

EXPLORING OFFLINE AND ONLINE RELIGIOUS IDENTITY IN TRADITION-ORIENTED RELIGIOUS COMMUNITIES

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Abstract

The aim of this study was to compare the offline and online identities of two tradition-oriented religious communities. The qualitative research interpreted the role of online space in the formation of religious communities within the framework of communication studies and sociology of religion. The results suggest that online presence did not weaken but strengthened the offline dimensions of community identity. Online communication also promoted participation, sharing of spiritual experiences and community cohesion. There was coherence between the online and offline identities of the communities studied, and online activity became an integral complement to traditional community functioning. The study concludes that social media tools can support the survival and adaptation of religious communities in a digital society. Our results show that religious communities are successfully integrating digital communication into their mission activities. Social media platforms offer new platforms for expressing and strengthening community identity. This research contributes to contemporary theoretical discourse on the relationship between religion and media.

Keywords

religious community, identity, offline, online, digital society

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Introduction

Belonging to a community and community identity are crucial in people's lives. Belonging to a community means having a social network around us, being listened to, setting goals, associating values with them, and working with others to achieve them. An important area of research on these issues is online communities, which in many cases represent the survival and survival of communities (Wellman – Guila 2007, Andok 2022). While 'offline communities' are little publicly visible, religious and community identity has become a publicly embraced and presented phenomenon. While secularisation has meant that church belonging and its expression is mostly done in the private sphere, social media have made it visible again (Andok 2022, Korpics – Hommer – Béres 2023). This is a new challenge for churches, small communities and individuals alike, but as communication researchers we know that the nature of mass communication is not the same as the nature of religion and religious communication (Luhmann 1977, Neville 2022). But we also know about the nature of media in the 21st century that media, especially social media, foster collaboration (Jenkins – Green – Ford 2013, Myat 2014). Religious communities have a place on the web. Already the Second Vatican Council stated that the Church must be attentive to the signs of the times. Since then, the Catholic Church has drawn attention to the importance of the media in several documents (Inter Mirifica 1963, Communio et Progressio 1971, Aetatis Novae 1991). This approach makes our study relevant to examine and describe how traditional religious communities use the media and what characterises a community's offline identity, what elements of this identity are and how these elements are reflected (if at all) in the community's online functioning.

Literature review

The concept of community is complex. One view of community is that it is a fundamental form of human coexistence and cooperation – in this case, belonging to a community is based on being born into it. The other view, which we call value-based, sees community as the highest form of human cooperation, an association freely created by autonomous individuals. This type of community is one in which individuals join of their own free will. The problematic nature of the concept of community is illustrated in Hillary's study *Definitions of community: areas of concern* (Hillary 1955), in which the author lists 94 different definitions of community, all of which are valid and applicable to a relatively wide range of social phenomena.

In today's industrialised societies, the processes of community formation are overriding the validity of earlier definitions of community. Wellmann, in examining social networks of

connections, proposes the introduction of the concept of a personal network community (Wellman 1999). Community is now less bound up with locality and more characterised by the definition of a social network. The authors, Wellman and Guila, pose the problem of whether the modes of communication made possible by the Internet have an impact on the disintegration of traditional communities or, on the contrary, whether they reinforce the specificity of the community as manifested in modern social networks and thus help communities to survive (Wellman – Guila 2007). In their discourse, the authors reinforce the media-optimistic view. Since then, however, the media pessimistic view has also been reinforced (Papacharissi 2003). However, in the study of religious communities, we can no longer ignore the study of online communities, as communities regularly use online spaces to share daily information and promote events and causes; even in the case of tradition-oriented communities, social media have been shown to play a role in reinforcing the ecclesial and traditional character of the community (Campbell – Tsuria 2021, Korpics – Béres – Hommer 2023, Battista 2024). The emergence of this function is supported by several studies that identify community as an important feature of reflexive modernity, where social media is a site for problem solving and the conducting affairs (Jenkins – Green – Ford 2013, Myat 2014).

The communicative relevance of community research

Data on religion, religiosity, religious communities, churches and church communities are collected and analysed by the sociology of religion. We have close descriptions, which are dealt with by anthropology of religion and religious ethnography. These communities have changed and bear many signs of social change, so their research must include new perspectives. There is no consensus on the definition of community, but there is agreement that these approaches have a number of characteristics that are relevant to communication. A community is defined by the presence of internal communication, shared experiences, and solidarity within the community. External communication with the rest of society is also present. The approach of the communication sciences is underpinned by the common root of the very notion of community and the notion of communication, since the notions of communication and community (*communio*) overlap, if we consider the Latin forms of the two terms. Several communication researchers link the two concepts: Rosengren (2004) defines community in terms of communication, Depew – Peters (2001) argues that communities are held together by communication, and Carey (1992) has argued for a new model of communication to study the changed social context, as he sees communication as a representation of shared beliefs, which is a symbolic process. In our approach, we relate to the communicative context of the concept of community.

The transformation of the media landscape, and in particular the increasing use of social media, raises the question of how the public sphere has been transformed over the past decade and how churches have responded (George 2006, Boyd 2011, Pariser 2011, Papacharissi 2015, Pariser 2011, Spadaro 2014, Cantwell – Rashid 2015, Cucci SJ 2015, Andok 2022). Papacharissi's (2003) approach to networked communication makes some remarkable claims about the way the public sphere works. One of the underlying themes of this thesis was the post-technological revolution of web 2.0, in which the author questions the ability of this technology to provide otherwise unavailable information to actors in public discourse. The author makes three claims to support his media pessimistic position. The first argues that although access and availability have become easier, the volume and variety of content has hindered rather than helped the process. The second important argument is that the whole online public sphere is now more about entertainment than rationality. The third point is the issue of

commercialisation¹, which he argues is not democratically organised because the internet is fundamentally driven by economic interests. In addition to the media pessimism, there is a framework that can formulate positive research problems and proposals for the public presence of churches and denominations, and that is the media as a model for action. This approach is becoming increasingly dominant in contemporary media research and even in the field of religious studies. Hoover's *Religion in the Media Age* (2006) explores the everyday interaction between religion and the media. The book also hints at a shift away from institutionalised religion towards individual spiritual quest. The author argues that the various media such as television, film, internet play an important role in this process, because they should be considered practices rather than technologies. Churches need to know how media works so they can be present in it in an appropriate way and can be embedded in contemporary operational strategies (Stark – Brainbridge 1987, Dominika 2009, Taylor – Casanova – McLean 2012, Lázár-Kovács 2017). Communication research offers appropriate and relevant theoretical and research frameworks and methods for approaching changing technological-sociocultural relations and changing publics. As communication researchers, our task is to explore the media's scope for change and to explore opportunities and changes. The media is an opportunity. The media is an opportunity for churches that can be an effective evangelization tool and can influence the internal communication of churches and the online functioning of religious communities.

Already in its publication of 22 February 2002, the Pontifical Council for Mass Communication stated that "[t]he Church must understand the Internet, because in order to effectively proclaim the Gospel to the people who have been shaped by the culture of the media, we must take into account the specificity of the channels themselves, the media".² The Pontifical Council for Social Communications also pointed out in the cited publication that knowledge of the internet is essential for churches to use it properly. Furthermore, studying and using the internet allows churches to reach people, especially the younger generations, who are completely immersed in the world of new media, as they were born into this mediatised world.

This series of reflections, more than twenty years old at the time of writing, shows that the study of the relationship between the Church and the Internet, and in particular social media, is essential for understanding and, not least, improving the Churches' communication in the 21st century.

Some churches – and the Catholic Church is no exception – now consider the online world as a natural medium for their organisational functioning. In the internal functioning of the church (internal organisational communication), there are many networked ways of sharing and transmitting information. This characterises not only interpersonal communication between church members, but also group communication. Today, many official Church documents and speeches call for the inclusion of these means in the evangelisation and missionary "arsenal". Indeed, the magic word is mission³, which has always defined the public discourse of the Church. This is because what is communication but an impact on another human being, and if that impact has a religious theme, it is mission par excellence. The most important paradigm

¹ This latter issue is well contrasted by Croteau and Hoynes (2013), who examine the media from a media-public perspective, contrasting the business and public sector models (Croteau – Hoynes 2013).

² Pontifical Council for Mass Communication: *The Church and the Internet*, 22 February 2002 <https://regi.katolikus.hu/konyvtar.php?h=131#N3> (Retrieved 18 June 2022)

³ Pope Francis uses the notion of the Church leaving the flock in the context of mission: *Pope Francis' Apostolic Exhortation Evangelii gaudium to Bishops, Priests and Deacons, Ordained Persons and Lay Faithful, The Proclamation of the Gospel in Today's World*, Budapest, St. Stephen's Society, 2014, 16-33.

shift in this respect was Vatican II, when it set new directions in the field of ecclesial communication by calling for the signs of the times to be recognised. Likewise, the documents of the Pontifical Council for Mass Communication and the papal declarations of the World Mass Communication Day are all important meta-messages. They are clear benchmarks that can define the nature of ecclesial manifestations, whether they are oral – including traditional (e.g. papal homilies) or other, such as more recently lay-originated – or written documents (Spadaro 2015, Cucci 2016, Adeola – Hinson – Evans 2019, Campbell – Tsuria 2021, Campbell – Bellar 2021, Battista 2024).

For the religious practice of the main churches, one of the greatest challenges is how to *convey the religious message* in a changed, constantly and rapidly changing social space, and what *new arenas* there are or should be for religious (public) life itself.⁴ In a study, Joseph Moingt describes the process of the church's organisational transformation by focusing on the act of communicating faith (Moingt 2010), describing how the 'unframed' - not clearly articulated, not precisely articulated - message of joy necessarily became an 'event' of faith, increasingly 'surrounded' by a normative set of rules. 'Necessarily' because the transmission of faith required a solid institutional environment: a cultural environment was created which produced a Christian heritage. '[...] the Christian faith was transmitted *as a* historical, cultural, social and political *heritage*: under the almost irresistible pressure of a complex *tradition*' (Moingt 2010: 48). The personal (family, community) examples of the environment induced a living faith in the growing child. However, this has changed in recent centuries: instead of living faith, only elements of Christian culture have been preserved, but the essence has been lost. The Christian tradition as the dominant social tradition gradually faded away from the centuries before modernity. Nor could its personally binding character – as an internalized, living and confessing belief (system) – remain dominant in the spiritual-identical dimension of the culturally still Christian believers.⁵ The final break with the earlier form of tradition transmission came in the 1960s and 1970s. Instead of the previous slow and localised transmission of tradition, the emerging virtual space becomes a medium of 'instantaneous and universal *communication*' [emphasis from author – authors] (Moingt 2010: 50). The medium is so oriented towards instant and current communication that almost all other transmission of information about normative knowledge, any knowledge, traditions, is disadvantaged. The momentary actualisation of the relational space excludes the validity of the old, the traditional. The process is not 'centred' on religion, the aim is not to break religion, but to 'target' all social institutions that are not based on this volatile immediacy and optionality. For the churches, it is particularly tragic in this process that they have relied heavily on tradition and that their 'basic function' is communication.

With the advent of the Internet, after its first phase, when, in addition to the novelty of the Internet, there was also an interest in other, more striking content, the search for spirituality gradually shifted to this new platform. This colourfulness and diversity is not, as many people think, a new and modern form of eradication of religion, but simply a case of a change of model (Dulles 1974, Casanova 1994). However, it seems to many to be quite threatening, and this is exacerbated by the perennial religious aversion to technology (Spadaro 2014, Cucci 2016).

⁴ These issues were highlighted in particular in the programme and documents of the October 2018 Synod of Bishops on Youth and in the resulting apostolic exhortation *Christus Vivit* (Christ is Alive) issued by Pope Francis : Pope Francis: *Post-Synod Apostolic Exhortation Christus Vivit to young people and to all God's people*. <https://katolikus.hu/dokumentumtar/christus-vivit> (Retrieved 25 August 2025) .

⁵ On social development, see Luhmann 1977.

In the space of globalisation, the constant flow of goods, people, capital, knowledge and cultural ideas means that previously purely local communities seem increasingly closed. In societies emerging from groups of metropolises organised around common interests, we can no longer make sense of organisations based on locality (Welmann 1999). Initial research often contrasted online communities with so-called 'real' communities, trying to prove that these organisations could not be considered real communities, as they failed to reflect the most important roles and meanings of communities (Depew - Durham 2000). An important difference, however, is the communication within communities. Due to the online space, communication can only take place through technology, so often even personal communication is public (for example, in the form of comments during a Facebook post). As there are no time and space constraints, everything happens in the 'here and now' and is characterised by network rather than hierarchy. Belonging to online communities is a free choice and, as in face-to-face social networks, it is not physical proximity but common interests that bind members together.

When a traditional community "chooses" to extend its operations into the online space, it unwittingly reveals itself to users outside the community. The very fact that it has a website or a community page, for example, communicates information about the community, even if it is a closed online group accessible only to its members, because at least in this way the existence of the community can be known to those outside the community. If the community's online activity is public (for example, on social media), then obviously a lot of information about the community can be made available to non-members - but it can also be information for members. The platform a community chooses to use can be attributed to two factors: one is technology and the other is peer networking (Campbell 2010).

In the media environment of reflexive modernity, social platforms, especially Facebook, have become a dominant and inescapable medium, which can also be seen as a new tool for social communication. Social media has become so successful and mobilised so many people because it builds on and amplifies basic human needs. In January 2025, there will be 5.6 billion internet users and 5.24 billion social media users worldwide.⁶ Mark Zuckerberg, on the platform's 10th birthday⁷, highlighted the important role Facebook's online community plays in building community and set a goal to make the coming years all about sharing problems and complex issues. Recently, it has become clear that the profit motive has overtaken this noble goal. As with the mass media, the use of the internet and Facebook must be aware of their characteristics. As with other tools, there are arguments for and against their use. An important characteristic of social media is that it is not only open but also closed, as those who are not part of the group cannot access the content (De Quaerol 2016). The online social scene orients users, the worldview of the group followed, the activities and preferences on the site filter and through this influence the user. Online community platforms play a revolutionary role in collective cooperation (Rheingold 2005) and are also a good example of uncoordinated cooperation (Shirky 2012). Arguments against them have also proliferated recently, with sceptical researchers arguing that online community platforms have limited cooperation and democratic potential for functioning (Papacharissi 2010), and may even be a tool for spreading propaganda and disinformation (Morozov 2011).

According to global data from Datareportal 2021, 45% of 15-24 year olds use social media to keep up to date with news and current affairs, which also means that social media is the most frequently used source of news among respondents in this age group (Datareportal 2021). Religious communities have both public and closed access on Facebook, which allows

⁶ The number of Internet and social media users worldwide as of January 2025.
<https://datareportal.com/reports/digital-2025-local-country-headlines>.

⁷ Mark Zuckerberg 2014. <https://www.facebook.com/zuck/posts/10101250930776491>.

them to contribute to both , and the external and internal communication of the community (organisation). Facebook, with all its positive and negative features, has the potential to reach the masses, inform and play an important role in mobilisation, on which churches and religious communities should build. Social media have played and continue to play a significant role in making personal religious beliefs visible and public. From a communication theory perspective, it is important to note that social media integrate interpersonal, group and mass communication and can be used to carry out a range of activities simultaneously. The convergence of communication levels is a defining feature of social media and this needs to be recognised (Walther et al. 2011).

The research

In our research, we investigated the offline and online community functioning of two traditionalist communities and present the results below. One community is the Ecumenical Pilgrimage Group⁸ , which has been operating for a few years, and the other is the Oblate Community of the Archabbey of St. Martin of Pannonhalma (hereafter: Benedictine Oblate Community). The offline functioning of the two communities was investigated as participant observers, and their online functioning was investigated by considering their presence on social media (Facebook).⁹ The authors of the study conducted the research from the emic-etic perspective of Geertz (1973). They are both part of the team of ecumenical pilgrimage organizers, so they can continuously observe the offline functioning in the annual pilgrimages. In order to describe this, a field diary was prepared and interviews with both pastoral members of the organising team and pilgrims were conducted in the initial stages of the research. To investigate and describe the online functioning of the two communities, the two researchers joined two closed online communities. In the case of the ecumenical pilgrimage, the published content (posts and comments received) was analysed manually over two years, 2021-2023. The content was coded, four codes were drawn based on the posts, and the posts and comments were grouped and analysed according to these codes. In the case of the Benedictine Oblate community, the research looked at posts and reactions to posts published between 2024-2021. For this research, all posted content was examined, within which manual codes were created to group posted content. For the Benedictine Oblate community, two codes were identified. The coding for both communities was done manually, without the use of any automated software.

The results of the research are presented first by describing the two communities, followed by the offline and then the online operation based on the results of the research. The two communities are described separately.

Ecumenical pilgrimage

A fine example of ecumenical unity in Hungary is the Ecumenical Pilgrimage, which has been held every year since 2017. The organisers of the pilgrimage are committed to ecumenism and consider it important to bear witness to this commitment in word and deed. The pilgrimage is a

⁸ For a description of how the pilgrimage group works and previous pilgrimages, see <http://okumenikus-zarandoklat.hu/> (Retrieved 20 March 2024) The pilgrimage group's website has a history of pilgrimages in previous years and the current pilgrimage. In addition to information, spiritual guidelines for previous pilgrimages are also available on the website. Each year the group produces a pilgrimage booklet which is sent to all pilgrims in printed form.

⁹ This was also necessary for the online operation, as for both groups the central sharing and communication takes place in the closed FB group. The two authors are members of the two closed groups.

millenarian tradition of Christianity that, in addition to being a public religious practice, is also a good indicator of the religiosity of a particular era, making it particularly suitable as an indicator of the religiosity of an era, a country, a region, or even a community (Voyé 1992, Pace 1999, Gomes – Losada – Pereiro 2019). The identity of the group is strongly marked by the pilgrim identity and the ecumenical identity. The activity of an ecumenical pilgrimage group is best placed in the model of ecumenical action (Huber 1998, Lukács 2017). But it is not only ecumenism that promotes ecumenism, but also a kind of inculturation, whereby the organisers work to make the gospel accessible to the participants, taking into account their cultural differences, and to give authentic meaning to what is described in it in a new context (Tomka 2006, Patsch 2014). The new context for pilgrimages is twofold. On the one hand, because each pilgrimage has a different spiritual-theological leitmotif¹⁰, and on the other hand, because the itinerary of each pilgrimage is different and the composition of the participants is different. One important aspect has not changed over the years, and that is the motto of the pilgrimage, which can also be seen as a mission statement: 'Let us all be one' (Jn, 17,21).

The ecumenical pilgrimage was started by the Benedictine Order, who organised the St Martin's pilgrimage in 2016, the Year of St Martin. On one of the evenings of this pilgrimage¹¹ in Mihályháza, the pilgrims (mostly Catholic and non-believers, but not rejecting God and religion) were invited to an ecumenical liturgy. The program was hosted by the local Reformed pastor in the church, but there were also invited guests, Reformed and Lutheran pastors, who led the prayer service. The prayer hour was followed by small group discussions led by the pastors. Among the organisers of the first annual ecumenical pilgrimage were the pastors who were guests at the ecumenical evening in Mihályháza, where the seed was sown from which the annual ecumenical pilgrimage grew. What does the pilgrimage give to the participants? To quote from an interview with one of the organisers: *'On the one hand, participants gain direct knowledge of each other's denominational specificities through the experience of walking the route each day (talks, group discussions, devotions, interactive programmes on inter-denominational awareness). At the same time, the most profound spiritual experiences, such as the liturgy of baptismal recollection or the agape (steps towards the realisation of a common community?), touch them and make them sensitive to the search for common points of contact. I find that the majority of those who come on pilgrimage are already defined by this interest and/or commitment to ecumenism'*.¹² Each year, the pilgrimage group spends a week on a joint pilgrimage on foot. The itinerary is always changing, as is the community, but there is a steady core of people who return year after year because they value both the community and the experience of their ecumenical religiosity. One pilgrim sees the community this way, *"I also see our community as a forest, a group of trees, perhaps placed together by chance, by the good will of the creator. They have a destiny, from a distance they don't seem different, but they are, and they are beautiful not only together but separately. During the pilgrimage, I developed the ability to listen to the other, gently, adjusting my steps to those in front and behind me. I became more aware of what I need, in my body, in my soul, in my backpack, and that I can carry much more than I thought I could."*¹³ In addition, the community has been active online for a few years, and every year they organize 1-2 day chamber trips. The community has a stable core, but new members are always arriving for the big annual pilgrimage, and the community is constantly changing.

¹⁰ The spiritual-theological guides are also available on the pilgrimage website.

¹¹ <https://www.zarandokiroda.hu/archivum/szentmartonzarandoklat> (Date of download: 10 April 2024)

¹² Based on an interview with evangelical pastor Gyöngyi Varga.

¹³ The pilgrim is 60 years old.

The "Ecumenical Pilgrimage Group" Facebook group was created on 11 December 2019, then called "Ecumenical Pilgrimage 2020". The original name of the group refers to the fact that it was created by the administrators for the prospective participants of the pilgrimage organised that year, presumably for better organisation and communication. On 24 August 2020, the group changed its name to its current name and its function changed from supporting the organisation of a one-off event (pilgrimage) to a platform for a year-round active community. The group has been set to private and hidden, so that it is only visible to those who are members of the group (for non-members, the Facebook search engine does not show the group). Membership is by invitation only and subject to approval by the administrators, ensuring that the new member is a personal friend of at least one group member. The spirituality and purpose of the pilgrimage - and thus of the group - is reflected in the fact that its members and spiritual leaders include monastic priests, Reformed and Lutheran pastors. Although there is a stable core, the composition of the annual pilgrimage is different each year, so it cannot be considered a permanent community. The presence of the community on Facebook, the creation of the group, shows that there is a need for continuity among the members, and this social media platform is perfectly suited to this. One of the members of the organising team is the most active, organising the prayer events and the one-day programmes. The latter has been present since February 2023. The ecumenical pilgrimage group is sustained by the annual pilgrimage on foot. The pilgrimage has its own website,¹⁴ which contains information about the organisation, and also a description of previous years' pilgrimages. The group has a permanent team of organisers (8-9 people) who are also present on the website.

In the closed group, we conducted qualitative research and looked at the main themes that emerged in the posts and the reactions to them over a given period (2.5 years). The results of the study revealed a high prevalence of four main clusters of themes (codes): interactivity (dialogue); participation - involvement in church life; spirituality; community. Within each main category, we were able to identify further subcategories through which each theme could be identified. The themes and comments on the themes over the 2.5 years covered by the qualitative analysis are very similar. Within the interactivity category, networking and meeting opportunities were the most dominant. Also this category was reinforced by the sharing of different reading experiences, where the group enabled connection through the sharing of faith experiences (interactivity). Within the category of participation, involvement in the life of the congregation, two different themes are distinguished. The first is the church year and its events, and the narrative threads related to them, and the second is themes related to the monastic life of the Benedictine monastery of the Order of the Benedictine Order in Bakony, which is closely linked to the pilgrim group. The theme was very strongly linked to the events of the Church Year, thanks to the moderators who were very active and addressed the Taja of the community, especially during the Lenten period. Within the category of spirituality, the most important theme was the relationship with God and sharing experiences of God. This was expressed in individual experiences, but often supported by various scriptural texts. Within the narratives of community, two main themes emerged: one was the community experienced on pilgrimage (with provisional references to the previous year's pilgrimage), and the other was the permanent community experienced and kept alive through the possibility of an online platform, the main element of which was defined by the theme of prayer community. It is within this latter theme that the defining contents of pilgrim identity and community identity emerged. The themes of connection to the Church (participation) in are linked to the identity element of ecclesial religiosity.

¹⁴ <http://okumenikus-zarandoklat.hu/> (Retrieved 20 March 2024)

Benedictine Oblate community

The members of the community are not monks or nuns, but, so to speak, civilians *living in the world*, who, in their present and different states of life, seek to live and follow the ideal of life which, in the Catholic Christian tradition, takes real form along the lines of the Rule of St Benedict¹⁵. Oblates themselves do not have to lead a particularly radical lifestyle, there are no extreme compulsory prayer practices that take up a lot of time in the daily programme (the minimum expectation is to eliminate one hour of prayer a day, but of course everyone can do more), they do not have to dress in a particular way (they only have to wear a St Benedict's medal, but it does not have to be visible outside their clothes), they do not have to live in a specific physical space (Binzberger 2009), but there are certain requirements that they have to meet. They visit their monastery once a year, where they participate in ceremonial and spiritual activities and work. They are not obliged to be Catholic. An important part of their identity is the religiousness that characterises the Benedictine Order, elements of which are also found in the Regulus. They receive spiritual and intellectual support from their monastery, under the responsibility of a rector-monk appointed by the Archabbot. This support may take the form of regular spiritual readings, spiritual exercises, excursions, visitations. Most important is the contact and regular communication between him and the members of the community. The overwhelming majority of people with obliteration live their daily lives in a dense network of family, relatives and workplaces. Of course, there is also an active stratum - typically middle-aged or elderly women (in addition to widows) - who are unmarried. This fits in well with the papal suggestion that a wide variety of movements and associations should maintain contact with the local Church, so that no one can become a "rootless nomad" (Pope Francis 2014). They are lay people, like everyone else who has not been ordained to a particular ministry.

The internet is not the primary arena for this community, but the scarcity of traditional interpersonal and group relationships in the everyday physical world has pushed the community towards the possibilities of the web. Members are scattered across the country, making it difficult to maintain direct physical contact, and this is further complicated by the fact that many members are elderly. Their public online activities - and here we are thinking in particular of their Facebook groups¹⁶ - are a kind of "cool" version of churchgoing. Totally devoid of any activism¹⁷. They avoid controversy, they don't want to offend anyone, they don't want to diminish anyone's integrity. The study found that the group's Internet usage patterns were in two major subject areas (code). One was participation in church life, which was manifested through interactivity (dialogue), and the other was the topic area (code) of participation (Farkas 2013). Interactivity, in the sense of dialogue, is open: the individual's beliefs are the 'stakes' (Kreiner 2007). The discourse has the intention to persuade, since the agent speaks as the "holder of truth", but it also has the "grace" of persuadability, i.e. the ability to renounce one's own truth, the ability to reject it as not true as a result of the dialogue. This is the pure form of dialogue. The "most beautiful" result of a community's internal communication on the Internet is to share in the truth by giving up or partially giving up one's own position (opinion). In addition, an important question is what the community uses the Internet for, i.e. what kind of

¹⁵ Benedict's Regula Benedicti of St. Benedict is available online in Latin: <http://archive.osb.org/rb/>, in English: <https://pannonhalmifoapatsag.hu/regula/>. The two are available in parallel: <https://maximilianoblatus.wixsite.com/regulabenedicti/> (Retrieved 20 March 2024)

¹⁶ There are two Facebook groups, one primarily aimed at the external community, the other primarily for internal information exchange.

¹⁷ By activism here we mean that group members seek to implement radical programmes of action to achieve a goal. They formulate initiatives that bring about changes in the internal functioning and teaching of the Church, at least at the local – parish, diocesan – level.

problems it can solve,, and how and to what extent it is integrated into the institutional system of the church (Silverstone 2010, Spadaro 2014). In this context, we have examined the specificities of online presence, which often implies anonymity. Another important aspect is how users perceive them, i.e., how the group functions in terms of perceived entitativity, how it appears real and existent to external observers and members (Hamilton - Sherman - Castelli 2006). Examining the online functioning, we can conclude that the platform is mostly used to share information and facilitate the offline functioning of the community. In addition, the expression of Benedictine identity and connection to the Order and participation in church life are strongly present. The online functioning of the community helps the offline functioning of the community by sharing information.

Results of the study of the two communities

Our research examined the offline and online activities of two traditionalist communities in terms of their community identity and activity. The theoretical context for the empirical research was provided by the paradigm shift in community research, but also by the relationship between religion and media, especially in relation to internet use, which has been a new area and challenge for churches. The research sought to answer the question of how the needs of community formation are met in the online and technical space. How and to what extent Christian communities are willing and able to operate on this platform and to what extent they are able to make good use of the benefits offered by the digital platform. The results of the research have shown that for these communities, operating online is very much complementary to operating offline and even strengthens the functioning of these communities. For both communities, elements of ecclesial identity and elements of identity that define offline operations were also present. In the case of the ecumenical pilgrim group, we saw the emergence of pilgrim identity and ecclesial identity, while in the case of the Benedictine Oblate community, we saw the presence of identity elements of Benedictine identity and belonging to the Church. Examining the online functioning of the group revealed that the online presence enhanced participation in church life, and this was also true for the dialogue between members, the topics raised in the discussions and the participation. In the case of both communities, it can be said that the online operation is equally capable of strengthening and sustaining *communio*, the real community mediated by the church. Two themes were common to the operation of the two communities. For both communities, elements of identity were strongly present in the two themes, which were elements of both ecclesial religiosity and communal identity. The online functioning of the Benedictine Oblate community contributes to the functioning of the community by sharing information and maintaining Benedictine identity. The four thematic groups of the ecumenical pilgrimage group show a more active online community. This is also due to the activity of the moderators, who constantly offer new topics related to the events of the ecclesial year. This links the community to the different denominations. And the presence of the annual pilgrimage on foot theme reinforces the pilgrim and community identity.

Summary

This research examined the offline and online identities of two tradition-oriented religious communities and found that online presence did not weaken but rather strengthened the offline community identity dimensions. Online communication facilitated participation, sharing of spiritual experiences and maintenance of community cohesion. The online activity of the ecumenical pilgrimage group was mainly manifested in interactivity, participation, spirituality and community experience. In the case of the Benedictine Oblate community, the online presence was mainly for information sharing and maintaining Benedictine identity. For both

communities, a strong synergy between offline and online identities was observed, which contributed to active participation in church life. Social media have created new opportunities to express and strengthen religious identity, while becoming an effective complement to missionary activity. Overall, the research has shown that these communities are successfully adapting to the challenges of the digital society and that online presence has become an integral part of their religious and community life.

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