Digitalization in Activities of Non-state Actors: Example of the Church

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Abstract. This study considers the role of digitalization in activities of religious institutions using the example of the Roman Catholic Church. The digital innovations undertaken by the Holy See and their results are being studied. The analysis revealed the intense impact of digitalization on approaches of the RCC with the world community, namely the opportunities expanded that allowed the Holy See to strengthen the efficiency of its own ideas. It is noted that digitalization processes have acquired special significance for the church during the coronavirus pandemic in 2020, when traditional formats for the implementation of political aspirations were not available. Thus, digitalization contributes to the fact that even the church, being oriented towards traditionalism and keeping the fundamental principles in its activity, successfully uses digitalization as an instrument of adaptation to modern social changes in society.

Keywords: Digitalization · Holy See · Non-state actors · Roman Catholic Church · Vatican

1 Introduction

Like any social revolution, digitalization has a significant impact on activities of non-state actors in international relations, for example, religious institutions. The authors' choice of the church as an example to consider the impact of digitalization is due to the desire to demonstrate that activities of even the most "conservative" actors in international relations did not escape the impact of the "knowledge economy", but rather gave it new opportunities. If we turn to the history of the issue, the emergence of monotheism would have been unthinkable without the invention of writing, and the birth of Protestantism would have been impossible without the emergence of a set through moving letters. In turn, digitalization can lead to a new religious way of life, possibly even to the formation of new religions [13].

Digitalization leads to a gradual decrease in the distance between people and groups - this leads to a gradual but inexorable devaluation of the material component in many

areas of human existence, primarily in the field of information exchange. Now, not only the human voice has received a digital dimension, but the phones through which it is transmitted are becoming less common in the form of an analog gadget. Not only communication devices, but also all traditional means of culture have been digitized. A paper book is becoming increasingly rare, as is a vinyl record for sound reproduction, and in the cinema, where digital technologies are increasingly used, real actors are less featured [8].

But this devaluation of the material and the increasing role of numbers have affected other social areas [7]. Not only books and informational materials are converted into digital form, but such universal human notions, friendship, and even love are gradually being taken into the digital sphere. Thus, the concept of “friendship” from a real relationship between people turns into a banal connection between two accounts registered in a social network. Of course, these trends are widely used by NGOs and public institutions to digitalize their activities in those areas where this is appropriate.

2 Methodology

The authors determined the methods considering the purposes and objectives of the study in the format of the interdisciplinary approach, involving the use of historical and political science research principles in a comprehensive manner. The study is dominated by qualitative and quantitative content analyses. The qualitative research methods are mostly based on documentary research, scientific articles and analyses. The objective is to understand opinions, perceptions and activities of the Roman Catholic church implementing digitalization. Quantitative methods proved to be especially useful while analyzing the church’s activity on online platforms.

3 Results

Active digitalization of its resources is carried out by the Roman Catholic Church, represented in international relations by the state called the Holy See. The Holy See, due to its unique legal personality (a combination of both state and religious components), at the present stage develops foreign policy and diplomacy, making maximum use of all types of influence at the religious level: activates forms of communication alternative to official diplomacy, uses a flexible approach to changing conditions of international relations.

It must be understood that the term “Holy See” combines two entities – religious and political. Religious is the Roman Catholic church, with its extensive network of dioceses around the world. Political is the State Secretariat, which conducts the country’s foreign policy through the Second Section on Relations with States and some nunciatures and papal representations abroad. Both institutions are directly subordinate to the Pontiff. The city-state of the Vatican, on the territory of which the administrative buildings of the Secretariat are located, in turn, stands as a separate formation under the management of a special body – the Governorate with the Chairman at the head [6].

The Holy See is actively updating its public diplomacy, making it more inclusive, open to all, rebranding the Roman Catholic Church. The Pope pursues this policy gradually and imperceptibly: using existing methods and internal resources, redistributing functions. Solving the problem of reducing the number of believers and parishioners, the Pope does not tighten politics, but is looking for reasonable ways, meets principles which are contrary to some canonical ones, and incidentally it is confronted by certain religious and public circles.

As part of informatization of its resources, the Holy See launched a site that is visited by more than 0.5 billion people, Pope Francis has launched his pages on social networks Facebook, Twitter and Instagram. More than 1 million users subscribed to the Pontiff's Instagram account within 12 h after its launch. The most popular pontiff account is on Twitter in different languages. The number of subscribers to the English version is 18.3 million, plus 17.6 million subscribers to the Spanish version, 4.9 million – Italian, 4.5 million – Portuguese, 1.4 million – French, almost 1 million – Latin, and about 500 thousand – Arabic. Thus, the total number of followers of the Roman First Hierarchy on Twitter reaches about 50 million people. This is almost 10 times more than that of French President E. Macron (4.9 million) and almost 100 times more than that of Italian Prime Minister J. Conte (525.4 thousand). Appeals that the Pope addresses every Sunday flock, broadcast on all information channels of the Holy See. These appeals are an effective tool for soft power.

According to a 3RDPlace study [11], the number of Pope Francis searches on Google reached 1.737.300 per month. In 2013, it was one of the most requested on the network (more than 49 million references) and fell in line with V. Putin, B. Obama and A. Merkel.

Pontiff's Twitter account (in different languages) with publication statistics of 0.79 per day shows an average engagement level of 6.637. For comparison, Barack Obama's account, according to the study, has an average engagement level of 2.309, despite the statistics of daily publication of 7.76 tweets per day. This feature is explained by the fact that Obama's account is focused on delivering his own political idea, and the Pope uses social networks to communicate with believers and to develop the concept of a universal church.

The Vatican has always communicated using the latest technology. In 1989, the Vatican's press service installed 40 of the most modern computers at that time. Since 1991, the Vatican began to actively use programs and services (WORM, SEDOC), which contribute to more active and high-quality dissemination of information in a format convenient for recipients. In 1992, a special DEI system was created through which all the messages of the Pope are transmitted [5]. Thus, throughout the 90 s, the Vatican did everything possible so as not to remain in the "backyard" of new technologies and to "keep up with the faithful". In the mid-90 s, the Vatican did not have its own website. However, all the important events of the Catholic Church (Christmas masses, solemn blessed papal blessings of *Urbi et Orbi*) were broadcast through the services of the French satellite operator Eutelsat and the British WRN Broadcast. Pope John Paul II addressed believers during the genocide in Rwanda in 1994 and the conflict in Kosovo in 1999. For five and a half months, the Vatican Radio broadcast Albanian programs for the people of Kosovo with calls for peace and solidarity, as well as regularly updated information about the victims of the conflict for people who have

lost their loved ones. John Paul II considered the technological development of modern media to be an advantage for humanity [2]. As you know, pontiffs pay special attention to digital diplomacy in the acute phases of crises and conflicts, which often Italian authors call “direct dialogue with the disadvantaged”. So, during the Apostolic visit of Pope Francis to the United States in September 2015, the Vatican Television Center, together with the American television channel ABC, released a program in which American and Cuban young people could discuss various topics relevant to them. This was another stage at normalization of public relations between the two countries after the establishment of diplomatic dialogue.

On March 30, 1997 the Vatican launched its own official website www.vatican.va. According to the former head of the Pontifical Council for Mass Communications, Claudio Maria Celli, the Vatican’s activities in the Network space have become “a continuation of the Pope’s pastoral mission” and, accordingly, his digital diplomacy. The Vatican is closely following new trends in technology and does not stand aside: in 1999, on the eve of the Jubilee Year, Sony and the Vatican City launched a large-scale project, AbbaPater, in which 11 tracks were recorded combining music and the voice of John Paul II, in five languages. The media of the Vatican worked vividly and effectively in 2000, when the Vatican media was tasked with the most intensive and round-the-clock broadcasting of anniversary events, acquainting the public (not only the Catholic, but the entire world community) with the goals of the Holy See in the new millennium.

On January 28, 2013, in Rome, at the conference “The Future of Communication is Responsibility” (Rome, January 28, 2013), a study by Eurisko was presented under the auspices of the Pontifical Council for Mass Communications, which aimed to determine the potential of Catholic media that expand and implement new principles of work, based on the following criteria: seriousness, accuracy, firm position, clarity of criteria and logic. According to the results of the study, being Catholic is becoming popular, which means participating in the universal “right” mission [3].

In the framework of this area, a policy is being developed to reorganize the activities of the Holy See mass media, which resulted in the creation of a unified information network Aleteia. This reform has yielded results – more than 67 million Catholics from the USA, Great Britain and Ireland have already been on the social network [11]. Aleteia is the first worldwide Catholic information network under the auspices of the Pontifical Commission on Mass Communications, which discusses issues of life, faith and society in 6 languages (English, Spanish, French, Portuguese and Arabic). According to the agency, more than 1300 are participating in its work. Catholic partners and more than 800 experts preparing materials. In addition, in the very near future it is planned to launch a new electronic resource, Dot.catholic, which will become the main electronic platform, uniting all the marked churches and dioceses of the Roman Catholic Church.

From the point of view of the Vatican, the church is called to be where there are people. Since now the entire electronic network also consists of people, there should be a church there. The Pope calls not to be afraid to become full-fledged “citizens” of the 21st century information society. It is important to note that Francis puts a special meaning in the concept of “citizen” in his messages, bearing in mind that being so means commitment and the desire to create a common good for society [12]. In his

opinion, modern digital technologies have given impetus to the creation of a completely new social space within which it is possible to build such connections that will have an impact on societies and their culture. Thus, the Pontiff raises the question of relations between the church and society, which are regulated at different levels, the most important of which, in his opinion, is the global Internet. He gives him central importance in building a new type of relationship between believers and representatives of secular society. With his call for active participation in digital contacts, he paves the way for building such a dialogue. This model of behavior of the Catholic Church is rooted in history. At the time when society was moving from verbal to written communication, the Church was the first to use a new type of communication. Thus, its written appeals acquired importance, and even holiness. The same attitude was won by their authors. So now the Catholic Church is striving to be the first to apply new forms of communication in the digital space for the effective implementation of its policy.

The rapid development of digitalization of the Roman Catholic Church is due to the orientation of young believers. It is no coincidence that the XV General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops, which was held in the Vatican in October 2018, was dedicated to the theme “Youth, Faith, and Recognition of Callings”. The work of the synod was not only accompanied by official comments of the Vatican, but was also tracked and posted on social networks by the faithful Catholics: 1,400 tweets marked with the official hashtag “# Synod2018” in six different languages published by the Vatican News and Vatican Radio channels, with 100 000 reposts on Twitter, 10 million users following the event on Facebook, 650 thousand views on Instagram [14]. In total, five hundred different full-fledged materials were posted on social networks, including publications, articles, images and videos. And 50 million people all over the world noted a message on Twitter by Pope Francis on the Synod and published on October 24, in which the Pontiff explained in nine languages that “this Synod should become a symbol of the Church that can listen, a church that does not always have ready Answers”. These statistics are published by the Secretariat for Communications as a report on the activities of the Vatican in social networks and on the activities of the Synod on Youth Issues.

During the Synod, participants were presented a study conducted by the Catholic information network Aleteia in collaboration with St Mary’s University in London and Ramon Lull University in Barcelona, which analyzed Facebook and Instagram accounts of 540 million people around the world – representatives of young people aged 18 to 25 years who used social networks to search for information on religious issues. Among the most mentioned queries – the primacy was given to the figure of the Pontiff – Pope Francis.

The results of the study showed that only 4% of young people share content related to Catholicism in social networks. This share is much less than the number of those who use the Internet to search for branded items and consumer goods. However, it was noted that young people who are interested in religion have a higher level of education. The overall picture was approximately as follows: 5 million young people are interested in the issues of faith in Brazil, 2 million are registered in the Philippines, 1 million in India, and 700 thousand young people in Italy, and a smaller number were recorded in other countries.

When considering digitalization of religion and the Roman Catholic Church, the Catholic world was divided into two camps on social networks, as well as in real life – the so-called “liberals” who support the reforms of Pope Francis, and the “conservatives” who they do not approve of his innovations and are grouped around several cardinal oppositionists. One of the most prominent representatives of the latter is Cardinal Raymond Leo Burke, who is considered the leader of the traditionalist wing of the church. However, when typing the hashtag #cardinalburke in any search service, you can easily find the full chronicle of the life of the prelate, published by different users from all over the world, and see that it is very popular.

At the same time, digitalization is not only an instrument of the internal polemics of the church, it is an important element in the spread of dogma around the world. Earlier the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith (the current Congregation of Evangelization) sent missionaries to different parts of the globe, now it can be done through online resources [10]. In any case, online sites that unite Catholics on Skype or other instant messengers regularly publish new services for Catholics: for example, a specially created application for the DinDonDan smartphone, which allows you to find the closest mass to the user’s location, as well as get the current working hours of temples and service schedules.

The next striking achievement of Catholic digitalization was the development of electronic beads “Click to Pray eRosar”⁴. An interactive cross is placed in the center of the device (the cost of which does not exceed 100 euros), which stores the technological data of the connected application on the smartphone. This device was created to assist believers in prayer [9].

The application that ensures the operation of the gadget is very easy to use: after activation, it allows you to access audio guides, exclusive images and personalized content, depending on the type of rosary chosen (there are thematic collections of prayers for young people, the elderly, for migrants and refugees, etc.). The Click to Pray eRosary application was completely “launched” by the Vatican. According to Frederic Fornos, head of the Pope’s Worldwide Prayer Network website (Rete Mondiale di Preghiera del Papa), “the challenge is to offer the world one of the millennia-old spiritual traditions of the Church through the best of modern technology,” always with a focus on acquiring new and supporting the youngest believers. After creating the “DinDonDan” application (Android and Apple), the Roman Catholic Church received the “Church 2.0” feature in the media, and the appearance of “Click to Pray eRosary” “updated” the religious institute in Italian media to version 3.0.

4 Discussion

Digitalization of the church played a role in the crisis that took place in the world; it turned out to be prepared for isolation caused by the coronavirus. RCC broadcasts not only the Holy Mass, which is served by Pope Francis every day, but also many other priests. All broadcasts are live thanks to the Tv2000 Vatican TV channel, which completely changed its schedule during the day, offering people, in addition to news about the coronavirus infection, all the necessary programs about spiritual life.

In conditions of self-isolation, the possibilities for leading a spiritual life for believers became even more increased. This is because 10 years ago, the Conference of Bishops of Italy (CEI) began to actively develop a project called the “Digital Shepherd”. Between 2009 and 2011, CEI organized four national conferences to push the Italian dioceses and Catholic media to make more active use of the digital platform. The conference data already received the following names: “Church on the Web 2.0” (2009), “Digital Certificate” (2010), “Diocese on the Web” (2010) and “Digital Residents” (2011). At that time, Don Domenico Pompili, who was firmly convinced in the choice of digital language as a new tool for evangelization and dissemination of Catholic culture, was the director of the National Service for Social Communication of CEI. Today, D. Pompili is a bishop and it is no coincidence that he belongs to the circle of proxies of Pope Francis. The site of his diocese is an example of the spread of the Christian faith over the Internet. The materials of the electronic resource called “Faith Clings to the Network” (developed by D. Pompili) contain information on dozens of social initiatives of parish priests, laity and Catholic educators.

Thus, digital investments made by CEI from 2009 to 2011 are bearing fruit. The diocesan sites of the Roman Catholic Church that have arisen in recent years provide opportunities for streaming divine liturgies performed by bishops, as well as many other religious events. In the same way, there is an extensive network of Catholic weekly newspapers that work full time and guarantee online support for believers informing them about the activities of the parish/diocese and enable people to participate in the spiritual life of church communities in a timely manner.

At the same time, the idea of digitalization belongs not only to the Roman Curia and to the staff of the respective church institutions. Digitalization initiatives are supported by simple priests and laity. For example, Don Paolo Padrini (diocese of Tortona) is one of the first Italian priests to be engaged in digital shepherding: every day he sends WhatsApp to his endless list of friends, links to the live broadcast of the mass on the Youtube channel from the episcopate’s chapel Tortona.

Don Alessandro Di Medio, the parish priest of San Francesco Saverio in Garbatella, is well known in Rome for his “innovative pastoral ways”, thanks to which young people from 19 to 29 years old can go through the daily “spiritual route for thought” during Lent through the Sir website (informational CEI agency). Also, in Rome, Father Roberto Cassano, the parish priest of São Paulo della Croce in Corvial, did not want his believers to forget about the liturgy, so he broadcasts the mass via Facebook. He also activated a chat for believers in WhatsApp and prepared an app for the parish, where every parishioner can find comments on gospel, prayers, fundraising announcements for charity, in times of crisis.

Parish priest initiatives are being reported throughout Italy, especially regarding maintaining relations with their communities. “There are many masses on the net, but for each of us it is of great importance,” prelates remark, “if we conduct them specifically for our parishioners”. In addition, any church, for example the Roman Catholic Church, has a significant archive. The Vatican Archive is a valuable repository of documents of interest to historians from around the world. Following current trends, the Holy See began to translate and archive activities in digital format.

The process of archiving all editorial documents, now in a multimedia format, will allow you to access the documents, as well as make their full digitization and

preservation. In addition, the media will also include media inherited from other organizations that are part of the Holy See Communications Department. Starting from 2019, materials are acquired and gradually digitized, to become publicly available to scientific community.

The Vatican Archive is the central archive of the Holy See, where all documents relating to the state and pastoral activities of the Pontiff and the activities of the Holy See are stored. The documents limited to specific periods are available for review by qualified researchers upon written application and submission from the accredited historical research institute [1]. The documentary heritage stored in its vast collections covers a chronological period of about twelve centuries (VIII–XX centuries) and consists of more than 600 archival collections. Although it is not the largest archive in the world in number, it is the largest in the world in geography of coverage – all continents and all states where the Catholic Church is present.

5 Conclusion

The Roman Catholic Church is an example of a traditional religious institution that, despite two major stages of reformation - the First and Second Vatican Councils, has changed many principles, but has not abandoned the fundamental doctrine of Christian doctrine [4]. Traditional religious institutions that adhere to this doctrine cannot fully transfer their activities to online mode. That is why the sacraments of the church, such as confession and communion, will always remain inaccessible to the digital format. However, in cases where this seems possible, the church actively and successfully applies the achievements of digitalization, which is a positive example of adaptation to modern social changes in society. The presence of such an approach allows a religious institution (as, indeed, any other actor in public life) to exist and strengthen its position in the present with a view to the future.

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