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The Christian religious communities and digitalization in Poland*

Abstract. Digitalization in contemporary times is a process permeating more and more clearly, or even appropriating individual and social life in its various dimensions. The presence of new technologies is also visible in the religious sphere, where it not only aids the evangelization processes, but also creates a space for communication, exchange, convergence, interactions as well as integration of the faithful.

This article will present a way of functioning of the majority (the Catholic) community as well as the minority (the Pentecostal) community in the conditions of digitalization in Poland. Strategies of utilizing the digital tools will be shown, which were used in the aforementioned religious communities in the time of the COVID-19 pandemic, together with their potential permanence in the period after the pandemic, thus their significance in shaping the religious life. The analysis will be performed on the basis of the qualitative research conducted within the project RECOVIRA.

Keywords: digital religion, digital religiosity, religious community, Catholic Church, Pentecostal community.

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Introductory remarks

The acceleration connected with the development of new technologies (involving their commonness), observed in our times, has imbued and “marked” almost every sphere of private and social life with their presence (cf. Campbell, 2012; Couldry 2012; Hoover & Echchaibi, 2023a). For new technologies can be found in the professional, educational, domestic, social, cultural and religious spheres. The acceleration of their use appeared in the time of the lockdown during the COVID-19 pandemic, which forced the “transfer” of almost every activity to the digital sphere. Digital technologies made it possible to break the introduced restrictions connected with the direct contact. In the religious sphere these tools allowed priests not only to broadcast or stream the liturgy, or communal prayers, but also to maintain relationship with the congregation. Therefore, the digital space has become a chance for religion to maintain, or even develop the religious life and channels of communication, intensifying interactions, building networks of social relationships (cf. Campbell, 2020, p. 12). Lifting the pandemic restrictions made it possible to return to conventional forms of practices in Churches and religious communities, although some of them continued using the technological improvements and solutions, *inter alia*, due to the necessity to adjust to the digital culture, or more broadly, to the cultural changes brought about by the new technologies (Campbell, 2020, p. 10).

The forms and ways of using the digital tools by Churches and religious communities might be considered dialectically. On the one hand, they could be a manifestation of an efficient adjustment and assimilation with the requirements of the surrounding culture of the digital media, but on the other hand, they might constitute a cautious reaction resulting from the obligation to be present in the digital world. The aforementioned strategies support the proselytising activity and strengthen (at least prospectively) the sense of belonging as well as engagement on the part of the faithful, at the same time saturating the public sphere and discourse with sacredness (cf. Hoover, Echchaibi, 2023a, p. 7).

This article will discuss the strategies of using the digital tools in two Christian religious communities, namely: the Catholic Church, including also the Neocatechumenal community as well as the Pentecostal community: the “DOM” Church in Warsaw. The analysis will be based on the results of the qualitative research conducted in Poland within the international project RECOVIRA.

Religion and digitalization

The alliance between religion and digital technologies forms new conditions of presence and presentation of the sacred in the contemporary times. The religious content and meanings are shared in “conventional” digital formats on the official websites of the Churches, religious communities and groups, but they are also distributed on social networking sites – starting from the YouTube platform, through the X portal (formerly Twitter) or Instagram, and ending with TikTok. Also, applications supporting the faithful in shaping and developing their religious involvement can complement this picture. The materials and messages posted and published in the digital media are either institutional in nature or not, which opens up a space for creativity, construction and deconstruction of their sense as well as meanings (cf. Campbell, 2012, p. 66–67; Hoover & Echchaibi, 2023a, p. 7–8;).

Therefore, these tools enable broadcasting, transferring the contents and their reception, at the same time creating conditions to modify the meanings and contexts (cf. Echchaibi & Hoover, 2023a, p. 1) according to individual preferences, as well as in a variety of configurations as to traditional denominations or entirely independently of them (Campbell, 2012). The emerging religious “space” in the digital world influences – as, *inter alia*, Campbell or Hoover and Echchaibi, indicate – identity, the shape of relations and communities, identifying authority figures, the perception of power and forms of practices (Campbell, 2012; Cheong, 2022; Couldry, 2012 ; Hoover & Echchaibi, 2023a; Lövheim, 2013; Lövheim & Lundmark, 2022). In a simplified view, the relationship between religion and digitalization can be seen as two-dimensional, according to Helland’s typology. The first one indicates that religion enters the digital area, in which it is a tool used by religious organizations for communication (Helland, 2000, 207; Hoover & Echchaibi, 2023a, p. 2). Another point of view refers to religious forms acting outside of the traditional structures of religious organizations (Helland, 2000, p. 207; Hoover & Echchaibi, 2023a, p. 2). However, the perspective does not “consume” numerous forms, which are located “between” this dichotomy, which Hoover and Echchaibi described as “the third space” (2023a, p. 2). For it includes initiatives displaying religious, beyond religious and non-religious features, as well as the ones connected with spirituality (Hoover & Echchaibi, 2023a, p. 2–3). Which of these dimensions emerges in the Christian communities in Poland on the basis of the conducted research? To what extent are they a temporary cooperation between religion and digital tools, and to what degree are they a permanent strategy?

The digital strategies of the religious communities in Poland

The Catholic Church

The Catholic Church in Poland makes use of both the traditional and the digital media to popularize its teachings, thus trying to respond to the challenges of the contemporary times and the needs of the faithful. In the time of the pandemic a crucial and at the same time common element of the activity undertaken by the Church were the broadcasts of the liturgy shared on television or online, which allowed the faithful to fulfil their religious needs. Such a dimension can be illustrated by the following statements of the respondents:

At home I had the TV set, the radio. I tried to listen to the Holy Mass there. And just be at the Mass, just like that through TV [...]

it happened on television, just when it was on, I joined in the Holy Mass, I just watched something on TV [...]

I know that there were also broadcasts on YouTube, since at a certain time I also watched them, but mainly television [...]

then, when we couldn't go to church there were such situations when we watched Masses online [...]

[...] when the churches were closed, well I used just those, well on TV yes, there that is not on TV, but more on YouTube exactly there were were such broadcasts. So I used that" [...]

during the pandemic I took part in online Masses. Actually, they were the Jesuits from Rakowiecka [...]

Similarly, connection with the faithful and concern for them was described by the parish priest of parishes where the research was conducted. For he stated that:

[...] there were also offers for the faithful. There were broadcasts of the Holy Masses from the Church for them. We were in constant contact with them [...]

A similar solution was used for the format of contact and maintaining relationships with the members of the intra-parish communities, and more precisely the Neocatechumenal ones, which are a crucial dimension of the parish life, thus the religious life. The initiatives aimed at these communities in the time of the pandemic were expressed as follows:

we had a way for that [...] we offered them the liturgy on the Internet all the time. They were at home, but at the hour of a given liturgy we connected toge-

ther [...]. On our part we maintained contact with them as much as possible. Especially when there was the Holy Week, holidays. They [...] cherished [...] and they also appreciated the value of the Eucharist very much, the meetings in the communities, which they missed a lot [...].

On this basis a picture emerges of the utilization of the digital tools to broadcast the liturgy, fulfil the practices, communication and maintaining relationships with the faithful, although the latter dimension of activity seems to be more aimed at intra-parish communities. Their members perceived online activity as a necessity, resulting from external conditions connected with the restrictions in the time of the pandemic, which after all allowed to maintain connection with the members, and also to cater for religious needs. The following statement of one of the respondents might depict that:

those were the tools, they were the only possibility, which allowed us to function in a certain way. We were closed for a long time. We had such a need [...].

These tools were identified in a similar way by the members of the community “Mary’s Children”, who treated the digital implements and contact online as additional, auxiliary, although making it possible to develop religiosity. The following statement from a female respondent might be an example of it:

[...] But because of the fact that the pandemic went on and on, even as children’s entertainers we missed meetings with them, so we suggested an online encounter and the children gladly attended. And so we started meeting online every Saturday, which had a great influence on the development of those children, I think so. Our meetings lasted a short time, as in principle we met online for only 4 months, I guess. Also, in the meantime there were holidays, so there were only a few of these meetings really. And then everything started going back to normal, so our meetings began going back to normal again [...]

The digital tools in the religious sphere appear as a complement and temporary necessity resulting from the pandemic restrictions. The members of the researched Neocatechumenal community indicated that they used platforms such as Zoom or Google Meet to organize meetings connected with the preparation for the liturgy. However, they emphasized the value of face-to-face meetings, which can be exemplified by the following statements:

in principle, we wanted to restore things as they were before. For the meantime we used it, as there was no other possibility

[...] the media make you indolent, it’s easier to meet erm online, you don’t have to waste time for the journey, etc. So these physical meetings require more time, but also bring us more benefits [...]

After lifting all those restrictions we were looking forward to the first liturgy [...] at last we can meet physically.

These statements paint a picture of the connection with the Church or the community of the faithful with the use of media tools, which made it possible to participate in the liturgy, fulfil the religious needs of the faithful, maintain relationships with the parish and the community. Such solutions, however, appear to be temporary and insufficient, after all, the emphasized value of the religious experience and religious life is a direct contact with another human being as well as being in the community offline, and not joining it by clicking the link.

The examples of the Catholic and Pentecostal communities provided in the analysis show that although the digital tools are used by those groups, they manage their potential in a slightly different way from the perspective of their integration and the involvement of their members. The Catholic community is oriented to the broadcasting and liturgical model, whereas the Pentecostal community concentrates to a larger extent on developing and modernizing the message, and therefore includes its members in building a digital arsenal, which highlights their involvement. The indicated difference might be connected with various strategies of the “market” presence, which are an implication of the position of both of these communities in the denominational structure in Poland. The first one, characteristic of the Catholic community, seems to be more focussed on maintaining the faithful and the position on the market. The second one, however, characterizing the Pentecostal community, is oriented towards gaining the faithful and building their visibility to that aim. Moreover, the age structure of the members of these communities might also condition the differences as to the selection of their tools, thereby being more or less willing to use the digital instrumentation. However, regardless of the applied digital solutions the aspect which emerges on the basis of the conducted research is the pursuit of direct contacts, as they complement the value of participation in the community.

The Pentecostal community “The DOM Church”

A slightly different strategy from the aforementioned can be seen in one of the communities researched within the project RECOVIRA, namely the Pentecostal community “Dom” from Warsaw. This community was founded more than 10 years ago and consists of approximately 300 members.¹ The digital

¹ Information received during an interview in the community DOM conducted on 5th February 2024.

culture and media seem to be an attractive, not to say a natural contemporary instrumentation making it possible to communicate, but also build a position in the religious sphere as well as a sense of belonging and cohesion in the community. The following respondents' answers might be an example of this:

Precisely before the pandemic, in the first week of the pandemic we were ready and we introduced a sort of professional livestream from our meetings, so we had prepared for that before not knowing at all that there will be such a necessity. And I have a strong feeling that it was such a supernatural guidance. That we had collected the money, bought the professional equipment for streaming. It seems that on the first or second Sunday of lockdown we were ready, we were performing a live-stream. And we have done it so far. So it has also influenced first of all the reception and secondly, also the people's involvement, as there is another space for people to get engaged in and be a part of the community and feel a part of the community [...].

[...] We had all the tools and procedures and ways of streaming already familiarized. We've done it for a few years on YouTube and other platforms. So for us it was very easy.

[...] For a long time we've been making a live broadcast. Also in the time of the pandemic we bought as a Church, as a community better, better cameras, better things to record, to create a better content, a better quality of the content so that such good quality of information would reach people at home and so that poor quality did not disturb them to understand the message [...].

Therefore, we can see that this religious community treats the digital space and its tools as an integral element of contemporary times, which not only serves evangelization, and further, a visibility of this community on the "religious market", and also enables the integration of their members and shapes their involvement. For making use of the digital tools allowed them to build integration and cohesion in the time of the COVID-19 pandemic, but also to strengthen faith. This dimension might be illustrated by the following fragments of statements:

Well, we use the broadcast of the church service all the time, as if such [...] This pandemic has given us a bit of an impulse, when it comes to other meetings, we are broadcasting live, but we also started using for example, using such online tools for coverage [...] it is not for coverage, but for communication. For example, we read YouVersion [The Bible App] with girls. And we have discussions there or for example we have also created a book club and we also discuss what we've read and the way things are going on Messenger [...].

There were broadcasts in the place where we meet, full church services were recorded and broadcast online on our Facebook and YouTube. And all our activities, which normally took place during the week, that is students' meetings, youth meetings, children's meetings, meetings for men and women, courses were moved online, plus in the evenings in the initial period of the pandemic, I think that for 2 months at 9 p.m. we had meetings on our internal, closed group on Facebook for the members of our community. These were evening houses of prayer and where we had inspiration and prayed together on topics we had submitted [...].

[...] on a closed Facebook group, every Tuesday or perhaps Wednesday we had such a house of prayer, where we encouraged each other, exchanged our needs, requests, we prayed for each other together. There was always an introduction, of one of us [...].

This community noticed the necessity to enter the digital "world" even before the pandemic. The lockdown only accelerated building its digital "counterpart", which today is supposed to encourage to come and engage in the life of this religious group. In order for the inspiration and "attraction" to be effective, this community tries to approach the digital culture professionally. Not only the new equipment and streaming indicated by the respondents proves that, but also building a social media team, which is supposed to support the visibility of this group in the online space, but also this initiative is building the members' involvement. Strengthening the involvement can also be seen in creating new practices in the time of the pandemic [cf. Campbell, 2020], such as for instance meetings and prayers in closed groups on FB. Also using the Bible and prayer applications can be included in this trend, as well as common discussions and debates on religious matters on Messenger. It all indicates an attempt to efficiently adapt to the new requirements of the contemporary culture, which makes it possible – which has already been mentioned – to intensify interactions, multiply the contents, participate "more broadly" in the public discourse. Except that this instrumentation seems to be a sort of complement, since for the members of this community – similarly to the Catholic community – the aim is to know another person and experience his or her closeness.

Instead of a conclusion

Religion in the digital culture "presents itself" in various forms, which allow for multiplications of its presence. This, in turn, favours an intensive saturation of the public sphere with religious content in different formats, inter alia, long or short ones (e.g. on TikTok), which are shared, forwarded,

received, commented on and reacted to. Some of these activities take place in the institutional, while others in the non-institutional area and because of that correspond with “traditional religious contexts” to a lesser or greater extent [Campbell, 2012, 77–79]. All these activities create conditions to fulfil individual, personalized needs and practices, to complete information, but at the same time it can be a way to contact a religious institution [cf. Campbell, 2012, 81]. The latter dimension emerges on the basis of the aforementioned research results. The digital tools were used in certain conditions, that is in the time of the pandemic and, above all, to perform rituals. The need connected with maintaining the relationship shaped offline was also significant. Although the digital instrumentation enables creativity and experimenting with religious experiences and practices [Campbell 2012, 80], the picture emerging on the basis of the research shows (especially in the context of the Catholic communities) a certain similarity between online and offline behaviours. Participation in the liturgy was not always connected with full involvement, after all, it was based on watching a broadcast while being distracted by the household rhythm. Religious practices also resounded as the leading dimension during the meetings of intra-Church communities and groups. For the religious communities the technological arsenal in the time of the pandemic was only a tool used for specific aims [cf. Campbell 2020]. After it ended, the conventional model of offline activity was restored. Thus, we can ask a bit rhetorically: to what degree is focusing “religion” on the ritual dimension a symptom of the condition of religiosity in Poland in the situation of the generally available “sacred”, especially on the Internet?

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