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Managing Digital Media During the Lockdown: The Case of Sanctuaries in Lazio, Italy

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The period of the first COVID-19 total lockdown in Italy and in the world offered a very interesting context to evaluate the use of Mobile Information and Communication Technologies (MICTs) by Catholic shrines for their pastoral care. This research was carried out through a survey and interviews with leaders (rectors) of sanctuaries of Lazio, the region of Italy where Rome is placed. The sample chosen evaluates which initiatives the rectors of these sanctuaries have undertaken to keep in touch with the faithful and other constituencies during the first pandemic lockdown. As in the case of *telework*, which allowed working at a distance, we focus our attention on the way those shrines maintained contact with people using digital technology. While according to the Catholic Church, there are elements of faith in which the physical presence is mandatory (e.g.: for the validity of a sacrament), that does not exclude the many pastoral activities which can be done online, as some Catholic shrines managed to do. Besides offering relevant case studies on the integration of ICTs within the Catholic Church during Covid19, this research could inspire further reflections about the place of ICTs in the Church pastoral.

Key Words: ICT, MICT, social networks, social media, pastoral care, digital pastoral care, digital religion, digital theology

Introduction

Like all other structures, religious places that receive visitors as pilgrims, general tourists or religious tourists (Smith, 1992; Mutangala, 2022) have faced the situation of immobility and restricted movements imposed by the COVID-19 pandemic. These three categories of visitors have been the subject of study by many researchers who have focused on the relationship between religion and tourism (Timothy & Olsen, 2006). The measures adopted by several countries to stop the transmission of the virus left a field of free action and creativity for all that is related to ICTs. The use of mobile technology devices such as smartphones and tablets in the context of the ubiquity of the Internet today leads us to talk about Mobile Information and Communication Technologies (MICTs) and not just ICTs. This implies mobility when it comes to those who connect and the opportunity to use different media for those who produce the content, as two pillars of this exchange (Cantoni, Di Blas & Bolchini, 2003). This current level of technology makes it possible to overcome the limits imposed by space and time (Mutangala, 2022).

On the one hand, we have the pandemic that forced everyone to reduce their movements in space, and on the other we have technological mobility and its tools that guarantee interconnection despite distance. This is what motivated us to focus on some pilgrimage and tourism sites to see the options taken as well as their implications in the technological field to maintain contact with visitors and worshippers.

For this reason, we will analyse the management of communication during the pandemic period in some sanctuaries of the Lazio Region in Italy during the first general containment. We consider the period from 20 March 2020 (Salute.gov.it, 22/03/2020) until 18 May 2020, when the Catholic Church was able to reopen parishes to the faithful (Marzano, 2021). This decision of the Italian National Episcopal Conference was based on the provisions of the Italian Council of Ministers for the second phase: *Dpcm per la fase 2: se ami l'Italia mantieni le distanze* – 'if you love Italy keep your distance' (Governo.it, 27/04/2020).

The health crisis was very hard in many countries and the rigorous reduction of movements created conditions that put the use of technology in pastoral work to the forefront. This challenging period was seen also as an opportunity for the integration of technology into the pastoral practices of different denominations that opted to remain in contact with visitors and faithful, despite the immobility imposed by the pandemic. Participants in religious events were already using, up to a certain extent, mobile applications and instant messaging (Narbona & Arasa, 2016) and integrating mobile information and communication technologies into their religious experiences (De Ascaniis, Mutangala & Cantoni, 2018). However, the pandemic created an unexpected context, in which digital media presented themselves as the only effective channel to tackle the necessary governmental restrictions related to the pandemic.

Mobile devices allow their users to access and share a wide variety of data. Innovation combines ubiquity and mobility: these two dimensions have considerably revolutionised and will continue to revolutionise many aspects of the encounter between religion and technological innovations (Mutangala, 2022). At the pastoral level, we focus on the use of Web Applications, Responsive Web Design platforms and Native Applications (Victor & Babaci, 2017). The level of tourism, pilgrimage and pastoral life has suffered a lot, and it is this difficulty that has been transformed into opportunities for ICT in places of worship and pilgrimage. We will look at what shrines did to keep in touch with the people who attended them before the pandemic, those who had left their contact details there, and what they did to keep in touch also with their own parishioners. How did the sanctuaries in Lazio manage the pandemic situation in order to not lose contact with their visitors? We chose Lazio because the area has many places that welcome people with different motivations for their visits.

Literature Review

In this section, studies about MICT, their integration within pastoral care and their emergence during the COVID-19 pandemic are briefly presented.

Among the new trends emerging due to the pandemic, there is teleworking, which relies on transportable

computers. Since the 2000s, studies have been carried out to explore the impact of teleworking on organisations and the advantages it offers in order to better balance work and family life, especially for women (Tremblay, 2001). Telework is multifaceted and difficult to regulate in a uniform way (Baruch, 2000, 2021; Taskin, 2006). While such studies started well before the pandemic, COVID-19 dramatically accelerated its practices and further studies about it (Dahmani & Elakry, 2020) as well as about digitalisation at large. In general, telework has demonstrated the actual possibility to execute complex and coordinated activities in an effective and efficient way without travelling, thanks to digital media (Smith, 2021).

A related dimension is the possibility of dramatically reducing physical contacts among people while still collaborating / interacting with them and with technical tools: this can be seen in the e-business sector or in contactless functions (Smith, 2021). This aspect, which excludes any physical contact between people, and between people and objects, poses however, a serious and relevant problem for the sacramental dimension of faith life in the Catholic Church.

In general, the integration of technologies in social life has undergone great changes in recent years if we consider the complexity and diversity related to the so-called fourth industrial revolution (Babinet, 2015, 2016; Floridi, 2017; Ducrey & Vivier, 2017). This concerns the whole new environment marked by new digital technologies which includes the contributions of Industry 4.0, the Internet of Things, Big Data, Interactivity on digital Social Media, the synergistic integration of IT, the crossing of physical and online processes, Artificial Intelligence and its assets as well as 5G; all innovations that make technology more and more present in the daily lives of humans. Such increased presence challenges the Catholic doctrine to consider a deeper understanding of the context.

With regard to the integration of activities related to church pastoral care, we can point to a number of publications: Giulia Isetti and colleagues considered the experience of pastoral work at a distance from the point of view of the faithful (Isetti, De Rachewiltz, Walder, Pechlaner & Weithaler, 2021). Further studies have focused on issues of the 'remote church', initiating a reflection on

the implications of online pastoral care (Campbell, 2020; Byrne & Nuzum, 2020; West, 2020). Isetti, Innerhofer, Pechlaner and Rachewiltz (2020) have provided research on religion in the digital age, considering the integration of new media, while Marzano (2020) undertook a qualitative study about how the Catholic Church faced an unexpected situation during the pandemic. These studies lay the groundwork for a reflection on pastoral and theological subjects in the digital age.

The presence of priests on the Internet had been studied by assessing their online pastoral presence, the contribution of ICT in the priestly mission and the challenge of the Church in digital media (Cantoni, Rapetti, Tardini, Vannini, Arasa & Ruiz, 2012; Marchetti, 2015; Lacovi, Badurina & Džini, 2018).

A further major issue tackled in previous research has been that of religious authority in the digital context (Campbell, 2021). Researchers have looked at specific areas, such as a study on the place of the Internet in the pastoral care of the Catholic Church in South Tyrol (Isetti, Stawinoga & Pechlaner, 2021), or a study on the various elements to consider while approaching online pastoral care (Campbell, 2020).

The Catholic Pope's presence on social networks has inaugurated a different type of communication and a different kind of papal pastoral care, as suggested by Narbona (2016), while the pandemic invited the Church to further adopt a different paradigm for its mission (O'Neill, 2020; Pillay, 2020). The ecumenical dimension of sharing spiritual materials during the pandemic has been studied by Johnson (2020), while Singh looked at the role of religion in combating the distress of believers during the COVID-19 period (Singh, 2020), a period that allowed also for a church outside the walls and a church at home (Plüss, 2020).

Other religious contexts have been explored *vis-a-vis* the pandemic, for instance a scientific study with theological perspectives in the Islamic context of the impact which smart media has in the spiritual experience of Hajj (Qurashi & Sharpley, 2018; Ahmad & Ahad, 2021), while Pavlovi (2020) has assessed the religious implications of social distancing imposed by the pandemic in the Orthodox Church.

The pandemic has also had impacts on religious tourism and pilgrimage (Raj, 2020; Dowson, 2020), the situation has provided an opportunity to reflect on the present and future of faith-based travel (Olsen, 2020), Mróz (2021) has focused on pilgrimage and religious tourism in the first six months of the pandemic in Europe. Virtual tours were already in existence before the pandemic and were being examined as technological developments (Kim, 2017), but the COVID-19 pandemic provided a fertile ground for both their development and their deeper examination (Dunn-Hensley, 2020).

The question of integration of technology in the field of pastoral care was already interesting researchers before the pandemic. This is the case in the observation of a permanent need to integrate certain technological aspects into the religious experience (Ventura & Zanoni, 2019; ISR, 2020). In this sense, the pandemic crisis can be seen as an element that has underlined and intensified a reflection that had already begun.

Many studies have tried to understand the impact and the perception of digital media in the pastoral, in the community of believers as well as in the mission (Agnor, 2018; Mpofu, 2021), up to the point that churches might foster a digital ecclesiology (Campbell, 2020). However, going forward, social distancing imposed by the pandemic will have very broad implications on everyone's social behaviour (Adegboyega, Boddie, Dorvie, Bolaji, Adedoyin & Moore, 2021). It is also important to analyse the place of creativity in religion and the role of religiosity in believers' experience (Liu, Guo, Sun, Wang & Wu, 2018).

Further studies have reflected on popular celebrations before and after COVID-19 focusing on the experience in Bari, Italy (Ivona & Privitera, 2020) or the impact on religious activities in Malta (Zammit, 2020), the impact of the pandemic on a place of pilgrimage such as the Koyasan Temple in Japan (Progano, 2021), the value of home stability such as among the Benedictines (Salim, 2021) or the experience of online pastoral care of pastors in the Philippines (Paras, Sy & Tus, 2021).

Research Methodology

First of all, in this study we chose to base our investigation on the sanctuaries of Lazio. The selection of particular sites was based on the lists proposed by the following two sites: ‘*lazionascosto.it / santuari-del-lazio*’ and ‘*viaggimedievali.com*’.

The first site, which presents the places of pilgrimage in Lazio, offers an extensive section on sanctuaries. In order to double-check that list, we then examined a second site, which takes up some of the first and adds others. Thus, based on the elements collected on these two sites, we made up the complete list of seventeen places to be studied. The research population included the following sanctuaries:

- *Madonna dell’Auricola* of Amaseno;
- *Madonna di Canneto* of Settefrati;
- *Madonna della Cività* of Itri;
- *Madonna del Colle* of Lenola;
- *Fonte Colombo* of Rieti;
- *Santa Maria della Foresta* in Rieti;
- *Eremo di Greccio*;

- *Mentorella-Capranica* in Prenestina;
- *Convent of San Giacomo* in Poggio Bustone;
- *Madonna del Ruscello* of Vallerano;
- *Madonna del Soccorso* of Cori;
- *Santissima Trinità* of Vallepietra;
- *Madonna del Tufo* of Rocca di Papa;
- *Maria in Vescovio* of Torri in Sabina;
- *Madonna del Divino Amore* of Castel di Leva;
- The monastery of Saint Benedict of *Sacro Speco* of Subiaco and;
- The basilica-sanctuary *Santa Cristina* of Bolsena.

The second step was to contact all sites by phone. After three weeks with several attempts, out of the 17 sanctuaries, 10 responded and agreed to participate in the research, while 7 did not respond or informed about their non participation.

The third step was to send all participants a questionnaire by e-mail. Two participated in an interview: the *Sacro Speco* in Subiaco and the *Santissima Trinità* in Vallepietra. After several iterations, all 10 sanctuaries provided the requested qualitative data (Guelfand, 2013).

Table 1: The 10 Studied Sanctuaries of Lazio

Sanctuaries	Addresses	Activities	Website
Convento San Giacomo-Poggio Bustone	Piazzale Missioni Fr. 02018, Poggio Bustone-Rieti (RI)	No	https://www.santuarivallesanta.com/santuari/poggio-bustone/
Eremo di Greccio-Greccio	Santuario di Greccio, 02045, Greccio-Rieti (RI)	No	https://www.santuarivallesanta.com/santuari/greccio/
Fonte Colombo-Rieti	Via Fonte Colombo, 40, 02100-Rieti (RI)	Yes	https://www.santuarivallesanta.com/santuari/fonte-colombo/
Madonna dell’Auricola-Amaseno	Località Auricola, 03021, Amaseno (FR)	Yes	No website
Madonna del Divino Amore-Castel di Leva	Via del santuario, 10, 00134, Roma (RM)	Yes	http://www.santuariodivinoamore.it/index.php
Madonna del Tufo-Rocca di Papa	Via Ariccia, 1, 00040, Rocca di Papa-Roma (RM)	No	No website
Maria in Vescovio-Torri in Sabina	Vocabolo Vescovio, 02049, Torri in Sabina (RI)	Yes	Reference to the site of Madonna del Colle
Santa Maria della Foresta-Rieti	Via Foresta, 30, 02100, Rieti (RI)	No	https://www.santuarivallesanta.com/santuari/la-foresta/
Santissima Trinità-Vallepietra	Santuario SS Trinità, 00020, Vallepietra (RM)	Yes	https://santuariovallepietra.it/
Sacro Speco-Subiaco	Monastero San Benedetto, 00028, Subiaco (RM)	Yes	https://benedettini-subiaco.org/

The research focused on the challenges of these sanctuaries in Lazio during the pandemic. Through the answers given by the rectors of these places we want to see how they behaved as ‘churches at a distance’ (Campbell, 2020; Isetti, Stawinoga & Pechlaner, 2021).

The questionnaire submitted to the rectors of the 10 sanctuaries includes questions about the sanctuary itself, the respondent, which online communication activities were carried out in the sanctuary during the lockdown, and which ones were expected to remain after it. Such questions help to assess the integration of MICTs into

the pastoral care of these shrines in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic and beyond it.

Results

The results are outlined in Table 1 and Table 2: the first table briefly presents the shrines, while the second one their digital activities. Among the six sanctuaries that did not participate in the research, one does not have a working e-mail, another informed us that they were serving a very small community and thus, decided not to do anything with digital technologies. In another case, a change in the rector was underway.

Table 2: Online Pastoral Activities During the First Lockdown

Sanctuaries	Online Activities	Activities in presence	Other activities
Sacro Speco			- Message of solidarity
Madonna dell’Auricola	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Streaming celebrations - Involvement of the whole parish in online prayer for and with families who have lost a member - Involvement of everyone in the preparation of Holy Week - Meditation on the seven words of Jesus on the cross - Repetition of some traditional texts - Silent procession of the Cross. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - <i>Pronto?</i> initiative “<i>Noi ci siamo</i>” - Concrete assistance to elderly, lonely and frail people - Listening and solutions to their needs - Psychological support, spiritual accompaniment, ad hoc home service, and meal distribution. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Innovative youth and community involvement. - Caritas volunteers - Youth from National Service - Youth from groups and movements (Scouts & Azione Cattolica).
Madonna del Divino Amore	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Streaming Rosary on Youtube channel and on Facebook page. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Nothing reported 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Daily Mass on TV 2000 - Involvement of the Oblates of the shrine community.
Fonte Colombo	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Keep in touch with the regular faithful of the shrine through the website. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Nothing reported 	
Santissima Trinità	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Contact with groups and companies through Whatsapp, Facebook and Youtube of the Shrine, - Transmission of moments of prayer, certain moments of the life of the Shrine 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Nothing reported 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Involvement of the faithful of the parish to which the shrine is attached.
Maria in Vescovio	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Share through Whatsapp the homilies of the Pope and the Gospel of the day - Relay the content of the official channel of the diocese: Lauds, Vespers, Lectio Divina, Via Crucis and the Rosary - Use of email 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Nothing reported 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Collaboration with families to help them educate their children in the faith - A documentary film has been made on different channels to make the shrine known - Use of the telephone.

Online Pastoral Activities During the First Lockdown

There was a great difference in using technologies during the pandemic period. Five shrines actively used technologies in their activities. They involved already existing youth and volunteer groups, and social networks were used to share information about people who needed assistance. The shrines guaranteed concrete assistance for needy categories of people by reaching out to the elderly, the lonely and the frail for concrete vital services. They also cared for children, by guaranteeing moments of education in faith, in collaboration with parents. Together with the pastoral operators and the members of the shrine community, it was necessary to stream Masses and various devotional activities through Youtube channels, or Facebook pages. These were often announced through WhatsApp groups or official shrine websites.

The initiatives were thought out and developed in the shrines themselves or by using the materials that the diocese had prepared for those who were in a situation of limited movement. This also allowed some Sanctuaries to present elements of their religious heritage that they did not know how to propose during face-to-face activities: ceremonies were proposed to those who connected to the platforms of the shrines, with an emphasis on images and silence.

Teamwork to cope with the situation of limited movement

At *Santissima Trinità*, the initiatives that were carried out during this period were made possible thanks to the work of the Communications Officer of the Shrine, which was supported by the whole community of the faithful of the parish-shrine. At *Maria in Vescovio*, everything that

the Shrine proposed during this period was first shared and discussed in the liturgical group and with all the members of the catechists' group. At *Fonte Colombo*, it was the fruit of the involvement of the members of the fraternity and the assistance of some people from outside. At *Madonna del Divino Amore*, television broadcast was made possible thanks to the collaboration of the teams of a media group (TV 2000), and the streaming transmissions counted on the expertise of various teams of the Oblate seminary who are also attached to the shrine. At *Madonna dell'Auricola*, the proposals came from the person in charge of social communications at the Shrine's pastoral council, and then went to a team of eight people, including teenagers and young people. These eight young people competently managed the various initiatives of the shrine, publishing them on Facebook, Instagram, Youtube and the official website of the shrine. They are part of the communication team in which all these proposals were discussed before being published on the different platforms. In all cases, the rector had the final say before the publication. Table 3 summarises the various teamwork solutions applied by the five sanctuaries that extensively used digital media.

Everywhere, there was an experience of collaboration between members of the shrine community and experts from within or outside the community itself. In the sanctuary where a group of young people collaborated, the experience included activities online, in presence and further involvement of shrine's groups.

Getting involved in communication to stay present

Hereafter, we present how the shrines communicated the presence of the sanctuary during the time of containment.

Table 3: Collaboration

Sanctuaries	Teamwork Participants			
Sacro Speco				
Madonna del Divino Amore	Rector	TV Broadcast Team	Oblate Seminary	
Fonte Colombo	Rector	Members of the Fraternity	Extern Experts	
Santissima Trinità	Rector	Communication Officer	Community of the shrine	
Maria in Vescovio	Rector	Liturgical Group	Catechists Group	
Madonna dell'Auricola	Rector	Communication Office	Pastoral Council	Team of Young People

At *Santissima Trinità*, they sought to keep in touch with those who know the platforms of the shrine through moments of prayer that were transmitted on the Facebook page of the shrine and materials shared in various related WhatsApp groups. At *Maria in Vescovio*, the Shrine used WhatsApp groups to share links of the celebrations of the diocese and used Zoom for some activities with the faithful of the Shrine.

Madonna del Divino Amore made this period become an opportunity to improve the official website of the shrine on which the quarterly magazine is published. Together with the rector of the shrine it was decided to keep the visibility of the shrine by participating in the TV 2000 programme 'Bel tempo si spera' (*Good Weather is to be Hoped for*), through a video documentary that was made with the NSL network about the shrine, and also by participating in the Vatican Radio programmes 'Pop Theology' and 'La finestra del Papa' (*Pope's Window*).

According to answers by *Madonna dell'Auricola*, the shrine

continued to live with a great spirit of faith and devotion. The spiritual and pastoral activities were offered with the support of digital communication tools. The use of technology allowed us to maintain an active and Christian presence towards those who knew the Shrine and those who came closer to it only during this period of confinement. It was necessary to use all possible means to transmit optimistic and trusting messages. It was also a commitment to encourage prayer and participation in the celebrations offered in streaming. In fact, thanks to these technological tools, the shrine allowed the exchange of news between different families in relation to various events that concerned them. It was possible to spread the shrine's own devotion by using the prayer and votive images of Our Lady venerated in this prayer site'.

A 'Gospel of the Day' initiative was also launched, which continues to this day and consists of finding a phrase from the Gospel and associating it with a work of art in the shrine. According to them, this moment and all of the initiatives carried out have nourished the image of the Shrine as a place where everyone is welcomed and loved, a place that offers material and spiritual support. It was always encouraged not to give up to the temptation of

virtualising the experience of faith but rather to emphasise the community dimension through all available means.

The Future of Online Activities

In this section, the future mission of a Shrine and the role of digital media after the lockdown experience is presented, based on what individual respondents declared, based on first experiences immediately after the lockdown, as well as on their intentions and plans for the future.

At *Santissima Trinità*, the activities that were carried out during the confinement will continue to be used in winter to keep in touch with the families and pilgrims. Most of them appreciated what was done and shared online during the pandemic moment.

At *Maria in Vescovio*, what was done during the confinement will be improved to offer a remote catechises using Google Meet to share online video lessons. The sanctuary team will share formation materials and their monthly schedule via Google Drive. The team members will be trained to acquire the necessary skills to take better advantage of the potential of the digital field. During the pandemic the main challenge was their evangelising mission which was underlined with the centrality of celebrating Eucharistic adoration. This mission takes on a Marian dimension thanks to the welcome that is offered in relation to the sacrament of reconciliation. For the shrine it is Mary who welcomes every pilgrim and visitor. She speaks to their hearts and guides them towards Jesus 'Ad Jesum per Mariam'. Prepared volunteers offer tourists a detailed artistic and historical tour. Each visit to the shrine helps participants to understand the spirituality of this place beyond the historical-artistic aspect. It is a privileged opportunity to rediscover the Christian roots of the history of the place and of the Christian faith with the visitors and through these online spaces.

At *Fonte Colombo*, the shrine remains a place of pilgrimage, especially because of its link with St. Francis of Assisi. The number of pilgrims has shown a slight growth at the reopening, especially in relation to domestic travellers. The shrine continues to offer its ordinary pastoral activity for the territory through the community of the Secular Franciscan Order and via its website.

At *Madonna del Divino Amore*, the initiatives organised during the confinement allowed for an increase in the number of visits after reopening, both during the week and on festive days. The shrine will use digital tools to continue their mission. They will use digital tools for Sunday and for other holidays. The pandemic changed many things in the shrine; in the summer, the celebrations were organised in the open air because of the number of faithful and to respect the distances. In October a new sanctuary was inaugurated, with a capacity for about 500 people, respecting the sanitary and social distance guidelines.

The online aim of *Madonna dell'Auricola* was to keep, maintain and grow the relationship with pilgrims and tourists who knew the shrine. A commitment was made not to lose the relationships that were developed during the lockdown. It was decided to continue the streaming of all special events at the shrine. The Shrine will continue with the virtual initiative 'Light a candle for Our Lady'. This consists of making an offering and leaving a personal intention. The shrine team will reply by e-mail within 24 hours to let you know that the prayer has been made. The shrine keeps the initiative of the virtual visit and gives the faithful the possibility to tell on its pages a devotional experience lived and linked to the shrine. The confinement has led to a very effective use of the tools that were already used before. The experience of the confinement has shown that technological tools can offer some pilgrimage experiences, but cannot replace the actual visit to it.

In the survey, the question 'Do you have in mind some important feedback received during the lockdown from pilgrims and tourists?' was included. While five shrines did not report anything, *Madonna dell'Auricola* reported that

the feedback is positive when we see on the shrine pages the 10,000 likes on Facebook as well as 4,000 views of the celebrations transmitted in streaming on Sunday. This is also confirmed by the fact that the streaming is followed by people from the territory and from outside our area. Many people have called in to share an experience or just to ask for prayer.

For the shrine this was welcomed as a reward for the effort made by the shrine team to stay close to the people

especially during this time of great difficulty. Through empathy, social involvement and sharing, the Shrine Team became convinced that they 'had served humans and God'.

Discussion

The studied shrines had to produce their own elements with volunteers from the community or share elements produced elsewhere for their contacts. In this way they invented new modalities of their pastoral care by utilising social networks as channels to keep in touch with parishioners and visitors who had left their address for further contacts. The concept of action without physical contact accompanied all the activities of this period, but it was only the pandemic circumstance that guaranteed their validity and legality (CIC, 1983:can. 841). However, the physical presence and the concrete rites create, strengthen and manifest ecclesiastical communion (CIC, 1983:can. 840). There are activities that can be done at distance, but there are others that cannot. The validity and licitness depend on the authority of the Church. The question of presence and absence at a rite has also been at the centre of debates in the Orthodox liturgy of Serbia in relation to the restrictions due to the pandemic (Pavlovi, 2020:117).

In the shrine of the *Madonna dell'Auricola* the respondents pointed out the temptation to give in to the virtualisation of the faith experience, they also underlined that technology can promote pilgrimage, but cannot replace it. It is peculiar of the religious dimension to go beyond what can be considered by a touristic gaze. In fact, the World Tourism Organisation, which considers religious tourism, recognises that it nevertheless has a spiritual dimension that goes well beyond the tourism industry.

This period has increased church practices that can be called 'digital ecclesiology' (Campbell, 2020). It has been a particularly favourable time – what in Christian religion is called a *Kairòs* (καίρως) – which resulted in the integration of ICTs and MICTs into church practices, a time that invites deeper reflections about church, faith and technologies. In pastoral care, understood as any action of the pastor (bishop, priest, rector, etc.) in favour of the faithful or of the people who are spiritually linked to them, technological tools have shown to be a possible way to stay in contact with members of different

communities who could not leave their homes. The shrines that used ICTs were of great help in spiritually supporting families in difficulty by offering them comfort and support, but, this is not to be taken as a refuge in faith to seek comfort and security, as Isetti's group says (Isetti, De Rachewiltz, Walder, Pechlaner & Weithaler, 2021). Those tools allowed different communities to gather at a distance around families who were living the drama of COVID-19 (*Madonna dell'Auricola* and *Maria in Vescovio*).

Zach Lambert (2020) speaks of the facilitation of digital friendships; this period introduced several shrines to an area in which the young people who were involved in the management of the platforms had a specific field in which they were effectively useful to the parish community in developing and supporting the tools of digital pastoral work (*Madonna del Divino Amore*, *Madonna dell'Auricola*). It was particularly relevant to constantly connect the 'digital community' with the actual community of people as such, to be contacted through all available means, always considering that the encounter in the physical space is the main reference point, and the ideal meeting model. In the message for the 53rd Catholic World Day of Social Communication in 2019, Pope Francis invited a move from the communities of social networks to the human community (Pope Francis, 2019).

This use of MICTs helped the faithful to live a concrete dimension of domestic church, considering the fact that parents and members of catechetical teams accompanied children who were preparing to receive certain sacraments. To this, if we also add the streaming of Masses, devotional practices and rites that were made possible in this period of forced solitude and isolation, we can begin a reflection as suggested by Joanne Mercier. This period was an experience that can help communities to move beyond the level of reflection that *de facto* excluded the place of ICT in pastoral care (Mercer, 2020).

The use of ICT has allowed many people to participate in online meetings: regular faithful, those who no longer come as well as people from other parishes or different denominations. This is where the notions of digital ecclesiology and that of ecumenism emerge because the religious content was reaching people of different confessions.

The integration of ICT into the practices of believing communities is specifically concerned with the pastoral level, which in turn can help to reflect on a new way of understanding the church within the digital context. It is this reflection that can give rise to a digital theology in its confessional, liturgical, and public dimension with its two levels (Garner, 2020): a new digital ecclesiology and a digital theology understood as an individual's and believing community's activity that seeks to understand the Christian faith and the object of this faith (Garner, 2020) in the specific context of the digital age.

The experience of the period of the pandemic offers valuable elements that can nourish and feed reflection at the crossroad of a community of believers, their faith and digital media, an overlapping area more and more of interest today, to better understand both faith and religious travel.

Conclusion

This research presents the use that some Catholic sanctuaries of Lazio in Italy made of ICTs during the first containment due to the COVID-19 pandemic. With the answers from ten of the sixteen shrines contacted, the rectors of those pilgrimage places show that many of them organised specific activities with MICTs, to maintain contact with their relevant stakeholders – parishioners and travellers / pilgrims who were in contact with them. They organised activities using applications for online meeting with their collaborators as well as with Christians of their shrine and their contacts from beyond the area of the sanctuary. They used streaming applications to share different moments with the entire community. This gave to those shrines the dimension of distanced but present church during a period of pandemic restrictions.

The produced elements reached more people within and outside of their nearby area. In that context the number of followers was higher than in normal times. In the community, shrines were able to reach those who used to be absent in normal times. A big challenge for the moments of restrictions was the capacity to work in a team for good results. Rectors of sanctuaries had to collaborate with members of their parish community to find out how to stay present online. They collaborated with professionals in ICTs in the community and some

out of the community. Young people who have a good relationship with ICTs were a precious resource for the entire community. Professionals and young people worked with the rectors so that the use of MICTs allowed an actual involvement of volunteers to assist the elder people and other people in need in that moment.

Technologies gave a unique and practical help in the mission of those pilgrimage places, to be present, to maintain contact and to share compassion and help people in need. The rectors show that they wanted to stay technologically present. This context offered an opportunity for digital media to be inserted in the pastoral care of the Catholic shrines in Lazio. The positive results obtained with mobile technology during the first total lockdown in Italy opened a new way for technologies in the pastoral church. Some rectors made the choice to organise technology training for the members of their team in the sanctuary, and may further reflect on the role of MICTs in their mission.

The discovered instruments could also be used in the period after the pandemic to support the activities of the shrines. This can be a moment for digital and analogical pastoral to work together hand in hand, supporting the overall mission of a shrine and articulating different relationships with different stakeholders. For this, the use of mobile technologies during the first lockdown became an opportunity to think about the place of technological innovation in the pastoral of the shrines. The pandemic period in Lazio has shown to sanctuaries and parishes that technology can effectively support pastoral care and religion; the online activities in those shrines offered elements that can help to reflect and understand the relationship between church, faith and mobile technologies.

We have to consider the fact that some of the shrines have decided not to do anything using digital technologies. This means that the adoption of technologies in pastoral care is not a reality for all shrines. For some rectors and responsible managers of shrines, pastoral needs only mean physical contact and one cannot use ICTs in substitution for this. We have then three groups:

- The first group has used MICTs,
- The second group has chosen not to use MICTs.
- The third group has not reacted to the research.

All three groups can reflect on both their experiences during COVID-19 and consider their future engagement with MICTs. The results in this paper can offer a basis for a reflection among all three groups within the Church.

The experience of the rectors who adopted some digital media was positive and enthusiastic: this is another dimension of the relationship between church and technologies.

Limitations

Among the limitations of this work we can underline the fact that only rectors were addressed. In a future study, the opinions of those who assisted them might be collected, as well as of those who were the recipients of the pastoral practices using digital media; that would provide a rounder picture of the issue. Comparing the image of the Church that different categories would consider based on from this experience might suggest other concrete elements for reflection in the Catholic context.

Contribution

This research can be seen to complement the exploratory study of Giulia Isetti and her team (2021) in South Tyrol, it can interact also with research on the Serbian Orthodox Church (Pavlovi, 2020) and with work by Paras and his team (2021) on Filipino pastors; it adds a different geographical area to this discussion and has considered shrines that also attract tourists (the sanctuaries of Lazio).

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