OPEN WALL CHURCHES. CATHOLIC CONSTRUCTION OF ONLINE COMMUNITIES

IGLESIAS EN ABIERTO. LA CONSTRUCCIÓN DE COMUNIDADES CATÓLICAS ONLINE

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RESUMEN

El debate sobre cómo las instituciones católicas globales han utilizado las nuevas herramientas digitales ha adquirido un rol relevante que va más allá de las limitaciones litúrgicas. Se basa en la participación, la justicia social y los nuevos contextos en los que alcanzar un nuevo target. Desde el mismo Vaticano, a través de los perfiles del Papa en las redes sociales, el catolicismo ha demostrado tener una destacada presencia en la web. A pesar de que los católicos no rompen las normas, son creativos cuanto a los formatos con los que extender su religiosidad a las nuevas plataformas. Los portales nacidos recientemente han implantado nuevas herramientas participativas que plantean nuevas formas de entender el concepto de comunión, clave para las comunidades cristianas. Más allá de detenernos en si los portales católicos incorporan estrategias seculares para promover la participación, exploramos las 19 webs católicas más relevantes según el ranking Alexa. Las dividimos en diferentes categorías que nos permiten analizar cómo construyen comunidades e impulsan el concepto de pertenencia. Los datos se han recogido en tres momentos distintos (2014, 2015 y 2016). Las webs localizadas son en 5 lenguas (español, inglés, francés, portugués e italiano) y provienen de 9 países diferentes.

ABSTRACT

The discussion regarding how global Catholic organizations have employed the new tools of digital media has become increasingly poignant and no longer focuses on liturgical limitations but on participation, social justice and new frameworks for reaching new targets. From the Vatican itself, specifically through the Pope's profiles on social media, Catholicism has proven to have an increasingly responsive presence on the web, although Catholics are usually creative without breaking the rules in the ways they extend their religiosity into new platforms. Newly born digital portals have embraced new participatory tools that shape other ways of understanding communion, which is a key concept among Christian communities. Rather than dwelling on whether Catholic portals are incorporating secular strategies to foster engagement, we explore the 19 most powerful Catholic websites according to Alexa ranking, and divide them into different categories that allow us to analyse how they build communities and thus foster the concept of belonging, which is one of the aims that they pursue. Data have been collected in three different moments (2014, 2015 and 2016) where these websites, belonging to 5 languages (Spanish, English, French, Portuguese and Italian) from 9 countries have been taken into account, according to Catholic population indexes.

PALABRAS CLAVE

Religión; religión digital; catolicismo; comunidad online; tecnología; participación.

KEYWORDS

Religion; digital religion; Catholicism; on-line community; technology; participation.

1. INTRODUCTION

In May 2011, the first Vatican meeting with bloggers was held in Rome (Wooden 2011), and more than 150 Catholic and non-Catholic bloggers shared their tech experiences at the Holy See with Church officials and were able to listen to Pope Benedict's invitation to «inhabit» the digital world (Spadaro 2014, Campbell 2012). It was not the first time that the Catholic Church addressed this issue, as the Vatican had already become one of the religious organizations that was a pioneer in embracing the possibilities of the internet by issuing the document «Church and Internet» in 2002. In this text, the Roman Catholic Church stated that the two-way interactivity of the internet is blurring the old distinction between those who communicate and those who receive what is communicated, which in turn is creating a situation in which everyone has at least the potential to do both. This is not the one-way, top-down communication of the past. As more and more people become familiar with this characteristic of the internet in other areas of their lives, they can be expected to also look for it in regard to religion and the Church. Those spheres include game and leisure time, which religion does not oppose (Wagner 2012, Brasher 2001).

2. OBJECTIVES

While previous research has focused on exploring religious communities online (Campbell 2005), *Religion and Cyberspace* (Højsgaard-Warburg 2005), on digital religious projects (Cantwell-Rashid 2015) and on Christian uses of new media that also include recruitment and disaffiliation (Hutchings 2015), our aim here is to focus on the top Catholic websites that manage to create digital communities. Catholics have seen the enormous potentialities of the internet and have been there soon trying to export the sense of community that is part of their identity. Scholars have examined Catholic conferences of bishops online (Arasa 2008) and also Catholic social media (Tridente-Mastroianni 2016), but none have explored the tools that are common for forming online communities among the most popular global Catholic websites. This study therefore aims to provide some empirical evidence on the shaping of digital Catholicism.

As Helland (2005) foresaw, the World Wide Web and internet communication continue to develop as a social space, making it very probable that organized religious institutions will begin to develop environments for online religion. Thus, «hierarchies and networks are two very different systems» (Helland 2005). For this reason, and despite the fact that participation and listening are assets in the Catholic media strategy, hierarchical websites still struggle to be social spaces that accommodate participation. However, the increasing activity on social media challenges the still informative and static vision of some

of the portals analyzed. Communities on the web lack physical contact and allow for «accelerated» building of relationships and elimination of social barriers (Vitullo 2013).

Theoretical frameworks for understanding the increased interplay between religion and media and how they are interconnected has been widely explored (Hjarvard 2008). Lövheim and Linderman (2005) determined how religious identity is constructed on the internet, a view that Spadaro (2014) further analyses when calling «cybertheology» the new way of addressing the challenges that the internet poses to traditional Churches. Zaleski (1997) embraced this concept as «the soul of cyberspace» and explored how new technology changes the way spirituality is conceived. Dawson and Cowan (2004) advocate the religion online concept when they refer to people seeking and finding faith on the internet. Even if fragmentation is a core element of the postmodern society, we observe in our analysis that cohesion is also a factor that constitutes part of the narrative that the internet helps to form. The new digital culture takes on a sense of narrative structure, weaving together stories about the world or about how the world interconnects. Not every website, Facebook page or Twitter post can be a narrative, but each of them fits into a larger narrative: the life of an individual on a Facebook timeline, observations in blog postings that attempt to make sense of a world unfolding before one's eyes, and even discussions of how people should understand their society (Soukup 2015:12).

The articulation of online community has also been studied in depth (Rheingold 1993, Gupta & Kim 2004, Karaflogka 2006). Nevertheless, not many projects commonly research how Catholic communities go online or how they achieve success by engaging in multiple and different ways. What tools and mechanisms are needed to create community beyond social networks? Is there any specific «Catholic» tool, issue or aspect to take into account when we deal with online platforms? This paper seeks to tackle those questions by applying them to religious websites (specifically, 19 of the top international Catholic websites).

In this article, we argue that Catholics do not differ from other organizations when it comes to forming digital communities, although they do have specific tools that make them recognizable among their faithful. The contribution of this research is that it systematizes Catholic websites according to their digital engagement techniques and then analyzes their evolution over 3 years, specifically regarding how these technological patterns have led to them evolving into religions online. No online religion in the sample we observed seems to be very developed; and as previous scholarship suggests, there is still much room for religion to develop its presence online.

3. LITERATURE REVIEW

For Catholic organizations, the web is a meaningful place where revelation also occurs. In this research we follow Burbules concept of web as a rhetorical place in the sense of its semantic implication. «But it also has a semantic dimension: it means something important to a person or a group of people, and this latter dimension may or may not be communicable to others.» (Burbules 2002:78). The web means a lot to a group of people in our case study, since the web is not another place but a continuation of the same life that has expanded in new, fresh and innovative ways.

Valovic argues: «Perhaps the metaphysics of the Net theme that Wired support was created with the knowledge that for secular scientism to succeed, it would somehow have to fill the void left by spirituality and other systems of value that offered genuine transcendence. But if so, an important principle has been forgotten: Technological powers and capabilities are only truly successful to the extent that they are fully humanized. When the process is reversed and our technologies being to shape us in their image and likeness, we are heading in the wrong direction» (Valovic 2002: 206). Gupta and Kim (2004) define Virtual Communities (VC) as: «a web-based community with bonding among the members of the community. VCs have evolved from simple exchange systems to the extant web-based communities. They have advantages over face-to-face communities in that they are larger and more dispersed in space, there is no turn taking in communication and communication can be preserved for future reference. They are mainly formed for four purposes namely, transaction, fantasy, interest and relationship.» Technological determinists argue that the social, cultural, political and economic aspects of our lives are determined by technology: «technology is culture» (Kitchin 1998: 57). In this vein, cyberspace is seen to directly cause changes in our everyday lives in fairly linear, simple cause and effect relationships. For example, for the determinists, cyberspace will lead to the formation of new communities. But Kitchin also argues that, according to another theory known as social constructivism, cyberspace is a social artefact, as it mediates a series of social interactions and is itself a product of social mediation. Other names have tried to embody virtual communities: «[T]here's no there there. It only exists in some hard-to-define place somewhere inside the computer» – in what is called cyberspace (Holtzman 1994: 197). The challenge is to integrate some meaningful personal responsibility in virtual environments. «Virtual environments are valuable as places where we can acknowledge our inner diversity. But we still want an authentic experience of self» (Turkle 1995:254).

Membership, sharing, participation and belonging are the new names of affiliation. While undoubtedly some users of cyberspace consider themselves to be members of an authentic community, with a shared sense of place, many cyberspace users are transient,

moving from space to space. As such, cyberspace for many users consists of inauthentic places (Dodge - Kitchin 2001:17). Gascue Quiñones put it this way: «It is a fact that members of Internet sustained social networks tend to group themselves more along lines of affinity than of geographical proximity. At present, diverse platforms capable of sustaining networks of personal interaction are associating with and complementing each other in a way heretofore unknown» (Gascue Quiñones 2011:116). Virtual community was initially seen as the illusion of a community where there are no real people and no real communication. It is a term used by idealistic technophiles who fail to understand that the authentic cannot be engendered through technological means. «Virtual community flies in the face of a 'human nature' that is essentially, it seems, depraved» (Wilbur 1997:14).

When digitalisation was still not common among religious communities, Babin recalled that the «affinity community» was the electronic version of the geographical community, a gathering of people who have chosen each other because of an affinity of character or interests or, in Christian terms, because of an «inner bond of calling and mission» (Babin 1991:51). This idea of call and mission are present in all the portals we've taken into account. «Interaction does not work on its own. The resources on which participants draw between when they compose their messages and the rules that shape what they can do from a variety of outside sources» (Baym 1995:161). These rules are changing, and the more one adapts and changes, the more rewarding it is in terms of participation. People on the internet are linked to people, not to a computer. «Instead of people talking to machines, computer networks are being used to connect people to people» (Wellman et al. 1996). The most optimistic proponents of the internet have argued that gender, race and age become unimportant in online interaction. «At the very least, many assume that the absence of these markers will provide the opportunity to explore and invent alternate identities» (Kollock and Smith 1999:11). What does not seem unimportant in online interaction is religious belonging. Being Catholic has became more public, more evident and more global than before the explosion of the internet. And now Catholics link themselves globally in new forms by following the key idea that the building of a community is a successful dimension for «selling» the idea of the religious path. It is evangelization in accordance with Catholic self-conception. Proselytism is not a shared concept among Catholic academicians. Evangelization is accepted more as the idea that bringing the gospel to the world is a mission. Church marketing authority Richard Reising (2006) advises that most churches should not practice promotion. Instead, they should focus on the preparation that will make members eager to invite others. Whether they do so aggressively, softly, explicitly or implicitly, all the Catholic pages analysed here have the purpose of bringing good news to a world that, according to all of them, need the gospel.

Effervescence in the digital world seems to accompany the Catholic Church in several places and in several languages. Nevertheless, Morgan (1994) affirms that it has been a commonplace in Western society and culture over the past three centuries that the grip of religious traditions and beliefs has weakened. Ritual life has changed in content and scope, and its hold on people's lives has become more restricted and less vigorous (Morgan 1994). This rituality is more individualistic, although rituals in the digital place are growing – especially in moments of mourning, trouble and the need to pray. Furthermore, those rituals are connected to a collective sharing of authority. Today, as Conrad and Scott (2005) assess, «Power is not possessed by a person. It is granted to that person by others. […] Power is a feature of interactions and interpersonal relationships, not of individuals or organizational roles».

Recent data show that, amongst the more enthusiastic forms of engagement that have recently emerged in the Catholic Church, the digital arena is one of the most interesting and prominent ways in which Catholics have found common ground to share and celebrate their world vision (Díez, Micó, Carbonell 2015). «Many Christians are succumbing to the postmodern temptation to fragment or tribalize into smaller units within the Church» (Long 1997:100). In this context many people today fear or deplore the loss of community and community spirit. «Rather than bringing people together, the mass media often isolate or divide them. Yet communication, including the use of alternative media, can revitalize communities and rekindle community spirit, because the model for genuine communication, like that for communities of all kinds, is open and inclusive, rather than unidirectional and exclusive» (Arthur 1993:279).

«The ontological character of cyberspace also incorporates the elements of connectivity, accessibility, openness, experience, communication and contact» (Karaflogka 2006:117). Connectivity is a key theme in Catholic self-understanding, and it evokes the etymology of the Latin word for religion, *religare*, which means «ties that bind». While trying to form community, Catholics know that they will compete in a myriad ocean of other communities. Catholic communities are aware of the tremendous challenges the internet poses to traditional Catholicism. As Hoover and Kaneva state, «[I]ncreasing personal autonomy in faith practice is an additional such pressure, encouraging religions to further relativize to compete in a secular-media-defined marketplace of ideas and discourses. The development of social networking media and web 2.0 cannot help but further exacerbate this trend» (Hoover, Kaneva, 2009: 9).

4. METHODOLOGY

The findings presented here are based on data collected over three years, from February 2014 to July 2016. The data show how Catholic websites are looking forward to having

a vibrant digital presence and activity as well as a strong community that is reinforced by continuous participatory and interactive activities. This desired interaction is obvious. About 74% of them registration on the website to access to some contents and services; 79% offer the possibility of being a part of both the publication and the dissemination process (for example, by use of the social media buttons at the end of each content page for easy sharing); and 95% have tools to help users (consultancy, FAQ sections, contact forms). Furthermore, 63% send a newsletter periodically, 95% have a Facebook profile (44% with a low number of followers at under 100,000) and 89% have a Twitter profile (only 4 of them have more than 100,000 followers).

Having seen the numbers presented above, it is important to show how interaction and participation take place on these sites. In this sense, only 7 of them (37%) allow users to comment on their content, 11% host a forum, 5% ask for the opinions of their users through surveys, and 9% organize games and other amusing online activities. Currently, 58% of the analysed sites are not exclusively offline.
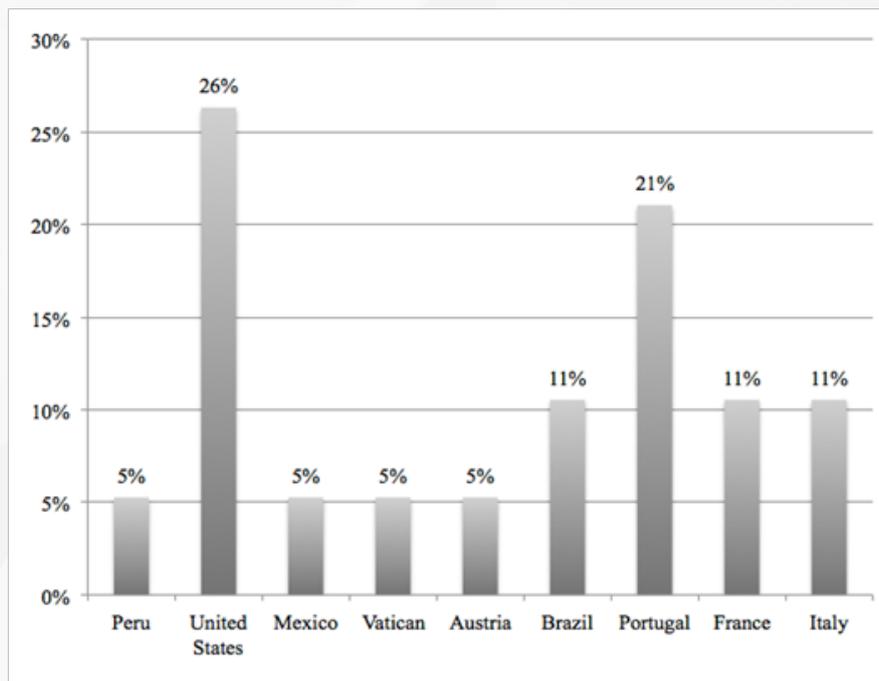
Figure 1
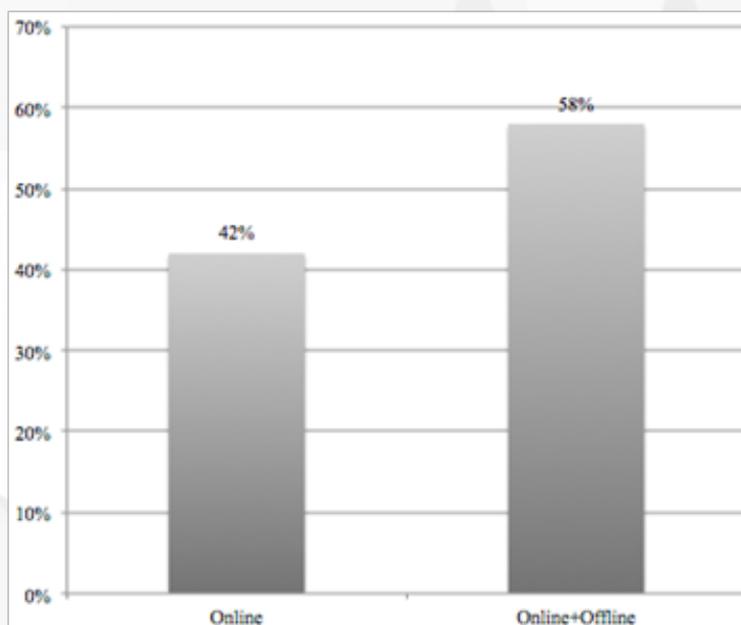
Source: Blanquerna Observatory

This information introduces results obtained by an investigation that aims to fulfil three main goals. The first one is to understand how Catholic websites create a sense of community. Next, we also want to explore the extent to which online Catholic communities are created according to specific skills and are like other virtual communities in the digital place. Our third main goal is to identify the common tools used by top Catholic websites when building online communities. To achieve these goals, we followed a methodology that let us obtain the percentages presented above. The process helped us

detect the most important Catholic communities online and also gave us objective criteria to determine how and why we considered them important.

There are an estimated 1.2 billion Roman Catholics in the world, according to Vatican figures. More than 40% of the world's Catholics live in Latin America, but Africa has seen the largest growth in Catholic congregations in recent years. According to the Pontifical Yearbook 2016 and the Annuarium Statiscum Ecclesiae, the number of Catholics in the world increased over nine years between 2005 and 2014 from 1,115 million to 1,272 million, which is a respective growth of 17.3 to 17.8 per cent of the world's population. Considering that Catholic religion has spread all over the world, we chose to use language as the primary factor for establishing a representative pattern. Our plan was to find which five languages are most spoken by Catholic people all over the world. Collecting data from Pew Research Center, we found that these languages are: English, Spanish, Portuguese, French and Italian. We searched these data looking for the countries where there are more Catholic people and noting the official language of each country. With these criteria, we consider our pattern representative enough because in the case of the three most spoken languages – English, Spanish and Portuguese – the percentage of Catholic people speaking them is higher than 10% in each case. If we look at French and Italian, more than the 5% of Catholic people speak them all over the world. These languages let us include in our pattern more than 50% of the speakers. Other detected languages spoken by Catholics (e.g., Polish) have a lower number of speakers. This methodology let us choose 5 websites in English (Catholic.com, Catholic.org, Gloria.tv, Usccb.org and Vatican.va), 5 websites in Spanish (Aciprensa.com, Aleteia.org, Catholic.net, Corazones.org and Religionenlibertad.com), 5 websites in Portuguese (BibliaCatolica.com.br, Cancaonova.com, Cnbb.org.br, Ecclesia.pt and Zenit.org), 2 websites in French (Catholique.fr and LaProcure.com) and 2 websites in Italian (ChiesaCattolica.it and News.va). The number of chosen websites in each language is justified by the proportion of its global consumption. In total, we analyzed 19 sites from the following countries:

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Figure 2

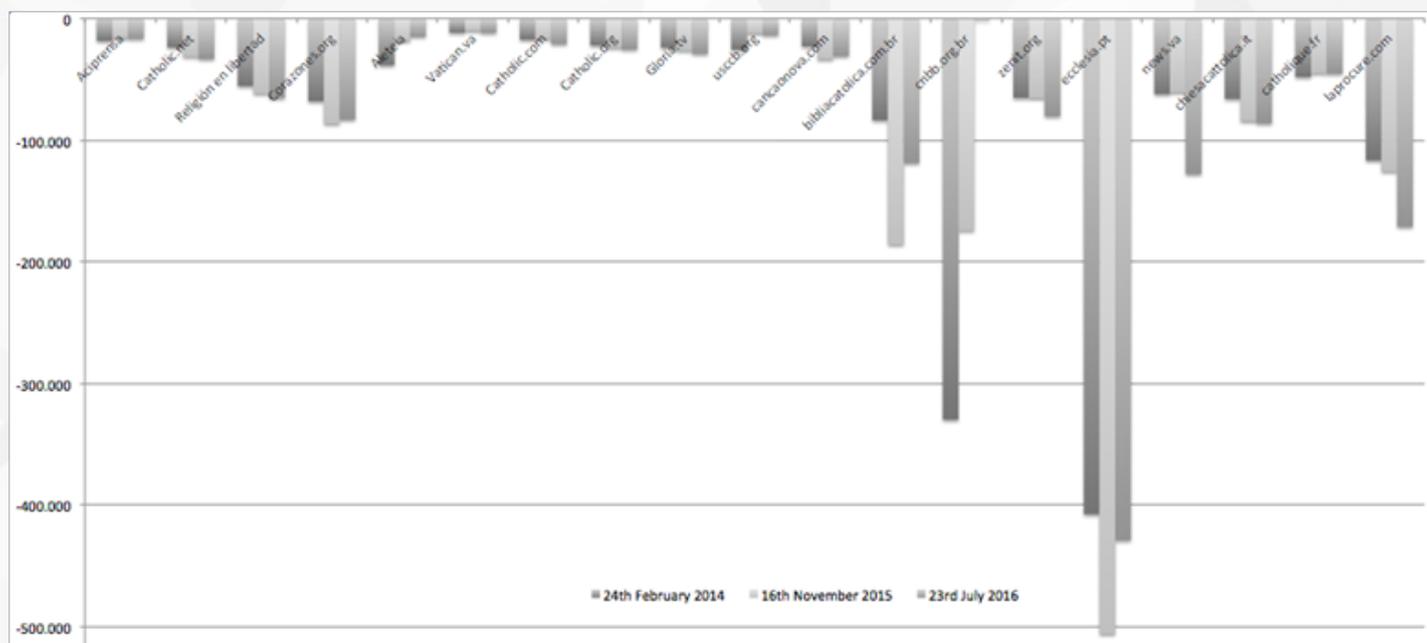**Source: Blanquerna Observatory**

To choose each selected website, we used Alexa, which is a tool from an Amazon subsidiary company that tracks the digital ranking of websites. The keywords for finding them were *Catholic*, *Catholic Church* and *Catholicism*. Among all obtained results, we chose the most visited websites in each of the chosen languages. In those cases where a website had more than one version, we chose the most visited version. This selection let us obtain the main list of Catholic communities to be analyzed. In this selection process, we avoided the general media because their main goal is not to create online Catholic communities.

Once we found 19 online communities with this methodology, we compiled a questionnaire to obtain the data we needed for analysis, comparison and contrast. This questionnaire had the same fields – 53 in total – in all cases, so that we could obtain the same proportion of data in each case and also have the same parameters to study. It is important to stress that, after designing this questionnaire and its contents, it was checked through simple exploratory research in which scholars studied a lower number of selected websites. The results obtained from each researcher were compared and contrasted, and most of the obtained conclusions were in line. Nevertheless, scholars' results did not agree in a small percentage – less than 10%. Differences were debated until reaching a single and unequivocal conclusion. After discussion, those issues in the questionnaire that were not quite in line were modified and the questionnaire was checked again. In this second checking process, researchers studied another group of websites, which was useful for verifying that all the authors made the same interpretation. The results obtained

in both checking processes are not included in this article. All the data we present was generated by the questionnaire implemented in the third phase. This final phase began when the interpretation of the questionnaire and gathering of information were unequivocal.

Using this methodology, we analysed these 19 sites with the questionnaire in three waves: 24th February 2014, 16th November 2015 and 23rd July 2016. We decided to register data on three occasions, because we wanted to compare the information in three different but consecutive years. Vatican.va is the highest ranked website on Alexa from among the 19 we analysed. The evolution shows that only one of them has a higher ranking in 2016 than in 2014: Aleteia.org.

Figure 3

Source: Blanquerna Observatory

Looking at their interaction level, the websites that offer the widest range of possibilities are Aciprensa.com, Aleteia.org, Cancaonova.com, Catholic.com and Religionenlibertad.com. They include almost all the items considered essential for interaction, such as comments, surveys and sections for witnesses and for sending prayers and intentions. Currently, Catholic.com and Religionenlibertad.com have a dating service for their users. Cancaonova.com and Religionenlibertad.com also have an online shop as a service. Regarding offline interaction, we must emphasize those sites that are not only a digital platform but which also organize offline activities on the website. In other words, the website is another place for announcing the organization of these activities. In this group we have ChiesaCattolica.it, Cnbb.org.br and Usccb.org. A few pages (5%) link their online activities to an offline context. In respect to pages that link offline activities to

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their online space, we could include here all informative sites. Formation and education is also an activity that these sites offer. Specifically, they are Catholic.net, Usccb.org and Cancaonova.com.

Approximately 68% of them have a mobile app, with the exceptions being Aleteia.org, Catholic.org, Corazones.org, Gloria.Tv, BibliaCatolica.com.br and Zenit.org. Despite this, Aleteia.org and Zenit.org have responsive versions of their sites. We detected several formats of text, images and video. The latter is the most used on Gloria.Tv. Regarding social media, all of them are on Facebook except Corazones.org, although it is on Instagram. The sites with the most followers are Aciprensa.com on Twitter, Aleteia. org on Google+, and Vatican.va has the most fans on their YouTube channel. Regarding the pages Corazones.org, News.va, Ecclesia.pt, Catholique.fr and LaProcure.com, we found that they offer information but are still do not employ interaction and participation tools beyond social media; so it is harder for them to build a strong community. Apart from the data collected by this analysis, we interviewed the people in charge of these websites and communities in order to delve deeper into the extracted information. Content analysis and interviews are two methodological techniques that have been used by Christopher D. Cantwell and Hussein Rashid in similar studies, such as *Religion, Media, and the Digital Turn. A Report for the Religion and the Public Sphere Program Social Science Research Council* (2015).

Once we obtained the 19 sites to study along with their digital evolution and rankings, we decided to classify them by their main goals. According to these criteria, we established five different categories:

a) Institutional. We define institutional websites as those belonging to an organization in which the main objective is to present its mission and values. It precludes other objectives such as merchandising, informing and gaming, which, if they exist, are put on other websites linked to the group. The classic example is the Vatican website (www.vatican.va), which is different from other portals hosted by the Holy See, such as www.news.va and www.vaticanradio.org.

b) Informative. In our classification, informative websites are those devoted to religious information. Most of them are digital originals, meaning that they are not copied from offline publications but exist only in digital form. We believe that the more the quality of religious information is improved, the more likely it is that this information will be transformed into 2.0 standards. Furthermore, it fulfils the need to help society understand religious facts as symbols of a reality that transcends them. One of the characteristics of the 2.0 era for religious claim is that the Church is finding more people who search,

confront, and argue in their institutions, people who were previously not as active in public debates.

c) Evangelistic and Apologetic. Some of the pages are clearly created to evangelize and defend the faith. Of those that are explicitly created to spread the gospel and to declare the doctrine as the core message, we classify them as apologetic.

d) Spirituals. We place in this category the portals devoted to prayer chains, meditation and spiritual quotes, among other similar matters. Although other pages may have some spiritual tips or banners, these pages exist only for these purposes.

e) Others. Other pages that do not fit, such as libraries, foundations, online shops and mourning portals, among others.

From the ethnographic data we collected, we found that 26% of the samples are Institutional, 26% Informative, 32% Evangelistic and Apologetic, 11% Spiritual and 5% belong to the category Others.

Figure 4
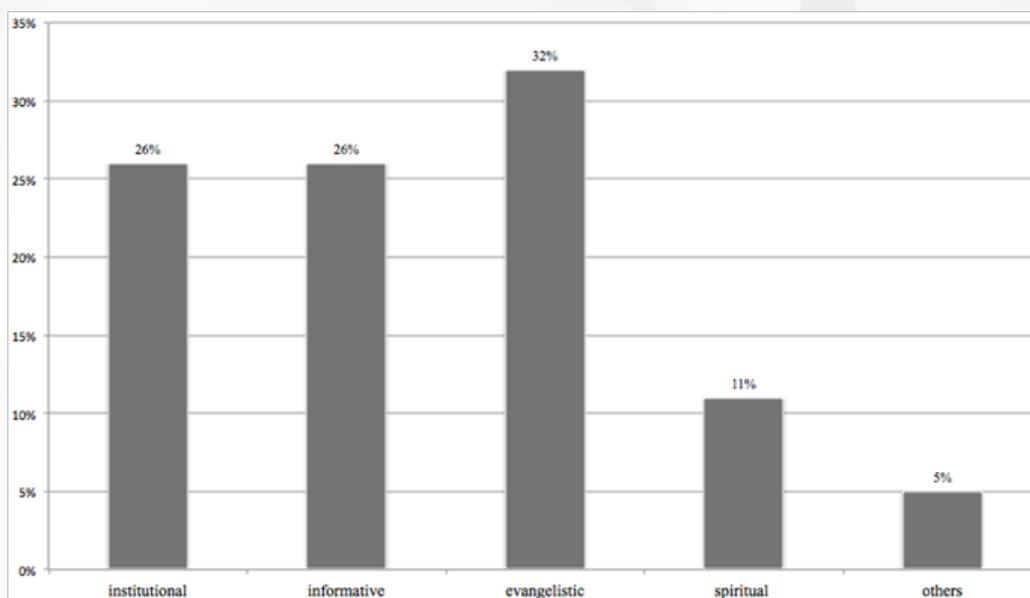
Source: Blanquerna Observatory

Having classified the websites, we filled out an exhaustive form that we prepared with 53 different fields structured into four sections: General Information, Interaction, Offline Interaction, Technical Facilities and Visibility. Using it while studying each website, we obtained a chart that let us collect, compare and contrast all data. Each field refers to a tool that could contribute to creating and strengthening the Catholic community on each site.

In our research, the analysis of these sites is complemented with a virtual interview with the person in charge of each website. Interviews were previously prepared and structured in depth. First we asked the people in charge questions related to the fields that we answered in our analyses, just to confirm the information collected and to check that our perceptions of their sites coincide with their perspectives and criteria. Not only did we want to know their goals in deciding whether or not to include in their websites content, a service or a section, but we also wanted to know their views toward interaction and participation.

In this sense, Jesús Colina, the editorial director of Aleteia.org, explained their vision to us and described how they see their website as one more channel among the three other complimentary but separate channels of Facebook, Pinterest and Twitter. Wellington Campos Pinho, administrator of Biblia Catolica, admitted that there was a lack of interaction on his site, but rationalized this by explaining that it was developed and is maintained only by him. Some of them, like Alex Rosal, director of Religiónenlibertad. com, do not take interaction into account when considering a community. On this site, all comments that users leave demonstrate the existence of their community, although they are written on a virtual wall and not in response to each other. This information is complemented by the answers obtained to more questions about the platform and its strategy, mission and vision. In this sense, interviews revealed several business issues that are relevant for our investigation.

It is important to highlight the double-checking process we followed. Our analysis was deep, but we consider it necessary for presenting a balanced view by comparing our perspective with those who not only work on each site daily, but also have information about its past, present and future – specifically regarding its contents as well as its strategy. Nevertheless, we took into account the opinion of a third agent in this study: experts. Their perspectives are useful to us because they act as observers situated between us and the website owners and employees. Lucio Ruiz, Secretary of Communication at the Vatican, suggests that Catholic communities are doing well in the sense that they are converting previously traditional and analogical aspects and realities into digital, for example: prayer, charity, information and dissemination of the magisterium, among others). Still, much remains to be done in regard to the new horizons presented by the "digital age". Creation of thought, network synergies and generating opinions are just a few. When asked about how he understands the Catholic formation of groups on the web, Robert A. White is not sure that Catholic communities are attempting to be online communities. In his own words: «Most of our communities are online, but how we get Catholic communities to communicate with each other is another issue.»

When we asked the scholar Stewart M. Hoover for his thoughts on Catholics and digital communities, the Director of the Center for Media, Religion and Culture in Boulder, Colorado, answered that it depends on the community, specifically on whether members feel empowered to make their own online connections. Online media assumes that people will create their own opportunities, connections, and networks. They cannot look exactly like offline communities, as they do not have the same borders and boundaries and do not recognize the same sources of authority and power. Online communities are created by their practitioners and follow their patterns of interest and practice. A strong sense of community or need for community is of course required, but it is expressed according to the logic of digital spaces and practices.

Despite this, further research should also take into account the WhatsApp factor, a dimension that we did not explore here because of its reliance on smartphones and private numbers. Calvarese (2016) says that WhatsApp has turned into a point of reference for many Catholics. Through this app, they share the Saint of the Day, gospel comments, pictures with quotes and many prayer requests. It is also possible to read truly inspiring stories directly from those who experienced them. All of these features are incorporated into the websites analysed in our sample.

5. RESULTS

As it has done in other subjects and contexts, the internet has challenged religious communities worldwide. Not only has it created a new means and process of communication among several stakeholders in each community, but it has also changed the entire context and created a new paradigm in which religions – as well as other sectors of society – try to make the most of it and take advantage of the new tools that are completely available and free to them. In this context, the results indicate that the Catholic Church views the digital sphere as an opportunity (Celli, 2013). All website managers that we interviewed regard evangelisation as the main goal of their digital spaces (Aciprensa. com, Aleteia.org, Gloria.tv, Religionenlibertad.com, Cançaonova.com and BibliaCatoli-ca.br). The new communication strategy carried out by the Vatican also demonstrates the Catholic Church's willingness to be digitally present and influential. The recently created Secretary of Communication was conceived along these lines.

This larger community joins together online based on the concept of *koinonia*. The classic understanding of *koinonia* includes dimensions of participation and interaction, which is needed in current online communities. After all, community implies that there is something that makes members meet each other and come together in a group, that they have something in common. As Campbell (2005:181) explains, in this case, it is faith. In the digital sphere, this common issue creates what Graham (1999) calls «confluences

of interest», which is easier to find online than offline. Campbell (2005:181) refers to attributes that are considered important to online Catholic communities: relationship, care, value, intimate communication and shared faith.

While paying attention to the context and situation, we wondered how Catholic websites build up a sense of community. The research informed us that the two most important digital tools they use are languages and content, the second of which tends to be messages and perspectives that are available on several platforms (e.g., text, videos and infographics). These are easy to share, disseminate and edit as well as easy to understand, comment on and be debated. Services related to specific issues on their websites or linked to Catholicism in general are also available. Other functions such as prayer offerings, witness spaces, funding and daily lectures are an easier way for believers to experience faith. The sites also provide dating services and calendars in addition to recommended films, books and other suggestions from their fellow Catholics. Alejandro Bermúdez, Director of Aciprensa.com, argues that the community is a «natural consequence of our actions». He does not believe that a virtual community must be created or built, nor that it requires forums or regular meeting points.

Among the tools that top Catholic websites use for building online communities through contents and services, we must also highlight social media. Social media constitutes the largest, most potent and most transparent digital places where Catholic communities are present. Internal forums on websites do not have the same level of interaction nor the same number of members. Of the 19 studied sites, the highest ranked on Alexa are not those with the highest level of internal interaction; but all of them have a remarkable number of followers on platforms like Facebook or Twitter. Thus, the followers of these pages are growing daily. These Catholic communities have also understood that within a larger public structure such as social media, they can find more members and also spread their message further. What Wellington Campos Pinho (of Biblia Catolica) said about his community is that it had entered «the various channels of social networks that were created in order to generate discussions and interactions with the site content». So, owners like Wellington create community through social media before doing it through their sites. He admits that the site is not currently registering users, although he wants to do so in the future. Blogs are another tool that provides users with the possibility of publishing and editing contents. The content and services that are related to the values expressed by Campbell (2005:181) can provide a sense of community that arises specifically from this shared faith, which becomes a nexus among all the members. This faith and the vision of life that it embodies could be a reason to start a conversation will grow into a stronger and more intimate discussion.

The digital sphere is a window to world in which Catholic people can continue to practice and attend to their religion. Assuming that being part of a religious community may at times be socially unpopular, the internet offers people the opportunity to express themselves with total freedom and without prejudices. They can feel some kind of protection there, protection that is obtained by being in a virtual space not only where more people think and feel the same, but also where they can share and gain advantages like social recognition as well as new relationships that may grow closer and migrate offline. This protection, once found only in church, is now available outside, at any place and any time.

Nevertheless, some of the 19 studied websites are digital platforms for an offline Catholic community; therefore, time and place play some kind of role. The study has unveiled that most of the digital Catholic activity on these sites is linked directly or indirectly to physical offline spaces. Regarding this issue, it is important to stress that offline relationship with reality always occurs before the online, but not after. That is to say, it is difficult to find online communities that have physical meetings. Gloria.tv, Wellington Campos, Religionenlibertad.com, Alejandro Bermúdez from Aciprensa and Jesús Colina from Aleteia.org all acknowledge that their sites have not organized any offline meetings for their virtual community, and this is because of the diversity of users' locations. Here, it is important to stress again the role of time and place. Currently, Cancaonova.com specifies when talking about a virtual community that it «reduces difficulties imposed by time and physical space». Reduction does not mean elimination. According to this judgement, it is clear that Catholic communities are like other virtual communities in digital space. Lajoie (1996) shares this vision and justifies why virtual reality should not be constructed in opposition to «real reality», but rather as an extension of it. In this sense, we also detect on Catholic sites some virtual activities that are clear imitations of real activities, such as the digital act known as «light a candle».

Language is another element that shows us how geographical issues play a role in online communities. Some interviewed coordinators such as Wellington Campos said that this is another factor that makes a physical meeting difficult. People enter into an online community with other users who are Catholic and who are also physically near them; therefore, they speak the same language and share the same cultural issues. Thus, if we study all websites that are available in more than one language, we find differences in content and, in some cases, structure. Physical differences are also present and easy to identify in an online platform. Only the largest platform, Vatican.va, offers exactly the same content in all its available and different languages. In this case, it is remarkable that this site has a global vision while several of the other analysed websites have an international vision that still maintains a noticeable national character. «We are not located anywhere but in the places that speak the languages we make available», says

Alejandro Bermúdez. Despite this, Campbell (2005:178) says that in some cases these communities become a supplement to offline relationships and not an extension. The author interviewed some members and found this case to be specifically true among those whose offline community was considered unbalanced or unable to meet certain needs that were being met online. In the digital sphere, Catholic people can live and practice faith more flexibly. In this sense, time and space are important but not quite so much if we note that virtual communities let users play with their virtual presence so that they can choose whether or not to respond immediately or say the truth about their location, identity or other private information. Ethics and values are considered to be less strict in the digital sphere than in the real sphere, and this is a difference that must be stressed.

At this point, this shared faith that becomes a shared reason for being in the community could be at risk due to the flexibility and freedom of the internet. In our society and in the digital sphere too, it is easier to communicate with more people, but at the same time we have tools that let people be more individualist and share opinions with others that do not disagree with them. It is easier not to answer somebody if we do not want to and even delete or block contact with them if we do not want to talk about something – perhaps because they do not think as we do. In a pluralistic atmosphere, different thoughts inhabit complete isolation. This characteristic becomes a big barrier to achieving a society based on the values of respect and tolerance, but it also has some advantages. Although only some of the analysed pages (Catholic.com) provide a dating service, it is a good example for showing how close these communities can get and how time and place have a role. In this case, they have more than one thing in common: the Catholic faith and the will to date somebody with the same religious thoughts and values. Among all websites offering this service, the Catholic ones have a more segmented target; so possibilities for people to have success in finding a partner are higher. In these cases, time and place play a remarkable role: people usually look for a partner of the same or similar age and living near them. Virtual barriers are broken by knowing that the relationship people want goes beyond the screen. This kind of service does not create a virtual community directly – as we understand the concept – but attract a loyal number of users interested in the space until they find a partner (if they finally do). So, indirectly, this service builds some kind of virtual community that creates bilateral relationships more than a solid community. There are several websites for finding a partner, but this service on a Catholic website gives the user previous information that others do not. Other users using the same service have some kind of Catholic interest, so it is easier for them to agree on several subjects and perspectives, which makes it easier for them to cultivate a friendship and perhaps even a relationship.

Despite this, online Catholic contents and services are not mature enough in terms of digitalization. The Church and different related organizations from all over the world have

seen the internet as an opportunity, and the existence of these platforms is the best way to prove it. Despite this, a lack of communication and marketing strategy is detected in several of them. This is evidenced by the fact that sites such as Biblia Catolica or Cançao Nova, for example, are not registering their users. We have observed that websites are a frequent tool for Catholic organizations to reach their members, but they are in an early digital phase in which websites only juxtapose information and show few signs of interaction and participation, which are essential for building and strengthening a community. Websites become an advantage for these kinds of institutions. They have a new platform for spreading their messages and perspectives and staying active 24/7. Interviews show that they want their site to achieve this goal. In this sense, we can conclude that Catholic communities have understood that they have a digital role, but they are still trying to find it properly. We could differentiate them by their origins – online or offline – and by whether or not they have an online platform. Digitally born platforms like Aciprensa.com and Aleteia.org obviously do not need to create a digital platform since they are already digital.

Thus, we detect a contrast between those platforms which include a lot of contents, services and community activities and those that offer only information. We discovered two kinds of online Catholic communities that we can organize in two groups: «overcomplete» and «simple». Although the former have the most complete spaces and are more attractive to users, it is sometimes really difficult for a user to navigate them comfortably. This is the case of Catholic.net, for example. The large amount of contents, categories and sections could overwhelm visitors. Regarding this issue, Alejandro Bermúdez from Aciprensa.com explains that one of the changes they are making to the website is related to design, usability and navigation. Nevertheless, simple pages are not as complete as the others, but their navigation is clear and easy to use. Some of them are not updated and exhibit an old design that, together with slow processing speed, could motivate users to leave a few seconds after having decided to visit them. Despite this, it is important to say that there is a trend of helping Catholic sites. Remembering that Mark 12:31 says in the gospel «Love thy neighbour as yourself», all the Catholic websites we studied have a space for helping users if they get lost or if they have any doubts or questions. Depending on the site, this space can be a FAQ section or a form to fill out. There are not yet any consultation sections via chat on these pages, although they are studying whether they can offer this service using volunteers.

Despite the low navigation quality in some cases, the studied websites build up a sense of community because of the subjects they talk about, which form the shared faith that is the centre and basis of their community. 32% of them are apologetic and defend a specific way to live and manage different life issues in accordance with the Catholic religion. These kinds of arguments attract users in the same way that they annoy those who do

not agree their statements. Community could also be created by disagreement, debate, discussion and some kind of conflict; but loyal users are those who share the same points of view, reminding us again of the risk detected in these kinds of communities and that were mentioned previously.

If we review the attributes that Campbell (2005:181) specified as those that differentiate online Catholic communities from other communities –remembering that these were attributes mentioned to the author by members of Catholic communities – they are: relationship, care, value, intimate communication and shared faith. The only difference is faith, which is the basis of all communities. The other attributes are easily identifiable in other kinds of communities. We also find hard to identify from among the analyzed websites those which can be called «online religion». This term was coined by Christopher Helland (2005) and refers to those sites in which the internet is not merely an instrument; it depends on the net, and religious experiences can only be lived through this digital sphere. Most of the sites are still what Helland calls «religion online», whereby the internet is used only as an instrument. As we stated, some of the website managers that we interviewed provided reasons for not achieving a high level of interaction; for example, Wellington Campos cited a lack of human resources.

6. CONCLUSION

Catholic communities worldwide have seen the opportunities that online platforms offer them, and they are more hopeful than fearful. Technology has changed society, and the Catholic Church has not fallen behind other large communities. We conclude first of all that digital Catholic communities are open wall churches for whom faith is their strongest foundation. What has bound Catholic people together since ancient times is faith. This powerful magnet has not disappeared; rather, it has become 2.0. The tool has not eliminated the feeling; it has become a place to live and to share it. The websites studied were created (as those in charge told us in our interviews) to evangelise. They are integrated with several sections and services that serve as tools, but what makes a user stay or leave a community is the confluence of interest (Graham 1999). In this case, everything involving the Catholic religion is present on sites such as Catholic.net and Catholic.com. Drawing on the research carried out, we also demonstrate that the large online Catholic community is integrated with other smaller Catholic communities made up of people that live in the same regions or who speak the same languages. This unveils the important role that time and space still play in these kinds of communities. We could consider some of them to be virtual versions or extensions of reality. As Alejandro Bermúdez (Aciprensa.com) asserts, «barriers between virtual and real are artificial». Only 42% of the 19 analysed sites are exclusively digital platforms.

In this sense, age is also a key factor. Online is a new form of Catholicism for the youth, but older generations are not so easily persuaded, as they view the internet more as an isolated «other» place rather than a tool for building community. Related to the above argument, we have also revealed that this new sphere for faith could become a double-edged sword. Digital tools can be positive for Catholic people to experience their own faith, but the internet is possibly giving rise to homogeneous communities and networks that live parallel to others who do not think the same. And this could create an invisible but strong barrier to dialogue (Carbonell et al. 2013). Even if relationships on the web are not the main goal of the Catholic presence on the internet (belonging and sharing are more powerful than the mere fact of knowing people), we could also conclude that Catholicism online binds its members in a way that could be risky, in that it restricts them to those communities without the flexibility of visiting other communities outside this comfort zone. This is a possible disadvantage that should be considered fairly if we want to remember the freedom and flexibility that digital media provides Catholic people for experiencing and attending to their faith. Horsfield (2015) has shown that in many cases the smaller numbers of these groups allow for a type of experimentation and flexibility that is not possible in larger churches. This conclusion prompts us to state that Catholic communities develop similarly to other existing networks that are based on common interests and that use several tools to share everything about these interests with people both within and outside their own community. Alejandro Bermúdez stated that a virtual community must not be built, but instead that the tools let the community give birth to itself.

Furthermore, we have also discovered that the tools used to build community demonstrate that the Catholic communities are what we could call «in-line religion». Between religion online and online religion, we could place some of the studied sites like Aciprensa. com, Aleteia.org, Catholic.net and Catholic.com. They use a wide range of tools to build the community and make it bigger and stronger. These are comprised of blogs (42% of them), forums (11%), newsletters (63%), apps (68%), witness spaces (26%), online shops (26%), dating services (16%) and surveys and games (9%). 32% allow users to send materials to be published. These tools are based on interaction and participation, but they do not achieve a high level of activity. According to Celli (2013), the channels that the Church can use have multiplied, and this revolution must not be understood only in instrumental terms. The author also adds that the Church and the various groups that are part of it have to redefine their approach in order to avoid doing «what we have always done, only with new technology». The Catholic Church has always shown great interest in communication, not only as a technique but as a means for dialogue and as a tool to shape meaning. Thus, digitalization could lead to new ways of establishing relationships and building communion (Sorice 2012:137). This in-line religion is also evident in the

large contrast we find among those that include a lot of different contents and services – sometimes with difficulties – («overcomplete websites») and those that only offer information on static platforms that are rarely updated («simple websites»). Users can hardly understand the goals and intentions of these sites, and this situation could create some confusion in navigation by driving users only to contents and services that are easier to find. This characteristic explains why strong communities are sometimes created outside these web pages on social media platforms where users can navigate comfortably. As Wellington Campos explained to us, one example of this situation is Biblia Catolica.

Two limitations could arise and benefit from further research on this topic: concentrating on a less heterogeneous sample and choosing portals that have the same nature (e.g., informative or organizational) in order to arrive at specific conclusions about the different facets of each website. Here, we have focused on how those top 19 pages ranked by Alexa build community, and we did so by observing them in 3 waves over 3 different years, by interviewing their webmasters or editors and by analyzing them according to a set of questions we wanted answered. Still, our research had no interaction with the users of those communities, and a complete study should investigate their participation and measure their interaction. Further research could follow the lines indicated by Hutchings (2015a) regarding how the boundaries between leaders and followers are also renegotiated. The most effective online communicators are not necessarily those individuals who currently hold positions of authority within established religious organisations, and independent media producers can gain considerable attention.

We have observed that over last three years online Catholic communities are still not sufficiently digitally mature (they still struggle to incorporate interactive tools on a daily basis), but they are at a stage that could be considered their youth. They have members and know some people, but they are still learning, gaining experience and growing. Only hard work, determination, curiosity and their capacity to understand and make the most of their present context will make them successful. Their youth gives them every advantage; it depends on them not to miss the boat. The old captains should allow them to grow.

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