk" the Via Dolorosa in

Jerusalem from their living rooms, while websites such as [Sacred Destinations](#) offer immersive 360-degree tours of global holy sites, from the Kaaba in Mecca to the Basilica of Guadalupe.

[Digital architectures reimagine ancient rituals](#), enabling participation across temporal divides, while raising questions about the authenticity and transformative potential of sacred sites. The architecture of digital pilgrimage inherits much from the [early utopian promises of cyberspace](#) — a realm once envisioned as a boundless, non-hierarchical frontier where identity could be shed, remade, or transcended entirely. These digital territories, shielded by avatars and anonymous handles, promised refuge from the scanning gaze of social hierarchies and institutional control. The disembodied pilgrim, cloaked in username and profile picture, moves along hyperlinked paths towards transcendence, no longer confined by the geographic boundaries of traditional sacred sites.



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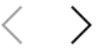
This virtual accessibility gestures towards a flattening of sacred geography. As Jean Baudrillard theorised in [Simulacra and Simulation](#), the copy may become more real than the original — the livestream becomes hyperreal, offering not just Mass, but an optimised, endlessly repeatable version of it, free from the friction of physical presence. What happens, then, to the weight of pilgrimage when the journey becomes redundant? If the sacred is no longer bound to an embodied space, can a devotional act hold equal significance whether performed in a bedroom or in a cathedral?

In [physical worship](#), the body is deeply implicated — kneeling, crossing oneself, rising with the congregation. In digital worship, participation becomes spectatorial or parasocial. The individual retains total control over their engagement: pausing, rewinding, skipping forward. Ritual temporality fractures, and spiritual immediacy gives way to convenience. A prayer becomes a looped recording, available at any hour — a digital relic, an incorporeal fragment of devotion circulating endlessly in cyberspace, untethered from physical or architectural grounding.

Unmoored from its original locus, the digital pilgrimage and its procession persist in virtual perpetuity, offering a spectral quality to the localised sacredness it once embodied. This transition suggests both a radical democratisation of holiness — making sacred experiences more accessible across physical and social barriers — and a potential dilution, where spirituality risks becoming an ambient background hum, diffuse and fleeting.

Emerging not as an aberration but as a defining feature of digital spirituality, rituals once defined by physical presence and communal embodiment are reconstructed to exist in the fragmented, asynchronous temporality of digital networks. This elasticity reflects contemporary existential conditions: perpetual digital availability amidst affective fragmentation and spatial displacement.

As a result, the sacred and the profane no longer exist in opposition but collaboratively, destabilising the phenomenological integrity of both realms. In this space, where devotion is streamed, archived, replayed, and consumed on-demand, we might ask if the absence of spatial fixity signifies an adaptation of sacredness — an evolution towards a more elastic, fluid conception of holiness. The answer may lie not in opposing digital devotion to traditional worship, but in recognising how digital architectures are producing new spiritual phenomenologies, ones that require both critical scepticism and an openness to what might still be genuinely transformative.



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