

The Digital as Sacred Space.

Exploring the Online Religious Dimension.

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Abstract

In the current context where digitization permeates all aspects of everyday life, the religious world is not immune to the influences associated with technological aspects. In recent years, a space has emerged on the internet where a collective faith is recognized, even through electronic means, bringing together individuals into a community that takes on the characteristics of a sacred place. This raises new questions about the concept of sacredness itself in relation to digitization, as this process has opened up the possibility of new forms of communicating the sacred through electronic means, transforming the very concept of the sacred into a digital dimension. The use of virtual environments or digital tools to spread a religious message has given space to creative figures who experiment with innovative language within the religious traditions. In this scenario, research has emerged aimed at understanding the multiple aspects and meanings of this new sacred experience. The objective is to analyze how these religious traditions adapt to and appropriate the digital dimension, exploring the dynamics of interaction between the sacred and the digital, as well as the theological, cultural, and social implications that arise from it. Through the exploration of these themes, this article aims to explain how digitization has redefined traditional concepts such as sacred place and how religious practice has evolved in the digital age. The goal is to offer a perspective on the transformation of the sacred in the digital context, exploring tensions between tradition and innovation, authenticity and fragmentation, participation, and distance in the contemporary religious sphere. This article aims to provide an understanding of how the digital has redefined the concept of sacredness, opening new horizons and challenges for religion in this new era.

Keywords: social media; digitisation; social religion; religious influencers; cyber-religiosity.

Introduction

Until some time ago, the commonalities between social identity and networks were confined to a specific space and enclosed within a precise timeframe; this essentially defined an individual's social sphere. Social interactions primarily took place in local contexts, relying on physical presence and geographic proximity among people, and networks were tightly intertwined with communities of belonging (family, friends, neighborhoods, or workplaces, for example). With the development of the Internet,

humanity has experienced a significant transformation in how it constructs and lives social relationships, thanks to overcoming the demarcation line of traditional boundaries and the composition of a thoroughly atypical social interstice. This new social space represents a fusion of mutual assistance and scrutiny of the customary system, along with distinctive features of the web such as multimedia and the ability to create and share content. As a result, social interactions are no longer limited by geographic distance or physical boundaries, and individuals can connect and communicate across national and cultural borders, overcoming the space-time barriers that once constrained the formation and maintenance of social networks. This digital dimension allows for the construction of social relationships based on shared interests, passions, and affinities, allowing people to expand their social circles globally. Furthermore, it is worth noting that the nature of this novel space offers a wide range of tools and platforms that enable the creation and sharing of content, facilitating individual expression and active participation in the social sphere. Through blogs, forums, social media, and other forms of online communication, individuals can create virtual identities, express their opinions and interests, share knowledge, and interact with others in an immediate and widespread manner. Social networking (Riva 2016) thus represents a form of mediation that originated from the diversity of methods with which they are employed. (Battista 2023; Battista & Uva, 2023).

The emerging questions can undoubtedly be useful in assessing the magnitude of the ongoing process. It is indeed asked in what terms and according to what logic these structures can contribute to shaping an individual's identity, and what repercussions they have in terms of resources and risks. Specifically, in our case, what are the implications for the religious sphere in the current period in which we operate? The contamination with the new forms of information mentioned above probably offers one of the most distinctive aspects of the pandemic period. Not surprisingly, the lexicon has suddenly been enriched with unfamiliar terms and electronic devices that have forcefully asserted themselves. It is now an established fact that Covid-19 has drastically shaped communication and daily living systems, encroaching into unimaginable territories until just a few decades ago. But in this framework of established relevance, it is more crucial than ever to emphasize the relationship between religion and modernization, which has experienced an indispensable connection in these very recent times and makes no exception in a phase of substantial disruption. At first glance, the image of the Church based on millennia of tradition and rituals is replaced by a more modern Church that does not want to lag behind when the rest of the world is moving in one direction: technological progress. It is now established that the massive social proliferation has allowed the scaling of a new model of participation (Vesnic-Alujevic 2012).

It is worth noting, therefore, that this process has contributed to triggering a mutation in our society that has greatly expanded social participation. In contemporary society, digital media have assumed a central role as spaces for socialization, providing

an environment in which people can interact, communicate, and build virtual relationships (Resina 2010). Furthermore, this metamorphosis has required individuals to adapt to a new online context, acquiring the necessary skills to navigate this constantly evolving digital world (García Peñalvo 2016). In this dimension, digital media are labeled as gateways for modernizing religious familiarization, aiming to ensure active participation in public life with innovative elements for those inhabiting this context. The diverse digital landscape has opened up new opportunities for religious communities and their followers, allowing them to engage more broadly and dynamically in public discourse. Digital media have created a virtual space where religious practices and spiritual values can be shared and openly discussed on a global scale. Religious communities and spiritual leaders use blogs, podcasts, online videos, and social media platforms to reach a wider audience, share teachings, spread religious messages, and encourage active participation. Through digital media, individuals can participate in public life by expressing their religious beliefs, engaging in online debates and discussions, supporting social causes aligned with religious principles, and seeking to influence public opinion. Sharing religious content on social media, for example, can contribute to raising awareness about social issues and promote greater understanding and tolerance. Furthermore, digital media provide fertile ground for the development of new forms of religious activism. Religious communities and their members can use the internet to organize awareness campaigns, online petitions, fundraising, and other initiatives aimed at promoting social justice, equality, and societal well-being. This type of digital activism allows people to come together and collaborate regardless of their geographic location, amplifying the impact of collective actions. In this landscape, the use of digital media could foster greater involvement of citizens in religious life, helping to overcome barriers that currently hinder such participation. Through digital communication channels, people can access religious resources, such as sacred texts and rituals, quickly and at low cost. The availability of online content enables individuals to approach religion autonomously, at their own pace, and regardless of their geographic location. Therefore, while exposure to and consumption of religious content are not new, the advent of digital interactivity in media has given rise to a phenomenon known as electronic religiosity (Cesari 2004). This phenomenon has rapidly spread on a global scale, especially during periods of confinement, generating an unprecedented scale of online religious practice. Furthermore, the approach considered links religious activism based on the use of the internet to the action and influence of religious influencers. These individuals, as we know, are popular figures on social networks, capable of exerting a significant impact on the opinions, behaviors, and choices of their target audience (Grossi 2011). They act as social intermediaries or digital opinion leaders, assuming a central role in promoting religious activism and encouraging community involvement. Through their presence and appeal on social media, they can disseminate religious messages, values, and practices, reaching a wide audience and influencing the opinions and actions of their followers.

Thanks to their authenticity, charisma, and effective communication skills, influencers can create an emotional connection with the audience and draw attention to specific religious themes or social causes related to faith. The influence of religious influencers is not limited, of course, to promoting online religious activism but can also extend to mobilizing people in offline life. Through their persuasive power and mobilization abilities, influencers can encourage their followers to participate in volunteer activities, awareness events, demonstrations, or other initiatives related to religious activism. Starting from the awareness of how much our society has changed, a pursuit will be undertaken to reach a judgment that leads us to define and establish whether this is a passing or enduring occurrence. In the latter case, if the religious message emerging from the emergency and the accentuation of a fracture that has involved, broadly speaking, all value systems, can legitimize itself through these new tools. The analysis focuses, therefore, on the current context but with a future projection of the medium to long term. It will be necessary to assess the consequences of what has happened with vigilance and pronounce judgments carefully and patiently to have a broad overview of the religious issue on the new platforms.

The Evolution of the Sacred in the Digital Age.

When characterizing the era we live in from the perspective of the prevailing modes of communication, it is difficult to underestimate the awareness that we are currently passively witnessing the transformation from a society centered on access to, and dissemination of, information to a society characterized by the predominance of the seduction phenomenon (Lipovetsky 2019). This transition is an ongoing process in which social and cultural dynamics are evolving to adapt to the changes introduced by digital technologies and online communication dynamics. After all, human beings belong to a species that can be defined as storytellers (Salmon 2013). For years now, contemporary society has been progressively shifting its focus from the mere transmission of information to the ability to seduce and engage people. This phenomenon is manifested through the strategic use of digital technologies to capture attention, arouse desires, and influence the choices of consumers and individuals in general. Today's society is founded on the awareness that leads to considering the media and the digital environment offer a vast space for expression and interaction in which people are constantly stimulated and engaged by a multiplicity of stimuli, persuasive messages, and commercial offers. This context fosters a culture of appearance, attraction, and self-presentation, where image and outward appearance represent a significant framework in the sedimentation of identity and relational aspects in the social context. Based on this, digital media and online platforms emerge as essential tools for seduction and influence, as they allow individuals to present themselves in an appealing way, create an attractive digital presence, and attract the attention and interest of others.

The dynamics of digital seduction are also reflected in the sphere of consumption, with the creation of marketing strategies based on the ability to attract and seduce potential buyers. Even religion does not escape this shift towards a seduction society, to the extent that religious dynamics and practices are permeated by digital technologies and the digital culture that promotes audience attraction. However, in the field of research aimed at identifying the relationship between religion and media, well-established concepts in media studies are predominantly employed to interpret the examined phenomena. Among these, the concepts of mediatization and publicity stand out as interpretative frameworks (Herbert 2011; Hjarvard 2011, 2012; Lundby 2009). Certainly, there are various processes where religion conforms to this unprecedented evolutionary binary. In general, there has been a digital campaign that has contributed to the increased online presence of religious communities, as the ecclesiastical institution has been adopting communication strategies for some time now (Marchetti 2015). Religious organizations and communities have gradually adapted to the digital society by creating an online presence through websites, social media pages, and mobile applications. The pandemic has provided an acceleration in this regard. From various perspectives, the notable growth of the religious element in the media circuit emerges only in the sphere of English literature in the new millennium (Knott et al. 2013; Lövheim and Lindermann, 2015).

A theoretical strand is established on the attention to the commissioned amplification of the religious flow in the public sphere attributable to the role of the media, which increasingly post a conspicuous number of intertwined contributions on various levels (Hjelm 2015). The increase in media attention towards religion can be interpreted as a reflection of the significant role it plays in contemporary society. In particular, scholars have highlighted how the media has amplified the scope and importance of religious news, contributing to a greater debate and public awareness of religious issues. These digital platforms have effectively allowed religious communities to present themselves in an appealing way, share spiritual messages, and offer religious resources to the public, and often the images, videos, and content created are designed to seduce and emotionally engage users. Moreover, the experience of religion is also changing through digital technologies, which provide new opportunities to create engaging and attractive religious experiences. For example, live broadcasts of online religious services, podcasts, and video sermons enable people to virtually participate in religious celebrations from anywhere, creating an immersive and stimulating experience. The concept that the use of music coupled with effects can evoke emotions and persuade viewers comes into play with the “public religion” conceived by Jose Casanova. However, this concept cannot be entirely overlapped with “media religion,” but certainly, nowadays, studying and attempting to classify a type of religion without considering the media could represent a mere utopia or a detachment from the reality that surrounds us (Axner 2015). In fact, the role of the media in the study of religion has become increasingly central compared to when Casanova wrote “Public Religions in

the Modern World” in 1994, due to the ongoing evolutionary process in media terms that has led to the widespread use of technology at all levels.

But perhaps above all, it is the digital religious influencers who have revolutionized the traditional religious system. These charismatic and popular figures on social media use their influence to seduce and engage the audience with religious messages and can present a spiritually inspiring lifestyle, share personal experiences, and offer practical advice, thereby creating an emotional connection with their followers. Thanks to social media and the processes of disintermediation (Chadwick 2013), these new religious actors, in this specific case, are able to intervene in the public debate, completely bypassing the potential obstacles imposed by traditional media. This scenario has opened up new avenues of research, prompting scholars to explore the interactions between religions and various communication tools such as television, radio, print media, cinema, and more recently, the Internet and social media. In particular, a significant acceleration has been observed in the process of mediatization of religion, a phenomenon that has led religious institutions to adapt to the dynamics of contemporary media. According to the theory of media self-regulation, proposed by Hjarvard (2008), the media has become an autonomous system that influences the organization and transmission of information, including religious information. This process of mediatization has brought about a series of changes and adaptations within religious institutions. Media self-regulation implies that the internal dynamics of the media system, such as the logics of content production, distribution, and consumption, influence the modes of expression and representation of religion. Religious institutions have been forced to consider the media as an essential communication channel to reach their audience and convey their messages. In response to this mediatization, religious institutions have adopted various strategies to adapt to the logics of contemporary media.

It is necessary to strongly emphasize in this regard that society, over the course of recent generations, has been undergoing processes that extend far beyond mere technological issues. It is essential to contextualize these processes within broader historical and social contexts to fully understand their impact and implications. Therefore, it is crucial to focus on the study of religious influencers in order to examine in detail the dynamics that emerge from this intersection between religion and digital culture. Analyzing phenomena related to religious influencers requires a multidisciplinary approach that considers historical, social, cultural, and technological factors. As mentioned earlier, the evolution of society towards digitalization has had a significant impact on religious practice and dynamics of people’s participation, and the emergence of religious influencers represents a form of adaptation of religious institutions to the new modes of communication and social influence that characterize the digital age. However, we cannot limit our analysis to the technological dimension and the figure of the religious influencer as a simple product of the digital age. For

this reason, it is necessary to seriously consider the framework consisting of historical and social elements in which these factors find expression. This also includes social, cultural, and religious restructurings carried out upstream of the transition to the digital system, which have shaped its respective structure. Successfully identifying the mechanisms leading to the emergence of religious personalities online also presupposes reflection on power management practices, religious authorities, the evolution of organizations, and the interrelationships between institutions and civil society. However, this may not be exhaustive for the purpose of our research objective. On the other hand, it is opportune to assess how recent advancements in society and culture have played a decisive role in shaping religious influencers and how they have also contributed to revising the role of religious authority and promoting the active participation of the faithful. Ultimately, the issue of religious influencers goes beyond a simple technological analysis and requires a broader perspective that contextualizes these phenomena within the historical and social processes in which they manifest. Through a multidisciplinary approach encompassing history, sociology, communication, and theology, we can fully understand their importance and impact on religious practice and people's participation in the digital context.

Sacredness 2.0: New Perspectives in Digital Religious Practice

In the aftermath of this crisis, a strong trend towards digital religious practices has emerged, aiming to overcome material restrictions and enable believers to participate in rituals even in the absence of their physical presence. This priority was particularly relevant for those who found themselves isolated and deprived of their religious routines during months of pandemic-related restrictions. For believers, the need to maintain a spiritual connection and participate in religious activities proved to be even more essential. This process of digitalizing prayers has helped bridge physical distances and create a new virtual space where believers can actively participate in religious functions. Through the use of online platforms, video streaming, and virtual communication tools, religious institutions have sought to offer alternatives to traditional on-site celebrations, allowing believers to follow prayers and ceremonies remotely. While this digitalization of prayers played a significant role in meeting the spiritual needs of believers, providing them with a sense of continuity and connection with the religious community despite the physical restrictions imposed by the pandemic, we can also affirm the decisive role played by religious influencers. It is also thanks to these figures that a considerable contingent of believers has identified technology as a valid support to preserve a sense of community and find refuge in an atypical context marked by the pandemic. It is evident that religious observances are evolving in the sense that the digital space should be considered an extension of physical space.

What emerges shows that believers are driven by a desire to follow virtual religious services, which contradicts what Pope Paul VI stated in 1975, which established the fracture between the Gospel and Modern culture as a dialectic between technology and faith, as two irreconcilable worlds. For example, during the lockdown period, there was a noticeable increase in the sense of religious persistence, as described in academic terms by Peter Berger and Thomas Luckmann. Sociologist Hans Joas has argued that science is unable to provide exhaustive meaning to human existence, especially in crucial situations where individuals tend to turn to the sacred as a source of meaningful answers. During the period of restrictions and uncertainties caused by the pandemic, many people turned to religion as emotional and spiritual support (Joas 2015). In a context where rational and scientific answers may appear limited or insufficient, humans exhibit an intrinsic tendency to seek a sacred or transcendent dimension to find meaning and comfort. For Berger and Luckmann, the sense of religious persistence emerges when individuals face crisis or transition situations, seeking answers to profound existential questions. In these circumstances, religion can provide an interpretive framework that goes beyond scientific explanations and offers a framework of meaning that satisfies the human need to make sense of one's existence (Berger and Luckmann 1967). Joas' perspective suggests that in critical situations, science may prove unsatisfying for many individuals as it fails to fully meet the human need for meaning, hope, and transcendent connection.

In such circumstances, religion becomes an important resource as it provides fertile ground for the exploration of the sacred dimension and the spiritual sphere. Additionally, it tends to provide an anchor of stability and a point of reference for many individuals in crisis situations, offering a sense of purpose and a connection to the sacred. A tangible example of the impact of religion in contemporary society can be observed by analyzing the viewership data of live-streamed religious events. An emblematic example is the words spoken by Pope Francis blessing held at St Peter's, which attracted the attention of a wide audience, recording a remarkable viewership of 8,625,000. This striking figure can be compared to the viewership recorded during the final evening of the 2021 Sanremo Music Festival, a highly publicized event in Italy, which involved 7,730,000 viewers. The enormous public participation in the papal blessing highlights the enduring interest and engagement of people with significant religious events (Berzano, 2020). This attendance represents a significant reference point for understanding the influence and importance that religion continues to have in people's lives, despite the social and cultural transformations characterizing contemporary times. The numbers clearly indicate how a religious event can capture the attention of a wide range of individuals, eliciting emotional and spiritual involvement. This phenomenon cannot be underestimated as it demonstrates the significant impact that religion can have on individuals, influencing their behaviors and choices.

Furthermore, the cited example highlights the relevance of religion as a central element in the public sphere, capable of competing with highly popular media events such as the Sanremo Music Festival. This underscores the strength and relevance of religious institutions in maintaining a prominent role in contemporary society, both in terms of participation and cultural influence. In short, the comparison between the viewership of the papal blessing “Urbi et Orbi” and the final of the 2021 Sanremo Music Festival highlights the importance and impact of religion in modern society. This example clarifies how religious events can attract a wide audience and demonstrates the significant role that religion continues to play in people’s lives, influencing the public sphere and generating socially relevant emotional and spiritual involvement. However, this has not been enough to alleviate the Church’s great hesitancy towards these digital tools. The discomfort with the profession of faith through media was also confirmed by Pope Francis in his homily on 17 April 2020:

“In this moment that we are living, this pandemic has caused all of us to communicate, even in religious matters, through the media, through means of communication... And this is not the Church: this is the Church in a difficult situation, which the Lord allows, but the ideal of the Church is always to be with the people and with the sacraments. Always.”

It is evident how the spread of the COVID-19 pandemic has been accompanied by a sharp surge in digital aspects of various layers of daily life. However, in the religious context, there remains a strong connection to traditions and rituals that involve face-to-face interactions. Nevertheless, the global health crisis has undoubtedly led to a widespread reliance on digital platforms and virtual communication tools for religious practices, such as online worship services, virtual religious gatherings, and digital religious education. Moreover, different attention to digital presence has been noticed among various monotheistic religions (Vitullo 2021). However, according to sociologist of religion Berger, the belief that the increase of modernity is inversely proportional to religious practice is incorrect. In other words, the progressive modernization of contemporary society towards the dissemination of conventional concepts and methods does not automatically result in a decrease in participation and faith relationships. Berger emphasizes that the importance and relevance of religion can persist and even intensify in modernity. His perspective challenges the idea that technological advancement, secularization, and cultural changes render religion obsolete or less significant. On the contrary, Berger suggests that religion, as a response to profound existential questions of human beings, can find new expressions and adapt to the challenges and opportunities offered by modernity. Furthermore, he argues that religious institutions and communities of believers are capable of adapting and responding to social and cultural changes, thereby strengthening their relevance and influence in people’s lives.

This implies that modernity does not necessarily discourage or limit religion but rather offers a context in which religiosity can evolve and take on new forms. Ultimately, according to Berger, modernity and religion are not necessarily in conflict. On the contrary, the interaction between modernity and religion can lead to a reinterpretation and reinvention of religious practices, allowing religion to maintain its importance and adapt to the changing context of modern society. His studies, long founded on the theory of secularization, have been refuted by the scholar himself, who, in an attempt to identify a new interpretive paradigm, approaches the result proposed by our research. The planet has been compelled to seek creative and unprecedented forms of support for maintaining the customs and social bonds within ecclesial communities (Isetti et al. 2021). All of this has taken place in a particularly challenging context for the Catholic Church, given the collective moment and the loss of the central relationship with the sacraments considered vital in Catholic religious life (Bryant, 2010). These significant obstacles have paved the way for a digital religion, which is not fully supported by the words of Pope Francis, who emphasizes to the faithful that these digital celebrations should be considered extraordinary events and not habits to be maintained.

From Theory to Practice: Interactions between Tradition and Innovation.

In his renowned work "The Medium is the Message," Marshall McLuhan, a prominent scholar of communication dynamics and their influences on individuals and society, astutely argues that mass media, considered non-neutral, have a decisive impact on viewers that goes beyond the mere transmitted content. According to McLuhan, the medium itself through which a message is conveyed alters and shapes an individual's perception, interpretation, and experience. In light of this perspective, McLuhan's theory could also be applied to the religious context, allowing for digital evangelization to emerge. In this view, media, especially social media, could be used as tools to establish and spread the religious message, particularly among the younger generation. Digital evangelization could leverage the unique characteristics of digital media to reach a broad and diverse audience that is increasingly immersed in a digital media environment. The strategic use of social media could enable religious communities to connect with people in their everyday lives, creating a virtual space where the religious message can be shared, discussed, and assimilated. However, it is important to recognize that digital evangelization also poses several challenges and issues to address. For example, the abundance of information and the fleeting nature of content on social media require special attention to ensure the quality and authenticity of the transmitted religious message. Moreover, the dynamics of online interaction and participation need to be considered, taking into account the potential for polarization and information manipulation. Therefore, a challenge arises that features religion and the younger generations on digital media. To effectively spread certain religious messages, it would be better to use creativity and experiment with

new, less outdated languages than those of traditional religious practices, which are often tied to a past far removed from the surrounding reality.

This is well-known, for example, by the founders of Alabaster, a religious publishing house created for the Instagram Generation. The founders realized that one of the primary reasons younger individuals struggle to read the Bible, the Gospels, or other sacred texts is the outdated and anachronistic editorial format, which does not align with the expressive parameters of a youthful perspective based on Instagram snapshots. From this observation, the idea arose to reprint sacred texts in a style that could be appreciated by the youth, a minimalist style that would give a young person the impression of reading an illustrated book of poetry. On the other hand, young people belonging to the millennial generation have not received a Catholic religious socialization like that of their parents. The majority of them do not show sympathy for the fundamental principles of the Catholic Church, do not participate in the celebration of Mass, or choose not to marry in church, contrary to the practices of their parents (Pond et al. 2014). The introduction of technology, therefore, is not entirely sufficient because what matters is how technology is used and the strategies adopted. However, it can be of great interest to the Church as it can leverage these online platforms to engage with a young audience that may not be interested in religion. This is also why it is necessary to conduct research that focuses on a precise description of how technology is utilized by users in religious observances, taking into consideration the social contexts in which these digital observances occur. At this moment, the question arises as to whether TikTok priests and nuns can be considered a source of inspiration and facilitation for religious participation, rather than being seen as an anomalous phenomenon. I start from the assumption that the Church has not been speaking with a single voice for some time now (Tentori, 1986).

This consideration also extends to the popularization of the religious message and the search for a greater appeal, facilitating understanding and potentially reaching spaces that are traditionally less inclined to approach religion. The perspective raises a series of relevant questions and raises the issue of the ability of religious influencers to effectively communicate the religious message using popular and digital formats such as TikTok. This platform, with its immediate and visual nature, can offer an innovative way to present religious ideas in a captivating and accessible manner to a wide audience. Furthermore, the participation of religious figures on TikTok could represent an opportunity to engage sectors of society that might otherwise be distant from religion. Traditionally, religious institutions have sought to reach people through more traditional means, such as religious ceremonies or preaching in churches and synagogues. In any case, the use of media and electronic platforms can enable reaching other segments of the audience who spend a significant amount of their time online (Pratiwi et al. 2021). This trend could be a way to make the religious message more

appealing and understandable to a broader audience. For example, the use of short formats, creative videos, and colloquial language could bridge the gap between young people and non-religious individuals, breaking down cultural and linguistic barriers.

Of course, it must be considered that such a practice raises concerns. One could argue that the use of social media trivializes or superficializes spirituality, reducing it to a spectacle for views and followers. It is crucial, therefore, for religious figures engaging on various social media platforms to strike a balance between entertainment and the transmission of the religious message, avoiding excessive commercialization or exploitation of users' emotions. Among prominent figures in the religious landscape, Father Enzo Fortunato stands out as a recognizable exponent of the Church in the digital format, thanks to his extensive presence on social media that has made him a true influencer. Moreover, his online activity has attracted a considerable number of followers, giving him extraordinary visibility in the religious sphere, and his engagement has extended to the television and radio world, further expanding the reach of the Church. The influencer friar has demonstrated the ability to effectively leverage digital platforms to communicate and share religious messages with a wide audience. This phenomenon has allowed for unprecedented fame and the spread of his message to a much larger audience than would have been possible through traditional channels (Cerioli, 2020). Through his social media accounts, he has adopted innovative communication strategies, using colloquial language, engaging images, and content formats suitable for digital channels, such as short videos and easily shareable posts. In contemporary times, social media represents a virtual square of sorts, where messages can be disseminated and preached.

A tangible example of this reality emerged during the lockdown period when my activity on social media took off. The initial objective was to offer comfort and support to the faithful who were scared and facing difficulties. The live streams I broadcasted immediately generated enormous participation, quickly going from reaching 120 to over 2,000 people. This experience was demanding yet extraordinary. My main motivation is to continue serving the Church through the use of social media. I recognize that these digital tools offer an unprecedented opportunity to reach and engage a wide audience, going beyond the physical and temporal boundaries of traditional religious activities. I am aware that my presence on social media can generate a significant impact, offering comfort, inspiration, and support to people who might feel distant or fearful of the religious faith. My determination to serve the Church through social media is fueled by the awareness that these tools represent a new frontier of evangelization and religious communication. Through the creation of relevant, shareable, and accessible content, I desire to convey the values and fundamental messages of faith in a relevant manner for a contemporary audience. It should be emphasized that despite the gratification of this experience, it requires considerable commitment and dedication. Managing

social media activities requires constant updating, creativity in presenting content, and the ability to promptly respond to the needs and questions of followers. However, it is precisely this challenge that makes the experience even more rewarding and stimulating. Ultimately, the use of social media as platforms for preaching represents an innovative and powerful way to continue serving the Church.

Through these new virtual squares, it is possible to reach a wide audience, sharing a message of hope, comfort, and faith. By maintaining a mindful, authentic, and values-centered approach, I can contribute to providing a meaningful service to the religious community and beyond. The era in which the idealized image of a religious conception from the 20th century was considered incompatible with modernity and digital structures has come to an end (Evolvi, 2019). This nostalgic view of religion as a separate entity, distant from the dynamics of contemporary society, has been overcome. In the current context, religion can no longer be understood as an isolated reality, closed in on itself and disconnected from the digital sphere and social transformations. On the contrary, digital structures and new technologies are becoming fertile ground for religious expression, communication, and interaction among the faithful. This transformation implies overcoming traditional barriers between the sacred and the profane, opening up new possibilities for the dissemination of the religious message and interaction with believers. The image of a static religion, alien to modernity and incapable of adapting to the challenges of the digital age, is thus challenged and redefined. Instead of considering religion as an unchanging entity independent of social and digital dynamics, it is necessary to recognize its ability to evolve and adapt to new realities. The digital age offers new opportunities for active participation of the faithful, sharing the religious message, and creating virtual communities. In summary, the traditional image of religion as incompatible with modernity and digital structures belongs to the past. Religion is actively embracing the challenges of the digital realm and harnessing its potential to spread the religious message, engage believers, and create new forms of religious expression. This transformation represents an opportunity for the evolution and adaptation of religion to the dynamics of contemporary society.

Conclusion

It can be argued that the presence of priests and nuns on TikTok and social media should not be seen as a trivialization or weakening of the religious message, but rather as an attempt to make the message itself more attractive and understandable, with the aim of reaching spaces and audiences that are traditionally distant from religion. This type of widespread worship emerges as a necessary response to the developments of a society oriented towards predominantly commodified communication. Rather than viewing it as a degradation or a decline of faith, such contamination could instead be interpreted as a response to the changing social dimension and communicative methods. Pop-

religion adapts to new modes of communication and penetrates spaces where messages, channels, and audiences are increasingly fragmented. This strategy allows reaching a broader audience and engaging citizens who may be distant from the Church and religious themes. It is important to emphasize that this form of popular religious communication does not seek to distort or overly simplify the religious message, but rather aims to make it more accessible and relevant to a contemporary audience.

Today, albeit in a different way, through the use of digital platforms and popular communication tools, priests and nun TikTokers seek to engage young people and bridge the gap between religious tradition and modern culture. In summary, the presence of priests and nuns on social media represents an adaptation to the transformations of contemporary society and modes of communication. Clearly, an at least partially innovative model of the Church emerges, departing from the traditional logic where the priest played a central role alongside ritual and sacramental aspects, in favor of a greater focus on the importance of the faithful, the community, and the world.

The logic of 2.0 participation, closely connected to the social media model, strongly enters the world of the Church. In reality, the majority of these experiments were imagined as temporary and exceptional, with the awareness that they would be set aside once the emergency phase ended. However, it did not turn out that way, and the innovations imagined and conceived as temporary have generated regular and stabilized practices, leading to institutionalization and consolidation (Scott, 2013). This certainly applies to online Masses, but also to the new formats proposed by religious influencers. In conclusion, this contribution reveals a dual consideration. On the one hand, an avant-garde Church with religious influencers as frontmen can work for several reasons, not least because it can reach different target audiences. On the other hand, it is clear that a significant portion of the faithful experienced the lockdown and the interruption of ordinary liturgical activities through reproduction and repetition, namely through the online transposition of in-person activities. For religious actors capable of increasing their popularity and for the faithful who are less tied to communion or community, online Masses were an opportunity to discover a virtuous alternative to normality, a new way of participating in celebrations. For all the others who hoped to return to normal liturgical life as soon as possible, the experiment had a much less positive outcome. Nevertheless, this experience was a conditioned response for the clergy and the faithful, an attempt to live during the quarantine in a way that differed as little as possible from the usual routine.

In this way, priests also had the opportunity to avoid social isolation and loneliness, to dispel the unpleasant feeling of being perfectly useless when they are away from the sacramental machinery's frantic rhythms. The fact remains that we are only at the beginning of this new phenomenon, the era of social religion has just begun. We are witnessing the end of an era in which the idealized image of a 20th-century religious

conception was considered incompatible with the progress of modernity and the structures of the digital age (Evolvi 2019), a transformation that marks a significant change in how religions are perceived and relate to the contemporary technological context. In this landscape, the image of a religion incompatible with modernity and the structures of the digital age has given way to a new paradigm, in which religions are adapting and reinterpreting themselves to meet the needs of contemporary believers. The interaction between religion and the digital realm is thus a constantly evolving terrain of challenges and opportunities, where new forms of religious expression, community, and spirituality are being defined (Leone, 2014). In conclusion, we are witnessing a transitional moment in which religions are adapting to new technologies and reworking their doctrines and practices to address the challenges and opportunities of the digital era (Vecoli, 2013). This evolution will require in-depth reflection and academic study to fully understand the implications and future directions.

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