ESSAY · IN THE REGISTER OF MARSHALL MCLUHAN

The Mass Age

The title was a typesetter's mistake, and McLuhan kept it. The medium is the massage, the mess age, the mass age. Probes on peanut butter toast, a barista, the many altars of the world, and the one device that contains every medium except the one who is fed.

Richard Verver · November 2026

> *We have an altar.*
> — Hebrews 13:10

> *The "content" of any medium is always another medium.*
> — Marshall McLuhan, *Understanding Media*

The voice is borrowed; the argument, and its errors, are mine. McLuhan wrote in probes, not proofs: short thrusts meant to provoke, kept if they open something and dropped if they don't. These are meant the same way. Words quoted as his are his own, from the works named in the note at the end. The common priesthood of the faithful is taken as the Second Vatican Council teaches it, which differs from the ministerial priesthood "in essence and not only in degree" (*Lumen gentium* 10). Nothing here blurs the two; the probes only say how far the likeness goes, and where it stops being a likeness.

I. Toast

My mother makes me peanut butter toast.

The medium is the plate. The content is the toast. The message is not the toast. The message is: *you are here, and I am feeding you.*

She does not know she is saying an offertory. *Fruit of the earth and work of human hands.* The wheat and the peanut are the earth's; the toasting and the spreading are hers. But the Missal is not lending her its words. It is the other way round. The prayers at the preparation of the gifts were modelled, in 1969, on the blessings said over bread and wine at a Jewish table. The Missal learned to offer at a kitchen table. My mother is only taking back what was hers.

An offering has two ends. Hers is the making. Mine is the eating. If I take the plate and set it beside the laptop and let it go cold, nothing has been refused, exactly. But nothing has been received either. The toast has been *set down*.

Probe: an offering that is not received is not yet an offering. It is a delivery.

II. The counter

There is a video game called *Coffee Talk*. You are the barista of a café in Seattle that opens only at night. It rains. The customers are elves, orcs, a vampire, a werewolf, a succubus, and the occasional human, and they bring you their trouble: a marriage across races their families won't bless, a job that is eating someone alive, a girl who can't tell her father what she wants to be.

You cannot fix any of it. The game gives you exactly two instruments. You can make a drink, and you can listen. If you get the drink right, and you hear them out, then over many nights they find their own way. That is the whole of the play.

The counter is a medium. It sets two bodies at a fixed distance: close enough to hear, far enough to serve. It is a rail. One side gives, the other receives, and neither crosses over.

People tell bartenders what they would not tell their priest. They tell baristas, a sentence at a time, over a year of mornings. The counter hears confessions. It cannot absolve them. The barista transforms the elements (bean, water, fire, milk), and no substance changes. It is a priesthood by likeness, and the likeness is exact right up to the place where it stops.

Probe: the game works for one reason, and it is a rule of the genre so old nobody states it. *Nobody at the counter is in their phone.*

III. The content of the café

The café in the game is a café as it was. No laptops. No one ordering through an app at the door and collecting a cup with a name misspelled on it from a shelf. No one at the window table with earbuds in, present by body and absent by every other measure. The customers sit on stools and talk to the person making their drink, because there is nothing else to talk to.

And in March the game came out on phones.

McLuhan said the content of a new medium is always the old one. The content of writing is speech; the content of print is writing; the content of the telegraph is print. Here is the next line of the series. The content of the phone is the café. You can now sit alone, in a real café, at the window table, earbuds in, and play at being present to someone across a counter.

This is funny. It is not hopeless. A medium that carries the old one also preserves its memory, and memory is how we find our way back. Some people will play it and look up.

IV. The field hospital

Now look at the café you actually stand in, at eight on a weekday morning. It is not the café in the game. It is an emergency room. You join the line and are assessed. You take your dose. You are discharged. The cup is the medium, and its message is printed on the side of it: *to go*. Back to the kilns.

In Egypt the Hebrews were ground down "with hard bondage, in morter, and in brick" (Exodus 1:14). Then Pharaoh tightened the quota: "Ye shall no more give the people straw to make brick, as heretofore: let them go and gather straw for themselves. And the tale of the bricks, which they did make heretofore, ye shall lay upon them" (Exodus 5:7–8). The same tally of bricks, with less to make them from. That is the modern workday, almost to the word.

In that room the coffee is not hospitality. It is a stimulant, taken so that the bricks keep coming. Even the coffee break was a slogan before it was a custom: in 1952 an advertising campaign for the coffee growers of the Americas told the public to "give yourself a Coffee-Break," and offices and factories took it up. The break is a short stay in the ward before the next shift.

The barista in that room is not a confessor. The line is too long to hear anyone out. She is a triage nurse.

And the triage nurse can be holy too. In 2013 Pope Francis said, "I see the church as a field hospital after battle." In a field hospital you do not ask a man bleeding on a stretcher about his cholesterol. You heal the wounds first, and talk about everything else after. Triage is mercy under the conditions of a battle: thirty seconds, a name remembered, eyes met over the counter, a hand that steadies the cup. The nurse warms what she can in the time she is given, and she is given almost none.

The sin of the emergency room is not triage. It is the discharge back to Pharaoh. A field hospital patches the wounded so that they may live. An emergency room run for the taskmasters patches them so that they may work.

The Law gave the answer to Pharaoh's quota before it gave almost anything else. The day of rest is grounded in exactly this memory: "remember that thou wast a servant in the land of Egypt" (Deuteronomy 5:15). The Sabbath is a weekly refusal of the tally of bricks.

Probe: the field hospital and the Sabbath table are one house. The nurse keeps you alive until you can sit down.

V. Many altars

"We have an altar," says the Letter to the Hebrews, and it means one, and that one is not made of stone. At Easter the Church sings that Christ "showed himself the Priest, the Altar, and the Lamb of sacrifice," and the Catechism calls the Christian altar "the symbol of Christ himself" (CCC 1383). Every other altar

is named from him, the way we call a diet healthy and a complexion healthy because of the one healthy body they serve or show. The schools call this the analogy of attribution.

So even the consecrated altar in the sanctuary is an altar by analogy. What sets it apart is who drew the analogy. We notice the others: a table looks like an altar, and we say so. That one the Word himself instituted, when he said "Do this," and the Church confirms it when she dedicates the stone. It is the analogy the Word makes, and so on that altar the one Sacrifice is made present, and not only remembered.

The rest are altars by a likeness we notice, and the world is full of them: the kitchen table, the workbench, the marriage bed, the hospital bed where the offering is only to stay put, the café counter.

John Chrysostom pushed the attribution as far as it goes. Preaching on the collection for Jerusalem in the Second Letter to the Corinthians, he told his people that the poor man is an altar, made of the members of Christ, more to be revered than the stone one in the church. "This altar may thou everywhere see lying, both in lanes and in market places, and may sacrifice upon it every hour." And then: "When then you see a poor believer, think that you behold an altar."

But for the counter there is a better word than analogy, and the Council supplied it. A barista who is baptized is not playing at priesthood. By baptism the faithful are made sharers, in their own manner, in the priestly office of Christ (c. 204 §1). Their secular character is not a deficit of the clerical life but what is proper to them (*Lumen gentium* 31). Their daily work, their family life, even their rest and their hardships, offered in the Spirit, become "spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ" (1 Peter 2:5), and so, the Council says, "the laity consecrate the world itself to God" (*Lumen gentium* 34).

Probe: the counter is not standing in for the altar. It is the place where a real priesthood is exercised. The likeness belongs to the game. The fact belongs to the baptized woman pouring your flat white.

VI. Let yourself be loved

In the autumn of 1906 a young Carmelite in Dijon, dying of Addison's disease, wrote a letter to her prioress and hid it, to be found after she was gone. Elizabeth of the Trinity said one thing in it, over and over, six times: *let yourself be loved.* "Let yourself be loved more than these!" She died on the ninth of November. Her day falls this week.

The giver's half of the rite is easy to praise. The receiver's half is the hard one, because it leaves you nothing to show. You did nothing. You were loved. A friend writing on whether, for Aquinas, woman is passive has corrected me for speaking of receiving as if it were one thing, and as if that thing were nothing. Receiving well is an act. It may be the hardest act we are asked to perform.

In the liturgy the receiver's half has a name. It is the *Amen*. The priest says the words; the people make them theirs. The Body of Christ is offered, and the communicant says *Amen*, and only then is the gift handed over. It is the shortest prayer in the rite and it carries the most weight.

Probe: the toast needs an Amen. So does the flat white. So, for that matter, does the bride.

VII. The medium is the massage

In 1967 McLuhan and the designer Quentin Fiore made a book of pictures and probes, and the typesetter got the title wrong. It came back *The Medium is the Massage*. McLuhan, so his estate tells it, said: "Leave it alone! It's great, and right on target!" He read the last word four ways: message, and mess age, and massage, and mass age.

The massage is the point. A medium does not only tell you something. It works on you, kneads you, rearranges your posture, your attention, your sense of where your body is, long before you have noticed what it is saying. You do not watch a medium. You are worked by it.

There is a fifth reading, and a Catholic can hardly miss it. The *Mass* age.

VIII. The singularity

If the content of every medium is another medium, follow the series to its end.

The smartphone contains the letter, the telephone, the telegraph, the newspaper, the book, the radio, the gramophone, the camera, the film, the television, the map, the clock, the wallet, the photo album, the shopping list, the encyclopedia, the arcade, and the breviary. Its content is every medium at once.

A medium whose content is every medium has no content of its own left. Only its form remains. Medium and message collapse into each other. This is a singularity, in the strict sense: a point where the ordinary distinctions stop working.

What, then, is left to be its content? The user. McLuhan saw this coming with the electric media. Of television and the telephone he wrote: "the sender is sent, and is instantaneously present everywhere." On the phone you have no body. You are everywhere. You are, specifically, everywhere except where your body is, which is at the window table, with the toast going cold.

He also said that every extension is an amputation. The wheel extends the foot and numbs the leg. Narcissus, gazing at an extension of himself in the water, is numbed by it, and does not know it is himself. The phone extends presence. It amputates it in the same motion.

IX. Four questions

Late in his life McLuhan and his son Eric reduced the study of media to four questions, which they called the tetrad, and published as *Laws of Media* (1988). Put them to the phone.

What does it enhance? Reach. You can find anyone, ask anything, hear anything, at any hour.

What does it obsolesce? The here. The counter, the table, the stool, the shared silence of a room in which no one is doing anything but being there.

What does it retrieve? Watch the posture. Head bowed. A small glowing book held in both hands, close to the face. Thumb moving, sometimes the lips. It is the posture of a monk at the Hours. The phone has retrieved the breviary, and aimed it at the feed. It has given us back the bowed head, and changed what we bow to.

What does it reverse into, pushed to its limit? Isolation. Connected to everyone, and with no one. The global village was meant to be a village. Pushed far enough, it reverses into a mass of people each alone in their own glow. A crowd is not an assembly.

X. The microphone

McLuhan was not a spectator of the Church. He was received into it in 1937, taught for more than thirty years at St Michael's College in Toronto, a short walk from where I would one day live, and went to Mass nearly every day. He watched a medium rearrange the liturgy in his own lifetime, and said so. In 1974 he argued that the microphone was the proximate cause of the end of the Latin Mass. Once every word the priest said could be heard by everyone, it became intolerable for him to be saying it in a language not understood by all. So he was turned round to face them, and began to speak their language.

The probe is not about Latin. Leave the quarrel where it lies. The probe is that the rite was reshaped by a device that nobody chose for that purpose, and nobody decided the change. It was a massage.

The phone is already massaging the assembly. For a season, during the pandemic, many of us watched Mass on a screen, and were right to. But the law, which is slow, knows what McLuhan knew. The Sunday obligation is satisfied by one who *assists* at Mass (c. 1248 §1). The bishops could dispense from the obligation; they could not make a livestream into assisting. A Mass can be watched on a phone. It cannot be attended on one. The canon counts bodies.

XI. The two mass ages

So there are two mass ages, and we live in both.

The first is the age of the mass: the crowd alone together, each in their glow, sent everywhere and present nowhere. Its medium is the phone. Its massage is the bowed head.

The second is the age of the Mass: the people gathered, actually there, bodily, to receive. Its media are older and humbler. The counter. The table. The altar. Each of them sets two bodies at a fixed distance, close enough to hear and far enough to serve, and asks of the one on the receiving side only that they be there and say Amen.

The Council asked for "full, conscious, and active participation" (*Sacrosanctum Concilium* 14). That phrase has carried a great deal of freight since 1963: about who reads, who sings, who stands where. Read it in the second mass age and it says something simpler. Full: all of you, body included. Conscious: here, and not elsewhere. Active: receiving, which is an act. A barista can pull a perfect shot. If the one across the counter is in their phone, the cup is set down rather than received.

Probe, the last one: put the phone face-down on the table. Look up. The toast is warm. Somebody made it for you.

Let yourself be loved.

A note on sources

Scripture: Hebrews 13:10 (King James Version); 1 Peter 2:5, as quoted in *Lumen gentium* 34. Christ as "the Priest, the Altar, and the Lamb of sacrifice" is from Preface V of Easter in the Roman Missal (2011 English translation); the altar as "the symbol of Christ himself" is from the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 1383. Exodus 1:14 and 5:7–8 and Deuteronomy 5:15 are in the King James Version. Pope Francis spoke of the field hospital in his interview with Antonio Spadaro, published in English as "A Big Heart Open to God," *America*, 19 September 2013; the cholesterol and the wounds are paraphrased from the same answer. The coffee break as a slogan is from the Pan-American Coffee Bureau's advertising of 1952. The words at the preparation of the gifts are from the Order of Mass of the Roman Missal; that they were modelled on Jewish table blessings is the common account of the 1969 reform. The common priesthood: Second Vatican Council, *Lumen gentium* 10, 31 and 34; *Sacrosanctum Concilium* 14; Code of Canon Law (1983), c. 204 §1 and c. 1248 §1, here in paraphrase.

John Chrysostom, *Homilies on the Second Epistle to the Corinthians*, Homily 20, in the translation of the Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers, first series, vol. 12. Elizabeth of the Trinity's letter to Mother Germaine of Jesus, her prioress, was written in her last weeks in 1906 and is known by its refrain, "Let yourself be loved"; it is quoted here only in that refrain and its best-known line.

Marshall McLuhan: *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man* (1964), chapter 1, "The Medium is the Message," for the content of a medium, and chapter 4, "The Gadget Lover: Narcissus as Narcosis," for extension as self-amputation, here described, not quoted. "The sender is sent, and is instantaneously present everywhere" is from "A Last Look at the Tube" (1978), reprinted in *The Man and His Message* (1989), p. 197. *The Medium is the Massage: An Inventory of Effects* (1967), with Quentin Fiore; the story of the title and the four readings are from the estate's answers to common questions. *Laws of Media: The New Science* (1988), with Eric McLuhan, for the tetrad. His remarks of 1974 on the microphone and the Mass are as reported by Kevin White in "Drop the Mic," *First Things*, and are paraphrased. *Coffee Talk* is by Toge Productions (2020); it came to iOS and Android on 20 March 2026.

SOURCES Chrysostom, Homily 20 on 2 Corinthians, *Lumen gentium*, *Sacrosanctum Concilium*, Elizabeth of the Trinity, "Let Yourself Be Loved", McLuhan, "the sender is sent", The McLuhan estate on the *Massage*, McLuhan on the microphone and the Mass, Pope Francis on the field hospital, *Coffee Talk* on mobile.

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