

## **New Media and the Mission of the Church – Some Notes on a Topical Issue**

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**Abstract:** In the context in which the truly overwhelming impact that new-media generates in post-modern society has repercussions, in an increasingly obvious way, on the Church and its pastoral-missionary activities, our study aims to identify and evaluate some of the aspects that define the interaction of the ecclesial institution with the new electronic means of communication. We will therefore try to develop a possible perspective on how public discourse and the Church's ministry can relate to the new technologies and their particularities, highlighting the opportunities that new media open up from a missiological point of view, as the recent pandemic conjuncture has proved. After all, the new media are a truly defining component of the contemporary world; ignoring them is, of course, possible, but at a price which, realistically speaking, no contemporary institution can afford, the Church being no exception to the global and imperative need to assimilate and put the new technologies into practice.

**Keywords:** new-media, globalization, Christian mission, post-modern society, Romanian Church life

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From a certain perspective, new-media can be considered as one of the most important "indicators" of the process of transition from modernity to postmodernity, reflecting, as a real marker, the substantial prefigurations that have occurred at the macro-social level, such as the intensification and, from now on, the irreversibility of the globalization process, the advance of the 'post-industrial

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age', in particular information and telecommunications, microelectronics, biotechnology and computer science, or the weakening of 'power and control mechanisms' on the part of the various political and social players who claim or represent authority<sup>2</sup>. Thus, we can consider new media as one of the most relevant aspects of the transformations undergone by human society (especially Western society) in recent decades, a true "symbol" that incorporates the essential data of complex and profound changes that have brought about "the most rapid and far-reaching change in the whole of human history"<sup>3</sup>. Basically, the new technologies have changed the very concept of mass communication, "harmonizing it with modern lifestyles"<sup>4</sup> and making it a faithful reflection of the new human and techno-scientific dimensions of the contemporary world. At the same time, 'recent man' (H.-R. Patapievici) has increasingly become a 'digital being' who is living through a 'digital age', experiencing its benefits to the full and feeling, perhaps even more acutely, its potentially harmful constituents, with the screen and keyboard, already an indispensable component of normality, effectively becoming a way of life<sup>5</sup>.

### **New Media: Some Necessary Landmarks**

Looking at new-media as the set of communication activities carried out by means of information technology, we will understand why the global advance and continuous improvement of "integrated electronic equipment", culminating in the primacy acquired by the wide-screen mobile phone and the tablet over the "traditional" computer, has brought with it the explosion of electronic communications, both in the form of "content generation" with general or controlled accessibility, and of "information exchange" on a bilateral and multilateral level<sup>6</sup>. This explosion is tending to 'capture' growing masses of people, and not only among the 'digital natives', in particular the 'millennials' and the 'next' and 'Z' generations, with those who remain outside the 'phenomenon' effectively

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<sup>2</sup> Martin Lister a.o., *New media. A critical introduction*, Second Edition, Routledge, London and New York, 2009, p. 10-11.

<sup>3</sup> Mihail Siminciuc, *Aspecte ale comunicării Bisericii Ortodoxe Române în timpurile crizei pandemice, în mediul on-line*, in Pr. prof. dr. Viorela Sava (coordonator), *Cercetări doctorale în pandemie – provocări, soluții, oportunități*, Iași, Editura Doxologia, 2021, p. 206.

<sup>4</sup> Cristina Puiu Moskovitch, „New media: Instant media”, in *International Journal of Communication Research*, volume 2, issue 1, January / March 2012, p. 38.

<sup>5</sup> Cf. Pr. Mihai Iordache, „Impactul tehnologiei digitale în viața oamenilor”, in *Studii Teologice*, seria a III-a, anul XIII, nr. 1, 2017, p. 144.

<sup>6</sup> Lucian-Vasile Szabo, „The Future of Communication: from New media to Post media”, in *Procedia - Social and Behavioral Sciences*, Volume 163 (2014), p. 37.

representing a minority. At the same time, new technologies have given communication dimensions and functionalities that are completely inaccessible to traditional media (such as, for example, the facilities for interpersonal relations and dialogue), so that the role and impact of new media in communities, in civil society in general, will predictably be quite different from that of traditional mass media. Moreover, new-media can also be seen as representing the "response" of technology, a response with the potential for exponential growth, to human needs for relationships and dialogue, some of which are inevitably limited, which brings to mind an older observation (from 1964!) by the Canadian philosopher Marshall McLuhan ("theorist" of the understanding of the globalized world as a "global village"<sup>7</sup>), according to which the increased dependence of communication on technology tends to put the actual content of the messages thus conveyed on a secondary level<sup>8</sup>.

Today, the use of new media is quasi-generalized, as is personal and direct access to the necessary equipment and technologies. Thus, in European countries, the proportion of households with fixed or mobile Internet access (in 2021) was often over 90% (Netherlands 99%, Spain 96%, Finland, Denmark, Sweden, etc.), with the lowest proportions in Portugal (85%) and Greece (84%). Under these circumstances, the vast majority of Europeans, including the so-called "digital immigrants" ("Silent", "Boomers" and "X" generations), use the Internet on a regular basis, with the proportion exceeding 95% in Sweden and Luxembourg (99%), Finland (98%), the Netherlands, Spain, France, Germany and others, Not infrequently (Denmark, Finland, Germany, France, Austria, etc.), more than half of the people born before 1945, the so-called "Silent Generation", also use the Internet regularly, which proves, once again, the attractiveness of electronic communications and their ability to overcome all kinds of barriers. In these circumstances, it should come as no surprise that, for example, American children and young people in the 8-18 age group use digital media for an average of at least 7 hours a day, whereas in the European Union almost 4 hours a day are spent accessing, browsing and using new media<sup>9</sup>.

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<sup>7</sup> Cf. John Tomlinson, *Globalizare și cultură*, traducere de Cristina Gyurcsik, Timișoara, Editura Amarcord, 2002, p. 12.

<sup>8</sup> Linda Friedman, Hershey Friedman, „The New media Tehnologies: Overview and research framework”, in *SSRN Electronic Journal*, April 2008, p. 3-5, document available on site-ul SSRN-id1116771%20(1).pdf [accessed on 27.5.2022].

<sup>9</sup> Manfred Spitzer, *Demența digitală: Cum ne tulbură mintea noile tehnologii*, traducere din germană de Dana Verescu, București, Editura Humanitas, 2020, p. 11, and Jean-Claude Larchet, *Captivi în internet*, traducere de Marinela Bojin, București, Editura Sophia, 2018, p. 13.

**a).** Naturally, our country could not remain outside these developments, as the last few years have brought a significant increase in the accessibility and use of the Internet, even if the data centralized at the end of 2021 show that only about 74% of local households were connected to the fixed Internet (81% in urban areas), a level below the European average. The above conclusion is perfectly justified, however, as every household had, statistically speaking, at least one mobile electronic device connected to the Internet as early as 2018, and this share is still growing. It should also be pointed out that the (only) 74% level mentioned above corresponds, as a distinct stage, to a process of constant growth, which started from a level of 62% recorded in 2019. Noting that, in recent years, the general population's access to the Internet tends to exceed that to cable or satellite TV, we also mention that, in the same year 2021, in the approximately 8.25 million Romanian households there were over 27.3 million fixed or mobile Internet connections, or 3.31 / household, a level that marks an increase of about 10% compared to 2018. A comparable positive dynamic was also recorded by the level of daily data traffic (an indicator that brings together the number of users and the time they spend using the Internet), increasing from an average of 1,184 Mb in 2019, to 1,757 Mb in 2020, to reach 1,995 Mb in 2021, which corresponds to an increase of over 68% in just two years. Of course, all these developments have been facilitated and stimulated by the relevant increase in network traffic speeds over the same period, as in 2021 some 5.2 million connections had speeds above the 100 Mb/s threshold, significantly more than the 4.5 million in 2020 and just 3.9 million in 2019, while the share of connections offering speeds below 30 Mb/s has gradually decreased to around 10% of the total in 2021.

Under these circumstances, we will note that in 2021, 88.6% of Romanians aged 16-74 used the Internet in one way or another, i.e. more than 2.5% more than in 2020. Beyond these average values, it must be said that, in the case of young people aged 16-34, the share of those who accessed the Internet was close to 99%, while, predictably, for those over 55, this share was only 70.5%. In the same year 2021, a large proportion of our fellow countrymen, i.e. more than 82% of users, were connected to the Internet daily or almost daily, with the amendment that, in the case of the elderly, a daily presence on the network can only be spoken of for about 45% of users, this in a context where the vast majority of them (more than 90%) connect at least once a week<sup>10</sup>.

**b).** The exceptional appetite for digital media of the so-called "Generation Z", i.e. those born between 1997 and 2012, is no longer surprising, as it is a practically

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<sup>10</sup> The data mentioned were taken from the *ancom.ro* website [accessed on 26.05.2022]. See also Larisa Simion, *Persoanele vârstnice în era digitalizării*, București, 2020, p. 15-16.

generalized phenomenon, including in terms of the situation in our country. Thus, in large urban areas, almost 15% of pre-school children have the ability to access audio-video content and games on the Internet, a percentage which is close to 80% for 10-year-olds. Basically, the Internet and, from there, social networks, are becoming common goods for the vast majority of Romanian primary school pupils, even if their "assimilation" processes are somewhat lower in rural areas. This difference disappears when we refer to the preferred use of the mobile phone to connect to the Internet (in 95-97% of cases) - an aspect that is also easily visible, as the portability and convenience of its use explain its maximum level of use among the "Z" generation, including in comparison with the laptop or tablet.

Against this backdrop, it must be stressed that the time spent online by pupils outside school hours and school activities is sometimes considerable (and inevitably to the detriment of all other age-specific activities, including learning), with all the problems and risks that this entails. No less than 47% of high school students spend at least 3 hours/day on digital media, as do 39% of secondary school students, of whom 25% and 19% respectively stay connected to the Internet or social networks for at least 6 hours/day. If we refer to the time extension of online activities on free days, we find that more than 56% of Romanian pupils spend more than 3 hours online, with the differences generated by the age of the users tending to fade, all these figures highlighting, if it were necessary, the importance that the young generation attaches to digital media.

At the same time, a relatively recent analysis (carried out under the auspices of the "Save the Children" Association<sup>11</sup>) of the way in which local pupils use the Internet shows that, at least apparently, work activities (i.e. those related to learning and school preparation) and those related to social networking and communication are relatively equal in terms of the "use" of electronic communications. Thus, while 60% of secondary school pupils and at least 70% of high school students use the Internet for their own learning, only slightly more (74% and 80%) use it to access and post personal photo and video material, while 52-69% of respondents use it to access social networks. So it seems that, from the point of view of Romanian teenagers and at least from the declarative point of view, the value of "lucrative" use (in this case instructive and educational) of the Internet takes precedence over the other more or less "consumerist" applications and utilities of digital media, including here facilities such as games (with an "audience" of 45-48% of users) or films (44-61%). At the same time, it should also be noted that 38-54% of Romanian students consider the Internet as their main

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<sup>11</sup> Cf. Ciprian Grădinaru, Teodora Stoica, *Studiu privind utilizarea Internetului de către copiii*, București, 2018, p. 9-31.

source of current news, a proportion which clearly exceeds that of television (around 28%) and, above all, radio (at most 13%).

On the other hand, more than 99% of Romanian middle and high school students use at least one social network, with half of them using at least 4-5 such connections at the same time, mostly on Facebook (96% of respondents), Instagram (81%) and WhatsApp (72%). Despite these figures, social networks tend to "consume" a rather small part of the time that the categories in question allocate to digital media, as around 75% of local teenagers do not use them for more than 2 hours/day, while half of them spend only an hour or less. Under these circumstances, using social networks for more than 3 hours/day is common practice for no more than 10-12% of pupils. There is therefore a clear time discrepancy between surfing the Internet (as a generic activity) and presence/activity in social networks, the former being clearly more time-consuming, since, for example, while around 35% of high school students surf the Internet for 3-5 hours/day, only 11% of them use social networks for a comparable length of time. Finally, it should also be noted that the evaluation of the relational structures related to the connections thus established shows that 70-80% of the "dialogue" partners of Romanian pupils belong to categories such as friends, colleagues or parents, and are therefore people known apriorically, while the so-called "virtual friends", who can only be found online, do not exceed 20-30% of all connections. Of course, this fact can be seen as beneficial in terms of the possible harmful influences of social networks, but naturally it cannot be overestimated and considered as reassuring in itself.

The motivational factors that lead local teenagers to use social networks to such an overwhelming extent were also the subject of this study<sup>12</sup>, the conclusions drawn reflecting, as expected, the strong subjective underpinnings of the practices in question. Thus, for 59-68% of Romanian teenagers "the pleasure of dialogue" is the main factor of attraction of social networks, closely followed by the desire to "counteract boredom" (44-47%) and the "need to relax" (about 35%), values that also highlight the psycho-social risks derived from the fact that, used in this way, digital media tend to replace the "physical" dimension defining dialogue and interpersonal relationships, a dimension consistent with authentic human nature. Moreover, the relevant link between virtual communication and relationship, on the one hand on the one hand, and the concern of young people for "counteracting boredom", on the other, raises, in a sufficiently acute manner, the question of how this age group understands (especially in the absence of constant careful guidance) how to make the most of their time resources in terms of personal development. At the same time, we would also point out that activities carried out in partnership

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<sup>12</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 15-31.

("joint projects" and "joint concerns"), cited by up to 65% of cases as a reason for using social networks, must be viewed from at least a bivalent perspective, as online collaboration can clearly be diverted towards the most harmful and risky concerns. At the same time, it is also undeniable that social networks respond to psycho-social needs specific to the age group in question, needs that highlight, first and foremost, young people's concerns about openly affirming and disseminating their own options/beliefs/references as insistently as possible ('desire for public expression', (41% of respondents) and "the desire to promote one's own beliefs" (20%)), those relating to the desire for notoriety and appreciation (around 15%) and, finally, those relating to the attestation of belonging to a particular group (12-15%).

We will conclude this passage by pointing out that, at present, the new media practically monopolizes the attempts of middle and high school students to get information about the issues that interest/concern them at a given time, a context in which the role of traditional media, specifically radio and television (used to get information by only 12-27% of Romanian teenagers) has become too irrelevant. In practice, almost 60% of young Romanians inform themselves using thematic searches on the Internet, while half of them do so using, as the case may be, news and streaming sites, social networks and blogs, practices that prove once again the importance of electronic communications for the young generation.

c). The attention paid to digital media by most of our fellow countrymen and women, and by young people, makes new media a real way of life, one that is proper to the "era of virtual communication" that we are going through and by virtue of which "information is transmitted quickly and without inhibitions" through a multitude of channels and in the most varied forms<sup>13</sup>. In fact, compared with traditional media, new media marks a 'shift from one-way communication to interactive communication', actively involving the recipients, encouraging them to process, comment on and further disseminate information, the apparent tree-like structure of its 'routes' outstripping the linearity of the old mass communication. Beyond this aspect, new media also stands out for the fact that it favours and facilitates the 'individualization of consumption' precisely because, by virtue of the diversity it possesses, it is open to and can satisfy practically all 'preferences' in this area. At the same time, and perhaps more importantly, the prevalent use of new media can lead, through the disconcerting variety of content and forms of information delivery, to the 'blurring of key social boundaries' associated with communication, relativizing the old antinomies that set information as an act of

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<sup>13</sup> Horea Mihai Bădău, *Tehnici de comunicare în social-media*, Iași, Editura Polirom, 2011, p. 16.

knowledge, entertainment, education - leisure or domestic activities against professional activities<sup>14</sup>.

Integrating these specificities, the "identity" picture of new media must necessarily include at least the following elements<sup>15</sup>:

- the creation and promotion of new forms/types of media expression, which have to cohabit with a series of "new consumption models" (photo-video content, online games, advertising, etc.);
- the shaping of 'new ways of representing the world', which has become, more or less, a 'virtual reality', perfectly interactive, always on offer and always absorbing, and, above all, open to being received and explored by users from the most subjective perspectives possible;
- the repositioning of the relationship between the individual and the community, i.e. "the way we perceive ourselves and [understand] our place in the world", as a direct consequence of the modification of the traditional ways of "living" the existential coordinates of space and time under the influence of users' interaction with virtual reality mediated by electronic communications;
- the establishment of new organizational and business mechanisms for putting information into circulation, new media implying new and complex relations with economic and financial activities, with legal issues (relating to intellectual property or regulatory relations) and with 'media culture' in general;
- the creation of fundamentally new relationships based essentially on ease of interaction between users ('consumers') and digital technologies, which are the 'physical medium' of new media.

In these circumstances, in a world dominated by the generalized interaction of supply and demand, new media imposes itself on news/information consumers through a multitude of immediate advantages such as "fast access", "speed of dissemination" (in the sense of virtually instantaneous updating of data streams) or increased accessibility<sup>16</sup>. Expanding to quasi-global dimensions, new-media will bring with it a new level of 'media and technology integration', facilitating 'generalized communication' (overcoming all spatial and cultural barriers), both through 'information exchange' and in the entirely specific form of continuous media content generation (text, photo, video). In fact, the very idea of communication by electronic means has undergone a profound change with the

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<sup>14</sup> Sonia Livingstone, „New media, new audiencens?“, in *New media and society*, april 1999, p. 59-66, available on <https://doi.org/10.1177/1461444899001001010> [accessed on 27.5.2022].

<sup>15</sup> Martin Lister a.o., *op. cit.*, p. 12-13.

<sup>16</sup> Cristina Puiu Moskovitch, „New media: Instant media“, in *International Journal of Communication Research*, volume 2, issue 1, January / March 2012, p. 38.



development of information technologies, and has become capable of assimilating a particularly wide range of objectives, activities and human needs. Thus, the 'use of integrated technological equipment' has increasingly become a genuinely determining factor (and one that cannot be abandoned!) in activities such as scientific research, the production of industrial goods, financial, banking and commercial activities, public administration, education and teaching, in a context in which it is no exaggeration<sup>17</sup> to describe all electronic communications as a genuine way of life.

Without ignoring the harmful effects of uncontrolled use of the facilities provided by new media<sup>18</sup> (because, after all, navigating in the digital environment "our personal freedom of choice is replaced by virtual digital heteronomy"<sup>19</sup>), we point out that the truly enormous potential of electronic communications can be accurately quantified by means of the so-called "five Cs", namely communication, collaboration, community, creativity and convergence, each of which reflects a particular component of the perfectly genuine use value of the new information technology. From this perspective, we will briefly note that, for example, communication in digital networks has a direct impact on the effectiveness and completeness of collaborative relationships, as individual activities and 'contributions' can easily be integrated and thus made more effective. We will then note that, beyond what might dispute their relevance, 'forums and discussion groups', social networks in general, have the capacity to create 'a community feeling among people', overcoming any impediments of space and time ("of geography and time zones"), making the world "a smaller place than it was before" and stimulating inter-human solidarity in a society, the modern one, almost completely dominated by individualism. At the same time, the use of new media 'promotes creativity' because, on the one hand, it fosters and stimulates debate, preventing situations of 'passive reception of the message', and, on the other, it removes the limitations generated by the environment of belonging and apriorically regulated frameworks for action. Lastly, electronic communications are bringing together a multi-purpose phenomenon of convergence, creating

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<sup>17</sup> Lucian-Vasile Szabo, *art. cit.*, p. 37.

<sup>18</sup> Cf. A. Velicu, G. Mascheroni, K. Olafsson, *Riscuri și oportunități în folosirea Internetului mobil de către copiii din România*, București, Ars Docendi, 2014, p. 67; Jean-Claude Larchet, *Terapeutică bolilor spirituale*, traducere de Marinela Bojin, București, Editura Sophia, 2006, p. 373; Marian-Ionuț Ursu, *Digitalizarea minții umane. Provocări și remedii filocalice*, in *Cercetări doctorale în pandemie...*, p. 240-242; Manfred Spitzer, *op. cit.*, p. 258; Nicholas Carr, *Superficialii: efectele internetului asupra creierului uman*, traducere din engleză de Dan Crăciun, București, Editura Publica, 2012, p. 25.

<sup>19</sup> Catarina Katzer, *Cyberpsihologia*, traducere din limba germană de Cora Radulian, București, Editura ALL, 2018, p. 27.

pathways that lead to the integration of technologies (such as digital television or Internet telephony), media resources (blogs, forums, social networks, etc.), media consumption (as each user can choose from a multitude of new media) and, of course, 'roles', as the terms 'producer' (of media content) and 'consumer' have become virtually interchangeable<sup>20</sup>.

### **New Media and Globalization**

As we have seen, by generating and nourishing a type of interactive communication that coagulates, maintains and extends relational communities (even if only virtual) beyond any conceivable barriers, new-media is one of the most important pillars of the contemporary process of globalization and, implicitly, one of the major factors in the mutations that this process induces in religious faith and practice in general. Of course, globalization can be viewed from a variety of analytical perspectives, starting with economic, social and political ones and ending with cultural ones (highlighted, for example, by Stuart Hall) or anthropological ones (revealed by Jerome Friedman), but, independently of any evaluation, the phenomenon in question brings with it what might be called a relational and actional 'interconnectedness' on a global scale. This is expressed in the configuration of 'networks', 'flows' and 'interconnections' that dissolve all political, state, cultural and religious<sup>21</sup> barriers and draw ever larger masses of people into a 'system of mutual relations' that gives modern society 'the character of a totality'<sup>22</sup>.

a). In the context in which globalization has become "the empirical condition of the modern world", generating "an ever wider and denser network of interconnections and interdependencies that characterize modern social life", the role of new media (and digital media in general) is indeed fundamental, as is its contribution to accelerating and consolidating the process in question<sup>23</sup>. Thus, by reducing distances to virtually zero and eliminating traditional communication and relational barriers, new media decisively favour those dimensions of globalization that are linked to 'increased spatial proximity' (Marshall McLuhan) and 'the compression of space and time' (David Harvey). Through electronic

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<sup>20</sup> Linda Friedman, Hershey Friedman, *art. cit.*, p. 9-14.

<sup>21</sup> Cf. John Tomlinson, *op. cit.*, p. 11.

<sup>22</sup> Walter Truett Andersen, *Reality Isn't it Used to Be*, San Francisco, Harper, 1990, p. 27.

<sup>23</sup> John Tomlinson, *op. cit.*, p. 10, Stefano Zamagni, *Globalizarea ca specific al economiei postindustriale: implicații economice și opțiuni etice*, in Ioan I. Ică jr., Germano Marani (coord.), *Gândirea socială a Bisericii. Fundamente, documente, analize, perspective*, Sibiu, Editura Deisis, 2002, p. 455-465, and Ralf Dahrendorff, *Cvadratura cercului globalizării*, traducere: Călin Pop, in *Gândirea socială a Bisericii...*, p. 444.

communications, interpersonal and group communication and relationships (for a wide variety of purposes, including spiritual-religious ones) have not only become independent of distance but, just as importantly, have acquired the capacity to overcome any 'censorship' linked to the pre-eminence of local traditions, customs or values. Implicitly, particularisms of all kinds and all scales, including those with the most profound meanings (such as religious ones), will find themselves in the position of being eliminated in favour of the 'universal' ones proposed by globalization<sup>24</sup>.

Basically, having new media as one of its main "allies", globalization fluidizes and expands to the maximum the circulation and exchange of data and information from all fields, creating on their basis connections and, implicitly, social relations/relationships otherwise unlikely or even impossible to coagulate. Thus, having entered into the specific circuits of digital media, information (and religious information is no exception) 'crosses vast expanses of space and time' and, having become so easily accessible, makes 'distant events and powers penetrate our local experience'. In other words, in the context and through the medium of new media, the circulation of religious ideas and beliefs (in forms adapted to digital media) and, inevitably, of the subsequent missionary-apologetic approaches, cannot be practically contained, so that the vast majority of spiritual values are accessible and made known to the general public. In these circumstances, by presupposing the interaction and/or confrontation of ideas and values and by ranking them according to criteria, always subjective, such as attractiveness, accessibility and pragmatic usefulness, globalization proposes „a certain degree of cultural compression”, a tendency to level out values and to reformulate them on the basis of more or less Western references, because, after all, in the global world „overcoming physical distance is accompanied by overcoming cultural distance”<sup>25</sup>.

**b).** As a first consequence (decisively influenced by new media) of the interaction of religiosity with the process of globalization, we note that, when religious values, i.e. doctrinal/dogmatic referents and the related cultural-liturgical practices, are immediately accessible, are, willingly or unwillingly, entering into competitive relations, from which they will coagulate a veritable 'psychopathy', a 'market of religions' which, as the French sociologist Jean-Paul Willaime pointed out, 'is beginning to be governed and to function according to the rules of the market economy'. From this point of view, starting with the large institutionalized and centralized faiths and ending with the informal groups that cultivate the most arbitrary pseudo-religious ideas, all the entities with a vocation or, on the contrary,

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<sup>24</sup> Cf. John Tomlinson, *op. cit.*, p. 83.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 15-22.

only with religious pretensions, would represent nothing more than a multitude of "commercial enterprises in the field of salvation", a "functional" perspective from which they elaborate and circulate "offers" in the space of a "competitive market", with the aim of gaining prestige and notoriety on a level that, at least sometimes, includes the whole world<sup>26</sup>. A similar conclusion was reached by the American sociologist and Protestant theologian Peter L. Berger, who, examining the 'religious scene of society', likened it to a 'marketplace' in which 'various religious entrepreneurs are crowded together [...] in a competitive situation'. Thus, the globalized world would put us in front of a "scene" complex enough to include, in addition to the religious "actors" themselves, also "a kind of market of meaning", aimed at separating the "religious from the non-religious", because, especially in postmodern conditions, the distinctions between the two terms tend to "blur"<sup>27</sup>.

Seen from the perspective of the traditional Churches, the situation described above highlights, albeit collaterally, the problem of possible ways of assuming and managing the religious pluralism that surrounds them and with which they inevitably interact, i.e., ultimately, of deciphering and evaluating the eminently theological dimension of the "psychopathy" of which Jean-Paul Willaime spoke. From this point of view, the options of the traditional Churches are relatively limited, for if, for example, they ignore or minimize the significance and impact of 'psychopathy' on their own levels of attractiveness and prestige, the risks of losing credibility and hence community relevance will be quasi-implicit. Likewise, 'giving in' to the pressures of 'psychopathy', i.e. assimilating its 'tendencies' with the corresponding rectification of dogmatic discourse and even worship practices, will only 'lead to the loss of one's own identity, since pluralism, which is constantly changing, will force the Churches to continually readapt themselves', and such conduct is therefore unacceptable. Similarly, a complete refusal to be attuned to the tones and emphases of present-day religiosity (such as the importance attached to social justice and equity, ecology or human rights) will itself be an undesirable solution, since in so doing the traditional Churches will be practically forced "to isolate themselves, to ghettoise themselves...becoming a closed homogeneous system", thus risking a failure into fundamentalism. Finally, a last option, which Peter L. Berger sees as the only possible one, would be to accept the competitive rules of "psychopathy", i.e. to enter into competition with other religious actors from all possible points of view<sup>28</sup>.

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<sup>26</sup> Pr. prof. dr. Nicolae Achimescu, *Religie, modernitate și postmodernitate*, București, Editura Trinitas, 2013, p. 207.

<sup>27</sup> Jean Baubérot, *Secularizarea*, in Jacques Bersani (coord.), *Enciclopedia religiilor*, traducere de Nicolae Constantinescu, București, Editura Pro, 2005, p. 220.

<sup>28</sup> Pr. prof. dr. Nicolae Achimescu, *op. cit.*, p. 346-348.

In view of these issues, in order to remain within the limits of our study, we will simply point out that, from the point of view of our Church, it is more than obvious that the transformation of biblical-dogmatic values, consecrated and validated during a bimillennial history, into an object of confrontation of ideas in a "market" of more or less arbitrary beliefs, often lacking the minimum scriptural and patristic foundations, is not at all possible. Therefore, without ignoring the reality of contemporary religious pluralism and the quasi-competitive relations that it generates in terms of attracting and enrolling adherents, the Church will express, imperturbably, its conviction that, beyond any competitive interactions, "the most important thing is the intensity of ecclesial life". Therefore, "the most important missionary means is the divine Eucharist" and, in its extension, "the sacramental ecclesial life", so that, through its entire work, Orthodoxy "aims rather to bring God to people than to bring people to God"<sup>29</sup>, which excludes a priori any kind of initiative and commitment at the level of "psychopathy".

c). A second and perhaps the most important consequence of the impact of globalization on religious faith and practice results from the way in which the latter are subject to the dissolving pressures generated by the pre-eminence that consumerist-utilitarian values have acquired in our world, values that a good part of the new media propagates with sufficient frequency and insistence to make them a truly relevant "vehicle". The fact is that, by exploiting the opportunities provided by 'communication systems and the electronic circulation of information' (i.e. new media!), globalization brings with it numerous economic and social advantages and benefits which are perceived as such and explicitly validated by the population<sup>30</sup>, but not infrequently at the cost of marginalizing spiritual values, i.e. those derived from religious faith and practice. Implicitly, the process of globalization will tend to "restructure reality according to utilitarian or hedonistic principles" and, against this background, to "propel utilitarian values into the foreground"<sup>31</sup>, to which it will confer the completely questionable role, we say, of a preferred indicator of any socially acceptable standards of civilization and well-being. Seen from a phenomenological point of view, globalization cannot, therefore, conceal the temptation to 'dispense with spiritual values to the point of

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<sup>29</sup> Pr. conf. dr. Constantin Coman, *Duhul misionar al Bisericii Ortodoxe*, in \*\*\* *Biserica în misiune. Patriarhia Română la cea aniversar*, București, EIBMBOR, 2005, p. 336-337 and p. 331-332.

<sup>30</sup> Olivier Clément, „Creștinătate, secularizare și Europa”, in *Gândirea socială a Bisericii...*, p. 510.

<sup>31</sup> Acad. pr. prof. univ. dr. Dumitru Popescu, „Ortodoxie și globalizare. Cultură globală și culturi particulare”, in Conf. univ. dr. Vasile Nechita (coord.), *Simpozionul „Modernism, postmodernism și religie”*, Constanța, mai 2005, Iași, Editura Vasiliana '98, 2005, p. 10-11.

abandonment', to strip them of meaning and significance and to replace them, insidiously and at the same time arbitrarily, with purely material values, designed to satisfy the most subjective expectations of a man increasingly (if not exclusively) concerned with life in the here and now<sup>32</sup>.

As a result, "recent man" (H.-R. Patapievici), who has fully appropriated and experiences what the Scottish sociologist Roland Robertson called "the global human condition", finds himself in the once unimaginable situation where "the economy is [perceived as] far more important than spirituality..., the body than the soul, time than eternity, the relative than the Absolute, man than God"<sup>33</sup>. We are therefore dealing with a 'new man, of a technical and applied type rather than one designed against a metaphysical<sup>34</sup> background', a man dominated by a concern for the acquisition of material consumer goods and the attainment of well-being, prosperity and material comfort, this to the detriment of, and even from a perspective that contradicts (through the mercantilism and utilitarianism it presupposes) the specific value referents of the faith taught and professed by the Church.

In this framework, the role of new media in hijacking the human condition in a direction in which the divine face of "recent man" is increasingly diffuse and less recognizable (this is also because "ancient man spoke to the Cosmos, medieval man spoke to God, and modern man speaks to himself"<sup>35</sup>), is all the more striking because its inappropriate or excessive use has accentuated the dependence of some individuals on digital media and their subordination to the pseudo-values which they not infrequently convey, especially as 'the virtual absorbs the real and the human' in order to 'recreate' them as pseudo-realities. This is precisely why the 'digital substrates' of the 'perverse triad' coagulated by the 'recent man's' monopolizing appetite for 'production, profit and consumption/show/communication' (as a reflection in everyday life of the consumerist-utilitarian accents of the global world), are significant factors in the contemporary process of involution of the prestige and authority of religious faith<sup>36</sup>.

Returning to the "global human condition", a condition that is shaped by the widespread use of electronic communications and their continuous progress, it must be said that the advance of globalization, in conjunction with the parallel

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<sup>32</sup> John Tomlinson, *op. cit.*, p. 16.

<sup>33</sup> Pr. prof. dr. Nicolae Achimescu, *op. cit.*, p. 198.

<sup>34</sup> Conf. dr. Ovidiu Pecican, „Biserică, globalizare și postistorie: anti-Babel sau eră apocaliptică?”, in \*\*\* *Biserica în era globalizării*, Alba Iulia, Editura Reîntregirea, 2003, p. 238-239.

<sup>35</sup> Nicolae Balca, „Criza culturii”, in *Telegraful român*, nr. 42, 1936, p. 58.

<sup>36</sup> Diac. dr. Ioan I. Ică jr., „Globalizarea - mutații și provocări”, in \*\*\* *Biserica în misiune...*, p. 693.

upward paths of modernity and secularization, also entails the dissolution, even if only temporary/partial, of man's religious vocation and aspirations. In fact, by deliberately compressing the range of his daily interests and concerns and reducing them to the infinite metamorphoses of the 'perverse triad', man puts himself in the position of being 'uprooted from his natural identity'<sup>37</sup>, impassively accepting 'the total triumph of technology over the spirit'. Implicitly, he will run the risk of becoming 'a humble and anonymous slave' of technology, a mere 'object' (as the Lutheran philosopher and theologian Paul Tillich put it) devoid of the godly face of which he was once aware and which he made the most of by faith, a banal and temporary pawn in a world which the logic of globalisation has subordinated to the value criteria of efficiency and productivity, profit, individual well-being or financial gain<sup>38</sup>. In practice, in his interaction with consumer society, "recent man" will be increasingly tempted to ignore his vocation and otherwise defining religious aspirations, deliberately assuming a profoundly artificial existential condition as long as it entails "the nihilistic reduction of beings to objects and commodities and of being itself to wealth or mere exchange value"<sup>39</sup>. Therefore, in a context in which "the object of modern consumer society is the human self-existing here and now..."<sup>40</sup> the "globalized" man will focus on and relate to "immediate satisfactions and achievements", which he will absolutize to the detriment of the permanence of his religious vocation. Under these circumstances, the horizon of expectation of individuals who are committed to the desacralizing 'spirit' of globalisation will be linked to the timelessness and superficiality of the eminently material value references to which they agree to relate and to which they agree to conform their existence. Thus, the life of "recent man" will take on the appearance of a "deceptive existence based on the convenience and mediocrity of a consumer life"<sup>41</sup>, from the perspective of which well-being exhausts the entire spectrum of general human aspirations, completely leaving aside the biblical and theologically structured expectations (including those of an eschatological nature) that the Church has always proposed to human beings. Therefore, we can consider that, from a theological point of view, the advance of globalisation can be causally linked to what Father Nicolae Achimescu called "the quenching of the thirst for

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<sup>37</sup> Pr. prof. univ. dr. Valer Bel, „Comunitatea mărturisitoare în contextul lumii secularizate și globalizate”, in *Simpozionul „Modernism, postmodernism și religie”...*, p. 33.

<sup>38</sup> Pr. prof. dr. Nicolae Achimescu, *op. cit.*, p. 215.

<sup>39</sup> Diacon. dr. Ioan I. Ică jr., *art. cit.*, p. 693.

<sup>40</sup> Pr. prof. dr. Nicolae Achimescu, *op. cit.*, p. 178 and p. 180.

<sup>41</sup> Asist. dr. Adrian Lemeni, „Globalizarea - o deturnare a unificării lumii în Hristos”, in \*\*\* *Biserica în era globalizării*, p. 444.

depth (of individuals and communities)", an involution that is perfectly plausible as long as "all that is around us is superficiality"<sup>42</sup>.

d). In our view, it would be wrong to claim that, even if it favours globalisation (Anthony Giddens), the new media would be one of the factors which, by themselves and by their mere action, would make the process in question the preferred environment of contemporary secularization and, by doing so, would favour the alienation of "recent man" from his Creator and Saviour, despite "the unprecedented expansion of information technology, unlimited access to data and the increasing role played by the media in the formation of the human personality"<sup>43</sup>. Moreover, as we shall show below, electronic communications can have undeniable beneficial effects, amplifying social impact and supporting the Church's pastoral and missionary objectives, as recent developments in the context of the pandemic have shown.

Beyond this aspect - which is the defining one for our study - it is imperative to emphasize that the facilities circumscribed to mass communication that new media so generously offer can be used and, inevitably, can serve the propagation of non-religious values cultivated by globalization. Thus, by forming an increasingly dense global network, electronic communications and social networks can disseminate, even if only implicitly (which seems to be the case most of the time), the desacralizing visions and approaches that characterize 'recent man', inviting him to truncate his existence and aspirations by reducing them 'to the present, the now and the here'<sup>44</sup>, precisely because 'today has become the mantra of man's existence; today the fulfilment of all promises is sought'<sup>45</sup>. Implicitly, "starting from the premise that the human being can live without God or at least without that God preached by the Church", globalization will insistently cultivate anthropocentrism, urging man to consider himself sufficient and, by making "a myth of material progress and efficiency", leading him towards "an alleged earthly paradise" coagulated through and around consumer goods. Under these conditions, religious values, rated as irrelevant as long as they would not be able to bring sensory quantifiable satisfactions, will be replaced by referential ones such as "success, efficiency, power or pleasure"<sup>46</sup>, creating such a context in which man,

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<sup>42</sup> Pr. prof. dr. Nicolae Achimescu, *op. cit.*, p. 486.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 489.

<sup>44</sup> Pr. Prof. dr. Bruno Cescon, „Globalizarea - perspective spirituale și teologice”, in \*\*\* *Biserica în era globalizării...*, p. 74-75.

<sup>45</sup> Horațiu Trif, *Tradiție și eshaton. Scurtă anamneză despre sfârșitul modernității*, in „Verso”, nr. 2-3 (109-110) /2014, p. 8.

<sup>46</sup> Pr. prof. dr. Nicolae Achimescu, *op. cit.*, p. 185 and p. 486.



deliberately narrowing his horizon of expectation, will "tend to eliminate God from his own creation"<sup>47</sup>.

Therefore, exposed to the influences and pressure of the pseudo-values cultivated by the globalized society, the "recent man" is inclined to forget that "the meaning of our life is discovered only when we discover our roots deeply rooted in the triune and cosmic reality, in Christ"<sup>48</sup>. Living under the illusion of his own centrality in a cosmos subject, like himself, to death (even though the human "has a central place [in the world] only insofar as he maintains communion with the divine logos"<sup>49</sup>), "recent man" has made God "a stranger" (Peter Hünemann), replacing Him with the fetish he has built around gain, prosperity and consumption (Fr. W. Bracht). It is not surprising, therefore, that the "death of God" thesis (as a "synthetic" expression of indifference to all religious beliefs and practices) is considered to be quite specific to our world<sup>50</sup>, precisely because, once suppressed, the "Christian spiritual, cultural and civilizational ideal" is arbitrarily and haphazardly replaced by aspirations to wealth, success or prosperity<sup>51</sup>.

We conclude that, simultaneously with this new "non-theological" vision of the meaning of existence, which globalization does not hesitate to propagate, "recent man" will be inclined to abandon absolutely fundamental theological referents (supernatural revelation, creation, incarnation, sacrifice, eschatological resurrection, etc.) which establish him as the image of God (Acts 1:26-27), as these are seen as "obstacles to individual self-fulfillment and personal creativity"<sup>52</sup>. Consequently, the "secularist religious surrogate" (Nicolae Achimescu) coagulated around consumerist-utilitarian concerns will increasingly tend to replace religious faith, seeking to trample on its prestige and authority.

### **The Church and New Media: Perspectives and Assessments**

Given the maximum accessibility and notoriety of new-media, the Church has no other alternative than to treat it with all seriousness and give it the necessary attention, its voice having to be present and be heard, as, moreover,

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<sup>47</sup> Acad. pr. prof. univ. dr. Dumitru Popescu, *art. cit.*, p. 13.

<sup>48</sup> Pr. prof. dr. Dumitru Popescu, *Omul fără rădăcini*, București, Editura Nemira, 2001, p. 21.

<sup>49</sup> Pr. conf. univ. dr. Vasile Citirigă, „Taina omului și tragedia lui în epoca postmodernă”, in *Simpozionul „Modernism, postmodernism și religie”*, p. 229.

<sup>50</sup> Cf. H.-R. Patapievici, *Omul recent*, București, Editura Humanitas, 2001, p. 96.

<sup>51</sup> Pr. prof. univ. dr. Gheorghe Petraru, „Paradigme conceptuale moderniste și postmoderniste și impactul lor asupra teologiei și misiunii Bisericii”, in *Simpozionul „Modernism, postmodernism și religie”...*, p. 54.

<sup>52</sup> Pr. asist. Tudor Cosmin Ciocan, „Postmodernismul ca revoltă împotriva autorității revelatoare”, in *Simpozionul „Modernism, postmodernism și religie”...*, p. 302.

happens, in all electronic means of mass communication. Moreover, given the definite value of use that new media can confer from the perspective of increasing the penetrability and increasing the public impact of its missionary and pastoral activities, the Church sees itself practically obliged to operationalize it, of course in a more coherent and systematic, own actions in digital environments. That such an approach is eminently beneficial is amply proven by the way in which the ecclesial institution, as a whole, managed the challenge posed by the restrictions specific to the pandemic, when, through judicious use, new media could compensate, if only in part, the pastoral and spiritual losses and difficulties generated by the impossibility of physical presence at acts of worship

a). The objective need for the organized/systematic involvement of the Church (through its servants and even its believers) in activities involving the use of new media, can be related, as a general working perspective, to the way in which the science of organization management (in this case of the organization that, functionally, communicates and interacts with the public), understands how to use and value electronic communications. Thus, it has been demonstrated that, from the perspective of this type of lucrative activity, the methodical use of electronic communications is able to generate quantifiable benefits on the following levels<sup>53</sup>:

- streamlining the public relations activity, with the optimization of the organization's communication and relationship with the public, in general, and with the target audience, in particular; from this perspective, it should be noted that, through the mediation of new media, public relations and marketing activities strengthen each other, the advantages thus generated being superior to those obtained through "traditional" means and methods;

- the efficiency of relational marketing activities, respectively those lucrative applications of the organization that aim, as an independent objective, to attract, retain and permanence customers, respectively their constant "satisfaction" and, additionally, the coagulation of "long-lasting and trust" with them; retrieving and centralizing in real time the appreciations, comments or observations of customers and the public, electronic communications fully correspond to this kind of managerial strategies;

- the facilitation and efficiency of profitable activities circumscribed to niche marketing, as a result of much easier and more precise targeting of advertising messages and actions towards those micro-segments of the market (relatively autonomous from the point of view of consumption peculiarities) targeted for exploitation;

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<sup>53</sup> Linda Friedman, Hershey Friedman, *art. cit.*, p. 16-18 and p. 20.

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- the continuous creation of new approaches and visions on advertising, by exploiting the facilities provided for this purpose by digital media.

Adapting and applying these conclusions to the particularities related to the presence and activity of the Church in digital environments, we will be able to conclude that, from the point of view of its specific pastoral-missionary objectives, the following directions of accumulation and development can be taken into account, as being perfectly concrete :

- preserving, expanding and strengthening the state of communion of the faithful around the local Churches (and the Church, in general), with the stimulation of their solidarity action both in circumscribly manifestations of the practice of the faith, as well as in the lucrative directions (spiritual, philanthropic or social) connected the operational particularities of each parochial/diocesan center;

- revitalizing and deepening the connection of believers to the discourse and pastoral-missionary activities of the Church; thus, through new media, the Church itself will be more present in the lives of the faithful, so that, in reciprocity, they can easily access what best corresponds to their spiritual-spiritual needs from a certain moment; therefore, the new media will facilitate the establishment of a perfect biunivocal report in terms of the Church's communication and relationship with the faithful;

- facilitating the missionary activities of the Church; for this purpose, the facilities provided by new media will have to be put to use within coherent actions that will be able to include, carefully "dosed", messages with different contents and destinations, using for this purpose liturgical, pastoral and social activities current humanitarian affairs, the teachings of outstanding clerics, the lives of the saints, etc.

At the same time, we must emphasize that new media can provide the Church with the impetus for catechetical and spiritual formation activities, including from the perspective of what secular education calls "continuous learning", and management science, "organizational learning". Moreover, Peter Drucker, the theoretician of these two concepts, once estimated that, in the long term, the entire learning activity will move to the online environment, so that, over time, "university campuses will become relics" (!).

**b).** Before detailing the elements of added value that the dynamic, but always attentive use of new media can generate in the pastoral-missionary plan, it is necessary to point out a series of aspects that the interaction of electronic communications with the practice of faith brings to the fore -plan, this all the more since, as professor Jeremy Stolow once pointed out, digital media are able to "mediate", like language or acts and objects of worship, the relationship of man with the transcendent divinity. Practically, the new media will be able to make

available to those interested an independent virtual space, suitable, by the very fact of circulating some sacramental-liturgical or religious contents dogmatically, to "shape individual identities" and, at the same time, "create connections", influencing, forming and coalescing people and communities (initially only online, and later also in a physical sense)<sup>54</sup>.

Thus, in the age of electronic communications, any religious community, regardless of its doctrinal profile and particularities, can also be seen as representing the socially bound "synthesis" of the "daily online and offline interactions" between its components. From this perspective, each religious group will coagulate, in a practically implicit way, its own virtual alter ego, one that transposes into the digital environment the mass of "human and ecclesiastical relations" coagulated at the community level, highlighting its identity (including from the point of view of relating to the transcendent) and making it known "in the physical world". In fact, the previously mentioned virtual *alter ego* will be nothing more than an "extension" in the digital environment of the collective self of the religious community itself, an ever-updated electronic "copy" that "reproduces the collective self by means of symbols and material characteristics" in new and new social circumstances and beyond any imaginable barriers, "exposing its specific philosophy" and highlighting its features (factors capable of making it attractive!) on the basis of which it identifies itself. Moreover, the ability of the virtual alter ego to disseminate with maximum ease and, thus, to "penetrate" (in the missionary sense or, if we want, "propagandistic") where the collective ego of the confessional groups cannot do it from the most objective reasons (respectively the existence of impenetrable barriers of space, of culture and civilization or even of social and political order) led, more than once, to exponential increases in terms of notoriety and public impact for a number of religious communities, which, otherwise, seemed to have exhausted their internal resources<sup>55</sup>.

That is precisely why the Church and the new media cannot ignore each other. Or, as Professor Stewart M. Hoover has pointed out, they are "not separate, disjointed spheres, but, entering into diverse and inevitable interactions, are rather "involved in a kind of dialectical relationship," that is, in a relationship that involves such a deep interpenetration that it induces a kind of mutual

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<sup>54</sup> Cf. Kristin M. Peterson, „Pushing boundaries and blurring categories in digital media and religion research”, in *Sociology Compass*, 2020, p. 1-11, available on the website <https://doi.org/10.1111/soc4>. [accessed on 11.6.2022].

<sup>55</sup> Pauline Hope Cheong, „The vitality of New-media and religion: Communicative perspectives, practices and changing authority in spiritual organization”, in *New Media & Society*, 2017, vol. 19 (1), p. 25-33, available on the website: [journals.sagepub.com/home/mms](https://journals.sagepub.com/home/mms) [accessed on 11.6.2022].

"determination". Of course, religious entities view and use new media in the most varied ways, giving it different meanings and levels of importance. Therefore, it is imperative to distinguish between "online cults", in this case those groups that "develop innovative religious expressions and rituals in the online space", transferring their activity (or most of it) to the media digital, and "online religions", a category that includes "religious institutions that use the new media space in the way they also used traditional media". Or, in other words, if "online religions" approach new media as a means of pastoral-missionary action complementary to traditional activities of this nature, "online cults" are built and act predominantly in the digital environment, adapting their current activities (speech, catechesis, acts of worship, etc.) in the manner of their full connection to the particularities of digital environments. In addition, we observe, the believers of "online cults" will practice their faith mainly in front of the screen, their community being therefore quasi-virtual, as well as the hierarchical relationships that coagulate and lead the respective entities, unlike those of "online religions", for which cultic-liturgical practices remain the traditional ones<sup>56</sup>.

In these conditions, it can be concluded that new media generally have a beneficial role from a pastoral-missionary point of view, as long as they "can increase the impact of religious activities by expanding and creating new communities", facilitating the expansion and strengthening the coherence and level of internal cohesion of communities. Moreover, as Alexander Verschoor-Kirss showed, the most relevant effect of new media on religious life seems to be related to the coagulation and consolidation of communities, both in terms of increasing solidarity (motivated by reasons related to the faith in question) of the components them, as well as from the point of view of "vertical" relations, which employ, equally, all the decision-making and functional echelons of a religious group. It must also be said that a similar conclusion was reached by Sean F. Everton, who, as early as 2015, considered that, with the explosion of new technologies, "social networks are actually crucial" both in terms of "recruiting and maintaining members within the Churches", including under the aspect of "their motivation", as well as in relation to the "diffusion of religious practices and ideas". So we see that, from a pragmatic perspective, new media can serve the objectives of the Church on two complementary components, in this case the "internal" one, when it has the role of strengthening it in terms of cohesion, and the "external" one, in which case it has the purpose to create a virtual identity and propagate it to gain notoriety, prestige and, above all, new memberships<sup>57</sup>. Implicitly, new media can

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<sup>56</sup> Kristin M. Peterson, *art. cit.*, p. 1-11.

<sup>57</sup> Mookgo S. Kgatle, *Social media and religion: Missiological perspective in the link between Facebook and tge emergence of Prophetic Churches in southern Africa*, in

be seen as a specialized tool that "legitimizes and promotes" the Church, contributing to increase its capacity to act and respond to the challenges of a "competitive global context"<sup>58</sup>.

Where does this unique capacity of the new media come from to enhance public adherence to a religious phenomenon, which the contemporary world, dominated by the "spirit" of secularization, rather tends to inhibit and marginalize? And, at the same time, where does the power of electronic communications to reinvest as relevant and attractive the religious ideas and beliefs that modernity, repudiating, associates with a reprehensible past that must, imperatively, be overcome? From the fact that, explains P.J. Brubaker, new-media can respond, with maximum operativeness, to a maximum spectrum of "needs and desires", no matter how subjective they may be, providing, instantly, access to data, information or audio and video materials, practically on any subject. That is why, especially in a general context in which, as the German philosopher Jürgen Habermas pointed out, the advance of postmodernity brings with it "the return of religion to the attention of contemporary society"<sup>59</sup>, new media meets the reborn concerns of some individuals (and, through by extension, of some communities), to have access to "religious resources" (in the cognitive sense, but not only) and to obtain "spiritual support" and "spiritual guidance" (Mookgo S. Kgatle). Therefore, the pastoral-missionary action carried out through electronic communications will have a higher probability than the traditional one of being "identified" and "accessed" by exactly those people to whom it is addressed and who really need it, i.e. the people which, in one way or another, tends to rediscover and revalue (including within religious communities proper) their defining religious vocation.

c). As early as 2014, Father Giorgi Zviadadze, the rector of the Theological Academy in Tbilisi, emphasized that, in principle, the level of individual religious commitment tends to be reflected, proportionally, also in online activity. In other words, the behavior in digital environments adopted by practicing believers (such as their posts or comments), is likely to indicate, alone and with sufficient accuracy, the existence of an increased religious commitment on the part of those concerned.

In fact, the issue of the link between the openness and interest in using new media, on the one hand, and the depth of religious feelings, adherences and activities, on the other, is complex enough, as a study carried out in the USA proves (at the level 2017), on a sample that included, in varying proportions, more

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„Verbum et Ecclesia”, 39 (1), 2018, document available on the website: [www.ve.org.za](http://www.ve.org.za) [accessed on 10.6.2022].

<sup>58</sup> Cf. Pauline Hope Cheong, *art. cit.*, p. 25-33.

<sup>59</sup> Cf. Pr. prof. dr. Nicolae Achimescu, *op. cit.*, p. 71.

or less practicing believers (Christians, Muslims, Hindus, Buddhists) and non-believers (unaffiliated, atheists, etc.) belonging to different American ethnic and racial groups<sup>60</sup>.

Perhaps surprisingly, given that a number of previous evaluations have concluded that "positive attitudes towards social networks decrease as religiosity increases", the study in question "could not demonstrate a link between how people use social networks and religion as a mechanism to satisfy their [personal] needs". Thus, it was established that 'openness' to new media (in the sense of perceiving it as positive/very positive or negative/very negative) is virtually independent of the level of individual religious commitments (systematized as low/medium/low), hence the conclusion that interest in new media (viewed in the most general way possible) and personal religiosity are not magnitudes between which a coherent functional link could be established. For example, the position of almost total rejection ("very negative" attitude) of electronic communications appears to have virtually no connection with religious concerns, being shared by 15.3% of those who consider themselves very religious, 15.0% of those with medium-level confessional commitments and 15.2% of the indifferent and non-religious. Similarly, a "positive" or "very positive" attitude about new media is expressed by 40.3% of the very religious, 38.4% of those with medium-level spiritual concerns and 41.0% among those not interested in religion. In these circumstances, the research under consideration reveals that, rather than correlating, religious belief and openness to new media function as independent 'parameters', without influencing each other in any significant way, so that it will be equally true that indifferentism does not amplify individual inclinations towards the virtual world, while aptitude for faith does not inhibit them. Thus, believers tend to use and relate to new media as much (or as little) as non-believers do, a conclusion that requires, we believe, a dedicated assessment of the implications it has for the Church's online presence and activity, all the more so now that, as Mia Lövhelm or Heidi Campbell have now pointed out, "people learn more about religion from online than from family and traditional media".

**d).** On the other hand, we must necessarily note that, from the point of view of Orthodoxy, online pastoralism will always and inevitably be incomplete and insufficient, for the simple fact that the sacramental-liturgical ministry of the Church (and especially the sacraments) necessarily presupposes what in the time of the pandemic was called the "physical presence" of the faithful in the

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<sup>60</sup> Amanda Jo Ratcliff, Josh McCarty, Matt Ritter, „Religion and New Media: A Uses and Gratifications Approach”, in *Journal of Media and Religion*, 2017, vol. 16, no. 1, p. 15-26, document available on the website [www.tandfonline.com/loi/hjmr20](http://www.tandfonline.com/loi/hjmr20) [accessed on 11.6.2022].

confessional premises. Therefore, no matter how coherent and comprehensive the strategies for its use may be, new media cannot replace the actual participation of individuals in acts of worship (always carried out in direct contact with the community of believers) and direct contact with the priest-servant, the icon of the Holy Sacrament. In practical terms, the very specific nature of Orthodoxy, with its emphasis on those works of grace designed to "bring God to people"<sup>61</sup>, namely to the people who are constituted in the supreme community which is the Church, the Mystical Body of the Saviour Christ (Ephesians 1:22-23), makes it impossible to 'convert' the cultic-liturgical assembly to digital, and the place and role of electronic communications cannot therefore be relevant from this point of view. Of course, the video access that new media offers to virtually all forms of worship can only be beneficial, at least from the point of view of preserving the link between the faithful and the ecclesial community (as has been shown in the pandemic context), but the fact that it cannot assimilate practically anything that constitutes the sacramental ministry of the Church is more than obvious<sup>62</sup>.

It has to be said that, in this respect, the post-Reformation denominations seem to be somehow more 'compatible' with online pastoralism, as, in their case, „liturgy of the word” has developed to the detriment of the Eucharistic liturgy", a type of approach that has led both to the restriction of the sacramental dimension of public worship (one centered around Baptism and the Lord's Supper) and to the insistent concern "to clarify, to enlighten, to explain [one's own beliefs] to everyone", an attitude born of "the conviction that people live in ignorance"<sup>63</sup>. In these circumstances, it is not only the otherwise obvious differences of a typical nature, but above all the completely different significance which the confessions in question attribute to ministry in and by the Church, which somehow facilitate their cohabitation with the new media, increasing the capacity of electronic communications to support their specific pastoral-missionary activities.

The situation described above, although real and undeniable, is not, however, such as to diminish the attention that the Church must pay to the new media, since such an approach, besides being completely unproductive from a pastoral-missionary point of view, would generate an image and credibility deficit that is practically uncontrollable in today's world. After all, "where the flock is, there must be the shepherd", so that if "the flock is on the Internet, we must be there too..., thus reaching out to all"<sup>64</sup>, with full respect for the specific characteristics of

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<sup>61</sup> Pr. conf. dr. Constantin Coman, *art. cit.*, p. 331-332, and p. 336-337.

<sup>62</sup> Mihail Siminciuc, *art. cit.*, p. 208-209.

<sup>63</sup> Pr. conf. dr. Constantin Coman, *art. cit.*, p. 330-331.

<sup>64</sup> Ionuț-Costinel Voicu, *Glasul Evangheliei în limbaj binar, în vreme de pandemie, în Cercetări doctorale în pandemie...*, p. 251.



Orthodoxy, of course, and with full awareness of the fact that in the digital environment the voices of all the others can be "heard" without any kind of "censorship" the voices of all other denominations<sup>65</sup>. Therefore, the Church's new media activity will have to be carefully calibrated and dosed so that, on the one hand, it contributes to the achievement of concrete pastoral-missionary objectives (strengthening the community, including through outreach activities, making catechesis more effective, facilitating access to youth environments, etc.) and, on the other hand, it contributes to the achievement of the Church's mission. On the other hand, to ensure the preservation of the image, credibility and authority of the ecclesial institution, both in relation to its own believers and in terms of interactions (inevitable in the digital environment) with other faiths. Precisely from this perspective, His Beatitude Patriarch Daniel notes that the Church will have to use new media with "ecclesial responsibility and pastoral wisdom", so as to make the most of the "development possibilities" derived from the facilities for "mutual knowledge of different traditions" and "strengthening of faith communities" that it offers users, while avoiding potential "challenges or dangers to the preservation of traditional spiritual, cultural and social values". At the same time, from the point of view of believers, it is expected that "the multitude of ideas and opinions freely expressed in cyberspace" will always be "subject to critical and selective analysis", on the basis of the referential constituted by "the permanent values of Christian faith and morals"<sup>66</sup>.

e). In our opinion, the Church's concern (going down to the level of the diocese or parish) for the implementation of a coherent and effective pastoral-missionary activity through the new media, could be based, sufficiently pertinent, on the conclusions of a SWOT type analysis ("Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities and Threats") which will be able to highlight all the problems and implications that the approaches in question imply.

Thus, without attempting a hierarchy (in terms of relevance or pastoral-missionary use value), we will be able to identify the following strengths related to the presence and activity of the Church in the digital environment:

- the possibility offered to the faithful to follow live the activities and events of worship (especially those of greater spiritual importance) carried out at parish and diocesan level, and to access or resume viewing these transmissions in any circumstances of space and time;

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<sup>65</sup> Cf. Laurențiu Tănase, *Religia și media-logică concurenței religioase*, București, Universitatea București, 2010, p. 34.

<sup>66</sup> Cf. Liviu Vidican Mancu, *Propovăduirea Evangheliei în era digitală*, Cluj-Napoca, Editura Renașterea, 2020, p. 123.

- the possibility (of interest both to the Church and its members and to the ordinary faithful) of disseminating in digital media material (text, photo, audio, video) with moral, ethical, spiritual, catechetical, pastoral and missionary content, capable of supporting the materialization of the specific and substantive objectives of the ecclesial institution;

- to provide opportunities for easy and widespread (of course, non-biblical and carefully linked to biblical imperatives) media coverage of those categories of philanthropic activities that reflect the Church's systematic approach to social problems, to people and their problems in general;

- the possibility of disseminating, with operativity and accuracy, the Church's official positions on those issues on the public agenda which interfere with its interests of image and credibility, as well as with its spiritual and social-philanthropic activities;

- the possibility of interacting more easily with youth, pupils and students, certainly in the context of the increased attention they are paying to digital media;

- facilitating pastoral activities at parish level by combining the positive effects generated by opportunities such as: maintaining a current link with the faithful through a carefully calibrated "policy" of postings (announcements, spiritual guidance, parables); getting to know the spiritual-spiritual problems, i.e. the personal difficulties faced by the faithful, from the perspective of guiding, supporting and helping them; identifying the shortcomings and problems that parishes may face at any given time; cultivating and strengthening solidarity among parishioners, stimulating willingness and concern for mutual support and help, control and mutual help, control and elimination of disputes and tensions, etc.

At the same time, the Church's presence in the digital environment is also characterized by a number of weaknesses, some of which inevitably dilute the overall level of pastoral-missionary utility of electronic communications. From our point of view, a relatively large part of these will be determined by the particularities of Orthodox worship, in particular the fact that the sacramental-liturgical ministry of the Church presupposes effective "physical" contact of the priest with his faithful. In these circumstances, we shall opt for the following configuration of weaknesses:

- the obvious inability of new-media to provide the imperative "physical" connection between the faithful and the serving clergy, i.e. the sacramental-liturgical ministry of the Church, starting with the Holy. In practice, the connection with the Church that new-media media mediate is virtual and (only) virtual, electronic communications being unable to go beyond the limits of this sphere; implicitly, the faithful will find themselves in the somewhat paradoxical,

but no less real, situation of entering into audio-video contact with the Church, while at the same time experiencing isolation, distancing and separation from it, respectively from its sacramental-liturgical ministry;

- the inability of electronic communications to "transmit" the totally different spiritual environment and state created by and through the joint participation of the faithful in ecclesial activities involving the common expression of the faith (singing together, common prayer, sharing from the same Holy Sacrament, etc.);

- the emergence of risks of an imagological nature resulting from the relatively easy possibilities of onerous intrusion into the Church's online activities by individuals/groups interested in compromising and discrediting, through biased postings and comments and misinformation, the discourse and activities of the ecclesial institution (i.e. its dioceses and parishes) and its laity and faithful;

- the difficulties encountered and reservations expressed by some people, and especially the elderly, in the current use of new information technologies, including new media.

Seen from an analytical perspective, all these aspects draw attention to the complexity of the issues raised by the Church's activity in the digital environment (as a synthesis of desirable "gains" and inevitable "losses") and, perhaps more importantly, reveal the need for balanced and careful use of electronic communications. In fact, compared to the ratio of strengths vs. weaknesses indicated above and seen from the perspective of the fundamental objectives of the Church, new media can constitute a factor of pastoral-missionary complementarity, capable of enhancing "traditional" activities of this nature, amplifying their capacity to interact with the secular "spirit" of the contemporary world, a world decisively marked by the explosive advance of new information technologies. From this perspective, new media can add value to the Church's activities and generate the following opportunities:

- strengthening and making permanent the link between the faithful and the parish community (as a necessary prerequisite for their spiritual progress);

- increasing the ability of the parish priest to stimulate the involvement of the faithful in supporting religious initiatives and activities and in organizing and implementing social and humanitarian projects;

- the creation of feedback mechanisms capable of making the parish priest's day-to-day pastoral work more effective and, where necessary, corrective;

- strengthening the Church's capacity to disseminate its faith teaching and moral and ethical values in environments strongly affected by secularism or which cannot be addressed through traditional missionary activities;

- creating the necessary informational levers for prevention (through correct, complete and timely information) and counteraction media aggression against the Church, its clergy and believers.

In practice, all these action opportunities (naturally, their list can be extended in the light of local pastoral-missionary particularities) should do nothing more than make concrete all the advantages resulting from the use of new media. However, the achievement of favorable results from this point of view is conditioned by a series of factors which constitute the set of needs required by the process of developing and implementing systematic and coherent approaches in the digital environment:

- the attention needed to ensure the technical quality of the video content disseminated and, above all, of the live broadcasts of the relevant parish activities;
- ensuring that postings are up-to-date, attractive and continuous (so that they attract attention and interest from users), and that the activities concerned (in terms of structure and media content) are in line with the digital skills, expectations and specificity/profile of the target audience;
- ensuring the necessary balance between the content of posts, with appropriate reflection of each of the informative, catechetical, moral, pastoral or social-humanitarian dimensions of the activities of the parish, the priest and the faithful involved in the various activities.

### **Conclusions**

Having reached the end of our study, we note, first of all, that, despite the psycho-social risks with which it is associated, and not infrequently despite its "powerlessness" in relation to the sacramental-liturgical ministry of the Church, ignoring the new media (and, implicitly, its fervent users) can only harm the pastoral-missionary work of the ecclesial institution. In fact, in a society in which the use of electronic communications has increasingly become a necessity, with the digital environment becoming a marked 'invariant' of post-modern society, the Church cannot but assimilate new media. Thus, even if, as Fr Ioan I. Ică jr. pointed out, computerisation and digitisation 'cancel out space and time through the instantaneousness of information and electronic media', creating the conditions whereby virtual reality 'absorbs' physical reality and, along with it, the special reality represented by man and community, the Church can find (in its huge spiritual and spiritual treasury) the means whereby it can 'humanise' all these developments. In this way, in the face of the advance of secularization brought about by the contemporary process of globalization (a process which, as we have seen, is significantly fuelled by the new media), the Church will be able to make her own voice heard, a voice which also insists on global unity, but that unity

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which will coalesce, eschatologically, around the heavenly Jerusalem (Revelation 3:12; 21:2).

At the same time, although constrained by the very sacramental dimension of public worship, the use of new media can support the pastoral-missionary work of the Church, being able to respond to (often objective) needs and to make concrete a series of opportunities that would otherwise remain untapped. New media cannot and will not be able to replace going to Church, attending worship events or interacting with other believers, and even less so will it be completely useless from a sacramental-liturgical point of view. Therefore, from the Church's point of view, electronic communications, while valuable and beneficial in themselves as long as they support the faith and strengthen the community of believers, will not be a substitute for "physical presence" at worship activities, which will remain absolutely necessary regardless of circumstances.